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PROSPECTS FEATURE

Prospects for the Study of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman

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ABSTRACT | Freeman studies flourished in the 1970s through the 1990s, and many rely on the groundbreaking work from that era. But Freeman studies has continued to develop. New interpretations of perennial favorite short stories have appeared, undiscovered texts have been brought to light, different contexts have been pinpointed, and fresh outlooks on feminist questions have been staked out. Scholars interested in reading Freeman will benefit from combining a focus on the heyday with a focus on new developments. These have included a more critical examination of female bonds, the Gothic, the criminal, naturalism, materialism, and ecocriticism. After reviewing recent bibliographical and textual studies of Freeman and these critical developments, the essay urges more focus on Freeman's novels and considers future directions Freeman studies might take.

KEYWORDS | Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, female bonds, ecocriticism, the Gothic, regionalism

Freeman studies flourished in the 1970s through the 1990s as part of a larger project of recovering women writers. In 1974, the Feminist Press published a new edition of Freeman's short stories edited by Michele Clark (*Revolt*), and in 1983, Norton published an edition of Freeman's short stories edited by Marjorie Pryse (*Selected Stories*). The previous year, 1982, had brought Brent Kendrick's collection of Freeman's letters, complete with detailed footnotes

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and section introductions (*Infant Sphinx*). The ever-useful *Critical Essays* series produced a volume on Freeman in 1991, edited by Shirley Marchalonis. The pioneering scholar Mary R. Reichardt compiled two story collections, *The Uncollected Stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman* (1992) and *A Mary Wilkins Freeman Reader* (1997), and two groundbreaking interpretive studies, *A Web of Relationship: Women in the Short Fiction of Mary Wilkins Freeman* (1992) and *Mary Wilkins Freeman: A Study of the Short Fiction* (1997). Leah Blatt Glasser brought forth an interpretive biography of Freeman in 1996, which provided a valuable feminist update to the Edward Foster biography of 1956. Dover produced a thrift edition of Freeman's tales in 1998 that remains useful for teaching (*Revolt of "Mother"*). In 1999, *American Transcendental Quarterly* published an issue devoted to Freeman (vol. 13, no. 3). In 2000, a Penguin edition of Freeman's short fiction appeared (*New England Nun*); that volume, edited by Sandra A. Zagarell, contains some of the later, lesser read stories, including the comic novel *The Jamesons* (1899). Charles Johanningsmeier published a critical edition of Freeman's novel *Pembroke* (1894) in 2002.

Given the wealth of scholarship published between 1974 and 2002, scholars may be forgiven for considering Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (1852–1930) to be a star of the 1980s and 1990s. Many rely on the groundbreaking work from that era. But Freeman studies has developed since then, with several articles or book chapters published each year since 2002. New interpretations of perennial favorite short stories have appeared, undiscovered texts have been brought to light, different contexts have been pinpointed, and fresh outlooks on feminist questions have been staked out. New turns have been performed, and scholars interested in reading Freeman will benefit from combining a focus on the heyday with a focus on new developments.

In the twenty-first century, this nineteenth-century writer continues to be a hit with students. My students enjoy reading "The Revolt of 'Mother'" (1890) as a clear allegory for the way that women might assert themselves in rural life. Both men and women side with Louisa Ellis against marriage in "A New England Nun" (1887). They recognize how "A Poetess" (1890) broaches questions of gender, authorship, and print culture. They are delighted with the wry humor of "The Parrot" (1900), especially its implication that parrots have souls. "A Church Mouse" (1889) shocks some with its female defiance against organized religion. Scholarship is keeping pace with this evolving interest in Freeman.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL AND TEXTUAL STUDIES

While interpretation has proliferated since the 1990s, bibliographical and textual studies have not followed in tandem. In the 1999 issue of *American Transcendental Quarterly*, Johanningsmeier wrote bracing words: “[T]he state of Freeman bibliographical and textual studies has hardly changed. Numerous gaps in the record of Freeman’s publications still exist, no descriptive bibliography of her periodical contributions has been created, and no authoritative texts of her work are to be found” (“Current State” 173). The problems he identified continue to plague Freeman studies.

Johanningsmeier points out that Freeman’s works for children, holiday stories written for particular occasions, and poetry are left out of the bibliography that appears in Reichardt’s *A Web of Relationship* (157–70) and an earlier index of short stories that appeared in 1923 (Firkin). Indeed, no up-to-date bibliographies have been published since those useful lists, and recent work demonstrates that these little-known texts are worthy of listing and fuller study. H. J. E. Champion’s ongoing work on queer children in Freeman’s adult fiction suggests that childhood, like old age, was a crucial period of life in Freeman’s world in which the strictures of heterosexuality, marriage, and motherhood could be bypassed. Jana Tigchelaar’s work on an alternative gift economy in Freeman’s holiday stories, a gift economy in which people give freely to neighbors instead of to their nuclear family, suggests that the holiday stories are also worth examining as an oeuvre. Even when Freeman was expressly writing for the market, she managed to tweak and swerve from dominant ideologies. Freeman’s poetry is almost entirely yet to be discovered, cataloged, and interpreted. Karen L. Kilcup and Angela Sorby include some of Freeman’s poems in *Over the River and Through the Wood: An Anthology of Nineteenth-Century American Children’s Poetry* (2014). The poems collected here, including “The Beggar King” (1881) and “Down in the Clover” (1897), further illustrate the critical contention that Freeman experimented beyond realism (Marchalonis, “Another Mary Wilkins Freeman” 90; Campbell, “Howells’ Untrustworthy Realist”). These poems raise questions of gender and class in the guise of fairy tale and fantasy.

In the last ten years, *American Literary Realism* and *Resources for American Literary Study* have regularly featured newly discovered short fiction by Freeman. For example, Philip B. Eppard has finally uncovered

Freeman's first published story, "Her Shadow Family" (1882), even though no extant version of the original publication in the *Boston Sunday Budget* could be located; Eppard found the story reprinted in a small-town weekly newspaper. Valerie Kinsey notes that Freeman's children's Christmas story "The White Witch" (1893), missing from Freeman bibliographies, exemplifies Freeman's fairy and folk themes. "The White Witch" is also an interesting rumination on the presence and absence of color in society, which might be read as an allegory for racial homogeneity versus diversity. Kathrine C. Aydelott has reprinted "An Idyl of a Berry Pasture" (1889), a story about an impoverished girl who fails to win the heart of the son of a mill owner by stealing a present for him. First printed in *Once a Week*, an early imprint of *Collier's Weekly*, the story draws on Freeman's classic themes of poverty and class distinctions as well as individual versus community, but with a starker, more socialistic description of the poor, for whom "the boundary lines of property looked very dim" (Freeman qtd. in Aydelott 87). "An Idyl of a Berry Pasture" makes explicit reference to female desire for marriage, romance, and upward mobility, which is intriguing given Freeman's more famous evocations of the renunciation of heterosexual marital desire in such stories as "A New England Nun" and "The Poetess." The story anticipates Freeman's later theme of criminal women as exemplified by the co-written story "The Long Arm" (1895) and discussed by Donna M. Campbell ("Reign").

The popularity of periodical studies and the growth of digital databases mean that more discoveries will be made: Freeman may well say new things to twenty-first-century readers. For this reason, the Freeman bibliography should be kept up to date. As scholars refine our sense of who read what Freeman text in what venue, they can render ever more substantial the contention that Freeman wrote for a variety of audiences. This contention overturns a central assertion made about regionalism in the 1990s. In that decade, Richard Brodhead argued that regionalists including Freeman wrote largely for the Northeast-dominated, middle- and upper-class audience of the quality monthlies such as *Harper's Monthly* or the *Atlantic Monthly*. It followed, in Brodhead's argument, that Freeman's work catered to elite urbanite desires to consume quaint and unthreatening rural otherness. Articles by Johanningsmeier ("Sarah Orne Jewett") and Ellen Gruber Garvey ("Less Work") have already established that Freeman's stories were read in local newspapers and magazines for humble audiences like farm

women. Perhaps this recent interest in uncovering more Freeman texts will finally put to rest the lingering assumption that she wrote primarily for elite audiences.

In his 1999 essay about bibliography, Johanningsmeier also complained that the bibliographical focus on book collections rather than periodical serializations means that “no full bibliographic record exists of what Freeman published in Britain during her career” (“Current State” 179). It is a bit unfair for Johanningsmeier to single out Freeman scholars for this omission, given that this state of affairs remains the case for most American authors. Bibliographies tend to privilege first book editions because they are usually the published version over which authors have the most control. Freeman published in an era when legal and financial considerations, as well as aesthetic ones, made it almost necessary for authors to publish works first in the United States. After the passing of the 1891 Chace Act, which forced US publishers to honor international copyright, US copyright law also required the manufacture and first publication of a work in the United States if an author were to benefit (Towheed 11–12). Thus, between 1891 and 1909, years in which Freeman published many of her volumes, her first book editions were always American editions.

Since Johanningsmeier’s article appeared, my *Transatlantic Footholds: Turn-of-the-Century American Women Writers and British Reviewers* has been published; it provides a full list of book editions of three of her major titles, a list of all the located reviews on these editions, and discussions of some author profiles and fan reminiscences that appeared in British print (72–105). I argue that the British associated Freeman largely with the British book editions *A Humble Romance and Other Stories* (published in two volumes for the British market by the Scottish publisher David Douglas in 1890), *A New England Nun and Other Stories* (published in 1891 by Osgood and McIlvaine, a London agent of Harper’s), and *Pembroke* (published by Osgood and McIlvaine in 1894). When British readers and critics later reminisced about discovering Wilkins in the early 1890s, they described having a book in their hands. One of the discoveries I emphasize is that the girl’s magazine *Atalanta*, edited by the prominent Irish writer and activist L. T. Meade (Elizabeth Thomasina Meade Smith [1844–1914]), and the New Woman magazines the *Woman’s Signal* and *Shafts* wrote about Freeman in protofeminist ways, thereby celebrating the writer’s spinsterhood and move beyond the coupling convention.

While Freeman's most familiar stories are widely anthologized and print-on-demand copies of her stories, story collections, and novels abound, authoritative critical editions of Freeman's works remain sorely lacking. Most of the aforementioned short story collections are still in print, and Hastings College Press has published inexpensive new editions, including *The Wind in the Rose-bush and Other Stories of the Supernatural* (2015) and *Six Trees* (2020), thus ensuring that Freeman's contributions to the Gothic and to ecoliterature remain easily accessible for scholars who may not know that the feminist recovery initiated interest in those areas. Freeman's novels and poetry, however, have mostly not been reprinted in editions usable for teaching or research. The Northeastern University Press paperback edition of *Pembroke* is inexpensive, and copies of it can be obtained, even though the publisher has gone out of business. This volume brought the novel into the public eye once again and redirected Freeman studies toward the recurring drama of family conflict in her work. Among Freeman's novels, *Madelon* (1896) and *The Portion of Labor* (1901) also seem worthy of refreshed scholarly appraisal and might work well in the classroom. They are edgier than Freeman's most famous stories, and they raise more difficult issues about race and class, thus extending our knowledge of white women's literary production far beyond the regionalist tale of female defiance for which Freeman is still best known. *Madelon* depicts the part-Native, part-French heroine Madelon Hautville, who is in love with Burr Gordon. When Burr seems to prefer Dorothy Fair, the aptly named blond daughter of the minister, who is an image of conventional white female loveliness, Madelon stomps home from the dance in the dark. Mistaking Burr's cousin Lot for Burr himself, Madelon stabs Lot with a knife, yet the town refuses to believe that Madelon committed the crime because she is a woman. The novel is a fascinating rumination on race and bloodlines and the wrongful assumption of female passivity in the face of sexual violence. *The Portion of Labor*, which concerns child abduction, high school female oratory, economic depression, stock speculation, and a shoe factory strike, has stumped Freeman critics for decades. Her first biographer, Edward Foster, dismissed the novel as a product of an author "in an attitude of tense spiritual striving" who mistakenly made her female heroine Ellen Brewster a "humorless perfectionist" (147). Her second biographer, Leah Blatt Glasser, considers the novel an analysis of love between women, whether this be maternal, sisterly,

friendly, or even the love between Ellen and Cynthia Lennox, the wealthy woman who abducts Ellen (182–89). Campbell interprets this vignette as a reference to capitalist class extraction of labor from workers (*Bitter Tastes* 218–22). Even though the novel defuses its disquieting energies into cross-class heterosexual marriage in the final chapters, it remains an understudied gem in Freeman's oeuvre. Yet this novel and virtually all of Freeman's other novels remain out of print.

One bright spot in the bibliographical and textual work on Freeman is the website *Works of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman*, which has been built over the years by a fan, Jeff Kaylin. This site is no substitute for good critical editions of Freeman's works, but its ease of navigation has meant that scholars come here first when searching for information about the chronology of publication or new texts to read. Kaylin's website features images of book covers and references to Freeman in the American press. It lists all of Freeman's book titles, including her difficult-to-find *Decorative Plaques, Poems* (1883) and her children's stories, such as *The Adventures of Ann* (1886). It lists the first American serial information of the stories as well. Stories are reprinted from the first serial edition, with all paratextual features removed (advertisements, page layout, etc.). This practice raises interpretative challenges. Lost is the original periodical context of the stories, the context that might provide us with clues about how cannily Freeman departed from the dominant voice of the periodicals where she placed her work, or about the identity of Freeman's primary audiences. Neither are there any links to online information about these periodicals or access to digitized versions. Scholars have yet to compare systematically the serial to the book form of any of Freeman's most celebrated stories. Thus, we do not yet know which version is closest to the author's intentions. The website is silent on such questions of editorial decision making, but then again, so are most of the printed editions of Freeman's works. Two other websites are also useful: The Mary E. Wilkins Freeman Society (established at the Society for the Study of American Women Writers in 2015) has begun a website on Freeman that lists recent conference papers and commemorative events in Brattleboro, Vermont. And Donna Campbell's Freeman page, *Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman (1852–1930)*, on her American author sites includes a bibliography of recent criticism on Freeman. There are tantalizing possibilities for further digital or print bibliographical and textual studies.

NEW TURNS IN FREEMAN CRITICISM

Since 2002, Freeman criticism has undergone a series of interlinked turns: the turn toward examining the darker side of female bonds, the Gothic, the criminal, naturalism, materialism, and ecocriticism.¹ Much of Freeman criticism published during the heyday of feminist recovery sought to uncover and theorize the presence in American history of a sisterly realm. Both Clark and Pryse focused their introductions and selections on characters, mostly female, who defy gender and class conventions in a world, like late-nineteenth-century New England, that was dominated by single women and old, disempowered men left behind by western expansion. In much of her groundbreaking work on Freeman, Pryse argues that Freeman's best work remains her early tales of independent women, "spinsters or older women, often women living together or for whom women's friendship rather than marriage provides emotional sustenance" (Pryse, "Mary E. Wilkins Freeman" 143). In stressing the sustaining and vivifying aspects of female bonds, Freeman scholars such as Clark, Pryse, and Josephine Donovan ("Silence") implicitly or explicitly draw on feminist scholarship coming out of philosophy, history, or psychology by diverse figures including Lillian Faderman, Hélène Cixous, Nancy Chodorow, Carol Gilligan, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, and Nina Auerbach. These scholars variously argue that nineteenth-century women shared physical and emotional bonds with other women. While Cixous explores the universal, antipatriarchal possibilities of these bonds in theory, Smith-Rosenberg stresses that these bonds emerged out of the strict division between the genders in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries among white, middle-class women across the United States. This wide-ranging feminist work has been contested over the years, largely for its tendency to be applied in essentialist ways.

Among Freeman scholars, Reichardt has explored bonds between female characters in the most depth, and of the work of these feminist scholars, she argues that Freeman's fiction "only partially corroborates their findings" (*Web* 103). In Freeman's fiction, women's dependence on each other "leads to hostility as well as affection," and "[o]nly a few of her tales depict women who, on an equal status in class, wealth, or intellect, can truly qualify as friends" (*Web* 104). Other Freeman scholars have extended Reichardt's argument. Rather than locating the roots of utopian thinking about sisterly bonds in Freeman's fiction, contemporary critics listen to the ambivalence

in the texts, their tendency to represent women's bonds with affection for their sustenance and bitter amusement at their constrictions. During the first wave of feminist interest in Freeman, Elizabeth Meese warned critics that Freeman wrote a fiction of "undecidability," rooted in the author's own ambivalence about the defiant steps taken by her characters. More recent critics have pressed this line of interpretation further. Freeman's fiction explores the destructive energies that can emerge when women are forced into dependence solely on each other. Monika M. Elbert identifies Freeman's women with fetishistic activity, "the incessant sewing and cleaning, the frenzied shopping and collecting, and the obsessive baking and inordinate saving," that can be read as symptoms of thwarted creativity (210). Given these fetishistic elements in the fiction, then, Freeman, according to Elbert, should be categorized as a naturalist, not a regionalist. In her study of female naturalism, Jennifer L. Fleissner similarly associates Freeman's characters with obsessive-compulsive disorder. Linda M. Grasso argues that the murderous grandmother in Freeman's increasingly popular tale "Old Woman Magoun" (1905) symbolically encapsulates the writer's "frustration, rage, and despair" at the limited powers afforded to mothers and, by extension, to artists hoping to nurture their talent in a country that refuses to support them. Grasso links Freeman, not with writers who celebrate New England bonds, but with Sui Sin Far (Edith Maude Eaton, 1865–1914), whose "The Wisdom of the New" (1912) has surprising affinities with "Old Woman Magoun."

Linked to this interest in the claustrophobic nature of female bonding, the Gothic is an increasingly important topic in Freeman studies. Freeman frequently wrote in supernatural, mythical, allegorical, or romantic veins. Beth Wynne Fisker argues that Freeman's tales of the supernatural speak to the author's deep anxieties about mothering, and Nicole A. Diederich's reading of maternal angst in "The Wind in the Rose-Bush" (1902) develops this line of argument further by linking Freeman's maternal figures with the abject. Roxanne Harde treats the child ghost as a sign of societal cruelty and neglect. Dara Downey locates a dark critique of domesticity within Freeman's tales of the Gothic: her "supernatural short fiction dwells on the abusive nature of domestic space and ideology, figuring the home and the behavior it prescribed as actively injurious, not only to middle-class women, but to American society at large" (120). Scholars including James B. Carter, Mike Barrett, and Mark Blacklock have brought Freeman's supernatural

stories to a wider fanbase, a strategy that is crucial if Freeman studies are to expand. The short stories included in *The Wind in the Rose-Bush and Other Stories of the Supernatural* are likely to attract more critical attention, as are “The Hall Bedroom” (1903) and “The Twelfth Guest” (1889). A fascinating story with fantasy elements is “The Prism” (1901), and more remains to be said about Freeman’s most famous detective story, “The Long Arm.”

Nonnormative sexuality and sexual identity continue to occupy Freeman scholars. While earlier scholars traced Freeman’s possible erotic relationships with Mary Wales (d. 1916) and Evelyn Sawyer Severance (1852–1939), Jennifer Ansley and J. Samaine Lockwood expand the sense of queer bonds in Freeman’s fiction beyond lesbian attraction or identity. Investigating Freeman’s early fiction, including “A Mistaken Charity,” “Two Old Lovers,” and “A Symphony in Lavender” (all three published in 1888), Ansley finds queerness in male and female characters marginally employed in rural regions outside the normative capitalist economy that was overtaking Freeman’s hometown of Randolph during her early years. These characters are “queer,” not because of their sexual desires, but because of their alienation from biological, social, and economic forms of reproduction. Lockwood contextualizes allusions to Puritan ancestry in Freeman’s short fiction, including “The Revolt of ‘Mother’” and “A Church Mouse,” against a broader interest in history-making among New England women writers, historians, and antique collectors. Whereas their work dovetailed with a widespread effort to consider white, Anglo-Norman New Englanders as the apex of the nation, these women turned to the archive with queer desire. They “wrote the unmarried daughter into a dominant narrative of national history just as it constituted a critique of the nation as the ideal political form of belonging for women, offering in its stead unmarried women’s membership in a community of New Englanders committed to cosmopolitan dissent” (Lockwood 6). This work is to be lauded for locating Freeman in the broad currents of queer theory. At the same time, however, Lockwood and Ansley sidestep expressions of sexual desire in Freeman’s work.² Freeman’s little-known story “Hyacinthus” (1904) might be reconsidered in light of these new approaches to sexuality. Campbell cites “Hyacinthus” as an example of the exotic Freeman, a Freeman that caused her editors consternation (“Howells’ Untrustworthy Realist”). In “Hyacinthus,” the garden symbolizes romance and eroticism, as well as queer male beauty and an advocacy for gender-bending in the form of

the gardener Hyacinthus. Future studies of Freeman's works might investigate expressions of nonnormative sexualities, in addition to nonnormative identities.

The conflict between historicism and feminism that emerged in the 1990s in readings of women's regionalism has been percolating in Freeman criticism for some time now. Whereas feminist critics of the 1970s and 1980s reached back into texts written in past centuries to find nascent critiques of gender and sexual roles that become legible in light of present-day feminist commitments, historicists such as Amy Kaplan, Richard Brodhead, and the contributors to the volume *New Essays on The Country of the Pointed Firs*, edited by June Howard, linked regionalism to late nineteenth-century discourses of nation building, imperial expansion, and class consolidation. Ever since that time, critics who find progressive tendencies in Freeman have used arguments of this group of historicists as foils.³ Many contemporary critics who perform this turn, however, are historicists themselves. They consider how Freeman's work challenges dominant ideologies of her day, never acquiescing to them as much as viewing them askance. Tigchelaar makes this argument about gift giving, while Debra Bernardi argues that Freeman rejects the typical conventions of female benevolence and scientific charity. Ansley traces the history of economic depression of the 1870s and 1880s that turned places such as Randolph from independent existence to depressed suburbs of Boston. Emma Calabrese shows how Freeman's "A New England Nun" and "An Honest Soul" (1884) indirectly contributed to the emerging field of occupational therapy by contrasting mechanized, efficient, capitalist time to working a routine with pleasure and breaks. Michael Grimwood's two indispensable essays on "The Revolt of 'Mother'" argue against earlier feminist readings of that story but resemble recent feminist readings by showing how Freeman's fiction attends to the intellectual and political discourses of her day. In Grimwood's reading, Freeman followed closely developments in photography, house building, and consumerism ("Revolt of 'Mother'" and "Architecture"). Whereas other critics maintain that Freeman viewed contemporary developments askance, Grimwood argues that Freeman's work registers longing for *more* consumerism—more architecture and more fine household possessions.

Freeman's work supports both views. The reason is two-fold: her stories are ambiguous, and her oeuvre, divided and organized without hierarchy into distinct short stories, supports different interpretations in different

stories. It depends not only on how a critic reads a story but also on which story a critic reads.

These new interpretations of Freeman support a feminist materialism that seeks feminist commitments in her work while tracing her unique and lasting contribution to the progressive or regressive discourses of her day. New work on Freeman might account at once for her texts' expansive and romantic tendencies and the nitty gritty of her historical realities. On the latter, the Foster volume, derided by Marchalonis for its tendency to reduce Freeman's work to a simple mimesis, a gossipy rendition of people and events that actually happened, remains worth reading with caution (Introduction 14). As Foster documents, Irish immigrants came to Freeman's hometown of Randolph in the late 1840s, and they were reviled because they were Catholic and competed for jobs. The Know Nothing Party flourished in Randolph in the 1850s (Foster 4). By the 1880s and 1890s, the shoe factories of Randolph were owned by the Irish, but they could not compete with the new factories in nearby Brockton (Foster 110). These are just some of the historical nuggets that might generate new readings of Freeman in the future.

A new turn in feminist materialism is ecocriticism, and this turn has become especially urgent in the global climate crisis. Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse borrow from Frank Davey the concept that regionalism is not a "geographical manifestation" but a discourse, "a general social or political strategy for resisting meanings generated by others in a nation-state" (Davey 4; qtd. in Fetterley and Pryse 5). Their conceptual decision has been embraced by critics who wish to avoid reducing regionalism to a flat recording of reality, an exercise in antiquarianism, or even an uncritical local patriotism. But Freeman critics such as Susan Garland Mann have long noted that Freeman's fiction is replete with references to flowers, trees, gardens, animals—in short, to the nonhuman nature of the New England region. Terrell F. Dixon and Stacey Alaimo have used ecocriticism to bring to light some of the innovative qualities of Freeman's later and so-far-unappreciated collections, *Understudies* (1901) and *Six Trees* (1903). Any attempt to understand human culture in Freeman's fictions needs to account for the continuing presence and potency within the fiction of non-human nature.

One element of Freeman's ecoliterature that distinguishes her from earlier writers is that the nature about which she writes, particularly in her

later collections, is suburban. In “The White Birch” (1901), a story collected in *Six Trees*, the eponymous tree is symbolic of a middle-aged man, Joseph Lynn. Man and tree are each the last member of their dying families. Joseph Lynn has lived in his family’s homestead for fifty years, a homestead that is stubbornly and awkwardly set back from the highway in the fields, close to the birch grove, far from the hustle of the road or neighbors’ prying eyes. Joseph loves a young dressmaker but eventually renounces her so that she can marry a younger man. The story ends with Joseph ruminating over his lost love while leaning against the white birch, who draws comfort from the man’s companionship. The birch is the last of a grove of sisters, and she is personified: “But all her sisters were gone; one or two had died of themselves, the others had been lopped down by the woodsman, and there was only the one white birch left” (44). This is nature as a diminished thing, an ornament in a suburban lawn rather than part of a working farm. The idea of a lost sisterhood resembles Freeman’s own move during these years after the death of Mary Louise Booth (1831–89), the editor of *Harper’s Bazar* who had cultivated Freeman in her apprentice years, and her impending separation from Mary Wales that followed from Freeman’s marriage in 1902. The lost sisterhood also resonates with Freeman’s shift to writing novels about heterosexual love and marriage or short stories with male protagonists. Freeman critics, too, have undergone a kind of lost sisterhood as the celebration of sisterhood in Freeman’s works has given way to studies of queerness on the one hand and maternal neglect on the other. “The White Birch” demonstrates that Freeman’s work is at once self-conscious and ecocritical.

Freeman adds something distinctive to US nature writing. Although it is useful to draw links between Freeman and the earlier New England transcendentalists, critics have also identified differences. Freeman critiques traditional gender relations (Alaimo 60), and she typically pays “attention to the physical and social world” rather than speculating “about abstract Spirit” (Dixon 173). This new ecocritical work does more than merely add nature to the list of objects of sympathy that women cared for under such compromising social movements as municipal housekeeping. Rather, it privileges the destinies of nonhuman natures in ways that Freeman herself probably only tangentially intended—insofar as we can know the intentions of this author, who left precious few manuscripts or diaries, and whose letters are rarely replete with candor.

FUTURE POSSIBILITIES IN FREEMAN CRITICISM

Critics have only just begun to address racial anxieties in Freeman. Marchalonis notes that Freeman replicated the prevailing discourse of innate racial differences in her fiction (Introduction). Talk of the innate passions of the French or the Native and the innate overweening consciences of the Anglo-Saxon Puritans were common in Freeman's own day and, for a person writing in that era, hardly unique or surprising. Lockwood notes the continual reference to Puritan ancestors in Freeman's fiction as a largely queer rather than racist insistence on the purity of bloodlines (58, 68–69). For example, Louisa Britton in "Louisa" rebels against her mother, whose surname, tellingly, is similar to the island Britain. When the incredulous villagers watch Hetty Fifield's act of occupying the meeting house in "A Church Mouse," two young girls "had their arms around each other under their shawls," hinting that the next generation might follow more radically in Hetty's footsteps (qtd. in Lockwood 69). My own work examines how British fans and critics of Freeman borrowed the language of Anglo-Saxon bloodlines and descent from Britain from her preface to the Edinburgh edition of *A Humble Romance and Other Stories*, identifying her characters' brand of awkwardness, stubbornness, and inward obsession with Yorkshire, the Brontës, and even religious dissidents in the colonies (*Transatlantic Footholds* 76–85). Although reviewers were happy to claim Freeman as, racially, one of their own, they found the stubborn anti-modernity of Freeman's characters a troubling reference to dangerous dissent.

Freeman's fiction taps into deep racial anxieties. What happens to whiteness once poverty and economic and cultural stagnation take their toll? Her short stories ask this question repeatedly, and the plethora of blue-eyed heroines and heroes comes across not so much as paeans to white supremacy as case studies in the danger of overpromising about the viability of whiteness itself. In order to understand fully Freeman's ruminations on race, scholars would be wise to move beyond her most famous stories to an examination of her novels. This will be difficult, given that her novels are out of print, and given that critics interested in recovering Freeman as a feminist may not like what they find there.

Madelon, for example, depicts three vibrant female characters, Madelon Hautville, Dorothy Fair, and the unnamed black servant of Dorothy. As Campbell points out in her forthcoming analysis of the novel, all three are

portrayed in racially stereotypical ways (“Reign”). True to her surname, Dorothy is small, obedient, demure, blond, and blue-eyed. Dorothy’s servant is a large, inarticulate, fiery woman who, in the absence of Dorothy’s dead mother, serves in the interests of corporate, patriarchal control over Dorothy’s sexuality. In the narrator’s unfortunate choice of words, “The black woman had thrown herself at the sill of her darling’s door, to keep watch, like a faithful dog” (ch. 7). Madelon Hautville is of French and Iroquois descent, and she is dark, seductive, graceful, and hot-tempered. Freeman’s narrator blames the stagnant town for the racism and xenophobia that eventually make the townsfolk suspicious of Madelon: “Anything of alien race was looked upon with a mixture of fear and aversion in this village of people whose blood had flowed in one course for generations” (ch. 1). The assumption is that Freeman’s more cosmopolitan readers will not be so quick to judge and condemn as the provincial townsfolk. Madelon is one of Freeman’s most forthright and accomplished heroines, a highly sought-after soprano and a good provider for her brothers and father. She is less shy about her desire for her lover than most of Freeman’s heroines and, in fact, unafraid to mortally wound a man she recognizes as a sexual assailant. Moral ambiguities ensue in the plot, which turns on the townsfolk’s inability to imagine that a white woman could wield a knife and subsequent readiness to treat Madelon as racially other when she manages to convince them that she has committed the crime. The novel is a fascinating commentary on definitions of race in the late nineteenth century.

The novel *The Heart’s Highway* (1900) is another candidate for further analysis. Staging a rebellion against the king in colonial Virginia, the novel is Freeman’s foray into the adventure romance. While the character of Madelon is redeemed by love and mixed-race status, the enslaved characters in the novel have no such opportunities. They provide a sullen and downtrodden background to the action, offering further support for Toni Morrison’s (1931–2019) argument that the Africanist presence in American literature enables the autonomy of white characters. The novel revolves around a white convict and a young white woman, a member of the noble Cavendish family, who play instrumental roles in running the rebellion. The white convict is the first-person narrator, and he expresses some sympathy for the slaves, noting that they straggle behind their female charge because they are in service under duress. Black characters are regularly described using stereotypes from minstrelsy such as rolling eyes and heaving bosoms.

At the same time, however, two black women play important roles in the rebellion and protect their white lovers. As a romance, this novel has been treated as an anomaly in the works of white women regionalists, but its very exceptional status begs for scholarly treatment.

The Cavendish family in *The Heart's Highway* temporarily transports their slaves back to England, and this is only one potential transatlantic connection that scholars might find in Freeman's works. Scholars might unearth more about Freeman's own travels to Germany, or they might consider European or African resonances in Freeman's work. For European resonances, Aušra Paulaukienė traces Catholic tropes in Freeman's "A New England Nun," "A Church Mouse," and *Pembroke*, a fascinating new angle on Freeman that suggests that the Irish immigrants in Randolph and throughout New England influenced Freeman more than scholars have previously recognized, while Myrto Drizou links "Old Woman Magoun" to the murderous grandmother in Alexandros Papadiamantis's (1851–1911) Greek novella *The Murderess* (1903).

In the 1890s and 1900s, British critics reviewing new rural fiction from the British Isles regularly said that these writers were doing for Ireland, or Lancashire, or Cornwall, or Suffolk, what Wilkins did for New England (Palmer, *Transatlantic Footholds* 75). On this basis, scholars might initiate comparative studies of Freeman and Mary E. Mann (1848–1929), Jane Barlow (1857–1917), Erminde Rentoul Esler (1860?–1924), Christopher Hare (Marian Andrews, 1839–1929), Mabel Quiller-Couch (1865–1924), Elizabeth Boyd-Bayly (d. 1927), Ida Lemon (possibly a pseudonym, dates unknown), Mrs. Murray Hickson (Mabel Murray Hickson, 1859–1922), Clara Louisa Antrobus (1846–1919), or Jeanette Marks (dates unknown). *The Way They Loved at Grimpat: Village Idylls* (1894), by the Irish writer E. Rentoul Esler, features stories about bashful, belated lovers that resemble Freeman's characters in their humor and humility. Mary E. Mann (not to be confused with the transcendentalist Mary Peabody Mann [1806–87]) is known for her stories of rural Norfolk. Recently revived by A. S. Byatt by inclusion in *The Oxford Book of English Short Stories* (1998), Mann's works are unsparing yet matter of fact about poverty. Late nineteenth-century British reviewers also invoked Freeman when discussing the Hamburg stories of Ilse Frapan (1849–1908) and the Swedish stories of Per Hallström (1849–1908). Josephine Donovan has rightfully argued that nineteenth-century American women's

regionalism drew inspiration from Irish national tales, German *dorfgeschichten*, and French *romans champêtres* (*European Local-Color Literature* 171–79)—but Freeman influenced later European writers as well. The distinct lack of access to the European writers' works has limited scholars' ability to draw such comparisons. Although American nineteenth-century regionalism is frequently dismissed as minor, and occasionally condemned as uniformly conservative in its politics, there remains a sense, inherited from the 1870s and 1880s, that regionalism is a national literature, that the story of the nation cannot be told without reference to the regions of which it is comprised. This assumption is rarely held by Victorianists about British literature. Despite such obstacles, new comparative work would add a cosmopolitan angle to Freeman scholarship. Scholars might uncover restrictions on the artistry of rural writers across national boundaries. Or they might discover an unpolished gem, a writer who navigated an unwelcoming or downright hostile national literary establishment to produce rural fiction that challenges reigning ideologies of gender, class, race, and nation.

Freeman's style is as arresting as her cultural politics. New interpretations of Freeman might well push questions of style, form, and aesthetics to the foreground of their analysis to counterbalance the thematic focus of the 1980s and 1990s. Elbert considers Freeman's style when she recategorizes Freeman as a naturalist rather than a regionalist. The clue to genre lies in the overabundance of activity amongst her frustrated female protagonists: the "excess of senseless and compulsive behavior reflected in frenzied and repeated activities, such as spending money, sewing incessantly, or collecting useless knick-knacks" (192). Gregg Camfield finds an innovative mixture of pathos and humor in Freeman's stories, with a memorable reading of humor through grotesque physical description in "A New England Nun." Daniel Mrozowski notes how Freeman's trademark style continues to be employed in her World War I stories, with her "penchant for the mundane choices that make up everyday ethics, the small yet dramatic reversals of fate and fortune, and the powerful illusions people make and embrace." One of the comments often made about Freeman, by such prominent critics as Leah Blatt Glasser, is that she defuses the explosive and disturbing energies of her fiction with cheerful, sentimental endings (217–18). My own work argues that this critical consensus should be revised ("Compromised Conclusions"). In her early fiction, Freeman often employed happy endings,

sometimes with the twist characteristic of 1880s and 1890s realist short stories. That was typical fare for the magazine readers of the day. What is arguably unique about Freeman, however, is that her endings are so economical and abrupt that they may leave the reader with a sense of their very constructedness and contingency. Even as a reader admires the writer's architectural skill, that reader is thrown to their own resources to answer moral questions or articulate emotional truths. For example, it takes only a few lines of the story "A Humble Romance" (1884) for Sally to accede to her wandering husband's plea for forgiveness. The abrupt ending forecloses authorial intrusion and leaves the reader morally at sea. Readers are uncertain whether it is right for Jake to marry Sally again. They also are left with questions about the viability of Sally and Jake's future relationship. Thus, despite the clear and conclusive ending, there is an openness to the story that might be considered modern, even though endings in marriage were the standard fare of popular and light literature. Humility, physical humor, exaggeration, and strategic forms of closure are just some of the stylistic traits of Freeman that future scholars might investigate.

Freeman was not just a star of the 1980s and 1990s. Since that heyday, inroads have been made (albeit more slowly than one might like) into critical and textual studies of Freeman's stories, poetry, and fiction. New works have been discovered, meaning that Freeman has the capacity to surprise us still in the twenty-first century. Meanwhile, Freeman criticism has been transformed by startling new developments in which scholars revisit the feminist theory of the 1980s and 1990s and come to new conclusions. Freeman's fiction expresses serious misgivings about sisterhood and a matriarchal realm: her vision of female community is darker than the wider audience for women's writing assumes of a writer of female regionalism. Freeman is now regularly considered a writer of the Gothic and supernatural, topics that were de-emphasized in past decades. Her works contain fascinating allegories of the thin boundary between human and animal or plant life, more so than scholars of the heyday recognized. Current criticism promises more focus on race, transnational connections, and a welcome shift to questions of aesthetics and style—as well as, surely, other avenues this essay has not explored. Freeman scholarship has developed in sophisticated ways, and the evolving readerly interest in Freeman is well served.

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NOTES

1. This section of the essay has some overlap in ideas with the introduction to “New Perspectives on Mary E. Wilkins Freeman: Reading with and against the Grain,” an unpublished manuscript edited by Myrto Drizou, Cécile Roudeau, and myself. I am indebted to Drizou and Roudeau for our continuing conversations on these issues.

2. In contrast, Judith P. Saunders reads through a Darwinian lens for expressions of desire for heterosexual marriage in “Louisa” (1890).

3. An example is Ansley, who writes, “Such an appreciation of Wilkins Freeman’s work challenges the assumption that regionalist fiction aimed to solidify an imagined community of primarily white, middle-class, urban denizens by projecting it against a nostalgic image of a provincial, pre-industrial, national past that erased social difference and created the rural townsperson as other” (439).

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