American Naturalism and Asiatic Racial Form:
Frank Norris’s *The Octopus* and Moran of the “Lady Letty”

**Abstract**

American literary naturalism is well known for its formal engagement with determination and abstraction and its thematic preoccupation with Anglo-Saxon degeneration. Yet the central importance of the U.S.-Asian border to the literature’s elaboration of the imperial contradictions of monopoly finance capitalism has been largely overlooked. Taking up the question of U.S. anti-Asian anticapitalism, a political movement with which American naturalism was historically coincident, this essay explores the powerful early twentieth-century consensus that permitted the conflation of trust-busting and coolie-fighting. / Representations 84 © 2004 The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018 pages 73–99. All rights reserved. Send requests for permission to reprint to Rights and Permissions, University of California Press, Journals Division, 2000 Center St., Ste. 303, Berkeley, CA 94704-1223.
reflected the growing influence of an Anglo-Saxon nativism that drew fundamental distinctions between “new” immigrant groups and America’s “original” immigrant stock. By 1924, Congress had passed the National Origins Immigration Act, which vastly restricted different categories of European immigration (Southern and Eastern) and put an absolute stop to all Asian immigration. From its triumphal rhetoric of Manifest Destiny to its besieged nativist outlook, Anglo-Saxonism as a discourse had undergone a significant tonal change over the course of the nineteenth century. Given the temptations of foundationalist thinking, particularly with regard to the force of racism in U.S. history, it has been easy for us to overlook the fact that Anglo-Saxonism, in the period of its greatest vociferousness, had recast itself as a minority discourse suspicious of a coming modernity. The encroaching sense of diminishing Americanizable space at the end of the nineteenth century, famously announced by Frederick Jackson Turner in 1893, was partly related to the contradictions of expanding U.S. relations with Asia, which could potentially renew or threaten the perpetuation of the American frontier.

Within a general context of anti-immigrationist feeling, there were those who held Asian immigrants particularly responsible for Anglo-Saxon “race suicide.” In an essay that helped to enlist Theodore Roosevelt in campaigning to boost the Anglo-Saxon birth rate, Stanford sociologist Edward Ross warned:

Suppose, for example, Asians flock to this country and, enjoying equal opportunities under our laws, learn our methods and compete actively with Americans. They may be able to produce and therefore earn in the ordinary occupations, say three-fourths as much as Americans; but if their standard of life is only half as high, the Asiatic will marry before the American feels able to marry. The Asiatic will rear two children while his competitor feels able to rear but one.

By 1901, when Ross’s essay “The Causes of Race Superiority” appeared in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, advocates of Chinese exclusion had been arguing for several decades that Chinese “cheap labor” threatened to degrade the American standard of living. In adopting the discourse of Asian exclusion, Ross’s essay underscores the far-reaching implications of Asian exclusionism’s questioning of American powers to eliminate or assimilate the Other body. “America is a psychic maelstrom that has sucked in and swallowed up hosts of aliens,” Ross writes, but Chinese immigrants are unique in that they “show no disposition, even when scattered sparingly among us, to assimilate to us or adopt our standards” (86–87).

The notion of Chinese unassimilability registers something more than an exception to an otherwise confident American advance; the notion of persistent difference, a presence that will neither recede nor accede, marks the new prospect in which the general expectation of Anglo-Saxon domination was itself thrown into crisis. According to Ross, Anglo-Saxons may have once found it easy to advance against those “cheaply gotten up manana [sic] races” (79) who lack mental reflec-
tion, self-reliance, and self-control. But in this new contest with the Asiatic, the Anglo-Saxon is no longer the supreme economic type, but rather a barbarian whose "war-like traits no longer insure race survival and expansion" (81). The future, when the "efficiency of average units" (81) will trump inventive genius, belongs to the Asiatic.

The " Asiatic question" marks some of the ways in which postcontinental imperialism reconfigured the American frontier, demanding a reconsideration of twentieth century U.S. colonial forms. The elusiveness of the U.S.-Asian border derived from a host of contradictory developments, including the forging of imperial partnerships with economic competitors, persistent resistances to the development of overseas markets, and the integration of transnational labor forces into the processes of economic accumulation throughout the Pacific region. These factors formed a context for a popular rhetoric of decline regarding Anglo-Saxon-led settler colonialism in the face of emergent and more abstract forms of imperialism. In view of the fact that "with all their energy and their numbers the Anglo-Saxons appear to be physiologically inelastic, and incapable of making Guiana or the Philippines a home such as they have made in New Zealand or Minnesota," Ross warns, the "extraordinary power of accommodation enjoyed by the Mongolians" appears more and more "ominous" (68–69). The rhetoric of expansion's end and consolidation's onset, shared by writers from Brooks Adams to Jack London, repeatedly associate the sense of the end of the American frontier with the image of Asia and Asians' new proximity. "Under commercial competition," Adams writes, "that society will survive which works cheapest; but to be undersold is often more fatal to a population than being conquered."

The coolie is a figural variant of modernity's economic masses; by definition, the coolie lacks individuality. Asiatic racial form is indissociably plural, and its affiliation with the urban multitude at the turn of the century is clearly connected to a contemporary sense of the general foreignness of the city. On the one hand, the Asiatic belonged to a discourse of alien invasion; on the other hand, in embodying the ultimate logic of industrial subjection, the Chinese coolie had paradoxically become a familiar figure of American capitalist modernity. The fact that the yellow peril closely followed a degenerationist discourse of modernity allows for both a sense of otherness and of exemplarity. Just as the discourse of degeneration imagined a "process of pathological decay" that was "at once precisely contained (there were certain identifiable degenerate categories of being . . . ) and ubiquitous, affecting whole populations," the Asiatic does not function as a Self-consolidating Other to Western modernity but presents the potential for the modern "decline of Western civilization."

As a racial form, however, the Asiatic exhibits a unique temporal assignment, even within the landscape of degenerationism. In positing the possibility of historical regression—and the survival of the most unfit—degenerationist discourse generally inverts the expected dominance of civilization over savagery, while tending
to leave the racialized dichotomy between them in place. The yellow peril discourse of a coming modernity, by contrast, switches the way in which the dichotomy between primitive and modern is typically racialized, such that the temporal hierarchization of Self and Other is reversed or abolished. In a sense, the historical emergence of Asiatic racial form can be read as the appearance of the otherness of Western modernity to itself. In the literature of naturalism, the brute is typically a kind of “wild man,” desire incarnate loosed from social control, denoting the figure of primitivism within modernity. The coolie signifies a different kind of monstrous presence, not the ambivalent pleasure of the body’s libidinal release but the efficient prospect of its mechanical abstraction. Its articulation to historical processes of mechanization helps explain the sense of Asiatic labor’s inevitability, or what exclusionists saw as “the silent replacement of Americans by Asians [which would] go on unopposed until the latter monopolize[d] all industrial occupations” (“Causes,” 87).

The connotations of “monopolize” as the verb used for coolie takeover signal particular anxieties concerning the degradation of work as a result of industrialization, a process fully realized when capitalism reaches a monopoly finance form. As the phantasmatically cheapening body of labor that capitalism strives to universalize, the coolie signifies a biological impossibility and a numerical abstraction, whose social domination means that the robust American body will have disappeared. In this regard, California naturalism’s preoccupation with beleaguered Anglo-Saxon physique was one facet of its engagement with the question of monopoly finance capitalism, which for J. A. Hobson and V. I. Lenin—as well as for Frank Norris and Jack London—was also the era of imperialism, when the overproduction of surplus capital witnessed a scramble among Western powers for overseas markets.

American naturalism was a literary development that arose in tandem with muckraking journalism and the efforts of the Progressive movement to provide measured correctives to rampant economic injustice. Just as the historical consensus on the ideology of the Progressivism is that it was ultimately conservative, naturalism, similarly, is considered by present-day literary critics to have failed to transcend a logic of commodification. Rather than debating naturalism’s complicity in or subversion of capitalism, my own interest lies in developing a reading of naturalism’s effort to represent capitalism specifically in its monopoly finance form, when the domination of the abstract over the concrete seemed to have been most intensely articulated by the debates regarding the appropriate circulation of goods and bodies across the U.S.-Asian border.
corporate excesses. Alexander Saxton has gone the furthest to contextualize the structure of anti-Asian feeling by chronicling the leading role played by trade unions in securing the passage of Asian exclusion legislation, and the efficacy of the Asian exclusionist cause in unifying conflicting interest groups. Nevertheless, even in his analysis, anti-Asianism came to be useful to the West Coast labor movement to the extent that anti-Asianism was somehow already there. As a theory of racism, the notion of Asians as an “indispensable enemy” does not fully explain why they, rather than some other group, might have played such a role, why they did so on certain occasions and not on others, nor why anti-Asianism takes the discriminatory forms that it does. As Moishe Postone writes, in the context of anti-Semitism: “The problem should not be posed quantitatively, whether in terms of numbers of people murdered or of degree of suffering. There are too many historical examples of mass murder and of genocide. (Many more Russians than Jews, for example, were killed by the Nazis.) The question is, rather, one of qualitative specificity. Particular aspects of the extermination of European Jewry by the Nazis remain inexplicable so long as anti-Semitism is treated as a specific example of a scapegoat strategy whose victims could very well have been the members of any other group.”

Adapting Postone, my purpose is not to explain why Asian exclusionism, whether or not it was an organic ideology of the U.S. working class, came to be promoted by so many of its leaders and allies between the 1870s and the 1930s, but what it was that came to be legitimized as an anticorporate, and sometimes even anticapitalist, discourse. Attention to the formal specificity of Asian racialization may well be the precondition to a substantive understanding of why Asian exclusionism came to be a leading channel for protest against the growth of monopoly power and class division in American society. The odd mixture of literary genres to which California naturalists were drawn, including adventure fiction and anti-monopoly novels, may help illuminate some historically well-traveled circuits between the pleasures of eliminating coolies and the imperatives of trust-busting.

The Force of Asiatic Hunger

By the spring of 1899 when Frank Norris commenced to write a trilogy of novels about the production, distribution, and consumption of American wheat, he had already gained recognition for two novels and was working for McClure’s Magazine, a key outlet for the publications of leading Progressives such as Ida Tarbell and Lincoln Steffens. However, it was The Octopus: A Story of California (1901), the first volume of “The Epic of Wheat,” that brought Norris to widespread public attention, selling an unusual thirty thousand copies. Based partly upon an actual historical incident at Mussel Slough in the central San Joaquin Valley in 1880, involving a bloody shoot-out between ranchers and representatives of the Southern Pacific Railroad, The Octopus centers its portrait of monopoly capitalism on the
travails of the large-scale wheat farmer. Norris’s wheat farmer is a figure who is being squeezed out of existence by forces beyond his control—the punishingly high transportation costs exacted by rail monopoly and low wheat prices, a product of the new, and highly competitive, world commodity market. Though the predicament of the wheat farmer is pathos filled, the text resists the easy sentimentalization of his demise. In many respects resembling the railroad they battle, the farmers of Bonneville conduct themselves like speculators, gambling with the land and failing to husband it. In eschewing an idealized portrait of the farmers’ agrarian virtue, *The Octopus* acknowledges the historical antagonism between the California wheat economy and the small family farm, which large wheat farmers opposed for fear of the increase in property values and taxes that would ostensibly have followed population growth. The 1890s demise of California wheat farming was due to declining per-acre yields, increasing land values, and the availability of cheaper credit, which made the high costs of specialty agriculture cropping more viable.

The text conveys contradictory perspectives on the corporation, which is sometimes portrayed as an avaricious monster, and at other times presented as the servant to a greater good—the social value of worldwide wheat delivery. The text’s concluding celebration of “wheat power” has been a particular source of critical puzzlement. In the 1960s and ’70s critics read the novel’s ending as evidence of *The Octopus*’s ultimate preoccupation with nature over the concerns of society. More recent critics have viewed the novel as a “corporate fiction” in which the monstrosity of the corporation is the monstrosity of personhood (*Gold Standard*, 206); as a radical emptying of the category of production by the collateral reassertion of the middleman (*Bodies*, 26); as Progressivism’s evasion of the representation of class relations by its exclusion of farmworkers (*American Literary Naturalism*, 122–23); and as California rural realism’s affirmation of a bourgeois sublime in which capital circulation is an end in itself (*Fictions of Capital*, 140). Despite differences of opinion regarding the viability of ideological reading (and whether critics think they are performing one or not), the critical consensus is that the novel reflects or animates the logic of capitalism. Here a central focus on the racial discourses in *The Octopus* may contribute an added complexity to our understanding of the text’s political economy.

Critics have regretted that Norris’s dramatization of monopoly’s stranglehold relies heavily upon the vehicles of nativism and anti-Semitism to make its case. In Norris’s San Joaquin Valley, as elsewhere in his fiction, blood and class converge. The action of large wheat farmers, who are Anglo-Saxon, is set against a background of small farmers, farm tenants, workers and the dissolute unemployed, who are ethnically Portuguese, Mexican, and mixed Spaniards. In one notorious passage, Norris describes a rabbit drive (in which the community mounts an organized extermination) in which racial types are explicitly character types: “The Anglo-Saxon spectators round about drew back in disgust, but the hot, degenerated blood of Portuguese, Mexican, and mixed Spaniard boiled up in excitement at this whole-
The productive wheat farming town of Bonneville is juxtaposed to the neighboring town of Guadalajara, whose picturesque sleepiness stands for a superseded Spanish mission-based economy. The text merges the figures of California’s colonial past (lazy Indians, Mexicans, mixed Spaniards) with new immigrants (drunk Portuguese tenants and gang workers) into a general Latino palate that provides dashes of local color. Here and there, on festive occasions, we see a “swarming family of Spanish-Mexicans, gorgeous in red and yellow colours” (233). For the most part, the major characters are Anglo-Saxon, and the minor characters are Latino, with the exception of one German farm tenant, Hooven, whose absurdity and foreignness are intertwined in his obtrusively accented and broken English.

What we might call a nativist aesthetics, however, serves as more than just comic diversion or a scenic means of differentiating novelistic foreground and background. It also actively codes what is good and evil in the epic conflict itself. In the story, the leader of the farmers’ defense league, Magnus Derrick, is betrayed by his own son Lyman, whose gubernatorial ambitions lead him to oppose the reduction of San Joaquin Valley freight rates as a member of the Railroad Commission. Har ran, the good son, inherits his father’s Duke-of-Wellington nose and blond hair, while Lyman has black hair and protruding eyes that give him an unusual “foreign expression” (286). In one climactic scene of confrontation with the farmers he betrays, Lyman is told to take his “dago face” out of there by one of his father’s friends (286). That the farmers of the valley on the whole turn out to be difficult to organize politically is partly attributed to the presence of a few too many “ignorant Portuguese and foreigners” (458) among the league’s membership who are lacking in loyalty to Derrick.

Meanwhile, the railroad’s corporate chief and local agent are both Jewish. When we are finally introduced to the hidden figure behind all the company’s far-reaching actions, we are shown a man wearing “a silk skullcap, pushed to one side and a little awry, a frock coat of broadcloth with long sleeves, and a waistcoat from the lower buttons of which the cloth was worn, and upon the edges, rubbed away, showing the metal underneath” (572). Shelgrim’s “enormous breadth of shoulders” and massive frame (571) symbolize the gigantism of corporate power and wealth, but still, the text hints, a certain Jewish cheapness shows through in the frayed edges of his buttons. “At the top,” the description continues, “this waistcoat was unbuttoned, and in the shirt front disclosed were two pearl studs” (572). The pearl studs, or a lesser version of them, recur in the dress of Bonneville’s banker and real estate agent, Behrman, who is the railroad’s most visible human representative and the farmers’ villainous nemesis. Behrman is a “large, fat man with a great stomach,” neck moist with perspiration, wearing a heavy black moustache and “vest buttons of imitation mother-of-pearl” (66). The corporate chief’s commanding and controlled massiveness contrasts sharply with the soft and wheezing corpulence of his local agent, yet their affiliation is established through a shared sartorial motif of blended
cheapness and luxury. Following Ignatius Donnelly’s blueprint for the antimonopoly novel, his 1891 *Caesar’s Column: A Story of the Twentieth Century*, Norris’s Anglo-Saxon farmer is situated in a middle position, oppressed from above by Jewish villainy and threatened by degenerate “new immigrants” from below. Yet the wheat farmers’ ongoing implication in global commerce reflects this text’s rather complex relationship to things foreign. The ambiguous status of the alien can especially be seen, I suggest, in the text’s less obvious figuration of the Asiatic—less obvious because there are no Asian characters with speaking parts, and not even a significant background demographic as in the area’s Latino residents.23

In the midst of his travails, Magnus Derrick encounters a manufacturer called Cedarquist who, though he is himself a wealthy capitalist and a member of the San Francisco social elite, personally identifies with the wheat farmer’s struggle against the railroad. “We are well met, indeed, the farmer and the manufacturer,” Cedarquist says to Derrick, “both in the same grist between the two millstones of the lethargy of the Public and the aggression of the Trust, the two great evils of modern America” (305). Cedarquist’s own bitterness stems from the failure of his iron works plant, but fortunately for him, unlike the farmer, he owns a diversified investment portfolio. “The building of ships—steel sailing ships—has been an ambition of mine,—for this purpose, Mr. Derrick, to carry American wheat” (305). In a novel about the predicament of the farmer who is captive to the railroad to move his wheat, transportation industries trump other kinds of productive enterprise. In Cedarquist’s business ventures, there is a parallel between what can or cannot be done with iron and where consumers are to be found. Steel ships provide the means beyond an American public whose political “lethargy” and feeble consumption mirror each other. That most of San Joaquin Valley wheat is destined for Europe, binding the California farmer to the vicissitudes of a global market, hints at this limiting condition.

Cedarquist launches into a speech that captures Derrick’s imagination:

At present, all our California wheat goes to Liverpool, and from that port is distributed over the world. But a change is coming. I am sure of it. . . . Our century is about done. The great word of this nineteenth century has been Production. The great word of the twentieth century will be—listen to me, you youngsters—Markets. As a market for our Production—or let me take a concrete example—as a market for our Wheat, Europe is played out. Population in Europe is not increasing fast enough to keep up with the rapidity of our production. In some cases, as in France, the population is stationary. We, however, have gone on producing wheat at a tremendous rate. The result is overproduction. We supply more than Europe can eat, and down go the prices. The remedy is not in the curtailing of our wheat areas, but in this, we must have new markets, greater markets. For years we have been sending our wheat from East to West, from California to Europe. But the time will come when we must send it from West to East. We must march with the course of empire, not against it. I mean, we must look to China. Rice in China is losing its nutritive quality. The Asiatics, though, must be fed; if not on rice, then on wheat. Why, Mr. Derrick, if only one-half the population of China ate a half ounce of flour per man per day all the wheat areas in California could not feed them. . . . Send your wheat to China; handle it yourselves; do away with the middle-
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man; break up the Chicago wheat pits and elevator rings and mixing houses. When in feeding China you have decreased the European shipments, the effect is instantaneous. Prices go up in Europe without having the least effect upon the prices in China. We hold the key, we have the wheat, — infinitely more than we ourselves can eat. Asia and Europe must look to America to be fed. What fatuous neglect of opportunity to continue to deluge Europe with our surplus food when the East trembles upon the verge of starvation! (305–6)

Cedarquist’s grand vision catches fire with Derrick, who immediately begins to fantasize about a new era in which farmers can emancipate themselves from speculators by “organizing into one gigantic trust, themselves, sending their agents to all the entry ports of China” (319–20). The mass market afforded by a limitless China provides the imaginative means by which farmers could achieve a scale of power equivalent to the transportation monopoly by which they are now oppressed. Norris of course means for us to view Derrick’s dream of escape through repetition with a measure of irony, in the same way that we know that Derrick the gambler is just another kind of speculator. As it turns out, Derrick’s fantasy of being economically rescued by a China market soon collapses “like a pyramid of cards” (322), with receipt of the latest news of another adverse court decision. In the end, Derrick is financially and psychologically destroyed, but the novel closes with Cedarquist successfully “organizing a line of clipper wheat ships for Pacific and Oriental trade” (647). Having appropriated Derrick’s bonanza crop, the nefarious Behrmann meets his memorable end when he tumbles into the cargo hold of the *Swanhilda*, and is buried alive by the wheat he’s just sold to Mrs. Cedarquist and other charitable San Francisco women for famine relief in India. Undiscovered, Behrmann’s corpse sails out with the wheat bound for Asia. On board ship is also Presley the poet, for whom a trip to India will be a restorative vacation from too much immersion in the farmers’ miseries.

What are we to make of this U.S.-to-Asia export as the novel’s closing gesture? What is the status of this text’s fantasy of an Asian “fix” for the California farmers’ problems? The sailing of the *Swanhilda* for India occurs without regard for the ruined farmers, so that the feeding of Asiatic bodies presents an ironic epilogue to the story of monopoly capital’s draining of the “lifeblood” of the American commonwealth. From this perspective, the novel seems to be questioning rather than endorsing a turn-of-the-century rhetoric of expansion that, in Derrick’s momentarily excited words, saw “the whole East . . . opening, disintegrating before the Anglo-Saxon” (319). Norris’s essay “The Frontier Gone At Last” (1902) confirms this sense of skepticism. In it, Norris shifts the significant moment in Frederick Jackson Turner’s narrative from the disappearance of available homestead land to the date of U.S. arrival in China. “Suddenly we have found that there is no longer any Frontier,” Norris writes, “Until the day when the first United States marine landed in China we had always imagined that out yonder somewhere in the West was the border land where civilization disintegrated and merged into the untamed.” The inhospitability of a Chinese ground for U.S. military occupation requires Americans
to reverse the course and form of colonial conquest: “Eastward the course of commerce takes its way; and we must look for the lost battle-line not towards the sunset, but toward the East,” Norris writes, meaning England, Europe, and beyond (“Frontier,” 1187). The “great word of our century is no longer War but Trade” (1185).

Yet despite the fact that Norris intended his novelistic trilogy to chronicle just this trade movement—with the first novel concerning production in California, the second the commodity market in Chicago and the third (never completed) consumption in Europe—*The Octopus* nevertheless ends by moving spatially in the opposite direction. Whatever the limitations of the farmers’ rescue by Asia, the wheat does exact a final revenge against the railroad’s representative. The shipping of Behrman’s corpse across the Pacific forms an integral part of the narrative movement toward the realization of market inevitability, the recognition that the wheat is all-powerful, and moreover, that its power is good.

But the Wheat remained. Untouched, unassailable, undefiled, that mighty world-force, that nourisher of nations, wrapped in Nirvanic calm, indifferent to the human swarm, gigantic, resistless, moved onward in its appointed grooves. Through the welter of blood at the irrigation ditch, through the sham charity and shallow philanthropy of famine relief committees, the great harvest of Los Muertos rolled like a flood from the Sierras to the Himalayas to feed thousands of starving scarecrows on the barren plains of India.

Falseness dies; injustice and oppression in the end of everything fade and vanish away. Greed, cruelty, selfishness, and inhumanity are short-lived; the individual suffers, but the race goes on. Annixter dies, but in a far distant corner of the world a thousand lives are saved. The larger view always and through all shams, all wickedness, discovers the Truth that will, in the end, prevail, and all things, surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good. (651–52)

Where the tragedy of the farmers’ deaths arouses a political critique of injustice, this ending suggests a final acquiescence to market forces—not just an impersonal representation of limited human agency but a moral justification of determination in the name of a mystical fatalism (“Nirvanic calm”). Norris’s fixation on the wheat, in particular, as the symbol of that “mighty world-force” that spreads everywhere regardless of human resistances, seems to mystify the circulation of commodities as unmediated movement. Recalling Cedarquist’s speech, the seduction of a China market lies in the fantasy of removing the middleman, the idea that the farmer can sell direct to his consumer, in a world of increasingly globalized marketplaces that has meant ever reduced agency for the producer. The ranchers “no longer felt their individuality. The ranch became merely the part of an enormous whole, a unit in the vast agglomeration of wheat land the whole world round, feeling the effects of causes thousands of miles distant—a drought on the prairies of Dakota, a rain on the plains of India, a frost on the Russian steppes, a hot wind on the llanos of the Argentine” (54). What interests me is the way in which the magnetic figure of insatiable Asian hunger works in tandem with the naturalizing tendencies in the text’s representation of commodity exchange: the wheat functions as an abstract symbol.
of nonhuman force but it is also the concrete substance that is supposed to answer embodied human need. The figure of Asian hunger is integral to the positing of a circuit of supply and demand whose natural inevitability is confirmed by the narrative’s spatial destination.

The novel is certainly all about food. The focus on a staple grain whose distribution is captive to a monopolized mode of transport enlarges the sense of injustice that would be more attenuated in the case of selling, say, vacuum cleaners. About this distinction, the novel reflects a deliberate canniness. It does not, in fact, conflate the distinction between shipping wheat for free to India and selling wheat for profit in China. Cedarquist is banking his future on the latter, though the only wheat that ships out to Asia by the close of the novel is motivated by his wife’s international charity. Mrs. Cedarquist’s exaggerated sympathy for starving Indians is consistent with her frivolous sponsorship of decadent arts and exotic charlatans in her salon. About her “Million-Dollar Fair” intended to promote artistic renaissance on the West Coast, for which she successfully solicits a large contribution from her cousin the railroad chief himself, Norris writes, “Money to the extent of hundreds of thousands was set in motion” (315). Mrs. Cedarquist presides over a subeconomy of the “Fake” (314), which is subsidized by the oligarchy that lives off the valley’s farmers. Originating as her pet project, the Swanhilda voyage is simply another exotic indulgence on the part of the wealthy do-gooders who close their eyes to the real suffering of their immediate neighbors. Mrs. Cedarquist’s husband, however, knows very well the difference between the real and the fake. For him, the Swanhilda may be a write-off, but it is also the “mother of the fleet” that will start shipping to Asia for profit: “the keel of her sister ship will be laid by the time she discharges at Calcutta. We’ll carry our wheat into Asia yet” (647). “My respects to the hungry Hindoo,” Cedarquist continues, “Tell him we’re coming, Father Abraham, a hundred thousand more.’ Tell the men of the East to look out for the men of the West. The irrepressible Yank is knocking at the doors of their temples and he will want to sell ’em carpet-sweepers for their harems and electric light plants for their temple shrines” (648). The good public relations of sending wheat to Asia aside, Cedarquist knows that expansionism is ultimately about creating new consumer demands for items previously unimagined.

The novel’s focus on wheat affords a way of naturalizing commodity production, literally. Once sown, the wheat grows itself: “the Wheat, wrapped in Nirvanic calm, grew steadily under the night, alone with the stars and with God” (448). No human presence seems to be involved in this product manufacture. The supreme autonomy of the wheat is certainly the view that serves the railroad chief Shelgrim, and given the way the narrative unfolds, it seems also to be the one embraced by the novel. The focus on wheat, moreover, naturalizes consumption: just as wheat will grow in abundance, people always need to eat. But here is where we can begin to see that for Norris, the problem with monopoly capitalism is not just that the “iron-hearted monster of steel and steam” lies between the “fecund San Joaquin,
recking with fruitfulness, and the millions of Asia crowding toward the verge of starvation” (322), but that consumption must keep pace with production. The fecundity of the valley is paralleled by myriad examples of troubled consumption, extremities of gluttony and fasting. Behrman’s protruberant stomach no doubt symbolizes the trust’s greed: “... was S. Berhman to swallow [Derrick’s ranch] Los Muertos? S. Berhman! Presley saw him plainly, huge rotund, white; his jowl tremulous and obese, the roll of fat over his collar sprinkled with sparse hairs, the great stomach with its brown linen vest” (542). Berhman is all digestive tract (jaw or jowl and stomach); his oversized stomach so crowds out his lungs that one can always hear his “difficult breathing” (66).

Annixter, a friend of Derrick’s, and another wheat farmer, is in many respects the novel’s true martyr, the man whose murder by railroad agents is especially poignant having been just personally transformed as a result of falling in love. Besides irascibility, Annixter’s main trait seems to be finicky eating habits. We first encounter him fasting on dried prunes because his “stomach was out of whack” from “terrific colics all the preceding night” (24); apparently he once returned early from a European trip because he couldn’t tolerate European cooking. As an emotional character, the man is utterly unselfreflective—his “only reflection upon his interior economy was a morbid concern in the vagaries of his stomach” (27). Though Annixter and Behrman are representative antagonists in the narrative conflict between the farmer and the railroad, they share the characteristic of being predominantly defined by their stomachs. One peculiar episode involving Annixter dining at the Derricks’ ranch calls attention to the symbolic significance of Annixter’s difficult eating.

The Chinaman had made a certain kind of plum pudding for dessert, and Annixter, who remembered other dinners at the Derricks’, had been saving himself for this, and had meditated upon it all through the meal. No doubt it would restore all his good humor, and he believed his stomach was so far recovered as to be able to stand it.

But unfortunately the pudding was served with a sauce that he abhorred—a thick, gruel-like, colorless mixture, made from plain water and sugar. Before he could interfere, the Chinaman had poured a quantity of it upon his plate.

“Faugh!” exclaimed Annixter. “It makes me sick. Such—such sloop. Take it away. I’ll have mine straight, if you don’t mind.”

“That’s good for your stomach, Buck,” observed young Osterman. “Makes it go down kind of sort of slick; don’t you see? Sloop, hey? That’s a good name.”

“Look here, don’t call me Buck. You don’t seem to have any sense, and besides it isn’t good for my stomach. I know better. What do you know about my stomach, anyhow? Just looking at sloop like that makes me sick.” (102)

Later Osterman, another guest at the ranch and a personality known for his tricks, places the syrup in Annixter’s bed as a joke, sending Annixter into a disgusted fury in the middle of the night. “‘Ah yes, in my bed, sloop, aha! I know the man who put it there,’ he went on, glaring at Osterman, ‘and that man is a pip. Sloop! Slimy, disgusting stuff; you heard me say I didn’t like it when the Chink
passed it to me at dinner—and just for that reason you put it in my bed’” (121). Antipathy to viscous (semenlike) fluid has been read in terms of the text’s misogynistic displacement of generative power away from women and biology toward a “resolutely abstract account of force” (Bodies, 28, 32). The misplaced syrup’s provocation of a racial slur in the text suggests further that the substance carries racial, as well as sexual, meanings. In Annixter, we have an Anglo-Saxon whose defeat does not deservedly follow from a process of internal degeneration, as is the case with the Derrick family. The novel draws a parallel between Annixter’s aversion to the syrup and his exceptional moral protest against the bribery scheme entertained by the farmers’ league that evening: “It runs in my family to hate anything sticky. It’s—it’s—it’s heredity. How would you like to get into bed at two in the morning and jam your feet down into a slimy mess like that? . . . And you mark my words . . . this business we talked over tonight—I’m out of it. It’s yellow. It’s too cursed dishonest” (123). Annixter’s metaphor for what’s objectionable about manipulating a political process elaborates upon something formless by giving it more color.

By the end, we have been prepared by the Indian associations of Annixter’s hair, which stands “defiantly erect as an Apache’s scalp lock” (227), to view his demise as a tragedy of the noble savage. In this story of the vanishing American, the “Chinaman” has a metonymic agency. Annixter’s phobic reaction to Chinese “sloop” is part of the text’s extensive discourse on food and feeding. The syrup episode can be read against other moments of feasting when Chinese cooks are serving something more palatable:

The half-hundred men of the gang threw themselves upon the supper the Chinese cooks had set out in the shed of the eating house. . . . The plowmen rinsed their throats with great drafts of wine, and their elbows wide, their foreheads flushed resumed the attack upon beef and bread, eating as though they would never have enough. All up and down the long table, where the kerosene lamps reflected themselves deep in the oilcloth cover, one heard the incessant sounds of mastication and saw the uninterrupted movement of great jaws. At every moment one or another of the men demanded a fresh portion of beef, another pint of wine, another half loaf of bread. . . . It was a veritable barbecue, a crude and primitive feasting, barbaric, Homeric. . . . Vanamee, simple, uncomplicated, living close to nature and the rudimentary life, understood its significance. He knew very well that within a short half hour after this meal the men would throw themselves down in their bunks to sleep, all life reduced to its bare essentials, uncomplicated, honest, healthy. They were strong, these men, with the strength of the soil they worked, in touch with essential things, back again to the starting point of civilization, coarse, vital, real and sane. (132)

More than other occasions, barbecues promise to awaken the community’s Homeric potential. Hearty eating of beef and bread is the key sign of the people’s continuing epic vitality. Moreover, such eating is properly Anglo-Saxon. “It was Homeric, this feasting, this vast consuming of meat and bread and wine followed now by games of strength. An epic simplicity and directness, an honest Anglo-Saxon mirth and innocence, commended it” (505).

A centerpiece of the American Federation of Labor’s campaign on behalf of
the renewal of the Chinese Exclusion Act, Samuel Gompers’s contemporary pamphlet *Some Reasons for Chinese Exclusion. Meat vs. Rice: American Manhood versus Asiatic Coolieism. Which Shall Survive?* (1902) memorably defined the Asiatic threat to the American social body in terms of the physiological capacity of Asians to survive on a lower standard of living; protecting the American worker from falling wages was couched as a matter of the right to meat. Norris’s and London’s reputation as founders of the “red-blooded school of American literature” may be worth reconsidering in light of their protagonists’ dietary vulnerabilities as well as their exceptional muscular definition. If eating meat returns Americans to their Anglo-Saxon origins, so does American contact with China. In “The Frontier Gone At Last,” Norris writes:

as the first boat bearing its contingent of American marines took ground on the Asian shore, the Frontier—at least after so many centuries, after so many marches, after so much fighting, so much spilled blood, so much spent treasure, dwindled down and vanished; for the Anglo-Saxon in his course of empire had circled the globe and had brought the new civilization to the old civilization, had reached the starting point of history, the place from which the migrations began. So soon as the marines landed there was no longer any West, and the equation of the horizon, the problem of the centuries for the Anglo-Saxon was solved. (“Frontier,” 1184–85)

Norris’s essay identifies “Asia” as the mythic origin point of an Anglo-Saxon identity based on westward expansion, which is why the arrival of the Western frontier in Asia eliminates a ground for the “West” itself. In Gompers and Norris both, Anglo-Saxon epic identity is defined, and potentially undefined, by an Asiatic origin and destiny.

*The Octopus* thematizes the thwarting of many an individual’s epic aspiration. A key figure for this is the beset masculine body. Norris’s novel contains many instances of the image of men everywhere caught within a vortex of forces or immobilized by an intractable foe. Whether in the case of Dyke’s submission to relentless, swarming bounty hunters, in Presley’s engulfment by the surging crowd, or in the image of the final, ironic drowning of S. Behrman in the cargohold by the wheat, a “dreadful substance that was neither solid nor fluid” (644), *The Octopus* is replete with individuals struggling against “an enemy that could not be gripped, toiling in a sea that could not be stayed” (645). Robert Wiebe writes, “when writers first adapted naturalism to America . . . they turned automatically to the huge and vast. . . . Crane, Norris and Dreiser were giving singular form to the perplexity of a nation. As the network of relations affecting men’s lives each year became more tangled and more distended, Americans in a basic sense no longer knew who or where they were. The setting had altered beyond their power to understand it, and within an alien context they had lost themselves.”

In portraying the grip of monopoly power, the novel suggests a correspondence between the wheat and the corporation, whose invisibility and ubiquity give it its special quality. Thus, “the League was clamorous, ubiquitous, its objects known to
every urchin on the streets, but the trust was silent, its ways inscrutable; the public only saw results. It worked in the dark—calm, disciplined, irresistible” (346). The corporation’s elusive representability partly explains the mixed metaphors that clutter Norris’s melodramatic evocation of the railroad:

abruptly Presley saw again, in his imagination, the galloping monster, the terror of steel and steam, with its single eye, cyclopean, red, shooting from horizon to horizon; but saw it now as the symbol of a vast power, huge, terrible, flinging the echo of its thunder over all the reaches of the valley, leaving blood and destruction in its path; the leviathan, with tentacles of steel clutching into the soil, the soulless Force, the iron-hearted Power, the monster, the Colossus, the Octopus. (51)

Norris’s description intermittently veers off into abstraction, with the train disappearing into what it symbolizes (“vast power” or “soulless Force”). Where the description stays concrete, a taxonomic disorder—where the mechanical, mythological, and animal collide—makes it difficult to visualize whether the entity is moving or embedding itself, whether swiftness, largeness, or tenacity takes priority.31 It is true that sometimes we see a victim of the trust “caught and choked by one of those million tentacles suddenly reaching up from below, from out the dark beneath his feet, coiling around his throat, throttling him, strangling him, sucking his blood” (352–53). However, one cannot help noticing how relatively little the text works with its titular metaphor. Veering between abstract and concrete—sometimes signifying nothingness, as in endless fields of monoculture, and sometimes signifying life’s pure substance itself, as in the germinating seed—the wheat more richly conveys the specificity of The Octopus’s representation of monopoly capitalism. Perhaps even worse than the suspicion of corporate parasitism or centralized conspiracy is the horror of the wheat’s formlessness, the erasure of all spatial boundaries that suggest capital’s totalizing reach and blanketing homogenization. This may be why, despite the railroad and the wheat’s grand confrontation as mirrored entities, their equivalence as representatives of force, finally only “the WHEAT remained” (651).

The equivalence between various kinds of inescapable substances associates an Asiatic presence with capitalist modernity’s assault upon individual autonomy. Thematic parallels between crowd, wheat, and syrup help to explain the powerful allure of empty Asiatic bellies to the increasingly dependent entrepreneur, who dreams of a figure of unfulfillable consumption who could forestall the dangers of overproduction. The racial figure deftly condenses capitalism’s mass dimension with its tendencies toward global expansion—hence, The Octopus’s detour across the Asia-Pacific despite the trilogy’s intended geographical trajectory and the historical facts of the California wheat export economy.32 Approaching the American Asiatic Association as a “historical bloc” during the McKinley and Roosevelt administrations, John Epijersi attributes to the trade group an appreciable effectivity in instituting the Asia-Pacific as a regional entity whose geographical inclusions and exclusions were defined by capital’s sphere of circulation (“Imperialist Imaginary,”
Though *The Octopus* certainly toys with the Asiatic as a romanticized figure for unfettered circulation, its ambivalent status necessarily alludes to the conflict between business and labor lobbies on the appropriate openness of the U.S.-Asian border at the turn of the century. The notion of clamoring Asiatic hunger reverses a racial economy in which too-easy Asian satiation, in the Asian exclusionist rhetoric of the period, popularly portends American starvation. The question of Asian consumption levels could well refer to the pressures placed upon American workers by transnationalizing labor markets or to the predicament faced by American businesses, whose drive to lower domestic wages and need for overseas markets went hand in hand.

Maintaining the average rate of profit may require searching for new ways to lower the cost of labor reproduction, but there is still no overcoming the tendency toward overproduction without stimulating more consumption—somewhere. The figure of perpetual Asian hunger reflects *The Octopus*’s borrowing of an Orientalist fantasy to recharge a classless frontier vision of noncontradictory and endless American growth. But the silent presence of Chinese cooks in the household economy of the California ranches who exist to prepare and serve food they do not eat, and the disturbing connections between eating and dying in the text, are dark reminders of the destruction wrought by global expansion. We suspect that what really kills Annixter is eating Chinese food. Despite *The Octopus*’s attraction to the idea that everyone might well benefit from Asia’s economic development, the ominousness of the text’s consumer problems registers a grave skepticism about the free market’s promise of universal emancipation.

After 1898, at a time when half of an unskilled worker’s income was spent on food, public discussions of farmers and their markets increasingly revolved around potential wheat shortages rather than chronic surpluses and the issue of the cost of living. Cedarquist’s proposed notion of elevating Asiatic dietary standards from rice to wheat addresses the fear that food prices may be both too low for American farmers and too high for American workers. Actually, the text makes clear that, in contrast to public discussions that may have construed the conditions of labor reproduction to be determined chiefly by natural swings in crop surpluses and shortfalls, industrial overproduction and declining relative wages go hand in hand. The text knows that what fills the cargohold of the *Swanhilda* is not really food. It is more than Berhman can eat, and it is also not going to fatten up Presley:

> “Get fat yourself while you’re about it, Presley” [Cedarquist] observed, as the two stood up and shook hands.
> “There shouldn’t be a lack of food on a wheat ship. Bread enough surely.”
> “Little monotonous though. ‘Man cannot live by bread alone.’” (648)

The wheat cannot be eaten because human need is mediated by commodity relations: the monotony of wheat signals exchange value’s domination over use value. The wheat is a social relation, not a thing. Though the *Swanhilda* carries a portion
of the bonanza crop from San Joaquin Valley, its uncertain nutritious quality (not just for Presley and Behrman, but for the vegetarian recipients of that contaminated cargo) forces us to recognize that what is being represented there is not the exported excess of California’s natural bounty but the movement of U.S. capital.

Though commodities represent the abstraction of social relations, their sensuous existence manifests the materiality of capitalist abstraction. The wheat is capable of quite literal force. “It filled the pockets of the coat, it crept up the sleeves and trouser legs, it covered the great, protruberant stomach, it ran at last in rivulets into the distended, gasping mouth” (646). The insatiable and invincible Behrman can only be finally conquered through force-feeding. If it is suggested that the decadent feasting at a railroad magnate’s home—at the very same moment when displaced farm tenants are starving as a result of the railroad’s brutality—is a kind of cannibalism of “dog eat dog” (608), the corpse buried within the wheat intended for famine relief certainly deromanticizes consumption. As a final gesture, the filling of Asiatic bellies with the body of the trust’s representative presents a macabre solution to the crisis of overproduction by staging another version of “meat versus rice.” In the same way that the wheat oscillates between the abstract and the concrete, the Asiatic helps figure both utopian and dystopian narratives of monopoly capitalism. Evoking a myth of endless creation and recreation, a “Nirvanic” mysticism helps propagate a universal vision of industrialized wheat production. As part of the theme of troubled consumption, chronic Asiatic need alludes to the darker social consequences of global expansion and the crises brought on by capital’s falling average rate of profit.

**Adventures on the Coastal Frontier**

Novels about monopoly were also racial polemics, narratives of Anglo-Saxons imperiled by aliens. In Norris’s *The Octopus* and Ignatius Donnelly’s *Caesar’s Column* (1891), corporate oligarchies are controlled by Jews and the social landscape teems with diverse new immigrants. Jack London’s *The Iron Heel* (1908) departs from these by its unusual lack of anti-Semitism and by investing the Asiatic with villainous agency. Despite such variations, all of these works presented monopoly capitalism as a world of Orientalized social relations. They issued pessimistic verdicts on the future by drawing a resemblance between the prospective decline of the West and the permanent stagnation of Oriental civilizations. In *The Octopus*, the Asiatic is a metonym for the loss of autonomy experienced by individuals caught in the web of globalizing markets, whereas in the other novels the American masses have themselves begun to grow Asiatic visages. In naturalism’s degenerationist emplotment of history, the Jew is the personification of monopoly capital, but the Asiatic refers to a condition of extreme economic determination. This is why the Asiatic is a ubiquitous but not necessarily manifest presence in naturalism. Anti-
Semitic anticapitalism strikes at Jewish bodies, affording the satisfaction of transforming an abstracted power into something tangible: Donnelly’s Prince Cabano and Norris’s Berhman are made to suffer lingering, painful deaths. By contrast, the final solution of the Asiatic question tends in the opposite direction, toward instantaneous evisceration rather than materialization. This can be seen especially in the genocidal fantasies London entertains toward Chinese and Japanese populations in his socialist science fiction. That the Asiatic embodies but does not usually personify a logic of capitalism requires that we switch genres to view naturalism’s staging of Asiatic character.

To the extent that it is distinguishable from realism in the American context, naturalism more relentlessly interrogates the autonomy of the subject, devising characters who end up behaving more like animals or machines than human beings. Writing of the European novel, Georg Lukács reads in naturalism a reflection of the declining ability of bourgeois realism to represent history over the course of the nineteenth century. Lukács’s assessment of the critical failure of naturalism, despite its sincere protests against the sordid realities of capitalist life, can be understood as a literary extension of his philosophical theory of reification. For him, the tendency of later-nineteenth-century writers to portray history as an inorganic compound of inner modernity and outward exoticism, with Gustave Flaubert being an early example, reflects commodity fetishism’s growing divorce of subject and object in everyday life. In suggesting that Madame Bovary’s interior psychological explorations and Salammbô’s frozen archeological grandeur form two sides of single literary development, Lukács’s dialectical account of apparently disparate genres may help us contend with the taxonomic slipperiness of California writers whose naturalism was more often clothed in romantic and exotic formulas than in the conventions of the social urban novel.

A number of California adventure narratives include iconic scenes of Anglo-Saxon warriors in martial face-off with coolies. Here is one from Norris’s Moran of the “Lady Letty” (1899):

Wilbur caught his breath as the two stood there facing each other, so sharp was the contrast. The man, the Mongolian, small, weazened, leather-colored, secretive—a strange, complex creature, steeped in all the obscure mystery of the east, nervous, ill at ease; and the girl, the Anglo-Saxon, daughter of the Northmen, huge, blond, big-boned, frank, outspoken, simple of composition, open as the day, bareheaded, her great ropes of sandy hair falling over her breast and almost to the top of her knee boots. As he looked at the two, Wilbur asked himself where else but in California could such abrupt contrasts occur. Just as yellow peril discourse routinely installs both men and women as Anglo-Saxon representatives, the coolie is a figure that is neither fully male nor female. In this instance of cross-dressing, the feminine identity of the archetypal Anglo-Saxon heightens the civilizational vulnerability of “American manhood” confronted by Asiatic coolieism. In actual pitched battle, the opposition is no contest, but the Mongolian eventually carries the day through an underhanded murder of
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The Anglo-Saxon. “The only theme, when all is said and done, that keeps its seriousness for these California novelists,” wrote Edmund Wilson, “is the theme of class war. . . . The labor cause has been dramatized with more impact by these writers than it has been on the whole in the East. . . . This tradition dates from Henry George, who saw the swallowing of the whole state by capital accomplished in record time during the sixties and seventies of the last century.” If Wilson is right that California literature engages questions of class in a manner distinct from other regional literatures, in what way is Wilbur’s reflection on the California-specificity of the visual contrast between Anglo-Saxon and coolie a key example? The Octopus and McTeague may be Norris’s most well-known explorations of the problems of the corporation and of money, but we can see that his earlier, explicit interest in coolies already formulates some of the same concerns with the elusive forms of monopoly finance capitalism that are to be reiterated throughout his work. Despite the rapid growth of corporations in American life beginning with the railroad industry in 1850, Alan Trachtenberg writes, at the turn of the twentieth century the “faceless’ corporation and the ‘organization man’ had not yet arrived as public perceptions.” Norris’s range of economic writings suggests that Asiatic racial form in this era may have been an overlooked yet major site where corporate life was registered but not fully recognized, to use Trachtenberg’s words, except in the already outmoded language of individualism.

Moran of the “Lady Letty” tells the story of a San Francisco society dandy named Ross Wilbur who is kidnapped and pressed into service aboard a Chinese-operated fishing vessel. In the course of a voyage down the California coast to Magdelena Bay in Baja, the vessel rescues a tough female Anglo-Saxon seafarer named Moran from a floating wreck, of which she is the sole survivor. Ross and Moran develop a sympathy; they gain mastery over the Chinese crew members who are more easily cowed by nature’s tempests, combat Chinese pirates over a valuable piece of ambergris, and return triumphant to San Francisco. Wilbur and Moran make plans to continue a buccaneering life on the high seas, “filibustering” in Cuba, but the defeated pirate leader, Hoang, treacherously murders her despite having pledged his service and escapes unpunished to Chinatown.

Hoang’s easy camouflage by an urban scene in which “no one even noticed . . . his passage to the station” (250) and Moran’s striking outlandishness together certainly imply a racial allegory of modernization, in which, in London’s concurring words, those of “Saxon” lineage are “the last of the Mohegans.” As the last in a family of Viking explorers, Moran’s continued means of livelihood was, before her death, already subject to question. Employees of the Chinese Six Companies, the Chinese of the Bertha Millner are engaged in the harvesting of shark liver oil; their operation is dually illicit, because Chinese operators must engage a “white dummy” captain for the ship’s permit and because they plan to market the shark liver oil as cod liver oil. In one sense, Moran and the Chinese are alike in belonging to the informal fringes of American economic modernity. In another sense, Moran
and the Chinese signify opposite forms of economic organization. Moran is a marine pioneer without visible ties. Despite the fact that the pirates are obviously independent entrepreneurs, and that the seamen on the *Bertha Millner* have a financial stake in the operation’s profits, the text uniformly refers to them both as “coolies.” The racial opposition between the Anglo-Saxon and the coolie, therefore, also erects a dichotomy between independence and dependence, between individual and corporate models of economic existence.

Literally speaking, the only actual “coolie” in the text is Wilbur, who is involuntarily indentured by the Chinese Six Companies—until, that is, he internalizes his servitude as an adventure.\(^{45}\) Having to “work this boat ’long with the coolies” (152), the dandy is transformed with the donning of “oil skins and a sou’wester” (144). “It was Wilbur, and yet not Wilbur. In two minutes he had been, in a way, born again” (144). Later, his resemblance to his Chinese shipmates is even more complete when the heat impels him to trade his pocketknife for a “suit of jeans and wicker sandals, such as the coolies wore” (154). His startling reappearance in society after a long absence “dressed in a Chinaman’s blouse and jeans” (236) advertises the changes his experience has wrought. Moran can be read as a kind of *bildungsroman*, in which the pampered dandy is toughened into a buccaneer who by the end is eager to volunteer to “liberate” Cuba from the Spanish. Besides functioning to cultivate an imperialist masculinity suitable for the late 1890s (gained through an experiment with fighting and killing Chinese), the adventure of Magdelen Bay explores the tension in Asian-American relations between the principles of free will and external imposition, competition and combination. As the novel’s center of consciousness, Wilbur can shapeshift between Anglo-Saxon manhood and Asiatic coolieism, just as morally we see him negotiating between the rule of violence and the rule of law.

For all his infatuation with Moran and adventure, Wilbur has his doubts about the ethics of her piratical instincts and violating agreements. Their conflict with the Chinese beachcombers arises over the proper ownership of ambergris in a whale that the contracting parties have agreed to cooperate in stripping. The text emphasizes Chinese observance of agreements: “The three principals came to a settlement with unprecedented directness. Like all Chinamen, Hoang was true to his promises and he had already set apart three and a half barrels of spermaceti, ten barrels of oil, and some twenty pounds of bone as the schooner’s share in the transaction. There was no discussion over the matter. He called their attention to the discharge of his obligations, and hurried away to summon his men aboard and get the junk under way again” (194–95). Trouble arises when Moran notices the existence of ambergris after the division of spoils has already been agreed to, and hopes to appropriate the all of it. It occurs to Wilbur that “it was quite possible that at least two-thirds of the ambergris did belong to the beachcombers by right of discovery” (198), but Moran’s claim sets them on a collision course. Wilbur is eventually convinced by Moran’s assertion that “the stuff belongs to the strongest of us”
(211), but the accession to violence, leading to Moran’s ruthless torture of Hoang, suggests the poetic justice of Hoang’s revenge. On California’s postfrontier, it is Moran who represents the outdated rule of force, and the coolies who adhere to contracts.

The narrative is propelled by a series of unstable Asian-American business partnerships, reluctantly entered into by both sides, and easily abandoned or compromised: we witness this in the “white dummy” captain’s employment by the Chinese Six Companies and the ready betrayal of his post; Moran and Wilbur’s agreement to work with the crew of the Bertha Millner in Captain Kitchell’s place until the Chinese abandon ship out of fear of the oceanic unknown; Moran and Wilbur’s joint whaling project with the Chinese pirates, discussed earlier; and Moran’s final deal with the original crew to fight the pirates (she gets the ambergris worth $150,000 and promises $1000 to $1500 to each of the men). The instability of Asian-American partnerships is registered in the text’s continual puzzlement over what is voluntarily undertaken and what is forced. Moran and Wilbur’s debate over the fatal injury dealt to one of the Chinese on their side during the fight reflects the text’s concern with the question of free will that arises in the case of coolie subjectivity. Can a coolie undertake a contract freely? Despite having earlier asserted the irrelevance of agreements made with Chinese in their deal with Hoang, Moran now worries that they may have been wrong to bring Charlie into the quarrel, “only to have him killed” (226). Wilbur attempts to absolve his guilt in the matter by insisting on the fullness of Charlie’s personhood: “I didn’t force him to anything. I—we, that is—took the same chances” (226).

The power relationship between Americans and Asians in this joint venture to Mexico is prone to sudden reversal: Wilbur is abducted to supply extra muscle, yet soon his Chinese captors recognize his superior navigational skills and ask him and Moran to captain their ship. The relational instability is reflected in coolie character: coolies can be coercive and menacing, yet they are also easily abused into servility by tough-talking Anglo-Saxons. Charlie’s face reflects this flux, oscillating rapidly between gravity and hysteria (187). In a sense, the coolies are less like human characters than a kind of unmotivated movement, hence their swarming tendency. From Moran’s perspective, they are a kind of vermin: “Huh! More Chinamen; the thing is alive with coolies; she’s a junk” (191). Coolies resemble one of nature’s obstacles in that they might generate narrative conflict at one moment and turn out to be entirely forgettable at another. Despite the fact that Moran and Wilbur are aboard a ship full of Chinese, the two are described as being “left alone on the open Pacific” (173). Though the novel appears to confront its protagonists with the challenges of primitive survival, nature’s threats are only half-hearted. Moran of the “Lady Letty” self-consciously parodies the epic possibilities of Pacific adventure. Its short-distance voyage to Baja California and mild bay setting reflect the banal circumscriptions of “late imperial romance.” The decayed whale carcass available for easy looting marks a considerable distance from the original force of Herman
Melville’s leviathan. In the contrast between Moran’s passion for the sea and the coolies’ discomfiture on stormy waters, it is the Anglo-Saxon who is at home in nature, which is shown to be fast vanishing.

Imagistic juxtapositions of heroic warriors and diminutive coolies in California adventure fiction reflect naturalism’s generally typological rather than developmental, descriptive rather than narrative, mode of representing difference. While realist progression is developmental, naturalist degeneration is metamorphic. The scenic confrontation between Anglo-Saxon and coolie at Magdelena Bay communicates the snapshot possibility of American degeneration into coolieism: it is the racially imaged equivalent of the individual being sucked into a vortex. Despite the apparent contrast between the Anglo-Saxon and coolie, at a narrative level the adventure text insinuates the unreliability of identities. With a mere change of clothing, Wilbur can start to look like a coolie. Perhaps, in the end, coolies have no less developed interiors than most characters in naturalism, a literature whose impulse toward representing the socially marginal is rivaled only by its lack of differentiation between characters. But, as archetypally nonindividual agencies, indeed, as entities without independent agency, coolies eloquently embody the extremity of modernity’s dehumanization of character. They are a device that permits a concrete solution to the problem of abstraction. They are the necessary counterpart to naturalism’s representation of the determinative power of monopoly capitalism. The varying appearances of Asiatic form—which in one place figures as a vanishing standard of living and in another as an approaching bodily horde—ask that The Octopus and Moran of the “Lady Letty” be read as economic and racial versions of each other.

Notes

3. The key text that gives voice to the idea that the end of the nineteenth century also brings to a close the unique conditions of the American frontier is Frederick Jackson Turner’s “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” delivered as a lecture at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago before a group of historians, 12 July 1893; see his essay collected in The Early Writings of Frederick Jackson Turner (Madison, Wis., 1938).
5. In his study of how “savage war” substituted for “class war” in America, Richard Slotkin addresses the coincidence between the closure of the old “agrarian/artisanal/en-
trepreneurial” frontier with a crisis in American social and political history in which class conflict could no longer be disarmed by the frontier myth. In taking a continental view of American space, Slotkin privileges a discourse of savagery for providing the terms of representation for the Others of industrial modernity: strikers, the urban mob, etc. For him, the Spanish-American War and the war in the Philippines are logical extensions of the Indian wars; Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* (New York, 1992), 31, 51. Although complicating the convention of frontier violence by viewing it through the lens of U.S. imperial adventures in the period, Amy Kaplan emphasizes aspects of continuity between the victims of continental conquest and victims of imperialism, writing that the “spectacle of American manhood and nostalgia for the American past” denies “political agency and visibility to the subjects of the American empire”; Amy Kaplan, “Romancing the Empire: The Embodiment of American Masculinity in the Popular Historical Novel of the 1890s,” *American Literary History* 2 (Winter 1990): 661.

6. Justification for reading Ross within the discursive context of Chinese Asia-Pacific labor migration becomes even clearer when we compare his disquisition on Chinese immigration and Anglo-Saxon race suicide to the writings of Charles Pearson, an Australian author concerned with Chinese southward expansion who lamented the “unchangeable limits of the higher races.” In Pearson, as in Ross, these limits have to do with climatic adaptability, which prevent the Aryan race from being able to “stamp out or starve out all their rivals on the face of the earth”; see Charles Pearson, *National Life and Character: A Forecast* (London, 1893), 31.

7. In *The Law of Civilization and Decay*, Brooks Adams lays out the connections between the modern tendency of the West toward centralization and decline, and the rise of Asia in the world. Through the appreciation of gold, the value of the dollar has declined against Eastern currency, “and the effect is the same as though the tenacity of life of the Asiatic has been increased four-sixths.” “The cheapest form of labour is thus being bred on a gigantic scale, and this labour is being accelerated by an industrial development which is stimulated by eviction of the farmers, as the ‘industrial revolution’ was stimulated in England one hundred and thirty years ago”; Brooks Adams, *The Law of Civilization and Decay* (New York, 1896), 292. As Henry Adams comments to his brother after reading his book, “On your wording of your Law, it seemed to me to come out, in its first equation thus, in the fewest possible words: All civilization is Centralization. All Centralization is Economy. Therefore all Civilization is the survival of the most economical (cheapest). Darwin called it fittest, and in one sense fittest is the fittest word. Unfortunately it is always relative, and therefore liable to misunderstanding. Your other formula is more difficult. Under economic centralization, Asia is cheaper than Europe. The world tends to economical centralization. Therefore Asia tends to survive, and Europe to perish”; Adams, quoted in Beard, “Introduction,” *Civilization and Decay*, xliii-xlivi. Likewise, Jack London demonstrates a concern with the “shrinkage of the planet” as a result of the fact that the “favored portions of the earth are occupied” and there are no more places to explore, and because of the advances in technology annihilating “space and time” so that all parts of the world are “accessible and drawn . . . closer together”; see Jack London, “The Shrinkage of the Planet,” in *Revolution and Other Essays* (New York, 1910), 148, 155. Following Adams, London writes, “From man’s drawing the world closer and closer together, his own affairs and institutions have consolidated. Concentration may typify the chief movement of the age—concentration, classification, order; the reduction of friction between the parts of the social organism” (154). Significantly, the declaration that “in 1869 the East was made next door neighbor to the West” (146) inaugurates London’s narrative of planetary shrinkage.


11. For the degradation of work under monopoly capitalism, see Harry Braverman’s classic Labor and Monopoly Capital (New York, 1974).


13. For naturalism as a literature of market culture, see Walter Benn Michaels, The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism (Berkeley, 1987). For realism and naturalism as structured by the contradictions of class conflict and mass culture, see Amy Kaplan, The Social Construction of American Realism (Chicago, 1988). For naturalism as a literature of machine culture, see Mark Seltzer, Bodies and Machines (New York, 1992). My argument most resembles June Howard’s account of naturalism in relation to the increasing dominance of “market relations in a national and even global economy; and the presence of class struggle in a nation with a constantly increasing, largely immigrant urban proletariat that was both very vulnerable to the recurrent economic depressions and relatively visible to other classes”; see June Howard, Form and History in American Literary Naturalism (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1989), 71–72.

14. See Alexander Saxton, The Indispensable Enemy (Berkeley, 1971). Saxton argues that anti-Asianism was a symptom of a conservative mainstream labor movement whose craft-bias mobilized a racial and ethnic rhetoric to justify exclusion of the unskilled proletarian majority.


18. James Machor points to critics’ worry about the disjuncture between the final rhapsodic faith in the wheat and moral optimism, and the amoral determinism and pathos pervading the story of the ranchers and the railroad; see “Epic, Romance, and Norris’s The Octopus,” American Literary Realism 18, no. 1–2 (Spring–Autumn 1985): 42.

19. Donald Pizer represents the view of ’60s critics who viewed The Octopus as “more a novel about man’s relationship to nature than a story of man as a social being”; see Pizer, The Novels of Frank Norris (Bloomington, Ind., 1960), 121. Some of this earlier critical discussion is fascinating. In an intriguing reading of the novel’s theory of nature, James Folsom collapses the opposition between railroad and ranchers by showing how they both symbolize an animal nature at odds with the wheat’s vegetable nature. See Folsom, “The Wheat and the Locomotive: Norris and Naturalistic Esthetics,” in Yoshi-
nobu Hakutani and Lewis Fried, eds., American Literary Naturalism: A Reassessment (Heidelberg, 1975), 68–70.

20. See Kevin Starr’s introduction to Frank Norris, The Octopus (New York, 1986), xxv. Citations from Norris’s text will be taken from this edition.

21. The physical proximity of Bonneville and Guadalajara is a geographical invention of The Octopus that reflects the thematic importance of the U.S.-Mexico border to symbolic representations of Californian political economy.

22. I place “new immigrants” in quotes because The Octopus does not seem to differentiate recent European arrivals from Mexicans and Indians. To an extent, the basis of difference among the various social groupings in the novel is more consistently religious: Jews and Catholics against Protestants.

23. June Howard, American Literary Naturalism, 122–23, cites the exclusion of Chinese workers from the scene as part of the text’s erasure of the laborer in general. I approach a reading of Asian exclusion in the text differently.


25. Frank Norris, “The Frontier Gone At Last” (1902), in Frank Norris: Novels and Essays (New York, 1986), 1183. Norris’s reference to the U.S. marine suggests that the event he has in mind is American military participation in the suppression of the 1901 Boxer Rebellion.

26. In a March 1899 letter to William Dean Howells, who had just reviewed McTeague favorably in Literature, Norris wrote: “I think there is a chance for somebody to do some great work with the West and California as background, and which will be at the same time thoroughly American. My idea is to write three novels around the one subject of Wheat. First, a story of California (the producer), second, a story of Chicago (the distributor), third, a story of Europe (the consumer) and in each to keep to the idea of this huge Niagara of wheat rolling from West to East. I think a big Epic trilogy could be made out of such a subject, that at the same time would be modern and distinctly American”; Norris quoted in Starr, introduction to Octopus, vii–iii.

27. In a virtuoso reading of The Octopus, Walter Benn Michaels keenly observes the novel’s concern with consumption, noting the exchangeability of Asiatic hunger and corporate greed as figures of consumer desire. See Michaels, Gold Standard, 185–86. Michaels’s approach to consumption, however, is to oppose it to production and distribution, and to note the extent to which the latter are displaced by the question of desire. Michaels’s handling of production and consumption as binary, rather than relational, terms reduces his political stake to that of showing how the agrarian producer ethos of the novel ends up being overwhelmed by the logics of consumer capitalism.


29. Carl Van Doren writes: “What was elemental in Frank Norris became abysmal in Jack London. He carried the cult of red blood in literature to an extreme at which it began to sink into the ridiculous, as in his lineal descendants of the moving pictures”; see The American Novel (New York, 1940). Alfred Kazin writes that London’s “thick slabs of bleeding meat were essentially only a confession of despair”; see On Native Grounds (New York, 1942), 115. The wide impact of Upton Sinclair’s muckraking exposure of the
meat industry, compared with the California socialist author’s other endeavors, might also be reconsidered in this light. Though *The Jungle* is set in Chicago, it should be considered another example of California naturalism. London’s publicity on behalf of the novel was instrumental to its reception. On the connection between London and Sinclair, see Philip Foner, *Jack London: American Rebel* (New York, 1947), 80.


32. Because the eastern United States was already glutted with Great Plains wheat, California tapped foreign markets for wheat sales, mainly Great Britain. Another factor was that routes to distant markets were already defined during the Civil War, when California was forced to buy manufactures from Europe. The wheat economy was based on California’s own indigenous sources of capital and also British capital; see Henderson, *Fictions of Capital*, 5.


34. See Moishe Postone, “Anti-Semitism,” for the logic of national socialism’s figuration of the Jew as the abstract form of capital that was reflected in the way the death camps could be understood to have sought the reduction of exchange value to use value.


36. V.L. Parrington writes that naturalism’s discovery of background, environment, and the economic basis of society depicts characters as “figures of men and women encompassed by the great stream, carried along on a resistless current”; see *The Beginning of Critical Realism in America, 1860–1920* (New York, 1930), 180–81. Lee Clark Mitchell writes that realist characters manage to withstand forces that pressure them into action, while naturalist characters always accede to their strongest desire whatever it is they resolve to do; see *Determined Fictions: American Literary Naturalism* (New York, 1989), 9. Contrasting market culture and machine culture—and realism and naturalism—Seltzer argues that what is a sign of agency in the former is a sign of automaticism in the latter; see Seltzer, *Bodies*, 17–18.


42. For a different account of racial representation and capital, see Henderson, *Fictions of Capital*, 21.

43. Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York, 1982), 5.


45. Unlike the thousands of Chinese transported as contract labor to Cuba and Peru in the nineteenth century, the Chinese arrived in the United States as free labor in an
economic and legal sense. Once here, however, they were proletarianized and racially excluded as “coolies”; see Lee, *Orientals*, 58.

46. For the characterization of the genre of “late imperial romance” as reflecting the desire for re-enchanting a globe already thoroughly mapped, see John McClure, *Late Imperial Romance* (London, 1994).