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**Reviewing the Purpose Novel: Reception, Social Reform, and the Limits  
of Persuasion in Turn-of-the-Century American Fiction**

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**by**

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# **Reviewing the Purpose Novel: Reception, Social Reform, and the Limits of Persuasion in Turn-of-the-Century American Fiction**

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“Reviewing the Purpose Novel” addresses the relationship between novels and public opinion by recovering an understudied category of nineteenth-century American fiction and analyzing the reception of four examples of the genre. Though narratives about how novels can change history are popular, my research indicates that there were far more barriers to a novel impacting public opinion than critics generally recognize. Drawing from a wide range of newspaper, magazine, and archival material, “Reviewing the Purpose Novel” constructs thoroughly contextualized accounts of each novel’s publication history and reception to show the ways that reviewers established generic expectations that limited the persuasive power an individual purpose novel was granted. Rather than locating the purpose novel’s disappearance in the modernist disdain for literature that engaged too explicitly with political or social issues or with the New Critical insistence that critics focus on aesthetic and formal qualities over social and historical ones, “Reviewing the Purpose Novel” offers a counter-narrative that engages mass and popular reading modes to show that by the turn of the century, reviewers, writers, and readers may have liked to imagine that a novel could effect concrete social change, but the models reviewers offered for reading the novels tended to limit or resist the persuasive process.

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## 1. “What is a Novel”: Reading the purpose novel in the nineteenth century

What we call a novel may educate the taste and cultivate the intelligence; under the hand of genius it may purify the heart and fortify the mind; ...but it has no right to tell us what its writer thinks about the relations of labor or capital, nor to set up what the author conceives to be a nice, original, easy scheme of salvation, any more than it has a right to take for its theme the relative merits of... temperance, vivisection, or the “Ideal Man” of Confucious... The purpose-novel is an odious attempt to lecture people who hate lectures, to preach at people who prefer their own church, and to teach people who think they knew enough already. It is an ambush, a lying-in-wait for the unsuspecting public, a violation of the social contract—and as such it ought to be either mercilessly crushed or forced by law to bind itself in black and label itself “Purpose” in very big letters.

—F. Marion Crawford, “What is a Novel?”<sup>1</sup>

F. Marion Crawford’s 1893 salvo against what he termed the “purpose-novel” set off a minor frenzy in a debate that had surfaced on and off in American letters throughout the nineteenth century. The place and relative merits of the purpose novel, the “novel with a purpose,” the “novel of purpose,” the “purpose-driven novel,” the “problem novel,” and the “political novel” were regularly discussed in a variety of national and local publications. Crawford was by no means the first to condemn the category; he was following in the well-regarded footsteps of critics like Henry James, who, in reviewing Mrs. Humphrey Ward’s 1888 novel *Robert Elsmere*, found Mrs. Ward “unique, so far as I remember in the long and usually dreary annals of the novel with a purpose, of carrying out her purpose without spoiling her novel.”<sup>2</sup>

While James’s view of the purpose novel’s questionable literary merits can be understood within the context of what Mark McGurl identifies as James’s elevation of the

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<sup>1</sup> F. Marion Crawford, “What is a Novel?” *Forum*, January 1893, 593-594. HathiTrust.

<sup>2</sup> Henry James, “Mrs. Humphrey Ward,” *Essays in London and Elsewhere* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893), 256, HathiTrust.



art-novel over other, more popular forms, Crawford's objections are a bit more populist. The first duty of the novel, in Crawford's understanding, "is to amuse and interest the reader."<sup>3</sup> As such, the purpose novel is a literary bait-and-switch, "a simple fraud," and a swindle. Crawford likens the reader to someone who pays good money for theater tickets, only to find that, when the curtain goes up, the stage is a pulpit and the play a sermon. By the turn of the century, both James's aesthetic position and Crawford's practical one would play a significant role in the purpose novel's declining fortunes. As an American literary canon began to take shape, the purpose novel served as a genre against which high art came to be defined, particularly by the emerging discipline of American literature.<sup>4</sup> But Crawford's more pragmatic and populist concerns were also reflected in the response to the turn-of-the-century purpose novel. Reviews published in a wide range of magazines and newspapers speak not only to the purpose novel's aesthetic standing, but also to its persuasive efficacy and to a set of generic conventions and readerly expectations that were, by the turn of the century, increasingly difficult to meet. "Reviewing the Purpose Novel" charts the ways that turn-of-the-century reviewers not only resisted the purpose novel on aesthetic grounds, but also established generic expectations that limited the persuasive power an individual purpose novel was granted.

Crawford's article inserted itself into a much larger debate about the general functions of the novel, beyond the issue of the purpose novel. By the 1890s, the

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<sup>3</sup> Crawford, "What is a Novel?" 592.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the formation of American literature departments and the twentieth-century canon, see David Shumway, *Creating American Civilization: A Genealogy of American Literature as an Academic Discipline* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1994) and Claudia Stokes, *Writers in Retrospect: The Rise of American Literary History, 1875-1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

American literary marketplace was a fertile site for such discussion; as the *Nassau Literary Messenger* noted, “the novel, which our respected and highly respectable forefathers often went so far as to consider an agency of the devil, is to-day the topic of a great many learned papers which nobody ever reads, and is likewise the theme of a number of thoughtful essays which everyone ought to read.”<sup>5</sup> Those thoughtful essays ranged from the still much-discussed works of William Dean Howells to now-forgotten editorials published in newspapers across the country. Many such essays presaged the debates about aesthetic and the novel that would continue to figure throughout the next century, while others were less prescient. In an 1891 editorial for the Columbus, Georgia *Enquirer-Sun* titled “It Will Have a Purpose,” Augusta Evans Wilson predicted that the twentieth century novel would turn away from “the numbing pessimism of the nineteenth century, and from the defiling clutch of sennuousness,” to “reflect... the tender warmth of an all-embracing Christian philanthropy... and successfully portray for the coming race a blessed world of noble, god-fearing men, and pure-gentle women, all wearing the vivid vesture of realism, animated with the immortal soul of idealism.”<sup>6</sup>

While Wilson’s predictions failed to match the trajectory of the twentieth-century novel, they expressed a fairly common view of the novel’s promises and pitfalls. As Barbara Hochman notes, “The idea of active and purposeful reading had long served as an antidote to anxieties about fiction-reading in particular as rooted in idleness... The ‘novel with a purpose’ was celebrated not only as a higher kind of fiction but also as an

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<sup>5</sup> “What is a Novel?” *Nassau Literary Messenger*, April, 1893, 710, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>6</sup> Augusta Evans Wilson, “It Will Have a Purpose,” Columbus *Enquirer-Sun*, April 5, 1891, 3, America’s Historical Newspapers.

antidote to the vapidness of ‘Art for Art’s Sake.’”<sup>7</sup> Proponents of the purpose novel argued that novels which did not work to improve their readers in some way fell prey to frivolity or, worse, the immorality typified by French novels or the theater. A truly great novel, many critics argued, was able to skillfully lead its readers to an improved moral or educational position without explicitly disclosing that moral. The St. Louis *Globe-Democrat*, for example, declared that the great novelist “must present for the instruction and entertainment of his fellow men pictures of human life in as many different circumstances as he is able... he must tell the world of what self sacrifice, what devotion it is capable; to what depths of depravity it may descend; how it will act under certain given conditions; how it becomes worse and may be made better.” But, the author warns,

He must do all this, not didactically, for if he attempts directly either to preach or to teach, his hearers will turn him the cold shoulder, but in such a way that the moral of his story, while not obtrusive, shall, nevertheless, not be overlooked nor forgotten... [T]he majority of novelists fall by this wayside when attempting it, either ignoring entirely the moral that underlies or should underlie every work of literary art, or so obtruding the point they would enforce upon the attention of their readers that the latter soon discover that they are being instructed in spite of themselves and drop the book in disgust.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Barbara Hochman, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and the Reading Revolution: Race, Literacy, Childhood, and Fiction, 1851-1911* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 144.

<sup>8</sup> “Novel with A Purpose: Some Famous Stories Written to Point a Moral,” St. Louis *Globe-Democrat*, reprinted in Sioux City (IA) *Journal*, March 17, 1895, 11, America’s Historical Newspapers.

The *Globe-Democrat* advocates that self-same practice Crawford so deprecates: making use of a novel's entertainment value to expose readers to some sort of moral or social lesson. Both the author and Crawford agree that, should the lesson be too obvious, readers will throw down the book in frustration, but Crawford frames that problem as a generic failing, while the *Globe-Democrat* approaches it as a failing of execution. That is, for Crawford, the purpose novel is categorically inferior because its ultimate goal is to cloak instruction in the guise of entertainment, while for the *Globe-Democrat*, the bait-and-switch is acceptable, even preferable, as long as it is done skillfully enough that the reader does not notice. The distinction here exposes an important tension in the way critics discussed the purpose novel. Critics who oppose the genre entirely generally define a purpose novel as a work that makes its persuasive agenda so explicit as to fail both Crawford's and the *Globe-Democrat's* tests. Anything Crawford opposes as a "violation of the social contract" would also fail to meet the *Globe-Democrat's* criteria for subtlety. The *Globe-Democrat*, on the other hand, defines a good purpose novel in such a way as to exclude just those novels Crawford objects to. The disagreement, then, is not about whether unsubtle purpose novels are bad art, but whether a good purpose novel can even exist.

For some critics, the category of the purpose novel can include anything from a thinly-veiled screed about temperance to a novel that subtly advocates for a generally upright moral atmosphere. For others, the purpose novel is defined by its transparency and is therefore incompatible with the subtlety the *Globe-Democrat* would grant a well-wrought purpose effort. Critics are not even able to agree about whether specific novels

are obvious polemics or subtle endorsements. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which is examined in more depth below, was described by some reviewers as a transparent piece of demagoguery and by others, including the *Globe-Democrat*, as a skilled example of persuasion that did not overpower the novel's aesthetic and narrative elements.

Those difficulties of definition and evaluation are revealed in the response to Crawford's article. Critics disagreed with Crawford's evaluation of the purpose novel as tedious or boring, while also taking issue with the criteria Crawford used to define the genre. An article in the *Critic* declared that the purpose novel "interests the public deeply; and it is the moral element in it that interests," while Margaret Deland, writing in the *Independent*, alleged that, "according to [Crawford's] own rule, some of his own enchanting books should be bound in black, and labelled to warn an unsuspecting and innocent public."<sup>9</sup> The *Interior* argued that in condemning the purpose novel, Crawford "raises his voice against the greatest books that have ever born the name of novels"; the author lists a number of prominent novels he considers to be problem novels, including *Jane Eyre*, several Dickens novels, *Vanity Fair*, *Les Miserables*, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, among others.<sup>10</sup>

The purpose novel, then, was a viable and much-contested genre at the end of the nineteenth century, particularly since many of its defenders claimed among its ranks the most well-known and best-selling book of the past fifty years, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Yet by the second decade of the twentieth century, the genre had all but disappeared from

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<sup>9</sup> "A Plea for the 'Purpose Novel,'" *Critic*, April 15, 1893, 229, HathiTrust; Margaret Deland, "The Novel with a Purpose," *Independent*, April 20, 1899, 1068, HathiTrust.

<sup>10</sup> "New Books," *Interior*, July 27, 1893, 20, HathiTrust.

both literary production and critical discussion, though we might trace its legacy in the proletarian novels of the thirties to fifties, feminist novels of the seventies, and in books like John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, or even the works of Ayn Rand.

In analyzing the years at the end of the purpose novel's popularity, "Reviewing the Purpose Novel" has several aims. The first is to recover the significance of the purpose novel to the late-nineteenth century literary landscape. Closely related, "Reviewing the Purpose Novel" also argues that, though the idea of the purpose novel played an important role in critics' and reviewers' notions about what a novel might accomplish, the responses to individual purpose novels revealed that public discussion of such novels tended to diminish, rather than amplify, critical examination of the social or political actions advocated or promoted by the novels. Finally, "Reviewing the Purpose Novel" argues that the public reaction charted in the forthcoming chapters makes visible the mechanisms by which the purpose novel fell out of favor and demonstrates that those mechanisms can not only be tied to the sort of critical habits associated with modernism and New Criticism, but also to generic conventions in more popular spheres of newspaper and magazine journalism that by the turn of the century were nearly impossible to satisfy.

### **Defining the purpose novel**

As the differing estimations of the purpose novel's value make clear, nineteenth century critics, though they often shared similar terminology, did not have a consistent definition of what makes a purpose novel. Some critics would restrict purpose novels only to the most overtly didactic works, while others would cast so wide a net that any

novel that fails to be explicitly salacious or transgressive meets the criteria. But what these critics could agree on was that there existed a class of novels that could be termed purpose novels, and that these novels had an effect on their readers that differed in kind as well as degree from the effect of novels read either purely for entertainment, or purely for “art’s sake.” The battle, of course, was over whether that effect was salutary and to be encouraged, or distasteful and to be condemned.

To the extent that scholars of American literature discuss the sort of novel that would have been called a purpose novel in the nineteenth century, they generally do so as part of a broader category. Phillip Harper’s chapter on “Fiction and Reform” in the *Columbia History of the American Novel* (1991) takes up not only explicit examples of reform fiction like *Life in the Iron Mills*, *Looking Backward*, and *The Jungle*, but also several works that seem not to be immediately involved in reform like *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, *The Awakening*, and “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Harper brings these different works together not based on the way they were read at the time—he notes that contemporary readers would not have considered “The Yellow Wallpaper” or *The Awakening* reform fiction at all, but simultaneously claims that following “The Yellow Wallpaper” and *The Awakening*’s “resurrection in the late twentieth century [they] exemplify this emergent genre [reform fiction] beautifully”—but rather based on an ex post facto definition of reform fiction as seeking to bring about social or economic changes through “moderation, gradualism, and/or... through established social and

political mechanisms, as opposed to sudden revolutionary transformation.”<sup>11</sup> As a category, the reform novel is not one its contemporary readers would have recognized, although, with the exception of *The Awakening* or “The Yellow Wallpaper,” they probably would have understood why Harper groups together most of the novels in his chapter.

Similarly, Cecelia Tichi analyzes a category of novels she terms “novels of civic protest” in the 2011 *Cambridge History of the American Novel*. Tichi’s category is even broader than Harper’s, and includes novels from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Life in the Iron Mills*, *Herland*, and *The Jungle*, to *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Native Son*, *The Armies of the Night*, and *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. Tichi explicitly connects novels of civic protest to propaganda, arguing that, like propaganda, novels of civic protest “exhibit a disciplined curtailment of interpretations, reflecting [Jacques] Ellul’s emphasis on coercion over consent.”<sup>12</sup> In tying the novel of civic protest so explicitly to propaganda, and to its negative connotations, Tichi applies a twentieth-century mode of reading to a category that includes a number of nineteenth-century novels. As Tichi notes, propaganda gained its unsavory connotations during the first World War, and only entered common parlance after 1918. In many ways, the Russian Revolution marks an important turning point for the reformist novel, as it introduced a formalized agenda for pro-socialist novels that was largely absent from the works of socialist writers like Upton Sinclair and Jack London.

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<sup>11</sup> Phillip Harper, “Fiction and Reform II,” in *The Columbia History of the American Novel*, ed. Emory Elliott and Cathy Davidson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 231, 217.

<sup>12</sup> Cecelia Tichi, “Novels of civic protest,” in *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, ed. Leonard Cassuto (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011): 399-400.



Tichi's novel of civic protest, tied as it is to a twentieth-century understanding of the relationship between propaganda, socialist reform, and the proletarian novel, applies a retroactive method for understanding nineteenth-century purpose novels that obscures the ways such books were received at the time in favor of their place in the twentieth-century history of protest.

Scholars of American literary history, then, have generally relied on overly broad or ex post facto categories that include but do not sufficiently define the purpose novel. The purpose novel is, however, the subject of at least one book-length analysis: Amanda Claybaugh's 2006 *The Novel of Purpose: Literature and Social Reform in the Anglo-American World*. Claybaugh examines the relationship between realism and reform as it was manifested in the transatlantic purpose novel, with particular attention to the ways major Anglophone writers like Henry James, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens used the form of the purpose novel without necessarily endorsing its aims.

Claybaugh's book contributes several helpful definitions that this project builds on. Arguing that the purpose novel grew out of the more narrow category of reformist novel, Claybaugh claims, "the novel of purpose came to encompass all novels that sought to intervene in the contemporary world."<sup>13</sup> She goes on to assert that the purpose novel describes a particular set of nineteenth-century concerns about the relationship between social reform and the function of the novel:

I have revived the 'novel of purpose' as a critical category because it recovers something crucial about the self-understanding of nineteenth-century novelists.

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<sup>13</sup> Amanda Claybaugh, *The Novel of Purpose: Literature and Social Reform in the Anglo-American World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007): 34.

Nineteenth-century novelists were united in their conviction that purposes were what novels did and should have, even if they sometimes disagreed about what these purposes should be. As a consequence, they thought of novels not as self-contained aesthetic objects but rather as active interventions into social and political life. They thought of novels as performative, and they took their conception of performativity from the writings of social reform. The novel of purpose, emerging as it does out of the reformist novel, reminds us that what is now seen—and often dismissed—as the ‘earnestness’ of the nineteenth-century novel was not simply moral but social, indeed political. It was actively seeking to remake the world that it was also seeking to represent.<sup>14</sup>

This project builds on Claybaugh’s observations about the prominence of the reform element in nineteenth-century thinking about the novel. In focusing on the turn of the century, though, *Reviewing the Purpose Novel* moves beyond the moment in which the purpose novel met with relatively little critical resistance. Claybaugh notes that at mid-century, “a number of reviewers did criticize certain novels for putting purpose ahead of art, but these criticisms tended to mask substantive objections to the particular purpose itself. Until the end of the century, only a handful of figures took a principled position against the novel of purpose as a genre.”<sup>15</sup>

“Reviewing the Purpose Novel” is interested in just that end-of-the-century moment when more than a handful of critics took up the charge against the purpose

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 35.

novel. Claybaugh argues that the fragmentation of the literary world accounts for the purpose novel's decline, claiming,

By the end of the fin de siècle, the literary world was newly divided into the artful and the nonartful, into high, middle, and low. As it happened, there was a resurgence of reformist novels at the same time... And realist novels would continue to be written as well; indeed, they continue to be written in our own day. But the reformist novel was now seen as nonliterary, and the realist novel was now seen as middlebrow. The novel of purpose was no longer predominant.<sup>16</sup>

Claybaugh's observation that realism and reform writing were by the end of the century coded as middlebrow and nonliterary skips over the accompanying professionalization of both reformer and writer that occurred during the Progressive era. More important, Claybaugh's narrative imparts a certain fatalism to the literary history it describes: the passive voice masks the actors responsible for dividing the literary world and seeing the reformist novel as nonliterary. This project argues that those actors were extremely varied, and working from a wider range of motivations and in a wider range of contexts than Claybaugh's narrative implies. Though highbrow readers and critics might have labeled the reformist novel as nonliterary and realism as middlebrow, middle- and lowbrow reviewers had already engineered the purpose novel's demise, not on aesthetic grounds, but on pragmatic or persuasive ones.

Claybaugh's study also draws attention to a particularly fraught issue in defining the purpose novel: that of intention. Claybaugh focuses specifically on what she calls

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 41-42.

“reluctant reformist writers” who “would take up reformist subject matter without feeling any reformist commitment or without intending any reformist effect.”<sup>17</sup> That these “reluctant reformists,” among them, Henry James in *The Bostonians* and George Eliot in *Felix Holt*, adopted the form of the purpose novel without an accompanying investment in a particular program of reform is an important element of Claybaugh’s argument about the integral and even opportunistic relationship between realism and reform in the nineteenth century. Yet for the purpose novel’s readers and reviewers, whether or not the author supported the reforms discussed in the novel was not necessarily a primary concern; indeed, without paratextual material to inform the reader that the author was uninterested in women’s suffrage or temperance, there was no way of knowing how the commitments of the author related to the commitments espoused in the novel. A better understanding of the purpose novel’s reception, then, requires only that the book in question have been discussed by reviewers as a purpose novel, regardless of whether the author saw the book as such.<sup>18</sup>

In defining the category of “purpose novel” for the purposes of this project, I begin with Claybaugh’s broad claim that “the novel of purpose came to encompass all novels that sought to intervene in the contemporary world.” But because this project focuses on questions of reception rather than intention, I amend Claybaugh’s intentionally broad definition: a purpose novel is one that was described by its initial reviewers or readers as seeking to intervene in the contemporary world. The novels

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>18</sup> Chapter 4 will return to this issue of reception versus the writer’s commentary as it relates to Frank Norris’s *The Octopus*.

examined in the forthcoming chapters are all books that were explicitly termed “purpose novels” by some set of their initial reviewers.<sup>19</sup>

“Reviewing the Purpose Novel” looks beyond the impact the purpose novel had on now-canonical authors like James and Dickens and argues that the genre played an important role in the literary marketplace at large. In recovering the purpose novel as an important category of nineteenth century American literature, “Reviewing the Purpose Novel” encourages literary scholars to re-visit a number of relatively fixed terms and genres that figure prominently in American literary history. Novels that contemporary readers and reviewers grouped together under the category of “purpose novel” are now read in terms of disparate genres and categories ranging from realism to naturalism to local color to muckraking journalism. In considering these novels together as purpose novels, “Reviewing the Purpose Novel” brings together novels that now tend to be understood as existing in distinct literary categories, but that at one point in their history had much more in common with one another than a current account would acknowledge.

In addition, this project challenges often-unexamined assumptions about how purpose novels functioned within the broader public discourse. From *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to *The Jungle* to *The Fountainhead*, the idea that a novel can effect widespread social or

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<sup>19</sup> One might narrow the definition even more: the category of the purpose novel was a viable genre from approximately the middle of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth. Tichi’s observation that propaganda gained its overwhelmingly negative connotations after 1918 argues for a demarcation around the first World War, when the purpose novel would become laden with a significance it did not previously have; we might also add the Russian Revolution as a significant moment in re-defining revolutionary or political novels. For the purposes of this project, though, an overly precise definition of the category of purpose novel is less important than the fact that reviewers at the time recognized specific novels as belonging to the broadly defined category of purpose novel.

political change remains compelling for readers, but our critical understanding of the ways novels interact with public discourse and social and political change rests on a precarious evidentiary record. New Historicist studies at the end of the twentieth century pushed literary scholars to consider the relationship between ideology and literary production, but New Historicism relies on symptomatic readings of the novels themselves, rather than the responses of first readers who read and discussed the novels in relation to contemporary events. Though the attention given by many of the purpose novel's defenders and detractors alike to the effects of the genre on its reader indicates that nineteenth-century critics often believed that the purpose novel had the potential to influence the reading public, the discussions surrounding specific purpose novels tell a different story.

The novels examined in the following chapters are drawn from a generic landscape representative of our current scholarly understanding of the American novel at the end of the nineteenth century. For New Historicist scholars at the end of the twentieth century, genre played an important role in the critical understanding of the relationship between literary production and social change at the end of the nineteenth century. Scholars like Amy Kaplan, June Howard, and Jane Tompkins focused on recovering the cultural and political functions of realist, naturalist, and sentimental and domestic novels, respectively, in the context of an academic reading practice that had long devalued such novels as formally inferior to mid-century romances. Howard, for instance, reads naturalism alongside contemporary political movements for reform, both populist and progressive, arguing that while naturalism is "fundamentally incompatible with this mass democratic movement [populism]," it "anticipates progressivism," which emphasizes the

disinterested, professional reformer over the uncontrollable mob of populism.<sup>20</sup> In this way, naturalism's formal structures align the genre with the political and social shifts evident in progressivism.

Similarly, Kaplan connects realism's formal qualities and narrative strategies to the changing position of the middle class at the end of the century and argues for a reevaluation of realism as a genre, criticizing exclusively formalist approaches to the genre that divorce realism from its social context, so that "Stylistic inconsistencies and problematic endings were usually treated as internal formal flaws rather than as narrative articulations of ideological problems" (5). Kaplan advocates viewing realism as a genre that, rather than uncritically reflecting the growing late-nineteenth century consumer culture, both expresses and mediates anxieties over the social, political, and economic changes that threaten to disrupt the stability and even reality of middle-class, white American culture. Kaplan's argument, like Howard's, is grounded in a close reading of realist novels within their historical context; to the extent that it addresses the conditions of literary production, it focuses primarily on the ways realist writers used the space of the novel to manage threats to the middle class from mass culture, often represented by new forms of journalism. Kaplan acknowledges the parallels between realism and social reform, noting that, "like contemporary social reformers, [realists] engage in an enormous act of construction to organize, re-form, and control the social world."<sup>21</sup> But while

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<sup>20</sup> June Howard, *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 127.

<sup>21</sup> Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 10.

Kaplan examines the way realism functions to re-form the social world within the novel, she does not address what happens when novels seek to reform the world outside the text.

Kaplan's project explicitly seeks to raise the profile of a genre that was long seen as less significant to American literary history than romance, but that had also remained a recognized part of the canon. Jane Tompkins's work also sets up an opposition to the canonical American romances, but she does so to argue for the importance of genres that had been almost wholly excised from American literary history—the sentimental and domestic traditions. While Kaplan's argument rests on a close reading of realist novels against the historical and social context within which they were written, Tompkins's claim for the significance of previously overlooked novels by women is grounded in an examination of the conditions of their production and initial reception. Tompkins argues, for instance, that our understanding of Hawthorne's early work is much more a product of twentieth-century critical narratives than those Hawthorne's first readers found significant in his stories. In questioning "the accepted view that a classic work does not depend for its status on the circumstances in which it is read," Tompkins asserts the need to consider canon formation as responding to changing critical concerns, and to include the initial conditions of reception among those concerns.<sup>22</sup>

Works like those outlined above tend to treat genre as a major or defining feature of late-nineteenth-century novels, and to base their analysis of the relationship between novels and their cultural context on novels' adherence to specific generic forms and conventions. "Reviewing the Purpose Novel" challenges these categorical distinctions.

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<sup>22</sup> Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 3.



The following chapters bring together as purpose novels Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition*, Frank Norris's *The Octopus*, Mary Wilkins Freeman's *The Portion of Labor*, and Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*—novels that would generally be categorized as realism, naturalism, regionalism, and muckraking, respectively. Reading these novels together, and even more significantly, analyzing the reviews that treated them in similar terms, reveals the ways the public discussion of these seemingly disparate novels relied on similar modes of interpretation. Further, the interpretive models employed by reviewers often revise or challenge scholarly readings grounded in generic assumptions.

### **Theoretical considerations**

As its title suggests, “Reviewing the Purpose Novel” is grounded in theories of reception and reader response. While the analysis in the following chapters is most immediately informed by the methodologies of reception study, reader response theory provides a theoretical foundation on which the historical concerns of reception study rest. Theorists like Wolfgang Iser, Hans Jauss, Stanley Fish and Peter Rabinowitz, as well as feminist reader response theorists like Judith Fetterley and Patsy Schweikart, discussed in chapter three, established a context within which scholars could consider the responses solicited, implied, or encouraged by a text as an object of equal importance to the text itself. “Reviewing the Purpose Novel” makes claims both about the relationship between reviewers’ interpretations and what happens in a text and about the relationships between the different reviews. In considering the ways reviewers interpret the text itself, I draw on a number of assumptions central to reader response theory. However, much of that work lacks a historical component necessary to make compelling claims about the relationship

between texts and their readers (or, in this case, reviewers). As I discuss below, reception study provides an important corrective to ahistorical theories of reader response.

Early reader-response theory attended to the relationship between text and reader, but the reader in many studies was a hypothetical construct: an implied reader or an ideal reader about whom critics could make claims based on the text itself. Wolfgang Iser, for example, proposes an implied reader who navigates the blanks and negations present in a text, seeking to resolve textual gaps. This process, which Iser identifies as dyadic communication between text and reader, is ultimately controlled by the text. The reader's role is limited to responding to structural elements of the text itself, making the implied reader a construct of the text rather than a historically-contingent independent agent. There is, of course, ample evidence that readers do not simply construct readings implied by a text, as anyone who has led an undergraduate discussion well knows. Many of the readings that emerge from the reviews in the following chapters differ from the responses an implied or model reader might be expected to come to, based on the structural elements in the text. Moreover, the purpose novel is a genre explicitly defined by the way it was categorized by its first readers. A novel might be structured in such a way that its implied reader would not consider it a purpose novel (one might, for example, make that argument about *The Octopus*), but if its reviewers identified the novel as seeking to intervene in contemporary issues, then the conventions of the purpose novel are relevant to our understanding of the book's publication and reception.

Stanley Fish and Peter Rabinowitz offer theoretical models that more explicitly mediate between the readings implied by the text and the context in which a text is

received, but like Iser, these models have significant limitations when it comes to addressing historically specific readerships. In “Interpreting the *Variorum*,” Fish argues that the act of reading is not governed by forms encoded in a text, but rather by interpretive conventions that the reader brings to the text. For Fish, the text does not determine the interpretive model, the reader’s interpretive model determines the text. Readers share interpretive models and assumptions as part of interpretive communities, which are “made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions.”<sup>23</sup> But because an interpretive community is defined by shared interpretive conventions that exist outside of (and, Fish argues, prior to) a given text, we can never know whether any two people are part of the same interpretive community, since, according to Fish, “any evidence brought forward to support the claim would itself be an interpretation.”<sup>24</sup> As described by Fish, then, interpretive communities are fundamentally ahistorical, which critics, including Edward Said, Frank Lentriccia, and Terry Eagleton, locate as a significant limitation to his theory.<sup>25</sup>

“Reviewing the Purpose Novel” takes as central the idea that reading conventions have as much influence over interpretations as the text itself, and that interpretations are a product of the specific conventions and the reviewer's conception of his own reading public. Reviewers are generally primed to interpret a novel in specific ways based on a

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<sup>23</sup> Stanley Fish, “Interpreting the *Variorum*,” *Critical Inquiry* 2, no. 3 (1976): 483, JSTOR.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 485.

<sup>25</sup> Vincent Leitch, “Reader-Response Criticism” in *Readers and Reading*, ed. Andrew Bennett (New York: Longman, 1995), 40.

host of factors: geography, political affiliation of the publication, readers' expectations for the review (or what reviewers believe those expectations to be), promotional material received, relationship with the publishing house, etc. Reviewers will also be affected by circumstances that we can know little or nothing about: personal views about the author, the amount of time given to reading the book or writing the review, personal feelings about the subject matter, misunderstandings about the content, and so on. But these factors are not, as Fish implies, all evidence for a set of equally difficult-to-prove interpretations. The historical circumstances of reviewing provide a basis for making supportable claims about the reading and reviewing publics for individual novels. In this way, the chapters that follow are most closely aligned with the scholarship that emerged out of Fish's theories and applied the idea of interpretive conventions to specific historical reading contexts. Scholars like Tompkins and Steven Mailloux brought together the concerns of New Historicism and reader response theory to demonstrate the ways that interpretive conventions shape critical interpretations of a text both historically and in contemporary scholarship.<sup>26</sup>

For Fish, the historical author of a text is inconsequential, since a reader's interpretive community, not the author's intention or even the circumstances in which a text was written, dictates interpretation. Peter Rabinowitz attempts to integrate the historically-contingent author and readers with their textually defined counterparts by

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<sup>26</sup> Tompkins, *Sensational Designs*; Steven Mailloux, "The Red Badge of Courage and Interpretive Conventions: Critical Response to a Maimed Text," *Studies in the Novel* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1978): 48-63. Mailloux's later work responds even more directly to specific historical instances of reading; in doing so he draws not only on Fish, but increasingly on rhetorical approaches to reception. Mailloux, *Reception Histories: Rhetoric, Pragmatism, and American Cultural Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1998).

differentiating between the audiences implied by and involved in a text's production and distinguishing between actual, authorial, and narrative audiences. The narrative audience is an entirely fictional construction of the novel's narrator, while the authorial and actual audiences have some connection to extratextual readers. Figuring the authorial audience as the hypothetical audience the author is writing for, Rabinowitz admits that the term necessarily implies or implicates authorial intention, but argues that the authorial audience gets around the problem of intention by "treating it as a matter of social convention rather than of individual psychology," in that it "allows us to treat the reader's attempt to read as the author intended, not as a search for the author's private psyche, but rather as the joining of a particular social/interpretive community; that is, the acceptance of the author's invitation to read in a particular socially constituted way that is shared by the author and his or her expected readers."<sup>27</sup> In contrast, the actual audience consists of "the flesh-and-blood people who read the book... Each member of the actual audience is different, and each reads in his or her own way, with a distance from other readers depending upon such variables as class, gender, race, personality, training, culture, and historical situation."<sup>28</sup>

Rabinowitz's actual audience is, of course, nearly impossible to pin down, given its unknowable heterogeneity, making it of little utility in discussing specific instances of reception. But the authorial audience is only slightly more useful. Unlike Iser's implied reader, which is a construction of the text alone, the authorial audience is subject to

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<sup>27</sup> Peter Rabinowitz, *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987): 22.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

specific social and historical circumstances. As Rabinowitz defines it, the authorial audience is primarily dependent on the author's understanding of his readers' expectations and the "social/interpretive community" to which they belong. But what happens when an author misjudges his audience? Or when the audience does not "attempt to read as the author intended"? While such a reading might be the product of a single member of the actual audience, and therefore idiosyncratic or wholly individual, it need not be so. The chapters that follow include a number of instances in which some subset of the reviewing audience appears not to be part of the authorial audience; that is, a subset of reviewers interpret the novel in ways that diverge from an apparent authorial intention. These reviewers constitute some other type of audience, one that is not entirely individuated and heterogeneous, since they are reading and writing in the context of a broad network of reviews, but also not one that necessarily aligns itself with the authorial audience. The distinction between authorial and actual audiences is further complicated by the introduction of a reviewer as audience member. Each reviewer may read differently, but, as I discuss below, he does so with an eye to influencing other members of the novel's actual audience.

Hans Robert Jauss's aesthetics of reception comes closest to bridging the gap between constructions of the author's intended audience or the text's implied readings and the actual circumstances in which a particular book was read. Jauss insists on the importance of a text's "horizon of expectations"—the limits of what readers could expect from and understand of a text at the time of its publication. Jauss's aesthetics of reception calls for a reconstruction of a text's horizon of expectations and, he argues, "demands

that one insert the individual work into its ‘literary series’ to recognize its historical position and significance in the experience of literature.”<sup>29</sup> Jauss’s ultimate aim, though, is to develop an aesthetics that relies not on formalist evaluations, but rather on the circumstances of reception: the mark of an aesthetically superior text, for Jauss, is one that pushes or expands readers’ horizon of expectations beyond its initial position.<sup>30</sup>

Because the purpose novel intervenes in contemporary issues, the ways it addresses its readers are an important part of our understanding of the relationship between text and review. Reader response theory provides the foundation for determining the structural elements a reviewer would have had available. We need to know what an implied reader might take from a novel, or what an authorial audience would discover in order to chart the ways reviewers responded to, undermined, or even ignored such readings. But making claims about the interaction between reviewers, readers, and the literary marketplace requires a close attention to the particulars of the historical moment, and an understanding of how all of these pieces work together requires a theoretical framework that takes such historical specificity as a fundamental quality. Building on Jauss’s work, scholars who practice reception studies have established a framework in which we can better understand and analyze the historically contingent responses of specific readers, as well as the interplay between texts, reviewers, and readers. Reception study offers a way of understanding the audience reviewers comprise and the audience

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<sup>29</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 32.

<sup>30</sup> Jauss’s aesthetics of reception is discussed in further detail in chapter three.

they speak to, a complex relationship that neither Iser's implied reader, Fish's interpretive community, nor Rabinowitz's actual and authorial audiences can fully account for.

As reception theorists emphasize, we must not assume a one-to-one correspondence between the reactions of reviewers and those of a novel's individual readers. But though reviews cannot tell us what the individuals who bought the novel thought about it, they can provide significant insight into the strategies for reading and interpreting the novel that were made available to those readers, as well as the character of the public response to the book. In *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (1984), Nina Baym uses reviews in American periodicals published between 1840 and 1860 to determine the function reviewers played in the literary marketplace, and the relationship between reviewers and readers of antebellum novels. Baym acknowledges that a review cannot be taken as a representative statement about a particular novel, but argues that novel reviewing was "directed toward readers, was conducted in constant awareness of what people were reading, and was always trying to understand the reasons for public preferences;" as a result, "The reviews offer guidance and correction in a way that enables us to see what [reviewers] thought they were guiding and correcting."<sup>31</sup> Reviewers, Baym claims, were concerned about the effects of immoral or frivolous novels on readers and about the danger that improper reading habits might cause readers to obtain the wrong message from more appropriate novels. As a result, reviewers were engaged both in policing the kinds of novels they

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<sup>31</sup> Nina Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1984), 14.



thought their readers should and should not read, and in emphasizing ways of reading that would result in an appropriate interpretation of the novel's moral.

James Machor's *Reading Fiction in Antebellum America: Informed Response and Reception Histories, 1820-1865* (2011) builds on Baym's work with antebellum reviews. Unlike Baym, who claims antebellum reviewers did not see "the act of reading novels as one of producing meanings, interpretations, or readings," Machor argues that reviewers "clearly *practiced* interpretation" and "assumed that fiction did possess a meaning that informed readers would ferret out."<sup>32</sup> Machor's work examines the relationship between antebellum reviewers and the informed reader, emphasizing, like Baym, that reviewers saw themselves as actively engaged in managing readers' interactions with fiction. For Machor, studies of so-called "common readers" that rely on letters, diaries, and marginalia are necessarily too limited in scope to tell us anything about the "processes of response and the dynamics of reception—little, in other words, about how historically specific readers processed texts and how interpretive strategies shaped the way texts worked on their readers."<sup>33</sup> Machor proposes what he calls a "historical hermeneutics" to better determine the historically-situated dynamics of public reception:

...a historical hermeneutics needs to reconstruct the shared patterns of interpretation for a specific historical era to define the reading formation of particular interpretive communities. That reconstruction would explore the role a particular interpretive community had—or sought to have—in shaping

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<sup>32</sup> Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers*, 61; James Machor, *Reading Fiction in Antebellum America: Informed Response and Reception Histories, 1820-1865* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2011), 59.

<sup>33</sup> Machor, *Reading Fiction*, 6.

interpretation, that community's repertoire of interpretive codes, its assumptions about how reading should proceed and about how texts position their audiences during the reading process, and the relation between community-specific interpretive strategies and the cultural contexts in which they were practiced.<sup>34</sup>

Essential to the practice of historical hermeneutics in the nineteenth century is the fact that the rise of magazines in the first half of the century resulted in "the creation and extension of a public sphere of interpretation that paralleled and helped form middle-class reading formations for the reception of fiction."<sup>35</sup> Machor notes that his use of the term "public sphere," following the work of Jürgen Habermas, indicates a "social or cultural (not physical) space in which access (in theory) is guaranteed to all," but admits that in practice, "the public sphere in antebellum America was hardly guaranteed to all."<sup>36</sup> The relationship between novel reviews and a public sphere in which reviews circulated, were discussed, and exerted influence is essential to Machor's historical hermeneutics, which focuses on reconstructing interpretive codes within a community's public discourse. But aside from his brief mention of Habermas and acknowledgment that access to the public sphere of nineteenth-century American letters was limited by class and location, Machor does not examine the ways our understanding of the public sphere might affect the practice of historical hermeneutics and the analysis of reviewing conventions. I want to suggest that a more nuanced deployment of public sphere theory, grounded in Michael

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 342, n. 84

Warner's work on publics and counterpublics, further enriches both Machor's ideas and their application to purpose novel reviews.

Machor's use of "public sphere" implies a singular or unitary quality that, as Michael Warner points out, critics sometimes mistakenly attribute to Habermas's theory. According to Warner, what Habermas describes in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* is the development of "the fiction of 'public opinion' as the ideal background of all possible publics," but that, in fact, "the public sphere" can be understood to encompass multiple publics. One might argue that antebellum book reviews were part of a unified public sphere to the extent that the magazines from which Machor draws the review were national in circulation, addressed readers who might be considered middle-class and well-educated, and responded to each other. In addition, literary magazines in the antebellum period were not yet competing with popular mass-culture alternatives like *McClure's* or *Ladies' Home Journal*, making it more likely that antebellum magazine circulation created a unified "social or cultural... space."<sup>37</sup> But when we look later in the century, it quickly becomes apparent that thinking about reviewing in terms of a single primary or dominant public sphere has significant limitations. By the end of the nineteenth century, magazines and newspapers existed in such variety and specificity that considering the *Phonographic Magazine*, the *Medical Century*, the *Baltimore Sun* and the *Portland Weekly Advertiser* in terms of a single

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<sup>37</sup> On the rise of the mass-market alternatives to the *Atlantic*-group literary magazines, see Nancy Glazener, *Reading for Realism: The History of a US Literary Institution, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 235-236.

public sphere hampers our ability to say anything meaningful or specific about the context in which each of these publications exists.

In *Publics and Counterpublics*, Warner expands on the potential for multiple publics that he identifies in Habermas's work. While we can, and often do, speak about "the public" as a "kind of social totality"—encompassing people in general, or possibly the public of a nation—according to Warner, a public "comes into being only in relations to texts and their circulation."<sup>38</sup> For Warner, publics are defined by their autotelic nature, so that they exist by virtue of and are organized around the texts that address them. In addition, publics are "essentially intertextual, frameworks for understanding texts against an organized background of the circulation of other texts, all interwoven not just by citational references but by the incorporation of a reflexive circulatory field in the mode of address and consumption."<sup>39</sup> Warner identifies seven defining qualities of a public, among them that "*Publics act historically according to the temporality of their circulation.*"<sup>40</sup> The importance of the historically and temporally specific nature of circulation, combined with the emphasis on a public as a reflexive space that includes previously existing and responding discourse, makes Warner's definition of a public particularly useful in examining reviews and studying reception. The public of the *Baltimore Sun* is distinct from that of the *Portland Weekly Advertiser*, and those distinctions may be important to understand when considering the reviews published in each newspaper.

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<sup>38</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 65-66.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

Moreover, reviews themselves often demonstrate an awareness that the public they are addressing is distinct from the publics organized by the circulation of other texts. One of the features Machor marks throughout antebellum reviews is the tendency of reviewers to caution against the reading habits of the “indiscriminate” “mass” of fiction readers. Given that the readers of periodical reviews were also by and large readers of fiction, Machor asks, “would not such unflattering characterizations of fiction readers offend and alienate the very readership on which periodicals depended?” Machor explains this rhetorical move on the part of reviewers as one that differentiated between middle-class readers of both magazines and novels and the uneducated, working-class readers of serial and penny fiction, thereby “inscribing and reinforcing a differentiation and hierarchy among readers that would appeal to bourgeois class status,” as well as provide a cautionary model of how not to read in the form of the indiscriminate reader.<sup>41</sup> In criticizing the reading habits of the mass of indiscriminate readers, reviewers are addressing the public of the relatively expensive, highbrow monthlies while simultaneously constructing the public of the penny-issue story papers, demonstrating not only reviewers’ awareness of the multiplicity of antebellum reading publics, but also reviewers’ attempts to make use of that multiplicity to exert influence on their own public.

Both reader response and reception theory raise questions about the degree to which an interpretation is internal or external to the text itself. Though Iser’s implied reader grants that reading is an interaction between text and reader, the text remains the

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<sup>41</sup> Machor, *Reading Fiction*, 42.

primary source of interpretation. In contrast, Fish argues that all interpretations are shaped by factors external to the text. Fish and Rabinowitz rightly point out the individual and personal nature of the interpretive process, such that we can never reconstruct an individual reading.<sup>42</sup> But historically specific conventions and circumstances often determine interpretation to a degree that allows scholars to make claims about particular instances of reading. And reviews bring an added layer, since reviewers are writing for readers and are therefore trying to make their reading process legible and transparent.<sup>43</sup>

The following chapters demonstrate that historical circumstances and interpretive conventions imposed significant limitations on the purpose novel, particularly by 1900. No matter what the specific qualities of the text, an individual purpose novel at the turn of the century would be hampered by a reading public that was torn about whether the category of the purpose novel should exist and often hostile to particular interventions a novel suggested. But the specific limitations placed on an individual purpose novel were closely related to what was in the book itself. The text presented reviewers with opportunities for interpretation that they could use to circumscribe the book's purpose, though those opportunities were not necessarily ones that the author intended. The reception histories that follow chart the means by which reviewers used both the

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<sup>42</sup> For an analysis of the difficulties inherent in reconstructing an individual's reading formation, see Tony Bennett's discussion of Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms*: Tony Bennett, "Texts, Readers, Reading Formations," *The Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1983): 3-17.

<sup>43</sup> As Machor and Baym demonstrate, reviewers often attempted to implicitly instruct or guide readers through their reviews, which might occlude elements of the reviewer's interpretive process. But even in such cases, reviewers needed to present their interpretations in ways their readers could follow.

interpretive conventions external to the text and the features internal to it to construct readings that, in many cases, worked to revise and minimize the political or social implications of the novel.

### **The purpose novel in the nineteenth century**

One of the central claims of this project is that the turn of the century represented an important turning point in the purpose novel's lifespan. Not only did the end of the century see the first widespread critical objections to the purpose novel's place in the literary landscape, but it also gave rise to popular modes of reading which significantly undermined the purpose novel's aims. Analyzing this shift in the purpose novel's public profile requires an understanding of both the literary marketplace at the end of the century and the purpose novel's place within that marketplace.

The American publishing landscape at the end of the nineteenth century was both complex and dynamic. Technological innovations had revolutionized book production and distribution, as well as the market for newspapers and magazines. Professional opportunities were also expanding rapidly; for the first time, it was possible for more than a few successful individuals to make a living as a professional author. Journalism, too, emerged in the second half of the century as a viable and even lucrative profession, and many authors of the late-nineteenth century got their start as journalists.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> On technological innovations in publishing see Michael Winship, "The Rise of a National Book Trade System in the United States," *A History of the Book in America*, vol. 4, ed. Carl F. Kaestle and Janice A. Radway (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 56-77. On the professionalization of literature and journalism, see Christopher Wilson, *The Labor of Words: Literary Professionalism in the Progressive Era* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), and Glazener, *Reading for Realism*, 93-146.

Thanks to a confluence of factors including improved printing technology, better systems of distribution, increased national literacy, and a growing middle class, the number of books in the United States increased significantly around the turn of the century.<sup>45</sup> Similar factors were at work in the magazine industry, where expansion was fueled by a price war brought on by the advent of magazines like *Cosmopolitan* and *McClure's*, which were aiming for a broader middle-class audience than was currently being served by the more elite twenty-five or thirty-five cent monthlies. Thanks to the drop in prices and the establishment of new general-interest magazines, circulation of monthly magazines in the US went from about 18 million in 1890 to 64 million in 1905.<sup>46</sup> The newspaper industry was growing as well, and by the end of the century newspaper journalism had begun to move away from the strict partisanship of the nineteenth century toward an emphasis on objective and unbiased reporting. Daily newspapers expanded and proliferated at the end of the century, reaching a peak of 2,600 papers in 1909, before shrinking again in the consolidation efforts that followed.<sup>47</sup>

Though the publishing landscape was expanding quickly, many of the monthly magazines retained close ties to the major publishing houses. The magazine and book publishing worlds were closely intertwined, and the authors whose books were reviewed in magazines like the *Forum*, the *Atlantic*, and the *World's Work* often had personal

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<sup>45</sup> According to Michael Winship, "The annual number of new titles and editions grew sixfold, from 2,076 in 1880 to 13,470 in 1910." Winship, "The Rise of a National Book Trade System," 57.

<sup>46</sup> Richard Ohmann, "Diverging Paths: Books and Magazines in the Transition to Corporate Capitalism," in *A History of the Book in America*, 103

<sup>47</sup> Richard L. Kaplan, "From Partisanship to Professionalism: The Transformation of the Daily Press," in *A History of the Book in America*, 127.



relationships with the magazines' editors as writers of literary columns, short stories, and reviews. Further, magazines were often affiliated with publishing houses, making the business of book reviewing closely tied to the business of book publishing. Walter Hines Page, the editor and publisher responsible for the publication of *The Marrow of Tradition*, *The Octopus*, and *The Jungle*, acknowledged as much in his pamphlet, *A Publisher's Confession*, in which he laid out his philosophy of publishing, emphasizing the pitfalls of treating authorship and publishing as a strictly commercial venture.

According to Page,

A literary judgment of a new novel cannot affect the judgment that men will form of it ten years hence. Therefore it is of no permanent value. Neither can it affect the sales of a new novel. It is therefore of no practical importance for the moment. I look upon reviews of novels as so much publicity—they have value, as they tell the public that the book is published and can be bought, and as they tell something about it which may prod the reader's curiosity. Further than this they are of no account. Not one of the three publishers whose personal habits I know as a rule takes the trouble to read the reviews of novels of his own publishing.<sup>48</sup>

Page's primary concern here and throughout *A Publisher's Confession* is with the tension between the literary and commercial aspects of the profession. For Page, reviews have a certain immediate commercial value, but little literary value, as reviewers' judgement tends not to reflect a novel's literary greatness or staying power. For a publisher, the opinion of a book's reviewers is less important than the number of copies sold and the

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<sup>48</sup> Walter Hines Page, *A Publisher's Confession* (New York: Doubleday, Page, & Co., 1905): 35-36, HathiTrust.

length of time the book continues to sell. But Page also acknowledges that reviews provide publicity and potentially pique consumer interest. They may not identify which books will become classics or the qualities that will be important for future readers, but they do indicate the terms with which a novel is discussed at the time of publication and the qualities that reviewers identified as likely to attract the interest of readers.

Though Page sets publishing and reviewing up as entirely separate actions, the extent to which publishers were able to influence reviews is not entirely clear. In their 1882 manual *Authors and Publishing: A Manual of Suggestions for Beginners in Literature*, publishers George H. and John B. Putnam caution the beginning writer that, despite charges to the contrary, publishers are generally unable to exert any influence on reviewers to write favorable reviews. The Putnams' assurances notwithstanding, reviewers, particularly those at newspapers, were generally responsible for making their way through far more books than they could carefully read, and often relied on the publishers' promotional material to fill out their reviews. Publishers were in this way, if not directly, able to guide the content of a review. And, as Nancy Glazener notes, accusations that publishing houses influenced reviews through advertisement or by encouraging editors to "puff" certain authors were common throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>49</sup>

Certainly, not all turn-of-the-century reviews were equivalent in quality, attention, and critical discernment. Reviewers for monthly magazines had more time than newspaper reviewers to read each book and compose the review, making them less likely

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<sup>49</sup> Glazener, *Reading for Realism*, 36.

to rely on the summaries and other promotional material provided by the publishers. Magazines affiliated with publishing houses might have a stake in publicizing certain books more widely than others. Newspaper reviewers might be influenced by the paper's political affiliation. While there is no way to account for all of the different factors that might influence a given review, the chapters that follow take into consideration many of the factors outlined above, particularly the political and class stakes of different publications. In addition, each reception history makes use of the broadest range of reviews possible so as not to place too much weight on any one individual review.

The end of the nineteenth century also saw the expansion of newspaper syndicates and popular novels marketed to mass audiences. At the same time that newspaper syndicates and ten-cent magazines were expanding access to various reading material, American reading habits were shifting, as well. The growing popularity of adventure stories, as well as the "romantic revival" in the 1880s and 1890s, alarmed observers like William Dean Howells, who worried that popular tastes were embracing frivolous or unhealthy reading, and equated popular novels with addictive reading and excessive emotion.<sup>50</sup> As the American readership grew, writers and critics expressed concern about broad changes in reading habits, particularly as they related to fiction. According to Barbara Hochman, writers' concern that readers were reading fiction for the "wrong" reasons is reflected in depictions of "mindless, pretentious, or otherwise obtuse readers" and "grimly determined or vulgar consumers of printed matter."<sup>51</sup> But though critics

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<sup>50</sup> Glazener, *Reading for Realism*, 93-188.

<sup>51</sup> Barbara Hochman, *Getting at the Author: Reimagining Books and Reading in the Age of American Realism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 33.

worried about the habits of fiction readers (and, as Nancy Glazener shows, often attempted to correct those habits), they also acknowledged that the market for fiction was greatly expanding. The debate over the purpose novel, then, was another instance in which cultural and literary commentators expressed concern about the effect of novel-reading on the character of the American public.

Novels, in other words, were big business at the turn of the century, as were magazines, which filled space by discussing books, authors, and literary gossip. In addition to book reviews' role as models of particular ways of reading, reviews also served to increase the visibility of individual novels and to capitalize on the ties between book and magazine publishers. The utility of book reviews both to book publishers looking to publicize their books and to magazine and newspaper editors looking to fill space results in a particularly large and rich archive of published material about the novels examined in the following chapters. In order to understand how this large and varied reviewing and commenting public viewed the category of the purpose novel, it is instructive to situate the purpose novel at the turn of the century in terms of its most visible predecessors. While there were a number of purpose novels that achieved bestseller status in the second half of the nineteenth century—including Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona*, the novels of Elizabeth Stewart Phelps Ward, and Timothy Shay Arthur's *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room and What I Saw There*—the two that had the greatest impact on American culture in the second half of the nineteenth century are arguably *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Looking Backward*.

### ***Uncle Tom's Cabin***

Abraham Lincoln never actually uttered the famous and oft-repeated quip that has been a favorite of American literary history. Meeting Harriet Beecher Stowe for the first time, the story goes, Lincoln declared, “So you’re the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war!” This anecdote first appeared in Beecher family lore, and after multiple re-tellings gained the ring of truth, if not the evidentiary record to substantiate it. And though scholars have long recognized the apocryphal nature of the anecdote, the story has been repeated in biographies of Stowe and Lincoln, studies of nineteenth-century literary history and histories of the Civil War throughout the twentieth century.<sup>52</sup>

The immense popularity of a line never spoken hints at the cultural power Stowe’s novel still wields, as well as how immediately after publication *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* began to consolidate its position as purpose novel *par excellence*. We can find evidence of the novel’s hold on the public just a few installments into its initial publication in the *National Era*: Stowe had fallen behind in her writing, and editor Gamaliel Bailey published the October 30 issue without the scheduled chapter of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Gamaliel Bailey even went so far as to suggest that, the installments being far more numerous than originally intended, the story might be concluded with a synopsis of the events to come, rather than the full text. The *National Era* was inundated by indignant readers complaining of the skipped installment and demanding the full story.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> For more on the genesis and popularity of this anecdote, see Daniel R. Vollaro, “Lincoln, Stowe, and the ‘Little Woman/Great War’ Story: The Making, and Breaking, of a Great American Anecdote,” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Society* 30, no. 1 (2009), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.2629860.0030.104>.

<sup>53</sup> David S. Reynolds, *Mightier than the Sword: Uncle Tom’s Cabin and the Battle for America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), 10-11.

When John P. Jewett and Company released *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in two volumes the following year, it was an immediate success, with 200,000 copies sold by January, 1853.<sup>54</sup> Once entrenched in the national consciousness, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* remained there well into the twentieth century. Scholars have identified any number of different ways of tracing the novel's influence, from its various theatrical adaptations and its history in film to the novelized responses during the Civil War and Reconstruction, most of which answered Stowe's abolitionist narrative with racist polemics of their own.<sup>55</sup> Scholars have recently turned their attention to the novel's circulation within African American culture; Barbara Hochman, for instance, argues that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* played an important role in African American literary culture in the years between *Plessy v. Ferguson* and *Brown v. Board of Education*. Hochman argues that, during a moment in which young white readers were reading the novel less and less, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "stirred intense mixed feelings... in the age of segregation."<sup>56</sup> For many mid-century writers and intellectuals, Hochman asserts, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* formed an important part of a formative literary canon of work about the African American experience.

Another measure of *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* influence can be found in the reviews of the novels published in the decades following Stowe's book. Any novel that took as its

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<sup>54</sup> Reynolds, *Mightier than the Sword*, 12.

<sup>55</sup> The scholarship on *Uncle Tom's* cultural influence is too vast to thoroughly summarize, but a few examples include: Stephen M. Best, *The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Sarah Meer, *Uncle Tom Mania: Slavery, Minstrelsy, and Transatlantic Culture in the 1850s* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005); Jo-Ann Morgan, *Uncle Tom's Cabin as Visual Culture* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007); Hochman, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Reading Revolution*.

<sup>56</sup> Hochman, *Uncle Tom's Cabin and the Reading Revolution*, 236.

subject a contemporary social or moral ill could expect at least a few reviewers to invoke *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in comparison. Some publishers sought to capitalize on the popularity of Stowe's book by advertising novels as the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of something. Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona*, for instance, was known as the "*Uncle Tom's Cabin* of the Indian," while Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* was subtitled "The 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' of the Horse." One might even, in the United States at least, define the nineteenth-century purpose novel as any novel that was widely compared to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Despite its popularity, reviews of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were not uniformly positive, even among Northern reviewers. It would take a project of its own to fully map the novel's reception, but the reviews reveal several trends that are common to all of the novels examined in the following chapters.<sup>57</sup> These trends form a sort of baseline for purpose novel reviews: just as many reviewers compared the purpose novels that followed to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, so, too, did they invoke a set of standard concerns and criticisms that apply to nearly all purpose novels and serve as common generic markers. Not surprisingly, reviewers disagreed about whether *Uncle Tom's Cabin* should be considered polemic or art. According to the *Independent*, "The book is full of the intensest Truth; the *very* Truth, of facts and of ethics. As the artist attains the highest truth, that which is really enduring and valuable... so in this book, though the several

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<sup>57</sup> For a general description of the reception of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, see Stephen A. Hirsch, "Uncle Tomitudes: The Popular Reaction to 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,'" *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1978): 303-330. On the reception of Stowe's novel among African American readers, see Robert S. Levine, "Uncle Tom's Cabin in Frederick Douglass' Paper: An Analysis of Reception," *American Literature* 64, no. 1 (1992): 71-93.

incidents as connected with the life of "Uncle Tom" may not all have occurred, we have the fullest clearest Truth on the matter of Slavery."<sup>58</sup> The *Southern Literary Messenger*, on the other hand, declared, "This is a fiction—professedly a fiction; but, unlike other works of the same type, its purpose is not amusement, but proselytism."<sup>59</sup> Certainly, sectional and political affiliation played a significant role in whether or not a reviewer decried *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as bald propaganda, and many of the reviews that endorsed the novel's abolitionist position took care to emphasize its artistic merits, as well.

A related point for reviewers involved the degree to which the novel's characters could be considered realistic or three-dimensional. While it has become a commonplace that Uncle Tom and Eva are more properly caricatures than characters, reviewers did not all agree.<sup>60</sup> The *North American Review* admits that "Eva and Tom are dreams; the one is a saint, the other an angel," but goes on to argue, "But dreams are founded on realities, and 'we are all such stuff as dreams are made of.'"<sup>61</sup> The *Boston Morning Post* asserts that the book "does not contain a figure that is not so vigorously sketched as to be fully individualized, and well able to stand alone," and goes on to declare, less politically, "we must say that Uncle Tom himself, St. Clare, Marie, Eva and Miss Ophelia are given with

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<sup>58</sup> Rev. of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Independent*, April 15, 1852, Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture online archive.

<sup>59</sup> Rev. of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Southern Literary Messenger*, December 1852, 722-731, Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture online archive.

<sup>60</sup> Philip Fisher argues that what we might term Uncle Tom's "puzzling blankness or passivity" is, in fact, evidence that the character has performed some sort of cultural work. According to Fisher, the fact that "Later periods often find such figures wooden, offensive, and trite" is evidence that the figures "have carried out their radical capture of imaginative space." Philip Fisher, *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 7.

<sup>61</sup> Rev. of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *North American Review*, October 1853, 467-493, Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture online archive.



a truth to nature that fairly astonished us, in our utter ignorance that a female author lived who was capable of such painting.”<sup>62</sup> Others viewed the characters as fundamentally unrealistic. In a denunciatory review, *Graham’s Magazine* declared, “Uncle Tom is an exaggeration—a monster of perfection;” similarly, the *Southern Literary Messenger* called Uncle Tom “an epitome of the cardinal virtues, a sort of ebony St. Paul undergoing the perils, the stripes, the watchings and ultimately the martyrdom of the Apostle, with all of the Apostle’s meekness and fortitude, carrying a stainless soul in an offending body, and walking through much tribulation, without a single turn from the straight course, to the portals of the Heavenly Kingdom.”<sup>63</sup> Eva, according to the *Western Journal and Civilian*, is “far too wise for her years, as well too good for human nature.”<sup>64</sup>

Finally, the issue of fairness and accuracy was often invoked in the reviews, much as it was later raised in relation to the other novels in this study. Reviewers differed significantly about whether the novel was pure exaggeration or an even-handed depiction of slavery. Pro-abolition publications generally claimed the novel, in the words of the *Independent*, that “There is no exaggeration in this book. There is no attempt made to conceal the brighter aspects of the Slave-system, as they are met in the more northern agricultural districts, or sometimes in the household life of the cities.”<sup>65</sup> Not surprisingly,

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<sup>62</sup> W.B.S., rev. of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Boston Morning Post*, May 3, 1852, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture* online archive.

<sup>63</sup> George Graham, “Black Letters; or Uncle Tom-Foolery in Literature,” *Graham’s Magazine*, February 1853, 210-215, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture* online archive; “Notices of New Works,” *Southern Literary Messenger*, October 1852, 631-638, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture* online archive.

<sup>64</sup> Rev. of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Western Journal and Civilian*, November 1852, 134-139, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture* online archive.

<sup>65</sup> Rev. in *Independent*.

southern reviews took the position that the novel was, as the *Southern Press* writes, “a caricature of slavery. It selects for description the most odious features of slavery... It portrays the slaves of the story as more moral, intelligent, courageous, elegant and beautiful than their masters and mistresses; and where it concedes any of these qualities to the whites, it is to such only as are, even though slaveholders, opposed to slavery.”<sup>66</sup> In one of the few positive reviews to strike a more moderate tone, the Boston *Morning Post* cautions, “we would here remark that some portions are very highly colored... In a word the effect of ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin,’ as a whole, is grossly to exaggerate the actual evils of negro slavery in this country. As a didactic work, therefore, it should be swallowed with a considerable dose of allowance.”<sup>67</sup>

Lincoln’s endorsement notwithstanding, there is no clear way to demonstrate the degree to which *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* impacted northern support for the Civil War.<sup>68</sup> What is clear, though, is that the novel’s significant cultural influence includes the popular narrative of its persuasive success. As a touchstone for the purpose novels that followed it, then, the mention of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* carries with it the implication of popular support or persuasive change. Further, the dynamics that emerge in the reviews of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—questions about whether the book is polemic or art, whether its portrayal is biased or evenhanded, and whether the events depicted correspond to the actual state of

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<sup>66</sup> Rev. of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Southern Press Review*, 1852, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture* online archive.

<sup>67</sup> W.B.S., *Morning Post*.

<sup>68</sup> One prominent marker of influence, at least in Great Britain, is the amount of money donated to Stowe on her trip to England; according to David Reynolds, Stowe received \$20,000 in donations, along with 500,000 signatures on an antislavery petition known as the Stafford House Address (Reynolds, *Mightier than the Sword*, 132).

things in the country—are issues that appear with regularity in the reviews of all the purpose novels in this study. These foundational issues form the basic framework for many purpose novel reviews; reviewers then build on these common issues to address the characteristics specific to each novel.

### ***Looking Backward***

While it is difficult to make direct connections between *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and specific political actions or even public opinion about specific policy issues, the line between Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* and the political movement it inspired is much clearer. Though *Looking Backward* has not had the cultural staying power of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, its popularity in the decade or so following its 1887 publication was comparable to that of Stowe's novel. Both novels were frequently cited in discussions about the novel's ability to effect real-world change, and they remain among the novels that scholars discuss in terms of subsequent legislative or political action. As such, *Looking Backward's* reception, like that of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, is particularly relevant to our understanding of what reviewers thought turn-of-the-century novels were capable of accomplishing. Although the relationship between *Looking Backward's* popularity and its readers' political attitudes is somewhat clearer than it is with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Looking Backward's* reception indicates that it is still difficult to make more than basic claims about the sort of action a novel precipitates. Further, as the following discussion of *Looking Backward's* reception shows, the responses to *Looking Backward* that privileged political analysis and action were generally distanced from the reading practices and generic markers of the novel. Taken together, *Looking Backward* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

provide an essential context for understanding reviews of turn-of-the-century purpose novels, but they also demonstrate the need to focus on public discussion of the purpose novel, rather than a causal relationship between a novel's popularity and specific political action.

*Looking Backward* tells the story of Julian West, a late-nineteenth century capitalist who falls asleep in his own bed one night only to awaken in the year 2000. West soon finds that the United States has undergone drastic changes in the century he has been asleep: the entire economy has been nationalized, and the state manages an army of citizen-workers who keep the nation running. West's host Dr. Leete leads him on a thorough tour of the utopian future, explaining to West, and to *Looking Backward's* readers, the process by which America was transformed from the capitalist-dominated plutocracy of the 1880s to the nationalized utopia of the twenty-first century. Dr. Leete describes a system of compulsory education and labor that drafts (male) citizens into an industrial army in which they begin as laborers but can rise through the ranks and may even achieve the position of president. All citizens are allotted an identical allowance sufficient to meet their material needs, eliminating, Dr. Leete assures West, any inequality among the state's citizenry.

Readers responded to Bellamy's depiction of an authoritarian technocracy by forming Bellamy or Nationalist Clubs, initially for the purpose of discussing Bellamy's books. The first Bellamy Club began in Boston in 1888 and was organized by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, author, abolitionist, and leader of the first African-American regiment in the Civil War. At their height, there were 162 Bellamy Clubs in the United

States.<sup>69</sup> The early Bellamy clubs launched a magazine, the *Nationalist*, which had a circulation of 9000 at its height.<sup>70</sup> Though the *Nationalist* failed after just two years, it was replaced by the *New Nation*, a weekly magazine dedicated to promoting Nationalism and edited by Bellamy himself. While the *Nationalist* had focused primarily on abstract treatments of general ills or inspirational essays on Nationalism, the *New Nation* emphasized specific programs of reform and concrete action.<sup>71</sup>

Scholars have noted the many ways Bellamy's utopian future reinscribes nineteenth-century systems of inequality even as it claims to have all of the social ills that once plagued America. Bellamy himself was suspicious of unions and other radical labor movements, and was largely uninterested in the plight of the very poor.<sup>72</sup> Further, as Sylvia Strauss notes, Bellamy was either unable or unwilling to imagine a future that did not include Victorian gender roles. The America of 2000 has eliminated the need for most domestic work by establishing centralized kitchens, laundries, and nurseries (much like, Strauss notes, the reforms proposed by feminists like Abby Morton Diaz and Marie Howland), and women are educated in much the same manner as men. But women do not serve in the industrial army, nor can they rise to the position of president. Instead, they may join an auxiliary army with a parallel system of leadership. As Strauss notes, though,

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<sup>69</sup> Walter James Miller, "The Future of Futurism: An Introduction to *Looking Backward*," in *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (New York: Signet Classics, 2000), v.

<sup>70</sup> Frederic C. Jaher, "Nationalist," in *The American Radical Press: 1880-1960*, vol. I, ed. Joseph R. Conlin (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1974): 35.

<sup>71</sup> Frederic C. Jaher, "New Nation," in *The American Radical Press*, 36.

<sup>72</sup> Milton Cantor, "The Backward Look of Bellamy's Socialism," in *Looking Backward, 1988-1888: Essays on Edward Bellamy*, ed. Daphne Patai (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988): 30-32.

the primary activity of the women depicted in the novel seems to be shopping, so that even in Bellamy's nationalist utopia, women are defined in relation to commercialism.<sup>73</sup>

*Looking Backward* sold 300,000 copies in its first two years of publication, and a million copies in the United States and England in the ten years after it was published.<sup>74</sup> The book was quickly translated into more than twenty languages and, like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, it attained significant popularity around the world.<sup>75</sup> Bellamy himself was often involved in the effort to translate his book, and quite a bit of his correspondence with Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., who acquired *Looking Backward* when they absorbed Ticknor and Company in 1889, concerns proposed translations of the novel.<sup>76</sup> The network of Bellamy Clubs and *New Nation* readers coalesced into a political philosophy, dubbed Nationalism, aimed at bringing about the political and social changes described in *Looking Backward*. Nationalists were supporters of and contributors to the People's Party from 1891-1896<sup>77</sup>, and in 1891 Bellamy and the Nationalists were instrumental in the

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<sup>73</sup> Sylvia Strauss, "Gender, Class, and Race in Utopia," in *Looking Backward, 1888-1888*, 68-90.

<sup>74</sup> Jean Pfaelzer, *The Utopian Novel in America, 1886-1896: The Politics of Form* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1984): 48.

<sup>75</sup> Elizabeth Sadler, "One Book's Influence Edward Bellamy's 'Looking Backward,'" *New England Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (1944): 543.

<sup>76</sup> Translations of *Looking Backward* appear to have been a regular source of friction between Bellamy and Houghton, Mifflin; Bellamy wanted to see his novel translated into as many languages as possible, while Houghton, Mifflin was concerned about the effect of those translations on their own copyright. In 1889, Houghton, Mifflin wrote to Bellamy concerning a proposed translation into Swedish: "We feel that we must guard such a book as 'Looking Backward' with zealous and jealous care, lest if we once gave the privilege to anyone of publishing it in this country, even in another language, it might be the means of opening the gates for a flood of unauthorized cheap editions of the book." Letter from Houghton, Mifflin, & Co., to Bellamy, MS Am 1181 (240), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

<sup>77</sup> Sylvia E. Bowman, *Edward Bellamy* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986), 110.

formation of the People's Party as a third party.<sup>78</sup> Though Bellamy was a strong supporter of the early Populist movement, by 1896 he and many other Nationalists were disappointed in William Jennings Bryan and his emphasis on free silver.

To some degree, then, *Looking Backward* stands as one of the few clear instances of a novel leading directly to political action.<sup>79</sup> But though *Looking Backward's* popularity and evident political impact led to immediate comparisons to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the actual terms in which the two novels were discussed differ significantly. Kenneth Roemer argues that the prevalence of comparisons to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "reflected a perceived similarity in content and appeal," and claims that the connection "attests to the significant connections between utopian and sentimental reform fiction."<sup>80</sup> But the speed with which reviewers and advertisers connected any novel with a social dimension to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* indicates that Stowe's novel had become a sort of shorthand or generic marker, making comparisons function as genre identifiers rather than specific commentary on similarities of content or form.

If reviewers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* were torn over whether or not Stowe had crafted a truly artistic novel, *Looking Backward's* reviewers appear to have had no such conflict. According to Jean Pfaelzer, "Although Bellamy thereby saw the fable of Julian

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<sup>78</sup> Bowman, *Edward Bellamy*, 113.

<sup>79</sup> Another example might be Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona* (1884), which historians often connect to the passage of the Dawes Act in 1887, although Siobhan Senier argues that the connection is more tenuous than scholars generally recognize (Siobhan Senier, *Voices of Indian Assimilation and Resistance: Helen Hunt Jackson, Sarah Winnemucca, and Victoria Howard* (Norman, U of Oklahoma P, 2001): 45).

<sup>80</sup> Kenneth Roemer, "Placing Readers at the Forefront of Nowhere: Reception Studies and Utopian Literature," in *New Directions in American Reception Study*, ed. Philip Goldstein and James L. Machor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 103.

and Edith as indistinguishable from the novel's historical analysis, from the first critics saw the two elements as structurally distinct—at best a 'sugar coating' on a political pill."<sup>81</sup> Roemer, too, notes that reviewers, "including William Morris, depicted the fictional elements of the book as necessary sugar coatings that would ease the consumption of important ideas for the average reader."<sup>82</sup> *Looking Backward*, in other words, was presented by reviewers as exactly the sort of book that both Crawford and the *Globe-Democrat* would agree was a poor purpose novel—one in which the sugar coating was clear and the political message obviously prioritized over the novelistic elements. Roemer's analysis of the reception of *Looking Backward* suggests that many reviewers advocated for just such a means of reading, in which astute readers would disregard the thin story and pay attention to the non-fictional elements:

Reviewers, in effect, recommended a hierarchical reading process according to which Julian West's long sleep and romantic episodes were less worthy of attention than the dialogues between West and Dr. Leete about government, production, distribution, and labor. These 'serious' essays were typically defined with non-fictional labels, including 'political economy,' 'social and political science,' 'sociological tendencies,' even 'philosophy.'<sup>83</sup>

Page, as well, describes *Looking Backward* as successful by virtue of the popularity of its message alone: "We have much to learn from the careers of such books as 'Progress and Poverty' and 'Looking Backward.' They reached their great sale not by the ingenuity of

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<sup>81</sup> Pfaelzer, *The Utopian Novel in America*, 46.

<sup>82</sup> Roemer, "Placing Readers," 103.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.



their publishers, nor by their literary merit, but only because they carried messages to many minds. However delusive these messages may be, they were sincere.”<sup>84</sup>

If we locate the most tangible elements of *Looking Backward*'s success in the formation of Nationalist clubs and their support of the Populist party in the 1890s, then the fact that reviewers advocated for a reading practice that attended to the non-fictional elements of the novel while disregarding the fictional ones fits into the broader reading patterns evident in the response. While discussions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*'s effect on readers tends to rest on assumptions and anecdotal evidence about the degree to which the novel galvanized individual support for abolition or changed readers' minds about the issue, *Looking Backward* provided readers with the outline of a specific political system that they could embrace. The reading practices advocated by reviewers worked to encourage readers to attend to Bellamy's political program in a systematic way that prioritized the persuasive agenda above the novelistic elements. By the turn of the century, though, such a reading strategy was far less tenable.

### **The purpose novel in the twentieth century**

Claybaugh locates the purpose novel's declining status at the end of the century in the division of the literary into high, middle, and low, and the accompanying association of the reformist novel with the nonliterary.<sup>85</sup> Though Claybaugh does not discuss it in detail, her explanation implies the increased influence of literary critics, particularly academic critics, in establishing the terms of literary value. The field of American

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<sup>84</sup> Page, *A Publisher's Confession*, 152-153.

<sup>85</sup> As we will see, the tension between the literary and the nonliterary is a significant element in many of the reviews discussed in the following chapters.

literature was only just emerging as a cohesive discipline, and the scholars defining the American canon at the beginning of the twentieth century were beginning, as Claybaugh notes, to oppose aesthetics and reform in their estimation of the literary field.<sup>86</sup> David Schumway notes that while turn-of-the-century critics, like their nineteenth-century predecessors, assumed that a primary function of literature was to instruct, men of letters “certainly did not see [literature] as a force for social change.”<sup>87</sup>

If turn-of-the-century criticism was wary of reform writing, the New Criticism of the 1930s and 40s set itself in explicit opposition to literature that advocated specific political ideologies, particularly the radical or proletarian novel. According to Barbara Foley,

When the New Critics proclaimed the superiority of showing over telling or the heroism of holding opposed ideas in balance without committing oneself to a single point of view, they were announcing their departure from philological, biographical, and history-of-ideas modes of literary study. But they were also articulating a mandarin distaste for the unabashedly leftist social commitments guiding much literature and criticism produced and read in the 1930s.<sup>88</sup>

In *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941*, Foley offers the initially positive reception of the proletarian novel in the 1930s as

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<sup>86</sup> On the early formation of American literature as a discipline, see Claudia Stokes, *Writers in Retrospect: The Rise of American Literary History, 1875-1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

<sup>87</sup> David R. Schumway, *Creating American Civilization: A Genealogy of American Literature as an Academic Discipline* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 34.

<sup>88</sup> Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 3.

evidence that the aesthetic failings cited by the New Critics were not immediately evident to reviewers; Foley argues that the fact that early critics did not view the proletarian novel as nonliterary indicates that the disdain later expressed by the New Criticism sprung from political rather than aesthetic motives.

It is widely understood that the New Critical agenda had political as well as aesthetic implications for American literature, and particularly for the kinds of literature enshrined in the academic canon throughout much of the twentieth century.<sup>89</sup> Based on this particular genealogy of literary and critical history, the decreased visibility of the purpose novel after the turn of the century comes as no surprise. The reformist aims of the purpose novel were opposed to the conservative agenda of the New Criticism; further, the qualities generally associated with the high modernist novel of the 1920s—fragmentation, alienation, and concern with the implications of modernity—are largely antithetical to the purpose novel’s transparency and topical emphasis.

“Reviewing the Purpose Novel” demonstrates, though, that the purpose novel’s stock was falling well before the advent of modernism and the New Critical agenda. Further, the shift away from the purpose novel took place not only in the newly formed academic discipline of American literature and in the elite literary magazines, but also in reviews in newspapers and popular magazines. The modes by which reviewers diminished or dismissed the ideological implications of specific purpose novels tell us a great deal about why the genre was no longer useful, and the fact that this shift took place

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<sup>89</sup> For more on the New Criticism’s conservative aesthetic agenda, see Shumway, *Creating American Civilization*.

in popular, in addition to elite, venues offers a narrative of the decline of a transparent, topical genre like the purpose novel that privileges popular reading habits.

The chapters that follow each have two primary aims: first, to show the ways that considering a book generally associated with a particular genre (realism, regionalism, naturalism, and muckraking) in terms of the purpose novel produces new readings, and second, to demonstrate the ways that reviewers resisted the specific persuasive work each novel undertook. Chapter two, “Displacing the purpose novel: Reviewers, imagined publics, and *The Marrow of Tradition*,” challenges the popular critical narrative about *Marrow*’s reception, which claims the book was poorly received by nearly all of its reviewers. The reviews show that, more than responding to the readings *The Marrow of Tradition* implies or prompts, reviewers were interested in imagining publics for the novel, as well as predicting ways those publics might respond to the book. In doing so, reviewers displaced the novel’s criticism and persuasive work onto geographically or ideologically removed imagined publics and away from themselves and their readers. Chapter three, “Gender and genre in the reception of Mary Wilkins Freeman’s *The Portion of Labor*,” examines the generic tensions between regionalist fiction and the purpose novel in Mary Wilkins Freeman’s under-studied 1901 novel *The Portion of Labor*. Reviewers consistently used the language of regional and local color writing to describe Wilkins’s novel, emphasizing the delicate, minute and detail-oriented quality of her prose, and establishing a connection between that delicacy, the form of the short story, and the thematic content appropriate to that form. In emphasizing the connection between Freeman’s prose style and the detail-oriented short story she was most

associated with, reviewers presented the broader scope of the purpose novel as beyond her abilities.

Chapter four, “‘If you must publish it, let it be in the daily press:’ *The Octopus* and working-class taste in the turn-of-the-century literary marketplace,” uncovers a significant distinction between the reviews Frank Norris’s *The Octopus* received in newspapers and in literary magazines. Reviews in literary magazines were much more likely to emphasize *The Octopus*’s epic and universal qualities and to minimize or ignore its social commentary and the contemporary events on which the novel was based. In contrast, newspaper reviews, which would be read by a larger working-class audience than the magazine reviews, stressed *The Octopus*’s timely critique of corporate trusts, as well as its gripping plot. Reading *The Octopus* as a purpose novel provided a space for newspaper reviewers to push back against the determinism that would come to define both *The Octopus* and the larger category of naturalism in the twentieth century. In doing so, newspaper reviewers tied their dissatisfaction with the novel’s determinism to the book’s failure to meet generic expectations about the way purpose novels should end.

Chapter five, “The purpose novel gets results: Success and disgust in Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*,” turns to the purpose novel best known for effecting legislative change—Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*. Although *The Jungle*’s lurid descriptions of the slaughterhouse prompted reforms to the meatpacking industry, its sentimental description of exploited workers resulted in little support for labor reform. Chapter five argues that, rather than evidencing the sort of working relationship between the sentimental and sensational modes that Sinclair believed he could establish, the reception of *The Jungle*

reveals a significant tension between the two. For many reviewers, the novel's sensationalism superseded any other affective response, so that even the scenes of personal tragedy and the narrative techniques used to describe that tragedy resulted not in pity, sympathy, or identification, but in more disgust.

## 2. Displacing the purpose novel: Reviewers, imagined publics, and *The Marrow of Tradition*

At the beginning of Charles Chesnutt's 1901 novel *The Marrow of Tradition*, Major Carteret, the editor of the *Morning Chronicle* in fictional Wellington, NC, has an audience problem. More precisely, Major Carteret finds himself without an audience for his editorials advocating white supremacy:

In spite of the force and intelligence with which Carteret had expressed these and similar views, they had not met the immediate response anticipated. There were thoughtful men, willing to let well enough alone, who saw no necessity for such a movement. They believed that peace, prosperity, and popular education offered a surer remedy for social ills than the reopening of issues supposed to have been settled. There were timid men who shrank from civic strife. There were busy men, who had something else to do. There were a few fair men, prepared to admit, privately, that a class constituting half to two thirds of the population were fairly entitled to some representation in the law-making bodies. Perhaps there might have been found, somewhere in the state, a single white man ready to concede that all men were entitled to equal rights before the law.<sup>1</sup>

The *Morning Chronicle* may be the primary newspaper in Wellington, and the “acknowledged organ” of the Democratic party, but its readers are presented as heterogenous in their personal interests and political beliefs and largely uninterested in

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 79-80.

the ideology of white supremacy.<sup>2</sup> Carteret's editorials do not have an audience, and without an audience, his campaign to regain the state after the Fusion victory in 1896 is bound to fail.

As an author, Chesnutt maintains this attention to audience throughout the novel, acknowledging a variety of readers and observers of news from the South. Chesnutt's white characters are equally aware of the importance of audience; General Belmont, Major Carteret's co-conspirator, informs him, "This is the age of crowds, and we must have the crowd with us."<sup>3</sup> In a novel that culminates in the elevation of crowd to mob during a thinly veiled account of the Wilmington Massacre of 1898, the role of the printed word in creating and directing audiences is no small matter.

Chesnutt had similar ideas about the role of novels in shaping public opinion. In an oft-quoted journal entry from May of 1880, Chesnutt wrote, "The object of my writings would be not so much the elevation of the colored people as the elevation of the whites... The Negro's part is to prepare himself for recognition and equality, and it is the province of literature to open the way for him to get it—to accustom the public mind to the idea; to lead people out, imperceptibly, unconsciously, step by step, to the desired state of feeling."<sup>4</sup> That same sentiment was at work as Chesnutt was writing *The Marrow of Tradition*, and in December of 1900, he wrote to his cousin John P. Green, "I think you understand how difficult it is to write race problem books so that white people will read

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>4</sup> Helen Chesnutt, *Charles Waddell Chesnutt: Pioneer of the Color Line* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1952), 21.



them.”<sup>5</sup> Getting audiences to read the novel proved difficult. The book sold barely 3,000 copies in its first year,<sup>6</sup> a great disappointment both to Chesnutt and to his publisher, Houghton, Mifflin, & Co., which had invested a significant amount of money and effort in advertising the book.<sup>7</sup> The sales of the novel fell so far short of what Chesnutt and Houghton, Mifflin had expected, particularly given the success of Chesnutt’s earlier novel and short story collections, that Chesnutt abandoned his attempt to make a living as a professional author and returned to his work as a court stenographer.

Our current critical understanding of *The Marrow of Tradition*’s financial failure is closely tied to the white audience Chesnutt imagined for the novel. Critics often link that failure to William Dean Howells’s famous (and famously ambivalent) review of the novel in the *North American Review*, which characterized the book as “bitter.”<sup>8</sup> Viewing Howells’s review as representative of the overall critical reception of *Marrow*, many scholars characterize that reception, like the book’s sales, as poor. Jean Marie Lutes, for example, claims, “Although Marrow is now celebrated as Chesnutt’s masterpiece, it did not sell well and received disappointing reviews; William Dean Howells called it ‘a

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Chesnutt, “*To Be an Author*”: *Letters of Charles W. Chesnutt, 1889-1905*, Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., and Robert C. Leitz, III, eds. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997), 156.

<sup>6</sup> Chesnutt, “*To Be an Author*,” 172 n. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Helen Chesnutt includes several excerpts from Houghton, Mifflin’s letters to Chesnutt about their advertising campaign for *Marrow*. In addition to taking out ads in magazines and newspapers, Houghton, Mifflin advertised in the program for a production of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* at the Boston Theatre and set up a large display in the windows of the Old Corner Book Store in Boston (H. Chesnutt 175).

<sup>8</sup> William Dean Howells, “A Psychological Counter-Current in Recent Fiction,” *North American Review*, December 1901, 872-888, ProQuest.

bitter, bitter book.”<sup>9</sup> Critics also tend to equate Howells with the novel’s audience, and Howells’s review with its reception. In his examination of Chesnutt’s and Howells’s literary relationship, William L. Andrews writes, “The significance of Chesnutt’s and Howells’s disagreement over *The Marrow of Tradition* lies not so much in the novel’s actual or reputed bitterness as in what it suggested to Howells and, by implication, other white readers about racial conditions and the prospects for racial harmony in the South.”<sup>10</sup> Andrews’s analysis implies that the reactions of “white readers” may be accurately represented by Howells’s response. Similarly, Matthew Wilson claims, “Howells’s responses to the novel allow us to gauge the effect of *The Marrow of Tradition* on a representative white reader... who was sympathetic to African Americans’ artistic aspirations.”<sup>11</sup>

Viewing Howells as a stand-in for *The Marrow of Tradition*’s white readers results in a significantly flattened picture of the novel’s reception, one that accords Howells a taste-making power he did not necessarily have. Howells certainly had a great deal of influence in his position as editor and critic at the *Atlantic* and *Harper’s*, and as scholars have demonstrated, often used his position to promote little-known authors, including Chesnutt himself, whose aesthetic aims seemed in sympathy with his own. But that influence was also limited to an elite circle of literary magazines, and, as Nancy

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<sup>9</sup> Jean Marie Lutes, "Lynching Coverage and the American Reporter-Novelist," *American Literary History* 19, no. 2 (2007): 465.

<sup>10</sup> William L. Andrews, "William Dean Howells and Charles W. Chesnutt: Criticism and Race Fiction in the Age of Booker T. Washington," *American Literature* 48, no. 3 (1976): 338.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew Wilson, *Whiteness in the Novels of Charles W. Chesnutt* (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2004), 140.

Glazener explains, often in tension with popular taste.<sup>12</sup> *The Marrow of Tradition*, though, was reviewed in a wide range of newspapers and magazines, ranging from elite magazines like the *Atlantic* and the *Outlook* to daily papers, religious journals, and hobbyist magazines.<sup>13</sup> Because the influence of monthlies like the *North American Review* was limited, we cannot necessarily expect all or even most of Chesnut's reviewers either to have been familiar with Howells's review or to have necessarily been in sympathy with his opinion. As I discuss below, Howells's review is, in fact, highly atypical when compared to other reviews of the novel.

Not only is Howells often treated as emblematic of the novel's audience, but critics also generally treat that audience as monolithic, imagining that readers of the novel can be described in terms of a general "white audience." Wilson, for instance, frames the argument for his chapter on *Marrow* in such terms, claiming, "In choosing to be more confrontational with his white audience in this novel, Chesnut had begun to change his conception of that white audience and what he was trying to accomplish with them. Although he was still trying to elevate his white readers, he now sought to do so by presenting them with a counterhistory that he hoped would help them remember what they had been taught to forget."<sup>14</sup> Joseph McElrath ascribes what he sees as Chesnut's aesthetic failure in *The Marrow of Tradition* to the fact that Chesnut "had strayed radically from the course he had set in 1880 toward the goal of seducing, rather than browbeating, the white American readership into a more benign attitude toward the

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<sup>12</sup> Glazener, *Reading for Realism*. Glazener also shows that the *Atlantic* group was addressing a fairly limited audience.

<sup>13</sup> For a complete list of reviews recovered and consulted, see appendix.

<sup>14</sup> Wilson, *Whiteness*, 99.

African American.”<sup>15</sup> And Richard Yarborough claims that “The average white reader who approached *Marrow* as a typical plantation tradition tale or as a latter-day *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was in for a serious shock.”<sup>16</sup>

This critical understanding of *Marrow*’s audience is problematic for several reasons. Equating that audience too closely with Howells has led to a limited and inaccurate view of the novel’s reception as part of the critical narrative of *Marrow*’s publication history. Moreover, critics who attempt to analyze the persuasive work *Marrow* undertakes often consider the potential or actual effects of the novel in terms of a poorly conceived “white audience.” Wilson, for instance, claims that the book’s persuasive potential was limited because readers were unwilling to consider its counterhistory, preferring instead to accept the version of the Wilmington massacre presented by southern and national media, and because Chesnut had “produced a novel that was too alien for his white audience both in generic and historical terms.”<sup>17</sup> As part of this argument, Wilson makes use of several negative reviews of *The Marrow of Tradition* from both northern and southern periodicals, often implying that the southern response to the novel can be understood to represent the general response of *Marrow*’s “white audience.” While he occasionally gestures toward elements that would differentiate a mass white audience, such as sectional affiliation or racial sympathy,

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<sup>15</sup> Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., “W.D. Howells and Race: Charles W. Chesnut’s Disappointment of the Dean,” *Nineteenth Century Literature* 51, no. 4 (1997): 475.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Yarborough, “Violence, Manhood, and Black Heroism: The Wilmington Riot in Two Turn-of-the-Century African American Novels,” in *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy*, ed. Timothy B. Tyson and David S. Cecelski (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P), 245.

<sup>17</sup> Wilson, *Whiteness*, 147.

Wilson does not actually incorporate distinctions in audience into his overall argument. This un-nuanced conception of the book's audience necessarily limits any assessment of the novel's persuasive effect, since if the work of the novel is understood as elevating all the white people who read the book, then it has almost no potential for success. Wilson's use of reviews to make claims about the way *Marrow*'s audience responded to the novel reveals yet another problematic slippage in critical treatments of *Marrow*'s reception: the common extrapolation from Howells to reviewers in general to readers of the novel at large. The claims critics make about *Marrow*'s "white audience" rest not only on a generalization of that audience, but also on the assumption that reviewers' responses to the novel can stand in for the responses of the novel's readers.

This chapter proposes a reconstructed picture of *Marrow*'s reception that emphasizes the multiple publics responding to Chesnut's novel and the ways the reviewers positioned the publics they were addressing in relation to other publics.<sup>18</sup> Rather than revealing one distinct public organized by (or around) *The Marrow of Tradition*, the novel's reviews demonstrate that the public response breaks down along sectional lines, clearly fracturing any conception of an imagined general "white

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<sup>18</sup> In emphasizing the multiple publics, both actual and imagined, that are constructed as part of *Marrow*'s reception, I rely on Michael Warner's work on publics and counterpublics, particularly his assertion that publics are "essentially intertextual, frameworks for understanding texts against an organized background of the circulation of other texts, all interwoven not just by citational references but by the incorporation of a reflexive circulatory field in the mode of address and consumption" (16). I am also indebted to James Machor's concept of a historical hermeneutics that "reconstruct[s] the shared patterns of interpretation for a specific historical era to define the reading formation of particular interpretive communities" (7).

audience.”<sup>19</sup> In addition, the reviews show that, more than responding to the readings *The Marrow of Tradition* implies or prompts, reviewers were themselves imagining publics for the novel, as well as predicting ways those publics might respond to the book. Reviewers understood the novel as part of a debate between opposing positions on the issue of southern race relations, and both northern and southern reviewers conceived of northern readers’ role as that of impartial adjudicators of that debate. In doing so, reviewers imagined publics for the novel that are defined by their distance from reviewers and their own readers and do not necessarily coincide with any actual publics organized around other reviews or periodicals, and that are not accounted for in current critical treatments of the novel. In other words, each review of the novel presents an individual reviewer’s response, and as part of that response, reviewers imagined publics for the novel that did not necessarily include themselves or their readers. Those publics were often defined in terms of sectional or ideological affiliation, so that northern reviewers imagined southern publics, southern reviewers imagined northern publics, progressive reviewers imagined conservative publics, and so on. Reviewers often performed a complicated rhetorical triangulation between the public of their own reviews, the imagined public or publics of the novel, and, in the case of southern reviews, an imagined northern public for the reviews themselves.

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<sup>19</sup> Although these publics are multiple, they are each part of a more general dominant public, in the sense that they represent subsets of the overall public of white America. They are not counterpublics, which Warner argues, “maintai[n] at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of [their] subordinate status” (119). That is, neither the publics the reviewers address nor the ones they imagine are set in opposition to the dominant public so much as they are a section of that dominant public. Reviews in African American periodicals would potentially be addressing a counterpublic, but there are not enough of those to make any really firm claims about them.

In imagining publics for *The Marrow of Tradition*, reviewers displaced the novel's criticism and persuasive work onto those geographically or ideologically removed imagined publics, and away from themselves and their readers. Rather than addressing the way the novel's criticisms might alter their own readers' attitudes, reviewers focus on how they think an imagined public might or should respond to the book. That they do so raises significant questions both about the utility of the sort of historical publics critics have imagined for the novel and the arguments scholars make about the readings of the novel that were available to those publics. More broadly, the ways reviewers displaced and failed to engage with the novel's persuasive work should prompt scholars who write about and teach the novel to consider the assumptions and deflections inherent in our own readings of *The Marrow of Tradition*.

### **Displacement and arbitration: Reviewing *The Marrow of Tradition* in the North**

*The Marrow of Tradition* is a fictionalized retelling of the 1898 Wilmington, NC, massacre, in which a cabal of white supremacists—the Secret Nine in Wilmington and the Big Three in Chesnut's novel—orchestrated a coup against the city's biracial Fusion government. Seizing on an anti-lynching editorial written by Alexander Manly, publisher of Wilmington's African American newspaper, as a pretext, the Secret Nine incited a riot, destroyed Manly's printing equipment, burned his office to the ground, and ran Manly and other prominent African Americans and white Republicans out of town. In Chesnut's novel, the race riot provides the climax of several inter-related family dramas, as well. In one plot line, African American doctor William Miller and wife and son are paired with the white Carterets. Although Mrs. Carteret is Mrs. Miller's half-sister, Mrs.

Carteret refuses to acknowledge the relationship until the final scene when she begs Mrs. Miller to allow Dr. Miller to save the life of the Carteret's young son, despite the fact that the Miller's son has just been killed in the race riot orchestrated by Mrs. Carteret's husband. In another plot line, Tom Delamere, grandson of aristocratic Mr. Delamere, robs and inadvertently kills his elderly aunt to pay his gambling debts, and then frames the Delamere's faithful black servant, Sandy, for the act. Prior to the riot, Sandy narrowly avoids being lynched only after Mr. Delamere, unwilling to doubt Sandy's honor, discovers that the crime was in fact committed by Tom.

*The Marrow of Tradition* was published by Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., which had published Chesnutt's first two collections of short stories and his first novel, a passing novel called *The House Behind the Cedars*. Chesnutt's earlier work had been well received, both critically and financially, and both Chesnutt and Houghton, Mifflin had high hopes for the novel. Houghton, Mifflin invested a considerable amount of money advertising the book, which they promoted heavily as "a novel that will recall at many points its great precursor 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.'"<sup>20</sup>

Houghton Mifflin's promotion of *The Marrow of Tradition* as a novel of the South in the vein of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Albion Tourgee's *A Fool's Errand* provides one possible explanation for the book's poor sales when considered in terms of the romantic reconciliation that occurred between North and South following the Civil War. As Nina Silber and David Blight have demonstrated, the reunion of North and South was facilitated by a romanticization of antebellum plantation life and an antecedent forgetting

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<sup>20</sup> HMC Co promotional material, Chesnutt Archive microfilm



of both the horrors of the Civil War and the genuine ideological differences that led to the war.<sup>21</sup> The very real issues that the war failed to resolve were replaced in the public consciousness by the metaphor of the marriage between the Yankee hero and the Southern belle. According to Blight, northern readers looked to southern novels to minimize Civil War conflict and emphasize the grounds for national reunion, not to revisit sectional differences or revive sectional conflict.<sup>22</sup> Given the desire for national reunion that manifested itself in the national literature of the 1880s onward, we might well expect that Chesnut's novel, emphasizing as it did the persistence of sectional and racial conflict, might struggle to find a national audience.

Despite *The Marrow of Tradition*'s poor sales, it was far from ignored by reviewers. Individual readers may have been weary of sectional conflict, but reviewers and newspapers were clearly willing to revisit the issue. Perhaps because of Houghton, Mifflin's efforts to promote the novel, or perhaps, as Helen Chesnut speculates, because of the controversial nature of the book,<sup>23</sup> *The Marrow of Tradition* was widely reviewed, especially when compared to the other novels by African Americans being published at the time.<sup>24</sup> My research has found reviews of *The Marrow of Tradition* in sixty

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<sup>21</sup> Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1993); David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2001).

<sup>22</sup> Blight also notes that many northerners described the problem of race as being solved completely by the Civil War, so that all problems of race disappeared following emancipation (236-237).

<sup>23</sup> Helen Chesnut says of *The Marrow of Tradition*: "The reviews kept coming in—the book was so controversial that the critics could not drop it" (178).

<sup>24</sup> Based on the reviews I have recovered, *Marrow* was more widely reviewed than *The Portion of Labor* and *The Octopus*, both published in the same year as Chesnut's novel. For a complete list of reviews, see the appendix.

newspapers and magazines, as well as six African American periodicals. By contrast, one is hard pressed to find even a handful of reviews of Frances Harper's 1892 novel *Iola Leroy*, or Pauline Hopkins's 1900 novel *Contending Forces*, two of the novels published by African Americans in the 1890s that, after Chesnut's novels, are most well-known to critics today. Harper and Hopkins published their novels with small publishers who focused primarily on African American readers, so it comes as no surprise that their books were not recognized in many mainstream newspapers and magazines, but because of the paucity of reviews of these and other novels by African Americans at the end of the nineteenth century, Chesnut's novel provides one of the few sites for examining the ways turn-of-the-century white reviewers responded to work by an African American author. In addition, because *The Marrow of Tradition* was heavily promoted by Houghton, Mifflin in anticipation of significant sales, *Marrow* also provides a particularly large archive of reviews, even compared to Chesnut's earlier novel and short story collections.

One consequence of equating Howells with *Marrow*'s white audience is that modern critics often characterize the novel's overall reception as falling in line with Howells's lukewarm review. In actuality, many of the reviews of *The Marrow of Tradition* were quite positive, praising the novel as a compelling work of fiction, a fact that added to Chesnut's frustration over the novel's poor sales.<sup>25</sup> But those reviews,

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<sup>25</sup> In a letter to his publishers in December of 1901, Chesnut complained, "If a novel which is generally acknowledged to be interesting, dramatic, well constructed, well written—which qualities have been pretty generally ascribed to *The Marrow of Tradition*, of which, in addition, both the author and publishers have good hopes—cannot sell 5,000

while positive, raise questions about reviewers’—particularly white northern reviewers’—willingness to engage with a novel about the race problem written by an African American author, and to respond to the persuasive work it undertook. Though the reviews of *The Marrow of Tradition* reveal white reviewers’ willingness to read and respond to the novel, despite the race of its author, that willingness tends to be accompanied by attempts to displace the brunt of the novel’s criticism onto publics well removed from the reviewer and his or her own readers.

The dilemma Chesnutt expressed to Green—the difficulty of writing “race problem books so that white people will read them”—required that *The Marrow of Tradition* be accessible to white readers who might be resistant to the book based on the author’s race. Although Chesnutt’s earlier conjure stories had been published in magazines like the *Atlantic* and the *Outlook* without any indication that Chesnutt was black, by 1901 Chesnutt’s race was well known. Howells’s favorable 1900 review of *The Wife of His Youth* and *The Conjure Woman* made much of Chesnutt’s race, informing readers that the author of the stories was “of negro blood,—diluted, indeed, in such measures that if he did not admit this descent few would imagine it, but still quite of that middle world which lies next, though wholly outside, our own.”<sup>26</sup> By the time *The Marrow of Tradition* was published, Chesnutt’s race seems to have been common knowledge, given that a majority of the reviews mention that Chesnutt is African

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copies within two months after its publication, there must be something radically wrong somewhere” (H. Chesnutt 179).

<sup>26</sup> William Dean Howells, “Mr. Charles W. Chesnutt’s Stories,” in *Critical Essays on Charles W. Chesnut*, ed. Joseph McElrath (New York: G. K. Hall & Co, 1999), 52. Reprinted from *Atlantic Monthly* 85 (May 1900): 699-701.

American. And while some reviewers, particularly the southern reviewers discussed below, found a novel by an African American author difficult to categorize and evaluate, most white northern reviewers had little difficulty placing the novel in the familiar context of southern race novels.

The novel introduces Dr. Miller as he rides a train south across the Mason-Dixon line toward Wellington. Boarding the train in Philadelphia, Miller runs into his friend Dr. Burns, a white man, and the two begin to discuss the state of race relations in the country. Burns tells Miller that the condition of African Americans “is a serial story which we are all reading, and which grows in vital interest with each successive installment.”<sup>27</sup> Burns’s description presents northern whites—“we,” in this context—as a reading public, organized around the circulation of a “serial story.” Although Burns tells Miller, “It is not only your problem, but ours,” his metaphor is one that absolves himself and those like him of agency: though they read the story with “vital interest,” as readers rather than authors, there is little they can do to affect the outcome.

Burns’s metaphor also identifies a context in which a northern public can understand southern racial conflict. Likening reports about race in the South to a serial story provides Burns with a familiar framework within which to understand an issue that touches him, as a northerner, indirectly. Just as Burns needs to contextualize the race problem, so, too, did Chesnut’s reviewers need to contextualize his race problem novel. Chesnut and Houghton, Mifflin offered up one such context in *The Marrow of Tradition*’s advertising: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Over one third of the reviews seized upon

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<sup>27</sup> Chesnut, *Marrow*, 51.

Houghton, Mifflin's connection of *Marrow* to Stowe's novel, and even reviews of just a few lines made reference to the comparison.<sup>28</sup> Though many reviewers, echoing the Houghton, Mifflin promotional material, simply stated that the novel would likely recall *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to their readers, others offered opinions on the degree to which *The Marrow of Tradition* might be considered a latter-day *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and the qualities the two novels shared. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* provided a convenient shorthand that reviewers used to place *The Marrow of Tradition* in context, point out its shortcomings, or highlight its successes. The *Bookman*, for example, wrote, "The book is undoubtedly an exaggeration, as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was an exaggeration," while the *Lincoln Courier* declared that Chesnut "writes with a fervor and conviction that inevitably recall Mrs. Stowe's great book, the book which more than any book ever written by man or woman made men ready to fight in response to the guns that were trained on Sumter."<sup>29</sup>

While *Uncle Tom's Cabin* provided a familiar context for understanding *The Marrow of Tradition* as a race problem novel, reviewers also looked to more recent novels of the Reconstruction South for comparison, most often *Red Rock*, Thomas Nelson Page's nostalgic 1898 plantation novel. Reviewers from the *New York Times*, the *Boston Sunday Herald*, and the *St. Paul Appeal* all present Chesnut's book as a counter argument to Page's novel. The *Herald*, for example, called *The Marrow of Tradition* "a picture of the South in its race relations as viewed from the Negro standpoint," going on to claim, "it is only fair that it should be given. We have had something like it from the

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<sup>28</sup> Portland Weekly Advertiser, Town and Country, Cleveland Journal, School Journal, Friend's Intelligencer, World's Work.

<sup>29</sup> "Novel Notes," *Bookman*, December 1901, 533, HathiTrust; "Book Reviews," *Lincoln Courier*, December 28, 1901, 10, LOC Chronicling America.

other side in the ‘Red Rock’ of Mr. Thomas Nelson Page, a novel which has been much read and generally admired. That book depicted the southern whites under conditions of government alien to their sympathies. This one gives the southern blacks in the same condition.”<sup>30</sup> Though the perspective of Page’s and Chesnut’s novels might be directly at odds, reviewers recognized them as addressing a similar set of concerns in the form of a Reconstruction plantation novel, allowing the books to be understood together. In this case, the context for understanding *The Marrow of Tradition* is not that of a novel that, like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, uncovers the consequences of institutional racism in the South, but rather one that, like *Red Rock* and, later, Dixon’s *The Leopard’s Spots*, addresses southern race relations from an opposing perspective.<sup>31</sup>

The similarity between Chesnut’s work and Page’s had been even more evident in Chesnut’s earlier works, particularly his conjure tales, which followed the well-known pattern of plantation and dialect tales that Page had become famous for. In contrast, *The Marrow of Tradition* is far more confrontational than the conjure tales, which provide readers with a white narrator as a focal point and foil to the African American characters in the stories. As Charles Duncan notes, “By drawing on such a well-established literary tradition, [Chesnut] enjoyed the considerable advantages of working in a genre his late-nineteenth-century readers found familiar and comfortable.”<sup>32</sup> Though *The Marrow of Tradition* does not offer the recognizable generic conventions that readers were likely to

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<sup>30</sup> “The Race Question in Fiction,” Boston *Sunday Herald*, October 27, 1901, 16, Chesnut Digital Archive.

<sup>31</sup> Dixon’s novel was itself a direct response to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

<sup>32</sup> Charles Duncan, *The Absent Man : The Narrative Craft of Charles W. Chesnut* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1998), 79.

have found in the conjure tales, it is clear that few reviewers had difficulty placing the novel in familiar terms—often either in comparison with novels by Harriet Beecher Stowe and Albion Tourgee or in opposition to *Red Rock* and, later, *The Leopard's Spots*.<sup>33</sup>

But though Northern reviewers had little trouble locating a familiar context within in which to situate *The Marrow of Tradition*, they had more difficulty imagining themselves and their readers as the primary recipients of the novel's persuasive message. Instead, they tended to locate the novel's work as happening to other readers—southern readers, or racist readers, but not the primary audience of their own reviews. Northern reviewers often positioned northern readers as mediators or arbiters of the debate that *The Marrow of Tradition* was engaged in, a specifically southern debate that affected northern readers only indirectly. The *New York Times*, for example, writes that, "Mr. Chesnut's book should receive as much attention in the South as was given to 'Red Rock' in the North."<sup>34</sup> This statement assumes a need for an almost judicial balance in which each section has an obligation to listen to the other's arguments. The problem, for many northern reviewers, was that they did not seem to be getting both sides of the story, making it difficult for them to accurately judge the debate. In addition to noting that *The Marrow of Tradition* provides a rebuttal to something like *Red Rock*, reviewers also comment on the difficulty of obtaining the African-American side from southern reports.

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<sup>33</sup> Matthew Wilson argues that "In generic terms, Chesnut's audience had a good deal of experience of historical romance, a form that had become very popular in the years before the publication of *The Marrow of Tradition*" (120).

<sup>34</sup> "Charles Chesnut's 'Marrow of Tradition,'" *New York Times*, December 7, 1901, BR30, ProQuest.

The *Congregationalist and Christian World* writes that *The Marrow of Tradition* is “of course... the other side of that story of Negro domination of which we have heard so much,” while the *Illustrated Buffalo Express* argues that, “Northern readers who must be guided by Southern accounts of lynchings and allied outbreaks are compelled to the belief that Mr. Chesnutt has not exaggerated his picture of conditions which have brought about the awful events so frequently chronicled in the newspapers.”<sup>35</sup> In these reviews, the reports of lynching and racial violence in southern newspapers put northern readers at a disadvantage, since they lack balance, and therefore, reliability. Chesnutt’s novel is valuable because it provides a response not only to *Red Rock* and *The Leopard’s Spots*, but also to questionable newspaper reportage, which threatens to hinder northern readers’ ability to accurately assess the debate over race relations in the South.

The novel itself highlights the potential for misleading newspaper articles to dupe northern audiences; when Sandy is accused of murdering Mrs. Ochiltree, the reports from the *Morning Chronicle* are reprinted throughout the country, so that “All over the United States the Associated Press had flashed the report of another dastardly outrage by a burly black brute,—all black brutes it seems are burly,—and of the impending lynching with its prospective horrors. This news, being highly sensational in its character, had been displayed in large black type on the front pages of the daily papers.” But when Sandy is exonerated of the crime, “The dispatch that followed, to the effect that the accused had been found innocent and the lynching frustrated, received slight attention, if any, in a fine

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<sup>35</sup> “From the Negro Side,” *Illustrated Buffalo Express*, November 3, 1901, 16, Chesnutt Digital Archive; “A Story of Race Conflict,” *Congregationalist and Christian World*, December 7, 1901, 897-898, Chesnutt Digital Archive.



print paragraph on an inside page. The facts of the case never came out at all.”<sup>36</sup> In providing a competing account of the events of the Wilmington massacre, Chesnutt attempted with *The Marrow of Tradition* to counter the descriptions that “had been displayed in large black type on the front pages of the daily papers.”<sup>37</sup>

Ryan Simmons makes a similar argument in his work on Chesnutt’s novels, noting that one goal of *The Marrow of Tradition* is to counter southern accounts of the Wilmington massacre, but he also acknowledges the limitations of that approach. Although he concedes that Chesnutt attempts to represent a counter-reality to the one white supremacists circulated, Simmons asks, “could such descriptive details do their proper work? To put it another way, might such a description be discounted by Chesnutt’s readers as mere words—no more (and likely less) authoritative than contemporary newspaper accounts that attempted to palliate the violence?”<sup>38</sup> Given the limited authority of descriptive details, Simmons argues that the more important work the book does is to force the reader to make certain acknowledgements about race and racism that he or she knows but does not want to face, asserting:

*The Marrow of Tradition* may have been an easy novel for a Northern white audience to agree with, but Chesnutt seems to wish his readers to do something much more challenging than merely agree. Chesnutt was well aware that most of his likely readers were not racists, at least in theory. The problem is that, while a

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<sup>36</sup> Chesnutt, *Marrow*, 233-234.

<sup>37</sup> On *The Marrow of Tradition* as counter-history, see Wilson, 99-147; Jae H. Roe, “Keeping an ‘Old Wound’ Alive: *The Marrow of Tradition* and the Legacy of *Wilmington*,” *African American Review* 33, no. 2 (1999): 231-243.

<sup>38</sup> Ryan Simmons, *Chesnutt and Realism: A Study of the Novels* (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 2006), 91.

reader may be moved emotionally by reading literary scenes such as those Chesnutt presents in this novel, spurring readers into action is a trickier matter to achieve. *The Marrow of Tradition* is not clearly intended to convert racists into nonracists; it seems meant instead to change nonracists into antiracists—that is, to make the fight against racial injustice no longer an abstraction, but central to one’s consciousness, and as a result to one’s decisions and actions as well.<sup>39</sup>

Simmons’s initial assessment that “*The Marrow of Tradition* may have been an easy novel for a Northern white audience to agree with” is well-supported by reviews.

Northern reviewers predict, often in fairly forceful terms, that the northern public will agree with the novel. According to *Town and Country*, Chesnutt “enlists the sympathy of all just-minded people for the terrible tyranny which the negro still suffers as the result of a vile social condition which remains almost the same as in ante-bellum days.” The *Boston Sunday Herald* declares, “there are instances... in the present story which will awaken for those who suffer from them the sympathy of many readers. We think there are few who will not agree that, at least in the matter of lynching at the South, there is a wrong upon which public opinion should be brought to bear.” The *San Francisco Argonaut* writes, “To many of his readers, the book will be as great a revelation of conditions existing there as was ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ at the time that was written, and undoubtedly popular sympathies will be with the colored race.”

Though these particular reviewers do not specify whether the “many readers” are northern or southern, other reviewers make it explicit that they expect northern publics to

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

find the novel agreeable and southern publics to resist it. The Omaha *Sunday World-Herald* assumes that the novel, “will doubtless be popular in the north if it is not in the south,”<sup>40</sup> while the *Worcester Magazine* sets the novel up as likely to find opposition from certain publics, although not the public of the review itself: “[The book] will not please the old slave-driving contingent nor their later successors, who are resorting to all sorts of means to disfranchise the negro. Already is heard the protest, and from Boston sources too, against the tone of the book as calculated to exasperate the southerner.”<sup>41</sup> This view of the novel sets the reviewer’s open-minded readers—who will be able to appreciate the tone of the book—in opposition to the exasperated southerners, not to mention the more benighted Boston sources. Those geographically removed and incompletely conceived readers constitute an imagined public that is clearly distinct from the reviewer and his readers. The reviewer’s readers are also part of a public, but one organized not by *The Marrow of Tradition*, but rather by the text of the review. The reviewer addresses one public and imagines another, organized not only by *The Marrow of Tradition*, but also by geographic distance.

This schema runs throughout the northern reviews. Reviewers, addressing the public organized by their reviews, imagine southern publics that respond to the book with hostility, and in doing so position both the public of their reviews and an imagined northern public as objective arbiters in comparison. In doing so, the reviews challenge the

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<sup>40</sup> “Books,” Omaha *Sunday World-Herald*, January 26, 1902, 31, Chesnutt Digital Archive.

<sup>41</sup> “Books,” Omaha *Sunday World-Herald*, January 26, 1902, 31, Chesnutt Digital Archive; “Some New Books,” *Worcester Magazine* 11, no. 5 (November 1901): 169, HathiTrust.

second part of Simmons's claim—that *The Marrow of Tradition* works to force realizations about the reader's own attitudes toward race that, while not likely to affect active racists, might push nonracist readers into a more explicitly antiracist position. While reviewers often position the novel as one northern public or the public of their reviews are likely to agree with, the sympathy they describe is a relatively unchallenging state. In addition to claiming that Chesnut "enlists the sympathy of all just-minded people," *Town and Country* adds that the novel "is a preachment that should work for much good," but neither the recipients of the preachment nor the good the novel might work are specified. Similarly, *Worcester Magazine* praises *Marrow* for providing a counter to southern propaganda, writing, "Many northern people are beholding the condition of affairs in the South with something akin to exasperation. We ask for fair play. We have heard the southern man say that the negro can be nothing, but we know that in the majority of cases the wish is simply parent to the thought... The book will work a great change in the hearts of readers, and should have a large circulation."<sup>42</sup> In this case, the novel is conceived as changing readers' minds or hearts, but that change is most immediately connected to northern readers' perception of the racial situation in the South, rather than with their own racial views.

The most concrete work that reviewers describe the novel doing for their own readers is related not to readers' own racial attitudes, but rather to their perception of racial attitudes in the South. In their position as mediators or seekers of balance, reviewers' understanding of the novel's persuasive effect on their own readers is fairly

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<sup>42</sup> "Some New Books," 169.

limited. For the public of their own reviews, the novel's primary function is to raise awareness of a problem that, as geographically-removed mediators, northerners need to be aware of, and perhaps to step in and take some sort of mediating action. The book may, in the words of the *National Magazine*, "recal[l] the North's wandering attention to its duty in the [South]," or, as a reviewer from the San Francisco *Argonaut* argues, "make us realize that the future of the negro race is a problem yet unsolved."<sup>43</sup> In showing the other side of the debate, *The Marrow of Tradition* reminds reviewers of their responsibilities as arbiters and intercessors in southern issues.

One of Chesnutt's chief reasons for seeing a color line in the response to his novel was what he perceived as a lukewarm reception from northern critics—Chesnutt had expected the South to condemn the book but had anticipated greater support from northern reviewers.<sup>44</sup> That northern ambivalence, I argue, is directly related to the way reviewers engaged with the novel and the ways they presented it to their readers. The same qualities that allowed white northern reviewers to view the novel in a familiar context also enabled them to understand it as part of a localized debate in which northern reviewers and their readers were not active participants, but rather observers who might be called to step in and weigh each side. At its most extreme, this position allowed reviewers to direct the entire force of Chesnutt's anti-racist argument away from themselves and their readers and onto the geographically and ideologically removed

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<sup>43</sup> "The Negro Problem Stated in a Negro's Novel," *National Magazine* 15, no. 4 (January 1902): 450-451, HathiTrust; Review of *The Marrow of Tradition*, San Francisco *Argonaut*, February 3, 1902, Chesnutt Digital Archive.

<sup>44</sup> William L. Andrews, Introduction, *The Portable Charles Chesnutt* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), xxxvi.

“other side” of the debate, and imagine the novel as doing exactly what Simmons argues it cannot accomplish—turning racists into nonracists. For instance, a reviewer for the *Chautauquan* writes that if *The Marrow of Tradition* shall “avail to give the advocates of ‘white supremacy’ . . . a glimpse of themselves as others see them, it will have rendered honorable and welcome service in a time of desperate need.”<sup>45</sup> The reviewer is able to localize the novel’s racial protest and present it as affecting only the advocates of white supremacy, who are not, it is clear, among the readers of the *Chautauquan*. Those readers can rest assured in their ability to appreciate what southerners and white supremacists cannot, and in their position as arbiters of the racial debate happening in the South.

In other words, Chesnutt may have found a context in which to write “race problem books so that white people will read them” (or at least review them), but that same context ultimately hindered reviewers from seeing the book as aimed at their own racial attitudes. Northern reviewers could read *The Marrow of Tradition* without expressing discomfort or alienation because, as a response to *Red Rock* and reports of southern conflict, the book addressed a set of issues in which they and their readers were implicated at best indirectly, as arbiters of right and wrong. Rather than applying *The Marrow of Tradition*’s criticisms to themselves or their readers, reviewers presented those criticisms as confined to the South, conceiving of the novel in a regional context likely to be both familiar and unthreatening to northern readers. Given *Marrow*’s depictions of violence and injustice, it would be impossible to frame the novel in such a way that it was not threatening to someone, but by imagining a southern public for the

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<sup>45</sup> “Talk About Books,” *Chautauquan* 34, no. 3 (December 1901): 327-328, HathiTrust.

book, reviewers were able to acknowledge the existence of those threats in terms of that southern public, rather than in terms of the public organized by their own reviews.

That dynamic is anticipated in one of the most famous scenes of the novel, in which a group of northern visitors come to Wellington to investigate a projected cotton mill. As the ladies in the party “were much interested in the study of the social conditions, and especially in the negro problem,” the southern hosts show them around Wellington, where they are given “the Southern white man’s views of the negro, sighing sentimentally over the disappearance of the good old negro of before the war, and gravely deploring the degeneracy of his descendants.”<sup>46</sup> This view includes an explanation of Southern racial violence that links it explicitly to class: “The severe reprisals taken by white people for certain crimes committed by negroes were of course not the acts of the best people, who deplored them; but still a certain charity should be extended towards those who in the intense and righteous anger of the moment should take the law into their own hands and deal out rough but still substantial justice; for no negro was ever lynched without incontestable proof of his guilt.”<sup>47</sup>

In addition to asserting that the practice of lynching is both justified and the product of a specific class of white southerners, the hosts also recognize the need for the appearance of balance in presenting their case: “In order to be perfectly fair, and give their visitors an opportunity to see both sides of the question, they accompanied the Northern visitors to a colored church where they might hear a colored preacher, who had won a jocular popularity throughout the whole country by an oft-repeated sermon

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<sup>46</sup> Chesnutt, *Marrow*, 115.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 115-116.

intended to demonstrate that the earth was flat like a pancake.”<sup>48</sup> Following the sermon and a visit to the colored mission school, on which errand “a Southern friend kindly volunteered to accompany them,” the visitors “felt inclined to sympathize with the Southern people,” since, “[t]here might of course be things to criticise here and there, certain customs for which they did not exactly see the necessity, and which seemed in conflict with the highest ideals of liberty but surely these courteous, soft-spoken ladies and gentlemen, entirely familiar with local conditions, who descanted so earnestly and at times pathetically upon the grave problems confronting them, must know more about it than people in the distant North, without their means of information.”<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, all the African Americans the northern visitors meet seem happy, and “Surely a people who made no complaints could not be very much oppressed.”<sup>50</sup>

The idea that northerners had limited information about the situation in the South is one northern reviewers expressed as well, and as we have seen, many praised *The Marrow of Tradition* for providing the other side of a previously one-sided story. In this scene, though, the northern visitors are taken in twice: once by the southern arguments about the justice of racial violence, and again by claims that they are being shown “both sides of the question.” The northern visitors are not relying on the dubious reports that reach them from the South; they are there to see for themselves, but they prove incapable of accurately evaluating what they see, preferring instead to accept the easiest and least-challenging conclusion. Although this passage provides a clear criticism of both northern

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 117.



and southern whites, the argument is communicated through irony, rather than transparent didacticism. The narrator never explicitly says that the northern visitors have been deceived or that the southern hosts have set out to fool them; instead, the narrative relies on the dissonance between the arguments the southerners make and the injustices the first hundred pages of the novel have chronicled. Readers are required to recognize the irony in the claim that taking visitors to hear a black preacher argue that the earth was flat showed “both sides of the question,” or in the description of white southerners “descant[ing] so earnestly and at times pathetically on the grave problems confronting them.” Readers, then, must be twice as perceptive as the northern visitors, able to recognize both the disingenuousness of southern defense of racism and the falsity of the proffered view of African American life.

Chesnutt, in other words, shows a northern audience that is patently incapable of performing exactly what many northern reviewers saw as their role: observing and evaluating both sides of this debate. *The Marrow of Tradition* is, itself, an attempt to show what the African American community in the novel is prevented from providing: the actual experience of African Americans in the South. In the novel, though, northern observers are all too willing to accept southern justifications for racial violence and to take the quaint and picturesque scenes they are shown as evidence of African American satisfaction. As Nancy Bentley observes, the northern visit and cake walk scenes portray the North as a willing audience for southern distractions and “pleasing customs.”<sup>51</sup> In

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<sup>51</sup> Nancy Bentley, “Literary Forms and Mass Culture, 1870-1920” in *The Cambridge History of American Literature*, Vol. 3, Sacvan Bercovitch, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), 205.

doing so, Chesnutt implicates the North in southern racism, both by demonstrating the northern audience's own racism and condescension, and by showing its desire to accept the easy, romantic answer to racial problems in the South. Not only is the North complicit in southern racism, but northern racism—the willingness to take the patently ridiculous preacher as representative of the race or the inability to see the African Americans they meet as anything other than servants or buffoons, for example—fuels that complicity.

Of course, not all reviews of the book were positive. The most notable negative review of the novel came from William Dean Howells in the December 1901 *North American Review*. Howells does not dismiss *The Marrow of Tradition* as biased or exaggerated, but he famously laments its “bitter” quality, writing,

in that republic of letters where all men are free and equal [Chesnutt] stands up for his own people with a courage which has more justice than mercy in it. The book is, in fact, bitter, bitter. There is no reason in history why it should not be so, if wrong is to be repaid with hate, and yet it would be better if it was not so bitter. I am not saying that he is so inartistic as to play the advocate; whatever his minor foibles may be, he is an artist whom his stepbrother Americans may well be proud of; but while he recognizes pretty well all the facts in the case, he is too clearly of a judgment that is made up.<sup>52</sup>

Unlike many of the other northern reviewers, Howells does not discuss *The Marrow of Tradition* in terms of the South, or cast the book as part of a regionally defined debate. Instead, Howells reacts to the novel with a disappointment that seems almost personal,

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<sup>52</sup> Howells, “A Psychological Counter-Current in Recent Fiction, 882.

writing that Chesnutt has “more justice than mercy” and that the book “would be better if it was not so bitter.” Howells’s reaction is not that of someone who is conceiving of the novel as speaking to a geographically and culturally distanced readership, nor of someone who is mediating a debate between two parties in the South, but rather the response of someone who sees himself and his readers personally implicated in the novel’s message. The mercy he asks for is for himself. Howells is too fair-minded to take the *Independent’s* approach and dismiss the novel as biased to avoid having to consider oneself in terms of it, but he is also too astute to imagine that the book is only an indictment of racists and white supremacists in the South. Following his lament that Chesnutt “is too clearly of a judgment that is made up,” Howells writes, “One cannot blame him for that; what would one be one's self? If the tables could once be turned, and it could be that it was the black race which violently and lastingly triumphed in the bloody revolution at Wilmington, North Carolina, a few years ago, what would not we excuse to the white man who made the atrocity the argument of his fiction?” The discomfort in his review—the accusation of bitterness tinged with too much justice and the admission that he might act similarly if the tables were turned—stems from Howells having conceived of himself and his readers as among the people the book is speaking to in a way that few of the novel’s other reviewers did.

According to Simmons, “Much of Chesnutt’s aim in the novel is to construct a text that compels readers to look at things they would just as soon avert their eyes from; this, I would argue, is just as central to his realism as the dense histories he draws.”<sup>53</sup> The

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<sup>53</sup> Simmons, *Chesnutt and Realism*, 98.

common critical understanding of Howells's review is that it demonstrates his discomfort with being forced to confront a view of race relations that did not fit with his more accommodationist philosophy. Though Howells's review expresses mild disappointment, a letter he sent to Henry B. Fuller was considerably more candid: "Good Lord! How such a negro must hate us."<sup>54</sup> But though Howells's response can be read as the reaction of someone who has been forced to look at something he might rather have ignored, many of the other reviewers found ways to reframe what they saw in the novel so that they and their readers did not need to be uncomfortable. The complex ambivalence of Howells's response emphasizes the degree to which other reviewers' sectional displacement allows them to engage with the book on a much less personally uncomfortable level. The *New York Times*, for example, writes that "The book is skillfully written, and although certain occasional touches seem too bitter, or quite unfair, who shall say that to an impartial reader, to a Hindu or Chinese critic, they might not seem entirely impartial?" The reviewer's fantasy of an "impartial reader" who is, strangely, "a Hindu or Chinese critic," is a sort of hedge against reacting to the novel either personally, or from the perspective of the *Times*'s readers. The reviewer acknowledges that elements of the book "seem too bitter, or quite unfair," but the reference to the imagined "impartial reader" makes it clear that in the reviewer's estimation, the novel's perceived unfairness is dependent on the position of its reader. Though the reviewer implies that a less impartial reader might find the novel bitter, he declines to identify the specific circumstances (geographical,

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<sup>54</sup> William Dean Howells, *Selected Letters, Vol. 4, 1892-1901*, Thomas Wortham, Christoph K. Lohmann, and David J. Nordloh, eds. (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981), 274.

ideological, or otherwise) that might lead a reader to view the book as unfair, preferring instead to defer to the hypothetical opinion of a hypothetical impartial (and geographically removed) critic. He may, like Howells, be acknowledging his own (and by implication, his readers') partiality in responding to the novel, but he does so through a series of indirect references rather than the more direct and personal language of Howells's review.

Not all Northern reviewers responded positively, and those who panned the book tended to do so on grounds that indicate their entrenched attempts not to read the book in a way that might force an uncomfortable recognition on the part of themselves or their readers. Chesnutt took particular offense at a review published in the New York-based *Independent* and urged Houghton, Mifflin to request a public apology, writing to George Mifflin, "The notice was not only unjust, I felt, to the book, and to my motives, but was personal to the point of offensiveness." Houghton, Mifflin contacted Clarence Bowen, editor of the *Independent*, who, according to Chesnutt, confirmed "that some Southerner had reviewed the book." But though the *Independent's* literary editor, Paul Elmer More, read *The Marrow of Tradition* at Bowen's request, More ultimately approved the review, "stating that 'Chesnutt had done what he could to humiliate the whites' and saying that the last chapter was 'utterly revolting' to him."<sup>55</sup>

The review claimed that *The Marrow of Tradition* was

A novel written apparently by a man with a racial grievance, and for the purpose of exposing conditions rather than to gratify any literary instinct in the author. All

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<sup>55</sup> H. Chesnutt, *Chesnutt*, 179.

the traditional virtues of the negroes are contrasted with all the reputed vices of Southern whites with the lively distinctions of a mulatto imagination. And the result is vigorous and vindictive to a remarkable degree. Mr. Chesnut will do well to remember that in order to make his enemy appear thoroughly despicable, he should be treated with a show of fairness instead of a malignant hatred, which always excites sympathy. He tips the scales of justice too far in favor of his own indignant emotions. But these, however justified by the fact of his own experience, are never safe foundations to build a romance upon. They are too rash, too personal. And art at least is no respecter of persons. There is no color line in its eternal fairness.

Like most of the negative reviews of the novel, the *Independent* reviewer locates the book's primary fault in the perceived unfairness in its depiction of white characters. Wilson argues that the "unfairness" or exaggeration that both reviewers and modern scholars have remarked on was part of an effort on Chesnut's part to "tur[n] typical practice on its head: readers had come to accept without question the deployment of stereotypes by white writers about racial Others. Chesnut turns the gaze back onto the white audience and quite deliberately manipulates his white characters as racial stereotypes."<sup>56</sup> But for the reviewer from the *Independent*, as well as a reviewer from the *Boston Sunday Herald*, Chesnut's perceived use of white stereotypes or caricatures provided yet another means of responding to the novel without responding to its criticism. According to the *Herald*, "In the comparison of the races it is important that

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<sup>56</sup> Wilson, *Whiteness*, 128

justice be done to the white race, if those who compose it are to be effectively addressed, as we assume, it is the desire of the author of this book that they shall be in its pages.” In other words, if Chesnutt wants to reach white audiences, he must not offend them by describing white characters unjustly. In declaring that Chesnutt has been unjust to all of the white characters in the book, the reviewer is able to dismiss the novel’s persuasive work out of hand. If the book misrepresents *all* whites, then it must not show the reviewer or readers anything about themselves. Moreover, both reviewers frame the novel’s primary flaw not as a failure of accuracy, but rather as an ethical failure, in the rhetorical sense: in allegedly painting all of the white characters in a negative light, Chesnutt has demonstrated insufficient good will toward his white readers. Focusing their disapproval on Chesnutt’s rhetorical choices allows reviewers to criticize the novel’s depiction of white characters without having to directly refute the historical or regional specifics of that depiction.

### **“Calculated to do infinite harm”: Southern reviewers take up the debate**

Although he had hoped for a uniformly positive northern response, Chesnutt expected his book to meet with hostility among southern readers and reviewers. Shortly after *The Marrow of Tradition*’s publication, he wrote to his daughter Ethel, “The book is out and is taking quite a start. I suspect the Southerners will pitch into it.”<sup>57</sup> Helen Chesnutt describes the book as meeting with “a storm of resentment and unfavorable criticism” from the South.<sup>58</sup> Southern reviewers used many of the same justifications as northern reviewers for dismissing the novel’s claims about race relations, arguing that the

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<sup>57</sup> H. Chesnutt, *Chesnutt*, 175.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 177.

characterizations of each race lacked fairness and believability, and therefore demonstrated that the rest of the novel was inaccurate. But though the reviews from the South are largely condemnatory of Chesnutt's novel, many of them also demonstrate an awareness of the novel's persuasive potential for northern readers. If northern reviewers framed themselves and their readers as adjudicators of a southern conflict, southern reviewers framed their responses as a counter-argument to the novel, taking particular care to appear balanced before the northern court of opinion. Southern reviewers, then, imagined a northern public for the novel, and, because that public was also imagined in a judicial role, responded to the novel in ways their imagined public might also find persuasive, couching their response to the book so that their objections would appear to be rooted in grounds other than knee-jerk racism or sectional ideology.

As the metaphor of Dr. Burns and other northerners as readers of a serial story indicates, *The Marrow of Tradition* demonstrates a keen awareness of the multiple reading publics involved in the debate over the race problem. Chesnutt's shrewdest analysis is reserved for the relationship between the southern press and its sectionally distinct publics. Carteret's audience problem at the beginning of the novel extends beyond the fact that local readers are unwilling to respond to his race-baiting editorials. Not only is the campaign for white supremacy lagging at home, but Carteret and his co-conspirator General Belmont are also concerned with the need for success with northern audiences. "It is clear that we must reckon on opposition, both at home and abroad," Belmont tells Carteret, adding, "If we are to hope for success, we must extend the lines of our campaign. The North, as well as our own people, must be convinced that we have



right upon our side. We are conscious of the purity of our motives, but we should avoid even the appearance of evil.”<sup>59</sup> Belmont ties the importance of northern opinion in the southern campaign for white supremacy to the role of the southern press, telling Carteret, “you... represent the Associated Press. Through your hands passes all the news of the state. What more powerful medium for the propagation of an idea? The man who would govern a nation by writing its songs was a blithering idiot beside the fellow who can edit its news dispatches. The negroes are playing into our hands,—every crime that one of them commits is reported by us.”<sup>60</sup>

Like General Belmont, southern reviewers recognized the importance of northern public opinion, along with the possibility that the public of their reviews might extend beyond regional or sectional boundaries. The New Orleans *Daily States* declared that *The Marrow of Tradition* was “calculated to do infinite harm if, unfortunately, it should win favor among and impress conviction upon Northern readers,” while the Washington, DC *Evening Star* accused the novel of “tend[ing] to revive the sectional differences which culminated in the civil war.”<sup>61</sup> If *The Marrow of Tradition* constituted an argument to northern publics, then the reviews, though published in southern papers, might well serve as the response. As Matthew Wilson observes, the southern papers had already led the way in framing the incidents at Wilmington for a national audience, reporting the riots in

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<sup>59</sup> Chesnutt, *Marrow*, 81.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 83

<sup>61</sup> “Books: Their Writers, Their Makers,” New Orleans *Daily States*, December 15, 1901, 16, Chesnutt Digital Archive; “With Ye Books,” Washington, DC *Evening Star*, November 9, 1901, 28, Chesnutt Digital Archive.

ways favorable to the white conspirators who had planned the coup to overthrow Wilmington's interracial government.<sup>62</sup>

In their capacity as the primary vehicle by which news of race relations in the South reaches northern readers, southern newspapers have the potential to speak directly to the imagined northern public that might have been swayed by Chesnut's argument.

We can see that impulse at work in a review in the New Orleans *Daily States*:

IN THE MARROW OF TRADITION, Charles W. Chestnut has written a novel of undoubted intensity and of marked felicity of narrative, but it is a book utterly repellant to Southern sentiment, and one calculated to do infinite harm if, unfortunately, it should win favor among and impress conviction upon Northern readers. The author is, we believe, a negro, who lived in the South in reconstruction days, and is seeking to present what he intends as a truthful picture of conditions of the period, to the end that Northern sentiment shall be aroused, by knowledge of the treatment the negro has received at the hands of the Southern people, to demand a settlement of the black problem upon terms acceptable to the class for whom the author assumes to speak. The gross immorality of the book, however; the studied attempt to insinuate the prevalence of sexual relations between the races as the rule rather than the rare exception in the South; the exaggeration of the virtues of the negro, and the minimization of those of the whites; and the shocking denouement are not likely to commend *The Marrow of Tradition* very strongly to Southern readers. The author is capable of really

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<sup>62</sup> Wilson, *Whiteness*, 107.

brilliant work, and it is a pity that he should have devoted his talents to a novel so insulting to this section of the country.

The *Daily States* reviewer clearly sees the possibility that Chesnutt's novel might arouse northern sentiments as a threat, and he identifies what he sees as the most inaccurate and potentially damaging elements of the book: "the prevalence of sexual relations between the races as the rule rather than the rare exception in the South; the exaggeration of the virtues of the negro, and the minimization of those of the whites; and the shocking denouement." But though the book is "utterly repellant to the Southern sentiment," the author does not merely list its offenses; he also acknowledges that *The Marrow of Tradition* is "a novel of undoubted intensity and of marked felicity of narrative." He concludes by condemning the novel as "insulting to this section of the country" while at the same time praising Chesnutt as being "capable of really brilliant work." The author's concern that *The Marrow of Tradition* might "do infinite harm if, unfortunately, it should win favor among and impress conviction upon Northern readers" indicates a clear anxiety about the northern response to the book, as well as an acknowledgement of northern audiences as important arbiters in questions of southern race relations. If *The Marrow of Tradition* truly is a threat to northern readers' opinion of the South, then the reviewer must answer that threat in a way that does not further undermine northern opinion—he must, following General Belmont's advice, "avoid even the appearance of evil." The reviewer cannot confirm the novel's charges of racism and blatantly unfair treatment by writing a blatantly racist and unfair review. Instead, he criticizes the novel and

acknowledges southern objections to it while at the same time acknowledging Chesnutt's facility as a writer, thereby framing his criticism in a way that appears balanced.

A review in the *Macon Telegraph* demonstrates a similar awareness of audience and appearance of balance. The reviewer begins by noting that *The Marrow of Tradition* is "written by the best known writer of fiction among American negroes and issued by a first-class Boston publisher."<sup>63</sup> The reviewer admits that the novel demonstrates a genuine problem in the South, but frames that problem not as one of racism on the part of white southerners, but rather, "the attitude and feelings of the new generation of educated blacks," which "shows that these people burn with a sense of injustice and wrong, and that they will never be satisfied until the color line has totally disappeared." The reviewer cites many familiar complaints about the novel, concluding that, "Its disregard of the probable and its scant regard for truth will often exasperate the white reader of 'The Marrow of Tradition,' but the man of broad sympathies will recognize in it the cry of a people who believe themselves to be under the heel of oppression, and he will be filled with sorrow as he contemplates conditions which can be altered only by the separation of the races." In shifting the problem of the novel from the treatment of African Americans at the hands of white southerners to the effects of perceived oppression on "the new generation of educated blacks," the reviewer frames the issue in a way that absolves white southerners of any responsibility, while still appearing to acknowledge the grievances represented in the book. The reviewer does not deny that Chesnutt and others "believe themselves to be under the heel of oppression," but neither is he willing to admit

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<sup>63</sup> "A Negro's Novel and Mr. Joel Chandler Harris," *Macon Telegraph*, January 30, 1902, 4, *America's Historical Newspapers*.

that they actually are oppressed. The “man of broad sympathies” recognizes that the characters in the novel feels oppressed, but he is not implicated in that oppression; as a result, he feels sorrow not because Chesnutt and others are suffering, but because they are suffering without cause (or perhaps that their suffering has been self-inflicted), and the only change that can be made is to segregate the races completely. The reviewer manages to appear as if he is sympathizing with Chesnutt in a way that completely avoids admitting any responsibility for the circumstances the novel describes, or even acknowledging that the circumstances exist.

Even in more uniformly negative reviews, we can see evidence that the reviewer is treading carefully. Katherine Glover’s review in the *Atlanta Journal* concludes with the pronouncement, “The whole story is ridiculous, it is not unusually well written and it is easy to predict oblivion for it. The American people are too sensible to waste their time upon such silly rot.”<sup>64</sup> But before reaching that conclusion, Glover argues:

Chesnutt should print his picture with his book in order to allow his readers to know whether he is a white man or a negro. This is said with all seriousness. After reading the work it is impossible to tell. The preponderance of evidence suggests that he is a negro. It really makes a difference, because it is possible to understand how an educated, ambitious and disgruntled negro could have written the book, but it is not possible to understand how a white man of sound mind in his sober senses could have been guilty of the book upon which Chesnutt places his name.

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<sup>64</sup> Katherine Glover, “News in the World of Books,” in *Critical Essays on Charles W. Chesnut*, ed. Joseph McElrath (New York: G. K. Hall & Co, 1999), 84-85. Reprinted from *Atlanta Journal*, December 14, 1901, 4.

If a negro wrote the book his work may in these days be overlooked; if a white man wrote the book it should be calmly but promptly dismissed with contempt. Report has it that Chesnutt lives in North Carolina. If that be true it is hardly probable that his neighbors are proud of him.

The obvious irony of Glover's response is, as Ryan Simmons points out, that a picture of Chesnutt would have been no help in determining his racial background and might even have left Glover with the impression that the author was, in fact, a white man, if not of sound mind or sober senses.<sup>65</sup> Glover's demand indicates that she needs to know Chesnutt's race before she can make sense of the novel, and implies that she might evaluate it differently if Chesnutt were a white man than if he were black. But as Glover herself admits, the ultimate result of her assessment changes only a little depending on the race Chesnutt belongs to: if Chesnutt is black, she can dismiss the book as the work of a disgruntled author and ignore it entirely, if he is white, she can dismiss it as the work of an unbalanced one and publicly register her contempt. Nonetheless, Glover presents these potential reactions as somehow markedly different. Glover may suspect based on the content of the novel that Chesnutt is black, but, as the *Telegraph* noted, the book is "issued by a first-class Boston publisher," evidence enough for Glover to entertain the possibility that Chesnutt might be white. After all, Houghton Mifflin had never before put out a novel written by a black man. While Glover seems to be willing to dismiss the work of an African American author out of hand, she is less willing to ignore a novel written by a white man and put out by a major publishing house, even if her ultimate opinion is

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<sup>65</sup> Simmons, *Chesnutt and Realism*, 107.

that the book is “silly rot.” Since Glover’s opinion of the novel does not change either way, such a calculation indicates concern on Glover’s part over the way she presents that opinion to her readers.

That southern reviewers would work for an appearance of balance and civility is far from a foregone conclusion. The New Orleans *Daily Picayune* printed the following review:

This purports to be a typical southern romance, by one presumed to know whereof he writes, but had the task been intrusted to an Eskimo he would have acquitted himself more creditably than Charles W. Chesnut, who belongs to that class of "edicated niggers" whose mouthings do more harm than good to the cause they champion. The author spoils what would have been a passably good romance by his nauseating sectionalism and his senseless harangues to prove that the negro is the social equal of the white and the victim of tyranny, prejudice and hatred. The book is disgustingly laudatory of the negro. It is a work which should be relegated to the kitchen for the delectation of Dinah and her scullions.<sup>66</sup>

Such a review bears little analysis beyond the obvious observation of the review’s blatant and vulgar racism, which easily exceeds the bounds of propriety set by all the other reviews of the novel that I have found. Even in this review, the author seems compelled to say something positive about the book, but the declaration that *The Marrow of Tradition* might have been “a passably good romance” without the “nauseating sectionalism” is in itself perplexing, as nearly the novel’s entire plot revolves around

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<sup>66</sup> “Recent Publications,” New Orleans *Picayune*, November 3, 1901, 15.

issues of racial injustice. The reviewer does not specify in what way the novel “purports to be a typical southern romance,” and the promotional material produced by Houghton Mifflin did not advertise *The Marrow of Tradition* as a southern romance. Promotional material announcing the publication of the novel made reference to “Mrs. Stowe’s romantic ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin,’” and promised that “Charles W. Chesnut’s powerful story, ‘THE MARROW OF TRADITION,’” would “recall at many points its great precursor ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin,’” but the description gives no indication that the novel might be considered a “typical southern romance.” The reviewer may be referring to the love triangle between Tom Delamere, Carteret’s niece, and an employee of Carteret’s paper that takes up a small section of the novel, or the *Picayune* reviewer may have recalled an earlier review of *The Conjure Woman* published in the paper, which describe the book as, “Well written, showing familiarity with the whimsicalities and comicalities of negro character, and a subtle perception of the poetry and romance often lying hidden in their hearts. The dialect is well handled and intelligible.” Whatever the cause, the *Picayune*’s association of *The Marrow of Tradition* with “typical southern romance” indicates that, like so many of the novel’s reviewers, the *Picayune* reviewer was either unwilling or unable to think about the book outside of a familiar context, in this case that of the plantation romance.

Though southern reviews provided an opportunity to target responses to the novel at both northern and southern publics, not all responses were calculated to have equal weight in both sections. Much of the precipitating action of *The Marrow of Tradition* hinges on the degree to which public speech resonates with a northern versus a southern



public. Unable to rouse his readers to action with editorials that promote white supremacy, Carteret resorts to reprinting an anti-lynching editorial published in the local African-American newspaper, accompanied by sufficient editorial comment to make it clear that the piece is “an insult to white womanhood.”<sup>67</sup> By invoking a threat to white female purity, Carteret finally manages to elicit the white supremacist sentiment he has been seeking, but as the narrator notes, that particular outcome is dependent on the regional publication context for the editorial: “Such an article in a Northern newspaper would have attracted no special attention, and might merely have furnished food to an occasional reader for serious thought upon a subject not exactly agreeable; but coming from a colored man, in a Southern city, it was an indictment of the laws and social system of the South that could not fail of creating a profound sensation.”<sup>68</sup>

Chesnutt’s observation that certain sentiments found sensational in the South are at best unremarkable in the North is borne out by the southern reviewers’ reactions to the use of social class in the novels. Southern reviewers found the subplot in which the degenerate aristocrat Tom Delamere robs and murders his aunt and then frames a black servant for the murder particularly shocking and objectionable. The *Macon Telegraph* writes, “The reader is hardly prepared for the spectacle of an aristocratic young Southern white man blacking his face, putting on a negro’s clothes, robbing and murdering an old white gentlewoman and then deliberately contriving that an innocent negro be charged with and punished for the crime.” For this reviewer, the shocking element is not that of a white man blacking his face and murdering a white woman, but of “an aristocratic young

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<sup>67</sup> Chesnutt, *Marrow*, 248

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 85

Southern white man” murdering “an old white gentlewoman.” A lengthy review in the *Dallas Morning News* concludes with the following paragraph:

How well [Chesnutt] understands the white or black character on which he has laid violent hands may be inferred from two incidents taken at random from the book. He makes the scion of one of the most exclusive families—a "swell," a young exquisite—dress himself in the clothing of a negro servant, black up and participate with negroes in a cakewalk. He endows an ex-slave, the father of his hero, with ambitions that any one familiar with old-time darky character would discount; in fact, the father is made to give the son "a professional education in the proud hope that his children or his grandchildren might be gentlemen in the town where their ancestors had once been slaves."<sup>69</sup>

That the reviewer concludes with these two incidents “taken at random from the book,” and lacking any commentary, indicates the belief that they can stand on their own in demonstrating Chesnutt’s lack of insight into his characters. In that context, the first incident only indicates that Chesnutt has “laid violent hands” on his characters if we recognize that Chesnutt’s offense is not that he has shown a white man dressing up as a black man, but that he shows “the scion of one of the most exclusive families” doing so.

For these reviewers, the violence of Tom Delamere’s actions is secondary to what they see as the impossibility of a man of Tom’s class committing such crimes. Glover makes that connection even more explicit by noting that not only is “Every white man in the book made to be a villain, and the white women... made to be designing creatures

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<sup>69</sup> “Fiction on Race Question,” *Dallas Morning News*, November 25, 1901, 5, *America’s Historical Newspapers*.

without a semblance of honesty or any other virtue that is esteemed in the south,” but furthermore, “The white characters all come from fine old families, and are in society.” In showing the architects of Wellington’s white supremacist movement to be an uneasy alliance of members of “the most exclusive families” and the savage and uncultured former overseer Captain McBane, *The Marrow of Tradition* challenges the claim that the so-called southern aristocracy actually abides by the sort of code of honor reviewers want to ascribe to Tom and the members of his class. The outcry from southern reviewers indicates that this charge struck home, and reviewers’ insistence on the absurd or shocking quality of the book’s depiction of the white elite reads as a defense of southern honor under siege.

But though the novel’s treatment of the white aristocracy was a common point of discussion in the southern reviews, few reviewers outside the South bother to mention the aristocratic origins of many of the novel’s white characters. The evangelical, New York-based *Christian Work* adopted a position very similar to that of the review coming out of the South, arguing,

That all the injustice, abuse and insult done the colored characters in the story are *possible* one does not attempt to deny, and that race prejudice is still strong in the South, which it will take generations to wipe out, every one knows; but educated men are human after all, so that the description of the unnecessary uprising of the whites (especially among the better class) against the blacks, together with the

wholesale and brutal murders, seems rather overdrawn, for while the Southerners may be intolerant, overbearing and hot headed, he is from heredity a gentleman.<sup>70</sup>

The reviewer's acceptance of southern claims to hereditary aristocracy leads to a reading of the novel that is particularly sympathetic to southern justifications of racial violence as confined to certain classes of white southerners. The more common view among the northern reviewers, though, seems to be that of the Newark *Sunday News*, which argues that a character like Tom "serves merely as a type of the dissipating young degenerate in which so many fine old families are fated to end."<sup>71</sup> Northern reviewers often express shock at the actions of the white characters in the novel, but they do not identify the characters' class status as contributing to that shock. Rather, it is the overwhelming villainous qualities of the white characters in general that alarm reviewers. Unlike the *Christian Work's* aside about "the better class" of whites in the novel, the *Bookman's* complaint that "Almost all the white personages of the book have very black souls," or the *World's Work's* claim that the book would be more convincing if "the Negroes were not so blameless and the Whites not so unrelievedly bad" make no distinctions among the the different white characters' social classes.<sup>72</sup>

The southern reviews of *The Marrow of Tradition* clearly attempt to defend against the charges offered in the novel, but it is not always evident for whom that defense is intended. Excepting the *Picayune*, reviewers tend to avoid using blatant racism

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<sup>70</sup> Review of *The Marrow of Tradition*, *Christian Work*, December 5, 1901, 859, HathiTrust.

<sup>71</sup> "Mr. Chesnutt and the Negro Problem," Newark *Sunday News*, December 29, 1901, 6, Chesnutt Digital Archive.

<sup>72</sup> "A Short Guide to New Books," *World's Work* 3, no. 4 (February 1902): 1788, HathiTrust

as the basis of their attacks, and often appear to go out of their way to find something to praise about the book, generally setting stylistic or formal praise against the criticism of the ideological elements of the novel. The reviews' concern with northern public opinion, coupled with the role of southern newspapers as the primary vehicles for disseminating information about the South to the North, indicates that reviewers are imagining a northern public for their reviews.<sup>73</sup> The fact that their concerns about class fail to resonate with northern reviewers, though, shows the potential difficulty in balancing responses to two different publics.

### **Conclusion**

Like the southern reviews, the reviews published in African American newspapers demonstrate an attempt to defend a position to some implied or imagined public beyond the public of the review itself. But while the southern reviewers defend their views against what they perceive as the attacks in the novel itself, African American reviewers defend the novel against the implicit attacks of southerners or other readers who question the claims Chesnutt makes. The Indianapolis, IN *Freeman*, for example, lists specific statements made by white characters in the novel that might appear inflammatory or exaggerated and then provides evidence that each of these statements was drawn from the remarks of actual politicians and public speakers.<sup>74</sup> In doing so, the review responds implicitly to common criticisms that Chesnutt was unfair in his depiction of white characters, or that no actual white people were as terrible as the characters in the book. A

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<sup>73</sup> For more on the official journalistic record that Chesnutt's novel provided a counter to, see Roe, "Keeping an 'Old Wound' Alive," 231-43.

<sup>74</sup> Charles Alexander, "Our Journalists and Literary Folks," *The Freeman* (Indianapolis, IN), December 28, 1901, 2, America's Historical Newspapers.

review in the *New York Age* addresses charges of partiality from a stylistic, rather than a factual standpoint, writing that

Charles W. Chesnutt will probably have a higher and more permanent place in prose writing than Dunbar will have in poetic writing, mainly because the former writes in a higher atmosphere of American thought and action than Dunbar... Dunbar thinks and writes as an American black man, for the most part, and there is always present in his work the melancholy note and the tropical profusion which are a part of the African nature, as far as I understand it; while Mr. Chesnutt thinks and writes more as an American, from the broad standpoint of country rather than from race. In 'The Marrow of Tradition' instance, it would not be easy to tell that Mr. Chesnutt is an Afro-American by any bias disclosed in his work, while a white man could not have written Dunbar's 'Sport of the Gods,' simply because he could not feel and think in the language of the book. Mr. Chesnutt shows in his literary work that he takes very lofty ground, without limitations of race, which is not always true of Southern writers of the present school. The broad, human note so often struck by Mr. Chesnutt is present much in the work of Joel Chandler Harris and Frank J. Stanton, and appeals to the race rather than to a race group.<sup>75</sup>

This review characterizes Chesnutt's writing as racially unmarked, so that although the novel deals with race, it could, in the reviewer's opinion, just as easily have been written by a white man. The idea that white readers would be able to "feel and think in the

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<sup>75</sup> "Review of *The Marrow of Tradition*, and Chesnutt Bio Note," *The New York Age*, July 20, 1905, 6, Chesnutt Archive.

language of the book” works, like the evidence that the most extreme opinions held by white characters were taken from actual events, to establish the balance in the novel and counter accusations of bias or distortion.

A review in the Topeka, KS, *Plaindealer* by T. Thomas Fortune, one of the most prominent African American journalists of the time, indicates that Fortune anticipates the responses of several separate publics that are distinct from the public of his review. Fortune speculates, “It would not be surprising if this book should work some such revolution in public sentiment as ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ wrought.”<sup>76</sup> The public whose sentiment may be altered is clearly not the same public of the *Plaindealer*, an African American newspaper whose readers are likely well aware of the conditions for African Americans in the South; rather, if the public Fortune means is the same as that which was ostensibly affected by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, it consists largely of northern readers. Fortune also anticipates the response of two specific southern reading publics when he writes, “Mr. Chesnutt despises ‘a good nigger’ of the ‘Jerry’ sort as much as I do, and I expect the editors of the Wilmington Messenger and the Atlanta Constitution to go after him and do him up, as they have me.” In contrast, the Cleveland *Gazette* directs its response exclusively to the public of the review itself, writing, “‘The Marrow of Tradition’ is ‘right up to the present time’ and ought to be read carefully by every intelligent member of the race. See that it is in your library.”<sup>77</sup> Though there are too few reviews available to form a complete picture of the reception of the novel in African American papers, the

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<sup>76</sup> T. Thomas Fortune, review of *The Marrow of Tradition*, *The Plaindealer* (Topeka, KS), November 29, 1901, 1, America’s Historical Newspapers.

<sup>77</sup> Review of *The Marrow of Tradition*, *Cleveland Gazette*, May 16, 1903, 2, America’s Historical Newspapers.

reviews indicate that, like white reviewers, and particularly white southern reviewers, African American reviewers were considering both imagined and actual reading publics in responding to the novel.

In 1902, Chesnutt's friend Representative Theodore E. Burton suggested he send copies of *The Marrow of Tradition* to certain influential members of the U. S. House of Representatives, all Republicans, who had already been exposed to Thomas E. Dixon's virulently racist novel *The Leopard's Spots*. Chesnutt sent the novel to the five men Burton suggested, and included an excerpt from a review of *Marrow* published in the *Nation* earlier that month. The reviewer found *The Marrow of Tradition* "inferior to [Chesnutt's] short stories in form and method," but praised the novel for "show[ing] more vigorously than they do the capacity for cool observation and reflection." Moreover, the author explicitly evaluated *Marrow* as a purpose novel, writing, "The medium of fiction is used by the author of *The Marrow of Tradition* to make a statement of existing relations between negroes and whites in several of the Southern States. Plot, characters, and situations are all conceived with this object in view. The combination of fiction and fact is not perfect, but it is closer and smoother than in most of the current purpose novels."<sup>78</sup>

In choosing to send this particular review to the representatives he hope to influence, Chesnutt was emphasizing the same qualities in *The Marrow of Tradition* that he highlighted in an article for the *Cleveland World*. Like the *Nation*, Chesnutt explicitly

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<sup>78</sup> Review of *The Marrow of Tradition*, *Critical Essays on Charles W. Chesnut*, ed. Joseph McElrath (New York: G. K. Hall & Co, 1999), 88. Reprinted from the *Nation*, March 20, 1902, 232.



identified *Marrow* as a purpose novel, writing, “The primary object of the story, as it should be of every work of fiction, is to entertain; and yet it belongs in the category of purpose novel, inasmuch as it seeks to throw light upon the vexed moral and sociological problems which grow out of the presence, in our southern states, of two diverse races, in nearly equal numbers.”<sup>79</sup> Chesnutt’s definition of a purpose novel as seeking to “throw light upon... vexed moral and sociological problems” emphasizes documentation over persuasion and frames the purpose novel in terms of what it might show, rather than what it might do. His decision to send the novel to members of Congress, though, implies a belief that his purpose novel might not only shed light on vexed problems, but also influence readers in their response to those problems.

The responses Chesnutt received from the Congressmen appear to have been exceedingly politic. According to Helen Chesnutt, the men “commented upon the fact that the two authors [Dixon and Chesnutt] had ‘entirely different points of view.’”<sup>80</sup> Representative Charles Edgar Littlefield “felt that both books were valuable because they dealt with great questions about which it was very important that the people of the United States should be fully informed.” Representative E. D. Crumpacker “felt that the book ought to be read by every man in America,” but also “proceeded to give Chesnutt a review of *The Leopard’s Spots*,” presumably because he imagined Chesnutt had not read the book. Chesnutt responded with a letter indicating that he had, in fact, read Dixon’s book, and outlining his complaints against it. Like many of *The Marrow of Tradition*’s

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<sup>79</sup> Charles Chesnutt, “Charles Chesnutt’s Own View of His New Story, ‘The Marrow of Tradition,’” *Cleveland World*, October 20, 1901, 5, Chesnutt Digital Archive.

<sup>80</sup> H. Chesnutt, *Chesnutt*, 180

reviewers, the congressmen emphasized a need for balance in the discussion about southern race relations. Their responses locate the value of *The Marrow of Tradition* in its ability to provide a rebuttal to *The Leopard's Spots*, rather than in the specific criticisms it puts forth. Doing so allows the congressmen to respond to the novel without responding to its criticism and to acknowledge the circumstances that led Chesnutt to send them the book without committing themselves on the issue.

The exchange between Chesnutt and Representatives Crumpacker, Littlefield, et al.,<sup>81</sup> shows a relatively unmediated response to *The Marrow of Tradition*: the men received the book directly from Chesnutt and responded directly back to him. In reviewing the novel, though, reviewers neither responded directly to the author nor framed their responses entirely in terms of their own individual readings of the novel. Instead, reviewers used geographically and ideologically removed imagined publics to distance themselves and the public of their reviews from the novel's criticism. Like the congressmen, reviewers used the idea that *The Marrow of Tradition* brought balance to the debate over race in the South to frame the novel as offering an equal and opposite, but not necessarily more accurate or compelling, perspective to Dixon and Page. But reviewers also had to consider both their own ideological position and that of their immediate readers, as well as the assumed responses of readers who did not share that ideology. Reviewers used those imagined publics to further distance themselves and their readers from the novel's criticism.

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<sup>81</sup> According to Helen Chesnutt, Chesnutt sent copies of the novel to a total of five members of the House of Representatives: Crumpacker (Indiana), Littlefield (Maine), Marlin Edgar Olmsted (Pennsylvania), William H. Moody (Massachusetts), John Blaisdell Corliss (Michigan) (180).

Chesnutt's description of the purpose novel as meant to "throw light upon... vexed problems" emphasizes the documentary element of the purpose novel—its ability to expose readers to an insufficiently publicized "other side." Many of the reviews, as well, evidence a similar understanding of the novel's function. But, as Chesnutt acknowledged in his 1880 journal entry and, implicitly, in sending his novel to members of Congress, the purpose novel also needed to "lead people out... step by step, to the desired state of feeling." While northern reviewers' identification of the benefit of the novel as showing the other side tracks with the documentary function of the purpose novel, reviewers also acknowledged its persuasive function, speculating about what *The Marrow of Tradition* might or might not accomplish with its readers. The *Chataouquan*'s hope that the novel might "avail to give the advocates of 'white supremacy'... a glimpse of themselves as others see them," or *Town and Country*'s declaration that the novel is "a preachment that should work for much good" support the view that the purpose novel (and *Marrow* specifically) might work to change readers' minds. Southern concerns about the effect *The Marrow of Tradition* might have on northern public opinion evidence a similar belief in the persuasive danger of the book.

But for both northern and southern reviewers, the novel's persuasive work—whether dangerous or laudatory—finds its object in imagined publics, organized not by the direct address of the review, or even by *The Marrow of Tradition* itself, but rather by the reviewer's description of the responses of a geographically and ideologically removed public. Because those publics exist only as imagined in the space of the reviews, the work reviewers imagine the novel performing never actually occurs in the public forums in

which the novel is being discussed. Reviewers' framing of the novel, both within the plantation novel tradition and as a piece of a localized, sectional debate, prevents the self-reflection necessary to apply the novel's critiques to reviewers themselves or the public of their reviews. In other words, despite the significant public discussion of the novel, and even of its persuasive work, the novel's reviews fail to provide a public manifestation of *The Marrow of Tradition* actually doing the work of a purpose novel. Instead, the reviews show reviewers imagining what that work might look like for other imagined publics.

Reviewers, then, engaged with *The Marrow of Tradition* in a manner much more complex than either agreeing or disagreeing with Chesnut's view of race relations. That complexity should prompt critics today to reconsider common assumptions about *Marrow's* relationship to its historical moment, particularly the common view of the novel as so clearly and unequivocally challenging of the status quo that it alienated all but Chesnut's most sympathetic readers. Modern readers of the novel have little difficulty identifying the anger, irony, and often-biting criticism in much of the book, but we should be careful not to assume that these elements were equally prominent for the novel's first readers. What might it mean to think about *The Marrow of Tradition* not as a book so challenging and combative that it alienated audiences, but rather, as a book that could, like Chesnut's conjure tales, be read (at least by northern audiences) as personally unthreatening? Currently, we tend to see Chesnut's primary challenge in writing *Marrow* as preventing readers from turning away from his bitter, forceful, unmistakable critique. The reviews show, though, that many reviewers were perfectly willing to read the novel

in ways that moderated or displaced that very critique. A better picture of *Marrow's* reception, then, prompts us to consider not only ways the novel challenges racist ideologies, but also the readings that emerged in a publication context that allowed readers and reviewers to minimize what critics today often see as the novel's most prominent and controversial features.

### 3. “If you must publish it, let it be in the daily press:” *The Octopus* and working-class taste in the turn-of-the-century literary marketplace

Like *The Marrow of Tradition*, Frank Norris’s *The Octopus* (1901) gives a fictionalized retelling of a recent conflict—that of the Mussel Slough affair, an 1880 dispute between the Southern Pacific Railroad and the farmers of the San Joaquin valley. Like Norris, who spent several months in California researching the events of the novel, *The Octopus*’s protagonist Presley is in the San Joaquin valley to collect material for his work. Presley is a poet who plans to write an epic Song of the West, but by the end of the novel produces a more topical poem that, like *The Octopus*, presents the struggle between the farmers and the railroad to national readers. Presley’s Song of the West is initially intended to capture the vast spirit of California, but by the time he finishes the work, his epic is transformed into a poem called “The Toilers,” whose composition arises from Presley’s intense emotional investment in the events of the San Joaquin valley. Having become enraged by the injustices of the ranchers’ situation, Presley sits down to finish his poem, which will not be the “vast, vague, *impersonal* Song of the West” that he tried to write when “his convictions had not been aroused” and “His sympathies had not been touched.”<sup>1</sup> Instead, “he was of the People; he had been stirred to his lowest depths. His earnestness was almost a frenzy. He *believed*, and so to him all things were possible at once.”<sup>2</sup> But Presley is unable to sustain this earnestness:

Then the artist in him reasserted itself. He became more interested in his poem, as such, than in the cause that had inspired it. He went over it again, retouching it

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Norris, *The Octopus* (1901; reprint, New York: Barnes and Noble, 2005), 314.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

carefully, changing a word here and there, and improving its rhythm. For the moment, he forgot the People, forgot his rage, his agitation of the previous hour, he remembered only that he had written a great poem.

Then doubt intruded. After all, was it so great? Did not its sublimity overpass a little the bounds of the ridiculous? Had he seen true? Had he failed again? He re-read the poem carefully; and it seemed all at once to lose force.

By now, Presley could not tell whether what he had written was true poetry or doggerel. He distrusted profoundly his own judgment.<sup>3</sup>

Presley's poem brings into relief some of the tensions between the naturalist aesthetic that Norris was in the process of theorizing as he worked on *The Octopus*, the stylized and highly aestheticized literature Norris often took issue with in his criticism, and the politicized function of the purpose novel that both Presley's poem and Norris's novel flirt with. Presley's first impulse to write a "vast, vague, *impersonal*" poem stems from his desire, as we learn at the beginning of the novel, "to see everything through a rose-coloured mist—a mist that dulled all harsh outlines, all crude and violent colours."<sup>4</sup> But in addition to failing to arouse his conviction, this epic material, suited, Presley hopes, for "True Romance," is constantly in tension with Presley's "ambition to portray life as he saw it—directly, frankly, and through no medium of personality or temperament."<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, Presley abandons the idealized romance of his epic in favor

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

of a poem that is “a comment upon the social fabric.”<sup>6</sup> But though Presley’s composition process begins with his indignation over the events he is describing, it concludes with an artistic discipline that overrides both that indignation and Presley’s immediate interest in the actual subject of his poem. In other words, when Presley begins the poem, he is personally invested in the outcome of the struggle between ranchers and railroad, but by the time he is done writing, he has become an observer of the situation, interested more in the composition of his poem than in the events themselves.

That distinction between impartial observer and partisan advocate is one critics often point to when differentiating the naturalist novel from the purpose novel. Critics of American literary naturalism often acknowledge that authors of works commonly considered naturalist tended to align themselves with Progressive and reform movements and write about subjects associated with those movements, but, as Donna Campbell writes, “Most classic naturalists drew the line, however, at the overt promotion of a specific social agenda, a distinction that traditionally separates nineteenth-century reform fiction from naturalism. In naturalistic novels, the solution to social problems exists outside the story itself; by contrast, reform fiction advocates a solution.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Lee Clark Mitchell notes that one characteristic of naturalism was “an affirming belief in social reform,” but labels that belief “the least consistent attitude associated with the naturalist mode.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 313.

<sup>7</sup> Donna Campbell, “The rise of naturalism,” in *Cambridge History of the American Novel*, ed. Leonard Cassuto (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011), 506.

<sup>8</sup> Lee Clark Mitchell, *Determined Fictions: American Literary Naturalism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1989), 32.



Much as Presley's poem skirts the line between personal indignation and artistic disinterest, Norris's novel exhibits qualities associated with both literary naturalism and the purpose novel. The novel's description of the villainous railroad trust and the iniquities suffered by the farmers of the San Joaquin valley suggests the potential for a reformist reading, while the emphasis on the uncontrollable force of the wheat in steering the economy aligns the book with the determinism often associated with literary naturalism. Critical readings of *The Octopus*, though, have generally downplayed the novel's potential as a purpose novel, reasoning, like Campbell, that Norris did not mean the book to offer a solution to the problem of the trusts, but rather used the trusts as a convenient subject for a novel that addresses more universal themes. Donald Pizer, for instance, argues that, though Norris had come into contact with muckrakers like Ida Tarbell and Ray Stannard Baker when he worked at *McClure's* at the end of the century, the "appeal of the Mussel Slough massacre as the pivotal event in his novel was less the opportunity it offered for the depiction of social injustice than its literary usefulness."<sup>9</sup> Asserting that "*The Octopus* is not a novel about the class war or about the downtrodden," Pizer claims that making the railroad trust the villain of the novel would have been far from inflammatory at the turn of the century, when "Attacking a trust at that time represented little more social involvement than attacking Communism today." In addition, Pizer notes, "the victims of oppression in *The Octopus* are not comparable to the mill workers or fruit pickers in the proletarian novel of the 1930's. Norris included a few tenant farmers and railroad workers among these victims, but for the most part they

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<sup>9</sup> Donald Pizer, *The Novels of Frank Norris* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1963), 120.

are capitalists who have large investments in land and equipment and who are competing with the railroad for the riches of the land.”<sup>10</sup>

Pizer’s most controversial claim is his assertion that since “Trusts had few defenders in late-nineteenth-century America except for a handful of economic theorists and the trust owners themselves, and the Southern Pacific had even fewer than most,” *The Octopus* should not be considered in terms of its social or economic content.<sup>11</sup> As the discussion of the reviews will show, a significant number of reviewers did, in fact, view *The Octopus*’s depiction of corporate corruption and unprincipled trusts as a call to action. And while many critics after Pizer, and a few reviewers at the time of publication, have noted that the characters in *The Octopus* are nearly all in positions of economic strength and relative political power, the novel’s depiction of the ranchers as powerless against the tentacles of the octopus led many reviewers to view them as oppressed, despite their land and wealth.

For reviewers, the purpose novel provided a viable mode for reading *The Octopus* that has since been discounted by critics who have focused on reading the novel as a work of literary naturalism. But though naturalism is the label most often applied to *The Octopus*, as well as Norris’s other novels, the category of literary naturalism resists definition, particularly since, as Campbell notes, naturalism is “a term more often applied after the fact to a type of fiction that shares a particular set of features than a category used by the novelists themselves.” There is little critical consensus on what defines naturalism—so much so that Campbell advocates using “naturalisms” rather than a single

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

naturalism—and only a general consensus about which writers and novels are naturalist. But as the only American writer to refer to himself as a naturalist, or to attempt to theorize naturalism as a literary mode, Norris and his work have figured heavily in attempts by twentieth-century critics to define and explore American literary naturalism.

Though scholars of naturalism from the mid-twentieth-century through the 1980s worked to define literary naturalism and identify successful and canonical examples of the genre,<sup>12</sup> more recent studies use the category of naturalism to explore not just naturalism as a literary mode, but also more general cultural phenomena for which naturalism provides an exemplar or focal point. Walter Benn Michaels, for instance, uses the naturalist novel as a site for examining late-nineteenth century anxieties over representation, consumption, and production, while Campbell connects the rise of naturalism to the shifts in the literary marketplace at the end of the century and popular concern over what was perceived as the diminished role of masculinity in literature.<sup>13</sup> John Dudley examines the naturalist aesthetic in connection with a similar anxiety about masculinity, but while Campbell sets naturalism in opposition to the declining mode of

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<sup>12</sup> One of the first major definitions of American literary naturalism can be found in Vernon Parrington's *Main Currents in American Thought*, vol. 3. Parrington describes naturalism as objective, frank, amoral, deterministic, sociological, mechanistic or fatalistic, and pessimistic. Similarly, George Becker defined naturalism as "pessimistic, materialistic determinism" in his introduction to *Documents of Modern Literary Realism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1963). Other studies of American literary naturalism from this period include Charles Child Walcott, *American Literary Naturalism, A Divided Stream* (1956); Donald Pizer, *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (1966) and *Twentieth-Century American Literary Naturalism: An Interpretation* (1982).

<sup>13</sup> Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1987); Donna Campbell, *Resisting Regionalism: Gender and Naturalism in American Fiction, 1885-1915* (Athens: Ohio UP, 1997).

regionalism or local color, Dudley links the rise of naturalism to an Anglo-Saxon chauvinism and anti-aestheticism that fed what Dudley calls naturalism's "anti-aesthetic sensibility."<sup>14</sup> And Jennifer Fleissner finds in naturalism's young female characters and representations of compulsion and non-progressive "stuckness" a concern over the changing role of women and maternity that Fleissner links to the rise of the New Woman and her role in the increasingly complex modern world.<sup>15</sup>

These studies, which use naturalism's place in its particular historical moment to make connections to important cultural trends at the end of the century, rely very little on a consensus definition of naturalism; Michaels avoids the question entirely, defining naturalism by a "concern with the double identities that seem, in naturalism, to be required if there are to be any identities at all," while Campbell defines naturalism almost exclusively in opposition to regionalism.<sup>16</sup> In shifting the emphasis to young women and the cyclical temporality of compulsion, Fleissner calls into question a number of characteristics generally associated with naturalism, particularly the emphasis on narratives that are "either fatalistic or nostalgic in the face of modern life."<sup>17</sup> But even readings as heterogeneous as those outlined above emphasize common qualities associated with naturalism, most notably the connection between naturalist novels and

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<sup>14</sup> John Dudley, *A Man's Game: Masculinity and the Anti-Aesthetics of American Literary Naturalism* (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Jennifer Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity: The Moment of American Naturalism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> Michaels, *Gold Standard*, 276; Campbell, *Resisting Regionalism*. Campbell's essay for the *Cambridge History of the American Novel* sidesteps the question of definition in a different manner—by positing multiple naturalisms that intersect with one another but do not converge in one single definition.

<sup>17</sup> Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, 6.

contemporary social, economic, and professional issues, and a concern with social and natural forces that exert a determining pressure on characters and situations.

Though recent studies of naturalism work to historicize naturalism's role in the literary marketplace and its connection to broader cultural phenomena, naturalism's connection to contemporary social issues or reform movements generally serves as a jumping-off point for symptomatic readings of naturalism's cultural significance, rather than an opportunity to consider the significance of the contemporary nature of the material to the novel itself. Michaels, for example, begins his chapter on *The Octopus* by analyzing a scene in which a description of a character starving on the streets of San Francisco is pointedly contrasted with a lavish dinner at the house of a railroad magnate. Though the "crude but powerful" contrast seems to be one of the clearest indictment of excess found in the novel, Michaels argues that, "stark as this contrast is, it is compromised by Norris's depiction of what Mrs. Hooven actually experiences in the moment of starving to death."<sup>18</sup> In Michaels's view, that description represents hunger not as a lamentable consequence of an iniquitous society, but as a necessary part of living, so that, "It is almost as if starving to death represents somehow a failure to be hungry enough."<sup>19</sup> Michaels's reading, then, takes a scene with a clear connection to contemporary social problems and reads it symptomatically as indicating a broader concern with satiation, consumption, and production.

What happens, though, if readers take *The Octopus's* engagement with contemporary social problems not as a starting-point for an analysis of either its

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<sup>18</sup> Michaels, *Gold Standard*, 183.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

adherence to a naturalist aesthetic or to its latent cultural concerns, but rather as a fundamental aspect of the work the novel performs? For those reviewers who approached *The Octopus* as a purpose novel, its commentary on the threat of the trusts to individual livelihood constituted one of the novel's defining characteristics. Reading *The Octopus* as a purpose novel foregrounds that commentary, making it central to our understanding of the novel, rather than the notable but ultimately peripheral function it serves in naturalist criticism. Doing so moves the focus of analysis away from the connections naturalist critics make between contemporary cultural issues and the underlying dynamics of the novel and toward the events emphasized by a surface reading of the text.<sup>20</sup>

Reading *The Octopus* as a purpose novel both highlights and complicates one of the qualities associated with American literary naturalism: determinism. The role that determinism plays in the critical understanding of naturalism varies; Lee Clark Mitchell argues that New Historical approaches to naturalism give determinism short shrift, and

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<sup>20</sup> Early twentieth century critical readings of *The Octopus* as a purpose novel were limited: Writing in 1943, George Wilbur Meyer argued that Norris meant the book to be a novel with a purpose—"that of persuading his readers to reform their society"—and that the optimistic ending of *The Octopus* is consistent with "Norris' whole conception of the novel with a purpose" (George Wilbur Meyer, "A New Interpretation of *The Octopus*," *College English* 4, no. 6 [1943]: 358, 359). Meyer's defense was in answer not only to charges from critics like Fred Lewis Pattee and Vernon Parrington that the moralizing ending was inconsistent with the rest of the novel, but also to Granville Hicks, who, writing in 1933, faulted *The Octopus* for falling short of its revolutionary promise and the "closer identification of realism with social purpose" (Granville Hicks, *The Great Tradition: An Interpretation of American Literature Since the Civil War* [New York: Macmillan, 1933]: 168). But these readings have generally been characterized as anomalous. In *Frank Norris: A Reference Guide* (1974), Jesse Crisler and Joseph McElrath, Jr., dismiss Hicks's reading of the novel, claiming, "Except for one critical trend in the 1930s—when Granville Hicks and others applied the term of 'muck-raker' to Norris for his performance in *The Octopus*—the main thrusts of Norris criticism have become relatively consistent" (Jesse Crisler and Joseph McElrath, Jr., *Frank Norris: A Reference Guide* [Boston: G. K. Hall, 1974]: xii).

Mitchell advocates for a more attentive reading of naturalism's determinist elements, while Eric Carl Link's attempt to define the guiding principles of American literary naturalism devotes considerable space to different varieties of determinism and their relationship to late-nineteenth century scientific thinking. But even the critics who focus on other elements of naturalism generally acknowledge the influence of determinist thinking on naturalists. Fleissner's reconsideration of naturalism's narrative trajectory, which questions the pessimistic decline associated with naturalism's emphasis on determinism, emphasizes compulsion as producing "a more drastic sense of the negation of agency" than determinism.<sup>21</sup> And though June Howard complicates the traditional description of naturalism as "pessimistic determinism," she acknowledges a "characteristic opposition between human will and hereditary and environmental determinisms that both shape human beings and frustrate their desires" as a significant theme of naturalism.<sup>22</sup> Howard's analysis of naturalism's reformist impulse, and *The Octopus* in particular, argues that "the tension between determinism and reform is intrinsic to naturalism."<sup>23</sup> Reading *The Octopus* as a purpose novel, though brings the reformist aspect of the novel to the forefront, replacing either pessimistic determinism or a tension between reform and constrained agency with an interpretive model that not only assumes the possibility of change, but that also makes that change a central part of the work the novel performs.

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<sup>21</sup> Fleissner, *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*, 39.

<sup>22</sup> June Howard, *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1985), 40.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 117.

Even scholarship that pushes back against the standard reading of naturalism as entirely focused on narratives of pessimistic determinism still represent the lower-class, brutish characters generally associated with naturalism as operating under circumstances of constrained agency. Howard, for example, distinguishes the agency accorded to Presley in his attempt to help the San Joaquin farmers and the brutish qualities of “the People” and the novel’s lower-class characters, who remain subject to the external forces that lead to a mob uprising. Howard notes, as well, that by obscuring the workers who harvest the wheat and build the railroads, “*The Octopus* writes threatening agencies out of the narrative as persistently as it reinscribes them.”<sup>24</sup> Reading *The Octopus* as a purpose novel challenges the depiction in naturalist novels (a depiction generally accepted by naturalist critics) of lower-class subjects as brutes ruled by natural or environmental forces. Reviews of *The Octopus* as a purpose novel are not uniformly distributed across different kinds of publications; rather, they are much more common in daily newspapers than in monthly literary magazines, where reviews tend to emphasize readings of the novel much more in line with later academic readings of *The Octopus*. Newspaper reviewers not only offer modes of reading *The Octopus* that emphasize the potential for social and economic change, but they also actively push against the novel’s determinist element. In doing so, the daily newspapers, far more than the monthly magazines, are addressing the very readers who are represented in naturalist novels, and in *The Octopus* in particular, as incapable of comprehending the circumstances that determine and constrain their actions. The newspaper reviews offer a model for reading *The Octopus*

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 121.



aimed at just those very people, one that emphasizes plot, the connection to contemporary events, and the narrative's excitement and gritty realism.

Reading *The Octopus* as a purpose novel, then, provided a space for pushing back against certain elements of the novel, particularly the determinism of the ending, and for shaping the novel so that it appealed to the wide range of newspaper readers, who were just as likely to come from the lower classes as the literary elite. For this reason, attending to *The Octopus*'s reception opens up an alternate interpretive space in which the classes given the least agency and the fewest opportunities to speak in naturalist novels and criticism are responsible, at least by proxy as the audience for the reviews, for shaping the ways the novel is interpreted and presented. In addition, the reception of *The Octopus* indicates that the priorities for reviewing the novel differed significantly according to the review's publication venue. Recognizing and understanding those differing priorities has significant implications both for our general understanding of the complicated dynamics of reception at the turn of the century and for our specific understanding of the role *The Octopus* and the mode that would later be known as literary naturalism played in the novel's cultural moment.

### **“An offer never before equaled in journalism”: *The Octopus* and the literary marketplace**

Not only does “The Toilers” expose some of the same tensions between art and purpose that we see in the reception of *The Octopus*, it also reveals complexities of the literary marketplace that have a significant bearing both on the reception of Presley's poem in the novel and on the response to *The Octopus* itself. After finishing “The Toilers,” Presley considers the question of where to publish his poem; he is inclined to

send it to an eastern literary magazine, where it will help him achieve recognition as a poet. But Vanamee, the shepherd and mystic to whom Presley shows his poem, implores Presley not to publish the poem in “the magazines,” telling him,

“Your inspiration has come *from* the People. Then let it go straight *to* the People—not the literary readers of the monthly periodicals, the rich, who would only be indirectly interested. If you must publish it, let it be in the daily press. Don’t interrupt. I know what you will say. It will be that the daily press is common, is vulgar, is undignified; and I tell you that such a poem as this of yours, called as it is, ‘The Toilers,’ must be read *by* the Toilers. It *must be* common; it must be vulgarised. You must not stand upon your dignity with the People, if you are to reach them.”<sup>25</sup>

When Presley protests that publication in a major magazine would mean prestige for himself, Vanamee lashes out:

“Gives *you* such weight, gives *you* such background. Is it *yourself* you think of? You helper of the helpless. Is that your sincerity? You must sink yourself; must forget yourself and your own desire of fame, of admitted success. It is your *poem*, your *message*, that must prevail,—not *you*, who wrote it. You preach a doctrine of abnegation, of self-obliteration, and you sign your name to your words as high on the tablets as you can reach, so that all the world may see, not the poem, but the poet. Presley, there are many like you. The social reformer writes a book on the iniquity of the possession of land, and out of the proceeds, buys a corner lot. The

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<sup>25</sup> Norris, *Octopus*, 317.

economist who laments the hardships of the poor, allows himself to grow rich upon the sale of his book.”<sup>26</sup>

Vanamee’s outrage echoes Norris’s assertion in his 1901 essay “The True Reward of the Novelist” that “To make money is not the province of a novelist. If he is the right sort he has other responsibilities, heavy ones. He of all men cannot think only of or for himself.”<sup>27</sup> For Norris, the novelist’s foremost concern is “sincerity, sincerity, and again sincerity... telling the truth as he saw it, independent of fashion and the gallery gods.”<sup>28</sup> Vanamee goes a step further, associating the sincerity that Norris himself advocates with a very specific publication context—that of the daily papers. In Vanamee’s conception, the newspapers are common, vulgar, and fundamentally more populist than the magazines, and as such are the natural venue for writing that seeks to represent social injustice with sincerity.

But right after the novel, by way of Vanamee, sets up the daily papers as a democratic alternative to the elitist literary magazines and offers publication in the papers as the act of a truly committed artist and reformer, the efficacy of that course of action comes into question. The poem proves to be an enormous success, and is “promptly copied in New York, Boston, and Chicago papers.” It is “discussed, attacked, defended,

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. Vanamee’s final words about the social reformer and the economist who get rich off their work bring to mind Howells’s words to Henry James, “After fifty years of optimistic content with ‘civilization’ and its ability to come out all right in the end, I now abhor it, and feel that it is coming out all wrong in the end, unless it bases itself anew on a real equality. Meantime, I wear a fur-lined overcoat and live in all the luxury my money can buy.”

<sup>27</sup> Frank Norris, “The True Reward of the Novelist,” in Donald Pizer, ed., *Literary Criticism* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1964), 87.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 86-87.

eulogised, ridiculed,” analyzed, praised, criticized, quoted, parodied, and distorted until “special articles, in literary pamphlets, dissected its rhetoric and prosody” and “Finally, the editor of an enterprising monthly magazine reprinted the poem, supplementing it by a photograph and biography of Presley himself.”<sup>29</sup> Presley’s poem may not have landed in the most prestigious of literary magazines, but it has garnered a national audience and has found its way into the “magazines” that Vanamee disdained. Not only that, but Vanamee’s advice seems nearly futile in the face of this response; the novel shows Presley’s poem working its way through bourgeois literary institutions, but gives no indication of the response from the People for whom the poem is ostensibly intended.

Following his sudden fame, Presley turns down an opportunity to work the national lecture circuit, preferring instead to remain in the San Joaquin valley with the farmers whose plight he had dramatized in “The Toilers.” But Presley makes one attempt to speak directly to “the People” (or at least to a land-owning sub-set of “the People”) when he gives a speech to the ranchers’ League following the bloody confrontation between ranchers and railroad. Though he waxes eloquent, calling for revolution and invoking threats of the Red Terror,<sup>30</sup> and though he receives enthusiastic applause, his effort is ultimately unsuccessful:

...it was not intelligent applause. Instinctively as he made his way out, Presley knew that, after all, he had not once held the hearts of his audience. He had talked as he would have written; for all his scorn of literature, he had been literary. The men who listened to him, ranchers, country people, store-keepers, attentive though

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<sup>29</sup> Norris, *Octopus*, 332.

<sup>30</sup> This scene is similar to the one in the end of *The Jungle*.

they were, were not once sympathetic. Vaguely they had felt that here was something which other men—more educated—would possibly consider eloquent.

They applauded vociferously but perfunctorily, in order to appear to understand.<sup>31</sup>

Presley is unable to reach “the People” through the ostensibly democratic daily press, and he is unable to reach them when given the opportunity to address them directly.

Vanamee’s insistence that Presley’s poem, “called as it is, ‘The Toilers,’ must be read *by* the Toilers,” proves to be little more than naïve idealism.

Despite the ambiguity of the outcome, the question of where to publish “The Toilers” highlights tensions between the monthly literary magazines and the daily papers that were very much at issue at the turn of the century. Norris himself was familiar with the daily papers, having written for the *San Francisco Chronicle* early in his career, but most of his early stories had been published in regional magazines like *The Wave*, *Argonaut*, and *Overland Monthly*. During his career as a novelist, Norris worked for *McClure’s*, as well as for the publishing houses of Doubleday and McClure and Doubleday, Page, and Co. In other words, Norris was well aware of the scope of the literary marketplace at the turn of the century, as he had been negotiating it for two decades by the time *The Octopus* was published.

By 1901, though, the landscape of daily, weekly, and monthly periodicals was far more complicated than Vanamee’s conception of the rich, literary readers of the magazines and the mass readers of the papers implies. The advent of the ten-cent monthlies, like *Cosmopolitan* and *McClure’s*, expanded magazine readership beyond

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<sup>31</sup> Norris, *Octopus*, 467.

those who could afford the thirty-five cents a copy that a magazine like *Harper's* or the *Atlantic* sold for.<sup>32</sup> In addition, newspapers began producing weekly Sunday editions that contained content previously reserved for general interest monthly magazines and appealed to readers, particularly women, who might not read the daily paper.<sup>33</sup> But despite the variety of periodicals available at the turn of the century and the fact that the ten-cent monthlies and the Sunday supplements had a much greater circulation than the elite magazines that had dominated the scene through much of the nineteenth century, scholars writing about literary commentary at the turn of the century have tended to focus on the magazines that make up what Nancy Glazener terms the *Atlantic*-group: elite literary magazines published in Boston and New York that participated in a specific set of literary conversations taking place among a fairly limited group of leading voices.<sup>34</sup>

The discussion of where to publish “The Toilers” ties the issue of publication venue to the complicated relationship between art and purpose that Norris sets up both in the novel and in his criticism: the where of publication influences who will read the poem and what they will do with it. In addition, this scene highlights distinctions in the literary

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<sup>32</sup> Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1957), 2.

<sup>33</sup> Charles Johanningsmeier, “The Devil, Capitalism, and Frank Norris: Defining the ‘Reading Field’ for Sunday Newspaper Fiction, 1970-1910,” *American Periodicals: A Journal of History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 14, no. 1 (2004): 91-112.

<sup>34</sup> Charles Johanningsmeier’s work on syndication calls attention to this divide; Johanningsmeier urges scholars to attend more closely to the often-ignored syndicated work of American authors, arguing that “syndicates represent a transitional stage between the more personalized ‘old-fashioned’ literary publishing industry... and the highly-capitalized and complexly organized one of the mass-market magazines and modern book publishing houses” (Johanningsmeier, *Fiction and the American Literary Marketplace: The role of newspaper syndicates, 1860-1900* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997], 5).

marketplace and sets up the alternatives to the elite monthly magazines—the daily papers, in this case—as important to our understanding of how a text circulated in its particular historical moment.

In his critical essays published between 1900 and 1903, Norris identifies as one of the most significant functions of the novel its ability to reach “the People,” who, according to Norris, “are “despised of the artist, hooted, caricatured, and vilified, are after all, and in the main, the real seekers after Truth.”<sup>35</sup> For this reason, Norris declares that the novelist has a duty to the public that exceeds that of the pulpit or the press, since “the Pulpit speaks but once a week; the Press is read with lightning haste and the morning news is wastepaper by noon. But the novel goes into the home to stay. It is read word for word, is talked about, discussed; its influence penetrates every chink and corner of the family.” Given this, the novelist has a responsibility to avoid venality and falseness. “The People,” Norris writes, “have a right to the Truth as they have a right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”<sup>36</sup> Though Norris rails against novelists who achieved popularity by giving the public “false views of life, false characters, false sentiment, false morality, false history, false philosophy, false emotions, false heroism, false notions of self-sacrifice, false views of religion, of duty, of conduct, and of manners,” likening such

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<sup>35</sup> Frank Norris, “The Responsibilities of the Novelist,” in *Literary Criticism*, ed. Pizer, 96.

<sup>36</sup> Norris, “The Responsibilities of the Novelist,” 97; Norris’s description of the novel’s influence might well be extended to the Sunday supplements and newspaper fiction that had become increasingly popular by the turn of the century; Johanningsmeier describes how by the 1890s, “Sunday newspaper reading had become somewhat of a societal obsession” (“Sunday Newspapers,” 94). Far more than the daily editions, Sunday papers were intended to permeate the home and be read by women, often aloud to their families, so that, like the novels Norris describes, their “influence penetrate[de] every chink and corner of the family.”

writers to disreputable editors or immoral clergymen, he acknowledges the advantages of literary popularity itself, noting that “He who can address a hundred thousand people is, no matter what his message may be, in an important position.”<sup>37</sup>

Both Norris’s and Vanamee’s use of the term “the People” indicates a shared conception of a popular reading public that is explicitly in opposition to a more elite, and more aesthetically-oriented group of readers. According to Norris, “The cult consider [novels] almost solely from their artistic sides. The People take them into their innermost lives.”<sup>38</sup> Vanamee insists that literature about the People must be made available to the People through the daily papers. Norris claims that when such literature is made available to the People, they will read it indiscriminately, absorbing whatever message, false or true, a novel may have to offer. In both cases, there exists a clear separation between an elite and popular reading public that can be mapped onto specific publication venues.

That distinction between reading publics is equally evident in the advertisements for the serialized versions of *The Octopus* that ran in the *New York Evening World* in July of 1901 and the *San Francisco Call* in November of 1902. The *Call* was a Republican paper with a circulation of approximately 24,000 in 1898, making it the third largest paper in San Francisco, and had been covering the composition and publication of *The Octopus* extensively, printing several reviews of the book, along with articles about Norris and brief mentions of events connected to the novel and its publication. The *Evening World* was a product of the competition between Charles A. Dana and Joseph Pulitzer, the latter of whom introduced the *Evening World* in 1887 to compete with

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<sup>37</sup> “Responsibilities of the Novelist,” 97; “The Need of a Literary Conscience,” 88.

<sup>38</sup> “Responsibilities of the Novelist,” 96.



Dana's *Evening Sun*. By 1901, the *Evening World* had a circulation of 350,000 and an editor, Charles E. Chapin, who embraced the sensationalism of yellow journalism.<sup>39</sup> So far, these two papers are the only instances I have been able to find of serialized printings of *The Octopus*. Doubleday, Page, and Co. held the syndication rights, and Norris himself tried to find buyers for the serialized novel, but previous accounts of *The Octopus*'s publication history mistakenly indicate that the novel was never syndicated.<sup>40</sup>

The *Call* advertised for weeks leading up to its serialization of *The Octopus*, which ran in the Sunday supplements from November 9, 1902 to December 7, 1902. Each advertisement differed from the others, but a representative ad informed readers:

When Frank Norris gave 'The Octopus' to the public he startled the whole world with the strength, the virility, the unexpected power, the keen, merciless analysis of men and things of to-day, shown in the stupendous scope of this, the first of his astounding trilogy of the epic of the wheat. It fell like a bomb in the literary fold.

It needed no advertising, for 'The Octopus' tells of the grim realities of life, in a

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<sup>39</sup> *Lord and Thomas' Pocket Directory of the American Press for 1901* (Chicago: Lord & Thomas, 1901), 348; "About the Evening World," Library of Congress Chronicling America.

<sup>40</sup> In their biography of Norris, Crisler and McElrath note that Norris met with no success when he tried to market a serialized version of *The Octopus* himself, and that literary agent Paul Revere Reynolds had no better luck than Norris (Jesse Crisler and Joseph McElrath, Jr., *Frank Norris: A Life* [Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2006]: 383-384). According to Crisler and McElrath, Norris tried to place the novel with *Munsey's*, *Collier's* and the *Saturday Evening Post*, while Reynolds approached S. S. McClure. The fact that *The Octopus* was, in fact, serialized—albeit in newspapers rather than magazines—opens up several potential avenues for further research into the audiences and marketing for the serials, particularly the ways they differed from the published book. Such research, though, would require discovering other newspapers that syndicated the novel or some record of the syndication agreements of promotional materials that Doubleday furnished the newspapers.

way that they have never been told before, and never will be told again for many a long year to come.

The ad went on to tout the significance of the serialized reprint:

Recognizing this fact and notwithstanding that “The Octopus” is now the highest priced book in the market, The Sunday Call, following out its new literary policy of giving its readers the very latest novels by the very best writers in the world complete in two or at the most three editions—absolutely free, set about the very difficult task of securing “The Octopus” at any price for immediate and exclusive publication in the Magazine Section...

Just think of what this means. Frank Norris’ great book of California, and the men and women who have made this the greatest State in America, the most talked of book in the world to-day, absolutely free. Do you need to be told to watch for The Sunday Call of November 9?<sup>41</sup>

The *Evening World* conducted a similar campaign to advertise its publication of an abbreviated and serialized version of the novel, declaring, “The Evening World to-day begins the presentation in condensed form of perhaps the most remarkable American novel printed in the past ten years,” and concluding, “It is not least of the triumphs of a daily newspaper when it presents in convenient instalments [sic] for busy readers the cream of the literature of the day.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Advertisement, San Francisco *Call*, October 29, 1902, 6, LOC Chronicling America.

<sup>42</sup> “A NOVEL OF GREAT THEMES,” New York *Evening World*, July 22, 1901, 6, LOC Chronicling America.

The *Call* and the *Evening World* frame their serialization of *The Octopus* in similar terms to Vanamee when he encourages Presley to bring “The Toilers” to “the People.” The advertisements take care to establish *The Octopus* as a work of significance and great merit; the novel “fell like a bomb in the literary fold,” and is “the most remarkable American novel printed in the past ten years.” But *The Octopus* is also presented as inaccessible to the average reader: the cost of its serial rights make it the most expensive book for newspapers to re-publish, and difficult for “busy readers” to read. Given that, its serialization in the magazine section is presented as a nearly-heroic enterprise, in which the newspapers perform the function of democratizing a piece of literature that would usually be available only to a select group of readers, defined by their income level and relative leisure. The *Call* makes this point even more explicit in a later advertisement:

Therefore, following out its new literary policy of giving its readers the best fiction of the day, by the cleverest writers in the world, absolutely free in two or three editions of the Magazine Section, the Sunday Call at once secured the exclusive Western rights to this remarkable book, and notwithstanding the great expense incurred therein, “THE OCTOPUS” IS NOW BEING PUBLISHED IN THE SUNDAY CALL ABSOLUTELY FREE. JUST THINK OF THAT—THE GREAT AMERICAN NOVEL—FRANK NORRIS’ MASTERPIECE OF CALIFORNIAN LIFE—FREE. It is an offer never before equaled in journalism.

The framing of the serialization sets the newspapers, and their magazine sections, as separate from the parts of the marketplace involved in the publication of *The Octopus*—

the *Call* must “set about the very difficult task of securing ‘The Octopus’” from its publishers so that readers can have access to it, and once that is accomplished, the result is so sensational as to merit not only the hyperbolic claim, “It is an offer never before equaled in journalism,” but also the attention-grabbing capital letters of the penultimate sentence.

The rhetoric of these ads is fairly typical for advertisements promoting syndicated fiction; the *Call*'s advertisement for *The Gospel of Judas Iscariot*, which followed *The Octopus* in its Sunday supplement, declared, “The most talked of book of the year is 'The Gospel of Judas Iscariot'... It is stronger than ‘Ben Hur,’ more thrilling than ‘Quo Vadis’... The Sunday Call has... secured the exclusive rights to this literary treasure for publication as an extra section—absolutely free—with the Christmas Call out December 14.”<sup>43</sup> But the ads for *The Octopus*, unlike the *Call*'s advertisement for *The Gospel of Judas Iscariot*, or for “Alice of the Old Vincennes,” which preceded *The Octopus*, carefully set the novel up as both literary and popular, a work of both aesthetic merit and great excitement.

Though the assurances that *The Octopus* is “the best fiction of the day,” and “THE GREAT AMERICAN NOVEL” seem to invoke the authority of the literary arbiters at the eastern magazines and correspond closely to the assessment of Norris's twentieth-century critics, the elements of the novel emphasized in the *Call* and the *Evening World* differ significantly from what later critics stress. Both papers seize on the novel's “grim” aspect; according to the *Evening World*, “With stark realism, with grim

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<sup>43</sup> Advertisement, San Francisco *Call*, November 30, 1902, 36, LOC Chronicling America.

directness, it goes straight to the heart of a big problem—the political rule of the American corporation,” while the *Call* declares, “‘The Octopus’ tells of the grim realities of life, in a way that they have never been told before, and never will be told again for many a long year to come.” The *Call* plays up the action-packed excitement of the novel’s plot, while the *Evening World* emphasizes that the book is “in one sense a story of fact.” The ads imply that the selling points for newspaper readers are a combination of the book’s literary prestige and its grim, exciting, true-to-life plot.

The ads also tout the exclusivity of their publication of *The Octopus*, a common rhetorical move when promoting syndicated fiction. The fiercely competitive environment of the daily newspapers emphasizes that, while the *Call* and the *Evening Sun* may be bringing the book from its inaccessible original publication context to the more available Sunday paper, in this case, publishing in the daily paper does not equate to Vanamee’s conception of a democratic forum that reaches the People, broadly conceived. The serialized novel will reach only the readers of the *Call* and the *Evening Sun*; in fact, the *Call* is eager to point out that it has secured the exclusive western rights to publication. And while the *Call*’s ad attempts to place itself outside the market altogether by declaring that “‘THE OCTOPUS’ IS NOW BEING PUBLISHED IN THE SUNDAY CALL ABSOLUTELY FREE,” readers must still purchase five issues of the Sunday paper to read the entire novel. In claiming that *The Octopus* will be available “ABSOLUTELY FREE,” the *Call* obscures the way newspapers function in the marketplace. At the same time, the *Call*’s calculated promotion of *The Octopus* exposes the limitations of Vanamee’s conception of the daily papers as vehicles of democracy.

Though they may be more democratic than “the magazines,” the newspapers still operate within a market driven by profit, and that profit motive limits the degree to which published material can, as Vanamee imagines it will, “go straight *to* the People.”

### **Reading for class**

Though the ads in the *Call* and the *Evening World* refer to specific serialized editions of *The Octopus* that were not available to most readers, the qualities about the novel emphasized in the ads are similar to the qualities promoted in newspaper reviews, and distinct from the emphases in reviews in monthly magazines devoted either exclusively or substantively to literary criticism, fiction, or news about the literary marketplace. The differences in the way *The Octopus* is treated in newspaper reviews and literary magazines indicate two distinct sets of interpretive practices that reflect the class-based values of the different publication venues which can best be understood through Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of taste and aesthetic value in his study *Distinction: A Social Critique of Judgement and Taste*. Bourdieu notes that one of the hallmarks of legitimate taste—by which he means the values endorsed by the dominant class with respect to works of art considered legitimate in a particular social context—is that of aesthetic distancing in which the observer displaces “the interest from the ‘content’, characters, plot etc., to the form, to the specifically artistic effects which are only appreciated relationally, through a comparison with other works.”<sup>44</sup> In contrast, popular taste “delights in plots that proceed logically and chronologically towards a happy end, and

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<sup>44</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of Judgement and Taste* (London:Routledge, 1986), 34.

‘identifies’ better with simply drawn situations and characters than with ambiguous and symbolic figures and actions.’<sup>45</sup>

Bourdieu’s main examples here are drawn from the theater and photography, and his primary focus is analyzing why people of different classes gravitate toward different kinds of art, as well as why popular audiences often feel alienated from high art and bourgeois audiences disdain popular art. The reception of *The Octopus*, though, shows the novel straddling the line between high and popular culture. The reading practices modeled in the reviews reflect the values Bourdieu identifies in legitimate and popular taste, but they demonstrate not that upper- and working-class readers sought out different kinds of novels (though the popular success of the dime novel and the relatively limited sales of Henry James’s novels attest to that), but that novels that circulated in both elite and popular contexts did so with markedly different expectations, expectations that were reinforced by the terms in which the novels were discussed and reviewed.

*The Octopus* was reviewed in least twenty-one monthly magazines that were devoted either exclusively or substantively to literary criticism, fiction, or news about the literary marketplace. These include the *Overland Monthly*, *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *Chicago American Literary and Art Review*, the *Bookman*, the *World’s Work*, the *Dial*, the *Arena*, and the *Land of Sunshine*, as well as the *Book Buyer* and *Book News*, which were house organs of Scribner’s and Wanamaker’s, respectively.<sup>46</sup> Reviews of the novel appear in newspapers throughout the country, including the *Dallas Morning News*, the *New York Times*, *Evening World*, *Sun* and *Daily Tribune*, the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>46</sup> For a complete list, see appendix.

Richmond *Dispatch*, the Washington *Times*, the Boston *Evening Transcript*, the San Francisco *Call* and the Louisville *Times*, among others.<sup>47</sup>

Certain observations about *The Octopus* appear consistently throughout the reviews, regardless of publication type. One of the most popular criticisms of Norris's style was his tendency to repeat words and phrases, a stylistic tic generally likened to that of Zola. The tendency is mentioned in at least seven newspaper reviews and seven magazine reviews; the most common consensus is that this tendency is distracting or unnecessary—the New York *Daily Tribune* writes, “The method is somewhat wearisome, and grown positively repugnant when it leads the author into indulgence in a very crude and meretricious mannerism”<sup>48</sup>—but some reviewers found the use of repetition effective—the San Francisco *Chronicle* described Norris's use of repeated phrases as “Zola's habit of working up a hundred petty details that have no other value except to give realism to his story and to excite interest in the various characters.”<sup>49</sup>

The newspaper reviews of *The Octopus* are characterized by several trends. First, they tend to be quite long: of the sixteen reviews I examined, fifteen exceed five hundred words in length, and twelve of those are longer than a thousand words.<sup>50</sup> In contrast, of

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<sup>47</sup> *The Octopus* was also reviewed in a number of general and special interest magazines, including the *Ohio Farmer*, the *School Journal*, and the *Albany Law Journal*, which I list in the appendix but exclude from the analysis.

<sup>48</sup> “A Polemical Novel. The First Instalment of Mr. Norris's “Epic of the Wheat,” *New-York Daily Tribune*, May 11, 1901, 14, LOC Chronicling America.

<sup>49</sup> George Hamlin Fitch, “Books for Spring,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 7 1901, 28, in *Frank Norris: The Critical Reception*, ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., and Katherine Knight (New York: Burt Franklin & Co., 1981), 127-129.

<sup>50</sup> My tally of reviews excludes mentions or discussions of *The Octopus* that are not part of a formal review of the novel—newspapers printed a number of notes of interest about the book and its author. I include these notes in the appendix, but do not include them in



the twenty-seven newspaper reviews of *The Marrow of Tradition* I examined, twelve were more than five hundred words long, but only five exceeded a thousand words. The newspaper reviews devoted far more space than the magazine reviews to summary of the plot, and to the description of the paratexts associated with the novel. Newspaper reviewers leaned heavily on the book's paratexts, which included promotional material from by the publisher and the prefatory matter at the beginning of the novel. Most of the reviews longer than five hundred words include a description of Norris's projected Trilogy of the Wheat drawn from the first few pages of the book. Many also borrow language from the promotional material in describing the plot and setting of the book. The New York *Daily Tribune* notes, "It is stated on the slip cover to the book that the story is founded on 'an actual piece of history almost unknown in the east—what is known as the "Mussel-Slough" affair, when the wheat growers of the San Joaquin Valley came into actual conflict with the railroad (the octopus), which they believed was trying to defraud them of their land,'" <sup>51</sup> a description that is paraphrased or repeated verbatim in the Dallas *Morning News*, the Richmond *Dispatch*, the Louisville *Times*, and the Boston *Evening Transcript*. At least three of the longer newspaper reviews include a list of primary characters and brief descriptions that appears to be taken nearly verbatim from the list of characters included at the beginning of the novel. A surprising number of reviews are accompanied by particularly detailed summaries of the book's fairly complicated plot.

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this tally, which looks only at actual reviews of *The Octopus* which were published after its release but prior to Norris's death in Nov. 1902.

<sup>51</sup> "A Polemical Novel," 6.

Though both the newspaper and magazine reviews quote heavily from the novel, the magazine reviews devote less space to plot summary, and only one magazine review mentions the paratexts associated with the novel. While the newspaper reviews describe the map, dramatis personae, and explanation of the Epic of the Wheat either without comment (“There are twenty-four characters... In the first pages of the book their names and functions are set out in tabulated form, as are the characters in plays”<sup>52</sup>), or with a general sense of admiration (“It is not often, if ever, that a novel has been accompanied by so admirable a map”<sup>53</sup>), a reviewer from the *Atlantic* uses the paratexts as an occasion to criticize what he sees as Norris’s over-tedious realism: “Mr. Norris’s latest story is a more pretentious sort of work. It boasts a good deal of preliminary apparatus,—a note explaining that this is the first of a trilogy, duly billed as *The Epic of the Wheat*, a list of personae, and a map of the region in which the action takes place. Photographs of a California wheat-field and a patent reaper and a tin-type or two of the leading persons would have left still less for the imagination to do.”<sup>54</sup> For the reviewers from the *Sun* and the *Dispatch*, the map and dramatis personae are functional additions to a complex novel; for the *Atlantic*, they are mundane and encyclopedic, unsuited to the form of the novel as a work of imaginative art.

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<sup>52</sup> “With the New Books,” *Richmond Dispatch*, September 14, 1902, 6, LOC Chronicling America.

<sup>53</sup> “New Novels,” *New York Sun*, April 13, 1901, 7, LOC Chronicling America.

<sup>54</sup> “Books New and Old: Literature and Fiction,” *Atlantic Monthly* 89, no. 525 (May 1902): 706-711, HathiTrust.

The *Atlantic*, in other words, “displac[es] the interest from the ‘content’ . . . to the form,” while the *Sun* and the *Dispatch* “subordinat[e] the form.. to its function.”<sup>55</sup> The distinction Bourdieu stresses between the formal, aestheticizing distance of upper-class taste and a popular aesthetic that prizes function, content and legibility is particularly evident in the newspaper reviews that treat *The Octopus* as a purpose novel, and in the magazine reviews that do not. Consistent with Bourdieu’s observations about upper-class taste, the reviews of *The Octopus* published in literary magazines were much more likely than the newspaper reviews to put forth readings that focused on a de-politicized aesthetic that emphasized formal qualities and epic universality. Newspaper and magazine reviewers found some common ground in their treatment of the novel’s ending, which I discuss in the next section.

Further, when literary magazines did connect *The Octopus* to social protest or a reformist agenda, it was more often with suspicion or criticism than approval. Wallace Rice’s review in the *Chicago American Literary and Art Review* includes a discussion of the specific historical events on which *The Octopus* was based; Rice asks “one of the leading officials of the Burlington Road” about the novel, and the official confirms that similar corruption occurs with the east coast railroads. Rice, though, sees the all-consuming corruption of *The Octopus*—the railroad “controls the Railway Commission, it controls the Legislature, it controls the courts”—as implausible and as ultimately undercutting the novel. According to Rice, “In drawing his indictment against it in the earlier part of the book Mr. Norris does unconsciously the thing he represents the

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<sup>55</sup> Bourdieu, 34; 42

commissioners as doing corruptly; he raises his rate so high that it is certain to be rejected at the bar of public opinion. If his novel be one with a purpose, and that the exposure of infinitely corrupt corporation methods, it is self-defeated on the instant.”<sup>56</sup>

A review in the *Outlook* asserts,

Certainly the reader must feel inclined by the vivid dramatic narrative to the belief that a railroad system having a monopoly because of no business competitor, a carrier upon which the public at large depends for service, should be forced to submit to public supervision, even in the matter of rates, to prevent positive oppression... The latter part of the story seems to us not entirely to sustain the force and really tremendous energy of the earlier half; such a scene as that where, in alternate paragraphs, the railroad capitalists revel in wine and talk art while their starving victim dies on the street is, from the literary point of view, distinctly ‘yellow.’<sup>57</sup>

Here, the reviewer associates Norris’s explicit juxtaposition of privilege and poverty with sensational journalism, and newspapers specifically, and implies that the heavy-handed and “yellow” sections are less literary than the other parts of the book.

Even the *Outlook*’s criticism of the novel as “yellow” is relatively oblique, and most of the reviews in literary magazines avoided the possibility that *The Octopus* might be read in terms of muckraking or social protest entirely. The *Independent*, for example, writes, “If the author has any political doctrines, they are not clearly defined. He simply

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<sup>56</sup> Wallace Rice, “Norris’ *The Octopus*,” *Chicago American Literary and Art Review*, April 6, 1901, in Don Graham, ed., *Critical Essays on Frank Norris* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980), 25-27.

<sup>57</sup> “Books of the Week,” *Outlook*, April 20, 1901, 923-934, HathiTrust.

dramatizes a tragic situation.”<sup>58</sup> And though William Dean Howells, writing in *Harper’s*, warns of “a bit of the melodrama towards which Mr. Norris dangerously tends in his hours of triumphs,” his review avoids all connections between the events of the novel and contemporary issues, writing instead that Norris, “gets back to something primitive, something primeval in his people; they love and hate with a sort of cave-dweller longing and loathing, yet with a modern environment of conscience that tells on them at last in fine despairs and remorse.”<sup>59</sup> The review in the *Atlantic* similarly makes no mention of Mussel Slough, the trusts, or political corruption, instead focusing on what he sees as Norris’s tedious and overly-French realism.<sup>60</sup> In a review in the *Bookman* that might well serve as a model for much of the criticism on *The Octopus* to follow, Frederic T. Cooper acknowledges that the “novel typifies on a small scale the struggle continuously going on between capital and labour, the growth of centralised power, the aggression of the corporation and the trust,” but emphasizes that the “truth is that *The Octopus* is a sort of vast allegory, an example of symbolism pushed to the extreme limit, rather than a picture of life,” and that “back of the individual, back of the corporation, is the spirit of the nation, typified in the wheat, unchanged, indomitable, rising, spreading, gathering force, rolling in a great golden wave from West to East, across the continent, across the ocean,

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<sup>58</sup> “The Octopus,” *Independent*, May 1901, 1139-1140, HathiTrust.

<sup>59</sup> William Dean Howells, “Editor’s Easy Chair,” *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*, October 1901, 822-827, HathiTrust.

<sup>60</sup> “Books New and Old.” Of Norris’s descriptions, the reviewer writes, “This is the sort of romantic vulgarity of which only the realist of the French school is capable.”

and carrying with it health and strength and hope and sustenance to other nations—  
emblem of the progressive, indomitable spirit of the American people.”<sup>61</sup>

The only major monthly magazine to explicitly and enthusiastically connect *The Octopus* to the purpose novel was the *Arena*, which in a review written by editor B. O. Flower praised *The Octopus* for taking on the trusts. In “The Trust in Fiction: A Remarkable Social Novel,” Flowers writes,

The Octopus is far more than a strong, compelling, and virile story of American life: it is one of the most powerful and faithful social studies to be found in contemporaneous literature. It is a work that will not only stimulate thought; it will quicken the conscience and awaken the moral sensibilities of the reader, exerting much the same influence over the mind as that exerted by Patrick Henry in the House of Burgesses of Virginia, and by those noble utterances of James Otis, Samuel Adams, and John Hancock just prior to our great Revolutionary struggle... “The Octopus” is a novel that every reader of THE ARENA should possess. If it is impossible for you to procure more than one work of fiction this season, my advice—my unhesitating advice—is to buy “The Octopus,” read it aloud to your family, and then lend it to your neighbors. In so doing you will be helping to awaken the people from the death-dealing slumber that has been

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<sup>61</sup> Frederic T. Cooper, “Frank Norris’s ‘The Octopus,’” *Bookman*, May 1901, 245-247, HathiTrust.

brought about by the multitudinous influences of corporate greed, controlling the machinery of government and the opinion-forming agencies of the Republic.<sup>62</sup>

That Flower and the *Arena* would take such a position is little surprise, given the *Arena*'s explicitly reformist political position. Flowers believed all literature should have an explicit social purpose, and his reviews were generally focused on whether a novel lived up to that belief;<sup>63</sup> as, Nancy Glazener notes, "the *Arena*'s book reviews functioned in coordination with the... political agenda of its journalistic commentaries."<sup>64</sup>

While the monthly magazines avoided implying that *The Octopus* might be considered in terms of contemporary circumstances rather than universal aesthetic concerns, the newspapers embraced the possibility, consistently emphasizing the reformist elements of the plot and the fact that an analogue of the grasping, corrupt octopus described in the novel had its tentacles wrapped around present-day Americans. Ten of the seventeen newspaper reviews make explicit mention of the historical circumstances upon which *The Octopus* is based. For the *Dallas Morning News*, the book's connection to the events of Mussel Slough demonstrate that "the story is no mere piece of polemical fiction," but the *New York Daily Tribune* found that "In spite of this declaration" that the novel is based on actual events, "Mr. Norris fails to carry conviction, leaving the impression only of an immature polemist, with a sociological problem on his mind."<sup>65</sup> In both cases, though, the connection to historical events offers a potential

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<sup>62</sup> B. O. Flower, "The Trust in Fiction: A Remarkable Social Novel," *Arena* 27, no. 5 (May 1902): 547-554, HathiTrust.

<sup>63</sup> Mott, *History of American Magazines*, vol. 4, 408.

<sup>64</sup> Glazener, *Reading for Realism*, 189.

<sup>65</sup> "A Polemical Novel," 14.

counter to the charge that the story has been contrived to serve a polemical purpose, and though the *Tribune* does not find that counter sufficient, the review acknowledges the possibility that it might be.

Despite Donald Pizer's claim that turn-of-the-century readers found attacks on trusts uncontroversial, a number of reviews framed *The Octopus* as an important and timely indictment of trusts and corruption. Two separate reviews in the *Dallas Morning News* emphasized *The Octopus* as an attack on political corruption and trusts in particular. According to one reviewer, "The story is no hot-headed attack on trusts as such. It is a well-considered and faithful piece of work, depicting one of the grave problems of the day, and ought to command wide attention," while the second review finds that after reading the novel, "One is convinced as no platform declamation can ever convince, as no arrays of figurines can ever convince, of the tyranny, the grasping, self-seeking, cold-blooded unscrupulous cupidity of the "Kraken" that has California in its grip, that controls the transportation of all its products and that has for its one motto: 'All that the tariff will bear.'"<sup>66</sup> While the first review explicitly distances Norris's economic and political critique from an affective response, noting, "The story is no hot-headed attack on trusts as such," the second review emphasizes affect: the reviewer describes the railroad trust as "grasping, self-seeking, cold-blooded," and describes the novel as enlisting the passions and arousing indignation. For both reviewers, though, the

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<sup>66</sup> "New Books Reviewed," *Dallas Morning News*, August 19, 1901, 10, *America's Historical Newspapers*; "Frank Norris' Work," *Dallas Morning News*, August 26 1901, 10, *America's Historical Newspapers*.



contemporary political implications of the novel form an important part of its impact on readers.

Louisville *Times* editor Isaac Marcossion places a similar emphasis on *The Octopus* as social protest. Marcossion was in a unique position with regard to Norris and his novel; he had never met Norris, but had been conducting a fairly regular correspondence with him for years, and, according to his autobiography, very much admired the young novelist.<sup>67</sup> Marcossion published several notices and reviews leading up to the publication of *The Octopus*, and Norris himself attributed the novel's success in Louisville to Marcossion's boosting.<sup>68</sup> Marcossion had been updated regularly on the progress of the novel, and Norris had written to him that with *The Octopus* he hoped to get back "definitely now to the style of MacT. and stay with it right along... The Wheat Series will be straight naturalism with all the guts I can get into it."<sup>69</sup> Marcossion's review in the *Times*, which is well over a thousand words,<sup>70</sup> spends some time discussing the function of forces in the novel and its sweeping scope and life-like characters. But Marcossion also connects those elements to the novel's status as social protest, writing, "Frank Norris has been the most brilliant exponent of this realism in American fiction,

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<sup>67</sup> I.F.M. [Isaac F. Marcossion], "Frank Norris, Realist: Something About the Brilliant Young Author of 'The Octopus,'" Louisville *Times*, April 6, 1901, p. 13, in *Norris: The Critical Reception*, 123-124.

<sup>68</sup> Marcossion would later take novel boosting to another level, first in the campaign for Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots*, and then with *The Jungle*. Marcossion's strategy was to get the novels mentioned in news stories as much as possible, rather than relying on publishers' announcements and literary notes. That strategy will be discussed further in the chapter on *The Jungle*.

<sup>69</sup> Marcossion, "Frank Norris, Realist," 237-238

<sup>70</sup> The review is reprinted in *Norris: The Critical Reception*, but the editors note that the ending of the review is illegible. Approximately 1100 words are reproduced before that illegibility.

and in his new book, 'The Octopus,' he reaches what is so far the fullness of his powers. His story is a terrific protest against the oppression of a community by a great railroad; it is a stinging indictment of a trust, that fastened its tentacles in the rich soil of a great country and wrote the story of its success in the life's blood of its martyrs."<sup>71</sup> Like the reviewers for the *Dallas Morning News*, Marcossou identifies the issues of trusts and political corruption as important selling-points for readers.

Of the contemporary reviews, Frederic Cooper's in the *Bookman* most closely models what would become the standard criticism of *The Octopus* in later decades. Cooper, who emphasizes that, though the novel seems to be about the struggle between capital and labor, it is in fact a vast allegory of something larger and more universal, writes of the book's ending, "It is a trifle exasperating to find a man who can do work like this deliberately choosing every now and then, after the fashion of his poet Presley, to look at life through rose-coloured glasses, instead of adhering fearlessly to the crude colours and harsh outlines."<sup>72</sup> The *New York Evening Sun* offered a similar criticism of the novel, writing that *The Octopus*'s optimistic ending "is not convincing, after the sombre picture of the lives of the San Joaquin ranchers, which Mr. Norris paints for us." But unlike the reviewer from the *Evening Sun*, who frames the turning away from the

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<sup>71</sup> Marcossou, "Frank Norris, Realist."

<sup>72</sup> Cooper's review is reprinted in both *Frank Norris: The Critical Reception*, and in *Critical Essays on Frank Norris*. Don Graham's introduction to *Critical Essays on Frank Norris* identifies Cooper's review, along with Wallace Rice's review in the *Chicago American*, as reviews that "remain vital today" due to their identification of "issues that continue to engage present-day criticism of Norris's work." Graham characterizes Cooper's review as "critically prescient" in its identification of "two critical problems that are still alive: the blend of realism and romance, in his view an uneasy blend; and the allegorical machinery that to his mind had got out of hand" (Graham, Introduction, *Critical Essays on Frank Norris*, xvii).

tragedy of the novel toward the optimism of the ending in terms of Norris's subject matter, which, the reviewers speculate, appears to have overwhelmed him, Cooper frames that movement in terms of colors and outlines. Where the *Evening Sun* focuses on the tragedy of specific events, Cooper emphasizes formal qualities and uses a metaphor that connects *The Octopus* to the visual arts. Cooper's description of Norris "adhering fearlessly to the crude colours and harsh outlines" anticipates later descriptions of literary naturalism, and his criticism of Norris' choice to "look at life through rose-coloured glasses" maps onto the inconsistent optimism critics identify in the ending.

The tension between reading *The Octopus* through the lens of contemporary events and the purpose novel on one hand, and a formal aesthetic invested in conceptions of more universal literary value on the other is manifested in an exchange that occurred between William Dean Howells and a correspondent in the pages of *Harper's* in 1903. Howells's "Editor's Easy Chair" column from the January, 1903 *Harper's Monthly* included a response to a "suggestive communication" published in a "polite periodical" that called for "more and better criticism in all our periodicals." The correspondent posed a series of questions—including, "What are the conditions from which springs, we will say, Mr. Norris's theory of the novel?"—that Howells answered in rapid succession. Howells writes, "Mr. Norris's theory of the novel is the Zolaesque theory, which he improved and adapted to conditions which it did not spring from; in his hands the theory of human documentation became more selective; he made the epic poetical again, and imbued it with the strong, fiery spirit of the California soil and air which is as native as

the California flavor of the grapes grown from the Spanish stocks.”<sup>73</sup> Howells’s answer, while glib, emphasizes the epic and Zolaesque in Norris’s writing and downplays the sociological; according to Howells, in Norris’s “hands the theory of human documentation became more selective.”

The Jan. 24, 1903 issue of *Harper’s Weekly* included a response to Howells’s column from Edith Baker Brown, the “polite correspondent” to whom Howells referred. Evidently unsatisfied with Howells’s response, Brown declares, “Mr. Howells’s answers are themselves so individual, so provocative, that the correspondent finds herself restating her own answers to the questions anew, and even writing them out—her only excuse being that Mr. Howells has made the questions themselves so much more interesting by his discussion of them.”<sup>74</sup> She goes on to ask, “Frank Norris’s theory of the novel was, indeed, broadly speaking, Zola’s theory of the novel; but the question remains, in the mind of the correspondent, why did Zola’s sociological method seem to adapt itself so well to Mr. Norris’s American theme—to the great exultant, practical and material civilization of the West?” Brown finds her answer at least partially in the ending of *The Octopus*; Norris, she writes, “laid bare the brutalities of a great economic struggle in which human lives and human souls went down with candor, but, in spite of himself, with zest in the intensity of the drama. Nor is his conclusion intentionally pessimistic. If I read *The Octopus* aright, it finds the sacrifice of these souls a heroic one, since it has

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<sup>73</sup> William Dean Howells, “Editor’s Easy Chair,” *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*, January 1903, 327-328, ProQuest.

<sup>74</sup> E. B. B., “Correspondence,” *Harper’s Weekly*, January 24, 1903, 146, HarpWeek.

helped to solve the great feeding problem of the world. This is truly the faith in a material progress to which the great lusty life of America is at present dedicated.”

Howells’s short answer puts the focus of Norris’s theory of the novel on formal and generic models, particularly the “Zolaesque theory” and the epic, which Norris “made... poetical again.” In contrast, Brown notes that Zola’s is a “sociological model” and emphasizes that Norris “laid bare the brutalities of a great economic struggle.” Brown’s reading of the novel’s ending is similar to that of the *Harvard Monthly*, which finds that in its conclusion, *The Octopus* “sounds the ringing note of optimism that cheers the theme.”<sup>75</sup> But Brown ties that optimism to specific events from the novel that are closely related both to contemporary events at the time of publication and to the book’s functioning as a purpose novel. For Brown, the optimism comes not just from Presley’s general realization that “all things, surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good,” but more specifically from the fact that the wheat will be sent to India, where it will help alleviate famine. That sequence of events demonstrates for Brown “the faith in a material progress to which the great lusty life of America is at present dedicated,” a statement that emphasizes both material progress and the present state of American social progress, neither of which correspond with Howells’s emphasis on the poetical and epic quality of Norris’s work.

Brown’s insistence that Howells consider *The Octopus* in terms its role in its specific social and political context hews much more closely to the model offered in the newspaper reviews than it does that of Howells and other magazine reviewers. In reading

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<sup>75</sup> G. H. Montague, “Two American Disciples of Zola,” *Harvard Monthly* 32, no. 5 (July 1901): 211, Google Books..

*The Octopus* as a purpose novel, newspaper reviewers demonstrate a response similar to that of Bourdieu's working-class survey respondents, who qualify their assessment of a particular photograph based on their assumptions about its intended audience, so that "The insistence with which the respondents point out the limits and conditions of validity of their judgments, distinguishing, for each photograph, the possible uses or audiences, or, more precisely, the possible use for each audience... shows that they reject the idea that a photograph can please 'universally.'" <sup>76</sup> Further, newspaper reviews, like the ads for the serialized *Octopus*, stress the exciting, plot-based qualities of the novel—what Bourdieu terms the "collective festivity" and "spectacular delights" of popular entertainment. As George Hamlin Fitch writes in the San Francisco *Chronicle*, "The story is crowded with characters and with incident," while the Washington *Times* declares, "The salient quality of the book is that nobody can help reading it through. It grasps the attention like tentacles and has some of the uncanny fascination of its namesake." <sup>77</sup> For newspaper reviewers, the characters in *The Octopus* are "first-rate," "very human," and "etched with unerring hand." <sup>78</sup> This emphasis on the characters as life-like and engaging further stresses the novel's attention-grabbing quality; according to the *Evening Sun*, "Mr. Norris never lets his reader's interest in the fortunes of his characters flag," <sup>79</sup> and the

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<sup>76</sup> Bourdieu, 42.

<sup>77</sup> "The Novel of the West," Washington *Sunday Times*, June 2, 1901, 8, LOC Chronicling America.

<sup>78</sup> "New Books Reviewed," Dallas *Morning News*; "Book Reviews," Richmond *Dispatch*, May 5, 1901, 8, LOC Chronicling America; I. F. Marcossou, "The Epic of the Wheat," Louisville *Times*, April 13, 1901, 13, in *Norris: The Critical Reception*, 129-131.

<sup>79</sup> "Books and Their Makers," New York *Evening Sun*, March 30, 1901, 5, in *Norris, the Critical Reception*, 112-114.

San Francisco *Chronicle* writes, “[The novel] lays hold upon the reader, and no one who takes it up will ever be able to efface it from the memory.”<sup>80</sup>

### **Working-class readers and naturalist determinism**

To summarize, the reading practices promoted in reviews of *The Octopus* are closely tied to the class affiliation of the primary reading public, so that the general qualities about the novel emphasized in the newspaper reviews—plot and characters that hold reader interest, connection to contemporary events, superficial markers of literary prestige—map onto the characteristics working-class audiences tend to gravitate toward, while the qualities stressed in literary magazine reviews—the novel as a work of art, the universal or epic themes, the specific connections to particular literary genres and traditions—map onto the values prized by middle- and upper-class audiences. But the specific interpretive frameworks offered in the newspaper reviews also reflect a mode of reading that, in assessing *The Octopus* according to the terms of the purpose novel, demonstrates contemporary, class-conscious objections to the qualities later associated with literary naturalism.

Aside from the stylistic criticisms discussed in the previous section, one of the most significant criticisms to appear in the largely positive reviews of *The Octopus* was about the way the novel’s ending resolves itself. Reviewers took issue with a resolution that appeared to be an endorsement of determinism, if not by Norris himself, at least by his primary character and narrative focal point. To the extent that reading *The Octopus* as a purpose novel reflects a set of interpretive practices and values more closely tied to the

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<sup>80</sup> Fitch, “Books for Spring.”

working-class readers of the newspapers than the elite readers of the magazines, the criticisms of the ending, which often follow from readings of *The Octopus* as a purpose novel, indicate a rejection of a significant component of the naturalist aesthetic—determinism—by reviewers addressing a working-class public. Reading *The Octopus* in accord with popular tastes and generic expectations, particularly those of the purpose novel, necessitates at least a partial rejection of the naturalist narrative of fatalistic decline, since a primary expectation of the purpose novel is that it address some contemporary issue which needs to be resolved with specific action.

The ending of *The Octopus* has received a great deal of critical attention over the years. Though the events of the book result in the death and ruin of nearly every character in the novel, in the final moments of the book, Presley experiences an epiphanic realization that, despite the horrors he has witnessed in the struggle between the wheat farmers of the San Joaquin valley and the P. and S. W. Railroad, “Falseness dies; injustice and oppression in the end of everything fade and vanish away. Greed, cruelty, selfishness, and inhumanity are short-lived; the individual suffers, but the race goes on... The larger view always and through all shams, all wickedness, discovers the Truth that will, in the end, prevail, and all things, surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good.” Much of the critical attention given to *The Octopus* in the twentieth century focused on how to interpret an ending whose spiritual optimism seems on its face



difficult to square with the pessimistic determinism generally associated with naturalism.<sup>81</sup>

Though critics find the final moments of optimism difficult to explain in the context of a naturalist aesthetic that was supposed to privilege “pessimistic materialistic determinism”,<sup>82</sup> the earlier deterministic note sounded in the novel conformed more easily to critical expectations. When Presley confronts Shelgrim, the railroad magnate, about his role in the massacre of the ranchers, Shelgrim declares, “You are dealing with forces, young man, when you speak of Wheat and the Railroads, not with men... Blame conditions, not men.”<sup>83</sup> Shelgrim’s insistence that natural and economic forces are unstoppable drivers of human life fits more readily into many accounts of American literary naturalism than Presley’s final epiphany that “all things... work together for good.” A few reviewers even interpreted the novel in similar terms. According to the *San Francisco Call*, “Mr. Norris’ object is to tell of wrongs and horrors, not with the idea of eliciting sympathy for sufferers of the past, but to show the everlastingness of the most

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<sup>81</sup> Twentieth-century critics of *The Octopus* generally resolved this tension by separating Presley from Norris, and demonstrating that, though Presley’s epiphany may be philosophically or aesthetically inconsistent with both the rest of the novel and with literary naturalism more generally, Presley is not necessarily a mouthpiece for Norris, and his views are not synonymous with those of the novel itself. For more on the ending of *The Octopus*, see Donald Pizer, “Another Look at ‘The Octopus,’” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 10, no. 3 (1955): 217-224; Clare Eby, “*The Octopus*: Big Business as Art,” *American Literary Realism* 26, no. 3 (1994): 33-51; Steven Frye, “Presley’s Pretense: Irony and Epic Convention in Frank Norris’s *The Octopus*,” *American Literary Realism* 39, no. 3 (2007): 213-221.

<sup>82</sup> Becker, *Documents of Modern Literary Realism*, 35.

<sup>83</sup> Norris, *The Octopus*, 487.

might of world forces—THE WHEAT.”<sup>84</sup> The Washington *Times* interprets the ending similarly, writing, “Yet this enemy, this force—silent, superhuman, polluting—is no respecter of persons, and in the end kills its willing and prosperous servant as remorselessly as its enemies. The final thought of the book is brought out with a marvelous delicacy of touch, and so naturally that it escapes the opprobrium of a moral. It is the wheat, after all, which has wrought this evil, the silent, impersonal power of life, crushing the few to feed the many, wrecking the ranches of Lower California to feed the millions of India.”<sup>85</sup> And a review in the *Academy* concludes by declaring, “The moral conceptions of the reader are thenceforward enlarged, and the frightful scenes which he has witnessed take their proper place as mere trifles in the great life of that organism which is the United States. ‘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.’ That seems to be Mr. Norris’s watch-word, Force.”<sup>86</sup> All three reviews emphasize the wheat as an amoral, natural force that works neither for good nor evil and that affects the lives of men without intent or design. This reading leans heavily on the lines from the penultimate chapter that the *Academy* reviewer quotes at length, but it ignores Presley’s

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<sup>84</sup> B. G. Lathrop, “Is This the Man to Write ‘The Great American Novel?’” San Francisco *Sunday Call*, 6, LOC Chronicling America.

<sup>85</sup> “The Novel of the West,” 8.

<sup>86</sup> “Fiction,” *The Academy*, September 14, 1901, 210-211, HathiTrust.

epiphany in the final chapter that “all things, surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for the good.”<sup>87</sup>

More common, though, were reviews that found the ending insufficient for various reasons. Though many of the most prominent literary magazines—*Harper's*, the *Atlantic*, the *Outlook*, and the *Overland Monthly*—did not address the ending at all, several other magazines did. Unlike the reviewers who focused on the amoral determinism of natural forces emphasized in Shelgrim's speech to Presley, these reviewers see the ending as a dangerous and potentially immoral fatalism that disavows individual responsibility. Wallace Rice's review in the *Chicago American Literary and Art Review* takes just such a position, writing of Shelgrim's injunction to Presley to “Blame conditions, not men,”

It need not be pointed out that this hideous doctrine, the doctrine that would justify a Nero and damn an Antonine, can be urged in favor of any crime that ever has hatched in warped and brutal brains. It is the doctrine of personal irresponsibility, of a conscienceless world, of a godless universe. It is the plea of organized greed and unrestrained lust in all ages. Most unfortunately it is the plea which Mr. Norris represents as wholly converting the most intelligent character in his book, the character with which he asserts the greatest degree of personal intimacy and for which he makes the greatest appeal for the reader's sympathy.<sup>88</sup>

Reviews in the *Dial* and the *Chautauquan* demonstrate a similar concern, albeit from a different perspective, that *The Octopus* seemed to justify criminal behavior. The *Dial*

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<sup>87</sup> Norris, *The Octopus*, 551.

<sup>88</sup> Rice, “Norris' *The Octopus*,” 25-27.

writes, “we are rather inclined to sympathize with the octopus, which stands, after all, for practices that come within the form of law, whereas the practices of the wheat-growers stand for the most part without the law, and illustrate nearly every form of violence and anarchy. If the writer means to preach anything, it is that a certain degree of outrage justifies individuals in taking the law into their own hands, and this is the most dangerous sophistry that now confronts our civilization.”<sup>89</sup> Similarly, the *Chautauquan* declares, “The characters are well drawn—strong, practical, whole-souled men and women, not at all the primitive nature-born, brutal beings the author makes them typify in his paragraphs of picturesque comment. We cannot accept their final destruction by the railroad. To lose property unjustly is hard, but it need not make men criminals nor cringing turncoats. The book is called an epic, but its view is too partial to justify the title.”<sup>90</sup> The *Dial* and the *Chautauquan* transform the anxiety over the morality of *The Octopus* and its philosophy demonstrated in Rice’s review into an anxiety about the criminality of the novel, adding a class-based inflection to Rice’s moral one. The emphasis on property, anarchy, and civilization indicates a concern less with the overall consequences of a philosophy of determinism than with the threats to middle-class values implied in the extralegal struggle between the ranchers and the railroad.

Concern with the moral consequences of fatalism was not entirely confined to the monthly magazines; an article in the Boston *Evening Transcript* lamenting the prevalence of fatalism in popular literature highlighted *The Octopus* as a prime example. The author finds the story itself admirable in its demonstration of “the futility of fighting the devil

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<sup>89</sup> “Recent Fiction,” *Dial*, September 1, 1901, 135-140, HathiTrust.

<sup>90</sup> “Talk About Books,” *Chautauquan*, August, 1901, 539, HathiTrust.

with his own weapons,” but takes issue with what he sees as Norris’s insistence that he “must preach, moralize, attempt to deal with the mystery of evil. He is not content to let the conscience of his readers draw the inevitable moral.” For the author, the most damaging preaching comes in the final paragraphs; while it “is quite proper to believe with Presley that ‘all things, surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good,’” “the danger of popular exposition of that comfortable optimism is that your man in the street soon begins to reason that Cain was not so much worse than Abel, Pharaoh than Moses, Nero than Marcus Aurelius, Saul than Paul, Ananias than Stephen, Napoleon than Washington, Parnell than Gladstone, Guiteau than Garfield; and the result is individual and national deterioration in morals.”<sup>91</sup> Though the author expresses similar objections to determinism’s denial of individual responsibility, the *Transcript*’s concern over “the man on the street” is indicative of the difference in audience between something like the *Dial* and the more general *Transcript*. The reviewer in the *Dial* aligns himself and his readers with those who might be damaged by the criminality condoned in the novel, while the *Transcript*’s concern is that the newspaper’s readers—the man on the street—might reason his way into joining those very criminals.

Ultimately, though, the newspaper reviews are less concerned with the moral implications of determinism than with the suitability of an ending that advocates determinism to a purpose novel. For readers who expect a more conventional resolution to the tragic incidents described in the novel, Presley’s final declaration that everything, even the deaths of the main characters, works toward the good fails to meet that

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<sup>91</sup> “The Octopus,” Boston *Evening Transcript*, July 31, 1901, 12, in *Norris: The Critical Reception*, 157-159.

expectation. A reviewer for the Richmond *Dispatch*, for example, faults the novel for failing to reward the good and punish the wicked; the *Dispatch* writes “The story does not end satisfactorily. The railroad wins in the great fight, and many of the heroes bravely perish at their posts of duty. In sooth, the finale is so tragic that we are forced to conclude that one of the characters was right when he said, ‘Don’t buck against the railroad.’”<sup>92</sup>

The more substantive version of the *Dispatch*’s critique notes that Norris sets up a great tragedy and fails to offer a solution. A review in Boston *Transcript* (not the same review that criticizes the immorality of fatalism) characterizes the novel’s ending in naturalistic terms, writing that Shelgrim’s advice to Presley to “Blame conditions, not men,” “stupefies [Presley]. No one, then, is to blame for the men killed at the irrigation ditch. Forces, condition, laws of supply and demand are the enemies, after all. No, not enemies. There is no malevolence in nature. It is, then, a gigantic engine, a leviathan with a heart of steel, knowing no compunction, no forgiveness, no tolerance; crushing out the human atom standing in its way, ‘with Nirvanic calm,’ the agony of destruction sending never the faintest tremor through all that prodigious mechanism of wheels and cogs.” The *Transcript*, though, is less willing to let that naturalist determinism stand as the ultimate message of the novel; the reviewer goes on,

If the respect for truth has prevented Mr. Norris from ending his tale with a climax in which justice is done, if in his youth he has no answer to the colossus whose work will endure for the final upbuilding of his country; if this book offers nothing in the way of amending the situation—of altering those conditions, those

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<sup>92</sup> “Book Reviews,” 8.

forces, those laws of supply and demand which alone were responsible for the blood shed at the irrigating ditch, for the women driven to lives of shame or starvation, for the broken hearts left behind after the Octopus has sucked the life-blood from the land—we must remember that he is not as yet the seer or the theorist, but that he is presenting us, in this first work, the conditions only of the mighty problem. He does not pretend to be the leader sent to guide this people in their dealings with that mighty modern force, the trust.<sup>93</sup>

Though the reviewer is willing to excuse Norris for failing to offer a solution, citing his youth and the difficulty of the problem, he still frames the lack of a solution as an insufficiency on the part of the novel. As the first in a series, *The Octopus* presents “the conditions only of the mighty problem,” but the reviewer explicitly raises the possibility of a solution that, as Norris “is not as yet the seer or the theorist,” might well be offered in later works.

A similar review from the New York *Evening Sun* combines the *Dispatch*'s complaint that the ending is incompatible with the tragedy of the novel and the *Transcript*'s declaration that Norris leaves his subject unfinished:

In the closing paragraphs of his book, Mr. Norris justifies the Octopus on the principle of the greatest good to the greatest number. “Falseness dies,” he says, “injustice and oppression in the end of everything fade and vanish away. Greed, cruelty, selfishness and inhumanity are short-lived; the individual suffers, but the race goes on. Annixter dies, but in a far distant corner of the world a thousand

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<sup>93</sup> “The Epic of the Wheat,” Boston *Evening Transcript*, May 22, 1901, 18, in *Norris: The Critical Reception*, 148-151.

lives are saved" (that is, by the movement of the wheat crop). "The larger view always and through all shame, all wickedness, discovers the truth that will, in the end, prevail, and all things, surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good." This is not convincing, after the sombre picture of the lives of the San Joaquin ranchers, which Mr. Norris paints for us. They were ground down and harshly used, but the concluding paragraph of "The Octopus" is probably a confession that the subject had overwhelmed the author, and he could conceive no remedy.

The *Evening Sun* rejects the final moments of the novel altogether, finding them, as does the *Dispatch*, unconvincing in light of the rest of the book. Like the reviewer from the *Transcript*, the *Evening Sun* reviewer implies that the satisfactory ending to the novel would be one that addresses both the specific events of the plot and the contemporary circumstances that the plot describes.

A reviewer from the *Dallas Morning News* praises the novel's ending, writing, "Most artistically the book ends with the triumph of 'The Octopus,' the destruction of the community with whose interests the reader is identified."<sup>94</sup> The reviewer implies that what makes the novel "artistic" is that it confounds reader expectations, so that high art in this case becomes defined explicitly in opposition to the satisfaction of reader interests and identification. But the reviewer goes on to offer a reading that seems to accept the ending as satisfactory by extrapolating from the novel to the circumstances on which it is based so that,

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<sup>94</sup> "Frank Norris' Work," 10.



...ten thousand persons who never set foot in California will rejoice when the blow falls, as fall it must some day. Such is the power of the novelist. Annixter's death must be revenged, or the eternal fitness of things is outraged, the ruin of Dyke's character and fortunes demands punishment, the untimely end of even "that goat Osterman" "pleads to the skies." It sounds perhaps a little like "Waiting for the Sleary babies to develop Sleary's fits," but the feeling is genuine and deep all the same, and it is the ability to arouse such feeling that gives the novelist his power.

Unlike the reviewer from the *Dispatch*, the *Morning News* reviewer does not chafe at the perceived tragedy of the events of the novel, despite an ending in which the octopus triumphs. But that lack of outrage is predicated on the assumption that the actual railroad on which the octopus is based will eventually fall, "as fall it must some day." In this conflation of novel and life, the failure of the actual railroad will avenge the wrongs suffered by the characters in the novel. Though this reading does not actually criticize the ending, it does presuppose its insufficiency, since some resolution of the problem posed by the novel, even if that resolution exists outside the space of the text, is necessary to satisfy the reader's expectations that "Annixter's death must be revenged."

These newspaper reviews' reactions to the ending reflect Bourdieu's observation that popular audiences expect art to be both legible and functional; Bourdieu notes that working-class observers measure the value of a photograph "by the interest of the information it conveys, and by the clarity with which it fulfils this informative function,

in short, its legibility, which itself varies with the legibility of its intention or function.”<sup>95</sup>

*The Octopus* is made legible by its generic markers, which, according to the reading mode promoted in the newspaper reviews, identify the book as a purpose novel with an explicit investment in the contemporary social problem it depicts. Under those circumstances, an ending that fails to address that problem is in violation of the generic expectations for the novel.

In framing the ending as an insufficient resolution to the generic expectations established by the novel, the reviewers take a significant quality associated with literary naturalism—an ending that stresses the inevitability of environmental, biological, or social forces—and make it in the context of the purpose novel a generic failing. That criticism is also consistent with a mode of reading that is aligned with a popular or working-class audience—a mode that stresses contemporary significance and functionality as important generic markers. Within that mode, determinism is an unsatisfactory resolution to the narrative action, since it denies that there is anything individual characters or readers can do to resolve the situation exposed in the novel. This rejection of determinism is particularly significant given that in many readings of American literary naturalism, the working-class characters are those who are most often trapped by naturalism’s narrative of decline, incapable of fully understanding their own place in the larger social context or of arresting their downward trajectory.<sup>96</sup> But in

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<sup>95</sup> Bourdieu, 43.

<sup>96</sup> The most obvious, and often-discussed examples include *McTeague* and *Trina*, Crane’s *Maggie*, Dreiser’s *Hurstwood* (although the class stuff is a bit more complicated there). In *The Octopus*, the Hoovens, and particularly Minna Hooven, exemplify this trajectory as well.

rejecting the ending's determinism and calling for a solution to the novel's tragedy, the newspaper reviews of *The Octopus* offer working-class readers a reading model that looks for ways that agency can be restored.

### **Conclusion**

In "The Responsibilities of the Novelist," Norris writes of "the People" and their literary taste,

Who is it after all, whose interest is liveliest in any given work of art? It is not now a question of *aesthetic* interest; that is the artist's, the amateur's, the *cognoscente*'s. It is a question of *vital* interest... The People—Mrs. Jones and her neighbours—take the life history of these fictitious characters, these novels, to heart with a seriousness that the aesthetic cult have no conception of. The cult consider them almost solely from their artistic sides. The People take them into their innermost lives.

Here Norris identifies many of the same values present in Bourdieu's analysis, particularly the tendency of working-class readers to prefer novels that hold reader interest and relate in some way to their own lives, and the emphasis of elite readers on strictly aesthetic concerns. But though Norris praises popular taste as more vital than the strictly aesthetic concerns of the elite, he does not trust the People to make sound literary judgments: "Nor do the People discriminate. Omnivorous readers as they are to-day, they make little distinction between Maggie Tulliver and the heroine of the latest 'popular novel.' They do not stop to separate true from false; they do not care."

“The Responsibilities of the Novelist” was published in the *Critic*, and Norris’s audience for his piece, and for much of his other work addressing the role of the novel, would have been the *cognoscente*, not the People.<sup>97</sup> Norris’s consideration of popular taste is not meant to call for or establish better reading practices among working-class readers, but rather to advocate for better novels, so that working-class readers need not exercise the literary discrimination they do not have. In both his criticism and in *The Octopus*, Norris recognizes working-class readers as an important element of the contemporary literary landscape, but he is unable to fully engage with popular taste as more than a vital but fundamentally indiscriminating force. Attending to the reading models of *The Octopus* published in newspapers and more explicitly aimed at popular readers provides us with one method of correcting for this one-sided view of popular taste.

Following Norris’s death in October, 1902, there was a flurry of retrospective writing about his work, along with a great many reviews of *The Pit*, which was published posthumously in 1903. An article titled “Problem or Art in Novels,” published in the *Washington Post*, attributed Norris’s relatively modest financial success to his gloomy outlook and didacticism:

The problem is too didactic. The lesson is too apparent. No man reels off discussions on economic subjects with unfaltering fluency in impromptu conversation. The reader instinctively feels that he is tricked into attending school,

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<sup>97</sup> “The True Reward of the Novelist” and “The Need of a Literary Conscience” were published in the *World’s Work* in 1901 and “The Novel with a ‘Purpose’” in the *World’s Work* in 1902.

and that the price of the book is his fee. He knows, too, that no real, live man, with red corpuscles in his veins and a normal mind, will weep over the injustice done the masses, while the first beggar who passes him in the streets will receive no more than a lecture on sociology.

Norris had art, but he allowed his tendency to generalization to distract him from the study of the men with whom he came in daily contact. His mind was on higher things than commonplaces, to be sure, but as an essayist he would have risen higher than as a novelist.<sup>98</sup>

The author's description of being tricked into attending school recalls Crawford's denunciation of the purpose novel as "an ambush, a lying-in-wait for the unsuspecting public, a violation of the social contract." The emphasis on Norris's tendency to generalize is echoed, albeit with a less damning conclusion, in Hamlin Garland's essay, "The Work of Frank Norris," published in the March 1903 *Critic*. Garland writes, "In 'The Octopus' the intention is frankly sociologic... At times the attempt to apply the methods of Zola is too apparent... The motive is too insistent, the impersonal ceases at times to interest."<sup>99</sup> Garland ultimately concludes that, despite *The Octopus*'s flaws, Norris "was a great novelist," but both his essay and the one in the *Post* emphasize the viability of a turn-of-the-century critical model that read *The Octopus* as a purpose novel.

The indictment of *The Octopus* as too "sociologic" implies an academic dryness to the novel's attention to the historical details of the trusts. But the same qualities that

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<sup>98</sup> "Problem or Art in Novels," *Washington Post*, December 3, 1902, 6, ProQuest.

<sup>99</sup> Hamlin Garland, "The Work of Frank Norris," *Critic*, March 1903, 216, American Periodicals.

when described in explicitly academic or technical terms seem dry and boring were framed in the newspaper reviews as timely and exciting. The newspaper reviews' emphasis on reader interest and the importance of contemporary events demonstrates a reading model that is clearly distinct from those offered in the monthly magazines. That distinction is evident even in Garland's review, which spends far less time than the *Post* examining the degree to which *The Octopus* is "frankly sociologic"; the bulk of Garland's analysis of the book focuses on Norris's Zola-esque phrasing and his impressive characterization.

The reception of *The Octopus* demonstrates a clear distinction between reviews published in monthly magazines, which stress qualities associated with an elite aesthetic, and those published in newspapers, which emphasize popular tastes and tend to read the book through the generic expectations of the purpose novel. Unlike *The Marrow of Tradition*, which Chesnut explicitly framed as a purpose novel, *The Octopus* evidences Norris's own ambivalence over the genre of the purpose novel. In both Norris's critical writing and in Presley's career, Norris waffles between an explicitly de-politicized aesthetic that aligns him with the literary elite and a disdain for fiction that does not engage with the common reader. That ambivalence makes room for readings that emphasize aesthetic distance over topicality. As we will see in the following chapter, the magazine reviewers' emphasis on the epic and universal qualities of *The Octopus*, like the reviewers of *The Portion of Labor* who stressed the qualities of local color over the broader themes of the purpose novel, provided a de-politicizing reading mode that stood in clear opposition to readings of the book as a purpose novel.

Newspaper reviewers, on the other hand, recognized the markers of literary prestige in *The Octopus*'s publication and reception, but also took hold of the purpose novel as a mode of interpretation that more fully addressed the needs and expectations of their reading public. But even in their reading of *The Octopus* as a purpose novel, reviewers still focused their attention on the novel's insufficiency, particularly in its ending. When read in terms of literary naturalism, this focus on *The Octopus*'s ending restores a degree of agency to a potentially fatalistic genre and to the class of people granted the least agency in the novel. But when read in terms of the purpose novel, newspaper reviewers' focus on the ending's insufficiency reveals yet again that by the turn of the century, the most prominent quality of the critical response to the purpose novel was a focus on its limitations.

#### 4. Gender and genre in the reception of Mary Wilkins Freeman's *The Portion of Labor*

Ellen Brewster, the heroine of Mary Wilkins Freeman's 1901 novel *The Portion of Labor*, conforms to nearly every standard of nineteenth century angelic girlhood: As a child, her "face like a white flower," the "golden cloud of her curls" and her "eyes full of innocent contemplation" attract the love and admiration of everyone who sees her, and by the time she is eighteen, "there was about Ellen a majesty and nobility of youth and innocence and beauty which overawed. The other girls of the class were as young and as pretty, but none of them had that indescribable quality which seemed to raise her above them all."<sup>1</sup> Ellen is not only beautiful, she is also smart, and her father, who works in a shoe factory, has saved enough money to send her to Vassar so that she can transcend her working-class origins.

But despite Ellen's halo of blonde curls, she is no angel in the house. When her father loses his job and savings, she goes to work at the same factory that fired him, and later leads the workers in a strike. Even before she enters the working world, she is something of a public figure in her mid-sized town. The initial chapters of the novel focus on six-year-old Ellen's attempt to run away from her arguing parents, and her disappearance brings the entire town out to search for her. She graduates from high school as valedictorian, and gives a radical speech on the subject of "Equality" in which

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Wilkins Freeman, *The Portion of Labor* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1901), 20, 138, 190, HathiTrust.



she “hesitated at nothing, she flung all castes into a common heap of equality with her strong young arms, and she set them all on one level of the synagogue.”<sup>2</sup>

Ellen’s angelic innocence and public engagement exist in uneasy tension throughout the novel. Freeman depicts her valedictory address as both youthfully principled and altogether innocent of the impact of her radical beliefs:

As Ellen went on reading calmly, with the steadfastness of one promulgating principles, not the excitement of one carried away by enthusiasm, she began to be interrupted by applause, but she read on, never wavering, her clear voice overcoming everything. She was quite innocently throwing her wordy bomb to the agitation of public sentiment. She had no thought of such an effect. She was stating what she believed to be facts with her youthful dogmatism. She had no fear lest the facts strike too hard.<sup>3</sup>

Ellen’s “almost anarchistic” political beliefs attract the cheers and applause of the factory employees, many of whom are “of foreign blood, people who had come to the country expecting the state of things advocated in Ellen’s valedictory, and had remained more or less sullen and dissenting at the non-fulfilment of their expectation.”<sup>4</sup> But though she preaches near-anarchy to a crowd of foreign socialists, Ellen is characterized as innocent, angelic, and thoroughly feminine. When the crowd erupts in applause, Ellen “stood there quite piteous in her confusion,” and no sooner has she finished reading than “the ushers

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 193.

began in the midst of the storm of applause” to bring her “great bouquets and baskets of flowers.”<sup>5</sup>

In creating a heroine with all the hallmarks of domestic beauty and a public life as a labor agitator, Freeman mirrors the narrative trajectory of the novel itself, which pairs a story about the labor problems of the working class with the romance between Ellen and the wealthy factory owner Robert Lloyd. In the last part of the novel, Ellen leads the workers in a strike and, when it becomes clear they will starve if they continue to strike, leads them back to work. In renouncing the strike, Ellen is also able to marry Lloyd, who, more out of love for Ellen than any genuine solidarity with his workers, agrees not to cut wages as much as he intended.

The tension between the public and the domestic manifests itself in *The Portion of Labor*'s generic qualities, which, like the other elements in the novel, do not fit neatly into a single category. *The Portion of Labor* is a purpose novel about labor set in an environment that is much more urban than the setting of Freeman's short stories, written by an author who was primarily associated, both at the time of publication and today, with local color writing. As I discuss below, local color was and remains an explicitly gendered mode of writing, and scholars have noted the ways that the gendering of the genre led both current and past critics to disregard its significance. In contrast, the purpose novel is not as closely or exclusively associated with women's writing; while one of the most famous purpose novels of the nineteenth century was written by a woman, and while other women's novels of the mid-nineteenth century might well fall

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 194.

into the category of purpose novel,<sup>6</sup> so, too, do many novels by men. Examining the reception of a purpose novel written by an author most closely associated with local color, then, reinforces our understanding of local color as a category with fraught gender politics. The reception of *The Portion of Labor* shows the extent to which the gendered expectations of local color limited the sort of work authors could accomplish by demonstrating that the conventions and limitations of local color writing followed Freeman outside the genre. But because not all reviewers dealt with the novel in terms of local color, the reception of *The Portion of Labor* also shows what the novel was able to accomplish when not hampered by the expectations of local color.

The reviews of *The Portion of Labor* reveal two primary interpretive modes at work. Reviewers employed both the gendered expectations of local color writing and the somewhat less-gendered expectations of the purpose novel in their assessment of Freeman's book. These two modes sometimes exist together in a single review, but one or the other mode generally predominates. The conventions of local color are most commonly used as a means of diminishing the book's seriousness and persuasive impact, while reviews that focus on the book as a purpose novel tend to accord Freeman both more topical seriousness or legitimacy and a greater ability to meet the conventions of the genre.

In addition to providing an instructive study in the way reviewers' generic expectations structured their readings, the reception of *The Portion of Labor* also challenges the primary modes of analysis evident in current scholarship on the novel by

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<sup>6</sup> Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona* (1884), Maria Ruiz de Burton's *The Squatter and the Don* (1885), and many of the novels of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps Ward, to name a few.

suggesting that scholars have imposed expectations on the novel that are similar to those evident in the reviews. In comparison to Freeman's short stories, *The Portion of Labor* replaces the qualities valued by literary scholars, and evidenced in many of Freeman's stories—complexity, cosmopolitanism, depth—with those often disregarded or delegitimized—transparency, explicit political commentary, contemporary subject matter.

As a result, *The Portion of Labor* has received relatively little critical attention. It is treated briefly in Susan Glasser's *In the Closet Hidden* (1996) as an example of “one of Freeman's most extended analyses of love between women” (182), but most book-length studies of Freeman fail to examine the novel in any depth, and there are only a few articles or book chapters devoted to the novel.<sup>7</sup> Though there is little scholarship on *The Portion of Labor* itself, recent scholarship on Freeman more generally indicates that the novel has much to offer the conversation about Freeman's work. Current scholarship on Freeman's work focuses primarily on analyzing Freeman's stories about domestic life and identifying extended systematic critiques implicit in stories about family life and women's daily lives. Such readings make a case for Freeman as a radical critic of gender norms who carefully packaged her critique in local color stories about women's lives. Unlike Freeman's short stories, *The Portion of Labor* requires very little analysis to read the text as an indictment of certain power structures and systems. Debra Bernardi argues that many recent scholars have tended to read Freeman “as a writer who chronicled the harsh difficulties of women's private lives in New England” (136). Bernardi calls for a

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<sup>7</sup> The scholarship that does focus on *The Portion of Labor* is discussed in greater detail below.

greater engagement with the ways Freeman's work speaks to public concerns, arguing that Freeman's stories take up the issue of privacy and private property among the rural poor, ultimately concluding that for Freeman "the right to privacy can only be realized if all individuals share what they own" (137). *The Portion of Labor* engages far more explicitly than Freeman's short stories with issues of civic action and public work, and a better understanding of one Freeman's most unambiguous treatments of public concerns can help scholars of Freeman's short stories better map out the ways stories about individual and private concerns speak to the broader public issues Freeman was interested in.<sup>8</sup>

As I discuss below, *The Portion of Labor* does not fit as neatly into the category of local color or regionalist writing as do Freeman's short stories. The varying readings of *The Portion of Labor* evident in the reviews indicate a need for a framework that explains how reviewers might conceive of the novel's aims and generic qualities in divergent ways. In his work on reception aesthetics and readers' horizons of expectations, Hans Robert Jauss argues that our understanding a text's aesthetic qualities must include a

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<sup>8</sup> Other recent scholarship on Freeman has also emphasized the need to expand our understanding of Freeman's work beyond stories of individual poverty and domestic life. Monika Elbert argues that the compulsive consumerism and fetishization evident in many of Freeman's stories constitutes a criticism of the contemporary economy that Elbert likens to that of Charlotte Perkins Gilman (Monika Elbert, "The Displacement of Desire: Consumerism and Fetishism in Mary Wilkins Freeman's Fiction," *Legacy* 19, no. 2 (2002): 192-215). And Charles Johanningsmeier's work on Freeman's publishing history and reception argues that scholars must be more attentive to Freeman's business decisions, which were consistently dictated by the expectations and limitations of the literary marketplace. (Charles Johanningsmeier, "Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary E. Wilkins (Freeman): Two Shrewd Businesswomen in Search of New Markets," *New England Quarterly* 70, no. 1 [1997]: 57-82. See also Virginia L. Blum, "Mary Wilkins Freeman and the Taste of Necessity," *American Literature* 65, no. 1 [1993]: 69-94).

clear picture of the horizon of expectations that existed for readers when the work was first published.<sup>9</sup> Only by understanding the particular horizon with which readers met the text can we understand the degree to which a given text altered, challenged, or expanded that horizon. Jauss uses the example of *Madame Bovary*, which readers' initially resisted for straying too far from their expectations about the appropriate subjects for a novel and the degree of realism the genre should attempt. That *Madame Bovary* ultimately pushed readers' horizon of expectations about the form of the novel beyond the boundaries that existed in 1857 indicates the impact and, Jauss argues, aesthetic merits of the novel.

Jauss's horizon of expectations is closely tied to issues of genre and mode, as familiar generic rules help form readers' expectations, and texts that challenge readers' horizon of expectations can alter or change generic boundaries. Jauss argues that "The ideal cases of the objective capability of such literary-historical frames of reference are works that evoke the reader's horizon of expectations, formed by a convention of genre, style, or form, only in order to destroy it step by step—which by no means serves a critical purpose only, but can itself once again produce poetic effects."<sup>10</sup> Jauss points to *Don Quixote* as an example of a text that parodies the form out of which the reader's expectations arises. Though Jauss rejects the New Critical emphasis on evaluating a text's aesthetic properties in isolation from its historical or cultural context, his interpretive practice ultimately values many of the same qualities praised by New

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<sup>9</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory," in *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1982), 3-45.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-24.

Criticism: complexity, novelty, formal variety, and generic experimentation. Jauss argues:

The distance between the horizon of expectations and the work, between the familiarity of previous aesthetic experience and the ‘horizontal change’ demanded by the reception of the new work, determines the artistic character of a literary work, according to an aesthetics of reception: to the degree that this distance decreases, and no turn toward the horizon of yet-unknown experience is demanded of the receiving consciousness, the closer the work comes to the sphere of ‘culinary’ or entertainment art. This latter work can be characterized by an aesthetics of reception as not demanding any horizontal change, but rather as precisely fulfilling the expectations prescribed by a ruling standard of taste, in that it satisfies the desire for the reproduction of the familiarly beautiful; confirms familiar sentiments; sanctions wishful notions; makes unusual experiences enjoyable as ‘sensations’; or even raises moral problems, but only to ‘solve’ them in an edifying manner as predecided questions.<sup>11</sup>

Jauss’s list of the qualities of “culinary” or “entertainment” art is very similar to the qualities critics have long objected to in writing by women, particularly the emphasis on the sensational and the conventionally moral. Even his use of “culinary” as a label implicitly genders the category of entertainment art.

The implicitly gendered assumptions Jauss makes in describing his reception aesthetics indicate the importance of feminist reader-response critics who argue for an

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 25.

increased attention to the gendered experience of reading and the ways academic reading practices have long normalized the masculine experience of reading. Judith Fetterley argues that, since most texts were historically written for an assumed male reader, women readers had to undergo what Fetterley calls *immascultation*, in which, “As readers and teachers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny.”<sup>12</sup> A feminist theory of reading, then, will encourage readings of male novels that identify and resist the process of immascultation; further, as Patrocino Schweickart argues, feminist reader-response criticism must “fight on two fronts: for the revision of the canon to include a significant body of works by women, and for the development of the reading strategies consonant with the concerns, experiences, and formal devices that constitute these texts.”<sup>13</sup> While Fetterley and Schweickart are most immediately concerned with the reading practices of individual readers, particularly women readers, their emphasis on identifying gendered elements of readers’ interpretive practices are useful in conjunction with Jauss’s horizon of expectations. Reviewers’ horizons of expectations were shaped not only by “announcements, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics, or implicit allusions,” as Jauss notes, but also by their assumptions about the kind of writing Freeman, as a woman author, would produce, and the reading strategies appropriate for that writing.

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<sup>12</sup> Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), xx.

<sup>13</sup> Patrocino P. Schweickart, “Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading,” in *Readers and Reading*, ed. Andrew Bennett (New York: Longman, 1995), 77.



Considering reviewers' horizon of expectations is helpful in analyzing the reception of *The Portion of Labor*, as the reviews indicate that the novel did not suggest a single horizon of expectations to all of its reviewers, but rather introduced two potential horizons arising out of two different generic categories: local color and the purpose novel. The degree to which a reviewer's expectations were structured by one or the other generic category had a significant impact on the terms in which the reviewer discussed the novel and the authority and facility granted Freeman in tackling a topical subject like labor issues.

*The Portion of Labor* does not fit neatly into what we tend to think of as the primary generic categories at the turn of the century. Freeman herself is most closely associated with local color, or what scholars, following Fetterley and Pryse, have come to term regionalism. At the end of the nineteenth century, local color had a well-established definition: short stories, often but not always written by women, that took place in a rural or otherwise-distant locale. Local color stories often incorporated dialect, and focused on characters, settings, and situations that might seem unfamiliar or exotic to urban readers. The stories often made use of a cosmopolitan narrator who visits an isolated setting and relates the curious, and often nostalgic or atavistic, practices of the local community.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> For more on definitions of regionalism and local color, see Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003) and Donna Campbell, *Resisting Regionalism: Gender and Naturalism in American Fiction, 1885-1915* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1997). Fetterley and Pryse argue that the term "regionalism" allows for a redefinition that emphasizes resistance in regional writing, rather than the commodification of the region implied in local color. But because local color was the term most often applied at the end of the nineteenth century to the category of writing to

Based on these criteria, which describe many of Freeman's best-known short stories, *The Portion of Labor* does not fit the category of local color. The setting of the novel is far from rural. Though Rowe is a small-to-medium town rather than a major city, it has a number of qualities that identify it as urban or semi-urban, as well as modern: Rowe is set up in residential neighborhoods surrounding a central downtown, characters get around by street-car, and the final scene is set in the newly built electrified park. The characters all work in factories, rather than on farms or in other traditionally agricultural occupations. The third-person omniscient narrative voice does not have any of the qualities of travel writing or other touristic markers so common in local color writing. The labor plot embraces issues of contemporary concern, rather than those of past decades, and the work itself is a full-length novel.

While one might well make a case that, despite these deviations, *The Portion of Labor* contains many other generic markers of local color, such a connection is far from definitive. Similarly, the novel has certain elements in common with the domestic novel.<sup>15</sup> Much of the plot and the final resolution center on the courting and marriage of a young, beautiful heroine, and the novel's complications include a rival suitor and potentially insurmountable class differences. But most of the narrative tension and conflict stems not from the romance, but rather from the labor plot. Ellen's career as a

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which Freeman's stories often belonged, I use it, rather than regionalism, in the following discussion.

<sup>15</sup> For definitions of the domestic novel, as well as its relationship to the female *Bildungsroman* (discussed below), see Lora Romero, "Domesticity and Fiction," in *Columbia History of the American Novel*, ed. Emory Elliott (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991): 110-129.

factory girl and labor agitator are the essential elements of the plot's forward motion, and neither characteristic is typical of the domestic novel.

Scholars have generally read *The Portion of Labor* as a faulty combination of labor novel and romance, largely ignoring the ways the book might be read as local color. In "'A Goddess Behind a Sordid Veil': The Domestic Heroine Meets the Labor Novel in Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's *The Portion of Labor*," Dorothy Berkson argues that the tensions between "domesticity and industry, between private sphere and public sphere, and between nineteenth-century culture's constructions of gender and of class" are at the heart of the novel's narrative failings, since the demands of the public, class-focused story of a workers' strike must be resolved within the narrative structure of the domestic romance.<sup>16</sup> Both Berkson and Susan Mizruchi read *The Portion of Labor* as ultimately failing to perform any radical work in challenging class structures; Berkson argues that the structure of the novel reinforces the very ideology the novel's characters challenge, while Mizruchi observes that in *The Portion of Labor*, "class is as fixed as any inborn trait and functions, paradoxically, to subdivide the working class."<sup>17</sup>

Mizruchi's discussion of *The Portion of Labor* is part of her chapter on labor novels, and she is less concerned with the novel's generic markers than with the ways it reinforces nineteenth-century ideologies of class privilege and the democratizing potential of capitalism. Mizruchi's analysis emphasizes the fantastic and improbable

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<sup>16</sup> Dorothy Berkson, "'A Goddess behind a Sordid Veil': The Domestic Heroine Meets the Labor Novel in Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's *The Portion of Labor*," in *Redefining the Political Novel: American Women Writers, 1797-1901*, ed. Sharan M. Harris (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 150.

<sup>17</sup> Susan Mizruchi, *The Rise of Multicultural America: Economy and Print Culture, 1865-1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 182.

elements of the novel's plot; she calls the book "a capitalist fairy tale," and notes that "Marriage in Freeman's novel is consistent with another magical arbiter of human fortunes—the stock market."<sup>18</sup> Mizruchi's analysis implies that *The Portion of Labor* is a fantasy or romance in the guise of a realist labor novel, an assessment that is similar to Berkson's. Berkson labels the novel a *Bildungsroman*, but, like Mizruchi, she characterizes the plot as having a fairy-tale element to it, particularly in its portrayal of the romance between Ellen and Robert. In a brief discussion of *The Portion of Labor*, Josephine Donovan describes the book as similarly split between a superficial labor plot and a more significant coming-of-age tale: "*The Portion of Labor* (1901), ostensibly a social novel about factory conditions and working-class miseries, is really on another and deeper level a work about a young woman's ambivalence about her proper role."<sup>19</sup> The consensus among scholars, then, seems to be that *The Portion of Labor* appears on first glance to be a labor novel, but is more fundamentally a romance or coming-of-age story that employs improbable or fantastic plot devices to resolve the narrative tension established by the combination of characters' economic and romantic woes.

This description of *The Portion of Labor*'s generic hierarchy carries with it an implicit set of values. For Mizruchi and Berkson, the potential analysis of class systems and capitalist hierarchies is more valuable than the romance and marriage plot, and the fact that the novel is ultimately unable to balance the two elements indicates an ideological defect in the book's treatment of labor issues. Donovan implies that the

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<sup>18</sup> Mizruchi, *Rise of Multiculturalism*, 181, 182.

<sup>19</sup> Josephine Donovan, *New England Local Color Literature: A Woman's Tradition* (New York: F. Unger, 1983), 124.

“deeper” story about Ellen Brewster’s “ambivalence about her proper role” is more valuable than the ostensible social novel, which in her description focuses on broadly defined “factory conditions and working-class miseries.” Each analysis positions the novel as torn between generic conventions, some of which are figured as more suitable or valuable than others. Genre, then, remains an important element in critical treatments of the novel, and scholars’ generic expectations or conclusions have a significant impact on how they evaluate the work the novel does. Mizruchi’s and Berkson’s analysis of the book as a labor novel that challenges and criticizes class structures leads them to conclude that the presence of the domestic romance hampers the economic critique. Donovan, on the other hand, privileges the novel’s exploration of Ellen’s relationships and minimizes the significance of the labor plot, and her analysis of the novel’s romantic pairings depicts the novel as a successful coming-of-age romance with a nearly incidental labor plot, rather than the reverse.

*The Portion of Labor*’s reviewers operated in a different generic landscape than today’s scholars, and though both groups use many of the same terms, particularly local color, realism, and romance, the definitions of those terms differ significantly between current scholars and turn-of-the-century reviewers, and, in fact, varied dramatically among reviewers of that period. But though their analysis was not always rigorously defined, reviewers considered *The Portion of Labor*’s genre, and its suitability to that genre, important to their assessment. Few reviews fail to mention the novel’s labor plot or to connect it to contemporary national labor issues, but some of the reviews treat the labor elements as a minor or ancillary plot point, or spend only a few lines discussing the

labor issues while devoting the majority of the review to the characters, the romance, Freeman's prose style, or other elements unrelated to the topical elements of the book.

**“The power of a delicate and detailed observation”: *The Portion of Labor* as local color**

While dividing reviews into negative and positive camps would be unnecessarily reductive, it is useful to note that the reviews of *The Portion of Labor* that I have recovered were relatively evenly split as to whether or not the novel's merits outweighed its defects. Some common criticisms of the novel fit neatly into the general pattern of purpose novel reviews: reviewers labeled the novel unfair or one-sided, asserted that the characters were unbelievable or one-dimensional, faulted Freeman for failing to provide a solution to the problem she described, and argued that the novel failed to accurately represent the labor issue. These criticisms, which I discuss in the next section, stem from expectations that the purpose novel should accurately and fairly represent a contemporary issue.

But not all reviewers cared if the novel accurately or persuasively represented the labor problem, and not all reviewers addressed *The Portion of Labor* as a purpose novel. Over one third of the reviews discussed Freeman's novel not only in the context of the purpose novel, but also, and sometimes solely, in relation to the generic conventions and expectations of local color writing. These reviewers, who were on the whole more likely to find Freeman's depiction of labor unconvincing, generally mapped the qualities of Freeman's innocent heroine onto Freeman's prose, and framed those stylistic qualities in connection with the scope of the novel itself. In doing so, reviewers read Freeman through the lens of the detail-oriented local colorist and concluded that Freeman was

generally incapable of writing either a longer novel or one about larger themes than the individual New England personality. For these reviewers, local color provided a means of resolving the tension between *The Portion of Labor's* public and private narrative strands by denying Freeman's ability to tackle contemporary public issues.

Such criticism from reviewers fits with the pattern recent scholarship uncovers in regional fiction. Scholars have consistently noted the way the category of local color and its attendant generic and aesthetic expectations served to limit or minimize female authors' capabilities as "real writers," particularly in comparison to the categories of realism and naturalism. In *Resisting Regionalism: Gender and Naturalism in American Fiction, 1885-1915*, Donna Campbell notes that by the 1890s, local color had come to be associated with smallness and delicateness, while naturalism was paired with largeness and strength. Campbell argues that writers of naturalism and critics who praised naturalism were reacting against what they saw as the dominance of a feminized and undesirable body of local color writing.<sup>20</sup> Further, the terms of reviewers' objections are in fact similar to the recent scholarly debate over regionalism.

Some recent scholarship on gender and regionalism emphasizes regional writing as an oppositional space that challenged prevailing racial, gender, class and geographic hierarchies. In their influential study *Writing Out of Place*, Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse note that scholarship on regionalism and local color tended to characterize regional writing as complicit in nationalist ideology. Amy Kaplan argued in "Nation, Region, and Empire" (1991) that Sarah Orne Jewett's portraits of the Maine coast endorsed a martial

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<sup>20</sup> Campbell, *Resisting Regionalism*.

nationalism consistent with late-nineteenth-century imperialism, while Richard Brodhead argued in *Cultures of Letters* (1993) that regionalist writing served to manage urban readers' anxieties about cities' changing demographics by representing otherness in the context of quaint rural villages, rather than in the cities.<sup>21</sup> Fetterley and Pryse challenge these claims about regionalism's inherent conservatism, arguing that regionalism served as "a tool for critique of hierarchies based on gender as well as race, class, age, and economic resources." They argue, further, that scholars' tendency to read women regionalist writers as complicit in rather than subversive of dominant ideologies indicates an inability or unwillingness to read regionalist writing from a feminist perspective. Fetterley and Pryse note that Brodhead presents Sarah Orne Jewett as a decidedly minor author, limited by her strict adherence to the conventions of regionalism, a reading of Jewett not unlike the critical responses to local color at the turn of the century.

The reviews of *The Portion of Labor*, though, move the discussion from the formal and stylistic elements associated with local color to Freeman's ability to write a full-fledged novel, to the capacity of her work to tackle contemporary issues. Reviewers use the aesthetic and formal elements of Freeman's prose to minimize the political work it does. The reviews provide a helpful supplement to our understanding of the way that local color functioned as a generic category at the turn of the century and underscore the fact that, for many of *The Portion of Labor's* reviewers, local color was incompatible with a rigorous and implicitly masculine critique of contemporary public issues.

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<sup>21</sup> Amy Kaplan, "Nation, Region, and Empire," in *Columbia History of the American Novel*, ed. Emory Elliott (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 240-266; Richard Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).



The most popular adjective in these reviews is “delicate,” which appears in six of the twenty-four reviews.<sup>22</sup> “Delicate” is used to describe two separate elements of the novel: Ellen Brewster herself, and Freeman’s prose. Freeman herself uses the word often, generally to describe Ellen, but also in relation to other characters. Cynthia Lennox, for instance, has a “delicate profile,” while workingman Nahum Beals has a “delicate, nervous face.”<sup>23</sup> Reviewers picked up on Freeman’s fondness for delicacy when describing Ellen. According to the *Independent*, “The heroine, Ellen Brewster, daughter of one of the factory hands, is sketched for us first as a little child, with an extraordinarily delicate nervous organization.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the *Washington Post* writes that Ellen “pits her delicate strength against [Robert Lloyd’s], loving him all the while.”<sup>25</sup> Freeman, on the other hand, “never writes without the charm of a distinguished style, and the power of a delicate and detailed observation.”<sup>26</sup> The book, according to the *St. Paul Globe*, “is a delicate, and at most times a convincing study.”<sup>27</sup>

The pairing of Ellen’s and Freeman’s delicateness becomes explicit in reviews in the *Book Buyer* and the *New York Times*. The *Book Buyer* describes Ellen as “a lofty and delicate soul, so lofty and delicate and beautiful that she honors the man of her choice beyond his deserts [sic],” going on to declare, “And yet with all her charm, with all the

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<sup>22</sup> For a full list of these reviews, along with several letters to the editor and other news items about *The Portion of Labor*, see the appendix.

<sup>23</sup> Freeman, *The Portion of Labor*, 81, 100.

<sup>24</sup> “The Portion of Labor,” *Independent*, February 1902 345-346, HathiTrust

<sup>25</sup> “New Books,” *Washington Post*, December 2, 1901, 9, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>26</sup> “Labor and Miss Wilkins—Her new novel not to be regarded as a serious contribution to the problem,” *Munsey’s Magazine*, January 1902, 597-598, HathiTrust.

<sup>27</sup> “Books and Authors,” *St. Paul (MN) Globe*, January 19, 1902, 26, LOC Chronicling America.

delicacy and the detail of her drawing, Ellen is not quite convincing.” The reviewer concludes by writing, “Miss Wilkins has done nothing in this, her finest and strongest work, finer and stronger than her self-restrained and delicate but most pathetic portrayal of this part of the workingman's life.”<sup>28</sup> The *Times* writes that “Mary E. Wilkins has fingered so many keys since she struck the delicate, vibrating note of ‘A Humble Romance’ and ‘A New England Nun,’ that when we take up her latest book, having attuned our ear to a minor third, we hold ourselves in readiness for new chords and unexpected resolutions,” and goes on to claim, “Though Ellen Brewster stands out, a delicate flower, from the coarser growth around her, her roots are as deeply imbedded in the same soil as [her family’s] are.”<sup>29</sup>

The end result is an odd twinning of Ellen and Freeman. References to Ellen’s delicacy emphasize her fragility, femininity, and, often, her flower-like quality which, in the *Times*, the *Globe*, and *Book Buyer* is contrasted with the coarser flora of her family and friends. Freeman herself is not painted as fragile, but her stories, by being delicate, are imbued with an explicit femininity that is made all the more explicit by its connection to Ellen. Freeman’s style is convincing, just as Ellen exhibits a certain strength, but both are limited by their delicacy.

In addition to being delicate, Freeman’s writing is consistently described as minute, observational, detailed, and focused on the individual experience, often to the detriment of the larger picture. According to the *Independent*, “Nothing is too minute for

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<sup>28</sup> Octave Thanet, “The Portion of Labor,” *Book Buyer*, December, 1901, 379-380, HathiTrust.

<sup>29</sup> “Miss Wilkins’s ‘The Portion of Labor,’” *New York Times*, November 30, 1901, BR17, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

Miss Wilkins; she expends the same amount of mental labor in portraying a child's whimsicalities as she does in describing the murder of the capitalist."<sup>30</sup> A reviewer from the *Literary World* writes, "The action is more rapid after this, but an infinity of detail is given, and yet the sensation of reality is not produced."<sup>31</sup> And the *New England Magazine* writes that the incidents in the novel "with many details are told in the graphic manner we know so well and prize so highly."<sup>32</sup> But the detailed observations which made Freeman's descriptions of rural New England life and impecunious old maids so successful struck reviewers as incompatible with the broader scope of *The Portion of Labor*.<sup>33</sup> Wallace Rice writes in *Current Encyclopedia*, "The insight which has been so abundantly Miss Wilkins' in smaller things seems to have failed her in the larger, and it is the more to be pitied because the undeniable faults in the book are the very things that give it popularity." Similarly, a reviewer for *Munsey's Magazine* declares, "In 'The Portion of Labor' she has these qualities still [her 'delicate and detailed observation']; but her fine miniature painting is unequal to the demands of a broad canvas, such as she chose when she began what she doubtless intended for a really important novel. Breadth of vision, sweep of arm, are necessary for the person who would portray, in any wide way, the life of the laborer in modern conditions. With all her accuracy and her photographic skill, Miss Wilkins has not shown these."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> "Portion of Labor," 345.

<sup>31</sup> "Current Fiction," *Literary World*, June 1, 1902, 91, HathiTrust.

<sup>32</sup> "Books Notes," *New England Magazine* (1902): 13, HathiTrust.

<sup>33</sup> For more on Freeman's writing about poor, and particularly starving, old maids, see Blum, "Mary Wilkins Freeman and the Taste of Necessity."

<sup>34</sup> "Labor and Miss Wilkins," 597.

These reviews explicitly pit the detailed smallness of Freeman's style against the scope of her novel. For the *Independent*, this tension between focus and scope manifests itself as an inability to prioritize, so that in describing everything with the same minute detail, Freeman is unable to indicate to her readers that some characters and events are more significant than others. The metaphor of the canvas used in the *Munsey's* review implies something similar: the reviewer describes the novel as full of "fine miniature painting" unsuited to a large canvas. This image suggests a painting with many small, accurate figures, but no overall focus, creating a lack of hierarchy similar to the one described by the *Independent*.

These objections are by and large formal or stylistic. They criticize Freeman's descriptions and characterizations and compare her prose to paintings. Reviewers also leveled similar charges on generic grounds, characterizing Freeman as better suited to the short story and incapable of writing a strong novel. A reviewer from the *Literary World* writes, "It is one of the peculiarly strong proofs that the author is a great teller of short stories and a much less great novelist, that the admirable instinct of artistic selection, so conspicuous in her earlier work, is so absent from her novels."<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the *New York Times* asserts, "The freshness of style that makes her short stories so delightful cannot compensate for the lack of finish plainly evident in whatever she attempts on a larger scale, nor an unusual power to realize character make us oblivious to heavy-footed action and strained situations."<sup>36</sup> Rice's review, as well, pairs his criticism of Freeman's failure

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<sup>35</sup> "Current Fiction," 91.

<sup>36</sup> "Miss Wilkins's 'The Portion of Labor,'" BR 17.

to extend her “insight... in smaller things” to the larger with his assertion that *The Portion of Labor* fails to meet the generic expectations of the novel:

There are not less than three resting places in the narrative where the heroine, by saying “yes” rather than “no” to her suitor, would have brought the story to an abrupt conclusion—and there are no really convincing reasons brought forward why her answer should not have been affirmative except the necessity for spinning out the book to the normal length prescribed for that sort of book.

Ultimately, the reviews tie Freeman’s detail-oriented prose to the genre of the short story and then map these formal and generic qualities onto the scope and content of Freeman’s theme, so that not only is Freeman not up to the challenge of the novel as a genre, she is also not up to the challenge of depicting the significance of the labor problem. After noting the many places where *The Portion of Labor* might have ended were it not necessary to make it a full-length novel, Rice writes, “The world knows, if Miss Wilkins does not, that the profits from the products of labor are becoming less and less equally apportioned between the laborer and his employer, and that the sacred duty of supplying the world with shoes to enable it to march the faster on to civilization is attended with increasing hardships on the part of those who toil and increasing luxury on the part of those who direct them.” And *Munsey’s* declares, “If “The Portion of Labor” had been intended for Christmas amateur theatricals, it would have been admirable... As a serious novel, however, the book is less commendable. And as a contribution to the great question of the relation between capital and labor, it is grotesquely inadequate.” The reviewer combines a generic criticism—*The Portion of Labor* is more properly theatrical

than literary—with a criticism of the subject the novel undertakes, so that “serious” refers both to the formal qualities of the book and the weight of its theme. The *Living Age* similarly groups formal complaints about the book with criticisms of its thematic content, writing, “Its conclusion is weak from the artistic point of view, and from the economic or philanthropic, evasive and unsatisfactory.”<sup>37</sup>

These reviews of *The Portion of Labor* support Brodhead’s and Fetterley’s and Pryse’s observations about the ways women’s local color writing was minimized and marked as less artistic than writing by men, but they also indicate that the aesthetic expectations for local color writing had ideological or thematic implications, as well. The limited scale and scope of local color’s stylistic qualities provided a vocabulary for criticizing the thematic scope of the novel and for marking Freeman as a less “serious” writer than her male contemporaries.

### **Reading *The Portion of Labor* as a purpose novel**

The reviewers whose horizon of expectations was shaped by the purpose novel were somewhat less likely to rely on the conventions of local color to describe Freeman and her novel. That is not to say they eschewed them entirely: A review in the *College Folio*, a magazine “Published Monthly by the Students of the College for Women, Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio,” noted that the novel suffered from slow pacing and a lack of dramatic situations, but that “The action does not drag much, however, for it is constantly enlivened by pleasing descriptions of types of New England

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<sup>37</sup> “Books and Authors,” *Living Age*, December 21, 1901, 790, HathiTrust.

laborers.”<sup>38</sup> In this instance, the reviewer identifies a staple of local color stories—pleasing descriptions of quaint or unfamiliar character types—as an effective solution to the problem of lagging action, a complaint far more common to the novel than the short story. Though such references to the qualities of local color appear in all the reviews, reviews that treated *The Portion of Labor* first and foremost as a purpose novel spent far less time addressing Freeman’s delicate and minute prose style or interrogating the scope of the book’s form and subject. Instead, they addressed the work as a full-fledged novel, granting Freeman the authority to tackle contemporary issues and the ability to deal with those issues in novel form. If the conventions of local color provided a convenient way to minimize Freeman’s persuasive impact and abilities as a novelist, the framework of the purpose novel offered reviewers a means of presenting Freeman’s book as fitting in to a clear generic category, rather than as diverging from the mode with which she was most often associated.

Reviewers who read *The Portion of Labor* as a purpose novel exhibited several of the trends evident in the newspaper reviews of Norris’s *The Octopus*: they tended to focus more on plot, characters, and the novel’s connections to contemporary issues, and less on Freeman’s stylistic or aesthetic qualities. Whereas in Norris’s case, this split corresponded to a high-/lowbrow bifurcation, that dynamic is less evident in the reviews of *The Portion of Labor*. The primary exception is the Editor’s Study column that appeared in the same issue of *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* as the first installment of *The*

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<sup>38</sup> “Book Reviews,” *College Folio*, January 1902, 172, HathiTrust.

*Portion of Labor*. Henry Mills Alden, *Harper's* editor,<sup>39</sup> is particularly invested in distancing the work from the category of the purpose novel. He notes:

In this novel the spiritual motive is predominant. No previous work of the author has yielded an equal measure of intellectual satisfaction, but the thought precipitates no corrosive acid and is never strained to an edge of smartness; though the story deals with industrial conditions, it is not a problem novel; it is the story of Ellen Brewster's spiritual development in the peculiar circumstances of her life.<sup>40</sup>

Alden's insistence that *The Portion of Labor* deals primarily with people and spiritual development, and his assurance that the book "is not a problem novel," indicates the sort of devaluation of the purpose novel evident in the reviews of *The Octopus*. In introducing readers to *The Portion of Labor*, which will be serialized over several issues, the editor is careful to emphasize its more universal qualities, epitomized in this case by "the spiritual motive."

The majority of the reviews, though, do not take care to separate Freeman's book from the category of purpose novel, though a few do note with relief that *The Portion of*

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<sup>39</sup> Michael: Would Alden be the one writing the "Editor's Study" at this point? The TOC lists the author of the "Editor's Easy Chair" as W.D. Howells, but the author of "Editor's Study" as "The Editor."

<sup>40</sup> "Editor's Study," *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, March 1901, 644-648, HathiTrust. Although the column is unattributed, Frank Luther Mott confirms that Alden took over the "Editor's Study" from Charles Dudley Warner after 1898 (Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, Volume II: 1850-1865* (Cambridge: Belknap P, 1938), 402.



*Labor* is not merely a dry sociological study.<sup>41</sup> But, the *Harper's* column excepted, nor do the reviews praise the novel as achieving the sort of overwhelming and universal aesthetic merit that literary magazine reviews accorded *The Octopus*. In general, reviewers whose expectations were shaped by the purpose novel were concerned with its accuracy, the fairness with which Freeman represented the situation, and to some extent, the practicality of the novel as a form for addressing contemporary labor issues.

The purpose novel framework provided a significantly different set of literary and aesthetic concerns for reviewers than did local color. Realism figured more heavily as a descriptive term for Freeman's style, and reviewers looked to an expanded set of literary contemporaries to compare Freeman to. A review in the Lincoln *Courier* begins by asserting, "Miss Wilkins' serial story now appearing in Harper's Monthly is the most sympathetic and the least one sided presentation of the side of labor, not against capital but against our system, that I have yet seen. After all Whistler and the rest of the newest artists can say against making a picture too real, their strictures can not lessen the admiration of the artistry which can produce such real people with real griefs."<sup>42</sup> For this reviewer, Freeman's realism lends to the accuracy of the novel's portrait of labor relations, which in turn produces a compelling indictment of the labor system. The reviewer uses the descriptions of the novel's characters, particularly that of Andrew Brewster, to editorialize on the fate of aging workers, writing, "This spectacle of the man

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<sup>41</sup> Differentiating the novel under review from a tract or sociological study is a relatively common move in reviews of purpose novels; reviewers make similar comments about *The Marrow of Tradition*, *The Octopus*, and *The Jungle*.

<sup>42</sup> "The Portion of Labor," Lincoln (NE) *Courier*, September 28, 1901, 2, LOC Chronicling America.

who is not old but who has lost the facility and elasticity of youth without firmly establishing himself in some business where the prevailing preference for youth is ineffectual, is a frequent and saddening spectacle. If employers only knew it the elder man is more likely to be valuable than the younger one.” Following an incomplete summary of the plot, the reviewer concludes by declaring:

Mr. Howells asserverates that Americans are over-fond of dramatic scenes and that true novelists, like himself and Mr. Henry James, no longer select newspaper moments for description, although it is admitted that they are more interesting. Miss Wilkins has not lost her liking for crises and scenes and may it be a long day before she does. Mr. James has a strictly psychological tragedy in the same number of Harper’s that for futility, mystery and far removal from anything of interest to his countrymen in America and to the moment is in striking contrast with Miss Wilkins’ story.<sup>43</sup>

Though much of the review focuses on summary and on the reviewer’s own opinions about the issues raised in the novel, these final lines place both Freeman’s book and the *Courier*’s review in the context of one of the most prominent literary-critical conversations taking place at the time. The reviewer criticizes James’s psychological realism for lacking a connection to contemporary American concerns that draws readers’ interest, and in doing so elevates interest value, dramatic scenes, and “newspaper moments” over what he sees as the “futility, mystery and far removal” of self-styled “true

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<sup>43</sup> The James story referenced here is likely “The Beldonald Holbein,” which appeared in the October, 1901 issue of *Harper’s*, along with the eighth installment of *The Portion of Labor*.

novelists.” This understanding of the novel’s value identifies the very characteristics associated with the purpose novel as preferable to readers. And unlike the newspaper reviews of *The Octopus*, which endorsed the characteristics of the purpose novel without explicitly comparing them to or denigrating the “novel art,” this review makes a case for the purpose novel as superior, at least in the respects that matter to the reviewer, to the novels of James and Howells.

While the *Courier* finds Freeman’s novel true to the experience of the American laborer, and therefore of greater interest than Howells’s or James’s recent work, Herbert Casson, writing in the *American Federationist*, takes the opposite view, arguing that the novel’s failure to represent the labor system as it actually exists indicates an artistic failure on Freeman’s part. Like many reviewers, Casson finds the ending unconvincing, arguing that it is “thoroughly Utopian,” and “would be charming in a Gilbertian light opera, but as the conclusion of a manifestly serious and purposeful book, it is trivial and out of the question.”<sup>44</sup> Casson argues that the conditions described in *The Portion of Labor* “no longer exist outside of the smallest factory towns of New England;” given the outdated quality of the novel’s setting, “The old-time personal contact between employer and workman has become a myth—a tale of ancient history.” Rather than implying that an attempt to represent forces, systems, or large-scale economic and political problems is an artistic failing on the part of the work, Casson suggests that novelists’ inability to represent these things in a way that is engaging instead indicates an artistic failing of the novelist, arguing that the absence of American novels that “weave a romance about [the

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<sup>44</sup> Herbert Casson, “Novelists and the Labor Question,” *American Federationist*, April 1902, 172-172, HathiTrust.

labor question] on the modern 'city water works' stage" might in fact be because there are "no writers whose minds are comprehensive enough to handle economic organizations instead of individuals—social forces instead of private families." In this respect, Freeman is much like Zola, Casson asserts. In portraying the "relationships between the union and the corporation" as "simply a chaos of individuals," Casson argues, "Neither can see the forest for the trees."

Casson ultimately finds the purpose novel as it exists at the turn of the century insufficient to represent modern economic conditions and the particularities of the industrial labor problem, and he locates that insufficiency in the authors and their work. Rather than arguing, as did many reviewers who criticized the purpose novel on aesthetic grounds, that economic and social conditions are too mundane and not universal enough to make truly good art, Casson asserts that novelists like Freeman and Zola have yet to find a way to fully represent the modern condition in novel form. For his part, Casson is uncertain whether such a feat can ever be accomplished; he concludes, "It is very probable that the novelist and the poet may never find it possible to attach romantic interest to social movements. They may always be obliged to limit the attention of their readers to 'The Man with the Hoe,' and not concern themselves with the career of the 'Hoemen's Union' or the 'Hoe Manufacturers' Trust.' But it is very important to remember that the limitations of fiction must not be confused with the history of our industrial development." For Casson, though, the material itself is not necessarily unsuited to the novel as a form, but rather, the novelists have yet to live up to the purpose novel.

Both Casson and the *Courier* address *The Portion of Labor* primarily as a purpose novel, and in doing so look to the mainstays of both realism and the novel—Howells, James, Zola—as points of comparison for Freeman’s novel. Even if, in Casson’s estimation, *The Portion of Labor* falls a bit short of the demands of the genre, locating the book in the category of purpose novel allows for a significantly different assessment than does a reading of the novel as local color, and one that contains far fewer gendered references to Freeman’s style or ambitions. Further, it situates *The Portion of Labor* squarely in the novelistic tradition, rather than treating the book as an imperfectly expanded short story.

Though not all reviewers agreed that Freeman had made a complete or persuasive case, the reviewers who framed *The Portion of Labor* as a purpose novel generally granted Freeman the authority to address the issue of labor. Though Casson finds Freeman’s novel an insufficient portrait of the current labor situation, he finds fault with the challenges of the genre, not with Freeman, who in Casson’s estimation, acquits herself at least as adequately as does Zola. The *College Folio* writes that Freeman “treats the [labor] problem very seriously and with such respect, that before we are half way through the story, the laboring class has risen greatly in our estimation,” while the *School Journal* writes that, “Miss Wilkins has made a thoro [sic] study of the condition of the middle classes and she has worked out her ideas in an interesting plot,” which has “given Miss Wilkins an opportunity to work out her own ideas on this great question of labor and capital.”<sup>45</sup> Similarly, *Booklovers Weekly* declares that Freeman “has done her part—

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<sup>45</sup> “Notes of New Books,” *School Journal*, April 26, 1902, 470, HathiTrust.

and done it well—in presenting the case of labor to the cultivated and influential in a strong, honest fashion.”<sup>46</sup> These responses differ significantly from reviews like Wallace Rice’s or *Munsey’s*, which tie what they see as defects in prose style and novelistic scope to Freeman’s allegedly unserious understanding of the labor situation. The gendered language of “strong, honest fashion” in the *Booklovers Weekly* review even implies the sort of masculine seriousness that Rice or *Munsey’s* would explicitly disavow in the novel.

For the most part, treating *The Portion of Labor* as a purpose novel reduced the degree to which reviewers feminized Freeman’s writing, particularly the degree to which they implied that as a woman writer, Freeman was incapable of writing a fully realized topical novel. The primary exception was the Lexington *Morning Herald*, which located the success of Freeman’s novel in the “sweetness of the story,” while simultaneously praising the novel on the grounds that, “In the continuous contest of labor to the equal right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” many invincible arguments may be written that will not have a penny-weight of worth in comparison with the dignified and tender appeal to the sympathy which Mary Wilkins has made in behalf of the toilers in this story of ‘The Portion of Labor.’”<sup>47</sup> In addition, the *Independent*, which expressed some ambivalence about the success of Freeman’s persuasive attempt and characterized her prose as excessively minute, found the primary redeeming value of the novel in a strictly gendered context. The author writes:

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<sup>46</sup> Review of *The Portion of Labor*, *Booklovers Weekly*, Dec. 19, 1901, 188, HathiTrust.

<sup>47</sup> “Literary,” Lexington (KY) *Morning Herald*, December 22, 1901, 14, America’s Historical Newspapers.

The thing that differentiates this story from a mere picture of sordid difficulties like so much of the work of Mr. George Gissing, is not merely the superior intellectual and spiritual force of the writer, but the vast womanly sympathy that underlies the whole book. Throughout the whole narration of the sorrows and pleasures of these work-folk we are conscious of the great depths of a woman's sympathetic heart, which glorifies and ennobles and makes warm with life what would otherwise be a mere exercise in the analytical intellect.<sup>48</sup>

In this context, the purpose novel as a genre is potentially suspect as producing "a mere picture of sordid difficulties," or, from earlier in the review, "a contribution to political economy, sociology or socialism." Freeman, by virtue of her "womanly sympathy," is able to avoid this pitfall of the genre. But while the review praises the womanly sympathy, it also casts Freeman's writing as limited in scope, so that the two characterizations work together to place the novel in an unanalytical context that may be more artistic than the work of Gissing, but that is also less weighty.

In focusing on *The Portion of Labor* as a purpose novel, reviewers granted Freeman the authority to tackle topical issues and, the above examples excepted, avoided overly gendered descriptions of Freeman's writing or aims. But though the purpose novel provided a framework in which Freeman's critiques of labor were taken more seriously than through local color, many of the same limitations of the purpose novel evident in the reception of *The Marrow of Tradition* are also at work in the reception of *The Portion of Labor*. The language of local color offered reviewers a means to minimize Freeman's

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<sup>48</sup> "The Portion of Labor," 346.

abilities as a novelist, but even reviewers who approached the book as a purpose novel found ways of discounting or avoiding any specific action the novel might prompt.

As with *The Marrow of Tradition*, reviewers who describe themselves as moved to sympathy by the novel do so in un-radical and often vague terms. *Booklovers Weekly* declares that if the scenes in Freeman's novel "do not move somebody to do something, then we have reason to lament the deathlike apathy of the cultivated and influential."<sup>49</sup> The call for somebody to do something is hardly a call to arms, and fails even to indicate whether the somebody in question is among the reviewer's readers. The *College Folio* describes a more specific state of sympathy, writing that in the novel, "we have the labor question presented to us strictly from the workingman's point of view, and from beginning to end we find ourselves sympathizing entirely with him... She lays bare to us the feelings and thoughts of the New England shoe-hands, and shows us how, in those rustic natures, love, honesty, and unselfishness are dominating motives in the struggle for existence."<sup>50</sup> But though the laboring class may have risen in the reviewers' estimation, there is little indication of what practical difference that might make. Further, the reviewer's description focuses on the shoe-hands' "rustic natures, love, honesty, and unselfishness," all qualities that signal complacency and forbearance under harsh circumstances and emphasize the workers' struggle rather than the injustice of their working conditions. The reviewer describes a state of improved sympathy toward workers as a class, but no anger or solidarity in their relationship with their employers.

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<sup>49</sup> *Booklovers Weekly*, 188.

<sup>50</sup> "Book Reviews," 172.



While the *College Folio* expresses an unchallenging extrapolation from sympathy for the characters in the book to sympathy to workers in general, a review in the *Book Buyer* reverses that movement. In a line that may well have been recycled in the *College Folio* review, which was published a month after the *Book Buyer*'s, Octave Thanet declares that in *The Portion of Labor*, "The soul of the New England 'shoe hand' is laid bare."<sup>51</sup> Thanet goes on to claim,

The New England shoemaker in the factories, for all his discontent, is a right man. He lives in comfort. He has meat three times a day, and spends a great deal of money making his little parlor a shocking offense to taste; he can put money into a gold mine, and give his daughter a graduating present of a watch and chain... Conditions which allow such a man may be faulty, but they are neither degrading nor hopeless. They are infinitely better than the conditions, for instance, of Kingsley's mill operatives in "Alton Locke." The American-born workman's discontent comes out of the envy of a wider vision, not out of failing fortunes and oppression. Because he gets better wages and is better educated and has better ways of living than before, he is able to realize more keenly how much (which he sees others have) *he* lacks. He is more helpless, and needs more. Scan the talk of the 'hands' when Loyd shuts down. They do not know how to retrench to the Continental standard. Of course, the improvidence of their class appears; and the rank ignorance of the facts of industrial life... but what is most impressive? Is it

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<sup>51</sup> Thanet, "The Portion of Labor," 378.

not the chance brains have in the fight, coupled with the inadequacy of mere manual dexterity?

Thanet not only takes Freeman's depiction of the Rowe shoe-hands as accurate, but she also extrapolates from the descriptions in the novel to the life of American laborers as a whole. Because the characters in the novel eat well and buy furniture and gifts, they, and, Thanet implies, the workers in American factories, cannot be all that bad off. Further, "Conditions which allow such a man may be faulty, but they are neither degrading nor hopeless." In Thanet's view, the system may not be perfect, but it is fundamentally sound. Further, the workers' discontent can be traced not to material privations, but to the improved education and conditions of American workers as compared to their European counterparts. Americans, Thanet argues, have enough to know what they lack, and are therefore much better off than workers in other places.

The horizon of expectations shaped by the purpose novel includes certain generic assumptions not prominent in the generic expectations associated with local color: the assumption that Freeman can and should write a novel about topical issues; that her novel exists in a broader context that includes work by male novelists; that realism, plot, and topicality are significant and desirable elements of the novel; that the novel should move readers to sympathy and reflection about the issues raised. But, as Thanet's review demonstrates, these qualities do not necessarily lead to a reading that challenges the position of capital with respect to labor.

## **Conclusion**

The fact that *The Portion of Labor* prompted readings that were indifferent to or even favorable toward the capitalist system that exploited the novel's workers certainly supports recent scholars' claims that the novel fails to live up to its radical potential. Mizruchi argues that the novel is "ultimately a capitalist fairy tale" in which "the divide between rich and poor is mediated by a culture of consumption, while the stock market is depicted as a democratizing medium capable of enriching the deserving regardless of class."<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Berkson argues that "The solution to the problems of the workers in this novel is no more radical than the solutions provided in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Bleak House*, or *Little Dorritt*. The structures that created the problems remain unchanged."<sup>53</sup> These criticisms are most clearly manifested in Thanet's review, which reads the novel's conventional resolution as reaffirming a narrative of American exceptionalism by "showing the vital quality of a democracy where such a marriage can occur and not bring the social heavens down on the audacious lovers."<sup>54</sup>

But the reviews of *The Portion of Labor* make it clear that the horizon of expectation shaped by the purpose novel did not necessarily include radicalism. While several reviewers noted that Freeman proposed no definite solutions to the labor problem, they did not necessarily expect her to; *Booklovers Weekly* notes that Freeman "does not offer any remedy, for that is not the province of the novelist."<sup>55</sup> *The New England Magazine*, like Casson, admits that no novelist "has remedies to propose," but praises Freeman for doing what she can: "As far as it goes Miss Wilkins's book is strong and

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<sup>52</sup> Mizruchi, *Rise of Multiculturalism*, 181.

<sup>53</sup> Berkson, "Goddess," 166.

<sup>54</sup> Thanet, "The Portion of Labor," 379.

<sup>55</sup> *Booklovers Weekly*, 188.

sympathetic.”<sup>56</sup> While scholars rightly acknowledge *The Portion of Labor*’s lack of radicalism, locating that deficiency in the novel’s generic confusion makes a number of insufficient assumptions about the differing generic frameworks in which the book might be read. Further, such an argument conflates the expectations of current scholars, which privilege certain ideological positions, with those of the novel’s first readers and reviewers.

More broadly, the reception of *The Portion of Labor* affirms scholars’ understanding of local color as a mode of writing that was by the end of the nineteenth century closely associated with women writers, and as a mode whose conventions could be mobilized to devalue the contributions of women to the literary field. Further, the fact that many reviewers used the language of local color to describe *The Portion of Labor* indicates that reviewers were so committed to a gendered view of local color that their expectations were shaped by the genre even when the generic connection was not immediately obvious. Local color, then, was not only a mode of writing that many nineteenth-century critics explicitly devalued, but it also provided a discourse that could be mobilized to minimize or de-legitimate writing by women that did not necessarily meet the expectations for local color.

The reviews of *The Portion of Labor* also show that the purpose novel offered an alternate horizon of expectations that avoided many of the assumptions inherent in local color readings. The fact that an alternate generic framework was readily available to reviewers adds important nuance to scholars’ understanding of the limitations placed on

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<sup>56</sup> “Book Notes,” 13.

women writers in the turn of the century literary marketplace. Returning to Schweikart's call that feminist reader-response criticism "fight on two fronts: for the revision of the canon to include a significant body of works by women, and for the development of the reading strategies consonant with the concerns, experiences, and formal devices that constitute these texts,"<sup>57</sup> I want to suggest that the reception of *The Portion of Labor* encourages scholars of women's writing and feminist reader-response critics to look closely at the reading strategies employed by texts' first readers and reviewers, in order to call attention to the ways reception histories both affirm and challenge scholarly narratives about gendered reading practices.

Finally, the reviews that addressed *The Portion of Labor* as a purpose novel emphasize yet again that the expectations for the genre provided a number of interpretive mechanisms that allowed reviewers to frame the novel's political challenges or persuasive aims in relatively unchallenging ways. Though purpose novel reviews do not follow the same heavily gendered patterns as the local color ones, and though they take the novel's topicality as a legitimate aim, they are no more likely to read the novel in radical terms than the local color reviews. The comparison between *The Portion of Labor's* differing horizons of expectations, then, emphasizes the degree to which reviewers' tendency to minimize or control the novel's critique is rooted in the interpretive mechanisms commonly mobilized in response to the purpose novel's specific generic expectations.

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<sup>57</sup> Schweikart, "Reading Ourselves," 77.

## 5. The purpose novel gets results: Success and disgust in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*

The Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, released on the one hundredth anniversary of the novel's publication in 1906, features a drawing of a sinewy, skinless cow's head on the cover, complete with red and yellow shading to indicate muscle, blood, and perhaps decay. One remarkably pathetic eye stares out from the bodiless head, its gaze following you around the room if you set the book down. The foreword to the anniversary edition is written by Eric Schlosser, investigative journalist and author of the food-industry exposé *Fast Food Nation*. Schlosser begins with the familiar comparison, originating with Sinclair himself, between *The Jungle* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and goes on to describe the role *The Jungle* played in the 1906 passage of the Pure Food and Drugs Act and the Meat Inspection Act. Schlosser is careful not to give too much credit to the novel alone; he notes that after *The Jungle*, "The conditions in slaughterhouses gradually improved—not because of Upton Sinclair and not because of any sudden burst of corporate social responsibility. Things got better because labor unions fought to make them better."<sup>1</sup> But, Schlosser writes, the modern-day meatpacking industry has come to look more and more like the one Sinclair described a century ago, so that *The Jungle* "transcends the specifics of one historical era and sadly remains relevant to our own."<sup>2</sup> Although Schlosser notes what Theodore Roosevelt called "the ridiculous socialist rant" at the end of the novel (noting, as well, that "most literary critics would agree" with Roosevelt's assessment), he concludes, "No novelist should be

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Schlosser, Forward to *The Jungle* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), xi.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

expected to provide neat solutions to extraordinarily complex problems.”<sup>3</sup> For Schlosser, “Upton Sinclair’s achievement was impressive enough. He saw through the lies of his era and exposed a world long hidden from view. He showed compassion for the weak and the poor, the powerless and the despised. He created images and characters that are poignant and memorable. He fueled anger at injustice.”<sup>4</sup> That Sinclair did all this in service of a socialist mission that “likely... would’ve been a disaster” is ultimately of limited importance to Schlosser.<sup>5</sup>

The inclusion of Schlosser’s foreword (not to mention the gory, disembodied cow’s head on the book’s cover) in the centennial edition of the novel invokes a very specific narrative about Sinclair’s most well-known work. In this version of the story, the novel is most notable for its role in getting regulatory legislation through Congress and for arousing the disgust and ire of its readers. Critics and readers of *The Jungle* are quick to point out that this popular narrative paints the legislative change as a successful outcome of the novel when, in fact, Sinclair actually failed in his attempt to bring attention to the condition of workers in the meat industry: Sinclair’s famous line, “I aimed at the public’s heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach,” invariably accompanies any discussion of *The Jungle*’s success or failure. Less commonly noted is the fact that the Meat Inspection Act, rather than dealing a terrible blow to the meatpacking industry, actually aided the industry by providing inspections and a public guarantee of quality at government expense, a step that made it much easier to export

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., xiv-xv

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., xiv.

American meat to Europe.<sup>6</sup> Despite the questionable nature of the actual change *The Jungle* provoked, the novel's success, both popular and legislative, is among the most common reasons cited for its continued interest to readers and relevance to critics. For readers who frame the novel in this way, *The Jungle*'s relevance to contemporary circumstances, whether relating to food safety, labor conditions, or industrial capitalism, is also of great importance; it is this clear connection to the current moment that allows Schlosser to make a claim for the novel as more than an interesting historical document.

Sinclair's description of his persuasive aims gone awry neatly glosses the conflicting modes operating in *The Jungle*: the heart and the stomach; the sentimental and the sensational. The gory cow's head and much of Schlosser's introduction emphasize the sensationalism and disgust at work in the novel, while the often-mentioned comparison between *The Jungle* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* gestures toward the sentimental tradition that Sinclair was drawing on in his depiction of the abuses suffered by the laboring class. In the most common narrative of *The Jungle*'s popular reception and persuasive success and failures, the sensational trumps the sentimental, bringing about changes to food safety legislation while leaving the conditions of labor unaltered.

In many ways, *The Jungle* might well be considered the quintessential purpose novel. It clearly sought to intervene in the contemporary world, and was discussed by all of its reviewers in terms of that intervention. It was compared to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Sinclair himself, by his publishers, and by many of its reviewers. The reviews of *The Jungle* are characterized by the same concerns and considerations that appear in reviews

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<sup>6</sup> Gabriel Kolko, *The Triumph of Conservatism: A Re-Interpretation of American History, 1900-1916* (New York: Free Press, 1977), 98-110.



of novels spanning from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to the novels discussed in the preceding chapters: accuracy and exaggeration; the novel's status as propaganda; the presence or absence of fully realized characters; and the novel's aesthetic value or lack thereof. The reviews of *The Jungle* also focus the bulk of their attention on what Sinclair was trying to accomplish in his novel and on the connections between the novel and contemporary events. And, perhaps most important, *The Jungle* succeeded in rallying public support for concrete legislative change.

The reception of *The Jungle* shows that the novel's use of competing sensational and sentimental modes made it difficult for reviewers to respond both to the novel's depiction of meatpacking horrors and to its representation of labor abuses. Contrary to the popular narrative of *The Jungle*'s reception, reviewers did not ignore the labor issues altogether, but they did address them in a manner that differed significantly from their treatment of the food safety concerns raised by the book. In charting those differences, the reception of *The Jungle* highlights not only a moment of remarkable popular reaction to the sensational mode, but also the difficulty of reconciling that mode, particularly when it is used to evoke disgust, with the sentimental.

Journalist Ernest Poole recounts one of the most oft-repeated anecdotes about the publication history of *The Jungle* in his 1940 autobiography. Poole recalls Sinclair arriving in Chicago in 1904 and announcing, "Hello! I'm Upton Sinclair!... And I've come here to write the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of the Labor Movement!"<sup>7</sup> This anecdote

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<sup>7</sup> Ernest Poole, *The Bridge: My Own Story* (New York: Macmillan, 1940), 95. The idea that *The Jungle* was "The *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of the Labor Movement" was repeated in a number of contexts—from the initial advertising in *The Appeal to Reason* to reviews of

appears in nearly every account of *The Jungle*'s origins and, apocryphal or not, it often acts as a sort of shorthand, foregrounding a number of elements about the novel's publication, including Sinclair's own sense of his not-yet-written novel in a specific tradition of reform novels epitomized by Stowe's famous work (a novel that, not incidentally, was a huge popular success), as well as the premeditated nature of *The Jungle*'s composition—Sinclair had come to Chicago to write a particular sort of book, though a single word had yet to be written.

Sinclair had been approached by Fred Warren, editor of the Socialist magazine *The Appeal to Reason*, about writing a serialized novel that would expose the conditions of workers in an industrial setting. Sinclair agreed, and in exchange for the serial rights, *The Appeal* advanced him five hundred dollars to support himself for a year while he gathered information and wrote the novel. It was following this agreement to write the “*Uncle Tom's Cabin* of the Labor Movement” that Sinclair settled on Packingtown and the meat industry as the appropriate subject for his exposé, and he spent the next few months gathering information about the beef trust and, later, crafting that data into a novel. Warren promoted the serial heavily in *The Appeal* and other radical publications,<sup>8</sup> and the first chapter appeared on Feb. 25, 1905. Despite Sinclair's concern that the novel lacked the necessary melodrama and pacing for a serialized tale, *The Appeal* continued to

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the novel in a variety of contexts. A short item in the Salt Lake *Herald* from June 6, 1906, asks, “May we be permitted to suggest that Upton Sinclair's book, ‘The Jungle,’ is the ‘Uncle Tom's Cabin’ of the packing house industry?” (Untitled item, Salt Lake *Herald*, 6 June 1906, p. 4, LOC Chronicling America).

<sup>8</sup> Ronald Gottesman notes that Warren's claim that *The Appeal* would publish a million copies of the first issue demonstrates a rather extravagant faith in the serial's popularity; the circulation for *The Appeal* never got above 300,000 during *The Jungle*'s run (Ronald Gottesman, Introduction to *The Jungle* [New York: Penguin Books, 2006], xxvi).

publish installments on a regular basis through Nov. 4, 1905. Although there were still a few chapters remaining, *The Appeal* announced that they would not be published in forthcoming issues; readers who wanted to know how the novel turned out could send a postcard to *The Appeal*, and they would receive the final chapters when they were ready. Sinclair, who had struggled to bring the novel to a close, attempted to publish a hard-bound edition of the book cooperatively. On November 18, Warren printed a notice in *The Appeal* that copies of *The Jungle* could be purchased for \$1.20 each—not quite at cost, as Sinclair would like to offer them, but as close as he could come while still supporting himself. About a thousand copies were printed, but Sinclair ended the scheme a month later, when, he informed his readers, he received an offer from a reputable publishing house.<sup>9</sup>

Although Sinclair had initially negotiated with Macmillan to publish *The Jungle* after its serialized run, the readers' reports were unfavorable, finding fault both with the level of violence and gore in the novel and with its artistic merits. Sinclair had more success with Doubleday, Page, & Co., where Isaac Marcossou, a young reporter working for Doubleday, convinced Walter Hines Page that they would be crazy not to publish the book.<sup>10</sup> Marcossou won Page over, and Doubleday agreed to publish *The Jungle*, although in a revised form from what had run in *The Appeal to Reason*. Marcossou had

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<sup>9</sup> For more on the serialization and publication history of *The Jungle*, see Gottesman, Introduction, xxiv-xxx and Anthony Arthur, *Radical Innocent: Upton Sinclair* (New York: Random House, 2006), 61-67.

<sup>10</sup> Marcossou's exact words, as he recounts them in his memoir, were, "If the revelations in this book are true we should have guardians appointed for us if we do not publish it" (Isaac Marcossou, *Adventures in Interviewing* [London: Jordan Lane, 1920], 282, HathiTrust).

been experimenting with a strategy of publicizing novels as news, rather than through what he describes as “amiable and sterilised ‘Literary Notes.’”<sup>11</sup> With *The Jungle*, Marcossou felt he had found the perfect novel for this strategy, and he set about promoting the novel as news, planning “its ‘release’ precisely as a message of a President of the United States is handled.”<sup>12</sup> Marcossou traveled to Chicago to collect data to verify the claims Sinclair made in novel, a trip necessitated not only by his promotional strategy, but by Doubleday, Page’s insistence that Sinclair’s allegations be investigated and backed up before they published the novel. Marcossou then set about publishing “a series of articles in *The World's Work* that would tell in fact the story that Sinclair thinly disguised as fiction,” as this was determined to be “the best guaranty of the accuracy of ‘The Jungle.’”<sup>13</sup>

Marcossou’s campaign was a success, so much so that following the novel’s publication on Monday, Feb. 26, 1906, Sinclair “woke up on Tuesday to find himself famous.”<sup>14</sup> The story of that success is a fundamental part of the narrative of the novel’s historical significance (and, to a lesser degree, its critical significance as well). *The Jungle* owed its success to a confluence of factors: Marcossou’s savvy marketing, an enormous public interest in the subject of the novel, and the attention of elected officials across the country, most notably, President Theodore Roosevelt. The response to *The Jungle* produced a huge sample of reviews, news items, parodies, and other reportage. In selecting sources for this chapter, I have narrowed my scope to reviews and articles that

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<sup>11</sup> Marcossou, *Adventures in Interviewing*, 280.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

focus primarily on *The Jungle* as a novel, rather than on the legislation that followed the investigation.

### ***The Jungle*, muckraking, and literary value**

Though muckraking is generally associated with a particular kind of magazine journalism that emerged shortly after 1900, the term itself was not in circulation when Sinclair published *The Jungle*, although it appeared shortly thereafter. Theodore Roosevelt's speech to the Senate on April 14, 1906 first introduced the idea that contemporary journalists were like the Man with the Muck Rake in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, who was so focused downward on the muck below him that he ignored the celestial crown being offered to him for his work. These muckraking journalists, Roosevelt asserted, were doing important work, but they must be wary of an excess of exposure that might cause the public to doubt their allegations. Further, they should not be like the Man with the Muck Rake and refuse to look up once in a while.

Roosevelt's speech came shortly after his attention was drawn to Sinclair's novel, and just ten days after he met with Sinclair in the White House to discuss the allegations in the novel. Marcosson sent Roosevelt a copy of the novel when it was published on February 26, and Roosevelt responded with a three-page letter to Sinclair on March 15, in which he agreed that something must be done about the meatpacking industry, but disputed Sinclair's conclusions that socialism was the answer to the ills depicted in the novel. In their April 4 meeting, Roosevelt told Sinclair he was sending a team to Chicago to investigate the meatpacking industry, and promised that the results of this

investigation would be more accurate than an investigation he had commissioned in March, which had denounced Sinclair as a liar and the novel as an exaggeration.<sup>15</sup>

While Roosevelt never mentioned Sinclair or *The Jungle* in his April 14 speech, historian Anthony Arthur argues that, “given Roosevelt’s obvious familiarity with *Pilgrim’s Progress*, his recent close reading of *The Jungle*, and his growing irritation with its author... it is obvious that Sinclair was high on his list of targets.”<sup>16</sup> The term “muckraker,” then, emerged simultaneously with the sensation over *The Jungle*. Newspapers often referred to both the term and Roosevelt’s speech in reference to Sinclair’s book, and reviewers and critics had a range of opinions about the value of muckraking journalism. An article printed in the Duluth *News-Tribune* and the Albuquerque *Evening Citizen* asserted that Roosevelt’s “famous muck rake address included Sinclair as one of its objects.”<sup>17</sup>

Though muckraking did not have its name until 1906, the practice itself was well established by the time of Roosevelt’s speech. Muckraking journalism shared some of the sensational tactics of the yellow journalism of the 1890s, but it was characterized by a reformist impulse generally absent from those earlier articles. The muckrakers of the early twentieth century, most prominently Ida Tarbell, Ray Stannard Baker, David Graham Phillips and Lincoln Steffens, wrote in-depth exposés of political corruption, economic inequality, and corporate malfeasance. These exposés were published in the

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<sup>15</sup> For more on Roosevelt’s meeting with Sinclair, see Arthur, *Radical Innocent*, 72-78.

<sup>16</sup> Arthur, *Radical Innocent*, 77.

<sup>17</sup> “Sinclair and His Jungle Revelation,” Albuquerque *Evening Citizen*, June 6, 1906, 4, LOC Chronicling America; “Clearing the Jungle,” Duluth *News Tribune*, May 30, 1906, 4, America’s Historical Newspapers.

general interest magazines, particularly *Cosmopolitan* and *McClure's*, that had risen to prominence in the previous decade.<sup>18</sup>

Much of the reporting surrounding *The Jungle* clearly falls under the rubric of muckraking, particularly the series of articles published in *The World's Work* that Marcossen intended to corroborate the charges in the novel. *The Jungle* itself is often termed a “muckraking novel.” In journalism studies, scholars often focus on the novel’s documentary style and place it in the realm of investigative journalism, or what John Hartsock identifies as literary journalism.<sup>19</sup> In this framework, the novel’s interest lies in its place in the history of American journalism, and the fact that it is a work of fiction becomes of secondary importance. For example, to mark the novel’s centennial, the academic journal *Journalism History* published a set of essays about the book the editors called “an inspiration to all muck-raking journalists over the years,” whose “seminal position... in American letters is matched by few other works.”<sup>20</sup> As part of the issue, Thomas Connery took up the question of *The Jungle*’s status as fiction, arguing, “What fiction may seem to be borrowing from nonfiction and what nonfiction might seem to be borrowing from fiction are due to both participating in and being informed by the same cultural paradigm. They both drink from the same well, so to speak: the well of actuality

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<sup>18</sup> For more on the role of *Cosmopolitan* and *McClure's* in the rise of muckraking, see Matthew Schneirov, *The Dream of a New Social Order: Popular Magazines in America, 1893-1914* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994).

<sup>19</sup> Though Harstock notes that *The Jungle* is often cited as an example of literary journalism, he argues that “formally *The Jungle* is an open and conspicuous fiction,” and therefore does not belong in the category of journalism (John C. Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form* [Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2000], 18).

<sup>20</sup> David Abrahamson, James Boylan, Thomas B. Connery, and Jan Whitt, “*The Jungle* at 100: A Century of the Journalism of Reform,” *Journalism History* 34, no. 3 (2008): 163.

observed.”<sup>21</sup> Like nearly all other critics, Connery locates *The Jungle*’s primary failure in its ending, not for the formal reasons cited by literary critics, but because in the novel’s ending, “Sinclair's grounding in actuality failed him... as he turned to the ideational and described what could be or should be in the end, still focusing on the common but attaching it to an unrealistic and unconvincing ideal of socialistic epiphany.”<sup>22</sup> For Connery, the “ridiculous socialist rant” that Roosevelt and later critics found fault with is a documentary or journalistic failure—a flaw that does not, however, mar the significance of the work as a “cultural document.” Connery sees *The Jungle*’s continued success as existing in spite of, not because, its literary qualities, claiming, “In the end, such works that indeed provided versions of reality that documented life being lived, live on not necessarily because of their artistic or literary merit but because of their rendering of actuality during a specific time and place. They have become, in effect, cultural documents.”<sup>23</sup>

This tendency to acknowledge the novel’s literary deficiencies seems to be more common in discussions of the book in disciplines outside of literature. In referencing *The Jungle*’s “dismissal by literary critics and literary historians,”<sup>24</sup> Connery is relying on a fairly outdated idea of literary criticism; scholars today are by and large unlikely to simply dismiss a novel on aesthetic grounds or to view artistic flaws as reason to exclude a novel from study. Granted, much of the literary criticism of *The Jungle* does include

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas Connery, “Fiction/Nonfiction and Sinclair's *The Jungle*: Drinking from the Same Well,” *Journalism History* 34, no. 3 (2008): 167.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*



some evaluation of the novel as literature, often with the familiar complaints about the novel's ending, or the overall characterization of the novel as propaganda. But most of the scholarship on the novel was also published well before the rise of cultural studies within literary study—of the thirty-eight “Suggestions for Further Reading” that follow the introduction to the 2006 Penguin Edition of *The Jungle*, only two were published after 1980, and none after 1985.

Of the critical work on *The Jungle* published after 1985, Cecilia Tichi's *Exposés and Excess: Muckraking in America, 1900/2000* (2004) is the most invested in synthesizing *The Jungle*'s position in the history of journalism with its role in American literary history. Tichi's primary goals are to recuperate muckraking as a literary mode and to draw connections between the muckraking journalism of the early twentieth century and the investigative nonfiction of the late 1990s and early 2000s (Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation*, Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*, and others). As such, *Exposés and Excess* situates *The Jungle* at the beginning of a twentieth-century history of muckraking that includes Baker, Steffens and Tarbell on one end and Schlosser and Ehrenreich on the other. Tichi's focus is on the way muckrakers then and now use narrative techniques common to fiction like plot, pacing, characterization, dialogue, etc., to construct a non-fictional and journalistic account. Tichi's emphasis on narrative allows her to bridge the gap between the fiction of something like *The Jungle* and the non-fiction

of Ida Tarbell's *History of the Standard Oil Company*, as well as the gap between journalism and literary studies.<sup>25</sup>

In situating *The Jungle* at the beginning of a twentieth-century account of muckraking, Tichi's framing emphasizes *The Jungle* as journalism even as it questions strict divisions between journalism and fiction. Tichi notes the role of melodrama, sentiment, and excess in *The Jungle*, as well as in muckraking non-fiction, but her analysis focuses primarily on the use of narrative conventions in non-fiction, so that *The Jungle* is notable for its affinity with journalism, rather than for its status as a novel.

Aside from Tichi, most recent literary scholarship on *The Jungle* has approached the novel through the lens of American literary naturalism, reading it alongside works by Theodore Dreiser, Jack London, and Frank Norris. It is within this context that June Howard considers *The Jungle* in her 1985 work, *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism*; for Howard, *The Jungle* is significant in demonstrating the "fluid distinction between fiction and nonfiction in American naturalism," as well as the complicated relationship between the reader/spectator, the narrator, and the novel's foreign or alien characters.<sup>26</sup> Howard's analysis presents *The Jungle* as something of a hybrid between naturalism and documentary realism. Other critics who place the novel within a naturalist framework still tend to regard it as a formal or literary failure, continuing to place the fault with the lengthy socialist speeches in the novel's ending. In this understanding of the novel, the ending's failure is not strictly aesthetic, nor is it an abandonment of the

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<sup>25</sup> Cecilia Tichi, *Exposés and Excess: Muckraking in America, 1900/2000* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2004).

<sup>26</sup> June Howard, *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1985), 157, 159.

realist or journalistic mode of the first part of the novel; instead, the novel fails because it deviates from the naturalist trajectory of decline, ending not with doom but with success achieved primarily through didactic speeches.<sup>27</sup>

While the framework of naturalism better allows critics to place *The Jungle* within a particular moment in American literary history and gives them tools for considering the formal qualities of the novel without dismissing out of hand its perceived aesthetic failures, it still does not satisfactorily engage with the narrative of the novel that circulates in places like Schlosser's foreword or Connery's article. The novel's formal and aesthetic success or failure cannot be entirely unrelated to its popular success and ability to prompt legislative change. Conversely, assessments of *The Jungle* as a social document or reflection of its time cannot neglect the fact that the novel's literary merits and generic conventions were as important to the context of its publication and reception as were the visceral details of the slaughterhouse.

Despite *The Jungle*'s almost-immediate success, and the importance of that success to later critical and historical treatment of the book, accounts of the novel's reception lack a degree of nuance that should be afforded to a book as widely discussed as *The Jungle*. In his 1985 study, *The Labor of Words: Literary Professionalism in the Progressive Era*—a book that remains one of the definitive works on Progressive-era literature—Christopher Wilson writes that “to speculate about the meanings received by his audience, as Sinclair himself did, is naturally to invite the perils of ‘affective’ criticism. Literally speaking, we cannot know precisely how Progressive-era readers

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<sup>27</sup> Christopher Taylor, “‘Inescapably Propadanda’: Re-Classifying Upton Sinclair outside the Naturalist Tradition,” *Studies in American Naturalism* 2, no. 2 (2007): 166-167.

actually responded.”<sup>28</sup> Wilson’s primary interest in the novel’s reception is the misreading that so famously occurred, in which audiences interpreted the book not as the “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* of the Labor Movement,” but rather as something closer to the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* of diseased meat, or, rather, the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* of American meat eaters. In this context, Wilson explains, reviews are of little help in understanding the novel’s reception, as they were shaped by the controversy following the book’s release, and therefore say little about the misreadings themselves. Wilson goes on to analyze *The Jungle*’s publicity campaign (discussed in more depth later) as the natural consequence of Sinclair’s own desire to “use the weapons of the modern literary marketplace for his own ends.”<sup>29</sup> In other words, Sinclair’s pursuit of the sensational and topical—the horrors of meat production—as vehicles for his own message about labor were what enabled the distortion of that message and the publisher’s use of those same sensational elements to sell more books and obscure Sinclair’s agenda.

In Wilson’s argument, the ways audiences received and responded to *The Jungle* are of limited significance, since they were under the influence of a wide-spread national marketing campaign and the publisher’s own desires for the novel. But the vigorous discussion that surrounded the novel did not confine itself to shock and horror at the state of American meat, although that was certainly a common subject of reviews and articles. And reactions to the novel do not all map neatly, as Ronald Gottesman suggests, onto the political leanings of the publication or reviewer, though political convictions certainly

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<sup>28</sup> Christopher Wilson, *The Labor of Words: Literary Professionalism in the Progressive Era* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1985), 137.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

were not immaterial to responses to the novel.<sup>30</sup> Looking closely at the reception of *The Jungle* allows us to do more than simply underscore the sensational way publishers promoted the novel and identify the contradictions inherent in Sinclair's goals for the book and his methods of attracting readers. The reception of *The Jungle* shows reviewers responding to the formal tensions in the novel, which could not always be easily reconciled.

### **Sensation, sympathy, and disgust**

Wilson's explanation of *The Jungle*'s publishing history credits public interest in food safety to the choices (and, Wilson argues, missteps) made by both Sinclair and Marcossou in publicizing the novel. Other scholars attribute the novel's failure to spark public interest in labor reform to the political or ideological tendencies of the reading public; Jude Davies, for instance, argues that, "Sinclair's well-known comment in a 1906 article that 'I aimed at the public's heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach' ... is one of the most striking examples of how the consumption of naturalism was determined by progressive-era class formations."<sup>31</sup> Certainly, Sinclair's reviewers were quick to blame his failure to hit the public in the heart to the lack of interest in his socialist agenda, something I discuss further at the end of this chapter. But *The Jungle*'s failure to shift readers' attention from meatpacking abuses to labor issues was not just a matter of its publicity campaign and the public's ideological preferences, it was also a function of its

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<sup>30</sup> Gottesman, Introduction, xxxi-xxxii.

<sup>31</sup> Jude Davies, "Naturalism and Class," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Literary Naturalism*, ed. Keith Newlin (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011), 314.

formal choices and its unsuccessful attempt to mobilize both the sensational and sentimental modes, particularly the competing affective responses of pity and disgust.

In differentiating between the sentimental and sensational modes, I am drawing on a distinction June Howard makes in her essay on “Sentiment” in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* (2007). Howard notes that the experience of sentiment is “anchored [the] body: tears come to my eyes or my heart beats faster, my skin flushes or my stomach roils.” But, Howard argues, “Sensations become emotions... only as they are played out in the theater of the brain.”<sup>32</sup> The sentimental mode, then, emphasizes certain sensations, particularly the bodily experiences of grief or sorrow, but it does so in the context of an emotional response, generally sympathy or empathy, that leads to a sense of identification or connectedness between readers and characters.

The sensationalism of *The Jungle* is not the same as that of the sensational novel, which relied on melodrama, dramatic plot twists, clearly demarcated villains and heroes, and climactic cliffhangers to keep readers coming back for each installment.<sup>33</sup> Unlike the heavily plotted sensational novel of the nineteenth century, *The Jungle* is structured rather like a working-class *Bildungsroman*, with a series of largely unconnected encounters and events. With the exception of some of the more lurid packinghouse descriptions, most of *The Jungle* is downright boring, with one scene of unrelenting poverty replacing the next.

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<sup>32</sup> June Howard, “Sentiment,” in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, ed. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York: New York UP, 2007), 213.

<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of the sensational novel, particularly the role of melodrama and other plot devices, see Shelley Streeby, “Sensational Fiction,” in *A Companion to American Fiction, 1780-1865*, Shirley Samuels, ed., (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 179-190.

Despite this, *The Jungle* was frequently called sensational by its reviewers, who generally associated the term with exaggeration and publicity. Here they were encouraged by Sinclair himself, who wrote that in penning his earlier novel, *The Journal of Arthur Sterling*, his “one desire was to raise a sensation, first to sell the book, of course, and, second, to give me a standing ground from which to begin the agitation of [his] cause.”<sup>34</sup> In addition to its notoriety, *The Jungle* is also sensational in another sense: it makes use of a sensational mode in which realist description is mobilized to evoke bodily sensations, most prominently, disgust. While the sentimental mode directs certain sensations from the reader toward another person in the form of pity or sympathy, the disgust the novel evokes remains lodged in the reader’s body alone. For reviewers, the inwardly focused and bodily nature of that disgust worked at cross-purposes to the book’s sentimental appeals.

In *The Anatomy of Disgust*, William Miller defines disgust as “a complex sentiment that can be lexically marked in English by expressions declaring things or actions to be repulsive, revolting, or giving rise to reactions described as revulsion and abhorrence as well as disgust.” These terms “all convey a strong sense of aversion to something perceived as dangerous because of its powers to contaminate, infect, or pollute by proximity, contact, or ingestion.”<sup>35</sup> Disgust is firmly lodged in the body, and its common responses—“nausea or queasiness, or of an urge to recoil and shudder from

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<sup>34</sup> “Upton Sinclair’s Ambition,” *Macon Daily Telegraph*, September 6, 1906, 4, *America’s Historical Newspapers*.

<sup>35</sup> William Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997), 2.

creepiness”<sup>36</sup>—are also bodily in nature. In this way, disgust differs significantly from the tears or grief evoked by sentimental descriptions, as the bodily sensation of weeping is (ideally) followed by the emotional response of pity or sympathy for the subject of the description. The subject of the sentimental description becomes the object of the reader’s emotional response; the subject of a disgusting description may become the object of the reader’s revulsion, but the physical response remains focused on the reader herself, rather than being transferred to a sentimental object.

Scholars of the sentimental tradition often question the kind of connection between reader and sentimental object that a sentimental description provokes; as Barbara Hochman notes, “Sympathy facilitates, indeed requires, the preservation of distance between the one extending and the one receiving the benevolent or compassionate emotion.”<sup>37</sup> But sympathy, empathy, and identification, the latter of which Hochman calls “a more unruly and less moralized response to reading,” all aim in some way to bridge the distance between reader and sentimental object. Disgust, in contrast, is, as Sianne Ngai notes, “never ambivalent about its object. More specifically, it is never prone to producing the confusions between subject and object that are integral to most of the feelings discussed in this book.”<sup>38</sup> The “other feelings” Ngai refers to are what she calls “ugly feelings”—animatedness (a kind of “innervation” or “agitation” that Ngai

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Barbara Hochman, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and the Reading Revolution: Race, Literacy, Childhood, and Fiction, 1851-1911* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 16.

<sup>38</sup> Siann Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2005), 335.



describes as the state of being “moved” without agency<sup>39</sup>), envy, irritation, anxiety, stuplidity (a term coined by combining “sublime” and “stupid” to describe “the aesthetic experience in which astonishment is paradoxically united with boredom<sup>40</sup>), and paranoia—but the confusion between subject and object that is absent from disgust is essential to the work of the sentimental, and even more essential, Hochman argues, to the work of identification: “By blurring the distinction between self and other, identification is more likely than sympathy or empathy to destabilize, even threaten, the reading self.”<sup>41</sup>

Sinclair himself imagined that the disgusting might be put in service of the sentimental, drawing readers in with lurid tales of slaughterhouse gore and then redirecting their attention to the plight of workers and the allure of socialism. In a May 1906 article in the *Independent*, titled, “Is ‘The Jungle’ True?” Sinclair defended both the facts of his novel and his writing process to a still-skeptical public. His description of his experience in Packingtown indicates that he conceived of the sensational and the sentimental working in tandem; certainly, he describes them as working together in his own experience:

I have nearly got over the emotions of it now, thank heaven! During the time that I was actually in Packingtown it used to make me ill; I would go into the settlement to supper, and people would remark that I was as white as a sheet. It was not merely the sights of human degradation and misery, it was not even the physical horror, the stench and the blood; it was a spiritual thing—it was the

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>41</sup> Hochman, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, 17.

sight of tyranny and oppression. The Beef Trust is a thing which presents itself to my imagination as a huge castle, a fortress of knavery and fraud. It towered above me, insolent and triumphant, mocking at all opposition; and I was poor, and alone, and helpless, with nothing but my cry of anguish.<sup>42</sup>

In Sinclair's account, the experience of other people's misery causes a spiritual response that manifests itself as physical illness. For Sinclair, sympathy and disgust are nearly the same thing, to the extent that "the sight of tyranny and oppression" result in the sort of illness his readers experienced after reading about horrors of the slaughterhouse. But rather than evidencing this working relationship between the sentimental and the disgusting that Sinclair imagined, the reception of *The Jungle* reveals a significant tension between them. Reviewers were not entirely deaf to the novel's calls to sympathy with its laboring-class characters, but they ultimately responded with much more immediacy to the book's evocation of disgust. And for some reviewers, the scenes of personal tragedy and the narrative techniques used to describe that tragedy resulted not in pity, sympathy, or identification, but in more disgust.

*The Jungle* is, of course, best known for the shock and disgust it evokes, and there is little need to catalogue the many sensational passages in the novel. Perhaps the most familiar, and among the most quoted by reviewers, is the description of the sausage-making process at a Chicago packing house:

There was never the least attention paid to what was cut up for sausage; there would come all the way back from Europe old sausage that had been rejected, and

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<sup>42</sup> Upton Sinclair, "Is 'The Jungle' True?", *Independent*, May 17, 1906, 1129-1133, American Periodicals.

that was moldy and white—it would be dosed with borax and glycerine, and dumped into the hoppers, and made over again for home consumption... There would be meat stored in great piles in rooms; and the water from leaky roofs would drip over it, and thousands of rats would race about on it. It was too dark in these storage places to see well, but a man could run his hand over these piles of meat and sweep off handfuls of the dried dung of rats. These rats were nuisances, and the packers would put poisoned bread out for them; they would die, and then rats, bread, and meat would go into the hoppers together. This is no fairy story and no joke; the meat would be shoveled into carts, and the man who did the shoveling would not trouble to lift out a rat even when he saw one—there were things that went into the sausage in comparison with which a poisoned rat was a tidbit.<sup>43</sup>

This passage combines a number of elements common to Sinclair's descriptions of the conditions in Packingtown. Though the content itself is shocking, the tone is matter-of-fact. The use of adjectives is fairly limited: the sausage is "old," "moldy and white," the piles of meat are "great," and the roofs "leaky," but the force of the passage does not come from an excess of description. Instead, the narrator's matter-of-fact recitation of the details emphasizes the claim that such things happen every day, and that they are horrible precisely because they are so common, and so unremarkable to the people who make the sausage. The narrator's admonishment that "This is no fairy story and no joke" acknowledges that readers will be inclined to disbelieve the allegations while

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<sup>43</sup> Sinclair, *The Jungle* (1906; reprint, New York: Bantam Books, 1981), 134-135.

simultaneously emphasizing not only that the allegations are true, but also that they are entirely routine, which is the most shocking element of the whole description.

*The Jungle*'s use of the sentimental mode relies heavily on excesses of language that contrast sharply with the above passage. When Jurgis's wife dies while giving birth to her second child, the narrator describes Jurgis's response as follows:

He stretched out his arms to her, he called her in wild despair; a fearful yearning surged up in him, hunger for her that was agony, desire that was a new being born within him, tearing his heartstrings, torturing him. But it was all in vain—she faded from him, she slipped back and was gone. And a wail of anguish burst from him, great sobs shook all his frame, and hot tears ran down his cheeks and fell upon her. He clutched her hands, he shook her, he caught her in his arms and pressed her to him; but she lay cold and still—she was gone—she was gone! ...She was dead! She was dead! He would never see her again, never hear her again! An icy horror of loneliness seized him; he saw himself standing apart and watching all the world fade away from him—a world of shadows, of fickle dreams. He was like a little child, in his fright and grief; he called and called, and got no answer, and his cries of despair echoed through the house, making the women downstairs draw nearer to each other in fear. He was inconsolable, beside himself—the priest came and laid his hand upon his shoulder and whispered to him, but he heard not a sound. He was gone away himself, stumbling through the shadows, and roping after the soul that had fled.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 190.

The tone of the passage is far from matter-of-fact description. While the description of the sausage-making used only a few adjectives, this scene is full of them: “wild despair,” “fearful yearning,” “great sobs,” “hot tears,” “icy horror,” “fickle dreams.” Sentences pile phrase upon phrase; where the sausage making was described as a process with discrete steps, Jurgis’s grief is described through accumulation and repetition. Both passages draw on physical details meant to evoke a bodily response. In the first, the mold, chemicals, and poison evoke a disgust that is compounded by the claim that such things happen all the time. In the second, the repetition and excessive description evoke Jurgis’s tears and grief. But if the second passage elicits a different affective response from the first, it also seeks to direct that response toward someone else. The shock in the first passage is clearly that of the reader—Sinclair emphasizes this by having his narrator address the reader directly (“This is no fairy story and no joke”). The sympathy of Ona’s death scene, though, is directed toward Jurgis.

As the protagonist, Jurgis is often the ostensible object of the reader’s sympathy, particularly in the more traditionally sentimental scenes. Jurgis, though, is a problematic sentimental object. According to Philip Fisher, “the typical objects of sentimental compassion are the prisoner, the madman, the child, the very old, the animal, and the slave.” These figures, who were traditionally denied fully human status, emphasize the centrality of the asymmetrical power relations of the family to the sentimental novel. These relations “are the fundamental social example of compassion: that is, of the correct

moral relation of the strong to the weak.”<sup>45</sup> While Jurgis is often disenfranchised and taken advantage of, he is still a strong, healthy adult man who can hardly exist in childlike relation to the reader. Moreover, as an Eastern European immigrant at the turn of the century, Jurgis potentially represents a threat to white, middle-class readers’ way of life.<sup>46</sup> Jurgis embodies the new kind of immigrant whose presence had to be carefully managed through literary forms like realism and regionalism, and whose supposed vitality and growth represented the threat to native-born white Americans.<sup>47</sup>

Not only does Jurgis not fit the pattern of the traditional sentimental object, but his immigrant status also associates him with middle-class fears about contamination and inferiority.<sup>48</sup> So while Sinclair clearly intends Jurgis to be a sympathetic character, Jurgis’s racial and class position establish him as a potential object of disgust for the book’s middle-class readers. As Miller notes, “Disgust evaluates (negatively) what it touches, proclaims the meanness and inferiority of its object. And by so doing it presents a nervous claim of right to be free of the dangers imposed by the proximity of the inferior. It is thus an assertion of a claim to superiority that at the same time recognizes

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<sup>45</sup> Philip Fisher, *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987), 102.

<sup>46</sup> Howard notes that *The Jungle*’s readers are clearly conceived as occupying a different class status than its protagonist: “There is no pretense in *The Jungle* that the group Sinclair is writing *about* is the same or even has much in common with the group he is writing *for*” (Howard, *Form and History*, 159).

<sup>47</sup> On realism and regionalism as responses to immigration, see Richard Brodhead, *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) and Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 10.

<sup>48</sup> For more on American anxieties about the influx of southern and eastern European labor in the 1890s, see Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876-1917* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 59-97.

the vulnerability of that superiority to the defiling powers of the low.”<sup>49</sup> As a member of a quickly growing immigrant class, Jurgis represents an inferiority to which turn-of-the-century middle-class readers saw themselves as increasingly vulnerable.

At least one reviewer articulated the middle-class concern about the threat of contamination from Jurgis and characters like him. In a lengthy article on the “Walking Delegate Novelist” in the *Independent*, Mrs. L. H. Harris describes the walking delegate novelist as “the literary offspring of the labor unions and the slums.”<sup>50</sup> Harris cites Dickens as the walking delegate novelist’s forefather, and lists Frank Norris and Jack London as among its ranks, but she reserves most of her scorn for Sinclair, who she calls “the lowest grade, but the most useful of all the walking delegate novelists.” According to Harris,

To be one of this kind requires a natural taste for what is vicious, indecent and revolting. He must have a vocabulary that settles like a swarm of flies over open cesspools and in houses filled with vermin. He must know how to create heroes, not villains, out of thieves, how to excite the reader’s sympathy and admiration for a man who “shovels guts” on the “killing beds” in a meat packing house; who sleeps in his clothes and never changes them; who drinks, suffers like an animal, fights like a fiend and sinks into the lowest leprosy of sin. He must know how to portray a saturnalia of fallen women in a light which represents them as the slaughtered lambs of a monstrous social system. He must be able to describe

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<sup>49</sup> Miller, *Anatomy of Disgust*, 9.

<sup>50</sup> The term “Walking Delegate Novelist” is a reference to a 1905 novel called *The Walking Delegate*, by Leroy Scott, which described the struggles of a New York labor union.

babies with the rickets and crawling over drafty floors. He must dull pain and dishonor into sensations that are daily commonplace; show men and women who have become acclimated to all the horrors of hell so that they do not go mad at the sight of themselves, but accept their condition with sodden indifference.<sup>51</sup>

Harris's scathing account applies the sensational language reviewers usually reserved for the meatpacking scenes to Sinclair's descriptions of human tragedy. Notably, she achieves this tone by responding to the events of the novel not with sympathy, but with disgust. Though she notes that Sinclair turns characters who should be villains into heroes and excites "the reader's sympathy and admiration" for their situation, Harris implies that such sympathy is far from the natural order of things. It is only Sinclair's "vocabulary that settles like a swarm of flies over open cesspools and in houses filled with vermin" that makes a character like Jurgis, who "'shovels guts' on the 'killing beds'" and does not change his clothes, appear to be admirable. Likewise, Harris implies, the natural reaction to the "saturnalia of fallen women" in the novel should be scorn, but Sinclair is somehow able to portray them as victims. That portrayal carries with it the threat of contamination from the characters Sinclair describes.

The primary force of the novel's disgust, though, involves the more literal contamination of tainted and spoiled meat. The popular response to *The Jungle* indicates that readers and reviewers found the disgust they experienced not only more compelling than any moments of sympathetic identification, but also more memorable. A month after *The Jungle*'s publication, the book came close to being outsold by Winston

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<sup>51</sup> L. H. Harris, "The Walking Delegate Novelist," *Independent*, May 24, 1906, 1213-1216, American Periodicals.



Churchill's *Coniston*, prompting a reviewer from the *Bookman* to wonder why, given all the hype, "has *The Jungle's* success not been more spectacular and pronounced from a commercial point of view? Why has it not reached the startling vogue of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example?"<sup>52</sup> According to the *Bookman*, the answer to this question was located in *The Jungle's* status as a "disagreeable" novel—one that was too unpleasant for most audiences to read.<sup>53</sup>

A reviewer from *Charities and Commons* made a similar claim, arguing that the reason Sinclair hit the stomach and not the heart was that it was "the horrors of Packingtown that leave the deepest impression, for they are wonderfully vivid, and the laboring man and his needs are overlooked."<sup>54</sup> But in addition to describing the horrors of Packingtown, *The Jungle* devotes a great deal of space to the plight of the laboring man and his family—children drown in the muddy street, families slowly freeze and starve to death before being evicted from homes they thought they owned, women die in childbirth, much of which is described with the same thoroughness as the scenes of

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<sup>52</sup> "'Disagreeable' Books," *Bookman*, September 1906, 2-3, HathiTrust.

<sup>53</sup> This characterization of *The Jungle* as thoroughly vile, repulsive, or venial appears to have been a common means by which libraries kept the book from the shelves. The book was barred from the Topeka Public Library because "its repulsiveness makes it unfit to be read." Similarly, a librarian told the *Kansas City Star*, "Upton Sinclair's story, 'The Jungle,' is not in. We do not keep it on our shelves. It is repulsive, and there are so many other books that are pleasant to read" ("The Jungle' Barred, *New York Evening World*, June 30, 1906, 5, LOC Chronicling America; "'The Jungle' Not There. Too Many Pleasant Things to Read to Bother With Upton Sinclair's Story," *Kansas City (MO) Star*, July 15, 1906, 6, *America's Historical Newspapers*). Sinclair himself wrote a letter to the *New York Times* complaining that his book had been suppressed in libraries in Chicago and St. Louis and noted that these cities were also major meatpacking centers (Upton Sinclair, "The Boycott on 'The Jungle': Upton Sinclair's Book in Trouble in the Packing Centres," Letter to the editor, *New York Times*, May 18, 1906, 8, ProQuest).

<sup>54</sup> Madeline Z. Doty, "The Socialist in Recent Fiction," *Charities and the Commons*, December 15, 1906, 485-488, HathiTrust.

sausage-making and meat packing. Arthur notes that the “lurid and revolting” descriptions of the slaughterhouse take up only about thirty pages of the book.<sup>55</sup> And yet the impression the reviewer from *Charities and the Commons* is left with is that of vividly described meatpacking gore and overlooked workers.

That sense that the disgust of Packingtown overshadows the tragedy of its workers is evidenced in the language of the reviews, as well, as Sinclair’s visceral details are echoed back in the responses to his work. The effect of the novel “is gained by revelling in ugliness, by lacerating the nerves so that a great tragic impression is obscured by foul-smelling detail.”<sup>56</sup> The book, according to a reviewer from *Out West*, is “Sickening, repulsive, filthy, revolting, disgusting, horrible,” and, in the words of the *Chicago Clinic Pure Water Journal*, “a naseous, disgusting composition whose stench all but strangled the reader.”<sup>57</sup> The *Bookman* described the novel as “a book which gives one the sensation of having come into contact with something physically unclean, that makes you figuratively and almost literally wish to take a bath after reading it.”<sup>58</sup> In complaining about the extreme and sensational nature of Sinclair’s descriptions, reviewers themselves replicate that sensationalism, indicating the degree to which that sensationalism had come to define the public discussion of the book.

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<sup>55</sup> Arthur, *Radical Innocent*, 54.

<sup>56</sup> Mary Moss, “The New Novels,” *Atlantic Monthly* 99, no. 1 (January 1907): 113-127, HathiTrust.

<sup>57</sup> “That Which is Written,” *Out West* 24, no. 6 (June 1906): 554-556, HathiTrust; “‘The Jungle’ and Public Opinion,” *Chicago Clinic Pure Water Journal* 19, no. 4 (April 1906): 105-106, HathiTrust.

<sup>58</sup> “‘Disagreeable’ Books,” *Bookman*, 2.

In addition to reviews and news articles, *The Jungle* also sparked a number of parodies and satires, which further indicate the degree to which *The Jungle*'s reception was framed in terms of the disgust it engendered. "The Vampire of the Shambles," a parody of a Rudyard Kipling poem published in *Life* magazine, begins by informing readers that the poem is

"for the delectation of dinner parties, when the conversation flags and the Homely Girl, who was invited at three o'clock that afternoon to fill a sudden vacancy, and who is always good-natured and is said to be kind to her mother, but is not eminently tactful, casually asks the Sad-looking Young Man on the far side of the table if he has read 'The Jungle;' whereupon the Sweet Young Thing from Washington Square North is suddenly heard to remark faintly that she really doesn't care for any of the roast, and the Hostess mentally revises her visiting-list..."

The poem that follows emphasizes the same personal, inwardly directed response that the introduction establishes:

A fool there was and he paid his cash

(Even as you and I!)

For a can of Armour's Patented Hash

(They knew it was nothing but scraps and trash),

But the fool he supposed that it really was hash

(Even as you and I!)

Oh the cats we eat and the rats we eat

And the horrible things that are sold  
Are worked on a public that does not know  
(And now we know that we never did know),  
Or didn't till Sinclair told...  
And it isn't the ham and it isn't the jam  
That gives us that worried look;  
It's coming to know they were only a bluff  
(Seeing at last they are only a bluff)—  
For we've all been reading the book.<sup>59</sup>

The poem casts the unwitting consumer as the fool who feels duped by the Beef Trust, and with its final declaration that the worst part is not the meat itself, but rather the realization of the deception on the part of the beef industry, comes a reminder, presumably to the Homely Girl who had the poor sense to bring up *The Jungle* during a meal, that “we’ve all been reading the book.” The anxieties engendered by the novel’s disgust ultimately come to define the reaction to the book. How can one respond sympathetically to the plight of the characters when the mere mention of the book puts the Sweet Young Thing off her dinner and reminds the duped consumer of the “cats we eat and the rats we eat and the horrible things that are sold”? And when such a visceral reaction to that disgust permeates the language with which the book is discussed and sends readers demanding that Congress investigate, there is little wonder that the novel’s suggestion that readers become Socialists seemed less than enticing—the immediacy of

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<sup>59</sup> McCready Sykes, “The Vampire of the Shambles,” *Life*, June 21, 1906, 751, HathiTrust.

the disgust the novel engendered required immediate legislative action, not personal political conversion.

### **Sympathy, disgust, and the question of social reform**

Grace Isabel Colbron, writing for the Chicago weekly the *Public*, speculated that in reviewing *The Jungle*, the sensational ultimately made for a better story, making it “fatally easy for uncertain reviewers to stick to the Packingtown problem at first, to write a review that would attract attention.”<sup>60</sup> Colbron’s assertion was undoubtedly true. When reviewers did direct their attention to the labor issues, they affirmed Colbron’s statement about the difficulty of writing about the other parts of the novel. If the vivid accounts of diseased meat left reviewers thinking about themselves and their readers, the novel’s sympathetic appeals left them with a sense of passive acceptance. And though Sinclair offered the most explicit solution to the problems of the novel that he possibly could—the immediate conversion of Jurgis (and, implicitly, the reader) to socialism—reviewers treated *The Jungle*’s ending as being as devoid of satisfactory solutions as *The Octopus* or *The Portion of Labor*.

Some reviewers responded positively to *The Jungle*’s sympathetic appeals. *Mother Earth* called the novel “a great moral appeal. Not in Victor Hugo or Charles Dickens does the moral passion burn with purer or intenser light than in these pages.”<sup>61</sup> *Out West* speculated that the book was “likely to make hordes of converts through their

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<sup>60</sup> Grace Isabel Colbron, “A Few More Words About ‘The Jungle,’” *Public*, July 21, 1906, 380-382, HathiTrust.

<sup>61</sup> “‘The Jungle’: A Recension by Veritas,” *Mother Earth* 1, no. 4 (June 1906), 53-56, HathiTrust.

imagination and sympathy who would be quite inaccessible to reasoned argument.”<sup>62</sup> According to the *Minneapolis Journal*, “the picture of packing-house methods is not nearly so appalling as that of the life led by the submerged of Packington [sic]. In the latter the author has shown his greatest strength—a strength almost, if not quite, of genius. The portrayal of packing-house conditions is only a part of the greater and darker picture.”<sup>63</sup> And a review from the *Rocky Mountain News*, reprinted in the *Albuquerque Evening Citizen* declared, “The saddest facts of ‘The Jungle’ are not those which have to do with diseased meat and poisoned canned stuffs. The human tragedy depicted is far more serious and general than even the widespread dissemination of disease-breeding food.”<sup>64</sup>

Other reviewers made a point of informing readers that Sinclair had not intended the meatpacking industry to be his primary target. The *Salem Daily Capital Journal* wrote, “Upton Sinclair did not write ‘The Jungle’ in order to reform the stockyards. He is not much concerned about the fate of the beef trust. Poisoned meat and ‘downers,’ and puffed cans and formaldehyde only interest him incidentally. He is a Socialist. In that lies the explanation of his conduct and the menace of his power. He menaces the status quo.”<sup>65</sup> And the *Lexington Herald* noted, “The horrors of the beef packing industry, which have caught the attention of the consumers of the world because these horrors

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<sup>62</sup> “That Which is Written,” 555.

<sup>63</sup> W. P. Kirkwood, “New Reading from the World of Books,” *Minneapolis Journal*, March 24, 1906, 4, LOC Chronicling America.

<sup>64</sup> “Sinclair and His Jungle Revelation,” *Albuquerque Evening Citizen*, June 6, 1906, 4, LOC Chronicling America.

<sup>65</sup> “What ‘The Jungle’ Has Done: Upton Sinclair, Aged 27, Is the Leading Literary Star of the World,” *Salem (OR) Daily Capital Journal*, July 6, 1906, 7, LOC Chronicling America.

personally concern them, because they, themselves the meat-eating consumers, are suffering from them, are but a small incident of the horrors of the book.”<sup>66</sup>

But though some reviewers drew attention to the novel's sympathetic appeals, most did not respond to sympathy with their own sympathy in the way reviewers responded to the novel's disgust with disgust of their own. Instead, reviewers tended to follow their descriptions of the novel's sentimental appeals with a sense of frustration and helplessness, or even with more disgust. The *American Amateur Photographer* argued that *The Jungle*'s hero “undergoes every woe that can fall to the lot of man, but the visitations of vermin or soaked clothes are emphasized as strongly as soul-crushing tragedies. In the end you know he is to suffer always, and it is merely a matter of wonderment what new torture will come.... The work serves merely to stir the fires of discontent and class hatred without proposing any means of reconstruction or alleviation.”<sup>67</sup> *Charities and the Commons* took a similar position, writing, “If the author had throughout the book showed rifts of light, by suggesting that a change is what is needed to better conditions, the book would have been stronger than it is, but to lug in socialism at the end was an anti-climax.... There is no suggestion at a solution of the accumulated horrors until it is poured forth as a sermon at the close.”<sup>68</sup> For these reviewers, the horrors described in the novel prove so overwhelming that the reviewers

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<sup>66</sup> M. McD. B., “The Jungle: Conditions Under Which Employe Works Purpose of of [sic] the Book—Spoiled Meat Revelation Incidental,” Lexington (KY) *Herald*, June 24, 1906, 2, America's Historical Newspapers.

<sup>67</sup> Review of *The Jungle*, *American Amateur Photographer* 18, no. 5 (May 1906): 244-245, HathiTrust.

<sup>68</sup> Doty, “Socialist in Recent Fiction,” 486.

lose all sense of scope, and with it, their ability to sympathize with the tragedies Jurgis undergoes.

Similarly, a reviewer from the *Reader* called the book “a nightmare, a voiceless horror, in which tortured humanity, unable to cry out, suffers and dies in silence. One is glad to look away from this story and assure himself that the sun is still shining in the heavens.”<sup>69</sup> The reviewer acknowledges that the novel depicts the suffering of tortured humanity, and yet his reaction is not to feel with or even for the characters, but rather to express a personal sense of horror and discomfort. His impulse is to look away, and assure himself that despite the suffering, he is okay, and his world is still sunny.

Harris’s article on the walking delegate novelist repeats the accusation that *The Jungle* paints an unnecessarily bleak picture of the Chicago workingman. Following her description of Sinclair’s attempt to “create heroes, not villains, out of thieves,” Harris writes that the walking delegate novelist “must never see a flower or blade of grass, for these would be mitigating circumstances, and it is not the business of this kind of walking delegate novelist to look for mitigating circumstances. He would not confess the sky itself except to smoke it black above the heads of his beloved demon people, who are demons of necessity, the unsightly victims of great trusts and powerful corporations.”<sup>70</sup> Harris grants that Sinclair’s depiction of the ills of the working class is useful, but only so far as “we need these buzzard geniuses to show the decayed places in the world’s life.” And like the reviewers who reacted against the overwhelming tragedy of the novel, she accuses Sinclair of being unable to allow into the novel anything of beauty that might

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<sup>69</sup> “The Jungle,” *Reader* 7, no. 5 (April 1906), 564, HathiTrust.

<sup>70</sup> Harris, “The Walking Delegate Novelist,” 1215.



mitigate the unrelenting gloom. This, too, was a common complaint among reviewers who addressed the novel's depiction of labor. A reviewer from the *New York Observer and Chronicle* declared that *The Jungle* "is most inartistically worked out; for a great writer would secure chiaroscuro, by mingling lights and shades, but Mr. Sinclair paints only with the blackest of black, and his picture soon wearies and disgusts the reader with its monotony of coarseness, pain, and brutality, unlike actual life, in which there is always something of good and humor and beauty."<sup>71</sup> Similarly, the *New York Times* wrote, "Like Zola, [Sinclair] studies but one aspect, and that the meanest, the most hideous, and the most vicious and painful of the phases of human life and conduct that pass under his examination. Virtue, generosity, good impulses, morality, and honesty have their place and exert their influence in the stockyard population, no doubt. They do not attract the attention or engage the pen of Mr. Sinclair."<sup>72</sup>

For these reviewers, the fact that things cannot always be as bad as Sinclair depicts them provides a means of tempering the sympathy such passages are meant to evoke. Much as the reviewer from the *Reader* looks up to make sure his world is still sunny, the reviewers from the *Times* and the *Observer and Chronicle* cite the absence of uplifting material as evidence of the incompleteness or unreliability of Sinclair's description.

### **The indecency of documentary realism**

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<sup>71</sup> Review of *The Jungle*, *New York Observer and Chronicle*, May 24, 1906, 677, American Periodicals.

<sup>72</sup> "Jurgis Rudkus and 'The Jungle.': A Dispassionate Examination of Upton Sinclair's Application of Zola's Methods to a Chicago Environment," *New York Times*, March 3, 1906, BR128, America's Historical Newspapers.

Sinclair's journalistic tendency to pile on details was a technique that attempted to expose situations and events that readers would find both unfamiliar and objectionable. This strategy of what June Howard calls "documentary realism" is clearly in effect in the descriptions of the meatpacking process, where the thoroughness and detail of the description is what produces the reader's disgust. Documentary realism is particularly suited to these scenes, since, as Miller notes, "Disgust uses images of sensation or suggests the sensory merely by describing the disgusting thing so as to capture what makes it disgusting. Images of sense are indispensable to the task."<sup>73</sup> Despite the unpleasant feelings of revulsion that Sinclair's detailed realism about meatpacking provokes, no reviewer went so far as to argue that Sinclair should have withheld his novel to avoid offending his readers' sense of decency. If the horrific details in Sinclair's depiction of the industry were true, as the Nialls-Reynolds investigation soon confirmed they were, then they must be brought before the reading public. Even Harris grants the need for unpleasant or indecent material in certain novels, writing, "squeamish as we may feel about him, we must be thankful for Upton Sinclair, as we are thankful for any other natural scavenger."<sup>74</sup>

But Sinclair also uses documentary realism to describe working conditions as experienced by the laborers in the factories, the squalor of the tenements in which those laborers live, and the legal and political corruption that keeps them trapped there. One of the most poignant scenes in the novel, and one that many reviewers remarked on, is the scene in which Jurgis and his family are tricked into signing a mortgage on a house that

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<sup>73</sup> Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, 9.

<sup>74</sup> Harris, "Walking Delegate Novelist," 1215.

they will not be able to pay for. The lawyers they consult assure them that the mortgage documents are standard, but the family later learns that the leasing agent has neglected to tell them that they will have to pay interest on top of their monthly payment toward the principal. Further, the house is not new, as it had been advertised, but has been leased to family after family, each of which is evicted when they fall behind on their payments. The force of this scene relies primarily on Sinclair's detached description, and the tragedy of the situation is at first only apparent to readers who are able to recognize the sale of the house as a scam. It is not until two chapters later that the family learns the degree to which they have been swindled.

Reviewers often found the realism of this scene stirring; an article in the *Lexington Herald* declared, "We can not think of any tragedy in fiction greater than the tragedy of the house buying described in 'The Jungle.'" <sup>75</sup> But absent a government investigation into workers' lives analogous to the Nialls-Reynolds investigation into the meatpacking process, reviewers were less receptive to most of the other scenes in the novel that describe workers' lives in documentary detail, particularly those involving Ona's rape by her foreman and her cousin Marija's descent into prostitution. When discussing these scenes, reviewers often made the argument that Sinclair's one-sided view of American life made the novel a catalogue of tragedy. Calling *The Jungle* "the realism of extremes," the *Duluth News Tribune* pleaded instead for "realism in fiction

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<sup>75</sup> M. McD. B., "The Jungle."

that paints the wholesome saneness of the life of the great middle class to which, thank goodness, most of us belong.”<sup>76</sup>

Reviewers’ tendency to respond to Sinclair’s realism about the lives of Chicago’s immigrant workers with disgusted disapproval was similar to the American response to Zola’s brand of realism. Many of the explicit comparisons between Sinclair and Zola made in the reviews of *The Jungle* are methodological: reviewers compare Sinclair’s method to Zola’s, citing the latter’s use of documentary details and a journalistic or sociological eye as a model for Sinclair, or they include Zola in a list of novelists who, like Sinclair, sought reform through their writing.<sup>77</sup> But process with which reviewers moved from realism to disgust had much in common to responses to Zola’s novels.

When discussing Zola, reviewers’ disgust often manifested itself as a fear of contamination—not the literal contamination of diseased meat, but the moral contamination of sinful or prurient subject matter. Reviewers made a clear association between the bodily and the moral; in a review of *Nana* published in the *Atlantic*, Thomas Sergeant Perry wrote, “A book more redolent of corruption it would be difficult to find; it reeks with every kind of beastly sin.”<sup>78</sup> Reviewers also accused Zola, like Sinclair after him, of delighting in the sordid parts of life without showing any of the good. A. K. Fiske, in the *North American Review*, wrote that “where another paints a garden of

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<sup>76</sup> “The Muck Rake in Fiction,” Duluth (MN) *News Tribune*, April 24, 1906, 6, America’s Historical Newspapers.

<sup>77</sup> Other novelists commonly listed include Dickens, Hugo, Tolstoy, Stowe, Gorky, London, Hardy, Norris, and even Winston Churchill, whose 1906 novel *Coniston* addressed political corruption.

<sup>78</sup> Thomas Sergeant Perry, “Zola’s Last Novel,” *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1880, 695, Making of America Project.

flowers, [Zola] depicts a dunghill; where others present to the imagination fields and trees and mountains or the charms of home-life, he conjures up the prospect behind the stables, the slough at the foot of the drain, and the disgusting bestiality of the slums. This seamy side of things is no more real than the other, and its delineation no more 'realistic' in the sense given to that term."<sup>79</sup>

### ***The Jungle* and the purpose novel**

To the extent that *The Jungle* creates a sentimental bond between reader and laborer, it should direct readerly sympathy outward, toward the suffering characters and the Packingtown workers, creating a sense of connection through an emotional response. But rather than expressing sympathy, reviewers express helplessness, horror, and discomfort. The socialism offered up at the book's ending is dismissed as a viable solution, and absent any concrete action to take on the behalf of the workers, reviewers are unwilling to react with sympathy. At the same time, the novel's sensational and disgusting elements permeate public discussions of the book, which, in the words of *Atlantic* reviewer Mary Moss, "spoilt the entire nation's appetite for its Sunday roast beef." Disgust manifests itself with concern about what readers themselves are eating, and how they themselves are affected by the scenes described in the book. When reviewers turn their attention to the parts of the book meant to evoke sympathy and direct readerly attention outward toward the suffering characters, they are still concerned with how they themselves are affected by the scenes of suffering. Much as reviewers found the

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<sup>79</sup> A. K. Fiske, "Profligacy in Fiction," *North American Review* 131, no. 284 (July 1880): 70, *American Periodicals*.

descriptions of sausage-making repellant, so, too, do they judge the scenes of suffering as excessive and personally unpleasant.

*The Jungle*'s realism functions as a sort of hinge between sympathy and disgust in the novel. The realistic descriptions are used to provoke both responses: the matter-of-fact descriptions of packinghouse horrors heighten the reader's disgust by implying that the contamination described is a matter of routine, and the litany of tragedies that befall Jurgis and his family suggests through its unending quality the impossibility of surviving in the Chicago slums. Reviewers, though, responded to the latter litany with disgust or fatigue, rather than the sympathy Sinclair looked to generate.

Like the *American Amateur Photographer* and *Charities and the Commons*, many reviewers took issue with *The Jungle* as failing to offer any satisfactory solutions to the labor problems it depicted. Neither *The Marrow of Tradition*, *The Portion of Labor* nor *The Octopus* offered prescriptive solutions to the problems they described, and in each case, some portion of reviewers cited that lack of solutions as a failing of the novel. The demand that the novel should offer concrete solutions was particularly problematic for *The Octopus*, where the expectations of the purpose novel led some reviewers to call for a solution that was in many ways in clear contrast to Norris's more formally naturalist ending. But *The Jungle*, unlike the other three novels, offers a clearly identifiable prescriptive and didactic solution to the problems of the novel, in the form of socialism.

A few reviewers praised Sinclair's portrayal of socialism. *Mother Earth* and the *Arena*, both progressive magazines that tended to be supportive of socialism, defended Sinclair's ending; *Mother Earth* called on "those who warn us against Socialistic

experiments to tell us if they know of any other effective remedy,” arguing that “all thoughtful men should study these theories of social redemption and learn why their advocates claim that putting them in practice would modify or abolish the evils of our modern conditions.”<sup>80</sup> But aside from a few exceptions, reviewers saw the socialism of the novel’s ending as no real solution at all. According to the *Bookman*, “many socialists will regret [Sinclair’s] mistaken advocacy of their cause. His reasoning is so false, his disregard of human nature so naïve, his statement of facts so biased [sic], his conclusions so perverted, that the effect can be only to disgust many honest, sensible folk with the very term he uses so glibly.”<sup>81</sup> The *New York Times* voiced a similar opinion, arguing, “The concluding chapters of ‘The Jungle,’ in which the saving grace of Socialism is made to do its beneficent work upon Jurgis, are sufficient to put the reader quite out of the mood of belief and assent.”<sup>82</sup>

Such reviews imply that, far from winning converts, the inclusion of socialism is likely to arouse readerly hostility that undermines Sinclair’s case. Others suggest that Sinclair’s case for socialism is unpersuasive. According to the *North American Review*, “The solution of the difficulties is all too facile.”<sup>83</sup> The *Duluth News Tribune* wrote that Sinclair “sacrifices literary art by allowing didacticism to run riot in his last chapters where he offers socialism as a panacea for all the ills he has depicted.”<sup>84</sup> *The Jungle* was actively encouraging legislative change, and its conclusion offered a fully articulated set

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<sup>80</sup> “The Jungle,” *Mother Earth*, 56.

<sup>81</sup> Edward Clark Marsh, “The Jungle,” *Bookman*, April 1906, 195-197, HathiTrust.

<sup>82</sup> “Jurgis Rudkus and ‘The Jungle,’” BR128.

<sup>83</sup> Louise Collier Willcox, “The Content of the Modern Novel,” *North American Review*, June 1906, 925, American Periodicals.

<sup>84</sup> “The Muck Rake in Fiction,” 6.

of political action items in the form of speeches and conversations with various socialist leaders. Despite that, reviewers still charged the novel with failing to offer creditable solutions to the ills it depicted.

While scholars are often quick to offer Sinclair's heart and stomach quip to illustrate *The Jungle*'s well-known interpretive difficulties, they tend to overlook the important fact that Sinclair's famous statement places the blame for misinterpreting the book not with his readers, but with himself. Readers did not react to a jab to the heart as if it were a punch in to the gut; instead, Sinclair's aim was such that he actually hit them in the stomach, even if he had not intended to. The reviews of *The Jungle* reveal several reasons why Sinclair missed the heart, from the competition between the sentimental and sensational modes to the sense of angry helplessness engendered by what appeared to reviewers to be a lack of compelling solutions.

More broadly, the reviews of all four of the purpose novels I examine indicate how tricky landing a punch to the heart actually was. The reception of each of the novels underscores just how much of a balancing act the purpose novel was, and how difficult it could be to navigate its generic limitations. Because the category of the purpose novel has faded from critical usage, the most important factor in defining the genre is the assessment of its original reading public. Readers and reviewers determined whether or not a novel was attempting to intervene in its contemporary situation and, following that determination, evaluated the novel according to the standards of the genre. But by 1906, those standards were so difficult to satisfy that even what was arguably the purpose



novel's most successful instantiation—*The Jungle*—was unable to meet the conflicting demands of its reading public.

## Conclusion

Upton Sinclair's difficulty integrating sympathy and disgust likely would not have surprised Harriet Beecher Stowe, who included in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* a demonstration, in the form of Miss Ophelia's northern hypocrisy, of the dangers disgust held for true Christian sympathy. For all Miss Ophelia's piety and abolitionist leanings, her response to Eva's familiarity with Tom and Mammy is to declare "that it fairly turned her stomach."<sup>1</sup> Later in the novel, Miss Ophelia cannot keep herself from recoiling from Topsy, and she worries to St. Clair that Topsy might contaminate Eva, telling him, "I know I'd never let a child of mine play with Topsy."<sup>2</sup> Though she tries to do her duty by educating and training her charge, Miss Ophelia is unable to sympathize with Topsy, and Topsy is unable to respect Miss Ophelia.

After Eva's death, though, Miss Ophelia's attitude toward Topsy changes: she "did not any longer shrink from her touch, or manifest an ill-repressed disgust, because she felt none. She viewed her now through the softened medium that Eva's hand had first held before her eyes, and saw in her only an immortal creature, whom God had sent to be led by her to glory and virtue."<sup>3</sup> Stowe makes it clear that Miss Ophelia's disgust was at odds with a state of sympathy, and that Miss Ophelia cannot experience both revulsion toward and compassion for Topsy at the same time. And while Stowe demonstrates the incompatibility of sympathy and disgust, she also avoids replicating Miss Ophelia's state

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<sup>1</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852; reprint, New York: Norton, 2010), 150.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

for her readers. Although Stowe informs readers on several occasions that Miss Ophelia experienced disgust in the presence of African Americans like Tom and Topsy, she never attempts to represent the objects of Miss Ophelia's disgust as revolting or repellant. Topsy is described as goblin-like, mechanized, cunning, dirty, and often inhuman, all descriptions that may by turns inspire alarm, amusement, condescension, pity, or distance in the reader, but they are not descriptions that will turn the reader's stomach as Miss Ophelia's stomach is said to be turned. Miss Ophelia's disgust is an impediment to sympathy, but *Uncle Tom's Cabin* does not encourage a similar impediment in its readers.

Stowe's careful negotiation of affective states serves as a reminder that the purpose novel was always a tricky proposition. A successful purpose novel had to balance a number of not-always-compatible imperatives: it needed to entertain and to sustain reader interest, to maintain a certain degree of accuracy when describing contemporary events, to make a compelling case about a particular social, economic, or political issue, and to comply with the general narrative conventions of the novel and the specific conventions of the purpose novel. Balancing these needs made the purpose novel a difficult genre both aesthetically and rhetorically.

By the turn of the century, this already difficult genre was an even harder sell for reviewers. The form of the purpose novel called for a complex response from reviewers: both literary, as the purpose novel made use of the conventions of fiction, and social or political, as it spoke directly to contemporary events. Further, as the reception of *The Octopus* indicates, reviewers expected that the novel would integrate the literary and the

topical and offer some sort of resolution to the issues it addressed. But as the reviews of *The Jungle* demonstrate, even the most explicit of resolutions could be dismissed as too radical. And the reception of *The Marrow of Tradition* and *The Portion of Labor* shows that reviewers were likely to minimize the social or political impact of the novels' most radical elements.

Recovering the purpose novel as a useful genre has several implications for our current understanding of American literary history. As the preceding chapters indicate, examining how reviewers responded to a book as a purpose novel suggest readings that are not as visible when scholars view an individual novel through the generic lens usually applied to it. Scholars who focus on the ways *The Marrow of Tradition* makes use of realist conventions often note how the text is structured to force readers into difficult realizations about their own racial position, but as a purpose novel, *Marrow* was read as part of a localized debate that allowed reviewers to displace its racial critique onto other publics. The lens of the purpose novel offers one way of reconciling, or at least making sense of, the generic conflicts in *The Portion of Labor*, allowing us to better understand the limitations placed on the book by its reviewing public, rather than faulting it for failing to meet modern scholars' generic or ideological expectations. As a purpose novel, *The Octopus* may have fallen short of reviewers' expectations, but the ways it fell short offer an alternate means of thinking about the novel that privileges the agency of the working-class people generally disenfranchised by American literary naturalism. And understanding the conventions of the purpose novel can help us better understand the

conflicting imperatives of sympathy and sensation/disgust in Sinclair's attempt to mobilize popular documentary techniques to enlist reader sympathy.

An examination of the purpose novel's final moments of viability also indicates that turn-of-the-century purpose novels were struggling against readers' and reviewers' expectations, and that those expectations had as much to do with how the genre functioned and its practical results as they did with the aesthetic objections of critics like Henry James. Reviewers may have been concerned that Chesnutt was "so preoccupied with the ethical object that he utterly forgets both nature and art," or that "Problems interested Norris more than people," but they were even more invested in the degree to which a novel met (or more frequently, failed to meet) the expectations of the genre.<sup>4</sup> Reviewers addressed questions of who a novel might or might not persuade, whether the author's stylistic approach was appropriate to the task of persuasion, and whether a novel satisfactorily solved the issue at hand. In many cases, the effect of such inquiries was to minimize the depiction of the novel as effectively persuading readers. By the turn of the century, then, reviewers, writers, and readers may have liked to imagine that a novel could effect concrete social change, but the models reviewers offered for reading the novels tended to limit or resist the persuasive process. The fact that this process often took place in newspapers and general interest magazines shifts the locus of the purpose novel's demise away from the modernist disdain for literature that engaged too explicitly with political or social issues or with the New Critical insistence that critics focus on

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<sup>4</sup> "In the World of Books," Seattle *Post-Intelligencer*, January 19, 1902, 31, Chesnutt Archive; "Problem or Art in Novels," Washington *Post*, December 3, 1902, 6, ProQuest.

aesthetic and formal qualities over social and historical ones and toward mass and popular modes of reading.

We can see echoes of the purpose novel in twentieth-century genres like the proletarian novel, the anti-war novel, and the civil rights novel.<sup>5</sup> But the popularity that made the nineteenth-century purpose novel an attractive vehicle for messages of social reform is hard to achieve today. The novel is no longer the primary entertainment medium of choice, and the novels that do attain widespread popularity tend toward escapism and fantasy, modes that are directly at odds with the purpose novel's imperative to expose unpleasant social and political ills existing in readers' own world.

The muckraking journalism that rose to prominence as the purpose novel declined has a clear modern analogue in the narrative exposés and documentary films of the early 2000s, including *Fast Food Nation* (2001 [book] and 2006 [film]), *Nickel and Dimed* (2001), *Food, Inc.* (2008), *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) and other Michael Moore documentaries.<sup>6</sup> We might similarly locate a modern corollary to the purpose novel in films that address contemporary issues, often either through feel-good narrative arcs that combine some degree of tragedy with personal triumph over adversity, or through a series of tragic events building toward a tragic conclusion.

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<sup>5</sup> Cecilia Tichi surveys many of these novels in "Novels of civic protest," in *The Cambridge History of the American Novel*, ed. Leonard Cassuto (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011): 399-400.

<sup>6</sup> Cecilia Tichi explores this connection in greater detail in *Exposés and Excess: Muckraking in America, 1900/2000* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2004).

Examples might include *Philadelphia* (1993), *Crash* (2004), *The Constant Gardener* (2005), *Babel* (2006), and *The Blind Side* (2009).<sup>7</sup>

Television, as well, has its answer to the purpose novel, in the Very Special Episodes that are a staple of both serialized dramas and comedies. These episodes are generally one-off narratives in which characters are confronted with a contemporary social issue. Very Special Episodes aimed at children and teens often conclude with a moral lesson about drugs, sex, abortion, etc., while a Very Special Episode of a prime time drama might explore the same issues in more graphic detail through high-stakes plot lines and melodrama. But serialized television, particularly TV drama, has undergone significant changes in the last decade, including the rise of HBO and other cable networks, the advent of the DVD and then the internet as a means of distributing and re-watching episodes, and the viability of web-only series. These changes in format, content, and distribution raise the possibility that television's answer to the purpose novel might expand beyond the Very Special Episode into longer narrative arcs or entire series. Here, we might look to something like *Orange is the New Black*, Netflix's series about life in a women's prison, based on Piper Kerman's memoir of the same name. While Kerman's memoir was a work of nonfiction that focused on her personal experience in prison and her discovery of her own privilege, the show uses the conventions of serialized,

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<sup>7</sup> This class of film is distinct from movies that focus on moments of historical injustice. Such movies—*Schindler's List*, *Mississippi Burning*, *Hotel Rwanda*, etc.—get audiences emotionally involved in issues they cannot actually do anything about, since the historical moment being represented has passed. In some ways, the experience of watching one of these films is like reading a purpose novel after its historical moment: the novel often remains compelling and elicits reader sympathy, but readers have nowhere in their own world to direct that sympathy.

fictionalized television to create dramatic tension, multiple character arcs, and a level of entertainment and suspense that audiences expect of television. Many of the most exciting moments in the show never appear in Kerman's memoir, and the show's entertainment value and popularity stem from its fictional elements. But Kerman and many members of the cast have capitalized on the popularity of the show to increase awareness about the American criminal justice system and the plight of women in prison. Kerman has advocated against the transfer of the 1,000 women currently serving at the Federal Correction Institute in Danbury, Conn. (the prison that serves as the basis for *Orange Is the New Black's* Litchfield), to a prison in Alabama where they will be unable to maintain contact with their families; she also advocates on behalf of JusticeHome, a program designed to allow some women who plead guilty to felonies to remain in their homes with their families.<sup>8</sup> The headline of an interview with Kerman in the *Washington Post* makes the connection between the entertainment of the show and the social issues it represents even more explicit: "'Orange Is the New Black' got you upset about prison? The real Piper explains what to do about it."<sup>9</sup> And cast members Kate Mulgrew, Uzo Aduba, and Laverne Cox appeared on Melissa Harris-Parry's MSNBC show to discuss the political realities the show represents.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Piper Kerman, "For Women, a Second Sentence," *New York Times*, August 13, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/14/opinion/for-women-a-second-sentence.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/14/opinion/for-women-a-second-sentence.html?_r=0).

<sup>9</sup> Dylan Matthews, "'Orange Is the New Black' got you upset about prison? The real Piper explains what to do about it," *Washington Post*, July 23, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/07/23/orange-is-the-new-black-got-you-upset-about-prison-the-real-piper-explains-what-to-do-about-it/>.

<sup>10</sup> Bryce J. Renninger, "Watch: 'Orange Is the New Black' Cast Members Defend the Show's Politics on 'Melissa Harris-Perry,'" *Indiewire*, August 6, 2013,



The relationship between fictional forms, contemporary social and political issues, and critical and popular reception remains significant, and there is still a prevailing attitude that popularity and attention can be immediately translated into productive persuasive work, generally in the shape of reform. The issues that the turn-of-the-century purpose novels brought to public attention—race relations and vigilante action, corporate corruption and monopolies, labor abuses and anti-union policies, even food safety and insufficient federal regulation—are still far from resolved, and the last decade has seen a return to what could well be described as a Gilded Age status quo, with an enormous wealth gap and growing domestic poverty rates and political and judicial support for corporate interests at the expense of individual welfare. Though the medium has changed, fictional forms continue to intervene in contemporary issues, making the lessons of the purpose novel's reception and demise instructive not only for scholars of American literary history, but also for our continued understanding of the ways fiction and public opinion function together.

## Appendix

This appendix lists all of the reviews and articles about each of the novels that I was able to find, in chronological order beginning with the earliest published review. In the case of reviews archived by HathiTrust, a digital repository that contains copies of nearly all of the public-domain books scanned by Google Books, I have included stable links to the first page of each review, since it can be difficult to find specific items on HathiTrust, even with an exact citation. The other digital archives and databases either do not provide stable links, or, as is the case with the Library of Congress's Chronicling America archive, are easy enough to navigate that a citation should be sufficient.

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