

**Beyond Curiosity:  
Late-Nineteenth-Century American Women's Narratives of Obsession**

by

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*for Kim Richards,  
with desperation, admiration,  
and obsession*

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## Abstract

In “Beyond Curiosity,” I identify a group of late-nineteenth-century American women writers whose all-consuming interests in observational sciences—from entomology to botany to ornithology to astronomy—guided their artistic creations. I call their short stories, novels, and personal and scientific essays “narratives of obsession,” a genre I reveal as a feminine reimagining of eighteenth-century natural histories and early-nineteenth-century literary sketches. I introduce “obsession” as a stylistic gesture, a narrative device characterized by plotlessness, heightened description, antisociality, idealized spinsterhood, and monomaniacal focus on specialized areas of personal study. I contextualize “obsession” against the postbellum shift in U.S. discourse when the sciences were becoming professionalized and institutionalized, less dependent on and welcoming of self-taught amateurs, and when women were facing new barriers against male-dominated universities and science organizations. I show how late-nineteenth-century upper-middle class white women crafted narratives of obsession as an alternative to the restrictive disciplinarity emerging around them.

I chronicle the obsessions of four women: short story writer-turned-entomologist Annie Trumbull Slosson and her literary-descriptive tales and essays; poet-gardener Celia Thaxter and her garden book, *An Island Garden* (1894); Harriet Beecher Stowe and her book of Florida essays, *Palmetto-Leaves* (1873), and her novel, *Oldtown Folks* (1869); and astronomer Maria Mitchell and the newspaper and magazine articles and literary

works that mythologized her (including Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* (1860), Herman Melville's "After the Pleasure Party" (1891), and Augusta Jane Evans' *Macaria; or, Altars of Sacrifice* (1864)). I extend the narrative of obsession to other white, upper-middle-class late-nineteenth-century women writers and naturalists, including Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Harriet Mann Miller, Mary Treat, Graceanna Lewis, and Katharine Dooris Sharp. While I locate women's obsession in a New England culture that fostered feminine curiosity and spinsterhood, I also demonstrate how the obsessed woman became a figure of national fixation.

By highlighting the antisociality and hermeticism in these narratives of obsession, I unsettle the standard critical account of community and empathy as the center of late-nineteenth-century women's nature writing and regionalism. These narratives of widows, spinsters, and outcasts rejecting normative romantic and social bonds with others rework the modes of expression deemed acceptable for late-nineteenth-century women (sentimentality, domesticity, regionalism). I propose obsession as a different nineteenth-century women's tradition that celebrates solitude and spinsterhood (not sympathy or connection). I end by tracing a spinster genealogy, a non-procreative legacy of late-nineteenth-century obsession. I examine texts by three late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century American women writers who imagine themselves as nineteenth-century spinsters in their narratives of obsession: Julie Hecht's short stories, Kate Bolick's memoir, *Spinster: Making a Life of One's Own* (2015), and Jamaica Kincaid's *My Garden (Book)*: (1999)—texts that expand the racial, social, and emotional possibilities of obsession even as they further narrow and make newly violent its monomaniacal focus.

**Introduction**  
**“To Me Everything Is A Discovery”:**  
**Harriet Mann Miller and the Making of Late-Nineteenth-Century Obsession**

On the eve of her fiftieth birthday, Harriet Mann Miller took on a youthful glow. The author of hundreds of stories for children, Miller had become a kid again herself. “She is not a young woman, is the proud grandmother of seven children; but her bright face crowned with handsome white hair, has that young, alert, happy look that comes with having a satisfying hobby that goes at a lively pace,” a friend of Miller’s wrote, three years before her death (Sanborn 147). The “satisfying hobby” was birding—and it was much more than “satisfying” for Miller: it was transformative. Experiencing the joys of bird-watching for the first time, Miller underwent a rebirth. “I had never spent any time in the country and had been absorbed all my life in books,” Miller tells us of her pre-birding life. Her inaugural afternoon of birding at Brooklyn’s Prospect Park in the summer of 1880 changed everything: “My friend was an enthusiast and I found her enthusiasm contagious...indeed before she left me I became so interested in the Catbird and Thrush that I continued to visit the park to see them” (Bailey 166). Once she started, she didn’t want to ever stop.

The discovery of this passion launched a kind of second life for Miller. What started as childlike wonder developed into a sustained investigation into her world: “after about two summers’ study the thought one day came to me that I had seen some things that other people might be interested in...All this time my love of birds and interest in

them had been growing, and soon I cared for no other study” (Bailey 166). Miller went on to publish eleven books about birds and help lead efforts to stop the killing of birds for hats. She was so keen on observing and understanding her beloved birds that she “turned one room of her house into a large aviary” (Anderson & Edwards 54). Her projects also took her far outside of the domestic space. The New Yorker went on birding expeditions throughout the West, the Midwest, and New England, almost always by herself. She returned to report her observations, under the pseudonym Olive Thorne Miller, to both juvenile audiences in educational texts for children and to adult audiences in nature books and articles in magazines like *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Scribner’s Monthly*, and *Harper’s Bazaar*.

Miller courted readers of all ages and interests, becoming one of the most popular bird writers of her time, but there was one audience to whom she couldn’t imagine writing: professional ornithologists. Throughout her work, Miller presents her observations in opposition to scientific research, as an alternative to ornithological study. The ornithologist seeks to count, name, and categorize, Miller tells us, while she strives for something deeper—“to make a personal acquaintance with the birds, find out how they live, their manners and customs, their individual characters” (*In Nesting Time* 17). She dismisses Science’s “relentless substitution of fancy for facts” and even goes so far as to suggest that “many crimes are committed” “in the interest of science” (*Upon the Tree-Tops* 116, 131). In *A Bird-Lover in the West* (1894), Miller defends a blue jay’s stealing of eggs from other birds’ nests as a survival technique much more honorable than the thefts performed by scientists: “what is he but a ‘collector’? And though he does not claim to be working ‘in the interest of science,’ which bigger collectors invariably do, he

is working in the interest of life, and life is more than science” (148). The significance of so-called life over science is central to Miller’s approach. She claims that her methodology necessitates skills and qualities that “scientific knowledge” doesn’t have access to: “infinite patience, perseverance, untiring devotion, and more,—a quick eye and ear, and a sympathetic heart. If you do not love the birds you cannot understand them” (*In Nesting Time* 17). She writes of her approach here as something greater than science.

Miller is proud of the “sympathetic” insights she brings to birding that ornithologists cannot, yet she also acknowledges the possible shortcomings of her narratives. In the introductory note of the same book where she extolls her “sympathetic heart,” Miller prefaces her work with a disclaimer: “The facts may not all be new to Science” (*In Nesting Time* iii). In another preface, to *Little Folks in Feathers and Fur and Others in Neither* (1875), Miller places herself below the scientist: “Far be it from me to intrude upon the field of the scientific naturalist. I merely take his discoveries, and translate them into the vulgar tongue, that every-one may enjoy the delightful results of his work” (3). What will be engaging to popular readers, she assumes, will not be of interest to professionals. On the one hand, she dismisses scientists for their unfeeling relationship their subjects. On the other hand, she dismisses herself for not contributing entirely new knowledge about birds.

Miller underestimated herself. Many of the observations she shared in her books and magazine articles *were* “new to Science.” She wasn’t just a translator. In an 1892 issue of *The Auk*, the official publication of the American Ornithologists’ Union, ornithologist William Brewster admitted that a discovery he’d once claimed as his own had actually been already made earlier by Miller:

I described at some length a peculiar process of regurgitation employed by the Flicker in feeding its young, believing—and indeed remarking at the time—that the habit was unknown or at least unrecorded. It seems, however, that it had been previously observed by Mrs. Olive Thorne Miller who published an account of it in 1890 in *The Atlantic Monthly* (365).

Brewster presents his short note as a “correction” to his original essay, but he goes on to blame the same woman to whom he is apologizing: “It is a pity that writers like Mrs. Miller—gifted with rare powers of observation and blessed with abundant opportunities for exercising them—cannot be induced to record at least the more important of their discoveries in some accredited scientific journal, instead of scattering them broadcast over the pages of popular magazines” (365). According to Brewster, he is not responsible for mistakenly taking ownership of a discovery that wasn’t his own. Rather, it is Miller’s fault for not publishing in the right venue. It turned out that the one audience to whom Miller couldn’t imagine writing, the people she simultaneously dismissed and thought herself beneath, found serious interest in her work.

In the next issue of *The Auk*, Miller fired back. Her response to Brewster is a stirring reflection on the openness and expansiveness of her work:

There is, first, my great desire to bring into the lives of others the delights to be found in the study of Nature, which necessitates the using of an unscientific publication...Let those who will spend their days killing, dissecting, and classifying; I choose rather to give my time to the study of life...to me everything is a discovery; each bird, on first sight, is a new creation; his manners and habits are a revelation, as fresh and as interesting to me as though they had never been

observed before. How am I to tell what is an old story and what a new one? What to announce in a scientific journal, and what to proclaim with delight to my fellow ignoramuses? (85-86).

The power of Miller's reply to Brewster is in her surprising acknowledgment that he is right. She uses the very premise of Brewster's objection to women who publish in popular venues as the explanation for what this literary kind of writing has to offer its readers: it's not quantitative discovery that she and her followers seek—it's the more experiential "revelation" of a close encounter with a strange creature. In justifying her work for Brewster and the ornithologist subscribers of *The Auk*, Miller reinforces Brewster's fundamental point that scientific ornithology belongs in scientific publications.

While Miller recognizes the scientific-popular divide that Brewster chastises her for not observing, she ultimately refuses to respect it. What's most shocking and exciting about her response is her willing violation of generic boundaries. She playfully attributes her commitment to "using an unscientific publication" as not knowing any better—"How am I to tell what is an old story and what a new one?"—but the move is a gloriously calculated one. For here she is celebrating what Brewster deems her most egregious wrongdoing: taking her findings and "scattering them broadcast over the pages of popular magazines." The language of expansiveness ("scattering," "broadcast," "popular") is vulgar for Brewster. By proclaiming that "everything is a discovery," Miller redeems that openness and reveals the toxicity of Brewster's genre policing. She both shuts him down and elevates the conversation by sharing her vision for a more visceral, revelatory, vibrant immersion in and account of the natural world. Miller shows us that when we

move past the impulse to delineate and divide, when we throw out the categories that others assume as given, we reach something more rewarding for everyone. Her rebuttal is a promise and a challenge: open your eyes without judgment or expectation and anything might become a discovery.

This dissertation is an enthusiastic acceptance of Miller's invitation to discovery. I borrow Miller's approach, sensibility, and interests as I discover the work of her similarly expansive, fluid, and inquisitive contemporaries: late-nineteenth-century women writers who cultivate passions for observing and experiencing their natural world that go beyond scientific study. The midlife origin story of Miller's fascination with birds is one that recurs throughout each chapter of this dissertation. The four women I consider—short story writer-entomologist Annie Trumbull Slosson, poet-gardener Celia Thaxter, popular novelist and Florida naturalist Harriet Beecher Stowe, and astronomer and cultural icon Maria Mitchell—all undergo life-changing transformations when they first meet their objects of intoxicating interest, all, with the exception of Mitchell who discovered her love of astronomy at a young age, in the later part of their lives. Their projects aren't just books, essays, and stories. They become a way of living and seeing, a conscious surrender to the pervasive, infinite possibilities of all-powerful curiosity.

At the center of this dissertation is a major shift in late-nineteenth-century U.S. discourse: the institutionalization of science, the postbellum moment when science became something practiced in universities and professional organizations and no longer mostly by self-taught amateurs. After the Civil War, as these new barriers to and expectations about scientific practice arose, women were increasingly excluded from participating in knowledge production, banned from most male-dominated societies and

organizations.<sup>1</sup> Thus, one narrative we can tell about Miller, Slosson, Thaxter, Stowe, and other women literary naturalists is a story about the alternative world for observational expression that these women created. We might read their hybrid forms of writing—their short stories, essays, novels, sketches, flower books, nature journals, and travelogues—as descriptive-expressive texts that embrace the pre-disciplinary, literary-scientific eighteenth-century tradition of natural history and that imagine a different, more

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<sup>1</sup> As Sally Kohlstedt has shown, the transformation of naturalist sciences into disciplines studied at universities and practiced by trained professionals at the end of the nineteenth century meant the exclusion of women, who were generally banned from professional groups, mostly relegated to amateur clubs and organizations. Kohlstedt traces three generations of American women scientists from the 1830s through the end of the nineteenth century. She calls the first-generation women scientists “independent correspondents” who engaged in “private and relatively isolated study” who were mostly “drawn by the Romantic movement to a sentimental, even religious attachment to ‘beauties of nature’” (83). Kohlstedt terms the second generation of U.S. women scientists “teachers and illustrators,” who, unlike their predecessors, began to occupy public roles as “early proponents of science education for women” (86). The late-century third generation of women scientists, Kohlstedt tells us, were faced with a decision: “private study or professionalism.” Even as reformers successfully brought science education to young women, the professionalization of science following the Civil War left few openings for women. “Experts on human species used arguments from Darwin and Francis Galton to assert that in evolution woman had been ‘the loser in the intellectual race,’” writes Kohlstedt. “Faced by these pervasive stereotypes, many women continued to be amateurs when given a choice between private study or professional participation” (90). These amateurs who were shunned by male-dominated professional groups joined “small, local, scientific study groups” that offered “an alternative to the modern demands of professional science.” The few women who did manage to gain access into professional circles often found themselves limited to “adjunct roles,” working as “teachers and assistants” or as “curators and librarians in all-male natural history societies” (90, 91). Thus, the sphere of private, amateur clubs provided women with more opportunities to explore and share their interests than the professional spheres that kept them in supporting roles. In *Maria Mitchell and the Sexing of Science* (2008), Renée Bergland writes extensively about the surprising ways in which women had many more opportunities and freedoms to pursue scientific interests in the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century before the professionalization of science. She reveals that “scientist” was actually “coined to describe a woman,” in 1834 in a “complimentary article” about Mary Somerville, a Scottish intellectual “whose erudite books brought together previously disparate fields of mathematics, astronomy, geology, chemistry, and physics so clearly that the texts became the backbone of Cambridge University’s first science curriculum” (xv). She claims that when Lucretia Mott named Maria Mitchell in her 1848 “Discourse on Woman” at Seneca Falls, she “knew that her audience would not shrink from the idea of women in science but rather would embrace it. A woman scientist was the most socially acceptable female role model she could think of” (xvi). Thus, the late-nineteenth-century period of professionalization marked a regressive turn for women with scientific ambitions.

capacious mode of connecting with and learning about natural science than the exclusionary model embodied by professional and university science.

To merely consider these women's literary explorations and experiments as critical and productive reactions to emerging scientific disciplinarity is to understate the grand visions behind them. If professional science was the party they weren't invited to, it was a party some of them didn't want to attend. Their own party was the more rousing affair, the higher experience. Even more so than Miller, who in spite of her persistent dismissal of science, maintained a scientific presence as a popularizer of ornithology, Thaxter and Stowe, prominent literary personalities, showed no interest in joining a scientific community of any kind. All of these women—including the two (Slosson and Mitchell) who did break into professional circles—ultimately accomplish something much more far-reaching than the articles in the scientific journals where Brewster expected Miller to publish her work. They propose naturalist study as intellectual, emotional, and personal fulfillment, as a mode of narrating and observing, a careful, slow, relentless—indeed, life-long—attention to the form of what's around us.

The grandness of these visions lies in their startlingly small scale. Although all the women I profile became public figures, their projects, in many ways, take them away from the public sphere. In their work and writing, they maintain an all-consuming devotion to their objects of study often at the expense of relations with other people. In *An Island Garden* (1894), Celia Thaxter presents her garden as a space only she can enter: “no hands touch it save my own throughout the whole season” (19). Many nineteenth-century newspaper accounts of Maria Mitchell's commitment to astronomical study call attention to her antisociality: “It cannot be said that Miss Mitchell was a lovely

woman, and to a few only did she seem lovable...she was admired, highly respected, even revered; but she was not tenderly loved” (*Bismark Tribune* 4). Consider, too, the solitude of Harriet Mann Miller herself. It was a friend who introduced her to bird-watching, but the more serious she became about it, the more she wanted to be alone. In *A Bird-Lover in the West* (1894), Miller recounts a trip she “took alone at age sixty-one to a Colorado tourist camp.” Here, she describes why solitude is crucial for her ornithological expeditions: “To insure any measure of success I always go alone; one familiar face would make the effort of no avail; and I seek a place where I am a stranger, so that my ordinary life cannot be recalled to me...I take no work of any sort, and I banish books, excepting a few poets and studies of nature” (6). The women who “scattered” their stories “broadcast over the pages of popular magazines” ultimately considered their passions private.

Turning away from other people, they couldn’t get close enough to their subjects. Thaxter assumed the identity of the bird she admired: for many years, she dressed only in white, black, and grey—the colors of the sandpiper—and took on the nickname Sandpiper herself (Fetterley 40). Slosson names many of her fictional naturalists after their interests: Botany Bay, Fishin’ Jimmy, Animal Ann. In the world of Slosson’s stories, there is little difference between animals and plants and the men and women who observe them. These women all take seriously Miller’s call for closeness, her urging that all naturalists “make personal acquaintance” with their objects of devotion to its most extreme. Beyond getting to know insects, flowers, birds, and comets, they imagine *becoming* them.

In this way, Brewster gets something fundamentally right about Miller: she did break the rules. In fact, her transgression was much more severe than he suggests—her violation wasn't just one of genre, not merely the failure to realize that her work belonged in scientific journals. Her greatest sin was getting too close, eliminating the boundary between subject and observer. By becoming the things they studied, these late-nineteenth-century women push the limits of curiosity to wild, uncomfortable, and sometimes destructive places. Thaxter cares so much for her flowers that she dedicated just as much time to exterminating pests as she did to cultivating the plants themselves. Part of the lure of her garden is the devastation: "There is something pathetic as well as wonderful in the way in which these growing things of almost all kinds meet disaster and discouragement" (65). The other dark side of these intense infatuations is that they allow room for no other interests. In *Palmetto-Leaves*, Stowe poses this larger question in reflecting on the arresting beauty of Floridian magnolias: "One must write what one is thinking of. When the mind is full of one thing, why go about and write another?" (161-62). The admiration these women feel for their subjects is less an appreciation of nature than a willing submission to its crushing charms.

In the wake of intoxication is stillness. This is perhaps what's most unsettling about these stories, essays, and novels to a twenty-first-century reader: nothing happens. Intensely close description of animals, plants, and natural phenomena become a replacement for action or plot development. The closest thing we get to narrative change or transformation is the further intensification of an existing passion. At the end of Annie Trumbull Slosson's "Anna Malann" (1894), a short story about a woman consumed by her fascination with animals, the narrator ties up the story—or, rather, refuses to tie it

up—with this statement of irresolution: “I told you I had no story, nothing but a picture—poorly drawn, I know—of one woman and her work and ways. I do not even point a moral. Maybe there is none” (*Dumb Foxglove* 117). The point is the mere introduction of this beguiling character herself. When curiosity is this heightened, narrative is an afterthought.

What might frustrate a twenty-first-century reader would’ve been familiar to nineteenth-century audiences. The plotlessness of these narratives does, after all, come directly from the antebellum tradition of the “literary sketch”—a nineteenth-century mode of writing that, as Kristie Hamilton tells us, combines the imaginative energy of a short story with the intellectual curiosity and speculative nature of an essay to create a brief narrative that is more descriptive than it is action-oriented (2).<sup>2</sup> These brief, essayistic stories eschew plot, instead describing “‘scenes,’ ‘characters,’ ‘incidents,’ ‘sights,’ ‘recollections,’ and ‘reveries’” (2). Antebellum writers, including Washington Irving, with his *Sketchbook* (1819) and Nathaniel Hawthorne, with stories like “Sights from a Steeple,” “Night Sketches,” and other sketches from *Twice-Told Tales* (1837), experimented with the sketch as a mode of storytelling that is ruminative rather than transformative.

The afterlife of the antebellum sketch is the late-nineteenth century regionalist short story—a genre that the texts I consider overlap with. In the 1870s through the early-twentieth century, women regional writers—including Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins

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<sup>2</sup> Kristie Hamilton suggests that during the nineteenth century, “tale writing and sketch writing were not understood to be at odds with each other, but rather...the identification of ‘tales’ as ‘sketches’ imbued fiction with the specialized authority of documentary” (2). Washington Irving and Nathaniel Hawthorne, Hamilton tells us, were among the most prominent experimenters with the form. The sketch saw a resurgence at the end of the nineteenth century, when women regionalist writers like Jewett, Freeman, and Cooke turned to the “literary sketch” in representing rural life.

Freeman, and Rose Terry Cooke—used the sketch in representing small-town life and the dynamics of rural communities.<sup>3</sup> As the sketch disappeared in the mid-nineteenth century, replaced by the plots of sentimentality and romance, women regionalists revived it with their stories of changeless out-of-the-way places. Regionalist fiction calls on the brevity and plotlessness of the literary sketch as it offers portraits of villages and their residents. In its revitalized form, the sketch as regionalist story became newly attuned to interpersonal dynamics. Sandra Zagarell suggests that women regionalists “replaced” the “peripatetic ‘alienated observer’ narrator” of Washington Irving’s *Sketch Book* “with an empathetic woman deeply involved in her own village” (501). In the introduction to their anthology, *American Women Regionalists, 1850-1910*, Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse name “empathy” as “one of the most significant features of regionalism” as practiced by women writers (xv). They distinguish women’s regionalism from the larger body of writing about rural places by men writers like Hamlin Garland, Bret Harte, and Mark Twain. While these other writers often used “regional characters” as objects of “ridicule by eastern urban readers,” the women regionalists represented “regional experience from within, so as to engage the reader’s sympathy and identification” (xii). In doing so, they created a genre that remained within the “woman’s sphere” and also extended it, a form of writing that was at once domestic and outward-looking. Fetterley and Pryse describe this empowerment as one that extends to the reader: “the narrator’s stance of careful listening fosters an empathic connection between the reader of the work

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<sup>3</sup> Sandra Zagarell has showed how, at the end of the nineteenth century, the sketch became the chosen form for white, upper-middle-class women like Jewett and Stowe, who wrote narratives that privilege the inter-connectedness of community over the individual. She calls these sketches “narratives of community” (499). Crucial to the “narrative of community,” Zagarell tells us, are a lack of “linear development or chronological sequence,” an “episodic” structure, “built primarily around the continuous small-scale negotiations and procedures through which communities sustain themselves,” and a “rootedness”—a narrative that “remains in one place” (503).

and the lives the work depicts” (xvii). “One listens to their stories, journeys with them to remote islands, shares their hospitality. One learns to see not as an outsider, but as a friend, a daughter, a sister, a welcome returning guest,” writes Marcia Littenberg of the New England regionalists (145). In this model, to feminize a genre is to socialize it.

Written by women concerned with isolated places, the sketch-like texts I examine are, at a fundamental level, regionalist stories. Indeed, critics of regionalism often name Thaxter as a central practitioner of the genre and credit Stowe herself as launching the regionalist movement with her early New England fictions.<sup>4</sup> And though she is mostly unremembered for her fiction today, Slosson was one of the most widely read New England regionalists in the late-nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> The New England identity of the writers I consider (with the exception of New Yorker Harriet Mann Miller, who was still a part of the larger Northeastern circuit of women’s literary culture) is important to understanding their work. While regionalism appeared in many forms in many places, from Kate Chopin’s Creole stories to Mary Murfree’s Appalachian tales to Zitkála-Šá’s sketches of the South Dakota Sioux, its New England iteration was one particularly conducive to intense naturalist curiosities. A recurring figure in New England regionalism is the unmarried woman recluse who pursues intellectual projects. The narrator of Sarah Orne Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896)—the most iconic work of regionalism—is a single woman writer who comes to a remote Maine town for

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<sup>4</sup> Fetterley and Pryse use Stowe’s story, “Uncle Lot” (1834), as the beginning point of their regionalism anthology “to illustrate the inception of regionalism.” They identify its emphasis on New England identity and its interest in character over plot as innovative developments toward a kind of storytelling that would eventually develop into a wider genre (xiv).

<sup>5</sup> While Fetterley and Pryse include Stowe and Thaxter in *American Women Regionalists*, they leave out Annie Trumbull Slosson. I address the ways Slosson was a popular regionalist in her own time yet was left out of the late-twentieth-century feminist recovery of regionalism at the beginning of Chapter 1.

the space and quiet to work on an unnamed book. As I show in Chapter 4, New England was a region where spinsterdom and feminine intellectual curiosity thrived, so the association of these writers with the region (and the genre of regionalism) is crucial in understanding their stories about overpowering inquisitiveness.

But there is also something decidedly un-regionalist about these texts about naturalist fixations. For all their attention to place and region, these works ultimately turn inward. If regionalist stories, according to Zagarell, present the self “as part of the interdependent network of the community rather than as an individualistic unit,” these works centralize the observer herself and her deeply personal, idiosyncratic preoccupation with knowing and experiencing her surroundings (499).<sup>6</sup> In lieu of the empathic network of villagers crucial to regionalism is one woman driven by the desire to get as close to her subject as possible.

With these texts about reclusive, solitary women immersed in nature, I offer an alternate account of the literary sketch’s late-nineteenth-century revival and feminization. Instead of substituting the “peripatetic ‘alienated observer’ narrator” of Washington Irving “with an empathetic woman,” these women actually deepen the brooding energy of Irving’s and Hawthorne’s sketches.<sup>7</sup> Where Fetterley and Pryse describe empathy as a uniquely feminine form of late-nineteenth-century narration in regionalism, I propose privacy, antisociality, and monomania as uniquely and powerfully feminine ways of

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<sup>6</sup> Zagarell claims that the “narrative voices” of regionalist fiction are “always hospitable to the language and frame of reference of community members, and this is so partly because the narrators exist primarily in relation to the community, their empathy arising from this position” (515).

<sup>7</sup> In Chapter 2, I show Hawthorne’s influence specifically on Thaxter and *An Island Garden*. I close-read her invocation of the poisonous garden in Hawthorne’s story of mad science, “Rappaccini’s Daughter” (1884) and her dark, murderous, Hawthornesque sensibility in caring deeply for her plants but imagining violence against other forms of life (see pp. 69-70, 85).

narrating. To feminize the sketch is not, as Fetterley and Pryse suggest, to make it more empathic and social but to enhance its ruminative curiosity and concentrate it even further onto a single object of study, and shut it off from all other people.

I call these women's stories, essays, sketches, and novels about intoxicating areas of naturalist interest "narratives of obsession." I define the narrative of obsession as a mode of writing created and practiced by upper-middle-class late-nineteenth-century U.S. white women who followed their passions in observational sciences in private forms mostly outside the restrictive realm of newly developing postbellum professional science discourses. The hallmarks of these narratives are their plotlessness, heightened description, antisociality, idealized spinsterhood, and monomaniacal focus on specialized areas of personal study. Looking totally inward, these women engaged in the ultimate exclusivity: a monomania confined to just themselves. Yet despite this antisocial sensibility, this hermetic monomania is broad-minded and vast in all its various possibilities. For these women, the intensity of naturalist curiosity extends to all aspects of personal and artistic expression and intellectual inquiry.

Thus, their narratives aren't simply alternatives to the scientific institutions and genres growing around them, institutions and genres many of them had no desire to be a part of and didn't at all define themselves or their projects in relation to. Even those who became involved in professional science or were professional scientists represent something beyond curiosity, beyond rigor, something closer to constant observation as a higher lived experience. These transcendent narratives appear in many contexts, as evidenced by the different kinds of women I group all under the shared term of obsession, from best-selling novelist Harriet Beecher Stowe and professional astronomer Maria

Mitchell to poet Celia Thaxter and writer-turned-entomologist Annie Trumbull Slosson. But even as these women loosen—in some cases ignore—the constraints of disciplinary science, the variety of roles and identities within obsession is highly limited. All of these women are white and upper-middle class, for the pleasures and indulgences of late-nineteenth-century obsession are only available to those with the privilege to cultivate them.

The narrative of obsession comes out of three genres of expression—the eighteenth-century natural history,<sup>8</sup> the literary sketch, and the regionalist short story—though its form is manifold, as small as Annie Trumbull Slosson’s tight short stories and as sprawling as Stowe’s New England historical fiction, *Oldtown Folks*, as reportorial as newspaper articles about Maria Mitchell’s astronomical observations and as lyrical as Thaxter’s garden memoir. What unites all of these texts is their celebration of an all-absorbing—obsessive—engagement with their objects of study.

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<sup>8</sup> In *American Curiosity: Cultures of Natural History in the Colonial British Atlantic World* (2006), Susan Scott Parrish categorizes “natural histories” as a “very popular print genre” that included “descriptive prose catalogs of the flora, fauna, and often exotic human inhabitants of specific geographical places. These tended to be written more by metropolitan travelers, promoters of colonization, or synthesizers rather than colonials themselves” (18). Parrish identifies them within a larger set of genres and media (including letters, travel narratives, sermons, poetry, “black Atlantic autobiographies,” and “settler captivity narratives”) through which the English and North Americans disseminated information about the natural world from the late-sixteenth century to the eighteenth century (18-19). The women I consider take up this literary-descriptive tradition in implicit and explicit ways—mostly in their genre hybridity and fluid understandings of literary form and scientific knowledge. The style of natural history is most explicitly apparent in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Florida essays (see Chapter 3). In its original context, natural history was not a genre open to women. On the place of women in the culture of Early American scientific description, Parrish tells us that “colonial women” found methods of recording and exchanging scientific knowledge outside of natural histories, “by sending or carrying birds back to London, by reporting on the effects of earthquakes using other female informants, by drawing pictures of astral phenomena for their brothers to present to the Royal Society, or by writing pastoral poetry to friends” (17). So when these late-nineteenth-century women write natural history-like essays and stories, they are delving into and claiming a genre previously inaccessible to them. The way these women take up natural history, an earlier masculine genre, is like the way they take up the similarly earlier masculine literary sketch.

“Obsession” is a kind of dirty word in criticism of late-nineteenth-century women writers. As Jennifer Fleissner suggests in *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism*, the “obsessional” quality in the stories of writers like Jewett and Freeman—their characters’ “compulsive” repetition of domestic and cleaning routines—was the very thing that early feminist recovery projects were writing *against*. Feminist critics like Josephine Donovan, Judith Fetterley, and Marjorie Pryse wanted to resist the “clinical diagnosis” of women writers and their association with “obsessive neurosis” (111).<sup>9</sup> More recently, rather than arguing away the compulsions and anxieties of this writing, critics have provided explanations for these obsessions. Monika Elbert reads the “compulsive behavior” depicted in Mary Wilkins Freeman’s stories—“frenzied and repeated activities, such as spending money, sewing incessantly, or collecting useless knick-knacks”—as fetishistic “efforts to compensate for their thwarted creativity or stunted sexuality” (192). Meredith Goldsmith connects the obsessive consumption of addictive substances like coffee, tea, cigarettes, and painkillers in *The House of Mirth* to “the rise of consumer capitalism.” She suggests that Wharton captures the turn-of-the-century moment when Americans first became compulsive consumers: “In Wharton’s fiction, addictive commodities and behaviors destabilize the autonomous self...habitual dependency drives individuals into the marketplace, as they continue to work, spend, and use in cyclical repetition” (243). For both Elbert and Goldsmith, obsession is a pathology, a sign of psychic malaise, a symptom of a larger unease.

What is the upside to feminine obsession? This is the question Jennifer Fleissner asks as she finds redeeming value in the obsessive dimension of Freeman’s and Jewett’s

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<sup>9</sup> Fleissner suggests that “the entire feminist recovery of Mary Wilkins Freeman’s work may be said to date from outrage at David Hirsch’s 1965 assessment of her most famous heroine, Louisa Ellis, as ‘almost a case study of an obsessive neurosis’” (111).

characters. Fleissner suggests that compulsion is actually a source of empowerment for the women in these stories, a way of enhancing their inner lives and resisting structures of oppression outside the home. Although she wants to normalize obsession, Fleissner remains interested in the clinical and pathological dimensions of the term, offering the possibility that these late-nineteenth-century literary narratives of obsessional behavior mark the start of a long history of American fictions of obsession that ends with twenty- and twenty-first-century OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder) narratives like Jonathan Lethem's *Motherless Brooklyn* and the TV series *Monk* ("Obsessional Modernity" 106). I, too, want to recover "obsession" as a productive way of being in the fiction of late-nineteenth-century women writers, but unlike Fleissner, I do not use "obsession" as a psychoanalytic term with the power to diagnose a character. Nor do I use the term, as Elbert or Goldsmith do, to reveal the underlying structure of a fetish. The narratives themselves resist the impulse to diagnose their characters. "But what is the matter with her? Is she crazy?" Slosson's narrator asks of Aunt Randy when she first spots the elderly amateur entomologist running around, searching for bugs (*Seven Dreamers* 85, 84). Also "a woman of hobbies," the narrator comes to understand Randy's passion so deeply that, by the end of the story, the two become "warm friends" and we see that she is, as Randy immediately recognized her to be, the kook's "kindred spirit" (92, 85, 87). This is a universe where, if you spend enough time around obsession, you'll likely catch its charms yourself.

Instead of using "obsession" as a clinical term, I explore "obsession" as a narrative device—as a stylistic gesture—as a mode of storytelling that combines the rigor of naturalist study with the subjectivity of an all-consuming passion. In the world of

Slosson, Thaxter, Stowe, Mitchell, and Miller, the intense pursuit of a single passion is a virtuous way of thinking and living. Their work presents the all-consuming immersion in a single area of study as an ideal, a level of devotion that is itself a worthy reward.

Obsession as a virtue is a distinctly twenty-first-century idea. “We live in an age of obsession,” Lennard Davis declares in *Obsession: A History* (2009): “No hot romance movie is complete without the idea that the lovers are obsessed. No scientist or musician’s reputation is safe without the word ‘obsessed’ tacked to his or her occupation” (3). He recognizes twenty-first-century U.S. obsession as a fetishized weirdness, an aspiration—and already a given: “To be obsessive is to be American, to be modern” (5). Davis identifies post-Freudian, post-OCD American obsession as a later moment in a much larger “age of obsession” in the Western World that begins “in the middle of the eighteenth century in England and France” when people started to isolate obsession, “write about it, study it, turn it into a medical problem and then try to cure it” (6). Early-nineteenth-century monomania—“the notion that the mind could be imbalanced or made unsound by a single idea or train of thought”—marks the “distinct emergence of the concept, if not the term, obsession” (67). Davis locates the mid- and late-nineteenth century as the first moments when obsessive behavior became understood simultaneously as a pathology *and* a sign of devotion to rigorous work. In particular, he links this shift to the professionalization of science and the specialization that came with that, deeming specialization a form of acceptable obsession, encouraging people to redefine abnormality. He calls “science, particularly as it is practiced in the nineteenth century” “a kind of mass obsession” (98).<sup>10</sup> Here are the seeds of post-millennial obsession.

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<sup>10</sup> Davis turns to fiction, naming and analyzing his own set of nineteenth-century obsession narratives, including *Frankenstein*, “Bartleby,” *Moby-Dick*, *Crime and Punishment*, and Sherlock

So even though obsession as admirable neurosis was not yet an established term in the world of late-nineteenth-century women's narratives of obsession, the concept was beginning to take hold in a powerful way. And the language of these narratives, at times, feels twenty-first-century in its sensibility, associating monomaniacal fixation with a dynamism. "There was just one thing that kept her up, occupied her mind, amused her all day long, and made her willing to live," Slosson writes of one of her most obsessive characters, Colossy Bragg—a woman who can't stop cooking (*Dumb Foxglove* 11). Her excess, uncontrollable passion is not a bad habit but an exhilarating life force. This is exactly the way that Thaxter represents her love of gardening, Stowe represents her fascination with Florida, and newspaper accounts represent Mitchell's commitment to astronomy.

This isn't to say that the kind of all-consuming interest that these women represent is mundane or universal. In fact, I want to highlight their peculiarity and their strangeness. If specialized science became understood as a "mass obsession," these women's obsessions are something different. In pursuing personal pleasures outside of academic circles without the practical rewards of disciplinary science, and sometimes in completely non-scientific areas, these women are doing things that were *not* understood as virtuous, *not* part of acceptable obsession but a particular kind of obsession.

The late-nineteenth-century feminine narrative of obsession is a non-standard form of literary representation that rejects interpersonal connection as a narrative end goal and that offers instead the dynamic engagement with a chosen field of study as a source of meaning. These narratives tell the stories of middle-aged and elderly spinsters,

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Holmes (15). While Davis' broad list—transnational in scope—accounts for many different kinds of obsession, the late-nineteenth-century "narratives of obsession" I name fall in a hyper-specific category defined temporally, regionally, and by gender.

widows, and solitude-seeking married women who discover naturalist interests that overtake traditional emotional gratification. In place of the desire for romantic intimacy or social connection is the desire to learn about the natural world. These works are provocative depictions of women who unsettle the structures of domestic coupling and familial identification or reject the imperative of marriage altogether.

Their provocation lies even further, formally, in their generic hybridity. For in their projects, these writers disrupt the conventions and expectations associated with the kinds of writing and thinking deemed acceptable for nineteenth-century women. Their writings are radical genre experiments that expand the set of styles and registers available to women: sentimental novels with unfeeling heroines who study science, regionalist short stories that replace empathic nostalgia with naturalist curiosity, flower books more interested in botanical scrutiny than floral charm.

I extend the narrative of obsession well beyond the circle of four women in this dissertation to other white, upper-middle-class late-nineteenth-century women writers—both those who identified as literary artists and those who identified as naturalists, all of whom borrowed from both the conventions of the natural science essay and the literary sketch: regionalist writers like Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman, other writers like Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and naturalists like Mary Treat, Graceanna Lewis, and Katharine Dooris Sharp. We can use this term to describe both short stories and novels *and* natural science essays: from Sarah Orne Jewett's *A Country Doctor* (1884), which dramatizes a woman's decision to pursue a career in medicine instead of marriage, to the essays of entomologist Mary Treat, ornithologist Graceanna Lewis, and botanist Katharine Dooris Sharp—to the sketches and memoirs of Harriet Mann Miller. Through

the four chapters of this dissertation, I tell the intimate and far-ranging stories behind four sets of narratives of obsession, from texts virtually unread by contemporary critics (the stories of Annie Trumbull Slosson and the garden writing of Celia Thaxter) to the lesser-known works of a canonical writer (the natural history essays and New England histories of Harriet Beecher Stowe) to representations of a pioneering woman scientist still celebrated (and obsessed over) today (Maria Mitchell).

In Chapter 1, I introduce a body of work generally overlooked by literary scholars: the fiction and science essays of writer-entomologist Annie Trumbull Slosson (1838-1926). Slosson established a career as a short-story writer, publishing frequently in *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's* during the 1870s. In the second half of her life, Slosson wrote articles for entomological journals, co-founded the New York Entomological Society, and discovered over one hundred species of insects. I claim that Slosson's narratives of obsession—both her narrative science essays and her naturalist short stories—deliberately disrupt the conventions and expectations of nineteenth-century literature and science. Her New England stories about uncoupled men and women outcasts obsessed with narrow areas of interest boldly, and unnervingly, undo the fundamental expectations for romance and sentiment in magazine fiction, while her science essays, filled with the literary-descriptive reports of amateur observers subvert the rising conventions of professional science. In the 1880s and 1890s, when newly professionalized university naturalists dismissed and limited the efforts of untrained amateurs, Slosson imagined and practiced an alternative, more accessible form of science practice that mobilizes the strategies of literary expression and the voices of outsiders.

In Chapter 2, I show how poet-gardener Celia Thaxter's *An Island Garden* (1894) uses conventions from both the sentimental flower writing that dominated women's popular culture in the mid-nineteenth century and the scientific writings of men botanists and intellectuals. Her book chronicles her obsessive gardening in her remote home on Appledore Island, off the coasts of Maine and New Hampshire. For Thaxter, flowers are both friends to identify with and objects to scrutinize. In the space where sentiment and botany meet is her fiery obsession, one characterized by antisociality and willful confinement that she imagines will allow her to more deeply get to know her flowers. While Slosson sought out connections with both professional and amateur entomologists, Thaxter pursued her gardening obsession totally alone, an obsession she didn't consider a form of knowledge production but one of personal satisfaction. Whereas other critics emphasize the communality and empathy at the center of late-nineteenth-century women's nature writing, I draw attention to the misanthropic energy that drives Thaxter's work, revealing her garden book as a dark fantasy of the austere spinsterhood she could not achieve in her actual married life and only in the literary confines of her garden.

In Chapter 3, I begin to expand late-nineteenth-century women's obsession past the confines of New England. I investigate Harriet Beecher Stowe's overwhelming fascination with the landscape of Florida. I ask what happens when we think of the novelist behind the best selling sentimental novel of the century as an amateur naturalist. I read her New England historical novel, *Oldtown Folks* (1869), which she wrote during her time in Florida, in the context of her desire to describe and disseminate knowledge about her Floridian surroundings. In the novel, Stowe departs from the sentimentality of her earlier work to create Horace Holyoke, a narrator who aspires to objectivity and

detachment. I argue that we can only understand Stowe's experiment with voice in *Oldtown Folks* if we consider it alongside her experiment with nature writing in *Palmetto-Leaves* (1873), her collection of natural history essays on Florida. I read this overstuffed novel as an extended narrative of obsession that alienated some readers yet allowed Stowe to indulge in her interests like never before.

In Chapter 4, I take a wider view of nineteenth-century feminine obsession by demonstrating how the image of the obsessed woman scientist became a cultural figure that circulated not just regionally, but nationally, beyond New England, in a variety of literary texts. I characterize the obsessed woman as a figure that itself inspired obsession in fans and admirers. In particular, I analyze popular images of astronomer Maria Mitchell, who gained national fame after discovering a comet in 1847. I look at the way periodicals and literary works mythologized the supposed obsession Mitchell brought to her work, dramatizing her sleepless nights and her solitary lifestyle. I consider these works narratives of obsession. In these works, it is not areas of naturalist study that invite obsession but the obsessed woman herself. I look at Mitchell's peculiar appearance in Augusta Evans' Civil War novel, *Macaria; or the Altars of Sacrifice* (1864), as a case study in the literary manifestations of the cultural obsession with the astronomer's obsession. Like Stowe and Thaxter, Augusta Evans—a novelist known for her sentimental writing—departs from that form, to create an unsentimental protagonist, an aspiring astronomer who models her life after Maria Mitchell as she refuses marriage and the expectations of the domestic woman in the name of her devotion to science. Despite its pro-Confederate politics, the novel holds up a distinctly New England kind of spinsterhood and model of feminine intellect, showing the possibility for a Southern

counterpart to New England women's obsession. *Macaria* is part of a larger group of novels and stories that re-imagine the story of Maria Mitchell and, in doing so, perpetuate the nineteenth-century cult of the obsessed woman scientist, a mythical figure suppressed by real-life institutions but revered in the minds of readers and writers of narratives of obsession.

What is the legacy of the obsessed spinster? Who is the forbearer of the single, monomaniacal village outcast? What comes in the wake of the motherless entomologist? More spinsters, more outcasts—no more children. In the afterword of my dissertation, I use the framework of “nonreproductive futurity” that Sarah Ensor uses to read Rachel Carson and Sarah Orne Jewett to create a non-genealogical tradition out of late-nineteenth-century narratives of obsession. I showcase texts by late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century women (Kate Bolick, Julie Hecht, and Jamaica Kincaid) who expand the possible identities behind obsession racially, socially, and emotionally, as they get still deeper beneath its hold. They imagine themselves as nineteenth-century spinsters with a violent twist, describing enchanting hysterectomies and dreaming of filicide. Desperate for alone time with their obsessions, they envision eliminating, once and for all, their distractions: patriarchy, children, heteronormative family. This, finally, is obsession as permanent, consummate solitude.

**Chapter 1**  
**Entomology, Fiction, Intoxication:**  
**Annie Trumbull Slosson and the Upsides of Obsession**

For Annie Trumbull Slosson, the study of insects was not merely an interest or a passion—it was an intoxicant whose addictive pleasures she likened to the euphoria of “cocaine and morphia.” A long-time amateur botanist and short-story writer, Slosson didn’t discover what would become the central intellectual pursuit of her life until the age of 47 in 1886, when she decided to read a textbook about insects written for children. Her goal was to “secure a superficial, cursory acquaintance with the more common ‘bugs,’ particularly those which infested my plants and flowers” (“A Few Memories” 85). But the overwhelming elation she felt upon seeing an insect that matched the image and description in her book for the first time was enough to keep her hooked for the rest of her life:

I sat near an open wood fire one day in my old Connecticut home reading the little book and as I reached for a stick of hickory to brighten the fire I saw something moving on the surface of the wood. It was a ‘bug’ and alive, my very first entomological specimen. And it was pictured in my book!...I found that its high sounding name was *Cyllene pictus*. That was the very first scientific insect-name I ever learned. But the habit was formed. You know what an insidious, enthralling habit it is. Victims to cocaine and morphia have been known to break their fetters; even dipsomaniacs have escaped from slavery and rejoiced in glad and sober

freedom. Did an entomologist ever burst his chains? What are drugs to bugs! (“A Few Memories” 85-86).

Slosson describes her initial exposure to entomology as a point of no return. Entomology becomes so “enthraling” that she surrenders herself to it, becoming its willing prisoner and delighted “victim.” It is the language of ecstasy and subsequent addiction that Slosson uses to represent her love of insects and their classification and naming. It is not a pastime or a form of scholarly inquiry so much as it is “a habit.”

Slosson wrote fiction from her teenage years through her fifties, but, in the later decades of her life, she went on to devote most of her time to her entomological obsession. As biographer Edward Ifkovic tells us, “her growing fascination with entomology rapidly began to overshadow her interest in literature” (10). Following the appearance of her first collection of fictional sketches, *The China Collector’s Club*, in 1878, Slosson regularly published short stories in *Harper’s* and *The Atlantic Monthly* in the 1880s and 1890s. Although she continued to publish fiction as late as 1912—with her final collection, *A Local Colorist*—she spent much more energy in the 1900s and 1910s studying and writing about insects, publishing essays and lists of findings in *Entomological News*, *Entomologica Americana*, the *Bulletin of the Brooklyn Entomological Society*, and the *Journal of the New York Entomological Society*, the group which she co-founded in 1892.<sup>1</sup> Her contemporaries considered her as central to

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<sup>1</sup> Slosson was instrumental in the founding of the New York Entomological Society in 1892. In fact, she offered her own home as a gathering place for the society’s early meetings and, according to Ifkovic, “was probably the biggest financial contributor to its coffers” (329). In *Women Scientists in America*, Margaret Rossiter describes Slosson as an “amateur” entomologist who became an “iconoclast” when she shocked the largely male membership of the New York Entomological Society by entering their ranks in 1893. Brought to one of the society’s earliest meetings by a male member, Slosson was immediately out of place. Rossiter goes on to detail this initial meeting of two worlds: “She had been properly escorted to the meeting by one of the older

the New England local color movement as Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman, yet she is virtually unknown today as a writer of fiction, even among critics of women's regionalism. She is much better known as a pioneering woman naturalist, with more than a hundred insect species named for her.<sup>2</sup>

Intoxicating obsessions abound in Slosson's short stories, which chronicle middle-aged, unmarried elderly men and women in rural New England who, like Slosson herself, become infatuated with narrow areas of interest. Take, for example, Uncle Hobby, the man who shows an "intense devotion at different times to different hobbies" in Slosson's short story, "Uncle Hobby" (1893)—first ornithology, then numismatics and botany, and finally ichthyology. Each time Uncle Hobby picks up a new interest, he follows it with an all-consuming rigor: "He was a man of great intelligence and much and varied reading," the narrator tells us ("Uncle Hobby" 194). Aunt Randy, the obsessed entomologist at the center of Slosson's story, "Aunt Randy" (1887), prefers the company of bugs to that of people. In these stories, "obsession" becomes a replacement for sociality and for plot: the interest that the characters cultivate in their chosen object of

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gentleman, but when they arrived most of the men already present were not only smoking cigars but also drinking an unspecified foamy beverage. The men were mortified, but Slosson held her ground and selected a comfortable seat. Soon someone with a clear head provided her with a cup of coffee, a beverage deemed suitable for a feminine throat, and the animated discussion of insects resumed" (94).

<sup>2</sup> To emphasize Slosson's literary reputation in her own time, Ifkovic calls attention to Horace Scudder's 1891 "seminal" *Atlantic Monthly* essay, "New England in the Short Story," "in which he pointedly addresses the contemporary power and success of three women writers, Jewett, Freeman, and Slosson. In doing so, he ensconced Slosson in a temporary literary pantheon" (5-6). Praising Slosson's eccentric characters and use of dialect, Scudder "labels Slosson the artistic equal of Jewett and Freeman, and he believes the three women represent one particular aspect of the evolution of the United States itself" (6). To emphasize the twentieth-century "relegation" of Slosson's literary "reputation" to "footnote status," Ifkovic tells us that even in early feminist recovery projects of New England regional writing, Slosson received little attention: "In Josephine Donovan's otherwise estimable *New England Local Color Literature: A Women's Tradition* (1983), Annie Trumbull Slosson is mentioned once, in the preface, and she is unfortunately called 'Agnes Trumbull Slosson'" (15).

fixation is the narrative energy that sustains these stories which otherwise have no action. These stories of obsessed outcasts, widows, and spinsters eschew conventional plot structures around marriage and romance. The emotional drama and payoff of these strange, quietly radical stories is private intellectual curiosity and extensive physical description. As a result, these literary character sketches take on the informative quality of a naturalist essay.

While Slosson's fiction adapts the techniques of the science essay, the opposite is true of her entomological essays, which call on literary tools—dialogue, first-person narration, vivid description—to deepen their observational powers. In their narrative exposition and figurative evocation of detail and emotion, her essays stick out from the standard essays published in late-nineteenth-century entomological journals, which simply report their findings. Through her literary-scientific essays, Slosson presents an alternative mode of gathering and communicating naturalist knowledge. I call both kinds of Slosson's writing, her essayistic short stories *and* her lyrical natural science essays, “narratives of obsession.” “Obsession” signifies an intense personal immersion in an area of study that has both an emotional and an intellectual reward. What these stories and essays have in common is their imaginative, plotless representation of the pleasures and insights that come with curiosity for the natural world.

Recent scholars of nineteenth-century American literature writing about “our changing understanding of the categories of the literary and scientific”—notably Kristen Case and Laura Walls—have turned to Thoreau (Case 107).<sup>3</sup> While it might seem that

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<sup>3</sup> In her essay on Thoreau's *Kalendar*—the collection of lists and charts documenting extensive observations about the natural world that he included in his *Journal*—Case suggests that this text represents an intersection of literary representation and scientific knowledge. She argues that “through his daily practices of walking and writing, Thoreau arrived at a particular way of being-

Slosson's work makes more sense in the more contemporaneous context of late-nineteenth-century literary realism, a genre shown by many scholars to borrow deeply from scientific discourses,<sup>4</sup> Slosson places her own work in this earlier mid-century Thoreauvian moment of the literary sketch and other fragmentary essayistic forms that use strategies from both literary expression and scientific description. Slosson names Thoreau as a writer whose essays successfully address "technical subjects" with a "delightfully literary touch" ("Entomology and Literature" 51). Laura Walls claims that the focus of Thoreau's nature writing is "a space 'between' the separating poles of 'objective' and 'subjective'" (27) as he expressed in his Journal:

I think that the man of science makes this mistake, and the mass of mankind along with him: that you should coolly give your chief attention to the phenomenon which excites you as something independent on you, and not as it is related to you. The important fact is its effect on me... With regard to such objects, I find that it is not they themselves (with which the men of science deal) that concern me; the point of interest is somewhere between me and them (quoted in Walls 27).

Slosson's narratives of obsession take Thoreau's imagined intimacy to a new extreme: there is no boundary anymore between observer and observed. Obsession brings the observer so close to her object of study that the two become one.

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with and thus of knowing the nonhuman—a way that should be of interest to contemporary efforts to rethink the nature/culture binary" (108). Walls highlights the generic fluidity of Thoreau's essays: "Thoreau deliberately extends the genre of the scientific expedition to compel an *inner* exploration in tandem with the outer" (21).

<sup>4</sup> See Tina Gianquitto and Lydia Fisher, ed., *America's Darwin: Darwinian Theory and U.S. Literary Culture* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2014), Maurice Lee, *Uncertain Chances: Science, Skepticism, and Belief in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), and Joseph Carroll, *Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

In this chapter, I introduce Annie Trumbull Slosson and her narratives of obsession as a new source that can enrich our account of the intersections between literature and science for women writers at the end of the nineteenth century. I start by showing how Slosson's short stories use the conventions of naturalist science—investigation, collection, curiosity—as alternatives to the social relationships that characterize standard literary plots (marriage, family, friendship). The result is a non-normative form of literary representation that replaces romantic and social connection with naturalist obsession. Then, I demonstrate how Slosson mobilizes the devices of fictional narrative in her entomological essays to challenge the ways natural scientists obtain and present knowledge. For her, the subjectivity of storytelling and lived experience can contribute to naturalist understandings of the world. I end by briefly turning to the work of three of Slosson's contemporaries—two naturalists (entomologist Mary Treat and botanist Katharine Dooris Sharp) and one literary writer (Sarah Orne Jewett)—to show how we might begin to expand the category “narratives of obsession” to a more expansive set of literary-scientific texts by women writers experimenting with the limits of curiosity.

**I. “There was just one thing that kept her up, occupied her mind, amused her all day long, and made her willing to live”**

In Slosson's fiction, the obsessions of her characters determine everything about them: from their name (Botany Bay, Fishin' Jimmy, Animal Ann, Uncle Hobby), to the very way they see the world. Behold Apple Jonathan, the Stonington, Connecticut apple-

dealer at the center of Slosson's short story, "Apple Jonathan" (1898), who "was not merely a dealer in apples; he was a lover of the fruit, which he knew thoroughly in all its forms, stages, and developments...all his thoughts and his words were of his favorite fruit" (*Dumb Foxglove* 52). He claims that apples are the key to understanding everything—from the shape of the earth ("it's like a apple, kind o' round, but a little flattened off at the stem an' blossom ends") to arithmetic ("Teacher says, 'If John's got fifteen apples, an' he gives Mary six' ... 'how many,' she says, 'has he got left?'"") to "the history of the universe" ("A apple was the one thing Adam an' Eve couldn't stan' bein' tempted by") (62-63, 64, 65-66). For Jonathan, apples are both a source of physical sustenance and universal knowledge. Apples are a worldview: a lens through which to see and understand the whole world. He cannot separate his obsession with apples from any other matters of interest or any other experiences in his everyday life. In this way, apple-selling is both a professional distinction and a personal identity for Jonathan who makes a living off of dealing apples and also defines himself through it.

For Slosson's characters, mere familiarity with an area of interest will not suffice—complete immersion is the only option. Each time Uncle Hobby picks up a new interest, he follows it with an all-consuming rigor, as if it were his first and only:

He had studied ornithology, collecting birds and nests and eggs, haunting woods and swamps watching for specimens, and climbing trees for nests. Then he had taken up numismatics, bought coins and copper tokens, and paid more than he could well afford for a cent of some particular year... Then came botany, and he tramped all day in search of rare and curious plants... talked himself breathless over the Linnaean system, exogens and endogens, phenogamous and

cryptogamous plants. Again it was ichthyology, and he hung about the docks and watched the fishermen bring in their spoils...All this time he was not considered insane; only a little odd. He was a man of great intelligence and much and varied reading (“Uncle Hobby” 194).

It is this intensity that Slosson admires most in entomologist A.S. Packard, for whom all other matters of the world lead back to insects. She recounts her friendship with the distinguished professor in an essay for the *Journal of the New York Entomological Society*. “He was an accomplished, well-read man and could converse with charm upon varied topics, but he never wholly forgot his favorite pursuit,” she writes. “In the midst of talk upon literature, art, travel, a faint almost hidden entomological allusion would rouse him to capture and hold it” (“A Few Memories II” 94). In this way, with his persistent return to his “favorite pursuit,” renowned scientist Packard is not unlike the fictional Apple Jonathan.

The characters in nearly all of Slosson’s narratives of obsession are similarly singular in their devotion to their areas of interest: they can only think about the single thing that they are passionate about. “They’re the one thing in all this shaky, onsartin’ airth of ourn that stands by you allus, an’ don’t never fail nor disapp’int,” says Apple Jonathan of his beloved fruit (*Dumb Foxglove* 53). Slosson uses the same phrase—“the one thing”—in representing the intensity of Colossy Bragg’s obsession with cooking in “Dumb Foxglove” (1895): “There was just one thing that kept her up, occupied her mind, amused her all day long, and made her willing to live and be so different from the other children” (11). In “Botany Bay,” too, the study of plants for the titular botanist is his “one

affection,” his “one pervading thought” (*Seven Dreamers* 74, 72). The all-consuming force of these interests makes it impossible to have any other interests.

There is a recurring logic behind these characters’ devotion to the pursuit of a single area of interest, of “the one thing,” the “one affection,” the “one pervading thought”: if this insight into this “one thing” can tell them everything else about the world, then there is nothing else worth dedicating their time to. In “Clavis” (1896), the narrator articulates this theory as he reflects on the origins of his obsessive sensibility:

From my earliest years there had been a constant wonder in my mind, a strange, eager questioning about the meaning of things. I did not care for answers men give to such questions—for the explanations found in learned books or the wisdom taught in schools. All my life long I had known that there was one key to all the mysteries of which this world is so full, but that no man had ever found it.

I had felt sure that if anyone could learn the meaning of just one simple thing in the woods, or the hills, or among the flowers or birds, he would understand everything; there would be no more puzzles, nothing hidden or unexplained, and from my boyhood I had striven, thirsted, to find that key (*Dumb Foxglove* 139-140).

Curious here is the way in which the universal and the particular exist alongside each other. Slosson alternates freely between the language of massive generalization (“the meaning of things,” “all the mysteries of which this world is so full”) and the language of tiny specificity (“one simple thing,” “one key”). In *The Orchid Thief* (1998), her book on the fanaticism of twentieth-century Floridian orchid-collectors, Susan Orlean describes the sprawling scope of obsession—the large rewards a seemingly small interest gives us:

“the reason it matters to care passionately about something is that it whittles the world down to a more manageable size. It makes the world seem not huge and empty but full of possibility” (109). This is exactly what obsession does for Apple Jonathan, Colossy Bragg, Botany Bay, Fishin’ Jimmy, Aunt Randy, and Animal Ann: it “whittles the world down to a more manageable size” even as it contains the universe.<sup>5</sup>

In Slosson’s stories, the meaning a person can get from her obsession is life-making: the curiosity to study and collect specimens becomes a stand-in for the social relationships we normally see in fiction. For these uncoupled, elderly, sexless characters, the interest in objects in nature is a compelling alternative to the love of people. Following the disappearance of her husband—“a shiftless, idle vagabond” whom “she never says nothin’ about” for “she don’t think no great o’ men-folks” (*Seven Dreamers* 93, 87)—and the tragic death of her young son, Aunt Randy discovers the delight of observing insects as a new source of happiness in her life. She describes to the narrator her particularly close attachment to a caterpillar that she treats like her late son:

‘I used to shet myself up here all day an’ think. I couldn’t have no posy gard’n or anything like that, now the little feller wa’n’t here to play in it...But one day I had to go down the road a piece, of an errand, an’ before I could help it I ketcht sight of a big clump o’ fire-weed shinin’ all pink in the sun...An’ as I was stoopin’ down a-lookin’ an’ tryin’ to get my handk’chief out, I see a big worm on the fire-

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<sup>5</sup> This belief of Slosson’s characters that the specific stands in for the general is a reworking of Ernst Haeckel’s “biogenetic law that ‘ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny’”—the theory that an organism’s embryonic development replicates the evolutionary progress of its species. Haeckel’s theory not only dominated late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century natural science discourse, but also social and cultural matters, becoming a major influence for the naturalist novel. William Rossi claims that, earlier in the nineteenth century, we see an earlier version of this theory in Thoreau’s writing, most notably his use of “leaves and roots” metaphors for human development in his *Journal* (32-33).

weed...just settin' up on its hind-legs in the humanest way...an' I felt the queerest drawin' to it...I tell ye, from that minnit I 'dopted that creeter an' took him right inter my heart. I hadn't cared for a livin' thing afore sence that little coffin went out my front gate... 'Twas a new thing to me, after all them lonesome months, to have some one at home waitin' for me when I was out, an' I used to hurry back 's quick 's I could jest 's if the boy was watchin' at the winder with his pretty little nose all flat agin the glass' (94-97).

She names the caterpillar Jacob, after her son, and follows its every move, until it transforms into a butterfly: "I watched him...till the end come, an' he was big an' beautiful, brown an' buff an' pink, an' with wings!" (101). Just as Slosson's own delight in discovering the first insect that matched an image in her book, at age 47, sparked the interest that would define the rest of her life, Randy's first personal encounter with an insect in her middle age is the start of a new life interest: "And so she lived on, surrounded by her insect friends, loving them, understanding them, calling each one by his Christian name, and quite happy in their society" (92). Her interest in and intimacy with insects not only takes the place of her departed family but also that of a larger community—a "society" to call her own.

With her entomological society, she has no use for other people. The narrator tells us that Randy "avoided the neighbors, shut herself up in dark rooms, never went to 'meetin'' or 'sewin' s'ciety' or any such gathering, and refused to admit the minister or other friendly visitors" (86). Shut in, Randy runs free. Her solitude is a wild party. Catching butterflies, the kooky would-be crone has the same look of surprise youth that lit up Harriet Mann Miller after she fell in love with birding. Here she is, catching

butterflies: “Though apparently rather elderly, she was dashing about, her wide cap-border flapping around her face, her limp calico gown twisted about her ankles by the breeze, and her long arms waving in the air” (84). She gets her energy from her isolation. Randy’s self-reliance is, in the end, the most defining element of her character. Where Slosson’s other characters gain their nicknames from their objects of infatuation, Randy has named herself after her autonomy: “Her name’s Mis’ Gates, an’ Randy’s short for Mirandy; but...she’s so independent, an’ sot on not belongin’ to no man, she won’t let any one call her My anything, so she’s left it off o’ Randy” (87). Beyond superseding closeness with other people, obsession rears absolute self-possession.

## **II. “Side by side, stand the two names, the easy and the difficult, the simple and the scientific”**

Not much happens in Slosson’s “narratives of obsession.” Description becomes a replacement for action: in place of a conventional plot, the narrators of these stories offer us character sketches. Slosson is more interested in capturing a sensibility—that of the endlessly inquisitive self-trained naturalist—than she is in telling a story. The subtitle of “Aunt Randy” is “An Entomological Sketch”—a label we can apply to nearly all of Slosson’s stories. What she says of her story, “Anna Malaan,” is true of her “narratives of obsession” generally: “I use the word ‘story,’ but in one way there is to be no story. This is a mere descriptive sketch. There is no plot, little incident, and no *dénouement*” (*Dumb Foxglove* 94). By calling her narratives “sketches,” Slosson places her work in the tradition of the “literary sketch”—the early-to mid-nineteenth-century mode of writing that, as Kristie Hamilton tells us in *America’s Sketchbook: The Cultural Life of a*

*Nineteenth-Century Literary Genre* (1998), combines the subjectivity of a short story with the “documentary” authority of an essay to create short, static, purely observational fictions (2). With her narratives of obsession, Slosson makes use of the brevity and plotlessness of the literary sketch and also embraces the implicit objectivity of its genre.

Description is, after all, the fundamental aim of Slosson’s narratives of obsession. Characters like Aunt Randy, Uncle Hobby, Botany Bay, Animal Ann, and Fishin’ Jimmy become narrative specimens to name and characterize, like the animals and plants that they themselves name and collect. Indeed, the very process of naming and describing is something that Slosson thematizes in her stories. The narrator of “Aunt Randy”—an outsider visiting a small New Hampshire town who is fascinated by Randy’s all-consuming passion for entomology—finds especially striking Randy’s naming of the insects she collects: Randy gives all of her butterflies, moths, worms, and other “flyin’ an’ crawlin’ an’ hoppin’ creeters” human names (*Seven Dreamers* 86). “There was a big dragon-fly with spotted wings whom she addressed as Horace,” the narrator tells us (92). At first, the narrator—who herself has read entomological books and knows the scientific names of popular bugs—is bothered by Randy’s unscientific method of naming. Of the butterfly that Randy calls Mary Ann Tough, the narrator says this: “Vanessa antiopa vulgarized into Mary Ann Tough!” (90). Spending more time around her, though, the narrator finds a surprising value in Randy’s unconventional mode of describing insects: “As she dwelt upon the salient points of his character...I seemed to see a humorous twinkle in his big eyes, and for the moment firmly believed in Horace’s sense of the ludicrous” (92). The narrator does, after all, find “fresh” and “delightful” Randy’s ignorance of and detachment from professional entomology, which she describes with

condescending admiration: “She had never met an entomologist or any one interested in the study of her favorites, and all her information was derived from her own experience. So her talk was fresh and delightful, and quite free from polysyllabic terms and the ever-changing nomenclature of the study as we find it in books” (88). Although she momentarily dismisses Randy’s association of her specimens with human emotions and individual identities, the narrator goes on to see the upsides of this unpolished way of practicing entomology. With her attention to character and the vibrancy of her descriptions, we might call the approach Randy takes to entomology a literary one. We can apply the same term to Randy’s accounts of insects that Slosson applies to her own short stories—“descriptive sketch.”

Slosson took seriously the possibility that a literary way of seeing—or, sketching—might enhance the way an entomologist names and identifies her specimens. In her essay, “Common Versus Proper” (1893), which appeared in the *Journal of the New York Entomological Society*, Slosson imagines an ideal language of entomological study that is simultaneously imaginative and playful in the vividness of its descriptions and precise and rigorous in its taxonomical work. She suggests that local, unread experts—like the fictional Aunt Randy—can teach professional entomologists new, better ways of seeing their objects of study. Slosson begins the essay by recounting her extensive experience walking through the “northern hills of New England,” looking for insects, “in the quiet autumn days when tourists and boarders have gone to their city homes,” when her “only friends and companions are the villagers themselves”:

These are intelligent, appreciative people, but not what we call liberally educated.

They know no Greek or Latin and could not easily learn even the dreadful mixture

of tongues which passes for these languages in the nomenclature of entomology. But they possess, many of them, keen powers of observation, a true love of nature and a bountiful stock of that patience and persistence which all fishermen, hunters and woodsmen so readily learn. So there is the material of which to make admirable collectors (“Common Versus Proper” 1-2).

In order to train these untrained villagers, Slosson must use their language—a vernacular free of the “polysyllabic appellations” of scientific naming: “I can safely say that my collection would be far smaller, infinitely less valuable and interesting, had I been one of those who confine themselves strictly to the use of scientific and polysyllabic appellations in speaking of my favorites,” Slosson tells us (1). Slosson goes on to describe her method of instructing local observers to discern the kinds of small differences in appearance and behavior that a professional entomologist pays attention to. She manages to translate the “polysyllabic” discourse of entomology into a vernacular while maintaining the careful nuances of its study:

Shall I tell the simple souls that my desiderata are Lepidoptera, particularly the Heterocera, that I am just now especially interested in the Bombycidae and the Notodontians? No, by so doing I should at once scare away my neophytes and lose all chance of making them useful to me...But they know what millers are...But a new difficulty arises, I do not want all millers...a term which is at once shortened and put into local dialect by my pupils and thus becomes the ‘ma’sh miller’ (2).

Even though she refers to these men and women as her “neophytes,” her “pupils,” who have the potential to be “useful” to her, Slosson isn’t exactly watering down the

nuances of entomological observation for these local collectors. Rather, she is using a different language to express it. Together, with these local collectors, Slosson comes up with an alternate naming system that, for all its apparent simplicity and accessibility, is as complicated as its professional counterpart. It is a system that accounts for all the subtleties and differences that “polysyllabic appellations” signify but without the unwieldy language of entomological terminology.

Striking here, too, is the way in which this becomes a collaborative process. She is not merely teaching these men and women what to look for in bugs. Often, they are teaching her, calling her attention to something that she herself has not picked up on, “a peculiarity of marking or habit which they themselves discover” (2). Slosson complicates and begins to undo the hierarchy of authority that she sets up at the beginning of the essay, with her as the instructor of these uneducated villagers. “We have a vocabulary of our own, I and my collectors,” Slosson tells us (3). She and her citizen scientists, the collectors she’s collected, are momentarily on the same level.

This is a nonstandard practice for an entomologist to adopt at the end of the nineteenth century—a moment when entomology, as W. Conner Sorensen claims, no longer depended on the contributions of local, non-professional experts: “From 1880 to 1900, when entomology became more firmly institutionalized in university programs requiring advanced degrees, and when biological investigations moved increasingly into laboratory settings, contributions by amateurs were no longer as important” (259).

According to Elizabeth Keeney, “journals and societies” associated with newly professional naturalist sciences like botany and astronomy openly dismissed amateurs as incapable of providing useful new knowledge, “imposing both scholarly publication and

research as membership requirements” (130).<sup>6</sup> The few professional organizations that did include amateurs, like the American Astronomical Society, did so in an attempt to “control them,” using them for financial support (131-32). In this way, Slosson’s alliance with local collectors unversed in the formalities of entomology is a departure from her own moment, a throwback to a mid-century conception of natural history and entomology that encouraged entomologists to “take full advantage of ‘amateur’ talent...in a democratic system at a time when ‘amateurs’ could and did make solid contributions to entomology” (Sorensen 259). Slosson welcomes to entomology the same kind of joy and intensity that her uneducated fictional characters bring to their field of naturalist study.

Slosson extends this disruption of the hierarchy between professionals and amateurs to the level of language: Slosson suggests that the ideal mode of representing entomological discovery is a hybrid language, one that combines the descriptive language of the literary sketch with the taxonomical language of naturalist science. In arguing for this simultaneously literary and scientific language, Slosson recounts the experience of talking about insects with “educated” non-specialists. “You may not believe it, but there are actually some educated and accomplished men and women, scholars in various branches of art, science and literature quite removed from our particular field, who do not care to spend the rest of their days in acquiring a new language, or jargon,” she writes (4). By using the dismissive term “jargon,” Slosson momentarily aligns herself with non-

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<sup>6</sup> Keeney describes one publication—the *Botanical Gazette*—that “made its professional approach abundantly clear.” One 1880 editorial “chastised amateurs for ‘spending so much valuable time in getting together material that has already been collected, or is not important enough to justify the trouble’ ... The remedy, suggested the editorial, was for amateurs to form clubs through which work could be directed by professionals, and for club leaders to send notable finds to journal editors, who could then publish what was worthy. The message should have been obvious to any amateur: this journal represented the interests of professionals” (128).

specialists who may be alienated by the “polysyllabic” language of scientific naming. Slosson describes one scholar-friend, in an unnamed field unrelated to entomology, who is responsible for some of the “rarest specimens” in her collection: “He is quite capable of committing to memory the scientific names of our entomological lists, but he has something else to do with his time and brains. So he gives the insects he finds, or looks for, names of his own coining” (4). The names he creates become surprisingly accurate, offering unexpected insight into the creatures, just like Aunt Randy’s human characterizations of her “insect friends” eventually reveal entomological truths to her previously skeptical visitor. He calls “the inconstant and variable geometer, *Hyperetis amicaria*” “Proteus.” He gives the name “scalloped sphinx” to “*Paonias excoecatus*” and “glowing eye” to “a large noctuid whose eyes shine in the darkness like rubies or garnets” (4). Just as her exchanges with local collectors depend on her translation of “polysyllabic appellations” into accessible language, so, too does her relationship with her scholar-friend require a vernacular way of talking about bugs: “I obtain from him...by the means of this vocabulary of home-made names, rare and desirable insects which I should long lose I am sure if I asked for them, or spoke of them only by the long, often meaningless terms which he has no patience or leisure to learn” (5). Entomological terminology, even more than being “often meaningless,” closes off the kind of conversations and exchanges with non-specialists, both educated and uneducated, who can actually lead her to new discoveries and new knowledge.

Slosson’s crucial point here is this: knowledge of scientific names is, finally, not the same thing as insight into the subtleties of insects. “The natural error” of many entomologists, Slosson tells us, is the belief that “these names always have some

legitimate meaning” (4). Naming is not knowing or describing or understanding or explaining. Thus, the language with which so-called experts communicate expertise is an artificial system that does not always sufficiently describe the things that they name. There is something about the idiosyncratic coining of popular terms—by both uneducated amateurs and scholars inside and outside the field of entomology—that shows a different, deeper kind of knowledge about particular bugs. Entomology is simply one language of many in which collectors and observers may talk about bugs. For Slosson, it may not be the best one. Rather, the best language might your own—the set of terms you come up with that make legible the qualities that matter most to you, qualities that another observer or collector may not value.

This is exactly what the narrator of Slosson’s story, “Botany Bay” (1886), implies when he describes Bay’s personal method of classifying plants: “I do not think he could read or write; he knew nothing of any botanical systems or artificial classifying of plants, but he had a sort of system of his own and by some curious instinct seemed to recognize kinship between certain herbs, which in later years I found were placed in one family by more scientific men—not closer observers” (*Seven Dreamers* 56). It is when we put these languages—the literary and the scientific—in dialogue with each other, Slosson tells us, that we produce new knowledge and make new discoveries. “Why should we not, in time, have an Index Entomologicus, like that of Wood, where side by side, stand the two names, the easy and the difficult, the simple and the scientific?” Slosson asks (“Common Versus Proper” 5). The ambition is to make accessible the description of scientific observation while maintaining the complexity of scientific language.

This was the goal behind the attempts of late-nineteenth-century women naturalists to popularize the natural sciences for a more general audience in magazines and textbooks. Slosson herself did not actively contribute to this popularization—she published no natural science essays, only short stories, in magazines and books, and limited her scientific contributions to entomological journals—but the possibility she introduces of “the simple and the scientific” existing alongside each other became a serious project for other women writers and scientists. Sally Kohlstedt offers an account of the mid-century “proponents of science education for women” and the kinds of natural science textbooks they crafted for young girls.<sup>7</sup>

Efforts to make science accessible for young girls and women continued later in the century in new forms and contexts. With their “sequestration into scientific backwaters in the 1880s and 1890s, when male scientists felt their disciplines were experiencing a ‘crisis of impending feminization,’” most women scientists were confined to local amateur clubs and organizations, excluded from professional organizations (Madsen-Brooks 27). Many of the women who did break into professional circles used their roles to make science more accessible to an unprofessional audience. Leslie Madsen-Brooks tells the story of later women museum scientists like botanist Alice Eastwood, agrostologist Agnes Chase, and ichthyologist Rosa Smith Eigenmann, who used their “curatorial and leadership positions” to increase the “popularization and democratization of science” by organizing “outreach” programs for students and museum

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<sup>7</sup> Emma Hart Willard, Mary Lyons, Almira Hart Lincoln, and other “early proponents of science education for women,” as described by Sally Kohlstedt, worked alongside textbook writers and illustrators to create a curriculum for young girls that emphasized the natural sciences (87). Kohlstedt shows how textbooks like Almira Phelps’ *Familiar Lectures on Botany* “included history, poetry, and bibliographical sketches along with the descriptions of specific specimens” as a “teaching tool” (87).

visitors and writing for a public audience (29). Tina Gianquitto identifies a similar impulse to popularize science in late-nineteenth-century women nature essayists like Charlotte Taylor, Sophie Bledsoe Herrick, and Mary Treat, who “knowingly appealed to the growing discussions about science conducted in public forums such as lecture halls and magazines” (137). In the preface of her collection of essays, *Home Studies in Nature* (1885), Mary Treat describes the process of translating her scientific work for a wider audience: “Some of them were printed in scientific journals, but as the interest deepened, the wish came to tell a greater number of readers what I saw around me, and I therefore sent notes of my investigations to some of our popular periodicals, mostly to *Harper’s Magazine*, and this volume is composed mainly of these papers” (5). Thus, although Slosson herself never produced the “Index Entomologicus” she dreamed of, with “the easy and the difficult,” “the simple and the scientific” next to each other, the work of her contemporaries achieved this popularizing of science in different forms.

### **III. “For surely it is not entomology and just as surely no one could call it literature”**

“Entomology and literature work well together in harness, each being a good ‘running mate’ for the other,” Slosson writes in “Entomology and Literature” (1916), an essay that appeared in the *Bulletin of the Brooklyn Entomological Society*, in which she describes both how literary expression might benefit from the techniques of entomology and how entomology might benefit from the techniques of literary expression. For Slosson, there are two different kinds of influence that the two modes of thinking and writing might have on each other: one is a surface-level influence of language and

naming and the other is a deeper, more fundamental influence of genre play and experimentation. On the surface level of language, the ornate naming system of entomology can become a source of inspiration for literary writers:

Some authors are troubled to find names for their stories, titles for their books.

An entomologist need never be at a loss in the matter. Let him take a volume at random from the shelf which holds his bound magazines. He will find it bristling with suggestions, scintillating with bright hints. Ah, the stories I have wanted to write as I looked over the index of some one of our journals. What an epic I might write on 'The Song of Thyreonotus' from an old magazine; it is a whole Greek tragedy in itself... 'Cannibalistic Tendencies of Certain Females' suggests a tale of lady vampires or ghouls, and 'A Flight of Water Boatmen' is not a bad name for a sea story. These things show, I think, how entomology may help the literary man (51).

Here, the unexpected imaginativeness, playfulness—even mischievousness—of entomological nomenclature can spark the imagination of the fiction writer. The crossover is a superficial one that deals with outward matters of language and stylistic ornamentation. The entomological title or phrase is a mere jumping-off point, a momentary muse for the “literary man.”

The alternative exchange—what the literary can give to the scientific—goes beyond the surface concerns of language, encouraging a deeper kind of formal experimentation with genre. “As to the reverse, how a literary touch adds to the charm of entomological writings, need I try to prove it?” Slosson asks. She goes on to call for a hybrid kind of literary-entomological essay:

Several of the writers for this and for our other journals make of their papers concerning dry, technical subjects, delightful essays, real idylls...I read them with great pleasure enjoying them as I do the essays of Thoreau, Burroughs, Muir, and Bradford Torrey. A certain orthopterist in a New England town often gives a delightful literary touch to his scientific descriptions, making the reader see sporting elves, fairies or brownies, in green or wood color, instead of leaping insects with their polysyllabic titles (51).

Slosson imagines an entomological essay that tells a story, an entomologist who delivers her findings along with the vivid details of a literary description. The result, she suggests, is not one that we can call “literature” or “entomology.” She ends her essay abruptly, almost overwhelmed by her own call for genre play: “But I must stop here. This is a wandering, erratic sort of essay, and, as I look over it I see that its title is most misleading. For surely it is not entomology and just as surely no one could call it literature” (52). Entomology values the skill of classification—and the knowledge that classification gives us—but Slosson calls for a writing that resists classification, that embraces the messiness of crossing categories.

In her introduction to *Literature and Science in the Nineteenth Century*, Laura Otis notes that literary and scientific forms of writing shared many characteristics and often even overlapped throughout the nineteenth century in the U.S. and Britain.<sup>8</sup> Renée Bergland describes the ways in which science and literature intersected in the discourses

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<sup>8</sup> Otis claims that “breadth of reading played a central role in science, because to establish their authority as writers many scientists needed to show a familiarity with the canonical texts of the Western literary tradition” (xix). She goes on to suggest that “for most of the nineteenth century scientists and novelists shared a common vocabulary and common literary techniques... The same *subjects* occupied both scientific and literary writers. The quest for ‘origins’ developed simultaneously in studies of language, geology, zoology, and numerous other fields” (xxiv-xxv).

surrounding pre-institutional science: “Today, the sciences and humanities are often seen as separate lines of inquiry requiring different skills...But until the late nineteenth century, the worlds of human thought were generally seen as contiguous and overlapping...Often, poets and scientists were one and the same: writers fiddled with microscopes and telescopes while scientists read, recited, and even wrote poetry” (*Sexing of Science* 37). In this way, science and poetry were mutual sources of inspiration: as Bergland tells us, Emily Dickinson’s “avid interest in astronomy” and Whitman’s “knowledge of physiology and physics” informed their poetry (39).<sup>9</sup> Similarly, it was not uncommon for scientists to pursue literary ambitions. According to Bergland, astronomer Maria Mitchell “devoted almost as much time to literature as she did to science, reading a great deal of fiction and poetry and producing a regular stream of tales for women and poems for her Coterie” (37). “Outraged” by the “false opposition set up between scientific truth and aesthetic beauty,” Mitchell claimed that “she would rather have written a great poem than discovered a comet” (40). In her own call for a writing that combines “entomology and literature,” Slosson suggests that these ambitions are not mutually exclusive.

Nature essays in magazines like *Harper’s*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *Lippincott’s* merged scientific appeal with literary strategies of representation as they attracted a popular audience (Gianquitto 137). According to Sorensen, “popularizer” of science was a role perceived to be uniquely suited for women, who, in writing for nonacademic

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<sup>9</sup> This exchange between literature and science is especially important in an observational field like entomology, dependent on the imaginative power of description and the contributions of amateur observers in the field. The Entomological Society of Pennsylvania—“the first society formed exclusively for the pursuit of entomology in America”—was started in 1842 by four men who called themselves “literary gentlemen,” including Solomon Oswald, who ran a bookstore in York, Pennsylvania (Sorensen 15).

publications, “fulfilled societal expectations of a distinct ‘woman’s sphere’ in science” (Gianquitto 190). Sorensen tells the story of entomologist Charlotte DeBernier Scarbrough Taylor, a frequent contributor to *Harper’s*, who did important work on the “life histories of insects harmful to southern crops”: “Despite the accuracy of her observations, her work seems to have received little or no recognition from scientists or agriculturists. This lack of recognition was most likely due to the mode of publication in a popular magazine and to Taylor’s lively, entertaining literary style. As a result, Taylor was viewed as a popularizer rather than a serious scientist” (190-91). With her vision for an “Index Entomologicus,” where “the easy and the difficult, the simple and the scientific” exist alongside each other, Slosson imagines a world where the popularizer can also contribute serious knowledge to the scientific community.

Although Slosson herself was not a popularizer, publishing regularly in entomological journals, she valued the power of literary flourish in narrating scientific discovery. It is the descriptive specificity of people and places—not the action of plot—that Slosson brings from fiction to entomological expression. In her essay, “Spring Collecting in Northern Florida” (1893), Slosson uses the hallmark of regional fiction—namely, dialect—to enhance the sharpness of her descriptions. She includes the local vernacular names for the insects she sees (“melonbugs,” “bee-flies,” “snake doctors,” “tumble bug”) and ends her essay with a piece of overheard dialogue: “Seems like them can’le-flies all gwine off this year to the World’s Fa’r” (149, 150, 152). With its first-person narration of daily life experiences, “Florida Field Notes” (1894), a collection of brief entomological observations of one late winter, takes on the diaristic form of a nature journal in the tradition of Susan Fenimore Cooper’s *Rural Hours* (1850). Thus, when

Slosson reports her entomological findings, she mixes and borrows from a complicated cluster of genres and modes of writing.

“Narrative of obsession” is a term that we can use to describe both the literary and scientific writing of a larger circle of late-nineteenth-century women writers—both those who identified themselves as naturalists (Mary Treat, Katharine Dooris Sharp, Graceanna Lewis) and those who identified themselves as literary writers (Celia Thaxter, Sarah Orne Jewett). Mary Treat—the entomologist, ornithologist, botanist, and essayist who published six books and more than 100 articles in both professional scientific journals and popular magazines, including *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper’s*, and *Lippincott’s*—describes her interests in the same terms of obsession that appear in Slosson’s work. In the opening of *Home Studies in Nature*, Treat tells us that her “time and attention have been devoted almost exclusively” to her scientific investigations (15). “I soon became so deeply interested that I scarcely took note of time, and the small hours of the morning frequently found me absorbed in the work,” she writes (141). Treat was willing to sacrifice herself—literally—to understand the insects and plants she discovered: she once offered her own finger as prey for a flesh-eating plant (Gianquitto 140). This kind of absorption is the defining quality that botanist Katharine Dooris Sharp associates with women scientists. In her essay, “The Woman Botanist,” included in her collection, *Summer in a Bog* (1913), Sharp claims that the intense passion women bring to botany is innate: “The true botanist is born, not made. . . . When, as a child, she sought the woods on holidays, bringing back the precious spoil of flower, fern, and sedge, the woman who would desire to name and classify was foreshadowed” (91). Sharp, like Slosson, presents

naturalist curiosity as a quality that is out of the individual's control, as a passion that takes over her rather than a hobby she chooses to pursue.

Identifying stories and essays as “narratives of obsession” can help us understand the scientific sensibility of writing that might otherwise seem totally unrelated to naturalist science. These literary works, like Slosson's stories, depend on absorption and engrossment in an object of fixation rather than relationships with other people. Consider, as a non-naturalist science narrative of obsession, Sarah Orne Jewett's short story, “The Queen's Twin” (1899), which describes a Maine widow's obsession with Queen Victoria. Having been born on the same day as the Queen, Abby Martin believes that the two of them are twins. She has spent her life collecting pictures, newspaper clippings—any artifact she can find related to Queen Victoria—building a shrine to her in her house, on a remote island where she lives alone: “She's most covered her best-room wall now,” Abby's friend says of her collection. “She keeps that room shut up sacred as a meetin'-house!”(20). The Queen becomes, for Abby, a specimen to study, not unlike the insects that Aunt Randy collects. Abby has, the narrator tells us, “come to live a good deal in her own thoughts” (7). In identifying “The Queen's Twin” as a narrative of obsession, we can see Abby Martin's fascination with the Queen not as mere celebrity worship but as something closer to naturalist study, something she pursues with the rigor and passion that Slosson's self-trained entomologists and botanists bring to their studies. The collection of pictures, newspaper clippings, and other documents that Abby amasses reaches the thoughtfulness and completeness of Randy's collection of insects or Botany Bay's collection of plants. Although she does not study the natural world, Abby Martin belongs in the tradition of Jewett's obsessive students of nature, alongside Sylvia, the

budding naturalist at the center of “A White Heron” (1886), whom I examine in the context of Celia Thaxter in Chapter 2, and Nan, the young woman who rejects marriage to begin a career as a doctor in *A Country Doctor* (1884).

This is precisely what these narratives of obsession do: reject marriage, romance, and other sources of conventional plot development. The curiosity and wonderment of naturalist description are so energizing that action, change, and human connection aren't just unnecessary. They're toxic—distractions that get in the way of obsession. Obsession is vitality. If we read Charlotte Perkins Gilman's iconic story, “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1899), about a sick woman who gets confined to a room by her physician husband but who, in her failed recovery, can only think about the room's creepy wallpaper, as a narrative of obsession, the torment behind infatuation turns into triumph. Now, at the end, when the narrator walks over her husband's body, her obsession is not maddening or deadening but, like Aunt Randy's, life-giving.

Animation and elation are the ultimate payoffs of Slosson's style of obsession. Recall the exhilaration with which Slosson recalls her first discovery of an insect that matched one in a book she read: “It was a ‘bug’ and alive, my very first entomological specimen. And it was pictured in my book!” It is that sense of exclamation that drives the passion and enthusiasm of her unmarried characters. In describing the literary naturalist science essays she admires most, “the essays of Thoreau, Burroughs, Muir and Bradford Torrey,” she repeats the word “delight” excessively—speaking of these “delightful essays” and their “delightful literary touch” and the “great pleasure” that they give her (“Entomology and Literature” 51). “Few who have not entered upon this study can imagine the pleasure to be found in it,” ornithologist Graceanna Lewis writes in her

essay, “Birds and Their Friends” (13). With Slosson’s narratives of obsession, this becomes a possibility: we can “imagine the pleasure” of naturalist science without actually practicing it ourselves. These stories model for us the delight of complete immersion in a single area of interest: they teach us to become as captivated by the self-taught naturalists they describe as the men and women themselves are by their chosen object of study. Under the scrutiny of obsession, the naturalist’s inquisitiveness becomes a thing of beauty, enchantment—an intoxicant.

**Chapter 2**  
**Between Sentiment and Science:**  
**Celia Thaxter's Obsessions in the Garden**

Poet-gardener Celia Thaxter identified so intimately with the sandpiper that she imagined becoming the bird. Close friends called her “Sandpiper” (also the name of her most reprinted poem), and, for a period of her life, Thaxter even dressed like the sandpiper, wearing only black, white, and gray (Fetterley 40). In her garden book, *An Island Garden* (1894), Thaxter describes her attachment to her flowers with the same all-consuming quality she brings to her interest in the sandpiper. For Thaxter, gardening is more than a pastime—it is a passion that takes over her life. Her concern with protecting her flowers from slugs, insects, and other pests, stops her from sleeping. “On many a solemn midnight have I stolen from my bed to visit my cherished treasures by the pale glimpses of the moon, that I might be quite sure the protecting rings were still strong enough to save them, for the slug eats by night, he is invisible by day unless it rains or the sky be overcast,” Thaxter writes (7-8). The urgency with which she watches over her flowers is unrelenting.

In this way, we might say that Thaxter’s representation of her devotion to nature on Appledore Island—the small, remote outpost of Maine where she spent much of her life—is a continuation of early- and mid-nineteenth-century sentimental narratives of women who develop close bonds to the natural world. Popular flower and gardening literature in the 1830s through the 1860s argued that the supposedly intrinsic attachment women shared with nature—and flowers specifically—meant that women should feel an

affinity or sympathy for the plants they cultivated. Middle-class white women joined gardening and botanical clubs and voraciously read the many “gift annuals, ladies’ magazines, and books on domestic science” that all urged them to go out and garden (Mann 36). “Women were asked to cultivate flower-like qualities,” Dorri Beam tells us, describing the national obsession with flower dictionaries—books that listed the specific qualities and emotions to associate with each flower: “So popular were flower dictionaries that John Ingram’s 1869 *Flora Symbolica* was able to claim that ‘in the United States, the language of flowers is said to have more votaries than in any other part of the world’” (40). In the decades before the publication of *An Island Garden*, sentimental floral culture was simply inescapable.

Thaxter pushes the sympathy associated with sentimental floral culture—the affection women were expected to feel for nature—to its extremity: her empathy for the sandpiper and her flowers is more intense than mere identification. The fervor of Thaxter’s passion threatens to eclipse the very thing that she loves. In dressing like the sandpiper and calling herself the sandpiper, she *becomes* the sandpiper. In zealously exterminating all the pests that pose a danger to her flowers, she brings violence into the garden, and, as I later show, takes solace in that violence. For a book that celebrates the joy of botanical life, *An Island Garden* contains an overwhelming number of passages about the death of the animals that might harm those plants: “Manifold are the means of destruction to be employed, for almost every pest requires a different poison,” Thaxter tells us (6), later going on to associate that destruction with its own kind of gratification and peace. There is, after all, something *unsentimental* about Thaxter’s extreme sentimentality: the impulse to love also brings with it the potential to destroy.

Thaxter wrote *An Island Garden* at a moment when American women were starting to grow tired of the language of flowers. In the later decades of the nineteenth century, sentimental flower books became less and less popular among Americans who began to consider the association of emotions with flowers as a “tired, old-fashioned notion” (Seaton 84). Although flower dictionaries and gift annuals that stressed the innate connection between women and flowers remained in circulation throughout the end of the century, the sentimental language of flowers had lost its power by the 1890s, when the “country woman faded into the cultural background, and with her went the sentimentalization of her environment” (Seaton 150). Middle-class white women continued to garden, but they no longer needed dictionaries to tell them how to feel about it.

*An Island Garden* comes out of this post-sentimental atmosphere. At a fundamental level, Thaxter embraces sentimental floral culture, effusively representing her sympathy for and identification with the plants in her garden, what she calls her “cherished treasures.” But in a book with copious citations of poets and naturalists, Thaxter does not reference a single woman writer, deliberately neglecting to engage with the huge body of women’s flower writing that precedes her. Instead, Thaxter spends much of *An Island Garden* citing men naturalists and scientists who study the natural world. Eighteenth-century English naturalist Gilbert White, German chemist Friedlieb Runge, and French astronomer Camille Flammarion all make appearances in *An Island Garden*. By situating her own interest in the garden around these scientists while she implicitly calls on the sympathy of mid-century women’s gardening culture, Thaxter presents her sensibility as both a sentimental and a scientific one. Her book combines the

sentimentality of a floral dictionary with the inquisitive scrutiny of a botanist—or, more specifically, of a “botanizer.”

In *The Botanizers: Amateur Scientists in Nineteenth Century America*, Elizabeth Keeney tells the story of self-trained men and women who collected, classified, and studied plants throughout the nineteenth century. In the years before the institutionalization and professionalization of botany and other naturalist sciences, “tens of thousands of enthusiasts” pursued their passion for botany and connected with other amateur scientists through “clubs, correspondence networks, specimen exchanges, and specialized publications” (1). Botanizers practiced their chosen hobby with rigor, but they had a “deeper commitment to self-improvement than to the advancement of science” (1). “Self-improvement” meant something different for men and women. Whereas men botanizers were encouraged to find intellectual enrichment, the payoff of botany for women botanizers was not intellectual—it was emotional well-being and moral education. While men botanizers performed fieldwork, the collecting and identifying of specimens, women botanizers were encouraged to use the study of botany as “preparation for other genteel accomplishments such as creating wax flowers and painting, writing travel memoirs, and making polite conversations” (79).<sup>1</sup> In *An Island Garden*, Thaxter wants the payoff of both affective women’s botanizing and scientific men’s botanizing: gardening can give her both a sentimental education and intellectual rewards. For Thaxter, flowers are both warm companions to feel for and specimens to study and collect. Thaxter shows us that the sentimentality of mid-century garden writing is not at

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<sup>1</sup> Keeney suggests that towards the end of the century, as they became “less concerned than their antebellum predecessors about traditional standards of gentility,” more and more women did their own fieldwork (79).

odds with the intellectual ambitions of botanizing, that you can simultaneously feel and study.<sup>2</sup>

At the intersection of sentiment and botanizing is obsession. Just as Slosson writes about entomology as an addiction, Thaxter represents her interest in nature not as a mere hobby but as an infatuation that controls her—her desire to become the sandpiper, the sleeplessness she endures in her life project of protecting her garden from pests. Fused with the inquisitive spirit of botanizing, the sentimentality of women’s floral culture is no longer mere sympathy towards, or feeling with, flowers. It is an obsession for them. In this way, obsession is sentimentality in an extreme form, an affective and intellectual interest in an object of fascination and love that becomes an all-absorbing fixation.

In pushing the limits of sentimentality to obsession, Thaxter presents a portrait of a gardener that is in many ways *unsentimental*. Where works like Laura Greenwood’s *The Rural Wreath; or, Life Among the Flowers* (1853) argue for the physically invigorating and spiritually enriching effects of the garden on women, Thaxter tells us that gardening induces within her precisely the opposite: maintaining her flowers brings her intense unease and anxiety, leaving her with insomnia. And as gardening and botanical clubs depend on the communal pleasures and social rewards of cultivating flowers, Thaxter loves the solitude of her own garden—a place, she insists, where only

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<sup>2</sup> Leslie Madsen-Brooks claims that late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century women’s botanical organizations similarly combined “objectivity and sentiment”: “If organisations like Eastwood’s botanical clubs adopted a broad mission, such as preserving natural beauty, still other clubs, like the Fuchsia Society, focused on a relatively narrow spectrum of biology—ornamental plants, for example—and evangelised about the benefits of cultivating, understanding and appreciating their favourite subject. The botanical organisations in particular provided women with opportunities to express themselves creatively in both scientific and aesthetic modes, to blend objectivity and sentiment” (39).

she is allowed. The botanic knowledge she seeks is not one that she wants to share with other people the way Slosson does in her entomological essays but a private revelation. Although Thaxter maintained a vibrant social life on Appledore Island, where her father ran “the first successful island resort in America” and she hosted writers like Hawthorne, Longfellow, Emerson, and Whittier, she describes no outside visitors to her home and leaves out any discussion of her public existence in *An Island Garden* (Mandel 2). She never once leaves the confines of her 750-square-foot garden over the course of her book. And she devotes an entire section of *An Island Garden* to “the economy of room,” closely describing how she can cultivate so much beauty in such a small space.

Confinement and solitude—these are not things that we normally associate with nature writing. Leah Glasser suggests that late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century women writers like Thaxter, Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Austin, Willa Cather, Elinore Pruitt Stewart, and Zitkála-Šá pursued an interest in nature because it meant breaking free of confinement in the domestic space and the constricting, everyday routines and tasks inside the home. For Glasser, immersion in nature and nature writing is about expansiveness—entering a place with no boundaries (2). But what Thaxter likes about going outdoors is the pleasure of creating, not rejecting, boundaries, and the appeal of staying in one place. She can explore anywhere she wants on Appledore Island, yet she chooses to confine herself to the small space of her gated garden. It is not the roving spontaneity of a long walk in the tradition of Thoreau that Thaxter is after.<sup>3</sup> Rather, she

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<sup>3</sup> Glasser suggests that Thaxter, who “read Thoreau before she wrote her own tribute to the natural world in *Among the Isles of Shoals*,” responded to Thoreau’s celebration of the long walk with her own strategy of engaging with nature (2). “Amidst the work of caring for ailing parents and growing children, Celia Thaxter could not have managed to take the four-hour saunter Thoreau proposed, but she did turn to her landscape for the inspiration he described in ‘Walking,’” Glasser tells us (2).

wants to remain in her own backyard and pursue her intellectual project. Sandra Zagarell, Judith Fetterley, Marjorie Pryse, and other critics of women regionalists highlight these writers' interest in community and the empathic bonds between people and places.<sup>4</sup> I claim that Thaxter is interested in the pleasures of being alone and her sentimental botanizing values both feeling and thinking. In following the threads of self-confinement, solitude, and obsession that we see in *An Island Garden*, I emphasize what scholars like Zagarell, Fetterley, and Pryse resist: the antisocial, introspective energy at the heart of Thaxter's narrative.

I start this chapter by analyzing the ways in which Thaxter both continues and departs from conventions of mid-century women's floral culture as she brings the spirit of biological scrutiny to the sympathy of sentimentality. Then, I describe the ways in which Thaxter rejects the communal affection associated with sentimentality. Rather than embracing the social dimension of gardening, Thaxter defines and thematizes confinement as a strategy of engaging with the natural world.

I end by turning to a fictional representation of Thaxter's obsession with nature, Sarah Orne Jewett's short story, "A White Heron" (1886). While Jewett's "The Queen's Twin" offered a way to track the reaches and implications of obsession as a mode of writing beyond Slosson at the end of the previous chapter, her popular story, "A White

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<sup>4</sup> Michele Mock provides an elegant overview of the emphasis on community in criticism of women's regionalism: "The work of Judith Fetterley, Marjorie Pryse, Sherrie A. Iness, Diana Royer, and Stacy Alaimo, among others, clearly indicates that U.S. women's regionalism has historically provided women with an innovative forum for social amelioration. Critiquing hegemonic norms while offering possibilities for change by depicting a community of women in a specific region of the world where difference among humans and nature is respected, the work of women regionalists most certainly is a 'legacy of subversion,' to use Inness and Royer's term, in which women 'used regionalism to write against the norm, to write subversively. They used regionalism to criticize larger society, to question the status quo.... They also used regionalism to present strong communities of women and strong women characters'" (154).

Heron” (often considered a hallmark of women’s regionalism), gets us even further beneath Thaxter’s text, life, and experiences—and gives us a deeper way of understanding the antisociality and obsession that Thaxter represents in *An Island Garden*. Thaxter’s childhood fascination with the animals on the Isles of Shoals was the real-life inspiration Jewett (a close friend of Thaxter’s<sup>5</sup>) had in mind for the story’s protagonist, Sylvia, and her love of the heron.<sup>6</sup> The story is a response to a letter Thaxter wrote about her desire to be a child again, so she could “set at defiance anything in the shape of man!” during a time when Thaxter retrospectively wondered whether her marriage was a mistake.<sup>7</sup> Thaxter dreamed of being single, and this dream is exactly what Jewett gives us: the story is a realization of Thaxter’s dream as Sylvia refuses romance and commits to a life of total nature immersion.

Yet what begins as a tribute to Thaxter and nature worship becomes a work of skepticism. Jewett wants to honor Thaxter’s fantasy but backs down from it once she sees it. Though the story extols Sylvia’s closeness to nature, it is also sorrowful about the human intimacy she misses out on. *An Island Garden*—itself a kind of self-fantasy—however, is exultant in its antisociality, aware of the uncomfortable implications of confinement but completely welcoming of them. Discursively becoming the spinster she could never be in reality, *An Island Garden* is a kind of extended, celebratory postscript

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<sup>5</sup> Mandel offers an extensive account of Thaxter’s friendship with Jewett. She also analyzes their strikingly similar backgrounds as children immersed in nature and their shared intense appreciation for gardening (115-22).

<sup>6</sup> Glasser points to the widely quoted letter Thaxter wrote to Annie Fields that likely inspired Jewett’s story, a letter in which Thaxter envisions being a girl again: “I believe I would climb to my lighthouse top and set at defiance anything in the shape of man!” (qtd in Glasser 11). Mandel reads Jewett’s “A White Heron” as not only a reimagining of Thaxter’s childhood but also as a response to Thaxter’s poem, “The Great Blue Heron” (123).

<sup>7</sup> Mandel offers a glimpse into the dark period of Thaxter’s life when she expressed anxiety and regret about marrying Levi Thaxter, with whom she had an estranged relationship, and eventually decided to live apart from him permanently (pp. 86-93).

to “A White Heron”—a fantasy of singlehood she could only achieve in the imagined boundaries of her small garden. Alongside “A White Heron,” we see the boldness and weirdness of *An Island Garden*, an unflinching portrait of antisocial nature-worship that makes even Jewett uncomfortable. While “A White Heron” is an almost-narrative of obsession, a tale of impassioned devotion to solitude that is unsettled by its own peculiarity, *An Island Garden* is a full-fledged, unabashed narrative of obsession that sees its darkness and embraces it, fully and gladly submitting to its totality. In its purest form, Thaxter’s ultimate fantasy isn’t a tale of revisited girlhood: it’s a vision of ascetic spinsterhood.

#### **I. “They seem like sentient beings, as if they knew and loved me”**

“I feel the personality of each flower, and I find myself greeting them as if they were human,” Thaxter writes of her friends in the garden (113). By attributing human-like qualities to the plants that she grows, Thaxter accepts the fundamental assumption of mid-century flower dictionaries: every flower has a distinct character to which the woman who cultivates it feels a deep sympathetic connection. Despite rejoicing in the “personality” of her flowers and the warm companionship they offer her, she often describes the strange melancholy that overcomes her while gardening. In a letter to Annie Fields, Thaxter shares the dark thoughts about mortality that come to her in the garden: “It is heavenly beautiful here now, ‘so sweet with the voices of the birds,’ so green and still and flower-strewn. Only I am too much alone, and get sadder than death with brooding over this riddle of life” (Fields 56). Juxtaposed against this sentimental image of the garden—“so sweet the voices of the birds,’ “green and still”—is Thaxter’s

intellectual interest in her flowers, her “brooding over this riddle of life,” which evokes in her decidedly unsentimental feelings. Devoting herself to the care and study of her flowers, Thaxter develops a sentimental affinity for her friends, an empathy that also necessitates unsentimental behavior—the killing of pests that pose a threat to those friends.

In *An Island Garden*, Thaxter spends just as much time closely describing her violent elimination of the insects, worms, and birds who pose a threat to her flowers as she does describing the flowers themselves. There is something undeniably morbid, and unsentimental, about the cathartic pleasure Thaxter finds in exterminating these pests. In this way, the intensity of Thaxter’s sympathetic identification with her flowers, coupled with the desire to study the way that they grow, brings her past the limits of sentimentality to shifting moments of affection and destruction. I begin this section by offering a brief account of mid-century sentimental flower culture and its influence on middle-class white women’s lives. Then I show how Thaxter is working within and against this tradition as she disrupts her celebrations of floral sympathy with dark, brooding reflections on solitude, destruction, and death.

Beverly Seaton describes the language of flowers and the sentimental writing associated with it as a transatlantic phenomenon that began in early-nineteenth-century France, hit England in the 1820s, and the U.S. soon after. “In America the language of flowers seems to have reached popularity in the 1830s...becoming a staple of the book trade in the 1840s, and thence gradually declining throughout the rest of the century,” Seaton writes (84). Like the French and English iterations of books on floral sentiment, American publications—including flower dictionaries, anthologies of flower poetry, and

domestic science books—personify flowers, imbuing them with a set of human characteristics that encourages readers to associate specific emotions with particular plants. Tina Gianquitto highlights the religious and moralistic import of U.S. women’s flower writing. She describes “the floriography of popular sentimental botanies and floral dictionaries” and the ways in which these texts “revealed the moral ‘meanings’ of flowers for the purpose of guiding women through nature to God” (48).<sup>8</sup> Proximity to and intimacy with flowers was a way of achieving proximity to and intimacy with God.

Susan Mann connects the sentimental language of flowers with the rise of gardening as a popular past time for nineteenth-century American women. Books like *The Amateurs’ Guide and Flower-Garden Directory* (1856) and *The Requirements of American Village Homes* (1856) “mounted a campaign to get women out of the house and into the garden” (35). Popular garden literature insisted that gardening “promoted women’s spiritual health” and “was also good for their physical well-being” (37). As a supplement to gardening, American women were encouraged to become students of botany, considered the “only science girls should study” (Seaton 24).<sup>9</sup> Deemed “a quite safe pursuit” in a “suitably tempered and watered down” form, botany “was introduced to children and to women, and those books designed for the female sensibility delivered science through the media of sentiment and poetry” (Mann 35).<sup>10</sup> The belief was that,

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<sup>8</sup> According to Gianquitto, “Sentimental botanies and flower language books used the minute details of flower structure as moral emblems of ideal Christian behavior and narrowly proscribed definitions of natural objects for nineteenth-century women readers” (48).

<sup>9</sup> Seaton tells us that women learned botany mostly from publications written by women: “The idea that women had to be taught botany in publications just for women was based on the notion that, since the female intellect was weak women had to be approached from a different perspective than male students” (22). She goes on to describe the various forms this instruction took—from dialogues to poetry.

<sup>10</sup> In *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England* (1989), Carolyn Merchant describes the rise of interest in studying natural history for nineteenth-century women:

when combined, botanic science and floral literary expression, would impart intellectual lessons and foster emotional wellness in female readers.

In 1894, when Thaxter finished *An Island Garden*, the putatively innate connection between women and flowers established in the mid-century popular imagination was beginning to break down. Sarah Josepha Hale's best-selling *Flora's Interpreter* (1832) was reprinted steadily through the 1860s. By the end of the century, however, it fell out of print (Seaton 84). Beverly Seaton attributes the decline in relevance and popularity of these books to changing definitions of femininity: "The sentimental flower book was intended for women, and as such presented a view of women which was seriously challenged by the end of the century. As America and England became more and more urbanized in reality, rather than in anticipation, women were no longer associated so much with the country and natural elements" (150). Gardening remained a popular past time for middle-class white women, but the sentimental emotional structures of floral culture no longer defined it. Coming in the wake of sentimentality, *An Island Garden* appeared at a moment when women readers and writers were becoming further and further removed from the emotional appeals of sentimental language.

In many ways, though, *An Island Garden* feels like a throwback to this earlier, mid-century moment of sentimental floral sympathy. In fact, Thaxter is often effusive in expressing her sympathy for her flowers, describing them as her "dear friends":

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"The study of natural history became popular during the 1820s and 1830s. Women along with their husbands attended local lyceum lectures on science and religion. They deepened their appreciation of nature through the study of botany, geology, and mineralogy. Stimulated by European books such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Letters on the Elements of Botany Addressed to a Lady* (London, 1785) and Priscilla Bell Wakefield's *Introduction to Botany, in a Series of Familiar Letters* (1786), plant collecting and identification gained acceptance in New England society and its burgeoning female academies as appropriate expressions of female piety" (251).

“comforters, inspirers, powers to uplift and cheer” (v). She goes so far as to suggest that her flowers are “sentient beings.” She explains this theory by explicitly invoking the emotional logic of sentimentality as she calls attention to her flowers’ “reliance on my sympathy and care.” The power of sympathy and empathic identification helps Thaxter both understand and build intimacy with her plants, in the tradition of the sentimental flower book:

I feel the personality of each flower, and I find myself greeting them as if they were human. “Good-morning, beloved friends! Are all things well with you? And are you tranquil and bright? and are you happy and beautiful?”...They seem like sentient beings, as if they knew me and loved me, not indeed as I love them, but with almost a reliance on my sympathy and care, and a pleasure in my delight in them. I please myself with the thought that if anything goes wrong with them, if a vine or tender stalk droops for lack of support, or if some insect is working them woe, or threat of harm comes to them from any quarter, they say to each other, “Patience! She will be coming soon, she will see our trouble, she will succor us, and all will again be well” (113).

Curious here is the way in which Thaxter tempers her own sentimentality with moments of restraint. That is, she undercuts this intense affection she has for her flowers with expressions of emotional moderation. She tells us that her flowers love her, but “not indeed as I love them.” Although they take on the appearance of sentience, she acknowledges that they are not actually capable of the same love that she has for them. There is something asymmetrical about the affective relationship between her and her flowers. It is the *semblance* of sentience that the flowers have: they cannot *actually* feel,

and Thaxter makes it a point to remind us of this: “they *seem* like sentient beings, *as if* they knew me and loved me.” Her flowers’ affective powers remain hypothetical. Thaxter uses the language of sentimentality but she refuses to completely surrender herself to it: she embraces the comfort of sympathy as she shows skepticism toward it.

Thaxter’s sympathy for the living things around her does ultimately have limits. In fact, she devotes a large part of *An Island Garden* to describing the animals and living things she feels no empathy for—the slugs, insects, worms, and weeds that attack her garden. The same impulse that drives Thaxter to protect the flowers she loves also drives her to eliminate those who threaten them. Notice that in the same space where she describes the mutual affection she and her flowers share, she finds delight in her responsibility to defend them. The prospect of something “going wrong with” her flowers, “some insect...working them woe” is a thought that “pleases” her because she enjoys protecting her flowers. She writes of her struggles against the slugs, insects, and worms with such intensity and bliss that there seems to be something inherently pleasing about getting rid of these animals. The satisfaction of defending her flowers she gets is the joy of fighting the living things that she hates. “Lime, salt, paris green, cayenne pepper, kerosene emulsion, whale-oil soap, the list of weapons is long indeed, with which one must fight the garden’s foes!” she says (7). Thaxter interrupts her sentimental reflections on floral friendship with intermittent moments of violence. Here, she rejects the empathy for nature represented in sentimental garden writing, instead opting to go in for the kill.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The birth of beauty literally requires death for Thaxter, not only in the extermination of pests, but also in her incorporation of ground bones in the roots of her plants: “To make a perfect success of Wallflowers they must be given lime in some form about the roots. They thrive marvelously if fed with a mixture of old plastering in the soil, or bone meal, or, if that is not at

Her worst enemy in the garden is “the loathsome slug...that devours every fair and exquisite thing” (6). Her nemesis takes her to alternate extremes of distress and happiness, at once to insomnia and elation. “I could not sleep for anxiety about the slugs,” she tells us, later waking to find “great joy” in discovering hungry birds “working the most comprehensive slaughter among them” (6, 54). There is, finally, a sense of catharsis—even victory—in her killings: even as she considers fighting pests “the hardest part of my gardening” and wishes “that not one person in a thousand has this plague of slugs to fight,” Thaxter enjoys the thrill of the massacre (62). “There is something pathetic as well as wonderful in the way in which these growing things of almost all kinds meet disaster and discouragement,” she writes (65). The most lyrical passages in *An Island Garden* are not her musings on floral elegance but her brooding rhapsodies on murder.<sup>12</sup>

Thaxter briefly expands her murderous imagination from slugs and other pests to people. She compares the lush flora on Appledore Island to the infamous deadly plants in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story, “Rappaccini’s Daughter” (1844): “the spotted jewelweed is as rich and splendid as a flower in Doctor Rappaccini’s famous garden” (27). In Hawthorne’s story, Dr. Rappaccini is a botanic-medical experimenter who works in isolation and who “cares infinitely more for science than for mankind” (185). He grows

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hand, the meat bones from the kitchen, calcined in the oven and pounded into bits, stirred in around the roots is fine for them. This treatment makes all the difference in the world in their strength and beauty” (41).

<sup>12</sup> In 1873, Karen and Anethe Christensen, neighbors of Thaxter’s, were brutally murdered by Louis Wagner on Smuttynose Island, off the coast of New Hampshire. Thaxter, both horrified and fascinated by the murders, published the essay, “A Memorable Murder,” in *The Atlantic Monthly* in May 1875. The essay went on to become the most popular account of the infamous events. Thaxter’s account presages the ambivalently macabre and tender interest in death she would go on to show in *An Island Garden*, as the essay draws attention to the “sickening details of the double murder” while it purports to bring out “the pathos of the story” (602).

flowers that are gorgeous but are also poisonous, that kill any person who touches them. So to liken a flower to one in Rappaccini's garden seems to require a subsequent "but"—to necessitate some kind of qualification: something to assure us that, though this flower is as stunning as one of Rappaccini's, it, fortunately, does not carry with it the same deadliness that Rappaccini's does. Thaxter, however, attaches no such clause to her comparison. Given her rapturous attention to the extermination of pestilence in *An Island Garden*, it is as if Thaxter admires the outward beauty *and* the inner virulence of Rappaccini's plants. Thaxter figures herself as a Hawthornesque mad scientist, experimenting with overflowing sentiment toward her flowers and disregard for all other life.

In the logic of Thaxter's version of sentimentality—the concurrent appropriation and rejection of sentimental devices—it is possible to feel for *and* against the natural world. Even though she delightedly killed slugs, insects, and worms inside her garden, Thaxter made the protection of wildlife a priority in her life. A devout ornithologist, Celia Thaxter fought tirelessly to save the lives of New England's birds. Years before she became the secretary of Waltham's Audubon Society in 1886, Thaxter wrote to her friend Feroline Fox, bemoaning the use of bird feathers for women's hats: "I cannot express to you my distress at the destruction of the birds. You know how I love them; every other poem I have written has some bird for its subject, and I look at the ghastly horror of women's headgear with absolute suffering" (Fields 145-46). Here, Thaxter uses the sentimental language of feeling for nature in articulating her concern for birds. Her conservationist project depends on an emotional appeal that uses the generic conventions of sentimentality. Indeed, Seaton tells us that "the conservation movement is the final,

perhaps culminating, expression of nineteenth-century nature sentiment.” She names “the love of flowers” encouraged by mid-century “sentimental flower books” as a major inspiration for this movement (151). As a conservationist, Thaxter harnesses sentimental language once used for aesthetic purposes to enact real change in the world. She can strategically use sentimental expression when it will help her conservationist ambitions. Sentimentality becomes a device Thaxter can use and reject at her own convenience.

With *An Island Garden*, Thaxter offers a response to what Gianquitto calls “the larger problem that plagued women writing about science and the natural world at the beginning of the nineteenth century: the increasing tension between presenting nature from a stance of objective perceptual accuracy versus that of subjective sentimental piety” (19). “Subjective sentimental piety” and “objective perceptual accuracy” are not mutually exclusive modes of entering the natural world.<sup>13</sup> In “Dust,” the poem that she includes as a kind of epigraph to *An Island Garden*, Thaxter writes, “Here is a problem, a wonder for all to see. / Look at this marvelous thing I hold in my hand! / This is a magic surprising, a mystery / Strange as a miracle, harder to understand,” eventually going on to confront this uncertainty: “There’s no more beautiful riddle the whole world round / Than is hid in this heap of dust I hold in my hand” (vii-viii). Thaxter uses the language of enchantment—the sentimental language of the mid-nineteenth-century woman gardener—to represent her curiosity for these flowers. But it’s an enchantment marked by

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<sup>13</sup> Gianquitto claims that “subjective sentimental piety” and “objective perceptual accuracy” were never really “mutually exclusive,” that even in the early nineteenth century, women’s flower writings depended on both scientific knowledge and emotional appeal. Of her case study, Almira Phelps’ *Familiar Lectures on Botany* (1829), she says “Phelps’ language was not empty rhetoric...she believed in science, and she believed that knowledge of science would lead her female students to happy and moral lives. Phelps succeeded in producing a textbook suitable for this purpose, writing a scientifically oriented manual that nevertheless revealed the close connections between the order of the natural world (scientific and moral) and the order of the ideal domestic space” (26).

a wonderment over biological processes: it is not merely the outward charm of her flowers that inspires Thaxter's love for her garden but also the experience of ruminating over their riddling birth. She believes that getting close to her flowers is what will help her understand the way they work. The language of sentimentality can illuminate and coexist alongside scientific curiosity.

## **II. "No hands touch it save my own throughout the whole season"**

The feature of sentimental culture that Thaxter most aggressively rejects is its emphasis on communal pleasures and social connections. Thaxter often embraces the sympathy for nature represented in sentimental flower books, but she never shows an interest in the public dimensions of community that sentimentality encourages. Susan Mann describes the powerful friendships that came out of nineteenth-century gardening clubs. She suggests that "a woman's association with gardening and flowers underscores the often subtle but enduring bonds she establishes with other women" (45). According to Elizabeth Keeney, this was also true for women botanists, who "organized botanical clubs to do fieldwork and indoor work together for camaraderie and to share what they learned" (79). Leslie Madsen-Brooks reveals the ways that women botanists responded to restrictions imposed by men. As men scientists banned women from joining professional organizations—like the Botanical Society of Washington, which didn't allow women members until 1923—women like botanist Alice Eastwood, "seeking both personal improvement and greater recognition," began forming their own clubs, "inspired by the formal structure of the professional societies yet in many cases emerging from the salon tradition" (Brooks 34). These clubs provided "a space where amateur and professional

women scientists mingled and exchanged ideas” (34).<sup>14</sup> Keeney describes one particularly influential women’s club—the Syracuse Botanical Club, formed in 1878—where members “organized weekly excursions during the collecting season, maintained a library and herbarium, and carried on—collectively and individually—correspondence with a variety of botanists elsewhere, including the Harvard Group” (79). Connected through these social networks, nineteenth-century women gardeners and botanists enjoyed the pleasures of exploring their interests with like-minded others.

In *An Island Garden*, Thaxter shows no interest in creating connections with other women or spreading her findings about flowers. She considers her garden a private space meant only for her and her knowledge a self-knowledge. It is curious that, in her life, Thaxter maintained a public persona and turned her small island home into an artists’ enclave—welcoming painters, writers, and musicians into her salon including Harriet Prescott Spofford, James Russell Lowell, and Childe Hassam, whose paintings of her garden Thaxter included in *An Island Garden*—but in this book, Thaxter neglects to address the social aspects of her life. Instead, she presents herself as withdrawn, alone—even reclusive. The pleasures her flowers give her are *antisocial* ones: solitude, confinement, and introspection. “In the first week of April the ground is spaded for me; after that no hands touch it save my own throughout the whole season,” Thaxter writes.<sup>15</sup> Recall, too, the way she puts herself in the tradition of Hawthorne’s Dr. Rappaccini, the

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<sup>14</sup> Sally Kohlstedt suggests that, “The organization of small, local, scientific study groups paralleled the general women’s club movement across the country and the cooperative tendencies among women in religious and reform movements” (91).

<sup>15</sup> The one moment of contact with another person in her garden is her communication with her brother, whom we only see working on his own garden—we never see him physically enter her garden: “Suddenly from the shore comes a clear cry thrice repeated, ‘Sweet, sweet, sweet!’ And I call to my neighbor, my brother, working also in his garden plot, ‘The sandpiper! Do you hear him?’” (22).

scientist behind a garden that is a literal threat to any outsiders. “It seems strange to write a book about a little garden only fifty feet long by fifteen wide!” she admits, “But then...‘it extends upward,’ and what it lacks in area is more than compensated by the large joy that grows out of it and its uplifting and refreshment of ‘the Spirit of Man’” (71). She treats the smallness of her garden as a challenge—to create as much beauty as possible in such a tiny space: “I have made a plan of this minute domain to show how it may be possible to accomplish much within such narrow compass, and also to give an idea of an advantageous method of grouping in a space so confined” (71). For Thaxter, there is something inspiring—not imprisoning—about confinement.

And yet Leah Glasser defines Thaxter’s relationship with nature in contrast to “confinement,” in opposition to the claustrophobia of domestic space. She suggests that for Thaxter, cultivating an interest in nature was a way of making an identity for herself outside of domesticity. By pursuing a connection with the landscape and animals that surrounded her, Thaxter “found an arena for self-expression that was unavailable to her within the confinement of her home,” Glasser tells us. Being outdoors, for Thaxter, is a respite from “the schedule of chores” that “dominated” her life (2). For Glasser, immersion in nature is boundary-breaking—a turn to the expansive in an attempt to flee imprisonment.

Thaxter did very much feel entrapped by the harsh demands her life put on her. In *Beyond the Garden Gate*, Mandel describes the regular long visits Thaxter made away from her husband, Levi, to the Isles of Shoals, “leaving a young girl to help Levi care for the children.” Mostly going to Appledore to care for her sick mother, “Celia was willing to go to the islands for almost any reason” (70). By 1869, a “pattern of separate lives had

begun, with Levi taking one or both of the younger boys south each winter while Celia went to Appledore” (71). Though it wasn’t until ten years later when Thaxter and her husband officially decided to live apart indefinitely, their relationship had been effectively defunct long before. In 1876, Thaxter wrote a letter to Annie Fields, admitting that her marriage might have been a mistake, wishing “it were only possible to go back and pick up the thread of one’s life anew!” (qtd. in Mandel 86). Her garden was a refuge from her constricting life—especially by the time she was writing *An Island Garden*. Levi was living away, her two sons, John and Roland, were married, and Karl, whose physical and mental illnesses she’d looked after for many years, was now “happily occupied with his photography” (Mandel 144). With this newfound freedom, Thaxter imposes new boundaries on herself, boundaries that she delights in. In her garden, Thaxter does find what Glasser calls “self-expression,” but that state is not about breaking free of confinement. It’s about embracing that confinement.

Thaxter’s interest in “the economy of room,” her passion for enclosure, and her insistence that, when it comes to her garden, “no hands touch it save my own,” all suggest a willful self-confinement. Confinement is not suffocating or constricting but inspiring—when it is on her own terms. In this way, with the smallness and privacy of her garden, Thaxter creates for herself a kind of study space for one where she can experiment with and ruminate over her flowers. The goal is not to end confinement but rather to take ownership of confinement in a new context—to find the personal and intellectual pleasures of sealing herself off from the world.

Thaxter associates her love of gardening with her separation from the outside world in her youth. “A lonely child, living on the lighthouse island ten miles away from

the mainland, every blade of grass that sprang out of the ground, every humblest weed, was precious in my sight, and I began a little garden when not more than five years old,” she writes (v). Brought to the Isles of Shoals at a very young age after her father accepted a position tending the White Island lighthouse, Thaxter describes the “profound isolation” she endured during the early years of her life in *Among the Isles of Shoals* (121).<sup>16</sup> But, as Mandel suggests, “the very isolation” in which the Thaxters lived “heightened their appreciation for the world around them” (14). This “appreciation” through “isolation” helps us better understand the counterintuitive impulse to know the outside world by refusing to enter it.

What might it mean for a nature writer to value confinement and small spaces rather than the expansiveness or endlessness we usually associate with an appreciation of nature? Where the engagement with nature epitomized by Thoreau depends on long, “four-hour saunters” through hills and fields (Glasser 2), Thaxter stays in the same place. She is not interested in walking or movement more broadly. She is more interested in remaining where she already is and scrutinizing what’s there. In this way, we might say that Thaxter is kind of homebody nature-writer.

Nature, for Thaxter, is not something to go out and see. “It takes Thoreau and Emerson and their kind to enjoy a walk for a walk’s sake, and the wealth they glean with eyes and ears. I cannot enjoy the glimpses Nature gives me half as well when I go deliberately seeking them as when they flash on me in some pause of work. It is like the pursuit of happiness: you don’t get it when you go after it, but let it alone and it comes to you,” Thaxter wrote to a friend in 1874 (Fields 54). While Thoreau and Emerson are

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<sup>16</sup> For further discussion of Thaxter’s isolated childhood in the Isles of Shoals, see Mandel, *Beyond the Garden Gate*, pp. 8-19.

exploratory, outward-looking nature-seekers who stage encounters with nature, Thaxter is static, waiting for nature to discover her. For Thaxter, the introspection encouraged by the patience and solitude of self-enclosure becomes its own kind of reward. In this model, inaction (not action) and reflection (not observation) are the fundamental strategies of convening with and studying nature.

If the archetypal naturalist is someone who explores the outside world and actively gathers specimens, Thaxter is a different kind of naturalist—one who comes to understand the outside world by refusing to enter it. Additionally, the floral knowledge that she comes to possess is ultimately something she possesses for herself—not shares with other people. Though we might read *An Island Garden* as an informational guide for flower-lovers and potential gardeners, Thaxter buries her practical guidance under layers of personal, aesthetic, and undeniably *impractical* imaginative diversions. Where the professional naturalist goes out into the world to learn something and then disseminates that knowledge, Thaxter's insights are hers and hers alone. Far from contributing to botanic study or naturalist discourse (or gardening advice), Thaxter's delight is in brooding alone.

In *An Island Garden*, Thaxter suggests that the payoff of brooding—the reward of ruminating over a single intellectual pursuit—is that there is no payoff. Her garden does not provide her with a resolution to her curiosity, a satisfaction for all the rigorous hours spent laboring over her flowers. It intensifies that curiosity. The payoff of brooding here is additional brooding. Thaxter does not actually come any closer to understanding the strange botanic mysteries that keep her up at night. Instead, she is left more deeply entranced by them. Her uncertainty becomes more layered. Brooding engenders more

brooding. Remember that Thaxter initially describes her wonderment over the garden in terms of an unsolvable riddle: “There’s no more beautiful riddle the whole world round / Than is hid in this heap of dust I hold in my hand” (vii-viii). The project Thaxter sets up for herself is irresolvable, delightfully impossible—a question that leads to further questions.

This is exactly what’s *unscientific* about Thaxter’s experiment in the garden. She is not looking for a quantitative or qualitative answer to this riddle about biological processes. She’d prefer to maintain an endless inquisitiveness about the world. Thaxter thrives on a relentless intellectual energy as a source of personal inspiration—an energy that’s self-sustaining: she doesn’t need any other person and she doesn’t need to go anywhere outside of her 750-square-foot garden to keep it going. In her garden, there is no Levi, there are no children, just flowers to wonder over. And that’s what makes it a paradise: it is endlessly frustrating, irreconcilable, torturous.

### **III. “I believe I would climb to my lighthouse top and set at defiance anything in the shape of man!”**

In her short story, “A White Heron,” Sarah Orne Jewett gives us a different tortured, forbidding, antisocial Thaxteresque paradise: not the married older woman’s garden but the single girl’s playground. The story is a kind of fictional origin story for *An Island Garden*. It shows us the formative experiences a nature-worshipper like Thaxter might’ve had as a child. Jewett used Thaxter’s experiences as a young girl isolated from the outside world on Appledore Island as a model for the character of Sylvia, the young

girl in “A White Heron.”<sup>17</sup> Thaxter became a close friend of Jewett’s after Jewett started visiting the Isles of Shoals in the early 1880s. Jewett went on to host Thaxter in Boston and Maine. It was in their small group of friends, around the literary circle of Annie Fields (the wife of *Atlantic* publisher James Fields and a cultural arbiter herself), where Thaxter first got the nickname “Sandpiper” (and Jewett took on the name “Owl”) (Mandel 73).<sup>18</sup> Paula Blanchard notes the shared qualities and background that made the two women such intimate friends, in addition to just their mutual “wonder” at nature: Thaxter, “having grown up in a place where time in the usual sense was largely irrelevant...could not help but embody Jewett’s favorite adjective: she was old-fashioned.” Jewett and Thaxter had both experienced a “circumscribed childhood” that left them “with a permanent residue of innocence...a lifelong capacity for being genuinely surprised by experience” (183). It’s the source of Thaxter’s “residue of innocence” that Jewett explores in “A White Heron”—a staple of American literature, short story, women’s literature, and regionalism anthologies, much better known than *An Island Garden*, essentially unread today.

“A White Heron” is a kind of alternate history, an experiment in what-might-have-been. The story reimagines a crucial aspect of Thaxter’s actual life. Jewett asks

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<sup>17</sup> The influence is a reciprocal one: just as Thaxter provided an inspiration for Jewett’s “A White Heron,” Jewett played a major role in the writing of *An Island Garden*. In her biography of Jewett, Paula Blanchard tells us that “Sarah often drove over from Berwick to see her, and Celia talked about her struggle with the manuscript, which had taken a will of its own like some sprawling and overfed vine. Sarah read it through at least twice, suggesting changes and cutting, and finally helped with the copying when Celia felt too sick to do it herself” (Blanchard 269).

<sup>18</sup> Mandel shows the depth of Jewett’s affinity for Thaxter by revealing the deep sadness she expressed when Thaxter died. “We were more neighbours and compatriots than most people,” Jewett wrote after Thaxter’s death, “I knew the island, the Portsmouth side of her life, better than did others, and those days we spent together last month brought me to know better than ever a truly generous and noble heart” (qtd in Mandel 124). So dedicated to “assuring that Thaxter’s writing would be enjoyed by future generations,” Jewett edited two collections of her work: the Appledore edition of her poems and *Stories and Poems for Children* (125).

what would have happened if Thaxter had declined the advances of Levi, the man she married, and remained single. The story was at least partly motivated by a comment Thaxter made to Annie Fields when speculating about what it might be like to relive her childhood: “Could I be but ten years old again! I believe I would climb to my lighthouse top and set at defiance anything in the shape of man!” (qtd. in Mandel 124). This is what Jewett gives us: the image of a girl who climbs to the tops of pine trees, running away from the man who wants to get close to her.

The fictional Sylvia’s experiences are, at times, jubilant, but Jewett imbues them with a somberness and regret. What begins as an homage to Thaxter’s idealized isolation becomes something much more complicated. Thaxter herself daydreams about defiantly and antisocially redoing childhood in the overjoyed exclamations that inspired Jewett’s story. Jewett represents this early hypothetical life with ambivalence, an initial excitement that becomes mournful. Once Jewett comes face to face with the picture of loneliness Thaxter holds up as idyllic, she turns away from it. Much of Jewett’s other novels and stories, like *Deephaven* (1877), *A Country Doctor* (1884), and *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), heroize solitary women in nature. Here, though, that heroization is tempered. She *almost* rejoices in Thaxter’s imaginary defiance. It’s the awareness of, and discomfort with, the sacrifice that comes with that defiance that stops her from fully rejoicing in it. In this section, I contrast the doubt over antisociality in Jewett’s fantasy of Thaxter with Thaxter’s resolute embrace of it in her own self-fantasies. I show how, when placed against “A White Heron,” *An Island Garden* becomes the more compelling and radical dream of defiance. The garden book does, after all, take on a fictionality, as Thaxter dramatizes antisociality and leaves out any details of her actually extensive social

life. While “A White Heron” is a narrative of obsession that ultimately can’t accept the discomfort of obsession, *An Island Garden* revels in that discomfort and actively seeks it out.

At the beginning of “A White Heron,” long before Sylvia faces her dramatic choice between romance and independence, Jewett creates a world, much like the world of Thaxter’s little garden, that nurtures antisociality.<sup>19</sup> Sylvia’s antisociality is what brings her to her grandmother’s country home in the first place. Her grandmother believes that since Sylvia doesn’t like to be around other people, she’ll fit in very well around her remote, quiet farm, where her only companions will be animals. This is precisely why she chooses to ask Sylvia—as opposed to her other grandchildren—to move in with her and help around the house. Consider the logic with which Sylvia’s grandmother makes her decision: “‘Afraid of folks,’ old Mrs. Tilley said to herself, with a smile, after she had made the unlikely choice of Sylvia from her daughter’s houseful of children, and was returning to the farm. ‘Afraid of folks,’ they said! I guess she won’t be troubled no great with ’em up to the old place!’” (3). Underlying Mrs. Tilley’s judgment is the awareness that what makes Sylvia a kind of misfit in one place will make her perfectly suitable for an immersion in nature.

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<sup>19</sup> Others have drawn attention to Sylvia’s antisociality. Where I use Thaxtersque language of active defiance to describe Sylvia, these critics use the language of silence and absence to describe Sylvia’s detachment from other people. Lynn Dolberg argues that willful silence—avoiding human language—is the defining element of the bond with nature that Jewett represents in the story (123). Rob Brault suggests that, for Sylvia, silence is a “form of resistance”: “Sylvia’s ultimate response to this attempted exploitation is resistance, and her power to resist the outsider’s exploitation lies in a particularly passive form of resistance—silence. The very silence that is originally ‘proper’ behavior within the context of the gender and class distinctions of her time becomes her best means of resisting the hierarchy that objectifies both herself and the heron” (75).

Mrs. Tilley's theory about her granddaughter's aversion to people as a potential benefit to farm life proves to be true. In fact, its effects are immediate. As soon as she arrives at her grandmother's home, Sylvia can tell she is in the right place: "When they reached the door of the lonely house and stopped to unlock it, and the cat came to purr loudly, and rub against them, a deserted pussy, indeed, but fat with young robins, Sylvia whispered that this was a beautiful place to live in, and she never should wish to go home" (4). Here, Sylvia basks in the same seclusion and smallness that Thaxter celebrates in her garden. Jewett does not let us forget just how tiny this "lonely" and "deserted" piece of countryside is—"the best thrift of an old-fashioned farmstead, though on such a small scale that it seemed like a hermitage" (8). This is a farmstead with unfarmstead-like qualities: it is not sprawling but small, not wild but still, not noisy but quiet.

Just as Thaxter considers her flowers her friends, Sylvia finds an alternate form of non-human friendship at her grandmother's house. One kind of antisociality becomes, in this new context, an intense sociality. "There ain't a foot o' ground she don't know her way over, and the wild creaturs counts her one o' themselves. Squer'ls she'll tame to come an' feed right out o' her hands, and all sorts o' birds," Jewett tells us (9). When a young man ornithologist—who Mandel suggests resembles Thaxter's own real-life husband Levi "who loved to hunt and stuff birds" (123)—approaches Sylvia in the woods, she is terrified. He is looking for the elusive white heron to add to his collection of bird specimens and hoping that she'll help him find it. Gradually, as he befriends her, Sylvia warms up to the idea of a possible human friend: "Sylvia kept him company, having lost her first fear of the friendly lad, who proved to be most kind and sympathetic"

(12). Striking here is the way in which the language of sentimentality—the man’s “kind” and “sympathetic” qualities—begins to encourage unlikely feelings of friendship, and vague romance,<sup>20</sup> in the otherwise hermetic Sylvia.

But once Sylvia realizes that to give away the location of the white heron would bring about the animal’s death, it becomes apparent that this newfound human sociality is a threat to the relationship Sylvia has built with the natural world: “Alas, if the great wave of human interest which flooded for the first time this dull little life should sweep away the satisfactions of an existence heart to heart with nature and the dumb life of the forest!” (15). In *Sylvia*, Jewett presents a social bond with another person and a compassion for the natural world as mutually exclusive modes of feeling.

In the end, Sylvia chooses the safety of the white heron over a potential friendship with the ornithologist after she climbs to the top of a pine tree and communes with the forest, like the way Thaxter imagines “climb[ing] to my lighthouse top and set[ting] at defiance anything in the shape of man.” But Jewett does not leave us convinced that this is the right decision—or that either decision is, in fact, the right one. Curious is the question that Jewett ends her story with: “Were the birds better friends than their hunter might have been,—who can tell? Whatever treasures were lost to her, woodlands and summer-time, remember! Bring your gifts and graces and tell your secrets to this lonely country child!” (22). Jewett refuses to celebrate Sylvia’s decision to save the life of a

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<sup>20</sup> Lynn Dolberg tells us that “Jewett herself understood ‘A White Heron’ to be a romance. In a letter to Annie Fields, she writes, ‘Mr. Howells thinks that this age frowns upon the romantic, that it is no use to write romance any more; but dear me, how much of it is there is left in every-day life after all. It must be the fault of the writers that such writing is dull, but what shall I do with my ‘White Heron’ now she is written?’ The romance Jewett refers to is in ‘every-day life’; these lines do not necessitate a romance between Sylvia and her companion. ‘Every-day life’ could describe the romance between child and nature, the romance of possible discovery, the romance that is almost a given within such pastoral surroundings” (126).

beautiful animal as unambiguously virtuous. Rather, Jewett wants to make us aware of the drawbacks that come with this love for the natural world. Human sociality is the expense Sylvia pays for the reward of maintaining her close relationship with nature.

There is something undeniably melancholic—eulogistic—about this final moment of Jewett’s story. Jewett is mourning all of the things that could’ve been: all the “treasures” of human intimacy that Sylvia is missing out on by choosing the heron over the man. Although Sylvia has saved the bird, the story ends with a kind of funereal commemoration or remembrance. It’s as if in saving the heron, Sylvia has killed something else—namely her social life as a human.

Jewett’s expression of natural identification, like Thaxter’s, pushes sentimentality to its limits, to an extreme identification that takes on unsentimental qualities. She uses the language of sympathy in representing Sylvia’s closeness with the wildlife around her only to reflect on the limits of that sympathy and draw attention to the *unsympathetic* forms of feeling that come with this closeness. Both Jewett and Thaxter confine themselves to a single small space in their narratives as they embrace and cross the boundaries that they construct around themselves. They are deeply aware of the things that they must give up in order to maintain their devotion to their pursuits in the natural world.

But while Jewett wants us to question whether Sylvia is making the right decision, Thaxter owns hers wholeheartedly. Thaxter speaks of the insomnia that her slug-killing brings her to and the loneliness of small-island life with amusement and contentment. *An Island Garden* doesn’t have the same reservations about antisociality that “A White

Heron” expresses. As the temporally opposite narrative—the golden years of a nature obsessive rather than the early days—*An Island Garden* is surprisingly more triumphant.

Reading “A White Heron” alongside *An Island Garden* shows us just how provocative and unreservedly strange Thaxter’s text is. “A White Heron” is a would-be, half-hearted narrative of obsession—a story about an infatuation with nature that comes to doubt the payoff of its infatuation. Eight years later, *An Island Garden* is a high-octane narrative of obsession that is aware of its obsession’s darkness and fully commits to its obsession. Thaxter has a penetrative wisdom and self-understanding that will take decades for the young Sylvia to develop. Years after her separation from her husband, now that two of her sons are married and the duties of caring for her sick son are starting to become less intense, Thaxter can indulge herself and be the spinster she never actually got to be. Thaxter does, in the end, conjure up both Hawthorne’s Dr. Rappaccini *and* Rappaccini’s daughter, Beatrice, who, raised to care for the deadly plants, becomes immune to their poisons and poisonous herself to other people, including the man who is courting her. She is a menace to human romance. Better off left alone, she dies when her male pursuer, who also has become poisonous, gives her what he thinks is an antidote. Whereas Beatrice’s lethal toxicity is a terrible condition imposed on her, Thaxter’s is an invigorating blessing she grants to herself. The Thaxter of *An Island Garden* is the anti-enchantress *and* her creator, the mad scientist *and* the man repellent.

What Thaxter longs for is something beyond mere spinsterhood. In the unreal world of *An Island Garden*, she doesn’t just have no human romance—she also has no friends. Jewett, who never married, didn’t choose complete solitude over marriage. Her life was actually quite social. For 28 years, she lived with Annie Fields (also a close

friend of Thaxter's).<sup>21</sup> After Fields' husband died, Jewett and Fields maintained a "Boston Marriage"—a cohabitation arrangement between two single women, "a common and socially acceptable relationship in the nineteenth century, particularly among upper-class women" (Mandel 116). The spinsterhood that Thaxter fantasizes about in *An Island Garden* is much more radical, completely solitary with no invitation for friends or visitors, only for flowers. Far away from the mainland of a Boston Marriage, she dreams up an Appledore Affair. Burning like "marigolds ablaze in vivid flame" (*An Island Garden* 103) and lurid like a late-night slug killing spree is Thaxter's love affair with herself, her ode to imagined total singlehood.

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<sup>21</sup> Jewett and Fields' friendship began to really take off only after they both spent time in the Isles of Shoals in 1880 (Blanchard 12).

**Chapter 3**  
**Feeling Wrong:**  
**Harriet Beecher Stowe's New England and Floridian Narratives of Obsession**

While Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote what she imagined would be the quintessential novel of New England, her mind was on Florida. She made her first trip to Florida in 1867, to see her son, Fred, whom she'd sent to Florida the previous year to manage the cotton plantation she'd leased. She was hoping the sunlight and responsibilities would help cure his alcoholism.<sup>1</sup> Stowe was also looking to heal herself—intellectually: “Cold weather really seems to torpify my brain,” Stowe declared, as she struggled to begin *Oldtown Folks*, her novel of life in eighteenth-century Massachusetts (Fields 314). Although Stowe took her inspiration for the book from her husband's stories of growing up in Natick, Massachusetts,<sup>2</sup> she hoped to find the spark to actually write it outside of the harsh northern winter, in the balm of Florida.

What started out as a retreat to look after her son and compose her book quickly became a region worthy of attention in its own right. Florida overwhelmed Stowe's senses. As soon as she set her eyes on this unusual, in her mind, paradisiacal place, she decided that recording its enchantment would be her next literary project. Stowe spent her

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<sup>1</sup> “Immersed in the responsibility of healthful, outdoor work, Fred would be removed from the temptations of city life,” Hedrick writes. “He would also be insulated from the gossiping tongues and social obloquy that were quick to descend in Hartford” (328). Earlier, Hedrick attributes Fred's illness to a Gettysburg ear wound, which left him with brain damage, and likely, post-traumatic stress disorder, driving him to alcoholism (306-7).

<sup>2</sup> “*Oldtown Folks* was a chronicle of Natick, Massachusetts, Calvin's hometown,” Hedrick tells us, “and much of the material had come from Calvin's stories, just as her prizewinning story, ‘Uncle Lot’ had drawn on stories she had heard her father's generation tell” (335).

days in the sunshine of the South pursuing both interests: she wrote *Oldtown Folks* (1869), her historical portrait of Natick, Massachusetts, alongside her nature essays on Florida, which she first published in her brother Henry Ward Beecher's newspaper, *The Christian Union*, and later released as a collection of sketches, *Palmetto-Leaves* (1873).

The two works each signify a major stylistic departure for Stowe. In *Palmetto-Leaves*, Stowe writes in a genre she'd never fully tried before: the natural history, an eighteenth-century genre she and other chroniclers of Florida (like George M. Barbour, Margaret Deland, and Edward King) called on as they described their journeys. Stowe, a gardening enthusiast, had briefly ventured into nature writing thirty years earlier, contributing to a local horticultural newspaper while living in Walnut Hills, Ohio (Hoyer 115), but her Florida essays were part of a project she took much more seriously. Stowe published her book with the intention of disseminating information about Florida and convincing more people to settle and visit this strange place.<sup>3</sup> Just as “metropolitan” visitors and colonizers of North America wrote natural histories—catalogues of the plant,

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<sup>3</sup> Diane Roberts calls *Palmetto-Leaves* a “dogged promotion of Florida” (198)—and a successful one that attracted tons of visitors, many of whom came just to see Stowe herself. In 2006, *Tampa Bay Times* reporter Jeff Klinkenberg declared that Stowe “invented the Florida tourism industry as we know it today” (qtd. in Roberts 197). Roberts suggests that Stowe's promotional work was “a political project: using tourism as a catalyst for colonisation which would, in turn, cleanse the old Confederate states of their racism” (197). Roberts offers these anecdotes in capturing the lure *Palmetto-Leaves* had over readers, hungry for both Florida and Stowe: “In the 1870s and 1880s, punters paid 75 cents to board the *Mary Draper* or some other steamer out of Jacksonville, ‘guaranteeing’ them a good gander at her orange groves and a glimpse of America's most famous writer in her chair under the great oak tree which had been built into their veranda, reading or composing or perhaps watching the great blue herons wading in the shallows. Less orderly visitors—often New England fans of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—would invade her gardens and groves and, as Harriet Beecher Stowe's son tells it, ‘pick flowers, peer into the house through the windows and doors, and act with that disregard of all the proprieties of life which characterises ill-bred people when on a journey’ (196).

wildlife, and exotic human others of New World locales (Parrish 18)—so too does Stowe catalogue (and exoticize) her Floridian frontier.

Where *Palmetto-Leaves* represents a foray into a new genre for Stowe, *Oldtown Folks*, is a retreat from a genre she previously embraced: the sentimental novel. She resists the sentimentality of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and her other earlier novels, creating a narrator who claims to be emotionally detached from his subjects, a narrator who values the techniques of naturalist observation. With its essayistic, plotless structure and its emphasis on heightened, technical description over affective appeals for sympathy, *Oldtown Folks* has more in common with *Palmetto-Leaves* than any of Stowe's sentimental novels.

What does it mean that Stowe's experiment with nature writing coincided with her experiment with voice in fiction? I argue that Stowe conceives of these two genres—the natural history and the novel, genres that in many ways already overlap<sup>4</sup>—as ways of seeing that she can use in conjunction with each other to describe and narrate everyday experience. In this chapter, I show how the skills Stowe cultivates as she studies the Florida landscape—observational absorption and naturalist scrutiny—become a larger set of tools she uses in her literary work.

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<sup>4</sup> Parrish describes the varieties of genres that observers of Early America used to record their experiences and the information they gathered, beyond natural histories and travel narratives (which she distinguishes from natural histories in the way they drew attention to the “presence, observations, feelings, and predicaments of the author, whereas natural histories acted as if nature were organizing and describing itself” (18)). She includes personal and formal correspondences, travel narrative-inspired novels (like Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1689), “settler captivity narratives,” sermons, “black Atlantic autobiographies,” and “pastoral and georgic poetry” as modes of writing and expression that conveyed information about the natural world. To show the generic fluidity of this information exchange and the many forms natural history-like knowledge took, she groups all of these genres under the larger category of “cultures of natural history” (19).

In her preface to *Oldtown Folks*, Stowe introduces the narrator, Horace Holyoke, as a man with no attachment to his subjects. Horace insists that his perspective will be one of total objectivity: “I have tried to make my mind as still and passive as a looking-glass...I myself am but the observer and reporter” (3-4). Horace presents himself as not a narrator of fiction but a “reporter” of nature who simply describes what he observes.

Detachment and objectivity: these are not the terms we normally associate with Stowe’s fiction. In fact, her earlier novels depend on the same narrative tool that Horace dismisses in the preface to *Oldtown Folks*: emotional manipulation. Far from “still and passive,” the narrator of Stowe’s sentimental bestseller, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, actively elicits the reader’s sympathy and compassion all in the name of fighting slavery. At the end of the novel, the narrator makes this spirited declaration about the power of emotional affinities in enacting political change: “There is one thing that every individual can do,—they can see to it that *they feel right*. An atmosphere of sympathetic influence encircles every human being; and the man or woman who *feels* strongly, healthily and justly, on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race” (468). The celebration of passivity and detachment in the preface of *Oldtown Folks* is a far cry from this statement about the triumphant potential of emotion in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. What does it mean that the same woman who championed sentimentality as a force of good, “a constant benefactor to the human race,” would go on to write a novel that purports to shun emotion?

Stowe wanted *Oldtown Folks* to be different from the novels she had written before. Unlike her other books, this novel would not be serialized in magazines or newspapers before it was printed. Joan Hedrick describes how this move away from

serialization signals a fundamental change in Stowe's style: "In her distance from her audience, the writing of *Oldtown Folks* was a more abstract undertaking than any of her other novels and moved decisively away from the tradition of parlor literature...it was not so easy for Stowe to find the right voice in which to begin. Somehow it would not do to talk so familiarly with the reader as she had in her previous novels" (332-33). Hedrick suggests that Stowe's decision to use the "passive narrator," Horace Holyoke, was linked to her desire to gain the respect of men editors and publishers whose "pretensions to literary authority and cultural leadership" no longer had a space for the "opinionated, funny, whimsical narrative voice" of Stowe's earlier work (333).<sup>5</sup> While Hedrick attributes this new style to larger developments in U.S. literary culture, a general late-century critical backlash against mid-century sentiment, I claim that Stowe's interest in narrative detachment is more connected to her own burgeoning interests in the Floridian landscape.

In order to understand how and why Stowe began to work against the sentimentality she once promoted in *Oldtown Folks*, we need to also understand how and why she became compelled to observe and describe the landscape of Florida. Critics have offered thoughtful considerations of Stowe's writing on Florida through the lens of literary tourism (Diane Roberts<sup>6</sup>), reform movements in Reconstruction South (John T. Foster, Jr. and Sarah Whitmer Foster<sup>7</sup>), and race and labor politics of the period (Rachel

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<sup>5</sup> Hedrick claims that "Horace Holyoke's resolve to be a passive mirror, a mere 'observer and reporter,' is a step toward the objective, omniscient narrative voice of the late-nineteenth-century novel that Henry James perfected" (333).

<sup>6</sup> In her essay, "Harriet Beecher Stowe and Florida Tourism," Diane Roberts reads *Palmetto-Leaves* as a promotional text Stowe wrote with the primary motivation of attracting newcomers to the state.

<sup>7</sup> John T. Foster and Sarah Whitmer Foster argue that Stowe's interest in Florida stemmed from her activist ambitions, that Stowe travelled there to join a network of Northerners leading

Klein<sup>8</sup>), but they all read *Palmetto-Leaves* independently of *Oldtown Folks* and Stowe's other fiction. I call attention to the crucial through-line between the nature essays and the fiction: since Stowe wrote these texts concurrently, we must read them concurrently.

Borrowing from the techniques of her nature essays, Stowe creates a novel that looks something like Annie Trumbull Slosson's and Celia Thaxter's narratives of obsession: a taut, plotless narrative committed to observation that captures an intense, all-consuming passion for a particular area of study. In *Oldtown Folks*, the area of study is not anything in nature. Rather, it is the microhistory of a Massachusetts village. Although Horace Holyoke tells us that *Oldtown Folks* will be an emotionless novel and that he is a narrator committed to reporting exactly what he sees, his obsessive attention to his subject itself becomes a kind of powerful emotion. He is obsessive about the history of his family and village in the same way that Slosson's narrators are obsessed with insects and plants and Thaxter is obsessed with her flowers—and in the same way that Stowe is obsessed with Florida. Horace Holyoke is precisely the kind of obsessive observer that Stowe herself becomes in *Palmetto-Leaves*. These feelings of passionate obsession are an alternative to the overflowing concern for suffering in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In resisting sentimentality, Stowe embraces obsession as an alternative form of emotion. At some level, obsession as an interest in description and observation, and not in closeness to other people, is unemotional. But at a deeper level, obsession is emotion in its most intense

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educational, religious, and social reform movements during Reconstruction (4). They suggest that participation in reform was the leading desire that brought her to Florida, that it was more important to her than her literary projects and interest in the natural beauty of the region.

<sup>8</sup> Rachel Klein interrogates Stowe's problematic racial politics in her essentializing descriptions of black Floridians in *Palmetto-Leaves* and her call for southerners to exploit former slaves as a cheap source of labor. Klein suggests that *Palmetto-Leaves*—specifically its final chapter on the labor potential of black men and women—shows just how “central” Stowe's “preoccupation with the labor questions of her own day” is to her work (135).

form, an outpouring of passion that can only be personal. For Stowe in *Oldtown Folks*, obsession is the new sentimentality.

Obsession is an unlikely emotional structure for a novel—especially one written by a writer known for her layered, riveting, page-turning plots. For obsession is still and unchanging, slow, sometimes uncomfortable. As a narrative energy, it creates and sustains an atmosphere—it doesn't drive a linear story. This is what can be so alienating about *Oldtown Folks*: it is a novel that doesn't move. Stowe figuratively turns eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century rural Massachusetts into the arresting, beguiling, unnervingly stagnant swamps of late-nineteenth-century Florida.

This helps explain why *Oldtown Folks* was off-putting to some of Stowe's readers. *The Nation* called the novel's New England revival sensibility "tedious" (437), and Bret Harte, writing for the *Overland Monthly*, had these devastating words: "Mrs. Stowe's treatment of 'Oldtown Folks' is even more provincial than her subject" (390). Hedrick deems the novel a failure to connect, suggesting that "Stowe's distance from her audience dulled her ear and her awareness of how far she could stretch the reader's tolerance" (345). By seeing *Oldtown Folks* as a narrative of obsession, I want to understand—and ultimately celebrate—this readerly distance. If *Oldtown Folks* fails as a novel, it succeeds as a narrative of obsession. For in the world of obsession, indulgence and minutiae are narrative goods. Tedium and uncomfortable distance are an inevitable part of total personal absorption. These are the feelings, as I showed in Chapter 2, that Jewett pulls back from at the end of "A White Heron" and that Thaxter gladly loses herself to in *An Island Garden*. When one person indulges their passions, others will

inevitably be left out. Where feeling right is the goal of sentimentality, feeling weird—feeling *wrong*—is the side effect of obsession.

In this chapter, I demonstrate how Stowe's explorations of Florida unsettled her understanding of genre, narrative, and emotion—and gender. I show how her narratives of obsession, both her essays on Florida and her novel of New England, not only unsettle generic expectations but also undo the sets of gendered behavior associated with those genres. In her discussion of women who wrote natural history during their time in Florida, Susan Eacker tells us that mid- and late-nineteenth-century Florida was a place where visiting women writers—like Stowe, Margaret Deland, Abbie M. Brooks, Sarah Stuart, and Ellen Call Long—felt empowered to enter genres dominated by men: the travel sketch and the natural history.<sup>9</sup> “This personal southern renaissance most likely had to do with the freedom found in travel and in the point of destination as well, since Florida was a holiday place where the suspension of the ordinary applied to feminine traits and behavior,” Eacker writes (496). I examine both the ways that Stowe takes on a discursively masculine role in her Florida writings and that she feminizes male characters in *Oldtown Folks*. I claim that the femininity of the novel's male characters—which Stowe links to their obsessive qualities—is part of the uncomfortable reaction that some

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<sup>9</sup> Parrish analyzes the ways in which earlier-generation, eighteenth-century women (including Jane Colden, Elizabeth Graeme Fergusson, and Eliza Lucas Pinckney) contributed to the “cultures of natural history” “through letters, drawings, poetry, and exchanges of specimen gifts.” “Their writing, and the writing they provoked,” she suggests, “shows them both manipulated by and manipulating the divide that placed women on the side of nature and men on the side of knowledge production” (177). The women who did manage to participate in naturalist print genres were associated with “spiritual-epistemological profanement.” Demonstrating this, Parrish turns to the example of eighteenth-century South Carolina horticulturalist Martha Daniell Logan, who ran a nursery and a boarding school and wrote the “Gardener's Kalendar,” first appearing in the *South Carolina Almanack* in 1752 and later reprinted in other colonial almanacs. Parrish examines how the men naturalists William Bartram and Peter Collinson, in their correspondence, “sexualized Logan's knowledgeable collecting to denigrate the curiosity of the independent, and hence disruptive, widow” (164).

readers had to the book. I suggest that it's not just Florida as a place that encourages fluidity and "the suspension of the ordinary"—it's built into the very form of obsession itself, a mode of narration that suspends and challenges prevailing mid-nineteenth-century generic and gender assumptions.

I start this chapter by providing a brief account of the various motivations that led Stowe to buy a home in Florida, revealing how her personal and familial struggles and reformist ambitions and her literary aspirations all intersected with her interest in describing and observing nature. Then, I articulate the techniques of seeing and thinking—and, most importantly, obsession—that Stowe practiced while in Florida. I argue that the obsessive mode of close observation that Stowe cultivates in *Palmetto-Leaves* goes beyond merely exploring nature and becomes, more broadly, a way of seeing the world and a set of techniques that can be applied to fiction. I show how Stowe brings these techniques into *Oldtown Folks*, a narrative of obsession that uses the powers of both sentiment and naturalist inquiry in its multi-generic, multi-gendered approach to narrative. I present obsession as a form of feeling wrong—a disruptive, disorienting, rambling mode of narration that, in its weirdness, distractions, and revelations, is alternately maddening and liberating.

### **I. "A never-ceasing source of interest and pleasure"**

In 1866, Stowe saw the possibility of prosperity in Florida. Her most pressing concern was the rehabilitation of her alcoholic son, Fred, but she also imagined making money. By setting Fred up in the warm, healing sun, as the manager of Laurel Grove Plantation—the cotton plantation she invested in—she hoped to heal him and gain a

profit.<sup>10</sup> Both projects failed. Fred stayed at Laurel Grove for a year, before going to a New York sanitarium. In 1868, he came back to Florida, though three years later, wracked by thoughts of suicide, he went off to sea, and Stowe never heard from him again.<sup>11</sup> Financially, Stowe had minor success with the orange grove she bought in 1868 after her unsuccessful cotton investment,<sup>12</sup> but by 1881, a deadly frost, which killed around 100,000 of Stowe's oranges, put an end to her agricultural pursuits (Eacker 500).

The good Stowe envisioned bringing about in Florida was beyond familial and financial. "My plan of going to Florida, as it lies in my mind, is not in any sense a mere worldly enterprise," she wrote to her brother, Charles Beecher, on the eve of her first trip down south: "I have for many years had a longing to be more immediately doing Christ's work on earth" (Fields 302). The wish to participate in religious and educational reform in the struggling state was a big part of Stowe's desire to go to Florida. In *Beechers, Stowes, and Yankee Strangers: the Transformation of Florida*, John T. Foster, Jr. and

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<sup>10</sup> Stowe was also motivated by the desire to "provide employment for a large number of black laborers" (Rowe 29). While this early attempt to cash in on the cotton crop and to give jobs to former slaves quickly ended with poor results, Stowe made it a side project to advocate for the exploitation of black labor. She devotes the final chapter of *Palmetto-Leaves*, "The Laborers of the South," to the advantages of black men and women as a cheap, reliable workforce. She speaks of southern blacks with racist condescension: "Our negro laborers, with all the inevitable defects of imperfect training, ignorance, and the negligent habits induced by slavery, have still been, as a whole, satisfactory laborers. They keep their contracts, do their work, and save their earnings" (317).

<sup>11</sup> "In 1871," Hedrick writes, "certain that he could not overcome the temptation of drink and equally certain that his continued presence was an insupportable burden to his family, Fred resolved to go to sea...He sailed around the Horn to San Francisco, but then went ashore and simply disappeared. Whether he went on a waterfront drinking spree and then met with some untoward event or simply took his own life, his parents never learned. Even in his end, the unlucky Fred Stowe was unable to let his parents rest easy" (382-83).

<sup>12</sup> Diane Roberts describes the failure of Stowe's initial cotton investment: "In 1865, she rented Laurel Grove, a plantation across the river from Mandarin, and sent Frederick down to grow cotton. Things did not go well. The rain came at the wrong time. His first 200 acres were eaten by worms. Stowe had invested \$10,000 in the venture, and Laurel Grove's total yield in 1866 was two bales of cotton" (200). According to Roberts, Stowe's subsequent land purchase was "a bargain"—"thirty acres of orange groves at Mandarin on the St. John's River" for just \$5,000 (201).

Sarah Whitmer Foster locate Harriet Beecher Stowe in a larger network of “like-minded activists” from the North that included minister John Swaim and social reformer and Florida First Lady Chloe Merrick. They all traveled to Reconstruction Florida with the goal of spreading Christianity and building schools (4).<sup>13</sup>

There was also literary work to be done in Florida. The novel of New England history she had conceived of three years earlier, in 1864, could only be written outside of the New England cold.<sup>14</sup> In a letter to Annie Fields, Stowe expresses her belief that the refuge from winter will help her write:

I am going to take my writing-desk and go down to Florida to Fred’s plantation, where we have now a home, and abide there until the heroic agony of betweenity, the freeze and thaw of winter, is over, and then I doubt not I can write my three hours a day...I write with a heavy numbness—I have not had yet one *good* spell of writing though I have had all through the story abundant clairvoyance and see

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<sup>13</sup> The changes that Stowe’s efforts brought were real and lasting. “Advice in *Palmetto-Leaves*...not only encouraged Florida’s agricultural development but also enhanced the likelihood of success for newcomers,” John T. Foster, Jr. and Sarah Whitmer Foster write (126). The schools founded by Stowe’s brother, Charles Beecher, and educational reformer Matthias Swaim ran into the 1920s. Foster and Foster describe the enfranchisement and empowerment of black residents and their crucial role in these reform projects: “The successes of the Beechers, Swaims, and Reeds required meaningful participation of African Americans. Quick to seize upon economic and educational opportunities, blacks flocked to Jacksonville. As a result they formed a majority of the citizenry for decades. In public affairs they remained a force within the state long after the Reconstruction. The Beechers, Swaims, and Reeds did not create modern Florida by themselves but rather were joined in their endeavors by thousands of eager Floridians” (127).

<sup>14</sup> Hedrick tells us that *Oldtown Folks*, “with the exception of the interrupted *Pearl of Orr’s Island*,” “would have the longest gestation of any of her books.” Stowe “had a clear view of its subject back in February 1864, at which time she was planning to have it ready for serialization the following year: ‘It is to be of New England life in the age after the revolutionary war & before rail roads had destroyed the primitive flavor of our life—the rough kindly simple religious life of a Massachusetts town in those days when the weekly mail stage was the only excitement...It is something I have been skimming & saving cream for many years & I have a choice lot of actors ready to come onto the boards’” (330-31).

just how it must be written—but for writing some parts I want *warm* weather and not to be in the state of a ‘froze and thawed apple’ (Fields 314).

Stowe anticipates this Floridian rejuvenation to be a stylistic or formal one. She already has the content of the story itself in her mind—she just needs the energy to write it, the voice in which to tell it.

When Stowe got to Florida, yet another desire overtook her, something even more powerful than her rehabilitative, financial, reformist, and literary plans: the desire to know and write about the striking world around her. Naturalist curiosity developed into a new interest for Stowe, something outside of the original objectives she set out for herself before coming to Florida. In a letter to her family, she recreates her initial sighting of Jacksonville, on a steamboat coming from Savannah:

In all my foreign experience & travels I never saw such a scene...The fog was just up as we came in—the river broad as the Connecticut in its broadest parts...The shores white and dazzling like driven snow & out of this dazzling white rises groves of palmetto pine (qtd. in Hedrick 329).

So captivated by her first glimpse of Jacksonville, Stowe immediately decides that she’ll “write an article for the Watchman describing this strange beautiful sea island country more particularly” (329). Stowe’s idea for an article on this “strange” new place would go on to become a long series of essays on nearly every aspect of natural life in Florida.

This emerging fascination with her natural surroundings began to inform the way she thought, lived, and worked while in Florida. In *Palmetto-Leaves*, Stowe presents the allure of nature in the language of unstoppable, uncontrollable enchantment: “It is a perpetual flower-garden, where creepers run and tangle; where Nature has raptures and

frenzies of growth, and conducts herself like a crazy, drunken, but beautiful *bacchante*” (138). Stowe tells us that her fascination with Florida is so “all-absorbing” that it’s all she can think about. “One must write what one is thinking of. When the mind is full of one thing, why go about and write another?” Stowe says at the beginning of her reflection on magnolias in *Palmetto-Leaves* (161). To write about the natural beauty of Florida seemed less like a choice than a calling.

This is the same tropical irresistibility that many white Northern visitors found in Florida in the late-nineteenth century. Nearly tripling in population from 188,000 to 529,000 between 1870 and 1900—largely due to the influx of Northerners—Florida attracted thousands of people who saw in the region economic potential and exotic abundance (Powers 1). The reputation came mainly from guidebooks and travelogues, like Edward King’s *The Great South* (1875), Sidney Lanier’s *Florida: Its Scenery, Climate, and History* (1875), and George M. Barbour’s *Florida for Tourists* (1875), and Stowe’s own *Palmetto-Leaves*, which, coming right after Ledyard Bill’s *A Winter in Florida* (1869), was one of the earliest works in this postbellum genre of Florida promotional material. While the state was actually “largely unexplored wilderness” when Stowe first arrived, the path that she, and most other Northern visitors, traveled was extremely well paved, a kind of “Grand Tour,” as Stowe points out, moving ‘up the St. John’s to Enterprise, across to St. Augustine, and back’ (qtd. Eacker 497). Similarly, the body of writing on Florida followed a well-established set of conventions. In the tradition of late-eighteenth-century naturalists, like William Bartram, exploring the same land, writers like King, Barbour, Bill, and Stowe

portrayed Florida as an earthly Eden whose luxuriant landscape was scattered with exotic characters: Crackers—poor, rural, white Floridians; Seminole Indians; and newly emancipated slaves. Additionally, the charms of Florida as a place of rehabilitation and even miraculous physical regeneration, were generally couched in highly exaggerative language (Eacker 499).

In this way, the kind of observation Stowe performs in Florida is both naturalist and fantastical, methodical and dreamy—the musings of a white northerner transfixed by both actual natural beauty and allegorical southern otherness.

The sketches themselves constantly negotiate between these investments in both landscape and subjectivity. In *Palmetto-Leaves*, Stowe uses the conventions of natural history, long lists of technical descriptions, but she presents her essays as letters and journal entries. Eacker identifies this technique of couching naturalist observations inside personal genres of expression as a strategy used by women writers in Florida—including Stowe, Deland, Brooks, and others—to satisfy readerly expectations for an acceptable feminine voice. These women avoided “straightforward narrative in favor of diaries and letters, which have been described as a ‘suitably private and domestic orientation’” in an effort to “make their writing and their travel palatable to the public” (498).<sup>15</sup> Thus, Stowe

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<sup>15</sup> This is just one of various strategies women nature writers in Florida used that distinguishes their work from men’s writing. Eacker identifies three other hallmarks of women’s representations of Florida: the emphasis on the warm climate as a cure for physical ailments, the call to preserve and protect the environment, and an attempt to chronicle the inner lives of the locals. “While women writers envisioned Florida as a health- and freedom-enhancing Eden, most male writers promoted the state principally as a site for sportsmen’s holidays, as demonstrated by the number of male-authored guidebooks devoted to describing the best hunting grounds and fishing holes,” Eacker tells us (503-4), going on to note the criticism women offered against the cruel killing of animals and these men’s “expropriation of the land” as they expressed concern for a “paradise lost” (505). Eacker extends the supposed sympathy of women travel writers to their attention toward local cultures: “If men ventured into Florida with the arms of the hunter or the avarice of the explorer, women writers came with the eyes of the ethnographer. Certain stock characters are described in the works of all of these women, with three predominating: Seminole

must rely on an outwardly epistolary, intimate form to convey an intellectual interest in her surroundings.

Naturalist curiosity was not an entirely new source of interest for Stowe. In his essay on the influence of eighteenth-century botanical discourses on Stowe's novel, *The Minister's Wooing* (1859), Mark Hoyer traces her early forays into amateur natural history. He portrays Stowe as an "enthusiastic painter of flowers" and "avid gardener," reminding us that, at the seminaries where she went to school, natural history was a core area of study. He also points out that, during the 1830s, when she lived in Ohio, Stowe published essays in a "local horticultural and agricultural newspaper" (115).<sup>16</sup> Hoyer suggests that in *The Minister's Wooing*—which appeared fourteen years before *Palmetto-Leaves*—Stowe uses her knowledge of botany as a way of thinking about contemporary political issues. He claims that Stowe draws a parallel between "the eighteenth-century debates in botany over the nature of reproduction" and "the nineteenth-century debates over slavery and women's rights" (113). In doing so, she uses "language and imagery in ways remarkably similar to those found in the pages of Gray's *Botany* and the *American Naturalist*" (111): "Even if we never choose to call Stowe a nature writer, we can credit her as being one of those writers whose experiments record nature's writing," Hoyer writes (123). Thus, the naturalist wonderment Stowe discovers in Florida is not a sudden

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Indians, African Americans, and Florida Crackers" (506). Despite their interest in difference, most women writers took on roles of either "local colorists" or "propagandists for colonial policies," giving all of these groups "the status of exotic inferiority" (506). This is exactly what Stowe does in her demeaning descriptions of former slaves as an ideal cheap workforce in her discussion of Florida labor politics in *Palmetto-Leaves*.

<sup>16</sup> Hoyer describes Stowe's love of gardening as intense and all-consuming, not unlike the way I describe Celia Thaxter's gardening in Chapter Two: "Even Harriet's husband, Calvin, complained in letters of her devoted attention to raising flowers, sometimes to the neglect of her wifely and motherly duties. So passionate was she about her gardening that when she and Calvin were building a new home in 1838, Harriet 'planned and executed grand gardens involving tons of manure and eight kinds of geraniums'" (115).

form of fascination sparked by her trip but a curiosity she had been steadily cultivating for a lifetime.

What is different about Stowe's urge to know and describe her natural surroundings when she gets to Florida is the exigency and intensity of that impulse. If Stowe uses botanical theory and language in *A Minister's Wooing* to think through the novel's greater political issues concerning slaves and women, her attention to natural history in *Palmetto-Leaves* is something valuable and meaningful on its own. Now, the vividness of naturalist description is not a way of reaching a larger point but the point itself. Florida is, she tells us, "a never-ceasing source of interest and pleasure" (209). There is no explicit action in these sketches of Florida life. Rather, they are still portraits of isolated moments and places. Here, the payoff is not the action or change of a novel but the stimulation of vibrant reporting and observing. The rewards of close description in *Palmetto-Leaves* are both intellectual and emotional: Stowe gains deep knowledge of her surroundings and achieves the feeling of "tropical exultation" (197), the joy of seeing, hearing, and smelling her mythologized paradise.

For Stowe, Florida represents a particular way of seeing the world—one that she brings not just to experiencing nature but to all aspects of her life. It is a place that asks her to observe her surroundings with painstaking care and closeness. The combination of an unhurried way of living and the beauty of the scenery encourages Stowe to look at seemingly little things for extended periods of time. "Our life is so still and lonely here, that even so small an event as our crossing the river for a visit is all-absorbing," she writes (228). This sense of "all-absorbing" scrutiny is what drives Stowe to write such extensive, intensely focused descriptions of the flora and fauna she encounters.

Rather than offer sweeping portraits of an entire landscape, Stowe zooms in on individual elements and devotes long passages to sketching their features. She dedicates an entire essay in the collection to conveying the complexities of the magnolia plant, from its “intoxicating, dreamy fragrance” to its “pearly hinges” and “golden brown and mottled leaves” (162). She catalogues each part of the flower individually, not moving on to the next one until she has fully exhausted her descriptive powers. Stowe prefaces her painstaking attention to the magnolia with a statement on the urgency of their appeal: “This past week we have been engrossed by magnolias...Forthwith all else was given up: for who would take the portrait of the white lady must hurry; for, like many queens of earth, there is but a step between perfected beauty and decay” (161-62). Once the magnolias come into bloom, everything else must be dropped and all energy given to their splendor. Stowe equates her project of writing about flowers with the time-sensitive task faced by a portrait artist.

Stowe extends the fervent concentration she brings to describing nature to otherwise unremarkable pieces of everyday life. Suddenly, under the spell of Florida’s “dreamy intoxication” (145), she becomes endlessly fascinated by even the arrival of the mail-boat, which comes twice a week to her Mandarin home. “The whole forenoon is taken up with it,” she says, before going on to present its approach like a momentous event in nature:

We sit on the veranda, and watch the mail-boat far down the river—a mere white speck as she passes through the wooded opening above Jacksonville. She grows larger and larger as she comes sailing up like a great white stately swan, first on the farther side of the river till she comes to Reed’s Landing; and then, turning her

white breast full toward Mandarin Wharf, she comes ploughing across, freighted with all ours hopes and fears (64).<sup>17</sup>

She achieves this same heightened level of fixation when she sees a dog and his owner while on a steamer. Over the course of the “three-days’ voyage,” she tells us, “the dog becomes a topic, and his devotion to the fair-haired lady an engrossment” (7). There is nothing extraordinary about the dog or this woman, but *everything* warrants close, protracted inspection in the Mandarin sun. The Florida way of experiencing nature slowly, with careful scrutiny, is, for Stowe, something that transcends nature: it is a set of narrative skills that she can use to describe anything she sees or imagines. Indeed, it was just the thing Stowe needed as she searched for the voice of her novel-in-progress, *Oldtown Folks*.

## II. “I have tried to maintain the part simply of a sympathetic spectator”

What does Stowe’s New England novel look like through Floridian eyes? What does the obsessive immersion of natural history teach Stowe about fiction writing? With *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe became the ultimate mid-century purveyor of sentimentality, harnessing the power of empathy to galvanize readers to act against slavery. With *Oldtown Folks*, nearly two decades later, Stowe replaces that sentiment with obsession.

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<sup>17</sup> Like the “white lady” that Stowe imagines the magnolias as in the previous passage, the “white stately swan” she envisions here is not a thing she observes in nature but an image she pulls out of her white, northern fantasy of a long day of Florida leisure. The emphasis on pure “great” whiteness in both spots reveals the privilege that Stowe relies on and perpetuates as she engages in these extended afternoons of seeing. Here, we can see that obsession, like sentimentality, is a uniquely white form of engagement. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the universe of “feeling right” that Stowe creates leads the former slaves to Liberia. Her vision of good ends with a banishment of blackness. The obsession with a white purity here suggests that obsession is similarly exclusive to white observers.

It's an emotion that comes not from concern for others but from personal fascination, an emotion that doesn't drive a plot but rather generates an atmosphere. Yet, for all their obvious differences, the transition from sentimentality to obsession is less a drastic shift from one emotional register to another than an interplay between two narrative strategies. In this section, I show how Stowe reaches obsession *through* sentimentality: her obsessive narrator must rely on a kind of sympathy, but he takes that sympathy and directs it onto an obsession with the village's history that many readers will inevitably not share. I look particularly at the obsessive character, Sam Lawson—the town's unofficial historian—whose charms Stowe turns into kooks. Especially striking is the way that Stowe feminizes Sam, linking his obsessive qualities with womanliness. It was this simultaneous obsession and gender play that readers found so discomfoting about the novel. I end this section, and chapter, by dwelling on that discomfort and showing how Stowe herself dwelt on it, publishing a follow-up book with even more Oldtown tales, from the weird man who couldn't stop telling stories: *Sam Lawson's Oldtown Fireside Stories* (1871).

Stowe had developed the idea of her small-town Massachusetts novel as early as 1864, but she didn't start it until she got to Florida in 1867. The project was a continuation of familiar material. She'd written about late-eighteenth-century Rhode Island in *The Minister's Wooing* (1859) and coastal Maine in *The Pearl of Orr's Island* (1862), but this novel would be much more personal: an imagined history of Natick, Massachusetts, where her husband grew up, based on the stories he had told her. She brings the same descriptive inquiry she develops in the Florida wilderness to her historical novel, crafting a fiction that is closer to a "study" than it is to a story—a

collection of episodic, sketch-like chapters not united by a plot.<sup>18</sup> *Oldtown Folks* is a novel that claims to deal in facts. In the preface, the narrator—a man named Horace Holyoke—describes *Oldtown Folks* as a collection of “studies” depicting early New England life: “My studies,” he tells us, are “taken from real characters, real scenes, and real incidents. And some of those things in the story which may appear most romantic and like fiction are simple renderings and applications of facts” (3-4). Horace is less a narrator than a chronicler—or, as he describes himself, an “observer and reporter” committed to accurately portraying an actual moment in time. He aspires toward observational precision and narrative effacement: “In doing this work, 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” (3). The image of the “mountain lake,” the calling on an object in nature is apt, for Horace is invoking the skills of natural history—recording, describing, naming.

It turns out that *Oldtown Folks* is not as “still and passive” as Horace wants it to be. Although Horace strives to be as cool and clear as a “looking glass,” he reveals the feelings he has toward his subjects even before the novel starts. The kind of narrator he claims to be at the end of the preface is not nearly as unemotional as the “mountain lake” he claims to be earlier:

In portraying the various characters which I have introduced, I have tried to maintain the part simply of a sympathetic spectator...I merely listen, and endeavor to understand and faithfully represent the inner life of each. I myself am

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<sup>18</sup> Kathryn Dolan proposes an additional connection between Stowe’s interest in Florida and *Oldtown Folks*—one not about genre or form but about the “utopian” ideals that these projects share: as Stowe worked on these two projects alongside each other, she brought together “her utopian vision of a reformed postbellum nation with remembered stories of Calvin Stowe’s childhood in small-town Massachusetts” (130).

but the observer and reporter, seeing much, doubting much, questioning much, and believing with all my heart in only a very few things (4).

Horace uses the language of restraint (“simply,” “I merely listen,” “I myself am but”) to emphasize his apparently plain, unembellished narration. And yet, even as he denies his emotional presence, he still invokes the language of sentimentality: he is not just a “spectator” but a “sympathetic spectator.” While he never really tells us the “very few things” that he believes in, he does assure us that he believes them “with all my heart.” Mountain lakes and looking glasses are *not* “sympathetic spectators”—they do not believe things with their heart or have any sympathy, because they don’t have a heart. This is the contradiction of Horace Holyoke’s preface: he wants to be an unmoving observer, but can’t help being an emotional creature. The project that Horace sets out for himself—to “represent the inner life” of his subjects—is not a project fit for a looking glass or a mountain lake. It requires something more than mere reflection: interpretation, imagination, sympathy. The descriptive skills of natural history will only take Horace so far. In order to complete the New England history he sets out to write in his preface, he also needs the affective insights of sentimentality.

What does it mean to be a “sympathetic spectator”? With this hybrid phrase, Horace evokes both the emotional intimacy of “sympathy” and the detachment and passivity of “spectatorship.” The embodiment of “sympathetic spectatorship” in *Oldtown Folks* is Sam Lawson, who uses his observational skills and emotional connections with others to become the village’s unofficial historian. Horace introduces Sam as the “village do-nothing,” “a man who won’t be hurried, and won’t work”—a man who “never had anything more pressing to do than croon and gossip with us” (31). Although the label

“do-nothing” initially suggests worthlessness and unproductivity, Sam emerges as a crucial presence in the life of Oldtown. “He was an expert in at least five or six kinds of handicraft,” Horace tells us, going on to list the many tasks Sam completes for his neighbors on a daily basis (32). But the “do-nothing”’s most profound work is his intellectual work. He spends all of his time collecting facts and anecdotes about Oldtown’s history and sharing them with people he meets: “Nobody had made love, or married, or had children born, or been buried, since Sam was able to perambulate the country, without his informing himself minutely of every available particular; and his unfathomable knowledge on these subjects was an unfailing source of popularity” (35). Sam Lawson does for Oldtown social life what Stowe sets out to do with the Florida landscape: surveying the area, “informing himself minutely of every available particular,” and cataloguing all the things he learns.

Sam is not merely an informational resource to the residents of Oldtown—he is also a kind of spiritual healer. His encyclopedic knowledge of the village’s history has an intellectual *and* affective payoff for the people he talks to. When Horace’s father dies, Sam is the only person who can comfort him. Sam’s reassuring words of homespun wisdom, his recounting of gossip from other funerals he attended (“his homely expressions of sympathy” (36)) are just the thing to soothe a young Horace as he begins to mourn his dad. In articulating Sam’s importance to Oldtown life, Horace highlights his sympathy for others: “The fact is, that Sam’s softly easy temper and habits of miscellaneous handiness caused him to have a warm corner in most of the households...every one knows the welcome of a universal gossip, who carries round a district a wallet of choice bits of neighborhood information” (35). In all these descriptions

of Sam, Stowe uses the language of sentimentality (“warm corner,” “expressions of sympathy”) and the language of natural history (“unfathomable knowledge,” “bits of...information”). As Oldtown’s vernacular historian, Sam brings the all-consuming curiosity a natural historian has for his or her specimens to the subjective matters of everyday life. In order to synthesize and communicate all this information, he must have a deep emotional awareness of his subjects and audience.<sup>19</sup>

Sam’s unending concern for his neighbors and his insatiable obsession with local history are not appealing to everyone. The way he can turn a short visit or a simple errand to fix a household appliance into a marathon of story-telling can drive some mad. Consider Horace’s account of a clock-repair that seemed, to his impatient aunt, to never end:

I shall never forget the wrath and dismay which he roused in my Aunt Lois’s mind by the leisurely way in which, after having taken our own venerable kitchen clock to pieces, and strewn the fragments all over the kitchen, he would roost over it in endless incubation, telling stories, entering into long-winded theological discussions, smoking pipes, and giving histories of all the other clocks in Oldtown, with occasional memoirs of those in Needmore, the North Parish, and Podunk, as placidly indifferent to all her volleys of sarcasm and contempt, her stinging expostulations and philippics, as the sailing old moon is to the frisky, animated barking of some puppy dog of earth (32).

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<sup>19</sup> Stowe’s description of Sam’s preternatural ability to recount weddings demonstrates just how comprehensive and deep his knowledge is: “Others could relate the bare, simple facts, but Sam Lawson could give the wedding, with variations, with marginal references, and explanatory notes, and enlightening comments, that ran deep into the history of everybody present. So that even those who had been at the wedding did not know half what they had seen until Sam told them” (470).

Here, Stowe pokes fun at the wearisome side of other people's curiosity, felt especially when what we're looking for isn't more oddity but a quick job to be done, or in the case of her readers, a linear story to be told.

The joke is on us: Aunt Lois' frustration with Sam is the same weariness that many readers themselves had with Stowe's rambling novel. Writing for *The Nation*, one reviewer declared that, "*Oldtown Folks* cannot be said to call for remark except from those whose duty it may be to point out defects of literary workmanship," pointing to the lack of story and the apparently flat characters (whom "she has put before us as she has seen the outside of them, and not as she has tried to imagine them") (437). Lydia Maria Child "liked it less than anything she ever wrote" (qtd. in Hedrick 344), and Bret Harte claimed that Stowe approached her material "with the provincial satisfaction of a village gossip recalling village worthies" (390).<sup>20</sup> Thanks to Stowe's marketing, the book still sold 25,000 copies in its first three months,<sup>21</sup> though the novel was an undeniable critical low point in Stowe's career.<sup>22</sup> This is where obsession turns from enchanting to off-putting: like Sam overstaying his welcome at Aunt Lois', the interest in rural minutiae

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<sup>20</sup> Maria Diedrich emphasizes the chauvinist condescension that recurs in male reviewers' responses to Stowe's New England novels. These men—including Bret Harte and *The Nation* critic I mention earlier—had no respect for Stowe's genre experiments, associating her regional writing with an inherent frivolity because of its femininity. Diedrich suggests that this reputation "impacted the reception of this text and Stowe's entire New England cycle for more than a century: they were either given up to oblivion or ridiculed as a woman's sentimental reminiscences in the disguise of historic fiction" (110). For an extended account of the broader misogynist patterns in *The Nation*'s nineteenth-century book reviews, see Hedrick, pp. 348-352.

<sup>21</sup> She oversaw an aggressive promotional campaign that included not only excerpts published in periodicals but also a series of events celebrating New England history in Natick, Massachusetts to bring to life to the spirit of the book. Hedrick notes that there was a "lucrative market for New England nostalgia" (347).

<sup>22</sup> The book did attract some fans in literary circles. "I think this in some respects her best work," Gail Hamilton wrote of *Oldtown Folks*. "The sense of it is brilliant, the logic of it unanswerable, in my estimation" (Dodge 641). John Greenleaf Whittier called it "the most charming New England idyl ever written," though Maria Diedrich points out the condescension in his praise, the diminution of terming the novel an "idyl" (110).

goes on for too long with no apparent narrative payoff. As sentiment becomes obsession, the warm feelings of sympathy become feelings of irritation and discomfort.

### III. “Motherly” Men and “Unfeminine” Wives

In *Oldtown Folks*, discomfort comes in many forms. The digressive sense of wandering storytelling that seems to go nowhere is part of a larger world of disruption and fluidity. Connected to Sam’s disregard for discursive conventions is the way he also disrupts gender conventions. In addition to the book’s plotlessness, *The Nation* reviewer names the femininity of Stowe’s male characters as another major fault of the novel—particularly Horace Holyoke: “While he is young he is not a boy but a little dreamy female, and as he grows on to the age and past it when the human character becomes distinctively—and with an obvious as well as a real distinctiveness—male or female, he becomes a more or less unsuccessful simulacrum of a man, except when he is a more or less unfeminine woman” (437). The reviewer’s misogynist repulsion to this destabilized gender characterization speaks to the depth of *Oldtown Folks*’ unconventionality, both in its fragmented, anecdotal, motionless form and its unsettling of masculinity.

While *The Nation* reviewer fixates on Horace’s effeminacy, Sam is actually the most womanly man in the novel. As a feeling observer, Sam takes on qualities linked to both nineteenth-century femininity and masculinity: Stowe characterizes him in the two seemingly contrasting terms of sentimental womanhood and male naturalist study. Sam is “a man” who “gave himself seriously, for years, to the task of collecting information,” Horace tells us (466). Here, Stowe represents Sam and his endless inquisitiveness and eagerness to learn about the world as if he were an eighteenth-century naturalist like

William Bartram. And yet, the defining attribute that makes Sam such a talented storyteller—his ability to empathize—is, to a nineteenth-century audience, a distinctly womanly trait connected to the sentimental tradition of femininity. In fact, Horace often characterizes Sam in explicitly feminine terms. Sam spends nearly all of his time in the domestic realm, visiting the homes of those whose stories he collects. The narrator insists that all mothers love Sam because he “always pleases the children,” from the “warm corner” he occupies in most “households” (35). Stowe juxtaposes Sam’s “soft easy temper” with the unfeminine ways of his wife, who had “fought life single-handed, tooth and nail, with all the ferocity of outraged sensibilities, and had come out of the fight scratched and dishevelled, with few womanly graces” (34). The world of *Oldtown Folks* is one of “motherly” men and “unfeminine” wives, feeling observers and sympathetic spectators.

In this way, *Oldtown Folks* takes just as much from its New England source material as it does from late-nineteenth-century Florida. Susan Eacker characterizes late-nineteenth-century Florida as “a frontier, untamed by civilization and thus a space where gender conventions had yet to be fully realized” (496). The “motherly” men and “unfeminine” wives Stowe creates come out of this untamed atmosphere.<sup>23</sup> Eacker connects the influence of “untamed” Florida to Stowe’s emerging affiliations with the women’s rights movement: “Only one year after she began wintering in Florida, Stowe

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<sup>23</sup> *Oldtown Folks* directly counters the prevailing discourse dividing feminine sentiment and masculine intellect. Consider, for example, this statement from Theodore Parker’s 1853 “Sermon of the Public Function of Woman”: “I think man will always lead in affairs of intellect—of reason, imagination, understanding—he has the bigger brain; but that woman will always lead in affairs of emotion—moral, affectional, religious—she has the better heart, the truer intuition of the right, the lovely, the holy” (19). Stowe’s feeling men and thinking women expose the hypocrisy of such popular opinions.

admitted to ‘being *to some extent* a woman’s rights woman’” (502).<sup>24</sup> I understand Stowe’s gender play in *Oldtown Folks* not simply as an extension of her fluid Floridian environment but as part of her genre experiment with obsession more broadly. Her surrender and commitment to obsession is an invitation to see across genre and gender. In playing with the expectations of the sentimental novel and the natural history essay, Stowe experiments with a cross-generic, cross-gendered logic. She exposes the fascinating—if, to some, off-putting possibilities of a novel motivated by obsession.

*Oldtown Folks* is a sprawling, longform narrative of obsession, very different in scope from the tight, brief narratives of Annie Trumbull Slosson and the claustrophobic narrative of Celia Thaxter. An expansive obsession is a strange concept: to stretch out an acute feeling and interest that otherwise resists drawn-out narrative. Yet Stowe had even grander visions for expanding *Oldtown Folks*. In spite of dismissive reviews, Stowe recommitted to her obsession, publishing two years later *Sam Lawson’s Oldtown Fireside Stories*, a sequel to the sprawling novel—more tales of the fictional town no one else wanted to visit more than she did, from the perspective of the obsessive man who had overstayed his welcome.<sup>25</sup> It’s the logical extension of an overwhelming obsession: to

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<sup>24</sup> Josephine Donovan claims that Stowe had “never formally analyzed her own situation” in relation to women’s rights before the 1860s (143). Donovan names late 1869 to 1870 as “a watershed year in the development of her feminist themes” (141). But Donovan insists that we can find seeds of these themes in her earlier work: “the passionate concern for justice which drove her to write *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* led her to appreciate and to care greatly about the oppression of women” (143). Jeanne Boydston, Mary Kelley, and Anne Margolis identify a shift in Stowe’s thinking and writing on women’s rights in the years following the Civil War: “Having previously restricted” the “role” of women in the “public sphere” to a role of mere “influence,” Stowe “now sought to extend women’s political power through suffrage and to enhance their social and economic position through property rights for married women and increased vocational opportunities for all women confronted with the need to support themselves” (258).

<sup>25</sup> There was a promotional dimension to Stowe’s continued obsession. Mentioning her idea for *Oldtown Fireside Stories* in a letter to James Fields, Stowe insisted that the sequel “will sell immensely on the cars and every where & combined with authentic New England traditions will

double-down on that obsession. Already overstuffed, *Oldtown Folks* wasn't enough Oldtown for Stowe. In her eyes, the imagined village was so persistently entrancing, it might as well have been the Floridian wilderness.

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make quite a rush—Moreover it will keep ‘Old Town folks’ afloat & going” (qtd. in Hedrick 347).

**Chapter 4**  
**How the Stargazer Became A Starlet:**  
**Maria Mitchell and the Nineteenth-Century Celebration of Female Obsession**

In the years following her 1847 discovery of the comet that later took on her name, people began to spend as much time watching Maria Mitchell as she spent watching the stars. It was a case of obsession as contagion: they'd read accounts of her devotion to her study in magazines and newspapers and become obsessed themselves, not by astronomical questions or even by the comet that Mitchell discovered but by Mitchell's rumored obsessive sensibility, her life as a spinster married to science. They were obsessed by the idea of obsession.

Tourists visited the Nantucket Atheneum, where Mitchell was a librarian, just to see the astronomer at work. Mitchell recounts the overwhelming attention given to her by admirers in the especially busy summer of 1854:

Four women have been delighted to make my acquaintance, three men have thought themselves in the presence of a superior being, one has offered me twenty cents because I reached him the key of the museum, one woman has opened a correspondence with me and several have told me that they knew friends of mine. Two have spoken of me in small letters to small newspapers, one said he didn't see me, and one said he did! (qtd. in Bergland 74-75)

The renown that "Miss Mitchell's Comet" brought her turned her into "one of our national celebrities," as one writer for the *Boston Recorder* put it in 1857 (144). It is "not

merely the lover of this sublime science” who “will rejoice in this triumph, but every American,” one newspaper claimed when the King of Denmark, who had set up a prize for the discoverer of a new comet, awarded a gold medal to Mitchell (*The Friend* 54). This iconic status persisted through the end of her life: “The name of Maria Mitchell has been a household treasure in this country for over twenty years. With Harriet Beecher Stowe she will be remembered as one of the great American women,” the New York *Sun* noted at the time of her death in 1889 (*Daily Inter Ocean* 10). As Renée Bergland suggests in *Maria Mitchell and the Sexing of Science: An Astronomer Among the American Romantics* (2008), Mitchell “captured the imagination of a nation increasingly enthralled with discovery and celebrity” (57). The image of an engrossed, unmarried woman who stayed up all night looking at the stars took on a dazzling glamour.

The subject of countless newspaper and magazine profiles and the inspiration behind numerous fictional characters, Mitchell became a fixture in nineteenth-century print culture. She was a particularly compelling object of fascination in the American literary imagination. In 1891, Melville published “After the Pleasure Party,” a long poem about an astronomer who struggles with the sacrifice of erotic love that comes with her lifelong dedication to studying astronomy. Scholars believe that Mitchell is the model for Urania, the woman at the center of the poem.<sup>1</sup> “Melville may have made little impression on Maria Mitchell, but she became important to him, either from the power of her as personal presence, or what she represented to him as a female in what had been a masculine field,” Hershel Parker writes of the one evening Melville spent visiting with

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<sup>1</sup> In her essay on the connections between Dickinson’s and Melville’s poetry and astronomy, Bergland claims that Melville biographer Leon Howard first “identified Mitchell as the basis for Melville’s Urania” in 1951. “Although few scholars have written about the poem since,” she says, “those who do generally accept Howard’s identification” (*Signs* 91).

Mitchell and her father on Nantucket in the summer of 1852 (117).<sup>2</sup> Hawthorne, a friend of the Mitchell family who traveled with Maria Mitchell when she visited Rome in 1858, had Mitchell in mind when he wrote *The Marble Faun* (1860). “He linked the character Miriam to his traveling companion Maria,” Bergland suggests—“not only by giving her a similar name but also by referring obliquely to Mitchell in his description of her, when he compared Miriam’s eye to ‘the woman’s eye that has discovered some new star’” (124).<sup>3</sup> In the nineteenth-century imagination, Mitchell’s gaze was so transfixing that it makes sense why Hawthorne might have reimagined her as a painter.

Much more striking than the allusions to Maria Mitchell in Melville’s fantasia of sexual frustration or Hawthorne’s portrait of an artist is her strange appearance in a novel far away from the immediate context of the New England cultural network she was a part of: Augusta Evans’ Confederate novel, *Macaria; or, Altars of Sacrifice* (1864). One of the most popular novels to come from the South during the Civil War, *Macaria* celebrates the valor of Southern women left at home.<sup>4</sup> Despite her open disparagement toward Northerners—and New Englanders especially—throughout the novel, Evans

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<sup>2</sup> According to Margaret Moore Booker, “the only record of the meeting between Mitchell and Melville is found in a letter from Melville’s father-in-law and traveling companion, Judge Lemuel Shaw, who explained that after he and Melville explored the island on horseback, ‘we passed the evening with Mr. Mitchell the astronomer, and his celebrated daughter, the discoverer of comets’” (106).

<sup>3</sup> In his *Italian Notebooks*, Hawthorne offers his initial impressions of Mitchell after she asked to join him and Sophia while they toured Rome: “This morning Miss Mitchell, the celebrated astronomical lady, called. She had brought a letter of introduction to me, while Consul, and her purpose now was to see if we could take her as one of our party to Rome, wither she likewise is bound. We readily consented, for she seems to be a simple, strong, healthy-humored woman, who will not fling herself as a burden on our shoulders; and my only wonder is that a person evidently so able to take care of herself should wish to have an escort” (17). He goes on to write about her with fondness, describing the close relationships she builds with his family over the course of their travels. “Miss Mitchell showed the children the stars and constellations, and told their names,” he writes of one evening on their way to Rome (51).

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Moss remarks that *Macaria* “sold so well...that by the war’s end Evans had amassed a small fortune in royalties” (11).

based her heroine on a quintessentially New England woman. *Macaria* tells the story of “an astronomer who explicitly modeled herself on Maria Mitchell” (*Sexing of Science* 164): Irene Huntingdon, who vows to avoid marriage and stay single as she pursues her passion for astronomy. The most rapturous scenes in this narrative of obsession are the long descriptions of Irene at work in her observatory. Although Evans dedicated the novel to the “Army of the Confederacy” and uses the narrative to further the Southern cause, the acceptance of women scientists is the more impassioned cause of the novel. Evans herself bemoaned the lack of women scientists in the South. “We can boast no Herschel or Willard, or Somerville, or Mitchell in Southern circles. Were we stronger in body, from systematic household work, we should be characterized by more intellectual vigor and originality,” she wrote, a year before the publication of *Macaria* (*Southern Woman of Letters* 66). Thus, with the character of Irene, Evans expands the New England specificity of feminine obsession to create a model for the Southern woman scientist, a Confederate woman astronomer—the Maria Mitchell of Georgia.

What is it about Maria Mitchell that fascinated Melville, Hawthorne, Evans, the many journalists who wrote profiles of her, and the men and women who made the pilgrimage to Nantucket for a sighting of the famed astronomer? What is it about Mitchell that transcends the allegiances of sectional and regional identity to transform her into a national icon? What all of these visions of Mitchell have in common is their emphasis on the scene of intense labor, their insistence on the all-consuming devotion that Mitchell brought to her study. These are narratives of obsession, romanticizing the scientist at work and heroizing what they perceive to be her antisociality, her giving up a romantic life to pursue her search for knowledge. They present spinsterhood and the

refusal to marry as a virtue related to the idealized woman of science. I situate these profiles and fictions within the larger celebration of the New England spinster as a cultural figure in the mid-nineteenth century, when, as Zsuzsa Berend tells us, spinsterhood began to be considered a sign of “uncompromising morality” (936). These narratives of obsession turn the Nantucket astronomer into the ideal New England spinster as they call attention to and rejoice in her supposed unfeeling character, her preference to be left alone. In these narratives of obsession, Mitchell’s rejection of marriage signifies an act of honor, a sacrifice for science.

In this chapter, my object of study is not Maria Mitchell herself or her life and work, but rather the ways in which American readers and writers made Mitchell and her story into a myth, an image of a woman genius appropriated and reappropriated in many narratives of obsession during and after her life. “Mitchell became a symbol to her contemporaries, men and women alike, of the contributions women were able to make in science,” Sally Kohlstedt claims (“Advancement of Women” 130). Mitchell was a “symbol” of the woman scientist—but the prevalence of her image in periodicals and fiction made her into a force much bigger than just an example of what women could achieve in science, a figure of the woman genius more broadly. In *Women and Literary Celebrity in the Nineteenth Century: The Transatlantic Production of Fame and Gender* (2012), Brenda Weber identifies the rise of cultural interest in great women and the proliferation of narratives celebrating their lives in the U.S. and England during the nineteenth century. She suggests that accounts of these famous women—including Fanny Fern, Eliza Potter, Charlotte Brontë, and Margaret Oliphant—created “a model of literary celebrity” that promoted women as figures of “genius,” “thus serving as an important

legitimation of the ‘public woman,’ a term that can no longer exclusively indicate the actress or the prostitute” (30). I extend the scope of this figure of the woman genius—which Weber categorizes as a term attached to literary writers—to include Mitchell, whose life story appeared alongside those of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Margaret Fuller, Louisa May Alcott, and other writers in nineteenth-century anthologies on great American women. Americans were as eager to read about Mitchell as they were the lives of literary artists.

I categorize these depictions and fictionalizations of Mitchell in the work of sketch-writers, journalists, and novelists, as narratives of obsession that form an alternative kind of celebrity. Now, the narrative of obsession is not about an area of naturalist study but an obsessed woman herself. Mitchell’s persona exists at the intersection of two models of womanhood: the figure of the woman literary celebrity and the figure of the New England spinster. The convergence of these two conceptions of femininity results in the formation of a public figure defined by her privacy. By praising Mitchell’s perceived unfeeling character and her preference for solitude, these sketches craft an unlikely celebrity as they cultivate an interest in the astronomer’s lack of interest in other people. There is a paradox that underlies the cultural attraction to Mitchell and her story: the emotional detachment of the persona constructed by these sketches is the very thing that also attracts people to the persona. In the face of her apparent imperviousness, Mitchell’s admirers craft their own stories about her and build an imagined intimacy with the distant astronomer.

I begin this chapter by offering a brief account of two nineteenth-century phenomena: the popular cultural interest in the lives of accomplished women and the

construction of the New England spinster as a figure of virtue. Then, I examine sketches and descriptions of Mitchell herself in newspapers and periodicals that foreground her purported stoicism and revel in her supposed unsentimentality, her aversion to social and romantic connection. Next, I look at Mitchell's surprising presence in Augusta Evans' Civil War novel *Macaria* as a case study in the literary manifestation of the cultural obsession with the astronomer. Augusta Evans—a novelist known for her sentimental writing—departs from that form (not unlike the way Stowe does in *Oldtown Folks*) to create an unsentimental heroine inspired by Maria Mitchell, who refuses marriage and the expectations of the domestic woman in the name of her commitment to science. Evans uses the myth of Mitchell to make the figure of the spinster and the culture of feminine obsession, both New England constructs, an acceptable form of womanhood to a southern audience. Finally, I end this chapter by tracking the persistence of Mitchell's hold on the public imagination, following her reappearance in late-twentieth-century narratives of obsession that revisit the life of the legendary astronomer.

**I. “She was admired, highly respected, even revered; but she was not tenderly loved”**

In July 1857, *Emerson's United States Magazine* reported that a group of Boston women—fans of Maria Mitchell—had started a fundraising campaign with the goal of collecting “three thousand dollars, to purchase a telescope for this distinguished and truly noble woman, who has devoted herself with so much zeal to the pursuit of science.”

*Emerson's* gave the project its full endorsement: “We sincerely hope something of the kind will be done, and it will be a most womanly tribute to one of the most gifted and

deserving of her sex” (94). The national coverage of this local Boston effort—all for a woman who lived and worked on the small island of Nantucket—paid off: the women gathered sufficient funds and purchased the telescope that they knew would grant Mitchell enhanced access to the sky. Detailed accounts of the new telescope appeared in mainstream newspapers around the country. The *New-York Evening Post* offered this description of the telescope’s ocular powers: “It is mounted equatorially, according to the German method, and furnished with graduated circles for the determination of the positions of the heavenly objects. The circle for measuring right ascensions is divided to single minutes, but by means of a vernier reads to five seconds of time” (“Miss Mitchell’s Telescope” 1). That these popular reports of Mitchell’s famed telescope, intended for a general, non-specialized readership, provide advanced technical information about the instrument shows the depth of the public’s fascination with Mitchell and her work. It wasn’t enough for people to know that she had gotten a telescope—they wanted to learn everything there was to know about the sophisticated piece of technology that they had helped buy. The crowdfunded gift of Mitchell’s telescope represents the confluence of public and private that characterized her career. Although Mitchell herself preferred to be left alone and enjoyed the solitude and quiet of her observatory, the most important object in her workspace was linked to the outside world and her celebrity in it.

What was so captivating about a woman astronomer to Americans in the second half of the nineteenth century? The fascination with Mitchell was part of a larger interest in the stories of so-called great women. Anthologies of biographical sketches—including *Our Famous Women: An Authorized Record of the Lives and Deeds of Distinguished American Women of Our Times* (1884) and *Daughters of Genius: A Series of Authors,*

*Artists, Reformers, and Heroines, Queens, Princesses, and Women of Society, Women Eccentric and Peculiar* (1885), both of which include entries on Mitchell—held up accomplished women like Clara Barton, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps for readers to emulate. “Probably no aspect of our time is more significant of progress than the ever-growing discussion of the place and duties of women in the social state,” proclaims the preface to *Our Famous Women*. “It seemed, therefore, to the Publishers of this volume that the time had come when the simple story of what a few women have done would prove an inspiration and incentive to the many women who long to do” (v). Similarly empowering essays on successful women appeared in periodicals like *The Saturday Evening Post*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, which ran a series on *Representative Women in Our Own and Other Lands* (1879) that contained a piece on Mitchell.<sup>5</sup>

Brenda Weber identifies the figure of the woman genius as a nineteenth-century phenomenon that charmed readers in both the U.S. and England. She looks at popular representations of famous writers, like Elizabeth Gaskell’s biography of Charlotte Brontë and Fanny Fern’s depiction of herself and her own fame in *Ruth Hall*, suggesting that they “functioned as a conceptual device” that created a particular model of celebrity. This form of persona, Weber claims, “both limited and ultimately authorized new codes of

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<sup>5</sup> Mitchell herself contributed to this genre of writing. Her first essay published for a popular audience was an account of the life of Scottish astronomer and mathematician Mary Somerville for *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1860. “There have been in every age a few women of genius who have become the successful rivals of man in the paths which they have severally chosen. Three instances are of our time. Miss Browning is called a poet even by poets; the artists admit that Rosa Bonheur is a painter; and the mathematicians accord to Mary Somerville a high rank among themselves,” Mitchell writes (568). She also wrote and lectured about sculptor Harriet Hosmer. She describes Hosmer as “a strong woman to whom no one can refuse admiration,” in her lecture “Women and Work” (qtd. in Bergland 127).

femininity and womanhood in a transatlantic Victorian worldview.” While these narratives granted women new agency, new powers to shape culture, the women themselves remained subjects created by restrictive structures outside of their control: “a woman’s notoriety” was often “a matter of fate rather than of design, of rewards passively received rather than conquests actively pursued” (4). Texts about the lives of women writers like Eliza Potter, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Fanny Fern are still invested in promoting some version of “ladylike deportment,” even if they are also challenging conventions of “womanhood” (Weber 168).<sup>6</sup> This is not true of the popular portrayals of Mitchell, which grant the astronomer more agency than the famous women receive in the biographical sketches that Weber studies. Representations of Mitchell detail the dedication and labor she actively brings to her astronomical work and the defiantly unsentimental personal life she leads. They extol the virtues of an alternative set of behaviors to those of Weber’s married celebrities: remaining a spinster and practicing science.

Zsuzsa Berend argues that the nineteenth-century spinster is a figure that particularly thrived in New England, where single “white, Protestant, middle-class” women were increasingly praised and respected by others (936). Kate Bolick names two major factors for the rise of spinsters in postbellum New England, beyond the deaths of millions of men in the Civil War: “the bruised postwar economy, which made it difficult for men to professionalize and marry early” and “a regional commitment to intellectual and literary pursuits, which extended to women” and “created a social atmosphere in which single women were allowed, a little bit, to flourish” (18). As prominent, mid-

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<sup>6</sup> Reflecting on all the representations of woman celebrities in her book, Weber claims that “none of them glorifies nor overtly romanticizes the revolt of women against patriarchal systems...women who go too fully against the grain are caricatured into gross monstrosity” (213).

nineteenth-century women like Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Lucy Larcom, Frances Willard, and others who identified as reformers of professional writers remained single, even before the Civil War, popular opinion toward spinsterhood changed, Berend claims. New Englanders developed “a broader understanding of women’s usefulness,” and they began to associate “the ideals of self-development and self-reliance” with the spinster. Berend suggests that the spinster was especially attractive “in the context of the overwhelmingly Protestant culture of the nineteenth-century American Northeast in which ‘the ideas, the convictions, the customs, the institutions of society were so shot through with Christian presuppositions’” (936-37).<sup>7</sup> Berend reminds us that, in the 1830s through the 1860s, only a specific kind of spinster was revered: the single woman who devoted her life to a worthy cause, who refused to “compromise” her “moral principles for the sake of matrimony” (936). In an article for *The Sunday Oregonian* on the merits of spinsterhood for women, one writer cites the example of “Miss Maria Mitchell’s single life” to prove that “a large part of the best work of the world is wrought by single women” (4). According to this logic, Maria Mitchell is an ideal spinster, a high-minded woman who has given up a romantic life for an admirable reason—scientific study. This is the quality that Mitchell herself values in singlehood. In a poem about a schoolteacher she wrote sometime in the early 1840s, Mitchell praises the “spinster race / Who always fill the highest place / In seeking others good” (qtd. in Bergland 36). Though still in her twenties at the time of the poem’s composition, Mitchell was already “beginning to identify herself as a spinster” (Bergland 36) and aspiring toward the virtue associated with that role.

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<sup>7</sup> The association of the spinster with New England persists through the end of the century, as the character of the unmarried woman living alone recurs in the regionalist fiction of Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman, and Rose Terry Cooke.

As both a famous “woman of genius,” in the tradition of the woman writer celebrity, as defined by Weber, and a New England spinster, as defined by Berend, the popular image of Maria Mitchell depends on a curious contradiction: she is a woman loved for her turn away from love. Her lack of affection for other people is, I will show, part of what encourages the affection her fans have for her. It is this emotional remoteness that inspires Mitchell enthusiasts to invent their own fictions about her life.

The other part of the mass appeal and intrigue of Mitchell’s story is its remarkability and singularity. In *Our Famous Women* and most of the other anthologies and series that feature Mitchell, she is the lone scientist represented. “From the time her discovery of a comet became public knowledge until her death, Maria Mitchell was known as the one ‘real’ woman scientist in the United States,” Nina Baym writes (123). The professionalization and institutionalization of science in the 1860s and 1870s put restrictions on the people who had access to university education and jobs. Women were banned from most professional organizations and it was extremely difficult for them to gain university positions. Shunned by male-dominated professional groups, these women, as Sally Kohlstedt suggests, joined “small, local, scientific study groups” that offered “an alternative to the modern demands of professional science” (“In From the Periphery” 91). Thus, when she received her position at Vassar in 1865, Mitchell was an anomaly. A woman astronomy professor was as elusive as the comet Mitchell discovered.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Despite the remarkability of Mitchell’s success, it was not completely unusual for a woman to study astronomy in 1847. In fact, women had more opportunities in the world of pre-professional science, earlier in the century, than they did when sciences became institutionalized. Early- and mid-nineteenth-century observational sciences, including astronomy, botany, and entomology, though dominated by men, remained accessible to women: “Because the sciences were accessible to all thinkers, not just members of specialized disciplines, there was no sexual binary in the popular mind,” Bergland tells us (*Sexing of Science* 40). Nineteenth-century Nantucket was a place particularly conducive to the cultivation of a young girl’s scientific interests. Open to

In the public imagination, Mitchell epitomized the intellectual woman devoted to scholarly work. Nearly all nineteenth-century accounts of Mitchell's life emphasize the fervor behind her commitment to study. Many of them start with the origin story of her genius, describing with enthusiasm her childhood interest in mathematics and science. An 1885 profile in the *Trenton Evening Times* offers this recollection of her early years: "The girl inherited her father's passion for mathematics... Very early, when most girls are still in the candy-eating and tear-shedding age, she became her father's assistant in the little private observatory he had fitted up" (3). In her entry on Mitchell for *Our Famous Women*, Julia Ward Howe tells us that, as a young girl, Mitchell didn't want to stop studying astronomy: "she often studied with her knitting in her hands" (444). By drawing attention to Mitchell's precocity, these profiles suggest that her intellectual gifts are innate. The writer for the *Trenton Evening Times* goes so far as to claim that, "She was the woman predestined by Providence to show the world that the American female mind is capable of digesting mathematics in its entirety" (3). This backstory of Mitchell's so-called predetermined fate and her status as a prodigy heightens the drama of her biography. Profilers and writers sustain this drama as they attest to the continued passion Mitchell brings to her studies. Her reputed vitality is like Harriet Mann Miller's in the afterglow of birding: "Her hair is white, but her black eye sparkles with all the fire of youth. Intellectual people never grow old," the *Trenton Evening Times* declares (3).

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Mitchell were a wide array of "clubs, associations, and institutions," including the Nantucket Atheneum, where she earned a job as a librarian at the age of 18 (*Sexing of Science* 27). The intellectual environment at home was just as stimulating: Mitchell's father—a pioneering educator who ran the schools she attended as a child—imparted his passion for astronomy to her while they made observations and performed calculations in his observatory. "Mr. Mitchell never recognized any distinction of sex in the education of his children," Julia Ward Howe writes in her biographical sketch of Mitchell: "Maria had therefore the same education with her brothers, and was especially taught navigation" (*Our Famous Women* 444). Mitchell grew up in a world where it was not only possible for young girls and women to pursue scientific study—it was encouraged.

*Godey's Lady's Book* insists that Maria Mitchell is “indefatigable in the cause of science” (446). Readers and writers get a thrill out of imagining the “indefatigable” astronomer performing her “all-absorbing” work.

The version of Mitchell reproduced in these profiles and sketches has so much passion for astronomy that she cannot have passion for anyone or anything else: her love of astronomy is so “all-absorbing” that it takes over her life completely. Intimacy with the sky and the stars necessarily also means lack of intimacy with other people. High praises of her scientific work are followed by reports of her coldness in social situations. “It cannot be said that Miss Mitchell was a lovely woman, and to a few only did she seem lovable...she was admired, highly respected, even revered; but she was not tenderly loved,” one writer in the *Bismark Tribune* claimed after her death in 1889 (4). This detachment from personal connection doesn’t take away from her reputation—rather, it feeds it. That is, in the popular imagination, Mitchell’s success comes out of her withdrawal from other people. Consider, for example, this anecdote about her dedication to nightly observation at a young age included in an 1897 *Popular Science Monthly* profile: “Miss Mitchell spent every clear evening on the housetop ‘sweeping’ the heavens. No matter how many guests there might be in the parlor, Miss Mitchell would slip out, don her regimentals, as she called them, and, lantern in hand, mount to the roof” (546). The article celebrates Mitchell’s escape from her home—even during her family’s parties—to do her own work as an admirable retreat. Here, the ritual of her self-removal from society is a righteous act.<sup>9</sup>

The collective fantasies about Mitchell’s life link her spinsterhood to her scientific talents, a sign of her extreme devotion to astronomy. The *Trenton Evening*

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*Times* calls her decision to remain single an act of “heroism”: “The girl astronomer lived a single life. In a confidential moment one day she confessed that it was much harder for girls to keep from being married than to marry, which is undoubtedly true. It requires far more heroism” (3). In this view, her self-reliant commitment to the study of astronomy is a result of her heroic turn away from romance.

The perceived unlovability of Mitchell—the universal acknowledgement that she “was not tenderly loved”—only enhances her lovability as a popular woman scientist. It is as if the more Mitchell is withdrawn, the more people admire her, the more they want to know her. In 1891, *The Macon Telegraph* reported this anecdote about a particularly eager fan of the astronomer who was desperate to get close to Mitchell:

A Nantucket woman tells of the annoyance to which the Mitchell household was subjected, after its daughter, Maria Mitchell, became famous at the hands of two importunate tourists. Its privacy was so persistently and unwarrantably invaded that its members felt occasionally that politeness ceased to be a virtue. One persistent woman, who got herself admitted on a shabby pretext, so wearied a sister of Miss Mitchell, into whose hands she fell, that when the woman after a series of searching questions wound up with, ‘And what do you do in this dull town after the tourists are gone?’ the other replied, with a drawl natural to her, ‘Oh, we cut off our coupons’ (3).

Although the subject of this article is Mitchell and her fame, the astronomer herself is completely absent from the story. It is her sister who responds to the “persistent woman,” while Mitchell remains sealed off from the outside world. Even in 1891—two years after her death—Mitchell’s shyness and privacy remained sources of fascination for the

American public. Her turn away from sociality, her absence is what drives the narratives that surround her. In this way, she is a ghost in her own story.

Even during her lifetime, there is a ghostly quality to the popular accounts of her life. Writers and readers would rather imagine her than get close to her. In reality, Mitchell was not the completely antisocial, hermetic figure people envisioned her to be. At Vassar, she maintained an active public life and gained a reputation for the close relationships she built with her students. The parties she threw for students in her observatory “became one of the most beloved of Vassar institutions” (*Sexing of Science* 195). According to Bergland, “her students were free to visit at any hour of the night in order to make astronomical observations,” so rather than “private quarters,” “Mitchell had the companionship of her students” (197). The way that these accounts of Mitchell’s life circulated a dramatized version of her solitude is a lot like the way Thaxter, as I argued in Chapter 2, represents herself as a spinster in *An Island Garden* as a fantasy version of her actual married life. To the votaries of feminine obsession, it’s best not to violate the purity of infatuation with the details of reality. These writers actively avoid the everyday matters of Mitchell’s professional and social existence, operating instead in the mode of reverie.

Preferring the ideal of Mitchell’s purportedly loveless life, her fans create their own stories about her. Consider this 1881 profile of Mitchell in *The New York Times*. Although the article presents itself as a “History of Miss Maria Mitchell: Her Life and Education at Nantucket—How She Came to Love the Company of the Stars,” the profile is less a factual account of her life than a speculative reflection on what her life might have been like. And even as Mitchell is the apparent subject of this sketch, the reporter

spends much of the piece describing the experience of visiting Nantucket and the evocative feelings toward Mitchell that this visit brings out. There is something undeniably personal and imaginative about this profile of the famous astronomer:

A dreary, sleepy place. Thus I characterized Nantucket as I sailed away from it, after my first brief visit, desiring never to return...Circumstances have brought me again to Nantucket, and for a longer stay than my first visit...Looking off on the water from my abode, which is in an elevated part of the town, on an evening soon after my arrival, and thence above to the sky, a grand sweeping view of which was obtainable, I saw the comet and called to mind the fact that Maria Mitchell, the Professor of Astronomy at Vassar College, was born and reared here. I wondered how much of her devotion to a life-long study of science was due to the fact that her youth was spent in this isolated spot, removed from the ordinary distraction of a young girl's life...From my own interest in the subject I am led to think that in her career is a valuable lesson for the studious young women of to-day who have dedicated themselves to similar work (2).

The reporter writes about Mitchell with breathless detachment, almost as if she were unreal, or a thing of the past, despite the fact that she was still alive and well at the time of this publication. The article is an imaginative recreation of a real person. By maintaining—embracing—his distance from the woman of genius, the reporter tells his own tale about her life. It is a version of Mitchell in her most withdrawn state, her most private space: now the celebrity spinster can become whatever her viewers want her to be, the protagonist of their fictions.

## II. “Her heart is in her science”

In 1864, the legend of Maria Mitchell and myth of the woman scientist captivated the Confederacy. Augusta Jane Evans claimed to have written her novel, *Macaria; or the Altars of Sacrifice*, “on scraps of paper by candlelight as she sat by the bedsides of wounded soldiers” (Talley 24), but the immediate inspiration behind her protagonist was Maria Mitchell. Irene, the heroine of the novel, is an astronomer who thinks of herself in the tradition of Maria Mitchell, Caroline Herschel, Mary Somerville, and other women scientists she explicitly names as her “glorious” predecessors. Irene boldly declines marriage proposals from various unpleasant men, instead vowing to live a life of the mind. Although Evans was known for her sentimental novels—including *Inez* (1850), *Beulah* (1859), and *St. Elmo* (1867), which is “believed to be the century’s third best-selling American novel, behind only *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Ben-Hur*” (Hutchison 64)—*Macaria* presents us with a woman who is fiercely unsentimental. Evans represents Irene’s insusceptibility to emotional appeals and matters of the heart as virtuous.

In doing so, Evans reproduces key conventions of popular sketches and profiles of Maria Mitchell: the amplification of her scientific passion, the dramatization of her stoicism, and the valorization of her spinsterhood. Particularly striking is Evans’ treatment of spinsterhood, given the shame associated with the single woman in the South. As Jennifer Lynn Gross has shown, spinsterhood as a respected ideal was unique to the Northern cultural imagination and looked down upon in the South: “Because of the institution of slavery and the system of patriarchy it buttressed, the discourse on marriage among Southerners remained true to the idea that marriage was the only acceptable place for women” (34). In this section, I show how, by calling on the universal appeal of

Mitchell, Evans creates the possibility for a Southern counterpart to the New England spinster. I also suggest that promoting the image of the idealized woman scientist and her potential to contribute to knowledge overpowers *Macaria*'s pro-Confederate political agenda and emerges as the novel's more powerful project. As a novel ultimately about a woman's intellectual absorption, *Macaria* is a narrative of obsession.

*Macaria* is a totally unlikely reappropriation of Mitchell's story. The New England spinster becomes the basis for the central character in a piece of pro-Confederate propaganda, a novel "filled with celebrations of the Southern way of life, tributes to Southerners' heroism, the glorification of Confederate politics and war victories, and criticism of the 'demagogic' North" (Gross 37). The great work and noble character of the astronomer, though, is more compelling and urgent than the depiction of war in *Macaria*. The most ardent speeches in the novel are, after all, Irene's fervent defenses of women in science. "Are you skeptical of the possibility of a devotion to science merely for science-sake? Do my womanly garments shut me out of the Holy of Holies, debar me eternally from sacred arcane, think you?" Irene asks her uncle when he expresses doubt about her ability to practice astronomy. She calls on the tradition of the great women scientists who precede her: "In glorious attestation of the truth of female capacity to grapple with some of the most recondite problems of science stand the names of Caroline Herschel, Mary Somerville, Maria Mitchell, Emma Willard, Mrs. Phelps" (174). While Evans uses the novel to affirm and establish a Confederate cultural tradition, here she glorifies a legacy outside of Southern culture—that of the woman scientist.

For Evans, the pursuit of science becomes something more than intellectual work, something closer to a high art of self-expression. The narrator describes Irene's

astronomical studies as an artistic creation: “She loved her work as a painter his canvas, or the sculptor the marble one day to enshrine his cherished ideal; and she prosecuted it, not as a mere pastime, not as a toy, but as a life-long labor, for the labor’s sake,” the narrator says of Irene (176). By likening the passion behind astronomical work to the love an artist brings to his craft, Evans suggests that this devotion is admirable because, beyond producing knowledge, it is itself a thing of aesthetic magnificence.

This comparison of astronomy to art is apt, for the other woman at the center of the novel, Electra, a childhood friend of Irene’s, is an aspiring painter, who brings to her craft the same kind of intense commitment that we see in Irene. The quiet moments of Electra “absorbed in her work” match the similarly quiet moments of Irene observing the sky (137). If Evans shows us how the astronomer is an artist through the descriptions of Irene’s attachment to her work “as a painter his canvas,” she also shows us how the painter is an intellectual: Electra spends almost all of her time reading “when not engaged with her pencil”—“with eager curiosity she plunged into various departments of study” (101). *Macaria* presents “eager curiosity” as a virtue and the women who cultivate it as purveyors of both beauty and knowledge.

The scene of late-night scientific investigation becomes an awe-inspiring event. Evans represents these bouts of solitary study through an almost gothic lens, imbuing the evenings Irene spends alone working and thinking with a dark romanticism:

Seven hours later Irene sat alone at the library table, absorbed in writing an article on Laplace’s Nebular Theory for the scientific journal to which she occasionally contributed over the signature of ‘Sabæan.’ Several books, with close ‘marginalias,’ were scattered around, and the ‘*Mécanique Céleste*’ and a

volume of 'Cosmos' lay open before her. The servants had gone to rest; the house was very still, the silence unbroken save by the moan of the wind and the melancholy tapping of the poplar branches against the outside. The sky was black, gloomy as Malbolge; and, instead of a hard, pattering rain, a fine cold mist drizzled noiselessly down the panes. Wrapped in her work, Irene wrote on rapidly till the clock struck twelve. She counted the strokes, saw that there remained but one page uncopied, and concluded to finish the MS (246).

Evans uses the language of all-absorption to describe Irene's immersion in her work. "Absorbed in writing," "wrapped in her work," Irene shuts herself away from the outside world. This is a recurring element of her work routine: "The night was keen, still, and cloudless, and, as Irene locked herself in, the chill from the marble tiles crept through the carpet to her slippers feet" (175). Removed from the people and concerns of her everyday life, Irene embraces the solitude and privacy that comes with her astronomical pursuits. Although the novel is a call for political engagement—showing how men and women can help the war effort—these romantic glimpses of Irene in her observatory celebrate a withdrawal from reality.

The novel builds a dream world around Irene and her studies. When she is practicing astronomy, Irene is transformed into a heavenly object herself: she is a "miracle of statuesque beauty," the narrator tells us, as she sits in her library "with her arms crossed on the table, the large celestial globe drawn near, astronomical catalogues scattered about, and a thick folio open before her" (173). Her uncle comes to greet his "queenly niece" while she's at work late one night and is overwhelmed by the sight of her:

...he could not look at her without a vague feeling of awe, of painful apprehension; and, as he stood watching her motionless figure in its grand yet graceful pose, he sighed involuntarily. She rose, shook back her magnificent hair, and approached him. Her eyes, so like deep, calm azure lakes, crossed by no ripple, met his, and the clear, pure voice echoed through the still room (173).

This scene of apparent inaction—a woman working alone at a desk—is devastating to Irene’s uncle, who cannot contain himself. Despite her evident “motionless figure,” there is something totally dynamic about the silent, solitary engagement Irene has with her books that makes the spectacle of it almost sublime, one that inspires within the onlooker a mix of “awe” and “apprehension.” *Macaria* is a narrative of obsession as fascinated by intellectual passion as Slosson’s stories, Thaxter’s garden book, and Stowe’s New England history.

This transfixing, almost hypnotic quality of the woman astronomer is precisely the same force surrounding popular images of Maria Mitchell in similarly awe-struck journalistic narratives of obsession. Recall the way in which the 1881 *New York Times* profile of Mitchell describes her as an almost unreal being of otherworldly genius as it prefers an imaginative idea of her over the actual facts of her life. Similarly, Irene’s uncle envisions Irene not as she literally appears before him but as a magical creature who lives in the sky that she observes: “With a heavy sigh the cripple returned to his room, there to ponder the singular character of the woman whom he had just left, and to dream that he saw her transplanted to the constellations, her blue eyes brightening into stars, her waving hair braiding itself out into brilliant rushing comets” (175). Just as journalists and fiction writers construct a myth around Mitchell’s life and work, remaking her into a legend,

Irene's uncle conceives of her as a fantastical being. In his imagination, Irene is indistinguishable from the stars that she studies.

Like sketches of Maria Mitchell that describe her passion for astronomy as an innate interest she showed even as a young child, *Macaria* calls attention to Irene's precocity. The narrative offers us the origin story of her obsession:

From her earliest recollections, and especially from the hour of entering school, astronomy and mathematics had exerted an over-mastering influence upon Irene's mind...Most girls patronize certain branches of investigation with fitful, spasmodic vehemence, or periodic impulses of enthusiasm; but Irene knew no intermission of interest, she hurried over no details, and, when the weather permitted, never failed to make her nightly visit to the observatory (176).

This account of Irene as a kind of prodigy is part of the larger process through which the novel elevates her and her devotion to astronomy to a mythical status. The novel teaches us to marvel at the figure of the woman scientist, a figure of wholesomeness.

In the world of *Macaria*, this admiration of the woman scientist is stronger than sectional allegiances. Irene—a devout Confederate—looks up to Maria Mitchell, an iconic New Englander, despite her avowed hatred for the region and its people. New England becomes a recurring source of disparagement throughout *Macaria* as the narrative dismisses the region's "canting, puritanical hypocrisy," "the fruits of the bigotry and fanatical hate of New England" (335). "If there be not a long and awful retribution for that Cain-cursed race of New England, there is neither justice nor truth in high heaven," says Irene (390). And yet the woman Irene wants to emulate more than anyone else is a Northerner known for her "find old New England stock" (*Trenton Evening Times*

3). Although Mitchell's fame was national—even international—in scope, newspaper and magazine sketches of her underline her New England identity as a source of honor. “She had a thoroughly Nantucket nature—strong, rugged and persevering,” one obituary claims (*Bismark Tribune* 4). In the popular imagination, Mitchell is an embodiment of an existing set of ideals linked to New England: “She gave the New England stamp to whatever work she touched, and the lines of influence she has left on many characters are as indelible as those on the rock surfaces of New England's granite hills” (*New Hampshire Sentinel* 2). In this way, her New England identity is inextricable from her commitment to study and hard work.<sup>10</sup>

So why does Evans invoke this distinctly New England woman in establishing the novel's ideals of womanhood even as she rails against the region as a hotbed of iniquity? This seemingly contradictory representation of warring regions is mirrored in the novel's immediate reception: smuggled through the blockade and reprinted in New York, *Macaria* achieved popularity in both the North and the South.<sup>11</sup> One reviewer for the *New-York Evening Post* recognizes the potential hypocrisy of enjoying a Confederate novel as a Northerner only going on to praise *Macaria* as “the most carefully written novel” inspired by the war:

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<sup>10</sup> In her study of nineteenth-century American women writers and the sciences, Nina Baym notes that, during this period, it was New England women in particular who had access to science education: “To be sure, in talking about ‘women's’ acquisition of scientific knowledge, one is not talking about all women. The women who did this work for science hailed mainly from the northern states, especially from New England. They imagined themselves addressing those who were already or potentially much like themselves. As we know, throughout the century New England women had the highest literacy rates and the most education of any group of women in the nation; teachers around the country were chiefly recruited from their ranks. As for science, its earliest American flowering had been in Philadelphia, but... Boston surpassed Philadelphia around 1840 as the residence of the larger number of U.S. scientists even though Philadelphia was twice as large as Boston at the time” (17).

<sup>11</sup> “Despite its attacks on the Yankee character, the novel... sold so well in the North that Federal officials felt it had to be burned,” Anne Jones writes. “Evans received a considerable sum of Yankee money for her Confederate novel” (59).

As a literary production, *Macaria* is at least equal to Miss Evans' previous works, and however repugnant it may be to loyalty to learn that such a rebel book can find publisher and readers in the North, yet it must be said that this is the most carefully written novel that the war has suggested to the novelists of either side ("New Novels" 1).

For this reviewer, it is possible to separate style from politics. In *Apples and Ashes: Literature, Nationalism, and the Confederate States of America* (2012), Coleman Hutchison argues that the novel rises above the specificity of region, appealing to an audience much bigger than just the Confederacy. He notes the narrative's refusal to name an exact location: "In its insistence on a geographically indeterminate setting, *Macaria* transcends local interests in favor of national ones" (78). Hutchison claims that the novel is a "'new experiment' in southern bookmaking"—one that imagines "not only a Confederate nation but a Confederate national novel" (98). The plan here is a political one: in broadening the audience for the Confederate novel, Evans wants to spread Confederate beliefs. According to Anne Jones, Evans' "political passion," her "identification with the Confederate cause" was so deep that, in 1867, she "refused to meet a Federal officer carrying a letter of introduction from a friend because of her 'determination to hold no social intercourse with persons who drew their sword against a cause—for which, I would gladly have sacrificed my life'" (59).<sup>12</sup> But, with the exception of a political dialogue Irene engages in at the end of the novel, there is only minimal mention of these Confederate beliefs in *Macaria*. The scenes of astronomical study are,

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<sup>12</sup> Jones emphasizes the intensity of Evans' Confederate beliefs: "Evans' identification with the Confederate cause seems to have been profound...After the war, she wrote to J. L. M. Curry that 'I believe I loved our cause as a Jesuit his order; and its utter ruin has saddened and crushed me, as no other event of my life had power to do'...Evans uses the language of faith to describe her political passion" (59).

curiously, much more stirring than any scene of war. In the midst of its overt political work and call for men and women to support the Confederacy, Evans inserts these bursts of intense isolation and intellectual retreat. The figure of the woman of science is larger than politics, larger than place. The freedom for women to pursue their intellectual interests—the central cause of this narrative of obsession—takes on more importance and urgency than the seemingly pressing issue of Confederate victory.

In fact, for a novel of the Civil War, there is very little description of the war itself. The novel begins ten years before the start of the war, and gives no direct account of the political events leading up to its outbreak. Sharon Talley notes that “Evans focuses almost exclusively on her two female protagonists and limits her treatment of the war to the novel’s final ten chapters” (25). Jennifer Lynn Gross suggests that the novel’s primary cause is the “expansion of the definition of true womanhood to allow those women who could never marry to find usefulness and social acceptance in their lives as manless women” (48). Indeed, at the end of *Macaria*, both Irene and Electra commit themselves to a life of singlehood: “Remember that the woman who dares to live alone, and be sneered at, is braver, and nobler, and better than she who escapes both in a loveless marriage. It is true that you and I are very lonely, and yet our future holds much that is bright,” Irene says to Electra, who plans to start a school for aspiring women artists (413).<sup>13</sup> In describing this conception of the single woman that *Macaria* champions, Gross makes no mention of astronomy. It is a very particular kind of single woman that

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<sup>13</sup> Irene and Electra’s plan to start a school for women is similar to the direct role Mitchell herself played in promoting women’s education. A “founding member and president of the Association for the Advancement of Women—chair of its science committee and collector of statistics on the participation of women in science around the country” (Baym 128), Mitchell gave public talks, like “The Need for Women in Science” (1867), and wrote essays in periodicals like *Century* and *The Atlantic Monthly* that argue for increased accessibility to science education for women.

Evans heroizes: one who devotes her life to the zealous pursuit of scholarly work.

*Macaria* is about the triumph of spinsterhood *and* the triumph of intellectual absorption.

The sacrifice of love that comes with the commitment to knowledge is central to the myth of the woman scientist that *Macaria* draws on and perpetuates. Lovelessness is the key commonality between Irene Huntington and Maria Mitchell. Evans associates the same kind of unloving quality that the public associated with Mitchell (“it cannot be said that she was a lovely woman,” “she was not tenderly loved”) with the women in the novel. “The warm gushings of her heart were driven back to their springs,” the narrator says of Electra (101), while Irene—who is “an enigma” to those around her—displays little outward emotion: “Her intellect was of the masculine order, acute and logical, rather deficient in the imaginative faculties, but keenly analytical” (38). Evans wants us to know that these are unsentimental women. In the book, there is none of the effusiveness associated with the sentimental novel. The biggest outbursts of emotion we get are the descriptions of joy that Irene gets when she’s working in her observatory. “Her heart is in her science,” *The Trenton Evening Times* claims of Maria Mitchell (3). We can say the same of Irene, who proudly calls herself a spinster at the novel’s end.

Celebrating spinsterhood in this Southern context means something different than it does for the writers praising Mitchell’s spinsterhood. Jennifer Gross outlines the opposing views on spinsterhood held by southern and northern Americans: whereas “a growing trend of singleness among elite, white women” in the North emerged in the mid-nineteenth-century, “the South held strongly to the belief that one must be married to be a ‘true woman’” (34). Gross shows how women novelists in both regions reproduced and reflected these beliefs about marriage:

Northern domestic novelists of the antebellum and bellum periods acknowledged the growing trend of single womanhood in their region and incorporated discussion of it into their works. Though most still favored marriage as the best state for women, they qualified such opinions by also espousing the societal and personal benefits of single life. Singlehood, according to domestic novelists, was a time to be socially useful. Southern domestic novelists during this period similarly reflected the society from which they emerged. In contrast to Northern authors, they strongly advanced marriage as the true calling of women, only encouraging usefulness in singlehood *until* a marriage proposal eventually came along (34).

Thus, Evans' holding up of Irene's spinsterhood as a sign of respectability and high-mindedness is untraditional in ways that representations of Mitchell's singlehood are not.<sup>14</sup> But because Evans openly associates Irene with a universally treasured personality, the astronomer and national icon, she can make the spinster an attractive figure for a Confederate audience. Here, the figure of Mitchell, the allure of her life story in the cultural imagination, triumphs over regional values. Invoking Mitchell allows Evans to momentarily erase the southern stigma against unmarried women. Suddenly, the spinster becomes as acceptable in the South as she is in New England.

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<sup>14</sup> This is not to say that the views on women that Evans espouses are subversive. In her introduction to the 1992 edition of *Macaria*, Drew Gilpin Faust argues that, "Augusta Jane Evans regarded herself as anything but a feminist... Even in *Macaria*, Evans ultimately offered a sharply conflicted message, stepping back from a celebration of genuine female autonomy." This "message" became much less "conflicted" later in Evans' career when she wrote a book, *A Speckled Bird* (1902), devoted to taking down the women's suffrage movement (xxv).

### III. “Maria Mitchell in the Great Beyond with Marilyn Monroe”

“What would my life have been with your face?” Maria Mitchell asks Marilyn Monroe. The nineteenth-century stargazer has a lot to say to the twentieth-century starlet. She shares with Marilyn her thoughts on men: “What man on earth isn’t selfish?” She invites Marilyn to enjoy with her the pleasures of unmarried life: “I never married. / Come walk with me. Smell the ocean / and pick daphne, grapes, heart’s east” (Oles 66). She even teaches her a bit of astronomy: “Here are stars you can trust: / Sirius, Canopus, Arcturus, Vega, Capella, / Betelgeuse, Altair, Aldebaran.” “We are women learning together,” Mitchell says to her new friend in the afterlife (67). This hypothetical encounter between two luminaries from different times is the subject of Carole Oles’ poem (and narrative of obsession), “Maria Mitchell in the Great Beyond with Marilyn Monroe,” part of her collection, *Night Watches: Inventions on the Life of Maria Mitchell* (1985). The thirty-eight poems in this book both re-create scenes from Mitchell’s life, including her 1847 discovery of the comet and her travels in Rome with Hawthorne, and imagine what her ghost might be thinking and doing in the spirit world of 1985. In the foreword to the collection, Oles offers this statement about the experience of occupying the astronomer’s subjectivity:

While writing I felt inhabited by Maria’s personality and ideas. In some of these poems her words or their essence are interwoven with mine. Other poems are total inventions—extrapolated from fact, and true I hope with that truth imagination can tell (7).

Oles brings Mitchell to life through a combination of fragments from historical documents and her own vivid ruminations of invented moments. Here, the time travel

that Mitchell undergoes is even more drastic than her journey beyond sectional lines to appear in an imagined form in *Macaria*.

And yet Oles' portrait of Mitchell feels no less accurate or reliable than any of the sketches or profiles of her from her own time, because those contemporary biographies similarly depend on the powers of imagination and emotional distance between themselves and the spinster astronomer. In this final section, I briefly examine two curious twentieth-century literary encounters with Mitchell, two narratives of obsession: Oles' *Night Watches* and Sena Jeter Naslund's novel, *Ahab's Wife: Or, the Star-Gazer* (1999). What can Mitchell's persistent reappearance in the literary imagination tell us about the mythical significance and dual role as scientific discoverer and cultural celebrity, public figure and private spinster she took on in her own moment?

Given the attention Mitchell received from the tourists, reporters, and fans who all wanted to get close to her, it is not entirely strange to envision a connection between her and Marilyn Monroe. Oles understands that Mitchell's own spinsterhood was as glamorized and admired as Monroe's romantic life was a century later. For all the playful anachronisms of her poems, Carole Oles frames her collection with a nineteenth-century document—a sketch of Mitchell that epitomizes her heroization in the popular mind. She reproduces verbatim the most evocative moments from the 1884 profile of Mitchell from *The Charlestown Enterprise* I discussed earlier. This is the profile that claims her scientific triumphs were “predestined by Providence,” and that calls her decision to live a “single life” an act of “heroism.” By opening her book with this 1884 text, Oles places her own reflections on Mitchell in the same tradition of narratives of obsession, a tradition of celebrating and mythologizing the astronomer's life represented by late-

nineteenth-century print culture. Even as Mitchell convenes with Marilyn Monroe and addresses her twentieth-century admirers, the world of Oles' poems retains the sensibility of the writers who dreamed of Mitchell as an unreal being during her own lifetime.

What these present-day meditations on Maria Mitchell share with nineteenth-century accounts of her life is the way they all have direct encounters with Mitchell through her absence: it is her perceived and literal distance that allows these writers to imagine being close to her. For Carole Oles, it is the way she feels "inhabited by Maria's personality and ideas." For novelist Sena Jeter Naslund, it is the experience of visiting Nantucket and seeing her former home firsthand. Naslund's novel, *Ahab's Wife: Or, the Star-Gazer* (1999), tells the story of Una Spenser, Captain Ahab's lover, and her life on Nantucket after her husband embarks on his whaling expedition. In Ahab's absence, she starts a close friendship with Maria Mitchell. In an article for *Victoria*—a women's lifestyle magazine that promotes nostalgia for nineteenth-century style and design<sup>15</sup>—Naslund recounts the joys of learning about Mitchell on a research trip to Nantucket:

The first time I stepped off the ferry onto Nantucket in the face of a wet January wind, I was looking for Ahab's wife. Herman Melville scarcely had mentioned her in his classic whaling novel *Moby-Dick*; I hoped my journey to the island would suggest something of her character. But the first person who seized my imagination was Maria Mitchell. Snug in my taxi on the way to my bed-and-breakfast, the woman driver proudly informed me that Nantucket was the home

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<sup>15</sup> The magazine's nostalgia isn't officially specific to the nineteenth century. *Victoria* identifies itself as a magazine "designed to nourish the feminine soul" and "created for all who love heritage linens, charming homes, gracious gardens, unique decorative touches, traveling the world, and all that is beautiful in life." Though the "return to loveliness" it "promises" is broad, it feels especially rooted in nineteenth-century domesticity ("About Victoria").

of Maria Mitchell and that she was the first person, male or female, to sight an unknown comet by exploring the heavens with a telescope.

I'd never heard of Maria, but the novel I intended to write had stargazing as a central image. Might this astronomer, whom I had stumbled upon as soon as I reached the island of Nantucket, serve as a model for my fictional stargazer? (32).

Naslund goes on to offer a brief biographical sketch of Mitchell, highlighting all of the qualities that nineteenth-century profiles drew attention to: her eagerness and precocity as a child (“By age fourteen, she was trusted enough to re-set or ‘rate’ the chronometers of sea captains when her father was away”), the relentlessness of her commitment to astronomy (“After teaching or working in the library all day, she would spend nights searching for an undiscovered comet”). What encourages Naslund’s fascination for Mitchell’s life is the affinity she feels toward her as she explores the island Mitchell once called home. “The sunshine still pours into Maria’s closet study; fossils are still to be found near the Sankaty Light. From the roof walks of Nantucket, the glory of the stars can be experienced as it was by Maria Mitchell,” Naslund says (33). She chronicles a personal meeting with a woman across time.

Even in her own moment, Mitchell was an imagined creation to the people who wrote about her. Recall the speculative nature of the 1881 *New York Times* profile of her in which the reporter narrates, in detail, his trip to Nantucket and what he dreams Mitchell’s childhood might’ve been like on the island. In the article, he doesn’t speak to Mitchell directly—he prefers to remain at a distance from her, living instead with the fantasy in his mind. Although Mitchell was still active as an astronomer and educator in

1881, he describes her in retrospective terms, as if he is reflecting on the memory of someone no longer around. “She had her great work and it was all-absorbing,” he tells us (2). It is as if, like Naslund writing one hundred years later, he is connecting with a woman across time.

The intimacy of connection is what unites all of these direct and indirect encounters with Maria Mitchell. “I wish I could swap half my head for half yours,” one man, an eager tourist, told Mitchell at the Nantucket Atheneum in 1855 (Albers 65). Watching her at work will not suffice—he wants to make her a part of him. This is like the desire Oles articulates in her foreword to *Night Watches*: “I could say my intention in this book is to bring Maria Mitchell back alive to a contemporary audience. Though I would be pleased if that were the effect of these poems, it is not why I wrote them. I was drawn to Maria Mitchell by private imperatives seeking satisfactions all their own” (7). In the nineteenth century, Mitchell came to represent something much larger and smaller than just the potential of women in science—something much more expansive and intimate. As the embodiment of the Confederate woman martyr in *Macaria* or the face of unfulfilled passion in Melville’s “After the Pleasure Party,” Mitchell is larger than herself, larger than the scope of her study, larger than the cause for women in science that she championed. As the personal object of her greatest admirers’ dreams, she is smaller than her world. For these devotees, the woman who “was not tenderly loved” is the close companion she never imagined herself to be.

**After Obsession:  
Kate Bolick, Julie Hecht, Jamaica Kincaid, and the Fruits of Sterility**

Obsession begets obsession. Annie Trumbull Slosson recognizes the addictive qualities of entomology only to enthusiastically surrender herself to them. Despite the promise of debilitating, slug-induced insomnia, Celia Thaxter recommits to her garden every year. Harriet Beecher Stowe follows up her weird, delightfully interminable New England history with a sequel. Maria Mitchell's obsessive commitment to her science inspired obsession in her many admirers and, a hundred years later, captivated new fans who recirculated and re-intensified that obsession with their own obsessions. Obsession doesn't end: it lingers, hovers, *persists*.

Still, plotless, and unchanging, obsession is the same in its afterlife as it is in its heyday. It is not a story or idea that grows or multiplies. It doesn't evolve. It merely refuses to go away. In her essay, "Spinster Ecology: Rachel Carson, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Nonreproductive Futurity" (2012), Sarah Ensor looks for a way of thinking about the future "outside the scale provided by 'future generations.'" She turns to two spinster texts—Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*—to show how, in rejecting "the imperative of biological reproduction," the queer sensibility of spinsterhood "alters our notion not only of where the future lies but also of how (or whether) it arrives." In lieu of maternal guardianship is "a model of care that allows distance, indirection, and aloofness," one that refuses "to understand the present and future as mutually delimiting terms" (410-11). I see Ensor's "distance,

indirection, and aloofness” and raise her my even more solipsistic non-reproductive terms of late-nineteenth-century obsession: selfishness, hermeticism, and indulgence.

How do you create a legacy of selfishness, hermeticism, and indulgence? You don’t. In the world of obsession, you can only cultivate yourself. The legacy of obsession is a non-genealogy. Obsession doesn’t go anywhere—and that’s okay. What Slosson, Thaxter, Stowe, and Mitchell teach us is that it’s okay to stay at home and dwell on the present. As the afterlife—or, maybe more appropriately, *continued* life—of late-nineteenth-century women’s obsession, I locate a group of late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century women writers who, in the non-linear temporality of spinster ecology stage their encounters with obsession as ecstatic, tortured trips in and out of personal archives. Like Maria Mitchell communing with Marilyn Monroe in Carol Oles’ *Night Watches*, the older women are not so much forbearers as companions. The older women have themselves become objects of obsession.

Take, for example, Kate Bolick’s *Spinster: Making a Life of One’s Own* (2015). The book is part-memoir, part-biography, part-cultural criticism, structured around the four women writers whom Bolick discovered at various points in her own life as a writer: Neith Boyce, Maeve Brennan, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Edith Wharton. Bolick weaves the stories of these women in and out of her own. Although most of her writer-companions wrote after the late-nineteenth-century moment of Slosson, Thaxter, Stowe, and Mitchell, Bolick locates her own spinster identity in an earlier nineteenth-century moment. “I was raised in spinster territory,” Bolick says, of her childhood in Newburyport, Massachusetts (where, incidentally, Thaxter and her husband briefly occupied a house (Mandel 37)), before offering a brief snapshot of the rise of

spinsterhood in postbellum New England (18). The childhood memory of vacations exploring the rocky landscape “on a tiny island off the coast of Maine” that Bolick uses as the defiant preface to her book sounds a lot like the childhood Thaxter reminisces about in *Among the Isles of Shoals*, an antisociality in its purest form:

I built, then, my own kingdom according to my own laws, and when the sun beat down, it beat down only on me, and when my feet acclimated to the freezing water, it was my resilience that made this so. My experience of being alone was total (xvi).

For a retrospective framing of a retrospective book, this self-portrait of fierce precocity feels both prescient and final. While spinsterhood is less (though, still, only a little less) stigmatized in Bolick’s world than it was in that of her predecessors and the implications of singlehood are different, there is something enduring about both generations’ ideal of solitude. The siren of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first-century narrative of obsession is the ever-present revelation of a woman committed to the “experience of being alone” with her interests.

This is the hypnotic indulgence that drives the work of Julie Hecht, a reclusive short-story writer who captures intense immersions in nature and popular culture.<sup>1</sup>

Nothing happens in Julie Hecht’s stories, all of which are narrated by the same unnamed woman who rarely ever leaves the tranquil confines of her small worlds in the health-

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<sup>1</sup> Hecht has done only three interviews over the course of a strange, remarkable career that started with the publication of her first short story in *Harper’s* in 1977 and continued with the publication of four books—two collections of short stories, one novel (*The Unprofessionals* (2003)), and an account of her meetings with Andy Kaufman (*Was This Man A Genius?: Talks with Andy Kaufman* (2001)). She has made no public appearances. “One likes to maintain one’s privacy,” she said in an interview with *The Believer* in 2008. “You don’t want too much in print about your own life” (64). Yet her work has attracted a cult following. When asked about this fan base during her *Believer* interview, Hecht responded with her characteristic bemusement: “I know of no cult” (64).

food stores and restaurants of East Hampton and the bogs, bookstores, and tree-lined streets of Nantucket. Each story chronicles one of the narrator's many objects of fixation from macrobiotic cooking to Elvis Presley to *The Red Shoes*. When she talks about or enjoys one of her obsessions, she cannot think about anything else. It's not enough for her narrator to be a nature enthusiast—she's a nature completist: she tells us that it is her life goal "to photograph every pond, cloud, flower, and vine" on Nantucket (*Happy Trails* 28).

Nineteenth-century New England is a particularly important obsession for Hecht's narrator. She spends much of her time trying to understand what it might mean to live the life of a Transcendentalist in the twenty-first century. In "Being and Nothingness" (2008), she visits the Nantucket Atheneum and feels "unworthy" to stand at the same podium where Emerson and Thoreau—two of her idols—gave lectures (*Happy Trails* 43). In "The World of Ideas" (1995), she recounts two decades spent trying to revisit the Maria Mitchell House: "I'd gone down the lane twenty years before to visit the birthplace and observatory of the first woman astronomer, Maria Mitchell, and I'd been trying to go back ever since. It was always too hot during visiting hours, and just when it cooled off, at four o'clock, the hours were over" (*Windows* 169). She's fascinated by the way Mitchell "stayed up all night scanning the sky and making observations," and wants to get close to her like, yet Mitchell is, eventually, an afterthought: a neighbor's problems choosing tomatoes and carpet patterns overtake her attention.<sup>2</sup> "But how much could I

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<sup>2</sup> Hecht's narrator's obsession with Maria Mitchell is curious given that the cult following Hecht herself attracts is predicated on a fascination with distance not unlike Maria Mitchell's following. Just as fans of the spinster astronomer were intrigued by what they perceived to be her remoteness, Hecht's fans are similarly entranced by absence. Hecht's narrator—like Hecht herself—tells us virtually nothing about herself even as she is endlessly curious about the people she meets. The result is that we become as obsessed with her (and Hecht) as she is with Emerson,

learn from studying the Maria Mitchell birthplace and observatory?” she asks. “Maria and her descendants were no longer around. No tomatoes were being eaten there” (189). In turning away from Mitchell and nurturing her own obsessions, Hecht’s narrator offers the greatest possible tribute to a woman who put her obsessions first.

As a spirited—if unwitting—tribute to late-nineteenth-century obsession, Jamaica Kincaid’s *My Garden (Book)*: (1999) is as simultaneously close to and far away from its original obsessed women as Hecht. Thaxter makes no appearance in *My Garden (Book)*;, but the perverse joy that Kincaid evokes in this collection of personal essays about her Vermont garden is decidedly Thaxteresque. “How agitated I am when I am in the garden, and how happy I am to be so agitated,” Kincaid writes. “How vexed I often am when I am in the garden, and how happy I am to be so vexed” (14). She describes the hold that seed catalogues have over her the way Slosson figures entomology as an addiction she can’t quit: “after vowing never to order fruit trees through the post again, I am looking at this very same nursery’s catalogue and I am making up an order. Oh, please, someone, Help Me!” (100-101). The plea is part of her performance: like Slosson, Kincaid doesn’t actually want to break her addiction.

In this moment, the catalogue, and not exactly the garden itself, is the site of Kincaid’s habit, and the medium through which she maintains it. The texts of gardening—seed catalogues, natural histories, domestic guides, and plant collectors’ journals—entrance her almost as much as the flowers themselves do. Incessantly allusive, the book pays tribute to an astonishing breadth of texts from American and English

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Thoreau, and Elvis Presley. The infrequency with which Hecht publishes new work and the fiercely withholding voice she uses when she does release new work give Hecht fans (like myself) a tiny trove of absorbing material to obsess over. The logic of Hecht’s (and Mitchell’s) retentive intimacy goes something like this: the more she gives us, the less we know, the more we want to read.

traditions, from Thomas Jefferson's journals to *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management* (1861) to Gertrude Jekyll's *Color Schemes for the Flower Garden* (1908). It's a wonder that Thaxter gets no mention in Kincaid's book. The woman who understands Thaxter so deeply and so perfectly may not even know her. Kincaid unintentionally respects the six chilling words in *An Island Garden* that forbid its own citation: "no hands touch it save my own."

Kincaid takes Thaxter's vicious pest control to a more devastating, brutal level. For Kincaid, killing slugs is child's play (quite literally a garden task she leaves for her kids)—it's the rabbits that would really sate her bloodlust:

How I wish that I could transform myself into an enormous, vividly striped animal that with a few bounds could approach the cavorting rabbits and, with a playful swat of my large paw, grab them and playfully toss them into the air. The joy I would get from hearing the snap-snap of their little necks breaking in midair would be immeasurable (172).

Kincaid's reveries of violence come partly from the dark reality of gardening she sees that Thaxter would never have interrogated, for, as an upper-middle-class white woman, she was too close to it herself. A black woman who grew up in colonial Antigua, Kincaid understands the barbarism that underlies every English garden, the hypocrisy at the heart of white flower-planting: "Almost as if ashamed of the revulsion and hostility they have for foreign people, the English make up for it by loving and embracing foreign plants wholesale" (103). While Slosson criticizes the scientific system of naming bugs for its emptiness and elitism, Kincaid identifies beneath botanic taxonomy a much more systemic, spiteful, personally crushing condescension that she doesn't have the privilege

of ever being able to remove herself from: the condescension of colonial conquest. “The botanists are like that man who sailed on the ships,” she says after a reflection on Christopher Columbus’ arrival to Antigua and his naming of the island. “They emptied worlds of their names; they emptied the worlds of things animal, vegetable, and mineral of their names and replaced these names with names pleasing to them; these names are pleasing to them because they are reasonable; reason is a pleasure to them” (160).

Kincaid tells us she can only bring herself to read her books about the slave trade when the days “grow longer, warmer, and softer” (64). Her logic is unnerving: she revisits the racial violence historically linked to building an exotic garden during the season when every well-off flower-lover dependent on hired help indulgently re-enacts it.

The most indulgent re-enactor is Kincaid herself. In her *New Yorker* essay, “Sowers and Reapers” (2001), Kincaid writes about the slaves who worked on Thomas Jefferson’s garden and then the men she hired to build two walls in her own garden and the happiness she found in their labor: “I became very possessive of the time spent on them and wanted the four men to be building only my walls. I didn’t begrudge them lunchtime or time taken to smoke a cigarette, but why did they have to stop working when the day was at an end, and why did the day have to come to an end for that matter? How I loved to watch these men work” (44). She reveals the entitlement and insidious hierarchy behind luxuriant obsession that late-nineteenth-century narratives take as natural by gleefully re-appropriating that exclusivity and by embracing confinement and antisociality. Her sinister restagings of colonialist gardening are a political critique *and* a taboo, private pleasure.

As her initial subversive motives give way to still-darker drives, the target of Kincaid's resentment shifts from white exploitation to her own children. Kincaid's ultimate garden enemy is her family. Married, with two children, Kincaid fantasizes about spinsterhood, much like Thaxter did in her own life, longing for the full attention she'd be able to give her garden. Consider the forebodingly affectionate way Kincaid dedicates her book to her kids: "With blind, instinctive, and confused love, for Annie & for Harold who from time to time are furiously certain that the only thing standing between them and a perfect union with their mother is the garden, and from time to time, they are correct." Later in the book, reminiscing about a trip to the Chelsea Flower Show in England, Kincaid admits briefly to "missing" her children—but only very briefly. While reading an article in an English newspaper about how the decline and disappearance of gardeners during an unnamed war meant the larger cultural loss of an ability to distinguish between plant varieties,<sup>3</sup> Kincaid reconsiders the relative importance of gardeners and children:

If when the gardeners went away, the world of plant differentiation fell apart, what else might have fallen apart? And what did she really mean to say, this woman? If only the world—especially the gardeners—stayed put? And then I missed my children less, because they always think it's my fault when things don't work out (108-109).

"Families are a malevolent lot, no matter the permutations they make...no matter the nice things they say," she says back at home, watching her kids laugh as they kill slugs under her direction (179). It seems unlikely that the woman who dreamed of slaughtering

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<sup>3</sup> Kincaid tells us that the author of the article "did not say which war, the British have been involved in many wars, but it is a small country so everyone must know which one 'the war' is" (108).

rabbits would consider slug-killing a form of malevolence. The real evil is the kids themselves—the garden pests Kincaid can't ever get rid of.<sup>4</sup> More important than the bond of motherhood or the procreative legacy of family is the simple but powerful ability to appreciate and distinguish one flower from another.

Obsession has no time for posterity. Surrounded by her bygone spinster sisters, Bolick knows this well. Yet despite the life situation of her narrator—married to a man for many years—Hecht knows this even better. Her first published story, “Love Is Blind” (1977), is a long treatise on the repulsiveness of breeding. “Although I love my husband,” she writes, “I see now that he has genes that should never be reproduced—that is, genes which must not be allowed to mingle with mine” (73). At the center of Hecht’s work is the narrator’s one great love, her strange friendship with her reproductive surgeon, Dr. Arnold Loquesto, who appears in many of her stories. She never tells us why she actually sees him or openly acknowledges the medical reasons she consults him. Her infatuation, as it is with Maria Mitchell, is in the person, not his work. She loves his quirks—his love of diet soda, his refusal to open windows in hot rooms, his impatience with everyone and

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<sup>4</sup> Ambivalent mother-child relationships abound in Kincaid’s work. In her novels, *Annie John* (1985) and *Lucy* (1990), Kincaid’s narrators articulate the desire to break free of their mothers’ hold even as they obsess over them. In her nonfiction, Kincaid has written about her own alternately intimate and alienated relationship with her mother. (“Three years before my mother died, I decided not to speak to her again,” she writes in her essay, “The Estrangement” (24).) Fantasies of killing family members recur throughout Kincaid’s fiction. In her short story, “My Mother” (1983), the narrator opens “wishing my mother dead” (*At the Bottom of the River* 53). Mrs. Sweet, the woman at the center of her novel, *See Now Then* (2013), reflects on her mother’s feelings of alternate murderousness and nurturing: “she wished me dead but not into eternity, she wished me dead at the end of the day and that in the morning she would give birth to me again” (29). Then, later in the novel, the woman’s son shows awareness of her desire to kill him and shares his own dreams of matricide: “my mother would kill me if she got the chance, I would kill my mother if I had the courage” (130). Like Kincaid, the woman in the novel discovers gardening after she has children. The narrator suggests that a fibroid her doctor removes from her uterus is a pestilential sign of things to come—a sign Mrs. Sweet herself couldn’t recognize: “this was before the time Mrs. Sweet became a gardener herself and so could not see then, as now, could not see anything at all, not that the thing growing on her uterus was prophetic or a metaphor” (114).

everything. The narrator becomes so obsessed with Dr. Loquesto that she embarks on a photography project, accompanying him to medical conferences and spending time with his family as she attempts to take his picture everywhere he goes. While following him, she asks him questions to become a true expert on his character. “What’s your favorite surgery?” she asks him. “Hysterectomy!” he says enthusiastically. She presses for more. “What’s the reason?” she asks. “Cut out the uterus. Throw it in a pot,” he says (152). Hecht does Kincaid one further, turning the violence of obsession from imaginary colonial and maternal revenge to actual gynecological destruction, all the more twisted given its playfulness, amusement, and enchantment. Dr. Loquesto is the object of an obsession even more transfixing than Slosson’s bugs or Thaxter’s garden or Stowe’s Florida or even Mitchell’s spinsterhood, the object of an obsession that eliminates all distractions, that allows, finally, for eternal focus: the sweet paradise of sterility.

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