

## Presley's Pauses: Unearthing Force in California's Land and Water Regimes and Frank Norris's *The Octopus*

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### Abstract

*Considered against the backdrop of California's pastoral obsession to realize Eden, Frank Norris's *The Octopus: A Story of California* (1901) reveals how his respective brand of American naturalism interprets the changes to California's physical space during the 1880s. Through his preoccupation with the pervasive discourse of force-theory that dominated late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century thought and his penchant for drama and romance, *The Octopus* becomes much more than an epic tale of struggle between the railroad and the wheat ranchers. Rather it explains the various layers of conquest and imperialist discourse within the text which both promote and explain the drastic reengineering of California's land and water resources during this period. By reading Norris's deterministic program through an ecocritical lens, we see how the novel sheds light on California's past, present, and future environmental transformations revealing a Golden State that is more of a tarnished ideal rather than the earthily paradise so many longed to find.*

### Introduction

In María Amparo Ruiz de Burton's *The Squatter and the Don* (1885), the reader encounters a group of Anglo families who relocate to California lured by the prospects of "free land" and opportunity. One of those moving west is James Mechlin, a wealthy Easterner plagued by "too close application to business," who follows some friendly advice to relocate to Southern California to cure his ailments (67). Upon arriving in California Mr. Mechlin finds that "his health improved so rapidly that he made up his mind to buy a country place and make San Diego his home," and as a result, "he devoted himself to cultivating trees and flowers, and his health was bettered every day" (67).

Though a very minor part of the larger narrative, Mechlin's restoration from the brink of death thanks to California's bounteous climate reflects a well-worn trope in the Golden State's literature: California as Promised Land. As David Wyatt observes, it is in California that westward expansion reached its end, the effect of which gave Americans the sense that they had found

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paradise—that in this land nestled between ocean and mountains they had returned to Eden (xvi). Here on the shores of the Pacific culminated some of the nation’s most cherished beliefs embodied in expressions of Manifest Destiny and the Frontier. Indeed, for countless Americans and foreigners who migrated to California in the nineteenth century, the state represented the realization of the American Dream. Yet as Ruiz de Burton’s novel demonstrates, California was far from the idyllic garden many imagined it to be as unjust land laws, pervasive racism, rampant greed and corruption, unregulated capitalism, monopolistic control, and violence depict a California fallen from grace.<sup>1</sup>

The tension between an idealistic vision for the state and the harsh reality that plays out in Ruiz de Burton’s novel becomes a principle theme among many turn-of-the-century California texts as writers attempt to come to terms with the state’s meteoric rise as a world economic and cultural force. For many California-based literary naturalists such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Jack London, Frank Norris, and John Steinbeck, the state’s varied physical and social geographies prove ideal settings in which to apply their respective philosophies regarding human nature and the elements that shape it. At the same time, the decision to locate their narratives within these locales is also about reimagining this space—and by extension, the broader American West which it epitomized—as something far different from the prevailing idealization of the region that has long dictated the nation’s relationship to these western lands. “[T]he overt project of those adhering to the naturalist mode,” argues Mary Lawlor,

was to construct a critical reevaluation of the West as a strictly material place and a historically determined culture. Thus, in the naturalist mode the West was pictured as a limited and often limiting geographical space that lacked the psychological and ideological colorings of a truly open frontier and cast regional identity as the product of material “forces” rather than of individualistic enterprise. (2)

Lawlor’s description of the naturalist treatment of the American West aptly describes what occurs on a more specific level in regards to how California’s literary naturalists grappled with the state’s multifaceted imaginations. Whereas Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 Frontier Thesis codified the nation’s mythic construction of the West, believing that the frontier continually remade and refined the American character, literary artists like those above complicated such optimistic and illusory sentiments through their representations of California. However, these beliefs proved to be too pervasive and powerful so that not even these writers, so adamant about rejecting Romantic principles, could entirely divorce themselves from the allure of the West. Thus, despite the fact that they could not entirely discard this national idealization of the region, one should not overlook how they attempt to construct California’s history as a highly deterministic space.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, it is precisely in the literary naturalists’ ability to explore the role of determinism and force evident in the numerous natural resource battles shaping turn-of-the-century California that writers such as Norris shed important light on the economic, environmental, and social transformations that reconfigure the state’s landscape. Considered against the backdrop of

California's pastoral obsession to realize Eden, Norris's *The Octopus: A Story of California* (1901) reveals how his respective brand of American naturalism—typically viewed as evidence of the more pessimistic side of this literary movement—interprets the changes to California's physical space during the 1880s.<sup>3</sup> Through his preoccupation with the pervasive discourse of force-theory that dominated late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century thought and his penchant for drama and romance, *The Octopus* becomes much more than an epic tale of struggle between the railroad and the wheat ranchers. Rather it explains the various layers of conquest and imperialist discourse within the text which both promote and explain the drastic reengineering of California's land and water resources during this period. By reading Norris's deterministic program through an ecocritical lens, we see how the novel sheds light on California's past, present, and future environmental transformations revealing a Golden State that is more of a tarnished ideal rather than the earthly paradise so many longed to find.

As the reigning motif in the "Naturalist Western"<sup>4</sup> (Lawlor 3), force-as-theory is an important contribution to the scientific findings arriving in America via Europe during the last few decades of the nineteenth century. In *American Literature and the Universe of Force* (1981), Ronald Martin traces how the turn-of-the-century fascination with force informs and controls the naturalist project. He explains that this pervasive belief—grounded in scientific discoveries such as the law of conservation of energy, otherwise known as the Law of the Conservation of Force—emerged from the observations of a host of scientist-philosophers "who tended to think of force as inherent in or acting upon physical nature wherever motion or change occurred" (xi). Harold Kaplan articulates this particular preoccupation with science in a slightly different way, suggesting that what defines this age was a "myth of power or what can be called a metapolitics of conflict and power" (1). For Kaplan, the nineteenth century's scientific breakthroughs created a "language of power" which relied on such synonyms as "'order,' . . . 'force,' 'energy,' 'conflict,' 'struggle'" among others to express not only the developments in the hard sciences, but those in the social sciences and humanities (4). He further defines literary naturalism as "a useful term for describing a literary practice and set of programmatic ideas reflecting the laws of thermodynamics, Darwinian theory, and the sociological thought derived from Adam Smith, Malthus, Marx, and Spencer" (5). According to Martin, perhaps the most influential contributor to this notion of force was Hebert Spencer, who, like Darwin, articulated a view of evolution that revolutionized the way in which humans understood the world (xiii). In fact, so powerful was Spencer's "description of the universe and its processes" that it became the de facto paradigm for an entire host of the late-nineteenth-century thinkers including "philosophers, scientists, ministers, journalists, and others" (xiii).<sup>5</sup>

A primary reason that this framework became so influential during this period, particularly in America and among so many different groups, was that it seemed to logically account for the era's countless alterations to the nation's cultural fabric. For Martin many Americans, "seeing in the universe of force a belief that explained the nature of their society—the industrialization, the competition, the unremitting change and growth—were reassured to know that this state of affairs was not only inevitable but it was right" (60). Another explanation for the popularity of force-theory in America stems from its melding of scientific and religious explanations of reality. Martin notes that Spencer's adherents built on his vision of determinism and "made it into a

model of the universe that had a place for God just as it had a place for science, and thus justified the ways of both” (69). With such a totalizing discourse dominating turn-of-the-century America, it is no wonder that California—the quintessential American space—would see these beliefs of divine right and scientific progress play out to drastically reconfigure the state’s social and physical landscapes.<sup>6</sup>

However, the comfort that force-theory gave to late-nineteenth-century Americans as it seemed to rationally explain the changes around them came with a high cost. What was for many a clear, organized explanation for change became, for others, a justification for:

some of the Western world’s most pernicious social practices and theories at the turn of the century. Force thinking generally rationalized racism, class superiority, imperialism, the acquisition of wealth and power, and veneration of the ‘fittest.’ Explicitly a philosophy of inevitable and benevolent progress . . . it meshed only too neatly with the rampant forms of Social Darwinism and helped to obscure from otherwise responsible men the obligation and even the possibility of social reform. (xv)

Like other Americans who looked to the apparent rationality of force-theory, Norris was attracted to this concept and relied on it to design his literary experiments regarding the human condition. Yet as the above reactions to force-theory indicate, his work is also mired with the tensions which derive from a reliance on this principle. On one hand, the theory justifies the scientific and technological breakthroughs to advance the human race while, on the other, it reveals the oppressive actions inherent in these attempts. Norris grapples with these tensions in his representation of central California, demonstrating how science, economics, and nature are part of a broader discourse concerning what Mark Seltzer defines as a “rivalry between modes of production and modes of reproduction” that he argues defines much of American literary naturalism (3). This rivalry relies upon what he further notes “is the resolutely abstract account of ‘force’ that governs the naturalist text” (28). Thus, Seltzer’s argument not only suggests the ways in which people dominate others, but in the case of the *The Octopus*, how such notions of production and reproduction—inherent in the cultivation of wheat—speak to broader concerns regarding California’s ecological transformations during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>7</sup>

Echoing the prevalence of force-theory evident in other naturalist texts such as London’s *The Sea-Wolf*, Norris’s *The Octopus* relies on this concept as the foundational discourse to retell the events of the 1880 Mussel Slough affair which pitted wheat ranchers against the railroad in a bloody shootout.<sup>8</sup> In fact, Norris refers to this principle repeatedly throughout the novel in such well-known passages as those near the end of the text. In this segment, Presley, the Eastern-born poet gone west in search of romance, scans the San Joaquin Valley following the massacre as the narrator gives voice to his thoughts: “FORCE only existed—FORCE that brought men into the world, FORCE that crowded them out of it to make way for the succeeding generation, FORCE that made the wheat grow, FORCE that garnered it from the soil to give place to the succeeding crop” (634). For Norris, force is the governing principle dictating both human’s and nature’s

existence. He views it as universal in its application, and as such, it becomes the primary essence to shape the novel's events.

Writing to his publisher in April 1899, Norris describes his grand vision for capturing the tragic shootout between the wheat farmers of the San Joaquin Valley and the Southern Pacific Railroad: "I mean to study the whole question as faithfully as I can and write a hair lifting story. There's [sic] the chance for the big, Epic, dramatic thing in this, and I mean to do it thoroughly.—get at it from every point of view, the social, agricultural & political. Just say the last word on the R.R. question in California" (*Letters* 35).<sup>9</sup> Whether or not he actually had the "last word" on the incident is debatable; however, few can argue that Norris lacked thoroughness. In attempting to create this epic tale that Norris envisioned as the first installment in his wheat trilogy, he ended up creating, in Heinz Ickstadt's summation, "perhaps the only major imperialist novel in American history (the novel of a new empire of power: of machines, markets, corporations)" as it concludes with California's wheat about to be shipped overseas to India's emerging markets (26).<sup>10</sup> While I do not want to downplay Ickstadt's attention to Norris's treatment of empire in these scenes, my own interests lie in the less overt references to empire that Norris explores in the text's first chapter. Through these opening passages and Presley's observations, Norris articulates what he envisions as the troubling social, agricultural, and political conditions of late-nineteenth-century California, conditions which are all rooted in the shifting economies of the Central Valley and their reliance on land and water.

Norris's representation of these changes in the novel's opening pages are illuminated by Raymond Williams's description of dominant, residual, and emergent cultural systems and their relationships to one another. In *Marxism and Literature* (1977), Williams explains that "the complexity of a culture is to be found not only in its variable processes and their social definitions—traditions, institutions, and formation—but also in the dynamic interrelations, at every point of the process" (121). As Williams outlines, dominant cultural processes maintain their authority through their appropriation and repression of residual forms. Although these latter expressions resist and oppose the dominant system, the governing cultural lens transforms them through a legitimizing narrative that downplays the violence and power differential evident in their relationship (122). Similarly, emergent forms are "incorporated" as they respond to the dominant through a process that seeks toward "recognition, acknowledgement, and thus a form of *acceptance*" (125). Ultimately, such incorporation "narrows the gap between alternative and oppositional elements" (126), normalizing and obfuscating any form of inherent resistance to the dominant system. In *The Octopus* this ongoing process of resistance and incorporation emerges through the relationships between the railroad, the valley's Spanish-Mexican heritage, and the cooperative irrigation efforts of the Anglo ranchers. Emblematic of Williams's dominant, residual, and emergent processes, respectively, these three components of Norris's text reveal the cultural clashes upon which California's economic and agricultural might in the late-nineteenth century is built.

Each of these cultural systems becomes the subject of Presley's wanderings in the novel's first chapter. When the reader first meets Presley, he is, as critic Reuben J. Ellis describes, "in medias ride" (17) since "early that morning . . . [he] had decided to make a long excursion through the

neighbouring country, partly on foot and partly on bicycle” (Norris, *The Octopus* 3). Noting this peculiar entry of one of the text’s protagonists, Ellis remarks, “*The Octopus* is to an important degree an exercise in the point of view established by the introduction of Presley in this first chapter. Whatever else the novel might be, it is plainly an account of what this bicycle-riding poet found when he came to convalesce in the dry air of the San Joaquin” (17). While Presley has a number of interesting encounters during his trip through the Los Muertos Ranch to the small town of Guadalajara as he periodically interrupts his journey to talk to neighbors and observe his surroundings, perhaps those most significant speak to the region’s history and current inhabitants. Using Presley’s cycling adventure as his narrative frame, Norris leads the reader—through Presley’s pauses—on a journey through California’s imperial past, one “already contoured to various economic empires” (Mrozowski 167). Moving through and commenting on this “historical palimpsest” (167), Presley reveals the powers which transform the San Joaquin Valley’s agricultural base from individual land holders to corporate control.

In fact, it is from the very first sentence of the novel that Norris introduces Presley and the reader to the omnipresence that the railroad—as the dominant cultural force—plays within the valley’s transformation. As he pedals his way past Caraher’s saloon, “Presley was suddenly aware of the faint and prolonged blowing of a steam whistle that he knew must come from the railroad shops near the depot at Bonneville” (3). Rambling over the dusty, rough road on his bicycle, Presley’s attention is drawn to the subtle yet persistent sound of the train’s whistle that interrupts his errand, a foreshadowing of the continuous interference that the railroad will perform in the text. Having stopped at the Home Ranch to deliver the Derrick’s their mail, Presley converses with Harran Derrick about grain rates and the increase in tariffs imposed by the railroad. Condemning S. Behrman, the Bonneville banker and railroad agent for Tulare County, and the rise in shipping rates, Harran remarks, “why not hold us up with a gun in our faces, and say ‘hands up,’ and be done with it?” (11). Not wishing to get caught up in the growing struggle between the farmers and the railroad, Presley leaves Harran to fume over the railroad’s decision while he lights out again across the ranches. Presley then meets Dyke, one of the railroad engineers, who explains how he has been recently fired by the railroad despite his willingness to work for it during a strike. At this point in the chapter, Presley has encountered the train on three different occasions, either through hearing it himself, or hearing about it from others; everywhere he goes he senses the railroad’s presence. But not until his own encounter with the train does its overwhelming and extensive power become unmistakably clear.

Making his way back to the Los Muertos Rancho after a long day in the saddle, Presley comes upon the Pacific and Southwestern tracks. Together, the bike and the train reflect the period’s technological advancements, and allow Norris to playfully comment on the romance of the West as its wide-open spaces are now traversed by two-wheels and an iron horse rather than a trusty steed. And as our supposed hero rambles down the county road, awash in his own idyllic thoughts inspired by the vast, serene landscape, he is rudely brought back to reality. Amid the cacophony caused by the passing of the “crack passenger engine of which Dyke had told him” (49), Presley hears the sickening bleats from a flock of sheep as they are struck by the speeding train. Overwhelmed by the brutality of the scene, he quickly makes his way back to the ranch “almost running, even putting his hands over his ears till he was out of hearing distance of that all but

human distress” (50). When he finally feels out of range from the animals’ horrible cries of agony, he uncovers his ears to find the world turned to silence once again. And yet, the silence is broken as it had been earlier in the day when the train’s whistle calls to him from afar: “Then, faint and prolonged, across the levels of the ranch, he heard the engine whistling for Bonneville” (51). Whereas the whistle had awoken him earlier from his pastoral revelry, it now resounded with “ominous notes, hoarse, bellowing, ringing with the accents of menace and defiance” to take on the form of “the galloping monster . . . shooting from horizon to horizon . . . flinging the echo of its thunder over all the reaches of the valley, leaving blood and destruction in its path; the leviathan, with tentacles of steel clutching into the soil, the soulless Force, the iron-hearted Power, the monster, the Colossus, the Octopus” (51). What was once a simple reminder of his morning’s errand had transformed by day’s end into a nightmare. The piercing whistle, the “echo of its thunder,” and its path “shooting from horizon to horizon” symbolize the railroad’s pervading influence in the San Joaquin Valley, punctuating the novel with its presence to remind the reader of its dominance over the text’s other characters.

As perhaps the novel’s most iconic scene, numerous critics have commented on the function of the railroad throughout the text and its sudden, violent appearance in this bucolic setting.<sup>11</sup> What these readings suggest is that not only is the railroad an intrusive power to be reckoned with, it is more significantly a representation of male aggression toward the land and people. Likewise it reflects Seltzer’s attention to production and reproduction as a central motif in the naturalist novel since the railroad operates to further economic productivity of California’s agricultural markets. Yet as the railroad represents a force of masculine, economic, and technological potency, it also becomes the totalizing force, the dominant cultural form, dictating all other subjects and residual and emergent practices within the novel. As Mrozowski observes, the railroad is the means by which Presley is brought “back into the social truth of the valley and its regimented timetables set by the powerful Pacific and Southwestern” (167). This particular “social truth” is rooted in the “immense empiric power now situated around him,” which he cannot initially see because he is “so dazzled by the ruins of past empires” (167). As Presley makes the rounds throughout the valley in the first chapter and is repeatedly reminded of the railroad’s presence in the daily affairs of what he attempts to envision as an idyllic pastoral space, he comes to understand just how entrenched the railroad’s power is within the region. With “tentacles of steel clutching into the soil,” Norris suggests that this dominant imperialist force pervades every aspect of the valley’s culture, thereby dictating how one envisions its past, present, and future.

One of the “ruins of past empires” that captures Presley’s attention is that of the Spanish-Mexican rancho system that once dominated California’s agricultural economy. This aspect of the valley’s residual culture changed dramatically in the wake of the Mexican-American War and the impact that Anglo-American legal and economic systems would have on California’s land. Following the war, an event historian Patricia Limerick calls “a shameless land grab and an aggressive attack on Mexican sovereignty” (232), the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo signed over Mexico’s northern territories to the United States. Although this land transfer opened up this vast region to Anglo development, the United States and those who migrated westward faced the challenge of actually securing the land from those who had lived there before Guadalupe-Hidalgo since the 1848 treaty had protected Californio land ownership rights. Yet,

these rich, productive lands proved too valuable to be left in the hands of a conquered people, and so a variety of measures were enacted to make a “legal” shift in ownership. In 1851, as noted California historian Kevin Starr explains, the Board of Land Commissioners convened to oversee this process, “assess[ing] title by title, the validity of all Spanish and Mexican land-grant claims” (*California* 104). Not surprisingly, the Californios saw this act as “a betrayal of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and a legalized form of theft” (104-05). And as Starr further suggests, “the question of land grants . . . would be compounded when the railroad became the largest landowner in the state” (105) as California was eager to bolster its economic position rather than support the practices of what amounted to a foreign culture.<sup>12</sup>

As one of the largest landholders in California, the railroad played a crucial role in dictating the state’s agricultural development. In his extensive study of the Central and Southern Pacific railroads and their influence on the development of California into an economic machine, Richard Orsi traces the railroad’s origins to California’s gold rush and the intervening years when Californians, challenged by their geographical isolation, looked to make their mark on the national stage. Eventually, a number of railroad companies emerged to improve California’s economic stature, but it was not until the question of California’s position as a free or slave state, the outbreak of the Civil War, and, ultimately, the federal government’s decision to construct a transcontinental railway that the railroad became the consummate power which would develop the state in subsequent years (Orsi 3). With the Central Pacific acquiring huge land holdings from the federal government to build east from the West Coast where it would eventually join the Union Pacific in 1869, the railroad opened the lands adjacent to its tracks for settlement, ushering in the dawn of California’s agricultural might and a lasting transformation from the Spanish-Mexican land grant system.<sup>13</sup> Amid these shifting cultural tides Presley enters Guadalajara, a run-down relic of California’s past and a prime example of William’s residual culture which the railroad would both appropriate and replace.

As Presley wheels his way into Guadalajara with the intent to “have a Spanish dinner at Solotari’s,” Norris unmask the valley’s historic past and its Spanish-Mexican heritage (Norris, *The Octopus* 4). Here, the narrator wastes no time in describing the dilapidated state of this community which “had enjoyed a fierce and brilliant life” when “the raising of cattle was the great industry of the country” (20). But the narrator further observes that these halcyon days had all occurred “before the railroad came . . . Now it was moribund” (20). As the railroad shifted the economic base of the valley from ranching to wheat and influenced Bonneville’s growth, Guadalajara had become a “decayed and dying Mexican town,” surviving solely on the businesses that catered to “those occasional Eastern tourists who came to visit the Mission of San Juan” (20). Reduced to little more than a tourist destination, Guadalajara’s inhabitants lament the town’s transformation from its heyday under the Californio land grant system to a relic of nostalgia as a new regime rises.

However, when Presley finally enters Solotari’s and joins its patrons for a meal, this transformation and the reaction of the residual culture to the dominant enterprise becomes even more apparent. In Solotari’s, one of the few businesses still in operation, Presley shares the restaurant with “two young Mexicans (one of whom was astonishingly handsome, after the



melodramatic fashion of his race) and an old fellow . . . decrepit beyond belief” (20). The descriptions that follow depict the Mexicans, their song, and their eventual conversation that capitalize on the romance of the bygone Spanish-Mexican empire and their traditional land use practices. The narrator describes these men as “decayed, picturesque, vicious, and romantic . . . relics of a former generation, standing for a different order of things” (20). Where these individuals and their land holdings at one time proved an obstacle for the railroad’s dominance and the opening up of the valley to the arrival of thousands of farmers, their “different order of things”—emblematic of Williams’s residual culture—is now only a reminder to Presley of a past largely extinct, a history to commemorate nostalgically. He eavesdrops on the conversation of the old man who reminisces about the valley in the days of bandits, explorers, and grand men of the Spanish-Mexican system. Eventually joining the man for a drink, Presley learns how much of the valley was once part of a feudal-like system where “Los Muertos was a Spanish grant, a veritable principality” (20-1). The old man longs for these days when the valley boasted a variety of industries, when “there was always plenty to eat, and clothes enough for all” (21), suggesting that under the railroad’s dominion conditions had greatly deteriorated.

Missing the old days, the man also scorns the alterations to the valley’s agricultural base. He exclaims, “what would Father Ulivarri have said to such a crop as Señor Derrick plants these days? Ten thousand acres of wheat!” (21). With further memorialization of the residual culture through tales of the nobles who once ruled the valley and their loves and losses, the man eventually concludes his tale sighing, “Ah, those were the days. That was a gay life. This,” referring to what had replaced those times, “this is stupid” (22). Speaking on behalf of a displaced and disenfranchised people, the centenarian condemns the imperial presence of the railroad, its Anglo-backed financiers, and even the wheat barons who have transformed the valley from a bucolic fiefdom to a one-crop, cash machine. Caught up in the tale, Presley, too, shares the old man’s sorrow. But as an outsider, his longing represents the end-of-century romanticization of the now exotic Mission system, a shift indicative of how the dominant culture appropriates through force that which it had wrestled away from the residual.

Later in the chapter, as Presley peddles his way back to the Home ranch, he passes the old, dilapidated San Juan mission “where swung the three cracked bells, the gift of the King of Spain” (42).<sup>14</sup> While the mission and its Catholic backing once resisted Anglo aspirations, it had now been appropriated by the dominant socio-economic matrix. Whereas this foreign religion, its practitioners, and their particular method of colonizing and cultivating the region once threatened the United States’ sense of Manifest Destiny, they now symbolize, under the dominant system characterized by the railroad trust and the tourist economy, quaint relics of an idyllic past to which tourists can escape and forget modern-day pressures.<sup>15</sup> The irony of this appropriation, of course, is that it relies on the removal of the Hispano landowner as an integral player in the region’s actual affairs. This commodification of California’s past is indicative of “imperialist nostalgia” which Renato Rosaldo defines as “a particular kind of nostalgia, often found under imperialism, where people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed” (108). Only once those of a particular complexion and heritage are deemed unfit to own and cultivate the land can the celebration of their religious and agricultural practices by Anglo America begin.<sup>16</sup>

Presley's visit to Solotari's occupies a key moment in the opening chapter and anticipates the rest of the text's imperialist focus. This scene underscores the long history of empire in California which transitions from the Spanish-Mexican landowners' reliance on native peoples to support their economy to the railroad's control of the land-grant system for its supremacy. It also speaks to the flow of force Norris traces between California's wheat empire and the new wheat markets in India referenced at the end of the novel. Nevertheless, this important pause in Presley's ride speaks to another empire—one which would make this imperial shift eastward possible. As Presley's ride across the ranches in the first chapter reveals the dominant and residual cultures of central California, his journey also reveals those cultures just emerging, those "new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship [that] are continually being created" (Williams 123). Underscoring the significance of these moments in Presley's journey, Nicolas Witschi contends that this novel "offers something not yet seen in any widely circulated literary prose from California, for in his first chapter Norris offers a vision of an emerging world in which economic, political, and social relationships are determined not by mining but rather by water" (109). As perhaps the first critic to note Norris's attention to this emerging industry, Witschi astutely observes that this chapter is "unmistakably marked at each of its dramatic beats with water" (110). Building on his observations, I turn to how Norris's references to water, aridity, and the infrastructure necessary to support agriculture in this region underscore the competing claims for this resource that bear direct impact on California's future as an agricultural power.

It is specifically in Presley's pauses surrounding Hooven's place where these new practices and relationships regarding irrigation and agriculture emerge. Before Presley stops to chat with Hooven, a German tenant of the Derrick's, the narrator describes the region's arid conditions that plague the ranches and complicate Presley's journey:

during the dry season of the past few months, the layer of dust had deepened and thickened to such an extent that more than once Presley was obliged to dismount and trudge along on foot, pushing his bicycle in front of him. . . . all the vast reaches of the San Joaquin Valley—in fact all South Central California, was bone dry, parched, and baked and crisped after four months of cloudless weather, when the day seemed always at noon, and the sun blazed white hot over the valley from the Coast Range in the west to the foothills of the Sierras in the east. (4)

Because most of the Valley's rainfall occurs in the winter months, such dry spells during the growing season are typical. Despite these conditions, wheat was the crop of choice in the San Joaquin because of its hardiness in dry climates and because farmers could rely on dry farming techniques which uses only whatever rain falls to turn a profit (Hundley Jr. 90). But with drought conditions like those that hit the region throughout the 1860s and 1870s, "even scrupulously practiced dry farming could not prevent total crop loss for many, especially in the southern San Joaquin Valley" (90). In light of these repeated droughts, the dry farmers and wheat barons began to look to irrigation as a panacea.

Contemplating his arid surroundings as he approaches the Lower Road, Presley encounters one of the county's water tanks, which "was a landmark" (4). Often covered by advertisements

painted on by the local citizenry, these “could be read for miles” (4). And because “he was very thirsty, Presley resolved to stop for a moment to get a drink” (4). About to slake his thirst, he notices men painting over a previous ad on the water tank, which now announces S. Behrman’s business services (5). Similar to Presley’s observation at the ditch, these references seem insignificant except for their purpose to orient the reader to the text’s setting and its principle characters. Yet as George Henderson posits in his treatment of the state’s complex relationship to capitalism and agriculture in the late-nineteenth-century, “the very way that Norris structures this chapter, social and economic space is made paramount” (140). The parched ranch, Presley’s thirst, and the looming water tower which stands above all the other landmarks in the vicinity symbolize the power of water in this text. And the fact that Behrman’s name and economic prowess are scrawled on the water tower communicates the ideology of monopolistic capitalism which will define the water industry by the novel’s end.

The significance of water for the region and as a theme within this chapter culminates when Presley stops at Hooven’s. Here, he notices once again that “there was nothing green in sight. The wheat stubble was of dirty yellow; the ground, parched, cracked, and dry, of a cheerless brown” (Norris, *The Octopus* 13). With Hooven away from his home, Presley takes a moment to survey the surroundings, focusing on an area of the ranch that held particular significance. “What gave special interest to Hooven’s,” the narrator explains,

was the fact that here was the intersection of the Lower Road and Derrick’s main irrigating ditch, a vast trench not yet completed, which he and Annixter . . . were jointly constructing. It ran directly across the road and at right angles to it, and lay a deep groove in the field between Hooven’s and the town of Guadalajara, some three miles further on. Besides this, the ditch was a natural boundary between two divisions of the Los Muertos ranch, the first and the fourth. (14)

Outside of the previous references to water, what this pause reveals has little importance other than to signify a variation in the landscape and to allow Presley time to decide which path to take to Guadalajara. However, the attention to water given in the novel’s opening pages suggests that there is much more going on here than mere plot development.

Indeed, as we consider the irrigation ditch in light of these other references to water and its placement on the map, which is part of the novel’s prefatory material, the ditch becomes a powerful ideological symbol that extends its significance far beyond its obvious role as the location for the shootout between the ranchers and the railroad men.<sup>17</sup> Although Henderson observes that this map “graphically illustrates the forces that intersect at the ranch and its environs” (140), Leigh Ann Litwiller Berte further elaborates on the map’s representation of power, suggesting that

while Norris includes some topographical and natural features on the map . . . far greater emphasis is given to roads . . . railroutes, and telephone lines—the lines of communication and transportation through which economic force flows . . .

Norris's map represents more than a material geography of the novel: it makes visible the circulation of *force*. (203-04)

Indeed these manmade developments capture an important moment in the Valley's march to modernization as faster and more reliable means of communication and transportation will improve the region's access to future markets. However, what Berte neglects to note is that although the features above are potent conveyers of economic might, so too is the irrigation ditch. Not only will it carry the precious water that will bring more land under cultivation and yield greater harvests, but the ditch also carries the imperial dreams and eventual realities of reclamation on an industrial scale that will forever alter California's ecology, economy, and social makeup.

The ditch is such a powerful symbol of force within the novel because while marking the space for the novel's violent climax it also represents a trajectory of force within the American West that involves all the major groups represented in the novel—the Spanish-Mexicans, the wheat barons, and the railroad monopoly—along with the region's earliest irrigators who are entirely ignored within the novel. Tracing California's earliest water development schemes to the indigenous peoples who inhabited present-day California, Hundley Jr. shows how tribes such as the Paiute manipulated water systems in the Owen's Valley, a region just east of the Central Valley and across the Sierra Nevadas. There they built dams and canals hundreds of years before the Spanish implemented their own forms of irrigation (21). When the Spanish arrived in the sixteenth-century, they too attempted to harness the region's water to support their missions—efforts Worster dubs as “means of power over the aboriginal peoples” (*Rivers* 75). In the 1800s Anglo settlers in the West drew on these previous models to irrigate on a much larger scale. Annixter and the Derrick's construct the ditch to improve their crops and ultimately follow in this tradition, supplanting the Californios before them who stand in their way of divine right to California's promising lands. Described in imperialist language, Magnus Derrick's vision is grandiose in its scope:

He saw only the grand *coup*, the huge results, the East conquered, the march of empire rolling westward, finally arriving at its starting point, the vague, mysterious Orient. He saw his wheat, like a crest of an advancing billow crossing the Pacific, bursting upon Asia, flooding the Orient in a golden torrent. It was the new era. He had lived to see the death of the old and the birth of the new; first the mine, now the ranch; first gold, now wheat. (320-21)

Derrick's vision relies on the demise of earlier residual cultural forms whose land practices have been replaced by the new empire of wheat. Nevertheless, to realize his own dreams, Derrick must partner with the railroad to move his goods to market, a relationship ensuring that a “more persistent pattern emerged: corporate agriculture” (Starr, *Inventing* 131). No longer isolated from the world's markets, wheat barons like Derrick could potentially make huge profits. Of course, as Presley's journey reveals, drought always looms on the horizon. For Magnus and his fellow wheat farmers to achieve their dream, they begin to work collectively to harness the valley's rivers and streams to bring more reliable water to the area in order to make crops more

productive. In doing so, they respond to the profitable economic conditions the railroad helped create. However, this partnership also opens the door for the railroad to acknowledge the possibilities of western water development and to seek control over the region's water resources.

Just as the wheat barons exploited the region's vast natural resources to extend their profits, the railroads equally sought new opportunities to spread their influence. In the case of the San Joaquin Valley, Orsi highlights how as the railroad played a crucial role in transforming this region into a grower's paradise and how it became an immensely powerful voice in respect to the valley's water use. Because the railroad had to navigate extremely arid expanses, it carried water to its backcountry outposts, and as a result, the railroad became one of the earliest proponents and developers of this finite resource (Orsi 173). Eventually, the railroad began to build its own water projects to encourage agriculture, and ultimately develop its landholdings. And the 1870s were a pivotal time for the railroad in the Central Valley: "by the mid-1870s, the railroad had successfully discovered local supplies throughout the valley and had drilled wells or tapped streams and had installed steam pumps or gravity-flow systems" (175).<sup>18</sup> Therefore, like the wheat farmers, the railroad saw the potential for manipulating the region's water resources for profit.

However, to fully take advantage of the available water, these irrigation projects necessitated immense capital that the local landowners could never generate alone. Thus, we see Magnus and Annixter, like the farmers who perished in the Battle of Mussel Slough, pool their finances to construct a ditch only to be defeated because of soaring land prices. As Starr notes, "the tenant ranchers of the Mussel Slough area . . . had improved their rental properties with a self-financed irrigation district on the promise that they would be able to buy their ranches at \$2.50 per acre" (*California* 156). Yet, when these early irrigation entrepreneurs saw those prices skyrocket to \$40 an acre because of the improvements they made to the land, they felt they had little choice but to make a stand and resist (156). This emerging industry of small-scale, locally controlled water development came in response to the possibilities that the railroad offered through access to new markets. However, the attempts to control the water and the land proved too enticing for the incomparable dominance of the Central and Southern Pacific Railroad, which acknowledged the wheat farmers' efforts to do likewise but which stepped in to control the extent of resource development. For as the reasoning went, "[if] profits could be safely made on small irrigated plots, then big profits could surely be made on big acreage" (Hundley Jr. 91). Although Magnus's acreage is far from that of a small-time wheat farmer, it is nothing compared to the railroad which eventually owned up to ten-percent of all of California's land during this period and sought to develop these holdings through irrigated agriculture (Worster 101). In so doing, it did not take long for the railroad to become the largest water developer in the state, only to be eclipsed by the federal government and public utilities in the twentieth century (Orsi 186-8).

The symbol of the uncompleted ditch at the beginning of the novel is significant in light of the trajectory of force that Norris outlines throughout the text. While it stands as a monument to the valley's burgeoning wheat empire which replaced the indigenous and Spanish-Mexican modes of agricultural production, it also becomes a relic of the small-scale, locally owned and controlled

water works which the railroad would eventually dominate. Thus, we can read Norris's ditch as a significant marker encapsulating the naturalistic program to articulate those forces—social, economic, scientific, environmental—as they are expressed through dominant, residual, and emergent cultural forms within late-nineteenth-century California.

Nevertheless, for all the attention given to these various forces which bring down the farmer's collective known as the League, the novel is neither entirely accurate in its portrayal of the Mussel Slough incident nor is it solely a reflection of pessimistic determinism. "[D]espite Norris's research and the undeniable accuracy of certain aspects of the novel," Adam Wood argues that "*The Octopus* is not an historical novel" (110). Wood supports his assertion through "[Norris's] simplification of history in his reassigning of the class position of the farmers . . . who actually resisted and ultimately lost to the railroad [since they] were predominantly working-class individuals—mostly immigrants who struck out West seeking to support themselves and their families" (111). This elision of race and class within the novel's protagonists couples with the overt Romanticism throughout the text evident in such aspects as the noble struggle between the farmers and the railroad, Presley's admiration of epic landscapes and bygone cultures, and the final conclusion which sees the wheat on a noble journey to feed the world.<sup>19</sup> Together, they suggest that Norris's tale is more than an accurate retelling of a dark part of California history. Rather, his manipulation of the event to create his epic reflects the author's grappling between the program of force-theory he eagerly embraced and the romance and promises of the West which he could not ignore.

At the beginning of this article I noted that California provides an ideal setting for American literary naturalists to apply their craft because of the uniqueness of the land, its history, and the ideologies that have shaped both. The supposed closing of the American Frontier articulated by Turner's Frontier Thesis plays a crucial role in the development of American naturalism and those texts located in the West. The implications of a closed frontier suggest, according to Lawlor, that "the largeness of the West was reconstituted as a potentially claustrophobic, totally socialized space" (58). While Norris's San Joaquin Valley might not seem crowded by today's standards, the history of this area suggests that many competing interests and ideologies existed among varying groups each vying for control over what was relatively "open" land. With the locales permeated by various ideological factors, Lawlor notes that "even the most wild-seeming element of Western landscape or character is accounted for in advance by the legal, commercial, and scientific codes that had comprehensively mapped the continent" (58). The foundation upon which all of these codes exist is encapsulated in force-theory as this accounts for humans' relationship with the natural world which they seek to own, buy, and transform and the human communities they desire to control. In the case of Norris's California, this perspective is evident as the ranchers and railroad battle over land jurisdiction, crop prices, and by extension, western water rights at the expense of the prior inhabitants of the land.

While Norris may have looked to other Western environs and events to develop these themes, he chose a setting which embodied the American Dream like no other place in the nation as its promises of health and prosperity were unparalleled, thereby attracting thousands to its hallowed grounds. Included in the ranks of those influenced by the allure of California's dreams

was Norris who wrote when “a passion for beautiful California filled the souls of the artists and intellectuals” (Starr, *Americans* 417-8). Inspired by the state’s varied geography, agricultural productivity, and competing economic interests, Norris creates a work that challenges California’s idyllic image as an ecological and social paradise to suggest how violence and conquest—expressed through the interactions between dominant, residual, and emergent cultures—go hand in hand with the state’s economic development. As he distills such issues through the ubiquitous discourse of determinism circulating during his day, Norris blurs the boundaries between pessimistic and optimistic versions of naturalism through his representation of turn-of-the-century California to show how the site of some of the nation’s most cherished ideals is nonetheless sown in force.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> The novel portrays the demise of Don Mariano, his family, and his estate to the hordes of Anglo squatters, corrupt politicians in Washington, railroad magnates who all clamored for the rich, expansive acreage tied up in Mexican/Spanish land grants.

<sup>2</sup> This challenge to the mythic West is valuable as it prefigures by nearly a century the advent of New Western History in the 1980s which argued that the West should be read as a process of ongoing conquest of marginalized groups rather than an entrance into an empty land waiting to be cultivated. See Patricia Limerick’s *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* and Donald Worster’s *Under Western Skies: Nature and History in the American West* for excellent treatments of this topic.

<sup>3</sup> In *American Literary Naturalism, A Divided Stream* (1956), Walcutt argues that naturalist literature embodied either a pessimistic or optimistic view, one based on human’s inability to control their fate and another that led to empowerment and social reform (23). Norris’s work has typically been viewed as embracing the more negative side of this coin while the writing of other naturalists such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s presents a more positive view of the human experience. See Gary Scharnhorst’s *Charlotte Perkins Gilman* for a consideration of her “reform naturalism.”

<sup>4</sup> Lawlor describes Naturalist Western fiction as those texts set in the American West which embody both the “romantic constructions of self and nation” and “determinism’s rival ideologies” (3).

<sup>5</sup> For consistency I will use the term ‘force-theory’ to refer to this governing paradigm of power, order, and conflict during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

<sup>6</sup> The notion of the Great American Desert, which once defined America west of the Mississippi and initially rebuffed large-scale immigration to the region, eventually gave way to the faith expressed in the biblical injunction: “the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose” (Isaiah 35:1). This belief was a guiding principle in reclaiming the West’s arid lands, and joined with the advancements in agricultural science and hydrological engineering, made the dream a reality in many cases.

<sup>7</sup> Seltzer’s argument hinges on what he contends is America’s shared love of nature and technology, a relationship which he dubs the “American body-machine complex” (3). His attention to nature focuses on people and the ways in which technology shapes bodies. My interest here, on the other hand, is how the natural world intersects with technology/science in the naturalist text, and how questions about California’s natural resource development are at the heart of *The Octopus*.

<sup>8</sup> Wolf Larsen, London’s irascible sea captain, precisely captures Social Darwinism when stating: “I believe life is a mess . . . It is like yeast, ferment, a thing that moves and may move . . . The big eat the little that they may continue to move, the strong eat the weak that they may retain their strength. The lucky eat the most and move the longest, that is all” (40).

<sup>9</sup> The Southern Pacific is called the Pacific and Southwestern in the novel.

<sup>10</sup> In Norris's essay "The Frontier Gone At Last," he envisions the progress of Western empire eventually turning back on itself and moving east. He argues, "because there is no longer a Frontier to absorb our overplus of energy, because there is no longer a wilderness to conquer and because we still must march, still must conquer, we remember the old days when our ancestors before us found the outlet for their activity checked and, rebounding, turned their faces Eastward . . . so we. No sooner have we found that our path to Westward has ended than, reacting Eastward, we are at the Old World again, marching against it, invading it, devoting our overplus of energy to its subjugation" (*Responsibilities* 73-74). For more on Norris and imperialism see Russ Castronovo's "Geo-Aesthetics: Fascism, Globalism, and Frank Norris."

<sup>11</sup> For example, see Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Idea in America* (1964), Donald Pizer's *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (1966), and Zena Meadowsong's "Romancing the Machine: American Naturalism in Transatlantic Context" (2011). For Leo Marx the railroad represents the complex pastoralism illustrated by the "machine in the garden" motif that he regards as a defining characteristic of American pastoralism. On the other hand, Donald Pizer has suggested that the railroad's appearance is less a tension between technology and the natural world than a "particular railroad company whose monopolistic practices are antithetical to a particular natural law" (138). That is, the problem is not the railroad per se, but the way that it is used by those who control it: the Trust (139). More recently, Zena Meadowsong argues that the railroad's prevalence and power is indicative of American Naturalism's link to Zola and his "monster machine" which for Norris "captures, with figurative authority, the horror of the man-made world" (30).

<sup>12</sup> Land grants were an integral part of Hispano settlement in the New World. The Spanish monarchy owned all lands but deeded out huge territories to missions and settlers to colonize these lands. Under Mexican rule, land grants were given as ranchos where extended families cultivated vast tracks of the central and southern portions of the state. See Starr's *California* and Hundley's *Great Thirst* for a brief overview of California's land grants. See also Juan Estevan Arellano's "La Cuenca y la Querencia" for a more detailed discussion of the land and water laws governing land grants particularly in New Mexico.

<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting that despite the passing of the land grant system, California continued to maintain land ownership on a huge scale. "Much of California would remain resistant to small farming," as Starr observes (*California* 105).

<sup>14</sup> Various scholars have noted that no mission actually existed in the San Joaquin Valley. The novel's San Juan de Guadalajara Mission is based on San Juan Bautista near Hollister, CA. For example, see Wyatt pp. 96-97.

<sup>15</sup> Kevin Starr points to Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona* (1884) as "the central formulation of the myth of Old California" (*Material Dreams* 252). He notes, however, that there existed other "symbolic appropriations of Hispanic California" decades before Jackson's novel appeared. See his chapter "The Santa Barbara Heritage" for a lengthier discussion on this topic.

<sup>16</sup> Notwithstanding the transfer of land ownership between the Californios and the Anglos, Norris Hundley Jr. suggests that this "did not mean a change in land use" (89). He notes how cattle ranching continued to flourish although wheat production became the primary agricultural interest because of the "vagaries of weather and market" (89). Thus, we see *The Octopus's* landowners perpetuate the feudal-like setting the old Mexican admired from his own day when the Californio dons ruled the valley while also embracing the opportunities wheat farming provided.

<sup>17</sup> This cartographic representation of power is also reflected in Lyman Derrick's consideration of a map depicting the state of California's railroad system. Upon this map "ran the plexus of red, a veritable system of blood circulation . . . that shot out from the main jugular and went twisting up into some remote country, laying hold upon some forgotten village or town . . . a gigantic parasite fattening upon the life-blood of an entire commonwealth" (289).

<sup>18</sup> Not only did the railroad come to control the irrigation infrastructure in the area, it also oversaw all transportation on the San Joaquin and Sacramento Rivers (Starr, "Introduction," *The Octopus* xiv).

<sup>19</sup> Norris's Romantic strain, evident in his depictions of the land and the mission system, is furthered by the Vanamee and Angéle story. The mystic vagabond longs for his lost love who had been brutally raped and left to die at the mission. Returning to the site of the crime each evening in an attempt to summon her, he seems to telepathically call her from death: "a Vision realized—a dream come true" (391). Norris describes this supposed reincarnation—whom Vanamee learns is actually Angéle's daughter of the same name—and aligns it with the



miraculous growth of the wheat, which like Angéle's daughter "called forth from out the darkness, from out the grip of the earth, of the grave, from out corruption, rose triumphant into light and life" (393).

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