IN MEMORY OF GREG HAYES

THE WORLD OF JACK LONDON HAS LOST A FRIEND

By Louis Leal

Greg Hayes, retired ranger of Jack London State Historic Park (JLSHP), died, surrounded by loved ones, on July 9, 2014 at 62 after a long struggle with cancer. He is survived by his wife Robin Fautley and daughter Nicolette. Both will remember him as an incredible husband and father.

Hayes joined Jack London State Historic Park as a ranger in 1978. While there, he helped create and administer horseback patrols, piano playing on Charmian London’s Steinway, golf cart rides, guided walks, and interpretive museum staff, the Jack London Cottage, and the Wolf House ruins. He continued this professional connection to Jack London until he retired as Head Supervising Ranger in 2003 and became a volunteer docent at the park, and contributed greatly to the success of the park by training new docents, leading tours, and working on interpretive projects where he used his writing talents. He was chosen to be on the executive board of the Valley of the Moon Natural History Association, the cooperative association that supported the park.

He was president of the board when JLSHP was in danger of closing. With his leadership the slow and difficult process of the association taking over the operation of the park was successful and JLSHP was not only saved, but also became the first California State Park run by a non-profit organization.

His received a B.A. from UCLA and an M.A. in American Literature from Sonoma State University. His thesis was “Jack London’s Agrarian Super Heroes.” Through his years as ranger at JLSHP he carried on an intense study of Jack London’s life. It was there in the park one day that he met his future wife, Robin Fautley. They were together for thirty happy years, sharing world travel, the love of nature, and the passion for preserving our environment.

Greg Hayes was also a poet. His recent book, *Earthsweats*, is an excellent example of his work. Here is what he wrote upon learning about his cancer:

In my pitifully tattooed brain
this announcement was conducive to
nothing
“going forward” (that unnerving cliché).
Instead I was propelled into
keenly focused backward-looking—
Satchel Paige (“Don’t look back,
something might be gaining on you”) would not have approved of me
peering into deep space
to see how fast the steamroller was
rolling. Suddenly expectation
needed to mesh with outcome
perfectly. Which, face it,
happens how often?
Anyway, long story
hopefully not short,
angels immediately lined up
on the telephone lines
outside my streaky windows
replacing each crow
like reverse notes
in some fabulous paean
of all-out love and support.
And here—what can I say?
—words fail me and plain gratitude
and Sly Stone unabashedly take over:
*I want to thank you
for lettin’ me
be myself
again.*

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On that final day, Robin Fautley wrote:

The world has lost a good man this morning
A poet
A lover of his family
A protector of forests and State Parks
A beautiful man whose humor, intelligence, and gentle calming nature touched the hearts of those who knew him
Deeply loved, deeply respected
Go with peace and love, dearest one.
GENDERING AND AMERICAN MALE IDENTITY
IN WHITE FANG

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AT first glance, Kiche, the she-wolf who gives birth to White Fang in Jack London’s novel White Fang, seems the very face of wild nature. She enticingly decreases needed sled dogs away from two men toiling across the frozen Arctic landscape, embodying the most threatening facet of the seductress/mother Louis Montrose associates with the feminine landscape personified in New World discovery narratives. This use of the feminine signals London’s incorporation of the pervasive land-is-woman metaphor that Annette Kolodny, like Montrose, traces to early discovery narratives, but also situates at the heart of the American pastoral. When the novel ends with the female sheepdog, Collie, surrounded by the puppies White Fang has fathered, we imagine that London has replaced the threatening seductress with the nurturing mother, signaling the taming of wild nature achieved by the proper management of masculine force. The novel is consistent with the Old World tradition of gendering the New World as feminine by framing it in the male gaze.

But such an interpretation is too pat, too tidy, too entirely disconnected from the feminine critique of masculine power that is a central concern of the book’s interior chapters. London does trade on the land-is-woman tradition, but he does so as complement to an equally significant process of gendering that casts wild nature as masculine. London requires us to adopt Collie’s point of view—a feminine perspective—to assess White Fang’s progress from violent male Other to protective father. The reader judges White Fang at the end of the novel on the basis of his success at winning approval in Collie’s eyes, not as she appears in his. This judgment culminates London’s effort to chart the development of a masculine identity appropriate to a settled and largely nonthreatening female landscape—the cultivated fields and growth of families London associates with the sunny Southland, White Fang’s ultimate destination.

Central to London’s presentation of healthy masculinity is his insistence that readers shift back and forth between masculine and feminine points of view. One of London’s achievements as a writer is his skill at managing perspective so that readers find themselves inhabiting shifting subject positions and thereby experiencing a range of variously gendered roles designed to erode the male/female binary and reveal a self within which masculine and feminine balances must be recalibrated according to the demands of a changing environment. This process defines sexual identity as a balancing of the gender polarities that characterize the internal management of the male self, as well as the way that self perceives the external world. As Scott Derrick observes, “in London’s narratives feminine strength and masculine strength exist in a state of tension, at times explicit and obvious and at other times muted and scarcely perceptible” (117). When this tension is situated within particular characters in addition to being projected onto the external world, it reveals selves buffeted by contesting gender imperatives that threaten the equilibrium essential to healthy male development.

London takes his reader into the vexed and fluctuating struggle to achieve gender equilibrium primarily through White Fang, whose growth can be understood as an exploration of the “anxieties over national identity and manhood” that Katie O’Donnell Arosteguy considers “an aspect of London’s work that needs further consideration” (38). Read as an examination of precisely these anxieties, White Fang’s passage from birth in the Arctic wild to fatherhood in civilized California performs as an account of the American journey from immersion in the wilderness first encountered by...
European explorers and colonists, to the refinement of the self properly adjusted to the demands exacted by civilized culture. Over the course of White Fang’s maturation readers witness the challenges to American manhood posed by a mutating cultural landscape that ceases to value the ferocity initially required for survival on the frontier or in the wild. White Fang is London’s acknowledgement that the violent male associated with the earliest phase of American history remains a core element of American male identity that must be curbed for the good of the nation and the happiness of the individual. According to Richard Slotkin’s *Regeneration Through Violence*, White Fang’s transition from the Arctic North to the sunny South most closely equates with the part of the American hunter myth that involves the hunter’s return to civilization. The hunter, like white Fang, must recognize that the female moral code founded on an “ethic of self-restraint and abnegation” is stronger than the masculine hunter’s dedication to “self-realization and aggrandizement” (553). Slotkin notes this transition is achieved through “a series of initiatives” (557), each of which brings its own trials and corresponding anxieties. In plotting White Fang’s journey, London makes clear the extent that balancing the violent male impulse to domination with the female desire for family and communal security is fraught with unavoidable uncertainties. The male’s engrained fear of personal vulnerability first resists and only grudgingly yields to the slow growth of trust and ultimately, love. One of the reasons London’s work continues to resonate with readers today is that it so successfully taps into masculine wilderness stands in sharp opposition to civilization can apply to the same landscape depicting us for the description of men who venture into this domain of “mockery and silence” as “puny adventurers bent on colossal adventure, pitting themselves against the might of a world as remote and alien and pulseless as the abysses of space” (10). This is the Arctic as masculine proving ground in which the “puny adventurers” assume the diminutive, vulnerable stature of the feminine. Yet by the mid-point of the second chapter, the wilderness has taken on an entirely different character. London personifies it through the she-wolf Kiche who lures sled dogs away from Bill and Henry, the two men hired to deliver a coffin bearing a dead man across the frozen landscape. Kiche, who embodies wild nature as a seductress, acts as “decoy for the pack” and, in Henry’s words, “draws out the dog an’ then all the rest pitches in an’ eats ‘m up” (17). Through this male point of view, London incorporates the second tradition, which is the feminization of the New World that Kolodny traces to the earliest accounts of European exploration and settlement and that she describes as “America’s oldest and most cherished fantasy” (4). Bill and Henry are horrified at the prospect of perishing due to the seductive powers of a she-wolf who has duped them and consumed all but two of their sled dogs. Kolodny says, “Beautiful, indeed, that wilderness appeared—but also dark, uncharted, and prowled by howling beasts” (9). It is this dark and uncharted dimension of the American landscape that Bill and Henry suddenly contend with through the predations of Kiche. Montrose accounts for the anxieties the two men experience through his analysis of a famous late-sixteenth-century engraving by Theodor Galle (based on a drawing by Jan van der Straet [ca. 1575] popularly known as Vespucci “Discoverers” America [Honour 80]) that teases out the implications that follow when nature is gendered female. The engraving presents a reclining nude female figure representing the New World who rises from her hammock to meet the gaze of an “armored and robed” Americus Vespucci, whose ships, weapons, and symbols of religious and scientific power cast him as the masculine representative of the Old World bringing enlightenment to virgin shores (179). Analyzing the engraving, Montrose pays special attention to the diminutive background image of two Indian women “preparing a cannibal feast,” one “who turns the spit” and one “who cradles an infant while she waits” (180). He reads this background image as standing in uneasy tension with the foreground, encapsulating the masculine fear that through her use of “sexual guile and deceit” America will overwhelm “vaunted masculine knowledge and power” and with it the hope that “the erect and armored Vespucci will master the prone and naked America” (181). In Montrose’s words, “the interplay between the foreground and background” sets in motion “an oscillation between fascination and repulsion, likeness and strangeness, desires to destroy and to assimilate the Other” (181-82). By presenting the she-wolf through Bill’s and Henry’s eyes, London brings the Galle background to the fore, defining the men as succumbing to the threat Montrose sees as present from the first European encounters with America. Bill’s observation that Kiche’s behavior is “suspicious and immoral” further substantiates the extent that London knowingly or unknowingly draws on this established tradition (18). Bill’s moral condemnation of can-
nibalism embodies the masculine/European combination of distrust and fear that judges cannibalism to be a defining feature of the savage female Other.

But London is not content to view America exclusively through the male gaze. If he were to analyze the Galle print, he might accuse Montrose of only going half way in his analysis of “the mutual gazes of Americus and America” (Montrose 180). After all, the engraving also represents America gazing back at Vespucci, behind whom we see arrayed the masculine might of empire. Like Vespucci, she is anxious about this new mysterious Other who might as easily place her in bondage as honor her with respect and affection. When London makes the transition from part one to part two of White Fang, he shifts from the male human perspective to the she-wolf’s assessment of potential mates. Kiche’s “kindly” acceptance of One Eye upon his defeat of two rivals can easily be read as America approving Vespucci (35). The female assessment of the male is ongoing in the novel as it is in the engraving, in both instances representing an iconic exchange of gazes that is endlessly repeated through reconfigurations of masculine and feminine power called for by mutating circumstances. This becomes evident in the novel when One Eye discovers that the she-wolf’s approval is short-lived as she refuses him entry to the lair where she guards a new litter of puppies that includes White Fang. Her “sharp snarl” defines him as the threat to family and motherhood posed by the savage wild he now embodies as a predatory male (41). London treats the opposition of motherhood and the wild as axiomatic, stating that “the Wild is the Wild, and motherhood is motherhood” (48). To make this point perfectly plain, London repeats the scene of One Eye’s sudden translation from father to predator in two passages where Kiche similarly rejects the older White Fang as a male threat to motherhood (97, 100).

Sudden shifts in perspective of this kind are a feature of London’s writing closely affiliated with a gendering process that requires readers to assume male and female subject positions and, at times, even develop a split vision of gender so that it becomes possible to view the external masculine world from the perspective of a male character’s inner struggle to achieve feminine self-expression. A striking example of this is London’s use of White Fang as a vehicle for the female gaze that takes place when we as readers assess the acceptability of White Fang’s three male owners. White Fang at first descends into increasingly extreme expressions of masculine violence and rage, during which we witness his initiation into profound states of isolation and distrust. Sensing this disequilibrium, we evaluate the owners as America might Vespucci, asking ourselves if they have the power to resuscitate White Fang’s declining female self and return him to health and happiness. Gray Beaver and Beauty Smith emerge as the agents of White Fang’s decline, and it is only with the entrance of Weedon Scott that we witness a return to health.

London begins the sequence of events that will include these contrasting owners by first showing how as a puppy White Fang discovers happiness while under his mother’s care and then enters a prolonged period of emotional deprivation during which we witness the distortion of his personality. His initial happiness is clearest when White Fang first ventures out of the womb-like lair, kills a ptarmigan, and is instantly “too busy and happy to know he was happy” (53). The narrative rapidly explains that his happiness comes from “doing that for which he was made.” Even though he didn’t know it, “He was justifying his existence, than which life can do no greater; for life achieves its summit when it does to the utmost that which it was equipped to do” (53). This high point, or “summit,” of happiness is a standard for gauging White Fang’s fall from and ultimate return to happiness as he makes his turbulent way through human society in quest of healthy masculinity.

From this moment of joy to the time he is rescued from Beauty Smith by Weedon Scott, White Fang is squeezed into two progressively restrictive emotional cages that dramatically reduce his access to happiness. This process begins with Gray Beaver, his first human master, whose sled dogs, led by Lip-lip, persecute White Fang (72), rob him of his puppyhood (109), cut him off from his own kind (103), and drive him to Gray Beaver for comfort and protection. When Gray Beaver proves inadequate to the task, White Fang’s capacity for masculine ferocity grows disproportionately while his feminine capacity for trust and affection atrophies. It comes as no surprise when the narrative tells us that White Fang’s “development was rapid and one-sided” (82). From White Fang’s perspective we learn that
“He had no affection for Gray Beaver” (90) and that “There were deeps in his nature that had never been sounded.” The narrative turns quite critical of Gray Beaver by placing the reader in the role of nurturing mother who laments Gray Beaver’s denial of affection, in effect providing a voice for the feminine side of White Fang that his environment silences: “A kind word, a caressing touch of the hand, on the part of Gray Beaver, might have sounded these deeps; but Gray Beaver did not caress nor speak kind words. It was not his way.” As a consequence, “White Fang knew nothing of the heaven a man’s hand might contain for him” (90-91). Gray Beaver resembles Kiche as she appeared in the opening chapters; he also acts in accordance with the rigors of an exacting environment that demands harsh sacrifices when reduced resources threaten survival. When “the old and the weak” of the tribe perish, Gray Beaver and the most able of his tribe resort to eating the dogs, leaving the dogs themselves to follow suit, thereby reenacting the cannibalism over which Kiche presided (99). In White Fang’s growth, this experience is cast as entirely natural, so that even Gray Beaver’s coldness is justified as a requirement for survival. Were White Fang to remain in this circumstance for the remainder of his life, his interior disequilibrium would perhaps have been appropriate, but it is precisely because London has other plans for him that it makes sense for the reader to recognize an intensifying distortion of his emotional make-up.

When London introduces us to Beauty Smith, we can see that his plan includes spelling out the way that civilization complicates the natural pursuit of happiness that up to this point has been associated with the struggle to survive. Suddenly London discloses a frontier world where the most potent manifestations of civilization possess the power to disconnect masculine identity from its mooring in nature and warp the impulse to happiness by separating it from the effort to survive and instead attach it to artificial and self-destructive appetites. Beauty Smith acquires ownership of White Fang by taking advantage of Gray Beaver’s thirst for whiskey, a thirst that London describes as a property of whiskey itself. “One of the potencies of whisky is the breeding of thirst” (113). And it is the breeding of this thirst that finally becomes all consuming for Gray Beaver, so that he squanders the wealth he acquired through the trading of pelts to satisfy it. In doing so, Gray Beaver not only “betrayed” White Fang but also his family and tribe whose security is directly linked to his success (116). Beauty Smith’s appetite is not for alcohol but for the power to inflict pain on those weaker than him. As was the case with Gray Beaver’s thirst, Beauty Smith’s appetite is also self-destructive by virtue of its being both insatiable and fundamentally at odds with survival. London describes Smith as dedicated to making the world pay for the pain it has inflicted on him due to his “twisted body and brute intelligence” (115). London is quite straightforward in his presentation of Smith as a man determined to inflict pain on the world as a way of compensating for his own weakness: “Cringing and sniveling himself before the blows or angry speech of a man, he revenged himself, in turn, upon creatures weaker than he.” White Fang is brutally compelled by Beauty Smith to enter what amounts to a dead-end zero-sum game that promises to exhaust White Fang’s energies in service of “a man more than half mad and all brute” (117).

Beauty Smith quickly confines White Fang within a second emotional cage that further narrows the range of feelings already restricted through his life with Gray Beaver. To establish White Fang’s descent into an even more distorted emotional sphere, London draws the reader’s attention to White Fang’s instinctive distaste for Beauty Smith while also making clear the way that Smith makes a show of offering what Gray Beaver withheld: a kind word and hand of comfort. White Fang immediately detects Smith’s malignancy even before Smith owns him: “The feel of him was bad. He sensed the evil in him, and feared the extended hand and the attempts at soft-spoken speech. Because of this, he hated the man” (113). Where Gray Beaver had no affection to offer, Beauty Smith makes a pretense of it that serves as a ruse to win White Fang’s confidence, in effect offering an illusion of the emotional nourishment White Fang has been denied. By presenting us with White Fang’s internal cage, London makes it clear that the resulting hatred is a direct expression of the desire for warmth and affection that abides and intensifies his fear of emotional duplicity, further weakening any remaining capacity to trust the world around him. Despite the fact that White Fang is not duped, however, he is powerless to escape the man. Beauty is a disastrous and far worse companion than Gray Beaver, a view the narrative reinforces. “Formerly, White Fang had been merely the enemy of his kind, withal a ferocious enemy. He became the enemy of all things, and more ferocious than ever” (119). Exhibited within a literal cage and advertised as “The Fighting Wolf,” White Fang’s life has now “become a hell to him” (120). In London’s words, White Fang has been molded “into a more ferocious thing than had been intended by Nature” (121). The actual cage serves as metaphor for an even more rigid constriction of White Fang’s emotional life, so that even before the near death battle with Cherokee, we sense the approaching extinction of his feminine self.

After Scott takes possession of him, we witness the reemergence of White Fang’s natural self and with it a resurrection of the happiness he last experienced as a pup. The first important step in this direction takes place when Scott offers the caress that Gray Beaver never considered and that Beauty Smith used as bait. Scott, “talked soothingly to him, but not for long, then slowly put out his hand, [and] rested it on White Fang’s head” (142). Thus begins White Fang’s emergence from a prolonged period of emotional starvation at the hands of a cold and evil man that the narrative describes as “the ending of the old life and the reign of hate” (142). White Fang growls during Scott’s petting but does so “because his throat had become harsh-fibered from the making of ferocious sounds . . . and he could not soften the sounds of that throat now to express the gentleness he felt” (143), a gentleness that only Scott detects and that quickly evolves into “love” (144). Viewed from White Fang’s perspective, Scott becomes “a love-god, a warm and radiant god, in whose light White Fang’s nature expanded as a flower expands under the sun.” In what may seem a daring move, London casts White Fang as a feminine flower whose inner nature organically expands in the sunlight of a loving man. This language makes it clear that Weedon Scott presides over this first stage of White
Fang’s initiation into healthy masculinity in human society.

Once his feminine nature is activated through the recuperative power of masculine love, White Fang enters the final stage of growth that will ultimately yield the gender equilibrium essential to his development as a healthy male. As June Howard has previously observed, “White Fang’s new circumstances open up the possibility of reshaping his character, and the very ‘plasticity’ before environmental forces that has made him ferocious as an outcast is here represented as a laudable sensitivity and adaptability” (56).

London narrates this last phase of White Fang’s maturation by presenting him as the object of a highly skeletal female gaze, that of Collie, the Scott family’s sheepdog. That White Fang must prove himself acceptable to her is made immediately clear during their first encounter when Collie instantly sees him as the same sort of threat One Eye and White Fang posed for Kiche when she drove them both away early in the novel. Through Collie’s eyes we once again see White Fang as the masculine wild. Instead of protecting a new litter of pups, though, Collie stands between White Fang and Weedon Scott so that we get a replication of the exchange of gazes that pass between Vespucci and America in the Galle print, only in London’s reconstruction of that exchange the female gaze dominates, as it is Collie who must be shown that White Fang is worthy of her acceptance. The irony is that as readers we know that they both want the same thing—to protect Weedon Scott—but Collie has yet to discover their shared sense of purpose. Until she does, White Fang is to her nothing more than an isolated and dangerous male force, dedicated purely to the satisfaction of his own appetites.

Before they can trust each other, they have to reenact a Southland version of the novel’s opening confrontation between civilization and wilderness that involved Kiche and the two men, Bill and Henry. White Fang represents a masculine version of the wild that is seeking admission to the feminine Southland Collie instinctively protects as a descendant of sheepdogs whose “Instinctive fear of the Wild, and especially of the wolf, was unusually keen” (157). Like Kiche, who traded on her sex to preserve the life she valued, Collie “took advantage of her sex to pick upon White Fang and maltreat him” (162), frustrating his efforts to feel at home in his new surroundings. From White Fang’s point of view, Collie is his “one trial,” the last test he must surmount before his initiation into civilization is complete (170). “She found him guilty before the act” and conducted herself “like a policeman” who followed “him around the stable and the hounds, and if he even so much as glanced curiously at a pigeon or chicken” would burst “into an outcry of indignation and wrath” (170). It is only after White Fang saves Scott’s life following his riding accident that Collie warms to him. Suddenly “Collie’s teeth [are] no longer sharp” and White Fang discovers “a playfulness about her nips” that signals her acceptance. This is verified when she leads him into the woods and he runs with her “as his mother, Kiche, and old One Eye had run long years before in the silent Northland forest” (173). Through Collie we witness civilized America’s acceptance of the recuperating hunter as an appropriate male partner whose exercise of masculine power enforces her own feminine values.

While he might have ended his narrative at this point, London chooses not to do so because mere acceptance is not enough; he wants to show that White Fang has become the kind of American male that women revere, and to do this White Fang must sacrifice his own safety for the good of the Scott family. Only after White Fang kills the escaped convict, Jim Hall, and incurs life-threatening wounds in the process, do we see the Scott women rally behind him and voice their approval for this exemplary expression of masculine selfhood. Their approval is what London highlights in the closing pages of the novel when a much weakened White Fang struggles to stand for the first time and Weedon Scott’s wife, Alice, renames him “‘Blessed Wolf’” (180). This tells us that his transformation from “Fighting Wolf” is complete, but even more important is the affirmation presented through the female gaze. We are told that upon Alice’s utterance of the new name it was immediately “taken up with acclaim and all the women called him Blessed Wolf.” London repeats this assertion of female approval even more emphatically when White Fang actually succeeds in rising to his feet and the women speak as if members of a Greek chorus. “‘The Blessed Wolf!’ chorused the women.” That their gaze is meant to dominate the closing moments of the novel is made clear when Judge Scott fails in his efforts to declare against the collective will of the women that White Fang’s violent dispatch of Jim Hall is additional evidence that he remains an ordinary wolf. His wife instantaneously corrects him and he bows to her authority: “‘Yes, Blessed Wolf,’ agreed the Judge. ‘And henceforth that shall be my name for him’” (180).

But London does not end his narrative here either; the one remaining refinement to his portrait of appropriate masculine development is his concluding reminder that male maturation is a process that will never achieve closure. As London draws the book to conclusion, he once again places White Fang squarely in Collie’s eyes, showing that her distrust persists. She “snarl[s] warningly at him” as he approaches the puppies he has fathered, once again reenacting Kiche’s earlier rejection and making clear White Fang’s continued status as the male face of the wild that stands in uneasy tension with the commitments of motherhood and the security essential to civilization. One of the Scott women restrains Collie as if to say that this male has earned our trust while through Collie’s eyes we anxiously watch White Fang lick rather than devour his progeny. What comes as something of a surprise in the final words of a novel dedicated to the feminine management of masculine ferocity is the fact that rather than having Collie express relief or approval London describes her as filled with “great disgust” (180). By means of this word choice, London suggests that the American male continues to benefit from the female’s anxious gaze not merely because she fears being overwhelmed but because she may also be wary of too complete a submission on the part of the male. This demand for continued male vigilance is perfectly consistent with Slotkin’s construction of the American hunter myth as a paradigm for American manhood. Collie lends credence to his view that “The hunters . . . return from the forest to find the people still only restively pacified” (564). The Jim Halls of the world still haunt the civilized Southland, insuring by their sheer presence that “the cycle of the myth never really ends.”

We leave the novel watching White Fang “drowsing in the sun” and hoping, as Collie does, that the wolf now slumbering will once again awaken (181). This closing scene reminds us that the positive attributes London associates with healthy masculinity derive from ongoing tensions that constantly reset the balance.
point of gender equilibrium that each individual must repeatedly rediscover as shifting circumstances dictate. For London, health does finally equate with the happiness White Fang first enjoyed when he stepped out of the lair as a pup to enter “life” at “its summit when it does to the uttermost that which it was equipped to do” (53). Different as his life has become by the end of the book, the happiness is the same; it is the circumstances that have changed. Perhaps the achievement of happiness is what London had in mind when he stated the following in a letter to George Wharton James: “I am an evolutionist [and] therefore a broad optimist, hence my love for the human . . . comes from knowing him as he is and seeing the divine possibilities ahead of him.

That’s the whole motive of my ‘White Fang’” (qtd. in Labor and Reesman 48). According to such a formulation, happiness is always part of the larger process of adaptation that is itself ceaseless. White Fang’s rediscovery of life lived at the summit consequently reminds us that, like any peak moment, attaining it opens our eyes to still other peaks that stand forth with sudden clarity. Perhaps Collie’s disgust with White Fang finally has as much to do with the fact that he is lying down as it does with his tolerant affection for his pups. Through Collie’s eyes London tells us there is never a good time for the American male to rest on his laurels.

Works Cited


Fantastic Tales and Future Yarns: The Representation of Coercive Political Violence in Jack London’s “Goliah” and “The Dream of Debs”

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Item JL 1354 in the London Archive at the Huntington Library in San Marino, CA is designated “Utopia: [note for a novel], written in pencil.” On this piece of paper torn from a notepad, Jack London wrote: “I MUST WRITE A UTOPIA! Young men sailing around the world. Men and women not allowed to ride horses without certificates. Production for service not profit. Get (?), also, some sort of motif—love, or something better” (“Utopia”). Perhaps someday, much like Robert L. Fish who finished the manuscript for The Assassination Bureau, Ltd., some ambitious young author, albeit with a paucity of prefatory material, will finish what London started. In the meantime, however, we are left with several texts that reveal the utopian dimensions, if not occasional limitations, of London’s thought and literary practice.

Rather than speculate as to the outcome of this suggestive outline for a utopia that never was, a more provocative and potentially productive line of inquiry concerns the interrogation of the relationship between London’s portrayal of idealized post-capitalist futures and his ever-evolving beliefs about the efficacy of coercive political violence. Some scholars argue that whereas London started from a position of sympathy for, if not outright advocacy of, the employment of coercive political violence in the pursuit of revolutionary change, by the time he published his later novels and essays he condemns such violence as counter-productive, serving to alienate the masses (Osipova). The following analysis, however, seeks to participate in the further critical reevaluation of Jack London’s SF and political fictions by arguing that London’s attitude toward various forms of coercive political violence in pursuit of the utopian socialist future is much more complex. In two of his lesser known short stories, “Goliah” and “The Dream of Debs,” London forces us to ask sometimes uncomfortable questions regarding not only the relationship between violence and social revolution, but also how our collective resistance to actively confronting these questions can lead us down the path to authoritarian, or even totalitarian, futures.

In many ways London’s political fictions can be read as inheritors of a long tradition in American letters. From James Fenimore Cooper’s 1847 novel The Crater, through Mark Twain’s A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court (1889) and the utopian novels of the late nineteenth century there has been a longstanding desire among American writers to explore the inherent inequalities and failed promises of our fragile democracy. A fundamental difference, however, is that while for many nineteenth century American writers their utopic vision consisted of a kind of capitalism perfected (Pfælzer 3-25), for London, the idea that a system predicated on exploitation and oppression could somehow naturally evolve into a humane and equitable social order was a foolish proposition.

London, born on January 12, 1876, in the era Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner referred to as “the Gilded Age,” composed his remarkable works of proto-science fiction and political fantasy during a time in which the United States saw a remarkable increase in the gap between rich and poor coincident with the commercially driven mania for efficiency and mass production. Of equal importance is the consideration of how phenomena such as the rise of the corporation and the ultimate dominance of monopoly capital, and certain historical events, including the massacre at Haymarket Square in Chicago in 1886, the assassination in 1901 of President McKinley by the anarchist Leon Czolgosz, and the Russian Revolution of 1905, came to inform the popular understanding of different forms of coercive political violence. In America’s Culture of Terrorism: Violence, Capitalism, and the Written Word, Jeffory Clymer observes that during the latter decades of the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth centuries, with their attendant intensification of political violence brought about as a function of the competition over increasingly scarce resources both political and economic, “mainstream opinion about terrorism conflated violence aimed at drawing attention to the inequities of capital with an outright attack on the American government” (3). He argues:

More particularly, the economy’s contradictions and disparities provided the grounds for an emergent way of imagining, understanding, and narrating certain forms of violence as “terrorism” across a wide representational range, including, among other places, the mass media, highbrow literature, the labor press, best-selling novels, and poetry aimed at mobilizing America’s working class. (4-5)

Clymer’s analyses trace the complex, problematic relationship between new technologies, specifically Alfred Nobel’s 1866 invention of dynamite and an emergent mass media capable of publicizing and more easily disseminating information regarding acts of political violence. We can see, therefore, how the relative anonymity afforded by the employment of dynamite in the construction and placing of incendiary devices in conjunction with the relative rapidity with which these acts were reported in newspapers and across telegraphic wires performed the function of inciting within the popular consciousness an increase in feelings of paranoia and vulnerability.

Clymer’s discussion of the ways in which contemporary events and cultural trends can have a profound influence on the literary practices of various authors operating in a wide variety of institutional and generic paradigms is richly suggestive. It has far-reaching implications for the critical debate surrounding the relationship between aesthetics and politics and it allows for the expansion of the critical gaze in London studies in order to consider his less well-known works so that we may begin to ask new questions and pursue new lines of critical inquiry. While perhaps best known for his novels Call of the Wild or The Sea-Wolf or for his widely anthologized short story “To Build a Fire,” Jack London experimented often, and with
varying degrees of success, with a wide variety of aesthetic innovations and in multiple genres. As far back as 1895 while a student at Oakland High School, London wrote and published in the school paper his short story “Who Believes in Ghosts!” This charming, if somewhat unremarkable, work of speculative fiction is a significant example of London’s willingness and tendency to explore and play with the conventions of different genres.

Addressing the connections between technological innovation and the literary representation of coercive political violence, Sarah Cole observes that in the decades subsequent to Nobel’s invention “the specter of anarchist violence flourished in this period, in a subgenre—the dynamite novel—which freely employed elements common to such nineteenth-century genres as the detective novel, the industrial novel, (proto) science fiction, fantasy novels of invasion and/or world war, and melodrama” (302). For Cole, “to resurrect both the cultural and literary history of anarchism in this period is to draw a variety of conclusions about how the imagining of political violence and literary form did and did not cooperate” (302). It is possible to document the many ways in which Jack London worked with and manipulated the social, cultural, and even institutional construction of the figure of the “terrorist” in order to consider how revolutionary social change could be achieved through the employment of coercive political violence.

It is not simply London’s sometimes sympathetic portrayal of terroristic figures in stories such as “The League of Old Men,” “The Minions of Midas,” or “The Enemy of All the World,” however, that demand further critical attention; it is also his representation of what can perhaps be referred to as the underlying authoritarian or even totalitarian impulse that motivates the desire for social change. In “Goliah” and “The Dream of Debs” London explores how this impulse inflects the vexing and problematic relationship between coercive political violence and utopian projects for social reconstruction.

In his recent study From Utopia to Apocalypse: Science Fiction and the Politics of Catastrophe, Peter Y. Paik summarizes his analyses of Kurt Vonnegut’s The Sirens of Titan and Alan Moore’s Watchmen by arguing that within these narratives “world peace is won not only through deception and genocide, but also extorted by means of myths concocted by the very perpetrators of the slaughter, imposing new illusions that effectively blackmail the world into abstaining from its violence” (26). It is evident that Paik’s discussion of these two texts offers compelling and especially apt models for the critical examination of Jack London’s short story “Goliah.” As the sociopolitical content of “Goliah” can be said to be motivated by what some critics have dismissed as London’s esoteric or even eccentric interpretation of classical Marxist doctrine, or by a kind of intellectual frustration or angst about the slow pace of revolutionary social transformation, the text also reveals aspects of authoritarian or even totalitarian ideologies pertaining to the myth of dictatorial benevolence and the necessity, if not desirability, of coercive political violence for the universal liberation of humanity.

In “Goliah,” originally published in The Red Magazine and again in his collection Revolution and Other Essays, Jack London describes a kind of enlightened despotism and the establishment of socialism through extortion and the threat of global annihilation. Goliah blackmails the “captains of industry” by making this threat:

I am inviting you, with nine of your fellow-captains of industry, to visit me here on my island for the purpose of considering plans for the reconstruction of society upon a more rational basis. Up to the present, social evolution has been a blind and aimless, blundering thing. The time has come for a change. Man has risen from the vitalized slime of the primeval sea to the mastery of matter; but he has not yet mastered society. Man is to-day as much the slave to his collective stupidity, as a hundred thousand generations ago he was a slave to matter. (1201)

The story of Percival Stultz, a German-American former ironworker with grand, global ambitions to usher in a new era of international solidarity, “Goliah” is as an example of how London incorporated elements from both the utopian and SF traditions into a meditation on violence and its relationship to the design of programs or blueprints for universal social change. In many ways, “Goliah” can be read as a prefiguration of Alexei Tolstoi’s 1927 Soviet SF classic The Garin Death Ray in which the development of a powerful, technologically advanced weapon, the “hyperboloid,” is used as a violent and destructive means to coerce the world into following the dictates of a mad scientist. In the case of “Goliah,” Stulz’s nom de guerre, the superweapon is the mysterious substance Energon. Goliah (or Percival Stultz) manufactured Energon, a “subtle and potent force,” from sunlight, and in addition to its capabilities as a super-weapon, one of the uses to which it was put was wireless telegraphy. Beyond the revelation of a contemporary popular fascination with new technologies of communication, Goliah’s Energon also betrays an interest in and fear of highly sophisticated “weapons of mass destruction” that revealed global angst over how recent scientific discoveries could be co-opted by the military industrial complex in the interest of developing new and increasingly efficient means of killing on a mass scale.

Jeanne Campbell Reesman refers to Goliah as “one of London’s most frightening characters,” in that an aspect of his plan to implement a global socialist utopia is his “eugenics vision,” elements of which include “the enslavement of nonwhites and the elimination of mentally retarded people and other ‘defectives’” (165). In the story, London describes Goliah as “a little old man, sixty-five years of age, well preserved, with a pink-and-white complexion and a bald spot on his head the size of an apple” (1220). He continues:

For a scientific superman and world tyrant, he had
remarkable weaknesses. He loved sweets, and was inordinately fond of salted almonds and salted pecans, especially of the latter. He always carried a paper bag of them in his pocket, and he had a way of saying frequently that the chemism of his nature demanded such fare. (1220)

London’s masterful use of humor and irony, and his dark, chilling anticipations of the most disturbing aspects of twentieth century totalitarianism, including eugenician plans for population control and concentration camps, open up new critical spaces for thinking about the relationship between coercive political violence and utopian projects predicated on the perfectibility of the human race.

“Goliath” brings to mind Rousseau’s theory of the Lawgiver he develops in his classic treatise The Social Contract and Giorgio Agamben’s recalcitrance or adaptation of Carl Schmitt’s concept of sovereignty, in which the sovereign, simultaneously subject to and yet outside of the law, has the power to decide the state of exception. While the “story” of Goliath can be read as meditation on the relationship between violence and a kind of politics of liberation, it also attempts to deconstruct the concept of benevolent dictatorship, a debate about which continues to this day among historians and political scientists.

To that end or for what purposes would a writer of such powerful examples of naturalist fiction, not to mention politically charged essays and strikingly personal works of non-fiction occasionally, and with irony, humor, and intensity exploit the conventions of SF in order to explore or deconstruct the contemporary socio-economic landscape? Of science fiction and its potential to represent a radical, culturally transformative politics, Peter Paik asserts that SF “can accordingly serve as a vital instrument for the investigation of the contingencies governing political life, the forces that structure and dissolve collective existence, by providing the reader with visions in which familiar realities are destabilized and transformed” (2). Instead of highlighting exclusively the “utopian orientation” of the genre of science fiction, with its attendant emphasis on Thomas More’s foundational narrative Utopia, Paik focuses on what he refers to as the “expository aspects of literary speculation,” taking his inspiration from Plato’s Republic “which portrays the play of forces and desires—on a sweepingly collective and on an intimately personal scale—whereby one type of social and political organization transforms into another” (2; emphasis added).

The concentration on the problems and potentially beneficial aspects of the ways in which one kind or type of political organization “transforms into another” is a consistent, if not persistent, theme in the speculative fictions of Jack London, one which is remarkably explicit in “Goliath.” If we take seriously the “expository aspects of literary speculation” that Paik discusses, we can see how London’s political fantasies, from Before Adam, infused as it is with Jungian psycho-drama and an almost proleptic incorporation of Levi-Straussian structural anthropology, to The Star Rover, with its emphasis on a kind of Kierkegaardian repetition or Nietzschean eternal recurrence, address the “contingencies governing political life.” In “The Dream of Debs” included in the 1914 collection The Strength of the Strong, London presents a tale of collective political action commonly known in the parlance of organized labor as the general strike. This speculative fantasy, with its emphasis on the socially transformative potential of a mass industrial action, represents, to a certain extent, not just cultural anxieties concerning the disruptive aspects of unrestrained class-based social upheaval, but also London’s belief in the capacity for collective resistance to effect great change.

In “The Dream of Debs,” the leisure class awakes on May 1 to find that nearly the entirety of the working class has stayed home; there are no deliveries of fresh milk or fresh French rolls and industry has ground to a halt. The narrator observes:

For a generation, the general strike had been the dream of organized labor, which dream had arisen originally in the mind of Debs, one of the great labor leaders of thirty years before. I recollected that in my young college-settlement days I had even written an article on the subject for one of the magazines and that I had entitled it, “The Dream of Debs.” And I must confess that I had treated it very cavalierly and academically as a dream and nothing more. (1262)

After several pages of the description of the upper class’s descent into barbarism and anarchy, the narrator’s final words are: “The tyranny of organized labor is getting beyond human endurance. Something must be done” (1278).

The story’s original publication in the International Socialist Review in 1909, beyond revealing certain insights into Jack London’s politics and the degree to which he was exceedingly involved in self-promotion and the conscious construction of a public-professional persona, also betrays much in the way of certain strategic debates among those on the radical left in the early twentieth-century. In 1909, the Socialist Party USA (SP) and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) were allied in their ideological and strategic opposition to capitalism—a key component of which was the tactic of the general strike. In 1911, the so-called “electoral wing” of the SP under the leadership of Victor Berger and Morris Hillquit gained prominence and moved to purge IWW leader “Big” Bill Haywood from the National Executive Committee over arguments concerning the degree to which the Party should advocate labor militancy.

After the schism within the SP, the reverberations of which could be felt once again in 1917, Jack London, an author always very much in charge of his public literary and political persona, republished “The Dream of Debs” in 1914, three years after the split with the IWW. He would not formally sever his ties with the Socialist Party until 1916, only months before his death, stating explicitly in his resignation letter that his reasons for leaving were tied directly to the SP’s reformist politics and, to his mind, its naïve reliance on the ballot box. In the letter he writes:

I was originally a member of the old, revolution-ary, up-on-its-hind-legs, fighting, Socialist Labor Party. Since then, and to the present time, I have been a fighting member of the Socialist Party. My fighting record for the Cause is not, even at this late date, already entirely forgotten. Trained in the class struggle, as taught and practiced by the Socialist Labor Party, my own highest judgment
concurring, I believe that the working class, by fighting, by never fusing, by never making terms with the enemy, could emancipate itself. Since the whole trend of socialism in the United States of recent years has been one of peaceableness and compromise, I find that my mind refuses further sanction of my remaining a party member. Hence my resignation. (Letters 1537-38)

What is of particular interest about “The Dream of Debs” (outside of the fact that it appears in a collection alongside other tales of catastrophic war [The Unparalleled Invasion] and an extreme indictment of what Benedict Anderson refers to as ‘print-culture’ [The Enemy of All the World]) is that this particular story, one in which an empowered and united labor front reveals not only the strength of their movement but also lays bare the impotence and helplessness of the leisure class, operates in a larger and broader complex of theoretical and practical questions regarding the efficacy of the general strike. For example, in 1908, Georges Sorel, a civil servant in the French bureaucracy, published Reflections on Violence, a remarkable and controversial study of the relationships between myth and political violence. The fundamental, and perhaps most simplistic, reading of this text is its suggestion that the ultimate victory of the proletarian revolution can only be achieved through the establishment of mass confusion and generalized social angst through the invocation of the general strike. This is not to suggest that London, as a consequence of the composition and subsequent publication of his “story of industrial revolt,” was a student of Sorelian philosophy or even an advocate of anarchosyndicalism; merely that within the cultural milieu of the first decade of the twentieth century, with its concomitant intensification of the labor struggle, certain authors and political activists were more open to exploring the merits of political violence. Aspects of this story provide insights into contemporary debates (that is contemporary with London) within the world socialist movement and specifically within the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party, debates that ultimately split the RSDLP into two factions. These debates are not dissimilar from conversations within the Socialist Party USA concerning the role of the party in the revolutionary struggle and arguments over what Lenin would refer to as “opportunism.” Lenin defined opportunism as “sacrificing fundamental interests so as to gain temporary and partial advantages” (Lenin). In other words, reformism. Expanding upon this definition, Lenin writes that “[o]ppportunism is opportunism for the very reason that it sacrifices the fundamental interests of the movement to momentary advantages or considerations based on the most shortsighted, superficial calculations” (Lenin). These arguments not only defined the parameters of debate during the periods preceding and following the Russian Revolution of 1905, but would come to have global significance after the events in 1917.

“The Dream of Debs” not only validates London’s belief in the transformative power and potential of certain forms of coercive political violence, but also references other moments in London’s massive literary output. In his essays “Something Rotten in Idaho” and “Revolution,” London discusses the necessity of the revolutionists to “meet[ing] legal murder with assassination,” and other modes of resistance against state terrorism (“Revolution”). And in his preface to “War of the Classes” London writes: “And far be it for me to deny that socialism is a menace. It is its purpose to wipe out, root and branch, all capitalistic institutions of present-day society. It is distinctly revolutionary, and in scope and depth is vastly more tremendous than any revolution in the history of the world,—that of an organized, international, revolutionary movement” (xiii).

“Goliath” and “The Dream of Debs” are only two examples of Jack London’s fictional speculations on the efficacy of coercive political violence and its potential to effect revolutionary social change. In other fantastic tales and future yarns like “The Minions of Midos,” or “The Enemy of All the World,” and in novels like The Iron Heel and The Assassination Bureau, Ltd., London’s fascination with and occasional ironic consideration of various acts of terrorism, including bombings, laser beams, assassinations, and mass insurrection, far from betraying a naïve or simplistic understanding of Marx’s theories of revolution, can be read instead as sincere meditations on the uses of violence and its relation to authoritarian blueprints for dynamic social reconstruction.

Notes

1. Throughout this essay, “violence” refers to “coercive political violence;” no standard academic definition of this term exists. The closest approximation is Jeff Goodwin’s concept of “categorical terrorism” which he defines as “the strategic use of violence and threats of violence, usually intended to influence several audiences, by oppositional groups against civilians or noncombatants who belong to a specific ethnicity, religious or national group, social class or some other collectivity without regard to their individual identities or roles.” In “A Theory of Categorical Terrorism. Social Forces 84.4 (June 2006): 2027-2046.

2. This impulse and its place in the tradition of U.S. American utopian literature is discussed at length in Arthur, Lipow’s ambitious study Authoritarian Socialism in America: Edward Bellamy and the Nationalist Movement. Space and other considerations prevent an exhaustive summary of Lipow’s argument in this paper; it suffices to say, however, that while specific to the works of Edward Bellamy Lipow’s analyses provide provocative and intriguing insights for thinking about the ways in which various authors represented the complexities of the relationship between utopianism and revolution.

3. In his article “The Historical Death Ray and Science Fiction in the 1920s and 1930s,” William J. Fanning Jr. discusses the responses to the horrors of the First World War among those working within the military and scientific communities and writes that “[a]rticles in newspapers, magazines, professional journals, and books began to appear that warned of a new conflict in which airpower, poison gas, disease germs, and exotic weapons such as death rays would result in the destruction, or near destruction, of civilization” (253). While Fanning locates his analyses in the context of the era succeeding World War I, London, in an essay published in the Overland Monthly in March 1900 entitled “The Impossibility of War,” alludes to the very same issues concerning the development of increasingly sophisticated weapons and tactics which eventually culminated in the strategy of total war. London, writing in response to recently introduced military technologies and tactical innovations employed during the First and Second Boer Wars, including trench warfare and the concentration camp, argues that these recent “advances” translate to the “impossibility of war” as the marked increase in the capacity to maim and kill renders traditional state conflicts obsolete.
During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the American frontier was considered closed, effectively making California the end of the West and the repository of broken dreams. In Jack London’s stories the city of San Francisco becomes a place freighted with the baggage of an American masculinity built on escaping civilization and challenging oneself on the frontier, even as the city itself was becoming more and more modern, cosmopolitan, and civilized. Jack London’s stories about San Francisco explore the changes that men in the far western United States experienced as the frontier disappeared and was replaced by a modern, urbane city. These men experience a dislocation between their ideas of the place known as the Western frontier and the actual space that is San Francisco. San Francisco might be wild, but it is not the stereotypical wilderness that 19th century thought cherished. It is not the spot for Teddy Roosevelt’s idea of the (ultramasculinized) “strenuous life.” The changing city foregrounds a new type of masculinity that expresses aggression through acquisition of capital, education, and organized labor, whether in the Socialist sense or in the sense of factory employees. The social Darwinism that London’s stories espouse expresses this dislocation as a repression that his male characters must resist in order to avoid becoming feminized by civilization.

The masculine myth prevalent from the founding of the Americas has privileged the idea of men as hunters, builders, and conquerors of wilderness. The ideas of boyology, the strenuous life, and other late nineteenth century and early twentieth century pop psychologies depended on men separating themselves from the feminized urban structures and testing themselves at the frontiers in wilderness country. Richard Slotkin notes that American myth is based on “the conquest of the wilderness” (12). Good men achieved by playing through a scenario of separation [from women and ‘civilization’], temporary regression to a more primitive or ‘natural’ state, and regeneration through violence” (12). Good men were, first and foremost, outdoorsmen who commanded nature and others through a controlled violence, but they were also often leaders, entrepreneurs, and even presidents. Sometimes, like Herman Melville, John Steinbeck, or Jack London himself, they were writers. Men absorbed these myths from the social
system as they are socialized through their relations with other men and through the popular culture. The American mythos seems to either foreground the wilderness sublime or the technological sublime of the bustling city, but never quite reconciles them. For the men in London’s stories, the shifting masculine boundary interferes with their ability to form a stable identity. Their struggle to find a stable space within the multiple ideas of manhood leads to desperation, dislocation, and even death.

Out of London’s many stories about and San Francisco, I’m focusing on “The One Thousand Dozen,” “The Night Born,” and “South of the Slot” to discuss the boundaries that Jack London’s male characters negotiate between the so-called civilized life of the city and the wilderness that they each feel is calling to them. For the characters in these stories, London’s San Francisco is also a gateway to masculine achievement, a place of failure and old age, and a city where new social boundaries, new competitions, and new forms of masculine achievement are displacing the old types of the frontier. The city occupies a place for these men that is very similar to London’s own relationship with the place. Here he was successful and had many adventures; however, his dream was to build a ranch “somewhere further out” like Rasmussen in “The One Thousand Dozen” (Complete 633). Reading through this frontier idea also reveals how London writes about systemic social expectations as they are negotiated through men’s lives. London’s men are often failures in their chosen fields, angry and/or repressed, and terribly violent to themselves and sometimes to others. All of them have a relationship with a city, whether San Francisco or cities back East, but they all feel that their true location is in the wilderness frontier. Most of his main characters, even if they are city dwellers, have wilderness adventures. His San Francisco is a site that illuminates how the loss of a frontier version of masculinity left many men with no way to form an identity or to negotiate in a newly “civilized” world. It also notes a type of masculinity that is becoming socially acceptable in the riotously capitalistic and entrepreneurial city where violence and aggression are sublimated into new shapes that require a different sort of brutality for survival. For these men, the two types of masculinity, or two sides of a social boundary, are available, but only if they are able to negotiate a way to accept themselves as both frontier men and fully civilized denizens of a sophisticated and growing city with pretensions toward matching the East coast cities of the United States. London develops an ambivalence about the American idea of manhood in which San Francisco acts as the medium separating the social boundaries. Limerick notes that, “if Hollywood wanted to capture the emotional center of Western history, its movies would be about real estate. John Wayne would have been neither a gunfighter nor a sheriff but a surveyor, speculator, or claims lawyer” (Kindle) because land, agrarianism and the building of towns were the goals of many western developers and the west was always being ‘tamed’ even in the midst of frontier adventure. However, popular culture sets urban and frontier masculinity against one another. After all, from his earliest movies, John Wayne Was often a gunfighter and cowboy sheriff. Early in the twentieth century, Buffalo Bill’s western show, Teddy Roosevelt’s imaginative writing, and Turner’s history all promoted a man who was comfortable in the wild and who needed the wilderness to endure civilization. For a man in the U.S. to be fully developed and happy, “the American must cross the border into ‘Indian country’ and experience a ‘regression’ to a more primitive and natural condition of life so that the false values of the ‘metropolis’ can be purged and a new, purified social contract enacted” (Slotkin 14). London’s men see urban and frontier masculinity as mutually exclusive, even as the stories indicate that they are only in opposition to one another by virtue of the changes in the Western frontier itself—or in this case, San Francisco.

The three stories examined here were published from 1903 to 1911 and reference “old San Francisco, which is the San Francisco of only the other day, the day before the Earthquake.” Yet, even as this line from “South of the Slot” evokes nostalgia for a bygone day, it is referencing a California only a few years past, and one that is already a thriving metropolis. As London writes that “north of the Slot were the theaters, hotels, and shopping district, the banks and the staid, respectable business houses. South of the Slot were the factories, slums, laundries, machine-shops, boiler works, and the abodes of the working class” (Complete 1580). Included in this description, of course, is the thriving and turbulent waterfront district that is the San Francisco of history and imagination. That waterfront, geographically and imaginatively, is the jumping-off point for those seeking to go into the wild and test themselves, but it is also the physical boundary of the United States’ Westward expansion. It makes San Francisco a cosmopolitan and sophisticated place. Because of its proximity to the sea, the city, that long before the nineteenth century, was racially, religiously, and socially diverse, although it was not necessarily tolerant. While exciting, it could also be a lonely and violent place. It
can also be brutal to those who cannot adapt. San Francisco and the Pacific West, become regions where enormous wealth and enormous risk meet and form the new Western American identity of entrepreneurship, discovery, achievement, and failure that spawns Hollywood and Silicon Valley.

In “The One Thousand Dozen” (1903) Dave Rasmunsen is a man who is in conflict with his masculinity. He is drawn to the wilderness as a method to test himself and, in both the romantic and literal senses, to find his fortune. Though he tells his wife that “Why we’ll build further out where we’ll have more space, gas in every room, and a view” (633), money for a better house is not his motivation. Instead, he is in a type of masculine competition with himself that rejects the “paltry” hundred a month he gets while working (about three times more than the average wage in 1909) and the “cozy dining-room” where he schemes to make it rich selling eggs in the Yukon. He does not want to be confined by the civilized and feminized town that San Francisco has become. Like London, he wanted to “live, not to exist” (qtd. in Watson, Electronic). As Robert G Athearn points out, “by the turn of the century, as this physical frontier [the West], appeared to be fading, [the notion that a great drama was about to begin] began to have a real impact all across America” (12), but perhaps the greatest impact was in the large cities of the former frontier, where the idea of the Old West was eclipsed by progress while its ghost remained in masculine stories and expectations. A man could only become wealthy (and enriched as a man) by risking everything in terrible conditions for great reward. Even Rasmunsen’s brother-in-law “the black sheep, the harum-scarum, the ne’er-do-well,—had not he come down out of that weird North country with a hundred thousand in yellow dust, to say nothing of a half-ownership in the hole from which it came?” (Complete 633). The Western man is called to test himself in nature. Roger Horrocks writes, for the man in a dangerous wilderness, “Here is life; seize it, live it, for tomorrow (or maybe today) we die.’ Life is a spectacle, at which one marvels and catches the breath” (70), and the Yukon at the turn of the century is the perfect place to put it all on the line and to marvel at the beauty and danger of the place. London left the drudgery of the Bay Area for “a canoe with Tlingit Indians, paddling from Juneau, Alaska to the head of the Chilkoot trail” (Watson, Electronic).

Rasmunsen becomes “a man of the one idea. When the clarion call of the North rang on his ear he conceived an adventure and bent all his energy to its achievement” (641). He is willing to give his all to achieve it; to literally do or die. He plans his trip with a clear goal of making it rich and becoming independent of wage slavery; “he figured briefly and to the point, and the adventure became iridescent-hued, splendid. That eggs would sell at Dawson for five dollars a dozen was a safe working premise. Whence it was incontrovertible that one thousand dozen would bring, in the Golden Metropolis, five thousand dollars” (632). He is determined to bring his One Thousand Dozen to the Yukon and strike it rich, even at the cost of his feet and most of his face. In the face of many delays and drawbacks, he feels compelled to hide his feelings, and never to admit his suffering. His adventure getting down river to the Yukon in ice and snow is illustrative, for “now Rasmunsen all his life had been prone to cowardice on water, but he clung to the kicking steering-oar with set face and determined jaw” (636) and by the time he overtakes his two rivals, “his grin had by then become fixed, and it disturbed the correspondents [his passengers] to look at him” (637). He fights off his passengers’ attempts to save the boat by throwing off his eggs. He does not get to Dawson before the freeze so he decides to walk, working with Chilkat natives on sleds. He’s so tough that “when he slipped through an ice bridge near the White Horse and froze his foot, tender yet and oversensitive from the previous freezing, the Indians looked for him to lie up. But he sacrificed a blanket, and, with his foot incased in an enormous mocassin, big as a water-bucket, continued to take his regular turn with the front sled” (640). Even though he fails on this first attempt, he achieves a fame as “the man with the thousand dozen eggs. . . . Gold-seekers who made in before the freeze-up carried the news of his coming” (639). and he becomes determined to succeed or die trying. He does not return to San Francisco for long, but works as a cook and dishwasher on steamers to earn enough capital for another try.

His masculine pride and desire to pull through are a perfect type of the Western frontier masculinity, showing no tears or pain, never complaining, and, in the end, dying before admitting failure, accepting pity, or going home a lesser man. When he finally arrives, after more cruel suffering (some at the hands of other men), he is greeted with joy. When asked the price of the eggs, “Rasmunsen became audacious, ‘Dollar’n a half’ he said” (644) and sells two hundred eggs immediately. He is well on his way to a fortune, but too tired to go on. While he is resting, he finds out that the eggs are rotten. No one is upset, because they can still be used as dog food, and because they did not have eggs before, anyway. However, Rasmunsen is undone. “Ultimately, Horrocks argues, “western masculinity is suicidal” (77) and, certainly, Rasmunsen had proved that point, almost killing himself many times for his “one idea.” He has failed before and come through. He can handle failure. What he cannot handle is the loss of the profits. There is no way he can make another attempt until he saves up enough money to pay his debts and buy more eggs. And that is what ultimately causes him to hang himself. He cannot go back to the city and resume the former life that no longer seems masculine or adventurous enough. He cannot once again be a clerk working for his hundred per week. Returning to San Francisco and resuming his former life is to cross back to a kind of masculinity that he holds in contempt, and he would rather die than go back.

Similarly, “The Night-Born” focuses on San Francisco as a world where men go when feminized by age or illness, or when they are used up by their adventures, like Trefethan, who says he has “nothing left in my soul... nor in my veins. The good red blood is gone” (Complete 1661). The Yukon is no country for old men, but San Francisco is the place where the ambivalence of the border becomes most pronounced. Though business, wealth, and success are foregrounded, the background myth is always one of struggle and overcoming in nature. The myth includes the joy and health (particularly the sexual health) of a man who is fit for such wilderness adventures. “The Night-Born” is interesting because its San Francisco setting, and more specifically the old Alto-Inyo Club, frame a story told by Trefethan, who drinks because he feels his forty-seven years. He tells the story of a remarkable woman in the Yukon who has escaped a brutal life and a boring husband to become the leader of a band of natives. While this story on its face is ridiculous, it makes sense as a reading of nostalgia and longing for Tho-
reau’s “night-born” natives who thrive in a close relationship with nature. The young white woman is Mother Nature as unspoiled west. Even her accent is crude and western, “that sharp, frontier, Western tang of speech” (1663). She has the nut brown body of an Indian, proving her essential sexuality and freedom, but the blue eyes of a white woman, showing her intelligence. Of course, only a white man can conquer her. On top of that she has mineral wealth in the form of found gold that could keep both of them quite comfortably for years.

She offers the riches of the Yukon, without the masculine adventure that “earns” it. All she asks is the body of the Trefethan in marriage. In many ways, she is the embodiment of the “one idea” that so possesses Dave Rasmunsen. And she tempts Trefethan. Like so many naturalists, including Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and London himself, he falls immediately in love. In the end, however, though Mother Nature returns the affection and desires to join with him, Trefethan finds that his fear of losing control is greater than his desire for a life as a night-born, especially if it means that he has to live among the natives that surround his vision of Mother Nature. In the frontier mythology, the young woman is a true Western hero, “the man [or in this case, woman] who knows Indians’ the frontier hero who stands between the opposed worlds of savagery and civilization, acting sometimes as a mediator or interpreter between races and cultures but more often as civilization’s most effective instrument against savagery” (Slotkin 16). She knows the value of her Indian braves, but expects them to follow her civilized rules and ultimately to accept her rule. She has accomplished a mastery of nature and achieved wealth in the wilderness, accomplishing everything that Trefethan expects of himself.

If he were to accept her proposal, he would have to submit to her idea of the world, which does not include a technological, capital society; the kind of society that eventually makes Trefethan well-off financially, if not physically whole. He is not sure he’s made the right decision, because as Sine Anahita and Tamara Mix write of Alaska, “Rural and wilderness sites where men can be real, masculine men, while men in cities are overly civilized, affected, and effeminate” (334). Trefethan regrets his decision, because he feels that age has emasculated him. After years in the city, “[he is] soft and tender. The thought of the long day’s travel appalls [him].” He is completely implicated in the border, unable to entirely choose a side and integrate himself. Like Rasmunsen, he was determined to make a fortune, and he has. However, living off that fortune and capitalizing on it has meant a return to an urban area where he can invest and grow his money. His masculinity, like Rasmunsen’s, is ultimately suicidal, he knows that to remain in San Francisco will kill him, but “suicide of this sort is so easy” (1672). He is conflicted between his desire for commercial success and his desire to be an adventurer. He has lived in the city so long that he has lost his physical prowess, and it is possible that, like Jack London; he is suffering from some of his earlier adventures and their affects on his health. He feels like a failure as a man because he did not make the choice to live his life in the wilderness as his female counterpart did. He is the return to civilization that Rasmunsen feared. He is depressed and suicidal, but not direct enough to end his life as Rasmunsen did. Rasmunsen risked his all for one perishable idea and failed, and Trefethan risked his all and succeeded, but their views of themselves remained identical and neither can respect the man of the city. Trefethan is suicidal, but passive, because his wealth has also made him comfortable. So he waits to die and his life will be measured out in highball glasses at the Alto-Inyo Club.

Occupying a social position requires accepting its values. That means accepting boundaries; “Western history is a story structured by the drawing of lines and the markings of borders” (Limerick, Kindle). In Freddie Drummond’s San Francisco, the border between “civilization” and “savagery” is the Slot. Freddie Drummond, in “South of the Slot,” is a citizen of a fully modern San Francisco (his fiancé and he even travel by car) embodying everything fit, outdoorsy and healthy in manhood, but also limited, at least emotionally and behaviorally, by his own civilization and education. He lives north of the Slot, but finds himself negotiating the boundary by going south. Eventually, he finds that divided sense of masculinity grows from a background of his work to a full-grown person, and a labor leader at that. His insanity is finally resolved in a satisfyingly Lacanian manner through the symbolic suicide of the Drummond identity, foregrounding a persona who fits the idea of the American frontier within the American world of business and labor. His alter-ego, Bill Totts, becomes an iconically masculine and peculiarly Darwinistic hero. The story, while pro-labor, is more about where the life-blood and the masculine energy of society are located.

The Slot is Market Street where the trolley tracks, during London’s time, provided public transportation across the city and the thriving mercantile district. The premise of the story is a labor dispute developing in an increasingly technological society, and the line, exemplified by the Slot, that the dispute draws between civilized and “savage” men. Drummond is an ethnographer who freely travels from the University across the Slot to the waterfront and the working district in order to make himself familiar with the subjects of his study. London portrays the working class people as though they were an entirely different civilization from the University world, which Drummond normally occupies. His portrayal of Drummond’s boiler plate scholarly language also gently criticizes ethnographic studies that make sweeping generalizations about the people who make the University, and all the modern comforts, possible.

The frontier in “South of the Slot” would seem to be thoroughly closed. Civilization has descended in all its messy power and yet, London manages to make the ambience between the “natural” man and the man who has accepted civilization visible by embodying the border in Drummond and his ethnographic alter-ego, Bill Totts. The difference is illuminated through the physical differences between Drummond’s body as himself, and his body as Bill Totts. London writes that “When [Freddie] entered the obscure little room used for his transformation scenes, he carried himself just a bit too stiffly. He was too erect, his shoulders were an inch too far back...But when he emerged in Bill Totts’ clothes, he was another creature. Bill Totts did not slouch, but somehow his whole form limbered up and became graceful” (Complete 1584-85). Freddie is similar to Trefethan in his desire for comfort and the things that make one an acceptable man in the civilized part of San Francisco, but he also desires the masculinizing influence of savagery.

Drummond’s transformation echoes a common psychological thought at the time; that boys must regress and enter a feral
stage in order to “recapitulate” their physical development in their psychology. However, the Bad Boy is supposed to grow up from “gentle boy-savagery into both manhood and literary vocation” (Kidd 520). London has the evolution occur in reverse. Drummond “accepted the doctrine of evolution because it was universally accepted by college men” but “was a trifle ashamed of this genealogy and preferred not to think of it” (1586), because his violent and feral past is beneath his civilized current self. However, as he spends more time south of the Slot doing research, Drummond becomes thoroughly comfortable as Bill Totts and becomes enamored of a world ostensibly ruled by labor unions and ideas of collectivity, but actually enacting traditional American themes of frontier masculinity, freedom, and individual might. Bill Totts is a “champion” or a hero to the working class people that live on the other side of the Slot simply by virtue of his physical presence, as “he towered a head above the crowd” (1594). He is comfortable with his arm about a woman, but Freddie Drummond is not. Neither is Freddie allowed to be a “savage” in his oh-so-civilized university life. London reminds the reader, when Freddie is faced with a romantic dilemma, Freddie must choose. He has to choose his side of the border and “either he must become wholly Bill Totts and be married to Mary Condon, or he must remain wholly Freddie Drummond and be married to Catherine Van Vorst. Otherwise, his conduct would be beneath contempt and horrible” (1589).

Of course, because he is a man who, as a true Westerner constrained by civilization, he picks the woman who constrains him least and who understands his need for freedom and accepts his conquest, Mary Condon, president of the International Glove Workers’ Union No. 974. Mary is a “royal-bodied woman, graceful and sinewy as a panther, with amazing black eyes that could fill with fire or laughter-love, as the mood might dictate,” and also an embodiment of wilderness nature, “a too exuberant vitality and a lack of . . . well, of inhibition” (1586). She is the very opposite of the civilized city man, Drummond. She accepts Totts when he emerges following the psychological suicide of Drummond’s personality. Her acceptance and love complete the recapitulation and there arises “a new labor leader, William Totts by name. He it was who married Mary Condon, President of the International Glove Workers’ Union No. 974; and he it was who called the notorious Cooks and Waiters’ Strike” (1594). In London’s social Darwinistic view of the world, Bill Totts has become the fully integrated, Darwinistically adapted man and found his true place in life, south of the slot in the urban wilderness.

Each of the heroes of these Jack London stories find themselves somehow outside of the bounds of normal masculine expectation, at least within their mythos, and they all seek to reconcile those expectations with their lived experience of the city of San Francisco at the end of the West. Their ability to do so, however, is impeded by a view of Western masculinity that expects grit, stoicism, and sucking it up rather than really exploring options. One must succeed or die trying. Dave Rasmussen succeeds in achieving his quest—even though the eggs were ruined—and succeeds in surviving the Yukon trail. He even achieves mythic status as the Egg man, but he hangs himself because he cannot face the return to the ordinary life of work in the city to pay his debts. Trefthan loves the wild, but cannot return to it and is slowly committing suicide by whisky as he faces the fading of his power and his chances of change, and Freddie Drummond succeeds because his civilized personality commits psychological suicide and Bill Totts takes his place. Each of these suicides takes place either in San Francisco, or, in the case of Rasmussen, in a refusal to return there. San Francisco provides the medium for London to reveal the frustration and pain for men expecting frontier masculinity at the end of the Western American frontier, and instead being confronted with the wild ambivalence of a city at the end of the West.

Works Cited


