

The Biomatters of American Modernity

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The Birth of the Biomaterial Imagination	1
--	---

CHAPTER ONE

“A Fluid Sort of Organism”: Jack London’s Biomaterial Imagination and Capital Punishment	40
---	----

CHAPTER TWO

Nonhuman Liability: Charles Chesnutt, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., and the Racial Discourses of Tort Law	104
---	-----

CHAPTER THREE

Naturalism, Public Health, and Feminist Entomology	149
--	-----

CHAPTER FOUR

Keeping a Novel Alive: Edith Wharton’s Biotextual Imagination	207
---	-----

WORKS CITED	265
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INTRODUCTION

The Birth of the Biomaterial Imagination

A hospital patient on life support becomes a “mere bundle of senseless reflexes” (Wharton, *Fruit of the Tree* 432); a technology of modern warfare reduces an invading army to globs of “homogeneous protoplasm” (Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee*); a prisoner awaiting execution experiences his body as “a palpitating mass of formless life” (London *Letters* 132); an economically dependent housewife becomes a “mere floating stomach” (Gilman, “Parasitism” 263); workers on a ship are “crawling yeast” and “elemental stuff” (London, *The Sea Wolf* 15, 40); a crowd of women on the street are a “writhing mass” (Glasgow, *Phases* 244); the law treats a human body as mindless matter in motion (Chesnutt, *The Colonel’s Dream*); a child is a “soft anonymous morsel of humanity” (Wharton, *Backward Glance* 432); the lives of men are nothing but “mere animalculae” (Norris, *The Octopus* 634).

These descriptions are drawn from a swath of popular American literary fiction written between 1880 and 1930, a historical period whose dominant metanarratives do not readily account for the prevalence of such oozing, slimy, particulate visions of human life. This period, of course, spans the nation’s “search for order” following the Civil War (Wiebe), the rise of scientific management, of Taylorist production, and the “incorporation of America” (Trachtenberg); it spans the moment of rugged individualism, of the West Cure, of a hunger for “real life” and “authentic experience” in an increasingly ephemeral society of mass culture (Lears); it spans the moment of American imperialism and “transatlantic crossings” (Rodgers), of civilizing missions, the closing of the Frontier, and Indian cultural assimilation; it spans the “nadir” of American race relations and the birth of Jim Crow (Logan), of first-wave feminism and the Social Gospel; and it spans the height of American literary realism and naturalism, those

movements so often characterized as symptoms of the era, technologies of regulation that aimed to “organize, re-form, and control the social world” (Kaplan, *Realism* 10) and “manag[e] late nineteenth-century ‘crises’ of production by the invention of a flexible and totalizing machine of power,” (Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines* 44).¹

What, then, should we make of these renderings of life distilled to its bare material substance—neither organized nor individuated, neither rationally administered nor functionally autonomous, neither quite synthetic nor quite natural? This dissertation foregrounds these overlooked but ubiquitous figures to theorize what I call American literature’s *biomaterial imagination*. I use this term to refer to a mode of understanding human life as reducible to sheer biological substrate that germinated out of the cross-pollinations between literary fiction and the transatlantic human sciences during the latter half of the nineteenth century.² Rather than simply reflecting scientific theories of the era, however, I argue that this representational shift toward the body’s base material properties constituted a fundamentally new way of conceptualizing life as an object of governmentality. At the same moment a host of state-sanctioned initiatives aimed at regulating the population’s vital capacities began to situate the body as raw material that might be directly administered and manipulated,³ American writers deployed a poetics of radical reductionism that both facilitated and challenged these initiatives in creative and surprising ways.

¹ The decades straddling the turn of the century are most often characterized by a broad-scale dialectical negotiation between, on the one hand, the burgeoning forces of corporate and industrial America’s “search for order,” which emphasized the virtues of “continuity and regularity, functionality and rationality, administration and management” (Wiebe 295), and, on the other hand, a range of populist and anti-modernist responses to this ordering impulse, which attempted to safeguard the integrity of the autonomous individual through the recovery of “the strenuous life” and rugged individualism. This tension can be traced across a range of recent and midcentury cultural histories of the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era. Of particular importance are Richard Hofstadter’s *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (1955), Robert H. Wiebe’s *The Search for Order 1877-1920* (1967), Alan Trachtenberg’s *The*

² The word “biomatter” is of a relatively recent coinage, having only come into use within the last half century. I deploy the term anachronistically, however, because of the provocative ambiguity it contains: biomatter simply refers to matter of biological origin, either living or dead, synthetic or naturally occurring.

³ If, in 1818, when Mary Shelley published *Frankenstein*, the possibility that the human could be reduced to its bare material components and then rearticulated in different configurations seemed distinctly monstrous, by the end of

In the chapters that follows, I read a range of authors in the context of specific biopolitical institutions that their fictions had recently begun to anatomize: Jack London's representations of the American prison system and technologies of capital punishment, Charles Chesnutt's fictional engagements with tort law and theories of legal liability, Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Ellen Glasgow's work on the American public health movement, and Edith Wharton's writings on the ethics of euthanasia and life support systems. On the one hand, I show how these authors drew upon biomaterial conceptions of the body in order to challenge what they viewed as the limiting conceptions of the human (whether as a racialized, gendered, or autonomous entity) being propagated in the particular milieus their fictions engaged. On the other hand, however, their biomaterial reductions frequently positioned *particular* lives as ontologically indeterminate and thus potentially less-than-human. By publicizing a new narrative of life as reducible, in its most elementary form, to a kind of pliant, undifferentiated biomatter, American fiction both sowed the imaginative seeds for the violent racial purification projects of the twentieth century, and, at the same time, provoked new ways of theorizing the human that rejected the dream of purity at the level of race and species alike.

Attending to the narrative dynamics of the biomaterial imagination involves challenging certain entrenched assumptions about literature's role as a technology of discipline and domination. Scholars have long held that realism and naturalism inherited from nineteenth-century science the task of making the human subject intelligible (and thus governable) through

the century, this had become a taken-for-granted assumption for imagining the human altered, improved, or perfected in a variety of scientific contexts. H.G. Wells, in his essay "The Limits of Individual Plasticity" (1895), for instance, writes, "We overlook only too often the fact that a living being may also be regarded as raw material, as something plastic, something that may be shaped and altered, that this, possibly, may be altered and that eliminated, and the organism as a whole developed far beyond its apparent possibilities" (36). Additionally, we might think of University of Chicago biologist Jacques Loeb, whose dream of developing what he called "a technology of living substance" that could "get the life phenomena under our control," pioneered biology's engineering ideal in the late nineteenth century (Loeb qtd. in Pauly 4-5). See Philip J. Pauly's *Controlling Life: Jacques Loeb and the Engineering Ideal in Biology* (1987).

techniques of classification and surveillance.⁴ By contrast, my readings attend to the uncanny moments when the scientific gaze distorts to the point of unrecognizability the very subjects it intends to make legible, and when efforts to define and isolate the essence of “humanness” end up denaturing that very category by rendering it indistinguishable from other forms of animal, vegetable, and mineral life. In the works I examine, condemned prisoners, emancipated slaves, hospitalized paralytics, and female domestic laborers inhabit this liminal space. Yet far from excluding these subjects from the sociopolitical realm, their biomaterial reductions provide the occasion for imagining forms of agency, responsibility, and collectivity, unavailable to the liberal ideal of the autonomous sovereign subject.

As a correlative to its historical claims, *Biomatters* questions the current antagonism in the humanities between poststructuralist and materialist methodologies. Many scholars in the fields of biopolitics and new materialism have heralded recent attention to the concepts of life and matter as a welcome return to “the real” long held in abeyance during poststructuralism’s preoccupation with language and mediation. My work disrupts this (false) opposition by demonstrating that the very notion of an irreducible vital substance is *itself* an invention of historically situated representational strategies precipitated out of the encounter between scientific and literary discourse at the turn of the century. The resources of both poststructuralism and new materialism can be brought productively to bear on biopolitical critique provided we

⁴ This dissertation takes issue with a wide range of realist and naturalist criticism that forwards some version of the “social control” thesis: the argument that literary works participate in the project of disciplining readers into the hegemonic thought-styles and ideological frameworks underwriting the period of the text’s production—be it heteronormativity, white supremacy, or market logic, or some version of each—either through interpellations of form and plot or through the visibilization of particular deviant or aberrant “types.” I dispute these claims predominantly on the grounds of their totalizations. A few notable mentions of this trend that are addressed in more detail later are June Howard’s *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism* (1985), Walter Benn Michaels’ *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (1987), Amy Kaplan’s *The Social Construction of American Realism* (1988), Mark Seltzer’s *Bodies and Machines* (1992), and Dana Seitler’s *Atavistic Tendencies: The Culture of Science in American Modernity* (2008).

resist a certain fetishization of materiality that is currently taking hold of certain strains of humanities thinking, which I elaborate later in this introduction.

The title of this project has three distinct but overlapping registers. *The Biomatters of American Modernity* refers to a particular aesthetic mode (a way of representing “life itself”), a particular historical situation (the emergence of specific nineteenth-century biopolitical initiatives), and a particular theoretical problematic (the resurgence of interest in materiality in humanities scholarship). In the remainder of this introduction, I will flesh out the claims outlined above by addressing each register separately.

I. Biomaterial Aesthetics

The shadow of Charles Darwin looms large over the study of late nineteenth-century literary representations of the human. The hypothesis implicit in *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and elaborated explicitly in *The Descent of Man* (1871) is of course that humans are evolutionarily continuous with the full spectrum of organic life on the planet, distinct only by degree rather than kind. Darwin’s metaphysical flattening, as Freud put it, not only “robbed man of his peculiar privilege of having been specially created,” but also “relegated him to a descent from the animal world, implying an ineradicable animal nature in him” (*Introductory Lectures* 285). For naturalist fiction especially, argues Donald Pizer, “a half-understood Darwinism...supplied one core of metaphor and symbol” to mediate this conceptual upheaval (18): the human subject engaged in a perpetual struggle against the beast or animalistic brute within. Famous scenes of physical atavistic regression in Frank Norris’s *Vandover and the Brute* (1915) and Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild* (1903), extended allegories of bestial practices at the heart of modern civilization in Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906) or Norris’s *The Octopus* (1901), as well as the metaphors of “the animal within” as that which is secret or hidden in

Henry James's "Beast in the Jungle" or Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) each stage the new dramas of animality as both constitutive of yet irreducible to the human subject made available in a post-Darwinian universe.⁵

For American literary critics, the animal/human dyad provides a useful hermeneutic lens for interpreting the popular texts of the period. June Howard and Dana Seitler, two critics whose work I turn to in more detail in Chapter One, identify the central drama of the naturalist text as that of literally or figuratively casting out the animalistic Other within. Commenting on Frank Norris's degeneration narratives, Howard remarks, "If these invasions of the brute into the realm of the human being are possible, civilization and stable identity seem at best provisional privileges, to be guarded at all costs against the most minute disruptions of social order and self-control" (393). Indeed, guarding the stable human subject from the ever-lurking beast within is precisely what Seitler, in her study *Atavistic Tendencies: The Culture of Science in American Modernity* (2008), argues is the function of the fin-de-siècle obsession with the trope of animality and its reversion-to-type narratives: "atavism operated in part as a policing mechanism that fixed the human body within readable signs of aberrance," she writes, "[c]riminals were said to have ears akin to those of lemurs; prostitutes and lesbians, genitalia like that of orangutans; sexual perverts, the brows of apes" (7). Like Howard, Seitler reads the cultural production of animality within the human as a project of rendering difference visible so it can be excised or quarantined in the form of racial, sexual, or social deviance.

⁵ A recent persuasive account of the emergence of the animal at the heart of late nineteenth-century understandings of identity is Michael Lundblad's *The Birth of a Jungle: Animality in Progressive-Era U.S. Literature and Culture* (2013), which documents what he calls "the discourse of the jungle" in turn of the century American culture. Lundblad defines the discourse of the jungle as an uneasy synthesis of Darwinian and Freudian orientations that operated to "associate animality with the supposedly essential, biological instincts for heterosexuality in the name of reproduction and for violence in the name of survival" (4-5).

While these approaches are indispensable for grasping literature's historical role in what Seitler calls "the project to make the human subject knowable" (5), I want to suggest that the Darwinian trope of animality has so dominated the discourse of embodiment during this period that it has eclipsed the presence of other intellectual traditions that played an equally significant role in influencing how the human was represented in literary texts, and in doing so, has blocked the path to other ways of reading that do not necessarily align with the kind of isolation and containment model frequently accompanying the figure of the "beast within."

A clear instance of this eclipsing can be found in an early, canonical essay on naturalism by Malcolm Cowley entitled "'Not Men': A Natural History of American Naturalism" (1947), which provides an excellent primer to the materialist reductions of persons this project explores, but fails to follow through on its insights, subsuming the specificity of these biomaterial visions into an abstract discussion of animality:

Instead of moving from the simple to the complex, as Herbert Spencer tells us that everything does in this world, the Naturalists keep moving from the complex to the simple, by a continual process of reduction. They speak of the nation as 'the tribe,' and a moment later the tribe becomes the pack. Civilized man becomes a barbarian or a savage, the savage becomes a brute, and the brute is reduced to its chemical elements (227).

Cowley invokes this example to illustrate what he calls a "favorite theme in Naturalist fiction," namely "the beast within" (226). Yet notice how the passage runs together at least three senses of "reduction": an ethnographic sense in which the modern space of the nation becomes the primitive space of the "tribe," a pseudo-Darwinian sense in which "civilized man" devolves into a "brute," and a material sense in which the body of the brute "is reduced to its chemical elements." Cowley's endpoint in the elemental raises the question as to whether naturalism's reductive materialism can truly be assimilated to the logic of animality. If the animal/human dyad in naturalist criticism tends to preserve the figure of a "stable" human subject as that which

needs guarding from the beast within, then perhaps contained in Cowley's series of reductions is a way to move beyond this anthropocentric framework altogether. What would it mean, in other words, to conceive of naturalist fiction as one whose object, truly, is "Not Men"?

Cowley's gateway into the realm of "chemical elements" is Émile Zola, a writer famous for pioneering the kinds of biomaterial reductions of persons this project seeks to track. Zola once described himself as depicting "people completely dominated by their nerves and blood, without free will, drawn into each action of their lives by the inexorable laws of their physical nature" (qtd in Bloom 1). In his naturalist manifesto, *The Experimental Novel* (1880), Zola appeals to novelists to apply the "experimental method" of his intellectual idol, the physiologist Claude Bernard, to the task of fiction writing. The role of the novelist, Zola believed, was to reveal the way environmental and social forces determine individuals in a manner absolutely homologous to how Bernard's experimental physiology revealed the physiochemical phenomena determining the body's vital processes. In his 1865 treatise, *Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine*, Bernard argued that every feature of organic life—from the highest, most abstract form of thought to the lowest, most primitive act of single-cell digestion—is the result of fully calculable, entirely deterministic material processes that only require mapping via the rigors of the scientific method to be fully understood. In fact, Bernard went even further, arguing not only for the absolute continuity of human and nonhuman life with respect to their determination by base material process, but saw no fundamental difference between organic and inorganic forms in this regard. "[T]he behavior of living bodies, as well as the behavior of inorganic bodies," he writes, "is dominated by a necessary determinism linking them with the conditions of a purely physio-chemical order" (61).

Bernard's most infamous legacy to literary history is his unwavering determinism, a charge frequently imputed to naturalistic writing as a whole.⁶ However, it is worth noting how productively defamiliarizing Bernard's vision of the human actually is. "It is our sole concern to study phenomena," he writes in the *Introduction*, "to learn their material conditions and manifestations, and to determine the laws of those manifestations," yet "as the essence of things must always remain unknown, we can learn only relations, and phenomena are merely the results of relations. The properties of living bodies are revealed only through reciprocal organic relations" (66). Life, for Bernard, is nothing but the manifestation of phenomena, yet phenomena themselves have no stable essence—they are the result of the body's material conditions, which are inevitably forms of "internal" and "external" relations. Phenomena change as relations change. The condition of possibility for Bernard's holistic determinism, we might say, is a thoroughgoing commitment to the radical *indeterminacy* of phenomena themselves. The human, as a collection of relationally contingent phenomena, has no stable form: "It is impossible to imagine a body wholly isolated in nature," writes Bernard, "it would no longer be real, because there would be no relation to manifest its existence" (71). Far from protecting the human against what Howard calls "the most minute disruptions of social order and self-control," Bernard's vision situates the "the self" as precisely the *result* of a disruption from an impersonal, physiochemical outside. Such a disruption, we might say, is the *only* way the body attains existence in the first place. Relations, for Bernard, are thus radically anterior to essence. If this ontology precipitates a kind of determinism, it is one in which bodies are inextricably bound up

⁶ The charge of crude determinism is everywhere in what we might call the "first wave" of naturalist criticism, such as the work of V.L. Parrington and Donald Pizer. Within the revisionist or "second wave" of criticism contemporaneous with the new historicism of the 1980s, Lee Clark Mitchell's *Determined Fictions: American Literary Naturalism* (1989) offers the most thoroughgoing attention to the term, arguing from a narratological perspective that the charge of determinism fails to take into account the way naturalistic "agency" always emerges retroactively, in the act of narrative itself.

with their organic and inorganic milieu in ways that challenge what it would mean to be an autonomous or “self-controlled” agent in the first place.⁷

In Chapter Two, we will see how Charles Chesnutt takes up this account of the human as relationally constituted through its environment to think through the problem of legal liability in the late nineteenth century. Chesnutt, like Bernard, argues against the possibility of imagining bodies “wholly isolated in nature,” a presupposition he attributes to the emerging theory of negligence as it was theorized by Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. Instead, like Bernard, Chesnutt conceives of both bodies and their material surroundings as contingent and unstable phenomena, whose essences change as they interface with one another. And like Bernard, Chesnutt understands this position as enabling a more systematic and rigorous way of accounting for the overdetermination of effects within a system. For Chesnutt, Holmes’s positing of a metaphysical human subject as the center of action in his theory of legal responsibility *obscures* the complex networks of relations through which harms materialize and get distributed to different sections of the population. Chesnutt’s recovery through his fiction of what I call a theory of “nonhuman liability” imagines the body politic along the lines of Cowley’s “chemical elements,” as impersonal matter in motion. In doing so, however, his aim is not to disavow the possibility of agency in favor of a sheer mechanistic determinism but to multiply the visibility of agents within the legal system to make a more equitable account of liability possible.

⁷ Bernard’s account of “phenomena” resonates with a number of recent new materialist thinkers who have endeavored to theorize forms of agency beyond the human. In *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, for instance, Karan Barad explicitly refers to properties that become legible in relation to others as “phenomena.” As she puts it, “[t]he primary ontological unit is not independent objects with independently determinate boundaries and properties,” but “rather *phenomena*,” meaning “the *ontological* inseparability of agentially intra-acting components” (33). She goes on to explain, “[t]he neologism “intra-action” *signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies*. That is, in contrast to the usual “interaction,” which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action. It is important to note that the “distinct” agencies are only distinct in a relational, not an absolute, sense, that is, *agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don’t exist as individual elements*” (ibid). This account also resonates with work by Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett, and Manuel DeLanda.

Along with Claude Bernard, two other nineteenth-century scientists provided the authors in this study with the basic vocabulary for their biomaterial aesthetics: Ernst Haeckel and Herbert Spencer, the latter of whom I address in the Interlude between Chapters One and Two. Haeckel's work as a biologist, naturalist, philosopher, and artist has largely been forgotten by cultural historians because of the ways his polygenic theories of racial descent (long disputed by Darwin and others) were taken up by nineteenth-century racial scientists and later, German National Socialists.⁸ However, Haeckel's writings were also extremely influential in reimagining the human body as an aggregate of particulate matter. At the center of his thought was the principle of *monism*, what he describes as the "conviction that there live 'one spirit in all things,' and that the whole cognizable world is constituted, and has been developed, in accordance with one fundamental law" ("Monism"). Haeckel called this law "The Law of Substance," a "cosmic law" that "establishes the eternal persistence of matter and force" (*Riddle* 3). Matter, for Haeckel, is not distinct from life or spirit; rather, according to the monistic doctrine, "an immaterial living spirit is just as unthinkable as a dead, spiritless material; the two are inseparably combined in every atom" ("Monism"). The Law of Substance is thus radically anti-anthropomorphic: "We cannot draw a sharp line of distinction between [inorganic and organic nature]," writes Haeckel, "any more than we can recognize an absolute distinction between the animal and vegetable kingdom, or between the lower animals and man" ("Monism"). Humanity, by this account, *is* a biomaterial aggregate of living atoms, "and as our mother earth is a mere speck in the sunbeam in the illimitable universe, so man himself is but a tiny grain of protoplasm in the perishable framework of organic nature" (*Riddle* 12).

⁸ Haeckel was also the innovator of the now-discredited recapitulation theory, that "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," or the idea that the development of the individual from birth to death mirrors the evolutionary development of man as a species. This theory was readily taken up by nineteenth-century ethnography to explain what was perceived as the childlike qualities of indigenous cultures, and thus was also used to justify the colonial and imperial projects to which such groups were subjected.

All the authors featured in this study read Haeckel, either directly or secondhand,⁹ but it was Jack London who drew most directly from the biologist's biomaterial aesthetics. In a letter to his friend, Cloudesley Johns, London writes, "It is the common belief that death is the correlative of life, that whatsoever lives must die. Yet this is not so. Why the life cells...lived when your ancestors were fishes in the sea, when they were reptiles in the dirt, when sex was unknown, when they were nothing but palpitating masses of formless life" (*Letters* 132). Like Chesnutt's materialist reductions, however, London's work invokes Haeckel's elision of the organic and inorganic in favor of a pulsing, vital substance for unique and counterintuitive ends. As I describe in Chapter One, London's biomaterial imagination develops in response to a specific biopolitical problematic: the moment at the turn of the century when capital punishment technologies begin to take the vital capacities of the human body as their new epistemological objects. For London, the Haeckelian possibility that life might lie dormant or suspended within different forms of organic and inorganic matter becomes a way to imagine modes of evasion from carceral capture that could only be expressed in the realm of fiction.

In the last decade, American literary criticism has begun to attend to the kinds of materialist reductions of persons that I am calling the biomaterial imagination, and my work here builds from them in ways I clarify below.¹⁰ In his study *American Poetic Materialism from*

⁹ Haeckel is cited directly in Charles Chesnutt's 1904 short story, "Baxter's Procrustes." Edith Wharton encountered Haeckel through Vernon Kellogg's popular synthesizing work, *Darwinism Today* (1970). For Wharton's influence, see Paul Ohler's *Edith Wharton's Evolutionary Conception: Darwinian Allegory in the Major Novels* (2006).

¹⁰ A relevant touchstone here is Monique Allewaert's *Ariel's Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics* (2013). Allewaert's study brings to light "a materialist tradition in which the body (animal or vegetable) is invaded, rendered in parts, and otherwise deranged" that she argues developed in the tropical plantation spaces of eighteenth and early nineteenth-century American colonies (3). This materialist vision—in which bodies become ontologically entangled with their environment, persist in a state of fragmentation, or become or agentially networked to nonhuman forces—constitutes what Allewaert calls "a minoritarian and anticolonial mode of personhood" through which Afro-Americans "gained power through their recognition and exploitation of human and parahuman beings' relations with nonhuman forms" (2, 7). Premises regarding the body's potential for disaggregation, if "minoritarian" during the Enlightenment, were much more commonplace by the close of the nineteenth century. Thus, while I draw from the theoretical tools in Allewaert's study, I am less sanguine than she

Whitman to Stevens (2014), for instance, Mark Noble uncovers a tradition of what he terms late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century “atomist poetics” that germinates from the Lucretian premise that the basis of all human experience is grounded in the movements of particulate matter (2). “Whether we specify this material ground as a field of atoms or a bundle of neurons,” writes Noble, “the Lucretian thesis demonstrates that the patterns of organization we think of as persons are in fact aleatory events tied to a physical substrate—irremediably contingent, historical, finite” (ibid). What unites the materialist imaginations in his study, Noble argues, is the assumption “that grounding any discussion of what constitutes human experience in its material components opens avenues for new models of that experience” (ibid). And yet therein is the rub, or what Noble calls, the “aporia” of atomistic poetics: in positing a material basis for experience, materialists expose themselves to the risk of *dissolving* the very experiential ground upon which they stand.

Because materialism insists on models of subjectivity that jettison transcendent axioms and idealist reifications, its practitioners are tasked with accounting for the structures and assumptions that tend to fill the ensuing conceptual void. [The] coherence [of materialist subjects] seems to depend, if we look closely, on the addition of special discursive ingredients that distinguishes one critical practice from another. A common materialist paradox ensues. To account for such an addition means to concede that materiality gets one only so far in any attempts to rethink experience—that the alterity of the objective world still requires speculative mediation (25).

Noble provides an astute diagnosis of the materialist paradox at the heart of atomist poetics, and his readings of Emerson, Whitman, James, Santayana, and Stevens reveal both the difficulties and productivities of their attempts to do away with a transcendental subject as the locus of experience and perception.

about the kinds of subversive or anti-hegemonic possibilities reductive materialism makes available for subaltern subjects given the range of biopolitical institutional settings I am demonstrating it was also deployed.

The authors in my study also wrestle with the problem of negotiating between “a materiality that achieves a determinate view of the world and a materiality that dissolves the subject who does the viewing” (Noble 5). Where my project parts ways with Noble’s is the latter’s assumption that such problems are primarily aesthetic or philosophical issues rather than political—or, in this case, *biopolitical*.¹¹ One of the central premises of this dissertation is that the question of whether, at what point, and under what conditions the material components of the body become or cease to become human life is precisely what is at stake in a range of late nineteenth-century biopolitical initiatives. In Chapter Four, for instance, I read Edith Wharton’s 1907 novel *The Fruit of the Tree* for the way it places the problem of the body’s ineluctable grounding in materiality explicitly in the context of nineteenth-century debates over medical euthanasia, whether assisted suicide should count as murder or a merciful easing of suffering. When wealthy heiress Bessy Westmore is suddenly paralyzed during a horse-riding accident, her personhood is reduced to sheer physical substance, “a mere bundle of senseless reflexes” (432), which renders her desires increasingly opaque to the individuals tasked with caring for her: is Bessy clinging to life with every ounce of will or begging to be put out of her misery? Put in Noble’s terms, Wharton’s novel recognizes that Bessy’s alterity *requires* a kind of speculative mediation: in order to justify treating her one way or the other, the novel’s characters are forced

¹¹ Although quite dissimilar to Noble’s work in style and argument, Branka Arsić’s recent study, *Bird Relics: Grief and Vitalism in Thoreau* (2016), is also remarkably reticent to countenance particular nineteenth-century theories of life and vitality as *at all* related to the period’s biopolitics. Arsić rigorously differentiates between what she calls Thoreau’s “vital materialism,” in which matter “is always vitalized, life being indistinguishable from the incarnated and the embodied” (124), and a distinct strain of Western vitalism descending from Aristotle to Leibniz to Kant that views vitality as an *immaterial* force distinct from yet moving through inert matter. Thus, where the latter view insists upon the difference between life and matter, the former, Thoreau’s, insists that “[a]ll life is germinal matter,” and thus that “[e]verything becomes alive even if not all life is organic” (Arsić 126, 124). This claim for the ubiquity of life will allow Arsić to argue that the vitalism of Thoreau and his likeminded peers “had nothing to do with what, in the wake of Foucault’s analysis, became known as the biopolitical organization of power” (140). “At the heart of the biopolitics that culminated in Nazism one finds death, not life, in complete opposition to the vitalisms to which I refer, which were formulated in radical resistance to any hierarchization and normativization of life, working toward a philosophy of life that is immanently constituted by the anomalous and the strange” (141). I find it strange in a work so attuned to the *impurity* of life, its perpetual constitution through an inanimate outside, that Arsić would insist so adamantly upon Thoreau’s purity from the contaminations of the biopolitical.

to impute a coherent intentionality to Bessy's biomaterial presence. And yet, as soon as the intervention of an external authority *decides* upon the situation, Bessy's alterity is nullified. Wharton's novel, in other words, stages precisely the "addition of special discursive ingredients" that Noble argues marks the failure of a truly rigorous atomist poetics. For Wharton, however, this philosophical aporia has distinctly biopolitical consequences: the confirmation of a coherent subjectivity will *always* depend upon a speculative supplement that simultaneously deforms or denatures it, a consequence *The Fruit of the Tree* dramatizes sharply.

II. Historical Biomatters

The Biomatters of American Modernity thus not only refers to a specific way of conceptualizing bodies as material entities but also to how this conceptualization became an explicit *matter of concern* for a set of institutions oriented toward the government of life in the latter part of the nineteenth century. I emphasize the historical specificity of these institutions because while my project draws significantly from the concept of biopolitics as it has been developed by Foucault and others, it also challenges what is frequently presented as a teleological trajectory in which the historical separation between *bios* and *zoē* (qualified life and life "as such")¹² terminates ineluctably in the concentration camps of World War II. What a careful analysis of American literature's biomaterial imagination reveals is that the palpitating blobs, crawling yeasts, writhing masses, and undifferentiated life scattered across the most popular works of this period are *not* assimilable to what Agamben calls "bare life," "life unworthy of being lived" (Agamben *Homo Sacer* 136-143). Rather, for the writer's in this study,

¹² Agamben's distinction, outlined in the opening pages of *Homo Sacer* (1998), goes like this: "The Greeks had no single term to express what we mean by the word 'life.' They used two terms that, although traceable to a common etymological root, are semantically and morphologically distinct: *zoē*, which expressed the simply fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and *bios*, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group (1).

the body's grounding in an elemental substrate enables new ways of imagining evasion, collectivity, responsibility, and agency from *within* the context of biopolitical capture.

Biopolitics, of course, is Foucault's term to denote the broad reconfiguration of Western power relations beginning at the close of the eighteenth century, in which the totality of the human life processes—sex, labor, reproduction, illness, mortality—comes under the increasing administrative control of the liberal state and its adjoining institutions. A closely correlated network of knowledge production and technological practices, integrating fields such as medicine, law, sociology, public health, statistics, population studies, and urban planning, biopolitics is born out of the matrix that constitutes its primary object of analysis, what Foucault, in his 1975-1976 lectures at the Collège de France, calls “a new body, a multiple body,” “man-as-species” (242). Working in tandem with the localized, individuating techniques of corporeal discipline, biopolitical strategies are *massifying*: they speak in terms of broad-scale, long-duration tendencies, probabilities, averages, and norms exemplified in the population as a whole, and thus, according to Foucault, open up a new array of possible interventions for the art of governance.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the pre-modern problem of identifying and guarding against extraterritorial threats to sovereign autonomy (epidemics, invasion, war, trade) is gradually supplemented by the task of quantifying, predicting, and regulating the range of “aleatory” effects endemic to the biological functioning of the population itself. Birth and mortality rates, breadth and scale of illnesses, accidents, incarceration rates, natural disasters, work injuries, public hygiene—anything that “sapped the population's strength, shortened the working week, wasted energy, and cost money,” becomes, for the biopolitical state, a potential site of modification (246). This paradigmatically modern form of political administration

constitutes what Foucault calls “a technology which is centered not upon the body but upon life...a technology which aims to establish a sort of homeostasis...by achieving an overall equilibrium that protects the security of the whole from internal dangers” (249).

Because it addresses itself to those threats perceived as already internal to the biological life of the population, biopolitics operates according to the logic of what Roberto Esposito calls “immunization.” Immunization “saves, insures, and preserves the organism, either individual or collective” by “subject[ing] the organism to a condition that simultaneously negates or reduces its power to expand” (Esposito *Bios* 46).¹³ Such a condition, however, means that biopolitics is always, to a certain extent, oriented against the thing it is meant to protect, forced to perpetually perform scissions upon its object, life, in order to separate that which is deemed pure, healthy, and worth proliferating from that which is contaminated, deathly, and in need of neutralization. Foucault’s name for the production of this scission within the “unitary living plurality” of the population is “racism,” “a way of establishing a biological-type caesura within a population that appears to be a biological domain” (255). Racism is the preemptive justification for biopolitics’ slippage into thanatopolitics: it renders the strategies associated with the project of “making live” coextensive with the project of “making die” by legitimating the dissection of the mass body of species life into a hierarchy of bodies whose differential access to the material means of state-sanctioned livelihood leaves certain segments of the population protected by the socio-juridical institutions of care, and others increasingly vulnerable to the tactics of what Foucault calls “indirect murder” available to the biopolitical state, “the fact of exposing someone to death,

¹³ While perhaps the most common contemporary icon of immunization is the medical vaccine, by which the body subsumes a fragment of the very threat it seeks to ward off, Esposito argues that the structure of immunization, the introjection of the negative becomes, with modernity, a kind of transcendental principle for sustaining life. We might think, for instance, of scenes from Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), where H.F. imagines the plague victims’ commerce with one another and with the healthy population as the autoimmunitary mechanism that leads to the plague’s eventual eradication. As Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse put it, Defoe “turns the principle of contagion against itself so that the very circulation spreading the plague begins to limit, check, and finally nullify it” (170).

increasing the risk of death for some people, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection, and so on” (256).

For much of the nineteenth century, the clearest expression of American state biopolitics was the institution of chattel slavery, which was defined by the incorporation of socially dead beings into the national body for the sake of profit. The slave’s body condenses the paradoxes of biopolitical immunity: the myriad forms of torture, death, rape, medical experimentation, and forced reproduction to which it was subjected were enacted in the name of productivity, optimization, and the preservation of life—but a form of life that opposed itself directly to the slave’s through the biological caesura of race. Slavery thus names the site of an included excess within the community that “saves, insures, and preserves” it, not by virtue of its excision but by its careful administration unto death.¹⁴

Following Emancipation and the failures of Reconstruction, however, the shape of American biopolitics begins to shift. The nineteenth-century paternalist ethos that characterized both the relationship of slaveholding states towards their human property and the federal government’s stance toward the South during and immediately after the Civil War appeared increasingly out of step with the liberalizing, market-driven individualism of the Gilded Age. The post-Reconstruction period witnesses a burgeoning skepticism toward direct state intervention into the lives of its citizenry. In 1887 Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. expresses it thus:

¹⁴ “The purpose of biopolitics,” writes Esposito, “is not to distinguish life along a line which sacrifices one part of it to the violent domination of the other—although that possibility can never be completely ruled out—but on the contrary, to save it, protect it, develop it as a whole. But...this object involves the use of an instrument that is bound to it through the negative, as if the very doubling that life experiences of itself through the political imperative that ‘makes it live’ contained something that internally contradicted it” (“Biopolitics” 341). The concept of the slave’s “social death” is elaborated by Orlando Patterson’s *Slavery and Social Death* (1982), where he describes the process of the slave’s “liminal incorporation” into the slaveholding community in a way that evokes Esposito’s understanding of an instrument that is “bound to [life] through the negative” (Patterson 45). As Ewa Ziarek puts it, slavery marks the “institutionalized containment within the law of a permanent anomaly, which confounds the differences between life and death, destruction and profit” (“Bare Life”).

The state might conceivably make itself a mutual insurance company against accidents and distribute the burden of its citizens' mishaps among all its members. There might be a pension for paralytics, and state aid for those who suffered in person or estate from tempest or wild beasts... The state does none of these things, however, and the prevailing view is that its cumbrous and expensive machinery ought not to be set in motion unless some clear benefit is derived from disturbing the *status quo*. State interference is an evil, where it cannot be shown to be a good... The undertaking to redistribute losses simply on the ground that they resulted from the defendant's act would not only be open to these objections, but, as it is hoped the preceding discussion has shown, to the still graver one of offending the sense of justice (*The Common Law* 96).

Holmes' comments are addressed toward one specific site of biopolitical administration: tort law, the field of law that determines faults and allocate damages for noncriminal wrongs. His point, which I explore in greater detail in Chapter Two, is that it is individuals, not the state, upon whom the cost for societal harms should fall. While Holmes specifically had in mind the harms engendered by large, government-subsidized corporations such as the railroad, his assessment that "state interference is an evil, where it cannot be shown to be a good" was a widely held sentiment of the period and could be applied to a range of institutions.

Stephen Crane's novella, *The Monster* (1898), dramatizes this shift away from direct state intervention explicitly. When the townspeople of Whilomville, New York urge Dr. Trescott to send away away his black coachman, Henry Johnson, whose face has been horribly disfigured in a fire that almost kills Trescott's son, Trescott replies "public institutions are all very good, but he's not going to one" (134). Johnson, the eponymous "monster," is the novella's, but also Trescott's, biopolitical object. "He will be your creation, you understand," remarks Judge Hagenthorpe at Trescott's decision to save Johnson's life, "He is purely your creation... You are making him, and he will be a monster, and with no mind" (100). If Trescott is a Frankenstein figure, someone with the power to "make live," his motivation is not knowledge but indebtedness to Johnson for the life of his son, and this relationship manifests in the novella

through the logic of immunization. The white child, the future of the community, is preserved only through the town's incorporation of a deathly, potentially monstrous excess that simultaneously stymies its capacity for unchecked growth: everywhere Johnson goes, the sight of his visage makes people sick and unable to eat. An excluded, illegible, and racialized body at the heart of the community, Johnson migrates from one site of temporary containment to another: a private hospital, a series of domestic spaces, and eventually the town jail. The "cumbrous and expensive machinery" of public institutions are not put in motion for Johnson; the harms he engenders upon the community and the harms the community engenders upon him, Crane suggests, are the responsibility of everyone and no one in particular.

What Holmes's sentiment and Crane's novella both gesture towards, in other words, is a *privatization of the biopolitical* that occurs in the United States during the late nineteenth century. The national project of optimizing life, protecting it against external threats, eliminating its unnecessary wastes, and ensuring its healthy reproduction become increasingly understood as the responsibility of private individuals to be enacted in the quotidian tasks of their day-to-day lives.¹⁵ In Chapter Three of this dissertation, I show how the American public health movement positioned female housekeepers as the sanctioned guardians of national wellness by locating the private home as the prime hub of contagious activity threatening the body politic. "Health in the home is health everywhere," was an oft-quoted slogan of the movement, and thus, as one domestic scientist remarks, "it is the women on whom full sanitary light requires to fall" (qtd. in Plunkett 10). As the dissemination of the germ theory of disease shifted the public health

¹⁵ Sociologist E.A. Ross, for instance, opens his influence treatise *Social Control* (1901) by allegorizing the maintenance of social order with the example of a busy thoroughfare in which the terms of orderliness are "an absence of collisions between men or vehicles that interfere one with another" (1). "When all who meet or overtake one another in crowded ways take the time and pains needed to avoid collision, the throng is *orderly*. Now, at the bottom of the notion of social order lies the same idea" (1). Ross's point is that social order can only be maintained when the individual understands his or her actions as inextricably tied to the proper functioning and preservation of the collective.

community's gaze toward the domestic sites of cooking, bathing, cleaning, dusting, and nursing that constituted the productive and reproductive labor of the modern home, the prescribed role of the female housekeeper transformed from a cultivator of moral law and order to a quasi-technocratic overseer of microscopic dangers. And the stakes of such a transformation were nothing less than the future of the race: "There is nothing in hygiene that [the housekeeper] can not comprehend," writes another public health advocate, "and too often does she realize this and begin to study it, when, too late, she stands beside the still form of some precious one, slain by some of those preventable diseases that, in the coming sanitary millennium, will be reckoned akin to murder" (Plunkett 10).

Female domestic laborers were thus confronted in the late nineteenth century with a specific *bio-matter*, a matter of biopolitical significance: how to preserve the health and safety of the human subject from the myriad microscopic threats to which it was inevitably exposed every day. The chapters that follow reveal that many American biopolitical institutions were invested in almost identical processes, namely, that of extracting a rational, autonomous, and intentional human subject from its grounding in a kind of formless, undifferentiated biomatter. The American prison system, which I explore in Chapter One, was organized around narratives of disciplinary rebirth, in which a "self-governing soul" might be saved and extracted from a "cadaverous and dehumanized" criminal body (Smith 6); similarly, as I show in Chapter Two, the introduction of negligence in American tort law represented an attempt to preserve the metaphysical presence of the intentional human subject who appeared at risk of becoming mere matter in motion through the radically materialist doctrine of strict liability; and finally, in Chapter Four, I show how euthanasia debates hinged upon the possibility of interpreting the intentions of a willful, self-possessed human subject at risk of becoming indistinguishable from

what one commentator of the period calls an “inert mass of hopeless agony” (qtd. in Kassanoff 76). In each case, the body’s reduction to sheer materiality designates the new object of American biopolitics.

However, as I have been suggesting, the writers in this study did not always act as “good” biopolitical subjects: rather than figure the body’s material grounding as something to be quelled, contained, or excised from the proper domain of the human (as the trope of “animality” so often functions in the critical discourse), they just as frequently invoked such biomaterial reductions to challenge, subvert, and critique the normative accounts of the human such projects sought to uphold. When Charlotte Perkins Gilman imagines the bodies of domestic women as a writhing mass of “wallowing seaweeds,” an “interminable string[s] of toadstools, budding and sprouting in endless convolutions” (“Yellow Wallpaper” 48, 51), she equates the female body with life *as such* not to advocate for its curtailment or destruction but for the political potential of female collectivity so often foreclosed by the privatizing and individualizing imperatives of domestic housework. American modernity’s biomaterial imagination engendered effects irreducible to the projects in which this vision of life becomes the object of political management.

To take seriously such deviations from the stark narrative of “bare life” put forward by Agamben and others is to rethink the historical argument whereby “the inclusion of *zoē* within the *polis*” begins with the Ancient juridical-political form of the sovereign exception and ends invariably in Auschwitz (*Homo Sacer* 9). In his study *Third Person* (2012), Roberto Esposito cites French Nobel Prize winning eugenicist Charles Richet, who writes, “a mass of human flesh without human intelligence is nothing. It is living material that is unworthy of any respect or compassion” (qtd. in Esposito 58). Esposito continues:

The path that leads from the knowledge of life—conceived of for a very different purpose at the beginning of the previous century—to the most lethal practice of

death has been fully accomplished. Only when its meaning and direction are reversed into its opposite—what is defined as biopolitics, in the sense of an originary implication between politics and life—does it express its extreme thanatological capacity, under Nazism. At its core, or in its origin, as we have seen, there is the clear-cut substitution of the idea of the person with the idea of the human body in which the person is biologically rooted (59).

This dissertation asks if the “path” that Esposito outlines is truly as ineluctable as it appears.

What if Richet’s “mass of human flesh” in fact had more variegated meanings in the decades preceding the height of the American eugenics movement? And what if literary fiction demarcated the primary site of this variegation?

While this project begins from the central premises of biopolitical critique that the human has been discursively constructed as an object traversed by a materiality improper to it, and that such excess life designates the primary site of modern political intervention, it also maintains that the development of this object is more fraught and politically complex than the resources of biopolitical critique have typically been attuned to. To account for these deviations from the teleology of modern biopolitical critique, this project draws from two additional theoretical orientations—new materialism and deconstruction—that, in recent years have been seen as diametrically opposed to one another. This theoretical intervention, bringing the resources of deconstruction and new materialism more strongly to bear on biopolitical critique, constitutes the third register of *The Biomatters of American Modernity*.

III. Biomatters as a Theoretical Problematic

One of the most pervasive narratives circulating in humanities scholarship today is that after decades of poststructuralist hegemony, which mired criticism in textualism, discourse analysis, and social constructivism, scholars from a range of disciplines—including literary and media studies, queer and gender theory, as well as affect and animal studies—are now able to

turn their attention back to the immediacy of materiality. As Samantha Frost and Diana Coole put it in their introduction to the recent collection *New Materialisms* (2008),

We share the feeling current among many researchers that the dominant constructivist orientation to social analysis is inadequate for thinking about matter, materiality, and politics in ways that do justice to the contemporary context of biopolitics and global political economy. While we recognize that radical constructivism has contributed considerable insight into the workings of power over recent years, we are also aware that an allergy to ‘the real’ that is characteristic of its more linguistic or discursive forms—whereby overtures to reality are dismissed as an insidious foundationalism—has had the consequence of dissuading critical inquirers from the more empirical kinds of investigation that material processes and structures require (6).

Variously identified as a “new materialism,” a “nonhuman turn,” or a renewed attention to the “networks,” “entanglements,” and “assemblages” through which human and nonhuman actors co-constitute one another, the turn to materiality develops in response to what the editors call “a sense that the radicalism of the dominant discourses which have flourished under the cultural turn is now more or less exhausted” (ibid).¹⁶

The cause of this apparent exhaustion can be summed up in the frequent charge of “anthropocentrism” directed towards the linguistic or cultural turn: the assumption that poststructuralism’s solipsistic, ahistorical language games and appeals to social or discursive construction have prioritized (a particularly limited notion of) the human subject at the expense of the various ecological, economic, environmental, infrastructural, atmospheric, and even tectonic forces through which the human is inextricably enmeshed, and upon which human endeavors have long-lasting and potentially catastrophic consequences. As Richard Grusin puts

¹⁶ Scholars pledge allegiance to this movement in a number of different ways depending on their disciplinary specificity. In the introduction to his recent book, *The Insistence of the Material: Literature in the Age of Biopolitics* (2014), Chris Breu writes “the various forms of materiality in contemporary social existence—the materiality of the body, the object world of late-capitalist life, the material elements of political-economic production, the various forms of materiality we group under the signifier ‘nature’—cannot be adequately or completely accounted for by language” (1). Alternatively, Stacy Alaimo, a feminist theorist, writes, “only by directly engaging with matter itself can feminism...render biological determinism ‘nonsense’” (5). What unites these positions is a commitment to the very subject/object ontology that poststructuralism sought to deconstruct.

it, “[p]ractitioners of the nonhuman turn find problematic the emphasis of constructivism on the social or cultural constructions of the human subject because, taken to its logical extreme, it strips the world of any ontological or agential status” (xi). To *re-imbue* nonhuman materiality with agential status in the context of biopolitical critique so as to provide a more robust account of the ways in which power operates *through* the vector of human/nonhuman relations constitutes, in part, the aims of the new materialism.¹⁷

I argue in the remainder of this introduction that while such intentions are welcome and admirable, they have only been partially fulfilled—or, rather, that the material turn has splintered along two divergent paths, only one of which is worth pursuing. The first path evidences a willful forgetting of the lessons of the poststructuralist moment it seeks to supersede and therein risks inaugurating a critical disposition that foregoes the resources of ideology critique, instead fetishizing “vibrant” nonhuman materiality as a chimerical space of otherness and dynamism. The second path *incorporates* the lessons of poststructuralism and thereby opens up the possibility for a critical mode that takes seriously the strange agencies of the nonhuman world, and that grasps its entanglements with human interests as sites for rethinking the way power and domination operate *across* the always overlapping zones of nature and culture. By delineating this split, we will get a clearer sense of how the authors in this dissertation both demand and enable the reading practices outlined by the latter path.

¹⁷ It’s worth remembering that new materialism’s efforts to expand the powers biopolitical critique by drawing in the agency of nonhuman forces is in keeping with Foucault’s own account of how governmentality operates. “The things with which...government is to be concerned are in fact men, but men in their relations, their links, their imbrications with those other things which are wealth, resources, means of subsistence, the territory with its specific qualities, climate, irrigation, fertility, etc.; men in their relation to that other kind of things, customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking” (“Governmentality” 93). Certain new materialists, such as Jane Bennett, define themselves as remedying an asymmetry with respect to Foucault’s enumeration: we have focused on “men in their relation” to “customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking” (ie. culture) but less so on the materiality of the territory itself (ie. nature).

First, it is necessary to absolutely reject the opposition between discourse and matter, semiotics and ontology, upon which new materialist scholarship tends to base its polemics. Such distinctions are, of course, undeniably metaphysical: they oppose mediated (or “constructed”) language to immediate (or “real”) “material processes.” In order to invoke this opposition, new materialists are obliged to forget the radical implications of deconstruction’s critique of metaphysical thinking *as such*: that the movement of the trace—its temporalization of space and spatialization of time, differing inherently from itself—“is in fact the absolute origin of sense in general” (*Grammatology* 65), and is thus “the condition for anything that is subject to succession, whether animate or inanimate, ideal or material,” as Martin Hägglund, Derrida’s best contemporary reader puts it (“Arche-Materiality” 265). “The unheard difference between the appearing and the appearance (between the ‘world’ and ‘lived experience’),” Derrida writes, “is the condition of all other differences, of all other traces, and *it is already a trace*. This last concept is absolutely and by rights ‘anterior’ to all *physiological* problematics concerning the [unit of engraving], or *metaphysical* problematics concerning the meaning of absolute presence” (ibid 65; emphasis in original). Deconstruction does not, as the accusation is typically leveled at it, concern itself with “semantics” and “language” at the expense of “reality” or “the world,” precisely because the history of Western thought has already implicated a certain definition of “reality” within its theories of language and communication. Metaphysics has always been internal to semantics in the form of logocentrism—the prioritization of the word (as *logos*, voice, life, *ousia*, origin, “nature”) over the *graphe* (as absence, writing, parasite, death, prosthesis). Derrida’s critique of logocentrism, as a critique of metaphysical presence, rejects the originary status of the body or matter, as well as the entire apparatus of metaphysical thought upon which

it pivots.¹⁸ To endure *in any form*, as I demonstrate explicitly in Chapter Four through the work of Edith Wharton, is always to be subject to the *deforming* movement of the trace.

As is the case with many “turns” in the humanities, then, the turn to materiality and the biological facticity of the body has been able to gain momentum, in part, by forgetting and simplifying the premises of the theoretical orientations it aims to supersede. The key point, of course, for constructivist theorists of embodiment such as Judith Butler is that there is no such thing as nature or matter *itself*; there are only processes of naturalization and materialization—always partial, always contested, and always in flux—that render matter legible or illegible within a particular discursive field. An entity like “the body,” for example, never precedes its representation via the cultural forms and embodied practices that constitute it. From this perspective, epistemology and ontology are always mutually imbricated: *how* we come to know something is constitutive of *what* that thing is at any given moment. And because epistemological categories are radically contingent—subject to the fluxes of history, context, and environment—so too are ontologies inherently unstable and unfixed.¹⁹

What, then, does the new materialist opposition between materiality and discourse performatively enact? When Jane Bennett, in *Vibrant Matter* (2009), argues for the necessity of “shift[ing] from the language of epistemology to that of ontology” in order to “give voice to a vitality intrinsic to materiality” (3), I suggest that she is at the forefront of an intellectual movement to *sever* the link between ontology and epistemology and thereby hypostasize

¹⁸ Hägglund develops a version of this deconstructive argument against the speculative realism of Quentin Meillassoux in “The Arche-Materiality of Times: Deconstruction, Evolution, and Speculative Materialism” (2011).

¹⁹ Butler, most pointedly in *Bodies That Matter* (1993), illuminates the problems with the dualistic assumptions underwriting the charge that feminists working in the thought-styles of the linguistic turn had avoided discussing the facticity of embodiment: “what constitutes the fixity of the body, its contours, its movements, will be fully material, but materiality will be rethought as the effect of power, as power’s most productive effect. And there will be no way to understand ‘gender’ as a cultural construct which is imposed upon the surface of matter, either understood as ‘the body’ or its given sex. Rather, once ‘sex’ itself is understood in its normativity, the materiality of the body will not be thinkable apart from the materialization of that regulatory norm” (2).

“matter” as an ontologically distinct and *inherently subversive* realm characterized by the very qualities—instability, unfixity, and fluidity—that an earlier generation of critics attributed to the materializing effects of discourse. This theoretical grafting can be seen, for instance, in Timothy Morton’s essay “Queer Ecology,” which argues that “because at the DNA level it’s impossible to tell a ‘genuine’ code sequence from a viral insertion,” “there is no contradiction between straightforward biology and queer theory (275-276). Here, the language of deconstruction—its emphasis on performativity, proliferations of difference, nonessentialism, etc.—gets sutured into biology *as such*, while those aspects of the discipline that codify identity and reinforce conservative or neoliberal ideology are ignored entirely. Another instance occurs in Myra Hird’s “ode to bacteria” in her essay, “Naturally Queer,” which claims that “[b]acteria...seriously raise the queering bar through their abilities to cross species barriers and perform hypersex,” a claim that elides *any* political or historical resonances attached to the term “queer,” and defines it purely in terms of abstract “boundary transgressions” (85-89). And finally, in a recent special issue of *GLQ* titled *Queer Inhumanisms*, Karen Barad asserts that the virtual movements of electrons in the quantum void demarcate the site of “perverse and promiscuous couplings, queer goings-on that make pre-AIDS bathhouses look tame” (2-3). “Matter is not the given, the unchangeable, the bare facts of nature,” she writes, “Matter is an imaginative material exploration of non/being, creatively regenerative, an ongoing trans*/formation” (ibid). In each case, nonhuman matter figures a site of speculative resistance to the very disciplinary formations—biology, physics, etc.—whose claims to absolute objectivity were once the primary antagonists of constructivist critique. In this strain of new materialism, it seems that nothing is more subversive or resistant to normative discipline than *matter itself*.

Yet despite these attempts to sequester matter from sociality, to posit its “intrinsic vitality” and revel in its endlessly creative, transgressive power, untethered from concrete political or social interests (a theme I take up explicitly in my reading of Jack London in Chapter 1), there also exists another strain of new materialist thought that *rejects* appeals to materiality as such and argues instead for the primacy of relations in a field of variable ontologies. The work of Bruno Latour stands out amongst this cohort for offering the sharpest account of how nonhuman materiality interfaces with and co-constitutes the human subject without jettisoning the inseparability of semiotics and ontology.²⁰ “Words are never found alone, nor surrounded only by other words,” writes Latour, “they would be inaudible” (*Pasteurization* 183):

A word can thus enter into partnership with a meaning, a sequence of words, a statement, a neuron, a gesture, a wall, a machine, a face...anything, so long as differences in resistance allow one force to become more durable than another. Where is it written that a word may associate only with other words? Each time the solidity of a string of words is tested, we are measuring the *attachment* of walls, neurons, sentiments, gestures, hearts, minds, and wallets—that is, a heterogeneous multitude of allies, mercenaries, friends, and courtesans (ibid).

Latour’s infamous litanization of seemingly disparate entities—or, in his parlance, actants²¹—is deployed here in the service of a principle that proponents of a “vitality intrinsic to materiality” forget to their detriment: *nothing acts alone*. For Latour, there are no such things as “purely discursive” forces because the moment one looks toward the location of “discourse,” one is already surrounded by other actants that support, transport, and alter the content of a given message; and similarly, there are no such things as “purely material” forces, either, because the

²⁰ “Even though it is always difficult to keep the point in focus,” Latour writes, “semiotics...has never been limited to discourse, to language, to text, or to fiction. Meaning is a property of all agents in as much as they keep having agency” (“Agency” 12).

²¹ The term “actant” is purposefully indistinct in Latour’s lexicon—it has no proper shape or “morphism”—because it is meant to designate first and foremost an uncertainty about agency: we do not yet know what kinds of actants populate the world. Actants are always hooked up to other actants in ways that translate, transform, and deform the capacities of each, so one is never sure how many actants are at work in particular entities, nor what kinds of forces they are exerting. To study an actant, for Latour, is to study its associations with other actants—the pressures, trials, and translations occurring between them. See in particular Part Two of *The Pasteurization of France*, “Irreductions.”

moment one looks toward the location of “matter” one is already surrounded by words, representations, and semiotic accounts that *materialize it*—imbue it with ontological stability and the chance to endure. For this reason, the ontologies of actants are always “variable ontologies,”²² subject to shifts, transformations, and displacements depending on what kind of things they do and what sort of differences in a particular state of affairs they make legible.

Like the ontologies of actants, whose realities vary in accordance with the allies they recruit to solidify their existence, agency, for Latour, is something that manifests only relationally: “An invisible agency that makes no difference, produces no transformation, leaves no trace, and enters no account is *not* an agency,” he writes (*Reassembling* 53). In this sense, actions should be understood less as something *taken* by a discrete subject than something *overtaken* by a multitude: “Action is not done under the full control of consciousness; action should rather be felt as a note, a knot, and a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies that have to be slowly disentangled” (ibid. 44). In these nodes or knots, nature and culture, matter and discourse, cannot be easily separated. This will become especially apparent in Chapter Three, where we will find the actions of naturalism’s domestic subjects *overtaken* by a multitude of nonhuman actants—dust, insects, mold, fungi—that divert them from their biopolitical task.

If one strain of the new materialism seeks to “absolv[e] matter from its long history of attachment to automatism or mechanism” by imbuing it with an intrinsic capacity for creativity, spontaneity, and self-organization (Bennett 3), Latour’s strain seeks to highlight the irreducibility of relationality itself—to emphasize that no vital phenomena exist without an array of appendages, prostheses, and life-support systems that collectively bring them into existence.

Even the most incontrovertible forms of life need to be assembled through chains of actants. In

²² “The ontology of mediators [or actants] has a variable geometry. What Sartre said of humans—that their existence precedes their essence—has to be said of all the actants: the air’s spring as well as society, of matter as well as consciousness” (*We Have Never Been Modern* 84).

The Pasteurization of France, a work I return to in Chapter Three, Latour provocatively argues that Louis Pasteur's great contribution to nineteenth-century science was less the *discovery* of the microbe than its *invention*. In order to attain a concrete, ontologically stable existence, the microbe's signal properties had to be *constructed*—that is, provoked, reproduced, isolated, recorded, and translated through a host of technical and discursive apparatuses that are inseparable from accounts of its biological “nature.” Microbial phenomena do not ontologically antedate their representation in the laboratory because without the laboratory equipment the phenomena themselves cease to exist. “The shape of the microbe,” writes Latour, “is only the relatively stable front of the trials to which it is subjected. If we stop the culture, if we sterilize the pipettes badly, if the incubator varies in temperature, the phenomena disappear; that is, they change their definitions” (93).

The correlative to the claim that natural phenomena possess variable ontologies that change their definitions vis-à-vis the human networks in which they are imbricated, however, is the claim that the shape of human networks change in response to natural phenomena. The question of political interests, in other words, has to be retranslated through the cipher of microbial life—a process that requires accounting for the way human interests link up with the nonhuman interests that variously enable, resist, impede or exacerbate them. In the tropical climates of French colonies during the late nineteenth-century, for instance, the capacity to mobilize microbial phenomena proved significant enough to overpower what one Pasteurian called “all the great endemic diseases that seemed to have stopped civilization at the threshold of the tropical countries” (144). The civilizing efforts of settler-colonialism are thus inseparable from the phenomena of microbial life; their interrelation signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies.

These two strains of new materialism I have outlined tell very different stories about the uses to which terms like “life” and “matter” are being put in contemporary scholarship, and I argue that our understanding of these divergent paths are both preempted and enriched by the turn of the century American authors I address in this study. The urge to find in renderings of particulate matter an exit strategy from the messiness of history and politics into the endlessly productive realm of “life itself” is evident in some of the texts I examine (in particular, the work of Jack London), and yet so too are sophisticated understandings of the way the relationship between life and matter is not “intrinsic” or given, but constantly mediated by concrete historical forces and political projects. American literature’s biomaterial imagination evidences the lust for dehistoricization and demediation characterizing certain ontology-based movements in the humanities today just as frequently as it rejects the premise of ontologies divorced from the workings of power. Looking back to the authors in this study, then, what materializes are surprisingly prescient visions of the way power and domination continue to operate in new and troubling ways, not in spite of but *because* of a radical uncertainty over what counts as life, what counts as human, and who enforces the distinction.

IV. A Note on “Vitalism”

As evidenced in the previous account of new materialism, this dissertation engages a range of literature and scholarship that takes as its object “life.” This, combined with the project’s historical specificity begs the questions of “vitalism.” Except when citing the words of another critic or thinker, however, I have chosen to eschew the term vitalism to describe the literary projects I analyze. In addition, I avoid the question of whether the writers I examine see their premises as interventions within a longstanding philosophical debate between vitalists and materialists. These choices are both practical and conceptual. Practically, because of its

ambiguity, I do not think the term vitalism *clarifies* the kinds of thinking I am describing. Much too summarily, I would phrase the problem this way: when vitalism is deployed in a casual (or, sometimes, pejorative) manner, it denotes the belief in the irreducibility of life to physiochemical processes and posits the existence of an immaterial vital force (whether soul, *dynamis*, *élan vital*, etc.), distinct from matter, that flows through and animates it *ex post facto*. Gilles Deleuze’s revisionary account of the term, descended from Bergson, shifts the usage from an active animating principle to a kind of virtual potentiality, “a pure internal Awareness” that “is but does not act” (*What is Philosophy?* 213).²³ More recently, however, vitalism has been taken up by a number of critics—including Jane Bennett, Branka Arsić, and Claire Colebrook—who claim a *different* legacy for the term, one in which it appears reconciled with the materialism to which it has historically been opposed. Invoking the beginnings of a “critical vitalism” or “vital materialism” in the works of Hans Driesch and Henri Bergson, Bennett writes, “The vital materialist affirms a figure of matter as an active principle, and a universe of this lively materiality that is always in various states of congealment and diffusion, materialities that are creative and active without needing to be experienced or conceived as partaking in divinity or purposiveness” (*Vibrant Matter* 93). This strain of vitalist thought, clearly visible in Arsić’s *Bird Relics* (see footnote 10), either explicitly asserts (or comes very close to asserting) that *all* matter is immanently alive, creative, and self-organizing.

This imbroglio is what I mean by a practical problem: the referent of the term vitalism is indistinct. Who counts as a vitalist, what constitutes a vitalist inheritance, and what is meant by

²³ Bergson already understood his vitalism as revisionary: “[vitalism] is sterile today,” he writes in “Phantasms of the Living” (1920), “it will not be so always” (99), once we “become accustomed to this idea of consciousness overflowing the organism” (97). Deleuze writes, “Vitalism has always had two possible interpretations: that of an Idea that acts, but is not—that acts therefore only from the point of view of an external cerebral knowledge (from Kant to Bernard); or that of a force that is but does not act—that is therefore of a pure internal Awareness (from Leibniz to Ruyer)” (213).

the attribution is a matter of dispute. But there is also a conceptual problem, which is that these positions—seeing matter as subject to an *external* vitalization from an immaterial force and seeing matter as always immanently vitalized—are not the only ways to conceive of the relationship between life and matter. There is a third position, in which it is possible to affirm the continuity between the organic and the inorganic, the animate and the inanimate, *without* claiming that matter is always immanently alive and thus somehow inherently resistant to forms of biopolitical capture or discipline (which I have shown is a tendency in the new materialism). This possibility, as Martin Hägglund argues, is contained in the Darwinian proposition that life emerges from non-life: “Darwin’s dangerous idea is precisely the account of how life evolved out of non-living matter and of how even the most advanced intentionality or sensibility originates in mindless repetition” (“Arche-Materiality” 272-273). What this means, argues Hägglund, is that “[r]ather than vitalizing matter, philosophical Darwinism devitalizes life” (273). Life originates and is composed of something *other* than itself, something not living: it is the result of a kind of organization-through-repetition that *might not have happened*, and the “moment” of its happening will inevitably be determined retroactively: “There is no virtual power that can determine an event to be the origin of life,” Hägglund continues, “on the contrary, which event will have been the origin of life is an effect of the succession of time that can never be reduced to an instant” (273-274). Life, from this perspective, inhabits the tense of the future anterior, the *will have been*: we do not yet know what will and will not have been counted as living. This perspective resonates with historical accounts of vital phenomena such as those of Bernard, Haeckel, and Spencer taken up here and elsewhere.

This third view comes the closest to articulating the kind of theoretical hybridity underwriting this project because it leaves the distinction between life and matter a *problem*—

one that, as we will see, gets perpetually worried over, questioned, narrativized, and decided upon through historically embedded institutional structures of power. The matter of determining the moment life leaves the body during an execution, the point at which an inhuman “spasm” becomes a human “action”, a fetus becomes a life, or a paralytic becomes a “vegetable”: *these* are the biomatters of American modernity addressed in this project. Because these matters trace the difference between proper and improper life, they are biopolitical; because they depend upon the displacement and deferral of the metaphysical instance into the denaturing flow of narrative, they are deconstructive; and because they depend upon the agency of nonhuman forces, they are materialist.

V. Chapter Breakdowns

In the following chapters, I outline the aesthetic forms, historical contexts, and biopolitical implications of four different but overlapping expressions of American literature’s biomaterial imagination as it emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Chapter One, “‘A Fluid Sort of Organism’: Jack London’s Biomaterial Imagination and Capital Punishment,” I examine Jack London’s fictional and nonfictional incarceration narratives, focusing specifically on what I call his figures of anesthesial life—life that appears held in abeyance or retained *in potentia* within both the sources and the products of human labor. I argue that this liminal ontological state, which London depicts through biomaterial images such as “meat,” “yeast,” and “elemental stuff,” offers him a mode of imagining evasion from the carceral and thanatopolitical systems of the modern prison. Reduced to mere “organic life,” London’s anesthetized bodies render the human vital processes diffuse and ungraspable at the very moment late nineteenth-century capital punishments technologies begin to take such processes as their new epistemological objects. The chapter reads London against the grain of much recent work in

Americanist criticism, which tends to emphasize naturalism's role as a technology for producing legible, taxonomized subjects. Attending to London's incarceration narratives, I argue, reveals an underground strain of naturalism invested in the production of illegibility and anonymity. The chapter ends with the caveat that despite their complexity and uniqueness, London's fantasies of biomaterial reduction are also complicit in American racial ideologies that position the black body as always already reducible to sheer material substrate. That the materiality of the body could become a kind of escape hatch from power is a uniquely white fantasy dependent upon the evacuation of American's colonial and slaveholding history.

Chapter Two, "Nonhuman Liability: Charles Chesnutt, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., and the Racial Discourses of Tort Law," provides an important counterpoint to London's ostensibly colorblind vision by gesturing towards an articulation of biomateriality explicitly grounded in the complexities of late nineteenth-century race politics. While the law's ability to reduce persons to the status of things was the precondition for American slavery, it was also the basis of a theory of legal liability that was being phased out of common law courts when Chesnutt began his literary career. Chesnutt recognized that this shift would be harmful to African Americans: strict liability held that responsibility for a harm rests with the source of the harm irrespective of the subject's intentions or mental state, which entailed treating humans as mere matter in motion. Negligence, the doctrine that superseded strict liability, invoked a metaphysical definition of the human subject still denied to black people in the wake of emancipation. From these premises, I situate Charles Chesnutt's fiction as the site of an extended critique of American tort law, specifically the rise of negligence as the dominant standard of tort liability in the late nineteenth century. Through a reading of his understudied 1905 novel, *The Colonel's Dream*, I argue that Chesnutt theorizes the harmful effects of negligence on black life by revealing how its metaphysical

definitions of intentionality and responsibility worked to normalize and legitimize the systemic violence of accidents afflicting a new class of black free laborers. I go on to demonstrate how this critique of the law sheds light on specific representational strategies most commonly associated with his fiction. In order to conceptualize liability in a way that did *not* obscure the multiple and diffuse sources of chance injury to black bodies, Chesnutt looked backwards to so-called “primitive” theories of liability, which granted legal agency and responsibility to nonhuman entities. Chesnutt’s conjure aesthetics provide models of systemic liability that do not rely upon the metaphysical standard of “humanity” African Americans were so often presumed to lack, and should be understood as a distinct contribution to nineteenth-century jurisprudence. This account departs from much contemporary criticism in African American studies, which has tended to emphasize the essentializing metaphysical integrity of the black body.

Chesnutt’s biomaterial imagination depicts human bodies becoming ontologically indistinguishable from their nonhuman environments as a way to theorize the systemic racial violence of accidents in the context of American tort law. In Chapter Three, “Naturalism, Public Health, and Feminist Entomology,” I show how female naturalist fiction performs a similar operation, consistently reducing human bodies to figures of indeterminate biomatter in response to a different biopolitical initiative at the turn of the century—the American public health movement. This chapter argues that the references to “human insects,” “writhing arm[ies] of ants,” “mere animalculae,” and a range of human “parasites” scattered across the works of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Ellen Glasgow should be read as ambiguous forms of life that condense the contradictions facing female domestic laborers at the turn of the century: on the one hand, the new proximity between human and microbe made visible during the “golden age” of American public health registered to the women charged with guarding the domestic sphere from

such encroachments as a disfiguring and potentially monstrous hybridization with nonhuman life; on the other hand, however, I suggest that this new entanglement also made possible a vision of female collectivity that could be imaginatively accessed from within the isolation of the home. Even as domestic women such as the narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” or the sanitary scientists in Glasgow’s novels were recruited to the biopolitical task of protecting the home from the threat of tiny nonhuman contaminants, this task simultaneously imbued the insect with a new form of latent political potentiality, aligning it with an indeterminate form of mass life whose meanings had not yet been foreclosed by the hygienic technocrats of the modern home. Drawing out the implications of this political potential, I suggest, involves rethinking the split between biopolitical and new materialist in contemporary accounts of American naturalism.

In Chapter Four, “Keeping a Novel Alive: Edith Wharton’s Biotextual Imagination,” I turn from Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s discussion of biomaterial parasites to a different figure of supplementation in the writings of Edith Wharton: *life support*, the technico-discursive means of keeping something alive. I elaborate a system of figuration traceable across Wharton’s career in which texts and bodies blur together as biomaterial hybrid entities. This representational mode, I argue, offers her a set of tools for theorizing what she calls the “survival” of both literary texts and living bodies in a culture of material obsolescence and biopolitical regulation. I focus in particular on her oft-neglected novel, *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), which features an extended euthanasia plot that foregrounds the problem of locating “proper” human agency and intentionality in a body reduced to its biomaterial essence, a “mere bundle of senseless reflexes.” I argue that the novel positions euthanasia as a radically undecidable act—an attempt to preserve the integrity of an essential “human” subject that always depends upon the inhuman materiality of language for its authority. However, if language functions as both the confirmation of a

subject's humanity as well as the inhuman excess that disrupts it from the inside, then the very idea of a human essence is *itself* contingent and unstable, dependent upon the slippages of figuration, and thus the "mere bundle of senseless reflexes" appears less a deviation from "proper" humanity than its very conditions of possibility. Unlike Gilman, then, for whom the parasitic supplement demarcates the site of an internal contradiction in an essay devoted to the maintenance of racial purity, Wharton's writing consistently acknowledges and draws out the implications of the paradox that survival itself is predicated upon constant deformations that render any appeal to purity impossible. This reading paints a much different picture of Wharton than new historicist accounts of her imbrication with the era's racial ideologies tend to emphasize, but I argue that it is equally necessary to insist upon biomatter's non-normative dimensions if a full account of its literary history is to become legible.

CHAPTER ONE

“A Fluid Sort of Organism”:

Jack London’s Biomaterial Imagination and Capital Punishment

There is a Languor of the Life / More imminent than Pain –
‘Tis Pain’s Successor – When the Soul / Has suffered all it can –
A Drowsiness – diffuses / A dimness like a Fog
Envelops Consciousness – / As Mists – Obliterate a Crag
The Surgeon – does not blanch – at pain / His habit – is severe –
But tell him that it ceased to feel – / The Creature lying there –
And he will tell you – skill is late – / A Mightier than He –
Has ministered before Him – / There’s no Vitality.
-- Emily Dickinson

I understand why people experience my writing as a form of aggression. They feel there is something in it that condemns them to death. In fact, I’m much more naïve than that. I don’t condemn them to death. I simply assume they’re already dead. That’s why I’m so surprised when I hear them cry out. I’m as astonished as the anatomist who becomes suddenly aware that the man on whom he was intending to demonstrate has woken up beneath his scalpel. Suddenly his eyes open, his mouth starts to scream, his body twists, and the anatomist expresses his shock: “Hey, he wasn’t dead!”

-- Michel Foucault

In *Volume I* of his seminars on the death penalty, Jacques Derrida gives the name “anesthetic logic” to the principle by which the conventionally opposed arguments of sentimental abolitionism and utilitarian anti-abolitionism achieve common ground in the dream of a perfected form of state killing purged of the vicissitudes of human embodiment. “All it would take [to save the death penalty],” he writes, “would be to make [it] insensible, anesthetized, to anesthetize both the condemned and the actors and spectators” (48-49). The logic of anesthesia, for Derrida, indexes a paradoxical fantasy about the thanatopolitical management of the human sensorium. On the one hand, appeals to the body’s seemingly endless capacities for pain, horror, shame, and pleasure consistently ground arguments against capital punishment, the supposition being that the cruelty, inefficiency, and irrationality of state killing

are demonstrable in the *effects* produced upon and within the bodies of those involved.²⁴ On the other hand, however, this volatile economy of sensation also appears to contain the possibility of its own transcendence, as if the insensibility offered by the figure of anesthesia might, if pushed far enough, achieve a state of *suprasensibility*, an escape from the limits of the body *by way of* the body itself:

[The desire for anesthesia] might...name the almost sublime desire to escape from the realm of sensibility or imagination, from space and time, that is to say, from the realm of phenomenality, that is to say, of the pathological, of affect, of receptivity, that is to say, of the empirical. A certain insensitivity, a certain anesthesia would be the condition of access to a pure, intelligible, and transphenomenal justice, sur-viving beyond life (274).

It's at this moment in the seminar, however, that Derrida displays a new uneasiness about the very term upon which his discourse hinges: "what *is* an anesthetic when seen from the promise of death?" he asks, going on to speculate that the question of anesthetics might, in fact, constitute its own theoretical problematic—one that would include, but not be limited to, the philosophical history of the death penalty, as well as every other state apparatus that claims authority to police the border between life and death (274). Derrida concludes by suggesting that if death is understood not merely as "one kind of suffering among others," but rather—in the spirit of deconstruction—as the shifting conceptual limit against which the long history of sensation discourse has variously oriented itself, then the desire for anesthesia haunting capital

²⁴ One of the loudest American proponents of death penalty abolition along these lines was Pennsylvania physician and Declaration of Independence signatory, Benjamin Rush, whose *An Enquiry into the Effects of Public Punishments Upon Criminals* (1787) argues for the detrimental effects of public punishment on the "sensibility" of the observer. In the wake of Lockean psychology, the discourse of sensibility, which referred to the receptivity of the senses to stimulation, became increasingly imbued with moral and social value insofar as it linked sensation to human development and progress. "Above all," writes Rush, "sensibility is the sentinel of the moral faculty. It decides upon the quality of actions before they reach that divine principle of the soul" (6). What historians commonly refer to as the eighteenth-century "culture of sensibility" challenged understandings of the body's susceptibility to pain as indicative of its intrinsically fallen nature; in its place, the discourse of sensibility linked pain (as well as the range of affective states flowing from the human sensorium) to social categories of gender and class as they interacted with the material world of the nervous system. This complex imbrication produced a heightened feeling of contingency between suffering and its alleged benefits.

punishment debates might in fact constitute a desire for something “altogether other,” something *beyond* the dualities of mind and body, reason and passion, that have grounded understandings of the human subject since the Enlightenment. If this were the case, Derrida writes, “the question of analgesics or anesthesia would have to be revised from top to bottom” (274).

This chapter begins from the premise that Derrida’s revisionary project would do well to look back upon one American writer at the turn of the twentieth century whose work addresses the cultural discourses and epistemological uncertainties surrounding anesthesia (as well as a range of other technologies that appeared to obstruct or override the body’s vital and sensorial capacities), all within the institutional context of capital punishment. To be sure, this is not the description of Jack London readers are probably familiar with. General audiences associate London with his popular Klondike adventure tales, while his name in critical circles frequently metonymizes a range of racist, masculinist, and anti-modern doctrines constellating around the moment of American literary naturalism.²⁵ But London’s enormous fictional and journalistic output over the course of his short life also documents the development of a complex and esoteric carceral imagination focusing specifically on the death penalty and the procedures of institutionalized killing. The figure of the anesthetized body haunts these meditations: from London’s gothic eyewitness account of a hanging at San Quentin Prison in 1902 to his description of Wolf Larsen’s slow “execution” via paralysis in the final pages of *The Sea-Wolf* (1904) to protagonist-narrator Darrel Standing’s discovery of “an anesthesia of pain” as a death

²⁵ Gail Bederman’s classic study, *Manliness and Civilization* (1995), for instance, invokes London’s name in a variety of contexts as shorthand for widespread “cultural assumptions about race, manhood, and civilization” (43). Jennifer Fleissner, invoking another feminist historian of the period, writes, “American naturalist writers like Norris, Dreiser, London, and Crane have most often been read as literary embodiments of this turn toward nature; veritable literary Roosevelts, they were said to be ‘interested most of all in depicting men under conditions of intense struggle, whether in war, in the capitalist economic system, on the frontier, or anywhere else away from the constraints of female civilization’” (13). It is telling that Fleissner’s *own* revisionist study of the period from which this quote is drawn includes all of the writers mentioned *except* London, the implication being that such assessments of his work stand complete, not in need of reassessment.

row inmate in *The Star Rover* (1915), the texts I discuss in this chapter posit an intimate connection between the state's sovereign power to take life and the body's uncanny ability to place it in suspension. The reason for this connection, I will suggest, is that the development and popularization of medical anesthesia over the course of the nineteenth century increasingly begged the question of life *as such*. The dramatic effects of ether, nitrous oxide, and chloroform, as such technologies were gradually integrated into biomedical practices such as vivisection, surgery, and organ transplant, appeared to temporarily shut off the sensory-volitional functions of what Xavier Bichat called "animal life" while leaving the metabolic processes of "organic life" intact (*Physiological Researches* 11-14). This uncanny effect—frequently associated with states of trance and suspended animation—entrenched the distinction already established by the contemporaneous innovations of cell theory, which defined organic life less in terms of vital functions than vital *capacities* or *potentials*. Anesthesia and the later development of local anesthetics thus contributed to a radically decentralized understanding of vital potentiality, wherein "life" became an elusive force, something that could appear perpetually held in abeyance against the background of a complex organic and inorganic bodily milieu. "Such potential life could be present without producing or requiring any physiological activity at all," writes one medical historian (Pernick 26). The premise that life could be suspended and then revived, flipped on and off like a switch, or lie dormant and imperceptible within the body, yielded increasingly elusive criteria for defining death, and thus was at the center of debates surrounding the ethics and science of capital punishment.

Whereas some nineteenth-century thinkers viewed anesthesia and its correlative theories of suspended animation as simply another form of malicious encroachment upon the human life processes for rendering them subservient to technocratic control, others—including John Keats,

Percy Shelley, Edgar Allan Poe, Stephen Crane, William James, and Jack London—viewed it as a potential source of what James called “intense metaphysical illumination” (294).²⁶ While the anesthetic state held out for these thinkers the promise of revelations philosophical, poetic, and even political, only London situates his speculations explicitly within a biopolitical context that takes the administration of the human productive and reproductive processes as the ultimate horizon of analysis. In a recurring trope that will guide my analysis, London figures the condemned prisoners at the center of his incarceration narratives as *anesthetized writers*, in whose insensate anatomies circulates a diffusive and ungraspable vitality that resists the “mechanics of power” associated, for Foucault, with the docile subject of the modern prison, and for Americanist literary critics, with the hegemonic “body-machine complex” of American naturalism. In London’s literary imagination, anesthetic states reduce the body to sheer biomaterial substrate—isolating in it what Bichat calls “organic life,” Claude Bernard calls “latent life,” and what London represents as a kind of pure vital potentiality: “that which writhes in the body of a snake when the head is cut off and the snake, as a snake, is dead, or which lingers in a shapeless lump of turtle meat and recoils and quivers from the prod of a finger” (qtd. in Pernick 23, 28; *Sea-Wolf* 15). Because such vitality remains unactualized, having not yet assumed a recognizably human form, it holds the potential to circumvent state power structures that seek to govern and contain it. Anesthetical life, in London’s work, disaggregates the

²⁶ Susan Buck-Morss’s “Aesthetics and Anesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered” (1992) outlines the pessimistic orientation towards anesthesia, exemplified by Walter Benjamin. Robert Mitchell’s “Suspended Animation, Slow Time, and the Poetics of Trance” (2011) engages Buck-Morss’s argument by describing Romantic interest in medically-induced states of suspended animation: “Authors such as Coleridge saw suspended animation as a dangerous condition, and they employed the concept to describe a loss of subjective autonomy produced by the distractions of modernity. Authors such as John Keats and the Shelleys, by contrast, drew on a more idiosyncratic, medical understanding of suspended animation...as a potentially desirable stage that could regulate the otherwise swift and automatic animations of modern life” (109). Mary Esteve’s “A ‘Gorgeous Neutrality’: Stephen Crane’s Documentary Anaesthetics” (1993) takes up late nineteenth-century interest in anesthetic states, including William James’s strange “Note on the Anaesthetic revelation” from *The Will to Believe* (1897), itself a commentary on Benjamin Blood’s “The Anaesthetic Revelation and the Gist of Philosophy” (1874).

components of productive systems (in this case, the body-machine relays necessitated by state executions) and recombines them in heterogeneous chains to form new assemblages of indeterminate and unstable agencies and identities. In contrast to Derrida's account of an "anesthetic logic" that would *justify* state killing by making it acceptable, London's anesthetic imagination works to disrupt it by making it impossible.

Over the course of this chapter, I will 1) describe how and why the institutions and technologies of state killing became a pressing thematic concern for London, 2) demonstrate how this thematization intersected with his uniquely embodied, bio-centric understanding of authorial labor, and 3) illustrate how his articulation of this linkage disrupts dominant accounts of the relationship between American literature and biopolitics inaugurated by the new historicism through a reading of London's floating-prison novel, *The Sea-Wolf* (1904), in which the uncanny potentiality of anesthesial life receives its most thorough articulation. In closing, I will argue that while London's self-characterization as "a fluid sort of organism"—an anonymous vital substance imperceptible to biopolitical designation—represents a crucial and under-recognized facet of his work (and American literature's biomaterial imagination as a whole), it nevertheless designates a particular (white) racial fantasy of illegibility that can never be fully disentangled from the logics of settler-colonialism. London's writing thus illuminates the symptomatic turn toward ever-smaller particulate matter as an evasion from the vicissitudes of politics characterizing a significant strain of work in the humanities and social sciences today.

I. London at the Scaffold

In 1900, at the age of twenty-four, Jack London "very much" wanted to witness a hanging. He confided so in a letter to his friend, Elwyn Hoffman: "My nerves I flatter myself are strong enough to study such human phenomena, and I have always been interested in the way

men die. Some can do it finely, can they not?" (*Letters* 211). It would be two years before this gruesome curiosity would be satisfied. On February 21st, 1902, London attended the execution of Isaac Daily at San Quentin Prison. The event itself was, for the time, unextraordinary: Daily had been sentenced to death for killing his mechanic over a monetary dispute; he had pleaded insanity and was subsequently denied. Given that state executions in California were not open to the public, it is likely that London gained admittance either as a member of the press or as one of the few "reputable citizens" chosen by the District Attorney to represent civil society during enactments of capital punishment.

Two days after the event, London described the experience in a letter to his friend Cloudesley Johns:

[The hanging] was one of the most scientific things I have ever seen. From the time he came through the door which leads from the death-chamber to the gallows-room, to the time he was dangling at the end of the rope, but 21 [sic] seconds elapsed. And in those twenty-one seconds, all of the following things occurred: He walked from the door to the gallows, ascended a flight of thirteen stairs to the top of the gallows, walked across the top of the gallows to the trap, took his position upon the trap, his legs were strapped, the noose slipped over his head drawn tight and the knot adjusted, the black cap pulled down over his face, the trap sprung, his neck broken, & the spinal cord severed—all in twenty-one seconds, so simple a thing is life and so easy is it to kill a man. Why, he made never the slightest twitch. It took fourteen and one-half minutes for the heart to run down, but he was not aware of it. 1/5 [sic] of a second elapsed between the springing of the trap and the breaking of his neck & severing of his spinal cord. So far as he was concerned, he was dead at the end of that one-fifth of a second (*Letters* 282-283).

It is easy to dismiss London's account as nothing more than a paeon to the technical rationality of the modern state's thanatopolitical apparatus, a celebration of the economization of killing made possible by the gradual absorption of capital punishment into the fold of scientific management over the course of the nineteenth century. To be sure, London's language revels in the details of Taylorist efficiency: the body of the condemned, here, is disassembled into a set of

discrete anatomical parts—legs, head, neck, spinal cord, heart—each of which articulates itself in a precise configuration—“walk,” “drawn,” “adjusted,” “split,” “broken,” “run down”—with the machine process of which it is has become a part. Meanwhile, London himself inhabits the scene as pure *cogito*, a disembodied computational device—simultaneously stopwatch, stethoscope, pedometer, and ruler—that compulsively measures Daily’s last traverse, the number of steps he ascends, the height and time of his fall, and the duration of his dying pulse. The account’s insistent rationalization—its translation of a man’s death into a series of empirically quantifiable processes—underwrites the maxim London draws from the experience: “So simple a thing is life and so easy is it to kill a man.”

A closer reading, however, reveals such simplicity and ease belied by the formal qualities of the letter itself. If London’s account esteems the cold rationality of Frederick Winslow Taylor’s shop floor, it also participates in a gothic sentimentalism worthy of Edgar Allan Poe’s grotesque laboratories. Notice that rather than describe the hanging chronologically from beginning to end, London offers it in the form of three discontinuous but overlapping temporal sequences: twenty-one seconds spanning Daily’s walk to the scaffold and his fall through the trap, one-fifth of a second spanning the fall itself, and fourteen and one-half minutes spanning the running down of his heart. Although, strictly speaking, these sequences are nested within one another (the time from the “death chamber” “to the time he was dangling at the end of the rope” *comprises* the one-fifth of a second fall, etc.), London’s account presents them linearly, one after the other. The effect of this, of course, is that Isaac Daily dies and is revived multiple times over the course of the letter: first he is hung, then he is hung again in greater detail and pronounced dead, then his heart runs down, then he is resuscitated in order to reenact “the severing of his spinal cord” a third time alongside London’s insistence that *this* was in fact the true moment of

death. These spatiotemporal recursions and telescopings—moving forward and backward in time, zooming in and out upon the different parts of Daily’s anatomy—render the condemned man’s vital status increasingly uncertain as the event unfolds in narrative time, such that the running-down of his heart needs to be supplemented by the strange qualifications, “but he was not aware of that” and “so far as he was concerned.” What kind of ventriloquizing act is London making us privy to here? Why does a document so insistent upon demonstrating the “scientific” methods of state killing dwell so long in this liminal zone of the undead, where narrator and narrated appear symbiotically linked through the gothic emblem of the shared beating heart?

Rather than treat London’s letter to Johns as idiosyncratic in its depiction of the condemned body, I want to suggest that it in fact provides a kind of *blueprint* for how the author came to imagine dying at the hands of the state over the course of his career. Four months after Daily’s hanging, London published a short story in *Cosmopolitan* magazine titled “Bâtard,” which recounts the exploits of a “devilish” man and his equally devilish dog, both of whom have been sentenced to hang by the neck for a crime the man may or may not have committed. Before the execution can occur, however, there is a disturbance at a nearby camp and the marshals are forced to postpone their work before securing the dog’s rope. The man is left teetering precariously on a wooden box with a noose around his neck while the dog, left momentarily free, regards him menacingly. When the marshals make their way back to the site of the execution, “they caught a glimpse of a ghostly pendulum swinging back and forth in the dim light. As they hurriedly drew in closer, they made out the man’s inert body, *and a live thing that clung to it*, and shook and worried and gave to it the swaying motion” (my emphasis; 741). Beyond the invocation of Poe in the description of a “ghostly pendulum,” it is difficult to read the phrase “a live thing that clung to it” in light of Daily’s hanging without venturing that this figuration of an

anonymous, vital surplus is constitutive of London's ontology of the condemned body as such. From the perspective of the law-enforcers, the dog and man dangling together from the noose appear as an uncannily composite entity—an "animal" life that insists as a kind of outgrowth from (yet inevitably bound to) the human. Granting the body the trappings of life, this clinging "thing" designates an excess or supplement that cannot be accounted for within the rational order of judicial procedure.

The premise that human life might somehow evade capture at the apex of institutional constraint by splitting off and differing from itself, becoming anonymous and untraceable, receives its most explicit fictional treatment in London's 1915 novel, *The Star Rover*, which grants what remains implicit in "Bâtard" and Daily's hanging the status of a full-fledged narrative conceit. The novel's narrator, Darrell Standing, on death row for murder at San Quentin, has trained himself through hours of straightjacket torture at the hands of the prison's warden to achieve what he calls "an anesthesia of pain, engendered by pain too exquisite to be borne" (156). Standing's anesthetic state, in turn, induces a form of "suspended animation" that allows him to persist beyond the point of his own death as an anonymous vital force or spirit, capable of inhabiting any number of corporeal forms (156, 251). As Standing writes himself up to the moment of his execution over the course of the novel—"My last lines. It seems I am delaying the procession"—he indulges in a series of speculations surrounding the circumstances of his fall that vividly rehearse Daily's execution (329):

Yes, I shall drop far. They have cunning tables of calculations, like interest tables, that show the distance of the drop in relation to the victim's weight. I am so emaciated that they will have to drop me far in order to break my neck. And then the onlookers will take their hats off, and as I swing the doctors will press their ears to my chest to count my fading heartbeats, and at last they will say that I am dead (254).

Prior to his incarceration at San Quentin, Standing specialized in farm management: “I know the waste of superfluous motion without studying a moving picture recording of it,” he brags in the novel’s opening pages, “all I needed was a mere look at a man to know his predispositions, his co-ordinations, and the index fraction of his motion-wastage” (6). This detail regarding Standing’s previous employment clarifies something important about London’s oscillation between seemingly opposed discursive registers in his accounts of these hangings. Rather than situate the cold rationality of scientific management as *opposed* to the liminal state of anesthetically-induced suspended animation, London suggests that the former in fact facilitates the latter. It is precisely *because* Standing understands bodies the same way gallows engineers do—that is, as anatomic machines whose “co-ordinations” and “motion-wastage” must be taken into account in the act of extermination—that he is able to avoid the fate they prescribe for him by becoming “cataleptic,” such that “the bodily processes are so near to absolute suspension that the air and food consumed are practically negligible” (251). Put more precisely, the very process of narrating the body’s decomposition by an apparatus designed to isolate and extinguish its life paradoxically renders that life diffuse and unverifiable. London’s descriptive reduction of his prisoners to a collection of organs and anatomical units—a spine, a brain, a heart—works to decentralize their body’s vital processes, rendering the relationship between the “body” and the “live thing that clung to it” indeterminate. Which organ takes precedence in the pronouncement of death? Should death be defined by the cessation of vital functions (such as breath and pulse) or can such functions be suspended and revived indefinitely? Should a body be considered alive in the absence of brain activity, or are there other criteria that existing instruments are not precise enough to determine?

As this chapter will go on to explain, these were pressing questions for nineteenth-century doctors, scientists, and physiologists, and they would be taken up enthusiastically by theorists and technicians of capital punishment for devising newer and more efficient modes of killing. That London's writing explicitly invokes this historical problematic by which the body at the scaffold becomes the object of scientific inquiry, however, points to an aspect of his work thoroughly unexamined by contemporary readers. This omission is particularly glaring given that American literature has such a long and complicated relationship to the death penalty—its theorists include James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Theodore Dreiser, Richard Wright, and many others²⁷—yet Jack London has never been considered part of this intellectual genealogy. The reason for this, I want to suggest, has to do with the way London's treatment of the condemned body challenges the assumptions underwriting the liberal figure of the "citizen-subject" so often presumed as the protagonist of American incarceration narratives.²⁸ If the citizen-subject is conceived as self-contained, autonomous, rational, and finite, London's anesthetized bodies are dispersed, composite, material, and potentially infinite. And if the canonical American literary engagement with capital punishment dramatizes what John Cyril Barton calls "the confrontation between the citizen-subject and sovereign authority in its starkest terms" (5), London's naturalistic hangings stage the confrontation between sovereign power and the vicissitudes of the biological body as they were unfolding in a discrete historical

²⁷ The relevant texts from the above list are Cooper's *The Spy* (1821), Hawthorne's "The Earth's Holocaust" (1844) and "The New Adam and Eve" (1843), Melville's *Billy Budd* (1921), Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925), and Wright's *Native Son* (1940).

²⁸ This term organizes John Cyril Barton's impressive study, *Literary Executions: Capital Punishment and American Culture 1820-1925* (2014), for instance. For Barton, the term indexes "what was for many a hypocrisy of American democracy: the execution of a citizen under a system of government in which citizens themselves are sovereign" (5). David Guest and Karen Haltunnen, in their studies, *Sentenced to Death: The American Novel and Capital Punishment* (1997) and *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination* (2000), respectively, take up the latter half of the citizen-subject couplet, illustrating how literary forms from the Puritan sermon to the sensational crime tabloid and to true crime confessional participate in the creation of "the criminal" as a psychologically discrete (though often monstrously unknowable) subject type.

moment. Literally suspended at the limit between life and death, London's condemned figures shed light upon his own uniquely situated ontology of life *as such*. "It is the common belief that death is the correlative of life," he writes in another letter to Cloudesley Johns, "that whatsoever lives must die. Yet this is not so. Why the life cells...lived when your ancestors were fishes in the sea, when they were reptiles in the dirt, when sex was unknown, when they were nothing but palpitating masses of formless life" (*Letters* 132). The body at the scaffold—"formless" yet embodied, "inert" yet animate, "aware" yet indeterminately human—offers London a figure for theorizing the relationship between life and its material expression as this relationship became the direct object of state power. London's elaboration of this relationship constitutes his biomaterial imagination.

My wager here is that the process of mapping this imaginative terrain—detailing the intellectual genealogy from which it arises, illuminating the biomedical technologies through which it materializes, and highlighting the ways it came to inform London's self-understanding as an author potentially subject to state violence and biopolitical capture—reveals a very different story of naturalism's investment in modes of discipline and punishment than traditional accounts of the field have allowed. A major vein of naturalist criticism, including the work of June Howard, Walter Benn Michaels, Mark Seltzer, and Dana Seitler, aligns the genre with a specific model of power organized around a set of correspondences between the materiality of writing and an ever-tightening control over the human life processes.²⁹ If the nineteenth-century

²⁹ In *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism* (1985), June Howard argues that the naturalist novel partakes of an "immanent ideology" whereby "the observant and articulate naturalist, in close conference with his reader" "inhabit[s] a privileged position" vis-à-vis the lower-class subjects of their fiction (387). Naturalist fiction works, according to Howard, by "casting out the outcast," excising the "brute" who stands in for the threat of proletarianization by "captur[ing] and control[ling] it in the webs of causality or plot" (402). Walter Benn Michaels' *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (1987) attempts to reframe debates over agency in naturalist fiction in terms of structural relations constitutive of *all* subjects. For Michaels, naturalism's dramas of control and loss of control, mastery and submission, are endemic to the "logic" of the naturalist novel insofar as these antitheses are built into "the double identities that seem, in naturalism, to be required if there are to be identities at all" (27). Such

realist novel, in the words of Seltzer, “secures the intelligibility and supervision of individuals in an evolutionary and genetic narration,” naturalism’s thematic emphasis on the vicissitudes of the productive and reproductive body marks what he calls a “systemic and totalizing intensification” of these effects (43). As a system of knowledge production, naturalist fiction incorporates the concepts and representational technologies of the nineteenth-century natural and social sciences “in the service of a project to make the human subject knowable” (Seitler 5). According to these accounts, naturalism performs the cultural work of disciplining and punishing human subjects by rendering their biological complexities legible and thus available as objects of governance.

And yet, what our attention to London’s hangings makes palpable is the way such “scientific” discursive techniques oriented towards the production of legibility—surveillance, quantification, and anatomization—when pushed to their limit produce the very opposite of what they intend.³⁰ The tighter the tendrils of state power wrap around Daily’s body, the more uncertain, unstable, and unreadable that body becomes. The more ink London spills to convey the end of Daily’s life, the more elusive that end appears. Jack London’s fiction consistently

double identities characterize conceptions of selfhood, aesthetic production, and economic value in sets of homological equivalences: subjects will continually appear distinct from their bodies and will thus be in need of controlling; writing will continually be reduced to bare marks and becoming devoid of meaning; money will continually appear reducible to its material form and become devoid of value; in each case, the difference between what a thing *is* and what it *represents* makes inevitable crises of agency in a culture of consumption. “Your mark,” writes Michaels, “is a continual reminder that you are you, and the production of such reminders enforces the identity it memorializes” (7). The task of writing in naturalism is thus a continual reassertion of a fantasmatic control that is perpetually in jeopardy.

³⁰ This, indeed, is the lesson of Jennifer Fleissner’s *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (2004), in its insistence upon a dialectical reading of naturalism’s purported obsession with ordering, organizing, quantifying, and controlling. Naturalism’s heroines, Fleissner notes, have often been branded the most compulsive organizers and administrators of the period, and yet their very compulsiveness creates possibilities for agency that neither transcend techniques of control and domination nor remain determined by them. Compulsive activity takes the imperative to rationalize embodied practices of female productivity and reproductivity (“sex, birth, death, illness, cleanliness”) to such an extreme that they begin to seem incoherent, even fall apart. “[T]he compulsive would actually make a terrible Taylorite worker, given that her breakdown of ordinary actions into minute, exacting rituals actually produces not greater efficiency but its opposite: a seemingly endless spiral” (10). A similar process, I want to suggest, is at work in London’s fiction, where efforts to define and isolate the essence of human life end up denaturing that very category by rendering it indistinguishable from other forms of animal, vegetable, and mineral existence.

envisioning authorship as a form of agency that renders human life diffuse, anonymous, and illegible, and thus temporarily able to evade the networks of power in which it is always inevitably caught. To grasp the rationale for this vision, it is necessary to elaborate the historical connections between authorship and incarceration. In what follows, then, we will see how London links the task of writing to the biological body in ways that allow him to trace his own lines of flight through and around the penal and industrial institutions that, from an early age, had him in their grasp.

II. A Fluid Sort of Organism

There is some irony in recognizing that the thinker whose work had the most direct impact on the rise of American new historicism and its “containment model” of textual production, Michel Foucault, is also the theorist best equipped to point us towards an alternative account of authorship, and one that actively attempts to engage with its own biopolitical entanglements. In his well-known essay, “What is an Author?” Foucault connects the emergence of what he terms the “author-function”—the principle of naming and textual attribution “by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction”—to juridico-political systems of punishment and incarceration:

First of all, discourses are objects of appropriation. The form of ownership from which they spring is of a rather particular type, one that has been codified for many years. We should note that, historically, this type of ownership has always been subsequent to what one might call penal appropriation. Texts, books, and discourses really began to have authors (other than “sacralized” or “sacralizing” figures) to the extent that authors became subject to punishment, that is, to the extent that discourse could be transgressive (108).

While Foucault sees the modern ascription of authorship entailed in the author-function serving to circumscribe, police, and contain the polysemia inherent in a given discursive field, he

suggests that the conditions of possibility for this attributive act emerge out of the institutional forms that circumscribe, police, and contain human life. The author is born out of the function of an inclusive exclusion. The figure of the writing writer rises out of, is excluded from, the chaos of historical logorrhea, the endless proliferation of utterances, in order to be retroactively designated the site of creative origin; but this designation is only possible to the extent that he or she is simultaneously included within the juridico-political apparatus that demands presentation of his or her body for possible scrutiny, torture, and imprisonment. Authorial expropriation comes at the expense of penal appropriation.³¹

What we have begun to trace here—the authorial body’s capture by the state apparatus as the ground of its legibility—provocatively opens up the space for considering the complex relationship between historical transformations in the author-function and the shifting operations of biopower, the administrative relays articulating what Foucault called an “anatomy-politics” of the human body with the “biopolitics of the population” (*HoS* 130). For if there exists an intimate theoretical link between the availability of the author’s living body to disciplinary regulation and the author’s ideological role as a “regulator of the fictive,” it is worth pursuing the implications of this entanglement with respect to particular literary texts as they navigate its shifting configurations and coordinates.

³¹ Foucault’s essay leaves the historical details of this process vague, citing the emergence of “rules concerning the author’s rights, author-publishing relations, rights of reproduction, and related matters” around the turn of the nineteenth century in Europe as the prime source of consolidation for the author’s status as a subject of state power and governmentality (108). Catherine Gallagher’s essay, “The Rise of Fictionality,” bears out Foucault’s suggestive hypothesis, linking the disciplinary dimensions of authorial subjectivity with the rise of the novel form explicitly. Gallagher argues that the novel did not merely transform fictional representation in the eighteenth century, it actually *invented* the very category of “fiction” as we understand it today by inaugurating fiction’s uniquely non-referential referentiality that allows the telling of “believable stories that [do] not solicit belief” (340). Prior to the novel, she argues, “believability was tantamount to a truth claim,” and hence “as long as they did not contain talking animals, flying carpets, or human characters who are much better or much worse than the norm, narratives seemed referential in their particulars and were hence routinely accused of either fraud or slander” (339). The history of the novel is thus inextricably bound up with scandal, lawsuits, and punishments—Defoe at the pillory or Delarivier Manley prosecuted for libel—and the form itself instantiated a transgressive mode of referentiality for which the body of the writing writer designated the site of reparation and reform.

“What is an Author?” closes with the prediction of the author-function’s eventual obsolescence. In its place, Foucault imagines a situation in which “[a]ll discourses, whatever their status, form, value, and whatever the treatment to which they will be subjected, would then develop in the anonymity of a murmur” rather than from a psychologized, desiring, and motivated subject position (119). Thereafter, to pose of the archive questions of source and identity would be met with “the stirring of an indifference” (120). Far from a liberation of hitherto shackled semantic possibilities, the condition suggested by “the anonymity of a murmur” would still operate according to what Foucault calls “a system of constraint,” but one “which will have to be determined, or, perhaps, experienced” (119). What remains underarticulated here is how this condition of discursive anonymity or indifference relates to Foucault’s other, and perhaps better known works, such as those focused on the birth of biopolitics, in which he traces the institutional consolidation of potentially anonymous acts (sex, crime, madness) into discrete identity categories (the homosexual, the criminal, the insane). The question I want to pose here, then, is: how might different theoretical enactments of authorship—ones that seek to problematize the disciplinary role of the author-function—inform a textual politics that take the punishable body, the body as potential “bare life” in the eyes of the state, as its ultimate horizon?

Anonymity, for Foucault, is less a state of being than a relationship to power, and an always-precarious one: becoming anonymous before the law inevitably risks exposing one to the violence that resides in the gap where proceduralism falters and the state of exception becomes visible. Anonymousness, for Foucault, is not self-diminution or becoming-invisible: it is a process, inextricably linked to discourse, speech, and writing, that questions the primary object of modern power as the power of *designation*—it questions “who designates, the kind of

designation, and the choice one has in accepting or changing a designation” (Hook 56). “Do you think,” writes Foucault in his introduction to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, “that I would keep so persistently at my task, if I were not preparing—with a rather shaky hand—a labyrinth into which I can venture, in which I can move my discourse, opening up underground passages, forcing it to go far from itself, finding overhangs that reduce and deform its itinerary, in which I can lose myself and appear at last to eyes that I will never have to meet again” (19). The author-function to come, as I take Foucault’s understanding of it, would not entail a means of escape from penal appropriation, but the possibility for becoming-Other that confounds the terms of appropriation itself, undermines, if only momentarily, the project of the subject’s capture in webs of power/knowledge. To write, for Foucault, always harbors the possibility for inscribing what Deleuze and Guattari call a “line of flight” within a given apparatus. “I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face” (*Archaeology* 19).

I will be arguing in this section that this was also Jack London’s task, and it is precisely in the context of incarceration that such a project becomes visible. In an episode from his autobiographical travelogue, *The Road* (1906), London recounts his arrest at the age of eighteen in Niagara Falls on the charge of vagrancy, for which he was sentenced to one month of hard labor at Erie County Penitentiary outside of Buffalo, New York. London had been “hoboing” across the country and was caught sleeping by an officer of the law in a country field. When unable to identify the hotel he was staying at, he was “pinched” (231). The incarceration was almost certainly an illegal affair. Denied due process, trial by jury, habeas corpus, and any form of outside communication, London was swiftly swept up into the penal system by a judge who processed men for sentencing like a disciple of Frederick Winslow Taylor: “And so it went,”

writes London, “fifteen seconds and thirty days to each hobo. The machine of justice was grinding smoothly” (233).³²

Finding himself a cog in this machine took a toll on London. “My patriotic American citizenship there received a shock from which it has never fully recovered,” he writes. London’s text at first suggests that a fully recovery *might*, in fact, be possible—that he might restore both the plenitude of his “broken down” body as well as his affective and legal investment in the discourse of the citizen-subject through the medium of his own writing. He imagines his recourse in the form of spectacular, authorial publicity: “Visions of damage suits and sensational newspaper headlines were dancing before my eyes when the jailers came in and began hustling us out into the main office” (234). Implicit in this account of authorship is the notion that discourse can be restorative, that language can performatively reassemble and reconstitute the violated material body of the prisoner and his immaterial legal body of rights. The experience at Erie, London thinks, will provide “the store of material” that he will later convert into public testimony to deploy against “the harpies of justice” (241). But this muckraking fantasy about the power of civil discourse is surprisingly short-lived. As he comes to witness things “unbelievable” and “horrible” in prison, London concedes that his “indignation ebbed away, and into my being rushed the tides of fear. I saw at last, clear-eyed, what I was up against. I grew meek and lowly.

³² London’s language is apt. Taylor’s theories of scientific management promised to eliminate all wasted energy and excess costs from the labor process by turning factory workers into increasingly efficient machines at the expense of their intellectual autonomy. Both the Taylorized factory and the modern work-prison actively partook in the production of what Foucault called “docile bodies” through institutionalized techniques of discipline and surveillance. Discipline, according to Foucault, “dissociates power from the body” (“Docile Bodies 182): dividing each workday into enforced periods of activity and inactivity, subdividing each time into discrete sets of tasks to be completed, and then decomposing each task into a strict set of movements to be accomplished within a specific timeframe, the body’s productive capacities increase in direct proportion to its subjugation. London’s Taylorist language proliferates as he moves through the prison system: “The men lathered themselves, and the barbers shaved them at the rate of a minute to a man. A hair-cut took a trifle longer. In three minutes the down of eighteen was scraped from my face, and my head was as smooth as a billiard-ball just sprouting a crop of bristles” (238).

Each day I resolved more emphatically to make no rumpus when I got out. All I asked, when I got out was a change to fade away from the landscape” (243).

What kind of *activity*—specifically, what of *authorial activity*—is implied by this desire to “fade away from the landscape”? In line with Barton’s account of the citizen-subject as the *de facto* protagonist of American incarceration narratives, critics have tended to read London’s “prison lesson” in terms of the dialectic between submission and mastery. In order to gain “intellectual mastery” over his writerly self, London needed to capitulate to “the emotional experience of absolute dependency” upon the institutional forms that dominated him (Hendrick 29). This is not a surprising interpretation given that London traffics in the language of mastery in many of his writings, and scholars have tended to import it wholesale into their commentary of his work.³³ The problem, however, is that this is not an accurate description of what actually happens to London at Erie, nor, as I will argue throughout this chapter, does it account for the complex authorial vision that London deploys over and over again the context of life’s capture by state power.

London’s desire “to fade away” from Erie entails neither mastery over nor submission to a system, but something closer to the fantasy of dissociating one’s own bodily existence *into* the discursive apparatus that constitutes it—what Foucault calls “preparing... a labyrinth into which I can venture, in which I can lose myself.” We begin to see this process at work in *The Road* from the very moment of London’s arrest in Niagara Falls, where the name “Jack London” marks the source of a referential evasion. “I gave the name of Jack Drake, but when they searched for me, they found letters addressed to Jack London... and to this day I do not know whether I was

³³ For instance, in *White Fang*, when the titular wolf-dog “abandon[s] himself” to the rule of his human master, this submission coincides with the White Fang “finding himself,” his nature “undergoing an expansion” (London 409, 413). Jonathan Auerbach writes, “What at first glance looks like a standard social Darwinist trope that London often cited—‘master or be mastered’—thus turns out on closer examination to teach the author, via a series of shifting naturalist scenarios, quite a different, more unusual motto—master *and* be mastered (or be mastered *to* master)” (9).

pinched as Jack Drake or Jack London” (231). London’s identity before the law depends upon the law’s power to ground the flight of these dead letters and impose determinations upon their indefinite addressers and addressees. “Jack London” exists from the beginning, then, as a semantic displacement, the site of a disjunction between sign and referent, the subject of the letters and the incarcerated body. *The Road*, however, evidences little investment in restricting these determinations; London’s time at Erie is a veritable revelry in the endless deferrals of language circulating around the figure of the author. “He called me ‘Jack,’ and I called him ‘Jack,’” London writes of his first prison chum; and later, when trying to “remember” the name of the train station where the penitentiary is located, concrete geography dissolves into metonymic chains of associations: “I am confident that it is some one of the following: Rocklyn, Rockwood, Black Rock, Rock-castle, or Newcastle” (235-236).

Given how emphatically *The Road* links incarceration with referential instability, it is perhaps no surprise that London survives at Erie, earning money and favors, by becoming a letter courier for the prison’s massive system of illicit mail, “the chain of communication of which was so complex that we knew neither sender nor sendee. We were but links in the chain” (252). London represents his own subjectivity, here, as inseparable from an attenuated discourse network, in which he facilitates the movement of the signifying process without being the thing signified. “Somewhere, somehow, a convict would thrust a letter into my hand with the instruction to pass it on to the next link (252). This radically embodied form of communication (“thrust a letter into my hand”) constitutes London at every moment (“somewhere, somehow”) *through* the discourse of an anonymous Other. It is also no surprise, then, that one of London’s side jobs at Erie is that of a surrogate composer, writing love letters to a female inmate for an illiterate fellow prisoner: “*I laid myself out on them*, put in my best licks, and furthermore, I won

her for him; though I shrewdly guess that she was in love, not with him, but with the humble scribe” (emphasis added; 247). This is an account of authorship, explored more substantially in the following section, in which the materiality of bodies and the materiality of texts are deeply entangled with one another—where the act of writing is figured as a form of physical contact, as if the letter itself contains the prone form of its composer “laid out” upon its surface. That London imagines the emotional transfer through these correspondences as a misidentification (the female prisoner is not in love with the *name* of the addresser but the ambiguous body/text of the “humble scribe”) only underscores the thematic of writing as a vital dispersal that simultaneously enacts an evasion from identity and legibility.³⁴

London retrojects his career as a fiction writer back into the youthful travels from which *The Road* is drawn, claiming “[t]he successful hobo must be an artist” and attributing his present literary success to “this training of my tramp days” (193). If *The Road* is a travelogue about a writer learning to write, then London’s account of his confinement at Erie is about the confrontation between his burgeoning sense of authorship—the subject positions, modes of agency, and (dis)identifications writing allows and disallows—and institutionalized state violence—the dispossessions, disciplinary techniques, and suspensions of civil liberties it mandates. What this confrontation produces, I am arguing, is a vision of authorship that tests those very power structures to contain the life dispersed within the figure of the writing writer. “Now it happens that I am a fluid sort of organism, with sufficient kinship with life to fit myself in most anywhere,” he writes upon admittance to Erie. To write, as we have seen, is for London

³⁴ To insist that this authorial mode demarcates a technique of evasion is not to make a claim about a given text’s subversiveness nor its capacity to perform feats of ideological resistance. To a very real extent, London was “complicit” with the systems of domination he inhabited. Indeed, he acted as a “hall-man” for the prison guards, whose job it was to keep prisoners in line from the inside, and he received better treatment for doing so. The point, rather, is to theorize the conditions of possibility for a conception of authorship that imagines itself offering modes of evasion and disidentification vis-à-vis the near-totalizing system of the carceral state apparatus.

to *enact* this organic fluidity, which takes the form of “kinship” with a “life” that appears radically abstract and undifferentiated.

In his book-length study, *The Prison in the American Imagination* (2009), Caleb Smith argues that carceral institutions occupy an ambiguous place in conceptions of national selfhood insofar as they designate *both* a site of reformation, correction, and self-discipline *and* one of torture, abjection and pain. Associated simultaneously with subject-making and subject-breaking, prisons and the cultural narratives of incarceration that surround their operations thus invoke “two starkly opposed figures: a reflecting, self-governing soul and a cadaverous, dehumanized body” (6). These figures are reconciled, Smith argues, through “narratives of rebirth” that demand “the convict’s virtual death” as its condition of salvation (ibid). American prison narratives thus continually engage (even as they rewrite) eighteenth-century social contract discourses, which “required the figurative sacrifice of natural (or animal) life as a precondition for the acquisition of the citizen’s spiritual (or human) subjectivity” (13). The terms of Smith’s analysis map nicely onto the dialectic between submission and mastery that underwrites critics’ readings of London’s “prison lesson,” and they allow us to articulate in more precise language the ways in which London’s carceral imagination departs from this narrative. London’s “fluid sort of organism,” we might say, aligns *neither* with the rational, reform-minded citizen-subject *nor* with the cadaverous body structuring Smith’s analysis. Instead, it alludes to the ways that the body’s “natural life” had acquired more complex connotations in the late nineteenth century, signaling not simply deathliness (or the more recent term, “bare life”) but an elusive vital *potentiality* that both traverses the material form of the body yet remains irreducible to it.

In the sections that follow, we will see how both the natural and social sciences were confronted with a newly dispersed and decentralized understanding of “life itself,” and explore

how the implications of this reimagining for the state institutions that administered to its bio- and thanato-political functioning spoke directly to London's authorial imagination.

III. Biomaterial Production

No American writer at the turn of the century foregrounds the biological facticity of the writing body—the author as living, breathing, eating, excreting, and reproducing organism—more forcefully and consistently than Jack London. “We are the ones who suffer from the belly need,” he writes in an advice column to aspiring writers in 1900, “We are joy loving, pleasure seeking, and we are ever hungry for the things which we deem the compensation for living” (26).

We want food, and plenty of it; meat as often as we feel inclined—not skirt steak, but porterhouse; fruits; and when the call is for cream, cream and not skim milk...And we want to marry and multiply, and we want our multiplications to be pleasures, not worries...We want them to grow up fat and strong, with big muscles and large lungs and clear eyes (26).

The vocation of authorship, as London understands it, is a thoroughly embodied experience that articulates digestive, reproductive, somatic, poetic, and economic processes: pain gets converted into text gets converted into cash gets converted into food gets converted into brood gets converted into joy gets converted into muscle gets converted into more text, and so on.

Underlying this circuit of translation is what London calls “belly need,” his synecdoche for the body's porous organic complexity—its openness to and permeation by a nonhuman outside. The biological body, in this formulation, is not simply the *ground* of the production process, the source of labor power whose upkeep and maintenance are necessary to reproduce the laborer's conditions of existence. Rather, the body's somatic heterogeneity—the totality of its pleasures, pains, hungers, desires, physical and emotional capacities—constitutes the central nodal point in

an extended network of production and consumption that operates by perpetually transforming one form of vital currency into another.³⁵

This strange conceptual entanglement between material texts and biological bodies is already implicit in the essay's title, "First Aid to Rising Authors," which figures the bestowal of advice to young writers hoping to make a living on the literary market as a form of life preservation, replete with the connotations of physical contact between biological and textual bodies, including the exchange of vital fluids such as breath and blood. Just as a public library represents, for London, "an artery where one may feel the pulse of the market," so too do the books that circulate within and through it function as extensions of the author's corporeal existence: "it were well that we, moved towards literature by belly need, should judiciously decide *what part of us is best to put on paper* (emphasis added; "First Aid" 27-28). An author expends vitality—puts themselves on paper—only to receive vitality back in a converted form, value. What London calls "the compensation for living," then, is inevitably *more life*. This logic reestablishes the image of London's body "laid out" in the surrogate love letters at Erie.

³⁵ Much recent criticism on London focuses predominantly on the author's economic ambitions and public self-fashioning, thus obscuring the imbrication between the biological body and the production of socio-economic value. Michael Szalay's account of London in *New Deal Modernism* (2000) focuses on the author's attempts to reconcile the feeling of "bifurcated agency" confronting writers subject to the contingencies of the literary market: "Whereas writing can be sold twice [ie. to publishers and then to readers], and worth two different amounts to the fickle mob of readers, labor time can only be sold once" (32). Szalay argues that this crisis of agency led London to consistently imagine his literary work as salaried labor, which explains the latter's obsessive tallying of his typing speed, daily word counts, and the average price per word received—converting craftsmanship *into* salary. Jonathan Auerbach's book-length study, *Male Call* (1996), takes up London's "literary Taylorism" from a different perspective, arguing that London's writerly project hinges upon his "performative marketing of self," his ability to "autobiographically encode his person in his fiction" and thus mold the public persona of "Jack London" in a semi-autonomous literary institution or trademark (8, 22, 190). "London's work as an author is less a question of identifying or possessing himself per se than of struggling to gain public recognition and power: the self as charismatically constructed and traded in relation to others" (8). There is no gainsaying London's investment in his own marketability or his embrace of the profit motive as an ethos of aesthetic production, but ignoring the biomaterial dimensions of his theory of authorship generates certain symptoms in these critics' arguments. For instance, while discussing London's efforts to brand himself, Auerbach slips into the discourse of mysticism and magic to explain the nature of the author's nominal power: the name "Jack London" "projects magical goodwill," functioning as "a charged sign of prestige," an act of "magical naming" carrying "a mysterious potential value" (26-35). What this section aims to show is that there is, in fact, nothing mysterious about London's biomaterial theory of value, but that uncovering its workings leads us far afield from the image of the bootstrapping, self-promoting *homo oeconomicus* orienting these studies.

In the fourth chapter of this dissertation, I will show how Edith Wharton takes up the metaphor of *life preservation* vis-à-vis literary production in ways that situate her work directly within the biopolitical milieu of late nineteenth-century euthanasia debates. At this moment, however, I will turn to London's semi-autobiographical novel, *Martin Eden* (1909), in which the question regarding "what part of us is best to put on paper" receives a thorough and illuminating answer. Early in the story, Ruth Morse, the novel's bourgeois love interest, is lecturing the poor, unlettered literary aspirant, Eden, about the importance of frugality and diligence in making one's way in the world. Her object lesson is a friend of the family, Mr. Charles Butler, who grew up, like Eden, in dire poverty, but by "denying himself the enjoyments boys indulge in" became a "great man" with an income of thirty thousand a year (619). Against this Alger-esque narrative, however, Eden responds with an unusual appeal to the negative effects of such thriftiness on the constitution of the man's *stomach*: "There's one thing I'll bet you," he tells Ruth, "and it is that Mr. Butler's nothin' gay-hearted now in his fat days. He fed himself like that for years an' years, on a boy's stomach, an' I bet his stomach's none too good for it" (620). When Ruth admits that Mr. Butler indeed suffers from "dyspepsia" in his senior years, Eden pushes the argument even further, charging that "thirty thousand, lump sum, wouldn't buy for him right now what ten cents he was layin' up would have bought him, when he was a kid, in the way of candy an' peanuts or a seat in nigger heaven" (621).

Eden's argument here sheds light on Jack London's unique understanding of textual production. Eden's point is less to oppose the pleasures of spending to the pains of saving than it is to route *both* processes through the body's gastro-intestinal tract (ie. "belly-need") as the ultimate determinate of *all* value creation. According to Eden, when Mr. Butler sells his labor on a perpetually empty stomach during his youth, he is not so much accumulating valuable profit as

divesting himself of the potential to extract *any* value from his capital in the future. Because he “lived like a dog,” according to Eden, Butler “robbed himself of life” (620, 621). Belly-need, again, establishes the relay by which somatic processes become convertible into economic ones. The currency of exchange in this network is “life” itself. Spend wisely and one can make a return; spend unwisely and one has merely robbed oneself. To elaborate this point, London translates Butler’s decreased receptivity to the pleasures of satiety (in his elder years he is “fat” but not “humanly happy”) and increased receptivity to digestive pain into the language of economic inflation, such that “thirty thousand” today has less purchasing power for him than “ten cents” did during his youth. The structural equation of “life” and “value,” here, positions both terms as *potential* rather than actual quantities, abstractable from bodies and commodities alike. “Life,” for London, is thus the potential to both *imbue* and *extract* value: it designates a conversional power for which the stomach acts in *Martin Eden* as the governing figure.

From where does London’s bio-centric logic of production derive? One convenient answer is that London simply learned it from experience. Born into near poverty and forced into wage labor as a teen, “belly-need” reared its head at every turn in London’s early life. A chapter from his autobiography, *John Barleycorn* (1913), recounts one of London’s first jobs in a powerplant for Oakland’s streetcar system, where he worked from morning until dark shoveling coal into the engine’s fire room.

I dripped with sweat, but I never ceased from my stride, though I could feel exhaustion coming on. By ten o’clock in the morning, so much of my body’s energy had I consumed, I felt hungry and snatched a thick double-slice of bread and butter from my dinner pail. This I devoured standing, grimed with coal dust, my knees trembling under me. By eleven o’clock, in this fashion, I had consumed my whole lunch” (194).

A clear instance of what Mark Seltzer terms American naturalism’s “body-machine complex,” London here imagines his body as a kind of combustion engine, incessantly

converting organic matter into energy—the capacity for work. On Seltzer’s account, naturalism’s interest in thermodynamic models of energy forms part of the genre’s textual regulatory apparatus, its attempt to “manage late nineteenth-century ‘crises’ of production by the invention of a flexible and totalizing machine of power” (44). The naturalist machine, according to Seltzer, operates by invoking a radically abstract and disembodied discourse of “force” (the paradigmatic example being Norris’s *The Octopus*) that allows it to displace and circumvent competing models of production (for instance, female reproduction) that threaten “the autonomous male technology of generation” the naturalist novel seeks to maintain (Seltzer 31). For Seltzer, the discourse of thermodynamics instantiates a dynamic equilibrium that continually converts oppositional (and feminized) forces into containable (masculine) channels, and thus functions as a narrative tool of sexual and economic hegemony.

What distinguishes London’s laboring body from Seltzer’s totalizing “cultural logistics” of power, however, is the fact that London’s conceptualization of “force” is *entirely embodied*, which renders the task of conversion a deeply problematic (rather than stabilizing) process. As London makes clear in the above passage, the main glitch in his body-machine is that it generates progressively diminishing returns: in order to repeat the length of his first workday the following shift, London carries “a lunch twice as big as the one the day before,” and continues his week “always with huger lunches” (196, 199). It is not difficult to imagine the large-scale implications of this bio-centric view of production for a theory of political economy. When the laboring body and its somatic liveliness become the absolute horizon of value creation, the coal London shovels will steadily decrease in value insofar as identical quantities of it will be convertible into less and less vital energy while “bread and butter” consumption steadily rises. More and more bread and butter will yield less and less coal shoveled and thus less and less

profit for the transportation company. In opposition to London's literary entrepreneur who, driven by belly-need, is able to convert bodily "pleasure" and "joy" into goods in the market, London the laborer releases only "rage, and mortification, and exhaustion, and despair" into the system (196). Any equilibrium in the system of production is sure to dissolve. As with Charles Butler in *Martin Eden*, "robbed of life" and thus unable to extract value from his fortune, London in *John Barleycorn* imagines value indelibly wedded to the somatic economy of pleasures, pains, hunger, and satiety that underwrite his own version of the body-machine problematic.

Beyond this appeal to biography, however, there also exists a clear intellectual tradition that London's theory of text production draws from: the work of nineteenth-century political economists, including Thomas Malthus, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill. In *The Body Economic* (2009), Catherine Gallagher argues that these thinkers were the first to situate the material needs and sensorial experiences of the biological body as the primary problem for theories of value creation. "[P]olitical economists and their Romantic and early Victorian critics jointly relocated the idea of ultimate value from a realm of transcendent spiritual meanings to organic 'Life' itself and made sensations—especially pleasure and pain—the sources and signs of that value" (3). Gallagher organizes her discussion of this relocation into two conceptual categories, "bioeconomics," pertaining to "the interconnections among populations, the food supply, modes of production and exchange, and their impact on life forms generally," and "somaconomics," "the theorization of economic behavior in terms of the emotional and sensual feelings that are both causes and consequences of economic exertions (3-4). For Gallagher, bio- and soma-economic plots consistently overlap with one another. Paradigmatic is the case of Malthus, whose *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) challenged the assumption of timelessness underwriting the Enlightenment homology between healthy individuals and a

healthy state by arguing that “the superior power of population cannot be checked without producing misery or vice,” and thus that the fact of reproduction *as such* could not serve as an index of social health (Malthus 10). Malthus’s now much-maligned and discredited theories of population control (of which London knew and mostly agreed with) represented part of an attempt to bring the somatic, material needs of the laboring population into the foreground of political economy. By turning the human body into what Gallagher calls “an absolute social problem,” Malthus inaugurated a perspective in which “[a]ll individual bodily states, without exception, mean trouble for the state of society” (40).

Yet, as Gallagher elaborates and *John Barleycorn* already demonstrates, this emphasis on the physical bodies of workers and their bio-somatic existence generated a powerful tension at the heart of nineteenth-century theories of production. If the value of a commodity can be measured by (as Adam Smith thought) and, indeed, derives from (as David Ricardo added) human labor, and if the value of human labor in turn derives from the commodities necessary to reproduce the material conditions of laborers, then those same commodities (“bread and butter”) could be considered intrinsically more valuable than, say, *coal*, which can only be processed by London’s body and turned into work energy through a much more attenuated chain of conversions, hence diminishing its value. And yet, as Marx knew, in *practice* labor is treated as an abstract measure, “homogeneous human labor,” and thus is able to produce endless chains of equivalences irrespective of use value for the body (as ten yards of linen equals a bushel of wheat equals one coat, etc.).

In other words, political economists’ new emphasis upon biological life in the determination of value paradoxically rendered “life” increasingly difficult to locate because it always seemed to be sliding imperceptibly *between* bodies and things. On the one hand, the labor

theory of value conceived of life as something that could be *extracted* and *alienated* from the bodies of individuals—the most famous figure of this, of course, being Marx’s description of capital as “dead labor that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks” (342). When Mr. Butler robs himself of “life” at a young age, Eden is alluding to precisely this understanding of capital’s vampiric quality. On the other hand, this same vision of extracted, alienated life could just as frequently make bodies and commodities alike look like reserves of potential life, future sustenance, or as-yet-unrealized capacity. When Ruth Morse tells Eden that Mr. Butler is a “great man” because of his thirty thousand a year income, his greatness derives, in principle, from his money’s potential to overcome *all* his incapacities because, as the form of general equivalence, money functions as a reserve of *all* human capacity: “I, in my character as an individual, am lame,” writes Marx, “but money furnishes me with twenty-four feet” (*Economic Manuscripts* 138). “Capital, therefore,” writes Gallagher,

could easily be imagined by the political economists as a repository of vigor and sensation, a guarantee of the corporate entity’s future life, but it could just as easily be attacked by its critics as a force withdrawing life and feeling from the people and withholding them for its own aggrandizement...In either the negative or positive version of its operations, capital appeared to place sensate life in abeyance, to abstract it from biotic form while preserving its potential force (*Body Economic* 60-61).

Nineteenth-century political economy thus made available a conception of life extractable and abstractable from bodies—life existing in the form of potential or capacity—and thus inherently unstable and ungrounded. Practically *anything*, including written texts as expenditures of vital energy, could be considered to contain life, while practically *anything* could also become deadened or lifeless, its vitality sucked dry by the vampire of capital. “The disappearance of the difference between life and its potential,” writes Gallagher, “augmented the general tendency to

conceive of matter as in some state of relative vitality. In short, ‘suspended animation’ could be thought of as an apt metaphor for the new uncanniness of matter itself” (Gallagher & Greenblatt 193).

IV. Partial Deaths

This specific reconfiguration of the body as a sensorial and social phenomenon—the entanglement of bio-and soma-economic plots in nineteenth-century theories of production—overlaps historically with the body’s problematization in other disciplines. Foucault traces one branch of this development in *The Birth of the Clinic*, where he describes how the Western medical gaze came to define life not as a set of primary characteristics distinguishable from non-life, but as the submerged, hidden background against which death, disease, and degeneration are always already at work. Comprised of “the totality of those functions which resist death,” as Bichat defined it, *life* takes the form of a radically decentralized relation, always bound up with the inorganic forms that intrude upon and jeopardize it (Bichat 1). “Bichat relativized the concept of death, writes Foucault, “bringing it down from that absolute in which it appeared as an indivisible, decisive, irrecoverable event: he volatilized it, distributed it throughout life in the form of separate, partial, progressive deaths, deaths that are so slow in occurring that they extend beyond death itself” (144).

What came to be conceived through the work of medical practitioners, biologists, and physiologists as death’s irreducible “partialness”—its transition from something like a binary to an analog model of multiple deaths distributed throughout the organism—gave rise to a broad cultural interest in new technologies and phenomena that magnified public interest in and seemed to proliferate appearances of death-like states.³⁶ Medical anesthesia was at the forefront

³⁶ To name only a few examples: the British Royal Society, as part of an inquiry into new methods of resuscitation, experimented with extreme low temperatures in efforts to produce suspended animation in living subjects, hoping

of this movement, in part because of the sensational narrative surrounding its popularization. The first public demonstration of anesthesia occurred in an amphitheater of the Massachusetts General Hospital in 1846, where Boston dentist William T. G. Morton applied the vapor of diethyl ether to a patient having a tumor removed from the side of his face.³⁷ Two years later, as other compounds, including nitrous oxide and chloroform, had been added to the list of technologies that induced insensibility, Morton's partner, Horace Wells, committed suicide with chloroform in his prison cell following "a series of crimes committed under the influence of anesthetic intoxication" (Pernick 66). The gothic fantasies that swirled around anesthetic treatments in the mid-nineteenth century—rapes, murders, abductions, grotesque experimentation, and premature burials—were due, in large part, to the intimate historical relationship between unconsciousness, lack of sensation, and death. "The depth of insensibility achieved through anesthesia," writes historian Martin Pernick, "had previously been seen only in cases of coma or shock, following massive brain damage, severe poisoning extensive blood loss, and similar portents of impending demise" (43). London was clearly aware of these conceptual linkages, describing in *The Star Rover* Darrell Standing's state of suspended animation as "Death in life it was, but it was only the little death, similar to the temporary death produced by an anesthetic" (106).

that their vital functions might temporarily cease without inducing death; in the US and elsewhere, a popular interest in mesmerism and trance states focused on bodies made insensate and seemingly lifeless and thought to be able to journey back and forth across death's uncanny borderland; experimentation with organ transplants throughout the century, along with the rise of cell theory in biology furthered the disorienting decentralization of "life"; and in 1896, the Society for the Prevention of Premature Burial was formed in London over widespread concern that medical professionals were not able to accurately diagnose death. On the activities of the Royal Society, see Mitchell's "Suspended Animation, Slow Time, and the Poetics of Trance" (2009); for these developments in cell theory and biology, see Georges Canguilhem's "Cell Theory" in *Knowledge of Life* (2008); and for this account of anesthesia as well as the creation of the premature burial prevention society see Pernick's *A Calculus of Suffering* (1985) and "Back From The Grave" (1988).

³⁷ The term "anesthesia" was coined by none other than Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr., who wrote to Morton soon after witnessing the demonstration: "The state should, I think, be called anaesthesia. This signifies insensibility, more particularly (as used by Linnaeus and Cullen) to objects of touch. The adjective will be anaesthetic" (qtd. in Davison 18).

As Pernick's study, *A Calculus of Suffering: Pain, Professionalism, and Nineteenth-Century America* (1985) aptly demonstrates, the slow uptake of anesthesia by the fractured and disreputable medical profession at midcentury reflected the way historical associations between insensibility and death had inscribed bodily pain as a kind of Republican virtue, a moral good, a sign of life. "To lose the ability to feel pain," as anesthesia promised, "was to become less than human, to be literally a vegetable or a brute" (Pernick 48).³⁸ The premise that the body without the capacity for pain was somehow *inhuman*, and thus that the uncanny potential of anesthetic technologies was their ability to isolate the inhuman aspect of human life, was, in fact inscribed into the human sciences from Bichat onward. Roberto Esposito identifies Bichat's pivotal contribution to the development of nineteenth-century biopolitics as his foundational distinction between two *kinds* of life that inhabit the body simultaneously: "animal life," "which governs the motor, sensory, and intellectual activities involving relations with the outside," and "organic life," "to which Bichat ascribes the vegetative functions (digestion, respiration, circulation of the blood)" (*Third Person* 22).³⁹ Whereas only certain creatures are imbued with animal life, organic life names the principle common to *all life*—animal, vegetable, and mineral. Esposito helpfully contextualizes late nineteenth-century interest in liminal deathly states as an extension of the foundational distinction upon which modern biology is founded:

Into this framework of partial deaths, local entropies, and continuous, unbridled mortality is also introduced the phenomenon of apparent death: a posthumous

³⁸ Behind such language, of course, is the discourse of racialization. Beneath the *de facto* humanism of most medical histories of anesthesia lies the enduring project of defining humanity through the discourse of sensibility. If, as Pernick argues, the rapid dissemination of anesthesia at midcentury helped revive and consolidate a dishonored and distrusted American medical profession, it did so at the expense of racialized bodies, whose subjugation it enforced at least twofold: first, by reinforcing the dehumanizing taxonomy aligning blackness with insensibility, brutishness, and resistance to pain, and second, by policing that taxonomy in restricting black individual's access to anesthesia during treatment and justifying their torture as medical test subjects, slaves, and reproductive factories.

³⁹ Bichat's distinction, which he articulates in the opening pages of *Physiological Researches on Life and Death* (1827), takes vegetable life as the basis of animal life: "Thus it might be said that the vegetable is only the sketch, or rather the ground-work of the animal; that for the formation of the latter, it has only been requisite to clothe the former with an apparatus of external organs, by which it might be connected with external objects" (13).

survival in which death seems to hang back and retreat before the unexpected return of life. What is its basis? What other truth does this enigmatic and disturbing phenomenon give voice to? Bichat's answer, in many ways decisive, is that this duplication of death points to a duplication of life itself. Apparent death—death that is not absolute and in which an interval occurs between its first appearance on the scene and its final victory—is the reversed expression of the preliminary gap between life's two modes of being (Esposito, *Third Person* 22).

What the growing popular and academic interest in liminal states of embodiment seemed to evidence, however, was that life's two modes of being were neither quantitatively nor qualitatively equal. Not only do humans appear to contain *more* organic life than animal life (sleep, for instance, which occupies such a significant portion of the human lifespan, constitutes an at least partial cessation of the animal functions), but organic life also appears to bookend the human life cycle in almost ghostly, making it both the alpha and omega of biological existence: “there is organic life before birth, when the fetus experiences only a nutritive life, and at the end, with the advent of death, when organic life continues for some time after animal life has ended, as can be seen from the growth of nails and hair even after the ‘first’ death” (ibid 23).

This sense of asymmetrical duplication or doubleness manifests, for instance, in Bichat's observations that, in the wake of a stroke, “the patient may live internally for several days after he has ceased to exist beyond himself” (qtd. in Pernick 29), a description that echoes Claude Bernard's later description of the effects of the naturally occurring anesthetic, curare: “Within the motionless body, behind the staring eye, with all the appearance of death, feeling and intelligence persist in all their force” (qtd. in Lee 744-745). Such descriptions, however, no doubt also evoke London's account of Isaac Daily at the scaffold—his heart, his spine, and his brain constellating the sites of what Foucault calls “separate, partial, progressive deaths,” whose relationship to one another and to the body as a whole remains deeply uncertain. By 1889, one eminent New York physiologist could state that “there seems to be no such thing as death, except

as the various tissues and organs which go to make up the entire body...lose their physiological properties...; and this occurs successively and at different times for different tissues and organs,” a position that proved the “commonly accepted explanation” among “the best modern physiologists” (Flint qtd. in Pernick “Back From The Grave” 42).

The same year this radically deterritorializing definition of death appears, a commission report issued by the state of New York was being drafted with the express purpose of investigating alternative forms of capital punishment to hanging. “Surely an apparatus can be arranged that one, single, simple cause of death can be put in operation quickly, certainly, and humanely,” the report pleads, “To multiply the causes savors of barbarity” (qtd. in Banner 180). The issue was not that social reform movements had begun to recognize the barbarity of hanging *as such*, but rather that hanging’s moral status (at least in the realm of the law) had become indissociable from new imperatives of efficiency and standardization that took the multiple and heterogeneous vital capacities of the body as their new epistemological objects. “The problem,” writes Stuart Banner in his American history of the death penalty, “was that hanging was extraordinarily variable. The difference between a painless and a painful death, it was thought, could depend on a wide range of conditions—the height of the drop, the elasticity of the rope, the position of the knot, the weather, the tension in the condemned person’s neck muscles, and not least with the skills of the hangman” (170-171).

Anxieties over the uncertainties and inconsistencies of state killing had long characterized American debates around the death penalty, but their registers were distinctly moral and jurisprudential; they were concerned, for instance, with the risk of a biased jury or a court swayed by human caprice rather than the guiding hand of reason.⁴⁰ By the turn of the

⁴⁰ In 1845, for instance, Lydia Maria Child reflected upon the institution of capital punishment in America, “an observing mind is struck with the extreme *uncertainty* of it” (*Letters* 61; emphasis in original). In Child’s view, the

century, however, the moral discourses of uncertainty and inconsistency would take on new resonances rooted explicitly in the relation between the body of the condemned and the state's thanatopolitical machinery. Death had become a matter of troubling indeterminacy: its visibility (*what* does it look like?), its location (*where* does it take hold?), its temporality (*when* does it truly occur?), its sensations (*how* does it feel?) and its ontology (*is* it final? *Will* the condemned body stay dead?) constituted the new set of epistemological circumstances around which legislative efforts were forced to orient themselves. And the problem was not only theoretical: from the 1870s onward, notes Banner, "every year or two brought another celebrated case of a hanged person believed to still be alive" (175). Gallows construction in the United States during the latter half of the nineteenth century thus saw new standards of measurement and design emerge in accordance with the need to bring state killing techniques in line with the newly deterritorialized understanding of life in the body. Engineers rebuilt gallows structures to exploit what they hoped would be more efficient physics for killing; the demand for "expert" hangmen became a regular occurrence as the perceived importance of specialization and professionalism increased; and new methods of execution such as the electric chair were introduced on the basis of their combined promise of painlessness, efficiency, and repeatability. The body's capacity for separate, partial, and progressive deaths had become the explicit biopolitical object of the state.

The turn to electricity as an agent of capital punishment, although too long and detailed of a story to recount here, is helpful anecdotally for the way it condenses much of the confusion surrounding the relationship between life and embodiment in the late nineteenth-century. When New York legislators drafted their commission report in favor of electrocution in 1889, they

law was inconsistent in its distributions of punishment and clemency. She reasoned that juries, fearful of the power they wielded and wishing to absolve themselves of potential guilt incurred by their decision, would "avail themselves of every loophole in the evidence" only to proclaim, arbitrarily and in violation of legal procedure, that "the next victim *shall* be sacrificed" (61).

were intervening in what was still a very speculative field regarding the effects of electricity upon the body. Eighteenth-century scientific movements such as Galvanism and contemporaneous concepts like Mesmer's animal magnetism had helped establish the connection between electromagnetism and biological life. Ben Franklin, practitioner of the infamous key-on-a-string thunderstorm experiment, conceived of electricity as a kind of vital fluid that pervaded all living matter. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), of course, played upon the trope of electricity's life-giving force, making Victor Frankenstein a student of Galvani. The supposed health and wellness benefits of electric currents were popular ideas throughout the nineteenth century, and, as Tom Lutz demonstrates in *American Nervousness, 1903* (1991), electrical metaphors were the dominant form of imagining bodily economies of "vital energy" at the fin-de-siècle.

At the same moment United States elites were celebrating the therapeutic properties of electricity, its progressive encroachment into domestic and public spaces magnified the risks it posed. The cultural confusion around electricity's life-giving properties thus saturated appeals to its death-dealing dimensions. If the dangers of electricity were well-known in practice, they were not well understood in theory. "No one knew for sure why electricity killed," writes Banner, "Some believed that electric current forced too much blood to the head. Other claimed that electricity deprived the blood of important magnetic properties, or constricted the arteries and blocked blood flow, or stopped the lungs from operating" (179). Introduced as a response to the uncertainty of hanging, the electric chair's operations underscored the very problem of the relations between vital process and vital capacities that London illustrates in the hanging of Isaac Daily. If electrical currents were somehow *continuous* with the body's natural energies, then who was to say how its applications might extract, imbue, or suspend vitality?

Materialist explanations of the nature of vitality, for example, are noticeably flexible about its location; ‘life’ can lurk in numerous, previously unexpected places: in electricity, in magnetic ‘force,’ in a subtly all-pervading liquid; indeed it can be latent in the whole of inorganic, or inanimate matter, which, with the development of organic chemistry, could be conceived as a vast storehouse for the building blocks of the organic. If not actually and actively alive, inorganic matter seemed pregnant with life potential, and redescribing ‘life’ as *this potential* immanent in matter was a crucial late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century development (Gallagher & Greenblatt 189-190).

We are now in a position to link the various threads of our investigation and give a somewhat schematic account of why London’s liminally animate bodies at the scaffold are persistently associated with the mechanics of writing. As elaborated in earlier sections of this chapter, London’s biomaterial account of text production conceives of writing as a mode of imbuing and suspending animation, transferring vital energy from one material form (food, a body, a written work) to another. Such transactions are consistently in flux; the bodily economies of sensation they instantiate are unstable. Expend a surplus of vitality without redirecting the earned biosomatic capital into the proper channels (like Mr. Butler in *Martin Eden*), or pay inadequate attention to the demands of “belly-need” (like young London in *John Barleycorn*), and one robs oneself of life, becoming a vampire-like husk of a body insensible to the pleasures of the body. But for London this risk always entails a flip side: vital energy can also be expropriated strategically, such as in the context of Erie Penitentiary, where “laying” oneself “out” in extended chains of text establish the conditions for a kind of anonymity that temporarily confounds the logic of designation at the heart of Foucault’s account of power. London’s self-figuration as a “fluid sort of organism” is an instance of just such a line of flight. This figure’s imagined “kinship with life” is a function of its alignment with an anonymous “latent” or “organic” life common to all animate forms, including, as Gallagher reminds us, texts themselves. During the latter half of the nineteenth century, anesthesia was the central figure

illustrating the disjunction between Bichat's two modes of life. Anesthesia's long literary genealogy—the seriousness with which Émile Zola drew upon Claude Bernard's work as a vivisectionist and his experiments with curare; the privileged place of anesthetic states in the plots of fin-de-siècle fiction; the strong analogies between writing and surgery, aesthetics and anesthetics, informing the various manifestos of literary naturalism⁴¹—only underscores the close relationship between the practice of textual production and the redefinition of “life” from a matter of *functions* and *actualities* to a matter of *capacities* and *potentialities* simultaneously taking place in the human sciences. What London's engagement with this specific historical entanglement offers him, then, is access to a form of life that biopolitical institutions from political economy to biology to medicine to the carceral system found increasingly difficult to pinpoint and isolate. Writing came to signify, for London, a form of labor that placed sensate life in abeyance—that could suspend animation, erase the difference between life and its errant potentiality, and thus open temporary paths of evasion from state power. This is why Isaac Daily proves such an uncanny figure in the London's oeuvre, giving rise to a series of fictional replicas: London comes to recognize the process of narrating death as coextensive with the process of deferring it. The anonymous vital excess that endures within the condemned bodies of

⁴¹ Emile Zola's naturalist manifesto, “The Experimental Novel,” addressed in the Introduction to this dissertation, argues that the truly social novel of the future would provide a site of empirical experimentation for conflicting environmental forces in a manner homologous to the way Claude Bernard's animal vivisections revealed the physiological forces at work inside the living organism. When Zola decided to focus the narrative of his first experimental novel, *Therese Raquin* (1867), upon a woman whose body becomes increasingly paralyzed while maintaining full awareness of her surroundings, he is only emulating and advancing Bernard's fascination with the naturally occurring anesthetic, curare, the effects of which struck him as poetic (as well as potentially useful for his vivisections) for their ability to produce “before our eyes sensitive beings imprisoned in motionless bodies.” Frank Norris, Zola's most vocal champion in the US, wholeheartedly appropriated the surgical metaphor for the novelist's practice, and when McTeague the dentist leans over anesthetized Trina, only to experience Trina's helplessness introjected as his own in the face of his submerged brute nature, this is Norris's nod to Zola as the progenitor of naturalism's perpetual crises of agency, for which the anesthetized body offers one key narrative topography.

Daily, the narrator of “Bâtard,” and Darrel Standing, is thus a function of London’s biomaterial understanding of text production.

In the next section of this chapter I will turn to London’s 1904 novel, *The Sea-Wolf*, in which the author attempts to create a body in narrative form that *cannot be put to death*, cannot be fully grasped by the operations of power, and cannot be executed—not by virtue of recourse to politics or the law—but through a conception of human life as decentralized potentiality and thus infinitely diffuse, malleable, and persistent.

V. The Sea-Wolf’s Latent Potentials

A prison novel masquerading in the popular genre of the nautical adventure, *The Sea-Wolf* is the story of a bourgeois literary critic named Humphrey Van Weyden, who, following the sinking of his ferryboat in San Francisco Bay, is taken hostage aboard an American seal-hunting schooner and placed in “a state of involuntary servitude” by the vessel’s menacing philosopher-captain, Wolf Larsen (26). The first half of the novel details the terms of this servitude—what Hump refers to as the “unstable equilibrium” of asocial sociality aboard *The Ghost*, where collective action between men is always on the verge of deteriorating into a vicious state of all against all (86). The schooner, where a majority of *The Sea-Wolf*’s plot unfolds, combines the disciplinary and biopolitical functions of a working prison: life aboard is violent, “precarious” and “count[s] for nothing” (123), but its ultimate purpose is the management and organization of bodies for the sake of profit—a task Van Weyden excels at, which grants him the temporary privileges of the captain’s good graces.

Van Weyden is no mere literary critic—his specialty is “Poe’s place in American literature” (2), and so it is no coincidence that it was Edgar Allan Poe who London believed best exemplified the biomaterial logic of textual production that *The Sea-Wolf* elaborates in strange

and fascinating ways. Poe's major accomplishment, according to London in his essay "The Terrible and Tragic in Fiction," was his uncanny ability to produce "shiver[s]," "shudderings," and "strange sensations" in the bourgeoisie who continue to read his "terrible" and "tragic" tales even as they purport to find them "repulsive" ("Terrible and Tragic" 60-61). Poe is able to produce these somatic responses because his work "rouses in us" a primordial "fear," "deep down in the roots of the race," a fear that London compares to the internal bodily "stirring...of the savage who has slept, but never died" (61). What first sounds like imperialist pseudo-anthropology assumes a new resonance, however, when we discover that the "stirring" thing that has slept but never died corresponds to London's description of Poe himself: "[T]he writer-men of [Poe's] day, who wrote the popular stories and received readier sales and fatter checks, *are dead and forgotten* and their stories with them, *while Poe and the stories of Poe live on*" (60).

London insists that Poe's particular form of canonical persistence should be understood as a *vital* persistence, equivalent to the thing that has slept but not died, continually stirring in the breast of the reader when they take up his work. London represents this vitality through a series of equivalences oriented around the image of Poe: the man and his texts are equally "alive," but this liveliness manifests at the interface between reader and text—it is a somatic "stirring" that is simultaneously *cause* and *effect* of the reading event itself. "Poe" is the name for *what* stirs us, and what stirs *inside us*. By collapsing the author into his text, and his text into its effects, London establishes a living circuit of consumption in which the corpus/corpse of Edgar Allan Poe persists beyond death. "They will shiver, express a dislike for such tales, and then proceed to discuss them with a keenness and understanding as remarkable as it is surprising" (61).

Poe's ultimate triumph, by London's standards, is that he lives on in the shivers of his readers as they continue to take shameful pleasure in his work: he is in their mouths, underneath

their skin, in their breasts. Parasitic on their sensational pleasure, Poe grows in strength. Thus, when London cites Poe's vast appreciation in market value over the half-century since his death (a first edition of "Tamerlane and Other Poems" had just sold for two thousand fifty dollars in 1900, "a sum greater, perhaps, than he received from the serial and book sales of all his stories and poems") (59), the point is not to lament Poe's *failure* to capitalize more thoroughly on those markets during his lifetime. London notes that other writers capitalized more lucratively than Poe and are nevertheless "dead," while Poe "lives on." Rather, London understands Poe's appreciation in economic value as itself a function of a non-economic relation by which an author places his living essence in abeyance for future extraction in the form of bodily manifestations of terror and repulsion.

This, then, is how we should understand the significance of Van Weyden as a Poe scholar in *The Sea-Wolf*. Only minutes before his ferry sinks and his life is made suddenly precarious aboard *The Ghost*, Van Weyden partakes of the very chain of affective consumption that London attributes to the generative genius of Poe. As Van Weyden boards the ferry, he witnesses "with greedy eyes a stout gentleman reading *The Atlantic*, which was open at my very essay [on Poe]. And there it was again, the division of labor, the special knowledge of the pilot and captain which permitted the stout gentleman to read my special knowledge on Poe while they carried him safely from Sausalito to San Francisco" (2). What Van Weyden describes here is a reading of a reading of a reading: the reader of *The Sea-Wolf* reads Van Weyden reading the "stout gentleman" reading the *Atlantic* essay, which is itself a reading of Edgar Allan Poe. As we saw above, Poe's "place" in American literature—the "deepest" scene of reading in this telescopic nested-doll effect—exceeds the realm of the textual: for London, Poe is in our mouths, nerves, and skin, at the interface between our bodies and the outside in the moment of the

reading event. The gentleman's stoutness, moreover, implicitly equates textual consumption with organic consumption, and his act of reading/eating makes Van Weyden himself "greedy." Clearly, it is not simply material greed that the author of the article experiences—ie. the recognition that he might receive a marginal profit from this man's purchase of *The Atlantic*. Rather, I would suggest that it has to do with the way what Hump understands as the "special knowledge" of writing multiplies the points of potential interface within a discursive chain. Hump's "greed," his desire, is to be *linked up* to such chains of production and consumption—or, what is the same to London, reading and writing. As we have already seen, material profits are inextricable from these circuits: one can only earn profits—be it London earning favors at Erie Penitentiary or Poe's posthumous celebrity—by first being subsumed by them.

Unsurprisingly, then, Van Weyden is quick to be subsumed by the biomaterial relays that link bodies to one another aboard *The Ghost*. A humanistic idealist unused to the brutality of ocean life, Van Weyden grows increasingly fascinated with Larsen, whose long diatribes expound a materialist philosophy reminiscent of London's own description of the "palpitating masses of formless life" that in his view traverse the human and nonhuman realm: "I believe that life is a mess," Larsen proclaims, "It is like yeast, a ferment, a thing that moves and may move for a minute, an hour, a year, or a hundred of years but that in the end will cease to move" (40). Dana Seitler rightly perceives that Larsen's materialism is, in fact, irreducible to a mere justification of social Darwinism or an exposition of survival of the fittest ideology. Emphasizing what she calls the "nondiscriminatory, nonhierarchical frame that the theory of yeastiness affords," Seitler argues that Larsen's discourse in fact "insists on a kinship web between human and animal that refuses to privilege one over the other. Instead, the human and the animal exist in

a complex and interconnected plasma of life...that permits unexpected connections and alliances across class lines, between men, and with the natural world” (222).

If Seitler’s description evokes London’s biomaterial self-portrait as “a fluid sort of organism, with sufficient kinship with life to fit myself in most anywhere,” then Van Weyden’s description of Larsen’s *body* is where such a vision attains its ekphrastic apotheosis:

I could not characterize his strength as massive. It was what might be termed a sinewy, knotty strength, of the kind we ascribe to lean and wiry men, but which, in him, because of his heavy build, partook more of the enlarged gorilla order. Not that in appearance he seemed in the least gorillalike. What I am striving to express is this strength itself, more as a thing apart from his physical semblance. It was a strength we are wont to associate with things primitive, with wild animals and the creatures we imagine our tree dwelling prototypes to have been—a strength savage, ferocious, alive in itself, the essence of life in that it is the potency of motion, the elemental stuff out of which the many forms of life have been molded, in short, that which writhes in the body of the snake when the head is cut off and the snake, as a snake, is dead, or which lingers in a shapeless lump of turtle meat and recoils and quivers from the prod of a finger...In fact, though this strength pervaded every action of his, it seemed but the advertisement of a greater strength that lurked within, that lay dormant and no more than stirred from time to time, but which might arouse at any moment, terrible and compelling, like the rage of a lion or the wrath of a storm (14-15).

Van Weyden strives to express Larsen’s strength “as a thing apart from his physical semblance” yet continually resorts to brute biomaterial figures—“elemental stuff,” “shapeless lump of turtle meat,” “that which writhes in the body of the snake when the head is cut off”—in order to convey its impression upon the senses. This conceptual paradox should no longer surprise us, however, insofar as it indexes precisely the “new uncanniness of matter itself” in the long nineteenth century that saw the concept of life reconceived as something that circulates *through* and is extractable *from* living bodies. What I have been calling London’s biomaterial imagination—his traffic in images of palpitating masses, fluid organisms, crawling yeast, elemental stuff, pieces of meat etc.—provide the tropological fuel for depicting this sense of abstracted life, life “itself.”

If Wolf Larsen both embodies and philosophizes biomateriality, he also is a practitioner of it. Indeed, the role London most frequently ascribes to Larsen is that of a literal and figural “vivisectionist,” who not only “grop[es] about in [the crew’s] mental processes and examin[es] their souls as though to see of what soul-stuff is made” (59), but also *physically* examines living bodies as a form of sadistic spectacle: “he probed and cleansed the passages made by the bullets,” Hump remarks in the wake of a particularly brutal brawl on the ship’s deck, “and I saw the two men endure his crude surgery without anesthetic and with no more to uphold them than a stiff tumbler of whiskey” (94). While all manner of human and non-human animals are literally opened up in *The Sea-Wolf* for the purposes of rhetorical demonstration and mass coercion (the catching and killing of a shark is one of the more memorable instances), discourse itself is repeatedly represented in the novel as an incision upon the lively body for intellectual examination: “I have an incisive way of speech,” admits Hump as he begins to earn his sea-legs against Larsen, “but I threw all restraint to the wind and cut and slashed until the whole man of him was snarling” (67).

The novel’s staging of philosophical debates between Van Weyden and Larsen serves primarily to foreground the latter’s speech as a biomaterial phenomenon, indistinguishable from and partaking of his body. Larsen’s discourse, *The Sea-Wolf* suggests, instantiates the very things it describes. Van Weyden notes that Larsen “deluged me, overwhelmed me with argument,” and at one point Larsen grabs his interlocutor by the throat and begins narrating the process of suffocating him (“Ah, it is growing dark and darker. It is the darkness of death, the ceasing to be, the ceasing to feel, the ceasing to move that is gathering about you”) such that Hump’s “[c]onsciousness was blotted out by the darkness he had so graphically described” (84-85). The point here is not simply that Larsen’s discourse has particularly visceral performative effects, but

that his discourse is of the same substance as the thing it describes, that Wolf's description of suffocation is inseparable from Hump's experience of its effects. Larsen's words *actualize* the "darkness" to which they refer, just as his ability to "deluge" Hump with his argument implies continuity between Larsen's vital substance and the rhetorical force they enact.

In accord with what I have been calling London's biomaterial imagination, *The Sea-Wolf's* vivisectional poetics thus explicitly link the materiality of the signifier to the materiality of the body. Larsen and Van Weyden vie for supremacy by literally and figuratively cutting in to the other to find out "of what soul-stuff is made," a form of power that hinges upon representation, designation, and surveillance as technologies of governance. This description, of course, also parallels new historicist readings of American naturalism, insofar as the critics discussed in the first section of this chapter align the genre with a specific model of power organized around a set of correspondences between the materiality of writing and an ever-tightening control over the human life processes. Larsen, we might say, embodies their account of naturalism as a whole: he employs the concepts and technologies of the natural sciences—the vivisectionist's scalpel, the surgeon's anesthetic—"in the service of a project to make the human subject knowable."⁴²

The clearest indication that *The Sea-Wolf's* readers have assimilated this account of naturalist fiction into their readings of the novel is their propensity to read its plot as a protracted role reversal between the effeminate Hump and the hyper-masculine Larsen, a reading that tellingly depends upon the presumed legibility of the anesthetized body. Van Weyden and

⁴² Foucault himself deploys the vivisection trope in a recently published interview from 1968: "I imagine that there's an old memory of the scalpel in my pen. Maybe, after all, I trace on the whiteness of the paper the same aggressive signs that my father traced on the bodies of others when he was operating... For me the sheet of paper may be the body of the other... [And] with my writing I survey the body of others, I incise it, I lift the integuments and the skin, I try to find the organs and, in exposing the organs, reveal the site of the lesion, the seat of pain, that something that has characterized their life, their thought, and which, in its negativity, has finally organized everything they've been." (*Speech Begins After Death* 39)

Larsen's agonistic bonding is brought to a head midway through the novel with the arrival aboard *The Ghost* of Maud Brewster, a poet who quickly becomes the object of their mutual attention. When Larsen attempts and fails to rape Brewster, the critic and poet abandon *The Ghost* on a lifeboat in the middle of the night only to be wrecked upon an island off the coast of Japan, where, a few days later, *The Ghost* mysteriously washes up on shore with Larsen the sole passenger aboard. Stranded on the island, Brewster and Van Weyden watch anxiously as Larsen slowly succumbs to a mysterious disease that paralyzes his entire body, one appendage and sensory mechanism at a time, a condition of "imprisonment" that the novel presents explicitly in terms of capital punishment's retributive function: for his past offenses to his crew, "[Larsen] deserves to die," thinks Hump, "and God forgive me, I am not man enough to be his executioner" (256).

The problem of becoming "man enough" is at the center of critical accounts of *The Sea-Wolf*, which has most often been read through the lens of genre. Late nineteenth-century sea adventure narratives in the style of Frank Norris's *Moran of the 'Lady Letty'* (1898) or Kipling's *Captains Courageous* (1897) offer plots in which an effete member of the bourgeoisie, often against their will, is immersed into a foreign world of virile masculinity through which they learn the virtues of the "strenuous life." Formally, we might say that these readings recapitulate the traditional accounts of London's "prison lesson," in which the male hero's "submission" to his environment eventually leads to his "mastery" over it. And thus, while critics see Van Weyden undergo a "complete transformation," being "born again" as a "'genuine' man" over the course of the plot, so too do they see Larsen become "more and more impotent as the novel progresses" (Baskett 13; Auerbach 215, 219). Where Van Weyden, in the novel's opening chapter, floats in San Francisco Bay with "no sensation whatever in my lower limbs," screaming like a "woman,"

and beating the water with his “numb hands,” Larsen, in the novel’s final pages experiences increasing bodily numbness and feminizing headaches that leave him “like a woman wringing her hands” (7-8, 243). By this logic, summarizes Walter Benn Michaels in his reading of the novel, “Wolf becomes Humphrey”; Hump earns his “sea-legs,” and Wolf loses his (“Success” 383).

The critical consensus that *The Sea-Wolf* enacts the perfect symmetry of role reversal presupposes that Larsen’s descent into anesthetic stillness in the final pages of the novel is unequivocally a descent into passivity and death. Of course, as this chapter has been arguing, such zero-sum accounts of agency and vitality do not do justice to London’s complex understanding of embodiment as it took shape around the body of the condemned. It is important to consider, for instance, that Larsen’s strength (or “essence of life”), has from the outset, taken the form of unactualized, “dormant” potential. Against the life/death opposition implicit in readings of the role-reversal thesis, then, we might say that Larsen’s characterization from the beginning mobilizes the discourse of suspended animation: he contains a “strength” indifferent to its physical manifestation, which “lingers” inside him *regardless* of his corporeal form.

Indeed, the final pages of *The Sea-Wolf* insist that Larsen’s anesthetic state *multiplies* rather than diminishes his vital capacities: as Hump remarks, “though I even removed the handcuffs, we could not adjust ourselves to his condition...To us he was full of potentiality” (260). As elsewhere in his catalogue of incarceration narratives, London identifies such potentiality with the circulatory mechanisms of text production, and thus Larsen’s anesthesial life disaggregates his body into a constellation of relay points through which he becomes a composite body-machine of reading and writing:

Three times [Larsen’s] hand essayed to write but fumbled hopelessly. The pencil fell. In vain we tried to replace it. The fingers could not close on it. Then Maud

pressed and held the fingers about the pencil with her own hand, and the hand wrote, in large letters, so slowly that the minutes ticked off to each letter, “B-O-S-H.” It was Wolf Larsen’s last word, “bosh,” skeptical and invincible to the end. The arm and hand relaxed. The trunk of the body moved slightly. Then there was no movement. Maud released the hand. The fingers spread slightly, falling apart of their own weight, and the pencil rolled away.

“Do you still hear?” I shouted, holding the fingers and waiting for the single pressure which would signify “yes.” There was no response. The hand was dead. “I noticed the lips slightly move,” Maud said.

I repeated the question. The lips moved. She placed the tips of her fingers on them. Again I repeated the question. “Yes,” Maud announced. We looked at each other expectantly (267).

In this remarkable scene, the condemned body marks the site of an extreme deterritorialization: a mouth asks a question of an ear, which responds through the movements of lips, which are interpreted by a hand, which translates the response back into verbal speech, which reaches an ear, which provokes a mouth to formulate another question, and so on. In London’s vision of anesthesial corporeality, “life” is the term for that which circulates anonymously through these material relays of stimulation and reception. The name “Wolf Larsen,” here, coincide with neither an object of knowledge (“B-O-S-H” is a message without content) nor a subject of inscription (to whom does “the hand” in the above scene belong?), but refers only to a potential emanation from within a composite milieu of organic and inorganic relations; he exists, as London puts it, “expectantly,” like in the glance between Maud and Hump that closes the scene.

This allegory of authorship reproduces a vision of writing as a form of uncanny symbiotic proximity with readers that distinctly parallels London’s description of Poe as a living dead force within readerly bodies. Indeed, in the scene above, it is functionally impossible to tell *who* is doing the writing—and, as with London’s experience as a letter carrier at Erie, this is precisely the point: authorship appears here to enact a dispersal of the living self that confounds the body’s capture by sovereign and disciplinary power. In the end, Larsen *is not* opened up, literally or

figuratively. He is *not* presented or offered up for display; the disassembly of his body makes such an act impossible: by the novel's close, there is simply no *there* there. He reveals no secrets hiding beneath his surface to be exploited or made productive incitements to discourse. This corporate tableaux of "life" held in a state of perpetual deferral materializes London's self-characterization as "a fluid sort of organism, with sufficient kinship with life to fit myself in most anywhere," and his dream of authorial agency, my reading wagers, is to enact this radically indeterminate form of biotic fluidity, indistinguishable from the heterogeneous chains of textual composition and decomposition of which it forms a part. Thus, we might say that Van Weyden's self-proclaimed failure to be Larsen's executioner parallels London's failure to be Isaac Daily's: both index the failure of a vivisectional logic to produce the legibility of docile bodies. In its place, London offers a biomaterial account of writing that imagines the possibilities of human embodiment opened up by the reconfigured sensorial apparatus.

The novel's last lines consist of Hump asking Maud for a kiss before they are rescued from their island, with Maud adding, "And rescue us from ourselves" (285). What readers have called London's "simmering sentimentalism" (Hendrick 131), his banal love-talk, we realize, is thus completely shot through with his strange authorial discourse. The "self," far from the naturalist object of desire, the ultimate achievement of the genre's disciplinary agenda, is here what one must be saved from. London felt this while incarcerated at Erie, and while watching Isaac Daily hang on the scaffold. And in Wolf Larsen he sought to create a character whose "self" is always in the process of becoming obscure, diffuse, and ungraspable. Like Poe, a thing that sleeps but never dies, stirring in the nerves of the other.

VI. Coda

Who gets to resist the force of designation? Which bodies are able to revel in the “labyrinth” of anonymous discourse, described by Foucault, “in which I can lose myself and appear at last to eyes that I will never have to meet again”? If race has been a peripheral category to this investigation, it is because London’s carceral imagination runs *counter* to so much of what remains doctrinaire in American racial discourses of embodiment and sensation. The figure of the unfeeling or under-feeling racial subject has been invoked as a justification of mistreatment, oppression, and genocide from the eighteenth century onward. From Thomas Jefferson’s famous indictment of African Americans’ dearth of sensibility and the ensuing discourse of slave bodies as able to endure pain extreme amounts of pain, to the characterization of Asian American coolie laborers as “nerveless” automatons able to withstand inhumane working conditions (Smith qtd in Lye 54), to the claims of Nazi scientists that “a mass of human flesh without human intelligence is nothing” (Richet qtd. in Esposito 58), the figurative reduction of raced bodies to mere matter has been a governing trope in the history of racial oppression.⁴³ London’s anomalousness within this genealogy, I have been arguing, is the way in which the figure of the anesthetized or insensate body assumes new meaning in the specificity of its carceral context, opening up new possibilities for theorizing naturalism’s entanglement with the biopolitical institutions of late modernity.

And yet it is necessary, in closing, to put some pressure on this narrative given how thoroughly London himself was imbricated in the discourses of Anglo-Saxon supremacy at the fin-de-siècle. Rather than offer a thorough account of London’s racial politics—a task that has already been undertaken in important work by Jeanne Reesman, Colleen Lye, Neal Ahuja, and

⁴³ The 2014 grand jury testimony of Ferguson, Missouri police officer Darren Wilson for the murder of Michael Brown, which characterized Brown as somehow insensible to the bullets Wilson fired, indicates the persistence of this racial trope into the present.

others⁴⁴—my goal here is to point to some of the ways London’s account of authorship as a form of vital dispersion is *itself* a racialized fantasy insofar as it traffics in a settler-colonial logic of appropriation at the level of the body and the territory. This logic can be glimpsed in London’s description of Darrell Standing’s anesthetic experience in *The Star Rover*, where the language of anonymity and imperceptibility marking London’s earlier writings here bleeds into a fantasy of omniscient, disembodied “lordship” over the very realms of time and space:

Thus, without opening my eyes to verify, I knew that the walls of my narrow cell had receded until it was like a vast audience chamber. And while I contemplated the matter I knew that they continued to recede. The whim struck me for a moment that if a similar expansion were taking place with the whole prison, then the outer walls of San Quentin must be far out in the Pacific Ocean on one side and on the other side must be encroaching on the Nevada desert. A companion whim was that since matter could permeate matter, then the walls of my cell might well permeate the prison walls, pass through the prison walls, and thus put my cell outside the prison and put me at liberty (79).

In opposition to what Caleb Smith calls American incarceration literature’s production of a “cellular soul,” whereby the prisoner’s “subjectivity...take[s] the shape of its miniature world” (92), London’s carceral subjectivity here is expansive and multitudinous. It not only exceeds the confines of San Quentin, spanning the Nevada Desert to the Pacific Ocean and beyond, but is also represented as collective and trans-temporal: “I have lived ten thousand generations,” writes Standing about his travels in altered states, “I have possessed many bodies. I, the possessor of these many bodies, have persisted” (123). While its emphasis on the immateriality of the spirit—Standing: “I was only a mind, a soul, a consciousness” (80)—shifts the terms of evasion away from the biomaterial registers we have been tracking in his other writings, this example helpfully foregrounds the way in which London’s theorization of the body as a kind of escape hatch from disciplinary confines both draws from and erases the history of racial imprisonment.

⁴⁴ See Reesman’s *Jack London’s Racial Lives: A Critical Biography* (2009), Lye’s *America’s Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893-1945* (2005), and Ahuja’s “The Contradictions of Colonial Dependency: Jack London, Leprosy, and Hawaiian Annexation” (2007).

This double movement occurs at two levels simultaneously. First, London rewrites the historical alignment of blackness with the irredeemable and unfeeling body into a narrative of white “liberty,” figured here as an omniscient, quasi-imperialist traverse over land and sea. The condition of possibility for such fantasies of absolute, unencumbered mobility, as Saidiya Hartman, Alexander Wiheliye and others have pointed out, is the existence of the over-encumbered, over-embodied racial subject, whose life and labor constitute the invisible surplus of American individualism. If “[t]he white soul could be renovated by penitence” (Smith 147), but the black subject, in the words of proslavery advocate Thomas R. R. Cobb, “can be reached only through the body,” then London’s depiction of Standing tellingly collapses the difference between them, granting his protagonist access to a redeemed and liberated soul by way of his rebellious and impenitent corporeality.

The second gesture of appropriation and erasure this example registers, however, is that Standing’s participation in a trans-temporal collectivity of identities gestures towards, even as it effaces, the distinction between the penitentiary and the plantation, two opposed but mutually reinforcing sites of nineteenth-century subject formation. If, according to Smith, the penitentiary “conjures the cellular soul, a figure of self-binding subjectivity,” the plantation enforces the production of “an undifferentiated collectivity” (148). Each institution thereby operates to produce a differentially racialized understanding of selfhood, “as if the convict, thanks to his whiteness, were already a self-governing subject when he entered the solitary cell; or as if the black slave were born without humanity” (ibid). Standing, in other words, overcomes his isolation at San Quentin via communion with a figure of the racialized collective, but one evacuated of the suggestions of servitude, dehumanization, and civil death attending the actual enslavement of black bodies.

London is perhaps most self-critical about the limitations of his diffusive model of authorship when he is forced to reflect seriously upon his own material legacy outside the context of incarceration. The final, surreal pages of *John Barleycorn* (1913), London's autobiographical meditation on his lifelong struggle with alcoholism, reveal the shadowy obverse of Wolf Larsen's bodily dispersal into anonymity. The book's second to last chapter begins with London "por[ing] over the abstract of title of the vineyard called Tokay on the rancho called Petaluma" (323), his 1400-acre estate on Sonoma Mountain in Glen Ellen, California, which he acquired in 1905. As is typical of the biomaterial relays subtending his authorial imagination, London describes reading the estate's ledgerbooks as coextensive with the act of *writing himself* onto the land:

When came Peter O'Connor, and whither vanished, after writing his little name of a day on the woodland that was to become a vineyard? [...] The names begin to appear fast and furiously, flashing from legal page to legal page and in a flash vanishing. But ever the persistent soil remains for others to scrawl themselves across... La Motte—he broke the soil, planted vines and orchards, instituted commercial fish-culture, built a mansion renowned in its day, was defeated by the soil, and passed. And in my name of a day appears. On the site of his orchards and vineyards, of his proud mansion, of his very fish ponds, I have scrawled myself with a hundred thousand eucalyptus trees... So I, too, scratch the land with my brief endeavor and flash my name across a page of legal script ere I pass and the page grows musty (324-326).

Reading and writing, soil and page, past and present here form an attenuated network of inscriptions and descriptions, scrawlings of the self across the surface of that landscape that eventually wither and decay, grow musty and vanish. But the experience now, as London writes from his drunken (we might even say, *anesthetic*) stupor, is enervating, a form of vital depletion. The effect is no longer a "kinship with life" that extends his subjectivity, but rather an anxiety over finitude and the transitory nature of being. Why should this be so? London refers to these records that bear the traces of striving for posterity as "a vital lie" (326), an expression that

contains a provocative ambiguity. If one understands “the lie” here as referring to the dream of immortality, the dream of persisting beyond the “self” in the hundred thousand eucalyptus trees “scrawled” across the soil, is the lie “vital” because it is *necessary*? This reading would seem to advocate a kind of willful ignorance along the lines of Žižek’s account of cynical reason: *I know very well that my markings will fade into obscurity but I will act as if they have the potential to endure indefinitely*. Or, on the other hand, is it precisely the term “vital” that *makes such strivings a lie*? This reading suggests that London perceives something false about the very notion of “vitality” as such.

One detail early in the chapter suggests that the latter reading may indeed be the more productive one. London notes that the vineyard’s ledger contains “a sad long list of the names of men, beginning with Manuel Micheltoreno, one time Mexican ‘Governor, Commander-in-Chief, and Inspector of the Department of the Californias,’ who deeded ten square leagues of stolen Indian land to Colonel Don Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo for services rendered his country and for moneys paid by him for ten years to his soldiers” (323). At the origins of London’s legacy, then, resides a primal lie, a theft of land, stolen from Indian tribes, the names of which have *not* been inscribed for posterity. Thus, we might say that London’s text makes visible the ways in which the very biomaterial equation between self and soil, the fantasy of immediacy entailed in scrawling one’s own being directly upon the landscape, *depends upon* that historical act of dispossession and erasure. The “vital lie,” from this perspective, is that wherein unmediated access to the pre-social lifeworld of nonhuman nature is revealed as the afterimage of deep and long-lasting historical violence. The writer’s vital dispersal of self comes to look, here, like the aesthetic correlative to a settler-colonial project of *terra nullius*.

If Jack London's work speaks directly to the present moment in humanities scholarship, it is through its persistent figuration of "life itself"—life in its bare, material, particulate essence: elemental stuff, palpitating masses, quivering lumps of meat, crawling yeast. As I explored in this dissertation's introduction, an attention to life as biomaterial substrate characterizes a range of academic disciplines from feminism to science studies to continental philosophy to literary and queer theory, which are collectively witnessing what Martin Haggglund calls "a turn away from question of language and discourse, in favor of a renewed interest in questions of the real, the material, and the biological" ("Arche-Materiality" 265). While the aim of this chapter has been to show the entanglement of these two poles—the ways in which, for London, text production is always bound up with questions of life and materiality—both London's writing and much that goes under the heading of the "new materialism" carries with the lure of immediacy. For academics, the unspoken appeal of what Stacy Alaimo calls "directly engaging with matter itself" lies, at least in part, in the possibility of bracketing off the complexities of the social, the political, and the historical, while discovering in a world of material objects the very anti-hegemonic capacities once attributed to human culture and activities (5). Everything from household dust to subatomic particles to microscopic bacteria to the human body itself has been described as "queer" in the last half-decade, ostensibly because of their "aleatory," "self-differing," or "transgressive" natures. As I outlined in this project's Introduction, the risk run by this bracketing is the hypostatization of "matter" or "life itself" as ontologically distinct and *inherently subversive* realms, a premise that frequently entails the rejection of ideology critique and the vocabularies of racial, sexual, and imperial subjugation. As evidenced in the above passage from *The Star Rover*, where access to a transcendent realm of "liberty" through the

somatic networks of the body simultaneously erases the racial history from which it draws force, this is a risk that London's fiction runs as well.

In closing, then, I want to briefly expand upon the connection between London's biomaterial imagination and the logic of settler-colonialism via the work of one theorist who has taken a particularly incisive position upon the new materialist turn in the humanities. Taking the "turn toward ever-smaller particulate matter for a foothold into the question of Being" as its scholarly occasion, Jord/ana Rosenberg's "The Molecularization of Sexuality" diagnoses the impulse to treat materiality as an escape hatch from the messiness of politics and history:

[W]hen I say 'the molecularization of sexuality' ...I mean the abstract force of the molecular as such. I mean an ontologization of the molecule that is authorized, in part, by some sense...of its putative queerness or its inherently resistant nature. Put another way, it is on the grounds of its sexualization—by which I mean its figuration as fantastically aleatory and seemingly essentially resistant to discipline—that the molecule becomes an abstraction. Moreover, it is as an abstraction that the molecular makes a claim to periodization; it does so by subtracting historicity from temporality (7).

The subtitle of Rosenberg's essay, "On Some Primitivisms of the Present," gestures toward the stakes of this turn toward the object-world of particulate matter. Drawing upon Marx's theory of "primitive accumulation," which foregrounds capitalist speculation's dependency upon a narrative of *terra nullius*—or no man's land—in order to justify the extraction of resources and labor power from the places and peoples it colonizes, Rosenberg argues that the materialist turn in the humanities constitutes a theoretical primitivism insofar as it posits the existence of an asocial, ahistorical, and apolitical realm of endless emancipatory possibility just beyond our humanist horizons. "The urge towards [molecular] objects comports itself in a very particular fashion," writes Rosenberg, "one that will be familiar to scholars of colonialism and settler-colonialism, and that calls to mind any number of New-World-style fantasies about locations unmediated by social order" (2).

If London's vision of an organic "kinship with life" appears disrupted and called into question in the closing pages of *John Barleycorn*, I want to suggest that it is precisely because such a vision depends upon the "vital lie" of *terra nullius* mobilized and enacted through the biomaterial imagination. The figurative reduction of human bodies to bare material processes scattered across London's fictional and nonfictional oeuvre thus encodes the fantasy of attaining, through the sensory relays of the body, an untrammelled, pre-social realm, even as it challenges contemporary readings of his work and naturalism's disciplinary functions as a whole. The point, here, is to suggest that these two impulses are inseparable. The dream of discursive anonymity, of being able to "write in order to have no face" theorized by Foucault and embodied by London's bodies at the scaffold, enact a particularly *white* fantasy, the subversive potentiality of which is inextricably bound up with its complicity in the vital lie of American history.

In the next chapter, we will explore how one African-American writer takes up a related set of discourses around the reduction of human life to sheer materiality in a different biopolitical context—the institution of nineteenth-century tort law—and does so in a way that foregrounds rather than occludes the mechanisms of racial oppression. When Charles Chesnutt began his literary career in the 1880s, the rise of negligence in liability rulings introduced new standards of care grounded in a metaphysical definition of humanness from which newly emancipated African American were frequently excluded, making them disproportionately vulnerable to a wide range of state-sanctioned violence administered under the guise of "accidents." In response, Chesnutt turned to his literary fiction, where he drew upon the liminal human/nonhuman ontologies of the African American conjure tradition along with his own knowledge of the law to imagine standards of liability beyond the historically exclusionary definition of the human subject. Chesnutt's literary experimentations with nonhuman liability conceive of subjects as

biomaterial entities, ineluctably entangled with their environment. Like London, these literary experimentations worked to defamiliarize the human subject, render it ontologically indistinct from its nonhuman background. Unlike London, however, these efforts were in the service of *revealing* the networks of relations that systematically distribute harms to black bodies.

Interlude I: Unstable Equilibrium

Recall that Humphrey Van Weyden employs the term “unstable equilibrium” to describe the conditions of imprisonment aboard *The Ghost*. Jack London learned the term from one of his intellectual heroes, Herbert Spencer, who defines it in a chapter of *First Principles* (1868) called “The Instability of the Homogeneous”: “The phrase *unstable equilibrium* is one used in mechanics to express a balance of forces of such kind, that the interference of any further force, however minute, will destroy the arrangement previously subsisting; and bring about a totally different arrangement” (401-402). In *The Sea-Wolf*, London uses the term somewhat crudely to denote the way precarious human collectivities are always at risk of breaking down and deteriorating into violence and mayhem. Yet the concept is at the very heart of Spencer’s theory of evolution: it describes the propensity of systems to change and, ultimately, become more complex. In famous contrast to the humbler, bio-centric hypotheses of Charles Darwin, Spencer argued that *all systems*—organic and inorganic, celestial and social—are comprised of particular distributions of matter and motion that move inexorably from states of “indefinite, incoherent homogeneity” to states of increasingly “definite, coherent heterogeneity” (380). Unstable equilibrium qualifies the condition of homogeneity; namely, it states that no system is ever *truly* homogeneous. “[T]he several parts of any homogeneous aggregation are necessarily exposed to different forces—forces that differ either in kind or amount; and being exposed to different forces they are of necessity differently modified,” writes Spencer (404). Whether applied to

particles floating in a glass of water, heat distribution in “a piece of red-hot matter,” the “still-continued existence of Saturn’s rings,” the distribution of stars in the Milky Way, or the structure of a single-celled protozoa (all of which Spencer uses as examples), the principle of unstable equilibrium proposes that perpetual but ultimately teleological flux is at the very heart of things. Every body is a shifting tangle of relations undergoing aggregation and disaggregation.

Spencer’s philosophy would have appealed to London for a number of reasons, not the least of which being its hypostatization of “matter” as a definite, “primordial” substance, “made up of extended and resistant atoms” that are subject to an infinite play of competing forces that perpetually transform and alter it (166, 167), a vision that would have been compatible with London’s biomaterial imagination. But “The Instability of the Homogeneous” appears in another literary text from the period in which its relevance is less immediately intuitive. The white carpetbagging narrator, John, of Charles Chesnutt’s 1899 conjure story, “The Gray Wolf’s Ha’nt,” reads the opening passage of the very Spencer chapter we have been considering out loud to his wife, Annie, when the latter accuses him of not paying enough attention to her.

“I’ll read to you with pleasure,” I replied, and began at the point where I had found my bookmark:—

“The difficulty of dealing with transformations so many-sided as those which all existences have undergone, or are undergoing, is such as to make a complete and deductive interpretation almost hopeless. So to grasp the total redistribution of matter and motion as to see simultaneously its several necessary results in their actual inter-dependence is scarcely possible. There is, however, a mode of rendering the process as a whole tolerably comprehensible. Though the genesis of the rearrangement of every evolving aggregate is in itself one, it presents to our intelligence”—

“John,” interrupted my wife, “I wish you would stop reading that nonsense and see who that is coming up the lane” (80).

As is typical in Chesnutt’s writing, the significance of the passage lies deeper than the joke at hand, which is that John’s interests are boring and difficult. More importantly is that Annie reacts to John exactly how John will soon react to the person “coming up the lane,” Uncle

Julius McAdoo, former slave and now hired hand on the North Carolina plantation property John and Annie have purchased, who will recount to the couple a fantastical story of slave life that involves such radical “redistributions of matter” as to seem “scarcely possible.” Moments after John reads the Spencer passage to Annie, Julius tells a tale of two slaves who metamorphize into a wolf and a cat; in other stories, human bodies transform into trees or clay or hummingbirds or mules, or become somatically entangled with the seasonal cycles of a grapevines; in another, a curse renders a man’s foot as hot and painful as the experience of eating the chili pepper used to adorn his voodoo doll likeness.

Hearing of such otherworldly redistributions of matter leaves John incredulous, a response, as many critics have pointed out, that Chesnutt presents as an ironic missing of the point. While the conjure tales’ use of black dialect and their formal similarity to Joel Chandler Harris’s popular *Uncle Remus* vignettes (comic romanticizations of the Slave South featuring a caricatured Negro storyteller) appealed to white Northern audiences seeking the kind of light, local color fiction on the upsurge in the 1880s, Chesnutt’s tales also contain an immanent critique of Harris’s nostalgic white paternalism in that they reveal the destructive afterlife of slavery in the present—the persistent economic exploitation of black bodies and the enduring displacements and deformations of black life that period instantiated. At the center of these critiques is the conjure tales’ materialist ontology, which allowed Chesnutt to not only draw explicit parallels between the slave’s body and the commodity form, but to literalize the dehumanization coextensive with the slave mode of production.

The parallel that Chesnutt establishes, then, between Annie’s premature dismissal of John’s text and John’s premature dismissals of Julius’s narrative suggests that Spencer’s notion of unstable equilibrium and the conditions of material flux that subtend it bears significantly

upon Chesnutt's fictional project. In what follows, I will be focusing on one particular effect of Chesnutt's redistributions of matter and motion that hasn't adequately been explored by the relatively recent renewal of interest in his work, which is that blurring the lines between the human and nonhuman realms problematizes the process of ascribing blame for harms that appear to have multiple or complex causes. When, in Chesnutt's story "Po' Sandy," a slave's desire to remain close to his beloved at the cost of her turning him into a tree results in his untimely death when the tree is randomly chopped down for timber, readers come face to face with the kind of "many-sided" problem that makes what Spencer calls "deductive interpretation" seem almost hopeless. Tracing the web of circumstances that lead to Sandy's death, we might say, demands assuming the position of a Spencerian materialist, for whom both organic and inorganic, human and nonhuman bodies must be understood as matter in motion subject to the pressures of competing forces rather than fully autonomous and intentional agents.

The following chapter argues that such a perspective was relegated neither to the domain of voodoo magic nor the province of esoteric science, but was in fact at the heart of legal debates over standards of liability in nineteenth-century tort law, debates that had enormous but undertheorized impacts on the lives of African Americans during the Reconstruction period. Over the course of the century, the doctrine of strict liability, which distinguishes only provisionally between humans and nonhumans and conceives of legal persons as nothing more than matter in motion, gradually gave way to the theory of negligence, which places the self-reflexive, sovereign individual at the center of its account of legal responsibility. This shift, I will show in what follows, was particularly detrimental to African Americans because it occluded the network of tangled relations through which the systemic biopolitical violence—the state-sanctioned distribution of harms to specific segments of the population—takes on the appearance

of accidents, *sheer chance*. The appeal of Spencer for Chesnutt, then, was that Spencer's materialist ontology of forces provided a set of tools for doing what negligence ultimately failed to: map out the overdetermined tangle of causes that engender harmful effects in the world and thus "render the process as a whole tolerably comprehensible." That John is reading Spencer's chapter on unstable equilibrium, then, is no coincidence, for it is precisely that concept's central proposition—ie. that no material body is ever stable, self-sufficient, or whole but rather at every moment subject to a set of competing forces—that negligence's insistence on the primacy of the sovereign individual must deny. Spencer, for Chesnutt, thus names a theorist of the very kind of *relations* the latter's fiction explores.

It is no coincidence, either, that Annie cuts off John's reading before he reaches Spencer's "mode of rendering the whole tolerably comprehensible." Like Annie's misreading of John and John's misreading of Uncle Julius, *we too*, Chesnutt suggests, are misreading if we presume the solution to the problem of the "many-sided" transformations lies within Spencer's philosophy. By directing readers back to the fiction at hand, Chesnutt is arguing for his own narrative as the site where the most thoroughgoing critique of the racial consequences for tort law takes place. Like Jack London, then, Chesnutt conceived of his own writerly project as a mode of intervention into the material conditions of life as an object of biopolitical regulation.

CHAPTER TWO

Nonhuman Liability:

Charles Chesnutt, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., and The Racial Discourses of Tort Law

Only a few months before Charles Waddell Chesnutt stepped onto the national literary stage with the publication in *The Atlantic Monthly* of “The Goophered Grapevine” (1887), the twenty-seven year-old aspiring author was living in Cleveland, training for his bar exam, and, in his free time, writing short sketches and anecdotes for local and nationally syndicated humor magazines. The majority of these pieces are set in lawyers’ offices, the kind Chesnutt had worked in as a stenographer and hoped to enter again as a certified attorney. They are wry and satirical in tone, but infused with a cynicism regarding the profession that stemmed from his having spent long hours eavesdropping on cases and poring over the minutiae of their procedures with his mentor at the time, Samuel Williamson, former judge of the Ohio county common pleas court.

One branch of the law stands out as Chesnutt’s particular focus in these vignettes: tort litigation, the sphere of jurisprudence dealing with noncontractual, noncriminal wrongs, commonly known as accidents. With titles such as “A Cause Célèbre,” “A Soulless Corporation,” and “Busy Day in a Lawyer’s Office,” the sketches recount the (literal) trials and tribulations of the fictional Brass Bound Railroad Company as it is bombarded with lawsuit after lawsuit from individuals demanding recompense for personal injuries, killed livestock, or damaged property. The joke at the center of each piece depends upon the reader’s awareness that one party implicated in the suit is lying or omitting important details for reasons of self-interest: an attorney convinces a doctor to re-diagnose his client’s injuries as more severe than they actually are so that the case “may prove a bonanza” for the firm (*Short Fiction* 74); a farmer wins

a large settlement by recruiting witnesses to testify to the obviously inflated value of his dead sheep; and a claimant fabricates a story about the precious contents of her damaged trunk, only to be revealed as a fraud by the railroad's savvy agent.

Especially to readers familiar with Chesnutt's later work, the class politics these sketches imply is striking. The claimants are poor, untrustworthy, inarticulate, and often coded as black, while the Brass Bound Railroad is anything but a "soulless corporation." With its beleaguered employees working diligently to protect their company's capital from the avaricious masses, the railroad emerges as practically the *only* source of integrity in the stories. That Chesnutt's sympathies should lie so transparently with big business is not entirely surprising given the unique structural contradictions attending his membership as part of an emergent black bourgeoisie in the postbellum South. Born light enough to pass as white to middle-class, property-owning parents and educated at the prestigious Howard School in the otherwise economically devastated region of Fayetteville, North Carolina, Chesnutt was a veritable poster child for Northern uplift ideology, which viewed economic industriousness and cultural refinement as the twin pillars of self-worth. Journals from his teen years offer what Richard Brodhead calls the blueprints of "a widely disseminated American cultural plan: the self self-driven and self-disciplined toward future attainment, of which Benjamin Franklin is the national archetype" (2). Alert to the slightest moments of laxity or indiscretion in his own conduct, Chesnutt attempted to disassociate himself from those he imagined embodied such qualities around him, particularly lower-class blacks, whom he chastised for everything from their "uneducated" superstitions to their "odor" (81, 112).

Rather than attempt to defend or recuperate Chesnutt's early sociopolitical allegiances, I am interested in approaching his overdetermined sympathies with the railroad from an alternative

perspective—one that allows us to follow his literary career down a very different path than the one heralded by the image of the bootstrapping liberal individual overshadowing these sketches. I am referring to the institution of nineteenth-century tort law, a topic Chesnutt's readers have tended to ignore despite the author's lifelong fascination with accidents, particularly railroad accidents, and the problems of liability they entail.⁴⁵ Tort law and the railroad, as one historian puts it, "grew up together" (Friedman 468). Indeed, in the American legal profession of the 1880s, commitment to the autonomy of the railroad entailed a corresponding commitment to a new theory of tort liability emerging to protect the railroad's interests from lawsuits demanding recompense for lost life and property. This theory is called negligence, and its development in the latter half of the nineteenth century is an important part of the story I wish to tell here. Suffice to say for now that negligence, as its most vocal exponent, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., theorizes it, locates liability in fault rather than harm. What matters in negligence is not whether or not your sheep was killed, your hand was cut off, or your trunk was destroyed, but whether or not someone exercised "ordinary care" in precipitating that injury. If we reframe Chesnutt's sketches as symptomatizing less an anxiety about the *kind* of person who files lawsuits against corporations, and more about the fact that a person *is able* to sue without a mechanism to verify their claims' validity—ie. without an appeal to fault, only to harm—then Chesnutt's affinities appear less a function of his sociopolitical status than his professional one: by advocating for negligence, he is behaving exactly like a common pleas lawyer.

⁴⁵ The one exception is Trinyan Mariano's "The Law of Torts and the Logic of Lynching in Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition*" (2013), which provides a comprehensive overview of the critical tradition's omission of tort thinking in Chesnutt scholarship. Like the majority of contemporary analyses of the interfaces between tort law and race, however, Mariano's essay is concerned with torts as a model of justice *for* African Americans rather than as an apparatus of domination. For a work addressing Chesnutt's critique of segregation and miscegenation laws, see Brook Thomas's "The Legal Arguments of Charles W. Chesnutt's Novels" (2002). See also Nan Goodman's *Shifting the Blame: Literature, Law and the Theory of Accidents in Nineteenth-Century America* (1998).

As the political and material conditions for black folk progressively deteriorated through the 1880s and 90s, however, these subject positions grew increasingly at odds with one other. At the very moment freed black workers flooded the South's most dangerous industries, negligence introduced new standards of fault that relied upon a standard of rational human conduct frequently denied to African Americans.⁴⁶ My first claim, then, is that Chesnutt's fiction evidences mounting distrust of negligence on the grounds of its destructive and widespread effects on black life, specifically as such effects manifested in the guise of "accidents." Given the myriad forms of judicial and extra-judicial violence to which black persons were relentlessly subjected during the period dubbed the "nadir of American race relations,"⁴⁷ it is unsurprising that historians and literary critics have not regarded tort law as a pressing matter for African American politics during the postbellum period.⁴⁸ Through a reading of his oft-neglected third novel, *The Colonel's Dream* (1905),⁴⁹ I will argue that it is precisely *because* the violence tort law addresses is typically not understood *as* violence, but rather as the workings of chance, that make it such a crucial site for illuminating the state's sanctioned distribution of harms to particular segments of its population. By positioning *The Colonel's Dream* as a meditation on the biopolitical function of negligence, my argument aligns with Saidiya Hartman's call to "look

⁴⁶ Nan Goodman writes, "In the nineteenth century, African Americans were cast in the role of accident victims par excellence," arguing that laws restricting the liability of participants in accidents "helped significantly to designate them as a class of expendable accident victims" (118-119). For a thoroughgoing account of tort law's devastating effects on American labor in general, see John Fabian Witt's *The Accidental Republic: Crippled Workingmen, Destitute Widows, and the Remaking of American Law* (2004).

⁴⁷ See Rayford Logan's *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901* (1954), for the origins of this expression.

⁴⁸ In his cultural analysis of torts in *Accident Society: Fiction, Collectivity, and the Production of Chance* (2012), Jason Puskar explains the conspicuous absence of African American writers in his study with the claim that "more concrete enemies than chance were usually near at hand" for blacks during the postbellum era (18).

⁴⁹ Exceptions to the common omission of *The Colonel's Dream* from Chesnutt oeuvre in contemporary scholarship include Brook Thomas's *American Literary Realism and the Failed Promise of Contract* (1997) and *The Literature of Reconstruction: Not in Plain Black and White* (2017), Dean McWilliams' *Charles Chesnutt and the Fictions of Race* (2002), and Gary Scharnhorst's "'The Growth of a Dozen Tendrils': The Polyglot Satire of Chesnutt's *The Colonel's Dream*" (1999).

elsewhere” than the violent spectacles of beatings, rapes, and lynchings to grasp the extent of African American subjection in the wake of slavery (4).⁵⁰ Unlike Hartman, though, I draw upon a branch of law that has a much more fraught relationship to the tenets of liberal individualism than the traditions of contract and property guiding her own study.

Hence my second claim: that Chesnutt’s eventual rejection of negligence prompts him to imagine alternative ways of theorizing liability that would render the systemic violence of accidents legible rather than opaque. To do this, he ventures backwards into the annals of Western legal history to excavate models of liability that do *not* rely upon negligence’s metaphysical standard of the self-conscious, self-governing individual, but rather invoke the possibility of extending liability *beyond* the domain of the human subject itself. The irony is that these models had already been racialized by nineteenth-century science: Holmes, in *The Common Law* (1881), charges rulings that invoke “the liability of inanimate things” with succumbing to a “metaphysical confusion” common to “primitive cultures” (28). Through a reading of the last story published in his lifetime, “The Marked Tree” (1924), I show that Chesnutt repurposes the racialized theory of nonhuman liability to politically and epistemologically innovative ends. I will argue that nonhuman liability conceives of legal subjects as ineluctably entangled with their environment, and thus helps Chesnutt reveal the occluded networks of relations that systematically and disproportionately distribute harms to black bodies. At the same time, it gestures toward a theory of culpability for complicity in the production of systemic violence irreducible to the metric of the individual.

⁵⁰ In elaborating the relationship between tort law and the management of racial populations I am following the excellent work of Sarah Lochlann Jain, whose *Injury: The Politics of Product Design and Safety Law in the United States* (2006) clearly situates torts as an apparatus of governmentality, considering “how injury laws themselves...are key actors in the cultural reproduction of material difference” (7).

The crux of Chesnutt's recourse to nonhuman liability is that the legal traditions he draws from do *not* hold up "the human" as the unmarked ideal of subjectivity. These traditions are distinctly nonmodern in Bruno Latour's sense: they foreground that the human has always been co-constituted through its imbrications with things.⁵¹ In the last section of this essay, I will suggest some implications of this project for contemporary African American literary studies, which continues—despite the influence of poststructuralist and new materialist methodologies—to align itself with distinctly modernist narratives of heroic subjectivity that invoke a humanist metaphysics of blackness.⁵² These narratives are a response to a different historical form of "metaphysical confusion"—the kind inaugurated by chattel slavery. I hope to show that there are productive ways to disarticulate these two types of "confusion," and that Chesnutt's lifelong interest in black folk aesthetics provides the resources for doing so. The truly radical dimensions of Chesnutt's legal vision come to the fore when we discover that the liminal human/nonhuman ontologies of the conjure tradition *are already constitutive of material history itself* via the evolution of tortious thought in nineteenth-century American jurisprudence.⁵³

I. Strict Liability and the Rise of Negligence

⁵¹ For this argument, see Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991).

⁵² What Paul Gilroy characterizes in *The Black Atlantic* (1991) as the "seemingly insoluble conflict between two distinct but currently symbiotic perspectives" in contemporary black studies, an "ontological" and a "strategic" essentialism, still rings true vis-à-vis much Chesnutt scholarship (31).

⁵³ I am offering this claim as an alternative to the dominant strain of argumentation in Americanist law and literature studies, exemplified, for instance, in Wai Chee Dimock's *Residues of Justice: Literature, Law, Philosophy* (1996). There, Dimock argues that the indeterminacy of literary form—its figural excesses, semantic nonclosures, and slippery narrative perspectives—implicitly critiques the form of legal judgment insofar as the latter, according to Dimock, always appeals to the possibility of commensurability, equivalence, and absolutism. "We might think of literature," she writes, "as the textualization of justice, the transposition of its clean abstractions into the messiness of representation" (10). I recognize the appeal of Dimock's opposition between "the law" as the fantasy of objective quantifications of justice and "the literary" as "the domain of the incommensurate" (10), but it is one that cannot hold from a number of perspectives. While Kant and Rawls are Dimock's primary antagonists, the legal realist tradition, beginning with Holmes, arises precisely in response to the "messiness" her study cites, hence Holmes's famous opening phrase in *The Common Law*, "The life of the law has not been logic: it has been experience" (1).

Prior to 1850, torts was not considered an autonomous branch of law at all, but merely “a collection of unrelated writs,” whereby “[o]ne could master ‘tort’ doctrine by mastering the technicalities of pleading” (White 8, 9). The imperative to formulate a comprehensive theory of tort law grew out of a convergence of intellectual trends and socio-historical necessities. American legal theory after the Civil War came under the influence of contemporary methodologies in the natural and social sciences, which aimed at creating totalizing systems of knowledge production. Just as importantly, jurists during this period were confronted with the concrete fact that industrial America was incredibly accident-prone. The dramatic rise in what came to be known as “stranger cases”—accidents involving parties with no previous relationship to one another—put pressure on the writ system, which was not well-equipped to deal with the kinds of fault-finding required, for instance, by ship, rail, and highway collisions. The drastic spike in such cases was linked to developments in the means of production and their correlative forms of social organization. Railroads, tenement houses, iron mills, dams, factories, ferries, and other innovations in transportation technology, urbanization, and industrialism brought foreign bodies together in novel and increasingly dangerous configurations. As the quotidian spaces of work, travel, and residence began to appear as inherently risky sites of interpersonal transaction, lawmakers attempted to establish universal common principles from which all tort claims might find their footing.⁵⁴

Within the writ system, the dominant theory of liability was a strict one. This meant that legal responsibility for damages rested with the source of harm irrespective of mental state, degree of care, or capacity to have acted otherwise. As Sandra MacPherson puts it, in strict liability, “fault becomes a question of *causation* rather than culpability: if an agent is the cause of

⁵⁴ For two excellent historical accounts of the consolidation of tort law as a discrete field of the law, see Morton J. Horwitz, *The Transformation of American Law 1780-1860* (1977) and G. Edward White, *Tort Law in America: An Intellectual History* (1985).

harm to another, she is responsible for that harm even if she herself is the victim of the grossest misfortune” (39). This theory of liability is strikingly indifferent to questions of interiority: what matters is not what one intends or how one feels, but what effects one engenders in the world. Strict liability’s jurisprudential origins lie in early modern English law, where it served primarily as a means to govern status relationships, such as those between masters and servants, hoteliers and guests, or carriage drivers and passengers. Its political foundation is a sovereign-centric notion of legal paternalism based upon the idea that no citizen should be unduly injured or deprived of property by the risky actions of others. Its philosophical foundation is radically materialist: in it, persons are effectively depersonified, rendered ontologically indistinguishable from mere *things in motion*.

Because the railroad industry killed, maimed, and damaged consistently and unintentionally as part of its daily operations, strict liability proved a major impediment to its development. It is no surprise, then, that railroad cases were at the center of the move away from this standard. As early as 1842, in *Farwell v. Boston and Worcester Railroad*, Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw (better known to literary scholars as Herman Melville’s father-in-law), attempted to alleviate the threat of strict liability to corporate autonomy by implementing what came to be known as the “fellow servant rule,” which prohibited injured workers from suing their employers if their injuries could be shown to have been caused by the “negligence” of a fellow worker. When Farwell, an engineer, tried to sue the Boston and Worcester Rail Road for the loss of his hand suffered during a derailment, the court ruled that responsibility for the injury should fall not upon the company but upon Farwell’s coworker, who failed to flip the proper track switch at the proper time. This ruling made it much less likely for plaintiffs to collect for their injuries, as fellow servants in the most dangerous industries frequently proved insolvent. Shaw’s

justification, however, was that the fellow servant rule promoted efficiency: if workers understand *themselves* as legally responsible for their coworkers' safety, they will be better incentivized to ensure it.⁵⁵

Shaw was only one of a number of nineteenth-century jurists who came to recognize the growing antagonism in American common law between the interests of business in generating capital and the interests of the state in insuring the safety of its citizenry. Echoing the charges of Chesnut's early railroad litigation sketches, prominent Gilded Age legal theorist Francis Wharton complained of the tendency to make "wealth the basis of liability" in cases of harms involving industrial activity, and ventriloquized proponents of strict liability as both authoritarian and communistic: "'Here is a capitalist among these antecedents; he shall be forced to pay'" ("Liability" 729). And like Shaw, Wharton invoked the concept of negligence—which he defined as "an imperfection in discharge of a duty" (*Negligence* 3)—as the solution to the problem of liability in the increasingly hazardous world of American big business.

Similarly wary that law would stymie the flow of economic energies or that the state should become "a mutual insurance company against accidents," Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., over the course of the 1870s and 80s, put forward a new argument about the role of negligence in tort rulings that radically broadened its scope.⁵⁶ In distinction from Shaw's and Wharton's use of the term to refer to the *failure* to perform specific duties to specific parties at specific times (eg. the failure of Farwell's coworker to flip the track switch at the proper juncture), Holmes claimed

⁵⁵ Shaw's fellow servant rule presupposed a mutuality of interest and care between workers that was simply inapplicable to slaves. Slaves were socially prohibited from acting as observers and superintendents of their coworkers and, as rented property, did not possess the right to take "leave of service" should their safety be perceived as at risk. Moreover, slaves could not be sued, so liability for harms they caused was likely to fall upon the slaveholder, while liability for harms caused *to them* was likely to fall upon the hirer. "In effect, southern judges were forced to choose between protecting slaveowners and protecting industrialists" (Finkelman 297). See also Jenny Bourne Wahl's "The Bondsman's Burden: An Economic Analysis of the Jurisprudence of Slaves and Common Carriers" (1993).

⁵⁶ See Holmes's "The Theory of Torts" (1873), in the *American Law Review*, parts of which were incorporated into *The Common Law* (1880).

that negligence should designate a general standard of care owed by “all the world to all the world” at all times.⁵⁷ Suspicious of dogma and sensitive to the contingencies of institutional and cultural values, Holmes offers a deceptively glib account of how the law should determine negligent behavior: “*experience*,” he reasons, “is the test by which it is decided whether the degree of danger attending given conduct under certain known circumstances is sufficient to throw the risk upon the party pursuing it” (149). Individuals, by virtue of living together with one another in a society, should be forced to measure their standard of care in undertaking risky behavior against “what would be blameworthy in the average man, the man of ordinary intelligence and prudence” (108). Tort rulings in accord with the doctrine of negligence thus always implicitly invoke the conduct of a third party—“the ideal average prudent man”—whose hypothetical behavior, a kind of statistical aggregate adhering to a social law of averages, provides the “external” standard against which liability is determined.⁵⁸

For Holmes, the “ideal average prudent man” functions as a way to preserve the categories of will, consciousness, and intentionality denied to persons in strict liability. It shores up the boundaries of the human subject by making it distinct from mere moving matter. Simultaneously, however, it introduces a metaphysical distinction into the problem of causation that makes liability dependent upon the humanness of human action. “An act,” writes Holmes, “is a muscular contraction, and *something more*” (my emphasis; 54). That something more designates the elusive supplement that confirms humanity. “A spasm is not an act,” writes Holmes, “The contraction of the muscles must be willed” (ibid). A spasm, in other words, is a

⁵⁷ The description of torts as designating the duties owed by “all the world to all the world” comes from Holmes’s 1873 article in *The American Law Review* called “The Theory of Torts.”

⁵⁸ “In his theory of torts,” writes Louis Menand, “Holmes did what Charles Darwin did in his theory of evolution by chance variation and James Clerk Maxwell did in his kinetic theory of gases: he applied the great discovery of nineteenth century science, which was that the indeterminacy of individual behavior could be regularized by considering groups statistically at the level of the mass, to his own special field” (43-44). See Menand, “The Principles of Oliver Wendell Holmes” in *American Studies* (2002).

figure for the human reduced to mere moving matter—a figure for what is *other* to the human *within* the human that must be excluded from consideration in tort cases as that which is “indifferent to the law” (ibid). But Holmes’s account of negligence does more than posit this distinction: it renders the law capable of asserting this distinction at all times in the wake of harm. Negligence holds the power to vacuum-seal actions away from legal significance by turning them into spasms, which is to say, render them meaningless from a juridical perspective.

The important correlative to this logic, however, is that in the eyes of the law, effects become fully disarticulatable from their causes. A pistol fired into a crowd during a “spasm” of the hand, or a stick raised without foreseeing the intrusion of a third party whose eye it gouges, from the perspective of negligence, are harms without liable causes.⁵⁹ This is the governing paradox of negligence doctrine: while it consolidates autonomy to the legal subject by safeguarding the categories of will and consciousness, it simultaneously makes room within the law for the possibility that some things *simply happen* beyond the scope of any interpretive, corrective, or justificatory framework. Negligence, then, introduces the element of chance into every tortious configuration. “Chance,” writes Jason Puskar, “is a name for the active decoupling of actions from agents, and of events from overarching moralizing and rationalizing schemes,” a mode of thinking that “obscure[s] agency and responsibility to precisely the same degree that other kinds of narratives clarify causation and establish blame” (8, 10). Negligence saturates the totality of the social field with juridical power at the same time as it creates a fundamentally new

⁵⁹ In *Brown v Kendall* (1850), one of the first cases to establish the precedent of negligence as the ground of liability in tort, Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw ruled that when one dog owner accidentally hit another dog owner in the eye with a stick while attempting to separate their fighting animals, the liability of the defendant rested on the criteria of “ordinary care” used at the moment of the incident. “If the defendant, in beating the dogs, was doing a necessary act, or one which it was his duty under the circumstances of the case to do, and was doing it in a proper way; then he was not responsible in this action, provided he was using ordinary care at the time of the blow” (60 Mass. 292, 1850).

set of blind spots within the law's vision. These blind spots are where chance slips in as the threat of harm without a legally recognizable source.

II. Railroads, Ramrods, and the Limits of Negligence

That realist and naturalist fiction offers a valuable site for thinking through the exigencies of late nineteenth-century American “accident society” has been well-established by critics and can be observed first-hand, for instance, in the use of statistical models and human “case studies” in the writings of Stephen Crane and Jacob Riis, in the narratives of gambling, risk-taking, and speculation in Edith Wharton and Frank Norris, and in the critiques of the randomness of social and economic mobility in William Dean Howells and others.⁶⁰ Yet the conspicuous whiteness of both this critical and literary canon bespeaks the recognition that negligence's universalist aspiration—its invocation of the “ideal average prudent man” as a figure for the human *as such*—is, in fact, already a racialized formation. My argument in this section is that the production of chance as a juridical construct had unique implications for African Americans, whose acquisition of the supposedly colorblind duties owed by all the world to all the world was in fact used to justify racist claims that such accruals were illegitimate and unjustified. This phenomenon—what Saidiya Hartman calls the “burdened individuality of freedom” to which blacks were subjected in the wake of jubilee—is evidenced in the fact that appeals to chance for emancipated African Americans were at the center of white Republican Reconstruction discourse (115). To “have a chance” in the rhetoric of the era designated *both* the imperative of freedmen to exercise their newly granted legal rights in the pursuit of profit and property *and* the recognition that at stake in such pursuits was the very humanity supposedly affirmed by those

⁶⁰ Puskar's *Accident Society* (2012) builds off of a number of influential works in the field of late nineteenth-century American literature that address the growing interest in risk, accidents, and statistical models of probability, most notably, Walter Benn Michaels' *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (1987), Mark Seltzer's *Bodies and Machines* (1992), and Nancy Bentley's *Frantic Panoramas* (2007).

rights. Congressman Ignatius Donnelly, arguing in 1866 in favor of the Freedman's Bureau Bill, makes this logic absolutely clear in his plea to "give [the freedman] a chance; let him make himself an independent laborer like yourself; let him own his own homestead;[...] If after all this he proves himself an unworthy savage and brutal wench, condemn him, but not 'til then" (qtd in Hartman 177). "Chance," in this context, signifies the chance of not being worthy of one.

"Had he been better equipped, or had a better chance, he might have made a better showing" (108). This is the internal monologue of the eponymous colonel, Henry French, in *The Colonel's Dream*, upon reencountering after a decades-long separation, his father's former slave, Peter French, now a rheumatic and destitute old man. In the opening pages of the novel, the colonel, a Confederate Civil War veteran and widower, has returned with his six year-old son to his hometown of Clarendon, North Carolina, after selling his shares of a prosperous manufacturing firm whose central offices are located in New York City. Confronted upon his arrival by the region's rampant poverty, unemployment, and economic stagnation, the Colonel embarks upon a doomed philanthropic mission to bring social and economic reform to the fields of his youth.⁶¹

In *The Colonel's Dream*, the Reconstruction sense of chance-as-opportunity and the tort sense of chance-as-accident are two sides of the same coin.⁶² This convergence manifests midway through the novel in a conversation between Colonel French and the minister of Clarendon's Presbyterian Church, Dr. Mackenzie, a character who bears striking ideological

⁶¹ Chesnutt's last published novel owes its carpetbagging plot to the more famous instantiation of that forgotten niche genre, *A Fool's Errand* (1879), written almost three decades earlier by Chesnutt's friend and fellow Ohioan, Albion Tourgée. *A Fool's Errand* was formative for Chesnutt's development as a writer. Yet, as is typical in cases of supreme influence, when Chesnutt read it at the age of twenty-two, he positioned himself in competition with Tourgée as the more worthy representative of black life in the post-Reconstruction South. See Chesnutt's comments on Tourgée in "*To Be an Author*": *Letters of Charles W. Chesnutt 1889-1905* (1997).

⁶² This overlap is encoded, for instance, in the etymology of the expression "to chance it," meaning "to risk it," dating from 1859.

affinities with the Social Darwinist scholar and clergyman, William Graham Sumner. Mackenzie chastises French's naiveté for believing that investing his Northern capital in local construction projects and job-creating initiatives will benefit the town's "degraded" black population:

“We will not assimilate him, we cannot deport him—“
“And therefore, O man of God, must we exterminate him?”
“It is God's will. We need not stain ourselves with innocent blood. If we but sit passive and leave their fate to time, they will die away in discouragement and despair. Already disease is sapping their vitals...It is the law of life, which God has given to the earth. To coddle them, to delude them with false hopes of an unnatural equality which not all the power of the Government has been able to maintain, is only to increase their unhappiness” (233-234).⁶³

Dr. Mackenzie's prophecy imagines a biopolitics of racial “extermination” overseen not by the administration of the state (which, he maintains, has proven powerless to integrate the freedman into the organic totality of the Union), but that of a higher authority, “the law of life, which God has given to the earth.” At the level of mass effects, his vision suggests, acts of killing and letting-die enter a zone of indistinction, instantiating a paradoxically “passive” form of racial cleansing that relies on the efficacy of “diseases” and other aleatory elements that enervate a population's productive and reproductive capacities. Because it need not target the lives of particular individuals, such power might avoid recourse to sovereign violence by intervening directly in the life of the population as a whole.

Mackenzie's opinions provide a stark ideological foil against which Colonel French positions his comparatively “enlightened” brand of entrepreneurial philanthropy. And yet, the colonel's response is notable for the way it amounts less to a rebuttal of Mackenzie's logic than an *extension* of it, essentially replacing the minister's invocation of divine authority with another,

⁶³ Compare Mackenzie's speech with Sumner's discourse upon the “laws of life” in *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (1883): “God and Nature have ordained the chances and conditions of life on earth once for all. The case cannot be reopened. We cannot get a revision of the laws of human life. We are absolutely shut up to the need and duty, if we would learn how to live happily, of investigating the laws of Nature, and deducing the rules of right living in the world as it is” (14).

more secular variety that would enable more flexible, less deterministic, modes of social regulation than those mandated by outright extermination. French begins by affirming the inevitable futurity of black life, explaining that such a situation cannot be addressed by “leav[ing] their fate to time,” but demands concrete administrative action. “They constitute the bulk of our laboring class,” he reasons, and thus “[t]o teach them is to make their labor more effective and therefore more profitable; to increase their needs is to increase our profit in supplying them” (234).

I’ll take my chances on the Golden Rule. I am no lover of the Negro, *as* Negro—I do not know but I should rather see him elsewhere. I think our land would have been far happier had none but white men ever set foot upon it after the red men were driven back. But they are here, through no fault of theirs, as we are. They were born here. We have given them our language—which they speak more or less corruptly; our religion—which they practice certainly no better than we; and our blood—which our laws make a badge of disgrace. Perhaps we could not do them strict justice, without a great sacrifice upon our own part. But they are men, and they should have their chance—at least *some* chance (74).

In response to Mackenzie’s affirmation of a genocidal, god-given “law of life,” where the concept of justice is rooted in an absolute determinism of racial hierarchy, the colonel invokes an ameliorative, manmade law of the “Golden Rule,” where justice is rooted in the indeterminacy of “chance—at least *some* chance,” owed to all individuals by virtue of being “men.” The key to understanding what “chance” means in this context lies in what the colonel posits as its inconceivable alternative: “strict justice,” which derives from the concept of strict liability.

Chesnutt’s fiction is captivated by the problem of strict liability as a way of envisioning recompense for formerly enslaved African Americans. His novels and short stories repeatedly stage the impossibility of concretizing the scale and extent of slavery’s wrongs as moments of

tragic epiphany for their white characters.⁶⁴ In *The Marrow of Tradition* (1900), for instance, bourgeois matron Olivia Carteret invokes a strict conception of justice for her own implication in the slave economy of the South, wondering, “If [slavery] had been such a crime, as for a moment she dimly perceived it might have been, then through the long centuries there had been piled up a catalogue of wrong and outrage which...must some time, somewhere, in some way, be atoned for. She herself had not escaped the penalty, of which, she realized, this burden placed upon her conscience was but another installment” (671). Carteret discovers, in other words, that applying the conception of justice made available via strict liability opens up a ledger of transgressions so enormous, pervasive, and all-implicating, that the very notion of compensation becomes practically inconceivable, let alone quantifiable by any earthly metric.⁶⁵ Colonel French too rejects the viability of strict justice in part because he perceives, like Carteret, that the sacrifice it entails for those obliged to pay would be too great—in other words, that the main problem is one of scale. And yet, his choice of the word “sacrifice” to name what is ostensibly an act of compensation places him in the same cohort of legal theorists as Shaw, Wharton, and Holmes, who each rejected what they viewed as the illiberal implications of the doctrine. In its place, they advocated for the very thing French does: the disarticulation of causes from effects made possible via negligence’s instantiation of a chancy universe.

The Colonel’s Dream underscores the stark disjunction between the white Republican discourse of chance and its concrete sociopolitical effects as they came to be enacted through the doctrine of negligence. Peter French, readers learn, *did*, in fact, have a chance, but one thoroughly saturated by this new form of juridical power. Following emancipation,

⁶⁴ See the epiphanies of the sheriff in “The Sheriff’s Children” from *The Wife of His House and Other Stories of the Color Line* (1899) and George Tryon in *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) for two other instances where the logic of strict liability registers affectively as guilt.

⁶⁵ As Trinyan Mariano notes of this moment, “[c]orrective justice simply caves in under the weight of history...A poor substitute for reparation, guilt does not yield legal, moral, or political rectification” (562-563).

[Peter] had worked for a railroad contractor, until exposure and overwork had laid him up with a fever. After his recovery, he had been employed for some years at cutting turpentine boxes in the pine woods, following the trail of industry southward, until one day his axe had slipped and wounded him severely. When his wound was healed he was told that he was too old and awkward for the turpentine, and that they needed younger and more active men (106-107).

“The question of liability,” writes Holmes in 1897, “if pressed far enough, is really the question how far it is desirable that the public should insure the safety of those whose work it uses” (“The Path of the Law” 182-183). As a worker effectively used up and abandoned by the very system deemed to hold out the possibility of his salvation as a freedman, Peter provides a textbook case of postbellum tort biopolitics. How far the public should insure the safety of its workers finds its clear limit in the wounded, sick, and overworked black body. Far from countermanding French’s demands for increasingly “effective” and “profitable” labor strategies, Peter’s immiseration in fact marks the *apotheosis* of efficiency from the perspective of an industrial capitalist mode of production. That Peter is obliged to cede his place in the labor market to “more active men” indexes the shift from strict liability’s paternalistic view of legal insurance (in which the state sees itself as protecting its citizens against the dangerous activity of others) to negligence’s laissez-faire model (in which dangerous activity is recognized as the defining feature of capitalist expansion, and thus that industrial development needs legal insulation from the risky undertakings that define it).

Peter’s extradiegetic destitution due to shifts in late nineteenth-century torts leaves him vulnerable to an interlocking system of juridical marginalizations. Unable to find work, the former slave is arrested for vagrancy by one of Clarendon’s corrupt police officers working on the payroll of William Feters, the son of a slave trader who has amassed a small fortune in the region by leasing convict labor to work on his family’s “plantation” (129). Sent to auction and threatened with conscription back into involuntary servitude, Peter is once again evaluated

within the double bind of chance: “I buy niggers to work, not to bury,” comments Fetters’ representative at the prospect of purchasing the old man (144). Eventually, Colonel French pays Peter’s vagrancy debt, “a purchase which his father had made, upon terms not very different, fifty years before,” with the intention of employing him as his son’s caretaker (ibid). Thus French grants Peter a chance to “make a better showing,” paradoxically, by placing him in debt bondage. Chesnutt depicts this intertwining of common law, criminal law, and contract law as a finely articulated biopolitical matrix in which the emancipated black subject’s opportunities are thoroughly circumscribed.⁶⁶

The double bind of chance structures Peter’s narrative trajectory in the novel, shadowing him all the way to his death at its climax. The freedman dies engaged in an act of care for white life, attempting to save Colonel French’s son, Phil, from the threat of an oncoming train. (As if to underscore the extent to which negligence saturates his novel’s plot, Chesnutt makes the colonel absent from the scene, immobilizing him with a sprained ankle sustained when a hammer is left “carelessly” lying on the floor of a construction site) (315). Peter reaches the tracks moments before the collision, but just as he is about to seize the child, a black cat jumps from a nearby truck bar, tripping him into the train’s path: “The car moved only a few feet, but quite far enough to work injury” (323). Peter is pronounced dead on the spot, and an impromptu “jury” assembled at the scene labels his death “accidental”: “There was no suggestion of blame attaching to anyone,” the narrator reports, “it had been an accident pure and simple, which ordinary and reasonable prudence could not have foreseen” (324). Phil, “bleeding and unconscious,” is taken

⁶⁶ For an excellent historical contextualization of Peter’s debt bondage in *The Colonel’s Dream*, see Brook Thomas’s *American Literary Realism and the Failed Promise of Contract* (1997), which reads Chesnutt’s novel as an indictment of contract law’s *de jure* inattention in race: “If the Court thought that guaranteeing color-blind rights based on freedom of contract would solve problems of racial discrimination, Chesnutt demonstrates that contract’s promise will be fulfilled in the South only if racial equality is guaranteed” (177). For a thorough juridico-political investigation into the concept of racial indebtedness in pre- and post-emancipation United States, see Stephen Best’s *The Fugitive’s Properties* (2004).

home, where he succumbs to an unidentified “internal injury” and dies the next day (ibid). In contrast to Peter’s death, the novel imbues Phil’s with a clear point of origin traceable directly to Colonel French: “he himself had been unwittingly the cause of it,” French thinks. “Had he not sent old Peter into the house, the child would not have been left alone. Had he kept his eye upon Phil until Peter’s return the child would not have strayed away. He had neglected his child” (326).

The discrepancy between these two accounts corresponds to the difference between strict liability and negligence that solidified over the course of Chesnutt’s professional career. Each causal narrative highlights the way tort law produces certain kinds of affiliations while dissolving others: it is negligent to allow one’s child to slip out of one’s field of vision but reasonable to encourage one’s black caretaker to do so; it is “foreseeable” that harm might come to white children who play beside train tracks, but unforeseeable that the same might be said for their black caretakers; it is considered an “accident, pure and simple” if a black man is crushed by a train but a tragedy if a white child is exposed to the identical threat. Tort law, in other words, defines the limits of civil associations by demarcating whom specifically of “all the world” one is responsible for. It confirms that Peter is a French in name alone who is nevertheless bound to protect the wellbeing of the very association that deems him extraneous to it. Peter’s role as informal caretaker to Phil—an act of “charity” on the part of the colonel—finds its fulfillment in a death liminally positioned at once inside and outside the civil associations in which he is inextricably bound up with others. Obligated to all the world through the figure of the white child, he is nevertheless the object of no one else’s care at the moment he is exposed to the “chance” encounter of the train crash.

Tort law, in this sense, creates *publics*, according to John Dewey's definition of the term, which refers to "all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systemically cared for" (15-16). In tort law, unlike in contract or property, one cannot *choose* one's associations; rather, associations are always determined retroactively following some tortious transaction, and thus one is obligated to others whom one may have been otherwise oblivious, simply *because* one has done them harm, or vice versa. However, this network of relations maintains a strictly virtual existence until the moment it gets retroactively established in the wake of harm or injury. Only then does one's adherence or non-adherence to the standards of ordinary care get called into question, and the emergence of a public with a particular shape comes into existence. In the eyes of the law, harm engenders relationships based on culpability, drawing certain agents into a terrain of visibility with others defined by the particulars of the case. However, such obligations are not distributed symmetrically across racial lines. That negligence works to systematically exclude Peter from tort's network of obligations while paradoxically reasserting his status as caregiver underscores its biopolitical function as it emerges in the late nineteenth century.

Importantly, however, it is Peter himself who gives the novel's most penetrating account of this perverse logic, and in doing so, offers a perspective from which to critique the deadly effects of tort law for black life in postbellum America. As Peter pursues Phil moments before the collision, readers flash back briefly to a warning he gave the child about the dangers of the railroad:

"Keep 'way f'm dat railroad track, honey," the old man had repeated more than once. "It's as dange'ous as a gun, and a gun is dange'ous widout lock, stock, er bairl: I knowed a man oncet w'at beat 'is wife ter def wid a ramrod, an' wuz hung fer it in a' old fiel' down by de ha'nted house. Dat gun couldn't hol' powder ner shot, but was dange'ous 'nuff ter kill two folks. So you jes' better keep 'way f'm dat railroad track, chile" (322).

At first glance, Peter's metaphoric equation between railroad track and gun appears compromised in two directions at once: first, a gesture of equivalence (between guns and railroads) slips into a metonymic chain of contiguous relations (lock, stock, barrel, ramrod); and second, the focus on tort, concerned with nonintentional wrongs (a railroad crash) slips into the intentional realm of crime (a husband beating his wife to death). Both breakdowns, however, indicate the tensions inherent to tort doctrine that we have been examining. The first indexes the fraught metaphysical imperative to restrict the sphere of negligence to discrete spatiotemporal instances, while the second indexes the problem of isolating what counts as the *human* component of action.

In *The Common Law*, Holmes uses the example of the muscular movements required for firing a gun ("to crook the forefinger with a certain force is the same act whether the trigger of a pistol is next to it or not") in order to distinguish between blameworthy and blameless behavior, concluding in the end that "the coordinated acts necessary to point a gun and pull a trigger, and the intent and knowledge shown by the co-ordination of those acts, are all consistent with entire blamelessness" (54, 150). He performs this figurative disassembly in order to delineate the proper jurisdictional parameters of negligence, which exclude those acts "taken apart from their surrounding circumstances" (54). His point is that if merely the gestures required to point and fire a gun were recognized as liable behavior in and of itself—that is, if legal persons were to be understood as nothing except the material effects their bodies engender—then American law would be thrown back into the dark ages of strict liability. Peter's metonymic disassembly, however, has the opposite effect as Holmes's: rather than circumscribe the law's sphere of "blamelessness," it expands and disperses it, imagining a web of causation so attenuated that the last term in his list, the "ramrod," actually becomes the prime agent in *two* deaths, only one of

which is technically a murder. To assert that a ramrod wielded as a weapon is also what “kills” said murderer when he is hung for the crime is to imagine the world organized according to the unpredictable materialist doctrine of strict liability Holmes was fighting against.

From Peter’s perspective, then, a ramrod is “dangerous” not because of any inherent property that makes it so, but because one can never know in advance how it will interact with its “surrounding circumstances.” The ramrod, we might say, invoking Herbert Spencer’s language, exists in a state of unstable equilibrium with its environment. According to Peter’s opening metaphor, this is equally true for the railroad itself: not only does the railroad *kill*, but it does so in ways that involve such complex forms of interactions across such wide spatiotemporal zones as to become invisible to the gaze of negligence. More specifically, the suggestion that a railroad is “dangerous” *in the same way* as a ramrod in the hands of an assailant generates, from Peter’s own mouth, the provocative claim that when railroads *kill* they actually commit something akin to murder, albeit a kind of murder that is irreducible to any individual action or intent.⁶⁷

But Peter’s warning to Phil also mobilizes a thoroughgoing critique of the metaphysical premises undergirding negligence doctrine as such. According to Holmes, again, an action’s blameworthiness is determinable by weighing its foreseeable consequences against the surrounding circumstances in which it takes place. In this view, a monolithic notion of *context* saturates the act, fully determines its legal significance, making “all muscular motions or co-ordinations...harmless apart from concomitant circumstances” (131). This account of liability is, crucially, also an account of subjectivity. To assert, as Holmes does, that an act might be “taken apart from [its] surrounding circumstances” is to posit the sovereign individual as absolutely

⁶⁷ Peter’s critique of causality here has a distinct antecedent in the writings of legal theorist and Metaphysical Club member, Nicholas St. John Green. In an 1870 essay, “Proximate and Remote Causes,” Green writes “To every event there are certain antecedents, never a single antecedent, but always a set of antecedents...There is no chain of causation consisting of determinate links ranged in order of proximity to the effect. They are rather mutually interwoven with themselves and the effect, as the meshes of a net are interwoven” (211).

primary, anterior to any and all possible relations. In Peter's account, however, where effects are fundamentally unforeseeable and the "circumstances" in which they arise are consistently shifting, in a state of unstable equilibrium, we get a very different view of subjectivity where *relation itself* is primary because there exists no foundational position or grounding center of action, no site from which an autonomous subject might be disentangled from its human and nonhuman environment. Against Holmes's appeal to the all-determining power of the context, then, Peter's speech illuminates the inability of the context to ever fully circumscribe the significance of an action insofar as actions continue to produce effects beyond the scope of will, intention, or consciousness. If self-presence can never be guaranteed at the instant of the act, then the very category of action as Holmes defines it—"a muscular contraction, and something more"—becomes indistinguishable from its *other*, the inhuman "spasm." From this perspective, the sheer materiality of the muscular contraction constitutes not a deviation from proper, human, self-consciousness, but rather its very condition of possibility. And if negligence can never verify the essential property of humanness to which it appeals, then the racial metaphysics it upholds is revealed for what it has always been: an ideological tactic of domination that *creates* the very scissions between man and brute, reasonable and unreasonable, negligence and blamelessness it purports to merely describe.

III. The Metaphysical Confusion of Nonhuman Liability

By drawing attention to the racialized account of "the human" at the heart of negligence, *The Colonel's Dream* implicitly invokes the possibility of a theory of liability that would *not* take the human subject as the conceptual starting point for thinking about the systemic violence of accidents. The last story Chesnutt published in his lifetime, "The Marked Tree," undertakes

this task explicitly.⁶⁸ There, ex-slave Julius McAdoo recounts to white carpetbagger John a fantastical story about an unnamed slavewoman who takes revenge on her master, Aleck Spencer, after his decision to sell away her only son leads to the boy's death at the hands of slave-hunters. Her retaliation takes the form of a "mark" upon the family's ancestral oak tree—a curse that transforms it from a living symbol of prosperity and longevity for the Spencer clan into the mysterious epicenter of death and destruction for their entire bloodline. One by one, in what appear to be a series of freak accidents, each family member meets an untimely fate in some way connected to the body of the oak: a poisonous spider descends from its branches and kills a child with its bite; a boy drowns in the river while fishing with bait collected from its soil; a mother and daughter are killed by a lightning bolt as they take shelter under its canopy; and the last remaining son collides with its trunk after being thrown from a carriage. While the household slaves understand the deaths as the workings of conjure magic and predict that "dere'd be still mo' trouble from [the tree]," Julius notes that "none er de white folks thought 'er blamin' de tree," assuming rather that "it wuz jes' one er dem things dat couldn' be he'ped" (142). Following the death of his last son, and swayed by rumors circulating amongst his household of its malevolent power, Aleck Spencer orders his beloved heirloom cut down. Yet even in the act of falling, "[the tree] jes' twisted squar' roun' sideways to'ds ole Marse Aleck an' ketched 'im befo' he could look up, an' crushed 'im ter de groun'" (143). In the final *coup de grace* for the

⁶⁸ "The Marked Tree" appeared across two issues of *The Crisis* between 1924 and 1925, accompanied by a series of illustrations by Yolande Du Bois, daughter of W.E.B. Du Bois. A number of factors have circumscribed its reception primarily to the level of the biographical. Its lateness vis-à-vis the rest of his literary output (Chesnutt was sixty-six at the time of its publication, his most famous works having been written almost four decades earlier), its venue of publication (the literary organ of the NAACP), and its content (a slavewoman's transgenerational curse) all contributed to its being read symptomatically as a kind of symbolic act of revenge on Chesnutt's part—a sign of the author's resentment toward the national literary establishment for forcing him to quit writing as a source of income due to lack of sales; his increasing bitterness toward the state of race relations in the South and elsewhere; and even as a rewriting of his own forays into the conjure tradition by restricting the use of magic to the slavewoman. Rather than emphasize how the story *consolidates* black agency (either through the figure of conjure or the figure of the author), I am interested in the way it *dispersed* it while returning to the tortious discourses of blame, accident, care, and responsibility of his earlier works.

Spencer clan, after the field hands succeed in chopping the tree into firewood, a log mysteriously rolls out of the hearth one evening, igniting a blaze that burns the house down with everyone inside.

“The Marked Tree” is Chesnutt’s most overt racialization of tort thinking. What the white family interprets in the late nineteenth-century language of the accident, *one of those things that could not be helped*, the slaves interpret through an appeal to “blame” that locates responsibility for the deaths in the tree itself. And yet, the very act of naming the tree as the source of “trouble” immediately underscores the impossibility of extracting it from the web of relations comprising its environment: the creatures that live in its branches, the worms that bury in its soil, the lightning that threatens its canopy, the density of its trunk, its height and weight, the trajectory of its fall—even the way it *burns* become inextricably factored into its range of extensive effects. There is no tree that acts by itself; there are only the interactions with other entities that constitute it, always provisionally, as an agential force. From this perspective, though, the marked tree can be understood as simply the mirror image of the railroad, and the logic of the family curse is simply the logic of state-sanctioned danger to which certain segments of the population are exposed over others: both are assemblages of humans and nonhumans that kill systemically in ways that occlude individual agency and intention, thereby producing the impression of an accident for which no one is responsible. To “blame” the tree for harms, as the slaves do, is to trace the connections through which harms come to be normalized in the guise of accidents.

The notion that a tree might be “blamed” for harms to human beings was not, in fact, an unusual proposition in the late nineteenth century, but, as Chesnutt’s short story suggests, it was an explicitly racialized one. In the first section of *The Common Law*, entitled “Early Forms of

Liability,” Holmes uncovers the strangest history of law’s traffic in nonhuman punishments: from Plato’s claim that “if any lifeless thing deprive a man of life...the nearest of kin...shall cast forth the guilty thing beyond the border” (*Laws*, Book IX) to the Roman rule of *noxæ deditio*, which enforces “surrender of that which caused damage,” to the English law of deodand, which mandates that “whatever personal chattel is the immediate occasion of the death of any reasonable creature...is forfeited to the king” (Blackstone 300), the history of Western jurisprudence is littered with quasi-objects—weapons, wheels, wells, carriages, animals, ships, and trees—that have, at one time or another, been found “guilty” of inflicting harm.

In these instances, notes Holmes, “liability seems to have been regarded as *attached* to the thing doing the damage in an almost physical sense” (11). “The action followed the guilty thing into whosoever hands it came,” he writes of ancient Roman law, noting cases where individuals in possession of wild animals “ceased to be liable the moment it escaped, because at that moment [the individual] ceased to be the owner” (9). This logic, which Holmes refers to as one of “adhesion,” turns guilt into a kind of material contagion, operating by relations of contiguity that transfer responsibility from one party to another depending upon the nature of the encounter between entities rather than the interior state of the actor. The possibility that an action might *follow* something as an appurtenance and thereby transfer its “guilty” status to whomever takes possession of it suggests that the notion of agency on display here is not something that originates in bodies themselves, but rather something that is *shared* between them in a state of mutual imbrication. The specificity of the interactions between human actors and the tools they wield, the trees they climb, the carriages they ride, and the oxen they drive become important in novel ways, insofar as liability, by this account, is a function of proximity to the site of injury.

What counts, from this perspective, is not *who acts* nor *why*, but *what kinds* of relations material bodies, in all their inconsistency and indeterminacy, will potentially engender with one another.

What is happening when the law punishes a nonhuman thing—when that which is deemed “actually and personally to blame” is not, in fact, a *person* in any conventional sense? Holmes’s answer is that early lawmakers succumbed to the habits of savage thought, which, as was commonly supposed, confuses things for persons, matter for spirit, effects for causes, and signs for referents:

It may be asked how inanimate objects came to be punished in this way, if the object of the procedure was to gratify the passion of revenge. Learned men have been ready to find a reason in the personification of inanimate nature common to savages and children, and there is much to confirm this view... It is noticeable that the commonest example in the most primitive customs and laws is that of a tree which falls upon a man, or from which he falls and is killed. We can conceive with comparative ease how a tree might have been put on the same footing as animals. It certainly was treated like them, and was delivered to the relatives, or chopped to pieces, for the gratification of a real or simulated passion (11).

Holmes draws his example of the punishable tree from E.B. Tylor, the founder of modern ethnology, whose magnum opus, *Primitive Culture* (1871), designates the belief that personification gives life to inanimate things *animism*, “that primitive mental state where man recognizes in every detail of his world the operation of personal life and will” (287). “To the lowest tribes of man,” writes Tylor, “sun and stars, trees and rivers, wind and clouds, become personal animate creatures, leading lives conformed to human analogies, and performing their special functions in the universe with the aid of limbs like beasts or of artificial instruments like men” (285). Holmes reasons that early lawmakers—in succumbing to the habits of savage thought, which fails to distinguish between persons and things, matter and spirit—left an

animistic residue, a “metaphysical confusion” (28), at the heart of American law whose effects continue to be felt.⁶⁹

Nowhere is this metaphysical confusion more resilient than in the modern laws of the admiralty. As late as 1844, in *The United States v. The Brig Malek Adhel*, the Supreme Court held a seafaring vessel—“the most living of inanimate things,” according to Holmes—liable for damages incurred upon its passage, and ruled that the brig be condemned and forfeited as indemnity to the injured parties (*The Common Law* 26). “It is true that inanimate matter can commit no offence,” comments Justice Joseph Story, whom Holmes cites on the case, “[b]ut this body is animated and put in action by the crew, who are guided by the master. The vessel acts and speaks by the master... The thing is here primarily considered as the offender, or rather, the offence is primarily attached to the thing” (qtd in Holmes 29). “Those great judges,” comments Holmes, “although of course aware that a ship is no more alive than a mill-wheel, thought that not only the law did in fact deal with it as if it were alive, but that it was reasonable that the law should do so... whatever the hidden ground of policy may be, *their thought still clothes itself in personifying language*” (emphasis added; 29-30).

Holmes insists that unlike savage philosophers, who believe that the “clothing” of language actually alters the very nature of the objects it describes, “those great judges” do not *truly* succumb to such metaphysical confusion. And yet, Justice Story’s description of the vessel’s uncanny animation—the way in which the coordinated actions of the crewmembers are depicted as giving life to the “wood, iron, and sails,” imbuing them with the capacity for agency and hence a kind of legal responsibility—reproduces the very categorical impurities ascribed to

⁶⁹ Perhaps the most famous contemporary instance of this historical reverberation is Christopher Stone’s 1972 essay, “Should Trees Have Standing?” in which Stone argues the “unthinkable” proposition that “we give legal rights to forests, oceans, rivers, and other so-called ‘natural objects’ in the environment” (3), an argument that takes as its primary comparative example the case of the African American slave.

the animist. Indeed, even as he attempts to maintain a strict separation between the thought-styles of today's "learned men" and yesterday's "primitives," Holmes concedes that the nonmodern origins of liability are still very much with us—that, in fact, the impulse to exact vengeance upon inanimate things is the most quotidian of experiences: "the hatred for anything giving us pain, which wreaks itself on the manifest cause, and which leads even civilized man to kick a door when it pinches his finger, is embodied in the *noxæ deditio* and other kindred doctrines of early Roman law" (11-12). Insofar as the figure of the savage represents the metaphysical confusion between persons and things that negligence was implemented to resolve, *The Common Law's* central aim can be understood as one of excising the savage from the heart of American jurisprudence. But insofar as Holmes admits that the metaphysical confusion characteristic of savage thought permeates even the most "civilized" strongholds of intellectual life, the very ability to distinguish between savagery and civilization appears thrown into question.⁷⁰

"The Marked Tree" exposes these contradictions underwriting the racial discourses of nonhuman liability in order to save the doctrine from itself—that is, in order to extricate it from the humanist metaphysics through which it has been disavowed as the characteristic error of savages. It does so by making clear what is already implicit but unarticulated in *The Common Law*: that there has never *been* a savage nor a savage philosophy. The Spencer slaves, in attributing responsibility for harms to a tree that has been animated by a slavewoman, behave identically to Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story, who attributes responsibility to "wood, iron, and sails" that have been animated by a crew; while Master Aleck, in chopping the tree down as punishment for its transgressions against his family, behaves identically to Holmes's "primitive," who "chopped [the tree] to pieces, for the gratification of a real or simulated passion." Chesnutt's

⁷⁰ For a treatment of the figure of the "savage" and its uncanny recurrences through nineteenth- and twentieth-century theories of language, anthropology, and philosophy, see Christopher Bracken's *Magical Criticism: The Recourse of Savage Philosophy* (2007).

story imaginatively embraces precisely the nonmodern dimensions of the law that Holmes must suppress in order to finally become modern.

IV. “Beyond the Human”

In his influential study *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (1993), Eric Sundquist argues that “The Marked Tree” is “one of the few tales in which conjure is practiced upon whites—and one of the few in which it accomplishes its purposes with complete success,” leading him to conclude that the story “accomplishes its own reconstruction of black integrity, worn down by judicial and illegal assault in the post-Reconstruction years, by an act of vengeance” (378). This seemingly innocuous claim yokes together a number of presuppositions orienting a major strain of African American literary studies known as “vernacular criticism,” which has exerted a tremendous amount of influence in readings of Chesnutt’s work since the late eighties. The vernacular critics—including Sundquist, Houston Baker Jr., and Henry Louis Gates Jr.—drew from the theoretical resources of poststructuralism, especially deconstruction, but notably avoided its thoroughgoing critique of Western metaphysics in order to maintain the metaphysical integrity of the signifying black subject. Through the elaboration of concepts such as “Signifyin(g),” “the blues matrix,” “the literary cakewalk,” and the “mask,” these critics cannily instrumentalized Derridean *différance* by turning it into an essential property of the black subject’s performative ingenuity.⁷¹ Houston Baker’s remarks regarding Chesnutt that “the fluidity of *The Conjure Woman*’s world, symbolized by [its] metamorphoses, is a function of the black narrator’s mastery of form,” or Sundquist’s assertion, again vis-à-vis Chesnutt, that “[t]he voice of African American culture is itself a voice of metamorphosis and transformations” (385), emblemizes how appeals to

⁷¹ For this critique, see Diana Fuss’s *Essentially Speaking* (1989).

fluidity, transformation, and difference sit comfortably alongside appeals to black performative mastery, precisely because the former are understood as merely discursive techniques while the latter is an ontological feature of black aesthetics (298).⁷²

Returning to Sundquist's description of the "The Marked Tree," then, we can see how these premises are encoded even in his synopsis of the story's plot: his reference to the "complete success" of the slavewoman's curse establishes the link between conjure and black performativity; "accomplishes its purposes" underscores the investment in individual agency and determinable intentionality; the story's "reconstruction of black integrity" emphasizes the stability of racial metaphysics that persists beneath the aesthetic (or linguistic) realm of "metamorphosis and transformations"; and the insistence upon a *singular* act of "vengeance" reaffirms the human as the primary locus of relation. As I have been suggesting in this essay, however, the interpretive horizons opened up by reading "The Marked Tree" as the culmination of Chesnutt's career-long engagement with nineteenth-century tort law force us to reassess each point of Sundquist's claim—and, I would suggest, the entire tradition of humanist essentialism that has tended to orient readings of Chesnutt's work. To argue that the slavewoman's curse "accomplishes its purposes with complete success" is to say that its effects coincide completely and undividedly with its motivating intention. But, as we have already seen in the case of *The Colonel's Dream*, this fantasy of metaphysical alignment is always fleeting: the act's condition of possibility is that it exceeds the circumscription of any intention. Did the slavewoman *intend* to kill the Spencer's slaves, who are, for all the reader knows, still in the house when it burns to the ground? This point is correlated in Chesnutt's narrative treatment of the slavewoman herself,

⁷² Or, as Gates speculates in *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), "[s]ome black genius or a community of witty and sensitive speakers emptied the signifier 'signification' of its received concepts and filled this empty signifier with their own concepts," instantiating what he calls "Signifyin(g)," "the black trope of tropes," consisting of "all the rhetorical play in the black vernacular" (46, 51, 53).

who disappears from the tale entirely after making her mark. Her intentions are never named, the mark is never described, and her presence is never felt after the instant of inscription. Her disappearance from the text enacts the disappearance of any original context (or consciousness) from which the effects of the mark might be determined.

The same should be said about the story's alleged "reconstruction of black integrity": the point is *not* that the slavewoman does not possess agency, that her mark does not produce effects, nor that she does not enact a form of vengeance upon her white owners for their cruelty, but rather that the enabling condition for each is the *deconstruction* of "integrity" defined as the state of being whole or undivided. The curse functions through such dispersed, ecologically networked forms of agency that its "essence" can only be understood as relational, what Chesnutt, in a different context, refers to as a "web of circumstances." Meanwhile, the human agents who get caught up in its effects mirror the very "metaphysical confusion" of the curse itself: alternately blaming trees and punishing their transgressions, both black and white bodies relate to their environment in ways that suggest the erosion of enlightenment dichotomies rather than their solidification. "The Marked Tree," rather than *affirm* an act of "vengeance" on the part of one race against another, calls the meaning of the term into question: what might an act of vengeance that does not posit the human as the anchoring point of agency, subjectivity, and relationality look like?

More recent criticism, positioning itself as an amendment to the work of the vernacular critics, has begun to ask exactly these sorts of questions about Chesnutt's fiction. Matthew Taylor has recently argued that the conjure tales model a "posthuman cosmology" in their refusal to draw sharp distinctions between the human and nonhuman realms, and thus provide a crucial site for thinking through what he calls "'relations' in the fundamental sense of a shared agency,

vitality, and vulnerability that is not reducible to an exclusively human standard” (137). Drawing upon a line of argumentation descended from Sundquist that conjure is ultimately synonymous with figuration, Taylor suggests that the only problem with this equation is that “turning conjure into an oppositional semantics invariably involves displacing it as an oppositional metaphysics—dispossessing it (so to speak), of its original force” (119). Taylor’s distinction between semantics and metaphysics boils down to what is *itself* a metaphysical opposition between mediated language and immediate (or “original”) subjectivity, the same opposition that the vernacular critics relied up for the elaboration of their own project. Taylor insists that attending to the forgotten metaphysical dimensions of the conjure universe—its “ontology of environments”—does not entail jettisoning “the stories’ deconstruction of racism” (119). And yet, because the semantics/metaphysics dichotomy provides the foundation upon which an essentialized black subject was able to persist through the moment of high theory in African American literary studies, Taylor’s understanding of race is also tied to this logic, which is to say that, like the vernacular critics, race, for Taylor, *inheres in the bodies of human subjects*. Thus, whenever bodies in Chesnutt’s fiction are transformed into animals, distorted by elemental forces, become prosthetic with surrounding vegetation, or sensorially bound up with their voodoo likeness—ie. whenever the category of “the human” appears to disperse into “an ontology of environments”—Taylor loses the vocabulary to theorize race, resulting in the troubling assertion that, in conjure, “equality comes from the ground up,” and that the stories’ indifference to the metaphysical integrity of the human subject “[l]evels slave, master, and nonhuman world alike” (126, 20).

While I am fully committed to Taylor’s assertion that Chesnutt’s fiction helps us theorize “relations” in a way that is irreducible to an anthropocentric standard, I reject the impulse to “level” such relations or claim that “beyond the human” resides a realm of fundamental

“equality.” Critics such as Alexander Weheliye, Zakkiyah Jackson, and—three decades before them—Gayatri Spivak,⁷³ have all evidenced wariness that claims to have done away with the sovereign Subject (in the figure of Race, Man, or the Human) do not evacuate the need for theories of power and domination, but in fact make them all the more urgent, because it is rarely clear *whose* version of the Subject is being jettisoned, and *whose* version is taking its place. In closing, I’d like to return to “The Marked Tree,” and, briefly, *The Colonel’s Dream*, to suggest some ways that Chesnutt’s work might help us through this impasse in the field.

Although Sundquist’s remarks on “The Marked Tree” make almost no reference to this formal feature, the story of the slavewoman’s curse, like all of Chesnutt’s conjure tales, occurs within a framed narrative, in which Julius, the storyteller, narrates a tale of plantation life to the new Northern tenants of his former master’s property, John and his wife Annie. Julius relays the story of the marked tree to John because the latter is contemplating purchasing the long-abandoned Spencer property as a favor for his cousin. When John absentmindedly sits on a conspicuous tree stump during their first tour of the estate, Julius grows anxious and inquires whether John has any blood relatives descended from the region. John confirms that he does not, leading Julius into the story of the Spencer family curse. Julius concludes his narrative by explaining that after the war, the Spencer estate eventually fell to a Mr. Brownlow, “some kinder fo’ty-secon’ cousin er nuther” who, he reckons, would be happy to rid himself of the useless property (144). Brownlow, upon meeting John, explains that he considers the curse nothing but a “silly superstition,” and their transactions for exchange of possession go smoothly, until a few hours later, when Julius interrupts John in his study to tell him that Brownlow has been bitten by

⁷³ See, for instance, Weheliye’s *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (2014), Jackson’s “Outer Worlds: The Persistence of Race in Movements ‘Beyond the Human,’” (2015), and Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988).

a rattlesnake while reposing on the stump. “I closed my deal for the property through Mr. Brownlow’s administrator,” John concludes in the story’s final paragraph:

My cousin authorized me to have the land cleared off, preparatory to improving it later on. Among other things, I had the stump of the Spencer oak extracted. It was a difficult task even with the aid of explosives, but was finally accomplished without casualty, due perhaps to the care with which I inquired into the pedigree of the workmen, lest perchance among them there might be some stray offshoot of this illustrious but unfortunate family (144).

If the trope of the family curse functions, in Chesnutt’s tortious universe, as a way of indicating that “accidents” have a tendency to afflict certain groups over others, then “the care with which [John] inquire[s] into the pedigree of the workmen” represents an explicit intervention on behalf of mitigating such effects. And if, as Holmes reminds us, “the question of liability...is really the question how far it is desirable that the public should insure the safety of those whose work it uses,” then John’s act of “care,” his recognition that he is liable for even the “stray offshoots” of the Spencer clan given their increased susceptibility to harm in proximity to the tree, is indication that the standards of care mandated by negligence functions to divide the world according to those whose safety is worth protecting and those whom it is not—demarcations, Chesnutt suggests, that do not merely *align* with the category of race, but actually help to establish and reinforce it. As in *The Colonel’s Dream*, “The Marked Tree” reveals the mechanism whereby modern torts, by indicating to whom of “all the world” one is obligated, creates civil associations, defining the boundaries of the family form itself. In this sense, the closing lines of “The Marked Tree” might be read as something like an allegory for the triumph of negligence in American legal history, as the dominance of that concept entrenched a destructive logic of racialization.

The Colonel’s Dream, written two decades before Chesnutt’s last story, ends on a more ambiguous note that points to one of the ways in which the possibility of nonhuman liability

might function as a different framework of culpability for registering harms against black Americans in the postbellum moment. The novel's coda focuses on a disagreement between Henry French and the white townspeople over the proper burial site for Peter French's corpse. Phil's last words to his father convey the desire to be buried next to his caretaker—a request French believes he has the power to grant on account of his family name, his great-great-great-grandfather having established the town's cemetery. This venture scandalizes the town's white population and a committee is called to decide upon the matter. In the end, both bodies are interned in the cemetery. The morning after the funeral, the colonel wakes to discover “a handsome mahogany burial casket, stained with earth and disfigured by rough handling, resting upon the floor of the piazza, where it had been deposited during the night” (346). Upon the casket is pinned an aggrammatical note, demanding French “Berry yore old nigger somewhar else,” signed “by order of cumitty.”

The Colonel left the coffin standing on the porch, where it remained all day, an object of curious interest to the scores and hundreds who walked by to look at it, for the news spread quickly through the town. No one, however, came in. If there were those who reprobated the action, they were silent (346).

What I would offer in closing is that the coffin's status as an object of public consumption—mute, but nevertheless “of curious interest to the scores and hundreds who walked by to look at it”—both indexes the violence of state-sanctioned racism at the same time as it redistributes responsibility for such violence *back* to the viewing public. Following Russ Castronovo, we might say that the coffin signifies “the deathly logic of citizenship” whereby the hyper-embodied black body is able to stand unquestioned and unmolested in the center of the *polis* only to the extent that it has been rendered symbolic in the form of a “statement” to the community, its face, voice, and body usurped by the state (10). And yet, reflected back at Clarendon's citizens, “stained” and “disfigured” by the traces of its necropolitical journey from grave to public sphere,

I am inclined to imagine that the ghoulish coffin creates, if only temporarily, a *different* kind of public—not one organized around the constitutive exclusion of the black body, but a public generated out of their shared culpability and complicity with the conditions of Peter’s death and desecration. This would not be a public built upon affective communion (“No one, however, came in”) but upon an incommensurable *guilt* activated in the image of an object at once common to each observer and yet never fully shared between them. This guilt cannot be understood in relation to preexisting standards of care, but rather as what Holmes in *The Common Law* calls *adhesion*, the “primitive” notion that guilt might attach to the source or object of harm, “following the guilty thing into whose hands it came.” This would not be guilt of conscience, but of proximity, the recognition that the networks of entangled relations through which the coffin ends up on the Colonel’s porch necessarily includes the witness in its web.

This coda departs from Chesnutt’s earlier attempts to sentimentalize the logic of strict liability as tragic epiphany from the perspective of a white character. Notably, at the very moment guilt appears to be spreading contagiously through the citizens of Clarendon, *The Colonel’s Dream* abandons the Colonel’s interiority—indeed, abandons any appeal to subjectivity altogether—and instead turns to the *object* for the scene’s center of gravity. The coffin, in this sense, possesses an uncanny vitality, a capacity to produce effects in the world by being interpreted. Such effects, however, cannot be known in advance. Of course, as Chesnutt well knew, the recompense of a heavy conscience will always appear inadequate to the extent of the harms committed against black life in America, which is why his choice of the casket as a perspectival cipher through which the possibility of a shared liability might be transacted represents something like the culmination in his fiction of a form of care beyond the ordinary and beyond the human.

Interlude II: Euthenics

At the same moment Charles Chesnutt was analyzing the way negligence's occlusion of interactions between humans and nonhumans worked to systematically marginalize African Americans under the law, a different group of political actors was invoking similarly non-anthropocentric standards of harm and responsibility to frame a different biopolitical issue, one whose geographical coordinates were not the developing industrial-technological sites of the New South but the densely populated municipalities and domestic spaces of the Northeast. Addressing the American Public Health Association in Boston in 1897, Ellen Swallow Richards—noted chemist, founder of the American Home Economics movement, and MIT's first female graduate and faculty member—called for city governments across the country to take greater responsibility for the sanitary conditions of their public institutions, specifically their schoolhouses, which, according to a contemporaneous study by the New York State Board of Health, evidenced “a disgusting, degrading, and harmful neglect of sanitary cleanliness in and about the school buildings” (4). “The great tax-paying public must be roused from its apathy in regard to sanitary matters,” Richards told the crowd, and she attempted to do so on that day by highlighting the stark contrast between the public's responses to two separate instances of civic harm. Recalling to the audience's memory “the death by drowning of four children at Castle Island last July” due to a faultily maintained gangplank that resulted in seventy-five classmates plunging into the Boston waterfront, Richards noted that the accident “caused exclamations of horror throughout the community and an instant attention to conditions existing at the time of the accident” (4). And yet, she observed, “the deaths of some 200 children [due to illnesses] during the year caused no ripple of excitement” (4). Why, she asked, did the people of Boston consider

the first loss of life an eminently preventable tragedy but the second simply part of the natural order of things?

In posing this question, Richards was participating in a collective rethinking of the very category of *the natural* taking place across the fields of bacteriology, medicine, and public health during the closing decades of the nineteenth century, when the germ theory of disease began to shift popular and scientific understandings of humanity's relationship to its nonhuman environment. By redirecting scientific inquiry toward the newly revealed vistas of microbial life, the germ theory simultaneously naturalized and denaturalized illness in America. On the one hand, it gave back to nonhuman nature a power that had long been attributed to malign spirits and acts of God.⁷⁴ On the other hand, though, it established the conditions for subjecting the material causes of disease to direct human intervention. No longer a mysterious contingency or a constitutional inevitability, illness in the wake of the germ theory became an explicitly *social* phenomenon, an object of governmentality: something traceable, measurable, and potentially containable by human actions. This shift is what allowed Richards to argue that the death of two-hundred students from airborne illnesses should be understood in the same way as death by drowning from a faulty gangplank: as the result of civic neglect. Microbes, like gangplanks, needed administration.

Richards had a name for the administration of microbial life: she called it "euthenics," "the science of controllable environment," the theory of which she outlined in a 1910 manuscript, subtitled "A Plea for Better Living Conditions as a First Step Toward Higher Human Efficiency." Richards defines "right living conditions" as "compris[ing] pure food and a safe water supply, a clean and disease-free atmosphere in which to live and work, proper shelter, and

⁷⁴ One reason for the speed of the germ theory's uptake with the general public was that it could readily be understood as revealing the biological "truth" behind the religious explanations of illness nineteenth-century Americans were so steeped in.

the adjustment of work, rest, and amusement” (“Euthenics”). Such conditions could be attained, she believed, through a coordinated and well-funded combination of theory and praxis that had three major components: 1) the creation of both private and state-sponsored education initiatives devoted to the training of young women in domestic science (a project that eventually became the American Home Economics movement), 2) an unyielding faith in the power of empirical research and technological advancement, and 3) an ecological comportment towards the environment, which begins from the premise that “the individual is a mere pin point on the chart of community advance” (“Euthenics”).

Euthenics was an intellectual offshoot of what Richards called “oekology,” a term she introduced to the United States from the work of German biologist and naturalist, Ernst Haeckel, in 1892, nearly half a century before it would become a household word. Richards’ definition of oekology draws upon Haeckel’s (“the whole science of the relations of the organism to the environment”), but foregrounds the terms’ etymological connection to the *oikos* or home: “As theology is the science of religious life, and biology the science of [physical] life...so let Oekology be henceforth the science of [our] normal lives,” she wrote in *The Boston Globe* (qtd in Richardson 27).⁷⁵ Euthenics thus marks an attempt to *ecologize* the domestic sphere: “home life—in its relations to the child, the adult, and the community—is considered in connection with the effect on the home of the influences outside it, and the reaction of each on the other. These relations are partly physical and material, partly ethical and psychical” (Richard “Euthenics”). In

⁷⁵ Haeckel’s definition of ecology from 1866 corresponds largely with our modern understanding of the term: “By ecology, we mean the whole science of the relations of the organism to the environment including, in the broad sense, all the ‘conditions of existence.’ These are partly organic, partly inorganic in nature; both, as we have shown, are of the greatest significance for the form of the organisms, for they force them to become adapted” (qtd. in Stauffer 140-141). However, a year after Richards’ introduction of the term to an American readership, the term was “expropriated,” in Barbara Richardson’s words (27), by a group of British scientists intent on excising its environmental implications. “Along with the eugenicists, the British journal editors believed the human species to be more profoundly influenced by heredity than the environment” (Richardson 27). Richards’ use of the term fell out of favor, then, until its reintroduction and popularization in the middle decades of the twentieth century.

accord with this description, euthenics maintains that establishing “control” over one’s environment would not be attained through force or domination, but rather through a dialectic of submission and adaptation, a process of opening oneself up to one’s ontological entanglement with a nonhuman outside in order to more effectively order one’s own actions with relation to it. “The real significance of biological evolution,” writes Richards, “is that man is part of organic nature, subject to laws of development and growth, laws which he cannot break with impunity. It is his business to study the forces of Nature and to conquer his environment by submitting to the inevitable” (ibid). Only by recognizing themselves as true domestic *scientists*—whose goal would not just be to eliminate but to *intimately understand* their newly visible household ecology of dusts, bacteria, insects, critters, molds, fungi, and their multiform interactions—would a new class of female homemakers achieve true autonomy vis-à-vis their domestic surroundings.

Richards’ insistence upon the primacy of environmental factors in the development of the human organism led her to distinguish euthenics from its now more familiar counterpart, eugenics. She found the latter’s heredity-based, future-oriented aims both ethically and scientifically suspect. “We know too little as yet, and the environment must come first,” she wrote to the *Association of Collegiate Alumnae*, threatening to withdraw her support from the organization if the name of a committee was not changed from eugenics to euthenics (qtd. in Richardson 28). While “[e]uthenics has immediate opportunity,” “[e]ugenics must await careful investigation” (Richards “Euthenics”). And yet, what the specificity of Richards’ reference to “the deaths of some 200 children” from her APHA address makes clear is that the stakes of her commitment to hygiene education and domestic science were ultimately biopolitical, oriented toward, in her own words, “higher human efficiency” and “the welfare of the race” (“Euthenics”). If agents of the euthenics movement were encouraged to take an unusually

expansive stance upon the category of the human by conceiving of it as inextricably embedded in multiple human and nonhuman relations, they were nevertheless also recruited to police a relatively *narrow* understanding of it as racially pure and hereditarily healthy.

The rhetorical imbrication of race and hygiene discourse was a key trope in Progressive Era discourses around national identity during a time of industrial expansion and mass immigration. In *Clean and White: A History of Environmental Racism in the United States* (2015), Carl Zimring argues that at the turn of the century, “the rhetoric and imagery of hygiene became conflated with a racial order that made white people pure and anyone who was not white, dirty” (89). This near-oversimplification in fact accurately condenses a complex set of cultural relays and equivalences between the perception of disease as an inassimilable excrescence threatening the domestic sphere and the perception of the racial other as an inassimilable excrescence threatening the domestic space of the nation. Priscilla Wald explains:

Ghettos of immigrants and migrants offered the most visible representation of the excesses of industrialization and of the limits of assimilation. Nationally, industrial prosperity produced insufficiently absorbed waste as it produced insufficiently absorbed foreigners (migrants and immigrants). The denizens of the ghetto were readily identified with the waste, and that tendency was reinforced when epidemics did accompany immigrants or when they did spread to the ghetto where conditions were particularly favorable to their growth... The assimilation (ingestion and digestion) of waste made people ill; that waste was, therefore, unassimilable. Typhoid made that unassimilability visceral, a literal taking in the foreigner’s waste products; it evinced the unassimilability of the products of industrialization with which waste was associated, including immigrants and other residents of the ghetto. The polluted fluids of the immigrant body became the polluted fluids of the body politic (“Typhoid Mary” 192-193).

In the popular imagination, the polluted fluids of the body politic were tributaries that ran directly from society’s margins through the center of the bourgeois home, making everything from food preparation to bathing to housecleaning to childcare to sex activities of sanitary scrutiny for the women recruited to the task of performing them.

The next chapter of this dissertation is about the way female naturalists—of both the literary and scientific variety—negotiated being burdened with the task of what one of Richards’ peers calls “keeping the world clean.” I begin with Richards herself, however, because of the way the euthenics movement exemplifies one of the key tension that I will be exploring in what follows: euthenics’ discourse of environmental control mobilizes an ideal of the pure, uncontaminated, prophylactic human subject over and against the threat of an impure, contaminated, invading racial other, even as the movement’s insistence upon the irreducible entanglement of the human organism with its nohuman outside consistently calls such an ideal into question. How can a euthenic understanding of the human be simultaneously so permeable and so closed-off? This tension manifests, for instance, in the strangely asymmetrical distributions of agency to dust and germs in Richards’ description of the “conditions existing” in a typical New England classroom:

The feather duster is ubiquitous, and it is the practice, sanctioned by the rules of the school-committee, to stir up by its use in the morning the dust which has settled upon the desks, just in time to greet the pupils as they enter, and to fill their throats with the germs which cannot fail to be present under such conditions. Moreover, from ignorance, indolence, and a mistaken idea of economy, the school-houses are not well aired during the evening and night, but close, stagnant air, laden with the dust of ages, greets teacher and pupil. What wonder that the windows are thrown open and cold air allowed to fall upon the tender bodies, heated with the hurry to school, causing colds, if not pneumonia! (“Municipal Responsibility” 5)

Richards’ aim in detailing the common errors of public school sanitation is clearly to underscore the ease with which humans might take power *back* from the microbe, might cut off its movements and bring it more fully under the control of scientific management. And yet her description reads as a veritable catalogue of weakly agential humans *at the mercy of extraordinarily active nonhuman agents*: feather dusters “stir up” miniscule particulates irrespective of any human intention; the dust in the air “greet[s] the pupils as they enter”; the

stagnant air and accumulated dust *forces* the humans to throw open the windows; the gusts of cold air, combined with the warmth of students' muscle strain, render their bodies susceptible to colds and pneumonia. This ecological account of the relationship between hygiene and health—bringing together the interactions of bodies, objects, dust, microbes, architectures, temperatures, and atmospheres—inevitably displaces the figure of the autonomous, self-contained individual, and replaces it with a kind of porous, dependent subject, shot through with the competing interests of nonhuman forces to which it consistently succumbs.

And here we begin to glimpse the way in which, despite their radically different subject positions at the turn of the century, Ellen Richards and Charles Chesnutt can be said to share a similarly biomaterial account of identity. If the radically materialist premises of strict liability, for Chesnutt, enabled a way of imagining human bodies as inextricably entangled with their environment in the production of harms, then the concept of eugenics, for Richards, should be understood as accomplishing a similar task. Conceiving of the microbe in a relation of what Holmes would call *adhesion* to intentional agents, Richards in a sense expands the concept of the human to include the movements of those microscopic entities that exist within, around, and between human bodies.

The following chapter examines such environmental entanglements between humans and nonhumans for the ways they disrupt what Priscilla Wald calls the narratives of “social control” that circulated around public health and domestic science movements at the turn of the century. Specifically, the chapter reads a range of fictional and nonfictional texts that center women as public health agents, examining the way such entanglements engender modes of agency, structures of feeling, and moments of identification *in excess of* any particular biopolitical ends. These moments of excess, I argue, most frequently take the form of an imagined biomaterial

hybridization between the female body and the microscopic objects of domestic science—dust, insects, bacteria, etc.—that renders woman’s imputed political function as guardian of the home uncertain. I read the ontologically ambiguous hybrids that emerge in these moments as materializations of an unrealized form of mass life whose meanings have not yet been determined by biopolitical systems of governance. The biomaterial body, in these sequences, thus encodes the possibility of woman’s *being otherwise* than what the present has offered. These moments thus open up a new narrative surrounding women’s imbrication with microbial life that renders its meanings open-ended and ambiguous, unscripted by the endless demands of domestic drudgery the public health movement demands.

CHAPTER THREE

Naturalism, Public Health, and Feminist Entomology

The world of M. Zola is a world of big things; the enormous, the formidable, the terrible is what counts; no teacup tragedies here.

-- Frank Norris

Our enemies are no longer Indians and wild animals. Those were the days of big things. Today is the day of the infinitely little. To see our cruellest enemies, we must use the microscope.

-- Ellen Swallow Richards

Midway through Ellen Glasgow's anonymously published, bestselling work of American naturalism, *The Descendant* (1897), Michael Akershem, a freethinking anti-marriage radical and editor-in-chief of a New York muckraking magazine, finds himself at a dinner party surrounded almost entirely by educated, professional young women. Of this diverse group of Vassar graduates and Theosophists in training, the novel's attention lingers over one Miss Patskey, who, the narrator tells us "was a woman of extraordinary attainments, having an aptitude for scientific pursuits, and was just completing a work on 'The Habits of Centipedes,' which she alluded to frequently, remarking that our ignorance of the habits of those domestic insects was depressing" (165). Dinner table conversation covers nothing less than "the greatest need of the American people": "spiritualism," "patriotism," "idealism," and "prohibition" are all floated as solutions, and Miss Patskey contributes "the emancipation of women" (168). For Akershem, the evening reads as little more than a farce of the haute-bourgeois Northern intellectual culture his magazine seeks to skewer. "The degeneration has attacked us," he hams to one of the guests later that week, "It is the *fin de siècle* disease...you will not escape the contagion—you will catch one of the 'isms' floating around and go mad, like the rest of us" (171).

Yet there are reasons to take Miss Patskey's brief appearance in the novel seriously, not the least of which being the length Glasgow goes to affirm the validity of the entomologist's unique research interests. This task Glasgow undertakes, in part, by populating her naturalist fiction with swarms of insects, clouds of dust, microscopic bacteria, and a host of other domestic minutia that the contemporaneous dissemination of the germ theory had made newly palpable (and newly threatening) to the American public in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. As the germ theory directed the gaze of scientists, reformers, and public health officials away from traditionally conceived "sickly environments" and "miasmatic atmospheres" towards the quotidian, feminized sites of care and intimacy—specifically, the cooking, bathing, cleaning, dusting, and nursing that constituted the productive and reproductive labor of the modern home—the prescribed role of the female housekeeper transformed from a cultivator of moral law and order (à la Catherine Beecher) to a quasi-technocratic overseer of unruly, microscopic domestic ecologies (à la Miss Patskey).⁷⁶ The insect and the microbe persistently indexed one another in this ecological configuration: the former was seen as a vessel for the latter while the latter was represented as a minuscule version of the former.⁷⁷ Indeed, *The Descendant* explicitly links Miss Patskey's concerns about "our ignorance of the habits of domestic insects" with the threat of border-crossing, trans-generational illness. One of Akershem's friends, referring to his crippling rheumatism, recalls, "I got it from my father, who contracted it in South America,

⁷⁶ Catherine Beecher's *A Treatise on Domestic Economy, For the Use of Young Ladies at Home, and at School* (1842), the first complete guide housekeeping published in the United States, explicitly links housekeeping to the cultivation of moral virtue necessary to the thriving of a young democracy. "The woman, who is rearing a family of children; the woman, who labors in the schoolroom; the woman, who, in her retired chamber, earns, with her needle, the mite, which contributes to the intellectual and moral elevation of her Country; even the humble domestic, whose example and influence may be moulding and forming young minds, while her faithful services sustain a prosperous domestic state;—each and all may be animated by the consciousness, that they are agents in accomplishing the greatest work that ever was committed to human responsibility" (37-38).

⁷⁷ This conflation registers in the present euphemism "bug" for "germ," which arose in the late nineteenth century. Popular advertisements and hygienic manuals of the period depicted magnified bacteria as having the shape of insects, lizards, and other animals. See Nancy Tomes' *The Gospel of Germs: Men, Women, and the Microbe in American Life* (1998), pp. 99-134.

when he lived in a tent with some centipedes” (52). Thus, while Akershem imagines political commitments as contagious diseases, something “floating around” that you can “catch,” Miss Patskey’s brief appearance in the novel holds out the inverse possibility: that the agents of disease are the *very stuff* of the political, and that the paths to both the emancipation of women and the consolidation of American empire lead through the domestic kingdoms of the insect.

If the figure of the female domestic ecologist is a fleeting presence in Glasgow’s novel, this chapter argues that the premise of politicized human/insect relations she metonymizes is, in fact, crucial to both the form and ideology of American naturalist fiction. To this end, this chapter lays out two theses. The first is that American naturalist fiction appropriated a set of tropes from the aesthetics of the public health and domestic science movements at the turn of the century. I call these tropes (after a coinage of Bruno Latour’s) “zoom effects,” referring to the dramatic shifts in scale between the microscopic and the macroscopic that emerged out of the need to represent human-microbe interactions in popular sanitary tracts, advertisements, and housekeeping manuals of the period. Second, I argue that while the zoom developed as a representational technique of hygienic ordering, the effects it produces within the texts themselves are irreducible to the biopolitical aims it was constructed to enact. For the isolated domestic subjects tasked with the labor of “keeping the world clean,” the zoom’s scalar shifts engendered not increased control and taxonomic specificity but disorder and confusion. The new proximity between human and microbe registered less as a heroic battle against nature’s encroachments than as a disfiguring and potentially monstrous hybridization with a creeping, crawling, form of nonhuman life. I read naturalist fiction as the primary site of this hybridization by attending to the moments when texts renders human bodies ontologically intertwined with microscopic minutia. I show how the proliferation of “human insects,” “writhing arm[ies] of

ants,” “mere animalculae,” and various “parasites” in the fictions of Glasgow, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Frank Norris can be read as ambiguous figures that encode *both* the horrors of enforced domestic labor *and* the unrealized dream of an alternative to it. While naturalist fiction depicts the microscopic realms of insect life as a fantasmatic threat to the body of the person and the body of the nation, it also represents them as a politically inchoate form of *mass life* that has not yet been coopted by the technocrats of the modern home, and thus as a site of unrealized political potential. From this perspective, American literary naturalism should be read as a kind of counter-archive of the domestic science and public health movements, documenting the ways American women at the turn of the century looked towards their nonhuman enemies for a way of imagining forms of female collectivity from *within* the isolation of the home. Such imaginings force us to reconceptualize female agency at the turn of the century as inextricably bound up with the agency of microscopic life. The wager of this chapter, then, is that Miss Patskey was right: there truly *was* no way to imagine “the emancipation of women” without attending to “the habits of those domestic insects.”

This argument builds upon the concept of biomateriality as it has been developing over the course of this project. Naturalism’s hybrid human/insect bodies form part of American literature’s biomaterial imagination because, as I argue here, they figure the unrealized potentiality of mass life—life that has not yet been oriented toward a particular form or goal but is nevertheless latently political for the sheer fact of its multiplicity. As was the case in London and Chesnutt, this figure emerges in the context of biopolitical regulation: the insect/microbe coupling gets invested with a vague and inchoate political charge for female domestic workers at the moment it becomes the direct object of their vigilance. In what follows, I demonstrate how female naturalists came to think of the insect as a figure for collective life *as such*, devoid of

teleology or aim, and thus as an alternative to the qualified, scientifically directed existence of the modern housekeeper. Despite Gilman's own well-documented political commitments to eugenic nationalism and racial improvement, the figure of the undifferentiated mass—what she calls a “blanket” of biomaterial life—persists throughout her own and other naturalist writing less as a source of condemnation than as a site of open possibility for a feminist politics to come.

I. Naturalism, Domesticity, and the Government of Species

In forwarding the arguments outlined above, my aim is also to call attention to a crucial gap in Americanist literary criticism that has made it nearly impossible to theorize the politics of female domesticity *alongside* rigorous attention to the agency of nonhuman forces. Miss Patskey, a feminist domestic scientist in a naturalist novel who studies the relationship between centipedes and American politics, embodies a conceptual imbroglio that contemporary criticism is particularly ill-equipped to account for. The reason for this has to do with the way studies of American naturalism and studies of late nineteenth-century domestic fiction have, in recent years, diverged from one another along what I argue are distinctly gendered paths. On the one side, naturalist criticism is currently characterized by a masculinist theoretical investment in the revitalizing possibilities of materiality and nonhuman agency, while criticism of women's domestic fiction is notable for its sustained feminist historicist investment in biopolitical critiques of race and empire. The result of this divergence is a sequestering of the methodological resources necessary to address the complex figure of the female domestic ecologist, who is *simultaneously* a creative, agential subject seeking personal and political revitalization through the figure of the nonhuman, *and* a subject of empire and white supremacy conscripted into the biopolitical regimes of public health service. Before proceeding, I will address this split in the critical literature and suggest some of the ways my analysis seeks to overcome it.

A canonically masculine vision of American naturalism—with focus on the writings of Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris, and Stephen Crane—has seen a critical resurgence in recent years, primarily on theoretical grounds, for its alleged role in anticipating and illuminating the questions and concerns of contemporary work in new materialism, thing theory, and object-oriented ontology.⁷⁸ The style and tone of this work is primarily recuperative, the implication being that turning back to naturalism as a site of important intellectual or philosophical meditation offers a way to move beyond the apparent dead-ends of the race, class, and gender analyses that so preoccupied a previous generation of critics. Bill Brown, for instance, promotes the “archival/archaeological task” of elaborating references to material objects in Stephen Crane’s fiction by appealing to what he calls the “obvious and immediate pleasures that such a project affords: [...] the pleasure of reference, the pleasure of discovering how certain referents in Crane’s work...can revise or complete readings of his best and least-known texts” (4-6). By allowing himself to “indulge” in “the prestructuralist fantasy of language’s material reference” (15), Brown frames his project as an antidote to the “potentially dematerializing accounts” of the linguistic turn, and one that would help recover the true historical complexities of the text’s concrete situation beyond the abstractions of a Jamesonian or Barthesian style of ideology critique (16).

More recently, though in an equally recuperative mode, Kevin Trumpeter argues that new materialism’s attention to nonhuman agency—exemplified in the work of Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett, and Manuel DeLanda—provides naturalist critics with the tools “to extend ethical

⁷⁸ In addition to Bill Brown’s *The Material Unconscious* (1996) and Kevin Trumpeter’s “The Language of Stones: The Agency of the Inanimate in Literary Naturalism and New Materialism” (2015), which I address in detail below, I would also draw attention to Brandon Carr’s “Rethinking Frank Norris’s Vital Materialism” (2015), which draws upon Jane Bennett’s concept of “vital materialism,” the premise that nonhuman matter is “lively and self-organizing, rather than...passive or mechanical” (Bennett 10), and Graham Harman’s *Weird Realism: Lovecraft and Philosophy* (2012), a work that positions Lovecraft as an intellectual precursor to the philosophy of Speculative Realism, which holds that the object-world exists in a state of absolute “withdrawal” from human relations.

consideration and political voice not merely to members of marginalized races, classes, genders, and species, but also to the myriad inanimate entities with whose existence the animate world is so thoroughly entangled” (226). The purpose of such an extension, Trumpeter claims, is to provide “a more refined and reenergizing perspective on the genre’s perennial concerns,” most notably the problem of naturalistic “determinism” (227). Attending to the “ever-finer process of individuation” that new materialist readings make possible, in his view, allows the naturalist critic to reinsert the human subject into a revitalizing nonhuman environment brimming with unforeseen entanglements and connections: (226).

The vision of agency that emerges from engagement with these perspectives is not cast in the familiar adversarial binary of free will versus social determinism. Works of naturalism, read with the complementary illumination of new-materialist theory, indicate that human agency, far from being constrained and determined by the inanimate things of the social world, is just as often enabled and amplified by them (228).

In both Brown and Trumpeter, then, the male reader of the male-authored naturalist text turns to the specificity of the nonhuman in order to “reenergize” the critical terrain, to recover something *lost* to an older, “adversarial” style of thinking—whether that lost object is conceived of as pleasure, history, individuation, or agency. By reconstructing the train of associations put into play by Crane’s reference to a specific cash register in “The Blue Hotel,” or enumerating the influence of inanimate things on Hurstwood’s criminal decision-making in *Sister Carrie*, the critic performs the sort of agency newly available within the work itself.⁷⁹ Just as the agency of

⁷⁹ In Brown’s reading of Crane’s short story, for instance, the cash register upon which the unseeing eyes of the Swede’s corpse rest, “registers the intimacy of violence and modernity” (81), a reading that directly equates sign and meaning in a way fundamentally denied the characters in the scene, who fail to make sense of the violence they have participated in. The critic’s ability to wield the materiality of concrete reference, we might say, bestows upon the characters an agential self-awareness that they would otherwise lack. Trumpeter’s essay, which offers a reading of Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, multiplies the sources of potential agency in the work. Commenting on Hurstwood’s decision to steal the money from the bar safe, Trumpeter writes: “even the safe plays an active role in the theft as its lock’s random yet irremediable click effectively decides Hurstwood’s ethical dilemma for him” (240).

naturalism's characters is "enabled and amplified" through their entanglement with nonhuman agents, so too is the agency of the critics themselves.

Meanwhile, late nineteenth-century domestic fiction—with focus primarily on the work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Edith Wharton—has been subject to ongoing critical condemnation, primarily on historicist grounds, for its complicity with the racial, imperial, and eugenic politics of its day. The tone of this work is primarily denunciatory, the implication being that what an earlier generation of feminist critics found laudable in these texts (namely, their attempt to challenge the naturalness of women's material and symbolic subjugation) is, in fact, thoroughly compromised by their proximity to pernicious racial ideologies. Alys Eve Weinbaum, for instance, characterizes her critical project as one of "excavating Gilman's racism and nationalism" to reveal how even the putative "queerness" of the novelist's domestic utopia, *Herland*, is structured along the lines of Anglo-Saxon eugenic reproductive fantasies (62). If queerness, according to the thinkers Weinbaum draws upon such as Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, is defined less by an appeal to any positive sexual content than by a swerve or deviation from normativity, then Weinbaum's strain of historicist criticism is remarkable for the way it subsumes textual specificity and particularity into overarching hegemonic metanarratives, banishing all queer potentiality from the text as complicit with "white racial superiority" (105).

Thus, where male naturalist critics exalt in the "ever-finer process of individuation" that the category of nonhuman agency affords, feminist historicists display an unrelenting skepticism toward the exclusionary effects of individuation as such. Following Susan Lanser's provocative argument that "The Yellow Wallpaper" mobilizes a racial discourse of color that links yellowness with the perceived uncleanness of Asian immigrants, Asha Nadkarni reads the narrator's efforts to scrape off the wallpaper as "[the] process of birthing a feminist self

[through] a eugenic process of cleansing that self of racial difference” (223). The premise that an individuated, feminist “self” emerges only against the background of a master signifier—race—underwrites much of this critical work. Jennie Kassanoff, for instance, will claim of *The House of Mirth* that “Lily [Bart’s] body becomes a supreme emblem of her race in all the ways race was understood at the turn of the century” (61), while Dana Seitler remarks of another Gilman heroine that “Vivian’s body becomes the vehicle for her grandmother’s...and by extension, feminism’s eugenic yearnings” (80). In both instances, women’s bodies and their behaviors are abstracted into “emblems” or “vehicles” of coherent and totalizing political ideologies. Especially in the case of Gilman criticism, this move frequently characterizes the act of paying attention to that which is truly singular or idiosyncratic about the work complicit with the act of whitewashing it.⁸⁰

Coextensive with this antipathy for the kinds of singularity and differentiation esteemed by naturalist critics is a corresponding traffic in a metaphors of constraint and enervation in contrast to the latter’s discourse of liberation and reenergization. Thus, Lily Bart is “caught in a complex *web* of racial discourses” (Kassanoff 62; my emphasis), while feminism is circumscribed by “the *confines* of racial nationalism,” and underwritten by the “race/reproduction *bind*” (Weinbaum 105, 64; my emphasis). While the rhetoric of confinement saturates these scholars’ descriptions of the text’s internal operations, it also characterizes their critical attitudes vis-à-vis the tradition in which they are intervening. The work of Weinbaum, Seitler, and Nadkarni each contains lengthy and rigorous metacritical asides regarding the obstacles feminist scholarship faces in revising the celebratory accounts of Wharton and Gilman

⁸⁰ Commenting on the work of another Gilman critic, Thomas Peyser, Jennifer Fleissner draws attention to the tendency to charge Gilman’s readers with whitewashing her work: “[A]s Herland maintains its racial purity by weeding out undesirables, so, Peyser asserts, have Gilman’s feminist supporters maintained their equally idealized notions of the novel...by weeding out its creator’s racism from the mainstream of her thinking, treating the feminism and what appear as unfortunate racist lapses as wholly separate phenomenon” (93).

forwarded by a previous generation of critics—a significant departure from the emancipatory posture of Brown and Trumpeter, for whom the turn to nonhuman materiality comes close to enacting a kind of *terra nullius* fantasy of the critical landscape.

One way to explain this gendered division in the critical literature is to note that it reproduces a commonly recognized gendered split *within* the fiction itself. Jennifer Fleissner, for instance, points out that naturalism has tended to be read through one of two “plots”—a nostalgic “plot of triumph” and a fatalistic “plot of decline.” “If fatalistic,” writes Fleissner, naturalism “depicts modern individuals bereft of agency or vitality, dwarfed by a cityscape of soulless mechanical dynamos, spiraling steadily downward in ‘plots of decline’;...If nostalgic, the reverse is true: naturalism goes along with a renewal of what Roosevelt called ‘the strenuous life,’ returning masculine power and adventure to a vitiated modernity by rediscovering the freedoms and struggles associated with a still wide-open, untarnished natural landscape” (6-7).

Fleissner’s argument in her study *Women, Compulsion, Modernity* (2004) is that neither of these hyperbolic narratives adequately account for the complexities of the fiction itself, particularly with respect to the trajectories of naturalism’s female characters, which are “marked by neither the steep arc of decline nor that of triumph, but rather by an ongoing, nonlinear, repetitive motion—back and forth, around and around, on and on—that has the distinctive effect of seeming also like a stuckness in place” (9). If Weberian modernity is characterized by the progressive encroachment of rationalizing forces into the totality of the human life processes and environments, then naturalism’s female heroines—Trina McTeague, Lily Bart, Edna Pontellier, the narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper”—embody the dialectical negation of this imperative: a compulsive repetitiveness in their work of cleaning, hording, ordering, caring, and desiring that

“produces not greater efficiency but its opposite: a seemingly endless spiral” whose meanings are left perpetually deferred and uncertain (10).

That the fiction of Gilman et al. functions today as a kind of shorthand for the totalizing reach of biopolitical administration via the body of the nineteenth-century woman, while the fiction of Norris et al. serves as a site for reconstituting elements of that lost vitality via the work of the contemporary male theorist should strike Fleissner’s readers as particularly strange, given how thoroughly her study elucidates the *similarities* between these two writers—indeed, the similarities between domestic fiction and naturalism *tout court*—in their shared rejection of these opposed narratives.

In a chapter devoted to what she calls “obsessional domesticity” titled “The Great Indoors,” Fleissner argues that the same compulsive logic of an “ongoing, nonlinear, repetitive motion” underwrites two seemingly opposed American literary *ur*-scenes: McTeague’s flight into the wastes of Death Valley and the narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper”’s efforts to “master” the pattern she becomes obsessed with during her rest cure in the story’s “colonial mansion.” McTeague, of course, flees a world of claustrophobic domesticity and seeks out nature as a site of open possibility and value creation (and, in attempting so, repeats the gesture of naturalism’s new materialist readers); Gilman’s narrator, on orders from her husband-doctor, seeks to quell the unruliness of her “sick” body by containing it within an orderly, maternal world of domesticity (and, in attempting so, repeats the gesture of nineteenth-century feminism’s historicist readers). Yet both the uncivilized Californian desert and the hypercivilized New England estate fail to fulfill their prescribed functions. Far from revitalizing, the scene of the masculine “West cure” and the feminized “rest cure” are revealed as “fundamentally unmasterable environment[s],” characterized by their uncontainable, “vertiginous” excesses and

ungovernable logics (75). The narrator's efforts to follow the wallpaper's "sprawling, flamboyant patterns" and McTeague's efforts to comprehend Death Valley's "immeasurable," "infinite reaches," engender only failures and repetitions. "The ceaseless attempts to manage nature's incursions links the rigorous housekeeper to the male frontiersman," writes Fleissner, "for in neither case can that quest's vitality be distinguished from its appallingly obsessional excess" (78).

Fleissner's work offers two insights that are crucial for moving beyond the critical split I have been describing here. The first is the recognition that what often appears politically or culturally *limiting* in a work of fiction is thoroughly bound up with what is liberating or energizing about it, an insight that forces us to abandon the all-or-nothing logic of celebration or condemnation currently characterizing the new materialism/historicism divide. The second is the recognition that the gendered division between a masculine retrieval of agency and a feminist denial of agency does not, in fact, hold up within the fiction itself, where both the "male frontiersman" and the "rigorous housekeeper" manifest the same compulsive tendencies, and where the agential possibilities of both are simultaneously limited *and* enabled by their various attempts to control their environments. However, that Fleissner's argument *collapses* the difference between the unique ecologies of the housekeeper and the frontiersman (a point to which I will return to later in this chapter), points to the limits of her critique in fully overcoming the critical gap we have been discussing. It is only when we are able to address the historical and material specificity of Miss Patskey's domestic ecologies (rather than through an abstract appeal to "nature" as such) that their centrality to naturalist fiction's gender politics will become clear.

What might it look like, then, to put the crucial elements of the two movements we have been discussing in dialogue with one another? Is it possible to retain from the naturalist critics

their investment in nonhuman agency without jettisoning theories of power and domination or falling into ahistorical praise of material reality's emancipatory potential, while simultaneously retaining from the feminist critics the commitment to theorizing the historical articulations of power without falling into blanketing abstractions and de-specifications? One scholar to recently attempt such a synthesis is Neal Ahuja, whose work on the role of disease agents in the consolidation of American imperialism makes a compelling case for how biopolitical and (what he calls) posthumanist thought might speak productively to one another. Ahuja notes that while contemporary biopolitical critique foregrounds the human subject as a technical-discursive byproduct whose legibility and value are generated within a shifting field of racial, sexual, national, and ableist distinctions, the posthumanism of new materialist, ecological, and actor-network approaches emphasizes the "entanglements" and "intra-actions" that produce unexpected or unusual assemblages of forces whose effects are irreducible to totalizing conceptions of power and domination. In response, Ahuja characterizes his project as one of theorizing the effects of nonhuman actors *within* human relations of domination by examining how these relations are exacerbated, modified, disrupted, and extended through the agency of forces that do not lie fully within the field of human control.

Ahuja's work theorizes one particular mode of such relationality, which he calls "the government of species," referring to "how interspecies relations and the public hopes and fears they generate shape the living form and affective lineaments of settler societies, in the process determining the possibilities and foreclosures of political life" (x).⁸¹ Attending to the precise

⁸¹ That Ahuja describes affects as containing "lineaments" suggests his work's indebtedness to a particular materialist strain of affect theory, best exemplified by the work of Lauren Berlant, which presumes "affective atmospheres are shared, not solitary," and that rather than delineating some radically autonomous, unrepresentable, prepolitical site of autonomic sensory reaction, "affective responses may be said significantly to exemplify shared *historical* time" insofar as "bodies are continuously judging their environments and responding to the atmospheres in which they find themselves" (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 14-15). Ahuja's point, of course, is that affective

historical configurations of the government of species, then, entails attending not only to the ways that human and nonhuman life are managed through governmentality, but also the ways human commitments and attachments get routed through the vector of the nonhuman—that is, the ways other species govern “us.” “Such an understanding,” writes Ahuja, “goes beyond an assertion that life is controlled by human government, which would embrace the strong post-Enlightenment division between government and life, human and nonhuman” (ix), but so too would it challenge the notion that “life” or “nature” is a space of *exteriority* to human government, unencumbered by ideological interests. Instead, Ahuja pursues what he calls the “queer hypothesis that the adaptability, risk, and differentiation central to life increasingly constitute the very matter of politics” (ix).

This hypothesis receives its clearest articulation in his essay “Intimate Atmospheres: Queer Theory in a Time of Extinctions” (2015), which documents the role of mosquito population migration in the elaboration of climate change discourse. Ahuja explains how popular narratives surrounding the threat of West Nile and other disease-carrying mosquitos moving northward across the American border from tropical climates frequently traffic in the ecological concept of “blowback,” the idea that “[mosquitos] feeding on humans is spurred by anthropogenic warming and intensified by the fact that development exterminates other potential hosts (monkeys, birds) from settler space” (374). And yet, this ecological understanding of mosquitos as “lateral agents of human environmental processes (ibid),”⁸² motivated by the

atmospheres are *also* sites of interspecies contact. A disease epidemic, for instance, will be perceived through various generic lenses that are not proper to it, and the sense of inhabiting a shared generic atmosphere would, for Berlant, constitute a particular exemplification of historical time.

⁸² The concept of “lateral agency” is another term drawn from Berlant’s work, which is used to index forms of activity that do not depend upon or entail a strong account of sovereignty. “Most of what we do,” she writes in *Cruel Optimism*, “involves not being purposive but inhabiting agency differently in small vacations from the will itself” (116). Although Berlant uses it in a humanist register, the concept of lateral agency is an attempt to move beyond the all-or-nothing rhetoric often characterizing the discourse of sovereignty. Ahuja’s deployment of it

effects of carbon capitalism's expansion, is constantly being rewritten in terms of a very different narrative that Ahuja calls "species desire," which gets deployed as the justification for the implementation of environmentally destructive mosquito extermination initiatives:

Infectious disease researchers developed the concept of *anthropophilia* and the metric of an anthropophilic index, a measure of the percentage of female mosquitoes in a sample population whose dissected stomachs revealed human blood... Since "mosquito-borne diseases" are usually zoonotic pathogens that transit through various species, insects and humans forming only part of the chains of their reproductive cycles, the concept of anthropophilia narrowed the lifeworld of the mosquito to a drama of unrequited love for the human, a vision of dangerous intimacy that mandated prophylaxis or eradication (374).

The disjunction Ahuja underscores here between the ecological concept of "blowback" and the strongly intentionalist narrative of "anthropophilia" suggests how the nondeterministic, often unpredictable reactivity of nonhuman life constitutes the very object of imperialist biopolitics. Public health officials' justification for the use of petroleum and synthetic nitrates to eradicate mosquito breeding pools relies upon an interspecies love story in which the tropical mosquito, zombie or vampire-like, relentlessly seeks out its reluctant human mate.

The "queerness" of this proposition, however, resides in the defamiliarizing account of the human that emerges in light of these findings. As Ahuja explains, what mosquitos in fact "pursue" in the act of cross-border migration is "not the unrequited lover that is the human but the smell of carbon plumes, lactic acid, and other waste traces of bodies that signal proximity of edible blood" (378-379). Thus it is not only the case that humans "construct" the mosquito as an agential force through an assemblage of material-discursive factors including climate, carbon dioxide, and melodramas of desire, but that mosquitos "assemble the human and other potential feeding animals not as bodies but as specters, expanding environments of liquid and gaseous traces" (390). The vision of the human subject that appears in light of mosquito migration

underscores the way in which strongly purposive or intentionalist narratives also tend to mystify the movements of nonhuman species and their entanglements with humans.

patterns is one in which human agency appears diffuse and collective yet irreducible to individual bodies. To the mosquito, human life registers as a kind of after-image of the species' long-durational ecological effects, a gas cloud of waste traces that functions as an atmospheric archive of postindustrial capitalism's territorializations and deterritorializations. Ahuja's wager is that mapping the production of such interspecies assemblages offers a conception of the political that refuses to take human action as the inevitable starting point for its theories of power and domination, an increasingly urgent task in an age of ecological catastrophe, when the lives of earth's most vulnerable gendered and racialized subjects are irreducibly enmeshed in precarious planetary networks of biodependencies that include the agencies of mosquitoes, climate, and carbon dioxide alike.

What sort of vision of the human emerges in its encounter with the microbe in the closing decades of the nineteenth century? The answer to this question depends upon reconstructing the technologies of representation that public health officials and domestic scientists put in place to set the terms of such an encounter. In what follows, I describe how the transatlantic diffusion of the germ theory of disease precipitated a representational crisis around the issue of scale in the popular discourses of hygiene, sanitation, and domestic science. On the one hand, health experts needed to explain to an incredulous (and predominantly female) readership the efficacy of invisible microorganisms in the etiology and transmission of illnesses, a task they undertook through particularizing personifications and anthropomorphisms—*zoom-ins*—that magnified the agency of the unfathomably small by granting them intentions, motivations, and personalities; on the other hand, they needed to situate these new agencies within a formal totality that could render the complex and unpredictable relationship between bodies, environments, and germs comprehensible, a task they undertook through appeals to depersonifying abstractions and

generalizations—*zoom-outs*—that minified these forces by circumscribing them within a set of generalizable principles and laws.⁸³

While this double movement sought to engender a flexible model of hygienic administration, a close reading of public health literature reveals that the workingwomen and domestic laborers tasked with enacting this project did not experience their work as a source of control or mobility. The unencumbered and disembodied subject of the zoom effect, able to circulate freely from one level of reality to the next, concealed a labor that, in fact, mired women deeper and deeper in the minutia of the microbial world. The optics of the zoom, in other words, never operated seamlessly: the translations it facilitated were always partial, leaving behind figural residues in the literary and pedagogical works in which the human came to look monstrous, disfigured, or deformed—less the master of the microbial universe than something oddly bound up with it and entangled with its interests. The domestic project of the government of species at the turn of the century combined an imperialist hubris at the prospect of conquering new frontiers of undomesticated nature with a new bewilderment at the endlessly permeable

⁸³ This account of naturalism's zoom effects is heavily influenced by the work of Bruno Latour. In a recent essay titled "Anti-Zoom," Latour calls out the use of optical zoom effects in popular media and culture for their promulgation of the premise that "one can circulate freely through and in every scale, from the most local to the most global" without also altering the form of the data as it circulates between the various levels (121). "Neither the schema of space, nor that of time, appear continuous: levels of reality do not nestle one within the other like Russian dolls. It cannot be said that the small or the short lie *within* the large or the long, in the sense that the largest or the longest contain them but with just 'fewer details'" (121). Rather, each shift in scale requires a corresponding act of *translation*—a distortion that is also a making-legible, which allows incommensurate levels of reality to interface with one another toward particular ends. What Latour calls the "optical expedient" of the zoom operates by substituting the horizontal movements of human and nonhuman actors in a flat topography of network relations with the unbroken vertical movements of scalar interposition (123). What this risks instantiating is not only a mystified vision of nature, but of the human as such. The subject of the zoom, Latour notes, is an impossible subject: it conjures an infinitely mobile, effectively disembodied perspective, seemingly unencumbered by the technical-discursive apparatuses that render accounts of the world durable and legible. By obscuring the networks of mediation in which all acts of perception take place, the zoom effect hypostasizes a transcendental Subject anterior to the contingencies of social, political, economic, and epistemological relations. "There is no zoom," Latour concludes, "though there is a rich history of zoom effects" (121). A key moment in that history, I am suggesting here, is the age of public health.

boundaries of those frontiers themselves—the uncanny realization that looking closer at the alien world of the microbe brings us face to face with a distorted image of ourselves.

II. Microbial Aesthetics

Gradually reaching the United States from the laboratories of Europe in the 1870s and 80s, the germ theory disrupted an earlier nineteenth-century model of health based on the notion of bodily imbalance, in which the presence of disease signified disequilibrium of the body's “natural” economy of energies and fluids. The concept of imbalance amalgamated a moralistic constitutionalism with an amorphous environmentalism: on the one hand, medical practitioners believed that certain individuals were vulnerable to specific diseases due to their heredity or unhealthy living habits; but on the other, they also maintained that disease agents generated spontaneously and were native to specific climates, landforms, and waste sites. Thus, radical contingency and fatalistic determinism existed side-by-side in a flexible synthesis of internal and external determinants: an infelicitous confluence of atmospheric conditions could lead to the spontaneous generation of disease agents, but improper diet or “poor breeding” could have marked one out for that sickness in the first place.⁸⁴

Because the imbalance model recruited practically *everything* as a factor in the production of illness, mid-nineteenth-century Anglo-European sanitary and medical epistemology confronted a distinct problem of agency: there were simply too many potential actants with too variable levels of strength to render accounts consistent. In his amalgamation of

⁸⁴ For a cultural history of the rise of the germ theory in the United States during the late nineteenth century, see Nancy Tomes' *The Gospel of Germs* (1998). Linda Nash's *Inescapable Ecologies: A History of Environment, Disease, and Knowledge* (2006) focuses her attention less upon the germ theory than what it replaced: what she calls an “ecological” conception of the body prevalent in the United States for the majority of the nineteenth century in which a range of climatic, geographical, hereditary, and atmospheric factors were believed to collectively contribute to the generation and spread of illness.

science historiography and constructivist philosophy, *The Pasteurization of France* (1993),

Bruno Latour describes this situation as one of constantly thwarted intentions:

A salesman sends a perfectly clear beer to a customer—it arrives corrupted. A doctor assists a woman to give birth to a fine eight-pound baby—it dies shortly afterward. A mother gives perfectly pure milk to an infant—it dies of typhoid fever...Between the act and the intention is a *tertium quid* that diverts and corrupts, but it is not always present, and we cannot capture it without taking everything into account at once: the heavens, weather, morals, climate, appetites, moods, degrees of wealth, and fortune (32).

Countering traditional accounts of the germ theory's rise that appeal to the autonomous power of scientific ingenuity in demystifying the naïve superstitions of the past, Latour characterizes Pasteur and his followers as primarily sociopolitical *strategists* faced with a peculiar kind of representational problem: how to intervene and gain allies within a milieu of forces where the power to make sick appeared so decentralized and diffuse? On the one hand, the Pasteurians needed to redefine the heterogeneous list of health determinants as the expression of a single agency (the microbe), while at the same translating their microscopic experiments with putrefaction, fermentation, and distillation (processes not intuitively connected to the deadly disease epidemics of the nineteenth century) into the macroscopic fields of agriculture, public health, and population control, which would most clearly benefit from such findings. The first movement siphons agency away from the human world toward the microbe, while the second movement routes agency away from the microbe back to the human, where its actions can ostensibly be measured, predicted, and controlled.

The gradual solidification of the germ theory from a collection of minute and unspectacular laboratory observations to a widely accepted, monolithic “fact” thus depended upon the ability of its proponents to mediate between radically different scales of reality. “This play of minimum and maximum made a great impression on their contemporaries,” writes

Latour, “a microparasite could kill a bull or a man millions of times larger than itself; a few men in their laboratories could acquire in a generation more knowledge about microbes than the whole of mankind from the beginning of time” (74). At stake in Pasteur’s famous recognition that “the role of the infinitely small in nature is infinitely great,” then, was also a system of representation that could be mobilized to forward his own ends: first, give microbial phenomena a distinct morphology, a form of power and agency that far surpasses the human; second, reveal the redistribution of power that can occur in the safety of the laboratory, where, as Latour puts it, “phenomena, whatever their size—infinately great or infinitely small—are retranslated and simplified in such a way that a group of men can always control them (ibid);” and finally, abstract this redistribution of power to the macro-level of the social totality. “Once interests had been aroused in such a way that the macroscopic problems of the hygienists and doctors could be treated at the microscopic level of the laboratory,” writes Latour, the Pasteurians were able to persuade skeptics of the reality of the phenomena they encountered (73). The germ theory’s eventual transatlantic hegemony depended less upon the scientific expertise of its proponents than upon their ability to produce the impression of seamless transition between micro and macro scales, a task that positioned the zoom effect at the center of public health discourse.

At the level of practical application, the germ theory’s power consisted in its ability to draw the study of disease out of the opposed shadowy realms of fatalistic determinism and sheer contingency alike. In its simplest form, the theory consisted of two basic propositions: “first, that animal and human diseases were caused by distinctive species of microorganisms, which were widely present in the air and water; and second, that these germs could not generate spontaneously, but rather always came from a previous case of exactly the same disease” (Tomes 33). The germ theory thus reconfigured the body-environment calculus by confirming the

existence and pathological efficacy of a semi-autonomous third term—the microbe—that bore only an orthogonal relationship to each pole in the dyad. Like all living things, microbes thrive in particular environmental conditions, but those environments do not actually generate them. And while human and animal bodies indeed harbor disease-causing agents and expel them through their excretions, those bodies themselves are not the source of disease. If, from the perspective of the imbalance model, the body’s porosity vis-à-vis its environment was simply a taken for granted condition—the *sine qua non* of *all* physiological states, “healthy” as well as “sick”—from the perspective of germ theory, such porosity became a distinct social and political problem. No longer a mysterious contingency or a constitutional inevitability, illness had become something traceable, measurable, and potentially containable through human interventions.

The responsibility for such interventions fell disproportionately on the nation’s women.

In her 1885 manual, *Household Sanitation*, sanitary reformer Harriett M. Plunkett explains:

To the woman, whose destiny it is to remain a large share of the time at home, whose divinely appointed mission it is ‘to guide the house,’ a new sphere of usefulness and efficiency opens with the knowledge that in sanitary matters an ounce of prevention is worth a ton of cure. There is nothing in hygiene that she can not comprehend, and too often does she realize this and begin to study it, when, too late, she stands beside the still form of some precious one, slain by some of those preventable diseases that, in the coming sanitary millennium, will be reckoned akin to murder (10).

Plunkett’s polemical claim, which should evoke the concept of strict liability outlined in the previous chapter, also echoes Ellen Richards’ appeal to rethink the concept of social responsibility in light of humanity’s entanglement with the microbe. Indeed, what was at stake in women’s new domestic responsibilities was nothing less than what Teddy Roosevelt called “the vital question of national life” (“Address” 209). At the 1902 national economics conference in Lake Placid, Henrietta Goodrich told the attendees, “Men in general must admit consciously that the home is the social workshop of the making of men” (qtd. in Ehrenreich 151-152). This

formulation that not only invokes the twinned concepts of masculinity and civilization underwriting American racial ideologies in the late nineteenth century, but also what Mark Seltzer calls turn of the century cultural obsessions with “unnatural nature,” “the ‘discovery’ that bodies and persons are things that can be made” (*Bodies and Machines* 3).⁸⁵ A dirty or inefficiently run household, the implication was clear, would “make” the wrong kind of persons.

The home, in other words, had become a site of biopolitical production and women its overseers. Alongside a dramatic expansion of state-sponsored initiatives including municipal sewage systems, water purification technology, garbage collection, and food inspection, Americans during the closing decades of the nineteenth century witnessed an explosion of mass-marketed literature and advertising advocating what Nancy Tomes calls “the private side of public health,” a “gospel of germs” that articulated the domestic labor of producing an efficient, sanitary home environment with the biopolitical labor of producing an efficient, healthy population, which placed women ideologically (if never materially) at the center of a new discourse of national health oriented around the government of species. “Health in the home is health everywhere,” was an oft-quoted slogan of the domestic science movement, and “it is the women on whom full sanitary light requires to fall” (qtd. in Plunkett 10). And what the “light” of sanitation revealed was a veritable jungle ecology of pathological threats living right, as it were, under the nose of the domestic laborer. Tales of experiments in which “3000 living organisms” were cultivated from “a pinpoint of dust” were common (Campbell qtd. in Ehrenreich); books with titles such as *House Fly, Disease Carrier: An Account of Its Dangers and of the Means of Destroying It* (1911) (Figure 1) circulated widely, and the hugely influential sanitary

⁸⁵ For an excellent historical treatment of the linkage between the concepts of manliness and civilization, see Gail Bederman’s cultural history of the same name, *Manliness & Civilization: A cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (1995). Mark Seltzer’s *Bodies and Machines* (1992), addressed at length elsewhere in this manuscript, theorizes what he calls naturalism’s “body-machine complex” as the site of cultural negotiation with the new possibilities surrounding the “making of men.”

compendium of the period, Charles V. Chapin's *The Sources and Modes of Infection* (1916) (Figure 2), devoted sixty-plus pages to the topic of "Infection by Insects" and other domestic creatures.

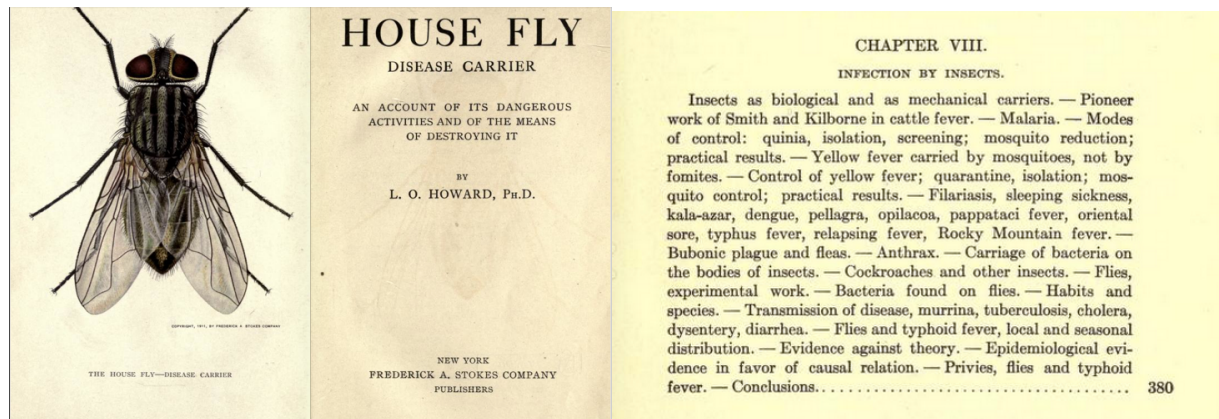


Figure 1

Figure 2

What Barbara Ehrenreich describes as the fin-de-siècle “transformation of cleaning from a matter of dilettantish dusting to a sanitary crusade against ‘dangerous enemies within’” (143) was also an aesthetic project for domestic hygiene literature that imported the conflicting imperatives of personification and abstraction from the conceptual origins of the germ theory. In order for the reality of the germ to become legible to the public, it needed to be imbued with particular morphologies and dispositions. The most common of these tropes was the martial metaphor. “The personification of germs as criminals, enemies, and strangers, and of public health agencies and soap companies as the arms of hygienic law,” writes JoAnne Brown, “created a dramatic, adversarial script” that both naturalized and exacerbated already existing social anxieties about the threat of immigrant racial, and class mobility (57). Advertising companies frequently anthropomorphized germs with grotesquely stylized African, Chinese, or Jewish features, or depicted them as destitute beggars, parasitically “hanging on” to unsuspecting victims. Such metaphorical equations between racialized or marginalized bodies and harmful

disease agents instantiated associative feedback loops that could be used to justify all manner of social and economic exclusions: proponents of segregation, for instance, frequently invoked the threat of bacterial contamination at public drinking fountains, while advertising companies often appealed to the uncleanliness of nonwhite businesses to narrow the competition for their products.⁸⁶

But sanitary experts and domestic scientists were also exceedingly wary of personification as a pedagogical device in the fight against germs because of what they perceived as its uncontrollability—its power to generate affective surpluses, irrational cathexes, and misplaced emotional investments in the very agents charged with learning from them. “[P]ersonification stands in the way,” writes Helen Campbell in her 1896 treatise, *Household Economics*, “personification, the mark of the child and the savage”:

To generalize, however hastily and crudely, marks growth in mental power. Here, in household economy, most of us are still in the stage of untutored and untutored savages. We can say “my house,” “my mother’s house,” and “Mrs. Jones’s House,” but THE HOUSE we have no brain cell ready to hold... Every detail mentioned in our work—and our work must deal largely in detail—fills the mind with crowding memories, pleasant, funny, exhausting, always personal. In touching on matters of detail in household economy, every woman who hears will feel the temptation to receive the thought with a strong personal color, and, perhaps, have her feelings hurt (12-13).

Campbell’s fear of personification’s figural excesses—its association with irrationality and a kind of animistic primitivism—gestures towards what Ahuja might term the government of species’ distinctly posthumanist register: granting microbial life a particular morphology that mobilizes it for specific political ends simultaneously imbues it with modes of agency potentially

⁸⁶ Tera Hunter, for instance, details how the black caricature of “Soap Sally” was used to discredit African American washwomen in Atlanta during their strikes in the 1880s. See *To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (1997). For an excellent account of the way popular depictions of contagion fed into racial anxieties surrounding skin color, see JoAnne Brown’s “Crime, Commerce, and Contagionism: The Political Languages of Public Health and the Popularization of the Germ Theory in the United States 1870-1950” (1997). Carl Zimring’s *Clean and White: A History of Environmental Racism in the United States* (2015) tracks the shifting cultural associations between race and dirt from the Revolutionary period to the present

irreducible to those ends themselves. According to Campbell, a woman's proximity to and entanglement with microbial life was liable to engender not sanitary vigilance but a varied set of affective dispositions—affection, nostalgia, laughter, exhaustion—whose effect within a particular biopolitical configuration would be uncertain. In place of this uncertainty, Campbell advocates for *depersonalization* or generalization, a figurative zoom-out, which would extract the subject from its imbrication with microbial life and make a properly prophylactic domestic science possible again.

The imperative of navigating these tensions was linked to changing understandings of personhood and responsibility inaugurated in the wake of the germ theory. “This is the Socialism of the microbe,” writes one journalist in 1895, “this is the chain of disease, which binds all the people of a community together” (Edson 425). The microbe's capacity to “bind” individual's to one another in hitherto unknown ways also demanded new forms of vigilance. As Priscilla Wald puts it, “individuals once seen primarily as endowed with natural rights were now viewed as social beings charged with responsibility for their actions, witting or otherwise” (183). Recognizing oneself as both an individual *and* a social being—assuming responsibility for both “my house” and “THE HOUSE,” as Helen Campbell might have it—depended upon the ability to toggle back and forth between different scales of reality, which is exactly what the zoom effect promised. The zoom effect thus develops as a mechanism of what Wald, following E.A. Ross, calls “social control,” referring to those external pressures or interpretive frameworks implemented to maintain conformity and compliance in a given population.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ In her essay, “Cultures and Carriers: ‘Typhoid Mary’ and the Science of Social Control” (1997), Wald argues that the discovery of the phenomenon of “healthy carriers”—individuals who harbored and spread typhoid but were not themselves infected by the disease—gave rise to a new set of cultural anxieties around the threat of contagion. The rise of contagion narratives such as the infamous case of “Typhoid” Mary Mallon functioned, in Wald's view, to normalize and legitimate new forms of population management demanded to appease such anxieties: “[they] establish the existence of carriers, assess their threat to the community, and justify the treatment accordingly” (183).

And yet, the representational tension between personification and abstraction, zoom-ins and zoom-outs, manifesting everywhere in the popular hygiene literature of the period, produced effects that were irreducible to the ends of social control. In Mitchell Prudden's *The Story of the Bacteria: Relations to Health and Disease* (1889), for instance, the Columbia University professor describes the supervised growth of mold on the surface of a potato as "realizing in another field a project which was urged with a good deal of persistency some years ago for finding out if there were inhabitants in the moon, and for communicating with them" (31-32). Prudden elaborates this bizarre comparison by describing a massive engineering project, ostensibly "on some great plain on the Earth's surface, like that of Siberia," to build "a gigantic structure so large that even assuming that the lunar inhabitants had no telescopes, it would be visible to them" (32). The sight of such a structure upon the earth's surface would prompt the moon creatures to erect a similar structure, thus establishing the first instance of interplanetary communication.

Prudden was not a quack; he was a Yale-educated pathologist who would later become a director of the Rockefeller Institute for medical research, and yet his description of interspecies relations depends upon the disorienting optics of the zoom foundational to the aesthetics of the American public health movement. First, Prudden zooms in by personifying mold colonies on a potato as human colonies on the surface of the Earth, and then immediately zooms out to recast human scientists as lunar creatures *receiving messages* from a mysterious world beyond their ken. "[W]e actually make the inhabitants of an unseen world communicate to us to-day some of the secrets of their hidden life" (32). In order to imagine interspecies "communication" between humans and mold as the revelation of a hidden secret, Prudden imagines the mold as, in some sense, *human*, and humans as, in some sense, extraterrestrial. In this digression, the act of

confronting the microbe makes us strangers to ourselves, at the same time transforming scientific history into speculative science fiction. In Prudden's account, coming face to face with bacteria harbors the unsettling potential to *displace* the human from the position of sovereignty the planetary metaphor is designed to uphold.

This instance of personification's figural potentiality may seem, at first glance, too far removed from the recognizable world of politics to be anything other than amusing. And yet, the zoom effect's representations of interspecies relations in hygiene literature determined the limits of political thought on the question of sanitation during this period. A remarkable instance of this occurs in Prudden's popular 1890 handbook, *Dust and its Dangers*, in which he describes via an array of personifications how the human body protects itself against microscopic particles that pass unseen through the nose and mouth:

The number of living germs which the New York citizen is liable to be forced to take into his body, when the dry filth is being stirred up by the diabolically careless procedures of the present street-cleaning fiends, it would be a thankless task to tell...The floating material which is carried past the well-guarded portals of the lungs and enters the windpipe and bronchial tubes and lodges on their moist walls finds here a most efficient arrangement for its expulsion. Here is placed, completely lining the tubes, an army of thoroughfare cleaners composed of individuals who are not in politics, who have no vote, and who present to us the unwonted, and at first puzzling, spectacle of street cleaners whose business seems to be to clean the streets (37-38).

Just as Helen Campbell warned, Prudden's personification of bronchial cilia as New York City street-cleaners generates an unexpected figurative excess insofar as it transforms the human body into the site of a labor struggle. His characterization of the street-cleaners as diabolical fiends refers to the widely recognized fact in the 1890s that Tammany Hall ran the city's Department of Street Cleaning as an arm of crony politics: sanitation in New York City was an organizational

mess, hindered at every turn by personal interests.⁸⁸ Prudden is thus able to imagine a solution to the city's public health crisis only by passing through the vector of microbial life. By *depersonalizing* the workers as "individuals who are *not* in politics, who *have* no vote"—which is to say, by transforming them *back* into autonomically functioning cilia—he makes them appear as properly rational workers unencumbered by political allegiances.

The key point here is that the formal strategies of the American public health movement's government of species—the zoom-ins and zoom-outs that transform windpipes into thoroughfares, cilia into workers, and workers into abstract labor—determine the contours of the political during this period. What's incredible about Prudden's description, then, is the way it anticipates the *actual* historical transformation of New York City's Department of Street Cleaning with the appointment of George Waring Jr. as City Commissioner in 1895, after none other than Teddy Roosevelt turned down the position. Waring, a former Colonel in the Confederate army turned civil engineer, had earned a name for himself on the national stage of sanitary science by designing Memphis's first drainage and sewage system after a series of devastating cholera and yellow fever epidemics ravaged the city in the postbellum period. William Lafayette Strong, elected upon a wave of anti-Tammany and anti-corruption sentiment, hired Waring to reform the city's street cleaning operations. As the *New York Times* tellingly put it, Waring "found the street-cleaning force a rabble and left it an army" (762), transforming their haphazard sweeping routines into a set of military-style drills, as well as outfitting them in

⁸⁸ It is remarkable how frequently the example of New York City politics appears in the literature of the period as the paradigm of sanitary inefficiency. In her 1885 tract, *Women, Plumbers, Doctors*, Harriett Plunkett notes, "It is humiliating to think that our proud metropolis has a higher death-rate than that of Rome, or than any of the English manufacturing towns that we have accustomed ourselves to compassionately pity as centers of poverty and disease. . . . It happens that a clique of men are determined that the streets of New York shall not be cleaned, as a monster mass-meeting of its citizens desire, because the mayor would be likely to give the sweeping and carting to men of the opposite political party" (222-223).

policeman-like helmets and entirely white duck suits, which earned them the title of The White Wings (Figure 1, Figure 2).

Conjoining a quasi-militarized racial appeal to cleanliness-as-whiteness with the suggestion of an otherworldly fastidiousness transcendent of political affiliations, the White Wings were *themselves* a personification of the disinterested, incorruptible individual that the aesthetics of the public health movement needed to simultaneously create and efface under the guise of the natural. Zoom in upon the self-regulating mechanisms of the human body, Prudden's fantasy suggests, and confront the spectacle of an army of tiny White Wings.



Figure 1.



Figure 2

This rhetorical sleight of hand proved portable far beyond the context of municipal management: Waring's success with the White Wings earned him the honor of being chosen by President McKinley to undertake an imperial sanitation survey of Cuba in order to establish what journalist Albert Shaw called "a regime of cleanliness in the Cuban seaports" (682). If the White Wings signified a commitment to sanitation so pure and nonideological that their work would appear indistinguishable from the "natural" labor of cilia sweeping the bronchial tubes, America's imperial regime of cleanliness gave up almost all pretense that politics could be kept separate from the movements of microbial life: "The harmful effects of Spanish methods upon our commerce, though easy to demonstrate, might not have afforded a sufficient ground for our peremptory interference," Shaw wrote in 1898, the year Waring died (682). "Considerations of the public health, however, have always afforded us an ample reason for condemning and ending

Spanish sovereignty in Cuba at any time it might seem to us advisable to execute judgment” (ibid).

The project of American imperialism needed to be routed through the vector of the microbe. “If it had been necessary to make colonial society only with masters and slaves,” writes Latour, “there would never have been any colonial society. It had to be made with microbes, together with the swarming of insects and parasites that they transported” (*Pasteurization* 144). However, as I have been arguing in this section, the government of microbial species was defined not only through its intersections with biopolitical management and imperial governance but also through a discrete set of aesthetic practices that both enabled and rearticulated these projects simultaneously. Turning back to the naturalist writing of the period, we will get a clearer sense of how this rearticulation functioned. As we will see, naturalism’s zoom effects provided the unlikely mechanism through which female writers aligned themselves with the very forms of nonhuman life they were tasked with policing.

III. Entomological Naturalism

Recall that Miss Patskey’s brief appearance in *The Descendant* provides an occasion for journalist Michael Akershem to dismiss her cohort of educated young women as victims of political faddishness, what he calls “the *fin de siècle* disease.” Whether or not readers are meant to subscribe to Akershem’s characterization, however, only becomes clear in the closing chapter of the novel, when Glasgow explicitly deals Michael Akershem a hand that reads as a kind of Patskey-esque poetic justice. Akershem, it turns out, *does* catch the *fin de siècle* disease, yet it’s not a political “ism” but a biopolitical “osis”—namely, tuberculosis, an “insidious enemy feeding upon flesh and blood” that leaves him “palsied” and coughing blood into his handkerchief on the streets of New York City (269). Akershem’s comeuppance, however, is not strictly physical;

what pains him more than his “wasted limbs” is his wasted ambition (ibid). Following a stint in prison for manslaughter after accidentally killing his colleague at *The Iconoclast*, Akershem has been excluded from the political life of the city. Glasgow aligns Akershem’s political marginalization with feminization—a fact the novel registers through his glimpse of a “Men Wanted” sign hanging across the street from his former employer, the muckraking magazine *The Iconoclast*—but a version of feminization that the novel represents an entomological massification:.

Amidst the congregate mass of moving atoms his outline was all but imperceptible, presenting to an observer from a distant height as indistinct an individuality as is presented to us by the individual in a writhing army of ants. He was an entity, but, surrounded by a host of greater and lesser entities, the fact of his personal existence was not conducive to philosophic reflection in another than himself (26).

To become like a woman, excluded from the political life of the city, Glasgow suggests, is to become indistinct, *de-individuated*, part of a “writhing army” of insects. The martial language here preserves an echo of purposiveness but renders it incoherent through the adjective “writhing,” which suggests a state of internal conflict or antagonism that prevents the mass body from acting as a discrete unit. Notice, too, how Glasgow’s use of the zoom effect—the toggle between the perspective of “an observer from a distant height” to the conflation of “individual” body with insect body—scrambles the logic of social control: subsumed into the indistinction of mass life, Akershem’s outlines become “all but imperceptible,” his relation to the collective impossible to determine. Rather than undergoing differentiation from the insect world, he has been incorporated into it. That he is a contagious entity is, of course, the point: where the zoom developed, in part, as a technique to *police* the relationship between the individual and the collective, Glasgow’s use of it renders that process moot: “his personal existence was not conducive to philosophic reflection in another than himself.”

Glasgow elaborates this thematic intertwining of insects, gender, and disease in her second naturalist novel, written two years after *The Descendant*. Set in post-Waring New York City, *Phases of an Inferior Planet* (1898) takes place against the political backdrop of the 1897 mayoral race, in which Tammany Hall Democrats took back the office from Republican sanitation reformer, Strong. “You really think they’ll elect Vaden [the novel’s fictionalized Democrat]?” asks a concerned citizen in one of the novel’s many conversations about the election, “It does seem a shame. Just after we have got clean streets and a respectable police force” (209). If the indices of fin-de-siècle sanitary politics permeate the novel’s setting through repeated references to street cleaners and billowing clouds of dust that coat the furniture and sills of every interior space, the novel is also quite literally about the question of sanitation *as* politics. Its meandering plot tracks the early adulthood and middle age of Anthony Algarçife, a failed biologist turned man of the cloth who amasses a devoted congregation of poor Bowery inhabitants on account of his popular “sermons on hygiene” (196), which he delivers with a kind of otherworldly charisma despite his own secret crisis of religious faith. As Helen Campbell might have predicted, it is precisely a lack of “personal color” that enables Algarçife to attend so scrupulously to the “details” of sanitary science: “Because the life was loathsome to him he left not one detail unperformed” (218). Like George Waring’s military-angelic White Wings, then, Father Algarçife is depicted as an empty vessel, an individual bereft of true political or religious convictions, who nevertheless preaches the “gospel of the germs” as if by sheer automatism: “His very sermons came to him with no effort of will or of memory,” Glasgow tells us, “but as thoughts long thought out and forgotten sometimes obtrude themselves upon the mind that has passed into other channels” (243).

Because of Algarcife's popularity amongst the city's tenement houses, his civic-minded friends encourage him to publically endorse a candidate in the mayoral race—a request he ultimately refuses for the same reason Akershem scorns the group of educated women in *The Descendant*: a belief in the arbitrariness and futility of party politics. As in Glasgow's first novel, Akershem's position gets transcoded through the language of hygiene: partisanship, one character exclaims, "will soil your hands." "I can wash them!" an interlocutor replies (238). Notice again the chiasmic structure: Algarcife performs his sanitary duties because they appear, to him, divorced from any kind of political commitment; meanwhile, political commitments (such as whom to vote for in the upcoming election) are represented as the arbitrary and contingent effects of microbial contamination—something one can "catch" but ultimately wash one's hands of. Yet, as in *The Descendant*, Glasgow counterpoises this discourse of political belief as microbial contamination with the stranger suggestion of the microbe *as* a political agent in its own right. Wandering through the Fifth Avenue crowds with a friend on election night, Father Algarcife experiences a vision in which the city's voting constituents are again entomologized along gendered lines:

The streets were filled with a stream of crushed humanity, which struggled and pushed and panted, presenting to a distant view the effect of a writhing mass of dark-bodied insects...Occasionally, as the white light fell on the moving throng, it exaggerated in distinctness a face here and there, which assumed the look of a grotesque mask, illuminated by an instantaneous flash and fading quickly into the half-light of surrounding shadows. Then another took its place, and the illumination played variations about the changing features. Suddenly a shrill cheer went up from the streets. [...] "Look at this," said Salvers, drawing aside. "Odd for women, isn't it? Half these girls don't know what they are shrieking about" (244-245).

Notice again the way Glasgow reworks the zoom optics of domestic hygiene discourse by scrambling the boundary between human and insect. Yet rather than enact the biopolitical scission to extract the normative human subject from the "writhing mass of dark-bodied insects,"

the racially and hygienically overdetermined “white light,” here, is what prevents that act of translation from occurring once and for all. Instead, Glasgow’s zoom-in upon the bodies of the crowd manifests as a cascade of figural deformations engendering not legibility but indistinction: a vision of the human as shifting, porous, and ontologically imbricated with the writhing form of nonhuman life it is always at risk of becoming.

Even more explicitly than in *The Descendant*, Glasgow associates this depiction of mass life with the state of exclusion from the political sphere through the reference to the women in the crowd who “don’t know what they are shrieking about.” By law denied the right to participate in the political process, and by characterization denied the potential to even understand it, these anonymous women are nevertheless juxtaposed to the “official” business of the election: they represent something like the possibility of a public *as such*. What makes the crowd appear a “writhing mass of dark-bodied insects” rather than a coherent and unified democratic movement, then, is its insistent feminization—the suggestion that it is somehow *pre-political* yet inextricably tied to the political realm by virtue of its exclusion from it.

Where does this articulation of insect life with the suggestion of inchoate political potential derive? Charlotte Perkins Gilman gives one answer in *The Home: Its Work and Influence* (1903), when she invokes the figure of the insect in order to draw a distinction between what she calls “multiplication” and “improvement,” dual aspects of the reproductive process. “One bee group-mother, crawling from cell to cell, lays eggs unnumbered for the common care,” she writes, “in infinite reproduction, and that is all; in more bees, and more ants, more and more forever, like the sands of the sea. They would cover the earth like a blanket but for merciful appetites of other creatures. But this is only multiplication—not improvement” (88). Whereas “improvement,” for Gilman, names the imperative “to be better,” “multiplication” is simply a

repetition of the verbs “to be” and “to re-be” (ibid). The beehive or the anthill, for Gilman, exemplifies the work of the latter. Following Giorgio Agamben, we might say that the insect here demarcates the terrain of *zoē*, “the simple fact of living common to all living beings” in opposition to *bios*, “the form or way of living proper to an individual or group” (1).⁸⁹ The insect, in other words, is a figure for collective life *as such*, devoid of clear teleology or aim.

It is perhaps no wonder, then, that insects feature so prominently as analogies for the parthenogenic community of women in Gilman’s 1915 feminist utopian novel, *Herland*, where they represent both the sense of undifferentiated homogeneity and sheer reproductive potential described in *The Home*. As Gilman’s trio of male explorers contemplate the social structures of Herland, they speculate that should the community truly lack individuals of the male sex, “they’d be as alike as so many ants or aphids” (78). However, when the explorers learn that “multiplication” and “improvement” have been made coextensive in Herland through a mysterious process of self-willed pregnancy that ensures only the healthiest women reproduce, the men’s entomological comparisons take on a different resonance: ““Go to the ant, thou sluggard’—and learn something,” commands one explorer, Jeff, to the skeptical Terry, “Don’t they cooperate pretty well? You can’t beat it. This place is just like an enormous anthill—and you know an anthill is nothing but a nursery” (68).

Jeff’s equation between anthill and nursery adds another dimension to the role of insect life in Gilman’s biopolitical imagination. If ants are a figure for “infinite reproduction,” an undifferentiated “blanket” of unorganized life, they also evidence an innate capacity for *cooperation*, which would seem to situate them in a liminal space between a pre-social or merely “reproductive” nature and something like a culture. The difficulty of preserving such liminality

⁸⁹ Far from connoting the corpse-like abjection of Agamben’s “bare life,” however, Gilman’s insect life is closer to Bichat’s “vegetable life” or Bernard’s “latent life” (explored in the first chapter of this dissertation) in that it is a condition of possibility for the differentiations and specializations of “animal life.”

cuts across many of Gilman's invocations of insect life. In what is perhaps her most famous poem, "A Conservative," published in *Life* magazine in 1892 (the same year as "The Yellow Wallpaper"), Gilman allegorizes anti-Progressivism through the figure of a beautiful butterfly stubbornly nostalgic for its days as a lowly worm. The poem's speaker attempts to reason with the creature to no avail: "Cried he, 'My legs are thin and few/ Where once I had a swarm!/ Soft fuzzy fur—a joy to view—/ Once kept my body warm,/ Before these flapping wing-things grew/ To hamper and deform!'" (58). The straightforwardly didactic interpretation of the poem is condensed in its final stanza: "O yesterday of unknown lack/ To-day of unknown bliss!/ I left my fool in red and black;/ The last I saw was this,—/ The creature madly climbing back/ Into his chrysalis" (ibid). In other words, the butterfly, "a conservative," is happier to regress into primitive familiarity than embrace the possibility of "unknown bliss" his new form affords.

Yet Gilman's readers would have recognized how easily the valences of the poem might be reversed. When the butterfly complains of newfound weakness, ornamentation, and bodily constriction he is in fact enumerating the same negative qualities Gilman associates with the over-development of what she calls "sex-distinctions," "those varied forms of crests, combs, wattles, callosities of blue and crimson, and the like, with which one sex attracts the other" (*The Home* 53). Modern sex relations, Gilman believed, had made humans (but especially young women) *overcivilized* and decadent, a characterization that orbits her description of the butterfly's "hamper[ed] and "deform[ed]" body.⁹⁰ Meanwhile, one could argue that it is, in fact, *the worm* that embodies the positive qualities of evolutionary use-value such as safety, warmth, and self-sufficiency that Gilman esteemed and hoped to reassert in the modern home through

⁹⁰ Like Helen Campbell, for whom "personification" or an over-investment in the personal and idiosyncratic characterized the modern housekeeper, Gilman's depiction of the modern woman, dependent upon the man for a living, is a similarly "savage" figure of unnatural excessiveness and bodily embellishment. Jennifer Fleissner writes, "Gilman's is the sort of savage who is said to delight in ornament, whose tattoos, piercings, feathers, and self-paintings 'distor[t] the human body' and thus leave natural simplicity behind" (80).

women's access to the means of production and reproduction. We might say that "A Conservative" negotiates the insect's liminal positioning between nature and culture by splitting the figure of "the insect" in two: a worm whose swarm-like legs and "squirm[y]" existence border on the over-natural, and a butterfly whose ungainly bodily embellishments border on the over-cultural.

The closing image of the butterfly climbing back into its chrysalis, then, is more ambiguous than it might first appear. If the gesture is indeed a sign of regression, as the standard reading of the poem suggests, then it too indexes Gilman's anxieties about the difficulties of determining once and for all what counts as *progression*, truly salutary social development. If "improvement," for Gilman, always entails the risks of sexual selection (risks that Herlanders, through parthenogenesis, are able to avoid), "multiplication," the "law" of reproduction traversing insect, microbe, and human worlds, retains a more positive valence in her literary imagination. And lest one should claim that Gilman's investment in multiplication ineluctably grounds her feminist politics in the (female) biological body, the figure of the insect helps us queer this formation by demonstrating that it is in fact *collectivity as such*, not biological reproduction, that insectoid life metonymizes. "Moved by an instinct coincident with its existence, the new-hatched ant, still weak and wet from the pupa, staggers to the nearest yet unborn to care for it, and cares for it devotedly to the end of life" (*The Home* 88). What Gilman calls "motherhood," in this example, is activated not by any essential trait in the individual but by the contingency of proximity, an unpredictable feature of collective existence. This latent potential for self-organization, which the insect persistently exemplifies across Gilman's fiction and nonfiction writing, represents, for her, the ground of any feminist politics.

This, I am arguing, is how we should read the scenes of human/insect hybridization in the writings of Gilman and Glasgow, writers who explicitly align their renditions of mass life with a pre-political female collectivity. I return in the next section of this chapter to the writings of Gilman and Frank Norris through the work of Jennifer Fleissner, where I show how the latter's characterization of naturalist fiction's "vertiginousness" must be reread through the formal mechanism of the zoom effect, and therefore in light of the unique foregrounding of microscopic life in public health discourses of the period. I will argue that McTeague's experience of himself as a kind of insect, crawling along the "sink" of Death Valley at the novel's close registers, with an important difference, the horror the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" experiences in her confrontation with a microscopic ecology of blossoming fungi and parasitic growths she can never escape. Read side-by-side, these texts reveal the ambiguity of the discourse of the government of species as it manifests in American naturalism: both the psychological toll it took upon the subjects recruited on its front lines *and* the lines of flight toward new political horizons it also made available.

IV. Why Is Naturalism Vertiginous?

The word "vertiginous," along with its cognates, appears a total of nine times over the course of two chapters in Jennifer Fleissner's *Women, Compulsion, Modernity* to describe the work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Frank Norris. In a study so attuned to the compulsive repetition of seemingly insignificant details, it is difficult not to perceive something both less-than-intentional but more-than-coincidental in the frequency with which Fleissner invokes the term. Its repetition, in other words, reads like a *symptom* of something else. I want to suggest that naturalism's vertiginousness is indelibly linked to what I have been calling the genre's zoom effects, which it appropriates from the aesthetics of the American public health and domestic

science movements. If Fleissner's scholarship has indeed integrated the formal features of its object into its own critical apparatus, then returning to her readings of Gilman and Norris with this understanding allows us to clarify what this act of critical transference has obscured: an account of naturalist fiction thoroughly implicated in the domestic government of species.

Recall the way in which Fleissner depicts domestic space in "The Yellow Wallpaper" as a kind of miniaturized jungle (with its obscenely fecund sprouting of bulbous toadstools and overgrown funguses), while the Wild West in *McTeague* becomes a kind of magnified parlor, what she calls "the outsized mirror image of naturalism's vertiginous interior detail" with its "uncounted" and "immeasurable" excesses (85). For Fleissner, the quality of being vertiginous, then, is what establishes the "mirror" relationship between the Great Indoors and the Great Outdoors: it designates, for her, the disorienting proliferation of unorderable details common to both environments. But while the word *facilitates* a scalar modulation to occur within her argument, it also *indexes* the embodied sensation of a scalar modulation in its more specialized medical register: to be vertiginous is to be vertigo-inducing, and thus the term would seem to contain within itself the very zoom effect Fleissner uses it to produce in her reading.

Vertigo, as physicians have recognized since the nineteenth century, is the pathological symptom of dizziness or disorientation—its Latinate etymology means a "turning or whirling around"—caused by a disturbance in the human vestibular system, responsible for balance and spatial orientation. Silas Weir Mitchell, pioneer of the infamous "rest cure" and Gilman's own doctor for a period in the late 1880s, defines it as "a sense of defective equilibrium, with or without actual disturbance of position, and accompanied by varying amounts of subjective feelings of motion of external objects, of the body itself, or of the contents of the cranium" (416). Mitchell's description suggests that vertigo manifests as a kind of embodied zoom effect: "the

brain,” he writes, “seems to be moving round or upward” (416). In the popular imagination, vertigo is commonly associated with the act of looking down from a great height because the recession of the visual cues necessary to calculate body positioning and motion frequently induces the sensation of disequilibrium, even in those without vestibular pathologies. True vertigo, however, can be triggered by *any* change in visual perspective, such as squatting, climbing up or down stairs, or looking out a window, and more generally signifies a short-circuit in the relays between the body’s perception of itself and its surroundings, “a false sense of the movement of external objects and of the relations in space of the individual to such objects” (Mitchell 416).

And here, I wager, a new perspective on naturalist fiction becomes available. Both Norris’s *Death Valley* and Gilman’s *Yellow Wallpaper* are vertiginous in precisely the sense that they engender a series of disorienting shifts in scale that produce a sense of defective equilibrium in their protagonists. Integral to the narrator’s experience of the wallpaper’s “optic horror,” for instance, is her suggestion that it contains an uncanny *depth*, “a kind of sub-pattern,” which appears to “move” independently of its manifest form. This effect is heightened by the fact that the paper’s foreground and background are depicted as scalar inversions of one another: “an interminable string of toadstools, budding and sprouting in endless convolutions” adorn its foreground, all seemingly blown-up to gigantic proportions, while “a great many women,” shrunk to the dimensions of garden fungus, attempt to “climb through” the paper’s top layer (51). Gilman furthers this interposition of the small and the large, the near and the far, in the narrator’s visual displacement of the wallpaper’s women into the “open country” beyond the mansion’s outdoor garden, where she can glimpse them “creeping as fast as a cloud shadow in a high wind” if she looks out the window (56). Like Mitchell’s vertigo patient, who experiences objects “as if

inverted,” Gilman’s narrator watches the unruly pattern “turn [the women] upside down,” at which point their bodies become fragmented and are rendered continuous with the “waddling fungus growths” and indeterminate biomatter figured within the paper’s pattern. And like Father Algarcife’s view of the Fifth Avenue crowds as a “writhing mass of dark-bodied insects” one minute and grotesque human faces the next, the wallpaper “changes as the light changes (51). No wonder the narrator’s “confusion” and “dizziness” replicate the symptoms of the vertigo-sufferer, going “Round and round and round—round and round and round”: the wallpaper itself behaves as a manifestation of the very affliction it induces (48, 55).

And the same, indeed, should be noted of Norris’s representation of Death Valley, which is vertiginous *not*, as Fleissner claims, because it is too vast to measure, but because it traffics in incommensurable scales for which no stable anchoring point exists. Moving from one level of reality to another in the novel’s Death Valley sequence appears to alter the very nature of perception itself, warping all narrative sense of space, time, and distance. Take, for instance, McTeague’s strange hallucination as he’s lying in a hand-dug trench in the desert floor, imagining that he’s “back in the Panamint hills,” following the path of the Amargosa River:

McTeague saw himself as another man, striding along over the sand and sagebrush...He looked, as it were, over the shoulder of this other McTeague and saw down there, in the half-light of the canyon, something dark crawling upon the ground, an indistinct figure, man or brute he did not know. Then he saw another, and another: then another. A score of black, crawling objects were following him, crawling from bush to bush, converging upon him. *They* were after him, were closing in upon him, were within touch of his hand, were at his feet—*were at his throat* (335).

McTeague stands hundreds, if not thousands of feet above the floor of Death Valley in his dream when he glances over his shoulder into the canyon and spies something “crawling” towards him. “Crawling” would seem an impossible visual distinction to make at such a distance, unless we grant that McTeague’s elevation makes the term phenomenologically appropriate: from his

perspective in the foothills, a “man or brute” moving in the canyon would appear so small as to resemble an insect crawling along the ground from only a few feet away. And yet, this perspectival rescaling seems to alter the empirical distance separating McTeague from his pursuers. Norris’s description of the figures’ rapid multiplication (“Then he saw another, and another: then another”) evokes the multiplicity of a swarm, and their particular mode of traverse (“crawling from bush to bush”) indicates a proportionality vis-à-vis the terrain remarkably different from McTeague’s human “stride,” which allows him to move “*over* the sand and sagebrush.” Is McTeague bearing witness to human-sized pursuers at a great distance or insect-sized pursuers at a short distance? This ambiguity is built into Norris’s description of the canyon itself, which he consistently refers to as a *sink*—“an awful sink of alkali,” “iniquitous and malignant”—and even ascribes to it the same noxious qualities (“he strangled and coughed and sneezed with it”) that he bestows upon the *literal* kitchen sink Vandover finds himself “crawling” around in at the end of Norris’s first novel, *Vandover and the Brute*, which also makes its protagonist cough with its “choking, acrid odour” (*McTeague* 334). Just as McTeague’s perspectives oscillate between anthropomorphizing and entomorphizing his pursuers, the dream’s perspective teeters between anthropomorphizing and entomorphizing *McTeague himself*: in this dream-like fugue, it is unclear whether he’s a human walking around in a canyon or an insect crawling around in a sink.

It makes sense, then, that the sentence depicting the strange, entomological movement of his desert pursuers concludes with the gerund phrase, “converging on him,” because it implies that the figures, whatever they are, have covered the enormous distance between the canyon and the hills in the blink of an eye—again, a logical impossibility, unless we understand that McTeague’s perspectival modulations have actually altered the landscape’s geographical

proportions.⁹¹ And this is precisely what Norris's representation of the scene suggests: as the figures move in upon the dentist—first within touch of his *hand*, then at his *feet*, then at his *throat*—they mimic the trajectory not of human agents, but of things that might emerge at hand-level (such as out of a kitchen sink), spill out onto the floor, and crawl up the length of his body.

Norris's decision to saturate Death Valley with these *domestic* connotations appears, on first glance, an inexplicable incongruity. Crawling bugs, malignant sinks, acrid odors, and choking dirt are not conventionally associated with one of the most barren environments on the planet. And yet, such associations were readily available at the turn of the century, when the American kitchen and bathroom were recoded through the discourse of Western expansion as the *new* frontier in need of the domesticating hand of civilization. "Our enemies are no longer Indians and wild animals," writes Ellen Richards, "Those were the days of big things. Today is the day of the infinitely little. To see our cruellest enemies, we must use the microscope" ("Euthenics"). Given the ease with which domestic scientists could apply frontier rhetoric to the microscopic world of the germ, it is no surprise that the American West *itself* became conceptualized as a site of residual, primitive filth that had evaded the touch of urban sanitation reformers such as George Waring. In her 1922 travelogue, *The White Heart of the Mojave*, which recounts her month-long traverse across Death Valley in a milk wagon, Edna Brush Perkins describes an encounter with a group of Panamint Indians that uncannily reproduces Norris's description of *McTeague*'s hallucination: "The Panamint Indians, in common probably with all Indians, do not count cleanliness among their virtues. The rising of the fierce, hot sun brought millions of flies which converted our dishes and camp equipment into black masses that

⁹¹ Norris is not fabricating this perspectival unsettling out of nowhere; Death Valley was known to induce this kind of disorientation. "You need a whole new adjustment of ideas of distance on the desert for the air is so clear that distant objects look stark and near," writes Edna Brush Perkins in her 1924 Death Valley travelogue (43). "What you judge to be half a mile turns out to be five, and four miles is certainly eighteen" (ibid).

crawled” (118). Here, the projects of colonial conquest and sanitary science coincide in the threat of the dirty indigenous body, whose very proximity to Perkins’ camp—itsself a mobile domestic space—transforms its appliances into filth-ridden masses imbued with grotesque insectoid mobility.

Rather than enact the oscillating optics of power imagined by sanitary experts and public health officials, the zoom in Gilman and Norris *conflates* incommensurable scales of human and nonhuman lifeworlds, producing a series of monstrous hybrids: toadstools and fungi become entangled with heads and eyeballs; human movements become indistinguishable from the creeping, crawling traverse of insects; black masses imbue domestic appliances with uncanny life. These hybrid figures are not reducible to the classically “degenerated” bodies of naturalism’s Darwinian plots so often targeted by readers as evidence of the genre’s role in “containing” and “managing” the period’s racial, class, and gender contradictions. While both “The Yellow Wallpaper” and *McTeague* have frequently been read as instances of what June Howard describes as the disciplinary project of “casting out the outcast,” or what Nadkarni describes as “a eugenic process of cleansing [the] self of racial difference,” the moments I have focused on gesture towards the *impossibility* of such purification. Indeed, both naturalists would develop these hybrid figures in their later writings: for Gilman, the microscopic parasite—“all the mosses and fungi thriving on dead wood”—would come to figure *both* the situation of the economically dependent woman *and* the period of prenatal gestation in the womb, when the fetus depends upon the life and energies of the mother (“Parasitism” 262). For Norris, the language of the germ theory and its metonymic substitutes came to preside over his entire existential lexicon: men were “human insects,” “mere animalculae,” and “motes in the sunshine” (*Octopus* 634, 651). For these writers, in other words, the entanglement between human and microscopic life

registered less the contamination of a “properly” human condition than a new ontological fact to be reckoned with.

And this process of reckoning, I have been arguing in this chapter, was a distinctly gendered one. The horror of McTeague’s desert hallucination, the nauseating vertigo of perception it instantiates and the anxieties of becoming-insectoid it produces register precisely the horror of the zoom effect’s *failure* to mediate seamlessly between separate levels of reality, precisely the horror of “The Yellow Wallpaper”’s narrator’s failure to situate herself within the endlessly proliferating “growths” of her sick room, which is to say *precisely the horror of seeing like a domestic woman in the wake of the germ theory*. This point becomes even clearer by looking at how Norris depicts Vandover’s domestic drudgery in the closing lines of *Vandover and the Brute*. Obligated to “crouch lower and lower” into the world of unseen filth beneath the sink of the working-class family he has been hired to clean for, Van’s perspective gets mired in an enumeration of hygienic threats, “the sour water, the grease, the refuse...an old hambone covered with greenish fuzz” (184). And like McTeague and Gilman’s narrator, Van is unable to disentangle himself from this miniature world, a fact that Norris underscores by locating the imperative to “zoom out” in the family’s four year-old son, who humiliatingly calls out to the prone Van, “Get up, you old lazee-bones!” (185).

The others shouted with laughter. *There* was a smart little boy for you. Ah, he’d be a man before his mother. It was wonderful how that boy saw everything that went on. He took an *interest*, that was it. You ought to see, he watched everything, and sometimes he’d plump out with things that were astonishing for a boy of his years (185).

Norris positions Vandover’s claustrophobic descent into domestic myopia against the perspective of the young boy who, as an overseer of Van’s domestic labor, “saw everything.” The boy’s panoptic perspective, Norris suggests, is the precondition for a particular *kind* of

manhood that both reveres but also usurps the place of the housewife: “He’d be a man before his mother.” The boy sees everything in a way that no one else in the scene—not Vandover, not the boy’s mother—can, because he does not participate in the labor they do. While the boy’s gaze represents the idealization of the zoom as a flexible mechanism of household administration, Vandover’s localized, embedded perspective shows how the *actual* work of scalar mediation entails a set of embodied material practices—crouching, crawling, creeping, groping—that ensnare workers within the very processes of the microbial world they are meant to manage, and how the fruit of such entanglements were of immiseration, anger, and even madness.

“The Yellow Wallpaper” is even more insistent in depicting the

But these were not the only possible responses. Indeed, to read *McTeague*, *Vandover*, and “The Yellow Wallpaper” side by side through the formal mechanism of the zoom is to grasp how Gilman’s vision, even more so than Norris’s, foregrounds the *uncertainty* and, indeed, unrealized political potentiality of interspecies relations at this moment. Notice how Gilman depicts female agency in the story as a process of tracing: the narrator’s movements in her room follow the path of what she describes as “a very funny mark on this wall, low down, near the mop-board” that resembles “a long, straight, even *smooch*, as if it had been rubbed over and over” (55). The reference to its production from repeated rubbing and its origins near the “mop-board” suggest that the “funny mark” is the product of cleaning; part of the wall has become abraded by repeated scrubbing, dusting, and mopping. The narrator’s body becomes quite literally articulated with this eroded section of wall: “here I can creep smoothly on the floor, and my shoulder just fits in that long smooch around the wall, so I cannot lose my way” (58). The narrator’s movements, in other words, are guided, though never fully determined, by a network of actants who have generated a path or blueprint irreducible to any single agency: the human-

engineered process of eradicating the colonies of dust, insects, fungi, and mold that the narrator witnesses creeping along the walls has left behind traces of itself, but these traces are produced through the interactions of humans and microbes, as the former stalk the latter, interrupting their appearance with mob, broom, and duster. In his essay on the migrational patterns of mosquitos, Neel Ahuja refers to mosquitos as the “lateral agents of human environmental processes” in that guided by traces of carbon dioxide, their behavior is motivated by the effects of human destruction. Gilman’s narrator in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” we might say, is also a lateral agent of environmental processes insofar as she is guided by the traces of domestic sanitation. Yet, as Ahuja argues, it is precisely this recognition of interspecies entanglement—“seeing” the human from the perspective of the mosquito—that allows new perspectives on the human itself to emerge.

And this is precisely what “The Yellow Wallpaper” achieves. Indeed, if the public health movement’s government of species remakes domestic labor into something uniquely nightmarish for women at the turn of the century, the fiction in which such relations were represented leaves open the question of what such nightmare conditions might engender: “I am getting angry enough to do something desperate,” remarks Gilman’s narrator in the closing lines of the story (57). Bound up with the narrator’s figurative metamorphosis into a domestic insect, “creep[ing] smoothly on the floor,” then, is a perspectival shift that enables her to rethink her relation to the collective: “I don’t like to *look* out of the windows even,” the narrator remarks, “there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast. I wonder if they all come out of that wallpaper as I did?” (58). Unlike the biopolitical project of the technocratic experts, the narrator’s shift in perspective does not reconsolidate the agency of an abstracted “human” over and against a nonhuman enemy. Rather, the narrator’s perspectival shift resituates “woman” as one excluded

excess *within* the category of the human, whose capacities for expression, action, and collective realization are inextricably bound up with the nonhuman agencies of domestic ecology. To see like an insect, in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” is to glimpse a form of female collectivity united *not* by virtue of any discrete political program but rather by virtue of a shared marginalization. Becoming-insect, “creep[ing] smoothly on the floor...so I cannot lose my way,” the narrator merges with a vision of biomaterial mass life—“numerous,” inchoate, yet full of potential.

The “shriek” that emanates from “all those strangled heads and bulbous eyes and waddling fungus growths” thus mirrors the “shrill cheer” that erupts from the disenfranchised group of young women in *Phases of an Inferior Planet*, whom Glasgow depicts as a “writhing mass of dark-bodied insects.” Both vocalizations, we might say, index a form of pre-political speech, what Aristotle would call “voice” (“the sign of pain and pleasure”) common to a host of living creatures, as opposed to “language” (the sign of political engagement), which is unique to man. Following Jacques Rancière, however, we might say that these texts’ capacity to foreground this distinction between the intelligible and the unintelligible, true language and mere voice, sheer multiplicity and qualified existence, *itself* constitutes a political act insofar as it stages a dissensus over the very meaning of having a voice in the first place for the women perpetually excluded from the poles (and public life more generally) to the drudgery of the domestic sphere. For Rancière, the political subject is precisely that which is *improper* to the space allotted it, that which is out of place in the collective, that which does not count in the official count or whose words are considered inarticulate in the official tongue. What are the proliferation of monstrous human/insect hybrids in naturalist fiction if not “a count of the uncounted,” the visibilization of a “supplementary part” that has no place in the political community precisely by virtue of its designating the boundary of the community itself? (70).

And what are the shrieks and cheers of these biomaterial swarms if not a rupture in the consistency of that community, a testing of its limits?

These readings become possible only by taking seriously the new kinds of interspecies relations made available through the zoom aesthetics of the American public health movement at the turn of the century. The strange intimacy between woman and insect that becomes visible across a range of naturalist texts reveals a strand of what we might call nineteenth-century entomological feminism, in which the necessity of scrutinizing a range of newly volatized domestic minutiae in the service of “keeping the world clean” facilitates new possibilities for theorizing the political possibilities for female collectivity. The convergence of these projects, I have been suggesting, is irreducible to the biopolitical narrative of the historicists (in which women’s emancipation is fully coextensive with their conscription as domestic agents of empire), just as it is irreducible to the posthumanist narrative of the new materialists (in which the agential possibilities of naturalism’s male heroes are multiplied through entanglements with the nonhuman). In its relentless documenting of the vertiginous horrors of human/insect relations, literary naturalism contains the traces of an affective counter-narrative which can now be read as speaking *back* to the imperial “regimes of cleanliness” that stretched from Death Valley to Cuba and beyond. As Helen Campbell herself knew, the sheer heterogeneity of women’s domestic attachments—their capacity for feeling *otherwise* than the role of vigilant sanitary guardian imputed to them—was a problem whose implications threatened to undermine the coherence of the regime of cleanliness itself. Retranslating this problem into a set of political possibilities for women specifically requires thinking anew what our biopolitical history will have been. It requires that we say with Miss Patskey, “our ignorance of the habits of those domestic insects was depressing.”

Interlude III: Parasites

In 1931, four years before her death, Charlotte Perkins Gilman penned an essay called “Parasitism and Civilized Vice,” which appeared in a popular collection of writing concerning the “woman question,” *Woman’s Coming of Age: A Symposium*. As its title suggests, Gilman’s essay addresses the phenomenon of parasitism, the process whereby one organism lives on or inside the body of another, its host, and derives subsistence at the latter’s expense. Gilman begins the essay by acknowledging the sheer ubiquity of parasitism across the vegetable and animal kingdoms: bacteria, fungi, mistletoe, fleas, ticks, hookworms, not to mention orchids, fish and mammalian fetuses all occupy the position of parasite during part or all of their life-cycles. Thus despite parasitism’s “offensive connotation,” she writes, “as a natural process it carries in itself no reproach” (261). Indeed, so overwhelming is Gilman’s catalogue of parasitic relationships traversing the human *umwelt* that by the end of the essay’s opening paragraphs, the term itself comes to look like a metaphor for an ever-expanding ecological network of interspecies entanglements: as Gilman quotes a nursery rhyme, “*Big bugs have little bug and these have less to bite ‘em/ Lesser bugs have smaller bugs and so ad infinitum*” (ibid).

However, the whimsical tone of the essay’s introduction cannot last. The issue that most concerns Gilman is one particular kind of parasitic relationship that she argues is unique to human animals, female sex parasitism, wherein a woman exchanges private access to her productive and reproductive labor for complete economic dependence upon the male of the species. “It has remained for humanity to show us the unique spectacle of a parasitic female,” writes Gilman, which she defines as “a creature who economically considered, at best shares in a consortium of low-grade activities, and at worst has no industrial faculties, but is entirely supported by the male” (265).

Gilman's shift in emphasis from biological to what she calls "social" parasitism is notable for at least two reasons (264). As she herself acknowledges in the essay's opening lines, the parasite's etymology is already explicitly social, not biological. Deriving from the Ancient Greek terms *para* (beside) and *sitos* (food, grain), the parasite originally referred to "one who frequents the tables of the rich and earns his welcome by flattery, hence a hanger-on-, a fawning flatterer, a sychophant" (Gilman 261). While contemporary usage often supposes that the word parasite is a *zoomorphism* applied to humans after belatedly from an "originary" biological realm, the imputation of parasitism was in fact *always* an anthropomorphism that only gained traction in the natural sciences during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. Why, then, does Gilman insist upon repeating in her essay the same detour through the realm of biology that the parasite experienced in its long-durational semantic trajectory?

This question gains additional force when one considers the resources of socioeconomic critique that Gilman already had at her disposal to theorize woman's structural dependency within the bourgeois monogamous family unit. Margaret Fuller's "The Great Lawsuit" (1843), for instance, acutely diagnosed the contradictions attending women's relegation to the private sphere, where "if kept from excitement, she is not from drudgery" (1628), while Friedrich Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) famously referred to women's position in the home as the "open or concealed domestic slavery" necessary to the reproduction of the exploitative relationship between labor and capital they were nevertheless barred from entering (89). Both texts, we might say, elucidate the double movement of social parasitism, in which women's only access to economic independence flows through her husband, while the family unit as a whole plays host to the parasitic vampire of capital itself.

What, then, does Gilman's detour through the biological do for her description of female parasitism? The answer is that it links the discourse of parasitism to the theory of degeneracy, a coupling that allows Gilman to argue that female economic dependency not only maintains women's collective subordination but actually undermines the project of racial improvement to which the nation's mothers, in her view, were required to commit themselves. "The disadvantage of parasitism is in its arrest of development," she writes, a consequence that she maintains is of little significance with respect to *interspecies* parasitic relations, but that becomes extraordinarily dangerous between two human beings who might ostensibly reproduce.⁹² "Social parasitism is an infinitely greater evil, its exponents being also human. In proportion to their prevalence is our social evolution delayed, while maintaining unabated the primitive faculties and appetites of sub-human egotism" (265).

The adjective "sub-human" recurs repeatedly in "Parasitism and Civilized Vice" to refer to the state of the dependent female domestic, and Gilman was not using it haphazardly. Indeed, according to Gilman, it was not simply the case that those women "entirely supported by the male" were subordinated and controlled, their capacities for self-determination everywhere stymied—rather, they were physically and mentally degenerating into a more primitive species.⁹³ It's likely that Gilman discovered the supposed connection between parasitism and degeneracy through the work of Ray Lankester, British educator, zoologist, evolutionary biologist and director of the Natural History Museum, who played a crucial role in bringing the pseudo-

⁹² Gilman explains her reasoning thus: "The innumerable parasites of the lower world are of different species from their hosts. The injury to the host is mainly in loss of nutrition, and sometimes in toxic deposits or in the ramblings of trichinae and the like, while the injury to the parasite in the abortion of all higher faculties is no consequence to the host" (265).

⁹³ Strains of post-Darwinian evolutionary theory—for instance, the work of Herbert Spencer—posited evolution as a teleological process moving inexorably from states of simplicity to states of increasing complexity. This made the concept of "devolution" or "degeneration" as applied to the evolution of species possible, although Lamackarian premises concerning the inheritance of acquired characteristics easily allowed the concept to be applied to individuals, as well. Most late nineteenth-century theories of degeneration, such as Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892), used the term in its social rather than biological register.

scientific notion of degeneration into the social sciences. The mechanism for this conceptual transfer was the figure of the parasite, which, in his 1880 text, *Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism*, Lankester locates as the primary “antecedent of degenerative evolution” (52).

Any new set of conditions occurring to an animal which render its food and safety very easily attained, seem to lead as a rule to Degeneration; just as an active healthy man sometimes degenerates when he becomes suddenly possessed of a fortune; or as Rome degenerated when possessed of the riches of the ancient world. The habit of parasitism clearly acts upon animal organization in this way. Let the parasitic life once be secured, and away go legs, jaws, eyes, and ears; the active, highly-gifted crab, insect, or annelid may become a mere sac, absorbing nourishment and laying eggs (33).

Lankester’s linkage of parasitism with degeneracy occurs here through the vocabulary of biomaterial reduction, in which a mobile, complex, and fully differentiated organism becomes—over an unspecified period of time—an immobile, simple, and undifferentiated “sac” once it has “easily attained” the means of subsistence.

Gilman’s essay traffics in the same sort of devolutionary imagery, but it goes a step further than Lankester in conflating the degeneration of the woman with the degeneration of the fetus she will ostensibly bring into the world. What Gilman calls the “socially aborted woman,” reduced to a state of abject parasitism upon “the higher man,” will be beset with “peculiar defects in what we call ‘human nature,’” and will thus perpetuate the race *not* with truly individuated life but rather something like mere animate matter, “cursed with idiocy, lunacy, [and] a moronic average” (273). The discourse of abortion, here, serves to link the arrested development of the parasitic woman, a kind of figurative “sac, absorbing nourishment and laying eggs,” with the arrested development of the parasite that she will bear (or not bear) into the world. In both cases the biomaterial figure of mere life, the “aborted” woman or the “aborted” fetus, names the parasitic excess that needs to be excised from the sphere of proper reproduction.

And yet, I would argue that this figurative equation calls into question the very distinction the essay begins by establishing: namely the difference between parasitism as a “natural process” and parasitism as the unnatural, dangerous effect of degeneration. The reason for this, of course, is that motherhood, as Gilman recognizes, is essentially constituted by parasitism: “The fetus may be called an endoparasite,” she writes, “drawing its life from the mother internally; the suckling an ectoparasite, a free individual but still nourished from her body. So long as supported by parents the life of the child is still parasitic, and in this sense the woman who does not earn her own living may be so classed” (261). Notice how the very argumentative move Gilman deploys to establish the parasite as a figure of degeneracy—ie. the conflation of the term’s social and biological registers—here functions to *normalize* the parasite as simply part of the natural order of childrearing. The fetus appropriates nutrients, then milk and other nourishments, then money and other commodities from the mother and parents in order to live. These appropriations, Gilman notes, are entirely natural: “The immediate necessity, as organisms developed from a mere floating stomach to a more complicated structure with different functions, was to distribute to all the other parts the nourishment obtained by the mouth and digested by the stomach” (263). Sap, blood, but also money (“society’s blood”) represent, for Gilman, in a formulation that harkens explicitly to Jack London’s vision of biomaterial transactions outlined in Chapter One, “the very juice of life” that must be circulated between and amongst bodies in order for any life to thrive (263, 264).

Here, the parasitic image of “a mere floating stomach” appears *not* as the degenerate *telos* of modernity but as the condition of possibility for life as such. And if the parasite, in Gilman’s biomaterial imagination, is simultaneously the alpha and omega of the evolutionary process, it is also a figure that I want to suggest is fundamentally uncontainable within the terms of her

argument. Notice, for instance, how the figure of the mother in Gilman's example is both parasite and host, the eater and the eaten, her body the primary site of a seemingly infinite proliferations of parasitic relationships. First, she is host to the fetus living inside of her, a parasite that partakes of the subsistence inside her body; yet that very *substance* is a product of the mother's *own* parasitism upon her husband. Moreover, if the latter form of parasitism leads to "peculiar defects" in the mother, then it also, by Gilman's logic, impinges upon the former parasitic relation between mother and fetus (and later, infant), whereby the mother circulates "the very juice of life" to her offspring. How shall we differentiate between Gilman's "mere floating stomach," a sign of evolution, and Lankester's "mere sac" of absorption, a sign of devolution? The natural blurs into the unnatural. At the same time, the husband too emerges in this network as a kind of parasite—dining at the table of the other whose labor he appropriates without recompense. He, too, is "beside the grain" of the food. How can one possibly disentangle the "good" parasites from the "bad," the "natural" from the "unnatural," in this interlocking circuit, where each term threatens to bleed into its opposite?

The parasite, we might say, represents an ambiguous *supplement* in Gilman's essay, understood specifically in the deconstructive sense. On the one hand, the parasite is that which arrives from the outside to disturb or disrupt the order of the system; it is an unnatural excess that "deforms" and "aborts" the normal workings of things, and as such must be evacuated or contained. On the other hand, however, the parasite supplements in the sense of *enabling*: it fills in what the system lacks, puts it into motion, establishes the conditions of its emergence, and thus appears absolutely necessary for it. This constitutive tension has been at the center of recent discussions of the figure of the parasite in both philosophy and literary criticism. In his Preface to Michel Serres' *The Parasite*, for instance, Lawrence Schehr notes that "the parasite is a

thermal exciter,” “both the atom of a relation and the production of a change in this relation,” and thus could be thought of as a figure for systemicity as such (x). In the same work, Serres asks, “Who will ever know whether parasitism is an obstacle to its proper functioning or if it is its very dynamics? If we eliminate these tie-ups, would a system still remain?” (27).

Deconstructive critics have taken up the aporia of the parasite—its dual and contradictory role as both obstacle and enabler—to argue for the inescapability of textual interpretation, the recognition that “there is no conceptual expression without figure, and no intertwining of concept and figure without an implied story, narrative, or myth, in this case the story of the alien guest in the home” (Miller 443). Following these readings, we might say that the parasite, in my reading of Gilman’s essay, functions parasitically in her own text, disrupting its explicit intentions and imagining strange figural crossings of life and matter that destabilize her argument from within.

The next chapter also takes up the issue of parasites, supplements, and biomaterial excess, but from the perspective of a writer who, I will argue, recognized more acutely than Gilman the ways in which figuration works to deform appeals to the proper and the natural. Edith Wharton, like Gilman, wrote persistently about the problem of locating “life” within both textual and biological bodies, and about the many forms of parasitism both organic and inorganic that intervene to enable, prolong, and extend that life. While I have used Gilman’s interest in the biological parasite to situate her within the historical context of the American public health movement, I take up Wharton’s writing in a different biopolitical context that nevertheless also foregrounds the imperative of distinguishing proper from improper life at the turn of the century: medical debates over ethics of euthanasia and various forms of life support. And whereas Gilman’s invocation of the parasite undermines her ability to differentiate between two forms of life, I argue that Wharton’s euthanasia narrative also pivots upon a biomaterial figure but for

diametrically opposed purposes: to suggest that life itself is *improper* from the very start, always already deformed by the technico-discursive forms that make it legible.

CHAPTER FOUR

Keeping a Novel Alive:

Edith Wharton's Biotextual Imagination

I have always been interested in the subject of survival, the meaning of which is not supplemental to life or death. It is originary: life is survival. Survival in the conventional sense of the term means to continue to live, but also to live after death.

--- Jacques Derrida

It is safe to say (since the surest way of measuring achievement in art is by survival) that the test of the novel is that its people should be *alive*.

--- Edith Wharton

This chapter maps the terrain of a biomaterial imagination contemporaneous with but divergent from the various articulations we have seen in London, Chesnutt, Gilman, and Glasgow albeit through a similar constellation of topics: namely, the relationship between the material text, the authorial persona, and the biological body in Edith Wharton's fiction and non-fiction writings. I coin the term "biotextuality" to refer to a system of figuration traceable across her career in which material texts and organic bodies blur together as hybrid entities. I suggest that this representational mode offers Wharton a set of conceptual tools to think through the problem of *survival* as it pertains to both texts and living bodies in a cultural of material obsolescence and biopolitical regulation. Wharton's anxieties about "keeping a novel alive" on the literary market took shape through narratives about keeping alive bodies that have been subject to various forms of disfigurement, injury, or exanimation. The two discourses of survival continually index one another across her writings. In Wharton's authorial imagination, both bodies and texts demand preservation against an ever-encroaching decay or dissolution through forms of mediation that simultaneously seem to compromise their lively integrity. Whereas Jack

London, for instance, imagined networks of writers and readers participating in an anonymous circuit of vital transaction, Wharton's biotextual relays function as prosthetic life-support systems, both necessary and threatening in their status as supplements.

In this chapter, I show that Wharton's biotextual hybrids have remained obscured from her readers precisely because of their ontological indeterminacy, which demands a suppler frame of analysis than the critical lens of "antimodernism" (through which she is often read) tends to permit. I go on to explain how Wharton's engagement with the practices of progressive publishing at the turn of the century provide a useful historical context for situating her vision of the fraught processes involved in keeping a novel alive, and I close by emphasizing the reciprocal structure of this problematic through a reading of *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), a novel in which biological survival hinges upon the material persistence of the textual artifact. I argue that Wharton's biotextual imagination at its most radical critiqued the viability of a "pure" or "authentic" locus from which modernity's meanings might fully emerge—be it the unsullied past, the race, the autonomy of the aesthetic, or the category of the "human" itself—and thus offers us a way into reassessing the dominant characterization of her writing as forwarding a reactionary, conservative, and antimodernist agenda.

Wharton's biotextuality, of the four instances of American literature's biomaterial imagination discussed in this project, is the most attentive to the way in which figures of irreducible life—"bundles of senseless reflexes," "anonymous morsel[s] of humanity," "mere vegetable life"—are not anterior to but rather *engendered through* discursive acts. This point will be elaborated thoroughly in the final section of this chapter, but it is important to keep in mind as scholars in the fields of biopolitics herald recent attention to the concepts of life and matter as a welcome return to questions of "the real" long held in abeyance during poststructuralism's

preoccupation with language and mediation. Edith Wharton's writing forcefully disrupts this (false) opposition by demonstrating that the very notion of an irreducible vital substance is *itself* an invention of historically situated representational strategies precipitated out of the encounter between biopolitical science and literary representations at the turn of the century. Historicizing our own theoretical moment in this way brings its political and ethical stakes into sharper relief. Looking back to Wharton's complex treatment of medical euthanasia in *The Fruit of the Tree*, what materializes is a prescient vision of the way power continues to operate in new and troubling ways, not in spite of but *because* of a radical uncertainty over what counts as life, what counts as human, and who enforces the distinction.

I. Biotextuality

Wharton's 1934 autobiography, *A Backward Glance*, is better known for its omissions than its revelations, one recent biographer calling it "an impressively evasive exercise in good manners and self-screening" (Lee 715).⁹⁴ This reaction is informed, in part, by scholars' relatively recent access, since 1968, to Wharton's private letters, which revealed a plethora of private trials and affiliations previously unknown to her popular audience: bouts of severe depression and illness, monetary anxieties, a deeply unhappy marriage, and a three-year adulterous love affair with Morton Fullerton, mutual friend of Henry James, who was helping her publish *The House of Mirth* in France. The apparent contrast thereby brought into sharp relief between the impression of her text's polished surfaces and their potentially sordid depths encouraged the trend of grounding critical readings of her work in biographical details—especially illicit ones.⁹⁵ It also helped fuel a genuine second wave of scholarly interest in

⁹⁴ Cynthia Griffin Wolff writes: "In *A Backward Glance* Edith Wharton gives a very limited chronicle of her own artistic growth, and the tone is stately—even when it is most candid—and measured and modulated" (9).

⁹⁵ Wharton criticism as a whole is deeply biographical, with her letters often comprising a significant portion of argumentative evidence. See arguments in Jennie A. Kassanoff's *Edith Wharton and the Politics of Race* or Nancy

Wharton's work, especially from feminist critics, who pushed back against the characterizations of her writing by midcentury male critics as simply too much a part of her own aristocratic milieu to be of lasting literary value, and argued that the poise of her prose concealed a politicized dagger aimed at the heart of America's patriarchal institutions.⁹⁶

However, *A Backward Glance*, in spite of its "good manners," has a lot to say on its surface about a hermeneutics of surface and depth, and might very well be read as Wharton's late-life rebuttal to the familiar imperative to locate the living motivations lurking "behind" the words on the page. The text opens with a remarkable passage that suggests the impossibility of disentangling (and thus prioritizing) the three etymological strands constitutive of the autobiographical genre: the self (*auto*), organic life (*bios*), and the written mark (*graphia*):

It was on a bright day of midwinter, in New York. The little girl who eventually became me, but as yet was neither me nor anybody else in particular, but merely a soft anonymous morsel of humanity—this little girl, who bore my name, was going for a walk with her father. The episode is literally the first thing I can remember about her, and therefore I date the birth of her identity from that day (777).

Here, Wharton recounts the "birth" of authorial selfhood as an effect of her own performative utterance: "*I date the birth of her identity from that day.*" In this fantasy of authorial self-inscription, the writer produces herself retroactively, through an anachronistic logic that recurs a few chapters later when she describes herself as having "no real personality of my own...till my

Bentley's *Frantic Panoramas* (2009). This trend is also evidenced by the fact that three of the most important scholarly texts on Wharton are themselves biographies: R.W.B. Lewis's *Edith Wharton: A Biography* (1975), Wolff's *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* (1995), and Hermione Lee's *Edith Wharton* (2007).

⁹⁶ The midcentury view is exemplified in Irving Howe's "The Achievement of Edith Wharton" (1962), with its charged claim that Old New York "was too fatally *her* world, beyond choice or escape, and it would serve her as lifelong memory, lifelong subject, perhaps lifelong trauma" (11). This view goes as far back as V.L. Parrington's *Main Currents of American Thought* (1927). For the political "turn" in Wharton criticism, Cynthia Griffin Wolff's *A Feast of Words: The Triumph of Edith Wharton* (1977) and Elizabeth Ammons' *Edith Wharton's Argument with America* (1980) are key for polemically reframing the conversation surrounding Wharton's work away from her imputed elitism and toward her engagements with "the woman question" during the fin de siècle. Dale Bauer's *Edith Wharton's Brave New Politics* (1994) builds off of these insights in a more explicitly new historicist register oriented primarily around Wharton's mostly-maligned late-career work.

first volume of short stories was published” (868). Wharton imagines seeing a book with her name on it in a bookshop window and thinks to herself: “*I* had written short stories that were thought worthy of preservation! Was it the same insignificant *I* that I had always known?”

Any one walking along the streets might go into any bookshop, and say: “Please give me Edith Wharton’s book,” and the clerk, without bursting into incredulous laughter, would produce it, and be paid for it, and the purchaser would walk home with it and read it, and talk of it, and pass it on to other people to read! (869).

The central conceit, again, is that the text does not reflect, hide, or gesture toward but actually *creates* the self from which the written work originates. Wharton’s act of recognition entails a literal *re-cognition* of herself as sharing an identity with the name in the bookshop window. Interpellated by the externalized form of her own public image, the referent “Edith Wharton” becomes indissociable from the chains of production, advertisement, and distribution through which the authorial persona is produced in the first place. But this potential for self-production occurs at the expense of self-alienation, a risk that *A Backward Glance* represents as an uncanny doubling at the core of the “self”: when Wharton performatively enacts the birth of her identity, she simultaneously invokes something antecedent to identity that is both her and not-her, “an anonymous morsel of humanity,” a living thing without features, abstract and undifferentiated that constitutes the very ground of individuation. The notion that before we have “identities” we subsist as something like abstract or unformed life, *mere biomatter*, and that through the act of writing and participation in the market we might come to (mis)recognize ourselves in our public self-projections, entails, for Wharton, the correlative possibility that the very process of artistic production, the act of writing ourselves into existence through works that the public will “read, and talk of and pass on to other people to read,” exposes us to the same set of *deformations* and *disfigurements* that furnish the conditions of our own legibility.

As we will see in what follows, Wharton's choice of the term "preservation" to describe getting into print—its associations with organic matter: fruit and animal meat, but also human bodies—is not incidental. Preservation (or *survival*, as she also called it) is, for Wharton, the primary goal of the literary artist, whose highest achievement is "keeping a novel alive" by imbuing it with "that imponderable something more which causes life to circulate in it, and preserves it for a little from decay" ("Visibility 163; "Introduction xiii). But the process of preservation is always ambiguous: it is both the sign of a work's "worthiness" (as Wharton realized upon seeing her book in the bookshop window) as well as an indication that forms of mediation, supplementation, and translation have intervened in its existence; it signifies a displacement of the work's phantasmatic singularity into a heterogeneous network of forces that potentially denature and contaminate it. Because Wharton understands texts as lively things that err towards their own dissolution and obsolescence, preservation always entails what she calls "an antiseptic quality" ("Visibility 163), something synthetic or artificial, something that "*causes* life to circulate in it," in the same way that market transactions cause commodities to circulate without guarantees of their effects upon the reading public. Keeping a novel alive, for Wharton, could look strange, like a form of embalming or artificial resuscitation, a form of life-support, or even of reanimating the dead and making them walk. Keeping a novel alive was a necessity that always seemed to jeopardize the quality of liveliness it sought to preserve.

This mutual contamination of *graphia* by *bios*, writing by life and vice versa, meant that Wharton frequently referred to bodies in the same way she referred to texts: as artifacts in need of careful preservation—but a preservation that always seemed on the cusp of turning them into hybrid monstrosities. It is strange, for instance, that she prefaces the first chapter of *A Backward Glance* with a list of suggestions as to how, "[i]n spite of illness, in spite of even the arch-enemy

sorrow, one *can* remain alive long past the usual date of disintegration” (771), until it becomes clear that the book we hold in our hands *is* precisely what Wharton envisioned as the preservative supplement, and through it the figure of the author arrives to us as already desiccated or mummified, held back from the edge of sheer disintegration. The relationship is chiasmic: Wharton imagined human survival *by way of* the material persistence of texts, and also understood textual production as a mode of human survival: “Why, before long I shall become a classic!” announces a character in her 1901 dialogue, “Copy,” “Bound in sets and kept on the top bookshelf—brr, doesn’t that sound freezing? I shall be as lonely as an Etruscan museum” (283). But the form of life that authorship potentially offers can be difficult to distinguish from the mummification through which texts persist through time: “this is very like unrolling a mummy,” says another character of a long-lost letter he has recovered (281). *A Backward Glance* draws this relay between living body and textual artifact into sharpest relief by offering two extreme visions of authorial life that emerge against the background of the literary marketplace: on the one hand, the “soft anonymous morsel of humanity” that indicates the disfigurements at the heart of identity; and on the other hand, the mummified writer, preserved “long past the usual date of disintegration.” In both cases, the materiality of life and its inevitable deformations do not precede the materiality of writing and its inevitable circulations, but are intimately bound up with one another, borrowing each other’s characteristics, and creating new hybrid forms.

Biotextuality denotes the system of representation that Wharton establishes to organize and deploy the confluences of texts and bodies in her fictional and non-fictional writing. It refers not only to the proliferation of hybrids that such confluences produce—figures through which texts take on the properties of living organisms (the capacities for growth, deterioration, decay) and bodies become subject to the features of textual inscription (grafting, translation, misreading,

disfiguration)—but also to the narrative mechanisms she constructs for articulating problems of bodily preservation alongside aesthetic preservation, such that hermeneutic or poetic questions become implicated in biological questions of life or death, and vice versa. Translated into the language of today's theoretical orientations, a set of deconstructive questions pertaining to the materiality of language and the logic of the trace, and a set of biopolitical questions pertaining to the administration, optimization, and differentiation of life are consistently feeding into one another, shedding light upon the contemporary relationship between the two theoretical movements, and rendering the divide between the biological and the textual in Wharton's work increasingly indistinct. My argument is that a properly nuanced account of Wharton's biotextual imagination is crucial for reframing the critical conversation surrounding her cultural elitism and the commitment to various forms of racial and aesthetic purity it is frequently assumed to entail. As we will see, this purity is often figured in her work through the twinned images of the autogenetic organism and the autopoietic text—images that, as our brief look at *A Backward Glance* already suggests, are consistently being challenged and disrupted by the intermixings constitutive of her biotextual imagination. Biotextual figures reveal the heterogeneous networks of mediation that make temporal persistence of any form possible: to survive is always to be linked up to new processes and mechanisms that compromise the fantasy of self-sufficiency. Where this potentially tragic vision harnesses the potential for radical critique is when these forms of compromise (such as making oneself available to a popular market of readers) become, for Wharton, both the originary gesture of aesthetic creation and the very condition of temporal becoming—what she calls the “disfigurations” and “alterations” intrinsic to life “when [it] has thoroughly dealt with us” (“Visibility 169).

I concretize these claims historically by framing them in the context of Wharton's relationship to the changing modes of production, publicity, and distribution that were transforming American publishing practices at the turn of the century. Frequently characterized as a war between democratic progressives and elite conservatives, the field of literary publishing, as we will see, becomes the site for a familiar set of oppositions to be played out in tension with one another: aesthetic autonomy versus commodification, creative genius versus corporate entity, aristocratic aestheticism versus mass-market appeal. As a massively successful and popular author with explicitly genteel sensibilities, Wharton is almost always described as being ambivalently positioned with respect to such oppositions. This chapter seeks to challenge the consensus of ideological "ambivalence"—so common a characterization amongst new historicist work—by offering Wharton's biotextuality, in its most fully realized forms, as a radically deconstructive alternative. This, of course, does not mean that Wharton herself was a radical, nor would she have come close to identifying as one, but that her writings frequently theorize themselves as enterprises in which ideological centers cannot hold. This chapter thus expands upon Dale Bauer's claim that Wharton's capacity for "thinking against herself," for "interrogating one's own values by imagining real alternatives to one's own" proves the most dynamic and challenging aspect in her work (9).

II. We Have Never Been Antimodern

One of the central claims of this chapter is that the hybrid ontologies and mediation networks designated by the term biotextuality have remained largely invisible to Wharton's readers—and, correlatively, that the very act of naming them is the first step in bringing them to light for more careful analysis. I want to suggest that this failure to recognize the complexity and heterogeneous composition of these hybrid forms is symptomatic of a tendency to partition the

world into discrete ontological realms that Wharton's readers actually import from the one theoretical assumption underwriting their divergent interpretations of her work: namely, that her writing articulates a shifting but sustained "antimodernist" position. Despite the ideological divide between a politicized, proto-feminist Wharton who wages an "argument with America," and a genteel conservative Wharton who holds reactionary views on race, class, and culture, accounts appear united on this one front. "Critics generally agree that Wharton possessed an 'antimodernist' outlook," writes Bentley, "a skeptical and largely disapproving perspective on the changing mores of her time. In Wharton's eyes, the erosion of traditional social orders and the rise of mass culture threatened to damage beyond repair the kind of rich interior life she prized the most" ("Wharton, Travel, Modernity" 148). And yet, "antimodernism" proves somewhat of a conceptual vanishing point in Wharton criticism. Some studies deploy the term but do not cite it at all, presuming its meaning to be self-evident; others refer to works in which the word itself does not appear; while others point to Jackson Lears' *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (1981) as the definitive study on the subject, even though Wharton herself is almost entirely absent from Lears' work, save as a loose associate of hardline antimodernists, such as Theodore Roosevelt or George Cabot Lodge.⁹⁷

In Lears' well-known account, antimodernism designates the diverse and ambivalent responses by America's privileged elite to the sense that "real life" was growing increasingly elusive during the decades straddling the turn of the century, and that formerly reliable forms of cultural authority (God, the patriarchal family, the race, the ethos of productive individualism)

⁹⁷ As a few examples: Bentley consistently invokes Lears throughout her writings on Wharton especially vis-à-vis "antimodernism"; Jennifer Haytock's *Edith Wharton and the Conversations of Literary Modernism* (2008) has an entire chapter with "antimodernism" in the title without defining it or referring to Lears's work; and strangely, Kaplan's *The Social Construction of American Realism* cites Irving Howe's essay, "The Achievement of Edith Wharton" as the place to go to find an account of Wharton's "antimodernism."

could no longer provide psychic and social strongholds against the accelerating, secularizing, and bureaucratizing effects of industrial capitalism. “Europeans and Americans alike began to recognize that the triumph of modern culture had not produced greater autonomy (which was the official claim) but rather had promoted a spreading sense of moral impotence and spiritual sterility—a feeling that life had become not only overcivilized but curiously unreal” (4-5). Antimodernist recoil, according to Lears, presented itself in a diverse set of practices seeking to reclaim “authentic” experience from the ephemerality of bourgeois life: these practices included militarism and the Rooseveltian injunction toward the “strenuous life,” various forms of simple-life and arts and crafts movements, mind-cure trends and mysticism (often supposedly grounded in Eastern or Medieval cultures), as well as a heightened interest in Catholicism and other pathways toward unmediated spiritual experience. In Lears’ estimate, such outlets for antimodernist values proved historically significant primarily for their ability to channel and redirect dissent against the increasingly rationalizing and alienating processes of industrial capitalism into a form that actually *smoothed* the very transition such practices meant to combat:

By exalting “authentic” experience as an end in itself, antimodern impulses reinforced the shift from a Protestant ethos of salvation through self-denial to a therapeutic ideal of self-fulfillment in *this* world through exuberant health and intense experience. The older morality embodied the “producer culture” of an industrializing entrepreneurial society; the newer nonmorality embodied the “consumer culture” of a bureaucratic corporate state. Antimodernists were far more than escapists: their quests for authenticity eased their own and others’ adjustments to a streamlined culture of consumption (Lears xvi).

It is worth pointing out that Wharton’s antimodernism is often posited (as in Bentley’s quote above) in a much more limited sense than Lears defines it here—that is, as a general “skepticism” or conservative impulse vis-à-vis the new permeability of social spheres due to the rise of a moneyed bourgeoisie. Moreover, critics frequently invoke Wharton as an antimodernist

in order to interrogate or problematize that label, even in its more limited sense.⁹⁸ The question then arises as to why one need even insist upon the term at all if neither the elaborated version Lears offers, nor its more restricted senses are helpful heuristic terms for situating her work?

The reason for the persistence of the antimodernist label, I want to suggest, has less to do with the specificity of Lears' historical claims and more with the particular orientation or thought-style that the term makes available through his work, and which gets subsequently redeployed in its appropriation by other readers. Importantly, Lears not only laments the process by which the radical edge of antimodernist thought became subsumed into an emerging "therapeutic" individualism, he also sees the antimodernists as "antecedents of my own quest for an 'authentic,' independent point of view" (xx). This gesture positions Lears' own project of recovery in *No Place of Grace* as homologous to the antimodernists' project of recovery one hundred years earlier: it recapitulates their argument less at the level of content (ie. less in the precise *manner* by which the real might be attained), and more at the level of form (ie. the sense that there *is* a real to recover in the first place). What this echoed appeal to authenticity risks producing, however, is a vision of history as a foregone conclusion, whose meanings have already unfolded and whose credits and debits have already been tallied—tallied, no less, by the "independent point of view" instantiated by Lears himself. This tentative redemption of antimodernist values not only means that antimodernism's dynamic potential has come and gone (Lears' vision is thus "tragic" in the same way Henry Adams' worldview is celebrated for its "tragic sense of life amidst a national chorus of self-congratulation") (xvi), but also that the

⁹⁸ Amy Kaplan, in *The Social Construction of American Realism* (1988), foregrounds Wharton's "apprenticeship" in the literary market and her modest embrace of the "professional" persona as the grounds to "contest...the traditional view of Wharton as an antimodernist" (67); in *Edith Wharton's Brave New Politics* (1994), Dale Bauer argues that the antimodernist label obfuscates Wharton's late-career turn to Progressive era political issues and "wrongly erases Wharton's profound concern for changing her culture" (4); and in *Frantic Panoramas: American Literature and Mass Culture 1870-1920* (2009), Nancy Bentley puts pressure on the designation by arguing that Wharton's paradigmatically "modern" love of speed and the thrill of risk inform the structure of her fiction.

metric for gauging such potential gets articulated as a battle between “authentic” and “inauthentic” commitments, between positions that increased or diminished human autonomy, and modes of existence that resisted or perpetuated the cultural hegemony of the bourgeoisie. This black-boxing of history—turning it *ex post facto* into a game of winners and losers—is visible in the semantic transition between an “older morality” and a “newer nonmorality,” terms that underscores the zero-sum nature of the game Lears often finds himself playing.

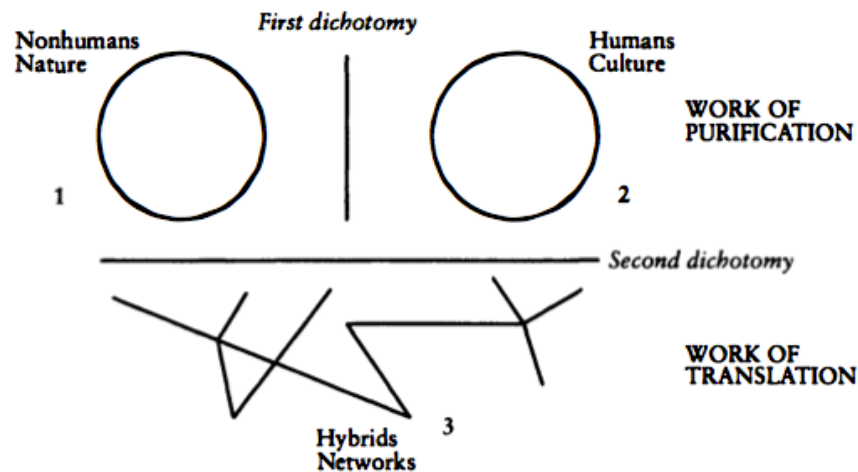
I want to suggest, then, that the invocation of Wharton’s “antimodernism” works primarily to delimit the sphere of “real” or “authentic” agents, forces, and figures in her texts—those whose modes of existence bear true scholarly significance, and those that do not. It accomplishes this by imagining individuals and texts as entities existing *within* a context that is already taken for granted as given, already built up “around” them, rather than something perpetually made and remade by diverse assemblages of human and non-human actors who make up the collective world they also inhabit. Because it appeals to a modernity whose constitutive parts we already recognize, whose outcome we know in advance, and a cast of participants whose power to enact change has been determined by a metric that precedes it, the discourse of antimodernism tends to divide the field of critical analysis into discrete categories that we assume constitute independent zones of inquiry, rather than letting the assemblages themselves determine what can be seen or not seen, what is moral or unmoral, and what counts as authentic or inauthentic experience.

One way to parse this problem more substantially is to turn to Bruno Latour’s polemical treatise *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993)—a work that has garnered less traction in literary studies than other branches of the humanities—for its strong attempt to reconceptualize modernity (along with its siblings, anti- and postmodernity) in ways that bear significantly upon

their use in Wharton criticism. For Latour, the concept of modernity demands radical rethinking because the double shift it has been used to index—"a break in the regular passage of time" and "a quarrel in which there are winners and losers, Ancients and Moderns" (10)—has become increasingly incapable of describing an epoch that knows neither whether it is reaching the culmination, termination or acceleration of that time designated by the Modern Era, nor whose side has actually won the war "modernity" is perpetually being invoked to settle. Lears' study is representative here because it is invested in simultaneously declaring that the match is over—the antimodernists "lost" to modernity—but also that the conflict is interminable, overflowing into the arena of "postmodernity," where only the mode of expression has altered: "the logical outcome of antimodernism in America," for Lears, is "the vision of a self in endless development," a vision which is "perfectly attuned to an economy based on pointless growth and ceaseless destruction" (306-307). These new expressions of antimodernism fall short, for Lears, in the same way as their predecessors: by failing to link up to "any frame of reference outside the self" (306). But such a world of authentic exteriority—be it God, Nature, History—is perpetually revealing itself, in Lears' analysis, to be *nothing but* a construction of human culture, an ideological placeholder for one set of group interests over another. *No Place of Grace* thus commits itself to finding redemption in the very realm it is constantly revealing to lack all authenticity, which explains why its claims are not limited to a specific historical epoch, but continue unimpeded into the present. The text's most pressing argument, then, is less historical than it is methodological: it argues for the unending demystifications of critique itself by organizing the world into authentic and inauthentic realms whose valences can slide endlessly back and forth into one another. Just as antimodernists could be shown to mistake forms of unmediated engagement with the "real" for the "evasive banality of modern culture," so too

might cultural forces be disparaged for their inability to attain a world of meaning beyond mere human interests. The “real” always exists on the *other* side of an abyss, no matter which side the agents of critique happen to be on.

Latour sees precisely this critical impasse as defining our contemporary intellectual moment. In response, he argues that modernity is best understood not as a historical period, movement, or point of rupture, but a set of thinking practices that organize the world according to a paradoxical distribution of intelligibility that he calls the Modern Constitution:



This constitution is divided into two halves of unequal visibility: the top half is dedicated to what he calls the “work of purification,” the processes that divide and stabilize the common world into distinct ontological zones of humans and nonhumans, phenomena of nature and phenomena of culture, objective and subjective realities, etc. This half enables our critical penchant of unmasking and demystifying—the sanctification of “social forces” or the hardening of “natural facts”—because it sorts entities according to their immanence or transcendence in a particular terrain of knowledge production.⁹⁹ The other half of the constitution corresponds to the

⁹⁹ So, to take an example from Lears: from one perspective, that of the antimodernists, the transatlantic “arts and crafts” movement at the fin-de-siècle located the *true* meaning of labor in careful, laborious, artisanal craftsmanship

“work of translation,” and refers to the perpetual mixing of ontological states and synthesizing of new heterogeneous networks that actually compose our epistemological projects across the disciplines. This half consistently introduces friction, resistance, problems of continuity and translatability, and new questions into our critical enterprises, because it is precisely by virtue of such mixings that we produce any new knowledge and stake any new claims at all. The two halves of the constitution always work together, although the purified subjects and objects populating the top half prove *much* more visible than the web of networks operating below through which they are assembled and persist. For Latour, the reason we are so frequently able to appeal to a transcendent Natural Fact in order to criticize the immanence of an ignorant Cultural Belief just as often as the reverse suggests that our collective world is *not*, in fact, composed of essentially distinct natures and cultures, but only endless assemblages of variable ontologies that fail to align neatly with either side, even as we insist that they do. “[H]ere, on the left, are things themselves; there, on the right, is the free society of speaking, thinking subjects, values and of signs. Everything happens in the middle, everything passes between the two, everything happens by way of mediation, translation and networks, but this space does not exist, it has not place. It is the unthinkable, the unconscious of the moderns” (37).¹⁰⁰ The two halves of the modern

in opposition to streamlined, homogeneous, industrial production. The “authentic,” for arts-and-crafters, was defined in terms of the precise relationship between hand, tool, and raw material—the valorization of use value; the “inauthentic” was defined in terms of the standardization and profit-driven ideology of machine culture—exchange value. However, from a different perspective, that of Lears himself, the antimodernists’ purifications should be entirely reversed: “Craftsmanship became less a path to satisfy communal work than a therapy for tired businessmen” (xvi). Where the arts-and-crafters thought they were dealing with the real thing, a return to hard, natural facts, Lears argues they were merely ideological dupes, stuck in flimsy human “culture” the entire time.

¹⁰⁰ What this means for Latour, however, is that “society” and “nature,” because they can no longer refer to something *out there*, preformed in the world, must be completely rethought. The society becomes conceptualized “not as a special domain, a specific realm, or a particular sort of thing, but only as a very peculiar movement of re-association and reassembling” that is no less *real* for having been made and constantly remade (*Reassembling* 7); while nature, too, is “what is produced, constructed, decided, defined” (*Politics* 35), but is no less *real* for having been so: only the number of agents involved in delineating their realms increases—but that, for Latour, is everything. See *Reassembling the Social* (2005) and *Politics of Nature* (2004).

constitution necessarily depend upon each other, each feeding the other's processes, and yet "modernity," for Latour, names the impossibility of thinking the two simultaneously:

So long as we consider these two practices of translation and purification separately, we are truly modern—that is, we willingly subscribe to the critical project, even though that project is developed only through the proliferation of hybrids down below. As soon as we direct our attention simultaneously to the work of purification and the work of hybridization, we immediately stop being wholly modern, and our future begins to change. At the same time we stop having been modern, because we become retrospectively aware that the two sets of practices have always already been at work in the historical period that is ending. Our past begins to change. Finally, if we have never been modern—at least in the way criticism tells the story—the torturous relations that we have maintained with the other nature-cultures would also be transformed (11).

What would it mean to argue that Edith Wharton has never been *antimodern* in the sense offered by Latour? As we will see, it will involve attending to the impurities that propagate as Wharton poses questions of aesthetic survival in terms of organic survival, and vice versa. It will involve situating what Wharton saw as the aesthetic and formal problem of "keeping a novel alive" and the biopolitical problem of keeping a person or community of persons alive as mutually inflecting and rhetorically overlapping matters. And it will involve dissolving the partition endemic to much scholarship on Wharton over the last half-century that has tended to separate the issue of politics and aesthetics in treatments of her work.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ On the one hand, a number of critics have attempted to theorize Wharton's aesthetic commitments by situating them within the boundaries of an archaeological or anthropological imagination, one preoccupied with preserving and curating what she referred to as the "moral treasures" of social orders lost to the ravages of time (*Backward Glance* 781); here, the museum, the relic, the ruin, and the private collection serve as the operative sites in her fiction for underscoring Wharton's status as cultural conservative with penchant for nostalgic commemoration. See, for instance, Bentley's "'Hunting for the Real': Wharton and the Science of Manners" in *The Cambridge Companion to Edith Wharton* (1995), Judith P. Saunders' "Portrait of the Artist as Anthropologist: Edith Wharton and 'The Age of Innocence'" (2002), and Jennie A. Kassanoff's "Coda: The Cesnola Controversy" from *Edith Wharton and the Politics of Race* (2004). On the other hand, critics have drawn attention to the sheer number of immobilized, paralytic, and anesthetized bodies scattered throughout her long writing career, bodies whose liminal vitality and fraught modes of persistence are made to index one form or another of political critique; here, *The House of Mirth*'s anesthetic stupors and tableaux vivants, *The Fruit of the Tree*'s paralyzed factory manageress, *Ethan Frome*'s frozen New England landscape and immobilized inhabitants, *The Age of Innocence*'s "bodies caught in glaciers," and *Twilight Sleep*'s parody of perpetually sedated moderns provide the occasion for speculating upon Wharton's racial, gender, and economic politics via the positive or negative valences ascribed to this array of prone figures. See Michaels' *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (1987), Ammons' "The Myth of Imperiled

III. Impurities; or, Keeping a Novel Alive

“[T]he surest way of measuring achievement in art is by survival,” Wharton asserts in *The Writing of Fiction* (1925), and it is no coincidence that the works in which she attempts to theorize the criteria of literary survival are also those that give birth to the strangest kinds of hybrid creatures. To get a sense of how these impurities function, I want to turn to a 1929 essay Wharton wrote for the *Yale Review* titled “Visibility in Fiction,” which opens with the strong but equivocal declaration: “No one interested in the art of fiction can have failed to reflect on the mysterious element which seems to possess, above all others, the antiseptic quality of keeping a novel alive” (163). The liveliness of a novel, according to the standards of Wharton’s realist commitments, depends upon “the aliveness of the characters”; however, it is difficult not to intuit that the figural implications of the essay’s opening lines actually stage the insolubility of the problem it seeks to solve: namely, the matter of distinguishing between works that merely imbue their characters with “an enduring *semblance* of vitality” and those that “*really* keep the characters alive” (163; my emphasis). As Wharton frames the issue in her essay, the difference between true liveliness and its mere semblance in fiction rests upon the distinction between a conception of texts as natural, organic and autogenetic/autopoietic entities, and texts as artificially maintained, non-genetic hybrids. On the one hand, “novels that live” are those that partake of “something so intimate and compelling, so much like a natural process” that “once called into life the beings thus created continue their dumb germination in the most tormented mind...and by the time they are born into the book which is their world they are such well-constituted organisms that they live on in our world after theirs has ended” (167-168). On the other hand, those works that possess only the trappings of liveliness (“beauties of style and of description,

Whiteness and *Ethan Frome*” (2008), and Kassanoff’s “Extinction, Taxidermy, Tableaux Vivants: Staging Race and Class in *The House of Mirth*” (2000).

intellectual insight and moral ardor”), but which lack the “animating principle” that gives its characters the ability to “go on living with the substantiality of the famous people of the past,” amount to “mere vegetable life,” “embalm[ed] tales” that only “arrest the air of lifelikeness” in their characters (163-166).

Wharton’s insistence upon the force and sustainability of this opposition despite the plethora of impurities, intermixings, and contaminations through which she never, in fact, ceases to traffic, should remind us of Latour’s description of the Modern Constitution. But whereas for Latour the “Middle Kingdom” of hybrid ontologies demarcates the space of the modern unconscious, the web of quasi-objects and quasi-subjects that can never fully come to light for their capacity to disrupt the sanctity of the house of Nature and the house of Culture, Wharton draws persistently from this reservoir of ambiguous actors in order to account for her own engagement with the various life-support systems that the popular novel finds itself hooked up to. What she calls “the mysterious element...keeping a novel alive” is understandable here only with respect to its “antiseptic qualities,” and thus the “natural process” of “dumb germination” is, from the outset, dependent upon an alien supplement for its operations. The “living” novel thus depends upon something distinctly *not living* in any conventional sense insofar as this supplement is figured as a synthetic chemical that is added from the outside rather than generated from within. The presence of an antiseptic quality at the heart of the living novel necessarily qualifies the “well-constituted organism” against which Wharton defines her unhealthy aesthetic imitations. By definition, an antiseptic works as a defense against a self-destructive tendency *internal* to the organism itself, countering the growth of disease-causing agents that are the result of an autoimmunitary response. Not only does the life-giving function of the novelist here begin to blur into the life-suspending dissemblance of the embalmer, but the very “substantiality” that

allegedly distinguishes truly living characters from lifeless husks seems perpetually in jeopardy of turning upon itself, deteriorating from the inside.

Wharton's essay registers this sense of uncanny self-estrangement through its jarring conflation of metaphors outlining the text's vital trajectory: what begins as a generative birth sequence (a "dumb germination" that is "born into the book") becomes a kind of Frankensteinian regenerative necromancy: "Balzac, Jane Austen, Thackeray, Tolstoi; almost invariably, when these touched the dead bones they arose and walked" (169). The autoimmunitary presence of an antiseptic vitality here looks like a *deathliness* at the very origin of life, textual generation always as *regeneration*, where the "re" demarcates the iterable and inherently anachronistic structure of the trace that makes "living on" a function of already being inhabited by "dead bones." If the great novelist, according to Wharton's impregnation narrative, has the ability to traverse the threshold between body and text and imbue their work with a living essence that will continue to thrive of its own accord, the reverse possibility—that the dead letter will displace the originary ground of the essence, will infiltrate the very heart of life—manifests in the biotextual figurations of living bodies become mummies, vegetables, and uncanny automata.

What if survival, for Wharton, is *always* an uncanny phenomenon—imaginable *only* as a form of becoming-inhuman, becoming-undead, or a becoming-machine—even as it is supposed to name "the *surest* way of measuring achievement in art"? This is the basic premise that figures of biotextuality both makes visible and consistently obscures. In order to shed light on this impasse, however, we need to look closer at a particular case study in Wharton's career from which we might begin to flesh out the historical stakes of her engagement with the problematic of aesthetic survival and preservation. In her 1922 Introduction to *Ethan Frome*, the short novel whose composition process first gave her the feeling of "the artisan's full control of [her]

implements” (*Backward* 941), Wharton describes the artist’s sense of proper correspondence between literary form and subject as something “almost instinctively felt and acted upon before there can pass into his creation that imponderable something more which causes life to circulate in it and preserves it for a little from decay” (xiii). This description reconfirms the autoimmunitary logic at play in “Visibility in Fiction” as well as its definition of creative genius as a matter of instantiating a radical proximity between body and text, such that both appear to partake of the same living essence. This essence, however, appears compromised from the beginning: in Wharton’s biotextual imagination, literary works are entities in constant need of preservation from a spreading “decay” that afflicts them from the “inside.” While it has been easy for critics to assimilate this preservationist impulse to the antimodernist feeling that “the authentic and the real are in some sense precarious, in need of preservation, and that they reveal their purest meaning in the form of special collections and related kinds of archival representation” (Bentley, “Wharton and the Science of Manners” 57-58), I would argue in terms already rehearsed that Wharton was skeptical about the very possibility of “purity” frequently invoked in antimodernist discourse, and that much of her fiction engages with that problem directly through the figures of biotextuality.¹⁰² In the case of *Ethan Frome*, a clue to the manner of the “antiseptic” that might act as a preservative arrives in Wharton’s 1936 Foreword to Owen Davis and Donald Davis’s *Ethan Frome: A Dramatization of Edith Wharton’s Novel*, which accompanied their adaption of the work for the stage:

[I]n reading the dramatization of *Ethan Frome* by Owen and Donald Davis, I found myself thinking at every page: “Here at least is a new lease on life for

¹⁰² Bentley’s description occurs in her discussion of *The Age of Innocence*, a novel that invites more careful readings of its purported “nostalgic” mode than her otherwise rigorous essay grants. There is a nearly unanimous failure among Wharton’s readers, for instance, to realize that the famous Metropolitan Museum of Art scene is *itself* a historical anachronism in the novel’s plot, a detail that certainly complicates any easy recourse the novel might make to the “real” or “authentic”: the Met only moved to its current location at Central Park and Fifth Avenue in 1880, almost a decade after the events in Wharton’s novel.

‘Ethan.’” And the discovery moved me more than I can say. [...] I should like to record here my appreciation for this unusual achievement, and my professional admiration for the great skill and exquisite sensitiveness with which my interpreters have executed their tasks; and to add that, if, as I am told, *their* interpreters, the personifiers of Ethan, of Zeena and Mattie, and the minor Starkfield figures, have reached the same level of comprehension, then my poor little group of hungry lonely New England villagers will live again for a while on their stony hillside before finally joining their forbears under the village headstones (264).

While Wharton admits that it is “always a curious, and sometimes a painful, revelation” to “see [one’s] books as they have taken shape in other minds,” this process is precisely what powers the machinery of reanimation that allows Ethan Frome to “live again,” and “preserves [the work] for a little from decay” (264). The text’s capacity for survival, in other words, is indissociable from the chains of mediation it must pass through—playwrights’ adaptations, directors’ stage directions, actors’ personifications—before it reaches the Philadelphia audience that witnessed the play’s debut in January, 1936. Each node in this network performs a different task of *translation*—a term that, following Latour, implies not only the inevitability of “drift, betrayal, and ambiguity” that accompanies any reiterative or reproductive process through time, but also the ability to solidify an interpretive position (253).¹⁰³ Translations—from one language, medium, or form to another—are always shot through with the interests of others, even while those interests are neither entirely transparent nor entirely secure from misfires and misappropriations. This is why *Ethan Frome*’s becoming-other to itself through intermedial adaptation is nevertheless the very precondition for “Ethan” as a character to attain a new solidity in Wharton’s eyes, coming *back* to himself in an act of aesthetic resurrection. In a move that reproduces the uncanny figures of survival in “Visibility in Fiction,” Wharton accounts for this double movement by suggesting that “Ethan” and his friends are, in fact, *already* akin to the

¹⁰³ See Latour, *The Pasteurization of France* (1988), for a full definition of the concept of “translation” (253).

walking dead, dispossessed of intrinsic vitality, and thus always liminally situated between “the stony hillside” of rural New England and the graves of their “forbears.” Ethan survives, in Wharton’s eyes, by being *already* divided from himself, with one foot in the past that is always fleeting and one foot in the grave that is always to come. What I would like (only semi-facetiously) to call this image of “Zombie Ethan” does not, for Wharton, designate an aberration in the “normal” process of literary survival, but rather represents its strange *sine qua non*. To survive is to differ from oneself, to be translated and thus disfigured, in the process of forming links elsewhere: “Words are never found alone, nor surrounded only by other words,” writes Latour, “they would be inaudible” (*Pasteurization* 183).

A word can thus enter into partnership with a meaning, a sequence of words, a statement, a neuron, a gesture, a wall, a machine, a face...anything, so long as differences in resistance allow one force to become more durable than another. Where is it written that a word may associate only with other words? Each time the solidity of a string of words is tested, we are measuring the *attachment* of walls, neurons, sentiments, gestures, hearts, minds, and wallets—that is, a heterogeneous multitude of allies, mercenaries, friends, and courtesans. But we cannot stand this impurity and promiscuity (ibid).

The 1936 stage adaption of *Ethan Frome* proved a critical and commercial success, in part because its set featured a twenty-five foot drop built to enact the story’s famous climax, in which the protagonists attempt suicide together on a sled.¹⁰⁴ This combination of sensationalist marketing technique paired alongside a work that Wharton worried would be too bitter and tragic for the New York crowd (where the play would actually receive its best reviews) points to one of the central tensions animating Wharton’s sense of literary survival—a tension that, by 1936, only months before her death, would have been palpable to her throughout much of her career, as she

¹⁰⁴ See Hermione Lee, *Edith Wharton* (2008), pp. 735.

witnessed work after work adapted for mass distribution on the screen or the stage.¹⁰⁵ On the one hand, if survival were reducible to the sheer fact of a text's material availability or cultural recognizability, such a definition would grant a disproportionate share of agency to what Wharton saw as the capriciousness of public opinion; the "popular" would become, in principle, indistinguishable from the truly worthwhile, and any recourse to judgment based on aesthetic principles would be hamstrung by the historical contingences of taste. But on the other hand, a text's capacity for survival—as the case of *Ethan Frome* makes clear—cannot be determined by recourse to a feature or set of qualities within the work itself (as if such borders are ever stable in Wharton's biomaterial imagination); even the text constructed with "the artisan's full control of [her] implements" is not guaranteed to survive, but must consistently ward off the threat of "decay" by linking itself up with the networks of mediation that simultaneously risk contaminating it.

In principle, Wharton was a devout formalist. She frequently compared writing to architectural planning, valued "technique" as the prime foundation for aesthetic order and coherence, and characterized novelists such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Elizabeth Gaskell as "pleaders of special causes," suggesting disparagingly that their "immensely remunerative results" were the result of recourse to "that unhappy hybrid, the novel with a purpose" ("Permanent" 175).¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, Wharton never fully adhered to the principle of aesthetic self-sufficiency. Her works of criticism in particular display a distinct hesitation over whether literature can be judged based upon its aesthetic properties alone—even as she frequently

¹⁰⁵ Among the adaptations were a stage adaption of *The House of Mirth* from 1906, a Metro film version of *The House of Mirth* in 1918, a Warner Bros. silent film of *The Age of Innocence* from 1924, a talking version of *The Children* in that same year, and a number of other stage dramatizations of varying success (See Lee 595).

¹⁰⁶ In establishing point of view in a story, for instance, Wharton encourages the aspiring writer to "choose this reflecting mind deliberately, as one would choose a building-site, or decide upon the orientation of one's house" (*Fiction* 46). For her comments on technique and her attack on modernist experimentations with form, see *The Writing of Fiction* pp. 1-30.

claimed that such criteria were the only ones worth paying attention to. This tension is inherent in the very title of the essay, “Visibility in Fiction,” which refers to both the imaginary effect of a readerly encounter with a text—we “see” Jane Austen’s characters, Wharton points out, despite scant description of their physical appearances—as well as a sign of the text’s continual material reproduction—Austen’s characters continue to “live” precisely because her works continue to sell, continue to be printed and hence continue to remain literally *visible* to us. This antagonism internal to the problematic of survival—a tension between the potentially contaminating effects of a mass reading public whose mediating capacities seem too promiscuous and indiscriminate, and the figure of the hermetic art object subject to inevitable decay without supplemental forms of mediation—is precisely what Wharton, her editors, and publicists attempted to navigate in the marketing of her fiction.

IV. Progressive Publishing and its Discontents

In “Copy,” a short satirical dialogue from Wharton’s 1901 collection, *Crucial Instances*, two former lovers, now famous, aging authors, meet to discuss the fate of their private love letters, each having safely preserved the others’ correspondences twenty years after their tryst. The vignette’s comic conceit is that both Mrs. Dale and Mr. Ventnor want to acquire the full set of letters for themselves as material for their upcoming memoirs, and intend upon tricking the other into handing over their share through a variety of feints, misdirections, and false offers. As their tactics fail and their true intentions are slowly revealed, the letters begin to take on significance beyond their potential value as commodities in an emerging culture of literary celebrity. Reading their forgotten missives over again seems to offer the pair a glimpse into a realm of non-reified relations antecedent to market forces, “a time when we lived instead of writing about life,” as Mrs. Dale puts it, “when our emotions weren’t worth ten cents a word, and

a signature wasn't an autograph," Mr. Ventnor adds (285). The letters, in their perceived immediacy—"how fresh they seem"—also gesture towards an implicit theory of literary value in that their potential market worth in the present depends upon their author's indifference to exchange value in the past: "Do you suppose we could have written a word of these if we'd known we were putting our dreams out at interest?" (285), Mrs. Dale asks. What the letters tantalizingly hold out, then, is a vision of aesthetic autonomy so pure that they do not even really count as written documents at all, but something closer to pure life—or, rather, the unsullied "dream" of living itself.

Following these cues, Amy Kaplan has argued that "Copy" represents celebrity culture's embrace of the mass market as compromising the divide between private and public spheres, a situation in which Kaplan argues the pair are already figured as the victims: "I died years ago," Mrs. Dale facetiously remarks, "what you see before you is a figment of the reporter's brain—a monster manufactured out of newspaper paragraphs, with ink in its veins" (278). In Kaplan's reading, Mrs. Dale's figurative fate—becoming mummified by an indiscriminate reading public who reanimate the once-living body in its own distorted image—signifies for Wharton the risks run by the female author who enters the marketplace as a means to escape the confines of the domestic sphere and the sentimental tradition associated with it.¹⁰⁷ What looks like a flight *toward* increased autonomy for the writer becomes the mechanism by which she is simultaneously divested of it: "The status of celebrity," Kaplan writes, "both confers and denies identity; it protects the self's property rights to its productions, at the same time that it leaves the self prey to public consumption" (82).

¹⁰⁷ See Kaplan's *The Social Construction of American Realism* (1988) for this argument in her reading of Wharton.

In arguing that Mrs. Dale's self-characterization as a monstrous biotextual hybrid stages Wharton's own anxieties about the encroachment of vulgar, sensationalist mass forms into the sphere of aesthetic autonomy, Kaplan's reading is of a piece with many critical accounts of Wharton's relationship to the shifting landscape of American publishing at the turn of the century, accounts that tend to position her as a cultural conservative, pessimistically navigating the new modes of production, publicity, and professionalism that were transforming the industry during this period. Through a broad and complex set of institutional shifts spanning the length of Wharton's writing career, literary journals associated with the nineteenth-century family-model of publishing (*Century*, *Harpers*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Scribner's Magazine*), whose genteel business practices and self-conscious presumptions of cultural custodianship had changed little since the Gilded Age, were gradually ceding authority and influence to the more progressive houses (*McClure's*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *World's Work*), who saw themselves primarily as innovators, advertisers, and product managers.¹⁰⁸ While the conservative presses tended to view their relationship with authors as a gentlemanly form of "literary cultivation," deferring to a set of implicit moral and aesthetic guidelines in order to vet submissions as they arrived, the progressives ascribed to a much more active vision of themselves as agents of democracy, whose role was to anticipate the trends of the popular market and engage directly with the literary production process itself, encouraging its subsumption under various forms of scientific management (Wilson 42-52). As Christopher Wilson explains, this shift entailed an editorial emphasis "away from independent inspiration towards the production of a planned idea" (61). Valorizing topical timeliness, the potential of generating

¹⁰⁸ For a thorough discussion of this division, the eventual triumph of the progressive houses, and the changes it entailed for the profession of literary authorship, see Christopher P. Wilson's *The Labor of Words: Literary Professionalism in the Progressive Era* (1985). Like Kaplan, Wilson places Wharton on the conservative side of the divide, noting that "even as she moved from what she called a 'drifting amateur to a professional' in these years, did not take up the new activist style" (143).

public interest, and the use of clear, direct prose over high style and “literariness,” the new school of S.S. McClure, Edward Bok, George Horace Lorimer, and others viewed literature as a commodity most effectively constructed piece by piece, as if in an assembly-line, with the editor-publisher acting as the foreman overseeing each stage of production. “[T]he progressive breed was always invoking the ethos of innovation: the idea in its original planning stages was considered the real badge of a good editor,” while the written word became increasingly relegated to the role of conceptual mortar—a necessity that should not get in the way of the piece’s primary talking points (Wilson 55). Artistic “inspiration,” by this model, was slowly being displaced from the genius of the individual to the space of the editorial office—a form of labor outsourcing based on the growing progressivist presumption that “good writing,” as newspaper magnate Frank Munsey wrote, “is as common as clam shells, while good stories are as rare as statesmanship” (qtd. in Wilson 57).

Where Wharton, in her non-fiction essays and elsewhere, expounds upon the creative process of authorship, she aligns herself predominantly with the old-guard tradition against the progressive imperative for innovation, albeit in complex and revealing ways. *The Writing of Fiction* (1925), for instance, exhibits many of the traits that have earned her the reputation as an antimodernist, dismissing the faddishness of experimental literary schools, admonishing the anticipatory impulse in contemporary publishing, and criticizing the professionalization of authorship more generally.¹⁰⁹ As the title of an essay like “Permanent Values in Fiction” indicates, Wharton was wary of the editorial demand for “timeliness.” She also insisted, contra

¹⁰⁹ “[The young writer],” she states, “will never do his best till he ceases altogether to think of his readers (and his editor and his publisher) and begins to write, not for himself, but for that *other self* with whom the creative artist is always in mysterious correspondence,” a statement that not only devolves into romantic obscurantism but is quite verifiably false, at least in terms of Wharton’s documented interactions with her publishers and her anticipations of readerly response (*Fiction* 21). Commenting on the way “the trade wind in fiction undoubtedly drives many beginners along the line of least resistance,” she additionally remarks that “one is something tempted to think that the generation which invented the ‘fiction course’ is getting the fiction it deserves” (19).

the progressivist suggestion that literary ideas might be disarticulated from their mode of expression, that “every subject (in the novelist’s sense of the term) implicitly *contains its own form and dimensions*” (“Introduction” to *EF* xi), and that the artist’s primary task was to bring to fruition the proper alignment between form and content latent within the subject itself.¹¹⁰

It is, however, indicative both of the complexity of the institutional shifts taking place in the publishing industry in the United States at this time, as well as Wharton’s own ambivalence toward these changes, that her actions themselves never fully committed her to one side or the other. Although she maintained a twenty-year long relationship with *Scribner’s* as her primary publisher, specifically its senior editors, William Crary Brownell and Edward Burlingame (genteel elites if there ever were any), she frequently challenged their lack of business acumen and failure to sufficiently advertise her works, often holding up more daring and market-savvy houses as her desired models.¹¹¹ Wharton was also inconsistent in the kinds of publicity she endorsed: while she tended to encourage the greatest possible distribution for her writing, frequently requested more promotional material for her new serializations, and advocated unabashedly for proper remuneration in a market that systematically discriminated in favor of men, she also refused what were becoming standard advertising practices, such as including illustrations with her novels, author photos, and biographical information.¹¹² Ellen Dupree has

¹¹⁰ See also *The Writing of Fiction* where she defines “genius” as “the faculty of penetrating into a chosen subject and bringing to light its inherent properties,” a task for which “[n]othing can be farther from the mechanical ingenuities of ‘plot’” (166).

¹¹¹ Wharton wrote to Brownell following Scribner’s publication of her first collection of stories, *The Greater Inclination* (1899): “I have naturally watched with interest the advertising of the book, & have compared it with the notices given by other prominent publishers of books appearing under the same conditions. I find that Messrs. McMillan [sic.], Dodd & Mead, McClure, Harper etc, advertise almost continuously in the daily papers ever new book they publish, for the first few weeks after publication, giving large space to favourable press-notices [which *The Greater Inclination* had received]; in addition to which, they of course advertise largely in the monthlies” (*Letters* 37-38). See also *The Correspondences of Edith Wharton and Macmillan, 1901-1930* (2007) and Hermione Lee’s *Edith Wharton* (2007), pp. 159-191.

¹¹² Ellen Dupree’s “‘Usually the Reward of Tosh’: Edith Wharton’s Business Education” (2001) provides an excellent summary of Wharton’s engagement with *Scribner’s* and, later in her career, D. Appleton & Company.

recently shown that a collection of unpublished correspondences between Wharton and her close friend, Walter Berry, from the early part of her career, reveal the workings of a much more calculated business agenda than she is generally given credit for, even going so far as to use competing offers from progressive firms as leverage for her royalty pay with *Scribner's* (7).¹¹³ A recent critic in the *New York Times Book Review* insisted that “Wharton was a fiend for advertising and promotion...Between her demands and her demurs, Wharton became the very model of a market-wise, talented, ‘problem author’” (qtd in Bauer xiii). Dupree surmises that Wharton decided to remain with *Scribner's* “not because she approved of their business practices but because she continued to hope that the competition for best-selling writers would force them to grant her a privileged status among their writers, providing her high earnings and greater control of the publishing process without sacrificing her respect or the tasteful production of her books by a firm associated with her own class” (3). Thus, while she was inviting *Atlantic Monthly* editor, Bliss Perry, to come visit her so that they might “despair together of The Republic of Letters,” Wharton was also engaging its conditions in ways that suggested far more than resignation and despair (qtd. in Lee 173).

Part of this engagement occurred in the realm of rhetoric and argument, as Wharton and her editors attempted to negotiate the problem of publicity by reconciling the contradictions it seemed to contain. When Wharton, for instance, complained to Brownell about reviewers criticizing her writing as inaccessible to the average American reader, he replied, “The only way

Specifically, Dupree aims to challenge the view of Wharton as a conservative on the literary market: “Wharton was forced to become much more the businesswoman than Kaplan suggests; far from separating herself from the ‘vagaries’ of the market, she became an astute reader of them, writing realist fiction calculated to attract a broad spectrum of readers and conducting her career on business principles” (3).

¹¹³ A 1902 letter from Berry contained an article about Edward Bok—founder of *Ladies Home Journal* and coiner of the term “living room” to replace the term for that liminal space of the “parlor” or “drawing room” (a detail upon which we can only speculate about Wharton’s reaction)—in which Berry “heavily underlined ‘a few years ago [Bok] was a stenographer for Charles Scribner’s Sons’ and appended a moral: ‘To succeed: Leave Scribs’” (Dupree 6).

to get the huzzas of the hoi—at a respectful distance—is to *impose* the thing on them by making it so *important* that they can't neglect it, but must join the chorus to show they can appreciate" (qtd. in Dupree 7). Brownell's condescension is particularly remarkable for the way it positions the "huzzas of the hoi" as both necessary and superfluous, desirable and threatening, equivocations that lead him to the bizarre insinuation that mass consumers do not actually partake in the unsavory act of consumption at all (a form of bodily proximity endangering the "respectful distance" of aesthetic contemplation) but merely "join the chorus" of proper discriminators like automatons, without getting an opinion or thought of their own in edgewise. Wharton herself had been trying to find ways to defang the beast of the reading public in similar ways at least since her 1901 essay, "The Vice of Reading," in which she distinguishes between the cognitive habits of the "born reader" and the "mechanical reader" in order to suggest that certain kinds of reading are not actually reading at all: "To the mechanical reader, books once read are not like growing things that strike root and intertwine branches, but like fossils ticketed and put away in the drawers of a geologist's cabinet...In such a mind the books never talk to each other" (516-517). Again, Wharton stages the problem of literary survival—this time from a readerly perspective: ie. how do certain texts "live on" in the minds of their readers?—as an opposition between the intimacy of organic cultivation and the sterility of scientific rationality. Although Brownell's and Wharton's figurations of a mass reading public are inverted, their ultimate consequences are the same: for Wharton, the "born reader" is so intimately bound up with his text that the two become a kind of symbiotic entity, while the "mechanical reader" is so removed from his text that the two are irreparably alienated from one another; for Brownell, the reverse is true: the bad reader sullies the text and its author by getting too close to it, while the good reader allows a text to "impose" itself at a distance. In both cases, however, Wharton and

Brownell dismiss *and* insist upon the threat of a mass audience by suggesting that *neither* instance of bad reading is actually reading at all, but rather the rote repetition of preformed opinion *or* the formulary consolidation of diffuse and unsystematizable commodities. In this way, it seems, they can have their (audience) cake, and eat it too.

“Copy,” published the same year as “The Vice of Reading,” reveals this rhetorical balancing act to be grounded in a set of distinctions that are ultimately impossible to maintain, suggesting once again that Wharton’s more self-reflexive moments—her ability to “think against herself,” as Dale Bauer puts it—evidence a critique of the same reactionary stance she occasionally took up vis-à-vis the threat of the mass market. For instance, Mrs. Dale forthrightly rejects the organic hospitality of the “born reader” by arguing, in typically biotextual fashion, that the only difference between seeing texts as “growing things” and “ticketed fossils” is an interval of time: “Don’t talk to me about living in the hearts of my readers!” she reproaches Mr. Ventnor for challenging her claim to loneliness in old age, “We both know what kind of a domicile that is. Why, before long I shall become a classic! Bound in shelves and kept on the top bookshelf—brr, doesn’t that sound freezing? I foresee the day when I shall be as lonely as an Etruscan museum!” (283). If the heart is already akin to a cold museum, then even the most lovingly preserved artifacts (such as the lovers’ letters) will be subject to the law of decay—a point explicitly underscored by Ventnor’s remark that opening them “is very like unrolling a mummy” (281). Moreover, the “life” the letters seem to contain—or, rather, the effect they have upon the pair in foregrounding the difference between “the time when we lived instead of writing about life”—proves just as illusory, insofar as it is inextricably bound up with the materiality of the text itself. Ventnor unrolls his “mummy” in the hopes of finding “a live grain of wheat in it, perhaps?” by which he means lines of poetry written as a young man and since forgotten (281).

The layers of biotextual translation Wharton compounds into this one metaphor are somewhat astounding: she figures the materiality of the letters as dried human skin, unnaturally preserved, within which Ventnor seeks a living thing that is *itself* a metaphor for written inscriptions. Not only does this *mise en abyme* of bodies and texts make the dream of finding an originary ground seem fruitless, but the “life” it hypostasizes at its center is *itself* a fantasy of market value in the sense that the “harvest” Ventnor seeks to reap from his “grain of wheat” is to sell his wares on the market. Indeed, one of the jokes of Wharton’s title, “Copy,” is that Ventnor and Mrs. Dale are both rampant self-plagiarizers, consciously and unconsciously ripping off lines from their own private correspondences in their novels and poems. Intertwined with a system of representation in which “living” and “writing” consistently feed back into one another, then, is the image of endless copies without an origin, proliferating from a “self” that is also a copy.¹¹⁴

By metaphorically transforming sheets of paper into the embalmed husk of a human body in which a “live” thing might still persist, Ventnor’s description reproduces at the same time as it inverts Mrs. Dale’s own mummification, in which she becomes “a monster manufactured out of newspaper paragraphs with ink in its veins” (278). The key difference, however, is that Ventnor’s letters have remained *private* documents, and thus their figural desiccation cannot—as Kaplan assumes—be a function of their public circulation. I want to suggest, therefore, that Wharton’s biotextual hybrids function as more than symptoms of her anxieties about either mass-market contamination or what Lee and Kaplan call the risks of “self-exposure” in celebrity culture (Kaplan 82; Lee 178). As we have seen, the mummy, the walking dead, the preserved body frozen in time that “died years ago”—these figures recur over and over again in Wharton’s

¹¹⁴ This imbrication crystallizes in the scene heading that introduces “Copy,” which describes Mrs. Dale in her office awaiting Ventnor’s arrival: “Books are scattered everywhere—mostly with autograph inscriptions ‘From the Author’—and a large portrait of Mrs. Dale, at her desk, with papers strewn about her, takes up one of the wall panels” (275). The visual composition foregrounds its *mise en abyme* structure, with a representation of a writing writer embedded within its introduction of a writing writer.

writing, but the liminal space they inhabit and the uncanny mode of persistence they make visible should be understood *not* as indexing an aberration in a text's "proper" trajectory (catering to the wrong audience), a professional transgression (vulgar marketing), or a forbidden intermixing of socio-cultural realms ("self-exposure"), but rather as *figures for survival as such*—which is to say figures that name the impossibility of full, self-identical presence due to the autoimmunitary mechanism that both blurs the line between corpus and corpse and divides each internally from itself. To persist through time, as living body or cultural document, is always, in Wharton's work, to encounter the effects of disfiguration, contamination, and translation. There is no endurance without networks of mediation—the market being only one of many systems through which people and objects subsist by linking up to other people and objects. This inevitable failure of autogenesis and autopoeisis—the failure of life and its productions to emerge from and sustain itself by adherence to an inner law—also belies the dream of purity that underwrites the "nostalgia" for which she is often charged, and which her own characters express in their desire for a time "when we lived instead of writing about life." "Copy," then, not only satirizes the mass culture of modernity, as Kaplan recognizes, but the reactionary impulses of antimodernism, too, and its tendency to divide the world into forms of authentic and inauthentic experience. Indeed, the dialogue makes clear that the Edenic past out of which the couple has fallen cannot actually exist anterior to their present, but rather appears by virtue of the materiality of the texts they possess, which remain legible not in spite of but *because* they have broken from all originary contexts, and thus posit a lost referentiality only retroactively, as a function of the reading-event itself. The non-reified world of pure "living" appears, in this sense, not from a lost past, but anachronistically, from an indeterminate future in which texts can always be reread and reinterpreted.

“Copy” ends with Mrs. Dale and Mr. Ventnor deciding to burn their letters rather than incorporate them into their memoirs in the hope that by consigning the written word to oblivion they will be able to “keep the excursionists out” of their happy past (285). The vulgar mass of potential readers rears its head again in the guise of the “tourists” who would encroach upon the lovers’ private domain: “it’s more than a park,” Mrs. Dale describes their imaginary preserve, “it’s a world—as long as we keep it to ourselves” (285). But this gesture—presented facetiously in the escalating pitch of sentimentalism—can only be self-defeating: if the only way to sift through the impurities of writing to get at the essence of “life” beneath is to renounce the very process through which the retroactive mirage of pure living appears, then surely the dream disappears along with its vehicle. By the standards of the argument Wharton crafts in “Copy,” the imperative of “keeping excursionists out” by renouncing the textual looks less like an affirmation of the lovers’ tragic elitism than it does a doomed and naïve attempt to isolate themselves from the heterogeneous networks of translation and extension through which bodies and texts persist. For Wharton, the attempt to transcend the problems of finitude and decay through the renunciation of writing is antithetical to survival, and thus represents its own form of suicide. In the dialogue’s final moments, Mr. Ventnor and Mrs. Dale part ways, and the latter watches the letters burn in her fireplace. What we might imagine comes next, however, is suggested in an unpublished poem called “Finis,” written around the same time as “Copy,” which Hermione Lee suggests expresses Wharton’s own vision of life divorced from textuality:

The postman’s ring, the doctor’s call,
The damage done by the plumber’s men,
The rise in wages, the mercury’s fall,
Knitting-needles and crochet-hooks,
An afternoon nap in a nice warm shawl,
And now and then, as a special treat,
A funeral passing down the street.
That’s the way the future looks

When I've grown tired of books (qtd in Lee 163).

V. Deconstruction, Biopolitics, and *The Fruit of the Tree*

The approximately four-decade interval separating “Finis” and *A Backward Glance* obscures a remarkable continuity of vision through Wharton’s career—what I have been calling her biotextual imagination—that discursively conjoins the properties of the written mark with the operations of organic life (and vice versa) to account for the vicissitudes of survival in a culture of seemingly increasing ephemerality. Given this continuity, Wharton’s premonition in the earlier poem that life in a world without books constitutes a kind of slow death leads quite directly to *A Backward Glance*’s correlative insistence that writing *itself* amounts to a mode of preservation, but one that leads to the mutual transfiguration of both writer and text. “Life is the saddest thing there is, next to death,” she wrote, “yet there are always new countries to see, new books to read (and, I hope, to write),” and these preoccupations were what enabled her to “remain alive long past the usual date of disintegration” (*Backward* 1063-1064, 721).

In the same work, Wharton compares discovering the vocation of writing to earning “citizenship” in the “Land of Letters” “after trying for years to take out naturalization papers, and being rejected by every country” (873). In 1934, what may have seemed to Wharton a handy metaphor, now—in the wake of Hannah Arendt’s argument in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* that after World War II, citizenship itself became the mechanism through which hundreds of thousands of stateless subjects found themselves reduced to the status of “bare life” in the absence of state protection—seems uncannily prescient as a way to dramatize writing’s imbrication with the politics of the *bios*. While such connotations are no doubt anachronistic, the light they throw on Wharton’s claim that her naturalization into the Land of Letters differentiated her from the “soft anonymous morsel of humanity” out of which her authorial identity grew—an

expression that shares more than a family resemblance to “bare life,” as it has been theorized by Giorgio Agamben and others—illuminates some of the ways in which Wharton’s biotextual imagination feeds directly into contemporary critical movements in the study of post-Foucauldian biopolitics.¹¹⁵

The last section of this chapter is dedicated to drawing this connection out more forcefully by demonstrating that Wharton posed questions of bodily survival and genealogical succession in terms of textual survival and the iterability of the mark, and was consistently interested in the historical mediators that linked these problematics together. I turn to her 1907 novel, *The Fruit of the Tree* for its provocative suggestion that the stakes of writing are always potentially a matter of life and death, as well as its insistence that acknowledging this imbrication involves *relinquishing* the ability to differentiate between “good” and “bad” survival, the “mere semblance of vitality” and “really” living. Recognizing this hermeneutic dilemma involves intervening in the way critics have read this novel—foremost, as an aesthetic and formal failure—but also as a work that exemplifies Wharton’s reactionary politics, Jennie Kassanoff calling it a novel “singularly concerned with the reproduction of a natural elite capable of dominating America’s rising proletariat and newly ascendant middle class” (69-70). By contrast, I argue that critiques of the work’s aesthetic deficits are implicitly grounded in a view of the “well-constituted organism” that Wharton consistently demonstrated to be unsatisfactory, and that the biotextual relays upon which the plot hinges (an act of euthanasia and an act of genealogical succession both founded upon moments of textual [mis]interpretation) function precisely to call the status of the “natural” into question. *The Fruit of the Tree*, I argue, offers a

¹¹⁵ See, especially, Foucault’s “Right of Death and Power Over Life” from *The History of Sexuality vol. 1* (1990), Agamben’s *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), Mbembe, “Necropolitics” (2003), and Robert Esposito’s *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (2008).

conception of human life that is inseparable from its understanding of textual errancy as an “inhuman” phenomenon constitutive of all linguistic expression.

This reading of *The Fruit of the Tree* also seeks, implicitly at least, to contribute to critical debates surrounding the status of biopolitics in contemporary American literary studies, whose current vogue, in part, rests upon the problematic assumption that by superseding deconstruction the field has moved from a surface preoccupation with texts to a primary and more pressing focus on “life itself.”¹¹⁶ Of course, it is precisely the notion of such a trajectory towards the real or the natural that deconstruction will question. Claire Colebrook, writing on the troubled afterlife of Paul de Man in a scholarly climate insistent upon claiming that “theory lost its way in textualism and can now be returned to the body, life, affect, ethics, animality or living systems,” argues that de Man may, in fact, have more in common with the thinker whose legacy orients a great deal of this theoretical “return”: Michel Foucault (132). “Indeed,” Colebrook writes, “Foucault questioned the very notion of ‘life’ and sought to examine language *not* as the means through which man makes sense of himself but as something that possesses its own *inhuman* force,” a force she sees paralleled in de Man’s description of language’s inherently errant structure as the “inhuman” movement of signification (137).¹¹⁷ Colebrook’s point is not that deconstruction forecloses upon analyses oriented toward the production of “life” as an object

¹¹⁶ Colebrook specifically cites editors Lisa Jean Moore and Mary Kosut of *The Body Reader: Essential Social and Cultural Readings* (2010), as well as Mariam Fraser, Sarah Kember and Celia Lury, editors of *Inventive Life: Approaches to the New Vitalism* (2006), and Franco Moretti’s polemics against deconstruction in *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (2006) and elsewhere.

¹¹⁷ The strain Colebrook identifies in de Man’s work can be traced to his famous reading of Rousseau in *Allegories of Reading* (1979), in which he equates the figural potentiality of language to a “mechanical” process that operates impersonally, “independently of any desire” (298). This strain becomes more explicit in his 1983 “‘Conclusions’ on Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Task of the Translator’” lectures at Cornell, where he emphasizes that “[t]he way in which I can try to mean is dependent upon linguistic properties that are not only [not] made by me, because I depend on the language as it exists for the devices which I will be using, it is as such not made by us as historical beings, it is perhaps not even made by humans at all” (27). “What is being named here as the disjunction between grammar and meaning,” he goes on, “is the materiality of the letter: the independence, or the way in which the letter can disrupt the ostensibly stable meaning of a sentence and introduce in it a slippage by means of which that meaning disappears, evanesces, and by means of which all control over that meaning is lost” (30).

of knowledge/power that characterizes the work of biopolitics, but rather that deconstruction should be read *alongside* contemporary theoretical engagements with biopolitics to help uphold Foucault's own revolutionary insight: namely, that the terms "life" and "history" demand a conceptual uncoupling such that one does not become the originary ground from which the other emerges. "Life" does not move through "history" as a homogeneous medium; both are "fabricated," as Foucault puts it, "in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms" (78).¹¹⁸ What Foucault calls "the alien," that which divides the normative ground of the human from itself in a perpetual displacement of its essence, Colebrook aligns with de Man's conception of language's inhuman materiality:

We might say that what appears as the figure of "man"—the speaking animal of politics and progressive history—is not only made possible by inhuman forces, such as the material inscriptions or tracing mechanisms that allow for something like the illusion of a stable body that maintains itself through time. There would also be something of an uncanny or doubling relation between human and inhuman: all those predicates that supposedly single out "the human"—speech, political formations, historical self-consciousness—are also those that render any identity impossible or unreadable. But this then allows us to make a remark regarding life in general. The figure of the organism, or the bounded, individuated, and autopoietic whole, is at once necessary—for any attempt to think *nature as such* or life in its pure state will always be the effect of having deconstructed *figured* life. "Nature" is that which recedes, which we can read as having been there—unreadable—in order to yield the readable figure or lure (142-143).

Drawing Colebrook's discussion back to Wharton, we should offer the same double gesture with respect to Wharton's figurations of the text as a natural, autopoietic, and well-constituted organism. The point is not only that in the spirit of deconstruction we should read for the excluded terms (the supplementary, the parasitic, the synthetic, etc.) that enable the

¹¹⁸ "The purpose of history guided by genealogy" writes Foucault in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," "is not to discover the roots of our identity, but to commit itself to its dissipation. It does not seek to define our unique threshold of emergence, the homeland to which metaphysicians promise a return; it seeks to make visible all of those discontinuities that cross us... If genealogy in its own right gives rise to questions concerning our native land, native language, or the laws that govern us, its intention is to reveal the heterogeneous systems which, masked by the self, inhibit the formation of any form of identity" (95).

privileged origin to inhabit a state of fantasmatic purity, but that what Colebrook calls the “lure” of readability offered by figures such as “germination,” “embalming,” and “vegetable life” serve real functions in biopolitical constructions of its primary object—“life itself”—and as such cannot be discarded or jettisoned as pure linguistic effects, but must be continually read and reread for the production of a “nature” they both make possible and conceal.

The Fruit of the Tree is a novel about the production of the natural in the guise of the “human”: it stages that production in the same gesture as it reveals the mechanism of its staging, thus giving us a view of the human as always “under erasure,” as it were. In *The Fruit of the Tree*, language itself—specifically as it manifests in the iterable structure of the written mark—functions as both the confirmation of a subject’s humanity as well as the inhuman excess that disrupts it from the inside. This paradox unfolds in the plot around an act of euthanasia, which the novel frames as a sovereign decision upon the state of exception that isolates a living human essence within the subject at the very moment of its negation, but whose force derives from the necessarily contingent result of readerly (mis)interpretations that undermine the authority of the decision itself. *The Fruit of the Tree* proliferates biotextual hybrids as bodily livelihood consistently hinges upon the structure of the trace. Wharton’s achievement, in this regard, is her insistence upon a radically symmetrical view of the body/text convergence: the same slippages and dislocations of intentionality and authorial presence that unground the sovereign decision to take a life provide the very mechanisms that enable the subject to survive as a memorialized text in the wake of its death by the novel’s close. This mode of survival, however, manifests as malevolent haunting, a ghostly disfiguration of the “living” origin that nevertheless provides the architectural “blueprints” for establishing a familial legacy. In what is possibly Wharton’s most

provocative vision of biotextual survival, genealogical continuity and biopolitical futurity come at the price of the alienating force of the trace.

The Fruit of the Tree's meandering plot consolidates a plethora of capital-I-issues that were at the forefront of public debate in Progressive Era United States. It begins by introducing the problem of industrial reform through the figure of John Amherst, a young, ambitious, and idealistic manager of the Westmore cotton mills in rural New York, who meets and is quickly captivated by the deceased mill-owner's beautiful widow, Bessy Westmore. Bessy, whose youthful energy and romantic impulsiveness Amherst mistakes for a devotion to causes similar to his own, is initially swept up by Amherst's sense of purpose. In the wake of their hasty marriage, the novel shifts into a kind of "war of the sexes" narrative, as Bessy's preference for the pleasures of high society over the demands of business along with Amherst's condescending recognition of this fact produce a negative feedback loop in their relationship: while Amherst distances himself from his wife's personal affairs and her old-stock family, Bessy becomes increasingly retributive in her alienation, acting out by reallocating estate funds to what Amherst deems frivolous expenditures (including plans to construct a personal gymnasium) and taking long rides on a dangerous and unpredictable horse, appropriately named "Impulse." At the moment their marital power plays reach a crisis and divorce seems inevitable, Bessy, while Amherst is away on international business, defies his (patronizing but nevertheless prophetic) wishes against riding Impulse, whereupon she crashes, breaks her vertebrae, and is left paralyzed in a state of excruciating pain. Left to care for her along with a team of male physicians hell-bent on "deferring death indefinitely" in the name of science and religion is Bessy's childhood friend and trained nurse, Justine Brent—whose name served as Wharton's original title for the novel, suggesting the centrality of her role in its argument (402). Justine willingly administers to

Bessy's condition in the wake of the accident, but prolonged exposure to her friend's agony leads her to question the imperative of keeping her alive at all costs. At this point, the novel shifts gears into an extended meditation from Justine's perspective upon the possibility of euthanasia, the consequences of which reverberate towards its conclusion.

Compared with the massive success of its predecessor, *The House of Mirth* (1905), *The Fruit of the Tree* was a commercial failure, and critical consensus surrounding the novel, from Henry James on, is that it is hamstrung by its own ambition: too long, too baggy, with too many subjects and moving parts at the expense of its characters, whose motivations are insufficiently realized with respect to the many Progressive Era topics in which they are caught up.¹¹⁹ "What is the 'problem' of the novel?" Cynthia Griffin Wolff asks, noting that the text contains "enough raw material for three or four different novels" (135), while James Tuttleton calls the novel "broken-backed," implying—with a vulgar nod to Bessy's paralysis—that its parts do not amount to a coherent whole (161). Hermione Lee remarks that "[t]he novel's three main issues—the need for welfare reform in industry, the inadequacies of American marriage and the argument for euthanasia—have as much difficulty co-habiting as Bessy and John Amherst do" (210), and Dale Bauer argues that it "fails to weave together the complicated issues of reform, scientific engineering, and medicine and the effects of these on the inner lives of the main characters" (xiii).

I want to suggest that implicit in all of these diagnoses, orbiting as they do around the figure of the coherent body, is the presupposition of the text as a "well-constituted organism"

¹¹⁹ James obscurely noted that the novel contains "a great deal of (though not perhaps of a completely) superior art," but faulted "the composition & conduct of the thing" specifically (qtd. in Kassanoff 60). Wharton's critical biographers—R.W.B. Lewis, Cynthia Griffin Wolff, and Hermione Lee—all agree that its construction ultimately dooms it to second-rate status in her oeuvre, but that its ambitiousness indicates a refining of the artist's sensibilities that will be fully realized in later work. Ammons, in accord with the tenor of much of her work on Wharton, absolves the text of its imputed ungainliness and dilettantish dabbling in a host of issues by virtue of its critiques of marriage and the impasses confronting the New Woman in American society (*Argument* 44-45).

that it has been the task of this essay to argue Wharton cannot—and, ultimately, did not want to—sustain as a model for her writing. Indeed, there is something ironic in charging the novel with failing to accurately depict “the inner lives” of its main characters when it is precisely what “Visibility in Fiction” sees as the *inhuman* “disfigurations” and “alterations” internal to the human itself that the novel is interested in rendering. The “problem” of *The Fruit of the Tree*, then, lies precisely in challenging the humanistic imperatives of sovereignty, self-identical meaning, and the “substantiality” of the “living” character that underwrite the critical charge of incoherence directed at the novel. Importantly, this project traverses the text’s separate themes, whose purported non-coherence allows it to be negatively aligned with the broken body at its center.¹²⁰ Nevertheless, as with Wharton’s other works we have examined, *The Fruit of the Tree* never fully overcomes its anxiety about the forms of “life support” to which bodies and texts are mutually hooked up to in the interest of their preservation: even as Wharton herself banked upon the novel’s success on the market, she opposed its merits to the interests of progressive publishing, stating to Scribner that “I herewith promise that my next novel is going to be so good that it won’t need any illustrations to make it sell!” (qtd in Lee 207).¹²¹ Whereas here, Wharton frames illustrations as “bad” supplements to the survival of her novel, *The Fruit of the Tree*’s argument hinges on a much more radical account of supplementarity, in which the poison that

¹²⁰ Early on, Amherst speculates that “only through sympathy with its personal, human side could a solution [to the problem of labor] be reached. The disappearance of the old familiar contact between master and man seemed to him one of the great wrongs of the new industrial situation...Till he entered personally into their hardships and inspirations—till he learned what they wanted and why they wanted it—Amherst believed that no mere law-making, however enlightened, could create a wholesome relation between the two” (48). It is worth noting that critics have generally aligned Amherst’s managerial ideology as it is presented in the novel with Wharton’s own—a conclusion that is forced to ignore the novel’s critique in the euthanasia section of the very possibility of this kind of “wholesome,” “human” contact and its explicit attempt to undermine of the possibility of “learn[ing] what they wanted and why they wanted it” that Amherst sees as central to the managerial relation (48).

¹²¹ Because *The House of Mirth* had, as Wharton put it, “consequently increased the value of the next born,” she would receive a raise from \$8,000 to \$10,000 as an advance from Scribner’s for *The Fruit of the Tree* (qtd in Campbell *Fruit* xvi).

compromises life appears indistinguishable from the “antiseptic” that protects against the autoimmunitary excess constitutive of life itself.

This argument begins to unfold at Bessy’s sickbed in the wake of her accident, where the terms of Justine’s moral intervention get elaborated through her interactions with the medical staff. “We all know there have been cases where such injury to the cord has not caused death,” Dr. Wyant, the doctor in charge of administering to Bessy, explains to Justine (402).

“This may be one of those cases; but the biggest man couldn’t say now.”
Justine hid her eyes. “What a fate!”
“Recovery? Yes. Keeping people alive in such cases is one of the refinements of cruelty that it was left for Christianity to invent.”
“And yet—?”
“And yet—it’s got to be! Science herself says so—not for the patient, of course; but for herself—for unborn generations, rather. Queer, isn’t it? The two creeds are at one.”
Justine murmured through her clasped hands: “I wish she were not so strong—”
“Yes; it’s wonderful what those frail petted bodies can stand. The fight is going to be a hard one” (402).

Conversations like this establish Justine as the lone possessor of an ethical conscience, who bears silent but outraged witness to the cruel conventional morality of what she calls, as if invoking an oath, “Society—Science—Religion!” (418). The slippages in Dr. Wyant’s language, however, indicate the complex biopolitical logic of reproductive futurity that underwrite Wharton’s sense of what such convention entails, and draw attention to some of the ways the novel deploys its different senses of what it means to “survive” as a living entity. The physician’s personification of science as a female law-giving sovereign (“it’s got to be—science herself says so!”) almost immediately blurs into a metonymization of the female body as mother of the race or population (“for unborn generations”). This tension between visions of sovereign power and biopower contained within the image of the prone body is reaffirmed in the concession that Bessy’s life-support apparatus is tantamount to torture—Justine likens the doctors to “skilled agent[s] of the

Inquisition”—despite Dr. Wyant’s additional assurance that the entire “cruel” process is “not for the patient” at all (401, 402). Whereas sovereign power, of which the capacity to inflict torture is only one of its possible manifestations, acts upon individual bodies “in the name of a sovereign who must be defended,” biopower’s will to “administer, optimize, and multiply [life], subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations” acts “on behalf of the existence of everyone,” what Foucault called “the species body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of biological processes” (Foucault *History* 137, 139). Bessy’s body, from this perspective, functions simultaneously as Foucault’s punishable body at the scaffold, a subject at the mercy of a law-giving “science,” *and* a figure for the biopolitical body, whose form cuts across individual subjectivities to encompass the “unborn generations” of the body politic *in potentia*.

The novel’s stance towards this perspectival split is complex. On the one hand, Wharton encourages her readers to be skeptical of Dr. Wyant’s formulation that yokes together the individual body with the mass body, and to recognize, as Justine does, that its rhetoric deploys biopolitical abstractions as the justification for individual human suffering. But on the other hand, the novel implicitly endorses this split insofar as Justine’s moral predicament involves navigating the double vision that sees Bessy alternately as a unique, willful individual in extreme distress, and as something distinctly *inhuman*, “a mere bundle of senseless reflexes”—a description that evokes Wharton’s biomaterial self-characterization as “merely a soft anonymous morsel of humanity” in *A Backward Glance* (432). “To the young physician,” Justine thinks to herself, “Bessy was no longer a suffering, agonizing creature: she was a case—a beautiful case” (418-419). What this means, however, is that Justine’s moral dilemma is less a matter of deciding whether or not “human life is sacred” (as she is perpetually being told by the doctors,

priests, and lawyers who visit the sickbed), and more a matter of deciding whether *Bessy is even human at all*—which is to say, whether she has become something that is capable of dying, or is merely an object of scientific knowledge, a “case,” that can only be “administer[ed], optimiz[ed], and multipli[ed]” indefinitely.

By framing the problem of Bessy’s state in this way, *The Fruit of the Tree* appears, on the surface, to be making an argument *not* for or against euthanasia, as critics have generally read it, but for what looks like sovereignty itself, for an authentic decision that will allow Bessy to die by *making* her human at the very moment when her humanity is most seriously in doubt.¹²² If Bessy continues to persist as a scientific “case,” she will be reduced—in language that provocatively anticipates Wharton’s description of bad aesthetics in “Visibility in Fiction”—to merely “a *semblance* of life preserved for years in the poor petrified body” (390). By contrast, the act of killing Bessy will paradoxically *confirm* her humanity in the very gesture of its negation because it will circumscribe the limits of an individual at risk of merging into the mass body of the population and its “unborn generations.” Once it becomes clear that the primal fear motivating the novel’s “bare life” plot is the threat of being transformed from a “creature” into a “case,” it also becomes clear that the novel’s solution to this fear replicates the appeal to sovereign power out of which the problematic emerges in the first place. Wharton’s achievement, as I am reading the novel, is to grant Justine this sovereignty in a form that radically undercuts any possible verification of its authenticity or the ground from which it acts, insofar as it derives its force from the structural errancy of the written mark.

Flipping through Amherst’s copy of Francis Bacon one night in a state of acute distress about Bessy, Justine comes across some marginalia scrawled in Amherst’s hand:

¹²² Both Kassanoff and Lee read *The Fruit of the Tree* through the biographical lens of Wharton’s own sympathy for the euthanasia cause.

Le vraie morale se moque de la morale...

We perish because we follow other men's examples...

Socrates used to call the opinions of the many by the name of Lamiaë—bugbears to frighten children...

A rush of air seemed to have been let into her stifled mind. Were they his own thoughts? No—her memory recalled some confused associations with great names. But at least they must represent his beliefs—must embody deeply-felt convictions—or he would scarcely have taken the trouble to record them (429; emphasis in original).

Here, Amherst's words, ripped from their unknowable original context, spring back to life in Justine's mind; quite literally, they *animate* her, as Wharton draws upon its etymological roots meaning "to give breath to." As if to underscore the novel's need to resolve the opposition constitutive of Bessy's condition—between individual sufferer at the hands of sovereign torturer and mass body of scientific administration in whose fate rests the health of future unborn populations—Wharton frames Justine's awakening to her moral duty as that which countermands both the masses ("the many") and the "child." Justine's capacity to decide upon the state of exception that paradoxically brings Bessy *back* to human life in the very act of taking it is situated here as an act that will sever Bessy's ties to the mass body and the unborn generations for which it is the handmaiden, leaving her a self-conscious individual, "her friend Bessy Amherst, dying and feeling herself die..." (432). The reflexive qualifier—"feeling herself die"—is precisely what distinguishes Bessy's human life from the "mere bundle of senseless reflexes" she is at risk of becoming; that difference, of course, can only come to light at the moment the light of "human" life is extinguished completely.

At every stage of *The Fruit of the Tree's* sickbed plot, Wharton encourages the reader to identify with Justine's deliberative process, such that when she is finally left alone with Bessy, after having been sufficiently steeled to her duty by Amherst's phantom inscriptions, her decision to administer an overdose of morphine and feign ignorance of the death produces a

sense of affective closure that could very well be interpreted as a besting of the *lamioë*—the triumph of the true morality that *se moque de la morale*. But Bessy's recuperation of sovereignty as reflexive human subject in contradistinction to abstract inhuman case depends upon the absent authority of the written mark whose inherently non-sovereign capacity to deviate from its source proves the very condition of its production.

Amherst's marginalia act as a set of performative utterances: they quite literally bring Justine's moral consciousness to a heightened state of liveliness and enable her to act. According to J.L. Austin's speech-act theory, such effects would fall under the rubric of the "etiolations" of language insofar as the marks exist citationally, removed from their original context and thus removed from the "circumstances" that would make their use "appropriate" (Austin 7-9). While their effect may be restorative, their status as language is sick, devalued, and parasitic. As Derrida's well-known critique in "Signature Event Context" reminds us, though, Austin's theory of performativity rests upon the dream of context as the full, originary plenitude of linguistic signification, from which subsequent displacements or extractions (ie. any citational practice whatsoever) represent deviations from language's life-giving source. Against this metaphysical organicist vision, Derrida contends, "there are only contexts without any center of absolute anchoring" (320):

For the written to be written, it must continue to "act" and be legible even if what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what he has written, for what he seems to have signed, whether he is provisionally absent, or if he is dead, or if in general he does not support with his absolutely current and present intention or attention the plenitude of his meaning, of that very thing which seems to be written in his name (316).

The errancy or spacing ("the always open possibility of extraction and grafting") that Austin understands as an aberration on "normal," healthy language is, for Derrida, the very precondition for written and spoken communication as such: it designates the necessary autoimmunity of the

letter without which there would be no meaning or inscription whatsoever—and moreover, *no survival*.¹²³ Justine’s animation by Amherst’s errant letter thus comes by way of a fundamental *exanimation*, which is the principle of textuality itself—a principle that, in the terms of Justine’s problematic, operates in the interval or gap making “[Amherst’s] *own* thoughts” indistinguishable from the “represent[ation of] his beliefs.” Amherst’s act of inscription demarcates precisely this division at the origin whereby the privileged mode of autonomous self-expression (his *own* thoughts) always looks liable to become alienated and disfigured, a mere “representation” rather than the thing itself. The structural iterability of the letter reveals the difference at the heart of the self-identical, the effect of which manifests here as the impossibility of anchoring Amherst’s “meaning” to a particular spatio-temporal milieu. That he can mean when not-meaning and signify when not-signifying divulges the difference at the origin of autonomous intentionality itself.

Jennie Kassanoff, whose reading of *The Fruit of the Tree* I take issue with in what follows, helpfully elaborates the discursive context of fin-de-siècle euthanasia debates to which Wharton adds her voice. As Kassanoff puts it, the central issue was “an essentially hermeneutic dilemma: who was authorized to interpret the desires of the prone body” (73)? Those in favor of legalizing euthanasia needed to position the act of inducing “a gentle and easy death” (as the *OED* defines it) as facilitating the direct intentions of the patient; those against it equated euthanasia with homicide, which is to say, they positioned it as a violent act contradicting the will and intention of the patient. Yet the question of the patient’s intention was far from a simple

¹²³ Häggglund’s excellent work on Derrida is helpful here: in *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (2008), he writes, “To survive is never to be absolutely present; it is to remain after a past that is no longer and to keep the memory of this past for a future that is not yet. I argue that every moment of life is a matter of survival, since it depends on what Derrida calls the structure of the trace. The structure of the trace follows from the constitution of time, which makes it impossible for anything to be present *in itself*. Every now passes away as soon as it comes to be and must therefore be inscribed as a trace in order to be at all. The trace enables the past to be retained, since it is characterized by the ability to remain in spite of temporal succession. The trace is thus the minimal condition for life to resist death in a movement of survival” (1).

matter to interpret. Kassanoff quotes a 1906 letter written to the *New York Times* in which an army captain, W.E.P. French, advocates for euthanasia thus: “I hope that if I ever become...an inert mass of hopeless agony, or if some incurable malady should make me a horror to the tender hearts that would minister unto me—I hope some merciful, compassionate, gently brave hand will ‘medicine me to that sweet sleep’” (qtd. in Kassanoff 76). Notice that French’s statement reproduces the issues at stake in *The Fruit of the Tree*: not only does the utterance refer to a context that has not yet occurred (making the act of ascribing intentionality to the “inert mass of hopeless agony” another instance of citational grafting) but it appeals to the “hearts” of others, for whom the sight of the patient’s “incurable malady” may or may not register as a “horror.” Even in the moment of the assertion, then, the desire for death is displaced and refracted. “Who is to tell after death whether the patient has consented to his own departure,” writes another commentator from the period, “or whether the last ray of hope had really disappeared or not?” (qtd. in Kassanoff 74).

This question is one that *The Fruit of the Tree* insists is fundamentally unanswerable, which means that the act will never, in fact, receive the authorization it requires, but will always be haunted by the errancy of the intentions to which it appeals. Wharton emphasizes this point even more insistently when Justine becomes a reader twice over, sitting at Bessy’s bedside in their last moments together. Amidst a procession of “vague animal wailing,” Justine hears Bessy utter one articulate word—the word “Justine”—that she interprets as the desire for death (432). “She knew what that meant: it was an appeal for the hypodermic needle” (433). Structurally, there is no difference between Justine’s interpretation of Amherst’s marginalia (of indeterminate age and spatial distance) and her interpretation of Bessy’s highly ambiguous utterance (of seemingly unmediated presence). As readers who have been following Justine’s deliberative

process, however, we know that it is imperative for her to hear in “Justine” more than an accidental collection of phonemes; in *The Fruit of the Tree*’s biopolitical matrix, wanting death is the surest sign of possessing life, which means that to find in the word “Justine” a *desire*, coherent and unequivocal, is to discover an index of humanity itself. But again, Wharton calls this form of evidence into question the moment she offers it: “[Justine] could not turn her gaze from Bessy, and Bessy’s eyes entreated her again—*Justine!* There was really no word now—the whimperings were uninterrupted. But Justine heard an inner voice, and its pleading shook her heart. She rose and filled the syringe—and returning with it, bent above the bed...” (433). At stake in the difference between “whimperings” and the “word” is the possibility of distinguishing between a “bundle of senseless reflexes” and “Bessy Amherst, dying and feeling herself die.”

The problematic of life, here—the problem of deciding upon the state of exception that isolates a bare life within the individual for extermination—is thoroughly enmeshed with a problematic of signification—of deciding upon the difference between words imbued with human intention and the noise of “vague animal wailing.” Wharton makes clear that the semantic difference cannot lie at the level of the utterance. The materiality of Bessy’s “word”—the fact that, at any moment, it might slide into inarticulate “whimperings” or pure phonetic exclamations devoid of signification—constitutes both the conditions of its intelligibility *and* what de Man calls its disfiguring, “inhuman” properties. For these reasons, in the final instance, the “word” that Justine hears, if it is to instantiate a pure communion without the dangerous movement of the trace, can only exist in the figural realm of the autopoetic inscription, “an inner voice” that speaks directly to the “heart” itself. In order for Justine to stabilize the ontological line across which Bessy’s liminal humanity perpetually traffics, she is forced to usurp the task of writing from her unreliable interlocutors, which entails bridging the gap between Bessy’s subjectivity

and her own. The mode of writing she instantiates is thus one purified of the capacity for errancy, risk, and uncertainty—it exists without the Other to whom the ethical relation is oriented.

If Justine kills Bessy, paradoxically, to save her from the sort of inhuman survival awaiting the biopolitical body—a state Dr. Wyant can describe only negatively as “deferring death indefinitely” through life’s perpetual administration—Bessy’s actual fate in the novel as the object of memorialization at the Westmore Mills will exactly invert this formula, turning her *back* into an inhuman abstraction whose legacy will be made to symbolize a path for the children of the future. This inversion occurs, again, through the trope of textual (mis)interpretation, and the perfect narrative symmetry it bestows upon Wharton’s novels suggests her acute attention to the risks of thinking textual life alongside biological life as mutually implicated problematics: that there can be no such thing as good survival or bad survival, but only a constant negotiation—a constant imperative for interpretation, as Colebrook argues—of the foundations by which those evaluations are made to attain the appearance of stability in the first place.

In the wake of his wife’s death, Amherst marries Justine Brent. The promise of happiness held out by their shared sensibility and mutual passion for philanthropic causes, however, is irreparably broken by the revelation of Justine’s act of euthanasia, which Amherst, in a total reversal of Justine’s expectations, finds abhorrent and impossible to condone. When Justine, in an effort to defend her decision, shows Amherst the marginalia in his hand, he becomes opaque, “look[ing] at her coldly, almost apprehensively, as if she had grown suddenly dangerous and remote; then he turned and walked out of the room” (524). “Like many men of emancipated thought,” Justine reflects, “he had remained subject to the old conventions of feeling” (525). But by the novel’s close, the same mechanism of textual (mis)interpretation that allowed Justine to

break with the “convention” of the masses, now allows Bessy’s afterlife to become reinscribed within it. The novel’s final scene takes place during a commemoration ceremony at the Westmore Mills, where Amherst is in the process of revealing plans for a new gymnasium to be built for the mill’s employees. The project is to be dedicated to the memory of his dead first wife, whose “intention” to construct the gym for the wellbeing of the millworkers Amherst deduces from “a carefully-studied plan for a pleasure-house” that he discovers amongst her possessions following her death (627). Both Justine and the novel’s readers know, however, that while the blueprints were certainly the product of Bessy’s imagination, her intentions for them were far from philanthropic: the gymnasium was designed exclusively for her own personal pleasure in a moment of “restless[ness]” upon proclaiming that “there was no way of keeping well in a winter climate which made regular exercise impossible” (355-356).

As Bessy’s confidante during this period, Justine registers acutely the bitter irony of this false attribution while she watches the dedication ceremony. “How was it possible,” she wonders, “that Amherst knew nothing of the original purpose of the plans, and by what mocking turn of events had a project devised in deliberate defiance of his wishes, and intended to declare his wife’s open contempt for them, been transformed into a Utopian vision for the betterment of the Westmore operatives?” (628). In the face of this “unreal woman, this phantom that Amherst’s uneasy imagination had evoked,” Justine chooses to hold her tongue, a silence that she sees as a final act of penance for her own misreading earlier in the novel (629). But what from Justine’s perspective looks like retribution—“it was as though [Bessy’s] small malicious ghost had devised this way of punishing the wife who had taken her place”—from the reader’s looks like simply the reconfirmation of a single textual principle that resists *all* logics of equivalence insofar as it undercuts the logic of self-consistency underwriting the notion of identity itself.

Again, as we have seen throughout Wharton's oeuvre, the false, degraded, and parasitic text ("a project devised in deliberate defiance of his wishes") comes to occupy the space of the healthy original, turning the original itself into a kind of spectral afterimage, the elusive origin that emerges only retrospectively as the *result* of a performative utterance. Just as Justine's decision to give Bessy an overdose of morphine produces the very "humanity" it will retrospectively posit as safeguarding, Amherst's speech performatively enacts the referent it purports merely to describe. For the effect of Amherst's speech, as Justine realizes when she sees Bessy's daughter taking part in the ceremony, will be to retroactively provide the child with a bourgeois, managerial legacy of which she will have always-already been a part. The act of dedication, thinks Justine, "would consecrate the child's relation to that work, make it appear to her as the continuance of a beautiful, a sacred tradition" (630).

Bessy's ghostly survival as a "tradition" grounded in a set of errant blueprints is made possible by the structure of the trace, which underwrites our "synthetic" experience of the present as always differing spatially and deferring temporally from itself. "The trace," writes Martin Hägglund, synthesizing Derrida's accounts in "Différance" and elsewhere, "is necessarily spatial, since spatiality is characterized by the ability to remain in spite of temporal succession...Spatiality, however, can never be in itself; it can never be pure simultaneity...A trace can only be read after its inscription and is thus marked by a relation to the future that temporalizes space" (18). "Bessy Amherst" survives in the interval of this double movement: her blueprints index a trace of now-lost-presence, a spatialization of time that holds over from a past that is always fleeting, at the same time as they break irreparably from the present for a future in which they have yet to be (re)read. This movement is what makes Bessy's spectrality more than just a return from the past (Justine imagines her "called from the grave"), but also a backward

glance from the *future* that turns the present into the natural antecedent of a “tradition” that is yet to come (“In my mother’s name, I give this house to Westmore,” recites Bessy’s daughter at the podium) (629). And it is precisely this spectrality, the rhetorical disfigurations and displacements it entails, which prove so horrifying to Justine, whose only option is to endure the haunting: “It was now at last that she was paying her full price” (632).

Wharton’s narrative symmetry—two scenes of textual (mis)interpretation in which the stakes are the survival of an individual and whose outcomes are diametrically opposed—generates a specific kind of narrative tension. To rejoice over Justine’s (mis)reading of Amherst’s marginalia in the act of euthanizing Bessy, and then lament, again with Justine, over Amherst’s (mis)reading of Bessy’s blueprints in the act of producing a lineage for her daughter is to encounter the finely crafted contradiction at the heart of *The Fruit of the Tree*. Wharton’s point is precisely to underscore the impossibility of naturalizing or definitively stabilizing the terms of moral action in the novel. As Bessy’s sickbed scene reveals, the threat of becoming-inhuman is constitutive of the human itself, and to keep this threat at bay, the human must be affirmed through its own negation; but becoming inhuman (in the form of a ghost, a specter, or the “unreal woman” that haunts Justine) turns out to be the only way to memorialize what now appears as a lost (human) origin. Here, the flipside of Bessy’s dehumanization in the name of future “unborn generations” reveals itself in the figure of genealogical continuity established by the maternal lineage. A “good” biopolitics of the unborn is thus made possible by the very inhuman figure it is meant to ward off. Bessy’s uncanny survival—like “Zombie Ethan”—is made possible by her becoming-networked to the unborn masses that render her existence a ghostly one.

It is hard to overstate the importance of Wharton's project here for redefining the terms by which she has almost always been read as a theorist of modernity—or more accurately, anti-modernity. As is clear from the complex temporal structures of survival and futurity at play in the novel (the past emerges from a future that is yet to come and the future precedes a past that never was), the invocation of a term like “nostalgia” to describe Wharton's authorial project, as long as it refers to a unidirectional trajectory and is used to smuggle in moralizing assumptions about her belief in the purity of the past and the impurities of the future, will have to be entirely reconceived if not discarded altogether. Jennie Kassanoff, one of the most rigorous of Wharton's contemporary readers, for instance, perceptively notes of *The Fruit of the Tree* that “[t]he problem of managing Bessy's body, the emblem of social and industrial control, ultimately parallels the status of writing in the novel,” but fails to follow out the radical implications of this parallel, instead counterposing the ontological integrity of bodies to the ontological instability of texts. Thus, “Bessy's euthanized death...restores both personal sovereignty and genealogical succession,” and as such is implicated in what Kassanoff calls “the novel's class logic” that allows us to clearly distinguish “success[ful]” suicides from unsuccessful ones (such as Mattie Silver's in *Ethan Frome*). Meanwhile, as if dramatizing a separate issue, Kassanoff points to Justine's “(mis)reading” as indicating “an anxiety of agency—this time, authorial agency” (81). But if both Bessy's death and her strange resurrection hinge upon the shifting ground of the textual, the reductions necessary for instantiating a “class logic” with successful and unsuccessful suicides (like Austin's felicitous and infelicitous utterances) seem to be in jeopardy. Kassanoff thus turns Wharton's *insistence upon* the necessary errancy of the letter within a biopolitical context that differentiates human vitality from nonhuman “semblances” into a *lament* for that errancy, and thereby reinstates the nostalgic moralizing that has characterized one

dominant strand of her criticism. This gesture, as I suggest earlier, also reenacts the blindness to Wharton's biotextual hybrids that has afflicted a majority of her closest readers. Figuring Amherst's dedicatory speech at the podium as an allegory of authorship, she argues that "[w]hen the author is unable to control the word, her authority is compromised and her agency disputed," and that "perhaps for Wharton this anxiety is the most pressing of all" (82). "The author," Kassanoff concludes, "becomes the final prone, incapacitated body in the text" (82).

But is Edith Wharton, who dwelt so insistently, here and elsewhere, upon the fraught, precarious, and variable afterlives of texts and the individuals who persist in and through them, and who paid such careful attention to the socio-cultural institutions that artificially preserve, curate, and maintain these traces, so naïve as to dream about an authorial fantasy of complete, autonomous control? And is it not extremely reductive, in light of her persistent questioning—we would venture, *deconstruction*—of this fantasy, to align Wharton's *many* incapacitated bodies with the figure of compromised authorial agency? While Jack London often, and for very quite divergent purposes, came to imagine the writing writer as inhabiting the scrambled and porous boundaries of a denatured, often paralytic, sensorium, Wharton did not, though body and text are consistently made analogous across her writings as a means to articulate what I have been referring to as the problematic of "survival."

Like "Copy" before it, *The Fruit of the Tree* ends ironically, with the renunciation of textuality and its insoluble hermeneutic dilemmas in favor of a different kind of inscription—a kind that recapitulates both Justine's fantasmatic vision of pure writing aimed at the "heart" (ie. without the capacity for misinterpretation or misdirection), as well as Mrs. Ventnor and Mr. Dale's dream of an unsullied privacy purged of the threat of "excursionists." Standing with the "smoke of Westmore" rising behind them immediately following the harrowing dedication

ceremony at the factory, Amherst suggests to Justine that perhaps the moment of “keenest happiness” they can share together is “the moment when the meaning of life [begins] to come out from the mists—when one could look out at last over the marsh one had drained” (633). “[L]et us go out and look at the marsh we have drained,” he entreats, to which Justine hesitantly assents, “half-smiling.” Here, Amherst figures his brand of philanthropic managerialism as an imprint upon the face of the earth itself, thereby transforming the fulfillment of his reform project into the final scene of writing in the novel, and the mutual recognition of this indelible mark as the purest form of communion the pair could share. Just as in “Copy,” where the public world of networked life and its biotextual impurities get replaced by the stifling isolation of a world without books, *The Fruit of the Tree* dissolves the precarious relays linking bodily and textual survival into the dream of pure, unmediated action—a writing that cannot be misinterpreted because it acts directly upon the form of the social body itself. “The evil done by democratic literariness has to be redeemed by the power of a writing engraved in the very flesh of things,” writes Jacques Rancière in “The Politics of Literature,” “But this fictional solution is a dead-end for literature itself. Were it taken at face value, it would mean that the writer must stop writing, must keep silent and cede the place to the engineers, who know the right way to bind men together, the right way to write without words in the flesh of things” (165). Wharton’s entire body of writing testifies against the feasibility of this premonition insofar as the system of biotextual representation makes the disentangling of words from flesh impossible. This entanglement, as I have suggested, does not represent the object of a lament, but rather provides the critical vocabulary for thinking the necessity of mediation, translation and originary difference—the very conditions for assembling our collective world.

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