The Dialectics of Form: Reification and Genre in Early Twentieth-Century American Literature

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ABSTRACT
The Dialectics of Form: Genre and Reification in Early Twentieth-Century American Literature

This dissertation foregrounds genre as a politically-charged modality in early twentieth-century American literature, specifically the entangled relations between realism, romance, and naturalism through which the shifting formations of race and gender reproduce or challenge transnational capitalism’s reifying processes. My readings of articulations of racialized and gendered subjectivity during two pivotal periods in US history offer a new way of understanding the historical conditions underlying the emergence and circulation of reified identities and address many puzzling textual ambiguities as the cultural effects of the reified abstraction of labor. Reification’s relation to labor frames the dissertation’s four chapters, appearing in the opening chapter as unconscious forgetting and in the final chapter as deliberate remembering. In the dissertation’s first part I devote attention to under-theorized representations of white heteronormative masculinity. I situate the emerging configurations of racialized heterosexuality at the interface of consumer culture’s social engineering of subjects of desire. In the dissertation’s second part, I turn to two narrative experiments that more strategically and dialectically manipulate conventions of romance and naturalism to recast reified racial and gendered subjects as they emerge out of histories of transnational capital’s hyper-extraction of value from the colonial body. I draw out the narratives’ romantic utopian aspirations for overcoming racialized divisions between agency and structure, culture and labor.

Chapter one on Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* foregrounds memory as a mediatory code for analyzing how reification relates to capitalism’s mechanization of labor and its effects on new white feminine and masculine disembodied consumer subjects. Chapter four on W.E.B.
Du Bois’s novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* reads the epic memory of the slave’s labor congealed in the commodity cotton as crucial to the black utopian socialist project of de-reifying the racialized division between labor and culture. Chapter two on the stories of Sui Sin Far and Chapter three on the novel *Cogewea* by Mourning Dove theorize reification as a process through the splitting and doubling of racialized subjects to manage white anxieties about miscegenation. These chapters examine how texts featuring mixed-race heroines work with and against romance and naturalist conventions to re-narrate histories of colonial capitalism and overcome experiential disconnections imposed upon self and community. Reading form dialectically draws out the intensely cathected constellations of relations as they open up vantages for understanding totality, all be it ones that hover in the margins.
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This dissertation foregrounds form as a politically-charged modality in early twentieth-century American literature. Genre, specifically the entangled relations between romance and naturalism, is, to use Fredric Jameson’s metaphor, a constellation or set of limited yet shifting formal possibilities that correspond to determinate social relationships through which the shifting formations of race and gender reproduce or challenge transnational capitalism’s reifying processes. “The Dialectics of Form” brings together four sets of multi-generic literary texts that manipulate the conventions of romance and naturalism as forms that structured the popular imagination and shaped late nineteenth and early twentieth-century US capitalism’s reifying processes of social differentiation. Each chapter focuses on fictive representations of racialized and gendered subjectivities—white Euro-American worker-consumers; Exclusion Era Chinese American immigrants, Assimilation Era Natives and half-bloods, and post-Reconstruction black workers—and shows how they acquire unexpected meanings through the narrative’s management of these inherited generic conventions.

In attending to form and genre, I draw upon Marxist literary theory particularly the concept of reification and the body of criticism surrounding the multi-generic composition of literary naturalism and realism and their trafficking in sentimental and melodramatic codes.¹

¹ Scholars of American literary naturalism agree that naturalist novels conspicuously incorporate romance tropes and conventions. The debates are largely split over whether the naturalism is predominantly influenced by the so-called American Romance tradition (see Donald Pizer and
Marxist literary criticism’s overriding concern is the relationship between literary form and social processes of capitalism. Reading the emergence of new identity formations from the vantage point of the historical implementation of reification offers a critical mode of analysis that links changes in cultural formations to changing relations of labor. My readings of articulations of racialized and gendered subjectivity during two pivotal periods in US history offers a new way of understanding the historical conditions underlying the emergence and circulation of reified identities and addresses many puzzling textual ambiguities as the cultural effects of the reified abstraction of labor.

Reification is an epistemological logic linked to capitalism’s ongoing international differentiation and enforced social dispersals which both open and foreclose new horizons of knowledge. One of its early theorists was Georg Lukacs who recognized that capitalism would need new forms of consciousness, subjectivity, and knowledge conducive to its new rationalized, accelerated regime of accumulation. In the early twentieth century Lukacs observed that as capitalism’s profit-driven technology advanced, the commodity-structure of social relations penetrated deeper into “every expression of life” \(\text{(HCC 84)}\). The process he called reification describes how the fragmentation of the labor process also epistemologically fragments the subject. When the commodity structure penetrates all aspects of society it “stamps its imprint upon the whole consciousness of man; his qualities and abilities are no longer an organic part of his personality, they are things which he can ‘own’ or ‘dispose of’ like the various objects of the external world” \(\text{(Lukacs, HCC, 100)}\).

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Eric Link) or popular romances associated with sentimentalism, melodrama, and women’s fiction (see Amy Kaplan, June Howard, and Keith Newlin).
Lukacs recognized that reification’s impact upon the forms consciousness takes coincides with capitalism’s Taylorist revolution: increasingly mechanizing and de-skilling the labor process; intensifying the division between manual and specialized labor; consolidating new faculties of skilled professional-managerial labor. The reifying process creates mystifying experiential disconnections where they never were before by breaking down and reconstituting naturalized structural and epistemological unities into anatomized components comprising new autonomies. For Lukacs, the concept of totality is the dialectical antithesis of reification. Whereas reification tears asunder multiple horizons of capitalism’s social relations of labor, totality thinking aspires to cognitively restore their connections and linkages. As such, totality can never be more than an aspiration, a dialectical maneuver to counter-act reification’s artificial limits imposed upon subjectivity and knowledge: “The plenitude of the totality does not need to be consciously integrated into the motives and objects of action. What is crucial is that there should be an aspiration toward totality” (HCC 198). Lukacs maintained that art, particularly the novel, is best suited to creating the aesthetic experience of totality. However, the aspiration to totality does not happen through a leap outside of inherited forms. Rather, by engaging their disparate effects on subject formation a process of disaggregation occurs, and it is this process that I address most directly in my readings of Sui Sin Far, Mourning Dove, and Du Bois whose engagements with inherited forms put forward glimpses of de-reified social life.

Lukacs’ dialectic of reification and totality is the blueprint of Frederic Jameson’s dialectical literary criticism. Jameson provides a useful model of analysis of the mediations between cultural forms and relations of labor. He proposes a materialist mode of reading that “aims to demonstrate what is not evident in the appearance of things, but rather in their underlying reality, namely that the same essence is at work in the specific languages of culture as
in the organization of the relations of production” (PU 40). One of the highly mediated cultural conventions he attends to is genre. My approach to genre draws on Jameson’s definition of genre criticism as an “operation of a historical regrounding” by which “ideal constructs earn their reality” (“Magical,” 157). For Jameson, the dialectical literary critic deciphers the internal logic of an ideal cultural construct through the constellation of generic systems that circumscribe it, a set of limited yet shifting formal possibilities that correspond to determinate social relationships. As Jameson understands it, genre criticism is not an argument for historical causality; instead, it is a historicizing operation that “blocks off a certain number of formal possibilities which had been available in earlier situations, all the while opening up certain determinate new ones which may or may not then come into being” (158). With its porous boundaries and intertextual networks, genre nonetheless “construct[s] a norm in terms of which even deviations may be read in a meaningful way” (Jameson 149).

Mikhail Bakhtin, too, understood genre as a historically-permutational and porous. Like Jameson, he attends to its operation in the heterogeneous formal features of the novel: “Since it is constructed in a zone of contact with the incomplete events of a particular present, the novel often crosses the boundary of what we strictly call fictional literature—making use first of a moral confession, then of a philosophical tract, then of manifestos that are openly political” (33). It is in precisely in this sense that I argue in chapter 3 that we consider the multiple voices in Cogewea, that is, as emerging within a zone of contact with the events of a particular present and inserted into a contemporaneous literary fictional “intertextual sequence.” In this milieu, the formal conventions of literary naturalism and realism mingle with journalism to address a concrete historical situation. Jameson argues that the task of a materialist genre criticism should be to require that the “the nature of the literary work as a symbolic act not becom[e] visible until
the frame is expanded to include the historical situation itself” (160). Following Jameson, my reading of multiple genres advances a historically and materially grounded understanding of literary form.

Kevin Floyd extends Lukacs’ theory of reification to account for capitalism’s process of social differentiation in the early twentieth century’s emerging culture of consumption. During this period, capitalists coordinated consumption and production in order to manage social demand for Taylorism’s mass-produced commodities and forestall accumulation crises. Against Lukacs’ view of reification’s absolute grip on consciousness, Floyd argues that Taylorism created the conditions for new sexual identities and subjectivities in a newly remade gendered body. Accelerated mass industrialism created an increasing demand for cheap labor and cross-national and transnational migratory shifts to new urban centers of production. He contends that the “micro-level” components of capitalism’s effort to normalize consumption as a central aspect of everyday life “operate at the level of the body, which provide[s] a way of understanding the relation between the dynamics of capital accumulation as they develop in the United States and the way in which reification of sexual desire attributes to bodies certain new, normalized forms of sexual, and potentially critical, subjectivity” (35) As Floyd underscores, to think dialectically, means to grasp reification’s cultural logic that simultaneously blocks and opens critical vantages on totality.

Drawing upon and expanding this historical materialist critical tradition, I theorize several ways of understanding reification, literary form, and cultural identity in early twentieth-century fiction. One way reification operates there is through the dialectical relation between “forgetting” and remembering labor, which, I argue, is crucial to the formation of new cultural identities. Reification’s relation to labor frames the dissertation’s four chapters, appearing in the
opening chapter as unconscious forgetting and in the final chapter as deliberate remembering. In chapter one, I foreground memory as a mediatory code for analyzing how reification relates to capitalism’s mechanization of labor and its effects on new white feminine and masculine disembodied consumer subjects. In Chapter four, the epic memory of the slave’s labor congealed in the commodity cotton is crucial to the black female heroine’s utopian socialist project of de-reifying the racialized division between labor and culture. I also read reification operating through the splitting and doubling of racialized subjects to manage white anxieties about miscegenation. Chapters two and three examine how texts featuring mixed-race heroines work with and against romance and naturalist conventions to re-narrate histories of colonial capitalism and overcome experiential disconnections imposed upon self and community. These chapters draw out the narrative’s romantic utopian aspirations for overcoming racialization’s reifying effects. At the same time I devote critical attention to these narratives’ intensely cathected constellations of relations as they open up vantages for understanding totality, all be it ones that hover in the margins. Another recurring aspect of reification I address is its manifestation in “ideal” or newly normative gendered and racial subjects. In the dissertation’s first part I devote attention to the representation of the under-theorized turn-of-the-century crisis of white heteronormative masculinity encoded in key texts by Theodore Dreiser and Sui Sin Far. Reading masculinity through the analytic of reification situates the emerging configurations of racialized heterosexuality at the interface of consumer culture’s racialized social engineering of subjects of desire and transnational capital’s hyper-extraction of value from the colonial body. In addition, this approach considers narrative strategies that contest and de-reify deeply alienated existence. Chapter one “She Forgot”: The Reification of Memory and Desire in Dreiser’s Sister Carrie” foregrounds the memory loss that structures the naturalist romance as performing the
critical work of indexing the reification of racialized and gendered consumers as the narrative forgets their embeddedness in social relations of labor and need. *Sister Carrie* entangles and juxtaposes two formulaic plot structures: the romance plot of female ascension and the naturalistic plot of masculine decline. Carrie’s memory—or lack of it—is a mediatory code that conveys the reifying effects of consumer culture in which commodities magically “speak” the language of immediacy, where immediacy forecloses access to the historical past congealed in the commodity and, for Carrie, any identification with ever having been a factory worker. The novel encodes Carrie’s success story in a displacement: the narrative marks her initially as a working girl who toils in a shoe factory but then “forgets” this designation, referring to her later as a “shop girl.” The effect is to both inscribe and erode the historical development of capital’s mediation of newly disembodied gendered subjects of production and consumption. Dreiser’s manipulation of romantic and naturalist emplotments results in ambivalence toward new gendered subjects that participate in the reified division between the production and consumption it critiques. *Sister Carrie*’s ambivalent stance regarding the impact of a newly fragmented labor force is also played out in its narration of a crisis in masculinity. I read the novel’s under-examined ambivalent stance as narrativizing capitalism’s systemic injuries to the body and psyche and the crisis of white hetero-masculinity it provokes. This ideological crisis is encoded in a displaced resentment onto the axes of gender, the structuring principle of the novel’s double plot, and the racialized otherness of the “ethnic” immigrant upstart.

Chapter two, “Sui Sin Far’s Jekyll and Hyde: Divided Subjects and Utopian Alternatives,” examines the overlooked linkages among Sui Sin Far’s complex strategies of re-narrating Chinese manhood, Taylorism’s mechanization of labor, and imperialist capitalism’s penetration into Asian markets. I read Sui Sin Far’s allusion to the Robert Louis Stevenson
memorial in San Francisco’s Chinatown as a dialectical image—an image that brings together fragments of the past and present making intelligible a new understanding of the doubling and splitting that underlie the formation of normative white masculine subjectivity and the costs of becoming “Chinese” in America. In a story of the violent formation of Chinese-white biracial identity, the narrative juxtaposes Euro-American literary figurations of fragmented white masculine subjects and Chinese immigrant experiences as incoherent others to disclose a racialized and gendered logic connecting different processes of social reification. Sui Sin Far’s defense of “the Chinaman” within the historical context of Progressive Era naturalistic discourses of the coolie as “cheap labor” discloses anxieties about monopoly capitalism’s unrestrained, undifferentiated economic degradation. I highlight the ways her narrative strategies inhabit the mediatory effects of changes in labor affecting the reification of white and Chinese masculine identities and their generation of a crisis of white masculinity. Against this backdrop, Sui Sin Far’s stories deploy sentimental tropes of innocence and experience, figuring the child as utopian unreified “Chinese” personhood, an imaginary and dialectical resolution to whiteness’ fragmenting effects on Chinese immigrant communities.

In the dissertation’s second part, I turn to two narrative experiments that strategically and dialectically manipulate conventions of romance and naturalism to recast reified racial and gendered subjects and the divisions between agency and structure, culture and labor. Chapter three, “Cogewea’s Octopus: Genre and Polemic in Mourning Dove’s ‘Depiction of the Great Montana Cattle Range,’” reframes critical debates over the novel’s competing authors’ visions in terms of the narrative’s formal tensions between its romance and naturalist plots. The novel’s naturalist polemic and realist depictions of land politicize capitalism’s development of Indian lands in Northwest Montana, making visible the collusion between the federal Bureau of
Indian Affair and corporate capital. Cogewea’s de-reifying narrative work operates through its formal shifts from western romance to Okanagan folklore to naturalist polemics, shifts that piece together—jagged edges and all—a social totality. From this vantage point capitalist systems and federal Indian policy can be seen to consolidate and invade Native-white social relations without diminishing the half-blood heroine’s romantic aspirations for Native survival and regeneration. I read the novel’s comic romantic resolution, where the half-blood heroine marries and inherits a fortune, as a meta-textual moment of self-conscious irony—a tacit acknowledgement of aspiration’s edges: the incommensurability of wish and fulfillment, political desires and the persistence of US federal government and economic systems.

In chapter four, “The Poetics of Cotton and the Cultural Surplus of Black Labor: The Counter-Mythology of W. E. B. Du Bois’ The Quest of the Silver Fleece,” I consider Du Bois’ deployment of romance and mythic tropes to re-narrate the epic hero quest as Zora’s quest to reclaim Southern cotton and land, the black worker’s rightful inheritance. Quest intervenes in racial capitalist discourses reifying black labor as labor of the body entirely severed from labor of the mind by proposing a unifying alternative: cultivation. The utopian content of Quest’s critique of the reified division between culture and work can be found in the novel’s poetics of cotton, the aesthetic features of cotton in its mythologized representation as the Silver Fleece. Quest’s poetics of cotton is the narrative’s anticipatory illumination of the immanent aesthetic dimension of the black worker’s cultivation of cotton plants, a creative relation to work that is foreclosed by slavery’s unpaid black labor and capitalism’s racial caste system of wage labor. Quest’s counter-mythology defetishizes cotton and cotton-made items, like clothes, by imbuing them with aesthetic, even sacred, qualities that are integrally linked to the black worker’s labor, cultivation of the land, and the culture of cultivation.
CHAPTER ONE

“She Forgot”: The Reification of Memory and Desire in Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*

In Theodore Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900), the narrator repeatedly refers to the heroine, Carrie Meeber, as a “shop girl” or “the little shop girl,” although she never gets that ostensibly glamorous “shop girl” position in the department store; she is instead hired as a machine girl in a shoe factory. But this plot fact does not preclude the narrator from referring to Carrie, or Carrie thinking of herself as “the shop girl” even while she takes her position at the machine in the shoe factory and when she becomes the drummer, Charlie Drouet’s, kept woman. Along with many aspects of her past, the labor Carrie performs in the shoe factory seems to vanish from her memory as she performs and inhabits new feminine identities.

In this chapter, I will consider Dreiser’s puzzling tendency to refer to his factory worker-turned-actress heroine as a “shop girl” as a symptom of the increasing reification of her consciousness by reading the novel with and against Laura Jean Libbey’s (1862-1924) widely-read working-girl romances. Libbey’s highly successful rags-to-riches tales of beautiful, virtuous working-girl heroines rewarded with wealth and true love gripped the popular imagination during the late nineteenth century when droves of young women were migrating to urban centers in search of work. My reading of the influence of Libbey’s working-girl melodramatic romances on Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* engages a long-standing debate surrounding the multi-generic constitution of this famous text of American realism and naturalism, particularly Dreiser’s
controversial, supposed reliance on sentimental and melodramatic codes. This chapter demonstrates how Dreiser’s “shop girl” tale reworks and reorients specific conventions of the working-girl melodramatic romance. Through a narrative of “forgetting” *Sister Carrie* registers an epistemological and ideological shift in sex/gender knowledges that Kevin Floyd has identified as “the reification of desire.”

Dreiser’s novel represents Carrie Meeber’s transformation from working girl to celebrity actress, “Carrie Madenda,” as facilitated by her capacity to forget the past, where Carrie’s “memory loss” represents a process of epistemological reification. My point is not that the novel argues one should be shackled by memories of the past, as the narrative is relatively sympathetic toward Carrie’s escape from her sister Minnie and her husband’s dismal working-class flat. Rather, it is striking how Carrie has little to no memory of anything—her parents in Ohio, her sister and brother-in-law, her work as a machine girl in the shoe factory, and, importantly, the assistance she receives in getting her start as an actress, specifically from George Hurstwood, the saloon manager. Carrie’s “memory loss” represents a process of dis-remembering indicative of the reification of her consciousness and subjectivity as she is re-educated as a consumer and subject of performative white femininity. The novel’s representation of Carrie’s “memory loss” performs the critical work of indexing the increasing fragmentation of her consciousness as she “rises” up the class hierarchy and becomes the consummate performer of white femininity. Carrie’s dis-remembering of her past dramatizes the reifying effects of the culture of consumption in which commodities magically “speak” the epistemological language of

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immediacy, where immediacy forecloses access to the historical past congealed in the commodity and, for Carrie, any identification with ever having been a worker in a shoe factory.

Carrie’s dis-remembering of her working-girl past is crucial to the novel’s re-narration of the popular working-girl romance which displaces the “working girl” with the “shop girl.” Critics have noted the degree to which Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* draws upon the conventions of popular romances, especially Libbey’s “working-girl” novels. Publishing eighty-two novels in her lifetime and a syndicated love advice column, Libbey was well-known for her “perfect[ion]” of the formula of the working-girl romance genre (Peterson 20). By reading *Sister Carrie* with and against some of Libbey’s novels, in particular *Leonie Locke; or the Romance of the Beautiful New York Working Girl* (1884), I will show how Libbey’s cross-class marriage plotting of the working girl’s ascent narrative hints at a type of epistemological dis-remembering of labor which will be more fully disclosed and critiqued in Dreiser’s novel. I will focus on Libbey’s *Leonie Locke* which aptly portrays her cross-class marriage plot formula and her repeated, almost compulsive, tendency to refer to her beautiful heroines as “working girls” even as they ascend to the capitalist class. Libbey’s strategy of repeatedly identifying the heroine as a “working girl” throughout her ascent narrative contains a critique of gendered class inequality and separate spheres ideology within and without the factory. At the same time, Libbey’s novels fetishize “the working girl” as a feminine embodiment of the “dignity of labor.” Specifically, *Leonie Locke* narrativizes a type of dis-remembering of labor through its nostalgic picturing of the working-girl in her former factory clothes. This metonymic, visual substitution of clothing (and its cultural symbolism) for labor is something *Sister Carrie* discloses as the epistemological severing of objects of desire from labor, a reification accomplished by Taylorism’s fragmentation of the labor process and the emerging culture of consumption.
Unlike Libbey’s identification of her beautiful heroine as a “working girl” who ascends to the capitalist class, Dreiser’s “little shop-girl” carries a very different valence. Carrie obtains a position as a machine girl and never works in a department store. But even before her factory job the narrative’s description of Carrie as a “little shop girl” has already disassociated her from the “romance of the working girl.” As a “shop girl” Carrie is linked to consumption rather than labor and associated with the new subject of performative white femininity whose arena is the new and alluring department store. The “shop-girl” narrative demonstrates how the reifying process entails more than the Cinderella story; rather here the narrative preoccupation is with an epistemological shift that, albeit ambivalently, is replacing the subject of work with the subject of desire and labor’s products with objects of consumption and status. As the narrative scopes out the layers of “objective” distance between the “little shop girl” tag, and Carrie’s work as a manual laborer in a factory and then in her position as a kept woman, the novel conveys a new gendered subject of desire and reifying consciousness in its formation. As I will show, there is evidence that although his heroine and many contemporary critics of the novel have forgotten Carrie’s work as a machine girl, the narrative does not entirely want the reader to forget the shoe factory.

_Sister Carrie_’s famous double plot—Carrie’s rise from working girl to celebrity actress, and Hurstwood’s decline from manager to beggar—overturns the narrative of the working girl as innocent victim propagated by the likes of Laura Jean Libbey. Instead, the novel entangles the rise of the working-class New Woman with what has been identified by historians and cultural critics as “the crisis of white masculinity.”² Dreiser’s novel represents the reifying culture of

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² Michael Kimmel is perhaps the principal cultural historian on the crisis of masculinity. For my purposes, Kimmel’s important contribution is his tracking of the lexical and cultural shift from manhood to masculinity with the emergence of the culture of consumption and development of
consumption’s social engineering of desiring, white hetero-gendered feminine and masculine subjects. The gendered narrative correlative links Carrie’s rise—the disremembering of the working girl’s labor—and Mrs. Hurstwood’s triumph—her disinher itance of Hurstwood’s manhood and wealth—with Hurstwood’s sexual disembodiment and economic decline. Hurstwood’s physical withering away after he is unemployed and living with Carrie and then as an anonymous beggar on the street both literally and figuratively mourn the death of embodied white manhood. Ultimately, for both Carrie and Mrs. Hurstwood, Hurstwood becomes a forgotten subject.

I. From Working Girl to Shop Girl

In the 1890s, the massive influx of native and immigrant women into the industrial workforce and urban centers generated widespread cultural anxieties about this new phenomenon. Women workers, called “working girls,” posed a threat to the Victorian ideology of separate spheres, and a heightened bourgeois interest in her sexual immorality, her fitness for marriage, and loss of interest in motherhood appeared in fiction in the late nineteenth century (Hapke 3). Laura Jean Libbey’s working-girl fiction popularized a narrative of the working-girl heroine as a figure of white womanhood, virtue, and success. Unlike representations of working-class women in middle-class popular novels, Libbey’s working-girl heroine survives and triumphs over evil figures and, importantly, retains her virtue. Deploying the cross-class professional-managerial class. Otherwise, I agree with Gale Bederman and Athena Devlin that Kimmel’s case for crisis is overstated.

3 Laura Hapke notes, “Almost 4 million—close to 20 percent of all American women, a sizeable increase of 10 years before—were by 1890 what the Census Bureau class as ‘gainfully employed’” (2).
marriage plot, Libbey’s novels pair together the working-girl heroine and the handsome son of a predatory capitalist who are separated by negatively-coded masculine and upper-class forces but always happily reunited in marriage at the novel’s conclusion. Her novels countered narratives of the working girl’s sexual immorality by constructing her as an innocent victim of masculine villains—supervisors and capitalists—and upper-class villainesses who prey on the working girl’s socioeconomic vulnerability. As Michael Denning points out, Libbey’s assertion of her working-girl heroine’s virtue was a departure from “the late nineteenth century bourgeois culture where a woman worker could not be virtuous, regardless of her virginity” (191). Combining the working-girl heroine with the conventions of women’s sensationalist novels, Libbey’s narrative formula was so successful that a genre of working-girl fiction came to be known as “Laura Jean Libbey” (Peterson 20).

Although written for mass consumption, Libbey’s novels were referenced in novels by F. Scott Fitzgerald, Sinclair Lewis, and Sherwood Anderson. Libbey happened to be one of “Dreiser’s boyhood favorites in the early 1880s” (Hakutani 18). The influence of Libbey’s narrative formula on Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* has been acknowledged by several scholars. Leslie Fielder argues that “[m]uch is made by [Dreiser’s] friendlier critics of the fact that just before the beginning of his writing career Dreiser discovered Balzac; much more should be made of the fact that long before that encounter, his imagination had already been formed by Ouida and Laura Jean Libbey” (249). Following Fielder, Jennifer Fleissner reads *Sister Carrie* as “[v]ery much in the vein of…Laura Jean Libbey” as “Dreiser sets his unworldly heroine loose in a mysterious

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4 I am indebted to Peter Gardner for his research on Laura Jean Libbey’s influence on famous American early twentieth-century male novelists.
new world of rakes and temptations, and he lays out her prospects in classically polarized terms” (167).5

Both Libbey and Dreiser’s heroines begin as young, white wage-earning women in urban factory settings (or sometimes mills for Libbey). But then in both Libbey’s working-girl romances and *Sister Carrie* the factory workplace is introduced only to quickly drop out of the narrative, eliminating contradictions like poverty wages and social immobility. Libbey’s working-girl heroine is typically discovered to be an heiress and marries into the capitalist class, and yet she continues to be referred to as a “working girl,” while Carrie is for some time referred to as a “shop girl,” although she never works in a department store.

Libbey’s narrator continues identifying the heroine as a “working girl” long after she is no longer a laborer. Her narrative’s nostalgia for the working girl negotiates anxieties about Gilded Age class privilege and new monied power by drawing on the rhetoric of the “dignity of labor.” My reading of Libbey’s working-girl narrative focuses on the novel *Leonie Locke* (1884) because it encapsulates her basic cross-class marriage plot formula and aptly demonstrates the ideological and epistemological contradictions of her nostalgic fetishization of working-girl identity, which will be more fully revealed in *Sister Carrie*. Dreiser’s narrator’s tendency to describe Carrie as a “shop girl” draws on this convention only to reorient the narrative of the “working girl” by locating her success story in the emerging culture of consumption, disclosing the epistemology of dis-remembering so fundamental to the reification of consciousness and formation of a new feminine desiring subject that Carrie enacts.

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5 That *Sister Carrie* breaks with the marriage plot altogether leads Fleissner to argue that Dreiser re-narrates the working-class New Woman’s desires and destiny as more complex and open-ended. At the end of the novel, Dreiser’s economically-independent heroine remains unmarried and apparently uninterested in heterosexual romance.
Both Libbey’s and Dreiser’s working-girl ascent stories acknowledge and, at times, critique unequal class relations and capitalism’s exploitative labor relations. In some respects, Libbey’s novels offer a more pronounced commentary on inequality and exploitation. Despite the conservative implications of Libbey’s cross-class marriage plot, her working-girl fiction represented genuine inequality and unfairness—wage theft, sexual harassment, forced marriage, upper-class inheritance, usury—and can be read as imaginatively resolving Gilded Age capitalism’s legitimacy crisis and its accompanying crisis of white manhood. Libbey’s working-girl heroine is represented as located in a particularly vulnerable class position. The narrator’s repeated reminders to the reader that although the beautiful heroine ascends the class hierarchy, as she is typically discovered to be an heiress on the way to her eventual marriage, she is still a “working girl” has ideological implications that exceed the obvious conservative and fantasy elements of the cross-class marriage resolution. Libbey’s narrative retains the social and material vulnerability of her heroine’s position as a working-class woman until she is safely married to the hero, the paternalistic capitalist. Undoubtedly, Libbey’s characterization of the working-girl heroine as “unprotected,” “poor,” and “innocent” connotes her need for masculine protection. Yet the characterization of the working girl’s innocence and vulnerability also at times functions as an explicit critique of gendered class inequality and exploitation from the standpoint of one of industrial capitalism’s most vulnerable subjects—the white woman wage earner. By portraying the working girl as a gendered class subject rather than as a consuming subject (as Dreiser will), Libbey’s working girl fiction attempts to assuage anxieties surrounding the “woman adrift” as a

compulsive consumer, and recruit the reader’s sympathy for the working girl’s struggle against
various injustices inflicted on women wage earners.

Libbey’s heroines originate in working-class families and are formulaically thrust into the
position of “breadwinner” by necessity, usually due to a lone, ailing family member. Leonie
Locke, “a small, petite young girl of perhaps some seventeen years, dressed in a neat dark-blue
dress, with jacket same material, and cloth cap to match,” must join the workforce to support her
dying father, Allan Locke (10). She heads to Lincoln & Carlisle Furriers for work and is
confronted by Charlie Hart, who humiliatingly insults the “honest, unprotected girl” with a
sexual proposition (10). After Leonie is hired at the fur factory, she discovers that Hart is the
factory foreman. Hart threatens to fire her if she rejects his sexual advances, but Leonie outright
rejects him and is immediately dismissed. On her way out of the factory, Leonie meets the hero,
Gordon Carlisle, the son of the factory owner, who attempts to redeem her honor by firing Hart
and offering her a clerical position with a week’s advance on her salary. But Hart’s revenge plot
foils Carlisle’s benevolent plan. Hart forges a letter which baits Leonie out of her home, and he
swiftly abducts her and takes her to his apartment. After Leonie miraculously escapes, she
returns home to find her father dead and immediately loses consciousness. She awakes under the
care of an initially compassionate neighbor whose daughter helps Leonie obtain a job in the hat
factory where she is employed. But Leonie is soon discharged from the hat factory because Hart
has publically slandered her as an “unrespectable” girl (26). Believing Hart’s slander, the
neighbor decides that she can no longer house a girl with such a reputation.

Libbey’s repeated references to the petite, girlishly beautiful heroine as a “poor,
unprotected working-girl” and an “innocent girl” construct the working girl as the physical
embodiment of working-class victimhood. As Joyce Shaw Peterson argues, Libbey’s
representation of the sexual harassment experienced by her working-girl heroine from villainous foremen and employers “ha[s] enough hold on reality to keep [it] from being pure fantasy” (27). Women’s historian S.J. Kleinberg also notes,

Low wages, competition for jobs, and unscrupulous employers made female workers vulnerable to sexual advances from male supervisors. Some women received higher pay for making ‘concessions’ to their employers or were allowed to keep their jobs….Foremen routinely dismissed women who resisted their sexual advances or protested against sexual harassment. (117)

Leonie Locke and Carrie Meeber’s extrication from family responsibilities represent “the almost half a million ‘women adrift’ who, by the turn of the century, had traveled alone to urban centers” (Hapke 6). By 1890 “[o]ne-fifth of [women wage earners] lacked the home and family ties of the working girl who turned over her pay envelope to her family” (Hapke 6). Whereas the threat of returning to Columbus City leads Carrie to move in with Drouet, Leonie’s homelessness and desperation land her at the doorstep of the Carlisle mansion in search of the fur factory owner’s son, Gordon Carlisle, who respects working girls.7

The International Great Depression from 1873 to 1896 affected all industrialized nations. The Long Depression was a period of rapid economic growth, rising per capita wealth, and expansion of urban markets riddled with persistent overproduction and speculation crises. The railroad strike of 1877 set off a wave of class violence bringing even greater numbers of strikes in the 1880s. Tightened competition, wage cuts, layoffs, and widespread unemployment

7 This scene epitomizes what Denning reads as Libbey’s tales of “a class confrontation that is at once more direct, for there is a violent world of male predators and jealous rivals” (195).
increasingly degraded working and living conditions for the industrial working class and bred resentment among workers, small business owners, and clergymen alike against monopoly capitalism’s new monied class. As Alan Trachtenberg explains, “a new breed of unscrupulous figures, chiefly financiers, speculators, and railroad promoters, tapping the public purse with apparent impunity, and parading their private wealth in lavish mansions and luxurious banquets, offended older business and political groups” (72).

Libbey’s predatory capitalist and haughty villainess figures represent this new monied class which was framed in the rhetoric of labor reformers as the enemy of the people and the republic. A blameless victim of slander, the working girl is cast off into the city to fend for herself against the symbolic members of the social elite of “the Four Hundred.” John Carlisle, the predatory capitalist, and his ward, the heiress and socialite Dora Lancaster, are offended by the presence of a working girl at their doorstep and send Leonie away, but she slips down the stairs and is knocked unconscious. This melodramatic scene stages a class conflict in which the predatory capitalist and arrogant leisure class woman use their class power to prevent the working girl from rightfully claiming the job offered to her by Gordon and, as it turns out, the mansion and wealth which legally belong to her. But Leonie’s fall ends up forcing Carlisle to allow her to recover in the servant quarters. While recovering from her injury, she and Gordon fall in love. But the Carlisle parents and Dora Lancaster conspire to separate the lovers: Leonie is told that Gordon would never marry her; Gordon is told that Leonie accepted money on the condition of never seeing him again. Gordon decides to still pursue Leonie and is disinherited from the family fortune. He dons a disguise and seeks to make his way in the world as a penniless tutor.
Denning views Libbey’s staging of the persecution of working girls in “a private world of sexual harassment” and “personal confrontations of the heroine” as limiting her critique of class inequality (196). Alternatively, Libbey’s representation of the class politics of marriage and inheritance can be interpreted as dramatizing how unequal class relations penetrate and structure gender relations in the “private world.” Nevertheless, Denning is correct to point out that Libbey’s novels portray the struggle of the working girl in individual, anti-collective terms. The narrative forecloses the possibility of the working-girl heroine’s attainment of friendship with other working girls and women in general. When friendship occurs, these alliances are fleeting or prove impossible, as other women characters inevitably perceive the heroine’s beauty, an outward expression of her virtue, as a cause for rivalry and vengeance.

Dreiser also represents women factory laborers through the individualized story of Carrie’s escape from toil. But whereas Libbey’s working-girl heroine is isolated and victimized because of other women workers’ jealousy, Carrie decides that the class of working girls and male factory workers are beneath her based on their lack of dress and manners. Ultimately, both Libbey and Dreiser’s reliance on the ascent narrative or the success myth erases the history of what David Montgomery describes as “a distinctive bonding of working women to one another” and young wage-earning women’s involvement and even leadership in strikes, unions, and Working Girls’ Clubs.8

Leonie is soon discovered to be an heiress and practically overnight becomes the belle of society—but even still she occupies a position of victimhood. Here, Libbey’s fetishization of the

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8 The Knights of Labor began accepting women workers in 1881. By 1887, sixty-five thousand women belonged to the Order. See David Montgomery, *The Fall of the House of Labor: The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 135-148. Denning cites Dorothy Pam’s argument that it is not until after 1900 that working-girl melodramas include scenes of working-girl solidarity (196).
working girl’s traditionally feminine qualities, her modesty and indifference to her new class position, ideologically construct the working girl as a liberal republican upper-class, feminine figure distinguishing her from the haughty, upper-class villainess who conspires with the predatory foreman to keep Leonie from marrying the hero. But more importantly John Carlisle, the greedy, amoral parasitic capitalist found in much labor fiction, turns out to be the architect of Leonie’s position of victimhood. Described as “the crusty old millionaire,” John Carlisle has squandered the inheritance left to Leonie by her dead father, Allan Locke (LL 31). Locke was a millionaire who “wanted to be considered poor” so he deeded all of his wealth to his daughter and left everything, including the mansion in which the Carlisles live, in John Carlisle’s care (LL 188). Carlisle “conceived the brilliant idea of appropriating [Locke’s wealth] to [his] own use” and lost it all through financial speculation, driving him to also appropriate his ward Dora Lancaster’s fortune (LL 188). Thus no one’s wealth—neither the modest, “self-made” millionaire’s fortune nor the villainess-heiress’s inheritance—is safe from the predatory capitalist. Near the conclusion of the novel, Carlisle confesses to his wife: “If this Leonie Locke only knew how matters stood, we might be homeless before another night” (LL 188). Libbey’s representation of Carlisle’s appropriation of Leonie and Dora’s inheritances, and the Carlisle family’s illegitimate occupation of Allan Locke’s home makes the connection between the economic and the domestic by drawing on separate spheres ideology and portraying capitalist greed and speculation as corrupting the sanctity of the home. Nevertheless, the marriage of the working-girl and the paternalistic capitalist ideologically dissolves the narrative’s gendered class conflicts. Leonie’s marriage to Hart proves illegitimate, Dora Lancaster dies, and Leonie is reunited with Gordon Carlisle in marriage. The Carlisle parents “learned to fairly worship
beautiful Leonie”, so there is no need to bring John Carlisle to justice. The truth of John
Carlisle’s crimes remains a “dead secret” (LL 209, 188).

Despite the fact that Libbey’s working-girl heroine does not establish friendships with
other working girls, she is celebrated as a “friend of all working girls” once she is a wealthy wife
of the son of a capitalist (LL 210). At the conclusion of Leonie Locke, when Leonie is
comfortably settled in her “luxurious Lexington Avenue home” with her new husband Gordon
Carlisle, the inheritor of his father’s fur-making business, the narrator again reminds the reader
that her heroine was only recently a “working girl” (LL 209). Mrs. Leonie Carlisle is regarded as
a “true friend of all working girls” because

[s]he had been a working-girl like themselves; she had known all their privations,
the early rising, hurried toilet, and hurrying steps to the work-shop. She had
known what it was to toil late and early for the sweet bread of life, and had known
all their sorrows and the pitiful desolation and fear of being discharged from work
(LL 210, 209).

But Libbey’s reminder to the reader of Leonie’s working-girl past does more complicated
ideological work than Denning’s suggestion that it merely shows “Cinderella does not forget her
roots” (LL 195). The contradictory ideological and epistemological effects of Libbey’s constant
reminder to the reader that the beautiful heroine rewarded with wealth and true love is
nonetheless a “working girl” are encapsulated in Gordon Carlisle’s framed picture of his new
bride in her factory clothes. Carlisle insists that his new wife was never more beautiful than
when he first met her as a working girl in his father’s factory, and to prove it, he preserves an
image of her as “a young girl in a dark merino dress with jacket and cap to match” in the form of a painting on the wall in the grand parlor of their Lexington mansion (210). Carlisle’s framed painting of Leonie frames him once more as a “champion [of] the cause of the working girl,” and as a “good” employer by drawing on the republican ideology, shared at one point by the Knights of Labor, that the employer who respects labor presents no antagonism to labor (Voss 87).

Carlisle’s painting is a nostalgic remembrance of his wife as a “working girl” which pays homage to the virtuousness of the working girl’s character, a moralizing image of the woman wage earner which invokes the republican rhetoric of the “dignity of labor.” The picture of Leonie in her work clothes on the wall of the mansion reminds the reader of the promise of the “dignity of labor” ideology: “independence and mobility for honest, diligent laborers” (Trachtenberg 77). Libbey recasts the rhetoric of the dignity of labor as a wish-fulfilling, success myth for working-class women: upper mobility combined with the right dose of feminine dependence and vulnerability, forever fix the paternalistic capitalist in the role of the masculine protector.

The framed painting of Carlisle’s wife freezes an image of Leonie in her factory clothes isolated from labor and the factory. The novel’s representation of this nostalgic gesture in the form of a painting can be read as the way the ideology of “the dignity of labor” is a fetishized way of seeing labor, where in the case of the working girl, work clothes and idealized white womanhood metonymically displace wage labor and the factory, which the novel earlier represents as a site of violent gendered class conflict. This framed nostalgic remembrance of Leonie Carlisle’s working-girl past indicates a type of “forgetting” or reified severing of her “working” (labor) past from the “poor, unprotected girl” (white womanhood), as she happily consents to exploiting other workers as the wealthy wife of the paternalist capitalist who inherits
the same fur factory that once exploited her. Carlisle’s nostalgic fetishization of his wife’s work clothes displaces her labor with clothing and appearance, a gesture that hints at the epistemological dis-remembering of labor and exploitation that *Sister Carrie* represents as a symptom of the reifying effects of Taylorism and the new culture of consumption.

When Carrie comes to stay with her sister Minnie and her husband in Chicago, the frugal working-class couple assumes she will get a job in one of “the great shops and do well enough until—well, until something happened” (Dreiser19). The Hansons cannot predict what that “something” might be. But they seem to believe, or hope, that before that unpredictable, even ominous “something” happens, Carrie will work her way up the job ladder in one of the great shops: “Anything was good enough so long as it paid—say, five dollars a week to begin with. A shop girl was the destiny prefigured for the newcomer” (18). In the early twentieth century, native-born white women with a rudimentary education were able to avoid the more common fate of the woman worker of domestic servitude and factory work in favor of work as sales clerks or “shopgirls” in department stores. Although the department store counter was considered more “genteel than the workroom,” shopgirls routinely worked long, demanding hours on their feet for low wages (Hapke 2). For the Hansons, the shop girl represents a wage earner with a steady income and, more importantly, an added contribution to their rent payments. The Hansons’ austere household economy and firm opposition to consumption for pleasure are rationally calculated to achieve an even greater consumption fantasy—homeownership.9

9 Christopher Gair reads the Swedish Hanson as an ethnically-marked laboring subject that “combines North European dourness with a melting pot desire to be rich” (165). In the culture of consumption, Hanson’s machine-like Protestant work ethic appears out of place. But Gair maintains that “Hanson is otherwise typical of Dreiser’s representation of white European’s ability to assimilate into American life” (165).
However, the moment Carrie steps into a department store for the first time, she learns to see the shop girl as a figure of consumption, or a status symbol, not as wage labor. That Carrie is captivated with the image of the glamorous shop girl shows the effectiveness of the “atmosphere,” in the novel’s terms, of the department store, combining the spectacle of the merchandise displays and store manager’s focus on the sales personnel’s appearance and manner as a source of surplus value. The interactive nature of the shop girl’s work, whether deferring to upper class consumers or posing as an impressive image to the envious working poor, concealed the conditions of her labor, i.e., her low wages, low position on department store labor hierarchy, and the unsanitary conditions of the stock room (Benson 131). Lacking experience, Carrie does not get a position, but the image of the well-dressed shop girl is imprinted in her memory, at least for the moment, as the ideal of success and femininity.  

Nonetheless, the narrative continues to refer to Carrie as a “shop girl.” After dressing herself for her first day of work as a machine girl in the shoe factory, Carrie is described as “ma[king] a very average looking shop-girl with the exception of her features” (32). On a rainy morning Minnie loans Carrie a “worn and faded” umbrella, which “trouble[s]” her “kind of vanity” (47). Unlike Minnie, Carrie refuses to see an umbrella merely for its use value, so she goes “to one of the great department stores” and buys herself a new umbrella with a portion of her meager extra cash (47). When Minnie learns of this purchase, she responds: “You foolish girl” (47). Dreiser writes, “Carrie resented this, though she did not reply. She was not going to be

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10 As Susan Porter Benson notes, beginning in the 1880s journalistic investigations of department store labor raised public awareness of the inhumane treatment of shop girls and saleswomen by managers. “Some of their complaints focused on the physical aspect of the store: bad lighting, inadequate ventilation, a lack of seats, squalid toilet and lunchroom facilities. Other concerned worker-manager relations, such as long hours, extremely low pay, brutal and humiliating discipline, fines for infraction of rules, and prohibitions on the use of seats even where they were provided. A third class of complaint considered the effect of working conditions on women’s lives, stressing ill health, exhaustion, an impoverished social life, and prostitution” (134-5).
a common shop-girl, she thought; they need not think it either” (47). The narrator’s description of Carrie as a “shop girl” continues even after she has moved in with Drouet and meets Hurstwood. At home with Mrs. Hurstwood, Hurstwood cannot conceal his giddiness over “his interest in Drouet’s little shop-girl” (87). Once Carrie starts secretly meeting with Hurstwood on a regular basis the narrator comments, “The little shop-girl was getting into deep water. She was letting her few supports float away from her” (91).

Prevailing readings of Carrie’s ambiguous economic position as a consumer or actress obscure the brief yet densely depicted representation of Carrie’s experience as a machine girl, or a manual laborer, in the shoe factory. In this way, the narrator’s curious description of Carrie as “the little shop-girl” can be read as an oblique intertextual reference to Libbey’s description of her beautiful heroine as a “working girl” long after she is no longer a worker. Like Libbey’s working-girl heroines, Carrie’s sentimentalized beauty is so alluring that men like Drouet, Hurstwood, and Ames cannot help but notice and become fascinated, if not obsessed, with her. But *Sister Carrie*’s representation of the little shop-girl-heroine’s escape from manual labor—her sexuality, her “acting” skills—reorients Libbey’s narrative of the “poor, innocent working girl” who is rewarded with wealth and marriage. Unlike Libbey’s working-girl heroine who actually enters the workforce as a “working girl,” Dreiser’s “little shop-girl” tag is a complete misnomer.

Although Carrie indeed has “shop-girl” aspirations, she is hired as a manual laborer in a shoe factory, the more typical fate of a young white woman from her class. Had Carrie remained

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11 Fleissner argues for the “realism” of Carrie’s ascension from working girl to successful actress, given her metaphorical “shop-girl” location in the labor market and the opportunities for women’s advancement in the theater. Scholars like Walter Benn Michaels have interpreted Carrie’s upward drift as motored by a “rising,” interminably “outstripping” desire, or, alternatively, what Fleissner has argued as “an open-ended orientation toward the future” (Michaels 387; Fleissner 191). Both interpretations underplay the means by which Carrie escapes manual labor and the ease with which she *forgets* working in a shoe factory.
a machine girl in the shoe factory, she would have had little chance for social mobility. The history of women’s factory work indicates that a gendered and racialized wage system and division of labor maintained stratifications within the working class. Kleinberg notes: “Shoe work paid better wages than the textile factories, but female shoemakers still averaged only 60 percent of male earnings, a proportion little changed from the middle of the nineteenth century. Given the paucity of alternative occupations for women, employers persistently discriminated against them, knowing they could not earn more elsewhere” (115). Indeed, Carrie’s work as a female shoemaker makes her unlike the metaphorical “shop-girl.”

The narrator’s tendency to describe Carrie as a “shop-girl” represents the collapsing of productive labor into consumption as the hallmark of a reifying consciousness, as Carrie skillfully—“naturally”—embodies her new role as a consumer and subject of white femininity even as she works in the shoe factory. While Carrie takes her position at “the machine” she refuses to see herself as typical, and the narrative seems to want the reader to agree: “The machine girls impressed her even less favourably. They seemed satisfied with their lot, and were in a sense ‘common.’ She was not used to slang. Her instinct in the manner of dress was naturally better. She disliked to listen to the girl next to her, who was rather hardened by experience” (45). Certainly the machine girl next to her does not seem “satisfied with [her] lot,” as she cries to her other neighbor, “I’m going to quit this…What with the stipend and being up late, it’s too much for me health” (45). Carrie may perform the same work as the neighboring machine girl and even loathe it just as much as she does, but the narrative emphasizes a perceptual division between the two workers, which can be traced back to her meeting with Drouet and attraction to the department store. Drouet’s alluring, flashy clothes and roll of greenbacks do the work of indoctrinating Carrie into the culture of consumption’s norms of
white middle-class masculinity, which she draws on to unfavorably compare the “uncouth” male factory workers (36). The department store’s spectacular displays interpellate Carrie as a consuming subject, and from this new vantage she learns to see and be “the shop-girl”—a figure of consumption, rather than labor. As a “shop-girl,” or subject of normative white femininity, Carrie differentiates herself from the other “common” machine girls along the lines of racialized and gendered linguistic patterns, manners, and dress associated with working-class and immigrant culture. On one hand the narrative’s gendered ethnocentrism endorses the cultural distinction between Carrie and the other machine girls. On the other hand, the narrative situates Carrie’s contempt for “the commonness” of the other machine girls as a strike against her and a critical comment on her already narrowing, reified consciousness.

The department store’s atmosphere and capitalism’s fragmented production process (in which Carrie once worked as a machine girl) condition Carrie to see commodities as objects of desire, consumption, and status rather than as labor’s products, a consciousness assisted by what I read as her “disremembering” of the past. The narrative permits Carrie to have little to no memory of anything—her parents in Ohio, her sister and brother-in-law’s working-class flat, her wage-seeking days, her work as a machine girl, and, importantly for Dreiser, the “help” she receives, particularly from Hurstwood, in getting her start as an actress. Dreiser’s novel contributes to our understanding of reification as an epistemology of disremembering through its linkage of Carrie’s increasingly sparse and fragmented memories of the past with her re-education as a consumer and subject of performative white femininity, and ultimately with Hurstwood’s decline narrative.

The notion that Carrie is a “shop girl” rather than a machine girl marks a stage in the reification of Carrie’s consciousness and subjectivity which actually begins before she enters the
department store. The beginning of the novel represents the conditions of possibility for Carrie’s journey from country to city, i.e., the breakdown of older forms of commodity production with the rapid development of industrialization and urbanization in the late nineteenth century. As Carrie first wanders around Chicago’s commercial district in search of work, the narrative tracks the epistemological effects of the city’s corporate planning of space on Carrie’s consciousness:

She walked bravely forward, led by an honest desire to find employment and delayed at every step by the interest of the unfolding scene, and a sense of helplessness amid so much evidence of power and force which she did not understand. These vast buildings, what were they? These strange energies and huge interests, for what purposes were they there? She could have understood the meaning of a little stone-cutter's yard at Columbia City, carving little pieces of marble for individual use, but when the yards of some huge stone corporation came into view, filled with spur tracks and flat cars, transpierced by docks from the river and traversed overhead by immense trundling cranes of wood and steel, it lost all significance in her little world. (19)

We see here how the effectiveness of corporate architecture’s design of “appropriate ‘fronts’” conceals the inner workings of business (Trachtenberg 119). As Trachtenberg points out, the city’s architecture “came to stand for education and tasteful picturing, and in its academic practices it reared buildings which furthered the sense of discontinuities in everyday life: discontinuity and fracture between what facades and interiors implied, between allusions of visible design and invisible organizations of life performed in the building” (119; emphasis in
original). Carrie’s comprehension of the meaning “of a little stone-cutter’s yard in Columbia City,” referring to artisan production, is displaced by a vantage of mystification and disremembering in the face of “the huge stone corporation.”

As the meaning of the stone cutter’s yard fades from Carrie’s memory, so too does her experience as laborer in the shoe factory. For some time after Carrie is released from manual labor and is comfortably living with Drouet as his mistress and carrying on a covert flirtation with Hurstwood, she recalls “that under-world of toil”:

Toil, now that she was free of it, seemed more a desolate thing than when she was part of it. She saw it through a mist of fancy—a pale, somber half-light, which was the essence of poetic feeling. Her old father, in his flour-dusted miller’s suit, sometimes returned to her in memory, revived by a face in a window. A shoemaker pegging at his last, a blastman seen through a narrow window in some basement where iron was being melted, a bench-worker seen high aloft in some window, his coat off, his sleeves rolled up; these took her back in fancy to those details of the mill….Her sympathies were ever with that under-world of toil from which she had so recently sprung, and which she best understood. (108)

What is most striking about Carrie’s “understanding” of “that under-world of toil” is the gaping absence in her memory of her work at as a machine girl in the shoe factory. Once Carrie is “[f]ree from toil”, her memory of that “desolate thing” which the narrator, perhaps ironically, claims she “best understood” is oddly depicted as little more than a hazy, romanticized image of her father as a miller in Columbus City. This scene recalls Libbey’s fashioning of her working
girl heroine as a “true friend of all working girls” because she too “had known what it was like to toil late and early for the sweet bread of life” (LL 210). Like Leonie’s sympathetic identification with the working girl from a distance where labor is hardly recognizable, Carrie can only sympathize with toiling workers once a secure, material distance is established between her, as a kept woman, and manual wage labor. The narrative’s representation of Carrie’s sympathies for manual laborers has the effect of raising questions, if not doubts, about the value of her sympathies. The sight of “white-faced, ragged men,” “poorly clad” shopgirls, and men working on the street “touc[h] her fancy” and evoke trite remarks like “It was so sad to be ragged and poor” (108). Yet Carrie’s “fanciful” thoughts on manual labor and the workplace (the mill) do more than represent the shallowness of her understanding. The way Carrie sees “faces” of workers—through a series of “narrow” windows, taking her back “in fancy to those details of the mill”—suggests a fragmented framing, making history into a nostalgic portrait, a de-contextualization process that is taking place in her memory of her father as a mill worker and the rural economy of her former home in Columbus City. As Gordon Carlisle’s picture of Leonie in her factory clothes fetishizes and romanticizes the working girl in her work clothes, Carrie nostalgically remembers her “old father” in his work clothes—his “flour-dusted miller’s suit.”

However, there is evidence to suggest that while Carrie may forget to remember her experience as a machine girl, the narrative insists the reader remember the shoe factory. When

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12 In her chapter on women’s militancy in early twentieth century strike fiction Laura Hapke comments on Dreiser’s decision to interview the IWW labor activist Elizabeth Gurley Flynn after her militancy and arrest in New York gained public attention. Hapke writes, “[A]s in his other journalistic pieces on famous women, he focused more on the singularity of her career choice than on her political agenda” (88). She argues, “Even as Dreiser completed his paean to the private stoicism of the laundress Jennie, across the country laboring women’s public unrest revealed that Flynn’s brand of activism was becoming more commonplace that Dreiser implied” (88).
Carrie meets Hurstwood for the first time she compares him with Drouet by distinguishing between the refinement of the two men’s clothes and, in particular, the quality of their shoes:

[Hurstwood’s] clothes were particularly new and rich in appearance. What he wore did not strike the eye so forcibly as that which Drouet had on, but Carrie could see the elegance of the material. Hurstwood’s shoes were of soft, black calf, polished only to a dull shine. Drouet wore patent leather, but Carrie could not help feeling that there was a distinction in favour of the soft leather, where all else was so rich. She noticed these things almost unconsciously. They were things which would naturally flow from the situation. She was used to Drouet’s appearance.

(75)

This scene is famous for how Carrie’s objectifying gaze reduces both men to the cultural status of their clothing. But this scene also subtly reminds the reader that Carrie once worked in a shoe factory. When Carrie looks at Drouet and Hurstwood’s footwear, she does not remember that she worked in a factory that produced men’s shoes. She sees both men’s shoes as symbols of masculinity and status, completely disremembering the back-breaking, mind-numbing, low-waged labor involved in making them. The narrator asserts—“She noticed these things almost unconsciously”—alluding to the formation of her reifying consciousness (75). Although it can be argued that when Carrie worked in the shoe factory she had little to no consciousness of making men’s shoes, this is exactly Georg’s Lukacs’s point: with the advent of Taylorism “the process of labour is progressively broken down into abstract, rational, specialized operations so that the worker loses contact with the finished product and his work is reduced to the mechanical
repetition of a specialized set of actions” (*HCC* 88). Once the girl to her right passes to her the piece of leather, Carrie’s job is to “punc[h] eye-holes of the upper, by the aid of the machine” (34). The narrator observes, “She suited action to word, fastened the piece of leather, which was eventually to form the right half of the upper of a man’s shoe, by little adjustable clamps, and pushed a small steel rod at the side of the machine” (34). “[F]ixed in an eternal position and performing a single mechanical movement” Carrie realizes that “what she did really required less mental and physical strain”; thus, she learns to conduct herself as what Marx refers to “an appendage of the machine” (37, 36). Carrie learns to “concentrate” less “thoroughly,” or tune out, so to speak, while repetitively performing an isolated, fragmented task at the machine. The novel shows how the experience of factory labor alienates the laborer from her human capacities and the products of labor.

But Carrie’s experience as a manual laborer is not the only factor contributing to the fragmentation of her consciousness and reification of her subjectivity. *Sister Carrie*’s representation of Carrie’s fetishized way of seeing Drouet and Hurstwood’s shoes ties together Taylorist production and the reifying effects of the culture of consumption. In other words, the narrative depicts Carrie’s disremembering of her work as a machine girl in a shoe factory as part of the same reifying process through which commodities take on masculine (human) qualities. This scene’s positioning of Carrie as both desiring subject and the bearer of the reifying gaze that metonymically reduces Drouet and Hurstwood to the cultural status of their shoes encodes what Floyd calls “the reification of desire”: the epistemological abstraction of sexual desire from the white heterosexual male body. Carrie’s new desire for soft leather (Hurstwood) over the patent leather (Drouet) signals a de-sexualization of white men’s bodies. Instead, the commodities that
define them are epistemologically endowed with masculine vigor, sexual potency, and personality which are no longer men’s “natural,” embodied qualities.

II. Masculine Disinheritances

Unlike Libbey’s working-girl romances which pair a working girl with a paternalistic capitalist, Dreiser’s novel entangles the working girl with the white middle-class professional. *Sister Carrie*’s re-narration of the working-girl romance reorients the epistemology of desire represented in the working girl romance through the novel’s double plot which entangles two exemplars of the new and divergent gendered paths the reification of desire is taking at the turn of the century: the emergence of a white feminine, dis-remembering, consciousness in which there is an emphasis on perception, on seeing and desiring material things, and a white masculine, dis-embodied and performative subjectivity in which the emphasis is on loss and precarity.

Libbey’s working girl romances with their cross-class marriage plots operate within the nineteenth-century sex/gender framework of embodied white manhood and womanhood. Her representation of the conflict between a parasitic capitalist, often a financial speculator, and both the working girl and the capitalist’s son, a “champion[ing] of the cause of the working girl,” encodes a legitimacy crisis of Gilded Age capitalism: the intensifying disparity between the wealth of the propertied class and the working poor, a disparity that was being deflected onto anxieties about “opulent decadence” and a crisis of manhood that was “produc[ing] national effeminacy and effeteness” (Homer Lea qtd. in Kimmel 105). Libbey’s paternalistic capitalist
hero is a somewhat revised manly alternative to the popular images of greedy, idle capitalists and functions to manage anxieties that the new monied class of monopoly capitalism was undoing the manhood of workingmen by robbing them of their dignity and autonomy. Libbey’s cross-class marriage plot’s wish-fulfillment fantasy draws on the Knight of Labor’s vision of a more cooperative society where employers and workers would be on more equal terms (Voss 85). Her representation of the paternalistic capitalist’s effusive respect and praise for the working girl’s dignity engages key aspects of the Knights of Labor’s policy on the admittance of employers into the Order in the early 1880s. Kim Voss notes, “The Knights distinguished employers who had once been wage earners from those who had not; and they distinguished employers who paid union wages, abided by union rules, and respected their employees from those who did not” (87). As my reading of Gordon Carlisle’s nostalgic image of his wife suggests, Libbey’s “dignity of labor” rhetoric recurs in many instances of wealthy men professing their practical worship of the working girl. As one lawyer character states, “I hold all working-girls in the highest esteem; there can be no greater proof of their honor and purity of heart than the fact they can earn their own living” (LL 95). Gordon Carlisle proclaims, “My respect and admiration for those young ladies is profound, and a king on his throne might be proud to win a noble working-girl for a wife” (LL 34). Working girls are figures of nobility, worthy of the throne, because of “the fact they can earn their own living” (LL 95). Thus, Libbey’s ideological attachment of virtue, honor, and nobility to the working girl’s labor is a melodramatic rendering of the working-class woman as a producer.

13 Voss cites the testimony of Robert Layton, the national secretary of the Order, before Congress in 1883 stating that while capitalists could not join the Knights, employers who “respected labor” could join (87). But as Voss argues, the Knight’s policy on employer membership changed throughout the 1880s. By 1886 “Knights members in Newark, New Jersey were preventing all employers from marching in Labor Day parades” (Voss 87; emphasis in original).
Libbey’s distinctions between the productive and idle rich more explicitly draw on the Knights of Labor’s producerist rhetoric. In her novel, *The Master Workman’s Oath: Or, Coralie the Unfortunate. A Love Story, Portraying the Life, Romance and Strange Fate of a Beautiful New York Working-Girl* (1888), Coralie, the “honest, honorable working girl,” is described by her benefactor Miss Montstrossor as “far better fitted to occupy a noble position than a white-handed idler” (*MW* 1058). Many of Libbey’s “white-handed idlers” include the bourgeois rakes, the heiress-villainess, and other figures of flagrant class privilege, but this negative characterization particularly targets “idle” capitalist speculators. In order to distinguish between the paternalistic capitalist hero from his “white-handed idler” father, Libbey employs the inheritance-disinheritance device. The handsome hero must typically undergo the ritual of being disinherited by his capitalist father because of his desire to marry the working-girl heroine. Gordon Carlisle responds to his disinheritance by pondering “perhaps it may make a man out of me” (*LL* 50). After he chooses disin inheritance, Arthur Drexel in another of Libbey’s novels, *Ione: A Broken Love Dream* (1888), declares, “I can work for a living, father…I am no better than other men who have had to face the world with nothing but a pair of hands and a resolute heart” and finds work in a mill, joining the ranks of the working class (46). The hero’s disinheritance impels him to shed his childhood dependence and the effeminate taint of opulence, becoming instead a self-made man. The paternalistic capitalist hero renounces his father’s model of unrestrained capitalism by becoming an employer who was once a wage earner and one who respects his working-girl employees. Contained within the cross-class marriage plot, Libbey’s paternalistic, cooperative capitalist fantasy begins with a veneration of the working-girl’s honorable labor and extends no further than the working-girl marriage to a paternalistic-minded capitalist.
The seducer in Libbey’s working-girl fiction is typically a lusty foreman whose uncontrolled desire to defile, marry, and/or destroy the working girl perverts his manhood. In a way, Libbey’s seducer-foreman is grouped in the “white-handed idler,” effeminate manhood category. In *Leonie Locke*, for example, Charlie Hart obtains his position as overseer of working girls through a family connection rather than by individual skills. An affront to middle-class ideologies of manhood, the seducer is nearly always punished by the capitalist hero, the “real man,” or is killed off through his own moral self-destruction.

Dreiser’s seducer-manager is clearly not the traditional sentimental or melodramatic seducer-villain. But like Libbey’s seducer-foreman, Hurstwood’s white masculinity is a reiterative self and public deception, proving more harmful to him than the woman he attempts to seduce. Hurstwood may not be a foreman but his manager position is part of the same socioeconomic processes, i.e., a technical division between salaried and wage workers, out of which the professional-managerial class, what Harry Braverman calls “the middle layers of employment,” emerged. The novel’s detailed portraits of men like Drouet and Hurstwood capture the emergence of a relatively new professional class sector of the white American middle class. Drouet and Hurstwood, along with Mr. Hale, Mr. Vance, and Bob Ames, are figurations of a new “white-collar” class sector of salaried managers, businessmen, and salesmen. Sales and business were fields where ambitious, young men could become “self-made men,” or achieve access to white middle-class identity and lifestyle without formal education (Hobsbawm 175).

Whereas the entrance of women into office and clerical work feminized these occupations, gender ideologies and norms were also retooled to accommodate the changing nature of work and labor relations with the emergence of the professional-managerial class formation. As Kimmel notes, “Salesmen were heralded as the self-made men of the new century;” for example,
selling “[l]ife insurance was described as a ‘manly calling’” (103). Men like the drummer Drouet, the traveling salesman who is promoted to manager at the novel’s conclusion, and Mr. Vance, the wealthy businessman who changes residence with his wife simply for the novelty of it, appear to be the picture of masculine class mobility and leisure, comfortable in their dressy suits and rented homes.

Yet Hurstwood’s fall from saloon manager to Bowery bum tells a different story of the new white male professional. Hurstwood’s decline would appear to represent the white middle-class professional who both profited off of the efficiency that Taylorism’s mechanization of labor produced and found his class position subjected to the torrential winds of capitalism’s accumulation and speculation crises in the last decades of the nineteenth century. His class sector was certainly affected by economic depression in the 1890s. Throughout the Long Depression 1873-1896 “tens of thousands of bankruptcies…drove home the reality that even a successful, self-denying small businessman might lose everything, unexpectedly and through no fault of his own” (Bederman 12). But Hurstwood’s decline from manager to beggar is not initiated by an unexpected layoff or a failed investment. Instead his loss of everything—his name, job, wealth, middle-class identity, and masculinity—is initiated by his entanglement with both Carrie and Mrs. Hurstwood, the new subjects of white performative femininity.

The influence of the conventions of melodrama and specifically Libbey’s working-girl romance on the shape of Dreiser’s gendered double plot can be found in Sister Carrie’s reworking and reorientation of the inheritance-disinheritance plot. The peculiarity of Mrs. Hurstwood’s legal ownership of Hurstwood’s property, which has largely been ignored by Sister Carrie critics, can be read as a re-narration of Libbey’s hero’s disinheritance by his father. Hurstwood’s desperate seduction of/by Carrie, i.e., by her beauty and her emulative projection of
traditional femininity, and, decisively, Mrs. Hurstwood’s filing for divorce set off the chain of
events that lead the frantic and confounded Hurstwood to commit theft. But even before events
escalate to Mrs. Hurstwood’s pursuit of a divorce and claim to her rights as the spouse of an
adulterous husband, Hurstwood already had lost his property to her. For vague and somewhat
mysterious reasons, Mrs. Hurstwood owns the deed to the house and controls other financial
assets. Before their marriage implodes, Mrs. Hurstwood is described as: “secretly somewhat
pleased by the fact that much of her husband's property was in her name, a precaution which
Hurstwood had taken when his home interests were somewhat more alluring than at present”
(86). After Mrs. Hurstwood initiates the legal proceedings of the divorce, and Hurstwood
receives a letter from her lawyer, he anxiously broods over the situation and realizes the gravity
of his predicament: “Somehow he felt evidence, law, the remembrance of all his property which
she held in her name, to be shining in her glance” (154). According to marital laws in Illinois and
many other states in the early 1890s, due to the changing nature of divorce laws, Hurstwood
would have had to pay Mrs. Hurstwood lifetime alimony if he were found to be guilty of
adultery. But Mrs. Hurstwood’s legal ownership of his property renders the alimony issue
superfluous: “He was worth more than forty thousand, all told—but she would get that. (182).
Libbey’s inheritance-disinheritance device effects a gendered transformation of the romantic
hero, from childhood to adulthood/manhood. But in Dreiser’s narrative Mrs. Hurstwood through
her usurpation of Hurstwood’s patriarchal control over the household and ownership of the deed
to the house “disinherits” Hurstwood of his wealth and masculinity, both of which he proves
unable to recuperate.

*Sister Carrie* revises the inheritance-disinheritance plot of melodramatic romance,
entangling the new subjects of white masculinity and femininity at a time when the sex/gender
knowledge regime of masculinity and femininity were emerging in the cultural vocabulary as opposites, displacing the manhood-womanhood epistemological schema. Hurstwood’s pursuit of Carrie is a desperate attempt for him to compensate for his “social powerlessness” at home and realize an image of youth, power, and manly independence (Kaplan 149-50). Carrie’s projection of a feminine image of passivity and unworldliness would seem to position her as the perfect foil to Mrs. Hurstwood, at least in the eyes of Hurstwood. But Mrs. Hurstwood’s appropriation of Hurstwood’s wealth and masculinity, is similarly, albeit ambivalently, enacted in Carrie’s dis-embodying desire for the image of status and masculinity he performs rather than embodies. As Rachel Bowbly notes, “It was above all to women that the new commerce made its appeal, urging and inviting them to procure its luxurious benefits and purchase sexually attractive images for themselves” (11). In their new subject positions as consumers, Mrs. Hurstwood and Carrie are portrayed as socially-empowered by their desires for commodities and status. Although their desires are shown to be achieved in part through men, Mrs. Hurstwood and Carrie’s reified and commodified desires are not epistemologically oriented toward traditional hetero-patriarchal social relations. Thus, the narrative’s detailed portrayal of the un-doing of Hurstwood’s white middle-class masculinity, particularly his inability to maintain his wardrobe and his physical withering away, registers an epistemological crisis in the white masculine subject.

As several Sister Carrie critics have observed, the narrative represents the formation of self-image as an intersubjective process of comparison and imitation we can understand through Thorstein Veblen’s concept of “invidious comparison.”¹⁴ For Veblen invidious comparison describes the psychological process whereby individuals are evaluated in terms of evidence of

their pecuniary superiority, which becomes legible through strategies of conspicuous consumption and leisure. Veblen’s term helps account for what has been interpreted as Dreiser’s seemingly “sentimentalized” rhetoric to describe Carrie’s perceptions of better-dressed women: “She became conscious of an inequality. Her own plain blue dress…now seemed to her shabby” (12; my emphasis). Carrie’s perception of “inequality” in wealth and status, whose visible markers are clothes, compels her to emulate more glamorous women and acquire more stylish objects of desire (Eby 118). With its emphasis on the external evidence of class privilege, Veblen’s logic of invidious comparison can be understood as the culture of consumption that the novel represents in the new centrality awarded to the visual and the epistemological shift from gendered embodiment to performative gender identity.

For my purposes, Veblen’s understanding of invidious comparison as producing a new type of “invidious self-esteem” which “yields painful rather than pleasurable sensations” through comparisons of unequal worth speaks to what I want to suggest is the narrative’s way of both capturing and managing the crisis of white masculinity (121). The logic of invidious comparison translates perceptions of class inequality, which for Veblen is most visibly manifest in

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15 Amy Kaplan reads this scene as portraying how consumption both compensates for “social powerlessness” and expresses “a utopian desire for change” (140). Kaplan problematically argues that Carrie’s “desire for social change,” which is essentially her desire to be like the more glamorous women she encounters, is similar to that of Hurstwood, Ames, and the strikers; the only difference is the way the strikers attempt to enact their desires for “social change.” Kaplan argues, “Both Carrie and Hurstwood share with Ames and the strikers the desire for change, yet rather than actively effect that change, they seek to possess the object, or person, that promises magically to transform them” (151). Kaplan correctly observes how the culture of consumption channels feelings of “social powerlessness” into the acquisition of objects of desire. But I think that the affective and psychological effects of feelings of social inequality are better explained by Veblen’s less utopian understanding of these visual perceptions of unequal difference as stimulating feelings of vindictive envy, which points to the individual rather than “social” quality of Carrie and Hurstwood’s perceptual comparison of superiority of wealth and status. Ames and the strikers offer different ideologically-oriented responses to perceptions of social inequality or powerlessness.
conspicuous leisure, into personal feelings of envy and acts of emulation achieved through consumption. The disciplinary consumption norms set by the leisure class, or the bourgeois, monied class of monopoly capitalism, reflexively stimulate and direct feelings of anguish and vengefulness at demonstrations of superior wealth and then redirect these feelings back onto the unequally-differentiated self. As Veblen points out, these feelings are contradictory because the same superior subject inciting vindictive envy, e.g., the wealthy neighbors, are also the ones who are treated with more regard than those of a lower social rank. Invidious comparison can be understood as a bourgeois ideological strategy of managing feelings of class resentment by channeling these feelings into the market, contributing to the misrecognition of class as status rather than a social relation.

Dreiser’s representation of the new woman as a consuming subject of desire shows her to be highly successful at invidious comparison. Mrs. Hurstwood fits the prototype of the invidious subject: she “was the type of woman who has endeavored to shine and has been more or less chagrined at the evidences of superior capability in this direction elsewhere” (68). Carrie can be said to have similar ambitions as Mrs. Hurstwood. But unlike Mrs. Hurstwood’s overt, calculating desire to rise in class membership and castrating ability, Carrie’s invidious subjectivity is more complex and ambivalent. The narrative portrays Carrie’s material and more elusive desires as generated out of a reifying epistemological process as it unfolds in her re-education as a feminine consuming subject of desire in the department store, and through her

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16 Veblen discusses the complex feelings of pleasure, pain, and esteem the perceptual mode of invidious comparison begets: “the contemplation of a wealthy neighbor’s pecuniary superiority yields painful rather than pleasurable sensations as an immediate result; but it is equally true that such a wealthy neighbor is, on the whole, more highly regarded and more considerately treated than another neighbor who differs from the former only in being less enviable in respect of wealth” (“The Limitations of Marginal Utility”).

17 See Eby, pp. 118-24, for a detailed analysis of Carrie’s invidious subjectivity.
invidious comparison of her appearance and social position with the shop-girl, then the pampered middle-class housewife, and penultimately, the celebrity actress.

The narrative’s ambivalent posture does not entirely identify with either the white middle-class professional or the “shop girl”-turned-actress. The novel makes use of the double plot structure to unravel and manage its own ambivalences about the new subjects of white masculinity and femininity. The long-standing debate on the generic classifications of Carrie and Hurstwood’s divergent plots is indicative of differing responses to this ambivalence. The debate among Dreiser critics over the incompatibility of Carrie and Hurstwood’s divergent plots pivots on a reading of Carrie’s rise as the unconvincing, pejoratively “sentimental plot” and Hurstwood’s decline as “the apogee of Dreiser’s realism,” as Amy Kaplan aptly puts it (151). Drawing on Leslie Fiedler’s reading of Dreiser’s “famous determinism” as “sentimental at its root,” Fleissner has provocatively reversed the dominant reading, instead arguing that Hurstwood’s plot is sentimentalized (171). She reads Hurstwood as Dreiser’s “begging man” who “can assume the female position and call forth our feelings of warmth and desire to protect him” (171). This idea that Hurstwood needs protection implies that he is under attack but it begs the question: from whom does Hurstwood need protection?

The narrative’s entanglement of Hurstwood’s decline with Mrs. Hurstwood’s ownership of his property, and, more ambivalently, Carrie’s pragmatic decision to leave the unemployed and feminized Hurstwood in New York, suggest a causal linkage between his decline and their rise (Mrs. Hurstwood succeeds in her plan to “rise a little” by way of her daughter’s socially-advantageous marriage) (67). The narrative’s advancement of the success stories of these New Women, whose insatiable desires are elicited and satisfied in the market rather than in the conventional roles of wife and motherhood (at least more traditional motherhood for Mrs.
Hurstwood) hints of anxieties vis-à-vis social and political changes achieved by the women’s movement. Furthermore, the double plot structure puts forth an argument that the new culture of consumption creates openings for women, empowered as consumers and subjects of desire, opportunities that are not available to men, or more specifically the culture of consumption’s new white middle-class masculine subject.

Hurstwood’s decline is initiated by a marital financial arrangement that defies the realist imagination, an arrangement that legally disinherits him of all of his wealth and property and finally his name. This decline unfolds within the 1890s social context of increasingly polarized wealth, dehumanizing factory labor conditions, violent class struggle, and a charity system designed to sustain rather than alleviate systemic impoverishment. The narrative portrays monopoly capitalism’s commodification and fragmentation of families and communities, and increasingly internally-divided social stratification system, creating the conditions for capitalism’s victims to “deterministically” free fall into beggary without a social safety net to catch them. At the same time because the narrative implicates Mrs. Hurstwood and Carrie in Hurstwood’s decline, the reader can detect a veiled resentment of the new subject of white performative femininity and European immigrant business owners.

*Sister Carrie*’s representation of the crisis of white middle-class masculinity can be interpreted as both ambivalent, where one ideological pole is sympathy and the other is resentment, or invidious comparison. Hurstwood’s clumsy act of stealing money from Fitzgerald and Moy’s safe suggests the professional-managerial class’s lack of financial control and the ownership of the white middle-class’ labor power by the owners of the means of production. It also signifies his lack of financial control in his marriage to Mrs. Hurstwood and subsequent mock marriage to Carrie, and even his unequal business partnership with Shaunnessy. These odd
details of Hurstwood’s lost control over his property, a detail that propels his decline story, portrays the precariouslyness of white suburban middle-class masculinity, which throughout the nineteenth century was politicized as the embodiment of the self-made man under industrial capitalism, in addition to its ideological assertion as the white American cultural standard bearer.

Hurstwood’s decline dramatizes the fatalistic inability of the new subject of white middle-class masculinity, whose identity is constructed in the space of consumption and leisure, to sustain himself in the labor market and as a subject of desire. Hurstwood’s feminization, through the loss of work and status, as marked by his clothes, dramatizes a crisis of white masculine heterosexual desirability. The “first essential” characteristic of Drouet’s mass-produced “masher” masculinity is “good clothes…the things without which he was nothing” (37). The same principle of clothes making the man applies to Hurstwood, whose more refined masculinity becomes legible through his elegant apparel. Hurstwood’s middle-aged success is in large part the result of his acute understanding of the need for a member of his class to maintain “a dignified manner, a clean record, a respectable home anchorage” (70). For Hurstwood these requirements of normative white middle-class identity are also the imputed obligations of his manager position, forcing him to be “circumspect in all he did, and whenever he appeared in the public ways in the afternoon, or on Sunday, it was with his wife, and sometimes children….He knew the need of it” (70). A “man of surfaces,” as Ellen Moers aptly puts it, Hurstwood has achieved a level of mastery in the area of masculine self-image dramatization. He is aware of the more favorable impression his rich-looking clothes and gentlemanly performance as a suitor make on Carrie: “When he looked at his fine clothes, he saw them with her eyes—and her eyes were young” (104). Hurstwood’s misrecognition of Carrie’s affection for his clothing as evidence of her deeper affection for him demonstrates the normalizing impact on men of the
reifying and fragmenting epistemology of white masculinity, where clothes metonymically stand in for the racialized gendered self.

The narrative marks various stages of Hurstwood’s decline through his inability to maintain his clothes and appearance from his former days as well-dressed, stout manager of Fitzgerald and Moy’s. Hurstwood’s loss of employment, his refined clothes, and of his interest/ability to maintain his body casts him as both a de-sexualized and feminized object of scorn in the eyes of Carrie. After Hurstwood and Carrie establish themselves in their first New York City flat, Carrie “noticed that he did not install a large wardrobe, though his own was anything but large” (207). Once Carrie befriends the more stylish and petted housewife Mrs. Vance and is introduced to Bob Ames, her situation with Hurstwood becomes decisively “disagreeable” (226). The narrative’s comparison between Ames’s and Hurstwood’s types of masculinity points to the issue of social deskilling and disembodiment that lie at the heart of the crisis of performative masculinity which Hurstwood’s decline story narrativizes. In comparison to the figures of the salesman and the saloon manager, Ames, the electrical engineer, represents the educated and technical sector of the professional-managerial class. Within the social world of the novel, the figure of the engineer or intellectual is the foil to the subject of white performative masculinity in crisis. Ames is described as “wholly free of affectation,” a pleasant, youthful man who is both “well dressed and wholly courageous” (220). Not the womanizing type, Ames’ putative absence of “affection” signifies a white masculinity unlike Drouet and especially unlike Hurstwood, whose masquerade of white masculinity depends on a “heightened awareness of self-performance” (Davies). While Carrie’s desire for Drouet’s shiny suit and greenbacks and Hurstwood’s elegant shoes is dis-embodied, reified desire, she is impressed by Ames’ superior intellect and attracted to his physical features: “He had a good, wide, well-shaped mouth, and his
dark-brown hair was parted slightly on one side” (223). Although Carrie is portrayed as not up to Ames’ intellectual level, she recognizes that he is “wiser” and therefore ‘better’ (223).

The engineer-industrialist, Ames is both a modern figure, a white urban professional, and a nostalgic representation of an older, “courageous” manhood modeled on Thomas Edison, a figure of “genius,” whom Dreiser idolized. Tratchenberg reads the Thomas Edison myth as “offer[ing] a reassurance that the old routes to personal success were still open, that the mass inventions and improvements profoundly altering industry and reshaping personal lives truly emerged from a heroic wrestling of the secrets of nature for human betterment” (66). The “wizard or genius” Edison figure obscures the fact that the “rise of specialized skills and arcane knowledge corresponded precisely to the obliteration of traditional knowledge among skilled manual laborers” (Tractenberg 62). Ames performs similar ideological management work in the novel. The narrator’s valorization of Ames’ electrical inventions (a new light bulb) and “genius” amounts to a lament on the excesses of urban materialism and fruitless espousal of humanitarian ideals.

Ames’ awkward and perhaps unconvincing moral intervention in Sister Carrie’s plot nevertheless underscores Drouet and Hurstwood as subjects of performative white masculinity, whose social deskilling as subjects of labor and desire is reinforced by the reifying mass marketing strategies that target and regulate the gendered body beginning at the turn of the century. As Floyd writes, “the performative normalization of the male body, during this period, as masculine, the emerging marketing of masculinity as a technique to be modeled, embodied and purchased” rendered the body an accumulation strategy (100). Commodity culture’s marketing pedagogies, its “disembodied, reified, and commodified” knowledges, are producing subjects of performative white masculinity, who are as Floyd argues, “deskilled sexual subjects”
“[D]eluded by fine clothes as any silly-headed girl,” Drouet is described as owing his success in sales to his “geniality and the thoroughly reputable standing of his house” (53). The point here is that Drouet has no skills other than the sale and successful performance of his masher masculinity. Of Drouet the narrator warns: “Deprived of his position, and struck by a few of the involved and baffling forces which sometimes play upon man, he would have been as helpless as Carrie—as helpless, as non-understanding, as pitiable, if you will, as she” (53). In other words, Hurstwood’s decline story could be Drouet’s as well as Mr. Hale’s and Mr. Vance’s. Ames’ education and genius are buffers against the deskilling of manly labor provoked by mass marketing.

Carrie’s return to the flat after her night at Sherry’s with the Vances’ and Ames hastens the unraveling of Hurstwood’s performative white masculinity and diminishing hetero-sexual desirability: “Hurstwood had returned, and was already in bed. His clothes were scattered loosely about. Carrie came to the door and saw him, then retreated. She did not want to go in yet a while. She wanted to think. It was disagreeable to her” (226). The “scatter[ing]” “loosely about” of Hurstwood’s clothes suggests the fragmented nature of his white middle-class masculinity and his increasing inability to keep the parts together in the eyes of Carrie and even himself. With the declining quality of his clothing, Hurstwood’s self-dramatization of white middle-class masculinity becomes increasingly inadequate and yields him a sexually undesirable subject. Carrie’s disapproving contemplation of the sleeping Hurstwood, lying in his bed without his clothes, the armament of his self-image, symbolizes his de-sexualization and increasing vulnerability. On the other hand, as Hurstwood proves utterly incapable of keeping up appearances, he suddenly becomes too much of a body to be desired. The narrative detail of
Hurstwood’s physical decline—his beard, messy hair, haggard eyes, “naturally dark skin,” loss of weight—suddenly draws attention to his middle-aged body in a way that repulses Carrie.

Hurstwood’s decline story reveals the subject of performative white masculinity as a de-sexualized, feminized subject whose white Americanness is also threatened. As Jude Davies has argued, “The world of *Sister Carrie* is not only almost exclusively white; this whiteness is unmarked and unremarked upon. The contingent status of whiteness, in being defined in opposition to Blackness is generally erased” (Davies). Still as Davies notes, the novel portrays the formation of middle-class white subjectivity in Drouet and Hurstwood’s membership in fraternities such as the Elks and in their frequenting of upscale resorts like Fitzgerald and Moy’s, institutions which policed the gendered, racial, and class boundaries of white American male identity (Davies). The narrative’s deployment of racially caricatured figures, e.g., the Negro waiter, the Jewish hiring manager, and, especially, the several Irish characters, underscore their racial otherness from the “white American” characters; the narrative marks their otherness as a racial measurement of how far Hurstwood has fallen and how his reified white middle-class consciousness is unable to fully comprehend his new membership in the racialized immigrant working class.¹⁸ As Hurstwood slides down the class hierarchy, he comes into contact, and often into conflict, with these racially-marked figures, demonstrating another threat to white American middle-class male identity posed by newer and older, more established European immigrants like the Irish. Immigrants like the Irish wrest political control from urban middle-class men in the area of electoral politics, which as Gail Bederman writes, “were, in a very real sense, contests of manhood—contests which the immigrants frequently won” (13).

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¹⁸ Criticism of the novel typically mentions but under-analyzes the appearance of racist caricatures. For sustain readings of race and ethnicity in *Sister Carrie* see Gair and Jude Davies.
From the ethnically-marked Irish detective to the Italian grocer, Oselegge, these not-quite-white American characters are in position of power in relation to Hurstwood from the moment he loses the basis of his white middle-class male identity. After Hurstwood flees to Canada with Carrie, Fitzgerald and Moy send the Irish detective to track him down and coerce him to return the stolen money. This detective is described as “a commonplace Irish type, small of stature, cheaply dressed, and with a head that seemed a smaller edition of some huge ward politician’s,” representing the “lowest stratum welcomed at the resort” (195). The association of the Irish with political corruption and control over law enforcement continues with Hurstwood’s discovery of “the influence of Tammany Hall and the value of standing in with the police” and his conviction that the most “profitable and flourishing places” “conducted anything but a legitimate business, such as that controlled by Fitzgerald and Moy” (205). Unlike his former honest and law-abiding employers, Hurstwood buys into a business with the “slow, greedy ‘mick’” Shaughnessy who is “[f]requently…the worse for liquor, which made him surly” (205). The reader is made to assume that the business owner Shaughnessy benefitted from Irish political cronyism. On the other hand, Hurstwood is described as a “self-made” man: “He had risen by perseverance and industry, through long years of service, from position of barkeeper in a commonplace saloon to his present altitude” (39). The narrative does not identify with this new

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19 Hurstwood’s identification with the ‘honest’ business model of his former employers could be interpreted as another symptom of his reified understanding of the social relations of labor underlying his position as ex-manager. Furthermore, if Fitzgerald and Moy are also Irish-Americans, the narrative’s favorable comparison of their business model to that of Shaunnessy, albeit through Hurstwood’s consciousness, could be read as a more complex, ambivalence toward race, European immigration, and white-American-ness. As Gair argues, “Dreiser’s position as the descendent of more recently arrived German Catholic migrants meant that his attitude was somewhat different” than that of Edith Wharton and Jack London’s more virulent strain of Anglo-Saxon supremacy (163). Nevertheless, I demonstrate that Sister Carrie contains elements of similar racist and nativist ideologies that influenced Dreiser’s more out-spoken, reactionary contemporaries.
class formation of salesmen and middle management but dramatizes how “white-collar” work like Hurstwood’s manager position ideologically creates the illusion of power and leisure, concealing the fact that he is a paid employee. The depiction of Hurstwood’s “self-made-ness” adds a layer of tragedy to his loss of position and wealth and deflects blame and resentment for the precarity of his class position onto both his unequal marital financial arrangements and these immigrant upstarts. The narrator’s more vindictive and envious representations of Irish-American achievement of class mobility are also evident when Hurstwood finds out that the land upon which the Warren Street pub is built is sold and that Shaughnessy will not renew the lease with him. While this development leaves Hurstwood out of his thousand dollars and jobless, Shaughnessy owns another saloon on Nassau street and he survives relatively unscathed. Once his arrangement with the businessman Shaughnessy ends, Hurstwood’s decline rapidly accelerates.

Wearing his old clothes and reading the paper in his rocking chair, the unemployed Hurstwood becomes confined to the domestic sphere and begins doing little chores around the flat and running household errands, depicting late nineteenth-century gendered adjustments in household labor. At this low point, Hurstwood’s characteristic shrewdness is blunted, as the hold of white middle-class ideology on his consciousness erects a blinder between himself and full awareness of his proletarianization and feminization. The narrator remarks, “He really thought nothing of these little services in connection with their true significance” (241). The “true significance” of Hurstwood’s performance of domestic labor is Carrie’s view of him as a feminized object of scorn. When he asks the Italian newspaper seller and the grocer Oeslogge for an increase in credit, Hurstwood unknowingly performs the work traditionally done by a working-class wife. David Montgomery notes the trans-cultural and trans-racial experience of
working-class women as interdependent members of households in league with their husbands and fathers who experienced class conflict in the workplace. In the separate and subordinate domestic sphere

women’s lives placed daily before them a panorama of goals and pleasures that required joint efforts, of loyalties to ‘one’s own kind’ in defiance of contempt so freely expressed by one’s ‘social betters,’ …If someone had to plead for still more credit from the grocer or coal dealer, the woman did it. If hunger drove the family to beg for help from official of charity, the woman went. (140)

Hurstwood’s credit game with Oeslogge causes him to hide from the grocer to whom he owes sixteen dollars. His desperate subterfuge is exposed when Oeslogge arrives at his door when Carrie is home. This moment of shame exposes to Hurstwood and, especially, Carrie their reduction to the status of working-class poverty. But unlike Montgomery’s description of the interdependent working-class family’s as a “nursery of class consciousness” (139-40), Hurstwood increasingly turns to memories of his Chicago days for solace, and Carrie is shown to rather easily escape Hurstwood and the working class once she gets a start as a chorus girl.

Dreiser’s treatment of Carrie’s rising success as an actress and pragmatic decision to leave Hurstwood is characteristically ambivalent. On one hand, the narrative’s minute and protracted description of Hustwood’s physical and psychological deterioration, his credit debacle, gambling episodes, and especially, his inability to bring himself to take any job make him incomprehensible and somewhat understandably a burden from the perspective of Carrie who, it should be reminded, is not privy to the details of his crime and its handicap. But a veiled
resentment of Carrie’s increasing prioritization of her material desires is hinted in the representation of her horror at the idea that she should be made out to support Hurstwood with her wages: “He seemed to get nothing to do, and yet he made bold to inquire how she was getting along. The regularity with which he did this smacked of some one who was waiting to live upon her labour. Now that she had a visible means of support, this irritated her” (262).

Although Carrie is only making twelve dollars-a-week at this point, the reader is reminded of the support she took from both Drouet and Hurstwood, albeit in exchange for her beauty and sexuality, and reveals perhaps Dreiser’s view of the unfairness of this gendered double standard (262).

On the other hand, the very ease with which Carrie “rises” to celebrity actress revises the myth of working-girl success propagated by the working-girl romance which nonetheless conforms to the fantasy elements of hyper-class mobility for the beautiful, young working-class woman. But unlike Libbey’s working-girl success myth which underscores the morality of the virtuous working-girl heroine’s rise, i.e., her taking of her “natural” place in society, Dreiser’s novel’s double plot structure—Carrie and Hurstwood’s polar opposite socioeconomic trajectories—betrays the narrative’s judgmental posture. As Hurstwood declines in wealth, appearance, and desirability, Carrie is met with increasing raises, opportunities, and fame. As the opposite trajectories of Carrie and Hurstwood become increasingly polarized, the narrative’s emphasis on Carrie’s “forgetting” Hurstwood as she rises is symptomatic of what I read as veiled resentment toward the new subject of performative white femininity for whom ceaseless opportunity in the theater—the performance industry—exists.

Within the space of Carrie’s first paid acting job and her good-bye note, the narrative dramatizes her dis-remembering consciousness as “Carrie Madenda” displaces “Carrie Wheeler”
and her memory of Hurstwood. As soon as she begins earning her own wages, Carrie’s desiring subjectivity is lit aflame by the clothes and trinkets now within her immediate grasp, and she soon begins to “forget” Hurstwood on a series of occasions. The narrative prefaces all of these instances in which her desire for commodities and entertainment displace Hurstwood with “She forgot.” Once Carrie is hired as a chorus girl she is at first eager to get home and tell Hurstwood, but then a thought comes to her: “‘Why doesn’t he get something?’ she openly said to herself. ‘If I can he surely ought to. It wasn’t very hard for me’” (260). Immediately the narrator interjects: “She forgot her youth and her beauty. The handicap of age she did not, in her enthusiasm perceive” (260). Another damning instance of Carrie’s ‘memory loss’ occurs when she spends her week’s wages on clothes once she obtains a small raise. Dreiser writes,

> Her first move was to buy a shirt waist, and in studying these she found how little her money would buy—how much, if she could only use all. She forgot that if she were alone she would have to pay for a room and board, and imagined that every cent of her eighteen could be spent for clothes and things that she liked. (269)

20 There are two more instances after this shopping scene where Carrie’s “memory loss” of Hurstwood, which are more ambivalent but still prefaced with “She forgot.” After Carrie reluctantly agrees to go on a joyride around the city with Lola and two young men, Carrie begins to enjoy herself at “the show of wealth—the elaborate costumes, elegant harnesses, spirited horses, and, above all, the beauty. Once more the plague of poverty galled her, but now she forgot in measure her own troubles so far to forget Hurstwood” (271). Later on in the night, when Carrie, Lola, and the youths are dining at an elegant restaurant, she is the night at Sherry’s and a later incidence when Mrs. Vance called at her flat and was greeted with the Hurstwood’s ghastly presence. The dialogue is as follows: “What are you thinking about, Miss Madenda?” inquired her merry companion. ‘Come, now, let’s see if I can guess. ‘Oh, no,’ said Carrie. ‘Don’t try.’ She shook it off and ate. She forget, in part, and was merry” (272).
The narrator’s notion that Carrie “forgot” the advantage her physical appearance and age give her over Hurstwood in the job market and that she could not spend all of her wages on clothes if she were on her own is somewhat disingenuous. Although Carrie’s youth and beauty are shown to be advantages throughout the narrative, she does not cogitate herself in those terms—Dreiser’s narrator’s terms. Also, Carrie does not “forget” that she would have to pay room and board because she never lived on her own. This repetitive rhetorical strategy—“She forgot”—instead, advances the narrative’s more critical, even invidious view that the reifying consciousness of the subject of performative white femininity privileges and obeys the culture of consumption’s reifying language of immediacy and visibility, thus supplanting the less visible (labor) and the inconvenient memory of Hurstwood as provider.

III. Conclusion

*Sister Carrie*’s re-narration of the gender ideologies managed and enshrined in the conventions of melodramatic romance can be better historicized and understood for the epistemological shift the text is capturing by reading Dreiser and Libbey together. Dreiser’s novel illuminates the reifying effects of Taylorism and the culture of consumption through the production of new, hetero-gendered subjects of desire. Through the figures of the “shop girl” and the mediation of memory, the text narrates the formation of a reifying white feminine consciousness for whom “forgetting” her embeddedness in social relations of labor and need, and the labor and exploitation congealed in the commodity, even if she was once part of the production process, are so fundamental to the formation of her desiring subjectivity.
Sister Carrie’s gendered and racialized double plot of fantasy class mobility for working-class women and the fantastic inability of the white middle-class professional man to sustain his class position, heterosexual desirability, and white American-ness both grapples with the reification of desire and conforms to the same reifying logic it is critiquing, albeit ambivalently. Performative gender’s new imbrication in class relations and increasing class antagonism in the late nineteenth century is narrated in Sister Carrie as a deeply-felt crisis of white middle-class masculinity. Hurstwood’s decline story dramatizes the embodied and psychic wounds inflicted by the reification of desire, i.e., the epistemological loss of white manhood’s embodiment, as well as its commodification, alienation, exploitation, and the breakdown of the nuclear family. As Wendy Brown explains, when these injuries inflicted by capitalism “are discursively normalized and thus politicized, other markers of social difference may come to bear an inordinate weight; indeed, they may bear all the weight of the sufferings produced by capitalism” (60). The narrative’s anxieties about capitalism’s victimization of the putative precariously located subject of white middle-class masculinity is managed through its shifting of “inordinate weight” as blame and displaced resentment move along the ideological axis of gender, the structuring principle of the polarization of the gendered double plot, and, as I have shown, the racialized otherness that shares the ideological burden as well.
In Sui Sin Far’s short story “Its Wavering Image,” included in the collection *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, the narrator calls on the reader to remember Robert Louis Stevenson in the story’s largely overlooked Portsmouth Square scene. Critics of “Its Wavering Image” have not examined its canonical literary references, although they are indispensable to understanding Sui Sin Far’s rewriting of literary history. I want to suggest that these references function as a hieroglyphic that encodes Sui Sin Far’s complex renarration of racial identity. The story cites Stevenson doubly—as an author of a mythic, internally divided subject in his famous novella *The Curious Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and as a figure memorialized in an actual statue erected in Portsmouth Square in 1897. The Stevenson allusions are a key to deciphering the story’s title and the white reporter Mark Carson’s song, both of which are taken from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem “The Bridge.” The story’s citation of Stevenson and Longfellow traces a lineage of Euro-American literary figurations of the fragmented white masculine subject that becomes crucial to Sui Sin Far’s representation of the costs of becoming “Chinese” in America.

Critics have commonly read the story’s title as an endorsement of the half-white, half-Chinese female protagonist, Pan’s, biracial identity as a form of resistance to Carson’s attempt to

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1 June Howard is one exception. In “Sui Sin Far’s American Words” Howard argues that Sui Sin Far’s fiction engages both Anglo and Chinese authors to foreground the importance of reading and interpretation to the advancement of a “Chinese American syncretism” (145). In her reading of “Its Wavering Image” Howard only briefly comments on the Stevenson memorial’s presence in the story, claiming that “Sui Sin Far adopts him as an ally, as she adopted Longfellow” (158).

2 Longfellow’s “The Bridge” was published in *The Belfry of Bruges* (1845). Howard is the only critic who has identified Carson’s song as Longfellow’s verse. June Howard, “Sui Sin Far’s American Words,” *Comparative American Studies*. 6.2 (June 2008): 144-160.
force her to choose a white identity. However, as the story makes clear, Pan has never experienced a biracial identity while living with her Chinese father in Chinatown. Only Carson’s reifying racial logic makes Pan’s biracial identity meaningful to her as a racial dilemma where she must “decide what [she] will be—Chinese or white?” (63). I argue that taking seriously the Jekyll/Hyde allusions reveals “Its Wavering Image” to be a quite different critical intervention in the reification of gendered and racialized subjects taking place in the United States during the early twentieth century. Refusing both a biracial identity and an easy capitulation to Chinese otherness for Pan, the narrative affirms that it is the white masculine professional’s image, not Pan’s that is always wavering, always in crisis.

In *Reification or the Anxiety of Late Capitalism* (2002) Timothy Bewes argues, “In the broader socio-political sphere, reification is what happens in every instance of racism and sexism, where the objects of prejudice are perceived not as human beings but as things or ‘types’” (4). Following Bewes, I read Sui Sin Far’s representation of Chinese American immigrants and their mixed-race offspring as a critique of early twentieth-century reifying racial logic, written more than a decade before Georg Lukacs published his monumental theorization of reification in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). Lukacs argues that reification is a cultural effect of the fragmentation and atomization of human capacities brought on by changes in capitalism’s relations of labor. Reification manifests when relationships between people or human properties take on a phantom objectivity. Lukacs writes, “[Reification] stamps its imprint upon the whole consciousness of man; his qualities and abilities are no longer an organic part of

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3 See, for example, Annette White-Parks (227-30), Vanessa Holford Diana (172-81), and Linda Joyce Brown (73). Carol Roh-Spaulding has made a concerted effort to move beyond readings of Sui Sin Far’s Eurasian heroines as biracial. She argues that Sui Sin Far’s mixed-race characters, like Pan, embrace “racial indeterminacy” rather than biraciality or Chinese Americanness (25). My essay shifts the focus from Pan’s racial identity crisis to Mark Carson’s white masculine anxieties about race, which are projected onto Pan.
his personality, they are things which he can ‘own’ or ‘dispose of’ like the various objects of the external world” (HCC 100). I argue that in Mrs. Spring Fragrance Sui Sin Far conceptualizes and critiques racial identity categories as reifications in precisely these terms.4

The allusions to Stevenson both as memorial and literary figure in “Its Wavering Image” are what Walter Benjamin calls a dialectical image—an image that brings together fragments of the past and present making intelligible a new understanding of the doubling and splitting that underlie the normative (reified) white masculine subject.5 In the narrative, the crisis that haunts this subject is displaced onto the Chinese-Eurasian subject, which is disclosed as a maneuver aimed to alleviate anxieties attendant to mass immigration, racial mixture, and new competition in the labor market. Indeed, Pan’s dilemma whereby she must choose to be white or Chinese is a decoy for managing white masculinity’s “wavering image.” The story presents the pressure on Pan to choose a racial identity, even a biracial one, as an instance of reification, which is to say an example of the violent rendering of a person as a fragmented, incoherent, constitutive other, a property in the service of white masculinity’s imaginary coherence.

The presence of the Stevenson memorial in “Its Wavering Image” makes legible the racializing visual architecture of San Francisco’s Chinatown just as its white tourism industry was emerging.6 The memorial’s brief appearance in this story functions dialectically: it is an

4 Notable examples of contemporary scholars who draw on Lukacs to formulate different theories of reification that address the ways identity formation is bound to changes in capitalism’s relations of labor include Rosemary Hennessy’s Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism; Colleen Lye’s America’s Asia: Racial Form and American Literature, 1893-1945; Marcial Gonzalez’s Chicano Novels and the Politics of Form: Race, Class and Reification; and Kevin Floyd’s The Reification of Desire: Towards a Queer Marxism.

5 My appropriation of Benjamin’s language, “dialectic image,” riffs off of his interpretation of Baudelaire’s poetic images of modern Parisian architecture as having the unique capacity to pictorially render “at a standstill” the past in the present (157).

6 Richard Longstrength notes that the erection of the artistic Stevenson monument in a seedy area of San Francisco was not only a risky political move but also something of an avant-garde idea:
image that simultaneously evokes and forgets, in this case the political controversy surrounding the erection of this memorial in the city’s ethnic ghetto of aliens ineligible for citizenship. As a visual fetish of white European male culture on American soil in the contested Portsmouth Square location, the memorial is a hieroglyphic for that history and also for Carson’s bifurcating vision of Chinatown’s racialized spatial landscape in which the cultured Pan must be a white woman. As I will go on to explain, unfolding the contradictions stilled by the ambiguity of the Stevenson memorial reference also helps us better historicize Sui Sin Far’s idealized Chinese merchant-class characters as participating, if strategically, in this reified picture of Chinatown.

This chapter’s broader aim is to demonstrate how Sui Sin Far renarrates the fin de siècle literary representations of white male decline stories as it is played out in white American anxieties about Chinese-white miscegenation. I situate her representation of mixed-race subjects in its transatlantic context where biracial and hybrid racialized categories were circulating in response to mass migration and miscegenation, which were both perceived as threatening to white manhood and the white heterosexual family. Furthermore, my reading of childish Pan in “Its Wavering Image” and the child Pan in “Pat and Pan” foregrounds the utopian dimension of Sui Sin Far’s imaginings of mixed-race and transracial children as positing alternatives to the “double self” and “wavering image” models of the subject. Unlike her autobiographical Eurasian subject, her utopian childlike figures narrativize ways of “thinking the history that cannot be experienced” (Floyd, “Childish” 19), namely an unreified—that is, defetishized and unfragmented—epistemology of cultural identity. Rather than iterations of the child’s infinite malleability, her utopianized child figures are meditations on the work of memory, racial

“The proposed location in Portsmouth Square, amid the tawdry Latin Quarter once frequented by Stevenson, was intended to demonstrate the relatively new idea of adorning many portions of the city rather just a few select places” (233).
ideology, and childhood’s vanishing temporality.

I. Robert Louis Stevenson and the White Euro-American Imagination of the Chinaman

Stevenson’s Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde figure has retained its place in the Western cultural lexicon as a metaphor for the “duplicitous self” (Rago 274). The generic applicability of this metaphor is an index of its ideological and epistemological distancing from the white professional masculine body, and its initial appearance in Stevenson’s text bears historical and cultural significance in Sui Sin Far’s representation of white masculinity’s wavering image and its inseparability from anxieties about miscegenation. Published the same year as Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), Stevenson’s representation of Hyde’s unspeakable perversity engages late nineteenth-century degeneration discourses that circulated in new professionalized sciences like sexology, criminology, and evolutionary psychiatry.

Stevenson’s ambivalent representation of the gentleman professional’s duplicity continues to invite readings of the novella as a “meditation on the pathology of Victorian masculinity” (Arata 244). Dr. Utterson and the text’s professional male interlocutors’ underlying gender and class biases wilfully obscure Dr. Jekyll’s shared embodiment with Mr. Hyde, a figure of male vice and perversity. As Jane Rago argues: “Hyde does not pass as a gentleman, he *is* a gentleman, and this is precisely where the anxiety of the text is located—in trying to contain this paradox of Hyde-as-same” (279). The Jekyll/Hyde dilemma, then, narrates the instability of the

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proper masculine subject, whose normative identity depends on a chain of binary oppositions (light/dark, civilized/wild, rational/mad, masculine/feminine) deployed by professional scientists’ discourses.

*Jekyll and Hyde’s* widespread influence on imaginings of crime, race, and masculinity are evident in the early twentieth-century deployment of Stevenson’s eponymous split-subject character in the US press as a device for figuring racialized masculinity. Illustrations like “The Chinese Jekyll and Hyde” published in the June 27, 1909 edition of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (see Figure 1) demonstrate the international influence of Stevenson’s novella and the impact of its endorsement, even if ambivalent, of evolutionary science and degeneration theory on white American imaginings of the Chinaman’s sexual threat to white womanhood. Here, the ideological mobility of Jekyll/Hyde iconography is notable for its complete dissociation from the white male professional body. The Chinaman is figured as the real Jekyll/Hyde: the well-dressed, studied Chinaman passes for the real white American man, while the monstrous Chinese Hyde hovers behind him. The Hydelike Chinaman’s phallic opium pipe stages white womanhood’s contamination by a foreign substance.⁸

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⁸ See Eve Sedgwick’s influential reading of drug addiction and homosexuality in *Jekyll and Hyde* (172-73).
Miscegenation dramas, with their cautionary tales of the sexual danger of Asian, African American, and other racialized men, proliferated in the popular press around the time of the June 1909 murder of Elsie Sigel, an upper-class white woman, by Leon Ling, the alleged but never

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apprehended murderer.\textsuperscript{10} Mary Ting Lui’s seminal study of the Sigel murder case demonstrates that the facts of Ling and Sigel’s relationship and the murder were largely furnished out of a host of cultural anxieties. Images like “The Chinese Jekyll and Hyde” reproduced what would become the official narrative of the Ling-Sigel seduction and murder plot.

Newspaper representations of “William” Leon Ling’s racially ambiguous Americanized masculine persona speak to the turn-of-the-century emergence of a performative white masculinity, which has been tracked by cultural historians to account for new representations of the male body and sexuality.\textsuperscript{11} The early nineteenth century white middle-class ideals of manhood, like honor, self-mastery, and self-restraint, lost relevance as industrial capitalism outmoded family-owned businesses and bureaucratized professions.\textsuperscript{12} At the end of the century, white middle-class men reconsolidated male power by assuming white masculinity’s new norms of conspicuous consumption and leisure, heterosexual virility, and white supremacy (Bederman 11-20). Newspaper accounts of Ling’s physical attractiveness detail his resemblance to this

\textsuperscript{10} As Karen Roggenkamp argues sensationalized crime reporting played a special role in objectifying the news: “By melodramatizing the lurid side of the case, the news became depersonalized entertainment in another case, a thing to consume voyeuristically and to digest without critical perspective, a literature as escapist in nature as the cheap crime novels at the time” (64). During this period “the constructs of fact and fiction—especially as they were manipulated to report sensational crime—became value laden and polarized” (60). Whether journalists reported criminal investigations using “objective” or sensationalized narrative styles, mass-marketed news stories of crime contributed to the “reification” of social reality, by constructing news as a “thing” of “reality,” therefore closing off critical interrogation and erasing the authority’s subjective positionality (64). The turn to the twentieth century was a “transitional period in American newspaper history,” where the industry was becoming increasingly professionalized with “managed styles” (Roggenkamp 60, 68). The objective de-personalized news story and the sensationalized journalism of the yellow press became the dominant industry standards, winning the battle among other competing narrative styles, such as the literary journalism of Stephen Crane and Julian Ralph.


\textsuperscript{12} On nineteenth-century ideologies of manhood, see Bederman, Kimmel, and Anthony Rotundo, \textit{American Manhood}.
white American masculine subject. One witness describes him as “a very good-looking Chinaman, with Chinese characteristics not very strongly stamped” (qtd. in Lui 180). He was “well dressed” in comparison to “[h]is companion. . . of a more decided Chinese cast [who] was more shabby in appearance” (180). Ling was alleged to have sexual liaisons with many white women (Lui 180). The public’s fascination with Ling’s ability to effect a white masculine persona, as Lui notes, emerged during a decade in which shifting, contradictory understandings of white masculinity cast it as a biological property of Anglo-Saxon men while changing labor relations and the culture of consumption at the same time loosened this property from white male biology (179).

The Jekyll-and-Hyding of the Leon Ling-like figure in the illustration thus vividly demonstrates the aggressive moves by the US press to manage the reading public’s hysteria over Ling and Sigel’s relationship. The Sigel scandal’s disciplinary effects on Chinese immigrant communities were still reverberating at the time Sui Sin Far was composing several stories that would eventually comprise Mrs. Spring Fragrance. Her representation of the white male reporter specifically in “Its Wavering Image” as the bearer of the Jekyll/Hyde dual personality can be

13 In Stranger Intimacy, Shah cites another highly publicized murder case of Rosa Domingo, a Portuguese working girl from the San Francisco Bay area, by Said Ali Khan, South Asian immigrant man, which bears similarities to the Elsie Sigel murder case (46-52). Said Ali Kahn was described as a “dandy or sporting man, sharply dressed in urban American fashion, heightening the danger of partially assimilated, appealing South Asian men to white Americans” (46). Domingo and Kahn’s sexual relationship was described by him, acquaintances, and discovered letters as a tempestuous affair over money, gifts, and promises (44-5). Shah writes: “Domingo and Kahn were bound together in an urban commercial social world where unmarried men and women met and mingled. Unmarried young women worked in retail, manufacturing, and service positions, lived outside their homes in rooming and boarding houses and engaged in contemporary rituals of dating and courtship. A consumer shift in the terms of courtship involved how men would ‘treat’ women in the offering of gifts and paying for women negotiated the exchange of entertainment and physical intimacy” (44).
14 Lui cites many examples of media images vilifying Chinese men who attend missions and delegitimating women’s missionary work. See Lui, chapters 1 and 4.
read as a riposte to the popular press’s representations of the Chinaman, with his unreadable surface, as a duplicitous character and sexual threat to white women.

II. White Masculinity’s Wavering Image

Perhaps no stories in Sui Sin Far’s *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* collection more explicitly capture turn-of-the-century white masculine anxieties than “One Woman Who Married a Chinese” and its sequel “Her Chinese Husband” published in the *Independent* in March and August of 1910, about a year after the Elsie Sigel murder. As Jane Hwang Degenhart argues, this set of Chinese-white marriage stories “suggest [Sui Sin Far’s] conscious effort to reverse the narrative of Chinese rescue by featuring the Chinese husband as rescuer” (665). After leaving James Carson, her abusive husband, Minnie, a white woman, is rescued by Liu Kanghi, a Chinese merchant. Kanghi offers Minnie an urban cosmopolitan lifestyle that had been inaccessible to her when she was the working wife of Carson, a salesman whose identity crisis and professional ambitions put a financial strain on the family. The story ends tragically with Kanghi’s murder by his own countrymen and Minnie left worrying about the future of her mixed-race son.

James Carson is the narrative’s villain and unsympathetic victim, whose self-destruction stems from his failed attempts to realize a fantasy image of white professional masculinity. His “death of apoplexy”—a stroke compounded by rage—in none other than “a public gymnasium” illustrates the cultural pressures exerted on white men to achieve the white heterosexual manly ideal (77). At the turn-of-the-century a national health craze drove masses of white men to gyms and to participate in the new sports industry developed in response to the perceived culture of
feminization (Kimmel 126). Advocating “the strenuous life,” Theodore Roosevelt feared that feminized men with “small feet and receding chins,” echoed the racialized discourses of degeneration and endangered the health of the white nation (qtd. in Hagedorn 51).

Minnie loathes Miss Moran because James places this office bookkeeper on a pedestal, and he pits the two women against each other as a means of deflecting his own masculine insecurities. On one hand, Minnie’s vilification of Miss Moran as masculine-featured and “one who neither loved nor understood children” capitulates to conservative fears of women in the public sphere losing their maternal femininity (69). Yet, Miss Moran’s masculinity does not merely represent “Progressive feminism”; it is also a fantasy projection of James’s ideal masculine subject. Not only is she “in the prime of her life and strength” with a robust masculine physique; she also has a “head for figures” (69). Miss Moran’s reaction to Minnie’s baby’s sickness—“There must be an error somewhere”—illustrates not only her absence of seemingly natural feminine qualities but also figures her as a disembodied mouthpiece for the Progressive doctrine of efficiency modelled on the new corporation (69). She and James share the same political interests, including a desire to write a book on social reform. Yet James’s desire to write a book is a manly desire to prove his worth in a professional arena outside of the office. Miss Moran’s rejection of James’s love proposition by toppling him with her manly physical strength illustrates how it was always James’s unstable masculine self-image that threatened Minnie and her child’s welfare.

Whereas James Carson never writes his book on social reform and dies a humiliated failure, Mark Carson (hereafter referred to as “Carson”), the reporter in “Its Wavering Image,” does complete his “special-feature article” on Chinatown (64). Like James’s phantasmic projection of an imaginary masculine self onto Miss Moran and his desperate effort to become
this subject, Carson’s relationship with the racially ambiguous Pan also involves a fantasy projection of an imaginary identity onto her—in this case a white feminine one—as a means of securing his own white professional masculinity.

The critical tendency to read Carson, the muckraking reporter, as a stock character, elides the literary subtext of his duplicity as integral to his white male professional identity—Stevenson’s *Jekyll and Hyde*. In many ways, Carson is an amalgam of stock conventions, namely, “[t]he white reporter seeking to ferret out Chinatown’s secrets” (White-Parks 229) and the “soulless manipulator” (Diana 177). Yet Sui Sin Far’s audience would arguably have more easily linked Carson to Stevenson’s famous novella.

Stevenson first appears in the story’s Portsmouth Square scene in the form of a memorial fountain, an actual monument erected in his name in 1897. By this time, Carson is well-aware of Pan’s discovery of his article on Chinatown, but he tries in vain to convince himself that “[s]he would have forgotten the article by now” (65). “[A]n undercurrent of feeling” causes “his steps to falter on his way to Pan,” leading him to take a detour into Portsmouth Square before his reunion with Pan:

He turned into Portsmouth Square and took a seat on one of the benches facing the fountain erected in memory of Robert Louis Stevenson. Why had Pan failed to answer the note he had written telling her of the assignment which would keep him out of town for a couple of months and giving her his address? Would Robert Louis Stevenson have known why? Yes—and so did Mark Carson. But though Robert Louis Stevenson would have boldly answered himself the question, Mark Carson thrust it aside, arose, and pressed up the hill. (65)
The Stevenson memorial becomes an occasion for the narrative to critique Carson’s wilful self-delusions and, importantly, an opportunity to evoke an alternative memory of Stevenson’s literary legacy and his storied visits to Portsmouth Square. The memorial is a hieroglyph that bears a trace of the nationally covered political controversy surrounding the architects’ proposal in 1894 that Stevenson’s memory be enshrined in Chinatown, rather than in “Golden Gate Park or in some square or avenue more familiar in its character, and to be visited by the cultured well-to-do,” as one reporter put it (“Memorial” 4).15

This scene constructs a pictorial image of the duplicitous reporter coming face-to-face, so to speak, with Stevenson, although he is too preoccupied with confirming his self-delusions to notice its implications. As I have suggested, the Stevenson memorial itself is a visual fetish that we can read as what Benjamin calls a dialectical image—one that interrupts or disrupts smooth normative conceptions by putting the fragments of history into a form that provokes critical understanding of them. The memorial to the famous Scottish author erected in a section of San Francisco’s Chinatown with its injunction “To Remember Robert Louis Stevenson” written in large type on its granite column destills multiple historical relations and contradictions: white patrons, the city’s local government, and the Chinese merchant elite claiming as property the white European self-described “Amateur Emigrant” in a racially segregated quarter of the city populated with aliens ineligible for citizenship.

The location of the memorial of the esteemed European man of letters in what was largely pictured as a premodern cultural ghetto, a doubly submerged city with its infamous labyrinthine underground, speaks to what Benjamin describes as the “ambiguity attending social

15 See also, for example, “Literary Affairs in Boston” (819); and “People in General” 6; Boston Evening Transport.
relationships” during the epoch of modernity (157). The erection of the Stevenson memorial in Portsmouth Square contributed to the cosmopolitan appeal of San Francisco’s Chinatown as a white tourist attraction. To garner support for the monument, the Memorial Fountain Committee distributed a circular stating that Robert Louis Stevenson “dwelt for a time with us and added a distinction to our cosmopolitanism, to our picturesqueness, by recognizing both” (“People in General”). San Franciscans could claim Stevenson as theirs since he professed a special appreciation for the city and the American Pacific coast.16 Yet Stevenson’s ethnographic depictions of Chinatown in Silverado Squatters (1883) and The Amateur Emigrant (1895) conform to the dominant Orientalist narrative, representing it as “a foreign land” with a dark underground of vice and barbarism.17 As one biographer put it, Stevenson “never tired of studying the strange foreign life which ebbs and flows by night and by day through the streets of that Bohemian quarter” (Hammerton 308). The young author’s visual consumption of Chinatown and its foreign inhabitants represented what was for white tourists of Chinatown an alluring if also typical practice. The presence of the Stevenson memorial thus draws attention to the efforts to transform San Francisco’s Chinatown into a picturesque attraction for the growing urban tourism industry of the 1890s. Planted in a public square, the memorial marks the racialized spatial practices of urban tourism, and is itself a way of managing space in the face of mass

16 In The Wrecker, Stevenson (and co-author Lloyd Osbourne) writes: “But San Francisco is not herself only. She is not only the most interesting city in the Union, and the hugest smelting pot of the races and precious metals” (49).
17 In The Amateur Emigrant, Stevenson writes: “Of all romantic places for a boy to loiter in, that Chinese Quarter is the most romantic. There, on a half-holiday, three doors from home, he may visit an actual foreign land. . . . And the interest is heightened with a chill of horror. Below, you hear, the cellars are live with mystery; opium dens, where the smokers lie one above another, shelf above shelf, chose-packed and groveling in deadly stupor; the seats of unknown vices and cruelties, the prisons of unacknowledged slaves and the secret lazarettos of disease” (171).
migration. For white tourists, crossing social divisions and enjoying firsthand experience with ethnic others in Chinatown supplied the authenticity lacking in their alienated lives.18

Yet it is important to disentangle the Stevenson memorial from the figure of Robert Louis Stevenson the narrative wants us to remember. The narrator’s citation of the figure of “Stevenson,” introduces a subtext for reading Carson’s villainous duplicity. Stevenson’s “bold answer” to Carson’s dilemma of self-denial can be read as an allusion to *Jekyll and Hyde* (65). By linking Carson to Stevenson, the narrative associates the reporter’s anxiety that Pan might discover his true self with the Jekyll-Hydean split subject, and it hints at an embodied manhood that is less secure than it seems. The narrator’s endorsement of Stevenson as Carson’s interlocutor and conscience enacts a particular reading of his novella as an apt diagnosis of the white masculine professional as a “double dealer” whose evil side is capable of committing horrific atrocities (Stevenson 62). Locked into “the fortress of identity,” Dr. Jekyll is “committed to a profound duplicity of life” because he has “radically both” normative and deviant natures (Stevenson 62). With the assistance of drugs, Jekyll expunges his evil self from his proper self by physically manifesting the former into Mr. Hyde, functioning as a separate bodily identity. Jekyll can temporarily maintain his professional reputation while Hyde is free to do the doctor’s evil bidding. But Carson’s duplicity is not a reenactment of the late Victorian professional’s embodied crisis of white manhood. The young white American reporter, rather, represents a different class sector and period from Stevenson’s gentleman-professional. Carson’s “wavering image” narrates a historical departure from the crisis of late-Victorian masculine embodiment to a new, performative white masculinity-in-transition.

Like Jekyll but without his impeccable reputation, Carson can persuasively appear as “a

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18 For histories of white tourism and ethnic slumming in San Francisco’s Chinatown, see Raymond W. Rast; Barbara Berglund; Anthony Lee; and Catherine Cocks, chapter 9.
gentleman” (62). While on assignment in Chinatown, he is arrested by Pan’s racial ambiguity and befriends her with the hidden agenda of finding a story. His reputation as “‘a man who would sell his soul for story’” is depicted as commonplace in the world of yellow journalism (62). Carson’s “soullessness” typifies the Chinatown reporter, who like a white male tourist can voyeuristically experience Chinatown with the privilege of recording his travels from a “detached yet possessive authority” (Berglund 9). We see Carson’s capacity to epistemologically divorce his perspective and experience from the respectable Chinatown Pan shows him with “tender regard and pride” (62). Even more, he conveniently forgets Pan’s Chinese parentage.

III. Racial Lessons

Pan is “a half white, half Chinese girl” who lives in San Francisco’s Chinatown with her Chinese merchant father, her only surviving parent (61). Raised by her Chinese father, Pan feels “at home with her father’s people” (61). While courting Pan, Carson attempts to convince her of the necessity of choosing her true white identity. In the end, Pan feels a cutting sense of betrayal when she discovers his racist and ridiculing exposé article. When the two meet for the last time, Pan dons a Chinese woman’s traditional dress and declares herself to be a “Chinese woman” (66).

Pan’s romantic relationship with Carson and his attempt to racialize her as a white woman are usually read as the cause of her wavering between racial identities and loyalties. The problem with these otherwise insightful readings is that they rest on the a priori assumption that Pan’s identity is biracial, when, in fact, the narrative resists this formulation. For Pan to be biracial would mean that she was of two discrete although mixed races: white and Chinese. But
the narrative represents Pan as neither—she is something else. Indeed, Sui Sin Far represents what we call “biracial identity” as an invention of the same reifying logic as white identity. Carson’s perception of Pan as a white woman is a symptom of late nineteenth-century white cultural workers’ reified imaginary of Chinatown that isolates white from Chinese, merchant from coolie, humanity from depravity. On the face of it, the formulation of racial identity as a wavering image seems to de-reify race by suggesting it is not an effect of discrete and fixed categories. But the story exposes that the wavering image of identity is in fact the historical product of systematically imposed racial boundaries whose effect is to preserve hegemonic white masculinity and the white heterosexual family.

In the story’s opening scene, it appears that Carson deliberates whether Pan is Chinese or white. But at first sight he already sees her as a white woman out of place in Chinatown and automatically disassociates her from her Chinese father. Filtered through Carson’s racially bifurcating perspective, the narrator introduces the reader to two “Chinatowns” and an ambiguously racialized space:

They met at the time of the boycott of the Sam Yups by the See Yups. After the heat and dust and unsavoriness of the highways and byways of Chinatown, the young reporter who had been sent to find a story, had stepped across the threshold of a cool, deep room fragrant with the odor of dried lilies and sandalwood, and found Pan.

She did not speak to him, nor he to her. His business was with the spectacled merchant, who, with a pointed brush, was making up accounts in brown paper books and rolling balls in the abacus box. (61)
The “spectacled merchant” can be none other than Mun You, Pan’s father, as they both occupy the inner space of his Oriental Bazaar. Yet seen from Carson’s perspective, the Chinese merchant is nameless and disassociated from Pan. Mun You is “spectacled” in that he wears glasses, a sign of the Chinese merchant’s shrewdness. But to Carson, the Chinese merchant’s antiquated bookkeeping methods are a visual spectacle for a white tourist or journalist to relish. The narrator’s fleeting reference to the boycott hints at Chinatown’s internal class conflict with features of its dangerous landscape like its “heat and dust,” “highways and byways.”19 This seedy, newsworthy Chinatown is supplanted by another as Carson crosses the “threshold of a cool, deep room” and enters Pan’s private, domestic space. The emphasis on the depth and fragrant smell of the room that Pan inhabits registers what Nayan Shah calls the invention of a hygienic whiteness.20 Carson’s perception of Pan, framed in a clean, elegant room, dramatizes how “whiteness displayed an astonishing flexibility” and the importance of material culture to whiteness (Shah 118). As in the case of the newspaper depictions of Leon Ling’s whitened masculine persona, nonwhite immigrants’ assimilation through conformity to middle-class material culture tended to sustain and undermine reified racial categories. Carson does not see the merchant as occupying the same room or family as Pan. Instead, he sees Pan as a white-looking woman in Chinatown, a troubling picture.

Sui Sin Far’s representation of an idealized interracial merchant-class family in “Its Wavering Image” does not entirely escape the fragmenting, reifying logic it critiques. As Arnold

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19 In the 1890s, the See Yup Association of small merchants and laborers boycotted stores owned by Sam Yups, the leading mercantile capitalists in San Francisco’s Chinatown. Since the See Yups outnumbered the Sam Yups, their boycott was successful, and many See Yup merchants expanded their businesses at the expense of the Sam Yups.

Pan reminds us, Sui Sin Far’s “model minority” Chinese merchants need to be properly historicized “as products of the same material conditions that contemporaneously construct the Chinese worker’s expendable labor, both as racialized economic figures” (89). Therefore, we must consider her fragmented representation of Chinatown in the story—the boycott (labor relations) and Chinatown’s supposed unsavoriness and the idealized Chinese merchant-father and Pan’s fragrant room—as in part a cultural effect of complex class divisions, cross-cut by district, within the Chinese American transnational immigrant workforce. As Anthony Lee explains, the “pictorialism” of San Francisco’s Chinatown was an aesthetic project that upheld the class biases built into the framework of the Exclusion Act (129). With the increasingly stringent legal definitions of Chinese “merchant” and “laborer,” Chinese merchants were coerced and incentivized to distance themselves from laborers, or coolies, perceived as threatening to the white working class and white womanhood. (Lee 130-31) The famous photographer Arnold Genthe pioneered the fragmenting approach to picturing San Francisco’s Chinatown, which “almost always separated” (Lee 128) pictures of members of the Chinese merchant class from laborers, and Chinese in isolation from white inhabitants and visitors (see Figure 2). Along with photography, writings of journalists, reformers, and tour guides framed the experience of white visitors by strictly maintaining and fabricating racialized boundaries. Reform-minded Chinese merchants who sought to benefit economically from the new tourism industry worked with white entrepreneurs to clean up the quarter’s image and present it as respectable.
As Carson tours Chinatown with Pan as his guide, the narrative reminds the reader to “Remember Robert Louis Stevenson.” As their relationship turns romantic, Carson attempts to teach Pan a series of racial lessons regarding her true whiteness and the urgent necessity of choosing a white racial identity. Although the explicit claim of Carson’s teaching is that Pan is truly a white woman, the underlying lesson, which is new to Pan, is of her biracial identity, where Chinese-white biraciality is an unhappy marriage of two mutually exclusive, contradictory racial selves, a lesson that echoes the narrative’s Jekyll-Hyde subtext. Carson “taught the young girl, all unconscious to his coming, she had lived her life alone” (62). By representing Pan as an
isolated individual, Carson attempts to induce her to forget her Chinese father and community. The narrator continues: “So well did she learn this lesson that it seemed as if her white self must entirely dominate and trample under foot her Chinese” (62). Carson’s lessons in forgetting send mixed messages: on the one hand, he affirms Pan’s essential racial doubleness—her biracial identity—and on the other, he insists on the impossibility of her being biracial: “Pan, don’t you see that you have got to decide what you will be—Chinese or white? You cannot be both” (63). As Carson’s sees it, Pan’s cultural whiteness is evidence that nature has already made the choice for her.

The story’s title is a double motif linking the biracialization of Pan to Carson’s wavering white masculinity. Sui Sin Far’s representation of the white masculine professional’s wavering image—an identity-in-crisis—enacts a particular reading of Stevenson’s novella, which locates the Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde figure as an archetype of the white professional who manages his wavering identity through its displacement onto Pan in the form of biracialization. Pan’s whiteness is its necessary supplement, an invention of Carson’s racial logic and its vision. For Carson, Pan does not merely look like a white woman; she is one because that is how he sees her. And thus he sees her as belonging neither in Chinatown nor to her Chinese father. Like Genthe’s photography of Chinese San Franciscans, which isolates them from non-Chinese—going as far as to etch out white intruders (see Figure 2)—Carson’s vision attempts to crop Pan, as a white woman, out of a biracial identity and his picture of Chinatown, and finally out of his article. Yet, other than the description of Pan’s “clear-cut features,” the narrator does not describe her as looking white (66). Instead, the narrative keeps the answer to Carson’s initial question—“What was she? Chinese or white?”—open-ended and ambiguous.
IV. Chinatown’s Utopian Children

Pan’s association with the figure of a child is an overlooked but significant detail that indicates the narrative’s reluctance to affirm her as having a “split racial identity” (Roh-Spaulding 172). Before Pan meets Carson, “her first white friend,” she enjoys the freedom not to think her difference, indicating that her subjectivity is not fully interpellated into Euro-American racial ideology (62). Early on the reader learns that “[a]ll her life Pan lived in Chinatown, and if she were different in any sense from those around her, she gave little thought to it” (61; emphasis added). Although of mixed parentage, Pan does not consciously think of herself as different from other Chinese Americans: she does not have a double self. For Pan, Chinatown has been a relatively hermetically sealed environment. None of the white onlookers’ “swords” have penetrated her protective environment until Carson arrives (60). The narrative’s resistance to the reification of racial categories figures Pan as more of a nonracialized person rather than a biracial, Eurasian, hybrid, or other fragmentary variety of reified racial mixture. This reading of Pan’s childish identity as unreified personhood is meant to emphasize the narrative’s refusal to divide Pan’s identity across racial lines as a form of resistance against reification’s fragmenting effects.21

“Pat and Pan,” a children’s story, by Sui Sin Far included in Mrs. Spring Fragrance, also employs such a utopianized child figure to trouble race’s reified visual epistemology. The story is about Pat, a white boy adopted as a baby by merchant-class Chinese American parents, and his bond with his sister Pan. The Lum Yook family raises Pat as a Chinese boy—he speaks the

21 My reading of Sui Sin Far’s idealizations of interracial families as expressing utopian aspirations has been influenced by Jose Esteban Munoz’s Blochian formulation of queer utopianism, a “relational” mode of reading and imagining that sees the “not-yet-conscious” in “the quotidian” and is rooted in historically-situated struggles. Jose Esteban Munoz, Cruising Utopia: the Then and There of Queer Futurity (New York: NYU Press, 2009).
language and thinks of himself as Chinese, like his family. When a white missionary woman discovers that Pat lives with a Chinese family, she begins the process of re-educating him at a mission school and then resettling him in a white family. When she finally removes Pat from his family, he cries “I am Chinese too! I am Chinese too” (164). Years later, Pan encounters Pat, a well-dressed white schoolboy. Pat is pressured by his white friends to drive away the “China kid” (166).

Pat and Pan’s passionate bond as siblings is conveyed in the image of their bodies wrapped in each other’s embrace: “They lay there, in the entrance of the joss house, sound asleep in each other’s arms. Her tiny face was hidden upon his bosom and his white, upturned chin rested upon her black, rosetted head” (160). Pat’s white chin resting on Pan’s “black, rosetted head” can be read visually as a yin-yang, a Chinese symbol that interconnects two seemingly antithetical elements. This tableau of interracial intimacy and family is enshrined in a Chinese house of worship. When the missionary inquires about Pat’s upbringing to a lichi vender, he responds: “His mother, she not have any white flend, and the wife of Lum Yook give her lice and tea, so when she go off to the land of the spilit, she give her boy to the wife of Lum Yook. Lady, you want to buy lichi?” (160). Like the vender’s sale of lichi, Chinese Americans caring for white neighbors and interracial-family formation are part of Chinatown’s everyday life. The vender articulates a radically different way of knowing race: “Yes, him white; but all same, China boy” (160). The vender is not colorblind, as he and the narrative recognize Pat’s whiteness. The point is that for the Chinese in this idealized Chinatown, race is not reified.

These representations of idealized Chinatown families acknowledge their historical impossibility. Moreover, both stories employ the figure of the child to demonstrate the temporal impermanence of these unthinkable ways of knowing cultural identity. Pat is “driven away” from
his Chinese family at age eight (165). Yet Pan remains young and childlike. A “little girl,” Pan is repeatedly described as “unusually small for her years” (163). Several years later when she is reunited with Pat, now a white adolescent boy, Pan’s small stature is once again emphasized: “Pan was much smaller than any of [Pat’s] girl schoolfellows” (165). With her stunted growth, Pan is the narrative’s stubbornly utopian figure who does not “forget to remember” Pat’s history, his “Chineseness” (165).

Although an intelligent, young woman, the adult Pan of “Its Wavering Image” is also characterized as childlike. Pan’s childishness is crucial to understanding Carson’s ability to deceive her and the violence he inflicts on her. The narrator, in curious prose, takes pains to emphasize Pan’s agile mind: “And Pan herself! A white woman might pass over an insult; a Chinese woman fail to see one. But Pan! He would be a brave man indeed who offered one to childish little Pan” (62). In the same passage warning of Pan’s acute sensitivity to a man’s insult, she is described as “childish little Pan.” In addition to her age and sexual inexperience, Pan’s “childish[ness]” refers to her as uncontaminated by white American racial ideology. When it comes to the subject of her racial identity, Pan and Carson are operating in different, dissonant registers.

Carson deceives childish Pan and elicits her affection with his convincing performance as a gentleman in an open retreat overlooking Chinatown’s streets. As they stare at “the silver stream and crescent moon,” he sings the last two stanzas of Longfellow’s poem “The Bridge”:

And forever, and forever,
As long as the river flows,
As long as the heart has passions,
As long as life has woes,

The moon and its broken reflection,
And its shadows shall appear,
As the symbol of love in heaven,
And its wavering image below. (64)

As Rachel Lee argues, Carson’s song racially encodes the moon and wavering image, its “broken reflection,” as a “hierarchal dualism” (268). Immediately following his song, Pan “broke down and wept” (64). In “breaking” Pan, Carson achieves a victory, fracturing Pan’s former childish, unreified sense of herself. The evidence of Pan’s whiteness that excites Carson the most is her tears, seeming evidence of her submission and fractured self. The next morning, Carson begins working on his exposé. By the time Pan’s father discovers the article, Carson is long gone. Like Hyde who flees his crime by retreating to a different address, Carson leaves town for two months.

In order for Pan to come to terms with Carson’s betrayal, she reinterprets the poem’s imagery: “she stumbled up the dark stairs which led to the high room open to the stars to think it out. Someone had hurt her. Who was it? She raised her eye.” As if an answer to her question, “There it shown: ‘Its wavering image.’ It helped her to lucidity” (64 emphasis added). The referent of the renarrated “it” is notably unmarked, without a name or fixed identity. The “wavering image” conjures the reporter’s duplicity and unstable self-image, which could not abide Pan’s unbound personhood and interracial family. The narrative physically elevates Pan to bring her closer to the moon and its broken reflection—which like the dialectical image brings
together fragments of the past and present to offer an alternative perspective.

For Pan, there is no return to her utopian childhood. Carson’s broken promise interpellates her into white American racial ideology if only as a resisting biracial subject. Pan “in the clear passionless light of the afternoon read that which forever after was blotted upon her memory” (64). Carson’s objectifying and ridiculing depiction of Chinese Americans installs her double, fractured consciousness of race—a new way to view herself and her Chinese American father and community, the way they are viewed by racist white American society. Pan’s mature, “clear” perception of Carson is paradoxically borne out of his “blotting” or coloring of her memory. Her political decision to identify as a “Chinese woman,” in other words, establishes an imaginary, that is, ideological, racial division that was never there in the first place.

Pan’s performance of a Chinese female identity is a gesture that grapples with the contradictions of the reification of racial and gender identity, and identity thinking in itself. Her visually staged spectacle as a Chinese woman unsettles Carson’s reified picture of her white womanhood, and it works. Her defiant act is testimony of her loyalty to her Chinese community and her rejection of whiteness, its racism and privileges. But it comes at a cost. The duplicitous means by which Carson compels her to choose one racial identity also suggests its unnaturalness and the tragedy of succumbing to this racial logic (not its racism), even if on her own terms. Her internalization of Carson’s reified logic is depicted as a devastating process: “the element of Fire having raged so fiercely within her that it had almost shriveled up the childish frame” (66). As the word “almost” suggests, Carson’s destruction of Pan’s childishness is not completely

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22 Pan’s loss of her childishness in this scene resembles Sui Sin Far’s account of the day she as a child learned she was “something different” in her semi-autobiographical essay “Leaves from the Mental Portfolio of an Eurasian” published in *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* (218).
successful. But the “shriveling” of Pan’s frame suggests the cost of her maturity is the utopian possibilities it represented.

V. Conclusion: “And Forever and Forever?”

Longfellow’s œuvre is well known for its “many thousands / Of care-encumbered men / Each bearing his burden of sorrow,” like those depicted in “The Bridge” (46). Longfellow’s immense popularity during the antebellum period suggests that his poetry’s sentimental themes of quiet fortitude and acceptance of life’s burdens helped manage men’s fears during a period of economic instability and social upheaval. In “The Bridge,” the masculine hero identifies with a community of men that has endured life’s “long procession,” whose length is an expression of seemingly unbearable times. Standing on the bridge, Longfellow’s aging manly hero can reflect on the past with relief at the sight of the moon, “the symbol of love in heaven” (49).

Sui Sin Far’s citation of a fragment of “The Bridge” in “Its Wavering Image” re-narrates Longfellow’s parable in the context of early twentieth-century virulently racist US society. She offers two competing interpretations of the poem’s symbolic “moon and its broken reflection” appearing as “its wavering image here” (50). Mark Carson’s song comprises the last two stanzas of “The Bridge” beginning with “And forever and forever,” the poem’s assurance that like the ebb and flow of the tide, the moon will rise and set (43). Rather than a promise of his devotion to Pan, Carson’s appropriation of Longfellow’s verse is a veiled endorsement of history as a repetition of the status quo. Pan’s identification with “the moon” rather than “its wavering reflection”

23 For a reading of the wide appeal of Longfellow’s “sentimental masculinity,” see Eric Haralson.
24 See Howard for a reading of Carson and Pan’s conflicting readings of “The Bridge” stanzas that emphasizes Longfellow’s biography and the poem’s spiritual values.
image,“ and the ambiguous “wholeness” of her former cultural identity—her “childishness”—
presents a glimpse of an alternative, utopian possibility: unreified personhood.

Sui Sin Far’s stories represent the fragmenting logic of racial classification as the
ideological scaffolding on which the fiction of whiteness and racial difference so integral to
hegemonic white masculinity depend. Her representations of Chinatown’s interracial families
and alternative identity formations imaginatively interrupt—if only momentarily—the reified
cyclical temporality of white America.
CHAPTER THREE

Cogewea’s Octopus: Genre and Polemics in Mourning Dove’s “A Depiction of the Great Montana Cattle Range”

In 1916 Mourning Dove completed Cogewea, the Half-Blood: A Depiction of the Great Montana Cattle Range but it would take eleven years for her editor, Lucullus McWhorter, to find a publisher.¹ Cogewea appeared in print in 1927 during a period of rising fervor within US political circles for reform of the General Allotment Act, known as the Dawes Act, originally passed in 1887. In 1911, educated, professional Native reformers, known as the Red Progressives, cohered under the banner of the Society for American Indians (SAI), the first pan-Indian national organization. The SAI sincerely believed that it was in the best interest of reservation Indians to shed their tribal identities and fully integrate into American society. Handpicked from elite Indian off-reservation schools like the Carlisle Institute, the SAI leadership adhered to many of the Anglo-Christian values undergirding the Dawes Act—worship private property, individual self-reliance, faith in teleological progress, and middle-class cleanliness standards (Dippie 263).² Toward the end of the 1910s and early 1920s, the SAI and

¹ Mourning Dove had completed a draft version of Cogewea by the time she met McWhorter in 1914 at a Frontier Days Celebration in Walla Walla (Fisher, “Introduction,” xii). Dexter Fisher explains that since Mourning Dove was “[e]ncouraged by McWhorter’s interest in her, she apparently sent him her manuscript for comments. There is no record of that initial correspondence, nor is there an extant copy of Mourning Dove’s original manuscript” (xii).

² Certainly the SAI was not a monolithic political organization. Upon the SAI’s formation, its leaders addressed pressing concerns about the Indian Bureau’s role, the allotment policy’s effects, along with questions of Native legal status, education, and religious freedom. One of the SAI’s leading members, Charles Dagnett, was the Indian Bureau’s Supervisor of Employment, the highest ranking position held by an Indian. Hazel Hertzberg comments, “[Dagnett]
white reformers could no longer overlook federal allotment policy’s ongoing dispossession and violent oppression of reservation Natives. Non-Native reading audiences opted for Native authors whose texts shed light on the social realities of reservation life over the popular idealized and exoticized tales of Indians (Warrior, “Reading” 239). Robert Allen Warrior argues that the 1927 publication of *Cogewea*’s “searing indictment of reservation life” is “the best example of how the [literary] market changed” (Warrior, “Reading,” 230). Among a handful of new Indian authors, Mourning Dove’s work “evidences an important shift toward contemporary social realism in American Indian literature,” writes Warrior (“Reading” 239).

Contemporary critics subordinate *Cogewea*’s social realism to its western romance and Indian folklore largely because of the tendency to attribute the novel’s more overt social commentary to Mourning Dove’s white editor Lucullus V. McWhorter, a businessman, amateur historian, and Indian rights activist. In 1914 Mourning Dove, who had already finished her original manuscript, met McWhorter in Washington. McWhorter immediately recognized the promise of Mourning Dove’s novel and agreed to help her publish it. McWhorter was deeply skeptical about the western romance tradition, dismissing it as “the wild and improbable yarns so conspicuous in the yellow literature of the past” (qtd. in Bernadin 488). He sought to offer historical and ethnographic weight to Mourning Dove’s fictional western romance by adding an introductory biographical sketch of Mourning Dove, lengthy footnotes, chapter epigraphs by poets like Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and substantial edits to the body text.

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3 Mourning Dove had completed a draft version of *Cogewea* by the time she met McWhorter in 1914 at a Frontier Days Celebration in Walla Walla (Fisher, “Introduction,” xii). Dexter Fisher explains that since Mourning Dove was “[e]ncouraged by McWhorter’s interest in her, she apparently sent him her manuscript for comments. There is no record of that initial correspondence, nor is there an extant copy of Mourning Dove’s original manuscript” (xii).
Upon *Cogewea*’s 1981 reissue, scholars debated the politics of the novel’s collaborative authorship in light of the colonial history of white Eurocentric voices telling Indian stories. Based on similarities in diction between the letters and passages in the novel, several studies deduced that McWhorter exerted his reformist political agenda over the novel by inserting extra-literary passages often described as didactic or polemical. In an effort to recover Mourning Dove’s aesthetic vision, critics credited her with *Cogewea*’s western romance plot and Stemteema’s Indian storytelling. Yet even staunch critics of McWhorter’s inflated and polemical prose, like Dexter Fisher, maintain that “Mourning Dove did agree with McWhorter that the value of the novel lay in its expression of the Indian point of view” (xiv).

While it is problematic to set aside the issues raised by *Cogewea*’s co-authorship, recent scholars have attempted to do just that. Current critics advance a “dialogical” approach to the novel’s multiple, conflicting, hybridized discourses. Because postmodernist readings privilege

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4 Paula Gunn Allen declared that McWhorter’s influence on Mourning Dove’s *Cogewea* produced a “maimed—I should say martyred—book” (83). Early readers perceived Mourning Dove and McWhorter’s collaboration as compromising *Cogewea*’s merit as a Native literary text. Other critics like Alana Brown, Mourning Dove’s chief biographer, argued that while McWhorter had indeed “editorialized” Mourning Dove, we can sort out Mourning Dove’s aesthetic achievement, that is, her transmission of oral Okanogan folklore in literary fiction, and renarration of a western romance told from an Indian point of view.

5 For example, Fisher distinguishes Mourning Dove’s prose as “direct,” “simple,” “unadorned” and self-consciously colloquial, while McWhorter’s language is “stiff, formal, and highly rhetorical” (Fisher xvii). Fisher attributes to McWhorter’s pen “innumerable didactic passages about the injustices suffered by Indians at the hands of government agencies” (Fisher xiv). Martha Viehmann argues, “Mourning Dove favors the use of story to sway readers, whereas Lucullus McWhorter favors history (in the form of verifying and verifiable elements)” (219).

6 Mourning Dove had completed a draft version of *Cogewea* by the time she met McWhorter in 1914 at a Frontier Days Celebration in Walla Walla (Fisher, “Introduction,” xii). Dexter Fisher explains that since Mourning Dove was “[e]ncouraged by McWhorter’s interest in her, she apparently sent him her manuscript for comments. There is no record of that initial correspondence, nor is there an extant copy of Mourning Dove’s original manuscript” (xii).

7 For direct appropriations of Mikhail Bakhtin’s heteroglossia to describe *Cogewea*’s multiple languages and voices, see Louis Owens (43-35). Martha Viehmann draws on Bakhtin and Gerald Vizenor to characterize *Cogewea*’s a “narrative of mixed descent” (206, 220). In a similar vein,
discourse over genre, their analyses of *Cogewea*’s dialogism elide the novel’s intervention into Progressive Era literary forms. This chapter argues that *Cogewea*’s de-reifying narrative work operates through its formal shifts from western romance to naturalist polemics that together narrativize a social totality wherein capitalist systems and federal Indian policy’s mechanisms consolidate racialized and gendered identities, e.g., the half-breed, and invade Native-white social relations, but without diminishing the novel’s romantic aspirations for Native survival, regeneration, and love.

*Mourning Dove*’s *Cogewea* deploys multiple genres, especially polemic and its associated Progressive Era literary movements, naturalism and realism, which form the bedrock of the narrative’s critical work of de-reifying racial categories and offering readers a standpoint that aspires to grasp systemic relations. This vantage is provided by its naturalistic and realist formal features, namely how they graft onto a romance plot mechanisms and social relations specific to monopoly capitalism, the Flathead reservation, and the landscape of Northwest Montana. The novel discloses *Cogewea*’s half-blood dilemma as an imperative entangled in a web of political and capitalist forces in the early twentieth-century industrialized West. The novel enacts multiple generic conventions to map a social totality, one that foregrounds the American Indian peoples’ struggle for survival in the face of early twentieth-century transnational capitalism’s integration of the West in Northwestern Montana as it was abetted by the Department of Interior’s Indian Bureau administration.

Laura Godrey draws on Gerald Genette’s concept of hypertextuality to analyze the novel’s multi-layered allusions and mixed-construction of the frontier.

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In *Injun Joe’s Ghost: The Indian Mixed-Blood in American Writing* Harry J. Brown more explicitly makes a case for a postmodernist reading of *Cogewea*’s hybrid discursive strategies. Brown argues that Mourning Dove and McWhorter’s “creative collaboration” produced a “synthesis rather than a dialectic” of ostensibly incompatible discourses (198). I disagree with Brown’s emphasis on “synthesis” because it idealistically and ahistorically implies that *Cogewea*’s inventive re-narration of discourses resolves their ideological contradictions.
Cogewea’s deployment of polemic and naturalist conventions inserts Mourning Dove’s novel into an intertextual constellation of forms and cultural institutions, which include Frank Norris’ naturalist epic The Octopus: A Story of California (1901). Reading Mourning Dove’s “Depiction of the Great Montana Cattle Range” alongside Norris’ “Story of California” foregrounds Cogewea’s strategic deployment of naturalist conventions to represent Native people’s experience and adaptation to capital’s corporate consolidation of Northwest Montana industries on Indian lands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century. Unlike Norris’ anti-monopoly novel that privileges white Anglo-Saxon ranchers, Mourning Dove’s Cogewea is an expansive anti-colonial critique of transnational capital’s extension of its tentacle into Indian lands in the American West. Cogewea appropriates the naturalistic metaphor—the octopus—to represent an interconnected system wherein the Indian Bureau administration, corporate monopoly, and ideology are inseparable. By reading Cogewea’s journalistic prose, historical passages, and didacticism in the vein of literary naturalism, I reconsider these formal shifts as aesthetic techniques in their own right aligned with the novel’s commitment to social realism.

As my starting point, I make a case for reintroducing literary genre as an analytic in Cogewea studies so that we can better historically and materially ground the novel’s seemingly polemical and journalistic-style passages in their Progressive Era literary traditions. Next, I read Cogewea as a polemical figure in the vein of literary naturalism and explain how the narrative negotiates its romantic heroine’s tendency toward polemics. In the following sections, I examine two different ways Mourning Dove’s narrative strategies ground the western romance in the social realities of early twentieth-century Northwest Montana: first, by deploying a direct

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9 My reading of genre draws on Jameson’s method of historically-regrounding genre that “provides clues which lead us back to the concrete historical situation of the individual text itself, and allow us to read its structure as ideology, as a socially symbolic act, a protopolitical response to a historical dilemma” (“Magical” 157).
critique of the Indian Bureau with polemic and exposition; second, by expanding the novel’s
glimpse of social totality with realist scenes of labor and commerce.

I. Reading Cogewea as a “Novel with a Purpose”

In a letter postmarked January 3, 1916, McWhorter writes to mentor J.P. MacLean:

“Mourning Dove is averse to having her picture and a sketch of her life go in the book. She says
that this would be alright for an historical work, but not for fiction, she thinks it out of place. I
have explained to her, that her’s is NOT fiction in the full sense of the word” (qtd. in Bernadin
493). This statement has been read for its fallacious conflation of real-life people and fictional
characters and, more importantly, for Mcwhorter’s Eurocentric ethnographic positioning of the
Indian author as a native informant.10 While I agree with these critics, McWhorter’s claim that
Cogewea is not-fully-fictional carries a different valence when we consider his statement in the
context of literary fiction specific to the Progressive Era. Notwithstanding his treatment of
Mourning Dove as a native informant, McWhorter emphasizes that the novel is invested in truth-
telling, a political aspiration shared by both authors.

American literary naturalists like Frank Norris also claimed they were not writing fiction
in the traditional sense of the word. In The Responsibilities of the Novelist (1903), Norris argues
that “the highest form of the novel” is a novel with a “purpose” (26). Responding to his critics
who contend that the novel with a purpose is a preaching novel, he insists that all novels have
purposes—“even the most frivolous, must have some reason for the writing of it, and in that
sense must have a ‘purpose’” (Norris 25). For him, the novel “preaches by telling things and

10 See Bernadin (493-4) and Alana Brown, “Looking through the Glass Darkly: The Editorialized
Mourning Dove,” in New Voices in Native American Literary Criticism, ed. Arnold Krupat.
showing things” (Norris 27). Norris’s novel with a purpose aspires to influence the primarily white middle-class readers of novels, a strategy that speaks directly to McWhorter and Mourning Dove’s literary-political objective. Norris writes:

The people who buy novels are well-to-do people. They belong to a class whose whole scheme of life is concerned solely with an aim to avoid the unpleasant. Suffering, the great catastrophes, the social throes, that annihilate whole communities, or that crush even isolated individuals—all these are far removed from them as earthquakes and tidal-waves. If there is much pain in life, all the more reason that it should appear in a class of literature, which, in its highest form, is a sincere transcription of life. (32)

For Norris, a “sincere transcription of life” cannot be attained through “didacticism or direct appeals to the reader” (27). Rather its purpose is conveyed through the narrative development of particular events.11 But as Malcolm Cowley has noted of the naturalists: “Try as they would, they could not remain merely observers…Their books are full of little essays or sermons addressed to the reader; in fact they suggest a Naturalistic system of ethics complete with its vices and virtues” (240).12 Recent studies of naturalist novels reconsider their reliance on conventions from sentimental romance and melodrama, which were once deemed flaws,

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11 Norris’s desire was to hierarchically separate the novel with a purpose from sub-literary genres even though naturalist narrators routinely stepped out the shadows of omniscience and delivered direct, melodramatic appeals and didactic speeches to the reader.
12 A famous example is Sister Carrie’s omniscient narrator’s speech endorsing the “new socialism” to improve the dismal state of factory labor conditions.
demonstrating naturalism’s receptiveness to the emotive techniques and metaphysical underpinnings of these feminized nineteenth-century popular genres.\textsuperscript{13}

Mourning Dove and McWhorter shared a reformist political-literary agenda, even if they disputed each other’s aesthetic visions.\textsuperscript{14} In part, Mourning Dove’s desire to write a western romance stemmed from her reading of Therese Broderick’s dehumanizing portrait of Flathead Indians in \textit{The Brand} and other popular western romances like it. During 1913-1915, Mourning Dove sought to pursue a writing career by enrolling in a Calgary business school to improve her typing skills. A newspaper article sheds some light on her early manuscript draft during this time:

she showed steady high grades. She also showed a dignity that rebuffed the snubs and cruel remarks….It was in these lonely years that she commenced to write down her thoughts. She wrote long journals of her experiences and her thoughts and dreams of the two races. She saw herself as the voice of her people in the wilderness of continued misunderstanding, trying to bring to the two races closer together.

\textsuperscript{13} On why the “excesses” of romance appealed to literary naturalists, Erik Link argues, “The romance allowed authors like Norris, Crane, and London to incorporate into their fiction the often abstract and hidden forces that naturalist theory revealed operating in nature. To do so they necessarily turned toward symbol, allegory, myth, and other narrative modes common to the American romance” (67). Norris aligned his romance with Crane’s aesthetic elevation of the form (Romance, as opposed to romance) as opposed to the inferior mass-produced dime novel variety.

\textsuperscript{14} In “Mourning Dove’s Voice” Alana Brown maintains: “Whatever one feels about the collaboration of L.V. McWhorter and Mourning Dove, it is important to recognize that they were of one mind when it came to the preservation of Indian culture. They both believed deeply that that cultural heritage must be saved for the surviving generations of Native Americans and for a Euro-American culture that did not even grasp the richness of its gift” (12).
Her notes finally evolved into a novel about a young Indian agent who used an Indian maiden’s love lightly. There was much bitterness and pathos in this amateur book which she hid in the bottom of her trunk. (qtd. in Miller “Introduction” xvii, xx)

The details in this article suggest that Mourning Dove’s manuscript contained a political and social commentary—“much bitterness and pathos”—advancing an emphatic critique of the Indian Bureau through an early iteration of Densmore’s city slicker character as an Indian agent seducer-villain. Moreover, Mourning Dove decries her people’s “wilderness of continued misunderstanding,” as the article puts it, in her autobiography in a chapter on “The Invasion of Miners and Settlers.” Mourning Dove narrates the coming of mining companies, stagecoach lines, white homesteaders, and white police captains into the Colville Reservation, where she and her people had enjoyed living in relative isolation. In one episode, she describes how a police chief of her district, James Bernard, abused his authority by performing “legal business between the tribes and government” when he had not qualifications and authority to do so, with the Colville inhabit, ignorant of how to hire a lawyer, trusting his “goodwill” (Mourning Dove, Autobiography, 182). But even if the Colville tribal people knew how to hire a lawyer, they could not do so independently without the approval of the Indian agent because of the 1887 federal laws: “Everyone was at the mercy and whim of the Bureau of Indian Affairs because the courts had decided we were ‘wards’ of the government. This injustice has been a great handicap to our advancement and self-respect” (Mourning Dove, Autobiography, 182).

Rejecting the common attribution of Cogewea’s political commentary to McWhorter, Carol Batker argues that we should consider Mourning Dove as a “literary reformer” much like
her coeval Progressive Era minority women whose journalism and political activism influenced their fiction writing (Batker 15-52). However, I argue that reading Mourning Dove as a literary reformer demands that we consider Cogewea’s place within its Progressive literary fiction milieu. Cogewea’s extra-literary discourses, like journalism and ethnography, are also generic conventions associated with institutionalized literary traditions from the Progressive Era, like realism and naturalism, which frequently trafficked in rhetorical strategies of journalism, discourses from the sciences and emerging academic disciplines, and formulas from popular literature.

In The Dialogic Imagination, Bakhtin argues that the stylistic or formalistic distinction between rhetorical and poetic forms, between extra-literary and artistic literary discourses, needs to be reconfigured in light of the novel’s developing dialogic form. Bakhtin theorizes the novel as a historically-permutational, porous genre that is closely related although not reducible to rhetorical forms. Bakhtin explains:

the entire development of the novel, its intimate interaction (both peaceful and hostile) with living rhetorical genres (journalistic, moral, philosophical and others) has never ceased; this interaction was perhaps no less intense than was the novel’s interaction with the artistic genres (epic, dramatic, lyric). But in this interrupted interrelationship, novelistic discourse preserved its own qualitative uniqueness and was never reducible to rhetorical discourse” (269)

15 Although Mourning Dove lacked formal education and was not a professional journalist, she was indeed involved in tribal politics, from working to protect Native employment and fishing rights to founding the Eagle Feather’s Club, a Native women’s organization. Commonly considered the product of McWhorter’s intrusive editing, Denmore and Cogewea’s lengthy debates over assimilationism, theories of social evolution, and Indian reform were similar to those engaged by Native women journalists affiliated with the Society for American Indians.
As novels dialogize rhetorical styles, extra-literary discourses, professional languages, and everyday speech, they are transformed by the novel’s “qualitative uniqueness” as poetic discourse.\footnote{Bakhtin writes, “The novel, and artistic prose in general, has the closest genetic, family relationship to rhetorical forms. And throughout the entire development of the novel, its intimate interaction (both peaceful and hostile) with living rhetorical genres (journalistic, moral, philosophical and others) has never ceased; this interaction was perhaps no less intense than was the novel’s interaction with the artistic genres (epic, dramatic, lyric). But in this interrupted interrelationship, novelistic discourse preserved its own qualitative uniqueness and was never reducible to rhetorical discourse” (269)} It is in precisely this sense that I argue we consider the multiple voices in *Cogewea*, that is, within a zone of contact with the events of a particular present in which this individual work is inserted into a contemporaneous literary fictional “intertextual sequence,” a milieu in which naturalism and realism mingle with journalism to address a concrete historical situation.

*Cogewea* appropriates conventions of literary genres inserted into Progressive Era reform politics and muckraking journalism, among them naturalism and realism. Although critics sometimes use the terms interchangeably, many scholars often distinguish naturalism from realism based upon its hallmark conventions, journalistic documentary strategies and espousal of late nineteenth-century evolutionary doctrines. Many famous naturalists, like Theodore Dreiser and Jack London, began their careers as journalists for newspapers, and their novels, with plots sometimes ripped from the headlines, exhibit late nineteenth-century journalism’s reverence for empirical accuracy and tendency toward sensationalism. A literary genre so insistent upon a relationship between literature and reality, aesthetics and politics, naturalist novels dialogized pamphlet polemics, entering into a zone of contact with capitalist labor relations, the commodification of social life, and financial speculation.
II. Cogewea’s Polemical Voice

As an early twentieth-century western, *Cogewea* defies both literary and social conventions in the Western genre, even those authored by women, not only because it is authored by a Native woman and edited by a progressive white male historian, but because of its striking mixture of genres, particularly polemic. Upon *Cogewea*’s publication, Mourning Dove expressed her fear that the novel may be too offensive to white readers: “Oh my Big Foot [McWhorter], you surely roasted the Shoapees [whites] strong. I think a little too strong to get their sympathy. I wish we had not gone too strong now. That is the only thing I am afraid of” (4 June 1928). Mourning Dove attributes the passages too strongly critical of whites to McWhorter in this letter, yet she also includes herself: “I wish we had not gone too strong now.” She wrote this letter after reading McWhorter’s significant revisions to Chapters XV “The Superior Race” and XVI “On Old Buffalo Grounds.” These chapters have been singled out for Cogewea and Densmore’s lengthy polemical debates about Western religion (XV) and the Indian Bureau and American governmental corruption (XVI).

However, a closer examination of Cogewea’s voice—not that of Mourning Dove or McWhorter—reveals a far more consistent polemical tone. Cogewea’s polemical voice springs from her representation as an intelligent, strong-willed, physically-fit heroine, traits all in keeping with the conventions of the formula western dime novel, especially westerns authored by women. Like the romantic heroine ideal, the stunningly beautiful Cogewea is young and

17 Norris Yates argues that formula western novels incorporated many elements of the domestic novel, particularly what he calls “the Ideal Real Woman” heroine: “a figure associated with physical fitness, self-reliance, some formal education, multiple skills, a cautious approach to marriage, and a claim to companionship after that event” (134).
sexually-innocent, yet she is also rebellious and capricious. A skilled rider, she is more capable than many of her male cowpuncher counterparts, yet unlike the H-B cowpunchers she is a distinguished graduate of Carlisle, a prestigious Eastern boarding school for Indians. In keeping with the romance formula, Cogewea will undergo a transformation. She will trade her naïveté and impulsiveness for maturity and security. She will also trade her vague desire to travel and expand her life’s horizons for marriage to fellow half-blood cowpuncher Jim and for planting roots in the West at the H-B Ranch. Cogewea’s representation as a thrill-seeking cowgirl consumed with “an undefinable restlessness” suggests to the reader that the lovingly-named “Chip-munk” still has life experience to gain and room to grow (22). In this sense, we can read Cogewea as a western romance heroine whose character is modeled strategically to balance fiery polemics on whites, politics, and the Indian Bureau with feminine beauty and the comic charm of youthful idealism.

In Chapter X Cogewea decides to read a book, The Brand, as a distraction from her conflicted feelings for the Easterner, Alfred Densmore, whom she nursed back to health after he fell off a cayuse. Earlier that day Densmore successfully carried out his ruse of having Cogewea transcribe a letter supposedly to his mother that included a less-than-subtle admission of his budding romantic interest in her. She wavers in her feelings for Densmore because she cannot completely forget her grandmother, the Stemteema’s, urgent warnings of the white suitor’s treachery. Enraged by The Brand’s depiction of the tragic half-breed, Cogewea masochistically tears through the pages. As critics have noted, Cogewea’s reading selection alludes to Therese

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18 Similar to the ideal romantic heroine, Cogewea’s awesome beauty her “true innocence” although she initially performs the activities of men and is ambivalent about marriage. Janice Radway notes that the ideal romantic heroine’s awesome physical beauty encodes her “true innocence” and, contradictorily, her sexuality (126, 123).
Broderick’s *The Brand: A Tale of the Flathead Reservation* (1909).¹⁹ In this chapter *The Brand* is a synecdoche for the western romance genre’s tragic half-blood trope and its racist reproduction of Indian inhumanity. She decries *The Brand*’s all-too-familiar narrative of the half-breed who is ashamed of his tainted Indian blood and declares himself unworthy of his white love object. In this meta-textual moment, *Cogewea* announces its intention to set the record straight.

After projecting her anger over the novel’s “beastly inhuman” half-breed portrayal onto the innocent Jim, Cogewea casually picks a more appropriate outlet, Densmore. She beckons to Densmore: “Come in, Shoyahpee!” “I just want to quarrel with somebody and you will do as well as any one” (90). In one of her many rhetorical addresses to readers under the guise of private reflection, Cogewea underlines the real consequences of a novel such as *The Brand*:

Cogewea reflected bitterly how her race had had the worst of every day since the landing of the lordly Europeans on their shores; how they had suffered as much from the pen as from the bayonet of conquest; wherein the annals had always been chronicled by their most deadly foes and partisan writers. (91-2).

She observes more generally that since the powerful write official history of its conquered others, Native peoples’ suffering by the pen is not entirely unique or without hope. All the while, Densmore is barely able to feign sympathy over what he calls “the inoffensive bund of paper in board covers” (92).

¹⁹ On Cogewea’s allusion to *The Brand* and Cogewea’s errors in reading the novel, see Arnold Krupat (95–6).
Cogewea’s representation as a polemical figure is mediated through the perspective of sympathetic secondary characters, like Jim and Silent Bob, who know her well and love her. In her debate over white literary representations of Indians, Jim, a half-breed, is her natural ally. The two half-breeds share a joke about Indian informants who feed lies to white writers who pay them for authentic-sounding material. Densmore insinuates that Indians are unjustly suspicious of white people and therefore are to blame for their failure to integrate. He adds: “The world is filled with a great variety of people…but your race must be doubly peculiar, judging from the slight effect that white-blood has in the mixing” (95). To Densmore’s benevolent liberal racism, Cogewea asserts: “We may be too sensitive about our blood, but I often don my war bonnet and go scalping” (95). Jim offers a translation of Cogewea’s warrior metaphors:

I’m a thinkin’ you must have on your war bonnet now…. You sure hand it to the pale faces steamin’ hot. Like a four minute phonograph, when you get started you run to the end of the trail. You keep unwindin’ the lariat till you fetch up at the picket-stake with a jerk. You’ve got to have your spiel. (95)

Jim injects humor into his revealing commentary on Cogewea’s polemical voice, its rhetorical and narrative style. Like a “four minute phonograph,” Cogewea’s “spiel[s],” implies all the features of polemic. It is excessive and dramatic speech that is meant to persuade. She delivers her polemic with the ease and swiftness of a cowpuncher roping in her latest catch. Moreover, she unleashes her criticism of “the pale faces” with righteous indignation, careless of whomever she may insult.
But Jim is not the only close friend of Cogewea’s who recognizes her need “to have [her] spiel.” He and Silent Bob both recognize Cogewea’s lengthy musings, her speeches, even the half-aloud ones, as polemic, that is, as social commentaries meant to be heard by a listening audience. Bob likens her to a “good preacher woman” and a suffragette, both troublemaking public figures. Critics have already noted the significance of the narrative’s association of Cogewea with the New Woman. I am specifically interested in how Silent Bob characterizes Cogewea as a forward-thinking woman—a new woman—prone to vocalizing her political views. Although characteristically silent, Bob interrupts Cogewea while she is “musing half-aloud” about how she will follow “the rough, stony path of life” because, unlike other half-breeds, she will never turn her back on her Indian ancestors (42). Cogewea’s rhetoric reminds Bob of “them there wimmin what go out an’ make speeches an’ everythin’ else. Yo’ know what’s allers in those noospapers ‘bout their doin’s” (42). Bob’s strong reaction to Cogewea’s speech betrays his masculine anxieties about these New Women: “Aw! Come outen it!....Them there kind what wants ter be made perlice wimin an’ jedges an’ th’ main push. Wantin’ to wear th’ breeches an’ boss th’ hull sheband. I hater……” (42). But the reader is assured that Bob’s outburst comes from a place of love and understanding. He “understood her perhaps, better than any of his companions. He knew that the girl meant right, despite her odd, ‘forward’ ways” (42-3). Here, the narrator paints a sympathetic, likeable portrait of the white Southerner who has familial

Charlotte Rich contextualizes Silent Bob’s comments, indicating the wide circulation of feminist ideas and Suffragist activities, during 1912-1916 when Mourning Dove was revising her novel (60). Although there is evidence of Native and white women’s political collaboration, the suffragist movement was still dominated by white women in the early twentieth century. Indeed, the narrative aligns Cogewea with New Woman ideas concerning marriage and “independence of speech and action.” But as Rich argues, Cogewea “call[s] attention to the limitations of the ideal of the New Woman as an embodiment of the Progressive Era, a time that for Native Americans encompassed many of their great losses, from land to political power to culture” (39).
relationships with half-breeds like Jim and Cogewea. We can trust and learn from Bob’s depiction of Cogewea, the passionate half-breed speech maker—the kind of woman who is often read about in the newspaper. Although he loves and appreciates her, Cogewea’s preaching and her didacticism tries Bob’s manly, stoic patience.

When she asserts that she will “don my war bonnet and go scalping,” Cogewea reappropriates tropes of Indian savagery to metaphorize her polemical voice. Cogewea’s war metaphors have a tribal history, and appear as a set of counter-narratives told throughout the novel for the reader’s edification. In Chapter XIV “The Dead Man’s Visit,” Stemteema explains how tribal leaders, like her father and grandfather, needed to be fearless fighters, since leaders must endure the hardships of war, waged every spring and fall against the fierce Blackfeet and Sioux. …A warrior’s ability and bravery was estimated by the number of captured ponies or scalps he could display in the village. These evidenced that he had met the foe, that he was not boasting the lie. This was why scalping was practiced by all tribes. (123)

The paragraph’s concluding sentence (“This was why…”) underlines the narrative’s pedagogical intent: tribes did not go scalping for sport or religious reasons; enemy scalps were material evidence of victory in battle.

Stemteema’s tribal history and Cogewea’s polemics actively counter Densmore’s rehearsal of white racist discourses of Indian savagery. At times, Densmore finds it too difficult to repress his racism and keep up his Eastern sympathetic liberal act. When Cogewea and Densmore’s diametrically-opposed political orientations surface, their debate disrupts the
romance plot because in these moments it is unsustainable. During their tryst on the buffalo
grounds in Chapter XVI Cogewea enters a debate with Densmore about the differences between
white Euro-American and Indian religious thinking and practices. Unlike whites, Cogewea
argues, Native people do not use their religious belief as a universal measurement of other ethnic
cultures. Densmore smugly remarks: “Well, the native excelled in the art of refined hair-lifting if
nothing more….Nor was he altogether averse a failure at kindling torture fires” (146). Cogewea
responds with a historical correction: “Scalping was not an exclusive American fashion….The
ancient Scythians at least were addicted to this pastime, who also used enemy skulls for drinking
cups” (147). Cogewea describes the ancient Scythians’ scalping as a “pastime” and addiction,
distinguishing it from Stemteema’s depiction of tribal warfare practices. She admits that the
“stake roasting” was “cruel and revolting,” but at least it “was never mixed with religious creeds
and the worship of a God whose chief attributes, we are taught, are love justice and mercy (147;
emphasis in original). She argues that white American racist ideologues can fetishize Indian
savagery as exceptional because of their willful historical myopia. We can observe Cogewea’s
anger in her polemical rhetoric, her jab at white Americans who worship a God who condones
violent punishment while preaching “love, justice and mercy.”

III. Cogewea’s Naturalism

Cogewea’s polemical voice is more consistent than acknowledged, but this does not
mean that her long spiels are evenly imbricated into the western romance plot in each chapter.
Chapter XVI “On the Old Buffalo Grounds” challenges the contemporary reader not only
because we know McWhorter substantially edited it.
Scenes where Jim and Silent Bob are privy to Cogewea’s polemical speeches and historical lessons add levity by inserting comic cowpuncher culture and the love triangle plot into the narrative sequence. *Cogewea’s* representation of the half-blood heroine Cogewea as a polemical figure reminds the reader of the chasm between romantic fantasy and lived Native experience. Without the comic relief provided by the H-B Ranch cowpunchers and other familiar western romance conventions, Chapter XVI “On the Old Buffalo Grounds” brings Cogewea and Densmore’s diametrically-opposed political views into sharper focus, threatening to unravel the romance plot. As Cogewea’s polemics take center stage, the narrative deploys naturalist conventions making visible their entanglement with capitalist social relations, or the zone of contact of its particular present. The old buffalo grounds on Buffalo Butte prove an unsuitable romantic setting for Densmore’s lovemaking and Cogewea’s attempt to escape Stemteema’s warnings against the white suitor. This chapter reminds the reader that the old buffalo grounds are a mass graveyard for Cogewea’s dead and displaced ancestors, her Indian forebears and the buffalo, whose genocidal history is continually re-enacted and erased in the mass-industrialization of the West, by federal Indian policy, and changing land laws.

On the morning after his love declaration under the pines, Densmore rides with Cogewea out to the buffalo grounds, her “favorite roostin’ place” (138). At first Cogewea decides to enjoy the exciting tryst “by forgetting that he was not her blood” and ignoring the Stemteema’s warnings (137). Cogewea’s curious use of “forgetting” implies that she, as a half-blood, must always remember her Indian blood when in the presence of a white man. As in other romantic tales of mixed-race heroines, Cogewea attempts to forget her racially-marked gendered embodiment so she can experience the pleasures and privileges of invisible whiteness: a romance with the handsome white suitor uncomplicated by race and blood. In her attempt to forget the
difference blood makes, Cogewea finds she must disremember other things, like Densmore’s expressed interest in extra-legal tribal marriage rituals in response to which she winced with suspicion. All of this racial forgetting is required for Cogewea to share with Densmore a place of sacred importance to her people. Yet the reader recognizes that the old buffalo grounds are hardly a romantic locale for Cogewea and Densmore, and this intrusion of an unsettling realist setting into romance conventions—Cogewea’s fantasy of forgetting— is reinforced when the old buffalo grounds are a backdrop for an ensuing debate between the half-blood heroine and the white racist villain.

Waiting for Densmore, who trails behind, affords Cogewea a moment to take in the panoramic view of the Western land, sky, and mountains as she ritualistically mounts her familiar seat on the summit and dreams of her tribal ancestors and the majestic buffalo. But her ghostly visions of the pre-contact past are abruptly invaded by the present, as she spied a row of homesteader shacks. A subtle temporal and narrative shift occurs:

Her forebears had, in other snows, come from the now state of Washington, to contend with the dominant resident tribes for the privilege of hunting the buffalo for meat and robes. The far stretching prairies, the flats and coulees now decorated by the six-by-ten shacks of homesteaders, were once this animal’s domain. (139; emphasis added)

As in an earlier buffalo butte scene, Cogewea views the expansive landscape and envisions pre-contact tribal peoples’ livelihood in these mountains. But as she scans the “far stretching prairies, the flats and the coulees” she is suddenly thrust into the present moment—the shack homes of
the homesteaders, the most recent white occupiers, dotting the plains. Through the eyes of a realist, Cogewea sees the present state of Northwest Montana’s landscape altered by social processes of capital. She is not without sympathy for the inhabitants of these rough, dilapidated dwellings: “True, she reasoned, those poor settlers must live, the wild places subdued; but should it be at the expense of the helplessly weak?” (139). Cogewea’s description of the “poor settlers” may refer to the railroad industry’s practice of misleading homesteaders’ about the agricultural prospects in the West. But the description of the settlers as “poor” is unmistakably tinged with bitter irony. Although fleeting, Cogewea’s sighting of the homesteader shacks reminds the reader that Cogewea’s representation of early twentieth-century northwestern Montana has a realist investment in representing actually-existing locales. Mourning Dove was intimately acquainted with the Northwest Montana depicted in Cogewea. In fact, Mourning Dove was living in the town of Polson when she finished her first draft of Cogewea in 1916. Thus a documentary principle informs the novel’s representation of The Flathead Reservation, the Flathead Lake, Pablo, Polson, Ravalli, and Buffalo Butte.

In 1912-3, the novel’s time period, Cogewea would have likely seen homesteader shacks and farms dotting the landscape near Polson given Montana’s homesteader boom between 1910 and 1921. Several factors made it easier for applicants to attain large homestead allotments. In 1909 and 1912 US government land laws changed to double the size of allotments and speed up the title waiting period. Dry Farming Congresses, supported by businesses, politicians, and land developers, launched a promotional campaign in which state agencies like the Montana Bureau of Agriculture (1900-12) (later the Department of Agriculture and Publicity (1914-21)) disseminated literature advertising the advantages of dryfarming and the promising agriculture prospects in the Great Plains (Libecap and Hansen 100). The railroad industry was also a
propaganda machine for Montana’s agricultural prospects, as the industry had a vested financial interest in migration and settlement. With the Dawes Act’s opening of unallotted Indian land, white ranchers and homesteaders eagerly seized much of this land through outright and legalized theft. The homesteader migration to Montana began slowly in 1900 averaging 3,495 entries and then rapidly accelerated at the end of the first decade with 21,982 recorded claims in 1920 (Libecap and Hansen 102). By 1920 Montana’s rural population included 376,878 inhabitants, more than double the 1900 population of 158,775 (Libecap and Hansen 102).

The appearance of the homesteader shacks in the sweeping landscape of Cogewea offers a shifting, albeit compressed, de-romanticizing of rhetoric and tone. We can see the imprint of naturalist literary conventions as Cogewea connects these ramshackle homes to the Indian Bureau in an eloquent denunciation:

Skilled in the art of white washing, brooded the girl, the Indian Bureau was an octopus [sic], with life extracting tentacles reaching into every Indian reservation of the Union. A vampire whose wing cools with the breeze of never-to-be-filled promises, the wound of its deadly beak, while it drains the heart’s blood of its hapless ‘ward.’ Where rested the wrong? The Bureau! [a] branch of the Government. The Government? The dollar-marked will of the politician. The Politician? The priest, and the Levite, who “pass on the other side” from the bruised, and robbed victim of systematized plunder-lust, lying naked on the trail. (140-1)

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Citing this passage as exemplary of McWhorter’s editorial overreach, critics of Cogewea’s “Indian Bureau” speech are understandably influenced by debates over the novel’s co-authorship. However, it is instructive how these criticisms converge on how the passage’s stilted rhetoric and feverish tone resemble polemic or propaganda. At stake in debates over how to read Cogewea’s seeming incoherencies in voice and genre is the widely held view of literary naturalism and polemic as aesthetic failures for insisting upon a relation between literature and reality and relying upon the formulas of muckraking journalism and sensationalist fiction to establish it (Howard xi). But if we consider Cogewea’s polemical speeches as influenced by literary naturalism, we see why such conventions may have been appealing to Mourning Dove’s western romance project.

Naturalist novels’ didactic tendencies and sermon-like speeches are best understood as transgeneric features of melodrama and sentimentalism. Keith Newlin observes, “Like melodrama, and unlike realism, naturalism conspicuously employs such emotive effects to promote the acceptance of a thesis” (6). We can see the influence of melodramatic narrative strategies in the emotive punctuation of Cogewea’s speech. Turn-to-the-twentieth century naturalist novels deployed melodramatic narrative strategies to articulate how universal, deterministic external laws invaded public and private social relations, like marriage, the family, labor struggles, and criminality (Newlin 6). Despite their often pessimistic conclusions, naturalist novels harnessed narrative strategies of melodrama to effect sympathy for a victim or class.

Cogewea’s Indian Bureau speech invokes the naturalist trope of the animal—an octopus and a beaked-vampire—to critique the Indian Bureau as an expansive, entangled web of profit-hungry corporate bureaucracies. A hallmark of literary naturalism, animal imagery features widely as sociological allegories of Nature, primitive instincts, and social and economic
processes. June Howard suggests that naturalism’s “pervasive animal imagery suggests to the reader that the generic category of realism may not be appropriate for the work in question” (19). Colleen Lye advances a materialist approach to literary naturalism to offer a way of reading animal imagery as figuring the elusive processes of US monopoly capitalism’s abstraction of social relations as it incorporated overseas markets. In other words, animal allegories capture the reifying capitalist processes where machines replace human labor and cheaper immigrant labor replaces white male workers.

Cogewea’s octopus metaphor for the Indian Bureau is an allusion to Norris’ famous metaphor for the railroad monopoly in his naturalist epic *The Octopus: A Story of California* (1901). Even if Mourning Dove and McWhorter had never heard of Norris’ *The Octopus*, it is notable that both texts deploy the same naturalistic animal imagery to critique capitalist bureaucracy’s totalizing reach and its degradation of labor and land. I argue Cogewea expands this critique to include the dehumanizing effects on Natives and half-breeds wrought by colonialism, racism, federal Indian policy, and capitalism. Reading Cogewea’s naturalistic tendencies, and its ideological and aesthetic deviation from the genre, situates Mourning Dove’s novel within its broader intertextual literary constellation. Cogewea’s polemical critique against the Indian Bureau and its realist scenes of Northwest Montana’s corporate infrastructure provide clues to the concrete historical situation experienced by ranchers and cowpunchers of fictional H-B Ranch with its ties to the political-economic eco-system of Montana’s corporate administration.

*The Octopus* deploy animal imagery to represent the devastating effects of the railroad monopoly on California’s Anglo-Saxon male wheat farmer through price-fixing, corruption, and

technological advancement during the late nineteenth century. Norris’ octopus is a novelistic conceit dramatizing monopoly capitalism’s penetration and subjugation of western markets and ever-expanding transnational reach. The Octopus’s victims are late nineteenth-century proprietary Anglo-Saxon wheat ranchers, the masculine rugged individualists of Frederick Jackson Turner’s myth of the frontier. Norris’ Anglo-Saxon ranchers are subjugated by capitalism’s transportation revolution—the railroad and steam ship that will move their wheat to market. The corpulent Jewish railroad agent, banker, and realtor, S. Behrman is The Octopus’ anti-Semitic embodiment of the octopus—the railroad monopoly system—whose tentacles sap the lifeblood out of the ranchers. In contrast, the novel’s white ranchers are flawed yet noble, true American frontiersmen. The ranchers are wheat growers who acquired rights from the government to farm and develop ungraded land in Tulare County, California land rights the government had bequeathed to the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad Trust. Before the road’s completion, P. & S.W. Railroad opened the ungraded land to settlers, encouraging them to farm, with the promise of a future patent sale at $2.5 to $5.5 per acre, prices purportedly uninfluenced by improvements. Over time the ranchers found themselves captive to the P. & S.W. Railroad’s monopoly control over an integrated market. Years later the railroad companies finally decided to sell the land with prices ranging from $20 to $30 per acre, essentially bankrupting the ranchers and evicting them from their homes. With collective action off the table, the ranchers fight back by forming a League determined to beat the railroad magnates at their own game by bribing their own elected officials. But the league of ranchers found it was up against the Octopus: the state railroad monopoly backed by the courts, federal law, the press, finance and lending institutions,

23 Norris’ inspiration drew on his research of a deadly shootout between a group of small-scale California ranchers and the sheriff’s department, arriving to evict the men from leased land owned by the South Pacific Railroad on May 11, 1880.
Eastern capitalists, and international investors. In naturalistic fashion, the ranchers, ranch workers, and all of their families are driven to death, insanity, starvation, and prostitution.

Norris’ octopus metaphor only figuratively exaggerates the railroad industry’s awesome totalizing power. As Bruce Robbins explains, “Although the railroad redirected the demographic makeup of the West, its most significant long-range effect was to centralize population, financial and banking houses, federal offices, and other decision making institutions. The new roads bound urban-service infrastructures, the vast hinterland beyond, and the distant markets and industrial centers into a cohesive system” (171). With the assistance of federal government subsidies in land and capital, the railroad ushered in a new stage in Western modes of production: from a “proprietary-competitive stage” to a “corporate-administered stage” (Robbins 104-5). Eastern and transnational financial centers effected the transformation of California and Montana’s labor and class relations. This “vastly more expansive and integrative” monopoly capitalism “recognized neither geographical nor political boundaries; their reach extended from metropolis to hinterland, embracing at once the urban nexus and the most distant output of settlement” (Robbins 105).

In The Octopus’ opening chapter, the novel’s romantic poet, Presley, sits atop “the highest” summit surveying the picturesque landscape and he finds in it the material for his epic poem of the Great West: a pastoral vision of tree rows, ranch houses, country roads, and the wheat harvest. Suddenly, his pastoral dream world is smashed to pieces as he witnesses, in all its gory detail, a train pummeling over and slaughtering a loose herd of sheep owned by his rancher friend Vanamee. With the railroad’s “massacre of innocents,” capitalism violently invades the pastoral (Norris 50). Running with his hands over his ears, Presley cannot escape the sound of the train’s roaring engine, the soundtrack of “hideous ruin”: “ominous notes, hoarse, bellowing,
ringing with the accents of menace and defiance” (Norris 50, 51). A new vision “abruptly” penetrates Presley’s imagination:

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

The Octopus’ violent invasion into Presley’s pastoral imagination thematically and stylistically resonates with the Indian Bureau’s intrusion into Cogewea’s dreaming on top of the butte while overlooking the ancient buffalo grounds: “the Indian Bureau was an octopus,” she realizes, “with life extracting tentacles reaching into ever Indian reservation of the Union. A vampire whose wing cools with the breeze of never-to-be-filled promises, the wound of its deadly beak, while it drains the heart’s blood of its hapless ‘ward’” (140). The Octopus and Cogewe’a’s deployment of the octopus image represents the all-pervasive reach of corporate and bureaucratic power with crescendo-ing intensity.

But there is a crucial difference between each novel’s deployment of the octopus metaphor and its articulation of evolutionary naturalism. Norris’ octopus metaphor is steeped in the mid to late-nineteenth-century teleological evolutionary doctrines promoted by English philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) which situated human activity within a universal
Despite the novel’s development of its Anglo-Saxon rancher protagonists as complex, tragic heroes, it concludes that these men are “human insects” and “motes in the sunshine” destined to perish. At the conclusion, the octopus’ analogue, the S. & W. P. Railroad and its tentacle mechanisms—e.g., politics and the courts—are subsumed by a greater abstract design:

Men were naught, death was naught, life was naught; FORCE only existed—FORCE that brought men into the world, FORCE that crowded them out of it to make way for the succeeding generation, FORCE that made the wheat grow, FORCE that garnered it from the soil to give place to the succeeding crop.” (634)

Still, the narrator is confident that this unseen “FORCE” works toward the ultimate good: “The larger view always and through all shams, all wickedness discovers the Truth that will in the end prevail” (634).

The narrative’s tragic rancher hero, whose downfall is a foregone conclusion, is symptomatic of literary naturalism’s confrontation with monopoly capital’s increasing abstraction of labor and commodification of all things social, the reifying processes to which The

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24 There is disagreement amongst critics on the extent to which evolutionary theory influenced naturalist novelists. Eric Link argues that naturalism as a philosophy and a science could only be said to have influence literary naturalism thematically rather than aesthetically. In terms of form, naturalists like Frank Norris and Jack London conceived their novels as “modern romances” committed to both realist accuracy and the romantic imagination in the vein of Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allen Poe. In contrast to nineteenth century “popular second-rate romances,” like dime novels and sentimental romances, literary naturalists mobilize romantic aesthetic devices of symbol, allegory, and myth as “a metaphysical backdrop upon which to build narratives of human experience and interaction, much in the manner of any idealistic philosophy, the transcendentalists of the early nineteenth century included” (Link 67).
Octopus capitulates in Norris’ grand fashion. Here Georg Lukacs’s critique of French literary naturalism is instructive. In his essay “Narrate or Describe?” Lukaes argues that “the decisive ideological weakness” of naturalist novels

is in their passive capitulation to these consequences, to these phenomena of a full-developed capitalism, and in their seeing the result but not the struggles of opposing forces. And even when they apparently do describe a process—in the novel of disillusion—the final victory of capitalist inhumanity is always anticipated. (Writer and Critic 146)

As the railroad monopoly destroys the American frontier and pauperizes the white rancher and field hand, the octopus tentacles reach across the globe toward India’s insatiable hunger for American wheat. As the traces of the frontier life settle into the dust, it is appropriate that Wheat, fetishized and reified, emerges as the real protagonist of The Octopus and of history. The omniscient narrator’s purported “larger view,” which sees beyond the cosmic smallness of human tragedy, recognizes what truly matters:

BUT THE WHEAT REMAINED. Untouched, unassailable, undefiled, that mighty world-force, that nourisher of nations, wrapped in Nirvanic calm, indifferent to the human swarm, gigantic, resistless, moved onward in its appointed grooves. Through the welter of blood at the irrigation ditch, through the sham charity and shallow philanthropy of famine relief committees, the great
harvest of Los Muertos rolled like a flood from the Sierras to the Himalayas to feed thousands of starving scarecrows on the barren plains of India. (651)

Norris’ octopus is a process metaphor for a developing global capitalism’s incorporation of the American West and expansion into transnational markets. Moreover, the novel’s depiction of capitalist processes, i.e., the corporate agriculture and decline of the rancher, bears the stamp of Progressive reform’s Exclusion Era labor politics. Norris’ Anglo-Saxonism and espousal of racialist taxonomies of civilization, particularly *The Octopus*’ representation of Asian markets as a civilizational threat, reify race in a mode particular to literary naturalism. Naturalism is well-known for its reification of race into types marked by their physiological and behavioral difference from white American masculinity, e.g., the weak, sickly, deformed, ugly, feminine, prurient.

Whereas naturalistic discourses figured the Asiatic as foreign and domestic menace to white American civilization, anthropological and scientific theories figured the Indian as the vanishing American, whose disappearance was inevitable due to his arrested development (Dippie 29). The noble savage trope juxtaposed the heroic Indian warrior of the past with the defeated Indian and tragic half-breed of the present. As Brian Dippie writes: “The noble savage substantiated a naturalistic interpretation of savagery’s inevitable defeat” (25). However, in the last decades of the nineteenth century the more fatalistic evolutionary theories lost sway to Progressive reformers’ insistence on managing the Indian’s disappearance. The 1887 Dawes Act

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25 Colleen Lye argues that naturalist authors like Norris and Jack London imagined Asian immigrant labor and Asian markets as racialized figures of transnational capitalist modernity’s increasingly less visible, more abstract—and therefore more menacing—mechanisms. Literary naturalism perceives the Asiatic as a contradictory figure of Eastern barbarism and capitalist modernity, contradictions articulated in discourses of Asian exclusion, Progressive reform, and socialism at the turn of the century. See Lye, *America’s Asia*, chapters 1 and 2.
ostensibly aimed to prepare the US government’s Indian wards for citizenship through coerced assimilation to white middle-class norms of patriarchy and capitalist veneration of private property, coinciding with Henry Louis Morgan’s highest stage of human evolution. Influenced by the Tuskegee model, the Indian Bureau implemented the factory system model of education and agriculture, proposed as a gateway toward citizenship. The Dawes Act’s allotment in severalty policy ensured the destruction of aboriginal economies and the weakening of tribal leadership. The Act ensured railroad and other corporate interests and white settlers would secure the most fertile land. With the sparsest equipment and most unfertile land, Natives were to become yeoman farmers, practically anachronisms in the corporate agricultural economy.

However, *Cogewea*’s half-blood and Indian characters are not defeated farmers working the most undesirable plots in an increasingly irrelevant proprietary market, where even Norris’ white Anglo-Saxon wheat farmers with high yields cannot compete with corporate monopoly power. The novel’s half-bloods are incorporated into modern industry as cowpunchers on ranches and factory workers working alongside white workers. Still, the debates over allotment policy, agricultural civilization, and evolutionary naturalism surface as Cogewea waits for Densmore to catch up with her. Here, Cogewea rehearses the naturalist discourses of the Vanishing American: “The unalterable edict had gone forth: ‘Civilize or go under!’ but where had there ever been a primitive hunter—race, able, ultimately to survive a sudden violent contact with a highly developed agricultural civilization? The native American could be no exception to this most inexorable of nature’s laws” (139). Indian rights activists, like Mourning Dove and McWhorter, recognized evolutionary doctrines as providing scientific justification in the name of progress of ongoing un-natural government-funded industrialized destruction of tribal peoples and livelihoods. Cogewea announces the inexorability of “nature’s laws” only to then counter
this discourse with a compressed counter-history of human evolution and the US government and the Indian Bureau’s “plutocratic chicanery” (140-1).

Cogewea appropriates naturalistic conventions for their systemic critique and polemical rhetoric and as a form through which the novel can more directly engage naturalistic evolutionary doctrines underpinning Vanishing American discourse and its literary manifestations, the once noble savage and the tragic half-breed. Here too “the octopus” is a systemic metaphor for a giant, corporate bureaucracy. Cogewea’s Indian Bureau speech deploys the octopus metaphor to polemically assert the entanglement of political bureaucracy, economic forces, and ideological weapons and the penetration of their tendrils into all aspects of Native life. The octopus’ tentacles and vampiric teeth represent its all-pervasive extractive, abstract mechanisms. Yet Cogewea insists on concretizing the metaphor:

Where rested the wrong? The Bureau! a branch of the Government. The Government? the dollar-marked will of the politician. The Politician? the priest, and the Levite, who ‘pass on the other side’ from the bruised, and robbed victim of systematized plunder-lust, lying naked on the trail (140-41).

Cogewea’s speech impels the reader to see the octopus as more than a symbol of entwined evils by naming the names of those branches culpable for systemic robbery and ruin and the devastation of its Indian victims. The octopus’ tentacles and teeth graphically outline the specific powerful institutions in collusion with the Indian Bureau.

Furthermore, Cogewea’s Indian Bureau speech has a melodramatic ring to it familiar to literary naturalism. Melodramatic conventions are more commonly associated with women’s
popular fiction like sentimental romance. But as Kevin Newlin argues, literary naturalist novels prove their purpose through melodrama’s emotive techniques (11). Naturalism, sentimental romance, and western romance mobilize melodramatic conventions to similar fantastic ends: to universalize human suffering and garner sympathy for the victim. However, unlike the melodramatic hero/heroine of popular romance, the naturalist protagonist is a predetermined victim, a conclusion to her novel Mourning Dove staunchly opposed. Cogewea too resists the romantic fantasy of individual historical agency unmoored from social norms and institutions of power through the novel’s mapping of a social totality made possible by its formal shifts.

IV. Mapping Cogewea’s Social Totality

Chapter XVII “Sentinel on the Rock” is possibly Cogewea’s most quintessentially dime novel western romance chapter. Cogewea runs off with Densmore to marry and begin a new life in the East. Naïve and hopeful, she falls right into Denmore’s trap. It is finally revealed that neither Cogewea nor Densmore is who they thought each other to be. Cogewea is not an heiress to a large fortune (yet), and Densmore has no intention of marrying her. He steals her money, beats her to the ground, and escapes by train to the East.

At the same time, this concluding chapter is the novel’s most strenuous and deliberate attempt to draw a realistic map of Northwest Montana land and industry. To quell her fears about “her present questionable course,” Cogewea seeks solace and escape in her observations of the Western landscape, but she and the reader are thwarted at every attempt (257). Cogewea sees her surroundings through the eyes of a realist not a romantic. The narrative of Cogewea and Densmore’s secret elopement plan unfolds gradually, even hesitatingly, through Cogewea’s
detailed observations of her surroundings as she travels from Polson, past Pablo Buffalo Ranch, reaching Mud Creek, and then arriving at Ronan. Once she meets Densmore, they gallop past Crow Creek down toward Post Creek until they reach their destination, the train station at Ravalli. She observes scenes of banking, deserted pastures, industrial labor and production, more homesteader shacks, cattle herds, and freight transportation. At every turn, Cogewea finds visual evidence that corporate infrastructure and white society are built over the remains of Native life. The narrative’s realist conventions interrupt the formulaic western romance plot, while also adding to the narrative’s ominous, foreboding mood.

During Cogewea’s first stop at a bank in Polson, the reader gets a sense of how the Indian Bureau’s administrative tentacles extend into Montana’s financial industry to the benefit of the bankers and brokers. Cogewea arrives at the bank to withdraw the money Desnmore requests as a loan for their travels and honeymoon. When Cogewea hands over her withdrawal cheque for $1000 “the cashier in the cage window” is dismayed:

‘A thousand dollars? Do you mean to draw all this—all this amount at one time?’

‘Yes, that was my intention,’ was the courteous reply. ‘Haven’t I enough on deposit to cover that cheque made payable to myself?’

‘Oh, certainly, Miss McDonald; but it was my understanding that since you became of age and this money was placed to your credit by the Indian Agent, you were to draw only small amounts as you might need for immediate wants; and if you contemplated investment to advice with the bank. I know that I had such instructions from the Agent. There is that preferred stock of which I told you, still
available at a slightly under-par value. Why not take a block and get it on the
ground floor? We are only placing these shares among our known friends.’ (256)

This scene discloses a familiar historical exchange: the low-level bank clerk is the voice of the
Indian Bureau, under the Department of Interior, enacting its infantilizing approach to Indians
living on allotted lands. It dramatizes one of the central contradictions of the Dawes Act: the Act
purported to transition Indian wards to self-sufficiency and citizenship, while it simultaneously
expanded and intensified administrative control over Indian lives (178). The Secretary of State
had total authority over when and which “competent” Indians would receive land patents. By
1910, the Secretary had authority over the transfer of lands and funds from deceased allottees to
their families or chosen heirs. Commissions formed to determine competency based on, for
example, completion of government schooling with a teacher-signed certification (Dippie 190).

The reader would assume that Cogewea, a distinguished graduate of Carlisle, would be
considered competent. However, half-blood Indians were approved “after careful investigation,”
and it is clear that Cogewea was once an incompetent (qtd. in Dippie 190). Cogewea indignantly
replies:

Yes, I do recall but who recommends the Agent? I know what a time I had getting
this money pried loose from the grasp of the Bureau, and I now intend handling it
without any assistance from that bunch. I am no longer an ‘incompetent’ and in

26 While Leupp personally counseled patience, he was in office during the years after 1906 when
the Secretary of the Interior, with discretionary powers to shorten the 25 year trust period,
gradually accelerated the rate at which patents in fee were granted to “competent” Indians. The
results were sobering. In the first three years after restrictions were eased, 60 percent of the
Indians receiving patents were dispossessed of their lands and monies (Dippie 190).
the present instance I believe that I can determine my own affairs, even to the withdrawal of my entire three thousand from your bank. While I am given control of my money, I shall be glad to consult with your firm should I contemplate any material investment—but not for any ‘preferred stock’” (256).

Cogewea’s rebellious attempt at self-determination has unexpected effects. Instead of her initial $1000, she withdraws all $3000 of her money, adding to Densmore’s pocket when he flees by train to the East. The narrative underscores the Indian Bureau and the white man’s legalized theft of Indian assets.

It is important to note the bank clerk’s advertisement of “preferred stock” options for the firm’s Indian “friends.” The clerk seems unprepared for the half-blood Cogewea’s informed and savvy refusal of the preferred stock, saying that she would only invest in a project of her own design. Evidently, luring Indians into the speculation market was another way of stealing tribal people’s money. This scene links the predatory nature of the government’s custody of tribal monies with the development Montana’s financial enterprises as part of a new regime of capital organization. Late nineteenth and early twentieth-century capitalists, speculators, and investors began developing Montana’s rich mineral deposits. Banking tycoons like Samuel T. Hauser (1883-1914) attracted swarms of national and foreign capital investment into Montana’s extractive industries.27

27 Hauser was a gambler in a boom-and-bust economy whose “precarious financial empire [was] tied largely to the speculative world of silver” (Robbins112). Yet Hauser and other leading bankers saw “limitless opportunity everywhere, at least if he had the cooperation of eastern financial houses and the Northern Pacific Railroad” (11). At the end of Hauser’s life in 1913, Montana had the largest market for electrical power and had officially emerged as a corporate colossus (Robbins 119).
The narrative then abruptly shifts from the Indian Bureau’s entanglements with finance capital to the deserted Pablo Buffalo ranch, the site where Mourning Dove traumatically witnessed the round-up of the last free-range bison in the US. Michel Pablo, a rancher and stockman, who married into the Flathead tribe and became one of its wealthiest men, sold the bison to the Canadian government in 1908 when the Dawes Act dispossessed the Flatheads of the ranch’s land. Angered by her banking transaction, Cogewea attempts to blow off steam by taking a detour to Pablo Buffalo ranch to remind herself of “when she rode the range a care-free girl” (257). However, the sight of deserted pastures leaves her with the foreboding “vision of the dust-cloud rolling up from the vast expanse,” and she continues on to Ronan to meet Densmore. The small city of Ronan was renamed for Major Peter Ronan (1839-93), the Indian Agent of the Flathead Reservation from 1877 to his death. This scene bears a trace of Ronan’s legacy of a compassionate, yet compromised Indian Agent who reluctantly oversaw the eviction of Charlot, Chief of the Confederate Flatheads, and his band from their land in the Bitterroot Valley. Nearly two decades after Ronan’s death, the city of Ronan had become a small corporate town owned

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28 Originally the Pablo ranch had sold buffalo to zoos and shows. When the allotment act dispossessed Flathead lands in 1906, Pablo lost the ranch’s land base, leading him to sell the herd to the Canadian government in 1908. Beth Piatote explains: “the sale of the Pablo herd to the Canadian government is directly connected to both allotment in the United States and nationalization for both the United States of Canada. The process not only renders the wild into the domesticated, but also serves to mutually reinforce the dominance of the colonizing governments” (106).

29 A former newspaper proprietor Peter Ronan became the Agent to the Confederate Flatheads in 1877. He was remembered as a compassionate and capable agent by whites and Indians. In the 1880s and early 1890s Ronan oversaw the coercion of the Flatheads onto a reservation, which then lost its protection as a tribal preserve with the building of the extension of the Northern Pacific Railroad (Fahey 227). On Ronan’s death in 1893, John Fahey writes, “Ronan’s passing stilled a strong voice against allotting the Flathead reservation land in severalty” (264). Agent Joseph T. Carter lacked his successor’s ability to bridge an alliance between Indians and whites and Ronan’s willingness to defend the Flatheads against the federal land policy and the Allotment Act’s more punishing effects.
and controlled by the “Father of Ronan,” a mysterious title suggesting its shadowy ownership.

Clearly, agent Ronan is no longer in charge. A flour mill scene arrests Cogewea’s attention:

Ronan was still some distance away when Cogewea came in sight of the tall elevator of the flour mill, with its gray roof and the smoke belching up in a dark column through the clear air. As she drew near, the twelve o’clock whistle, deep and sonorous, bellowed a respite to the toilers, both white and Indian. Some hurried to homes in the little village for their noon-time meals, while others sat by the creek with well filled lunch boxes. A few with more extravagant tastes, repaired to one hotel, conducted by the same party who controlled the store, post office and livery barn,—the “Father of Ronan,” as he was commonly called. (257-8)

Cogewea finds herself distracted by this scene of industrial production and downtrodden laborers. Although this mill scene is fleeting, Cogewea fixates on the details, like where the white and Indian workers each lunch. The narrative allows Cogewea’s seemingly stray observations to briefly disrupt the climactic western romance plot. Unlike Chapter XVI “On Old Buffalo Grounds” Chapter XXVIII contains no footnotes and no obvious imprint of McWhorter’s pen.

Cogewea perceives Ronan as a small mill town with features similar to Montana’s bigger corporate cities like Butte, the copper-rich, urban metropolis.30 Although it contains a “little

30 Robbins explains, “Butte was everything that the mythical West was not: it was heavily industrial; its population was composed of people who worked for daily wages; it was the scene
village,” Ronan is unlike the mythical West. Cogewea’s view of the flour mill elevator with its “gray roof and the smoke belching up in a dark column through the clean air” resembles Euro-American realist representations of factory labor, urban industrialization, and pollution. The depiction of the flour mill workers is also anti-romantic, stripped of the H-B Ranch’s familial culture of labor, brimming with manly bravado and practical jokes. The H-B cowpunchers are typical Western figures in that they share an insider-lingo and prized skills. As they heroically work from dusk-till-dawn, the cowpunchers enjoy relative freedom of movement. In stark contrast, the flour mill toilers are depicted as noticeably disempowered, anonymous subjects laboring under dreary, routinized conditions.

The mill scene interrupts the pacing of the western romance’s climax with a brief yet dense realistic image of Montana’s industrial factory labor, where labor is unmistakably toil. The lunch whistle alerts Cogewea to a wage labor force of Indian and white toilers. Cogewea’s depiction of where the millworkers eat obliquely critiques the mill’s social relations of labor, where most of the exhausted workers eat by the creek and the few can afford to indulge in a good, restful meal at the nearby hotel. Interestingly, Cogewea knows that “the same party” owns the hotel, the grocer, the post office, and livery barn—the figurehead known as “the Father of Ronan.” The cryptically-named Father of Ronan connotes feudal paternalism and corporate capitalist ownership.

At every turn, Cogewea observes the industrial topography of the locales she and Desnmore pass through. Even as the elopers gallop south toward Post Creek, Cogewea’s vision takes in sights of Northwestern Montana commerce. She sees “a train of ‘freighters’ from Ravalli” and horse-drawn wagons “piled with merchandise, and […] strung along the road for a
considerable distance” (258). Cogewea’s view of the land is consistent with the geography of the region just past the lower end of Flathead Lake. The incidental passing of the trains and wagon through Cogewea and Densmore’s orbit contributes to the realist portrait of a modern industrialized Montana incorporated into larger markets beyond the state’s borders. Entering into the landscape, the freighters hint at the history of the construction of the Northern Pacific Railroad line in Montana, which officially displaced the Flatheads and adjoined tribes and ultimately destroyed some of the last vestiges of tribal life. Upon the railroad’s completion in 1883, Flatheads were forcibly dislocated onto the reservation, and the land was thrown wide open to settlement and investment. The Northern Pacific Railroad line through Arlee and Ravalli became “focal points of racial friction” (Fahey 241). As white settlers flooded to the region, new forms of profitable transportation emerged. By 1885 a stagecoach line and steamboat line were developed to service new paying customers settled north of the Flathead Lake (Fahey 241).

The Ronan flour mill and the freight train from Ravalli bring us back full circle to The Octopus’ representation of the railroad monopoly and the corporate integration of Western agriculture. The same abstract mechanisms of transnational capitalism and the railroad monopoly Norris metaphorizes as the Octopus in his “Story of California” were also at work in early-twentieth-century Montana. In the 1870s and 1880s, the completion of the Southern Pacific and Northern Pacific Railroads were largely responsible for the modernization and urbanization of the West by integrating western extractive industries, like mining, agricultural, and cattle, into Eastern US and the international markets. California was “[t]he pacesetter and the model for agricultural modernization…where machines had displaced people and animals and where corporate capitalism had come to dominate the production process” (Robbins 155). Federal-sponsored agricultural enterprise in the San Joaquin Valley, the fictionalized geographical setting
of *The Octopus*, created what Carey McWilliams called “an empire in itself” in the early twentieth century (qtd. in Robbins 156). As rail and steam technology advanced, the Northwest became an increasingly attractive investment opportunity. Railroad lines connected mines, smelters, mills, and markets in Butte and Helena, contributing to the rapid transformation of Montana into a “corporate colossus” in the last three decades of the nineteenth century (Robbins 93). The coming of the Northern Pacific Railroad pried Montana wide open to market penetration, opening millions of acres to the cattle industry and homesteaders. The railroad assisted government efforts at social and population control of the Great Plains Indians and paralleled the slaughter of the buffalo (Robbins 64). When railroad industry and eager white settlers found Indian reservations to be geographic roadblocks, the railroad industry exerted pressure on Congress to dismantle tribal lands. D.S. Otis observes, “It is interesting that the same session of the same Congress that passed the Dawes Act went in for grants of railroad rights-of-way through Indian lands on a new and enlarged scale. On nine Indian bills that became law, six were railroad grants” (24). By the late 1890s, the government’s approval of railroad right-of-way legislation had only multiplied.

Early on, Cogewea contemplates the divides of culture and knowledge between older and newer generations of Natives when she picks up her grandmother, the Stemteema, who absolutely refuses to ride the rail, arriving instead by steamboat. Cogewea interprets Stemteema’s resistance to rail technology as a sign of her grandmother’s vanishing generation:

Cogewea was thinking of the old grandmother, who, like many of her contemporaries had until this trip, declined riding a railway train. Where there was so much clang and clatter, there must be a corresponding jarring and shaking,
which she could not endure. Thus the primitive and the modern are ever at variance; neither comprehending or understanding the other. (40)

Here, Cogewea confirms her misunderstanding of her grandmother’s standpoint with her reliance on the common evolutionary doctrines to explain why the Indian was not integrating and vanishing. The evolutionary rhetoric—the primitive and the modern—has the effect of erasing a history of violence and destruction of the Indian way of life accelerated by the invasion of the Northern Pacific Railroad line. Cogewea’s perception of her grandmother evinces the reifying effects of evolutionary anthropological discourses--the ideological scaffolding of the mythic tragic half-blood, a national figure much like the mulatto, serving as a literary vessel for white anxieties about miscegenation and racial amalgamation.

Stemteema’s refusal to ride the rail contains a compressed, perhaps untranslatable, history of the Northern Pacific Railroad’s seismic destruction of tribal livelihoods. This chapter has endeavored to show that Cogewea’s deployment of naturalist polemics and realist scenes of labor and transportation are a critical vantage for understanding capital’s colonial conquest of Indian lands via the extension of corporate monopoly infrastructure. By pursuing a study of Cogewea’s deployment of Progressive-era literary forms, this chapter’s broadest aim has been to make room for more synergistic accounts of critical possibilities that emerge within the novel’s generic tensions.
CHAPTER FOUR
The Poetics of Cotton and the Cultural Surplus of Black Labor: The Counter-Mythology of W. E. B. Du Bois’ *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*

In *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (1935), W. E. B. Du Bois redefines the revolutionary role played by a half-million fugitive slaves who ensured the North’s victory as a “general strike”:

If [fugitive slaves] were seeking peace and quiet, they were much better off on the plantations than trailing in the footsteps of the army or squatting miserably in the camps[....]This was not merely the desire to stop work. It was a strike on a wide basis against the conditions of work. It was a general strike that involved directly in the end perhaps a million people. They wanted to stop the economy of the planation system, and to do that they left the plantations. (54)

In other words, neither the myth of heroic Southern martyrdom nor the legend of the great Northern emancipator could fully explain the historic downfall of the institution and economy of slavery. Rather, Du Bois contends, “The Southern worker, black and white, held the key to the war; and of the two groups, the black worker raising food and raw materials held an even more strategic place than the white” (*Reconstruction* 50). At the onset of the Civil War, the Northern armies were not disposed to interfere with slavery and would return fugitive slaves to their Southern masters. Inevitably, however, Northern armies realized that fugitive slaves could
perform needed labor for their military operations. Infrastructure, funding, and labor were required to build fugitive colonies to employ, house, and care for Negro refugees.

Du Bois observes that when Negro fugitives were offered land, wages, shelter, and education, their agrarian colonies flourished as self-sufficient collective, even socialist, communities. Some of the resources for these experiments came from the U.S. government.¹ Du Bois writes:

Negroes were willing to work and did work, but they wanted land to work, and they wanted to see the results of their toil. It was here and in the West and the South that a new vista opened. Here was a chance to establish an agrarian democracy in the South: peasant holders of small properties, eager to work and raise crops, amenable to suggestion and general direction. All they needed was honesty in treatment, and education. (Reconstruction 54).

Du Bois underscores that the “phenomenal result” of organized relief efforts was due to Yankee military leaders’ recognition of Negro capabilities as workers and their desired conditions of labor (Reconstruction 54).² He cites the socialist inclinations of Negro refugees as a major factor that assisted their transformation into self-sufficient communities. For example, General Grant’s Chief of Negro Affairs, John Eaton, oversaw the development of a self-sufficient Negro refugee

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¹ In Black Reconstruction in America Du Bois credits Edward L. Pierce’s “Ten Thousand Clients” report with bringing the needs of Negro refugees to national attention (67). Under General Grant and with the backing of the Treasury Department, Pierce oversaw relief efforts for Negro refugees in Port Royal, South Carolina and the Sea Islands.
² Du Bois cites several examples of successful colonies: “This was testified to by Pierce in the Carolinas, by Butler’s agents in North Carolina, by the experiment of the Sea Islands, by Grant’s department of Negro affairs under Eaton, and by Bank’s direction of Negro labor in Louisiana” (Reconstruction 54).
The government paid fixed wages to Negro men, women, and children. The Negro workers in this refugee colony willingly paid a tax funding the sick and dependent “and were flattered by having the government ask their help” (Du Bois, Reconstruction 57). For the first time, Negro workers were being paid for their labor, had disposable income, and had time for leisure and creativity.

Du Bois’ study of the government-supported Negro refugee agrarian colonies established from 1862-1865 forms the historical basis of the utopian imagination in his novel The Quest of the Silver Fleece (1911). As far as I know, Du Bois critics have not identified his study of the refugee agrarian colonies during the Civil War as an influence on Quest, although the similarities between socialistic organization of the refugee colonies and the fictional utopian socialist settlement project lead by the black heroine Zora are striking. Developed out of her studies, life experience, and creative wisdom, Zora’s visionary settlement plan includes a school and model farm, profit-sharing farms, a mill and gin, hospitals, social agencies, a cooperative store—what she calls “the beginning of a free community” which resembles and builds upon the unfinished, historical achievements of Negro refugee agrarian colonies in Yankee military camps (Du Bois, Quest, 362).

Like Zora, whose dreams are rooted in Southern soil and realized in the mystical swamp, Du Bois’ utopian socialist novel, Quest, is similarly anchored the General Strike and the Negro refugee camp experiments—what Ernst Bloch calls “the real content” of “utopian realism” (76). For Bloch and Du Bois, utopianism is a realism that sees beyond the horizon of the historical

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3 In July 1864, Eaton reported that 41,150 freedmen worked in departments for the military, and 72,500 either worked or were cared for in villages or on plantations. He noted: “Of these 62,300 are entirely self-supporting—the same as any industrial class anywhere else—as planters, mechanics, barbers, hackmen, draymen, etc., conducting enterprises on their own or working as hired laborers” (qtd. in Du Bois, Reconstruction, 57).
present because it grasps reality-as-process and ventures to render what is not-yet-there. *Quest’s* imagination of a black female-led multiracial socialist settlement in Alabama soil channels and re-presents the “the cultural surplus” of black labor: black workers’ unfulfilled, lost dream of collective control of the land, the organization of their labor, and the fruits of their labor. Bloch theorizes the cultural surplus as the not-yet-filled aspirations hovering above and transcending dominant ideologies of certain epochs.⁴ I argue that the manipulation of romance and myth in Du Bois’ *Quest* foregrounds the cultural surplus of black labor in precisely these terms.

Set in Reconstruction Era Alabama, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* narrates the marriage of interests between Southern property owners who continue to rely on the semi-slavery of black plantation labor and Northern capitalists who possess the capital and intelligence needed to industrialize cotton farming and more efficiently exploit black labor. *Quest* tells two stories of cotton: one is the realist narrative of the transnational production and manufacturing of the cotton commodity off of the backs of Southern black peonage labor;⁵ the other is the mythic romance narrative of the novel’s black protagonists, Zora Cresswell and Blessed Alwyn’s cultivation of swamp cotton—the Silver Fleece—and Zora’s epic memory that refuses to forget her rightful ownership of it.

*Quest’s* deployment of mythic and romantic tropes casts the quests of Zora, Bles, and the Silver Fleece as a shared destiny through the narrative’s harnessing the utopian function of the black worker’s cultural surplus—a lost vision of hope and freedom of the serf, the slave, and the black worker, from whom the property owner expropriated unpaid or hyper-exploited

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⁴ Ernest Bloch writes: “Most of all it is the element that produces the valid, eternal, genuine quality and the transformed and transforming truth of this surplus that accounts for the continual impact in the midst of its mere ideological character” (38-9).

⁵ On the influence of realism and naturalism on Du Bois’ fiction and *Quest’s* critique thereof, see Arnold Rampersad, “Du Bois as Man of Literature.” *American Literature* 51.1 (Mar 1979): 50-68.
agricultural labor and the products of labor. *Quest* intervenes in the racial capitalist discourses of black labor (as labor of the body entirely severed from labor of the mind) by proposing a unifying alternative: cultivation. The culture of cultivation and the labor of cultivation share a vital life-supporting relation to each other and to the human relation to the land.

*Quest* argues that the racialized divisions between work and culture, and culture and nature, are not metaphysical; rather they are reified through and by racial capitalism’s relations of labor. The novel is clear about the determinants of the black-work/white-culture divide: racial inequality in education; denial of voting and civic participation for blacks; inured black servility and inferiority; and, principally, the imprint of the slaveholding South’s unpaid black labor model and racist ideologies on the developing industrial capitalism. Du Bois’ novel takes on capitalism’s reifying process as it epistemologically fragments social life and human capacities, specifically the way in which during the Reconstruction period slavery’s racist ideologies were grafted onto capitalism’s reified division between skilled and unskilled wage labor.

The utopian content of *Quest*’s critique of the reified division between culture and work can be found in its poetics of cotton, the aesthetic features of cotton in its mythologized representation as the Silver Fleece. *Quest*’s poetics of cotton is the narrative’s anticipatory illumination of the immanent aesthetic or creative dimension of the black worker’s cultivation of cotton plants, a creative relation to work that is foreclosed by slavery’s unpaid black labor and capitalism’s racial caste system of wage labor. Zora’s natural and supernatural ties to the Silver Fleece are a counter-mythology that defetishizes cotton and cotton-made items, such as clothes,

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6 Here, I disagree with Emily Grosholz’s reading of *Quest*’s metaphysical stabilization of the master binary culture and nature, out of which all other binaries emerge. Rather than metaphysical resolution of the racialized binary of nature and culture, I read Du Bois’ utopian socialist settlement foregrounding more of a historical and materialist resolution.

7 My use of “racial capitalism” draws on Cedric Robinson’s formulation in *Black Marxism*. 
by imbuing them with aesthetic, even sacred, qualities that are integrally linked to the black worker’s labor, cultivation of the land, and the culture of cultivation. The novel articulates a materialist critique of reified racial divisions through Zora’s organization of her people for black ownership of the land for collective use and benefit.

*Quest* dialectically opposes its utopianism against normative cynicism, represented as the ruling ideology of capitulation and submission to racial capitalism. *Quest*’s utopian project argues that radicalized hope is the weapon of the oppressed in their epic battle against cynical realism, which conditions Negro subjects to brandish their talent for self-interested personal gain, while accepting the lived experience of racial injustice and disidentifying with the struggles of the masses of semi-enslaved black workers. Du Bois’ deployment of genre, the novel’s re-narration of conventions from myth, romance, naturalism, and realism, is the formal mechanism through which the dialectic of hope and cynicism unfolds. The novel represents the cynical worlds of Wall Street’s Cotton Combine and Washington, D.C.’s political swamp as totalizing capitalist systems. As Zora collectively organizes black and white workers they must battle the realistically-rendered forces of white supremacy and capitalism, the Cresswells and the Cotton Combine, but without being defeated by their totalizing control and deadening cynical ideology.

I. Work vs. Culture

One of the central conflicts of *Quest* is over Miss Smith’s embattled school for Negroes, which is located practically in the back yard of the plantation owners, Colonel Cresswell and his son Harry. The Cresswells’ crusade to close Miss Smith’s school represents the determination of Southern whites to deprive blacks of education or, with the help of Northern philanthropy, to severely limit their education to menial service training. Although the Northern capitalists are
portrayed as believing in an “aristocracy of talent” above race, financiers John Taylor and Mr. Easterly willingly acquiesce to the Cresswells’ stance on Negro education because their profits depend on cheap, illiterate black labor. The Northern financiers form a board of hand-picked Northern philanthropists and politicians, ensuring that the Cresswells have leadership control over Southern Negro schools.

The novel’s utopian visionary, Zora, is a young black woman living in semi-slavery on the Cresswell cotton plantation. Zora’s mother Elspeth, who was Harry Cresswell’s mammy, facilitates the prostitution of black women and girls, including her daughter, to white men in her cabin. Seeking a form of self-preservation, Zora physically and psychically retreats to the hidden corners of the forest and the swamp. An “elf girl” with a musical voice in tune with nature’s melody, Zora is rendered in the symbolic, mythological vein of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “little elf” Pearl, the child of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmsdale’s adulterous relations. Pearl is the Puritan return of the repressed: the artistic, emotive, magical, and intellectual expressiveness her mother inhabits but that is prohibited by Puritan society. She is the bearer of childish wisdom that arouses disquiet and awe in those she encounters. Like Pearl, Zora is perceived by others as a living symbol of sin and sexual impurity. Zora Cresswell, whose name suggests she shares Cresswell blood, is a reminder to Harry of his penchant for raping young black girls, as he did Zora. Like Pearl’s imagination which is sealed off from the Puritan community’s moral severity and conformity, the young Zora experiences imaginative freedom from the oppressive racial caste system lorded over by the Cresswells. Her imaginative inner life polemically confronts the social world of Toomsville’s violent racial caste system. The narrator depicts the twelve-year-old

Critics have noted the influence of Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter on Du Bois’ Quest, particularly its representation of Zora as a young girl and then adult. See, for example, Maurice Lee.
Zora: “Slight, straight, strong, full-blooded, she had dreamed her life away in willful wandering through her dark and sombre kingdom until she was one with in all its moods; mischievous, secretive, brooding; full of great and awful visions, steeped body and soul in wood-lore” (44). The swamp’s beauty and ugliness, and wild and mystical properties form the symbolic vocabulary of Zora’s dreams of freedom from bondage. The “child of the swamp,” Zora’s supernatural and natural associations textually situate her as outside the norms of the plantation and resolve the problem of her immobility.

Zora’s beauty, self-possession, and unruly temperament exist in a hostile relationship with the white New England teacher, Mary Taylor, and her conceptions of black feminine servility. Mary is a prim college-educated New Englander who comes South to work at the school. She aspires to a life of usefulness and service, as long as the work does not challenge her liberal world view of racial castes or expose her to daily contact with the black recipient of her service. Finding her life in Alabama dreary and disappointing, Mary had only accepted the job teaching Southern black children at Miss Smith’s school because her brother, the broker John Taylor, who financed her education, has ambitions to dominate the Southern cotton market. Most of the white characters in Quest espouse Booker T. Washington’s education propaganda, but Mary Taylor is its most coherent spokesperson because her desire for a service-oriented career disguises her deep-seated racist elitism. Mary believes

it wrong to encourage the ambitions of these children to any great extent; she believed they should be servants and farmers, content to work under present conditions until those conditions could be changed; and she believed that the local
white aristocracy, helped by Northern philanthropy, should take charge of such gradual changes. (131)

Mary’s encounters with Zora stage philosophical and political debates on Negro education and labor. Zora radically reorients the conversation, however, by challenging its very framing. In an attempt to “establish her own authority” over the wayward black girl, Mary asks her pupil, Zora, the seemingly commonplace question: “[W]hat do you propose to do when you grow up?” (72, 73). After a moment of consideration, Zora replies, “Think and walk—and rest” (73). Mary clarifies: “I mean, what work?” (73). Zora’s response disrupts the racialized script of the conversation because it is unknown to her. No one has ever asked her what future occupation she desires because the question of desired work is irrelevant to her circumstances. Two paths are already laid out for Zora. One is that she will end up like Bertie, a young black woman who once attended Miss Smith’s school but could not escape the “forces of evil” at work in Elspeth’s cabin and now worries about the safety of her illegitimate mixed-race little girl. Or Zora could pick cotton with the hope of becoming another black sharecropper permanently indebted to the Creswells.

Zora’s plan to “think and walk—and rest” reveals not merely her worldly naivete. It also signals a resistant subjectivity that is characterized as an impish affinity with the natural world. Du Bois’ narrative harnesses the utopianism of these romantic and folkloric tropes by constructing Zora has a black feminine figure who defies racist educational theories that African Americans are intellectually and naturally suited to the routinization and instrumentalization of industrial labor. When Mary suggests to Zora that she “‘might make a good cook, or a maid?’” Zora replies “‘I hate cooking. What’s a maid?’” (73). She replies as if Mary were truly interested
in learning about her preferences. To Mary’s veiled definition of a “maid” as “a woman who helps others,” Zora responds favorably to the verb “help”: “Help folks that they love? I’d like that” (73). Here, Zora inadvertently rips the veil off of Mary’s clichéd definition of a maid as ‘the help’ which conceals a maid’s work as unequal relation of labor. The conversation that ensues discloses why Mary is threatened by this young black female pupil who “knows quite too much,” as the teacher will complain:

‘It’s not a question of affection,’ said Miss Taylor firmly; ‘one is paid for it.’
‘I wouldn’t work for pay’
‘But you’ll have to, child; you’ll have to earn a living.’
‘Do you work for pay?’
‘I work to earn a living.’
‘Same thing, I reckon, and it ain’t true. Living just comes free, like—like sunshine.’
‘Stuff! Zora, your people must learn to work and work steadily and work hard—.’

(73)

Zora’s literal interpretation of Mary’s idiomatic phrasing—“earn a living”—de-naturalizes its premise, flustering the teacher and forcing the reader as well to reevaluate the idiom’s political and ontological implications. The narrative’s endorsement of Zora’s position—that living is free like the sun’s energy is free—over Mary’s reveals the depraved inhumanity lurking beneath the Northern white liberal capitalist culture of “free” labor.
Mary exclaims that Negroes need to “learn to work,” implying that chattel slavery was not work. But for Zora and the rest of the Cresswells’ black tenants, “work” means a continuation of slave labor. Emancipation had nearly bankrupted the Southern planter class whose only way of retaining some of their economic and political power was through the hyper-exploitation of black workers and an army of black surplus labor. The Southern campaign of barbaric violence and terror against blacks eventually gave way to economic pressures on planters to offer former slaves labor contracts, which they in turn refused knowing that plantation labor meant a return to slavery (Reconstruction, 551). Du Bois argues that organized mob violence against blacks ultimately “fasten[ed] the dictatorship of property over labor in the South.” Persuaded by the property owners to choose poverty over racial equality, white proletariat united with the Southern white elite to keep black labor from better-paying work and desirable land. Organized mob violence used “secret order to fasten the dictatorship of property over labor upon the South” (Reconstruction 556). Du Bois documents incidents of mob actions, first reported in 1865 in New Orleans, and other violent outbreaks that eventually became pervasive throughout the Southern states (Reconstruction 556). While the Ku Klux Klan and other white secret orders used violent force to deprive blacks of voting rights, Northern capitalists conspired to protect bond-holder interests through a variety of strategies. Among them were appointments to the Supreme Court, which “freed land and capital from any fear of control by black and white labor” (Reconstruction 565). Du Bois concludes: “It was the policy of the state to keep the Negro laborer poor, to confine him as far as possible to menial occupations, and to make him a surplus labor reservoir and to force him into peonage and unpaid toil” (Reconstruction 570).
In the post-reconstruction period, the meaning of “work” for the black worker was directly tied to the industrial model of Negro education. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois concedes that the Negro industrial school once had a pragmatic purpose: to meet the labor needs of the industrializing South in the mid 1890s. But in conjunction with common schools, industrial schooling became “the final and sufficient answer in the training of the Negro race,” which would comprise a “servile caste” (126, 88). Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Machine was constituted as a political organ with a monopoly on fundraising from Northern and Southern capitalists. His great compromise with Southern white elites sacrificed black voting rights and higher education in exchange for industrial school education for freedmen, training them to become wage laborers suited to the South’s emerging industrial economy. Because Washington’s teachings devalued black higher education, the few existing black colleges could not produce enough Negro schoolteachers needed for Southern common schools. As Du Bois puts it: “Southern whites would not teach them; Northern whites in sufficient numbers could not be had. If the Negro was to learn, he must teach himself, and the most effective help that could be given him was the establishment of schools to train Negro teachers” (*Souls* 128).

*Quest*’s Miss Smith, the white New England spinster who runs the school for Negroes, declares “I don’t want us to be the only ones that count. I want to live in a world where every soul counts—white, black, and yellow—all. That’s what I’m teaching these children here” (24). Miss Smith represents the white missionary women who went to the South during Reconstruction to teach black students. Du Bois lauded them as “saintly souls” for their

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9 Du Bois writes, “The industrial schooling springing to notice in this decade was coming to full recognition in the decade beginning with 1895, was the proffered answer to this combined educational and economic crisis, and an answer of singular wisdom and timeliness” (*Souls* 125).

10 In 1876, the Supreme Court ruled to neutralize the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments’ guarantee of black enfranchisement, which, as Du Bois argues, guaranteed corporate rule, or “bargain between Big Business and the South” (*Reconstruction* 566).
commitment to racial equality in education and their brave alliance with the struggles of black people against the ridicule of Northern whites and the violent backlash of white Southerners.\textsuperscript{11}

Washington’s industrial school contributed to the legitimization of the popular conceit of Southern and Northern whites that culture is the exclusive property of whites. In \textit{Quest}, Mrs. Vanderpool, the white Northern dilettante who cynically dabbles in politics, articulates the class-serving rationale of Northern capitalist endorsement of industrial schooling that leaves intact slavery-era doctrines of black inferiority and the racial caste system of wage labor. While vacationing, Mrs. Vanderpool engages Mary Taylor in a conversation on Negro education that dovetails larger debates about culture and the masses. Unlike Mary, Mrs. Vanderpool is acutely aware that the Cresswells, “the charming Alabama people,” are opposed to Negro education, even the most basic industrial training, based on racial grounds. To Mrs. Vanderpool’s skepticism, Mary asserts that “people like the Cresswells” would be “delighted” with her teaching Negroes “how to handle a hoe or to sow and cook” (59-60). To Mary’s claim that she must interact with her black pupils, Mrs. Vanderpool agrees with a qualification: “just as one must associate with one’s maids, chauffeurs, and dressmakers—cordially and kindly, with a difference” (60). Mary hesitatingly invokes the discourses of socialism in launching her defense:

‘But—it seems to me—that’s the modern idea of taking culture to the masses.’

‘Frankly, then, the modern idea is not my idea; it is too socialistic. And as for culture applied to the masses, you utter a paradox. The masses and work is the truth one must face.’

\textsuperscript{11} See Edward Blum for a study of African American’s, including Du Bois’s, radical memories of Reconstruction missionary teachers and how their interracial friendships influenced their religious and political views.
‘And culture and work?’

‘Quiet incompatible, I assure you, my dear.’ (59)

Mrs. Vanderpool’s racialized dichotomy of culture and work, whereby culture belongs exclusively to whites who do not work, simultaneously extends to a broader class division—“to the masses.” Thus, the older, savvier, unapologetically bourgeois Mrs. Vanderpool helps refine Mary Taylor’s position on Negro education by framing it in terms of class struggle.

Du Bois was acutely aware that the reified and racialized division of work and culture that applied most brutally to black workers also applied to poor immigrant white workers in the US. As it has often been noted, he theorizes the Euro-American white working class political and ideological identification with the white bourgeoisie as “the public and psychological wage” of whiteness rooted in US slavery and adapted by capitalists (Reconstruction 700). Off the backs of unpaid slaves, nineteenth-century US industrial democratic capitalism developed into advanced monopoly capitalist empire. For Du Bois, the advancement of US capitalism from of the system of slavery explains the failure of the American white working classes to unite with slaves and then emancipated Negroes against their shared ruling-class exploiters.

Unlike the European working class movements that critiqued US slavery and capitalist exploitation, the US mass movements were sharply divided regarding the legacy of slavery and its relation to labor struggles. The naturalization of Southern slaveholders’ racist ideologies consented to by poor whites obscured their relation to property. The majority of the five million

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12 Du Bois argues, “Indeed, the plight of the white working class throughout the world today is directly traceable to Negro slavery in America, on which modern commerce and industry was founded, and which persisted to threaten free labor until it was partially overthrown in 1863 “ (Reconstruction 27). In the mid nineteenth century, American Marxists “simply gave up the idea of including the black worker in the socialist commonwealth at the time” (Reconstruction 21).
antebellum Southern whites were illiterate and property-less, living in degraded conditions. Moreover, Northern labor unions abandoned poor Southern whites until the mid-1930s. The Abolition movement had the singular goal of ending slavery, and the Free Soil and Northern union movement, hoping for removal of slaves and freedmen from the US, pitted the plight of white wage labor against the condition of slave labor. After the formal abolition of slavery in 1863, the Southern white laborer’s antipathies toward the black ex-slave continued unabated. As Du Bois notes, “The resulting color caste founded and retained by capitalist industrialists was adopted, forwarded and approved by white labor, and resulted in subordination of colored labor to white profits the world over” (Reconstruction 27). But what Du Bois calls the “public and psychological wage” of whiteness legitimized low wages for all wage laborers.

II. Re-Imagining Black Labor as “Cultivation”

*Quest* intervenes in the racial capitalist discourses of black labor, as labor of the body entirely severed from culture or labor of the mind, by proposing a unifying alternative: cultivation. In the Reconstruction South industrializing cotton farming proved to be fertile ground for re-imagining culture as cultivation. *Quest* returns the modern class-privileged, race-exclusive concept of culture to its premodern English-language etymological roots here inserted into the post-bellum, semi-feudal agrarian economy in which Negro workers are still producing cotton under slave-like conditions. From the fourteenth to seventeenth century, the noun form of culture referred to “the tending of something, basically crops or animals” (Williams 25).13 As

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13 “The subsidiary *culter*—ploughshare, had travelled by different route from *culture* L – ploughshare, *culter*, OE, to the variant English spellings *culter, colter, coulter* and as late as eC17 *culture* (Webster, Duchess of Malfi, III, ii: ‘hot burning cultures’) (Williams 25).
early as the sixteenth century, culture referred to “the tending of natural growth extended to a process of human development, and this, alongside the original meaning in husbandry was the main sense until the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century” (Williams 25-26). Raymond Williams notes that while there are seventeenth-century examples of culture’s migration from the soil to the mind, the modern usage of culture as applied to intellectual and artistic works and capacities, cut off from the physical and material production, appears “decisively” in English in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. “Cultivation” underwent a similar etymological transformation from the physical to the educational, appearing in the early nineteenth century as “cultivated” and in a dichotomous relation with “civilization” (28-29). Williams argues that in contemporary humanistic and cultural studies, the term culture refers to “signifying and symbolic systems,” which has had the effect of “confus[ing] and but even more often conceal[ing] the central question of the relations between ‘material’ and ‘symbolic’ production” (28). In *Quest*, Du Bois recognizes the epistemological severing of the symbolic-as-culture from material production as labor at the heart of the reifying process. *Quest* recasts culture as cultivation to refer to both soil and mind, where the cultivation of black subjects and that of the Southern soil are a fully-integrated whole process. Moreover, *Quest’s* reimagining of the cultivation of black subjects critiques late nineteenth-century capitalism’s racialized division between mental-professional and manual-unskilled labor that legitimizes culture as the exclusive property of middle-class and elite whites.

The novel stages its re-envisioning of culture via Zora and Bles’ swamp cultivation of cotton plants. The swamp-grown cotton is Zora’s inchoate visionary project. Bles’ middle-class aspirations initially push her to actively shape her future with the raw materials of the outside world. Concerned about his new friend’s welfare, Bles acts as Zora’s teacher and mentor. He
teaches her to how to read and some basic writing skills. As spring turns to summer, Zora
achieves literacy as a result of her “dogged persistence” and Bles’ encouraging praise (48).
Although she is initially resistant, Zora concedes to Bles’s urging that she must attend Miss
Smith’s school so she can learn about “world on worlds of things” (49). Zora commits herself to
backbreaking work picking cotton to pay her tuition and to please Bles, not because she accepts
his wisdom. Moreover, she rejects Bles’ contention that white people “know things that give
them power and wealth and make them rule” (46). She holds fast to her beliefs: “[Whites] don’t
really rule; they just thinks they rule….We black folks is got the spirit….Black folks is
wonderful” (46). While Bles’ theory will prove correct, nothing will shatter Zora’s faith in her
people’s spirit.

Bles’ plan to save Zora underscores the dire inaccessibility of a future of material security
and dignity for a young, intelligent black woman like Zora living in the South. He determines
that Zora should move out of the swamp, far away from Elspeth’s hut. Zora insists, “I want to
live here always” to which Bles responds: “Then, you see, Zora, if you stay here you’ll need a
new house, and you’ll want to learn how to make it beautiful” (51). Zora imagines “a new
house” as “a beautiful, great castle here in the swamp” (51). Bles more conventionally implies
that Zora would be the homemaker responsible for making the house “beautiful.”

Zora decides they will plant the Silver Fleece “down in the heart of the swamp” (52). Because the swamp is secluded on the outskirts of the Cresswell plantation, Zora and Bles can
act as farmers who have control over the conditions of their labor. Released from Cresswell’s
objectification of their labor and appropriation of its product, Bles and particularly Zora are
subjectively unestranged from the labor of cultivating the Silver Fleece, motivating them to work
tirelessly and endlessly with Zora nearly sacrificing her life so that her cotton can live. Planting and nurturing the Silver Fleece activate Zora’s latent gifts, particularly her “infinite patience” which she applies to the task of breaking the strands of the allegorical “barbed wire fencing” surrounding the Cresswell farm, so she can steal one of their mules (92). She endures “infinite work and pain” to single-handedly dig a one-hundred yard canal to save the Fleece from doom from the rains (154). Bles and Zora’s cultivation of the Fleece simultaneously cultivates her person. In a triumphant scene, Zora emerges as a “tall, dark, and gorgeous flower of the storied East” among the sea of cotton (157). Her spiritual rebirth is directly tied to the flowering of the Silver Fleece and the mutual respect and affection she and Bles share. The cotton is intricately woven into her newly cultivated personhood, an integral relationship that is represented by her physical entanglement with the cotton: “She did not move, but lifted both her dark hands, white with cotton” (157).

The narrative’s representation of farming as creative labor rejects the prevailing ideology that farming for the black farmer is an unskilled occupation requiring no education, an ideology originating in slaveholding society and retained by the capitalist class. This racialized reification of black farmers legitimizes culture and education as the exclusive properties of white elites and naturalizes Negro labor and poor immigrant white labor as unskilled and uncreative. Bles and Zora’s swamp cotton thus stages a counter-narrative. Moreover, their experiment has a certain

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14 My argument that Zora and Bles’ cultivation of the fleece is “unestranged” labor refers to Marx’s theory of estranged labor as predicated on the wage laborer’s alienation from nature. In the “First Manuscript” Marx writes, “nature provides labor with [the] means of life in the sense that labor cannot live without objects on which to operate, and on the other hand, it also provides the means of life in the more restricted sense, i.e., the means for the physical subsistence of the worker himself.” Capitalism’s objectification and appropriation of nature thus deprives the wage laborer of nature’s life-sustaining resources and deprives her or him an active, creative relationship with the natural world.
socialist and utopian dimension. Not only do they direct the labor process and experience the work as life-affirming, theoretically they also share the profits.

Through the vehicles of Miss Smith and John Taylor, the narrative argues that the racial capitalist association of farming labor with black labor and unskilled labor elides the trained intelligence needed to understand the transformation of US agricultural production in relation to the world market. When a talented pupil named Robert tells Miss Smith to her dismay that he is not going to pursue college because Colonel Cresswell offered him forty acres to farm as a sharecropper and “farming is the only thing we ought to try to do,” her response demystifies racist and elitist ideologies of farm labor:

Robert, farming is a noble calling. Whether you’re suited to it or not, I don’t know yet, but I’d like nothing better than to see you settled here in a decent home with a family, running a farm. But, Robert, farming doesn’t call for less intelligence than other things; it calls for more. It is because the world thinks any training good enough for a farmer that the Southern farmer is to-day practically at the mercy of his keener and more intelligent fellows. And of all people, Robert, your people needed trained intelligence to cope with the problem of farming here. Without intelligence and training and some capital it is the wildest nonsense to think you can lead your people out of slavery. Look around you….Are they not hard working honest people? (137)

Here Miss Smith articulates Du Bois’ argument that the Southern white planter class could have avoided war and defeat had they accurately and soberly grasped the historical forces of
commercialization and industrialization driving down the cost of Southern agricultural raw materials (*Reconstruction* 29). The Northerner John Taylor is one of the exemplary “keener and more intelligent fellows.” He is the only character with a complete and accurate knowledge of the inner workings of Southern agriculture within the context of the world market. If John Taylor is more intelligent than the Southern farmer, it is because he studies the Southern economy as a scholar on a fact-finding mission. The indolent, pompous Cresswells represent what is left of the decaying Southern planter aristocracy. Thus, Miss Smith’s contention that farming calls for more “intelligence” is not an overstatement.

The utopian content of *Quest*’s critique of the reified division between culture and work can be found in its poetics of cotton and human cultivation. Through passages like the above advice of Miss Smith and through the eyes of Bles, Zora, and the narrator, the reader gains access to features of the cultivation process that farming entails when labor is not alienated or controlled and owned by another. In such a situation, the culture of cultivation and the labor of cultivation share a vital life-supporting relation to each other and to the human relation to the land. The celebration of this integral tie is what we might call the immanent aesthetic dimension of the cotton plants and the farming performed by black workers. While Bles ultimately intends to sell his and Zora’s cotton to pay for schooling, he rearticulates the labor process of cotton production as a creative process whose end product, “the beautifullest bit of all,” can be valued by them for its beauty and as a source of personal pride. Under post bellum conditions, Southern planter aristocrats like the Cresswells remain empowered to steal the product of Negro laborer and take credit for its profitable qualities, such as beauty. Like the slave, the Negro laborer can only feel a sense of personal pride in the product of their labor as a cruel joke.
In order to get a better purchase on *Quest*’s poetics of cotton, I invoke Ernst Bloch’s concept of the “anticipatory illumination” to distinguish between the type of romanticizing that eliminates or idealizes historical contradictions and Du Bois’ utopian reimagining of cotton farm labor within this novel’s realistic rendering of its historical conditions. For Bloch the “anticipatory illumination” is the attainable in that the métier driving a thing to its end occurs in the dialectically spread and open space in which any object can be aesthetically portrayed. Aesthetically portrayed here means more immanently achieved, more genuinely material, more essential than in the directly natural or directly historical appearance of this object….It is only the aesthetic illusion that detaches itself from life. On the other hand, the aesthetic anticipatory illumination is precisely what it is because it stands on the horizon of the real itself. But this means content, utopian and real content, not the content of an illusionary abstract appearance. (73)

Bloch theorizes the aesthetic in contradistinction to religious and bourgeois aesthetics, where art transcends, escapes, or terminates the world. Rather, the anticipatory illumination in art, which I am calling *Quest*’s poetics of cotton, distills the real’s latent or obscured tendencies and represents their untold possibilities in a mutable world unencumbered by foreseeability and inevitability. For Bloch, the anticipatory illumination in “art drives its material, situations, or forms to an end”; in other words, the utopian is immanent to the aesthetic fabric of the work that commits to realizing what is already-there in a world not-yet-there.
In *Quest* Du Bois narrativizes the anticipatory illumination in the culture of black worker’s cultivation of cotton in Southern soil. Even before Bles devises his plan for him and Zora to grow the Silver Fleece, his poetic description of the field of flowing cotton animates Mary Taylor’s imagination and establishes its mythological resonances. Owning up to her complete ignorance of farming and cotton, Mary enjoys a lively conversation with Bles who “dreamily” narrates the planting process:

> We turn up the earth and sow it soon after Christmas. Then pretty soon there comes a sort of greenness on the black land and it swells and grows and, and—shivers. Then the stalks shoot up with three or four leaves….After that we chop out the weak stalks, and the strong ones grow tall and dark, till I think it must be like the ocean—all green and billowy; then come little flecks here and there and the sea is all filled with flowers—flowers like little bells, blue and purple and white. (31)

Bles’ dreamy vision “dares to create a paradise” illuminating the reality’s immanent richness (Bloch 77). He remembers cotton planting as a labor of love, syncopated with the earth, effecting a prismatic Edenic garden of wonder. But Bles’ utopian vision of cotton is not for him an illusory projection onto cotton or an escapist fantasy from labor. Rather, through the prism of Bles and Zora’s vision of cotton, the narrative projects a rich aesthetic dimension to cultivation, a dimension that the alienated conditions of labor foreclose. Bles’ anticipatory illumination sees the profundity and beauty of the product of Negro labor. Mary Taylor’s ability to see glimmers of the poetry of cotton testifies to the immanent reality of Bles vision: “She bent wondering over
the pale plants. The poetry of the thing began to sing within her, awakening her poetic imagination: ‘The Golden Fleece—it’s the Silver Fleece’ (31). Mary adheres to the conventional interpretation of the myth of the Golden Fleece, centering on Jason’s heroic journey. Nevertheless, her poetic imagination of the mythical resonances of cotton in the name (the Silver Fleece) she gives it, is an instance of the utopian overtaking her consciousness. The tragedy of Mary Taylor is that she is capable of momentarily losing herself, transcending the rigid limits of her imagination in order to see through the veil of racism to value the living labor of those who are cultivating this crop, only to willfully and self-interestedly return to pulling down the blinders.

Bles’ poetic imagining of cotton is the cultural-aesthetic experience of cultivation foreclosed by the post-reconstruction Southern property owner’s entrapment of black labor into serfdom. Bles’ access to the anticipatory illumination is only possible because his “friendship [with cotton] had not been coarsened and killed by heavy toil” (31). The narrative’s argument is that if the black peons who sow, reap, and pick cotton on the Cresswell estate do not experience the beauty and friendship of cotton this is not because they lack imagination. As we see in Quest, Southern property owners like the Cresswells instated a peonage system of black plantation labor that resembles the conditions of slave labor but with the false promises of profits and eventual land ownership. The narrative represents the realistic conditions of illiterate black peon labor with characters who will die indebted to the Creswells—figures like Uncle Jim, the elderly, crippled scarecrow, and Aunt Rachel, who cannot save her boys from the chain gang. Jim sighs: “I’se getting old…and I ain’t got nobody to take care of me. I can’t work as I once could, and de overseers dey drive me too hard. I want a little home to die in” (136). Jim has paid the Cresswells a thousand dollars over the past ten years for a shack originally priced at four
hundred, but he will never own it because he signed “a complicated contract binding the tenant hand to foot to the landlord” (136). Miss Smith cries “it’s slavery” and she is right (136).

Zora, on the other hand, lives in a relatively self-enclosed sphere of other-worldliness in the swamp until she meets Bles who sets a path for her to try to realize, or cultivate, herself in the social world. Culture reconceived as cultivation involves for Zora and Bles simultaneously going to school and growing their own cotton, the Silver Fleece. While studiously tending their swamp cotton, Bles notices that “Zora was speaking better and better English: the idioms and errors were dropping away” (128). Zora and Bles’ philosophical inquiries organically grow out of their discussions of farming and observations of their crop:

They were both wondering at it this morning as they watched their cotton. It had seemingly bounded forward in a night and it must be hoed forthwith. Yet, hoeing was murder—the ruthless cutting away of tenderer plants that the sturdier might thrive the more and grow.

‘I hate it, Bles, don’t you?’

‘Hate what?’

‘Killing any of it; it’s all so pretty.’

‘But it must be so that what’s left will be prettier, or at least more useful.’

‘But it shouldn’t be so; everything ought to have the chance to be beautiful and useful.’

‘Perhaps it ought to be so,’ admitted Bles, ‘but it isn’t’

‘Isn’t it so—anywhere?’

‘I reckon not. Death and pain pay for all good things.’ (127)
Here Zora, not Bles, articulates the novel’s socialist utopian vision that “everything” not just the white, wealthy people, should be given a chance to be “beautiful and useful.” While Bles has access to the poetics of cotton, his imagination and love serve as a vehicle of hope for Zora, so she can drive the vision to its end. A “talented tenth” figure, Bles possesses the skills and determination to be a leader of his people, but the narrative shows that his adherence to white patriarchal morality narrows his liberatory vision, blinding him to the systemic oppression of black women’s bodies. On the other hand, Zora’s psychic and material connection to the natural world leads her to directly identify with the cotton plants, the weak and the strong, and insist on what “ought to be.”

III. From Cotton to Clothes: Remembering and Dereification

*Quest* gives voice to the cultural surplus of black and poor workers of the world depicted as the inextinguishable hope and dream of the oppressed and exploited to be free:

After the miracle of the bursting bolls, when the land was brightest with the piled mist of the Fleece...a sudden cloud of workers swarmed between the Cotton and the Naked, spinning and weaving and sewing and carrying the Fleece and mining and minting and bringing the Silver till the Song of Service filled the world and the poetry of Toil was in the souls of the laborers.

From the peasant toiling in Russia, the lady lolling in London, the chieftain burning in Africa, and the Esquimaux freezing in Alaska; from long lines of
hungry men, from patient sad-eye women, from old folk and creeping children went up the cry, “Clothes, clothes!” (54)

The narrative does not seek to romanticize the world’s workers’ conditions of labor or their enjoyment of their labor. If the world’s working poor are like a Greek chorus whose “Song of Service” and “poetry of Toil” are a universalizing and historicizing frame for Zora and Bles, the aesthetic features of their utopian aspirations cannot be disentangled from their aspirations for labor unestranged from their human capacities and from labor’s product. Furthermore, the worldwide cry of “Clothes, clothes!” credits the black worker’s cotton plantation labor with the heroic feat of clothing the world’s population. The narrative repeatedly compels the reader to recognize that the world-wide “cry of the naked” is answered by the American black worker along with other workers of the world.

From white table cloths to a basket of clean clothes to Zora’s scarlet dress, Quest exhibits a preoccupation with everyday commodities manufactured out of cotton, and they appear often in the novel. The narrative spotlights the clean, bright, soft whiteness of linens, skirts, and curtains. The effect is to remind the reader that these items for use are manufactured from cotton, cotton likely grown and processed by black workers, and sewn and spun by cheap white labor in mills across the country. In most of these scenes, wealthy white characters enjoy “the whitest of cloths” and “soft white beds” (107, 173). Furthermore, the narrative transvalues white supremacist religious and cultural symbology, where whiteness equates with cleanliness and purity, epitomized perhaps in white bed linens. Miss Smith hires Zora to do light office work with the ulterior motive of protecting the swamp girl by offering a bedroom of her own for “when [she is] tired and want[s] to be alone” (120). The narrator describes the white-cotton-clad
room: “A tiny bedroom was disclosed, with one broad window looking toward the swamp; white curtains adorned it, and white hangings draped the plain bureau and wash-stand and the little bed. There was a study table, and a small book-shelf holding a few books, all simple and clean” (120). At first, the whiteness and cleanliness of the bedroom make Zora feel uncomfortable and unworthy as she enters the foreign world of a domestic safe haven, the ideological property of white womanhood. But as Zora spends time reading books in the little bedroom, losing awareness of herself in the books and the room’s comfort, the fetishistic spell of the room’s white linens quickly wears off. Zora’s little white bedroom becomes an indictment of slavery’s institutional sexual violation and instrumentalization of black women’s bodies and absolves the victim of white supremacist patriarchy’s historical crime against black womanhood. Miss Smith’s gesture argues that young black women must have control of their sexual bodies in order to have the opportunity to be useful and beautiful.

Cotton also features in Zora and Bles’s concern, or lack of concern, for clothing. As Zora picks cotton to earn money for school, Bles considers “the momentous question of clothes” (50). The half-naked elf-girl, however, has no concern for clothes nor does she recognize a need for clothes for school. Bles goes to a department store called Caldwell’s Emporium to buy Zora school clothes. Surprisingly, Bles does not choose a conventionally-appropriate, matronly school dress for Zora: “One caught his eye. It came from the great Easterly mills in New England and was red—a vivid red. The glowing warmth of this cloth and cotton caught the eye of Bles, and he bought the gown for a dollar and a half” (50). The origin of the clothing item is an important detail: the scarlet red dress was produced in mills owned by the Wall Street financier, Mr. Easterly. The “great” Easterly masterminded his predecessor Mr. Job Grey’s multi-million dollar fortune. Grey originally began buying and selling cotton in the South during Reconstruction.
Easterly expanded Grey’s enterprise to include the buying and selling of stocks and then the consolidation of mills. Now John Taylor is the brainchild of Easterly’s vision of “financial domination”: the Cotton Combine, the monopolizing trust over the nation’s cotton manufacturing industry (62).

In addition to these property relations, Zora’s scarlet dress has woven into it a direct allusion to Hawthorne’s scarlet letter, the letter “A” that Hester Prynne is forced to wear as punishment for her adulterous sexual relationship with Reverend Arthur Dimmsdale. The scarlet letter is a fetish of female sexual danger encoded in a public symbol shaming and condemning the adulterous woman for her sexual impurity. A religious fetish, the scarlet letter has a life of its own entirely unhinged from its empirical existence as an embroidered letter and the historical and social relations that produce its meaning. When Hester makes her first appearance in the marketplace wearing the scarlet letter, she immediately feels the effects of the letter’s fetishistic qualities: “It had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations, and enclosing her in a sphere by herself” (Hawthorne 41). Ironically, Bles gives Zora the scarlet dress as a gift and then later condemns her for her sexual impurity. The reader is led to see that Bles is influenced by Mary Taylor’s white patriarchal norms of sexual purity, which, unbeknownst to him legitimize and obscure the systemic rape of black women by white men like Harry Cresswell.

Through its allusion to the scarlet letter, Zora’s red dress articulates Quest’s critique of commodity fetishism on three levels. First, the narrative foregrounds the scarlet dress as a clothing commodity and makes visible the series of capitalist labor relations that went into making it beginning with black plantation labor in the South, owned by financiers like Easterly and plantation aristocrats like the Cresswells. In addition, as critics have noted, Zora’s scarlet dress rejects the fetish of female sexual purity as an ideology reinforcing white American
patriarchal control over black women’s sexuality. Finally, when to the supreme horror of Mary Taylor, Zora appears wearing the scarlet dress, “hanging from shoulder to ankle, in formless clinging folds” as she crosses the “threshold” into the schoolhouse the scarlet dress ushers her into new ordinary relations, breaking the spell of the fetish of female sexual danger symbolized in part through Elspeth’s witchcraft (Du Bois, *Quest*, 57). With the help of Bles and Miss Smith, Zora begins to realize herself through her participation in the outside world.

Fetishism, with its religious and mythological intonations, might also seem to characterize the Silver Fleece, but Du Bois’s counter-mythology actually demystifies the fetish by figuring the fleece as a material plant tied to wants and wishes, the reproductive labor of care and aspiration:

> In the field of the Silver Fleece all her possibilities were beginning to find expression. These new-born green things hidden far down in the swamp, begotten in want and mystery, were to her a living wonderful fairy tale come true. All the latent mother in her brooded over them; all her brilliant fancy wove itself about them. They were her dream-children, and she tended them jealously; they were her Hope, and she worshipped them. (125)

With the budding of the Silver Fleece, the swamp transforms before Zora’s eyes into a “wish-landscape” charged with the dreams for unrealized freedom stemming back to her enslaved ancestors. The newborn cotton is a “wish-landscape” in what Bloch calls the utopian tradition of

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15 For readings of *Quest* as Du Bois’ radical intervention in the literary representation of black womanhood and black female protagonists, see Nellie McKay and Gary L. Lemmons.
“social fairytales” which have the courage to settle for “[n]othing but countless ways to fulfill wishes, nothing but via regia to attain in the fairy tale as quickly as possible what nature itself outside the fairytale refuses to grant human beings” (172). For Bloch, wish-landscapes are not escapist fantasies; they are the geographies of utopia that aesthetically bridge (and measure) the distance between the real and the not-yet-there.\textsuperscript{16} Significantly, the wish landscape of Zora’s cotton plants is a real product of her labor and nature; the cotton plants are her “living wonderful fairy tale” a dream rooted in the earth. The narrator declares, “One thing alone lay in her wild fancy like a great and wonderful fact dragging the dream to earth and anchoring it there” (215).

It is worth comparing the above passage to Apollonius of Rhodes’ \textit{Argonautica} to capture the political significance of Du Bois’ counter-mythology. Du Bois’ directly alludes to Jason’s experience with the Golden Fleece in his depiction of Zora’s “worship” of the fleece and her “jealous” tending of it. In Book IV \textit{Homeward Bound}, Jason “snatch[e] the fleece from the oak” once Medea subdues the serpent-monster with her spell and potion. The narrator writes:

\begin{quote}
Lord Jason held up the great fleece in his arms. The shimmering wool threw a fiery glow on his fair cheeks and forehead; and he rejoiced in it, glad as a girl who catches in her silken gown the lovely light of the full moon as it climbs the sky and looks into her attic room. The ram’s skin with its golden covering was as large as the hide of a yearling heifer or a brocket, as a young stag is called by hunting folk. The long flocks weighed it down and the very ground before him was bright with gold. When he slung it on his left shoulder, as he did at times, it
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{16} For Bloch, the wish landscape is art’s willing a world into realization, moving “the essential, which has not yet emerged…an important step closer to its full realization in that it is treated without illusion as process and existing” (76).
reached his feet. He was now mortally afraid that some god or moan might rob him on the way. (151)

Once Jason has the Golden Fleece safely in his possession, all about him radiates with golden light, even the ground he walks on, and he is “mortally afraid” of the fleece being stolen. If as Bles observes, the Cresswells are Jason’s analogue, then their enjoyment of the golden riches from the fleece and Colonel Cresswell’s gloating over its beauty puts a new spin on Jason’s moment of golden splendor. In *Quest*’s rewriting of the Golden Fleece myth, Zora’s jealously worships the silver fleece in part because it is the unestranged product of her labor. Here the trope of motherhood conveys the embodied labor and love she invested in its birth and future. Like a slave mother whose children are the property of the white owner, Zora intuitively senses the danger of giving life to something and having a dream, and so she tends her cotton plants “jealously.”

The narrative suggests two different ways for Zora to cope with the experience of the two devastating losses she will confront—the loss of Bles and of the Silver Fleece. When Bles leaves for Washington D.C. after Mary Taylor recounts Harry Cresswell’s public disparagement of Zora as sexually impure, Zora seeks solace in Miss Smith’s loving care. Concerned that Zora will “go crazy,” Miss Smith offers her the wisdom of New England common sense: “do something” (182). Zora asks “Do crazy folks forget?” Miss Smith responds: “Nonsense, Zora! . . . . They are people who remember; sane folk forget. Work is the only cure for such pain” (182). Work, first picking her cotton and then serving as Mrs. Vanderpool’s maid, indeed proves to be a salve for Zora’s heartbreak. But Zora has another love that transcends her unhappiness and disappointment, a love the narrative argues is “worth a whole life.” While Zora must displace her
memories of Bles’ unjust rejection of her, she cannot forget that she is the rightful owner of the Silver Fleece because it is she, and Bles, who created it with their tireless labor and fashioned it out of her dreams. Zora’s spiritual and supernatural attachment to the Silver Fleece has the effect of de-fetishizing the cotton because it entails her profound and integrated relation to it as the product of cultivation, labor, and love.

When the Cresswells steal the Silver Fleece out of her hands, Zora experiences the injustice most violently and acutely. As he does with all of his black tenants, Harry Cresswell “pays” for the cotton by subtracting a figure from a fraudulent list of her debts, leaving her still in debt. “Like a brooding mother,” Zora’s holds a vigil over the cotton as it is cleaned and baled and then sent to market:

To Zora’s mind, this beautiful baled fibre was hers; it typified happiness; it was an holy thing which profane hands had stolen. When it came back to her (as come it must, she cried with clenched hands) it would bring happiness; not the great Happiness—that was gone forever—but illumination, atonement, and something of the power and the glory. So, involuntary almost, she haunted the cotton storehouse, flitting like a dark and silent ghost in among the workmen, greeting them with her low musical voice, warding them with her cold majesty…. (215)

In representing Zora’s loss, the narrative uses biblically-inflected language to couch its argument that black workers are the rightful owners of Southern cotton and the land and to call for reparative justice. Zora imbues the Silver Fleece with spiritual and aspirational powers of
“illumination, atonement, and something of the power and the glory.” Moreover, “with clenched hands” she believes that the Silver Fleece will return to her because it must.

Zora’s ardent faith in the Fleece’s return is rewarded through a series of fantastic coincidences that allow her to hold on to a remnant of the Silver Fleece. When Mrs. Vanderpool asks for a recommendation for a black maid, Miss Smith names Zora, so that she can escape the Cresswells and other the malevolent forces of Toomsville. As Mrs. Vanderpool’s maid, Zora first works as a servant for the Cresswells, which gives her the opportunity to be Helen Cresswell’s dressmaker for the upcoming Cresswell-Taylor double marriage, symbolizing the unified interests of the Southern planters and Northern capitalists. When presented with the cloth, “[Zora] trembled at its beauty and felt a vague inner yearning, as if some subtle magic in the woven web were trying to tell her its story” (227). Indeed, the “bolt of silken-like cambric of wondrous fineness and lustre” embodies a history of labor and expropriation beginning with Zora and Bles’ cultivation of cotton in the Cresswells’ swamp (226). Cresswell had two bales of cotton shipped to the East on behalf of John Taylor, who then sent them to be manufactured into silken woof in Easterly’s mills in New Jersey and then express mailed back to Toomsville, Alabama. Zora injects the same love and devotion with which she tended the Fleece into her embroidering work. Alluding to Hester Prinn’s “fantastically” artful embroidering of the scarlet letter, Zora “[w]illfully. . . departed from the set pattern and sewed into the cloth something of the beauty in her heart” (227). Once again, Zora realizes herself through her labor. As she embroiders the wedding dress, she continues to shape the Silver Fleece according to her unique vision. And once again, the Fleece, the embroidered wedding dress will be stolen from her. Because her passionate labor—twice-over—gave birth to the Fleece, Zora is unwilling to allow
the Fleece—such an integral part of her subjectivity and being—stolen out of her arms again.

She hatches a desperate plan to lock the wedding dress in a cedar box and bury it in the swamp.

But Helen Cresswell’s preference for Parisian finery incidentally prevents Zora from carrying out her potentially disastrous plan, thus reaffirming the Fleece as Zora’s talisman. When Helen’s gown arrives early from Paris, she flippantly decides to give the cotton wedding dress to Zora to “hide it and keep it if [she] want[s] it” as if it were just an old hand-me-down (230).

Helen gives away the wedding gown, created by the painstaking work of the dressmaker and Zora, out of a moment of convenience, not care her black female servant. Moreover, Helen’s extravagant taste for Parisian fashion adds an extra layer of history to Quest’s epic of cotton. Helen represents the typical planter class white woman with extravagant tastes for European styles. She does not work and has little interest her father and brother’s cotton plantation business. Furthermore, Helen’s Parisian gown encapsulates the antebellum South’s cultural identification with and preference for economic transactions with European markets, rather than subsidize the North’s industrial infrastructure. By rejecting the cotton gown, which is spun in Easterly’s mills, Helen inadvertently snubs the capital-intensive Northern manufacturing industry.17

As both protagonists leave Alabama and enter the urban swamp of Washington, D.C., Zora and Bles’ separate yet intersecting journeys unfold in different, competing narrative modes.

17 In Black Reconstruction Du Bois lists several cultural and economic reasons for why the Southern planter class preferred exchange with Europe. Du Bois writes, “All their ideas of gentility and education went back to the days of European privilege and caste” (Reconstruction 30). The wealthy planter class was known for its lavish consumption habits and their good breeding. Southern women “affected the latest European styles” (Reconstruction 30). Du Bois notes that the Southern planter class “not only preferred Europe for social reasons and for economic advantages, but they sensed the new power of monopolizing and distributing capital through a national banking system, if permitted in the North in an expanding industry, would make the North an even greater financial dictator of the South than it was at the time” (Reconstruction 33).
While Zora’s plot follows a romantic trajectory, Bles’ work for Republican machine party politics unfolds as a gritty realist plot where he must learn hard lessons. Like Toomsville, Alabama, Washington, D.C. is owned and ruled by white elites. But unlike Toomsville, where white supremacy is more violently and strictly enforced, D.C. contains an emerging black middle-class sector working in professional jobs for politically-powerful whites. The Republican leadership is quick to boost Bles’ political career because his noble ideals magnetize black voters weary of the Party’s betrayal of Negro rights: “Alwyn was new, clear, and sincere, and the black folk hung on his words” (273). Through his romantic relationship with the savvy, ambitious Caroline Wynn, Bles learns that cynical realism is the prevailing ideology amongst the urban black middle class. Although white and black subjects differentially develop and experience cynicism, it is nonetheless the uniform rationale for ruthless self-interested economic advancement over any greater good. When he is nominated for Treasury of the United States, Bles learns that he must launch a defense of the Party’s decision to jettison the Education Bill, capitulating to white Southern Democrats’ efforts to control and thus eliminate Negro education. By refusing to tow the Party line, Bles retains his honor but loses the support of the Republicans and romantic future with Caroline Wynn. Through Bles’ earnest efforts yet utter failure in D.C. to advance Negro rights, the narrative argues that Negro leaders cannot achieve genuine progress—much less freedom—for their people through traditional channels without conforming to the political establishment culture of cynical individualism and institutional racism.

Switching from the realist mode of storytelling, the romance narrative of Zora’s training as Mrs. Vanderpool’s servant-protégé bears similarities to the Cinderella story. Zora becomes a
stately ladylike heroine, shedding her wild ways, under her rich white employer’s roof. However, unlike the white heroine from sentimental and melodramatic romance, Zora reaps benefits from her fortuitous relationship with Mrs. Vanderpool that are primarily intellectual and directed toward the uplift her people. As soon as Mrs. Vanderpool becomes acquainted with Zora, the patrician white woman finds herself unable to see her black female servant as other than an intellectual equal and treats her as a friend. As she explains to Mary Cresswell, Mrs. Vanderpool sees herself as Zora’s benefactress: “I like the girl….well, I think of her future” (248). Mrs. Vanderpool’s greatest gift to Zora is her continuation of Miss Smith’s educational project, offering Zora the time and space to develop her intellectual capacities. Like Miss Smith, Mrs. Vanderpool provides Zora with a room of her own containing a library stocked with the classics of the Western and European literary tradition. Unlike a typical house servant, “[Zora’s] work took but little of her time and left hours for reading and thinking” (251). Mrs. Vanderpool admiringly observes Zora “curled in a chair with a book….in dreamland; in a world of books” (251).

Zora and Mrs. Vanderpool’s relationship manifests the dialectic of hope and cynicism. In spite of her role in Mr. Easterly and Harry Cresswell’s plan to undermine Sarah Smith’s school, the cynical and detached Mrs. Vanderpool does not actually believe that her philanthropic meddling will benefit the Smith school and Southern Negro education in general. As a cynic, Mrs. Vanderpool believes in nothing other than her own self-interest, i.e., maintaining her wealth and privilege. “Essentially…unmoral,” Mrs. Vanderpool’s cynical reason legitimizes prevailing ideological creeds of espoused by the Republican Party and Booker T. Washington, for example, yet she truly believes they are “meaningless” (246). On the other hand, Mary Taylor is self-

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18 Maurice Lee argues that whereas the young Zora echoes The Scarlet Letter’s Pearl, the mature Zora resembles Hester Prynne and Anne Hutchinson, the more radical historical figure (394-5).
deluded by racist ideologies of white liberal charity and benevolence, believing she is acting in the best interest of her white counterparts and Negro students. Mary “had so jauntily set out to solve this mighty problem [of Negro education] by a waving of her wand,” which is why Sarah Smith brands Mary a “fool” (180). Although Sarah Smith, the educator, is firm believer in all human potential, she declares to Mary: “You will never learn; you have blundered into this life work of mine and well nigh ruined it” (180).

Yet, the reader is lead to believe that there may be hope for the cynical Mrs. Vanderpool to learn from Zora. For Zora sparks in Mrs. Vanderpool a degree of passionate interest she does not experience in daily life: “For the first time, perhaps, Zora gave her life a peculiar human interest” (247). Whereas Mary Cresswell remarks that Zora could never be a “lady” “[w]ith that hair,” Mrs. Vanderpool sees the “artistic possibilities”—glimmers of the anticipatory illumination—of Zora’s hair (248). Offending Mary’s racial propriety, Mrs. Vanderpool lavishes in her praise of Zora’s mesmerizing beauty:

[Zora’s hair] lay in some great twisted cloud and in that black net gown of mine Zora was simply magnificent. Her form was perfect, but her height is regal, her skin is satin, and my jewels found a resting place at last. Jewels, you know, dear were never meant for white folk. I was tempted to take her to the box at the opera and let New York break its impudent neck” (248).

Mrs. Vanderpool’s recognition of Zora’s humanity rips off the veil of race unveiling a beautiful young black woman cast in the mold of a Greek or African goddess. Mrs. Vanderpool’s
newfound rebelliousness is rendered in strong, colorful language—she fancies bringing Zora to New York opera to “break its impudent neck” (248). Yet Zora’s transformation will far exceed Mrs. Vanderpool’s limited vision of her becoming a black belle of society and her traveling companion. Zora entrusts Mrs. Vanderpool to use her influence in Republican politics to secure for Bles the office of “Treasurer of the United States without sacrificing his manhood or betraying his people” (298). Predictably Mrs. Vanderpool breaks her promise to Zora because she is willing to sacrifice anything to secure her husband’s nomination for Ambassador to France. However, Mrs. Vanderpool, although a powerful political player, is not directly responsible for Bles becoming a pawn in the Republican Party, i.e., the Party’s attempt to use Bles an apologist for its betrayal of Negro voters. And Zora knows this because she has learned from her studies to think systemically. Before she leaves for Alabama, Zora tells Mrs. Vanderpool, “I do not blame you….I blame the world” (327). But Mrs. Vanderpool admits her shame and enlarges her blame, replying “I am the world”—expressing her view that the world—the world where rich white people thrive—is a system of predetermined outcomes (327). Thus, Mrs. Vanderpool’s broken promise is a cynical reminder to black workers that they cannot hope to change “the world” by playing by its rules.

Had Zora assented to Mrs. Vanderpool’s wishes, she would have continued her studies of “settlement work and reform movements…in England—in France” for at least “five years” more years (297, 298). If Zora had the freedom to spend a minimum of five years educating herself and travelling, then Mrs. Vanderpool’s plan for her education would be beneficial and generous. But as the narrative reminds us, Zora’s personal freedom is tied to the freedom of black workers, who cannot wait five years. During one of her late night walks, Zora stumbles into an unmarked...
church and hears a black rector’s rousing sermon that points to “the Way” she has been searching for; and “the Way” is down South. The radical rector exclaims:

Sacrifice. Lift up your heads, then, ye gates of prejudice and hate, and let the King of Glory come in. Forget yourselves and your petty wants, and behold your starving people. The wail of black millions sweeps the air—east and west they cry, Help! Help! . . . Behold the Supreme Sacrifice that makes us clean. Give up your pleasures; give up your wants give up all to the weak and wretched of our people. . . . Go down to the South where we writhe. Strive—work—build—hew—lead—inspire! (295)

Zora declares herself “converted” by the sermon, although Mrs. Vanderpool dismisses the black rector as a “fakir” (296). It is not as if Zora had lost her way under Mrs. Vanderpool’s roof, where she was given refuge from the Creswells plantation and the opportunity to educate herself. But from the rector’s sermon radicalizes Zora, awakening her sense of the urgency of her quest that began with the Silver Fleece. The rector speaks not only of the suffering black peonage farmers and the rape of young black girls. He broadens the scope of suffering to include the “black millions”—the same black millions of workers who answer “The cry of the naked” and sing the “Song of Service,” “the poetry of Toil” (54). Zora heeds the call to return to Toomsville, Alabama, and soon Bles will follow her.

Although Zora never forgot the Silver Fleece while in D.C., she did not fixate on it while tending to her studies. It is thus fitting that the Fleece reappears in the narrative right before Zora
departs from Mrs. Vanderpool’s D.C. estate. To assuage her guilt, Mrs. Vanderpool donates to Sarah Smith’s school ten thousand dollars, a trifling sum for the wealthy woman but a sum large enough for Zora to facilitate her vision. As Zora puts the envelope with the check in her trunk, “her hand came in contact with a long untouched package. Zora took it out silently and opened it and the beauty of it lighted the room” (329). The Fleece paves her way to the South in silvery brilliance. Zora touching the Silver Fleece—the wedding gown spun from swamp cotton—is a dialectical image bringing together hers and Bles’ labor of dreams in the swamp and the unfulfilled needs and hopes of the masses of semi-enslaved black workers.

IV. Conclusion: Mobilizing the Cultural Surplus of Black Workers

When Zora returns to Toomsville, Alabama, she begins her work as a collective organizer of black workers with the odds heavily weighted against their struggle. Sarah Smith’s beleaguered school can barely retain its black students because the Cresswells entice them with plots of farming land and false promises. The elderly schoolmarm interprets Zora’s return as “an omen of salvation”—her last hope before the Cotton Combine shuts down her Negro school (page). The local black preachers, like Jones, “the huge black preacher, uncoated, red-eyed,” use their religious platform to do the bidding of the white planters by keeping the black congregation submissive and helpless (372). The local poorer whites, jockeying for power against the big planters, comprise the town’s law enforcement that oversees the re-enslavement of young black men and boys routinely condemned to the chain gang. As soon as Zora gives Colonel Cresswell a down payment on the swamp, she calls on her people to help her clear it and “free yourselves!”
(370). But with the interference of Jones and the looming threat of the Cresswells, no one is ready to join her.

To mobilize her people, Zora must unleash the cultural surplus of black workers, but she cannot do it alone. Another radical black preacher emerges seemingly out of nowhere to help her. The narrative juxtaposes two black religious revivals. One is held in the cathedral where the preacher Jones works “a living mass of black people” into a feverish, chaotic ritual of song and dance (372). From afar Zora spies “[f]laming pine torches burned above the devotees; the rhythm of their stamping, the shout of the voices, and the wild music of their singing shook the night” (372). The Jones-led revival is critiqued as “mummery” and a “heathen cult” (372). Here, the black church’s rituals do no more than channel black workers’ pent up frustration, agony, and deferred dreams into a vacuous exercise that is an end in itself. But another revival is about to begin. Just as Jones lunges at Zora for daring to enter “the circle of light,” an “old man” steps in with the musical accompaniment of “rhythmic chanting, wilder and more primitive than song” (373). The other-worldly old man with “the eyes of death” is sent by God “to preach His acceptable time. Faith without works is dead” (374). The old black preacher can speak the colloquial language of the devotees while commanding an audience as well as Bles’ speeches and rousing listeners to action like the radical rector in the D.C. church. The black masses follow the ghostly black prophet heralding a new “great revival” where “men and women came pouring in….and the ringing of axes and grating of saws and tugging of mules was heard” (375). By day break, the living mass of black people has cleared the swamp. With the help of the preacher from the other side, Zora’s bold vision of a utopian socialist settlement takes shape, manifesting the hopes and dreams of black workers for freedom and self-determination.
The “great revival” is *Quest’s* glimpse of the aesthetic illumination—a symphony of black humanity collectively working for and bringing forth an incipient free community—a world yet unknown outside of racial capitalism.
CONCLUSION

Throughout this study I have modeled a materialist reading practice for analytically reestablishing linkages between cultural identity, subjectivity, and labor. This reading practice attends to the dialectical work of form at the frictional interface of three major fin-de-siècle American literary genres: realism, naturalism, and romance. In four case studies, I bring together novels and short stories from early twentieth-century multi-ethnic American authors. Their deployment of these generic conventions naturalizes and resists the reifying social processes of transnational capitalism and its attendant racialized and gendered political crises focused on the New Woman, white masculinity, the Yellow Peril, the vanishing Native American, and Negro education under Jim Crow.

My approach to reading the dialectics of form attends to several facets of the narrative work of textualizing history. Allusion is one narrative strategy that conveys the textual impulse to historicize and re-narrate, and as such it is a key feature of my analysis of genre. I consider narrative forgetting and remembering in the intertextual allusions to earlier well-known texts and disclose how their entanglement in narrative re-orientations of generic conventions mediates historical changes in capitalist social relations. For example, Dreiser’s “little shop girl” tag becomes meaningful and intelligible as a signifier of the reifying process only when we consider its self-conscious re-narration of the working girl figure in Laura Jean Libbey’s popular romances. Sui Sin Far’s “Jekyll and Hyde” allusion also mediates adjustments in labor relations—the growth of the white professional class sector against the backdrop of US capital’s demand for cheap coolie labor and its impact on the reification of white and Chinese masculine identities. My reading of *Cogewea, the Half Blood*’s “octopus” metaphor as an allusion to Frank
Norris’ naturalist use of the figure in his novel, *The Octopus*, allows for a more expansive understanding of Mourning Dove’s representation of early twentieth-century transnational capital’s penetration of the West—here given from the Indian point of view—by highlighting the de-reifying critical work of the novel’s naturalist polemics.

Reading for the dialectics of form also identifies and historicizes narrative modalities of reification. One of these modalities is forgetting as a signature trope of reification. Memory, or lack of it, in cultural narrative is a mediatory code analytically connecting the reification of consciousness and subjectivity and the subject’s positioning in social relations of labor. One example is *Sister Carrie’s* dramatization of the shop girl and the saloon manager as figures who identify as gendered subjects of consumption, a representation that depends upon the narrative forgetting their embeddedness in labor relations. In contrast, Sui Sin Far and Mourning Dove’s texts question and re-narrate the liberal incitement to forget one’s racially-marked body—a trope of the tragic mulatto and half-blood—as a fantasy of white patriarchy.

Tropes of reification also appear as framed images where framed picturing signals a certain narrative awareness of fetishizing that freezes or isolates a view or a figure. For example, through a series of successively narrow windows, Carrie sees misty images of workers (a shoemaker, a blacksmith, a bench worker) with whom she ostensibly identifies. The narrowing windows through which Carrie sees convey the reifying frame that her memories of labor encode—she nostalgically remembers her father in his miller suit covered in flour while forgetting her work in the shoe factory. It is fitting that both Carrie’s and Laura Libbey’s Leonie Locke’s memories of labor are framed, nostalgic images of clothing that distance and displace their experiences with precarity as low-wage factory workers. Framing is also a trope of racialized reification in Sui Sin Far’s short stories where the white manly reporter’s framed
picture of Chinatown is exemplary of the racializing gaze that isolates and condemns the spectacle of white-looking women living with and among Chinese men.

Reading for the dialectics of form in these narratives also attends to the narrative work of reifying and de-reifying as it pivots on representations of commodity fetishism, in these examples specifically clothing commodities. Dreiser’s and Du Bois’ novels are saturated with depictions of clothing. *Sister Carrie* might even be considered a primer on the reifying effects of commodity fetishism and the culture of consumption, dramatizing the ways clothing loses its social history as a commodity and becomes the signifier of social value. As I have shown, *Sister Carrie*’s famous shoe scene obliquely alludes to the fact that Carrie once made shoes in exchange for low wages at the same time it dramatizes how Carrie’s fetishized way of seeing men’s shoes is linked to—indeed dependent upon—her disremembering her work at the machine in the shoe factory. The narrative condenses traces of labor in its depiction of Carrie’s objectifying gaze of Drouet’s patent leather shoes and Hurstwood’s more refined leather shoes; if it is gently critical of her measuring the men by their shoes, it also ultimately endorses Carrie’s forgetfulness. Du Bois’ *Quest of the Silver Fleece*, too, exhibits a preoccupation with clothing but as a mode of resistance against the reifying effects of commodity fetishism. *Quest’s* mythical romance hangs upon the figures of Zora’s scarlet red dress and the white wedding dress spun from the Silver Fleece. Woven into this romance is a realist history of race, labor, and land, during the consolidation of North and Southern capital and Wall Street’s cornering the price of cotton in the world market. The narrative’s preoccupation with cotton—its poetics of cotton—refuses to forget the black worker’s semi-slave labor on Southern plantations, while also illuminating the aesthetic, creative facets of agricultural labor of which the black worker is deprived. Du Bois’ novel argues that crucial to the black worker’s consciousness of her rightful
inheritance of the land and her labor’s product is the active remembering of the hyper-exploited black labor congealed in cotton commodities. Because the social relations of racial capitalism induce the forgetting of black labor at every level, the narrative endows Zora with the heroic feat and the revolutionary burden of black labor’s collective memory.

Through these exemplary works, in “The Dialectics of Form” I demonstrate how narrative deployments of multiple generic conventions perform de-reifying critical work and offer a new understanding of how we might assess the entanglement of naturalist and romance conventions whose fraught, seemingly incompatible relationship has been debated by critics for over a decade. The prevailing “dialogical” readings of mixed-genre texts which privilege discourse analysis forget Mikhail Bakhtin’s thesis that literature is dialogical because it articulates—“utters”—social contradictions rooted in class struggle. Early twentieth century fiction writers both represent, and at times forget, these contradictions in their navigation of conventional genres. Moreover, some also incite readers to a systemic and historical understanding of them. In chapters three and four I highlight two of these efforts—Mourning Dove’s *Cogewea* and Du Bois’ *Quest of the Silver Fleece*—and argue for a historical re-grounding of the naturalist and romance conventions they re-narrate in order to disclose relations of labor. Regardless of whether we read their handling of these conventions as strategic or idiosyncratic, each contributes a noteworthy critical perspective that ambitiously aspires toward the representation of capitalism as a social totality and in so doing offers glimpses of a possible alternative way of life.


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