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THE PAINTING OF MODERN LIGHT

LOCAL COLOR BEFORE REGIONALISM

The realist or veritist is really an optimist, a dreamer. He sees life in terms of what it might be, as well as in terms of what it is; but he writes of what is, and, at his best, suggests what is to be, by contrast. He aims to be perfectly truthful in his delineation of his relation to life, but there is a tone, a color, which comes unconsciously into his utterance, like the sobbing stir of muted violins beneath the frank, clear song of the clarinet...

– Hamlin Garland, “Literary Prophecy” (1894)

Within that great hymn to progress known as the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893, local color represented America’s official contribution to the progress of art. Hamlin Garland’s address, “Local Color in Fiction,” appeared in between talks by prominent local colorists on a panel dedicated to “Modern Aspects of Fiction” (George Washington Cable moderated), implicitly reinforcing the claim that “the fashion of local color” was “the most modern phase of literature” (Allen 1886: 14). In the Ethnology and Archaeology department, the new genre of the life-group exhibit in the United States Government Building proudly employed the most current local color techniques in calling attention to the effects that everyday practices have on the hearts and minds of native groups (Brown 2004: 92-98). And most dramatically of all, every single one of the fair’s enormous ephemeral plaster neoclassical buildings was custom-built to express the latent local color of the exhibits. “It has been found, after numerous experiments,” explained Henry van Brunt, one of the fair’s architects:

that the most effective surface treatment of the large masses, both of the exterior and interior in the greater buildings, is one of nearly pure white, modified, so far as the interiors are concerned, by screens of translucent fabrics, stretched beneath the skylights, in combinations of tints varied to suit the especial conditions of each building. This device furnishes to each an atmosphere of faint rainbow color tones, which is felt as a pervading spirit of refinement throughout the interiors, but is so contrived as in no case to compete with or to influence the stronger local colors of the exhibits (van Brunt 1893: 586; my emphasis).

If the whiteness of the buildings' walls gave the White City its name, this same whiteness also served a purpose that may come as a surprise: the engineering of local color. In contrast to the current critical definition of local color as a genre expressive of the geographic region, van Brunt describes a discursive register whereby local color is seen as an aesthetic effect – one that can be made more apparent when placed within a carefully designed observational frame like the rainbow-tinted white walls of the museum or van Brunt's Electricity Building – within, as Garland writes, the subtle “suggest[ion]” of a “contrast” (see Figure 1).ⁱ

Due to critical developments in the early-twentieth century, and particularly due to regionalism, which redefined local color fiction as its failed precursor, we have lost touch with this aesthetic understanding of local color. Yet local color once represented realism's most sophisticated technique of engaging readers and observers in the production of the human.ⁱⁱ It once explained why the semi-transparent screens and fabrics of the White City could give local color exhibits “a pervading spirit of refinement,” while the absence of such a technology of chromatic contrasts could make the apparently

similar spectacle of living native tribes on the nearby Midway Plaisance seem chaotic and dangerous, seem like a “HUMAN KALEIDOSCOPE,” as one guidebook put it, “showing as it does, every shade, color and type of humanity” (Smith 1893). And it once explained how the mute details of American local color fiction – a patch of pennyroyal in Jewett, the mulatto skin of Desirée’s baby in Chopin, or Louisa Ellis’s habit of wearing two aprons in Freeman – could speak in multiple registers at once.

This essay clears ground for a new understanding of local color’s relation to realism.ⁱⁱⁱ I begin by situating local color within the long aesthetic history of the detail, and specifically by returning local color to its initial definition in neoclassical painting as the aesthetic reproduction of an object’s natural color. Neoclassical restrictions – on how detail should be used and how much of it – persisted long into realism as a framework for judging what counted as art. For just as the White City’s “spirit of refinement” was thought to come from the subordination of its local color exhibits to a master plan, so too did the Midway Plaisance seem “like a foretaste of pandemonium itself” because of its unchecked proliferation of people and things (ibid 1893).

At the same time, this essay also argues that realism further transformed this neoclassical constraint into a new principle of selection. For what made local color a primary site of political and ethical contestation in realism was its new status as the indexical details of the human. For in realism, the coordination of local color details within the frame of the artwork works in three registers at once: it constitutes the text as a work of art; indexes how human populations are constituted by their relations to their environment; and promises its readers that aesthetic self-cultivation can engender the agency required to break free from material determinism. Put another way, learning to

see how other humans are made was itself an aesthetic mode of self-fashioning. The highest mark of local color was thus less its creation of an authentic sense of a place, and more its ability to generate in its readers this materially collective sense of being enlisted in a practice of realist self-cultivation that promised the individual the capacity to become more human through the acquisition of agency over her relations to the world. Put in this light, we can now see Garland's well-known Crumbling Idols as actually overturning the realist practice of local color through its rejection of the universal conception of the human that had underwritten local color's poetics of agency. In calling instead for a spontaneous, radical receptivity to the detail, one that would fly under the flag of impressionism, Garland allows us to sketch out the limits of realism and to see the new possibilities that local color would acquire in the pluralist aesthetic constellation of American modernism.

1. LOCAL COLOURING

The history of la couleur locale in painting goes back a long way to the early French Enlightenment. Roger de Piles first coined the term in his Dialogue sur le Coloris (1673), describing it as the colors "that are natural in each object" (de Piles 1673).^{iv} De Piles's expanded definition clues us in to why the concept would serve as a recurrent site of debate for centuries:

Local color is what, in relation to the place that it occupies, and through the help of some other color, represents a singular object: like a carnation, linen, flesh, or whatever else distinguishes the object from other ones. It is called local because the place it occupies is necessary for it, in order to give it a greater character of

truth to its other neighboring colors (de Piles 1708: 304-5; my translation). To produce local color, the painter has to meet two mimetic criteria: first, by using “artificial” paint to approximate as closely as possible the “natural” colors, texture, and topography of an object (the qualities that make it singular); and, second, by situating the local color within the overall color scheme of the painting, so as to lend credibility to the painting’s trompe-l’oeil claims to truth. Local color thus begins as a critical term of appraisal about the relative success of the reproduction of natural color in painting. The concept focuses critical attention on the quality of the relationship between the coloring of the local color detail and its immediate neighborhood within the painting. While we will see that this definition differs from later definitions by confining attention to internal, formal relations within the artwork, the questions it raises about what best represents truth in art – the detail or the overall composition of a work – will prove critical to realism’s self-constitution.^v

Within the French Academy, De Piles’s advocacy for local color belonged to a debate that became known as the “quarrel over design and color.” De Piles was a member of the Coloristes, a group that battled to raise color, long subordinated to design (roughly what we would call form), to a new level of importance. While one side defended design on the grounds that it gives a painting “just proportions,” color’s proponents insisted that color “makes it real, that is, makes it apparent or noticeable, and fools the eye” (Elliott 1958: 464).^{vi} De Piles consequently argued that there is significant skill involved in “bringing out the local colors, as well as the entire composition of the tableau,” by means of the careful interplay of light and shadow, i.e. *chiaroscuro* (de Piles 1708 – my translation; see Puttfarcken 1985: 67; see Figure 2). This argument was highly

controversial because of the attention it drew to the materiality of painting and the arts of deception, and would remain so long into realism. For what de Piles is likely referring to is the production of illusory color, which can be seen as a mark of a painter's skill. This is color produced not simply through mixing, but through the arrangement of paints. For by means of the juxtaposition of the right pigments, and through the contrast of shade or light with an unmated color, it is actually possible to trick the eye into seeing a local color more vivid than would be otherwise possible – what was later called an optical illusion. As Hermann von Helmholtz put it in 1872:

The painter is compelled, in order to produce the resemblance of reality, to paint actually these subjective appearances of color. He paints the neighborhood of yellow with a slight bluish tone. He can only produce the saturation of tone and of local color by these contrasts; this only produces the charm, the splendor, the joy of color (Helmholtz 1872: 69).

Helmholtz's point is that the optical illusion can only be made to work through a prior understanding of how observers form impressions. This kind of attention to details, colors, and observation was highly controversial because it breached the logic of a discourse that was deployed against not just the local color detail, but also the detail in general for much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. To say as the Coloristes did that color and details could be a mark of artistic skill, let alone mastery, threatened a major break with the orthodoxy of the neoclassical art institution.

In Reading in Detail, Naomi Schor argues that the subordination of the detail to design was maintained by a highly gendered discourse, which historically has marginalized the detail as feminine, decadent, and ornamental. Using the example of

Joshua Reynolds's Discourses on Art (1769-90), which she calls the "supreme formulation of neo-classical aesthetics," Schor unpacks the overdetermined logic by which the detail was feminized and made to seem materially contingent, prone to proliferation, regressive in its deceptiveness, divisive of the spectator's attention, and a sign that the artist is "second-rate," lost in "the servile copying of nature in its infinite particularity" (Schor 2006: xliv, 5). For Reynolds, excessive detail is problematic because it draws attention to the manner in which pictures were painted, and to considerations of their material constitution as masses of color. Hence local color, insofar as it is expressed in details, is incompatible with the ideal, and subversive of the sublime, since it shifts attention from form and proportion onto the vulgar, sensual, accidental, and material aspects of painting – that is, onto color. Not for nothing did Hazlitt pithily state that in Reynolds's philosophy, "the great style in painting, and the most perfect imitation of nature, consists in avoiding the details, and peculiarities of particular objects" (Hazlitt 1836: 193).

Schor's account helps explain why the Coloristes provoked such a violent response merely by calling for the production of local color through juxtaposition, as it shows how the feminized detail was associated with a secular mode of reflexive awareness to material conditions that was wholly unsupported by existing art institutions (Elliot 466). While the rise of realism would give support to what Schor calls the "contingent detail," this prehistory is crucial because it allows us to see how the local color concept continued to raise troubling questions about what could count as successful art (Schor 9). When one critic of American local color writes in 1878 that "local color seems to me to be the slightest part of a story; it is the universal color of human nature

that gives value”; when Turgenieff’s “local color” is praised because it is “felt as a whole,” unlike the “painful stippling of some prominent detail-artists”; or when another reviewer finds that “the local color is properly subordinated to story” – when we read examples like these, we encounter the persistence of a patriarchal and idealist hostility to the aesthetic of the detail (Gilder 1878: 429; Anonymous 1884: 120; Anonymous 1886: 142).

While it is apparent from these and other statements that the neoclassical subordination of local color details to form persisted into realism, it is equally important to understand how realism dramatically transformed the concept of local color. By the 1820s, critics had already begun to draw attention to the empirical conditions for the observation of local color. This new relation between observer and local color is implicit in one landscape painter’s 1823 definition of local color as “the colour of the object when seen in a full, clear light, and at a small distance” (Nicholson 1823: 13). Since lighting conditions affect the perception of color, critics increasingly began to ask if local color could be seen at all, in nature or on the canvas. Consequently, they argued that the observer needed to develop a sense of precision through the acquisition of scientific knowledge and the cultivation of aesthetic feeling. This is how local color was restaged as the product of the trained, eyewitness account. Realist skepticism about the reliability of observation would continue to build, until, in 1888, one painting manual could caution its students that, “scientifically speaking, there is no such thing as ‘local color,’” only the play of light on surfaces (McLaughlin 1888: 38). For our purposes, the most important aspect of this century-long buildup is the newfound importance placed on the observer’s affective and cognitive relationship with local color. For at the same time as realism

opened up aesthetic experience to a mass audience of tourists, amateurs, and sightseers, its scientific skepticism deemed local color almost impossible to observe, and consequently, an enormous site of aesthetic pleasure once achieved, not as a thing but as an effect.

This problem of scientific skepticism is what John Ruskin's Modern Painters attempted to defuse by placing science in the service of art. To do so, Ruskin reformulated the old argument that painting can never hope to match nature's colors. By positing art's inherent inadequacy, he argued that science should be used to gauge just how much of nature's "truths" can be reproduced. (Truth for Ruskin means working to imitate nature within the impoverished limits provided by paint itself [Ruskin 1848: 147])^{vii} Thus, the best a painting can do is to optimize its use of color in the effort to imitate the maximum number of natural aspects (e.g. a handful of local colors), all of which contributes to the illusion of the overall composition.

We can register the magnitude of this shift from the neoclassical definition of local color by considering why J.M.W. Turner holds such an exemplary status for Ruskin. According to Ruskin, what separated Turner from other painters was his skill at drawing upon the material limitations of art to harmonize local colors with the color balance of the painting. Turner's skill lay in balancing local colors against the entire color spectrum, from pure white to lampblack – in successfully distributing these colors in proportion to their gradation in nature, and in painting light which "alters no colour, [but] brings every colour up to the highest possible pitch and key of pure harmonious intensity" (Ruskin 145). Even as Ruskin maintains the neoclassical emphasis on harmony, measure, and proportion, his turn to science reinvigorates the Coloristes's

formal questions by giving the material details of painting a new importance. So, while scientific knowledge sets a limit on how much local color can be imitated, it also draws attention to local color details by investing them with a new aesthetic pleasure. Realist local color becomes pleasurable as an aesthetic judgment – the trained judgment that an object has successfully managed to represent local color, all without violating the rules set by neoclassical formal composition and scientific knowledge. As one highly trained observer, Henry James, wrote, there is in “the common relish of local color...few sensations so exquisite in life.” (James 1875: 26).^{viii} In becoming an organizing concept for American literature in the 1860s and early-1870s, local color would maintain its status as a site that required intense training, but that promised equally intense pleasure – not that of the fetish, but the pleasure of a map to an affective encounter with the material world. Local color had come to name realism’s aspirations of aesthetic pleasure and scientific precision, aspirations that were now pinned to the observer (Levine 1981: 40).

2. LOCAL COLOR WITHOUT LOCAL COLOR

The critical acclaim that greeted Mary Murfree’s first collection of short stories, In the Tennessee Mountains, neatly represents how realism had transformed local color by the 1880s.^{ix} In praising Murfree, or rather her nom de plume, Charles Egbert Craddock, in familiar terms for her “regard for the total impression,” for “the range and minuteness of [her] observation,” and for not simply “piling up a mass of details” like a bad artist (and realist), critics judged her work a masterful instance of local color and placed her alongside leading local colorists like Bret Harte, George Washington Cable and Sarah Orne Jewett (July 1884: 132; May 22, 1884: 449). What distinguished her work was not

so much the rural settings and dialects that are strongly associated with her stories today (see, for example, Barrish 2011: 76), but rather her artful ability to use these details to generate something else – not a sense of place, but a sense of belonging to the realist pedagogical project of human self-cultivation. If, as in Ruskin, Murfree’s stories balance local color against an aesthetic frame, they indicate the new role that this frame had come to play in local color fiction: to divide populations according to their aesthetic training. One story in particular, “Over on the T’other Mounting,” demonstrates how narrative could train readers to recognize local color precisely through exposure to a group of people whose problems derive from their total inability to identify local color. Lacking the training provided by a realist epistemology, Murfree’s mountaineers cannot distinguish unreal and visible phenomena from real and invisible ones.

The plot of “Over on the T’other Mounting” revolves around the superstitions of a group of isolated Tennessee settlers who believe that one of the mountains looming over their valley, T’other Mounting, is evil. Tony Britt has been feuding with an herb-doctor, Caleb Hoxie, because Britt believes, incorrectly, that Hoxie killed his consumptive wife by giving her “pizenous yerbs” (Murfree 1884: 260; hereafter TM). When Britt accidentally strays over onto the allegedly cursed T’other Mounting while hunting, he spies Hoxie coming up a trail and pushes a boulder down to try to kill him, supposing correctly that the other inhabitants will blame Hoxie’s death on the witches thought to haunt the peak. What Britt fails to anticipate is how hard it is to dispel the superstition surrounding the haunted mountain. When he confesses in church to trying to kill Hoxie (the boulder missed and the herb-doctor lived), the settlers respond in unison: “Pore Tony

Britt! He hev los' his mind through goin' ahuntin' jes' one time on T'other Mounting"
(TM 282).

What complicates matters is that the settlers are not entirely incorrect in thinking that T'other Mounting is haunted. Residents of a steep valley permanently cast in shadow where local color is never visible, the settlers' mistake is to confuse the T'other Mounting's gothic appearance with its local color. The atmospheric modification of local color may make the mountain look evil, but, as the following passage suggests, this is only an effect of light, what painters called "apparent color" (Cross 1895: 1):

The sun had sunk, and the night, long held in abeyance, was coming fast. The glooms gathered in the valley; a soft gray shadow hung over the landscape, making familiar things strange. The T'other Mounting was all a dusky, sad purple under the faintly pulsating stars, save that high along the horizontal line of its summit gleamed the strange red radiance of the dead and gone sunset. The outline of the foliage was clearly drawn against the pure lapis lazuli tint of the sky behind it; here and there the uncanny light streamed through the bare limbs of an early leafless tree, which looked in the distance like some bony hand beckoning, or warning, or raised in horror.

"Anythink mought happen thar!" said the woman, as she stood on night-wrapped Rocky-Top and gazed up at the alien light, so red in the midst of the dark landscape (TM 260).

The first paragraph carefully decomposes the mountain sunset into painterly terms ("horizontal line," "outline," "tint," "distance," et al.), just as the second paragraph suggests that the woman's terror before the mountain is conceivable. After all, the light is

described as “uncanny” and “alien” in the dusk. The reader is even given the same sightline as the woman, and is asked to compare her take on the mountain with the narrator’s. This alignment is only temporary, however: the woman’s response is shown to be naïve, not because things don’t happen on the mountain (they do), but because she’s wrong about why they happen (she misattributes events to magical forces conjured up by the atmosphere). Like the other settlers, she cannot connect cause and effect because she lacks aesthetic training. “The scenic effects of the drama,” explains the narrator, “that serve to widen the mental vision and cultivate the imagination of even the poor in cities, were denied these primitive, simple people” (TM 274). Without the aesthetic framework that the story models in its narration, the settlers cannot make their valley work for them.

It is not simply that they miss the benefits that come along with realist observation, however. Rather, Murfree’s story argues that misrecognizing local color as “supernatural” actually has the damaging effect of making the settlers unnatural (TM 277). In connecting the settlers’ misdeeds to their misreadings, the story argues that the settlers are deformed by their bad educations – to the point that the mountaineers’ dialect can be read as a deformed speech proceeding from their false perception of their (admittedly inhospitable) surroundings.^x “In coloring, as in everything, men come to see what they try to see,” the philosopher George Lansing Raymond wrote in 1899:

Those who strive to enter into the realm of coloring will find capabilities within themselves which, if properly used, will introduce into their field of vision an infinite variety of tints and shades which, so far as concerns the effect upon the senses, transcend in beauty those which the ordinary man perceives... It is only the man, too, who is able to perceive these colors in nature, by whom they can be

fully recognized as representing truth when they are placed upon the canvas of the painter (Raymond 1899: 318).

Raymond argued that the “natural tendency of color,” just like “the artistic tendency,” is toward a “unity” that highlights the dominant “local colors” of a scene (Raymond 325). By contrast, Murfree’s story describes the opposite situation, where an uneducated population degenerates into what she elsewhere called “the bare skeleton of humanity” through its persistent misrecognition of local color (TM 223). In this cautionary tale, the reader, by learning how not to read like the Tennessee mountaineers, learns to read the mountaineer as a bad object of local color.

Murfree’s story is only one example of how realism staged local color as an encounter between trained observers and naïve populations. Like Murfree, Henry James’s The Bostonians identified the inability to recognize local color as a symptom of a pathological attachment to place. Because the Mississippian Basil Ransom’s “artistic sense...had not been highly cultivated,” he is not only incapable of recognizing local color, of forming, for example, “any sufficient account” of why Olive Chancellor’s “morbidness was typical” of Boston, but also incapable of forming any new relations in the North, except through a violent rejection of extant ones (James 1886: 14, 10). Both Murfree and James use their self-reflexive narration to model how trained observation asserts control over potentially harmful details through their aesthetic reframing as relations of local color. This poetics of agency is made most apparent through contrasts with pathologically weakened wills like Ransom and the mountaineers, who inadvertently contribute to their self-harm. By contrast, for the observer, even invisible local color can be reconstructed as one end of a relation that makes a population human

(or, in Murfree's account, barely human).

Realist local color is underwritten by this humanism, and assumes with Sarah Orne Jewett that "human nature is the same the world over," and is only differentiated by the influences of place (Jewett 1966 [1893]: 33). Local color can thus be seen as entirely subordinated to the demand that the detail index a relation to what constitutes – what colors – the human as local. This new subordination of the detail to the "human relation" easily aligned with the neoclassical constraint on the detail to create a new frame for local color by the 1880s.^{xi} "It is not really for the sake of describing a locality that local color is given," one author wrote in an article tellingly named, "The Management of Details," "but for the sake of showing how that place or certain attributes of it can be impressed upon the consciousness of a beholder" (Stetson 1907: 18). What makes local color successful, then, is not its ability to connect readers to a place, but rather its pleasurable ability to generate a materially collective sense of being enlisted in a realist pedagogy, of belonging to a practice of self-cultivation that promised the individual the agency required to break free from her environment and become more human.

When "a pleasant young lady" walked into the editorial room of the Atlantic Monthly in 1885 and "remarked that she was Charles Egbert Craddock," Mary Murfree made a bold feminist statement that reveals the contours of this logic. For in revealing her identity as a woman and a resident of St. Louis, not Tennessee, Murfree underscored that the sense her stories gave of "arising spontaneously out of the conditions of the peculiar community" was a wholly inauthentic effect of authenticity (1884: 133).^{xii} Murfree's provocative performance of gendered detachment convincingly demonstrated how she had satisfied what the Canadian poet, Bliss Carman called "the great difficulty and desire

of the artist...to be a local colorist without being local-colored, to be at once in and apart from his work” (Carman 1894: 186). And in making Thomas Bailey Aldrich, the editor of the Atlantic, bear witness to her revelation firsthand, she caused him to momentarily lose his self-control, as if “the roof [had] fallen in, and he turned and ran several steps under the pressure of the shock before he recovered his usually imperturbable presence of mind” (March 14 1885: 127). With this carefully dramatized event, Murfree radically undermined the gendered opposition between masculine aesthetic control and feminine mass detail by enacting a kind of cross-dressing: for even as she reveals herself as a woman, she retains the masculine agency of the artist and relegates Aldrich to the feminized position of her mountaineers, scattering details to the wind.

3. LOCAL COLOR WITHOUT LIMIT

If local color claimed that the cultivation of self-control depended upon learning how to identify a limited quantity of detail, this poetics of agency could just as easily be reversed. For as realist skepticism increasingly made the successful observation of local color contingent upon mastering a form of knowledge that preceded observation itself, it tacitly diminished the importance of the visibility of local color in proportion to its privileging of indexical signs. Put differently, the recession of the truth of the detail meant that it could only be accessed by means of training. Eventually, by the end of the nineteenth century, the invisible detail had come to present less of a problem; as Raymond related at the time, a knowledge of physics could be used to devise experiments “to find out what the colors of objects actually are.” Thus, with proper training, artists could find local color virtually everywhere. As a result, it became a real question why art

should persist in enforcing a neoclassical restriction on the quantity of local color detail when this limitation no longer made strict sense (Raymond 309-24).^{xiii} This is the question that Hamlin Garland raised when he delivered his address, “Local Color in Art,” at the Columbian Exposition in 1893, and soon after in his book of essays, Crumbling Idols. In calling for a new local color, with “such quality of texture and back-ground that it could not have been written in any other place or by any one else than a native,” Garland found in impressionist and plein air painting just such a model (CI 64).^{xiv}

If this call for relational local color sounds familiar, Garland’s emphasis on the “native” observer is new, and makes all the difference. For unlike Murfree’s spontaneity, which is revealed to be the product of aesthetic mastery, Garland makes observation into the site of spontaneity. Because impressionism consists in deriving the artwork from the spontaneous observation of “a complete and...momentary concept of the sense of sight,” the impression can, in one fell swoop, dispense with the centuries-long hold of the neoclassical restriction on the quantity of detail. Garland argues that local color fiction can include as many details as enter into a given impression (CI 122). Likewise, by representing local color details differently, it can eliminate the need for aesthetic training on the part of the observer. “The impressionist does not believe nature needs toning or harmonizing,” he writes, nor does it need “ornate or balanced effects,” for these compositional techniques only draw attention away from the work that all observers do. There is no need for a mathematically arranged balance, like the one Ruskin recommends, when the organizing principle of representation is relocated in a constructive act of vision:

[Nature's] colors...are primary, and are laid on in juxtaposition. Therefore the impressionist does not mix his paints upon his palette. He paints with nature's colors,— red, blue, and yellow, and he places them fearlessly on the canvas side by side, leaving the eye to mix them, as in nature (CI 127; my emphasis).

Put another way, the impressionist paints the local colors that are otherwise invisible to the eye. In doing so, the painting materializes, rather than indexes local color (as in the case of realism). And in a method that reverses the optical illusions that so incited the French Academy, it juxtaposes colors – though not to produce a more vivid local color, but rather to anticipate their “effect...upon the eye,” which will “mix them” into apparent color and make them compose atmospheric effects (CI 124).^{xv} By subtracting the psychophysical processes of vision from the act of aesthetic composition, impressionism reconstructs its local colors and represents them at the moment before perception. Thus, local color is surprisingly shown to be the material basis of impressionism.

Consider one of Garland's central examples (see Figure 3). Here is his description of a painting “of a meadow stream,” which is most likely “The Pool, Medfield” (1889) by Dennis Miller Bunker, a French-trained American painter and friend of John Singer Sargent:

He did not hesitate to paint the water blue as the sky, nor to paint the red band of rust-like silt on the margin of the stream in close juxtaposition to the vivid green of the meadow grass. This picture, beside a Dutch or English conventional landscape, was as radically different, as radiantly beautiful, as a sunlit day in New England June put over against a dull day on the low-lands of the North Sea; and this is right (CI 101).

When we look at the painting, the stream stands out, as it appears to rush into the meadow and away from us by virtue of broad, long, apparently rapidly painted brushstrokes which catch the light blue of the sky. As the eye tracks the stream, these brilliant blue brushstrokes seem to recede into the vertical brushstrokes of the “vivid green” of the grass, more brilliantly painted in the foreground than in the pastel-green expanse of meadow dominating the rear third of the painting and leading up to a line of trees in the far background. This movement of the eye from bottom to top, foreground to background, immerses us within the painting’s logic of depth and space, and gives us a feeling that we are looking uphill from a slight depression.

If these brushstrokes evoke scenic interpretations such as these, they also let us understand how the artist’s spontaneity is made visible. For what is amazing is that Bunker’s brushstrokes are his details – each one seems to comprise a distinct object or color of an object. More than simply materializing local color, they call attention to the activity of the artist in witnessing and painting the scene. These bright, raw, bold strokes of local color trace the contours of a present that has inevitably passed, but that somehow managed to overflow its boundaries – perhaps because of Bunker’s hurry to capture the scene, but, perhaps just as likely, because, in painting each blade of grass and each flow of the current, his hand lingered over each detail, slowing down, stalling, only trailing off after going on too long, after making the field a little wilder and making the moment extend a little longer. Given the otherwise strange opposition between the stream and the reference in the painting’s quasi-Heideggerian title to “The Pool,” I find this second reading – of a “pooling,” of a deceleration within the otherwise rapid movement of impressionist painting, of a changed perception of time itself – much more satisfying.

This slowed-down perception of time is the “personal impression” of the painting. It jumps out as the affective residue of a refusal to stop painting on the part of Bunker, as a resistance to the closure of any aesthetic frame, but particularly the neoclassical and humanist frames demanded by a realist art. I believe this is something like what Garland means when he writes in my epigraph that, amidst the realist’s optimistic aspiration to be “perfectly truthful in his delineation of his relation to life...there is a tone, a color, which comes unconsciously into his utterance, like the sobbing stir of the muted violins beneath the frank, clear song of the clarinet” (CI 52). For if this new kind of local colorist refuses to assert control like the realist over “his relation to life,” and instead opens herself up to the spontaneous reception of details, then Garland’s “sobbing stir” represents a counterpoint, the minor threat that this receptivity to detail will lead to the loss of control of painting through losing oneself over to the slow time and wild expansive field of detail that gives Bunker’s work its full name, “The Pool, Medfield.”^{xvi} Thus, nativist impressionism entails a refusal of realism’s universal project of becoming human, and calls instead for a celebration of the plurality of human difference, which it locates in the artwork as the artist’s spontaneous deviation from a scientific or technological account of local color. Yet as Garland’s proto-regionalism/proto-modernism suggests, a pluralist aesthetic would continue to define itself against the logic of realist local color.

4. LOCAL COLOR AFTER REGIONALISM

In 1921, Robert Ramsay included a map of “the twenty-five ‘Literary States of America’ as the frontispiece of the Short Stories of America (see Figure 4). Ramsay’s anthology of

local color fiction, the first of its kind, has had the lasting effect of inventing local color as a genre dependent, first and foremost, on the regions that collectively defined America.^{xvii} Calling himself a “literary geographer,” Ramsay argued that the modern short story was “distinctively American,” and that, “among the many varieties of our national literary form,” local color is “the most distinctively national,” because it is an “intimate revelation of its chosen region” (Ramsay 1921: 1). Anthologies like Ramsay’s effectively regionalized local color in the 1920s by redefining it geographically and enlisting it in the service of an emergent American pluralism. The result of these efforts was that what had once been stories governed by a specific set of aesthetic rules were now collected as literary expressions of the plurality of America – of the kind of pluralism that rose to prominence following the hypernationalism of the First World War (remembered today through works like Horace Kallen’s “Democracy versus the Melting Pot” and Randolph Bourne’s “Trans-National America”) and reached a crescendo among nativists and regionalists in the following two decades. In contrast to our current understanding of local color, it was actually long after its own heyday that local-color fiction was defined according to geographical difference and invoked as sources of regional and national feeling. Only after World War I was local color reinvented as the fiction of rural America – in order to answer a new call for a nativist-pluralist American literary canon.^{xviii}

Ramsay’s anthology came on the heels of a flood of critical studies on the short story, which collectively promoted the form as “America’s supreme literary achievement, its chief contribution to the literature of the world” (Jessup 1923). These works, which mark the beginnings of the academic study of American literary history, identified the

short story as the “most distinctive product” of the first period of American “literary independence” following the Civil War (Pattee 1917: 23).^{xix} Yet in singling out the short story, literary scholars found themselves confronted with a new problem: namely, how to establish a canon for the short story that would support their claims about its national importance. The very brevity that had made the short story so suitable for magazines, classrooms, and anthologies presented a problem in this new context. For while it was obviously an emblem of American mass culture and the burgeoning magazine industry in the Gilded Age, it was precisely the short story’s shortness that had allowed it to appear in such massive quantities (one anthology, The American Short Story: Examples Showing its Development [1920], impossibly lists over 3,500 stories for “further reading”).^{xx} Clearly, a new logic of canon formation was needed since it was not apparent how to select and arrange specimens of the form. It is within this context that the region emerged as the dominant taxonomic principle of critical studies and later anthologies of the American short story.^{xxi}

In The American Short Story: A Study of Locality in its Development, Elias Lieberman explained his decision to divide his chapters by geographic “section” because of this formal difficulty posed by the mass production of the short story. “There are so many sections and so many writers for each that it would be an impossible task to take up the work of each author intensively” (Lieberman 1912: xii). Instead, he adopted a “representative” model:

The method of treatment was to take a locality, note a few of the men and women who have written short stories about it and of it and endeavor to ascertain just how the locality affected their work. Having done this we are prepared to see why

locality has proved so helpful to the development of the American short story and lastly why it has made it the most typically American form of our fiction (ibid: 158).

With (circular) arguments like this, critics like Lieberman used the region as a sorting technique to make sense of the prodigious local color movement. Thus, the region was initially mobilized to perform a number of formal as well as political functions, as it gave coherency to scholarly texts, and aided in the canonization of the short story as America's national literary form by foregrounding the story's geographic setting and place within the nation.^{xxii} It was initially due to the short story's elevation that local color, which, as Fred Lewis Pattee wrote, "did its work almost wholly by means of this highly wrought and concentrated form," acquired its still-current status as the regionally representative fiction of America (Pattee 1917: 24). Not only had the region become a way to categorize the mass production of local color fiction after the Civil War, but now it could also be claimed that local color had always been about the region. When the New Regionalist movement took shape in the 1920s, it inherited a local color that had been consolidated as a genre around American regional representation.^{xxiii}

Thus, even as the New Regionalists severely criticized local color's elevated status within the national canon, this criticism only reinforced the connection between local color and the region.^{xxiv} Moreover, by attacking local color on the aesthetic principles that they had set for themselves, regionalists actually redefined the genre in their own terms. Three examples make this process visible. First, in calling for an aesthetic of "conscious decentralization" built around the folkways of the region, the Southern Agrarian, Donald Davidson, criticized local color fiction for its formulaic

representation of place. And as the regional novelist, Mari Sandoz, wrote, the problem with “the older local color school...[was that it] provided a unique backdrop for incidents that might occur anywhere, characters that were regional amphibians, conflicts that were in no way affected by the folk ways and the folk place” (Sandoz 1932: 65). Finally, in his programmatic statement, “The Folk in Literature: An Introduction to the New Regionalism,” B.A. Botkin faulted “early local-colorists” like Bret Harte and Joaquin Miller for a “facile impressionism” and “mechanical realism” that failed to capture the “‘subliminal influences’ of terrain and atmosphere” (Botkin 1929).^{xxv}

When the first generation of American Studies scholars compared regionalism and local color in the 1940s, they further confused the picture by claiming some local colorists as proto-regionalists. While Henry Nash Smith wrote in his review of the landmark anthology, American Local-Color Stories, that “it is undeniable that many local-colorists had a rather naïve desire to describe unfamiliar regions,” he also argued that Sarah Orne Jewett and Joel Chandler Harris “escaped from...[the] formula” of local color (Smith 1942: 101-02). With this move, scholars like Nash obscured the genre’s historical specificity by privileging stories that fit the new regionalist criteria, and thereby allowed certain local colorists to remain within the national canon. Thus, while carefully distinguishing the “modernistic structure” of New Regionalist writers like Willa Cather, O.E. Rølvaag, and Mary Austin from “the wrecked foundations of a slightly older structure called ‘local color,’” scholars also recognized Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman, and sometimes Harris and Garland as proto-regionalists because they were said to transcend their “particular substance and setting” (Stewart 1948; Berthoff 1959). Not only did this criticism naturalize the link between local color and the region, not only did

it privilege a select group of local colorists, but it also set the terms by which local color would be criticized (or rehabilitated) by future critics. In the process, the regionalization of local color obliterated the memory of the aesthetic dimension of local color, erased the differences between local color and other American genres, obscured the transatlantic history of local color in literature and the visual arts, and severed logical connections within the genre between diverse kinds of local color stories.

Conclusion

Over the last thirty years, regionalism and local color have become synonymous terms, largely, I would argue, because of earlier critical developments in the twentieth-century. It is now generally assumed that local color refers to a discrete American genre, popular from 1870 until the early 1900s, and that this genre was primarily focused on using representative details to delineate the geographic regions of America. When Carrie Tirado Bramen writes that “regionalism did for geography what the hyphen did for ethnicity: it linked a subculture with a national identity”; when Richard Brodhead claims that “it requires a setting outside the world of modern development, a zone of backwardness where locally variant folkways still prevail”; when Amy Kaplan argues that, “by rendering social differences in terms of region, . . . more explosive social conflicts of class, race, and gender made contiguous by urban life could be effaced”; and when Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse distinguish regionalism from local color by arguing that the former term “constructs an approach to place that makes available the good of a place . . . and that enhances rather than destroys the value of the region” – when some of the most important critics of local color make these claims, they rely on an anachronistic

image of local color that was established after the fact, by the scholars and individuals who took control of the history of local color (Bramen 2000: 119; Brodhead 1993: 115; Kaplan 1991: 251; Fetterley and Pryse 2003: 119). Whether thought to index a nascent American pluralism, the nationalism of invented traditions, an effort to heal Civil War sectionalism, or the utopian potential of a female community, all of these claims rest on the assumption that the geographic space of the region holds special political and affective value. While the recent work of Josephine Donovan, Brad Evans, Stephanie Foote, Vladimir Kapor, and Tom Lutz has drawn attention to formerly veiled aspects of local color – such as its cosmopolitan production, the existence of urban local color stories, and its histories in painting and European literature – they remain bonded to regionalism’s definition of local color (Donovan 2010; Evans 2005; Foote 2000; Kapor 2009; Lutz 2004).

This essay has worked to decouple local color from regionalism in order to reveal a new set of connections between local color and realism. By reframing local color as the aesthetic mode by which realism constituted its truth effects and enlisted its readers in its cosmopolitan project of self-cultivation, I hope to break local color out of the imprisoning set of place-based oppositions that have set the terms of even the most recent critical debates about American local color fiction. Reading local color exclusively in terms of scale or setting (the local versus the global, rural versus urban), or as a nostalgic “code...for spatial and temporal rootedness and...for the rejection of modernity” tends to devalue the very qualities that made local color realist in the first place: namely, the cultivation of the will through an aesthetic training that promised the individual the ability to break free of her own attachments to the material world (Fisher 2000, quoted in

Joseph 2007: 9; Hsu 2004). Thus, far from seeing the realist “project as fundamentally ‘anti-literary,’” as marked by a “rejection of style,” I have tried to demonstrate that realism’s style consisted precisely in its use of local color as a sophisticated method of affectively and aesthetically winning readers over to its model of self-cultivation (quoted in Bentley 2009: 71). By tracing the concept of local color through this complex set of discourses, I have tried, in conclusion, to generate new critical interest in how the aesthetics of truth – in realism, in impressionism, but also elsewhere – is also a politics of truth.

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AN INTERIOR VIEW OF THE ELECTRICITY BUILDING.

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Figure 1. “An Interior View of the Electricity Building,” from A History of the World’s Columbian Exposition, 1897. (One of two buildings that van Brunt designed for the Exposition.)

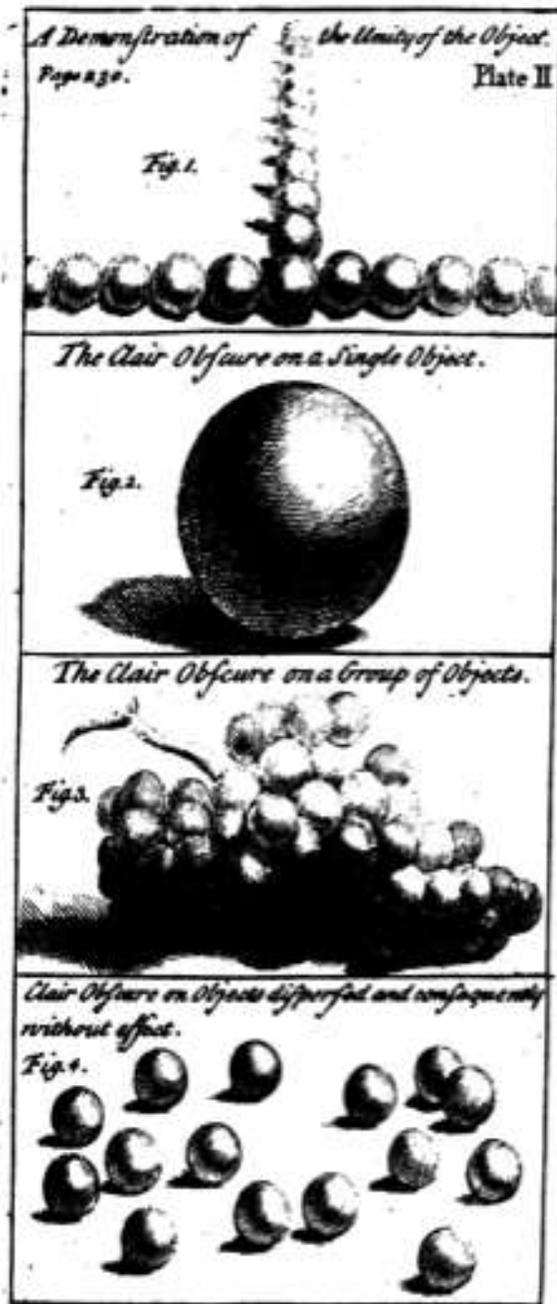


Figure 2. From Roger de Piles, *The Principles of Painting*, 1743. (Chiaroscuro as the opposite of local color)



Figure 3. Dennis Miller Bunker, “The Pool, Medfield,” 1889

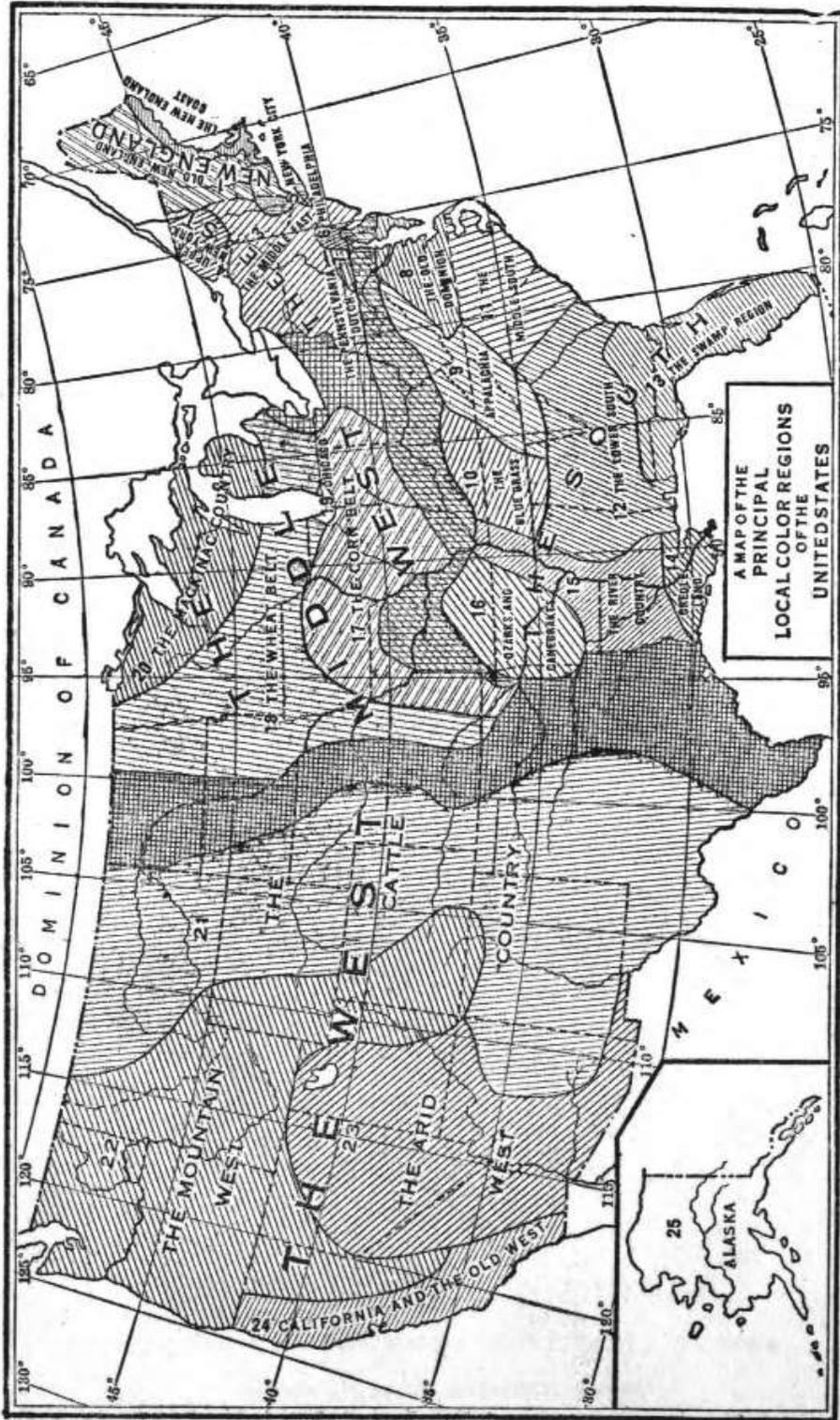


Figure 4. "25 Literary States of America," from *The Short Stories of America*, 1921

ⁱ Muting the color and intensity of incoming light has become a hallmark of the museum, whether it be van Brunt's screens or the 216-foot wide "flying carpet" canopy that now hovers over the Art Institute of Chicago's Modern Wing. Local color, in part because the museum is arguably our most neoclassical institution, has always been the object of these alterations, even if it no longer carries the luster of the new and we are no longer trained to look for it.

ⁱⁱ According to James Lane Allen, local color was much like Zola's experimental novel because it required the technical proficiency and expertise of the artist, writer, and scientist.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jonathan Flatley's distinction between cognitive mapping and cartography has been extremely helpful for thinking about the relation between local color and regionalism here. See Flatley 2008.

^{iv} Some scholars believe that local color emerged in the Italian Renaissance out of debates about aerial perspective, i.e. the expression of space in the picture. This alternate origin point would still tend to support de Piles's definition. See Kapor 2009: 39.

^v This definition, from an 1819 encyclopedia, captures the neoclassical understanding of local color in painting:

LOCAL Colour, a technical term in the art of Painting, wherein, however, it has two meanings. The one is the actual colour of an object intended for imitation; the other alludes to that colour in conjunction with the situation the object which possesses it fills in a picture; wherein it must be more or less subject to shadows, and the regulations of aerial perspective: which latter diminishes the force of colours according to their distance from the eye, by the intervention of that of the atmosphere... (Rees 1819).

^{vi} As Gabriel Blanchard argued at the time, the goal of the painter is, after all, "to deceive the eyes and to imitate nature" (quoted in Elliot).

^{vii} Ruskin writes, "but all I am concerned with at present is, that it is not true; while Turner's is the closest and most studied approach to truth of which the materials of art admit" (Ruskin: 143).

^{viii} James's travel writings were instrumental in the American reception of local color in two senses. In the 1860s and 1870s, he was one of the first authors to use the French term "local colour" in his writings. And in translating it, he gave local color new applicability as a concept that could describe the touristic pleasures of observation.

^{ix} For a good overview of the reception of Murfree's work, see Satterwhite 2006. Also, while Murfree may not be part of the main local color canon today, I've chosen her work because I think it best exemplifies the standards of local color set by realism. More canonical authors could have been selected, either because they are still thought of today as local colorists (Jewett, Freeman, Harris, et al.) or because what once marked them as working in the mode of local color is no longer visible to us (James, Howells, Frank Norris, et al.). For example, when James Lane Allen, a popular local colorist from Kentucky, sought out an exemplary instance of local color, of how "a character may be brought into the realm of color by its picturable phenomena," he turned to Henry James: "Witness the red stone in the bosom of Mr. James's hero in 'The Bostonians:' it is equal to a Rembrandt spangle on the nose!" (Allen 1886: 14).

^x It is likely for this reason that Allen claimed that dialect is not a fundamental part of local color.

^{xi} The resounding critical failure of The Bostonians can be said to result from its failure to balance this new frame against the older imperative to subordinate the quantity of detail to formal composition. As William James wrote to Henry, "One can easily imagine the story cut out and made into a bright short sparkling thing of a hundred pages, which would have been an absolute success. But you have worked it up by dint of descriptions and psychological commentaries into near 500,— charmingly done for those who have the leisure and the peculiar mood to enjoy that amount of miniature work,— but perilously near to turning away the great majority of readers who crave more matter & less art" (William James 1886: 180).

^{xii} Charles Dudley Warner: "Among the most pleasing occupations of our literary times has been the hunt for 'local color,' This is so well understood that when a writer is about to put his fiction into limits of time and space, he finds it to his advantage to get, either by letter or personal visit and inspection, some local color to make vivid, if not real, the scenery and personages of his representation... Given a knowledge of the prevailing wind, the shape of the hills, the attitude of nature in that locality towards the residents, and the dialect, a story can be made so saturated with local color that it would deceive anybody..." (Warner 1892: 156; my emphasis).

^{xiii} Raymond described a fascinating experiment that he devised to decompose the color of an object into its constituent colors. While too complicated to describe in full, it basically consisted of projecting white light through a series of prisms and a set of colored glasses (like the filter on a camera) into a darkened room and

onto a set of colored screens. “The use of colored glasses and spectrums must enable us to detect everywhere in the appearances of nature, the presence of color which otherwise we might not see. The connection is apparent between a knowledge of the discoveries thus made, and the successful representation of many of the appearances both of texture and of life” (Raymond 317).

^{xiv} Michael Fried argues that the move to theatrical absorption in the 1760s was attended by the new critical criteria of necessary arrangement: objects had to appear in the painting as if they could have been painted in no other way. See Fried 1981.

^{xv} See Gaskill 2010 for a different take on Garland’s investment in color.

^{xvi} This switch from scarcity to an abundance of local color detail runs parallel with the switch to the economies of abundance characteristic of consumer society, as described by Lears 1995.

^{xvii} Ramsay, a professor at the University of Missouri, was not the first scholar to define local color as regionalism, nor was he the first anthologist to select short stories primarily by local colorists (that honor goes to William Dean Howells’s 1920 anthology, The Great Modern American Stories). However, he was the first to use the new scholarly definition of local color as regionalism as a principle for building an anthology (for two prior scholarly examples, see Lieberman 1912 and Canby 1913; “the local colorists,” Canby writes, “can be classified, like wheat or apples, by their districts” [57]).

Ramsay’s anthology was divided into three literary types, American regionalism, local color, and the spirit of home, and was grouped into five sections: New England, The East, The South, The Middle West, and The West. These states were further subdivided into four “stages in the development of the local color short story...: American types, American traditions, American landscapes, and American communities.” One reviewer found the categorization of local color as regionalism surprising, as “the term local color, besides belonging to another art, is perhaps somewhat narrower than the thing to be named” (French 1922: 502-503;

Later major local color anthologies include Harry R. Warfel and George Harrison Orians’s American Local-color Stories and Claude M. Simpson’s The Local-Colorists: American Short Stories 1857-1900.

^{xviii} For influential early studies of the short story, see Matthews 1900, Smith 1912, Canby, and Pattee 1923.

^{xix} According to Pattee, so long as “American life” remained “heterogeneous,” “discordant,” “scattered,” and full of “provincial varieties,” the short story would remain “the unit of American fiction” and the “Great American Novel” would remain impossible. “Instead of writing ‘the great American novel,’ which was so eagerly looked for during all the period, its novelists have preferred to cultivate small social areas and to treat even these by means of brief sketches.” (Pattee 1917: 381-382).

^{xx} For Pattee, himself the author of two studies on the short story, the first decade of the new century was “the era of the short-story handbook,” and “by 1910 the short story had become a distinct subject for study in American colleges and universities” (Pattee 1923: 364-65).

Writing about “the mass of prose” in the Gilded Age, he observed that “he who explores it emerges with the impression that he has been threading a jungle chaotic and interminable” (Pattee 1917: 355).

^{xxi} Early attempts took a variety of shapes. Other anthologies, like Charles Sears Baldwin’s American Short Stories (1904), sought to bypass the problem of the short story’s mass production by devoting equal space to each period of American fiction (a method still employed by anthologies today).

^{xxii} Comparing William Dean Howells’s eight-volume collection of short stories, Harper’s Novelettes (1906-1907), to his later The Great Modern American Stories (1920) sets this change in relief. The earlier anthology collected short stories by Mary Wilkins Freeman, Alice Brown, and Constance Fenimore Woolson, not because they were local colorists, but according to how their fiction spoke to the themes of the volumes they were included in – “Different Girls,” “The Heart of Childhood,” and “Quaint Courtships”; only two volumes in all were organized around geographic setting (on the South and the West). By contrast, Howells’s introduction to later anthology highlights the national significance that the geographic settings of local color stories had attained. His introduction now speaks of Brown and Freeman’s “simple and native stuff,” and Dreiser’s skill at representing “local conditioning.” Most significantly, Henry Blake Fuller’s “Striking an Average” is “not only good Chicago, but is good native American...and is good Irish-American...” (Howells 1920: xiv). However, while today we would call fully half of the 24 authors local colorists, Howells’s introduction does suggest a more capacious definition.

^{xxiii} Regionalism first emerged in postwar France and was picked up by the Scottish urban planner, Patrick Geddes, before making its way to America. Economically, it responded to the mechanization of society by calling for “a return to a more primitive industrial system,” and, politically, it called for the decentralization

of the State. According to one author in The Sewanee Review, “Everywhere in France since the war Regionalism is in the air. Public men and statesmen are declaring themselves Regionalists.” The movement was seen as a “protest against what one may term the monstrous administrative extension of the French State into every nook and corner of local political life and of local self-government. It seeks to re-create, what the tentacular civil service and over-centralization in Paris had almost succeeded in destroying – vigorous and autonomous regional life, both economic and political. (Hetherington and Muirhead 1918: 172-73; Ware, April 1922: 191; Ware, July 1922: 316).

^{xxiv} Constance Rourke’s American Humor: A Study of the National Character (1931), for example, is a study of Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, and Twain, all men, and all but Twain non-local colorists.

^{xxv} See also Carey McWilliams’s criticism of Botkin in McWilliams 1930. As historian Robert Dorman writes, for regionalists like the Southern Agrarians, regional planners like Howard Odum, and folklorists like Botkin, “the region was more concretely, indeed, programmatically envisioned to be the utopian means for reconstructing the nationalizing, homogenizing urban-industrial complex, redirecting it toward an accommodation with local folkways and local environments” (Dorman 1993: xiii).

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