Attempting to discredit Rachel Carson’s 1962 book *Silent Spring*, former Secretary of Agriculture Ezra Taft Benson wrote to Dwight D. Eisenhower and asked “why a spinster with no children was so concerned about genetics.” Benson’s attack, its misogyny at best thinly veiled, makes legible one of the central challenges to developing a queer ecocritical practice: the status of futurity.

Contemporary environmentalism, especially given the recent emphasis on sustainability, tends to be future-oriented, its rhetoric predicated on matters of inheritance and procreation alike. A popular environmentalist slogan asks, “What will your children breathe?” A proverb widely invoked across the environmental movement insists that “we don’t inherit the earth from our grandparents. We borrow it from our children.” The Brundtland Report officially defined *sustainable development* as that which “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Much recent queer theory, by contrast, insistently resists futurity, marked as it often is by heteronormative imperatives. What does it mean, then, to develop a queer ecocriticism? How might we envision a mode of environmental futurity separated from the imperative of biological reproduction, or outside the scale provided by “future generations”? Or, to put these questions another way, one that makes the seemingly irreconcilable tensions between the two camps legible, what possibly constitutes a sustainable “no future”?

In this essay, I suggest that the figure of the spinster can help to resolve these tensions insofar as she practices an avuncular form of stewardship, tending the future without contributing directly to it. By
looking at a series of texts that take up this mode of invested indirec-
tion in both their content and their form, I make the case for a spinster
ecology that alters our notion not only of where the future lies but also
of how (or whether) it arrives. I turn first to Silent Spring and argue
that Carson’s intransitive understanding of ecological consequence
confounds the gestures of refusal and negation that have dominated
recent queer theoretical treatments of the future. I then look to Sarah
Orne Jewett, a writer whose fictional towns are populated almost
exclusively by spinster figures, to suggest that the complex futurity of
Silent Spring has a literary correlate in the indirect structural unfolding
and muted tonality of Jewett’s The Country of the Pointed Firs (1896).
Ultimately, I argue that an approach that pays heed to nonreproduc-
tive (and indirectly invested) figures like the spinster might inspire a
queer ecocritical practice attentive to affects customarily considered
too weak or quiet to be politically efficacious. By redefining where and
how we see the future, the spinster also alters our sense of how we
might best move toward it, no longer permitting us to understand the
present and future as mutually delimiting terms. The result is a model
of care that allows distance, indirection, and aloofness to persist and
that transforms the vexed concept of “enoughness” from a chastening
limitation to a quietly affirmative state.3

The significance of the spinster, therefore, is not merely biographi-
cal or characterological. Rather, as a stylistic and structural quality
informing both Carson’s and Jewett’s texts, spinsterliness demon-
strates how the problem of a queer ecocriticism might in fact have for-
malist answers.4

Ironically, the belief that queer subjectivity somehow precludes an
investment in futurity undergirds not only Benson’s dismissal of
Carson but also much recent work in queer theory. In No Future:
Queer Theory and the Death Drive (2004), one of the most influential
texts in queer theory’s antisocial turn, Lee Edelman argues that poli-
tics is predicated on a reproductive futurism embodied by the figure of
the child, a fact that “preserv[es] . . . the absolute privilege of hetero-
normativity” and leaves the queer structurally outside the bounds of
both politics and social belonging.5 Queerness, for Edelman, thus not
only “names the side of those not ‘fighting for the children,’ the side
outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value
of reproductive futurism,” but also “attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it accedes to that place, accepting its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social” (NF, 3). The queer, in other words, “comes to figure the bar to every realization of futurity” (NF, 4).

Although Edelman makes the boldest—and most polemical—case for a queer no-futurity, he is hardly alone in his skepticism about the promise of the future as such. In the introduction to Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History (2007), Heather Love describes her project as an attempt “to resist the affirmative turn in queer studies in order to dwell at length on the ‘dark side’ of modern queer representation.” Whereas “contemporary gay, lesbian, and queer critics tend to see queer subjects during [the modernist] period as isolated and longing for a future community,” she instead focuses on texts that “turn their backs on the future: they choose isolation, turn toward the past, or choose to live in a present disconnected from any larger historical continuum” (FB, 8). Love’s work advocates another kind of “no future”: rather than insisting that we actively refuse the tyranny of reproductive futurism, she suggests that many queer literary figures already have made (or been forced to make) that choice for themselves—and, by extension, for us. It then becomes our task as readers to consider the affective resonance of the temporal backwardness that such literary figures both embody and perform. If Edelman advocates the act of rejection, in other words, Love explores the feeling of the backward queer subject having-(been-)rejected. Whereas an affirmative (and pride-based) queer politics looks to the future as an ever-beckoning space of promise, Love is ultimately as skeptical of that anticipatory orientation as Edelman is of the liberal inclusion model that often accompanies it. If she doesn’t go so far as to reject politics or the future themselves—indeed, she expresses some concern that “it is . . . hard to see how feelings like bitterness or self-hatred might contribute to any recognizable political praxis” (FB, 4)—she insists on retaining the backwardness of the shamed or otherwise injured queer subject, not only because “the idea of modernity—with its suggestions of progress, rationality, and technological advance—is intimately bound up with backwardness” but also because “the history of queer damage retains its capacity to do harm in the present” (FB, 5, 9). If she doesn’t outright deny the possibility of a queer future, then, she suggests that it can be approached only with an injured back turned.

And so it seems safe to say that No Future—Edelman’s book itself,
or the stance toward temporality that it shares with much recent queer theory—might be the last place an environmentalist would look for inspiration. (Indeed, we can envision No Future being the title of a work of apocalyptic environmentalism—its foundational negation serving as a chastening warning, not a battle cry or siren song.) Yet although ecoterrorists undoubtedly would earn Edelman’s scorn, their treatment of futurity can in fact illumine something about the nature of his own. For despite their differences of opinion, these two camps share a fundamental understanding of just what the future is and entails, just where it stands relative to those of us staring it down, with either desire or animosity in our eyes. The antisocial theorist’s rejection of futurity, I would argue, ultimately no more radical and no less normative than is the steadfast promotion of child-rearing—in large part because it continues to concretize and externalize the future, to treat it as the grammatical object of our transitive acts. When Edelman says, “Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized; fuck Annie; fuck the waif from Les Mis; fuck the poor, innocent kid on the Net; fuck Laws both with capital ls and with small; fuck the whole network of Symbolic relations and the future that serves as its prop” (NF, 29), he posits metonyms for the future as objects out there. Queer theory and contemporary environmentalist rhetoric agree on how the future appears—legibly, at some point down the road, able to be recognized and harnessed and seized. Vehement rejection is ultimately no less invested in futurity than is the process of wholehearted embrace. Whether the future arrives in the form of a swaddled newborn or is structurally rejected through the annihilating stance of a radical queer seems ultimately to change little about (and do little for) our understanding of that future itself.

Yet perhaps Edelman can yield some productive language toward our rethinking of a queer environmental future, even if his mode remains anathema to environmentalism’s practitioners. In the final sentence of his introduction, he suggests that “what is queerest about us, queerest within us, and queerest despite us is this willingness to insist intransitively—to insist that the future stop here” (NF, 31). He locates queerness’s intransitivity in its affiliation with the death drive—which, as he says earlier, “can only insist, and every end toward which we mistakenly interpret its insistence to pertain is a sort of grammatical placeholder, one that tempts us to read as transitive a pulsion that attains through insistence alone the satisfaction no end ever holds”
Edelman wants to figure queerness as intransitive in the face of a reproductive futurism that is insistently transitive; whereas the heteronormative regime insists that the future will arrive, straightforwardly and uninterruptedly, the queer keeps the verb from meeting its object, turns a transitive quest for fruition or validation into an insistently intransitive pulsion. And so too, for Edelman, queerness becomes intransitive to the extent to which queers embrace the fact that their own sexuality is nonreproductive, cannot depend on a product or an object to legitimate it or give it meaning. However, a problem emerges insofar as Edelman’s intransitivity becomes negation. Just as his syntax slips from the proclaimed intransitivity of “insists intransitively” to the more directed, if not overtly transitive, formulation “insists that,” his definition of queer objectlessness slips from the queer’s identification with the death drive into the queer’s overtly transitive negation of the future as object.

This trend toward transitivity matters, too, in terms of how we read the foundational no of the book’s title—and how we understand transitive negation to be functioning at the expense of a potentially intransitive negativity. Near the beginning of his introduction, Edelman implies that his titular no may be akin to “figuratively . . . cast[ing] our vote for ‘none of the above,’” a formulation that seemingly strives to make the word not a directed act but rather a gesture of evasion—one that would allow “the future” to persist while positioning the queer subject in a slanted relation to it. Throughout Edelman’s introduction, however, the negativity both embodied and figured by queerness shifts repeatedly into an oppositional act of negation, one predicated on hypostasizing (for the sake of rejecting) the future as object. The “none of the above” sentence itself continues in such a way as to reveal this slippage. As Edelman writes: “We might rather, figuratively, cast our vote for ‘none of the above,’ for the primacy of a constant no in response to the law of the Symbolic, which would echo that law’s foundational act, its self-constituting negation” (NF, 5). Across these clauses, we move from a no that indicates separateness to a no that signifies rejection to a no that constitutes negation. Once again, transitivity and object-orientedness seem to bear a kind of gravitational pull within Edelman’s argument.

Indeed, maintaining intransitivity seems untenable given Edelman’s choice to write in the polemic form, which is predicated on taking a stance against an existing object or position. The structural transi-
tivity of the polemic makes it impossible for him to maintain in his mode of argumentation what he promotes philosophically. Whereas Edelman decries the “demand to translate the insistence, the pulsive force, of negativity into some determinate stance or ‘position’” (NF, 4), his own writing succumbs to a similar demand at the level of its rhetoric. For example, although he emphasizes the nonteleological, pulsive potential of queerness by arguing that it is “intent on the end, not the ends, of the social” (NF, 28), he cannot maintain this intent rhetorically. The “end” that Edelman proposes in place of the teleological “ends” of reproductive futurism is brought about through insistently transitive acts of negation, rejection, and refusal.7

I would like to suggest instead that a queer environmentalism might become positively intransitive not because of its willingness (or structural mandate) to reject the future but instead because of how the future appears to a queer subject considering it outside the bounds of biological reproduction. What if the queer relationship to futurity is intransitive not because of how it refuses but rather because of how it facilitates a notion of the future (and of futurity) outside the realm of objects, outside the push and pull of acceptance or refusal, both outside and beyond our capacity to control? Perhaps the question is not the future, yes or no, but the future, which and whose, where and when and how.

It is here that a return to the figure of the spinster may be apt, insofar as she challenges the customary notions of futurity that entrap both Edelman and the environmentalists. For the spinster, we might say, is legible as a kind of social outsider precisely insofar as she has been abstracted from time. She becomes a spinster only once it has been determined that she likely has no marriageable future; when that happens, however, she also comes to have no past—or at least no past in which a future, or the desire for one, ever existed. (We need think here only of the oddly virginal resonances of the phrase old maid, which erases the spinster’s lived past in favor of a kind of ahistorical, perpetual innocence.) But in the context of an environmentalism whose futurity is predicated on transmission and parcelled out in twenty-five-year generations (the same understanding of futurity on which Edelman’s critique depends), where does the spinster—quintessentially childless, by definition uncoupled, by reputation asexual—find her future? When does the spinster’s day come? And how might the complicated answers to these questions begin to help us understand not
simply a different stance toward the future (one outside the push and pull of wholehearted, teleological anticipation or outright rejection) but a different understanding of that future itself?

Carson’s life and work perhaps give us a place to begin, for Benson was at least partially correct: the author of Silent Spring was, definitionally speaking, a spinster. Never married, she spent her life in a series of deeply invested but oblique relationships to the world around her: she was an academic scientist without a doctorate or a university appointment. She was a biologist in an era of nuclear physics. She was a creative writer invested in scientific precision. She was a committed partner in the romantic friendship that she shared with Dorothy Freeman, a married mother of one with whom she exchanged thousands of passionate letters (and many fewer, but no less passionate, visits) between 1952 and 1964. She was herself surrogate mother to her grandnephew, Roger Christie, whom she adopted at the age of five when his own mother, her niece, died young.8 When a Baltimore Sun reporter asked in 1962 about her spinster status, Carson responded simply that she had never married because she had “no time.”9

But Carson, who claimed to have no time, became in Silent Spring a philosopher of the present and the future and how both become legible within the natural world. And her book, often cited as a foundational text for the modern environmental movement, consequently became one of the first to establish that movement’s stake in the health of future generations. For Silent Spring’s indictment of DDT came not only from what had happened and what was the case but also from what would be: from the accumulation of toxins invisible until they reach a threshold of legibility, from the slow dispersal of poisons across an ecosystem until they appear far from their source, making their presence felt in seemingly inexplicable ways. The book is full of apparently conventional references to a future that Edelman would perhaps dismiss as terroristic in its heteronormativity: to mother’s milk, to biological reproduction, to families having the capacity—and, further, the right—to endure. Indeed, one of the darkest images or fiercest specters in the rhetoric of Silent Spring is the “shadow of sterility” that hangs over fields sprayed with pesticides.10 In this, we might say, the function of Carson’s DDT sounds a lot like the role of Edelman’s queer.

But is Carson’s understanding of the future really as normative as such an account would make it out to be? After all, we are talking
about a queer woman who herself had no future—dying of breast cancer while completing her most famous book, trying to account for what would become of her home and her writings and her adopted grandnephew and her beloved cat and Freeman, questions of inheritance and transmission were, for Carson, tangled at best. And this was of course the case even before her own shadow—not of sterility but of mortality—fell upon her. For there are many names for the spinster’s relationship to the future, none of them conventional or readily recognized as contributing to traditional sociality. Perhaps one would be avuncular: often an aunt, the spinster stands in a kind of slanted or oblique relationship to the linear, vertical paradigms of transmission that govern familiar notions of futurity. (This is, of course, all the more radically true of Carson, who adopted her niece’s son.) In her 1993 book, *Tendencies*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick takes up the potential of aunts and uncles to display possibilities for alternative relations both across and within generations:

> Because aunts and uncles (in either narrow or extended meanings) are adults whose intimate access to children needn’t depend on their own pairing or procreation, it’s very common, of course, for some of them to have the office of representing nonconforming or nonreproductive sexualities to children. . . . But the space for nonconformity carved out by the avunculate goes beyond the important provision of role models for proto-gay kids. . . . If having grandparents means perceiving your parents as somebody’s children, then having aunts and uncles, even the most conventional of aunts and uncles, means perceiving your parents as somebody’s sibs—not, that is, as alternately abject and omnipotent links in a chain of compulsion and replication that leads inevitably to *you*; but rather as elements in a varied, contingent, recalcitrant but re-forming seriality, as people who demonstrably could have turned out very differently—indeed as people who, in the differing, refractive relations among their own generation, can be seen already to have done so.11

The spinster, not saving the planet for her own children, engages in a more impersonal mode of stewardship—one whose investment is neither linear nor directly object-based but instead, as Sedgwick suggests, somehow more “varied, contingent, recalcitrant [and] re-forming.” Distanced from the heteronormative paradigm often central to the rhetoric of both liberalism and environmentalism, she
stands in a slanted relationship to a place and time that she will tend but will not—and cannot—directly pass on. And so the spinster, like the aunt, both displays and becomes a figure for the openness of the future—and of the present that was once understood as the future of another past. Not only does her role within the family demonstrate the extent to which one’s parents could have—and, indeed, already did—turn out differently, but she also alters the simple narrative in which each of us, at our birth, marked that the future had arrived. By serving as a link between the horizontal and vertical paradigms of relation that exist within any traditional family (and within many nontraditional ones as well)—by *queering* the very shape of transmission—the spinster aunt challenges the notion of the future as a readily reachable and readily identifiable realm out there, as an entity that can straightforwardly appear or arrive. That is to say, down the avuncular path there is no way to get directly from here to there; it leads only from one person’s present to another person’s future.

It is not only theoretically or biographically that this Carson of alternate, nonlinear, somehow askew futurity becomes legible. For throughout *Silent Spring* itself, she posits a future far more entangled and varied than either Edelman or today’s environmentalists tend to promote. There Carson seems to suggest that the future is already strange to (or nonidentical with) itself, insofar as we’ve been looking for it in all the wrong places and ways. In the chapter titled “The Human Price,” Carson writes a description of risk that is also an eloquent account of ecology itself:

> We know that even single exposures to these chemicals, if the amount is large enough, can precipitate acute poisoning. But this is not the major problem. . . . We must be more concerned with the delayed effects of absorbing small amounts of the pesticides that invisibly contaminate our world.

> Responsible public health officials have pointed out that the biological effects of chemicals are cumulative over long periods of time, and that the hazard to the individual may depend on the sum of the exposures received throughout his lifetime. For these reasons the danger is easily ignored. . . .

> For each of us, as for the robin in Michigan or the salmon in the Miramichi, this is a problem of ecology, of interrelationships, of interdependence. We poison the caddis flies in a stream and the salmon runs dwindle and die. We poison the gnats in a lake and the
poison travels from link to link of the food chain and soon the birds of the lake margins become its victims. We spray our elms and the following springs are silent of robin song, not because we sprayed the robins directly but because the poison traveled, step by step, through the now familiar elm leaf-earthworm-robin cycle. These are matters of record, observable, part of the visible world around us. They reflect the web of life—or death—that scientists know as ecology.

But there is also an ecology of the world within our bodies. In this unseen world minute causes produce mighty effects; the effect, moreover, is often seemingly unrelated to the cause, appearing in a part of the body remote from the area where the original injury was sustained... When one is concerned with the mysterious and wonderful functioning of the human body, cause and effect are seldom simple and easily demonstrated relationships. They may be widely separated both in space and time.12

Carson’s paragraphs here become insistently intransitive; the grammar of her sentences, in other words, performs the point that “the following springs are silent of robin song, not because we sprayed the robins directly, but because the poison traveled.”13 Although far-flung and seemingly inexplicable environmental changes, for Carson, connect back to the initial act of pesticide spraying, the intertwined and polyvalent patterns of ecology are more a matter of process and persistence than of direct causal links, or of a linear progression (either grammatical or biological) from subject to verb to object. As a result, ecology is made manifest in these paragraphs by the sheer preponderance of intransitive verbs: is, are, be; have pointed; are; may depend; is; dwindle; become; are; are; traveled; are, was, is, is, is, are; be.

And where is the future here, amid these verbs that persist and insist, without reaching an object or an end? It comes in the “following springs.” It is “soon.” It appears in “delayed effects.” It arrives, tellingly, “throughout a lifetime.” Cause and effect, relatedly, “may be widely separated both in space and time.” The future may not only be distant from here temporally; it may also be quite a hike away—and not found down the path on which we originally set out. The present is the future of any number of pasts—some near, some far; some recent, some long gone. Indeed, Carson suggests, we are already in the future—not simply because today marks one of yesterday’s possible futures, but also because the future is here well before it makes itself
legible to us as such. Once we stop expecting the future to appear as the precipitate of acts we can directly trace, we can see how any given future (including the child as future) is in fact the result of processes and conditions more entangled and polydimensional than we typically allow ourselves to acknowledge. It is not just that the queer (or nonreproductive) future is more complicated than we think, but also, returning to Sedgwick, that the queer or avuncular stance helps us to see how every future is more complicated than we think. Just as the aunt opens for the child a window into sexuality and relation writ large, the spinster might open for us a window into futurity freed from the bounds of objects, freed from the promise of ever arriving in recognizable form. Unlike the biological mother (or the environmentalist, or the queer theorist), whose envisioned future resembles the present like the child resembles the parent, the spinster aunt’s future proceeds far less predictably, is far less invested in replication and repetition, is far more open to unanticipated effects. Less traditionally familial, that is to say, the spinster’s future is also less insistently familiar. But perhaps all futures in fact already work that way, Carson suggests. And perhaps our role as spinster ecologists is to be attuned to these forms of variation, of nonlinearity, of illegibility that constitute the futures in which we already dwell. Adequately seeing the future hence becomes a question of adjusting the scale of our gaze, of looking not simply in generational intervals, of learning to see the future not just as a state that arrives but also as a somehow medial condition of emergence.

I have opened my discussion of spinster ecology with Silent Spring in part to emphasize the surprising fact that a text which could be blamed for inaugurating (or at least fortifying) the heterosexist bias of contemporary ecology also provides one basis for developing a queer ecocriticism. Implicit in that discussion, however, is an assertion that this more radical basis is found not simply in the thematic dimensions or explicit argumentation of Carson’s book but also in its style, its grammar, and its form. With this formal emphasis in mind, I turn now to Jewett in order to suggest that there is an important place—both in contemporary environmentalism and in queer ecocritical discourse—for an attention to the muted, often aloof nineteenth-century literary texts, most frequently grouped under the heading of American region-
alism, that pay attention to the ways and byways of small-town spin-
sters. In particular, I would like to suggest that the tonal and affective
registers of these texts—what Love has recently deemed their “spin-
ster aesthetics” 15—might in fact teach us as much about the feel of this
alternate futurity as Carson teaches us about its location and mode of
emergence.

I am far from the first to find myself intrigued by Jewett’s spinster
figures, arguably the (wonderfully reticent) stars of her body of work.
And those spinsters themselves can become the ground on which to
track the tensions—and gaps—in recent criticism of those writings.
For if Carson, the ecologist invested in the future without directly con-
tributing to it, is caught in a theoretical chasm between the antisocial
queer no-futurists and the environmental(ist) reproductive futurists,
then Jewett, the writer of muted, plotless, regionalist spinster tales,
seems similarly suspended between two camps: those critics who
wish to find in her unattached female characters the longing and lone-
liness of the historical queer subject, and those who wish to find in
them instead a fully satisfying, enlivening, model of female maturity.
But what makes spinsters an apt object of our attention at this juncture
is how they once again structurally sit between—and demonstrate
the limits of—the two approaches. Neither turning their backs on
the future nor embracing it wholeheartedly, Jewett’s spinsters exem-
plify an alternative mode of temporal movement and inhabitation; they
head toward a future unconcerned with fruition and accessible only by
moving through the spectral presence of all the futures that will never
come to pass.

One of the few critical essays on Jewett to focus exclusively on the
spinster figure, Barbara Johns’s “‘Mateless and Appealing’: Growing
into Spinsterhood in Sarah Orne Jewett,” treats the spinster’s social
position as a positive and even “productive” alternative to the tradi-
tional trappings of female domesticity. Playing repeatedly on her titu-
lar phrase, Johns argues that Jewett portrays “the growth into true
spinsterhood,” 16 treating life as a spinster as “a productive future for
young single women” (“MA,” 156); satisfying spinsterhood is thus fig-
ured as one (if not the) desired end of female development. Instead
of remaining a flexible space open to multiple forms of relation and
multiple forms of futurity, spinsterhood for Johns becomes a rigidly
taxonomized realm whose most favorable incarnations are associated with progress and improvement: while “the growth into wholeness and integrity can be thwarted” (“MA,” 158), even those unmarried characters who initially have chosen the “stunted pattern” of life as an old maid can always “[grow] instead into a newer, healthier spinsterhood” (“MA,” 159). Rather than spinsterhood serving to complicate certain assumptions about the future, it becomes a synecdoche for them. The achievement of healthy spinsterhood—like the arrival of Edelman’s scorned child—becomes proof of fruition, proof that the desired future has arrived.

In response to both this kind of triumphalist narrative and a treatment of lesbianism that would nostalgically idealize historical forms of same-sex relation (including Jewett’s own Boston Marriage with Annie Fields), Love recently has read the literary spinster as a much more deeply fraught and problematic figure, one aligned with the backwardness she finds in the historically shamed queer subject more generally:

Lesbian weddings, lesbian soccer moms, lesbian sex radicals, lesbians on TV, lesbians in *People*: all of these developments significantly lessen the chances that women who love women will be confused with old maids. Given that the stereotypical image of lesbians as isolated, pathetic, sexless creatures is an effect both of women’s real lack of social power and the pathologizing of female agency and sexuality, this dissociation of lesbianism from the spectacle of the lonely old woman is no doubt to be celebrated. And yet, before wholeheartedly applauding the transformation, we need to consider what is lost as we overcome the “historical sisterhood” between the lesbian and the spinster. . . .

. . . I return to Jewett in order to offer a fuller portrait of the loneliness and longing that run through her writing. I . . . argue that we can find in her work a “spinster aesthetic” that draws attention to loneliness and impossibility as lived experience. (“SA,” 309, 310)

In stark contrast to Johns’s narrative of progress and paean to female wholeness, Love’s treatment of (Jewett’s) spinsters not only emphasizes their loneliness and longing (their many forms of incompleteness) but also—in a way reminiscent of Edelman—challenges an understanding of contemporary lesbianism that would aspire to acceptance, improvement, or inclusion. Spinsters, in other words, become
the proper foil to the LGBT community’s rhetoric of progress: as inclusion-oriented social movements pull gays and lesbians into the limelight, Love’s attention to lonely spinsters (and her aligning of said spinsters with contemporary lesbians through the positing of a “historical sisterhood”) emphasizes the darkness and backwardness toward which they’re always tending. Where Johns’s spinsters are satisfied, Love’s are longing. Where Johns’s spinsters are happy, Love’s are hopelessly sad. Where Johns’s spinsters can hope for a future bright and fulfilling, Love’s see on the horizon only a dark impossibility.

As is perhaps suggested by these formulations, Love’s critical approach both here and in *Feeling Backward*, subtle and important though it is in many ways, places its authors and characters on a linear track, aligned with either the “progress” of modernism or the “backwardness” of the queer subject refused (or refusing) inclusion in a genealogical system. And so her readings remain within the parameters of the camp(s) she critiques while simply inverting their terms, proclaiming recalcitrance where other kinds of readers would customarily find progress, affirming loneliness and solitude where others would find interpersonal nourishment. But if the slanted or avuncular stance of the spinster places her outside the vertical axes of transmission and inheritance that define reproductive futurism, then it seems likely to similarly skew her position relative to linear paradigms of approach and retreat, progress and backwardness. Indeed, throughout *Pointed Firs*, the future seems not to lie before characters linearly (in such a way that they could either embrace its approach or turn their backs in resistance or shame) but instead to exist both more immanently within and more irrevocably distant from the present in which they dwell. For Jewett’s spinsters, the future is never as distinct from the present or the past as either the triumphalist or backward narrative would make it seem. The hermetic spinster Poor Joanna, for instance, is oriented toward a future that exists in or as an objectless continuity with the present; Mrs. Todd reports that when she went to Shell-heap Island to visit her “remote and islanded” friend, Joanna commented that she “‘[had] come to know what it [was] to have patience, but . . . [had] lost [her] hope.’”17 Although this kind of hopelessness could, in one reading, be taken as a form of despondency or nihilism, in another it comes to represent the stance toward the future more broadly adopted throughout Dunnet Landing; the town’s residents, exemplified by Mrs. Todd, seem to “[give] no place to the plea-
sures of anticipation” (PF, 85). This means not that the future ceases to matter to them—Mrs. Fosdick critiques those “new folks nowadays, that seem to have neither past nor future” (PF, 61)—but instead that it is not understood as a state or an object distinct enough from the present, or legible enough in its arrival, for the distanced, gently transitive acts of hope or anticipation to become significant.

Although this alternate stance toward futurity is evident thematically in Pointed Firs, it is most salient—and most noteworthy—within the structure of the book. If Silent Spring’s syntax suggests the extent to which it might be useful to think of (spinster) ecology as an intransitive form, Pointed Firs suggests what it might look like for a text to unfold avuncularly, for style itself to exemplify a mode of futurity predicated on something other than direct transmission or discernible “arrival.” At the broadest structural level, as every reader of Pointed Firs readily notes, Jewett’s sketches—portraits of visits or small journeys or individual conversations—are linked only in the gentlest of ways: by summer’s almost indiscernible shift toward fall, by familiarities that burgeon as much in silences as through direct interaction, by forms of interpersonal commonality that are most often left implicit. There is little in the way of plot, and, consequently, there are few narrative through-lines. The text unfolds not linearly but instead recursively—beginning with an arrival characterized as a return and proceeding as a series of encounters that build on one another without building into any discernible moral or trajectory or plot. But while the entire structure of Pointed Firs is nonlinear in nature, the promise of an avuncular unfolding is most pronounced in the local moments of the text. Near the end of Pointed Firs, the anonymous narrator passes an afternoon with the aging seafarer Elijah Tilley, gaining a kind of reticent intimacy with him through the act of keeping watch for his wife, who has been dead for eight years:

I ventured to say that somebody must be a very good housekeeper.

“That’s me,” acknowledged the old fisherman with frankness.

“There ain’t nobody here but me. I try to keep things looking right, same’s poor dear left ’em. You set down here in this chair, then you can look off an’ see the water . . .”

We were both silent for a minute; the old man looked out the window, as if he had forgotten I was there.

“You must miss her very much?” I said at last.
“I do miss her,” he answered, and sighed again. “Folks all kep’ repeatin’ that time would ease me, but I can’t find it does. No, I miss her just the same every day. . . . I get so some days it feels as if poor dear might step right back into this kitchen. I keep a-watchin’ them doors as if she might step in to ary one. Yes, ma’am, I keep a-lookin’ off an’ droppin’ o’ my stitches; that’s just how it seems. I can’t git over losin’ of her no way nor no how. Yes, ma’am, that’s just how it seems to me.”

I did not say anything, and he did not look up. (PF, 120–21)

In this scene, as throughout Pointed Firs, the future emerges only as a modification of persistence. Over the course of their afternoon together, Tilley and the narrator share an objectless watch, looking not for an entity that would confirm, conclude, or otherwise justify their practice but instead “off” and “up” and “out” at a vista that remains as seemingly consistent or continuous as Tilley’s life, where patterns of mourning persist “just the same” every day. Within this paradigm, the future can modify the present adverbially but is never itself concretized, never itself emerges or arrives. The most important modifier throughout the passage is the capacious “as if”: Tilley keeps “watchin’ them doors” not for his wife’s arrival but instead “as if she might step in to ary one.” The adverbial as if inscribes a sense of possibility into the present, even though—or perhaps precisely because—it is a possibility divorced from any potential for fruition. Or, in other words, the as if, like Sedgwick’s understanding of the avuncular, interweaves the present with the unrealized. In Elijah Tilley’s sitting room, as throughout the fictional town of Dunnet Landing, the unrealized—and the unrealizable—presses on, modifies, and even shapes the present; Jewett writes in a syntax where what is is always put in relation to what did not and will not come to pass. Whereas Carson’s intransitive ecology complicates our understanding of fruition, demonstrating the extent to which future is often already here, Jewett’s adverbial or avuncular style embodies a present where nonfruition is allowed to persist as such, where the path from present to future—or from one sentence to the next—nearly always passes through what could have been, nearly always allows us to sense what the present as future has already failed to become.

Accompanying the question of how a text (or life, or narrative) unfolds is the question of this indirect unfolding’s tonal effects. Along with Love’s attention to backward subjects comes an attention to bad
affects: in her spinster aesthetics piece, she promotes a (re)turn to the spinster so as not to lose sight of “the loneliness, abjection, and social exclusion that have largely defined the modern experience of same-sex desires and relations” (“SA,” 309), and her broader project “[pays] particular attention to feelings such as nostalgia, regret, shame, despair, ressentiment, passivity, escapism, self-hatred, withdrawal, bitterness, defeatism, and loneliness,” tied as they so often are “to the experience of social exclusion and to the historical ‘impossibility’ of same-sex desire” (FB, 4).

Although Love is unique among Jewett scholars for her emphasis on bad feelings, the investment in strong affects is not hers alone; Catriona Sandilands decries those critics who “have not only missed the running theme in [Jewett’s] work of women’s emotional relations to each other, but . . . have even gone so far as to accuse Jewett’s writing of a spinsterly lack of passion.”19 These theorists’ emphasis on strong passions recalls Judith Halberstam’s imperative, in a 2006 PMLA forum on the antisocial thesis, that queers ought “to be loud, unruly, impolite, . . . to speak up and out, to disrupt, assassinate, . . . and annihilate”: an assertion that, in its broader context, critiques Edelman’s style in No Future at the same time that it praises the content of his claims.20 Halberstam’s list of the proper (or properly improper) actions of the queer theorist stands in contrast to what she deems the “gay male archive,” which “is limited to a short list of favored canonical writers” and “bound by a particular range of affective responses”: “And so fatigue, ennui, boredom, indifference, ironic distancing, indirectness, arch dismissal, insincerity, and camp make up what Ann Cvetkovich has called ‘an archive of feelings’ associated with this form of antisocial theory. This canon occludes another suite of affectivities associated, again, with another kind of politics and a different form of negativity. In this other archive, we can identify, for example, rage, rudeness, anger, spite, impatience, intensity, mania, sincerity, earnestness, overinvestment, incivility, and brutal honesty.”21

Tellingly, Halberstam treats as authentic and genuine only the strong negative affects on her list—a stance that likely would meet with Love’s approval. The “sincerity [and] earnestness” of “rage, rudeness, anger, spite, impatience, intensity, [and] mania” stand in as stark opposition to the perceived “[irony]” and “insincerity” of Edelman’s stylistic affects as Halberstam’s insistently direct, declarative sentences do to Edelman’s insistently recursive, punning mode. But if
Sandilands worries that we will reduce Jewett’s affect to “a spinsterly lack of passion,” if Love emphasizes that Jewett’s characters’ passion puts them in contact with “‘all the sorrow and disappointment in the world’” (FB, 97), and if Halberstam argues that Edelman’s “‘ironic distancing, indirectness,’ and “‘insincerity’” occlude a politically efficacious “suite of affectivities” otherwise open to the antisocial turn, I want to suggest instead that Jewett writes with an *affirmative dispassion*, a tone that—if attended to seriously—might open both queer theory and ecocriticism (and their practitioners) to the possibility of a nonironic distancing or a rigorous indirectness. For ecocriticism too has traditionally had an uneasy relationship to distance, in large part because of a belief that immediacy of experience is a prerequisite for environmental investment or care. As Ursula Heise suggests, many environmentalist perspectives “associate spatial closeness, cognitive understanding, emotional attachment, and an ethic of responsibility and ‘care.’ Put somewhat more abstractly, they share what philosophers Hans Jonas and Zygmunt Bauman, as well as the sociologist John Tomlinson, have in a broader context called an ‘ethic of proximity.’” And this investment in closeness translates, too, into a stylistic imperative; if environmentalism often operates in the polemical mode, then ecocriticism frequently relies on other ways of achieving rhetorical intensity and immediacy, ranging from narrative scholarship to a rhetoric of presence to what Timothy Morton has labeled ecomimesis.

But perhaps we can envision a queer ecocritical mode capable of embracing a mutedness that is neither the masking nor the repressing of strong emotion, and an indirectness that is neither a deflection nor an evasion of political stakes. As both a response to and an extension of Sandilands’s assertion, I want to suggest that the spinster figure in Jewett may be precisely the province in which such affirmative dispassion or sincere indirectness can be found. Indeed, we might account for the strangely muted tone of *Pointed Firs* by considering the equally strange fact that the text’s main characters are exclusively aged, exclusively uncoupled, and exclusively nonaspirational. There is to their lives a kind of closed sufficiency, a sense of enoughness that has little use for wishing, longing, or a consideration of what could be. If anything is longed for, the sense of anticipation is always consigned to the past, and the sense of hope is always—and only—for what could have been.
The book’s affirmative dispassion pervades even those scenes most preoccupied by what the future has failed to become. The scene in which the narrator visits Poor Joanna’s hermitage, for instance, demands that we reconsider the terms of identification and connection, that we rethink Love’s notion that to turn backward (or to grow remote) is to refuse.24 As in Silent Spring, where we found a form of objectlessness that wasn’t achieved through negation, here we find a form of backwardness that isn’t the same as rejection. In the very section of the episode that Love cites in Feeling Backward, the place “remote and islanded” is also the place closest and most intimate:

I drank at the spring, and thought that now and then some one would follow me from the busy, hard-worked, and simple-thoughted countryside of the mainland, which lay dim and dreamlike in the August haze, as Joanna must have watched it many a day. There was the world, and here was she with eternity well begun. In the life of each of us, I said to myself, there is a place remote and islanded, and given to endless regret or secret happiness; we are each the unaccompanied hermit and recluse of an hour or a day; we understand our fellows of the cell to whatever age of history they may belong.

But as I stood alone on the island, in the sea-breeze, suddenly there came a sound of distant voices; gay voices and laughter from a pleasure-boat that was going seaward full of boys and girls. I knew, as if she had told me, that poor Joanna must have heard the like on many and many a summer afternoon, and must have welcomed the good cheer in spite of hopelessness and winter weather, and all the sorrow and disappointment in the world. (PF, 82)

Although Love reads this passage as an example of the loneliness and longing of Pointed Firs, its predominant tone seems to be a kind of stoicism or matter-of-factness.25 From the simple, balanced syntax of “There was the world, and here was she” (which gives a kind of equal reality or immediacy to the distant mainland and the dead woman’s trace) to the apparent equivalence of “endless regret” and “secret happiness,” from the acknowledgment of the universality of Poor Joanna’s “remote and islanded” state to the empathetic understanding that the narrator achieves by herself abandoning the world, the passage suspends us between community and isolation, proximity and distance, in a way that acknowledges the coimplication (and mutual constitution) of the two. And perhaps a name for this invested suspension—for this
mode of being that is neither backward nor anticipatory, neither fully satiated nor filled with longing—is avuncularity, in Sedgwick’s rich understanding of the term. Like Carson’s intransitive mode, which can tend (in both senses of the word) without ever landing or arriving, Jewett’s avuncular syntax and spinsterly tone allow us to feel the full affective capacity of indirectness without ever making us (or the *Pointed Firs* characters) wish that it could be transformed into anything more than it already is. If *Pointed Firs* refuses us anything, it is desire for more than it yields. Both the text’s own lexicon and our readerly experience of that lexicon are permeated by a kind of quiet sufficiency—a register that, in the Poor Joanna episode, yields the muted but insistent equality of “endless regret” and “secret happiness.” *Pointed Firs*, it seems, asks us to idle or to tarry more than it asks us to long.

This turn to the mutedly affirmative, or to affirmative mutedness, allows us to reimagine the relationship between present and future outside the paradigms of lack and excess that dominate the customary treatment of temporality within environmentalism and queer theory alike. For in both models of futurity with which we began—the futurism of the traditional environmentalist and the annihilating stance of the antisocial queer theorist—the present and the future become mutually delimiting realms. The sustainability-minded environmentalists consider themselves ethically obligated to limit their environmental impact in the present in order to preserve the planet for the next generation. The queer subject understanding himself as a bar to sociality, by contrast, forfeits any investment in or concern with the future in the name of *jouissance*. Typically defined by his engagement in a form of sexual activity disconnected from the potential of biological reproduction, the queer embraces the pleasures of the present and refuses a future over which he feels no responsibility and to which he feels little tie. In either case, we find subjects and communities preoccupied with the question of what constitutes “enough”—a word that, in the environmentalist’s arsenal, serves to chasten those whose practices roam too far beyond necessity’s bounds. Those invested in sustainability insist that we must content ourselves with “enough”: an indeterminate quantity (or quality) that—even in its indeterminacy—seems defined by the fact that it is less than we might otherwise want.
“Enough” becomes a synecdoche for the practice of not always acting on desire, of thinking beyond current wants, of compromising the present in the name of the future, of doing without. For the antisocial theorists who find in reproductive futurism a hegemony worth resisting, then, “enough” becomes yet another word to curse, yet another limit to break. The future in whose name such an utterance would be spoken is not ours, this group would claim. We’ve had it. Enough is not always enough. And so the schema simply gets reversed, as schemata so often do. The present becomes the tense with the trump card. The future becomes the realm that can ask for little at best.

But Jewett’s writing asks us—in its tone and syntax and interpersonal situations alike—to consider the possibility of an affirmative sense of “enoughness,” one that allows the past and present and future to coexist—often on the same plane, or within any given moment—without impinging on each other. Throughout the sketches of *Pointed Firs*, Jewett presents us with a sufficiency that is neither privative nor the same as completeness; her characters remain suspended in a state removed from hope, removed from longing, where what they have (and what they have had, and what they once thought they might have had) manages to be enough. By presenting characters who turn away without rejecting, whose communities permit their members’ backwardness, whose emotions are conveyed in and as their mutedness, Jewett offers us both the affect and the ethical imperative of a spinster ecological future. Whereas the environmentalist concerned with tomorrow would implore us to “leave no trace” and refrain from making contact (again in the name of the future), and the antisocial queer theorist would instead promote an uncompromising touch (again in the name of the present), Jewett suggests that there might be (perhaps perpetually suspended between present and future) something like an intransitive touch, a mode of making contact so glancing, so gentle, that the tonality of the gesture seems infinitely more important than its (elided) end. Jewett’s spinsters, like Carson herself, implicitly ask us to inhabit a temporal stance outside the bounds of object-based preservation and instead place us in the realm of something akin to persistence or continuity, where the question stamped on the bumper sticker might unfold more like this: What will your spinster aunt have been breathing all along?

Cornell University
Notes

My deep thanks to Shirley Samuels, Anne-Lise François, Aaron Sachs, Rick Bogel, Jacob Brogan, Mari Crabtree, Melissa Gniadek, Peter Lavelle, Daegan Miller, the members of Cornell’s Nineteenth-Century American Reading Group, and interlocutors at conferences sponsored by MLA, ACLA, and C19 (especially Travis Foster) for their feedback on this work. I am particularly grateful to Ingrid Diran for the sustained conversations that have both inspired and helped to refine many of the ideas found here. This essay is for her.


3 These opening paragraphs gesture toward the interventions that I seek to make into both queer ecocriticism and ecocriticism more generally—interventions that center around questions of temporality and tone. While there is not room in these pages to fully sketch out the current contours of queer ecocriticism, neither do I want to disregard the existing work in what Timothy Morton recently has called “a field that doesn’t quite exist” (“Guest Column: Queer Ecology,” *PMLA* 125 [March 2010]: 273). The tension in this sentence—the existing work in a field that doesn’t quite exist—begins to suggest the tentative status of queer ecocriticism and ecology; indeed, even those essays that make claims about the state of the field act as if they are treading on unsteady ground. Greg Garrard, for instance, writes that while “queer theory needs ecocriticism to rescue it from its biophobic assumptions, . . . It is not yet clear what ecocriticism stands to gain from queer theory” (“How Queer Is Green?” *Configurations* 18 [winter 2010]: 73). Although I think that Garrard’s asymmetrical formulation underestimates the potential contributions of the “queer” to the “green,” I am not ready to go so far as Morton, who makes up for his own tentative start by concluding his article with the claim that “fully and properly, ecology is queer theory and queer theory is ecology: queer ecology” (281). Rather than identify the fields with one another, I prefer to consider how—precisely in their differences—they might challenge each other. Queer theory, I argue, in its critique of the normative structures of (inter)generational time, can complicate ecocriticism’s frequent reliance on heteronormative, nuclear family–based paradigms of inheritance and transmission. And an ecocriticism of the kind that I practice here and elsewhere—one that attends not to mimetic representations of
the natural world (to the objects of environmental relation) but rather to paradigms of oblique or distanced (interpersonal and environmental) relation themselves—can help queer theory expand the range of tonalities understood to both constitute and express investment. This emphasis differentiates my approach not only from those of Garrard and Morton, whose essays focus on questions of biology and the “natural,” but also from the influential work of Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, whose analyses are largely spatial in nature. More broadly speaking, my essay suggests how an attention to queer theory can help ecocriticism more consistently and complicatedly turn its attention from spatial to temporal concerns. This is just one of many possible replies to Garrard.

Such an assertion is in keeping with Christopher Looby’s and Christopher Castiglia’s call for an increased attention to literariness within queer theory. In their introduction to an \textit{ESQ} special issue on sexuality and nineteenth-century US literature, they suggest that “we might take care, when doing literary criticism as a means of analyzing and historicizing sexuality, to be at least as vigilant as usual in our attention to questions of representation, aesthetic autonomy, or literariness” (“Introduction: Come Again? New Approaches to Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century US Literature” [\textit{ESQ} 55, no. 3 (2009): 200]). An implication of my argument is that ecocriticism, a field whose focus has largely been on the thematic or mimetic representation of the environment in literature, also stands to benefit from an increased attention to literary form and style.

\footnote{Lee Edelman, \textit{No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive} (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2004), 2. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text as NF.}

\footnote{Heather Love, \textit{Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History} (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007), 4. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text as FB.}

\footnote{I point this out less to critique Edelman than to consider a rhetorical and generic possibility that his argument invites even as his rhetoric denies. What would happen if we forestalled the slippage between \textit{insist} and \textit{insist that}? What if we wrote in a mode that “insists intransitively”? Although there is not room in this essay to fully elaborate such possibilities, I would like to suggest that rethinking futurity (in large part through expanding the kinds of texts we examine, and the practices of reading we pursue) might also force us to rethink the efficacy or desirability of the polemic itself, a genre traditionally as important to ecocriticism’s and environmentalism’s own politicized approach as it has been to queer theory’s (anti)political thrust. As Garrard has written, “ecocriticism is . . . an avowedly political mode of analysis” \textit{(Ecocriticism} [London: Routledge, 2004], 3), a fact that Lawrence Buell takes to have generic and rhetorical implications: “Environmental criticism, even when constrained by academic protocols, is usually energized by environmental concern. Often
it is openly polemical” (The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination [Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005], 97). For more on stylistic and tonal alternatives to the polemic, see the final sections of this essay.


10 See Rachel Carson, Silent Spring (1962; reprint, Boston: Beacon, 1996), esp. 26 and 108, for more on this “shadow of sterility.”


12 Carson, Silent Spring, 188–89.

13 This is not to suggest that transitive verbs appear nowhere within Carson’s description—such a feat is unlikely within the meaning-making paradigms of English grammar. However, even when transitivity is posited, it is imminently complicated or revoked.

14 By “biological mother,” “environmentalist,” and “queer theorist,” I mean structural or categorical entities, not any actual persons or historical subjects. In this, I concur with Edelman, who insists that No Future is not impugning any historical child (or childbearer) so much as pointing out structural facts about politics and society as we know them (17).

15 Heather Love, “Gyn/Apology: Sarah Orne Jewett’s Spinster Aesthetics” (ESQ 55, no. 3 [2009]: 305–34). Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text as “SA.”


17 Sarah Orne Jewett, The Country of the Pointed Firs, ed. Mary Ellen Chase (1896; reprint, New York: Norton, 1994), 76. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text as PF.

18 In this formulation (“what the present as future has already failed to become”), we might hear echoes of Sedgwick’s work in “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You,” which I returned to late in the process of writing this essay. There, in discussing the practice of reparative reading, Sedgwick writes: “Because the reader has room to realize that the future
may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did” (Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity [Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2003], 146, my emphasis). In a formulation reminiscent of her discussion of avuncular possibility, the future becomes less the fruition of the present than a heuristic for seeing the past; our renewed awareness of the contingency of the future (or of temporal unfolding more generally) attunes us to the presence of nonfruition within any present.

Sedgwick’s writings are not customarily grouped with those works that seek to theorize queer temporality (for critical works in this queer theoretical subfield see, among many other examples, Judith Halberstam, In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives [New York: New York Univ. Press, 2005], and Valerie Rohy, Anachronism and Its Others: Sexuality, Race, Temporality [Albany: State Univ. of New York Press, 2009]), but I choose to emphasize her account here because it posits a queer temporality that tarries with—and is shaped by—the future rather than defined in contradistinction to it. Whereas many queer theorizations of time understand the future as a developmental telos that queers fail (or refuse) to reach, Sedgwick instead understands it as an immanent facet of queer subjectivity. This is not to say that Sedgwick is inattentive to the queer community’s vexed relationship to the future (indeed, the most moving section of her essay involves a discussion of her own—and her queer friends’—impending mortality); however, she often treats the future more as a modality—one perpetually embedded in, and woven through, the present—than as a hypostasized state.


21 Ibid.

22 Ursula Heise, Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global (Oxford, UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), 33. Heise’s project is invested in challenging these emphases so as to develop a newly ethical mode of global relation; as she points out, “Some recent ecological and technological risk scenarios (regional ones such as the nuclear accident at Chernobyl in 1986 or truly global ones such as atmospheric warming and the depletion of the stratospheric ozone layer) affect populations that are geographically, politically, and socially distant from the places where these risks originate” (53). To Heise’s list of distances, we might find ourselves wishing to add the temporally distant, a paradigm that in fact forms the basis for Rob Nixon’s recent book Slow Violence and
the Environmentalism of the Poor (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2011). Whereas Heise and Nixon emphasize the ethical imperative of relating to (temporally and spatially) distant objects, people, events, or phenomena, I instead seek to emphasize the ethical capacities of distantly relating, and of relating to distance itself. In other words, the spatial and temporal distances that Heise and Nixon emphasize are, in the works I read, immanent to the local scenes at hand rather than opposed to localness itself. The broader project of which “Spinster Ecology” is a part seeks to more fully elaborate the ways in which these immanent distances, which yield rather than preclude investment and relation, might form the ground of a new environmental ethic.

23 For more on ecocriticism and the polemic, see note 7 above. For an elaboration on what Morton calls “the illusory immediacy of ecomimesis,” see Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007), 29–32, 132–35. Although there is not room here to trace the many ways in which ecocritics have sought to achieve rhetorical immediacy (or the many reasons they traditionally have privileged such modes), an important discussion—which takes the form of a debate about mimesis—can be found in an exchange between Dana Phillips and Buell. (See Phillips, The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America [Oxford, UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003], 5–11, 15–17; and Buell’s response in The Future of Environmental Criticism, 30–44.) For more on narrative scholarship, see Scott Slovic, “Seeking the Language of Solid Ground: Reflections on Ecocriticism and Narrative,” Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction 1 (fall 1999): 34–38.

24 This discussion perhaps helps clarify my resistance to the binaries that structure Love’s argument in Feeling Backward. It is certainly not that I am opposed to binaries but rather that I want to resist the ready identification of affects and postures—like backwardness—with the ways in which they have customarily been valued (as good or bad). Rather than (de)value, then, I seek to describe: to ask what backwardness achieves, how it is constituted, and how it feels. Certainly, backwardness—like isolation, like loneliness—often feels bad. But not always, and not necessarily—especially not within the context of Jewett’s text, where many of these “bad affects” in fact become the ground of relation and community. Similarly, if loneliness (or “loneliness”) isn’t automatically bad, and if a text like Jewett’s tends to suspend such valuation almost entirely, then our affective lexicon itself becomes more complicated. To Sedgwick’s suggestion that critics seize the “opportunity of experimenting with a vocabulary that will do justice to a wide affective range” (Touching Feeling, 145), I would add that we should also consider how the vocabulary that we currently employ might already yield access to a wider affective range than we typically believe. This impulse to particularize relates to my essay’s broader investment in not presupposing a meaning or value
for its central term: the future. Just as we don’t necessarily know in advance what loneliness means or how it feels, we don’t necessarily know what the future means or where/when it arrives.

25 For Love’s reading of this passage, see FB, 96–97.


27 A similar paradigm of objectless touch appears in the final lines of William Wordsworth’s “Nutting”: “Then, dearest Maiden, move along these shades / In gentleness of heart; with gentle hand / Touch,—for there is a Spirit in the woods” (in William Wordsworth: The Major Works, ed. Stephen Gill [Oxford, UK: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000]).