POOR THINGS: OBJECTS, OWNERSHIP, AND THE UNDERCLASSES IN AMERICAN LITERATURE, 1868-1935

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This dissertation explores both the production of underclass literature and the vibrancy of material between 1868-1935. During an era of rampant materialism, consumer capitalism, unchecked industrialism, and economic inequality in the United States, poor, working class Americans confronted their socioeconomic status by abandoning the linear framework of capitalism that draws only a straight line between market and consumer, and engaging in a more intimate relationship with local, material things – found, won, or inherited – that offered a sense of autonomy, belonging, and success. The physical seizure of property/power facilitated both men and women with the ability to recognize their own empowerment (both as individuals and as a community) and ultimately resist their marginalization by leveling access to opportunity and acquiring or creating personal assets that could be generationally transferred as affirmation of their family's power and control over circumstance. Reading into these personal possessions helps us understand the physical and psychological conflicts present amongst the underclasses as represented in American literature, and these conflicts give rise to new dynamics of belonging as invested in the transformative experience of ownership and exchange. If we can understand these discarded, poor, and foreign things and people as possessing dynamic and vibrant agency, then we will change the ethics of objectifying and ostracizing discarded, poor, and foreign humans, then and now.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In January 1939, federal relief worker Elvira E. Burnell contributed a profile of the Stembler family to Florida's Folklore Project of American Life Histories. Both Burnell and the Stemblers were victims of the Great Depression's lasting social and economic alienation, and both relied upon the Works Project Administration's Federal Writers' Project to be seen and heard as valuable members of the nation's historical narrative. Burnell introduces the profile's main speaker and heroine, Minnie Stembler, as a pious woman who lives in a state of "cluttered disorder," within a home filled with children and rotting wood and over-filled garbage cans, "giving the impression that things are just thrown out the door." But amid the family's obvious poverty, Burnell focuses on Minnie's love for flowers: "discarded washtubs and tin cans are used as receptacles for ferns, cuttings, and young plants. These are placed on either side of the three steps which lead directly into the house." Minnie is proud of her front yard oasis, and despite her inattention to housekeeping or the general cleanliness of her family, Minnie sees her ferns as valuable, rejuvenating, and indicative of her potential to make things new. Burnell's portrait is a strange one to look at with the intent to "see America," but nevertheless, it was deemed a significant preservation of cultural democracy and national diversity.

The Federal Writers' Project was the Roosevelt administration's response to the estimated 26,000 artists put out of work by the Great Depression, 6,000 of whom were writers employed to compile local, cultural, and oral histories of "a usable past that could unite Americans by recovering and affirming national values" (Pillen 49). In a special FWP publication entitled *American Stuff* (1938), the editorial staff applauds the project's catalogue of "true people's literature": "Men and women whose economic position would have stunted and

warped their creative faculties have been enabled to achieve a means of expression" (2). The subjects amassed in these guidebooks and pamphlets included ex-slaves, western miners, Eastern European immigrants, urban laborers, rural farmers, working women, aging veterans, and underclass families who had sunk deep into the crevices of American poverty and took pride in sharing their hardships when confronted by relief workers. Writers used a "new" hybrid documentary approach by diligently recording local speech while emphasizing environmental features that emphasized socioeconomic status and personal taste. Like Minnie Stembler's washtub flowerbeds, the materiality of marginalized Americans became a focal point for authenticating the subaltern spaces that readers had never before seen. The project was lauded then, and is hailed now, as an audacious undertaking, an advancement of "history from the bottom up," and a singular and extensive look at "the anonymous many," historically ignored and left out of the Great American narrative (Rodgers and Hirsch 9).

But this writers' project has always been alive and well in the annals of American literature, and is an institutionalized culmination of what I see happening throughout the Gilded Age and into the Progressive Era: critical attunement to poor Americans and the things that define, confuse, or shape their poorness. Since the nineteenth century, American authors have been illustrating versions of Minnie Stembler, confronting the presence of an underclass, and reflecting on how the social lives of people and concepts of ownership are tightly intertwined. The authors considered in my project scripted, in a sense, the questions that federal relief workers asked when depicting the social realism of indigent and marginalized folk: how do we represent underclass people and their various possessions? How do we convey their poorness or blackness or foreignness? How does language fuse or separate people and objects? And how and

when do the objects themselves intervene to tell, sometimes, a different story than the characters that fill poor spaces?

My project endeavors to bring to light both the production of underclass literature and the vibrancy of material between 1868-1935 because this is the original era of rampant materialism, gilded consumption, unchecked industrialism, and economic inequality in the United States. The Gilded Age - an era that set in motion developments that would forever shape the nation, namely, western expansion, immigration, and urbanization - intensified the production, promotion, retailing, purchasing, and disposal of things while solidifying the material ethos of American identity. As the nation overflowed with material desires and possessions, so did the confidence to participate in a leisure culture, one that inspired many to collect household goods, souvenirs, clothing, tools, and other things that became seen as essential to everyday life. The foundational myth of America as a land of opportunity and excess has consistently downplayed or ignored the socioeconomic crises of underclass Americans throughout history. Miles Orvell argues that Americans have always believed "there was *enough* for everyone, that in fact there was *more than* enough, that indeed there was *so much* that it must be natural, very easy, and almost a God-given right, to own things" (42, original emphasis). As the middle class expanded and big businesses boomed, society's upper echelons worked to exclude the lower, working classes who could not afford the conspicuous consumption or property values. The very concept of poverty aroused in many Americans the need to understand how and why the other half experienced such socioeconomic suffering, but it also preyed on middle-class fears of economic instability, and therefore representations of poor citizens became "the negative symbols of moral degradation" (Jones 9). The era's trust in a spirit of self-reliance to explain the individual shortcomings of poor citizens and to emphasize each person's ownership of his or her own labor further drove a

wedge between the working class poor and the people who chose to deny their plight (McGerr 9). Ignorance and privilege, paired with a historically weak understanding of what or who constitutes the "underclass," have affected the way that we have always read and experienced underclass literature.

Although the term "underclass" is more commonly associated with Gunnar Myrdal's 1963 usage, I believe this late term better describes the social groupings that existed both above and below the poverty line throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. The characters represented within this literary niche are working-class individuals who struggle to maintain property or employment and experience their condition as "founded in material disadvantage" (Jones 18). Michael B. Katz argues that it is the word *underclass* that is itself impossible to objectively define because it conjures "a mysterious wilderness in the heart of American cities; a terrain of violence and despair; a collectivity outside politics and social structure, beyond the usual language of class and stratum, unable to protest and revolt" (4). For Katz, the underclass must stay in a space "outside" of the national consciousness because it threatens national identity as a whole. The FWP sought to retrieve underclass identity and demystify these qualities in order to market American resilience and camaraderie, but it has been argued that the project's romantic nationalism got in the way of simply telling their countrymen what their country looked like.[1] This sort of discursive outsider/reformist sentimentalism is common for literary portrayals of the underclass, but this study only works with texts that avoid this response and instead document the reality of underclass life. As there is no single anthology or collection of "American underclass literature," I attempt a generic grouping of texts written by authors who are or have lived as members of the underclass because these authors are not distant

[1] For criticism of the Federal Writers' Projects' objectives, writers, and form, see Jerre Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers' Project*, 1935-1943 (Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 1996).

or separate from the observed but bound with the socioeconomic Other. I do not attempt to write a social history, nor do I intend to critique welfare reform; rather, I prefer to investigate how the underclass saw themselves via the environmental materials with which they were physically and mentally connected.

From the perspective of literary study, analyses of representations of poverty tend to be limited and problematic because the poor are commonly treated as one oppressed mass as opposed to individual "victims of capitalism," Walter Benn Michaels argues, who fight or dissent against an economic system that keeps money and objects at arm's length (180). John Allen has focused more specifically on homelessness as a theme in American literature that preserved the impulse to either romanticize or objectify the underclass. Allen sticks to the symbolic elements of dwellings that affect conceptions of human morality or values, which is useful, but he ultimately misses the opportunity to discuss the tangible material of a "home" (or lack thereof) that would materialize the "authentic" underclass experience (118). Moreover, Gavin Jones maintains that poverty proved "a particular enigma, a puzzling paradox" that "seemed to jar with national ideals of freedom, equality, and self-improvement" (26). Jones' critical framework grapples with the linguistic difficulties of poverty as a substantial category of social being and is the only other known redress of poverty as a critical discourse in the study of American literature (xiii). This study confronts representations of the underclass by utilizing this limited foreground and expanding it to include a theoretical materialism that elucidates a more dynamic class of Americans who saw reflected in their environments the potential for subversion and agency. Only through a reading more attuned to these materialisms can we fully recognize the social conflict and economic reality of underclass life that American authors narrated and experienced throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Late-nineteenth-century American literature has represented a large quantity of underclass characters like McTeague and Carrie Meeber who were created with the drive to collect and own objects despite their poverty. Their socioeconomic deprivation, in fact, does nothing to deter their gravitation toward physical things that were endowed with very specific, meaningful, benevolent histories that shape the trajectory of their characterizations and in some cases, of the plot entirely. I now aim to understand why authors created a state of poverty where conspicuous consumption or vain proprietorship still existed - where characters needed to own *more* than clothes, food, and shelter in order to be identifiable and animate. What was the reality of those characters who refused to pawn or forget family heirlooms in the face of starvation or exile? Why do so many poor characters come with a list of old possessions, long ago accumulated and kept safe? In general, literary characterizations are often accompanied by catalogues of possessions that each suggest some personality trait or history that is key to fully realizing human agency and self-definition. In fact, most authors prove that without these types of catalogues, a character's past or present is not so easily illustrated: Gatsby's war medal or collection of silk shirts each vivifies Fitzgerald's focus on human desperation and illusion. Tom's Bible and Eva's curls demonstrate Stowe's commitment to morality and self-preservation even in the face of slavery and death. There is no question that collections of objects matter to all kinds of people and authors, but it is worth questioning to what extent does a person's socioeconomic status affect the way that we/they understand their possessions? Is there some relational threshold in which objects are perceived as threatening instead of cooperative? Is capitalism to blame for changes in subject-object relationships, or is there something more sinister being imagined that punishes humankind for littering the nation with so much stuff?

In each primary text considered in this study, things operate as a conduit through which

the narrator or speaker mediates on the act of possession and property, opening further into a space of contemplation about subjectivity. *How* something is possessed is just as expressive as *what* is possessed. In thinking about a thing in motion, the energy, agency, and memory attached to the transaction emphasizes who or what is more powerful. For example, in Bret Harte's "The Luck of Roaring Camp" (1868), Oakhurst the gambler attains a fancy embroidered handkerchief from a middle-class woman, then donates the possession to the camp's newborn child. Whether or not the anatopistic handkerchief was gifted or stolen, Oakhurst can now do with it as he pleases, and he chooses to reappropriate the possession as a ceremonial token of respect and optimism for the newborn opportunity to raise a child and build a utopian society at Roaring Camp. The dual transactions (both gifts) indicate an avoidance of mainstream economies, the empowerment of Oakhurst to secure the "Luck" in his life, and evidence of how physical possessions furnish a self-possession and individualism that liberates underclass citizens like Oakhurst from feelings of alienation and roughness. In order to better understand poor characters like Oakhurst and gifted exchanges within underclass communities, we must trace representations of possessions that are acquired because of their subjective, emotional value instead of their practical use value, chosen for their ability to inspire resistance, nostalgia, or longing. These personal possessions are found, inherited, gifted, or stolen objects that are acquired outside the system of capitalism and reappropriated by the owner into a *thing* of power: these things reveal a power to own something at one's command and a power to mentally escape one's despair and alienation. These things cathartically affect individuals who then can see themselves outside the confines of social stratification, avoid victimization, and push back against the Emersonian mythology of self-reliance by instead valuing a shared, communal sense of ownership and camaraderie that looks outward, not only inward, for support, opportunity, and

autonomy. In subverting a faith in this distinctively American principle, these texts imagine underclass communities - across time and space - that are interdependent with and responsible for one another, and this cooperative instinct clearly manifests in the types of exchanges and materials that emerge in these communities. References to inheritances, gifts, winnings - and at times discarding or wasting - frequently work their way into the language of these texts, and this allows for us to see the workings of the "material unconscious."

The material unconscious, argues Bill Brown, lingers within the "undernarrated, 'subhistorical' fragments" (15) and "shards of the past" (18) that offer new insight to a text's meaning and cultural moment. Brown calls for a new critical materialism that "does not just recognize the materiality of everyday life unconsciously registered by the literary, but also recognizes how literature develops what we might call the unconscious of material objects themselves" (*Material* 250). In adopting this approach to read the things within underclass literature, we are able to distinguish how images from consumer culture, urban marketplaces, and impoverished landscapes seeped into nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors' unconscious and exerted pressure on the production of each work - while at the same time allowing these things to exert a life and a will of their own. I use the word "thing" throughout this dissertation because of Bill Brown's later differentiation between the concept of an "object" and a "thing" in his essay "Thing Theory," where Brown proposes:

> We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us…when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation. (4)

As this is a project concerned with material objects endowed with narratives and an agency to reconstruct the social makeup of American life, the word "thing" is more suitable when

addressing the desire, memory, and energy attached to personal possessions.

Attention paid by underclass authors to these types of subject-object relationships is a product of optimism and subversion. The myths of America's equal opportunity, venture capitalism, and conspicuous consumption generated authors' fascination with objects, but the representation of these ideals in the hands of the poor resulted in an ambivalence toward things that would appear - and act - more powerfully than their owners. Authors found that things had more opportunity, potential, and privilege than underclass Americans who fought for agency and survival every single day; so these authors created literary characters who instead used disparity to their advantage and forged a mutual dependency with materials that also needed restoration: by owning "vibrant matter" (Bennett viii), characters recognized their own vibrancy; in being upcycled or inherited, things renewed their potential. In creating a cyclical codependence, these authors sought to illustrate specific interactions that confronted who or what was really in control: humans or things? And if the answer was things, what were the consequences in accepting a world run by seemingly inanimate material?

In grappling with these questions, my project draws on Cultural Materialism as a critical model that reframes underclass environments and "fully vibrant, dangerously vibrant, matter" in literary texts (Bennett 13). In particular, Brown's *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (2003) has inspired a school of materialist criticism that seeks to render literary objects legible and expressive while thinking about the object-status of literature itself. Brown utilizes Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1962) to distinguish the types of things that confront literature and readers, which Heidegger distinguished as "conspicuous" objects, defined by their obsolescence due to breakage, "obtrusive" objects defined by the loss of a part needed to make them function, and "obstinate" objects, which work as obstacles that divert action (102-

104). The loss of "readiness-to-hand" arouses human awareness and "makes a *break* in those referential contexts" that interconnect our world (Heidegger 105, original emphasis). This basic confrontation with our materiality applies to the confrontations imagined as early as the mid-nineteenth century when authors like Harte and, later, Hamlin Garland and Frank Norris felt the "breakage" or diversion of action due in part to the environmental elements with which the underclasses interacted. McTeague's biological determinism drives his character, but a pair of handcuffs divert his getaway and put an end to Norris's novel. To unravel these early irritations with "tricky matter" that seemed to step out of line with Realism's social backdrop, I rely on the work of materialist scholars who investigate abrasive materiality like Brown, but also Daniel Miller's *Stuff* (2010), Maurizia Boscagli's *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism* (2014) and Susan Morrison's *The Literature of Waste: Material Ecopoetics and Ethical Matter* (2015). These studies provide vital models for scholarship that examine literary production in relation to marginalized social subjects and objects that appear out of time and place.

This approach to underclass literature also borrows from Susan Stewart's *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (1993), because in the literary texts discussed here, things are accumulated or collected together in a way that begs a reading of objects en masse. Stewart argues, "the economy of collecting is a fantastic one, an economy with its own principles of exchange, substitution, and replicability" that procures "an aura of transcendence and independence" for the collector (188). She points out that "the collection presents a metaphor of 'production' not as 'the earned' but as 'the captured,'" and thus collecting in itself is a "mode of control and containment" (Stewart 195, 160). Stewart's emphasis on the psychological and physical power elicited by the collection can be applied to

underclass narratives that imagine collections of things as they incite resistance and establish means of control. Stewart's work is also beneficial to the discussion of collections of *texts* as they were published together as short stories and in monthly periodicals; or as they collected voices from real people in documented research like that of Jacob Riis and Zora Neale Hurston. These authors are collectors themselves who recorded subjects/objects as collectibles for voyeuristic audiences and consequently recognized the materiality of their own authorial existence in subtle expressions of apprehension about taking live matter and turning it into a book-thing. Their language and imagery suggests, at times, a conflicted sense of ownership over the narratives of poor people who want to retain their own narratives, who wish to share their stories without losing their autonomy. Brown's commentary on textual materialism's ability to confront how far a literary work "can be said to 'transcend' the object" ("Introduction" 25) is beneficial to the idea that these authors recognized the economy of their discourse and wrestled with the task of manifesting underprivileged voices for a privileged audience.

In a similar vein, the new materialist and social theories of Bruno Latour and Jane Bennett offer a way to access the nonhuman 'stuff' that participates in the rearrangement of human social networks within and outside of American underclass literature. As materialism theorizes that our given social position follows from our material circumstances within the framework of the accompanying relations of production, so does Latour's work with object-agency and actor-network theory (ANT) explore the ways in which things inform or influence human activity. As Latour first spells out the mission of ANT in *Reassembling the Social* (2007): "no science of the social can even begin if the question of who and what participates in the action is not first of all thoroughly explored" (72). The personal possessions represented in underclass literature are "actants," or, as Rita Felski explains, "anything that modifies a state of affairs by

making a difference," so that both human and non-human bodies are considered to have both agency and force (582). These authors create narratives and memories *within* things because each author detected in an object the capacity for it to "transform, translate, and modify" human social structures (39). By networking human and nonhuman actants instead of forming a hierarchy of power, we are able to trace an underlying narrative of cause and effect that does not simply blame capitalism or welfare reform or sociopolitical hegemony. In order to avoid an objectifying discourse of the underclass, Latour's framework allows for the ability to create every body as active and agentic. And in reframing the underprivileged bodies of underclass narratives as agentic and able, we are able to humanize the "facelessness" of poor Americans.

The goal of Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010) is in line with this project's methodology: "to articulate a vibrant materiality that runs alongside and inside humans to see how analyses of political events might change if we gave the force of things more due" (viii). Underclass literature demands an attention to the "thing-power" of the inanimate and to the "moment of independence from and resistance to us and other bodies" that quietly lies within the objects we see and circumnavigate every day (Bennett 18). When cataloguing the power of personal possessions, Bennett helps us explore how underclass characters claim ownership of waste, oil, graveyards, monuments, and bloodlines on the basis of nativity or proximity. Even as supposedly dead, discarded, or unwanted stuff, these materials are all affective, responsive, and *communal*; they inspire characters to act in ways that defend and recognize their own position in the complex web of active bodies and materials that create the self. For example, in *In the "Stranger People's" Country* (1891), Mary Noailles Murfree's mountaineer community works together to reclaim their rightful ownership over an ancient burial ground that must not be exhumed lest the legends of the region be exposed and exploited. When

the community “wins” the fight to keep the land sacred, they rejoice not only in having defeated the elitist outsider, but also in maintaining the vibrant material that acts as a cultural cornerstone for both the author and the backwoods residents. Like Latour and Stewart, Bennett positions readers to recognize that human interactions (i.e. the social world) are mediated by or even a product of material arrangements. This dissertation substantiates the need to further investigate representations of subject-object relationships in American underclass literature because (a) no such reading of this material from a materialist perspective yet exists,[2] and (b) these readings challenge minimalistic, mass-produced representations of the poor and reveal a new history of resistance to the rigidity of one’s socioeconomic status while also reconsidering what that socioeconomic status looks like. Reading representations of underclass bodies as cooperative, confident, and well-endowed - especially during an era of great class difference, mass commodification, and no institutional welfare reform - reinforces a more ethical approach to identifying and characterizing underclass American citizens in the nineteenth century and into the twenty-first. Our engagement with documented, imagined, and experienced poverty can extend beyond the page and into a social praxis that values and listens to all classes of people.

The patterns identified here involve expressions of self-possessed proprietorship unrecognized by previous criticism on underclass literature. While contributions are slim, Mark Pittenger argues that the “underclass” in Progressive America was formed by muckraking journalists and social scientists who disguised themselves in order to present the poor as products of fixed behavioral and cultural traits. Pittenger is more concerned with why writers wanted to

[2] The only comparable study of literary representations of the underclass is Stephen Schryer’s *Maximum Feasible Participation: American Literature and the War on Poverty* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2018), which begins its focus with the post-World War II literature that rethought the relationship between artist and audience when addressing the welfare activism and culture of poverty from 1950 to the present. If anything, Schryer’s collection of authors who wrote about the underclasses picks up where my project ends.

"go native" in order to gain interclass understanding; and while he does suggest that Progressive authors "harbored a contradictory consciousness" that supplanted hereditary and moral explanations of poverty with environmental forces, his examples do not include any writers who were poor themselves, which leaves a hole in his conclusion that public discourse on the underclass is driven by those who *pretended* to be the Other Half (37). This presents the problem of "authenticity," which can easily be fixed by studying underclass literature via underclass authors who historically *lived as* the Oher Half. Additionally, literary scholars have been slow in fully recognizing the material dimensions of the text as something more than setting or atmosphere, so the objects and possessions in texts like *The House of Mirth* and *Sister Carrie* are typically read as commodity fetish or mere backdrop.[3] By recognizing the "material unconscious" in these texts and in representations of their socioeconomic landscapes, we might better examine: what does the very personal, very "vibrant material" in underclass literature accomplish, and how does it represent and contain the life of the social Other? To answer these questions, we must read those patterns of underclass representation that reveal a class of people conspicuously consuming outside of capitalism's control, therefore determining their own outcomes with what little they have. Authors create such repetitions to affirm the humanity of the underclass, but also to demonstrate their resilience and resistance to the rigid socioeconomic stratification that defines our national history. The authors discussed here were informed both by their own experiences living under the lion's paw, and by an anxiety specific to their writing moment that involved their own agency once their thoughts entered the literary marketplace.

[3] Amy Kaplan's earlier reevaluation of *American Realism in The Social Construction of American Realism* (1988) is concerned with this struggle to reflect society when faced with high-speed American capitalism and a mass media culture, and although she does not focus on the material of poverty, she does challenge traditional views of texts like *The House of Mirth* that contribute to a reinterpretation of Realism as a restless debate among competing versions of reality.

Therefore, we must read both the fictional prose and autobiographical material when available in order to distinguish each author's experience as an underclass man or woman.

Over the course this study, chapters are chronologically arranged (beginning with the Gilded Age and ending in the Harlem Renaissance) and separated by different types of collectors: rural, urban, immigrant, and black. Each chapter considers three authors writing in temporal and spatial proximity who simultaneously navigated concerns about materialism and class, and who all together expressed doubts about the nature of human subjectivity when confronted with nonhuman actants. Both male and female authors are included to demonstrate the ways that gender plays a role in shifting concepts of ownership and possession. These social and spatial groupings are not as rigidly stratified as the chapter categories may suggest; in fact, there is plenty of overlap in the ways that underclass literature represents underclass citizens and their belongings. In comparison, regionalist authors represent rural workers embracing and collaborating with found and gambled possessions, while naturalist authors represent urban bodies as fearful or overwhelmed by objects in general. In the open West, objects are imagined as advantageous; in the closed East, objects are imagined as lethal. These large ideological shifts represented in the first half of this project are undoubtedly due to changes in literary style, trends in Social Darwinism, and economic depression. External forces also bear responsibility in altering authorial perspectives of and experiences in their respective environments. However, the second half of this project finds a more consistent attitude toward property and ownership, which is in line with the modernist turn detailed in Chapter 4. The final two chapters focus on authors who share a reverence for inheritance and gift economies that avoid capitalist exchanges and commodification. Representations of things are fueled by familial ties and nostalgic longing. In *Modernism and Nostalgia* (2013), Tammy Clewell argues that modernist nostalgia "may

constitute a progressive force by functioning as a bulwark against any unquestioned acceptance of the present social order and by giving rise to new directions for change" (3). The struggle between a "perfect" past as represented in an object of memory and a "tense" present that begs expediency and mechanization drives the final two chapters, so that the consequences of private ownership in a modernized world are clearly visible and indicative of things to come.

More specifically, each chapter grapples with the fluctuating attitudes toward the underclass in order to pinpoint the socioeconomic climate of the times. In Chapter 2, I examine postbellum literature written in and about wild spaces in the United States. Reaching from the mining West to the Appalachian East, these regionalist texts confront the reality of frontier myths and challenge capitalism's dominance. These texts ask the reader to reconsider how property, exchange, and possession work for pioneers who are portrayed as ungovernable and who engage in lawless, deviant, and alternative modes of acquisition in order to attain their own economic success. Nineteenth century moralists worked to legitimize a market culture in America that taught citizens to consider alternative acquisitions as illicit, illegal, and inappropriate. Bret Harte and Hamlin Garland are familiar fodder for discussing subversive lifestyles and populist opinions, but they are rarely considered for their insight into the centrality of inanimate matter in determining human affairs. Despite the twenty-three years that separates their most famous collections of short stories, Harte and Garland were probing similar questions about the powers of possession and the nature of objects such as: Is it possible to survive out West by "making an honest living"? How do wild environments change the way that humans claim ownership over things? How do things change the way that humans reimagine personhood? What is the measureable force of materiality that redefines social consciousness, and what is the author's very role in pressurizing a found sense of dignity in the lives of indigent

laborers? Harte and Garland answer these questions in their considerations of material things as transformative and the act of possession to be a dynamic embodiment of self-possession. These authors critiqued the capitalist ethos of the Gilded Age and sought to create a space with more realistic opportunities for pioneers who longed to fairly reap what they sowed.

Additionally, Mary Noailles Murfree is a crucial female regionalist whose career and body of work probe concepts of ownership via acts of resistance. With as much critical attention as Sarah Orne Jewett has received for her foundational materialist epistemology, her contemporary Murfree is rarely evoked for her own effort to turn matter into meaning (Brown 83-4). Commonly known either as Charles Egbert Craddock, or as an invalid woman who misled editors and audiences into accepting her Appalachian machoism, Murfree's identity as an influential female author whose writing is a valuable resource for remembering the plight of "stranger people" in the nation's premodern backwoods must be given the attention it deserves in the American literary canon. *In the "Stranger People's" Country* (1891) and *The Mystery of Witch-Face Mountain and Other Stories* (1895) are texts inundated by competition between proprietors who debate: who or what has the "right of property"? Men and women, insiders and outsiders, scientists and folklorists, ghosts and grave-robbers all square off to claim ownership over both cultural memory and personal identity, and Murfree's employment of high stakes - losing one's culture or losing one's self - allows the audience to consider how claims of origin are so easily endangered by an encroaching modern world.

The turn of the century brought with it a celebration of consumption, excess, machinery, and metropolitanism, which affected both understandings of material objects and the language used to describe them. The birth of literary Naturalism placed at its core the tenets of determinism, pessimism, and materialism, so that what we see in Chapter 3 is a foreboding fear

of objects that are imagined to be more lethal and oppressive than any human antagonist. Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and Edith Wharton all unpack the metaphysical consequences of a suffocating, wasteful materialism within poor, urban environments, and in doing so, they each exhibit an anxiety about being reduced to or supplanted by the autonomous and dynamic world of one's own possessions. The more that characters scavenge, recycle, inherit, or covet, the more violent their things become - both literally and physically. For example, *McTeague* (1899) ends with its 'hero' falling victim to both his greedy theft of his wife's fortune and the dead weight of his nemeses handcuffed to his arm in the desert. In *Sister Carrie* (1900), Hurstwood attributes his misfortune and ultimate suicide on a safe that locked itself shut. And finally, *Sanctuary* (1903) blames both bad blood and bad inheritances to be the root cause for a family's shame and immoral fiber. These texts hinge their outcomes on the constitutive power of "human-nonhuman assemblages," where there is no escape from the things that overpopulate urban environments (Bennett xvii). These authors, Wharton especially, were also informed by society's "*disjecta membra,*" its thoughtless consumer waste, and its gravitation toward disposability (*Mirth* 474). Preoccupied by the human and economic waste in American cities, these authors confuse objects and humans as either salvageable or obsolete, and their confusion relays a society that dehumanizes its citizens and fetishizes its commodities.

But the reality of this national narrative did not satisfy Americans, so a new myth was created, in part by President Theodore Roosevelt, that promised security, charity, and opportunity to any citizen that pledged loyalty to the United States. Chapter 4 examines narratives of Americanization written by incoming European immigrants that endorsed Roosevelt's nationalism but also suggested the remnants of things carried across the Atlantic to be memorialized in a new American space. By focusing on details about foreign possessions,

Jacob Riis, Anzia Yezierska, and Hilda Satt Polacheck prove that total assimilation is impossible so long as the "ideas in things" are shared and the things themselves are coveted. The immigrant characters in their narratives express a nostalgic longing and embed such feeling in the familial objects they hold dear in their Americanized households. Establishing a dual allegiance is subversive and underappreciated during a period of xenophobia and anarchy, and these authors represent vibrant, *foreign* matter as compelling enough to stimulate a mental resistance to the dominant hegemonic forces that sought to perpetuate a singular and oppressive national consciousness. Instead, these authors create a new American type that honors an ancestral past but values social mobility. "Making" this new self is possible through pseudo-autobiographical and documentary narrative forms, new and experimental forms in themselves that allowed immigrant writers access to the literary marketplace. Therefore, Riis, Yezierska, and Polacheck consider how their foreign bodies (and books) are intrusive but capable of ushering in a wider acceptance of cultural pluralism for future generations.

In the wake of Rooseveltian rhetoric and a modernist literary turn, tolerance became a factor that prevented objects from being understood apart from their ethnic *and* racial context. This project's final chapter asks: how do we read personal and private possessions belonging to African Americans as imagined by African-American literati during a time that had normalized black dispossession and alienation? Chapter 5 examines how Harlem Renaissance authors imagined negotiations of racial identity through the recovery and revision of collected matter, and focuses on a lingering skepticism about how black ownership functions in a country historically and economically driven by proprietary whiteness. Whiteness in America is a symbolic material itself: a badge of privilege and entitlement. So when objects are socially designated as white things, as opposed to black things, and those objects are appropriated by

black owners (and vice versa), such transactions are troubled by a language of separate but equal, but also mediated upon as authoritative acquisitions that can invert power structures and rewrite history. For example, Jessie Redmon Fauset plots her novel *There is Confusion* (1924) based on a black man's efforts to recognize himself in a white family Bible, inherited from his black father. The novel's representations of historical, ideological, and self-revisions are motivated by the legible revisions recorded in the pages of the Bible, and Fauset means for these edited materials to break from a white institutionalized patriarchy and to reposes an ideal mode of self-control and belonging for its owner. Additionally, Fauset's text, and others in this chapter, are overwhelmed by an apprehensiveness about racial and national belonging, so we must be aware of how these conflicting affiliations are in line with Du Bois's "double consciousness," as well as how recent studies in affect theory help us consider the ways in which Harlem Renaissance authors represented the materials of racial segregation.

James Weldon Johnson and Zora Neale Hurston grapple with similar questions about how the nature of racial identity is organized by biological matter, physical possessions, and social creation. When illustrating inheritances between characters - a noticeable trend in ownership featured also in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) and *Mules and Men* (1935) - these authors ask, did all inherited material have the power to transform one's identification? How did black texts function in white literary marketplaces? Would black texts communicate an "authentic blackness" that defied white representations of race and set in motion a new tradition of literature for future generations to inherit? Or would their work be misinterpreted by both black and white audiences as stereotypical, "dead stuff"? To answer such questions about the (im)mortality of their writing, Johnson, Fauset, and Hurston reconcile how personal collections made up of black things fare within and outside of white environments.

These authors express apprehension about being collected themselves within both mainstream and subsidiary marketplaces, thus reflecting an ambivalence toward their own production value and its own habit of laying claim to a new generation of black property.

In these four chapters, I challenge existing criticism that reduces underclass literature and authors to a class defined by lack and loss. Instead, I offer an examination of how these authors represented resistance and resilience in characters who held a mirror to their possessions and asked how they might work together to create a more vibrant life. This project further challenges the idea that underclass literature solely expresses one-dimensional themes of dispossession and idleness, when in fact, it confronts socioeconomic despair by interconnecting with environments dense with salvageable objects and vibrant matter. In redefining the generic representations of "poor things," this project's methodology reconceives subjectivity, property, and agency in marginalized lives throughout our nation's history. The literary interactions with poor things considered here provide a more nuanced view of American literary history, revealing an ambivalence toward consumption and ownership that is as permanent as class conflict in America. Moreover, the authors who felt like poor things themselves sought to decipher where animacy and agency begins, and where it ends. Questioning the nature of one's reality is an enigmatic hole that authors as early as 1868 found themselves looking down into, and it is my intention to shed light on representations of uncertainty about things as they reveal a mounting national distrust in property and exhibition, and a shared silent inquiry into the materials of dissent.

CHAPTER 2

WILD THINGS: REPRESENTATIONS OF SUBVERSIVE EXCHANGE IN REGIONAL LITERATURE

In his short but controversial story "The Luck of Roaring Camp" (1868), Bret Harte details a curious collection of things cobbled together by a group of poor miners, fugitives, and criminals who come to pay tribute to their mining camp's newest arrival: baby "Luck." Despite the child's status as an orphan and the mother Cherokee Sal's status as a "sinful… [d]issolute, abandoned, and irreclaimable" prostitute, ceremonial offerings are made in the middle of the night as she dies in childbirth (2). Rather than cast out the outcast, the miners welcome the newborn and proudly display him in a make-shift crib, placing beside it an empty hat into which each miner may contribute some personal token or charity. Harte carefully lists the hat's contents for his readers:

> A silver tobacco-box; a doubloon; a navy revolver, silver mounted; a gold specimen; a very beautifully embroidered lady's handkerchief (from Oakhurst the gambler); a diamond breastpin; a diamond ring (suggested by the pin, with the remark from the giver that he "saw that pin and went two diamonds better"); a slung shot; a Bible (contributor not detected); a golden spur; a silver teaspoon (the initials, I regret to say, were not the giver's); a pair of surgeon's shears; a lancet; a Bank of England note for £5; and about $200 in loose gold and silver coin. (6)

While this collection's valuable pieces seem out of place coming from miners who are "reckless" misfits and working class citizens, these gifted things mark the beginning of the camp's regeneration. "Almost imperceptibly a change came over the settlement," and the men take ownership of the child, adjusting to a new kind of wild domesticity (12).

The miners offer physical and economic support to the child by offering him more material things: a refurnished home, a rosewood cradle, trinkets from a creek bed, and finally an elaborately decorated Christening ceremony. Although the historical romance ends with the

death of the Christ-like Luck, the miners are noticeably changed into proud fathers who have rebuilt a new utopic community. It is easy to argue that the baby's presence makes the men more civilized, but it is difficult to ignore the number of things present in this short story, as well as the newborn intimacy between persons and things that also improve the miners' behaviors and perceptions of self. They begin to demonstrate the confidence to exclude others - an outsider comments, "'they're mighty rough on strangers'" -, to rebel against their economic condition, and to feel liberated from their preexisting role as criminal and reckless miners (16). The things once individually collected are now submitted for the greater good of the community, and this submission emphasizes more a dedication to undoing the status quo than a dedication to private property and covetous ownership. The miners appear to confidently circulate in society as freely and optimistically as an embroidered handkerchief or an initialed silver teaspoon. There is power in ownership, and Harte probes the relationship between property and people, things and class, like many of his colleagues at the time who wanted to better understand American selfhood within an increasingly capitalistic United States.

Harte and other regionalists witnessed the profound economic, social, and cultural changes taking place in the United States and devoted much of their time to conceptualizing the sheer proliferation of things to which they were exposed during the so-called "Gilded Age." The physical world began to exert a pressure like never before, forcing an intimate engagement with the electric lights and sewing machines and telephones (among the millions of other material objects) that now populated the nation. But alongside the pressure to *have*, there lurked the anxiety about *having-not*. A socioeconomic chasm grew in the wake of capitalist dependence, and the effect was not only hard labor, thrift, and desperation, but also fractured understandings of identity that created new types of Americans: the haves and the have-nots, the capitalist and

the populist, the proprietor and the laborer, the native and the alien. These fractures, rooted in conflicting ideologies and inheritances, gave rise to a long historical narrative of difference wherein belonging and ownership play the key role in defining a person, place, or thing.[4] And in order to more clearly understand the significant changes in the relationship between Americans and their stuff, between man and material, more scholarly attention must be paid to the origins of consumer capitalism's effect on *all* types of Americans, most especially to the rising have-not population whose socioeconomic status threatened popular representations of their "home" as a gilded place filled with prosperous people. The very material presence of a have-not or a struggling laborer or a reckless nomad complicated the national narrative, and yet it captured the imagination of voyeurs and writers alike who wanted to know what underclass Americans looked like. How could they be so poor in a land of opportunity? How could they be defined and described without any *thing* with which to define them?

Regionalism emerged out of this desire to see and convey what Hamlin Garland characterized as a "broader Americanism."[5] Realism's typically white and bourgeois narratives failed to capture powerless Americans on the periphery, and thus regional literature took up the responsibility of presenting the racial, cultural, social, spatial, and gender differences that now dominated life outside of New England.[6] While there is no shortage of scholarship that differentiates regionalism from local color - the former encouraged sympathy and identification,

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[4] See Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1953), and Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (1982).

[5] In *Crumbling Idols* (1893) Garland himself argued for a regionalist art that represented a "broader Americanism" and covered a "whole field of human experience" (68).

[6] Eric Sundquist argues, "Economic or political power can itself be seen to be definitive of a realist aesthetic…while those removed from seats of power (say, Midwesterners, blacks, immigrants, or women) have been categorized as regionalists." From "Realism and Regionalism," in *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (Ed. Emory Elliot. New York: Columbia UP, 1988), 501-524.

the latter criticized as too romantic and exploitative[7] -, and while regionalism is both celebrated for its contribution to the reunification of the country after the Civil War and scolded for satisfying the fantasies of an urban, elitist masculinity,[8] this chapter is interested in both the flaws and fashioning of the "democratic pioneer" as rendered by regional literature.[9] Regionalism responds to a moment in history when "the invention, production, distribution, and consumption of things rather suddenly came to define national culture," but at the same time, as Bill Brown has argued, it represents spaces where things were not so easily owned.[10] Brown claims that regional texts produce a unique "world of legible artifact" (83) and engage in a materialist epistemology in line with the period's budding fascination with ethnographic study, which is why his study, and mine, engages with the movement in order to more clearly understand how "our relation to things cannot be explained by the cultural logic of capitalism" (*Sense* 6). Because regional fiction tended to present its locales as outside of the exigencies of capitalism, Stephanie Foote argues, the idealization of mythic Western communities encouraged readers to appreciate "the region as leisure space and its folk as collectibles" (160). So regionalism's value as a site for exposing poor things in wild spaces is two-fold: we can see how authors represent things as crucial tools for understanding communities while they also represent communities as folk objects for a marketplace. And as many regional authors like Sarah Orne Jewett, Willa Cather, and Mary Austin wished to convey themselves as insiders or natives of the regions that they represented, their texts expose similar tensions about verifying their belonging

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[7] See both Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse's *American Women Regionalists: A Norton Anthology* (1995) and *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture* (2005).

[8] See Amy Kaplan, "Nation, Region, and Empire" in Emory Elliott and Cathy Davidson, *Columbia History of the American Novel* (1991), 240-266.

[9] See also Tom Lutz, *Cosmopolitan Vistas: American Regionalism and Literary Value*. (2004), and Stephanie Foot, *Regional Fictions: Culture and Identity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (2000).

[10] *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (2003), 245.

without falling victim to their own objectification.

Regionalist authors who search for this happy medium find their answers by reconceptualizing old ideas of ownership derived from a feudal past. Rather than constructing property as an individual's exclusive right to a place or object secured by a legal system, regionalist authors envision ownership as a relationship with objects established through intimate experience. Jewett's "A White Heron" illustrates a country child's claim over a hunter's prey and the exchange she makes - society for wilderness - in the end; most of Cather's short stories and novels, too, function around prairie objects that are sources of comfort, inspiration, or rebellion, and are claimed through inheritance or gifting within local communities. These redefined notions of ownership hinge upon regionalists' rethinking of the binaries typically used in structuring interactions between humans and things because of the revolutionary energy and hustle of the era that refused to be squashed by capitalism and competition. I argue that the incongruity between America as "narrated" and America as "lived" produced a tension in public consciousness and literary expression that in turn powered a complex process of negotiation and adaptation for authors and their audiences.

For example, the mythical West promised egalitarianism, but the daily lives of the miner or the farmer refuted and denied this fabled success. The figure of the dispossessed pioneer in American literature reveals a heritage of strength and imaginative strategies used to deal with the reality of the frontier myth. And despite the common burden of mortgages, growing debt, and an unforgiving environment, a consistent affirmation of personal freedoms in frontier narratives frames a resilient perspective that encouraged a dispossessed class to retain their confidence and seek alternative modes of economic success outside the confines of aristocratic capitalism. These narratives represent a heritage of resistance, as James M. Marshall argues; their authors expose

"the flaws in a conceptually ideal frontier society of open opportunities and fair competition" with the employment of ironic inversions and clever characters with an emerging liberal vision (6).[11] Representations of homesteaders' plight and protest took political shape in the People's Party in the 1880s, as later discussed in this chapter's attention to Garland and his depiction of downtrodden farmers who formed the central core of Populist support. But these representations are also very much part and parcel of regionalist literature published before and after the Populist movement, which indicates a larger cultural and social resistance to the loss of the frontier promise of Jeffersonian democracy in the wild West.

Against that background, this opening chapter examines early representations of American material possession and exchange models that vexed both American frontier narratives and subject/object relationships. My aim is to highlight the overt and covert skepticism about what it means to own property as an underclass citizen - and to be owned by the labor system. The concerns expressed by Bret Harte, Hamlin Garland, and Mary Noailles Murfree all set the stage for an even more critical attitude toward objects and ownership that the authors in subsequent chapters of this dissertation address. Harte, Garland, and Murfree imagine poor laborers, land owners, and ruffians in states of poverty who are all survivalists navigating alternative marketplaces and narrating concerns about their abilities to possess things in a wild environment. These authors represent a generation's exploration of property as it became dematerialized and increasingly disembedded from its local and familiar contexts in the late nineteenth century, as commodity culture and the bureaucratic corporate structures that supported it began to take over. These authors, then, created characters who acknowledge their lowly position within capitalism and occupy their time studying ways to work around it by

[11] *Land Fever: Dispossession and the Frontier Myth* (2003).

following more abstract exchange models like scavenging, gambling, and gifting. Characters would rather invest in luck and "narratives of chance," argues Jason Puskar, that are "prescriptive and not just descriptive, for they obscure agency and responsibility to precisely the same degree that other kinds of narratives clarify causation and establish blame" (8). Narratives of chance are more durable the more collectively they are shared, which may be why authors locate them within local communities like the mining camp or the Appalachian backwoods that socially organize around their environment's wildness - spaces full of volatility and angst as machines and modernization moved into every quiet corner of the nation. By taking part in deliberate risk taking through gambling, bootlegging, or thievery instead of passively waiting for work-related financial gains, Puskar argues that these gambles "functioned as a questionable attempt by those on society's margins to defend their self-conception as free and empowered liberal agents" (18). By seizing the "popular consciousness of chance" (Puskar 25) at a time when ordinary folks were mystified by corporate hierarchies and market economies, Harte, Garland, and Murfree imagine what *could* happen if westerners rejected rationality and played to win their own favorable outcome. With not much left to lose in taking such risks, these characters collectively perceive a constant threat to personal or private property and recognize the threatening force as American capitalism. While private property should give the owner a sense of privilege, participation, and authority, underclass citizens find that they are ultimately unable to keep any sort of private property for themselves; that some force is always pulling their things back into circulation. These authors ask the reader to reconsider how capitalism "works" in America, and if it does in fact "work" for all classes of people who want *to have*.

Harte, Garland, and Murfree each employed the short story form in order to more effectively prod their audiences into a reaction against economic inequality. In *The Subversive*

Storyteller (2009), Michelle Pacht argues that nineteenth-century American authors adapted and expanded the short story form in order to convey subversive ideas without alienating readers and threatening their ability to succeed in the literary marketplace (1). The space and the contrast between published pieces allowed these stories to accomplish a harsher social criticism than the novel of the time, while also extending their examination of characters and their simulated reactions. The attitudes and (mis)understandings about both class and things that were so visibly contested in the newspapers and publications, and many authors, argues Gavin Jones, seized the opportunity to share "the realist and reformist urges of the Progressives, the muckraking desire to document and expose the social problems of the era" (70). These authors' texts are overwhelmed by the socioeconomic and physical force of debt that structures language and the relationship between man and material, and therefore any contemplation about ownership pushes back on the popular consumerist rhetoric that told these authors and their readers that they must obey the laws of capitalism, that they must *be* the supply when there is demand. Rebellion is always the outcome within and outside of these frontier narratives, but so is a sense of resignation when authors question what had more freedom at the end of the century: the laborer or the product? Within this debate, authors were also grappling with their own authorial anxiety about laboring and producing popular and memorable content. The imagined underclassmen and women reminded the author of his or her own role as both a collector (of narratives and characters) and a collectible (in the book or manuscript, bought and sold), which further complicated the way that authors understood their own social and occupational (and human) status. As authors became apprehensive about the socioeconomic status of their characters so do we see their eagerness to understand their own place within the social and literary landscape.

The Western narratives considered here are propelled by nonconventional capitalist

exchanges - gifts, gambles, inheritance, and theft - that also play with the ways in which these exchanges create new obligations, divide families, and offer deliverance from a taxing economic system. I start with Bret Harte's early collection of short stories that jarred his contemporary editors, many of whom refused to publish tales about social delinquency. Harte's interest in "luck" and in finding things out of place fuels the dramatic action of his stories that feature hardworking miners or frontiersmen fighting to survive in the West. The criminal intent we see in narratives such as "The Luck of Roaring Camp" is rationalized as a necessary evil, a way of surviving the dangerous and underpaid labor of coal mining. While theft and ingenuity drive Harte's characters to overcome their indigence, his narratives never illustrate a world of financial stability because possession is always temporary on the frontier; "luck" will eventually run out when objects - and people to share them with - become unavailable. Harte represents his miners, then, at the mercy of their things, which is why Harte's everyday objects are frequently ceremonious and worshipped like totems that will somehow fix the system.

Hamlin Garland's *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891) reflects a similar skepticism about occupation, acquisition, and neglect from the perspective of Midwestern homesteaders who work to own the very fruits of his labor. The battle for economic survival is a hopeless one in the "hot and dusty…dull little town[s]" of the "Middle Border," so Garland's stories produce a need for ruthlessness and manipulation. Garland examines the active role of inanimate matter in determining human affairs in the collection's seven original sketches, and thus he confronts the brutality of land speculation and homesteading that gives mortgages more power than human hands. Characters struggle to understand the meaning of "land value," as a laborer or a speculator or an author, and I am interested in how the attachment of different values to the same environmental material affects the way characters interact with the rest of their material

possessions. For Garland, his narratives attach doubt and shame to person-object relationships, and those feelings of rejection and neglect disturb his own sense of ownership of a place he left in order to thrive.

This chapter concludes with an examination of Mary Noailles Murfree as female mountaineer and "male author" (writing under the penname Charles Egbert Craddock), because her dual personality most certainly derived from her keen understanding of the privilege of literary property in the late nineteenth century. Murfree's fascination with Appalachia's supernatural folklore and archeological history influences her attention paid to the intimate relationships formed between mountaineers and their natural environment, and how those relationships justify a covetous reaction when outsiders enter the landscape with the intent to extract materials (oil, ancient corpses) from the ground. Murfree's mountaineers defend their ownership of the stuff underground without ever even seeing it, but they do see a threat in the bureaucratic corporations and scientific inquiries that arrive without regard to the physical or cultural destruction they may cause. Like Garland, Murfree grapples with the issue of belonging to wild spaces that are deemed valuable by both insiders and outsiders for conflicting reasons, where each contests the others' legitimacy for "owning" land that has never been titled or surveyed. She also considers methods of winning or awarding ownership that do not require financial (or gendered) privilege but are based upon a character's wit and talent; opportunity is available to even the lowliest of mountaineers who know how to outmaneuver the competition. Murfree's comments on ownership and opportunity are self-reflexive; they take aim at her own status as a female writer occupying a male title and a male-dominated marketplace, as well as her intention to repossess an audience that did not read women writers as capable contributors to the genre. Murfree's representation of a different kind of American is a possessive power move in

itself, and one that contributes to this chapter's investigation of the ways in which authors felt untethered to their own literary art within a volatile consumer culture.

Bret Harte and the Materialization of Luck

"I do not think very respectfully of the designs or the doings of the people who went to California in 1849," wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson in *The Conduct of Life* (1860); "It was a rush and a scramble of needy adventurers, and, in the western country, a general jail-delivery of all the rowdies of the rivers…all of them with the very commonplace wish to find a short way to wealth" (243). Emerson's condemnation of Western migrants and his judgment of the bunch as one-dimensional criminals represents how many affluent Easterners felt about the frontier. It would be another eight years before Bret Harte would write and publish "The Luck of Roaring Camp," a text that aptly captures Emerson's caricature of "all the rowdies," but Harte had already arrived in the barren outback of California as a penniless teenager and was bearing witness to the great Western adventure. Alongside the masses who sought refuge from the East's social stuffiness and economic stiff-arm, Harte befriended and worked alongside miners, criminals, gamblers, druggists, cattle ranchers, and express messengers, all of whom would find their place in a new and grittier type of American literature.

Best known for his editorial work for the *Overland Monthly*, as well as his realistic portraits of migrating Californians, Harte primarily and successfully focused on representing the frontier and the poor mining towns that housed a rebellious - but hopeful - phase in American history.[12] He stood by the notion that this new America was built upon diversity and a messy

[12] It is for this reason that I consider Bret Harte one of the first regionalists, and I define him as such for his ability to capture the legible artifacts of difference detailed earlier in this chapter. Recently, Ryan Wander's 2016 article, "Heterochronic West: Temporal Multiplicity in Bret Harte's Regional Writing" also makes a case for Harte's regionalist inclusion because "Harte uses literary narrative's power to shape readers' conceptions of time to restore power and vitality to those otherwise made to lose out and disappear in the course of time and history's movement"

sense of tolerance fueled by a popular curiosity about the way *other* Americans lived. Gary Scharnhorst writes that Eastern readers "were intrigued by the romance of the gold rush," and thereby welcomed Harte's social misfits into their homes (42-3). Harte understood the cultural perception of the Westerner, and he made use of it in his monthly sketches of vagabonds while also calling attention to the reality of their socioeconomic circumstance. These vagabonds weren't so bad, Harte argued to his readers; they aspired to live their own bootstrap narrative like all classes of Americans in the nineteenth century and found creative ways to do so in a wild and unforgiving place.

"The Luck of Roaring Camp" is a significant cultural artifact in itself, not because it is a responsible for California's and Harte's celebrity, but because it exposes how collections of material objects helped authors like Harte think about the possibility of navigating society outside of capitalist rule. Harte himself struggled with debt while maintaining a lavish appearance and spent all of his life relying on his craft to pull him and his family out of poverty. Harte's anxiety about his own state of lack influenced the way that he represented ownership in his narratives, and therefore should not be forgotten or overlooked by scholars who read his stories mainly as parable or parody.[13] Material things, for Harte, were vital to creating a public persona - his debt was accrued by his expensive wardrobe, and one Pittsburg critic observed, "altogether the appearance of the poet was that of one who has paid some attention to the demands of fashion" - but things were also valued for their happenstance (Scharnhorst 96).

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(146). See also Fetterley and Pryse, *Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women, and American Literary Culture* (2003).

[13] Patrick Morrow argues that the story is a parable for Christ and redemption in "Bret Harte, Popular Fiction, and the Local Color Movement," in *Western American Literature* 8 (1973), 123-31. More recently, Jennifer Riddle Harding in *Similes, Puns, and Counterfactuals in Literature Narrative: Visible Figures* (London: Routledge, 2017) focuses on "luck" as a pun (see more specifically Chapter 5). See also Axel Nissen, "The Feminization of Roaring Camp: Bret Harte and the 'American Woman's Home," in *Studies in Short Fiction* (1997), and Jackson Lears, *Something for Nothing: Luck in America* (2004).

Harte's personal letters express a genuine appreciation for finding, granting, or receiving things to and from his cohorts and family. Not surprisingly, he discusses his own luck in business matters; he sardonically considers fortuity like a man without job or social security. Harte represented economic outsiders like himself, known as Bohemians: nonconformists who embraced irony, chance, and reinvention (Tarnoff 9).

Gamblers like Harte undermined the sleek façade of American moral competence and control. Gambling requires participation in subversive exchanges, thereby forsaking a system that condemns illegal play, and abandoning the linear framework of capitalism that draws only a straight line between market and consumer. And because of these things, gambling has historically been associated with vice, violence, and criminality. In *Something for Nothing: Luck in America* (2003), Jackson Lears examines America's fascination and experimentation with luck. He argues that "longings for a lucky strike have been counterbalanced by a secular Protestant Ethic that has questioned the very existence of luck," and the result is an obedient society that believed the American economic system to be part of a providential order (12, 15). Lears demonstrates how hard it is to draw a line in the sand between shrewd speculating and risky stock exchange, between the gamble of American democracy and the gamble for income. Moralists legitimized market culture in America, and citizens have been taught to consider alternative means of acquiring money as inappropriate, illicit, and/or illegal (Lears 16). And yet the gambler is an attractive figure in American culture because gambling is rooted in fantasy; men and women can acquire things with a hand of cards or roll of the dice. [14] Getting something for nothing is an idealistic exchange not typically reserved for a working class citizen, but the

[14] For more on gambling, specifically as represented in literature, see also Michael Flavin, *Gambling in the Nineteenth-Century Novel: "A Leprosy is o'er the Land"* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2003), and Jason Puskar, *Accident Society: Fiction, Collectivity, and the Production of Chance* (2012).

transaction's risk pales in comparison to the potential of the reward. Gambling is a leisure activity, a privilege enjoyed by upper-class patrons who could afford to bet and lose. The fact that poor men consider themselves privileged enough to indulge in extracurricular play outside of hard labor also speaks to the gambler's ability to see themselves outside of their working class. By imagining the chance to escape the work and win the income without the pain, poor gamblers played with the idea that they were better and more capable than the socioeconomic position they had fallen into.

Harte, too, imagines the gambler's potential and frequently represents gambling as a transformative experience in his narratives. Thomas Kavanagh argues that gambling "brings with it a celebration of the twinned mysteries of subjectivity and imagination. To gamble is to proclaim that there exists, beyond the calm dictates of law, a subjective wildness consubstantial with who I am and with the bets I place" (11). Lears concurs: "The gambler, endlessly starting over with every hand of cards, has embodied the American metaphysic of reinventing the self, reawaking possibilities from one moment to the next" (15). In narratives of nonconformity and transformation, then, we must focus on subversive actions like gambling to better understand the agentic effort to change one's own being. Erving Goffman describes gambling as "an occasion generated and governed by the exercise of self-determination, an occasion for *taking* risk and *grasping* opportunity" (161). The possessiveness and physicality of gambling demands a reorganization of ownership with high stakes. When someone wins something, there is attached to that thing the euphoria of winning. There is a signification beyond its status as an object that memorializes its pleasure and lucky acquisition; the narrative of happenstance or fate accompanies the object, and the thing is personalized, protected. Harte represents both gamblers and things gambled in order to validate a new class of workers navigating alternative

marketplaces, taking possession of things in a wild environment, and experimenting with new freedoms on the fringes of society. In this national phase of chaotic social and economic fluctuation, Harte envisions “a city of refuge” where luck is common and available. His stories are about the seizure of property for the greater good, an early socialist argument for leveling access to opportunity and achieving equal distribution. And while Harte publically stood by his Republican ties that pleased his upper class friends, his personal letters indicated otherwise when he wrote in 1887: “I can understand how a man feels when he is a Communist and a Socialist - and what makes him one! I like these [wealthy] people very well - but Heaven help them when the day of reckoning comes!”[15]

“The Luck of Roaring Camp” is a small but subversive narrative of reckoning, heralded by multiple publications across the country as the “best magazine story of the year” in 1868 (Scharnhorst 41). Readers demanded its reprint for more than a decade because they appreciated the humorous morality tale of rough men raising a newborn baby and of the Victorian domestication of their once-wild camp. While some readers objected to the sympathetic representation of a prostitute, and to the expletives spoken by the miners, most approved of the salvation found and the cult of domesticity honored by the miners, especially if they represented a potential for all vagrants out West.[16] Even Mark Twain scoffed at the popularity of this literary subculture: “We own Harte a deep debt of gratitude - the reverence in which gamblers, burglars, and whores are held in the upper classes to-day is all due to him, & to him only” (*Notebooks* 312).

[15] To his wife Annie, written on September 15, 1887 and reprinted in Axel Nissen’s *Bret Harte: Prince and Pauper* (2000), 220.

[16] For a more extensive argument about the feminization and domestication of the camp, see Axel Nissen’s article, "The Feminization of Roaring Camp: Bret Harte and the American Woman's Home" (1997), 379.

But this was Harte's intention. Harte's miners represent a subaltern part of the national narrative who know how to manipulate a capitalist system that has shut them out; his West allows for social heterogeneity and a degree of economic flexibility or mobility. Harte's things represent what Maurizia Boscagli calls "materiality out of bounds," or accumulations of things that appear no longer useful or desirable but are in fact invested with lingering claims of sentiment and profound ambivalence by their human owners (3). As opposed to existing passively as a sterile, market-manipulated commodity fetish, "stuff" is volatile, resistant to disposal, and active as it affects different users in different ways. The miner's stuff is what deserves a closer look here, not only because it represents a physical seizure of property/power, but also because it activates a psychological and social transformation wherein the men recognize their own empowerment (both as individuals and as a community) and ultimately resist the social structure to which they have each been assigned (underclass and criminal). Moreover, Harte positions each man as maintaining a prized possession who willingly contributes it to the greater good of the newborn's collection. To pair gambling with gifting is an odd juxtaposition, but these exchanges can and should be read as assertive rejections of capitalist marketplaces, as Harte mulling over the idea that social elevation may in fact be possible with the help of things, not people.

Things, like the ones placed in the hat beside the newborn baby in the mining camp, offer insight into these men's lives before their migration, their habits as collectors of objects, and their judgment regarding what suffices as a worthy offering for the child in the context of their makeshift ceremony. The 100 residents of Roaring Camp file in to pay their respects to the deceased Cherokee Sal and her newborn baby now swaddled in a borrowed red flannel, lying in a candle-box. The solemn procession is out of place itself; Harte has already made it clear that

these are criminals, gamblers, and “reckless” men, who lack sympathy for the opposite sex, much less the dead. But at the direction of their leader Stumpy, they perform a premodern, almost tribal ceremony reminiscent of a Native American rite for the mother whose body lies sheeted across from her child.[17] The miners make offerings to the child, like donating charms to a shrine for a happy delivery into a new life. The gravity of the scene affects the weight of the things offered, and because Harte’s narrator labels this a ceremony, the offerings are ceremonial exchanges, or publically displayed and reciprocated items of value that demonstrate the social importance of their rite of passage.[18] These gifts negotiate not only the miners’ new paternal relationship to the orphaned child, but more importantly, their new status as property-owning citizens who are capable of appropriating objects from around the world and assembling them without any rules.

The fourteen objects submitted by the miners to the hat (and listed at the opening of this chapter) are vital to thinking about the way that authors such as Harte imagined objects circulating in the American West. For one, the alms are not simply monetary donations, although the $200 in loose coin, or the equivalent of $6500 today, is quite a heavy stash for the laborers.[19] The miners instead give their personal possessions to the child, most of which are not accompanied by an owner’s name or are confessed to be “not the givers” originally. One might

[17] Ryan Wander also argues that the story offers “a premodernity poised to give way to an impending modernity… Sal’s giving birth to Tommy and her death function as plot points that enable and emphasize the subsequent forward movement of the text’s fairly linear narrative of social and material progress” (148-49).

[18] For an anthropological discussion of ceremonial exchanges, see Andrew Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart, “Ceremonial Exchange,” in *A Handbook of Economic Anthropology* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2005); and Jason Baird Jackson, *Material Vernaculars: Objects, Images, and their Social Worlds* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2016), 185.

[19] Hypothetically, if there are 100 miners in the camp, each miner would only have to give $2; according to a Comparative Wages report from 1889, gold and silver workers earned an average of $2 a day; see the *Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor, Comparative Wages, Prices, And Cost of Living: from the Sixteenth Annual Report of the Massachusetts Bureau of Statistics of Labor*, for 1885. (Boston: Wright and Potter Printing Co., 1889), 52. Although the miners would have been sacrificing their day’s wages, together their $200 collaboration would be the equivalent of a middle class income, thereby changing their status in a matter of hours.

assume these objects to be gambled winnings, stolen goods, or objects that have also migrated from East to West. Oakhurst the gambler is the only owner specified as giving a "very beautifully embroidered lady's handkerchief," reminiscent of a token of love and domesticity; he is, after all, the "philosophical" character who recommends the baby be named "Luck" (6). The diamond breastpin and the diamond ring are given in competition with one another, so we may consider these to be also the possessions of gamblers who see an opportunity to play a game. Most of the possessions are indicative of a material mining culture: a tobacco box convenient for indulging on worksite, but its silver form and the fact that tobacco was a luxury good suggest the piece was valuable to its owner; a gold specimen most likely taken from working in the mines; and a single golden spur suggesting a horse rider between camps, as well as the fact that it is an incomplete set of spurs thus probably valued for its precious metal. Additionally, there are three different weapons submitted, four if we count the surgeon's shears, but those are almost a wink at the theft of the surgeon's tools that were just shown performing Cherokee Sal's labor extraction. The silver teaspoon whose initials, the narrator "regrets to say," are not the giver's, also implies theft ("regret" implies the narrator's conventional or middle-class morality), as well as the popular idiom, "born with a silver spoon in his mouth" (6). The Bible also suggests virtue, although the narrator makes a point to tell us that the contributor could not be detected. The secrecy of this offering accentuates its sacred form while at the same time lending possibility to the idea that *any* of the miners could have been holding onto the material symbol of their faith, only to sacrifice it for the child. These things together, in the closed system of the collection, signify in a different way during this ritual than they do in their original social contexts; they are not meant to be used according to their original function, but meant to build a totem of symbolic

wealth and opportunity for the child, although he too could pawn or gamble these objects away for material wealth.

Finally, the doubloon and the £5 Bank of England note are the most foreign objects in this very domestic narrative; they have traveled the farthest, and they represent a worldly currency unexpectedly present in a rude cabin on the bottom of an isolated ravine. The fiver is the smallest denomination of banknote issued in England, and yet it suggests the luxury of travels abroad - or the winnings taken from an English traveler in the neighboring hub of San Francisco.[20] And while its exchange rate would have been higher overseas, it has little to no value in the tiny camp with no way to honor or convert the note. It is merely another object that symbolizes wealth with no physical value in this context. Similarly, the Spanish coin is unusable, although its exchange for value would be more tangible in the colonies of neighboring Mexican territories that continued to mint doubloons in the 1850s. The narrative provides no detail about its origin, but the currency itself indicates the Spanish Empire's process of minting gold coins in order to support transatlantic commerce and fund newly conquered Mexico. These coins then freely circulated in the Caribbean and into Colonial America, long before settlers moved West. Its "otherness" fuels the "otherness" of the collection. These foreign objects evoke larger transnational relations, and deep continental histories, that are only partially operative now, or that are only tangentially relevant to the lives of the men on the frontier. More so, they are remnants of empires that were met with the resistance of citizens who wanted self-government and liberalism, much like the miners who appear to resist the bureaucratic control of their mining camp. Together, these things all derive from different classes, genders, and nations and have

[20] Close reading would suggest that this is Cockney Simmons' contribution, who is narrated as reminded of his home in Greenwich upon listening to Tommy Luck's lullaby. He sees the pastoral scene as "heavenly," thereby seeing his offering as a token to create such an Eden in America.

somehow fallen into the hands of criminal, "reckless," and poor men in the middle of nowhere.

Every thing that Harte illustrates is out of place, including the child himself. The orphan whom they name "Tommy Luck," but whom the narrator and Kentuck refer to as "The Luck," is adopted without legal contract or maternal consent. He is seized from his mother's birth canal and treated like a possession. The added article transforms his name into the label of an object; "The Luck" suggesting equivalent of a hand of cards, a pair of dice, or a totem. He is called a "specimen" and "an acquisition," even an exchange piece when they fear taking the child to Red Dog would result in the other camp "swap[ping] it" for a new body (8). The *OED* specifically cites Harte's story in its definition (3b) of "luck" as "an object or (occasionally) person on which the prosperity of a family or community is believed to depend." The more The Luck is described, the less we see him acting like a child; he is instead carried around like a charm, moved along with the men as they go about their errands. If the miners prefer to understand Luck as an object, not a human, then Harte is demonstrating how important objects are to these men in radically regenerating a sense of self. But he is also evoking the disturbing historical narrative of slavery and the way in which people can treat each other as objects. With Reconstruction happening on the periphery of the text and the Fourteenth Amendment just newly adopted a month prior to the story's publication, the physical containment of a human life and his treatment as an object broadly implicates slavery's violation of human rights and its legacy of conflating people with things. As "masters" of this child's life, the miners believe their responsibility for Luck is in the child's best interest. Cherokee Sal might demand back her product and threaten the game, or a female nurse might only serve as a "defunct mother" (9). The miners protect The Luck as they protect their right to property.

All of these material objects, then, exert a "thing power" that embodies a vibrancy and context of its own.[21] In exploring objects' meaning as not inherent, but rather socially developed, Edwina Taborsky argues vis-à-vis Claude Levi-Strauss, "It is the bundle of relations, the set of interactions with the people in that society that will make the unit [of things] meaningful which is stored in group memory" (64). In this new place together, in Roaring Camp, the miners create a counter-memory; they share, evaluate, and move forward with their collection that instigates a "regeneration." The collection represents a set of possibilities for the community, and it materializes a new underclass consciousness that resists the feeling of hopelessness and embraces a gambler's optimism. Lears distinguishes "cultures of control" - like the American Protestant tradition that dismisses all gambles and praises managerial order - from "cultures of chance," which treat chance as "a source of knowledge and a portal of possibility" (17). The story's gamblers entertain a culture of control when they domesticate their camp, but both the gamble they take in raising a child with no prior experience and their refusal to leave the camp even after hearing the flood warnings are reminders that they will always be gamblers.

For a while, their gamble appears to pay off, as Harte's narrator describes a regenerative "change" in the men with a cheery tone. Their commitment to keeping the child is labeled the "first spasm of propriety" (9), they develop "stricter habits" (12), they "import" fancier things; they embrace "innovation" (13), "they wash themselves twice a day" (16), and "the rehabilitation of the camp became a necessity" (12). They deny incoming travelers and secure their boarders apart from neighboring camps. They suddenly do not stress the need to mine but indulge in downtime, smoking their pipes and singing lullabies to The Luck. The miners reject the

[21] See Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2010).

surrounding world, with its ruthless financial pressures, and they recreate a closed social and economic system that works just as, if not more, successfully in the valley of Roaring Camp.

Not only do they share Luck's collection to generate their own wealth and plans to build a hotel, they also rely on Nature's gifts found and fostered as bedding, carpeting, décor, and sustenance. "A fire of withered pine boughs" hardly lit at the beginning of the story turns into "a hedge of tessellated pine boughs, which surrounded [Luck's] bed" (15). Because the gold mined in the camp yielded the men little success prior to The Luck, they are disillusioned by and thus fail to appreciate Nature's material worth. But when they collectively decide to be a self-sustaining enterprise of men working toward a shared regeneration, "[t]he claims had yielded enormously" (16). The narrator illustrates a collective epiphany:

> The men had suddenly awakened to the fact that there were beauty and significance in these trifles…A flake of glittering mica, a fragment of variegated quartz, a bright pebble from the bed of the creek, became beautiful to eyes thus cleared and strengthened, and were invariably put aside for The Luck. (14)

Things that they had always discarded suddenly appear valuable and worth harvesting in the name of a content and collaborative existence; they are, as Bennett defines, "vibratory - at one moment disclosing themselves as dead stuff and at the next as live presence' (5). Once the miners eliminate outside interference and a mental reliance on the need to enlist help, they express a proud, cooperative self-reliance, "something original, independent, and heroic about the plan" (9). They "see" a new sense of worth that justifies their decision to raise a child (and a new world order) alone. Seeing a generous objective reality is believing in a prosperous subjective experience.

Harte's use of the phrase "awakened" suggests his intention for the miners to replicate the conventional, materialistic domestic world of the East on the frontier, but on their *own* terms; this "awakening" marks a sudden awareness of material wealth and a way to work around an

alienating wage-labor system by instead adopting a system of scavenging and sharing. In an open and wild territory, these men close and domesticate their space in a way previously unfathomable upon arriving out West. They take control, find property, and wield power. In closing their own frontier, the miners declare themselves free individuals who choose community over market-reliance and defy a capitalist worldview that conceived of human beings like the miners as expendable and mechanical. This "awakening" inspires a new vision of selfhood in the face of its profound negation outside of the camp, with which the miners assume the position of powerful domestic subjects and in the end, sacrifice themselves in order to protect The Luck. And while Tommy Luck ultimately falls victim to the flood, and it would seem that their renewal is futile, Kentuck's final cheer - "'he's a-taking me with him. Tell the boys I've got The Luck with me now'" - designates the story as an optimistic narrative of revolutionary transformation (18). There is no regret or remorse for chasing a belonging into the flood; Harte hints at no failure as Kentuck's body "drifted away into the shadowy river" (18). Instead the final catastrophe abruptly signals another twist of chance, another risk in following Tommy downstream. Harte allows us to indulge in a gambler's idealism without dwelling on the consequences, and the result is an illustration of a new type of American who seizes opportunity regardless of class or circumstance.

Harte created hundreds of characters who rejected capitalism and created a new system reliant upon fortuitous acquisition, compassionate gifting, and communal prosperity. "The Outcasts of Poker Flat" (1869), for example, features four exiled "criminals" and two runaway lovers who try to keep each other alive in a snowstorm. The gambler John Oakhurst returns his gambled winnings to innocent Tom Simson when he discovers that he is trying to create a new life with his young bride. Similarly, "Tennessee's Partner" (1869) highlights the gifting of an

honorable funeral and deathbed for a fellow friend. In “Baby Sylvester” (1874), the narrator is gifted a bear cub from a fellow miner and imagines the same sort of domestic utopia for him and the bear as dreamed up by the miners of Roaring Camp: “I lay awake some time later with plans for his future. I finally determined to take him to Oakland-where I had built a little cottage…in the midst of a rosy picture of domestic felicity” (506). In “Left Out on Lone Star Mountain” (1887), the narrator celebrates finding gold as a “supreme moment”: “It was all his own! His own by right of discovery under the law of the land, and without accepting a favor from *them*. He recalled even the fact that it was *his* prospecting on the mountain that first suggested the existence of gold in the outcrop” (*Frontier* 351). He imagines himself now crowned “‘hero of the camp!’” (*Frontier* 353). These examples - which all call for more close study than can be provided here - demonstrate that Harte undoubtedly was interested in the West’s creation of its own rules, its own regional identity, but even more so how things out West could act wild in unregulated exchanges. And while Harte offers a relatively optimistic outlook for his underclass citizens in the texts, he more importantly conveys a provocative subculture out West that sought to demystify the capitalist machine.

Making a Living in Hamlin Garland’s *Main-Travelled Roads*

While Harte focuses on disreputable men who built a life on risky luck, Hamlin Garland concentrates on a different kind of American hero: the disciplined self-made man who reaps his rewards with ethical merits. Garland’s characters are the antithesis to Harte’s gamblers, and yet both illustrate similar feelings of entitlement and debt commonly experienced on the frontier. Garland, a champion and ledger of the Populist Party in the 1890s, is the most politically outspoken of the authors discussed in this chapter. Jonathon Berliner argues that “far from simply espousing nostalgic rhetoric, the Populists articulated demands for concrete reforms” on

practical issues such as monopoly, land speculation, and the gold standard (220). Garland campaigned widely for the party's single tax platform and against the erosion of individual freedoms under the dominant system of corporate capitalism. In his 1891 pamphlet *A New Declaration of Rights*, Garland argued that "to allow any part of a social group…to have absolute monopoly of space is a social crime, and human reason revolts against it as against the most vital infringement of the rights of man" (167). His purpose in writing *Main Travelled Roads*, then, was to agitate and reform - to shine light on the "vital infringement" happening in Middle Border regions previously unidentified in American literature.[22]

The mythic allure of life out West erased the average homesteader's poverty, hard labor, and oppression. In periodicals and newspapers, nineteenth-century editors and staffers created a fantasy of bootstrap success and optimistic living. A writer for the *Michigan Farmer* indicated that "misfortunes will come, and sometimes circumstances will combine to cause the farmer trouble and loss but labor conquers all things, and clear brains, economy, and good management will surely lead to success" (230). Another editorial in *Outlook* opined that "[t]he general spirit of hopefulness and energy does much to soften their deprivations. If once the mortgages can be paid off, the farms properly stocked, and the dwellings made attractive, it will be a region of comfortable and prosperous homes" (Whicher 63). A popular camp song of the decade included the egalitarian verse, "Come along, come along, don't be alarmed; / Uncle Sam is rich enough to give us all a farm!" (qtd. in Faragher 18). Such public boosting of a rugged but valuable life in the Midwest did much to encourage thousands of Americans to file claims and work off debt in efforts to obtain deeds for their homesteads. In fact, Garland himself recalls being taken in by the

[22] Garland's editor actually encouraged Garland embolden the Farmer's Alliance revolt with a series of stories when he asked in a letter, "'why can't you write a serial story for us? One that shall deal with this revolt of the farmers?'" (Son 422).

opportunistic rhetoric, telling his father, "'I was eager to clutch my share of Uncle Sam's bounty as any of them. The world seemed beginning anew for me as well as for these aliens from the crowded eastern world. I am ready to stake a claim'" (*Son* 302).

But what Garland's family and thousands more like them found out West was the stark reality of poverty, economic turmoil, land speculation, unpredictable seasons or crop yields, fires that destroyed years of progress, and a depressing isolation from civilization or metropolitan access that might serve some reprieve. The "crushing and invisible weight upon the farmer and mechanic, and upon women and children" proved too much for the young and progressive Garland, who returned East to begin his writing career ("A New Declaration" 167). Garland's autobiography details the changing relationship with his parents and place that ensued as a journey of "rebellion and desertion to guilt and rescue," argues Donald Pizer (*The Significant* 88). The author's work thus became burdened by the idea that if Uncle Sam's bounty was not real, then what was?

Garland's texts work to correct the incongruity between America as "narrated" and America as "lived" in public consciousness and literary expression. But in his own "lived" experience, he left the farm, which explains why so many of his stories are crafted around "returning insiders," or those who have abandoned their homes for better lives, only to find themselves back again fighting the same physical forces they swore off some time ago. Garland's guilt "narrated" the "silent heroism" of his parents and their fellow farmers with a romantic perspective of rural life - which inversely affected the way that Garland represented those who deserted the homestead (*MTR* 1).[23] How could they (he) forfeit a possession so

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[23] Hereafter, *Main-Travelled Roads* is indicated in text as the abbreviation, MTR.

integral to their (his) very being? Could you repossess a thing that was never really yours to begin with?

Main-Travelled Roads, a collection of seven short stories about hard-worked and oppressed famers, sought to identify the answers to these questions through a rhetoric of ownership. Garland addresses the concept of ownership on two fronts: most obviously, he is concerned about the farmer's ability to reap what he sows, but he also considers what kind of work is available to the farmer who leaves his farm (and familial connections) and seeks alternative modes of earning a living. At the root of both circumstances, Garland is ambivalent toward those who abandon their things and their land, even if those things were not legally bound together. Usually, the characters of his life and his narratives "stick to the job" and keep their place in the overgrown trenches of homesteading (*Son* 428). Even when his parents and their land fell into an aged, decrepit state, Garland recalls being appalled by his brother's suggestion to bring them all back East.[24]

This is because his definition of "value" for the land involves much more than the land's actual productive capacity. And his texts reveal a critical slant toward those who do not share Garland's emotional and psychic valuation of a place so full of wild opportunity and romance. Proper ownership, for Garland, looks like a farmer who "sticks to the job" of improving their land with their mortgaged and decaying things, who voices their contempt for the hostile environment or an impersonal economic system, but represents "a visible incarnation of hospitality and optimistic poverty" (*MTR* 181). These owners grow out of Garland's nostalgia for a homogenous region that "excludes historical change" and rejects feudalist hierarchies (Gilman

[24] Garland's main reasoning for not wanting his parents to migrate East is that his father would have nothing to "do," and "He would be among strangers in strange conditions" (*Son* 431). They finally agree to move them further West, to Garland's birthplace in Wisconsin, which he recalls was "a purely selfish plan," as his nostalgia for their familiar past defeats any rationale for a healthier future.

101). *Main-Travelled Roads* works to stabilize concepts of ownership on the farm within a broken system that tangled legality and injustice, villainy and survival, but all seven stories find this feat impossible. Instead Garland struggles with his own indignation toward the fallible machinery of capitalism that thrived on risk and emboldened slick speculators who pursued their own version of the American Dream. Garland grapples with how alternative marketplaces and unconventional exchanges may in fact save the homesteader from a life of loss and oppression, even if some rules must be broken.

As opposed to Harte (and later Murfree), Garland respects an order of things. And so do most of his characters with the exception of the few who prefer the economic messiness of the era. For every honest laborer, Garland introduces a cunning character who makes his living through unconventional or suspicious employment. The subversive characters, the ones represented as dishonest or disruptive, are worth a closer look in juxtaposition because they are underappreciated for their efforts to physically work around a system built to break their backs. Each of the Middle Border stories are structured with character foils who reflect upon circumstance and ownership in different ways. For example, in "Up the Coulee," Howard, who leaves the farm, understands his success as a product of luck while his brother Grant, who stays, must work harder in his absence, make scarifies for his family, and deny charity in order to value his life as productive. Grant and Howard demonstrate the collection's clearest socioeconomic disparity, and their anxieties about and aggression toward one another is the best place to start in order to better recognize Garland's perception of what a "democratic pioneer" should be able to own.

In "Up the Coulee," Garland pays particular attention to the ways in which a person lays claim to a regional identity. At the beginning of the story, Howard McLane returns to Wisconsin

after a ten-year absence, reflecting that "[i]t was, besides, *his* West. He still took pride in being a Western man" (*MTR* 69, original emphasis). His absence prompts a nostalgia for pastoral rural spaces in comparison to the mechanistic artificiality of the city: "In [Howard's] restless life, surrounded by the glare of electric lights, painted canvas, hot colors, creak of machinery, mock trees, stones, and brooks, he had not lost, but gained appreciation for the coolness, quiet, and low tones, the shyness of the wood and field" (*MTR* 77). Howard becomes more attuned to the "majestic amphitheater of green wooded hills" that instead thrilled his sight and memory, instead of his guilt and dread of facing his family's depreciated condition (*MTR* 71). "'The poet who writes of milking the cows does it from the hammock, looking on,' Howard soliloquized," imagining himself as poet and actor in order to voice his reverence for the land (*MTR* 103). Howard experiences his homecoming through the lens of art, higher education, and belongings that he has acquired in his "outsider" life, and therefore is unable to imagine the homestead without incorporating its artistic likeness ("low tones," "amphitheater"). Although his claim to "knowing" the landscape is filtered through memories of romanticized artistic interpretations, he senses a greater aesthetic and psychic value of his home that was previously unavailable to him as a farmer (*MTR* 103). Because Grant has never seen these renderings or known an environment that did not break a man's back and spirit, he is unable to recognize any other value beside the financial gains and losses he has experienced as a landowner and then a tenant. Grant claims a regional identity that is unimaginative and fatalistic based on the reality of his residency.

In his time away, Howard became a well-paid actor, one of those "who are always in luck, and the best of it was he kept and made use of his luck" (*MTR* 77). He details that his luck happened in the form of introductions made by the New Yorkers he met: "they all helped me along. I did nothing to merit it" (*MTR* 102). He neither drinks nor smokes, and he's known for

his camaraderie in his profession; he appears an honest laborer who has sought an alternative marketplace for a greater success than he saw available in the coulee. His brother Grant is critical of Howard's profession - "'Well, that's another way of makin' a livin', sure'" - and he compares "the dramatic business" to gambling, a business that plays to win while others work to live (*MTR* 84). Stephanie Foote points out, "Grant's shock at this state of affairs accords with the Populist or producerist critique of those who live from the labor of others, producing nothing themselves, but managing to live well anyway" (*MTR* 174). Grant values his own farming profession because of his demonstrable sacrifices - the patched overalls and the dirty hands - but also because of his profound relationship to the farm. Grant explains to his brother that the land will "'skin a man alive. More than that, farmin' ain't so free a life as it used to be…Binds him right down to the grindstone and he gets nothin' out of it - that's what rubs it in. He simply wallers around in the manure for somebody else. I'd like to know what a man's life is worth who lives as we do?" (*MTR* 113). The combination of "skinning" and "binding" and "rubbing" all infer a parasitic amalgamation that occurs between farmer and homestead where the farmer is eventually erased by the earth and his sacrifices are worth nothing; he becomes the waste that others have the privilege to discard. And yet Grant wears his helplessness and bleakness as a badge of pride, and perhaps he is attracted to the struggle like the "fly in a pan of molasses" to which he compares himself (*MTR 113)*. Grant's conflicted response to the worth of his work relies on the American system of capitalism that promised, but did not always deliver, gains for hard labor, profit for production, and in his isolated corner of Wisconsin, this is all he knows.

So when Grant is faced with Howard's "cuffs, collar, and shirt, alien in their elegance, showed through the dusk, and a glint of light shot out from the jewel in his necktie," he is confused and angry why his own returns do not appear as flashy or rewarding (*MTR* 79). The

narrative pays attention to things that each brother owns; these things are always in comparison in order to heighten the unspoken conflict between them but also to distinguish the insider from the now-outsider. The brothers square off about the cost of their clothing, their abilities to purchase shirts and shoes for competing prices and for different purposes because each sees in these things a transformative and agentic power that affects their interpretations of their own identity. The fight ends with Grant venting his own aggression, but also his fellow working-classmen's plight: "'Singular we think the country's goin' to hell, we fellers, in a two-dollar suit, wadin' around in the mud or sweatin' around in the hay-field, while you fellers lay around New York and smoke and wear good clothes and toady to millionaires?'" (*MTR* 93). Again, Grant makes it clear that the version of capitalism that requires no work and much pay seems illogical, and he still stands firm that his work is much more valuable than his brother's perceived laziness. Both subjects self-consciously develop an attention to class division and oppression through their relation with things in these scenes; they both acquire in their own words the historical burden between subject and freedom that disenchants both men from further trusting in the egalitarian promises of the farming industry. The cataclysmic realization that man has become entangled and dependent upon his things so much that he cannot know his brother in any other way is a consequence of commodity capitalism at the turn of the century. Garland's skepticism toward how these things make meaning - instead of how men make things - demonstrates the author's inquiry into the advancement of consumer culture that arrested human energy and made people "as inanimate as the things around them" (Brown 99).[25]

Grant refuses to indulge in consumerism, even when Howard presents the family with a

[25] The following chapter, "Lethal Things," further explores this agentic oppression and growing fear towards the lives of things as literary expression moves towards Modernism. The grayness of that fear as contoured here is indication of this project's larger argument that things are always on the minds and in control of the men and women who seek to have, and those agentic anxieties are always lingering in the subconscious of the author as laborer.

trunk full of luxurious presents: a Parisian silk scarf for his mother, a parasol for Laura, and an autobiography of General Ulysses S. Grant for Grant himself. When his brother rejects the gifts, Howard is pained, "the pleasure was all gone for him and for the rest" of the recipients (*MTR* 105). Both brothers notice what the audience must already see: the gifts are out of place against the aged, poverty-stricken, work-weary frame of the house and family. The things are not only reminders of a life that the McLane family will never experience, but also of a divide between natives and outsiders, those who stay to endure the labor and those who abandon shop.

But these things are also reminders that Howard is much more capable and financially successful because he pursued an alternative mode of acquisition. He buys horses and yachts and art with the earnings made as an actor, and without the farm, he now lives as a figure of American consumerism and cosmopolitanism. And he confesses no shame either; Howard comes to the conclusion that "in the world of business, the life of one man seemed to him to be drawn from the life of another man, each success to spring from other failures" (*MTR* 97). Understanding himself as successful and his brother as failure, Howard assumes the rescue role that Garland wanted to fulfill in his own life. Howard resolves to buy back the family farm, despite its financial burden, and he becomes consumed with the daydream of his mother back in the old home, "the fireplace restored, the old furniture in the sitting room around her, and fine new things in the parlor!" (*MTR* 98). He plans to build a new barn and buy them a new carriage not only because he feels guilty for his negligence, but because he feels a certain power and privilege in doing so. He will no longer be a tenant or a laborer but a land owner, the ultimate goal in the life of any American farm worker. Grant of course rejects his offer, claiming, "'I ain't got any right to take anything that I don't earn'," but then seems to only surrender because he is on the verge of death (*MTR* 126). Herein lies Garland's thesis: the farmer cannot thrive in the

existing system that works him to death and teaches him that reciprocity is mandatory, but the farmer who circumnavigates the system and returns full of nostalgia to recuperate his losses with a will survive.

Garland's less well-known stories, including "Among the Corn Rows" and "A Branch Road," also criticize those who desert the family farm at the same time that they reward non-farmers with abundance and awareness. In "Among the Corn Rows," a junior editor of the *Boomtown Spike*, Seagraves, appears to be the only character who can see and analyze capitalism as a whole:

> Seagraves felt that it was a wild, grand upstirring of the modern democrat against the aristocrat, against the idea of caste and the privilege of living on the labor of others. This atom of humanity (how infinitesimal this drop in the ocean of humanity!) was feeling the nameless longing of expanding personality. He had declared rebellion against laws that were survivals of hate and prejudice. (140)

The "atom of humanity" in this passage refers to Rob, a "self-reliant" and hopeful claim-holder who works for and with himself; this registers as a revolutionary idea to Seagraves, but it is lost upon Rob who struggles to understand why those closest to him are also disillusioned by life on the farm. Seagraves, like Howard in "Up the Coulee," is an urban visitor ready to imagine the metaphoric imagery of a burgeoning class consciousness for his readers; Rob has only ever known the pain and labor associated with his underclass status. And despite Seagraves' jabs at his "infinitesimal"-ness and "wildness," Rob manages to rebel against his circumstance by imagining a life in Boomtown and running away with his lover in the middle of the night. Unlike Grant, Rob is prepared to take a risk, and the final success of his exit strategy seems to reward him for doing so.

In "A Branch Road," Will returns home after being scorned by a lover, only to find that he has earned a scandalous reputation but also improved his overall quality of life when he is

faced with what has become of his home and his old lover. Will is always conscious of "the instinct of possession," aware of how "[s]igns changed and firms went out of business with characteristic Western ease of shift…and contrasts of newness and decay thickened," while others are represented as clueless and ignorant of change (*MTR* 23, 35). His ability to see within and outside of the region's borders, like Howard, gives Will the upper hand in both understanding the systematic oppression of farmers and knowing how to overcome the odds. And like Howard, Will gives thought to "a vast number of things, mostly vague, flitting things," instead of standing slack-jawed over a hoe like his nemesis Ed Kinney or Grant or even the returning veteran in "The Return of a Private" (*MTR* 38).

Will's vague and flitting things are reflections on the decrepitude of the homesteads in contrast to the kinetic energy of the environment. Will weeps when he comes across the land where he had worked his entire childhood and built a community at their dining table only to find that the farm no longer exists: "In the face of this house the seven years that he had last lived stretch away into a wild waste of time. It stood as a symbol of his wasted, ruined life. It was personal, intimately personal, this decay of her home" (*MTR* 44). Additionally, he finds his own home sold to old Kinney, now a "sort of prison" where they had all been born and there his father and his little sister had died (*MTR* 46). The flowerbeds and the domestic landscape were now overgrown because old Kinney "never believed in anything but a petty utility" (*MTR* 46). His house also reflects a disregard for domestic hospitality; the furniture was "worn and shapeless," the calico lounge was rickety, and "the carpet of rags was patched and darned with twine in twenty places" (*MTR* 49). Their dining room was swarming with bees, "the walls were bare plaster, grayed with time," and "the table was warped so badly that the dishes had a tendency to slide to the centre" (*MTR* 52). The swarming, overgrowing, and warping are all

erasures caused by the passage of time in an environment that cares more about the harvest than human habitation.

Will's escape from such a fate comes under scrutiny by neighboring farmers and family members who like Garland are uncomfortable with Will's desertion. They rationalize his departure as connected to illegal or perverse actions back East. When Will runs into his uncle upon return, he conceals his identity in order to assess the honest state of affairs. His uncle informs him that Will was making "a *terrible* lot o' money," but "'[i]t ain't made right noway'" (*MTR* 43, original emphasis). The uncle guesses that Will sends so much money home because he's a gambler by trade: "'He plays cards, and every cent is bloody'" (*MTR* 43). Will reveals himself in anger and challenges his uncle's standards for money "made right": "'did you ever hear of a man foreclosing a mortgage on a widow and two boys, getting a farm f'r one quarter what it was really worth? You damned old hypocrite! I know all about you and your whole tribe - you old blood-sucker!'" (43). This debate rests upon the supposed "right" way to make money that should require hard work, not luck. The equivalence of gambling to murder instead of labor to death demonstrates a backwards standard that only natives like Will's uncle withhold. Because of his cosmopolitan distance, Will can conclude that even if he is gambling - which is neither confirmed nor denied by the narrator - it is no worse an occupation than land speculating and hiking interest rates for other natives who work to make an "honest" living.

And it is "Under the Lion's Paw" that has famously discarded and demonized men like Will's uncle: the landlord, the land speculator, or the claim holder who mortgages his land for more than its production value. The battle between Haskins and Jim Butler is Garland's most discussed because it underscores the Populist's disdain for an impersonal and oppressive economic system. Their debate - "'It's my work an' my money.' 'You bet it was; but it's my

land',"' - encapsulates Garland's concerns about proper ownership and fair exchange that haunts the text as a whole (*MTR* 214). Haskins is the "silent hero," the ploughman numbly at work under the lion's paw because he cannot yet afford to own the homestead. Butler is the region's antagonist, a controlling presence who can do whatever he wants with the land that he rightfully owns - but never touches. But Butler is given a bootstrap narrative as well, and Garland inverts the villainy of speculators who also appear to have overcome their own troubles.

Butler was once known to the community as "land poor," a man who came West as a grocer and "earned all he got" (*MTR* 205). After careful observation of the way in which land values peaked and men grew poor, Butler sold a lot of land for four times what he paid for it: "he believed in land speculation as the surest way of getting rich. Every cent he could save or spare from his trade he put into land at forced sale, or mortgages on land, which were 'just as good as the wheat,' he was accustomed to say" (*MTR* 205). And while Butler's greed is typical of the speculator's, his humanization is not. Garland creates Butler as an "easy" mortgager, a man who had pity on tenants and "let the debtor off again and again" (*MTR* 206). And while he claims to not have enough money to pay the taxes on the land itself, he seemingly lives a life of luxury, "sitting around town" and going on leisurely gaming excursions. If anything, Butler's scheme is his poor-man camouflage that attracts new tenants looking for a break (like Haskins) who will improve the land and pay the rent. Instead of being an omnipresent symbol, Butler is a present claim holder who can defend himself against the disgruntled farmer. When Haskins complains that he has to pay "twice f'r my own things, - my own fences, my own kitchen, my own garden'," Butler argues that he's not to blame: "'Don't take me for a thief. It's the law. The reg'lar thing. Everybody does it'" (*MTR* 215).

Exploitation is protected by the frontier's social and legal contracts, but the anxiety about

theft and dishonest (re)possession is still there, tainting the ownership when it is in fact legal and typical. Even when Haskins resolves to buy the farm at double its original cost, there is no joy or accomplishment from either party: Butler is threatened and frightened by Haskins, the "avenging demon," who then sits "dumbly on the sunny pile of sheaves, his head sunk into his hands" (*MTR* 217). This should be a welcomed exchange between two parties, a reciprocal purchase and sale of a thing earned, and instead the transaction is uncomfortable. I believe this is because Garland does not know what will repair the Middle Boarder marketplaces and valuation of property. Tom Lutz argues that unresolved disputes are typical of regionalist texts: "instead of resolving these debates, [authors] oscillate between the sides, producing, finally, a complex symphony of cultural voices and positions whose only resolution lies in the reader-writer compact to survey the fullness of the scene" (31). Perhaps Garland is giving us what Mary Austin called the "proverbial bird's-eye view of the American scene," but there seems to be a more anguished tone to his own inability to "pick a side," so to speak (qtd. in Lutz 31). Even decades later, in his autobiography, Garland mourned the farmer's condition as inevitably contaminated by capitalism and subjugation, writing that "[t]here is no escape even on a modern 'model farm' from the odor of the barn" (*Son* 34). Garland's loss of faith in the system to which his family contributed so diligently tempers *Main-Travelled Roads*, and he expresses feelings of shame about proper ownership that are self-reflexive and overwhelming. Garland therefore doubts his own ability to shed light on the toil and trouble of the Middle Border farmer as an insider-turned-outsider looking in from a privileged and well-paid pedestal, but he seems to find that he must conceal his reality, like Butler, in order to make more money and sell more Populist rhetoric. And while Garland's literary art fought for the protection and prosperity of the American farmer, his despondency casts light on a numbing capitalist system that imprisoned

even the author's ability to celebrate an escape from underclass injustices.

Mary Noailles Murfree's *Strange Things in a Strange Country*

This chapter closes by pivoting to a neglected female regionalist who also experienced nineteenth-century pioneer life and examined it in her fiction. Mary Noailles Murfree is woefully understudied, and it is my aim to illustrate how her body of work expansively and sensitively represents Appalachian territories, regional narratives, and the conversation about ownership and possession at the turn of the century. We simply cannot study rural American literature without Murfree's voice, nor can we draw conclusions about literary representations of ownership and entitlement without taking into account her short stories and folklore.

Most scholars dispute Murfree's significance as a regionalist worthy of study and have spent little time exploring her work aside from drawing a contemporary comparison or including short excerpts in several recent anthologies.[26] Murfree's work has been separated from the regionalist mainstream for a variety of reasons, the most common being that Murfree's biographical background has complicated, limited, or distorted our understanding of whether she counts as a "regionalist," or a "local colorist." Emily Satterwhite reads Murfree's relationship to Appalachia as problematic because of her nativity; while she was not raised in the Tennessee mountain ranges that she illustrated, she spent fifteen summers visiting the territory where her ancestors lived as distinguished citizens (61). Murfree's family owned a plantation in Murfreesboro, a town named after her great-grandfather and Revolutionary War hero Colonel

[26] Fetterley and Pryse have included Murfree's work and their analyses most extensively of all anthologies in *American Women Regionalists: 1850-1910: A Norton Anthology* (1992). Lisa Maria Hogeland and Mary Klages include Murfree in *The Aunt Lute Anthology of U.S. Women Writers: 17th through 19th centuries* (Santa Cruz: Aunt Lute Books, 2004). Elaine Showalter most recently included only "The 'Harnt' That Walks Chilhowee" in *The Vintage Book of American Women Writers* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011). Sandra L Ballard and Patricia L. Hudson's *Listen Here: Women Writing in Appalachia* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013) is the only anthology that specifically collected Appalachian literature that included an excerpt from *In the Tennessee Mountains.*

Hardy Murfree; and her family lived a refined upper-class, educated life, all of which complicates her status as an "insider." While some scholars of Appalachian literary culture have discounted Murfree as a privileged visitor exploiting a marginalized mountain people, others are comfortable calling her a "familiar outsider."[27] Nevertheless, the academic emphasis on Murfree's social position and biographical narrative has prevented modern readers from interpreting her texts as regionalist lenses that "present regional experience from within, so as to engage the reader's sympathy and identification" (Fetterley and Pryse, *AWR* xii).[28]

Yet the most important reason why Murfree is a neglected presence in American literary history involves her public androgyny. When she began submitting material to publications, Murfree adopted the male pseudonym Charles Egbert Craddock so that her narratives about rugged mountaineers would have a rugged male author to represent them. Her brother offered to the public that she did this in order to ''secure the advantage that a man has in literature over a woman [in]…obtain[ing] a quicker reading by the publishers…[and in being] better received by the public in the beginning" (qtd. in Satterwhite 69). Craddock's regionalist work was welcomed into the *Atlantic Monthly* and the *Boston Herald* by William Dean Howells and Oliver Wendell Holmes with open arms. Publishers and reviewers alike congratulated Craddock for his stories "full of genuine power…a freshness, a vigor, a pathos, and a dramatic power in these stories of Southern life" ("Review" 425). A reviewer in *The Critic* likened Craddock to "the Bret Harte of the Tennessee Mountains, but he has in his own right a genius that would have found some of its

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[27] Danny Miller in *Wingless Flights: Appalachian Women in Fiction* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State Univ. Popular Press, 1996) criticizes Murfree for creating stereotypical characters and connects his issues with her style to the fact that she is and always will be an outsider (32). As editors, Ben Forkner and Patrick Samway do include Murfree's work in *Stories of the Old South* (New York: Penguin, 1989), but they are critical of her regionalist status when they describe her as a familiar outsider (99).

[28] Another reason that Murfree may be sorely overlooked is due in part to the geographical region that Murfree delivered to her audience. As Fetterley and Pryse argue in *Writing Out of Place* (2003), the Tennessee mountains of Appalachia were hardly a region that could be consolidated into any monolithic "South," making it difficult for the average contemporary reader to locate the territory in larger classifications of American space.

material wherever it searched" ("Tennessee" 75). So the news that the assumed "six-foot Tennessean" was instead a young woman with a limp spread like wildfire throughout the literary community (qtd. in Satterwhite 59). The moment she publicized her sex in 1885, her ethos and her style became defined by that single biological fact, analyzed for its surprisingly masculine quality that seemed too authentic to be true. *The Nation* reviewed every story based on her gender: "it is through the strength and the defects of these [imaginative and reckless] qualities that her stories always appear more like the work of a man than of a woman" ("Book Reviews" 82).[29] Murfree spent all of her career defined as a permanent outsider: a lady clothed in masculinity, a frontiersman who turned out to be an invalid woman.

But even after her reveal, Murfree fought for and wrote about identity both as a regionalist and as an Appalachian. She published several novels and collections inspired by Tennessean history, folklore, war tales, and mountain life, all rich with the authentic twang of dialect and custom and filled with the estranged rural communities that pushed back against urban development and state authority. Her portraits of Appalachia in her most popular text *In the Tennessee Mountains* (1884) became "the principal text used to understand the peculiarities of mountain life" (Shapiro xv). Murfree's relationship with the territory, albeit as a temporary resident, is anchored by family history and storytelling, but it was strained by class and an elite education. And for that, Murfree's narrative prose, juxtaposed against mountaineer dialect, is widely rebuked for being overblown and stereotypical, as is her consistent plotting of white elites showing up in a primitive time and space. Murfree's Appalachia expresses the reality of what Mary Louise Pratt describes as "contact zones," or "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and

[29] This reviewer also specifically relates Murfree's work to that of Bret Harte, further emphasizing the similarities of their art and their thematic content.

subordination" (4). By representing interactions between the traveler, the mountaineer, the corporation, and the legal system, Murfree's work identifies the "asymmetrical relations of domination" that exist in the most rural communities - and the ways in which powerless people push back.

Across her fiction, Murfree examines her own role as both powerful and powerless, as an autoethnographer and as an impersonator.[30] She is aware of her status as neither native nor stranger; neither cosmopolitan nor marginalized. She is nostalgic for a local place, but also satisfied as an urban author, which projects an ambivalence and uncertainty about the meaning of the clash between tradition and modernity. Indeed, she appears to celebrate these identity complexities of identity and liminality in her decision to maintain the Craddock penname and to produce the same burly mountain narratives as before her exposure. In her crossing of all spatial, social, literary, and gender binaries, her writing itself is an act of resistance. In her career, Murfree created a loophole that allowed for her voice to be heard in a literary marketplace that favored (white) men and masculinity, and her stories represent similar, "stranger people" who sought out alternative acquisitions in order to thrive in a competitive and repressive society.

Murfree's late mountain stories creatively reimagine the social loopholes for the disenfranchised at the end of the century. Her fiction complicates the outsider-insider binary, advocates for cultural distinction (and its sacred mysteries), and argues against the intrusion of capitalist modernity. Murfree's full length novel, *In the "Stranger People's" Country* (1891) marks a more mature relationship between her narrator's encounters with "outside" preconceptions regarding mountaineers and "inside" empathy with her local subjects. The novel

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[30] Mary Louise Pratt coins the term "autoethnography" as "widespread phenomenon of the contact zone," a form that "appropriates the idioms of travel and exploration writing, merging or infiltrating them to varying degrees with indigenous modes" (9). Autoethnography is "heterogeneous" both in creation and reception because it relies on appropriation and collaboration between the dominate and subordinate cultures (9).

also extends Murfree's concerns about ownership and entitlement, as the narrative operates around an archaeologist's efforts to exhume a graveyard near the Yates' cabin in order to repossess and study the buried "Leetle Stranger People" whom the mountaineers respect as the stuff of legend and property. The memorial space is threatened by two outsiders, a "valley man" (2) archaeologist and an electioneering politician, who both enter the region of Vonore, Tennessee with the purpose of exploitation. Strangers and natives agree that the ancestral bodies possess a strange fusion of economic and cultural value: "The forgotten relics lying there in that long rest became all at once…individualized, invested with the rights of property, the sense of a past and the certainty of a future, humanized as a man and a brother, rather than a system of bones that might, ethnologically considered, establish or disprove a theory" (211). The narrator suggests that whoever has access to the past, controls both the future and the narrative - and it is important to remember that Murfree's liminal state gave her the most access and the most power. But at the same time, Murfree is considering who or what has the "right of property": the mountaineers or the archeologist? The folk or science? The past or the present? The region or the nation?

The novel's 300 pages debate the authority to lay claim over the ancestral site. Each local resident bases his or her decision to claim ownership based on reciprocity - "'Them Leetle People never done me no harm, an' I ain't goin' ter do them non jes' 'kase they air leetle an' dead, an' can't holp tharse'fs (17)'" - and communal privilege - "all the country-side confirmed the tradition with singular unanimity, with one voice" (212). Murfree represents what a disturbance to these relationships and exchanges will mean for the people: exploitation, cultural misappropriation, and victimization. These "grave-robbers" threaten not only the objects that create the cultural memory, but also the cultural memory of the ancestors who owned and

thereby bequeathed the land to the mountaineers (21). In the end, the archeologist and the politician are denied access to the coffins; science, law, politics, and corporate interference (a mining company is silently setting up shop throughout the story) fail against the premodern community's legends and veneration for the dead. Murfree as the narrator closes the novel with her own protection of the "sacrilege and the sanctity" of both the tomb and the mountaineers (21). Despite emphasizing their "strangeness" in dialect, custom, and superstition, Murfree does not disclose to her readers whether or not the "Leetle People" are Cherokee or children, history or legend. The mountaineers maintain possession over their land and their narrative, avoid becoming objects of any outsider's study, and keep their region safe with the production of new fireside stories about "the heavy doom that fell on all who carried their schemes therein and sought to know [their] secrets" (359). But this silence, problematically, positions Murfree as the ultimate keeper of mountaineer secrets. Her ownership of the narrative is as protective as it is underhanded in that she attempts to distances herself, an author of their ancient history, from the archaeologist and the politician while she empathizes with the marginalized group's resistance to outside forces. She leaves the "stranger people's country" as she found it: "doubly deserted," "easily forgotten," and still functioning without the help or influence of outsiders (359).

Murfree returned to writing short fiction and serialized novels after the success of *In the "Stranger People's" Country*, exploring similar themes and unresolved questions in *The Mystery of Witch-Face Mountain and Other Stories*, published in three installments in *The Atlantic Monthly* between September and November 1895. Scholars have basically ignored the collection's contribution to American regionalism, and not one comprehensive study has ever considered Murfree's treatment of the value of Appalachian life in these popular folkloric

stories.[31] However, this collection is culturally significant for three primary reasons: (1) its three stories span Murfree's entire career, as "Taking the Blue Ribbon at the County Fair" was her first mountain tale written in 1873[32] and "The Mystery of Witch-Face Mountain" was one of her last (2) the three stories explore ownership and entitlement in critical ways that deny outsiders the privilege to lay claim to Appalachian resources; and (3) Murfree's female characters are all highly attuned to their power as disruptors of the status quo. "To the great majority of men, the presence of women in affairs of business is an intrusive evil of times out of joint," Murfree writes, and the "intrusive evil" her male colleagues may fear is embodied by her subversive presence in the literary marketplace (35).

Like Harte's miners or Garland's tenants, Murfree's mountaineers are impoverished but industrious people who refuse victimization by seeking out alternative ways to make a living. It is noted that her folks have the same hopes, pleasures, and pains, "like those of a higher culture, differing only in object," and they prosper because of their ingenuity and a seemingly symbiotic relationship with the material environment (168). All three stories - "Taking the Blue Ribbon at the County Fair," "The Casting Vote," and "The Mystery of Witch-Face Mountain" - focus on the exchanges, ownership, and (re)appropriation that occurs in Appalachian "contact zones." The exchanges of resources occur either between insiders and outsiders, or between different classes of mountaineers, but in all cases, a sense of superiority is expressed in owning some *thing*, whether it be a blue ribbon or a vote or a parcel of land. Murfree imagines this superiority

[31] In my extensive search, I have only located a single brief mention of the collection in Cratis D. Williams and Martha H. Pipes's overview of "The Southern Mountaineer in Fact and Fiction: Part II" in the *Appalachian Journal,* 3. 2 (Winter 1976), 149). The one page includes a summary of the text and indicates that all of her characters are "representative" of the typical mountaineer (149).

[32] "Taking the Blue Ribbon" appears to have been published in "Appleton's Summer Book," in 1880 under the name "Charles E. Craddock," according to "The Lounger" in *The Critic* 161 (Jan 29, 1887), 54. Richard Cary's biography of the author, *Mary N. Murfree* (New York, Twayne Publishers, 1967) claims that the story was written after 1872, sold in 1876, and published in 1880 (39).

as a temporary euphoria that is ultimately disrupted by loss, where sacrifice must occur in moments of appropriation. Even if trade is conducted outside of the rules of capitalism, and even if the exchange grants the new owner new successes, Murfree is skeptical about the reciprocal values of things as they are lost and received by mountaineers. The fact that these three stories were written across the span of her career emphasizes her abiding attention to the concepts of ownership, but more significantly, what is at stake in owning something. Murfree's reluctance to celebrate the alterative acquisitions of her peers is rooted in her own experience in acquiring a successful male public persona but losing her self as a female author. The dynamics of exchange in the local setting, which involve forms and experiences of loss as well as gain, are homologous to the tradeoffs that Murfree herself made as an author, and she expresses this ambivalence in both "Taking the Blue Ribbon" and "The Casting Vote," two stories that reward male competitors at the cost of female relationships.

"Taking" comes first in the collection, followed by "Casting;" both forceful verbs that indicate the hasty possession of physical material. The two stories operate with the same plot mechanics: a prize is pursued and won, but in exchange for something more sacred and familial - a daughter in "Taking the Ribbon" and a sweetheart (and a brother) in "The Casting Vote." Both prize-seekers are males: Jenks Hollis is "an ex-cavalryman of fifty battles" and hyper-masculine equestrian, and Justus Hoxon is a hunter and electioneer with too much faith in his brother Walter's political intentions. Both men seek success beyond their prize's physicality; they both romanticize the blue ribbon or the ballot as a vehicle for social escalation *over* the community instead of within it. Nevertheless, the fantasy of power is confronted by the reality of loss, and while the concept of "winning" a saddle or an election dodges capitalist jurisdiction, both men

find they cannot escape its basic economic system of exchange. Everything costs something in the end.

In both stories, women are used as exchange pieces, unbeknownst to their male exchangers. Only after he wins his prize does Hollis come to find that the more talented competitor made a deal with his daughter to drop out of the competition in exchange for her hand in marriage. And only after Justus Hoxon has spent all of his time electioneering and worrying about an incoming comet above does he realize that his sweetheart has already married his brother. His sweetheart, Theodosia, jokes, "'We 'lowed ye didn't see nothin' of it through the tellingscope, did ye?'" but also indicates that Justus' literal and figurative blind spot compels his loss of both the election (the marriage becomes a scandal and discourages voters) and his social place in the community (Justus leaves town immediately) (259). Women appear to act as objects who are objectified - there is no shortage of details about their physical appearance and "vaunted beauty" (262) - but more specifically they are prizes, or things "taken" out of their normal "marketplaces" and won through "the clever outwitting" of male consumers. The stories' relationships are shaped by a consumerism where women are assumed commodities with "exchange value" that mutely move around in a patriarchal system that the men control. The disparate roles between men and women might have been acceptable for Murfree's contemporary readers, especially since they were supposedly created out by a male author that would value power, property, and control. The recognizable drama is between men battling for domination and ownership over both people and things; women on the periphery appear to act as currency, both the grand prize and "the price of his political defeat" (275). Embedded in these stories is a nostalgia for the premodern local that upholds patriarchy, informal social control, and traditional settings (a county fair, a court house), while at the same time it clashes with Murfree's

gender assertion and her overhaul of female suppression in these "primitive" communities. This problem of female objectification also echoes Harte's characterization of baby Luck as being essentially an object for ritual and exchange; the solution, for Murfree at least, is rethinking female compliance in these traditional conventions and realizing the social prospects for American women toward the end of the nineteenth century, including the freedom to choose a career or a partner.

In both stories, the women ultimately, willingly choose to accept their proposals from other men. In "The Casting Vote," it is Theodosia's idea that one brother is better than the other in terms of who promises the most social success and who grants the most access. Filled with "a turmoil of conflicting anxieties, hopes, resolutions," Theodosia's conscience and conflicts are given brief but potent attention upon her realization that Justus Hoxon was not her only *choice* of a husband now that the town was filled with new and arriving voters (238). In fact, she realizes that as a "stylish…graceful" woman, she deserved a "wider sphere" within which to live, and she ultimately chooses to pursue Walter because of his access to a better standard of living; Walter represents the promises of modernity for a woman who would rather be productive in "wider spheres" than reproductive at home. The only other time the word "casting" is used in the story is in the context of Theodosia's heart, "beating placidly now with the casting away of this new expectation that had made all its pulses tense" - that expectation being that she must settle for Justus only because he is an interested suitor (242). The same aggressive verbiage used to describe men putting forth their privileged ballot is extended to Theodosia as she throws off the social custom of quiet courtship and becomes a newly self-aware coquette that too can play her hand in the contest. In these small and defiant moments, Murfree allows us to experience Theodosia as a powerful agent and as a sort of shopper of men; she controls the acquisitions and

she is ultimately the possessor of the man she prefers. And although the narrative quickly shuffles the reader back into Walter's masculinized pursuit of this seemingly hapless mountain girl, we now know that the game has been rigged.

"Taking the Blue Ribbon" also allows Cynthia a chance to make herself the prize and to escape the possessive household she endures at home. And although it is not her idea to run away with her father's competitor Jacob, Cynthia realizes that her sacrifice will allow her father to win the blue ribbon and saddle he so desperately wants. Cynthia also understands the value of a blue ribbon, of a dignified object that symbolizes strength and elitism and that is earned by skill, never bought with capital. At the fair, Cynthia focuses on all the things that have been certified the best, first "those trophies of feminine industry, the quilts" (185). She finds the blue ribbon winner whose prize is a glass bowl and the envy from the townswomen. She searches out the winner for largest fruit, best preserve, the winning painting. After examining all the prized pieces, it is then that she appears ready to become a prize herself. To the on-looking mountaineers, Cynthia herself is a symbol of strength and skill, now much more important and valuable than a piece of blue fabric. Murfree concludes the short story "without a word of self-justification or apology" from Cynthia, and with purpose: Cynthia is happy having made her own decision and leaving the poverty-ridden homestead of her family. It is Hollis who "lost his daughter," and who appears to have made the wrong investment.[33]

Both Cynthia and Theodosia emerge out of what Sandra Harding calls "the gap between women's experiences and the dominant conceptual schemes" (70-71). Murfree imagines the

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[33] It is also worth mentioning that Cynthia's mother Mrs. Hollis is also narrated as talented, industrious, and patient. Her family's small possessions "were the trophies of a gallant battle against unalterable conditions and the dragging, dispiriting clog of her husband's inertia" (168). Even in these descriptors, Murfree portraits her women as capable of "winning" things that make them stronger; even Mrs. Hollis is capable of imagining her possessions as more powerful than her state of lack.

local from the perspective of oppressed female characters only to apply her own observations as a marginalized but modern woman, "to look back at the self in all its cultural particularity from a more distant, critical, objectifying location" (Harding 151). The reader understands these mountain women as fitting into the familiar American framework of gender norms, power, femininity, and commodification, but we also sense Murfree's fight for self-possession that women experience even if only from within. Fetterley and Pryse argue that "the greatest of all the subversions of regionalism lies in proposing the survival of the women it presents…and the strategies of survival are not necessarily those of overt resistance" (*Writing Out of Place* 166). This is true for both Cynthia and Theodosia who act with an understated rebellion to get what they want. Within the very structure of courtship designed to dominate and constrain women, both characters find use value in the system when they choose what they want out of a suitor instead of submitting to the suitor. The quiet contemplations and the "defiant" head shakes are more than characterizations. For Murfree, these are acts of resistance as clever and subversive as her own hidden self behind a male penname.

Whereas "Taking the Blue Ribbon" and "The Casting Vote" feature women as quietly resisting, "The Mystery of Witch-Face Mountain" liberates a single woman, Narcissa Hanway, from the male-dominated systems of capitalism and narrative. In this story, the longest of the three, Narcissa fits into a larger cultural drama about the civilization of wild things. Much as *In the "Stranger People's" Country,* the story begins with a violation of space: a traveling chemist arrives on Witch-Face Mountain to investigate for rumored oil pits along the range, but then he mysteriously dies and the town is left to piece together his death and his purpose. Alongside this plot, another conflict emerges between Constant Hite, valley man Alan Selwyn, and the Hanway family who debate whether or not a paved road should be built through the secluded range and

connected to larger metropolitan areas. There ensues a battle for enterprise and proprietorship: Constant and his gang of moonshiners (as well as neighboring horse-thieves) demand that no progress shall come to the mountain range because its wildness conceals and enables a profitable black market that avoids the throes of capitalism, while the Hanway family hopes it will *bring* capitalism, modernity, and an economic boom to the mountain.

Meanwhile, it is revealed that Alan Selwyn, a non-native valley man, undermines both parties by purchasing all of the land around his cabin, calling out the chemist to appraise the range, and "opposing the premature opening of a road which might reveal the presence of the oil springs, when the law discriminating in favor of oil works and similar interests would later make the way thither a public thoroughfare at all events" (146). Selwyn tries to fight all forms of capitalist, governmental, and local jurisdiction for his own selfish economic gains, laying claim to the territory and its resources for the sole reason that he discovered it first. Selwyn accuses the locals of letting "marble and silver and iron, and gold too, all sorts of natural wealth, millions and millions of the finest hard-wood timber, lie here undeveloped, without making the least effort to realize on it, without lifting a finger. They have got no enterprise in the world, and they are the most dilatory, slowest gang I ever ran across in my life.'" (112-13). The entrepreneur does not understand why the mountaineers have not and will not capitalize on the good earth beneath their feet, and it is these pragmatic criticisms that tempt the reader to agree: why not exploit the natural riches that can be found instead of paid for? Why not embrace an alternative "finders, keepers" mentality and lay claim to unclaimed territory? While Murfree obviously empathizes with the local people - she demonstrates this by killing off Selwyn, which in turn protects the land and defaults the project -, her contemporary readers might have pitied the

mountaineers for such “small-mindedness provincialism” and a complicity in their own economic oppression (Lutz 140).

But Murfree’s characters are hardly an unassuming bunch; there is a piercing anxiety from each man and woman about “any encroachment on [one’s] vested rights” in property (98). Ownership for natives like Constant Hite, Nick Peters, and the Hanway family derives from belonging and cultural narrative. All three lay claim to the “strange unhallowed mystery” of the region, respect “the weird presentment of a human countenance” in the mountain, and navigate smartly the wild spaces that allow for the subversive consumption (stealing horses) and production (creating moonshine) that economically supports the village (32). And all three are defensive of the space and its superior mysticism, as Murfree (and regionalism) are prone to illustrate. Constant pokes fun at the government’s efforts to measure the mountains, saying they can be better measured by the eye. He acts like a sort of tour guide, pointing out the “witch-face” to strangers “with an important placid satisfaction, as if he had invented the illusion” (5).

The locals read the suddenly planted surveyor poles as both biblical and apocalyptic: “‘the poles jes' 'peared ter them sprung up thar like Jonah's gourd in a single night, ez ef they kem from seed; an' the folks, they 'lowed 't war the sign o' a new war’” (12). And the quiet flames that burn like eyes within the mountain’s witch-face are “hell-fire” (138), “beyond yer knowin’ or the knowin’ o’ enny mortal” (20). Murfree’s mountaineers value themselves and their legends to be more powerful and providential than any outsider’s understanding of the land’s properties. Both the mountain and the men survive with the road unfinished and the oil unprofitable. Murfree argues that neither capitalism nor modernity will ever flourish in this region, especially when pitted against locals who fight for possession of their wildness. As quietly and confidently as a local woman “seated upon the beam of a broken plough, refuse of

the agricultural industry long ago collapsed here…calmly smoking her pipe," the natives always reclaim their home (35).

Such reclamation is not only reserved for the mountain men, as this image suggestions, but available to women like Narcissa who are part and parcel of the mountain in a way that demonstrates ownership as inherent. Murfree endows Narcissa with the same sort of power and weirdness of Witch-Face Mountain. Described as an "exaggerated wild thing," Narcissa is perceptive and privileged, able to access steep mountain peaks and crowded courthouses (36). Narcissa is criticized for her "freakishness" (104), her "acridity" (118), and her "mischievous" inability to be controlled (91). Her disruption mimics that of the mountain's presence that fascinates and intrigues both locals and visitors; its looming figure is as unexplainable as Narcissa's ability to penetrate masculine spaces and withhold knowledge of exceedingly important events. Narcissa confesses that she had been the last person to see the chemist alive, and she performs for the jury with a tall tale of evil-possessed hogs running through the woods and the Witch-face's glowing eyes full of fire. She claims that the hogs had spooked the stranger's horse, and upon hearing this narrative, the men agree that he died from a concussion consequent to being thrown from his horse. The fact that they listen to the young woman at all is surprising, especially given her outrageous testimony, but Murfree alleviates any concerns about her reliability by simply showing her acceptance and moving on with the plot structure.

There is no doubt that Narcissa was created as a reflection of the mountain and of her environment that she holds so dear. She lives adjacent to the Witch-Face Mountain, she labels the range the "familiar furniture of her home," and she resists Selwyn's and the chemist's overtures to *take* the landscape (121). Her name of course evokes reflection, and this is clear on two circumstances. One, when Selwyn meets Narcissa he says he knew a man once named

Narcissus - a deliberate indication of a female-male binate - and that her “flower-like face, the corolla of red-gold hair” resembles the ancient and common Appalachian flower of the same name. And two, Narcissa is drawn to the river on several occasions where she watches the reflection of the cliffs and homeward-bound hawks, and changing skies without ever seeing her own face (65). Murfree shows us the mountain range most clearly in these moments where we should be seeing classic descriptions of a young woman in repose - or even a narcissist. Her mimesis nearly erases her presence all together when she sees the familiar “jagged brown border of the rocks, and a grotesque moving head, which she recognized, after a plunge of the heart, as her own sunbonnet” (125). This description is reminiscent of earlier representations of the mountain’s “great peaked brown hood; the oblong sandy stretch forms the pallid face” (2). The “weird mirror” literalizes Narcissa’s biocentric relationship with the territory, her relational sense of self, and therefore her “vested right” to claim and protect the mountain from all outside forces (125).

Narcissa’s presence in the text is another testament to Murfree’s understanding that experiential knowledge and belonging are superior to the conventions of mechanistic science, law, or capital. In the end, Selwyn succumbs to his “lung complaint” and dies without an heir to his land contract. The road is never finished as Constant Hite had prophesized. The oil spring is quickly exhausted, and the companies “long since ceased to pay expenses…[and] the company was a heavy loser by the enterprise” (162). The intruders have all failed to lay claim to this property with the success guaranteed to them in the name of capitalism and corporation. Their seizure is denied by the wildness of both the people and the place - and quite literally at the hand of Narcissa. Within the last few pages, Narcissa reveals to the audience the possibility that she

was the one to push the chemist to his death in order to avoid further discovery of the range's value:

> She had not failed to perceive her own agency in the betrayal of his secret, when the story of the discovery of the oil was blazoned to all the world by those mystically flaring waters in the deeps of the mountain night. It was she who had idly kindled them; she who had robbed him of his rights, of the wealth that these interlopers were garnering. She had sent him to his grave baffled, beaten, forlorn, wondering at the mystery of the hand that out of the dark had smitten him. (159)

Narcissa is all-knowing - a keeper of her own truthful narrative about what happened that night -, and "the hand" is confused here with her own with great purpose. Murfree withholds the truth behind her longwinded, superficial narrative until Narcissa is ready to reflect on the *real* drama. Her silence is subversive, protective, and of course violent. If we are to read literally that she "sent him to his grave," then we admit that Narcissa has controlled the entire narrative. Additionally, we can admit that Narcissa is grittier, cleverer, and more coercive than any other male figure in Murfree's Appalachia. No husband, brother, or father is able to possess Narcissa because Narcissa is already the owner of the mountain's physical, psychic, and spiritual properties of which they all belong.

Narcissa's silence is her power in the same way that Murfree's silence is her disruption. Rooted in Murfree's female experience, Narcissa lays claim to the intellectual property of these wild spaces as a woman who could not legally own any property at all in a premodern world. Murfree's own resistance to these marketplaces and her subversive camouflage as a man, as well as these narratives that represent women as even sturdier and more cunning than their male counterparts, are bold maneuvers to secure her "vested right" to speak free and loud out of rural Appalachia and into mainstream America. Murfree died in poverty, severely in debt to her publishers, and yet she continued to write because she insisted on a space, a style, and an ethos all her own. The effect of her "an intrusive evil" echoes in every burly-man, backroads mountain

narrative produced through and out of the twentieth century. Her resistance is valuable if we are to understand the ways in which real Americans fought to feel enfranchised, gambled to make a living, and broke boundaries in order to survive. Without Murfree's narratives, we risk missing the opportunity to fully grasp the drama of ownership for *everyone* in America during the nineteenth century.

Wilder Things

As Murfree's career was winding down, Frank Norris was beginning his own a thousand miles away, in what was no longer Harte's American West, but a grittier and greedier cityscape brimming still with gambles and gimmicks. Norris was busy creating McTeague, a mixture of ruthlessness and determinism heretofore unseen in the pages of American literature -and especially not in the canons of regionalism. As this project moves into the twentieth century, it seems as if a shade is pulled down upon the sunny optimism of the "democratic pioneer" and replaced with a malevolence born of capitalism and consumerism. This chapter has demonstrated how collections of material objects helped authors to think about the possibility of navigating society outside of capitalist rule through gambling, luck, or belonging. The physical seizure of property/power facilitated both men and women with the ability to recognize their own empowerment (both as individuals and as a community) and ultimately resist their marginalization by leveling access to opportunity via nuanced and subversive ways. Without an appreciation for material possessions found or fostered by their own two hands, regionalist characters might blindly follow the conventional capitalist machine that sought to erase human agency and individualism, so as a survival strategy, these characters invested in the local and created intimate relationships with those things that offered a sense of autonomy and success. Reading into these possessions helps us understand the personal and psychological conflicts

present on the frontier over what it meant to be American - or a regionalist author -, and these conflicts gave rise to new dynamics of belonging that legitimized marginalized voices and forwarded a preoccupation with the transformative experience of ownership and exchange.

The clashes between modernity and tradition, capitalism and the environment, outsiders and locals are all dramatized in the regionalist texts discussed here, which also lay the foundation for the modern American experience.

The following chapter challenges the optimistic bootstrap narratives of Harte, Garland, and Murfree by focusing on the more threatening urban novels, written only years apart, that failed to imagine *any* positive outcome associated with acquiring property. The Naturalist novels of the early twentieth century subscribe to what Jane Bennett describes as "the fantasy that 'we' really are in charge of all of those 'its' - its that…reveal themselves to be potentially forceful agents" (x). These novels will imagine a passive material world only to become passive materials themselves; underclass characters are suddenly punished for collecting and disposed of by the things they collect. It is my goal to investigate the shift in experiential, spiritual, and dialogical understandings of things and concepts of ownership, and to ask: why have all the things revolted against us?

CHAPTER 3

LETHAL THINGS: NARRATIVES OF DISPOSAL IN URBAN LITERATURE

In Frank Norris's 1899 novel *McTeague*, his protagonist is lost, alone and paranoid in the desert after murdering his wife and stealing her $5000 in gold coins. McTeague flees San Francisco for the Big Dipper Mine where he adopts a new life as a miner until his nemesis Marcus Schouler hunts him down in a duel that leads to the melodramatic death of both characters. But when reckoning with his paranoia, McTeague is unaware that Marcus is actually following him; he only feels the presence of some *things* stalking him into the Death Valley wasteland:

> McTeague saw himself as another man, striding along over the sand and sage-brush. At once he saw himself stop and wheel sharply about, peering back suspiciously. There was something behind him: something following him. He looked, as it were, over the shoulder of this other McTeague, and saw down there, in the half light of the canon, something dark crawling upon the ground, an indistinct gray figure, man or brute, he did not know. Then he saw another, and another; then another. A score of black, crawling objects were following him, crawling from bush to bush, converging upon him. '*They*' were after him, were closing in upon him, were within touch of his hand, were at his feet - *were at his throat*. (427)

The "score of black, crawling objects," not men, that he envisions in an "empty, solitary" desert environment, are anomalous; this is a place where no objects, nor men, should exist (427). McTeague's "indistinct" and "gray" hallucination becomes an army of "*they*" that inflicts a sort of revenge, seizing his throat and forcing his audible surrender: "'I *can't* go on'" (427, original emphasis). McTeague becomes paralyzed in the chase, suffocated by both imaginary forces (the memory of slitting his wife's throat may be weighing on his conscience) and real ones (his throat is actually swelling because he is thirsty and without water). His inability to know the thing undermines his ability to act upon the thing, and thus McTeague bears witness to his own erasure by the black objects that violently crawl upon him. Of all the threats in his life - poverty,

unemployment, marginalization, the legal repercussions for murdering his wife, Marcus - why are objects, not people, more menacing to McTeague in these final hours of his life? Why has Norris constructed McTeague's psyche to fear some *thing* instead of someone? There is no question that McTeague's horror is narrated much more emphatically here than during the actual confrontation with Marcus. In fact, Norris excludes both characters from consciously acting in the final *battle royale*: "McTeague did not know how he killed his enemy…McTeague's right wrist was caught, something clicked upon it, then the struggling body fell limp and motionless with a long breath" (442). The handcuff is more active in killing McTeague - he becomes anchored to Marcus's lifeless body in the middle of the desert - than McTeague is in killing Marcus.

At this climax and throughout the novel, Norris crafts a vibrant matter that is far more violent and unpredictable than any human agent - even monstrous McTeague - which is problematic given the time period's growing infatuation with material goods. At the turn of the century, "crawling objects" tended to be celebrated and welcomed by all consumers, from the Rockefellers to the Polk Street masses. People consumed, sold, made, displayed - *controlled* - stuff from birth until death with great pleasure and automated effort. Ambitious Americans like McTeague spent their lives obsessed with owning an excess of stuff - here: dental tools, teeth, handbooks, engravings, lithographs, goggle-eyed pug statues, concertinas, a canary - things upon which an identity is built. Without this stuff, class would be indistinguishable, social mobility impossible, and personality unequipped, which is why McTeague spends his life chasing giant Tooth displays and coveting signs of wealth and stealing coins. But Norris doesn't allow McTeague a successful life in the end, or social mobility, or even any prized possessions as he stands alone in the "measureless leagues of Death Valley" (472). So one should ask, why not?

Why is Norris interested in watching his characters fall victim to the inanimate objects they work so hard to possess, and what ideological tension transpires if it is humans, not things, that are so easily disposable?

It is this chapter's goal to expose how Naturalist novels propose a more threatening narrative about the lethal repercussions of consumption and possession in a capitalist-driven, urban setting. Characters like McTeague - working underclass men and women who desperately aspire for middleclass status through the accumulation of objects - are the subject of this chapter because while their stories are unique, their circumstances and the language that frame these scenes are not. Whereas the previous chapter demonstrated how collections of material objects helped authors to think about the possibility of navigating society outside of capitalist rule, this chapter argues that writers composing urban and economic novels failed to imagine *any* positive outcome associated with acquiring stuff. In rural fictions, poor collectors are rewarded with access for their alternative acquisitions and thrift; in Naturalist novels, poor collectors are punished for collecting and disposed of by the things they collect. I investigate this sudden shift in representations of poor collectors in American literature by first probing its cause: is it the genre's bleak materialistic determinism that transforms objects into agentic, malevolent forces, or rather a larger cultural skepticism felt by Americans toward governing marketplaces at the turn of the century? Or does this shift reflect a preoccupation with concepts of disposability upon witnessing human and economic waste in American cities? What might this shift indicate about the way authors then produced literary things, knowing that their voices would become dusty bookends within middle and upper-class collections while they struggled to survive on the production of more written words?

Utilizing what Mark Seltzer calls the "melodramas of uncertain agency" as a literary

benchmark, I conclude that the period's blunt concerns about underclass ownership were more generally in line with anxieties about *things* - anxieties about being reduced to or supplanted by the autonomous and dynamic world of one's own possessions (21). The hyper-accelerated urban world of excess amplified these anxieties to the point of fear and foreshadow, which prompted writers to unpack the metaphysical consequences of urban environments and rampant materialism. Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and Edith Wharton were far from alone in imagining objects as uncontrollable and lethal, but by dramatizing the physical agony of an urban consumer culture, they each criticized a new reality governed by suffocating materialism. At the base of that reality, poor, working, and underclass individuals fell in line with the American habits of industry despite their state of lack, working to consume and consuming to thrive. Ownership of material things was supposed to guarantee upward mobility and "true," non-ethnic American identity, but when these types of characters came in contact with material rewards, writers discovered that their characters disappeared altogether, that the lower classes could not collect without being collected themselves. Norris, Dreiser, and Wharton relied on representations of characters swimming at the bottom of the class pool, not to demonstrate how easy it is to perform identity, but rather how easy it is to erase or dispose of characters when they are immersed in a materialistic world.

The problem of underclass ownership, then, of imagining the most powerless humans with powerful objects, confronted writers with the task of reexamining the active role of inanimate matter in determining human affairs. Most Naturalist writers agree that the impersonal forces of the material world - wheat, machinery, gold, legal wills, clocks, bacteria - are what really shape our behaviors and our fates, but these three authors push their representations of things to work *without* owners, to function intelligently and thus reduce humans to "subservient

machinery."[34] This renewal of agency results in the production of apocalyptic dramas that critique comfortable understandings of human/object agency and warn audiences that their mindless consumption will ultimately consume the self.

Literary naturalism published during the Progressive Era suggests that concerns about agency and ownership that began long before the recent wave of new-materialist theory. By working with new-materialist discourses, however, we are able to return to naturalist works with a rejuvenated perspective on the genre's "pessimistic materialistic determinism" and consider how these two movements similarly confront the active nature of things, especially when things start working *against* instead of for us (Becker 35). Bill Brown's article on "Thing Theory" asks us to "confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us" (4) and encourages "new thoughts about how inanimate objects constitute human subjects, how they move them, how they threaten them, how they facilitate or threaten their relation to other subjects" (7). His foundational new-materialist inquiry is valuable to this chapter's critical analyses, as is Seltzer's early discussion of naturalism in *Bodies and Machines* (1992). Seltzer assesses "what Thorstein Veblen called the 'vague and shifting' line between 'the animate and the inanimate' and between the natural and unnatural in turn-of-the-century American culture" (3). By looking at the tensions between "market culture," in which individuality is determined by what subjects possess, and "machine culture," in which individuality is determined by how subjects have been disciplined, Seltzer argues that we must "understand [human] agency and intention not as the *cause* of the action but as *part* of the action" (84). Additionally, and more recently, Kevin Trumpeter argues

[34] In *Le Roman Experimental* (*The Experimental Novel*) (1880), Emile Zola comments that "our role as intelligent beings" is "to penetrate to the wherefore of things, to become superior to these things, and to reduce them to the condition of subservient machinery" (25). While Zola's treatise on the great "conquest of nature" is a fundamental feature of naturalism, this chapter points to examples where authors are working against this relationship between man and object.

that all events occur with “a swarm of competing agencies,” and echoing Bruno Latour’s theoretical position, he states that we cannot reduce one cause to any one particular agent, whether we are studying history or literature (230). Both Seltzer and Trumpeter offer very little attention to any of the writers featured in this chapter who I believe are critical to understanding the shifting perspectives of human-object agency. Nevertheless, their work illuminates those literary scenes where things are the active participants that authors use to make audiences realistically assess humanity’s ability to shape the world to its own ends. Seeing a “full spectrum of agency,” according to Dana Phillips and Heather Sullivan, puts an end to acting and reading blindly in the face of abrasive agentic transformation (446).

Rereading the representation of material agents, then, unravels a series of epistemological problems within the works of Norris, Dreiser, and Wharton. Each author destabilizes notions of human and object agency by testing our understandings of symbolism and authenticity. While literary objects function as “romantic symbols,” or what Link defines as “a device for bringing an abstract concept into the concrete world of narrative” (63), these authors also imagine objects as irrational aesthetics within disturbing city spaces. American literary naturalism emerged as a response to the uncontrolled growth of the American city, and that response reflected a more “rigorous investigation of reality” (Howard 147).[35] Norris endorsed this theory by his own declaration that any author’s characters are not “so important in themselves as in relation to the whirl of things in which he chooses to involve them” (*Novels and Essays* 1193). Norris’s literary attention to grotesque spaces of excess that cause dehumanization indicates that what we are

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[35] James R. Giles’ article “The Grotesque City, the City of Excess, and the City of Exile” (2011) briefly surveys the connection between Naturalism and the depiction of urban environments, while June Howard more thoroughly argues in *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism* (1985) that Naturalism is a genre that must be considered as a response to a specific historical situation in which Americans felt disorder and ideological uncertainty during the late nineteenth century. Both studies contribute to a broader discussion of Naturalism’s ownership themes.

reading in *McTeague* is not only an abstract commentary on materialistic determinism, but also a greater polemic about the very real and very claustrophobic American city. By closely attending to the handcuffs, the caged canary, the junk, and the gold - and their "owners" who all perish in the end -, we can understand *McTeague* as a new type of drama that empowers objects over marginal persons in order to demonstrate that personal possessions are part and parcel of the omnipotent forces beyond human control.

Norris's representations of ownership underline the trouble of every type of American achieving capitalistic success, which is also what Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* illustrates when we encounter his characters who easily disappear into their consumption. *Sister Carrie*'s objects (clothes and a safe) are the primary actors and even speakers throughout the drama, and I argue that the "giant magnet" of urban capitalism is more violent and deleterious than any human antagonist imagined within the canon of Naturalism. Finally, I shift my attention to Wharton's *Sanctuary* (1903) and "Bunner Sisters" (1916) because these early works expressed a profound distrust in consumer culture and human disposability. Wharton questions the use value of exhausted materials *and* exhausted bodies, but she also explores how interactions between the two agents present a metaphysical conflict: who or what is at the greatest risk of disposal, and who or what has the luxury of disposing? Is the human agent always powering exchange, or do second-hand objects, legal documents, and rubbish have a way of putting people as objects out of use? Wharton, as well as Dreiser and Norris, represent obsolescence and replacement in the most frightening of ways for their readers, threatening them with a new lived relation to the world of objects where no one is guaranteed any value, including the authors themselves.

"Something" Strange: Monstrous Things in *McTeague*

McTeague is a narrative of decline. Both characters and objects circulate in a dingy urban

workspace until they are wasted or destroyed by environmental and economic forces from which they cannot escape. McTeague, Trina, Zerkow, and Maria have all undergone criticism for their savage baseness since the novel's publication in 1899. Norris was accused of "searching out the degraded side of humanity" when readers met the cast of characters who together played out "the most unpleasant American story that anybody has ever ventured to write."[36] John D. Barry's "New York Letter" to *The Literary World* defended the novel as "a study of people who were on the verge of the criminal classes" (*McTeague* 303) while William Dean Howells reviewed Norris's disregard for any literary gentility as "a little inhuman, and it is distinctly not for the walls of living-rooms, where the ladies of the family sit" (305). The ethnic diversity, inherited weakness, economic desperation, and "vulgar" behaviors of a misunderstood class of Americans repelled readers and publishers alike who suffered through the depression initiated by the Banking Panic of 1893, and who now preferred a discourse of upward mobility and American exceptionalism.[37] A dentist's atavistic degeneracy, his turbulent love affair with an obsessive lottery winner, and their friendship with two immigrants who collect junk and tell stories of yesterday's lost fortunes were puzzling but not celebrated until Pizer's redefinition of American naturalism and his case for *McTeague* as culturally significant ("Late Nineteenth-Century" 19). Naturalism, he argues, responded to "a 'moving box' of economic and social deprivation" that imprisoned the average American in the late-nineteenth-century (106). Authors like Norris created "victims" as a reflection of that social reality.

McTeague's characters fight disposal by embracing fringe spaces and capitalizing on

[36] 1899 reviews of McTeague were compiled by Ernest Marchand in the "Early Criticism" chapter of the *Norton Critical Edition of McTeague* (1997), 301. These two quoted reviews come from *The Review of Reviews* (June 1899) and *The Independent* (April 6, 1899).

[37] For an extensive reading of Norris's gold obsession in the context of the period's gold standard debate, see Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (1987).

alternative marketplaces and acquisitions. While the faceless crowds of Polk Street complacently travel to and from the workplaces like cogs in an economic machine, Norris's characters seek some sort of substitute venture (self-employment, lottery winning, scavenging) that will allow them to function both within and outside of capitalism. They depend on their acquisitions to redefine themselves and to redesign a path toward American success, and along the way material objects become indispensable participants that inspire, personalize, and will eventually possess the individual. Norris was outspoken about the power of things and argued for an examination of a person's objects in order to see into "the unplumbed depths of the human heart" and search "the black, unsearched penetralia of the soul of man" (qtd. in Link 50). Norris understood material objects as more powerful than scenery; objects worked with critical purpose to not only characterize, but to create a narrative all their own. He aimed to honor Zola's "world of big things…no teacup tragedies here," thus we cannot ignore the detailed possessions that Norris knew could act in extraordinary, if not monstrous way (qtd. in Link 47).[38]

In *McTeague*, Norris's main and marginal characters are all attracted to assemblages of material things as collectors: McTeague is obsessed with the contents of his office, Trina hoards her lottery winnings but also a woodworking set; Zerkow collects junk to resale in his secondhand shop, Maria Miranda Macapa also scavenges and maintains a mental anthology of "gold plate" stories; even Mister Grannis keeps book binding materials to capitalize on a new patented craft, and Marcus becomes a bounty hunter by collecting criminal bodies for money (McTeague's included). While there is room to explore every collection that appears in the novel - as they all play pertinent roles in displacing the subjectivity of "owners" -, I want to focus on those things that raise the most questions about object matter and the status of the human:

[38] Frank Norris praised and defended Zola, naturalism, and consequently his own style and subjects of literary production in his *San Francisco Wave* article, "Zola as a Romantic Writer" (June 27, 1896).

McTeague's canary and Trina's Noah's Ark animals. These things exhibit powerful force of agency capable of representing characters beyond their control. In moments where Norris represents human subjects at their most object-like - as brutes, "machine-like" (170), "like [pieces] of clockwork running down" (378) - material objects take on new life in order to blur the comfortable distinction between person and thing. If Norris desired to create a dysmorphic, "crude and formless" space in his novels, then a world without object permanence equips his mission (Pizer, *Realism* 106).

In *McTeague,* things are frequently indecipherable to humans; the word "something" is used almost sixty times throughout the novel to describe objects that elude or plague characters in moments of duress. And without being able to identify the somethings "dark crawling upon the ground" (427), "something no longer human" (234), "something to get married in" (214), "something else in life besides concertinas and steam beer" (27), the "very confused ideas of something better" (191), "something that seemed to be choking her" (317), a "[s]uspicion of something" (389); Norris calls into question the reliability of human subjects to narrate or define their things - and therefore their reality. He rather positions human subjects at the mercy of what "something" might in fact be. The elusiveness of objects and their ability to evade human comprehension during a time when people were defined by their possessions and consumptions challenges even Norris's confidence in the material world's self-evident, empirical truth.[39] Consequently, Norris sees the tragic consequences of urban poverty as both affecting a sense of worthlessness and alienation for characters like McTeague and Zerkow, as well as a loss of

[39] Norris's earlier essay "The Need of a Literary Conscience" encourages writers to pursue truth based on material things: "the hard nub of the business, something we can hold in the hand" rather than as "an elusive, intangible abstraction" (Novels and Essays 1158). Too, we might consider Norris's own experience with reliance on an object to determine his very wellbeing. When he was twenty-four, his parents divorced and his father threatened Norris's disinheritance; he in fact changed the will, leaving Norris financially stable but not comfortable (Giles 328). A piece of paper determined the author's ability to produce work and attend college without the leisure and patience he once experienced as a wealthy heir.

subjectivity despite the culture of mass consumption that promised self-enhancement and empowerment. Norris instead exaggerates the subjectivity of his material objects in order to illustrate how an insatiable desire for possession triggers the greatest threat to human agency: death and disposal.

The material objects represented in *McTeague* have been underappreciated and mostly ignored as “signs” of characters, passive identity markers or masks that enhance the appearance of class, social, or ethnic status. The canary bird “in its little gilt prison,” for instance, has been considered by David McGlynn to be a symbol of urban imprisonment and a frivolous possession of a middle-class property that inspires economic frustration and atavistic regression in McTeague (36). Sarah Elisabeth Quay’s extensive study of *McTeague*’s excess of objects as indicators of assimilation and American imperialism fails to mention the canary at all, except as a final symbol of McTeague’s expired self (225). While the canary in its cage is indeed the first and last object associated with McTeague - and one that symbolizes anxieties about dominance and entrapment - the canary is also a powerful actant apart from its owner.

Despite the fact that “there was not one of all his belongings that McTeague had cherished more dearly,” the canary appears on page one without a narrative of possession and without explanation for how it fell into a working-class dentist’s hands on Polk Street (369). Every other possession that lives within McTeague’s personal collection of knickknacks is given a story: a concertina, a steel engraving of “Lorenzo de’ Medicini and his Court,” a stone pug dog, a rifle manufacturer's calendar, and seven volumes of “Allen’s Practical Dentist” are all given some “context of acquisition” (Stewart 153). As Susan Stewart has argued, “Such accumulation [without context] is obviously not connected to the culture and the economy in the same way that the collection proper is connected to such structures” (153). By Stewart’s standards, the

exclusion is interesting because it takes the canary out of an object status and places it in an unclassifiable space: it is an animal, not an object, but most definitely not a human, which still allows the canary to be classified as nonhuman.[40] Is the bird a saved souvenir from McTeague's mining past? During his previous career as a car-boy at the Big Dipper Mine, did he become attached to the song bird known for its detection of lethal gases by miners who listened to hear if the birds stopped singing and signaled death?[41] Or is the canary and the "gilt" cage a frivolous purchase made after his move to Polk Street with his mother's small inheritance? Did McTeague feel the need to conspicuously consume a tangible sign of affluence in order to demonstrate the success of opening his own Dental Parlor?[42]

Whatever interpretive stance we take, there are consequences to choosing a "sign": McTeague is either a man who respects his origins as a hard worker, or he is an indulgent optimist who maintains appearances. The narrator, however, denies our ability to read McTeague's emotional interior when his own "heavy, slow to act, sluggish" demeanor is contrasted with the lively canary" (3). The narrator indicates twenty-seven interactions between McTeague and the canary. McTeague is animalistic- "draught horse, immensely strong, stupid,

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[40] I do not mean to ignore an entire side of the posthuman materialist debate that encourages "critical examinations of the aliveness and agency of animals" (qtd. in Opperman 28) and fosters "a transcorporeal ethics that links human and nonhuman animals in networks of advocacy and concern" Alaimo 112), which Eileen Joy, Stacy Alaimo, and Karen Barad have built into theories about the agentic power of matter. These scholars also employ the word "nonhuman" when addressing animal life and material, and I am also focusing on the enmeshment of bodies as integral to our conception of agency, therefore labeling the bird "nonhuman" and "unclassifiable" fits within a materialist discourse but also indicates that the mass consumer audience would not have recognized the bird as "human." By flexing the canary's possibility of acting human, Norris is again blurring the lines between possessions and the possessor. See Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment and the Material Self* (2010) and Serpil Oppermann, "From Posthumanism to Posthuman Ecocriticsm" in *Relations. Beyond Anthropocentrism* 4.1 (2016), 23-37.

[41] Dennis F. Brestensky's book *Mining Literature & Lore* (Connellsvillle, PA: Connellsville Printing Company, 1997) details mining legends and practices that indicate canaries as warning signs for miners in the American West.

[42] Veblen writes in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* that kept domestic animals, including "cage-birds," served no industrial end: "These commonly are items of conspicuous consumption…[and] are conventionally admired by the body of the upper classes" (140).

docile, obedient" (3) - and nearly inanimate compared to the dynamism of the canary who is always "chittering," "keeping up an incessant noise and movement" (18), and sometimes "sleepy and cross at being awakened" by its owner (377).[43] When the canary sings, McTeague awakes (1, 185, 302, 377). While the couple lives in filth and "wretchedness," the canary receives its birdseed (337). After McTeague murders his wife and flees the city, he resolves to bring the canary to the mining camps out West with him where he intends to start a new life. Before his travels, he takes great care to tie "a couple of sacks about it to shelter the little bird from the sharp night wind" (377). His loving consideration for the canary juxtaposed with the brutal murder of his wife feels inappropriate despite the narrator's reconciliation that the bird was "a tiny atom of life that McTeague still clung to with a strange obstinacy" (367).

When Trina tries to sell the canary to the bird-store for extra income, McTeague becomes enraged and stashes it away, "attaching to [his possessions] tags on which he had scrawled in immense round letters, 'Not for Sale'" (277). McTeague refuses to be dispossessed because of his deeper state of poverty, nor allow his possession to reenter a secondhand marketplace. The canary is priceless but without any legitimate rationale for its coveted status. William James's *Principles of Psychology* (1890), a text Norris was familiar with while writing *McTeague*, questioned the same sort of "insane" attraction that "misers" - like McTeague and his wife - have for their objects (425). James's argument that "[t]he hoarding instinct prevails itself among animals as well as among men," pushes the same atavism that Norris saw in his characters (424). James understands the miser to impulsively go after the things he hoards because of a loose "association of ideas" that is self-created and hardly consistent in the owner's mind (424). Hoarding is more about seizing power, and less about what one actually owns. Karl Marx also

[43] McTeague is compared to a plethora of other animals throughout the novel: a young bull (31), a panther (30), an ape (375), and a bear (208). The canary is never described as "animal-like" despite eating bird seed.

comments on the status of the miser in *Capital* (1867): "the miser is merely a capitalist gone mad, the capitalist is a rational miser. The never-ending augmentation of exchange-value, which the miser strives after, by seeking to save his money from circulation, is attained by the more acute capitalist, by constantly throwing it afresh into circulation" (171). Both McTeague and his wife never intend to risk losing their prized possessions to capitalist exchanges, even with the possibility of economic gain; Trina refuses to recirculate her gold coins the same way McTeague refuses to let go of his things. Norris represents their behaviors as obsessive, irrational, and madness. James's diagnosis and Marx's comparison allow us to see these characters for what they are: pursuers of social and economic power but only through the acquisition of bizarre things (teeth, coins, statues, a canary), none of which anyone has any interest in sharing.[44]

The only way we can explain their "madness" is by taking another look at the concept of "belonging." As a relational, reciprocal, and connective condition, belonging entails "not only being taken care of but taking care" (Rubenstein 4). As his belongings, McTeague takes care of his things, but in return, he feels taken care of: the canary will be his companion, the tooth will produce a fortune, the concertina will bring him joy. In a world of social exclusion and alienation, with these belongings is the only place that McTeague can feel like he belongs. This is why Norris's characters express a complacency with their miserliness; at any cost, they are all excessively desiring to save the only things that make them feel whole.

Except Norris's belongings do not always reciprocally act in the ways that characters would like to imagine. Things are elusive and out of reach by the end of the novel: the tooth becomes a "vulgar" substitute table covered in greasy dishes and waste that a rival dentist

[44] The canary is even vocalized as bizarre by the other prospectors at the Big Dipper Mine, who call McTeague a "fool" and "crazy" for not leaving his canary behind at the hotel (399). The narrator, too, comments, "But strange enough in that horrid waste of sand and sage was the object that McTeague himself persistently carried – the canary in its cage, about which he had carefully wrapped a couple of old flour-bags" (415).

purchases out of pity, not utility (338), the volumes of “Allen’s Practical Dentist” are sold when his practice is lost and the couple needs money (274), the concertina is “stolen” by Trina and sold in a secondhand store for a price he can no longer afford (368), and the canary is left to chitter alone without an owner in the desert (442). These things act *resistant* to McTeague. They assert their thing-power with an agentic capacity to change the course of human action. The canary, especially, is an “intervener,” according to Latour, an operator that “becomes the decisive force catalyzing an event” - that event being McTeague’s death (Bennett 9). The concertina also intervenes as a catalyst of death: Trina is ultimately murdered because she sells his most prized possessions and erases any personal or economic value attributed to them when she keeps the money for herself. Because he finds his concertina in an inaccessible environment, he resolves to stealing his wife’s lottery prize and making his wife inaccessible to anyone else. Because McTeague carries the canary around in a desert wasteland, it also becomes an easy identifier when the newly self-employed bounty hunter Marcus solicits his whereabouts: “Two men from Keeler had made a strike, the peddler had said, and added the curious detail that one of the men had a canary bird in a cage with him” (432). Following this lead, two days later, Marcus locates McTeague and both of their lives are extinguished. While the canary itself is not lethal, per say, it does “make things happen” with a vital materialism that privileges the chittering bird’s lively body over McTeague’s dead corpse.

Trina’s handmade Noah’s Ark animals, however, are directly lethal, and work at killing her before McTeague can. Despite winning $5000 in a local lottery, Trina proves to be a stingy wife who keeps her winnings out of McTeague’s reach by investing the money with her uncle who runs a wholesale toy store. She insists that she and McTeague must live on the earnings from McTeague's dental practice, and the bit of money she makes from carving small wooden

figures of Noah's Ark animals for sale in her uncle's shop at nine cents a dozen. This woodcraft is an inherited one from her German-Swiss ancestors who "had handed down the talent of the national industry, to reappear in this strangely distorted guise" (133). Trina's strong sense of economy is also attributed to inherited characteristics: "A good deal of peasant blood still ran undiluted in her veins, and she had all the instinct of a hardy and penurious mount race…saving for the sake of saving, hoarding without knowing why" (134). The narrator's contrast between a biological determinism versus an socio-environmental one is a conflict that runs deep throughout the novel and into the historical moment of the text. At the same time that Norris was conceiving of *McTeague*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman publically argued that industrialism was initiating an "inexorable effect of conditions upon humanity" despite "the power of the individual will to struggle against" them (1). This argument gestures toward Spencerian ideas of evolutionary social progress through competition - also the sole driving force in economic exchange -, and it forecasts modern concerns about the biological basis of human economic behavior, or what we now call bioeconomics.[45] Trina's "undiluted" blood is in fact diluted by her consumption and the lure of commodities in an industrial environment. Trina's genetic makeup and her environment are co-constitutive; they are networked to create the vital assemblage of her body. But instead of benefiting the evolution of her personality, the socio-environmental determinants ruin her strong, German "national industry" that is never properly nurtured and is instead "strangely distorted."[46] Trina's creative utility (and production value) is stunted by her social condition.

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[45] For a brief but useful overview on the history of bioeconomics, see John Gowdy, "Introduction: Biology and Economics" in *Structural Change and Economic Dynamics* 8.4 (1997), 377-383. It also must be noted that the biological theories of Charles Darwin were influenced by his readings of Thomas Malthus' economic and social theories (and Marx became increasingly interested in Darwinism); Social Darwinism is built upon progressive change, and Naturalism carries within its representations these evolutionary influences. These readings and ideas in themselves are a network of powerful assemblages.

[46] The "strangeness" of Trina's production is also attributed to the fact that she "couldn't whittle them fast enough and cheap enough to compete with the turning lathe," and that she was incapable of making "'the manikins'" of

And yet Trina demonstrates pride in her craftsmanship. Trina explains to McTeague the details of her work: "'You see, I take a block of straight grained pine and cut out the shape…then I put in the ears and tail with a drop of glue, and paint it with a 'non-poisonous' paint - Vandyke brown for the horses, foxes, and cows; slate gray for the elephants and camels; burnt umber for the chickens, zebras, and so on…They sell for nine cents a dozen" (133). She is a one-woman assembly line creating traditional handmade goods that will be sold to children who visit Polk Street.[47] However, Trina acknowledges that there only exists a demand for her continued labor because of conspicuous consumption and a new culture of disposability that she herself has witnessed. She asks herself, "'Where *do* all the toys go to?'" and answers, "'It's a good thing for me that children break their things, and that they all have to have birthdays and Christmases'" (342, original emphasis). At the turn of the century, a person's consumption of disposable modern commodities marked wealth or economic mobility when they spent and wasted at will, but the objects produced - and those human hands producing - were considered expendable at little to no cost. The conflation of a useless thing and a useless person, of wasting things and wasted people, during the Progressive Era did much to test Norris's belief in the autonomy of matter. And we see Trina considering her worth only in terms of how frequently children might "break" her products. She cannot imagine her labor without imagining the impermanence and futility of it. Trina's assumption that her crafts have fallen out of exchange and into the garbage - and her complacency with that assumption - underscores the period's tolerance for conspicuous

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Noah and his crew to accompany the ark set (133). Her inability to physically reproduce human figures in inanimate forms reads like a distressed response to her own fear of possession and her paralysis in the hands of her husband.

[47] While they are traditional goods in the sense that Trina's artisanship is personal and ancestral, she sold her ark sets with the label "'Made in France'" pasted to the bottom (133). Not only does this render them as mass-produced, foreign objects to her consumers (therefore registering foreign-made objects as more valuable than American working-class art), but also this "origin camouflage" erases the rhetoric of self-empowerment in which one working-class woman is attempting to independently create a better life for herself.

waste.

Trina's woodworking also represents the existence of underclass poverty, but once again in a way that represents Trina at the mercy of urban filth. Her mental and physical decline is mirrored in the decline of her environment once the couple moves into Maria and Zerkow's impoverished residence after their deaths. "The McTeagues now began to sink rapidly lower and lower," both in appearance (Trina "grew coarse, stunted, and dumpy") and in habit ("grime grew thick upon the window panes and in the corners of the room") (335-36). The narrator concludes his description of their new tenancy by noting that, "All the filth of the alley invaded their quarters like a rising muddy tide," further accentuating that their poor and unsanitary environment is alive and invasive (337). In his dissertation on waste and American fiction, John Michael Duvall argues that "pollution supplements the body" in *McTeague*, both appearing to adhere itself to human forms while also overtaking and replacing them (128).[48] Susan Morrison's work on literary representations of waste reminds us that waste is a matter "independent from our intentionality," an actant with "the capacity to modify a state of affairs by making a difference" (8). The filth in their apartment now functions independently; as "deviant agency," according to Stacy Alaimo, it is out of human control (138). Trina becomes infected by an urban decrepitude that makes her negligent, as well as desperate. She works more frequently, she stops wearing gloves, and it is twice indicated that "[t]he one room grew abominably dirty, reeking with the odors of cooking and of 'non-poisonous' paint" (336). The chips and shavings that fell upon the floor were later used to burn fires in the tiny apartment, adding to the toxicity of the air they breathed; "[s]treaks and spots of the 'non-poisonous' paint that Trina used were upon the walls and woodwork" (288). Norris shows the couple's domestic environment to be as poisonous

[48] Duvall's primary targets for this conclusion are Maria and Zerkow's decline, especially after the death of their child; he does not tend to Trina's polluted self as I do here.

as the exterior alleyways. The significant consequence of such pollution is what Alaimo calls "trans-corporeality": human and nonhuman bodies are susceptible to one another, thus what we do to the environment, we do to ourselves (68). Trina cannot keep the filth from entering her home, and she cannot keep the poison from entering her body.

Trina's tireless production, her industry, and her thrift should reap security, respect, and advancement, but things only get worse for the laborer. Instead, Norris denies her anticipated economic return by imagining Trina's handiwork as lethal. A real violence occurs between material object and laborer when Trina is overcome with delirium and finds herself unconscious (and literally inanimate). When the visiting doctor hears of her headaches and notices her fingers "swollen as never before, aching and discolored," he exclaims: "'Why, this is blood-poisoning, you know…the worst kind. You'll have to have those fingers amputated beyond a doubt, or lose the entire hand - or even worse!'" (351). By her frequent exposure to what we assume to be lead-based paint, Trina falls victim to an indestructible metal.[49] The paint's toxicity not only causes the amputation of Trina's fingers, but it also destroys her craftsmanship and forces her to become a scrub-woman at the local kindergarten (where she is then murdered by McTeague). The seemingly inanimate Ark animals that Trina takes such pride in manufacturing are the "doers behind the deed[s]," the lethal things that work against instead of for Trina's well-being (Bennett 28).

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[49] My assumption that Trina used lead-based paint is based on the facts that: (1) lead paint was most prominently used in American cities, industries, and homes because of its convenience and low cost to produce; (2) in an April 18, 1901 article, written in the *Journal of the Society of Chemical industry* and entitled "Paint Industry in the United States," scientists lauded the fact that the American paint industry was so successful because of its localized lead deposits and extractions, as well as its upstanding machinery used to crush and grind lead into pain; and (3) at the turn of the century, nearly every toy was painted or manufactured with some type of lead content. I assume that these toys made by a cheap paint obtained by a poor, working-class woman also contain the lead that poisoned their maker. See Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner, *Lead Wars: The Politics of Science and the Fate of America's Children* (U of California Press, 2013), 8. For a posthuman materialist perspective of lead narratives, see Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham: Duke UP, 2012), specifically Chapter 5.

Moreover, Trina's circumstance is a direct critique of capitalism at the turn of the century, as industrialism formed a widening gap between capital and labor, between output and return. Norris witnessed an entire class of Americans investing in their labor and getting nothing in return, and we see his bleak reaction to capitalism's deficiencies in *McTeague*, and again in both *The Octopus* (1901) and *The Pit* (1903). Trina's mechanistic return to her craft, the products of hard labor she supplies to a business, and her ultimate estrangement from her self, both physically (her fingers are estranged from her body) and mentally (she expresses no joy about her new work cleaning the kindergarten) all confirm a Marxist assessment of the laborer's lack of power. In a world determined and defined by capitalism, Trina's loss of utility leads to her obsolescence. The narrator describes Trina as "alone, a solitary, abandoned woman, lost in the lowest eddies of the great city's tide - the tide that always ebbs" (354). Her death is unseen by the reader who listens with a stray cat to "the sounds of stamping and struggling," but also by the system and society that constantly ignores the suffering of the poor (375). In disposing of Trina, Norris demonstrates how easily it is to dispose of working class citizens when they are rendered useless.

It is difficult to detect the monstrosity of objects when Norris has created such monstrous humans, but these things are alive and well in *McTeague*, outlasting their characters as the stuff that still networks beyond human intention (children are still purchasing Trina's toys in her uncle's shop, the canary still chitters in the desert). Curious, too, is the fact that the novel's material things confront most violently those characters who question concepts of agency. Trina's confusion about where the toys "go" and McTeague's fear of "something" somewhere both recall a lack of intimacy between themselves and the things they *think* they own. In their expressions of doubt, both characters lose their possessiveness and submit to a world where

things act beyond their control. *McTeague*'s things are imagined as monsters, but they are not given voices - nor listened to - in the way Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* would imagine in the following year.

Sister Carrie and "The Curious Shifts of the Poor"

In *Sister Carrie* (1900), Theodore Dreiser amplifies "the voices of the so-called inanimate" because he understands objects to control humans as much as humans believe they control objects (98). *Sister Carrie* is filled with things that beg for possession or lure human agents away from their comfortable ownership roles. These things - money, a safe, clothes - challenge humans to ascend the social ladder as quickly as they can but without real reflectiveness about how such material transformations might affect one's character. The cultural assumption that possessing more things confers status and makes an individual more powerful dictates the way that characters react when they are presented with an object. For example, Hurstwood finds an open safe with easily accessible and free money that should guarantee him success, but instead the incident initiates his decline. Carrie finds new clothing and a stage presence that should make her happy, but instead the uplift isolates her with a deeper restlessness than she had ever felt. Like *McTeague*, Dreiser's novel explores the consequences of possessing material objects that are understood as morally or socially "unsuitable" for their owners.[50] While the obvious consequence is social rejection and stigmatization, Dreiser reveals a fascination with the possibility that objects actively reject humans. He argues that a sense of human autonomy and agency is lost by those who "incorrectly" consume because the things consumed are capable of changing the course of action while also putting their owners out of use. In the novel's

[50] By "unsuitable," I mean that a classist preconception exists within and outside of the text wherein only upper-class people should own upper-class things as clear and visible representation of their socioeconomic status.

exploration of a new lived relation to the world of objects at the turn of the century, Dreiser finds that human life becomes tenuous when confronted with so many powerful objects.

The novel itself is an excessive thing filled with an excess of things that nearly suffocate the human narrative. *Sister Carrie* was a commercial failure, primarily due to disagreements between Dreiser and his publisher, the Doubleday and Page company, who disagreed with the portrayal of Carrie's sexuality and objected to Dreiser's inclusion of real people and real places in a work of scandalous fiction.[51] The novel has also been attacked for its "tedious repetition of words" (Leibowitz xvi) or its "relentless repetition" (Matthiessen 85). Stanley Corkin argues that "the book deteriorates into a morass of description of various mass-produced objects of the world" (607). Many critics comment upon the novel's "microscopic analysis" (Moers 64) of city life, but only a few praise the thingness of the narrative as a vehicle for better understanding the strained relationship between the animate and inanimate. Tracy Lemaster looks closely at how Dreiser's use of the word "thing" becomes a vital means of characterization, specifically for Carrie who challenges woman's social objectification when she appropriates an authorial voice (41). Kevin Trumpeter argues that the authorial emphasis in *Sister Carrie* demonstrates that the story's nonhuman actors are just as significant in driving the narrative (235). He examines how Dreiser uses the city's presence to "illustrate how desire never exists in isolation from the things that tempt and thus how circumstance has the capacity to influence action" (236). However, neither Trumpeter nor Lemaster focus on the erasure of the tempted human actors, nor mention the possibility that Dreiser is purposefully illustrating how humans can so easily disappear into their assemblages and become useless. Because *Sister Carrie* depicts "a society in which there are no real equals, and no equilibrium, but only people moving up and down" (Matthiessen 75), I

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[51] A lack of promotional enthusiasm led the novel to sell only half of its 1000 copies, and it was not reprinted until 1907 by B. W. Dodge and Co. (Pizer, *Realism* 433).

think it is apparent that a social life in flux welcomes all kinds of ambiguity, suspicion, and doubt when defining one's reality. Dreiser stages *Sister Carrie* with a "morass of description" (Corkin 607) because he wants us to think more carefully about the cumbersome role that things traditionally play in our narrative accounts of action.

Moreover, unsuitable and elusive things throw a wrench in the uplift rhetoric that characterized the era's American Dream novels. Although characters like Carrie are taught, "'You shall not better your situation save by honest labour," none of them listen (556). Arun Mukherjee argues, "Honest industry was considered the sure formula for attaining riches as well as Godliness. Dreiser makes fun of the formula by…commenting on the discrepancy between the pieties of the success literature and the actuality" (212). Much like the regionalist authors who focused on gambling and inheritance as alternative forms of exchange in order to "win" success, Dreiser mocks the efficacy of the moral-capitalist formula by creating characters who chase success through alternative acquisitions that avoid marketplace oversight: thievery, extortion, and taboo exchange. Alison Shonkwiler argues that authors like Dreiser "experiment with a more radical approach [to economics], in which self-possession represents neither a form of opposition to the market, nor even necessarily a will to dominate it, but a radical new kind of accommodation to market demands" (63-4). But the American myth of self-reliance and equal opportunity collapses alongside Dreiser's focus on the inherent and natural capacities of human life. As a man interested in self-help literature and representations of industrious character, Dreiser became disillusioned by American success stories by the turn of the century, which he began to see as more dependent upon fate and circumstance; upon an "unexplainable, inescapable something" within that guarantees "that there are certain things which some of us cannot do, however much we may wish to or try to (qtd. in Diebel 125)." Anne Diebel recently

points out that personality, for Dreiser, is "as mysterious in humans as it is in nature, cities and objects," a Spencerian concept that refers to "an aura, distinctiveness, or individuality that cannot be explained by rational means" (131). Dreiser's shared apprehension about "something" within and some outward *thing* that humans work to achieve is illustrated in *Sister Carrie* when he characterizes individuals who are *made* of the "right stuff" (Carrie Meebler) versus those who *own* the right stuff (George Hurstwood). The contrast is made fatal by the fact that personality is inherent, while ownership is temporary. Someone like Carrie can own the "wrong stuff" (a working class outsider with a fancy hat) and draw an audience with her ability to perform. If someone like Hurstwood owns the "wrong stuff" (stolen cash, a mistress), there are consequences, and Dreiser is suggesting, like Norris, that inanimate matter determines human affairs in dangerous and unpredictable ways.

Carrie is always the central focus of scholarship as the title character (and the most amorphous energy in the text), and I believe her characterization is vital to this study's concerns about the instability of human/object agency. But I also believe that Dreiser meant Hurstwood to serve as an empty foil to Carrie's fullness, as a character so dependent upon economic position and material possessions that when stripped of his wealth we find only a debased corpse (much like McTeague).[52] Not only does Dreiser punish Hurstwood for collecting the wrong materials on his mission to maintain status, but he annihilates him. Carrie is spared, most certainly because of her innate aura - her unique presence fights for permanence in a system of capitalism that fabricates and commodifies being, à la Walter Benjamin -, but also because of her unique respect

[52] While Carrie has been accused of being only an empty vessel, I agree with Diebel's reading that it is Carrie's personality and reflective curiosity that provides this "fullness" indicated here. Dreiser also attaches an "aura" or a "something" to her descriptions, thereby dispelling the idea that she is empty in any way. Jackson Lears also argues that Dreiser revered individuals "who could orchestrate outward impressions while remaining true to some inner core of being" ("Dreiser" 75).

for objects and ownership.[53] Dreiser has created a world where “things seem slightly human and humans seem slightly thing-like,” thereby challenging our assumption that humans are the only agents capable of shaping reality (Brown 9).

The year Dreiser assigns to Carrie's migration to the city is 1889, and her search for labor in the closest major city reflects a national trend, as glimpsed in the titles of contemporaneous texts, such as the U.S. Bureau of Labor's *Working Women in Large Cities* (1888) and the Massachusetts Bureau of Labor's *The Working Girls of Boston* (1889). In 1890, one year after Dreiser imagines Carrie's arrival in Chicago, women made up seventeen percent of the national labor force, with women between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four forming the largest proportion of this group (Matthiessen 141). Women also had purchasing power, could access public spaces to pick up public goods, and could freely participate in a consumer culture via markets and department stores, much like Carrie finds immediately upon de-boarding her train. Consumption and capitalism - as well as romantic fantasies of wealth and fashion available in the penny press - allowed women the ability to imagine a new type of “character” and “taste” that in turn established middle-class identity. Nan Enstad argues, “Because the middle class could now participate in the purchase of fine clothing and other consumer products, it declared this transition to be ‘democratic,’ emblematic of a new nation, and celebrated it as ‘egalitarian,’ as opposed to elite consumption” (24). Carrie is introduced as “a fair example of the middle American class,” unqualified for hard labor or book-smarts, but interested “in her charms” and “quick to understand the keener pleasures of life, ambitious to gain in material things” (3). Her self-interest and fine taste epitomizes the era’s Gibson girls who welcomed the chance to freely navigate urban spaces without the patriarchal control of their fathers.

[53] See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 2002).

Upon arrival, Carrie, alone, establishes an immediate and special attention to the city's markets and department stores, as well as her new and powerful role as consumer:

> Carrie passed along the busy aisles, much affected by the remarkable displays of trinkets, dress goods, stationery, and jewelry. Each separate counter was a show place of dazzling interest and attraction. She could not help feeling the claim of each trinket and valuable upon her personally, and yet she did not stop. There was nothing there which she could not have used—nothing which she did not long to own. (25)

Although she is only an "outcast," a shop girl without a husband, Carrie "feels the claim" of each material item she sees. Her longing to own is personal and independent; she demonstrates a sort of reverence toward the objects that she knows can reflect a new self. Gunther Barth argues that despite the low waged work of female sales clerks, this form of employment allowed women to escape the isolation of domesticity but also enter into a male-dominated urban job market; women became a new social force in city life because of the department store, which Carrie takes full advantage of as both working girl and validated consumer (145). Carrie's presence in these new market spaces is emphasized by a psychic attunement: rooms "sooth" Carrie (45); "the kaleidoscope of human affairs" pains her as she watches the "poorly clad girls" and Irishmen with picks and rolled up sleeves (118); and she "learned much about laces and those little neckpieces which add so much to a woman's appearance" (119). She engages with her material surroundings on an ontological level, learning not only how they affect her psyche but also how they effect change in the world. Carrie's symbiotic relationship with the perfumes and lanterns and environments that she encounters permits her to recognize the plasticity of identity and to therefore build the "right" one. Dreiser further accentuates her attunement in the chapter entitled "The Lure of the Material," when he employs prosopopoeia to emphasize these nonhuman actors persuading Carrie to live a new coquettish life: "'My dear,' said the lace collar she secured from Patridge's, 'I fit you beautifully; don't give me up.' 'Ah, such little feet,' said the leather of the

soft new shoes, 'how effectively I cover them; what a pity they should ever want my aid'" (98). These material things lure Carrie into recognizing that she "fits" into this new environment, and that owning these things will facilitate a smooth transition into an elevated social landscape. [54] The fact that Carrie imagines the shoes as "pitying" her for wanting their aid also speaks to her understanding that they "effectively" need one another; that without her purchasing power, the shoes are useless and unwanted. Dreiser allows Carrie to hear the "voices of the so-called inanimate" more closely than any other character in the novel in order to convey a new type of relationship between humans and objects - one in which mutual support and responsibility is shared if conspicuous consumption is to be successful.

Hurstwood however, is a portrait of "fastidious comfort" at the height of consumerism in America (37). And he although he had once "risen by perseverance and industry, through long years of service" (33), Hurstwood maintains no real power or solid position in society; Dreiser labels his employment as "a kind of stewardship which was imposing, but lacked financial control" (32). Dreiser does not offer any further details about Hurstwood's past social elevation, precisely because we are to think of him as a one-dimensional everyman - Dreiser often times refers to him as "the man" (187-88) or "like everyman" (95) - who unconsciously consumes and displays his earnings. "Hurstwood had only a thought of pleasure without responsibility" (108); he gives very little thought to the substance and circumstance of his social and object interactions because he is wired to see himself as Master. Unlike Carrie, Dreiser designs Hurstwood with an anxiety about being the "master of the situation," but also of people, or things (97). Hurstwood

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[54] In *Cities, Citizens, and Technologies: Urban Life and Postmodernity* (New York: Routledge, 2009), Paula Geyh agrees that the fetishistic seductiveness of these materials suggests that Carrie has been transformed by the city because she listens only to the shoes and collar as final productions without thinking about the process of their production (28). Geyh also argues that the language from the possessions mirrors Drouet's earlier wooing, so that Carrie actually collapses both seductions into the materials closest to her body.

thinks of Carrie as having "the aptitude of the struggler who seeks emancipation" (93), and so "he picked her as he would the fresh fruit of a tree" (100). Hurstwood "wanted to win" Carrie only so that Charles Drouet could not (100, 123, 190, 380). Yet the frequently evoked master-slave dialectic reveals a flaw in Hurstwood's romantic illusion of himself. Hegel explains in *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) that the "master" is a "consciousness" that defines itself only in mutual relation to the slave's consciousness - a dynamic of mediation and mutual interdependence: "Thus he is not certain of existence-for-self as the truth; rather, his truth is the inessential consciousness and the inessential action of the latter [the slave]" (61). Hurstwood *needs* the slave (Carrie, objects) to act like a slave in order to enjoy his privilege as master; but neither objects nor Carrie fall in line.

Carrie's deviance has received much attention, but the objects that manifest around Hurstwood are actually more manipulative and determinative of his fate. For one, the changes in Hurstwood's material circumstances, his social and economic fall, reveal that his power only relies upon his consumerism and not an inherent personality that could magnetize success. His descriptions and flaws are conveyed through the perceptions of others; he becomes an object to be evaluated or observed without the desire to better understand what makes him "work." While Hurstwood thinks he is winning Carrie over with his strength and "ornate appearance" (101), Carrie "pitied this sad, lonely figure" (105). She wonders, "How could such a man need reclaiming?" when he in fact believes himself to be "reclaiming" Carrie from Drouet (105). In his pursuit of Carrie, Hurstwood "purchased a box of delicately coloured and scented writing paper in monogram," upon which to write impressive love letters (117). When his coworkers notice this, they "now wondered at the cleric and very official-looking nature of his position. The five bartenders viewed with respect the duties which could call a man to do so much desk-work

and penmanship" (117). Again, Hurstwood is valued by his staff because of a perceived manner of importance; the bartenders respect Hurstwood more because of his ability to purchase a frivolous office accessory. The reality of this purchase is an accumulation of debt, motivated by adultery and competition, but not even Dreiser takes the opportunity to illuminate his transgressions. Hurstwood, himself, is meant to be another object within the text, and he is bound up with things in a way that renders him vulnerable and leads to his downfall.

The most powerful actant in the novel is then the Fitzgerald and Moy safe that Hurstwood is given the responsibility of closing; when he finds it open and filled with cash, he once again chooses pleasure instead of reason. Karl F. Zender argues that the novel is a "dialectic of character and circumstance in which Hurstwood contributes to his own destruction each step of the way" (63). But I absolutely disagree because of how Dreiser designs this scene; that is, by making Hurstwood inactive and useless. Exactly like McTeague in the desert, Hurstwood sees and hears the momentous scene outside of himself:

> "I didn't know Fitzgerald and Moy ever left any money this way," his mind said to itself…
>
> "Count them," said a voice in his ear…
>
> "Why don't I shut the safe?" his mind said to itself, lingering. "What makes me pause here?"
>
> For an answer there came the strangest words: "Did you ever have ten thousand dollars in ready money?"
>
> Lo, the manager remembered that he had never had so much. (209)

It is easily assumed that "the voice" is Hurstwood's conscience, but it also feels as if this disembodied voice is coming from the safe.[55] Hurstwood hands over responsibility and authority

[55] If the voice is his conscience, Dreiser also makes the mind seem inhuman when he uses the metaphor of a clock twice within the scene: "Those who have never heard that solemn voice of the ghostly clock which ticks with awful distinctness…are in no position to judge" (210). Dreiser's narrator even calls the mind a thing: "The wavering of a mind under such circumstances is an almost inexplicable thing, and yet it is absolutely true" (211). We can sense Dreiser's understanding of human existence as nothing more than an assemblage of objects and metaphors that

to the objects around him when he asks, "'*What* makes me pause here?'" He is no longer Master of his body or mind or circumstance; a what, not a who, changes the course of action. Dreiser's use of the verb "make" instead of "cause" is also significant because this infers production; to make is "to produce (a material thing) by combination of parts, or by giving a certain form to a portion of matter, to manufacture, to construct, assemble, frame, fashion," according to the *OED*.[56] Not only does this word choice indicate that the scene involves a network of actors that manufacture an outcome together, but it also complicates the audience's impulse to blame Hurstwood entirely. "What" produces Hurstwood's inaction. And if we do not have to blame Hurstwood for stealing the money, then we are allowed to blame the money or the safe itself, and therefore recognize a subjectivity in Dreiser's objects.

"Hurstwood could not bring himself to act definitely," and so the safe must act in his place if the conflict is to end and his decline is to begin (212). Instead of writing Hurstwood as a mindless thief, Dreiser makes him a victim: "While the money was in his hand the lock clicked. It had sprung! Did he do it? He grabbed at the knob and pulled vigorously. It had closed" (212). The lock is far more active - it "clicked," "sprung, and "closed" - when compared to Hurstwood's delayed reaction. Furthermore, Hurstwood, the narrator, and the audience ask in unison, "Did he do it?" And while the logical answer should be, "yes," no one in this moment can confirm his fault. With this question, Dreiser asks us to consider the object in the room as have more agency than Hurstwood; with our hesitation, Dreiser confirms that a new discomfort exists in his/our constitution of the material object world.

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suffocate comfortable concepts of human agency.

[56] "make, v.1." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, March 2018, www.oed.com/view/Entry/112645.

Hurstwood ultimately privileges the money as having an agential force over his decision, allowing the nonhuman actor to take responsibility for his moral deficiency as he deceives Carrie into leaving town and escaping persecution. Hurstwood prefers to be powerless in this interaction, and Dreiser penalizes his compliance by marking the scene as the moment of decline. Kevin Trumpeter also argues that this scene is far from static, comprised of "a multifaceted actor-network composed of disparate material parts from different orders of being - human and nonhuman - each doing important work in the eventuation of Hurstwood's fatal crime" (239). Trumpeter, however, ignores the scene's lethality. Whether man or thing is to blame for the outcome, Hurstwood never recovers socially, economically, or mentally after this interaction, and in fact dies as a result. After stealing the money, he rationalizes that Carrie would "love him wholly…*It* would repay him; *it* would show him that he had not lost all" (316, my emphasis). Hurstwood gives the "money lump" control over his fate and mental state; *it* is now in charge of navigating his emotional well-being, his love affair, and his economic freefall in a new city. Hurstwood relieves himself from fully understanding his circumstance: "he could not analyse the change that was taking place in his mind, and hence his body, but he felt the depression of it" (262). By relying on the vague pronoun, the narrator too pushes confusion about who or what is steering Hurstwood toward decline.

Hurstwood's decline into poverty and then death also indicates that he is disposable. Not long after they arrive in New York, Hurstwood physically and mentally deteriorates. Both he and Carrie comment upon his "constant state of gloom" (262). Carrie observes, "He looked a little bit old to her about the eyes and mouth now, and there were other things which placed him in his true rank" (265). Those things, of course, were his new environment (a lower class neighborhood), his threadbare clothes and unshaven face (283, 321), his unemployment, and the

“disease of brooding” (266) that suddenly darkened his skin and “made him look slightly sinister” to Carrie (271). As soon as he declines, Carrie begins thinking about Ames’s comfort and youth. She becomes more independent: reading the newspaper, demanding to sleep alone, and then finally leaving Hurstwood for the stage and the theatre’s admiration. Hurstwood is easily replaced by all the other pleasures that city life and performance can provide for Carrie because he is just like another manufactured, interchangeable object of the capitalist system. And once Carrie is done with him, so is the city. When desperately seeking work, Hurstwood tries to replace the striking trolley workers but is threatened and debased by an angry mob that refuses to become disposable. Pizer argues that Hurstwood cannot survive in the slums because he has no “class solidarity;” he is “blinded by the habits of mind of his former class” while failing to understand the significance of his current state (“Late” 200). Starving and sick, he relies on the city’s institutions and charities until giving up all hope: “he turned the gas on again but applied no match…the uprising fumes filled the room…‘What’s the use?’ he said, weakly, as he stretched himself to rest” (396). His suicide and his final reflection on his own lack of utility indicate that this is a narrative about disposability. The “leisure class” *and* the working class have determined that Hurstwood is valueless. He disappears into the crowds of old hats and wet shoulders and grizzled beards as if he never even existed; “A slow, black boat setting out from the pier at Twenty-seventh Street upon its weekly errand bore, with many others, his nameless body to the Potter’s Field” (398). Hurstwood’s offshore disposal marks the end of his lifecycle and the novel’s narrative (only three paragraphs follow his last mention); it feels as if Hurstwood’s displaced utility carries along with it the novel’s termination.

Dreiser offers a critique on the disposability of humans within a capitalist system. Hurstwood’s wasted and unidentifiable form is a historical condition in the age of mass

consumption; he is exhausted and eliminated like worn clothing (395) or oiled faces (19) or the soot on the windows (394). In Hurstwood's "content[ment] to droop supinely while Carrie drifted out of his life," Dreiser illustrates the difference between Carrie's animation and Hurstwood's extinction (289). He becomes the "empty shell" indicated by the title of chapter 42, and he confirms his transformation when prompted: "'I'm not anything'" (326). Dreiser shows us an uglier narrative of American life: the common decline of so many citizens who transform from a desirable self into a "weakly looking object" and finally a decaying corpse in an offshore field (368). Without his façade, his money, and finally his utility, Hurstwood is the ultimate figure of disenfranchisement, and his social abandonment induces a state of physical hollowness and inanimacy.

"The curious shifts of the poor" (the title of the novel's next to last chapter) are the shifts from human to object that Dreiser himself witnessed and spent his life recreating in text. The word "thing" is used more than a thousand times in the novel, so Dreiser's uncertainty about how to define and then convey human life that seemed so thing-like is always lingering, but made most apparent in Hurstwood's decline. Hurstwood's transformation is instigated by (a) a seemingly inanimate object and (b) his inability to act, which further emphasizes how interchangeable humans and objects can be at any time. Dreiser imagines humans at the mercy of a network of object-actors that are suddenly capable of determining and dominating the outcomes of life's drama, but he also imagines humans as objects. For Dreiser, urban America has become a space of indistinguishable products and consumption; everything is for sale and everyone is disposable.

This brings us back to Carrie, who seems to have escaped Hurstwood's fate but is very much a live commodity who concludes the novel with her inherent personality intact but her

mind wandering. Carrie is last described alone, without a replacement suitor or an audience: "In your rocking chair, by your window dreaming, shall you long, alone. In your rocking-chair, by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel" (558). Throughout the novel, both Carrie and Hurstwood spend ample time sitting in rocking chairs (eighteen times to be exact), but as the novel's final image, the object tells us more about the state of the working and middle class population in America at the turn of the century than any other thing. While Carrie's wistful look out her window is a common symbolism in modernist literature that both divides and connects characters to their environments, Dreiser employs the rocking-chair as a much more haunting representation of the type of static energy created by those who work hard to mobilize onward and upward through the social and economic hierarchies but find themselves stationary, always stuck in one groove with only the sensation of motion. Despite how many times individuals like Carrie and Hurstwood rock forward, they are always pulled back into idleness (and then death). And despite Carrie's conspicuous consumption, her "infectious" magnetism, her knack for performance and imitation, and her romantic navigations that enable social escalation, Dreiser brings her right back to where she started: alone, "full of illusions" (3), and in pursuit of some unattainable status that she will only ever imagine and never actualize.

Edith Wharton, Waste, and Disposability

All eighty-six Edith Wharton productions are worth reexamining for the active role of inanimate matter in determining the narrative of human affairs. In fact, *The House of Mirth* (1905) is most frequently analyzed in terms of its representation of the culture of consumption and detailed social exchanges and exclusions in the Gilded Age. The life and death of heroine Lily Barth offers a hard look at "a society so relentlessly materialistic and self-serving that it casually destroys what is most beautiful and blameless within it," according to Carol Singley and

many others who have made similar conclusions about the famous text (3).[57] There is no doubt that Wharton was interested in a world where possession is culture, but she was also disillusioned by "the country's present moral impoverishment" (*A Backward Glance* 7).[58] Wharton begged her contemporary magazines to remain a "light in the chaotic darkness of American 'literary' conditions" (qtd. in Lee 16); and in her autobiography, *A Backward Glance* (1933), she reflected a nostalgia for "my old New York" that had been replaced by the nouveaux-riches that "abruptly tore down the old frame-work" (6). The result of this late-nineteenth century shift in power from the established urban elite to the "successive waves of parvenus" resulted in what Amy Kaplan calls a supplanting of "inherited wealth with industrial fortunes and traditional values with conspicuous consumption" (*Social* 92). In *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), Christopher Lasch argues that a more profound dependence on capitalism motivated reexaminations of identity: "capitalism subordinated being to having…it subordinates possession itself to appearance and measures exchange value as a commodity's capacity to confer prestige - the illusion of prosperity and well being" (137).[59] Wharton's dissatisfaction with the social and material world that she was writing for and about is reflected in her recurrent return to themes of American vulgarity and acquisition. Wharton felt that her own literary

[57] Among others, recent and extensive studies about the concepts of agency and oppressive materialism include Patrick Mullen's "The Aesthetics of Self-Management: Intelligence, Capital and *The House of Mirth*" in *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 42.1 (2009); Kathleen Moore's article "Edith Wharton's Lily Bart and the Subject of Agency" in the *Edith Wharton Review* 19.1 (2003); and Sarah Way Sherman's book *Sacramental Shopping: Louisa May Alcott, Edith Wharton, and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2013).

[58] In her autobiography, directly after this statement, Wharton then pictures herself as a sort of archeologist or curator: "The compact world of my youth has receded into a past from which it can only be dug up in bits by the assiduous relic-hunter; and its smallest fragments begin to be worth collecting and putting together before the last of those who knew the live structure are swept away with it" (*A Backward Glance* 8). Like her character, Wharton understands time and literature as stuff that must be recollected and piecemealed together if she is to achieve self-preservation.

[59] Susan Stewart similarly argues in *On Longing*, "The function of belongings within the economy of the bourgeois subject is one of supplementarity, a supplementarity that in consumer culture replaces its generating subject as the interior milieu substitutes for, and takes the place of, an interior self" (xi).

productions would be displaced by a tasteless culture that would not appreciate their laborious creation, and her growing concern for self-preservation translates into stories of violent conflict between culture and possession.

Two of her earliest texts share Naturalism's sinister view of materialism, punish characters who are plagued by fight for ownership, and are far more attuned to an object world that threatens and disposes of human agents. Naturalism's battle between instinct and civility, duty and desire, allows for deeper contemplation about the concepts of 'having.' "Bunner Sisters," written in 1892 but published in her 1916 collection of short stories entitled *Xingu*, and *Sanctuary*, a novella published in 1903, have received little to no scholarly attention despite their sharp criticism of society's changing attitude towards consumption, disposability, and extinction. Because both stories were written in the 1890s, so early in Wharton's career, they are either omitted from Wharton bibliographies all together,[60] or hold up as severely flawed apprentice-pieces and texts unrepresentative of Wharton's more mature style (Nevius 25). But these two narratives inaugurate and provide insight into Wharton's consistent return to themes of agency and ownership, and thus can add depth to our understanding of the more commercial Wharton novels, as well as other social narratives of the time.

Both *Sanctuary* and "Bunner Sisters" focus on objects that literally cause the elimination of characters - a family will, a clock, and trash - but that also stress the durability and permanence of material over human life. The will as a legal document and the Bunner Sister's consumable hand-made and recycled products are still operative and valuable after their owners and creators have perished. This is because Wharton sees objects as immortal even when they are broken, wasted, or trashed, because objects can be reused, resurrected, or littered in ways that

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[60] Eleanor Dwight's 1984 biography of Wharton, *Edith Wharton: An Extraordinary Life* (New York: Henry N. Adams), omits the novella from its bibliography and makes no further mention of the text.

humans cannot. In the same way Trina's lead paint and toys live on after her death, so does Wharton create objects that survive her characters and stand as a menacing presence in her narratives of underclass American citizens.

Urban naturalist fiction like Wharton's often responds to public sanitation problems and questions of disposability by utilizing a language of waste that infiltrates the minds of characters like Kate Orne, who thinks that "life was honeycombed by a vast system of moral sewage" (*Sanctuary* 37). Wharton's characters see the self as disposable within that system, no matter who or what may "put new life in me'" (*Sanctuary* 93). The human body is ultimately extinguishable and has no utility beyond its dead form. Nineteenth-century cities could move those expired bodies to Potter's Field, but they could not effectively dispose of them, nor the tons of garbage and manufacturing refuse that polluted the streets. David Trotter argues that "waste can often be recycled, or put to alternative uses; if the system that produced it cannot accommodate it, some other system will. Waste remains forever potentially in circulation because circulation is its defining quality…However foul it may become, it still gleams with efficiency" (20). Waste can be recycled, refurbished, resold, or even cast aside in alleyways and minds alike. Waste can only be relocated, or incinerated and projected into the air; and in cramped urban spaces, waste is much more vibrant and forceful as it interferes with and obstructs human action. Twenty years after the publication of Wharton's texts that represented urban waste as thematically and dramatically pivotal to her narratives about moral fiber, F. Scott Fitzgerald would also be thinking about the human waste products of capitalism in *The Great Gatsby*'s infamous "valley of ashes" (24). Fitzgerald was an admirer of Wharton's work - and even received feedback from her about his great American novel[61] - so his representation of an

[61] See Wharton's letter to Fitzgerald, dated June 8, 1925, via the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library in the

industrial wasteland's "foul dust" (2), its obstructive division between East and West Egg, and its ability to consume Myrtle (physically) and Gatsby (mentally) is a projection of Wharton's America that still hid its decrepitude behind shiny new things.

Like Gatsby's narrative of failed redemption, *Sanctuary* is a melodramatic tale of moral consciousness that traces Kate Orne's conflicted presence in the life of her son, Dick Peyton, who is plagued by a series of inheritances and "inherited tendencies" that test his moral agency (146). When Dick's father receives an inheritance of his brother, Arthur, that is intended for Arthur's illegitimate wife and child, his mother, Kate, discovers the true "cursed" nature of the family wealth. The curse manifests throughout the novel in Kate's unwavering attention to her son's moral fiber, but also in Dick's later decision to plagiarize his good friend's architectural plans in order to win a contest that guarantees fame and fortune. While early critics were not interested in what later critics like Angela M. Salas see as a "ghostly presence" that dominates the novel's decision-making, they instead spent their efforts arguing over who was to blame. A review published in the *New York Times* on November 21, 1903, that presented Kate as a "superbly strong woman" (qtd. in *New York* 837) received an immediate reader response from Anna C. Laws on December 5 that Kate was to be blamed, not lauded, for her compliance in her son's "theft" of Dallow's inheritance (qtd. in *New York* 907).

At the heart of their debate is the question of proper ownership and Darwinian orientation. Wharton contributes to naturalism's nature/nurture debate: can a mother's vigilant love overpower her child's "bad blood"? Salas argues that to overlook this early text is to ignore Wharton's earliest, most ambivalent "analysis of paternal responsibility towards their offspring" (122). Lev Raphael suggests that the text is also a psychobiographical benchmark for Wharton,

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Yale University library catalogue: <https://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Record/3820822?image_id=10938114>.

an expression of Wharton's well-documented difficulties with her own mother (qtd. in Salas 123). Surprisingly, *Sanctuary* has only ever been scrutinized based on the representations of family matters instead of the actual family *matter* that drives the novel's conflict: inheritances. Whereas Salas argues that Kate is haunted by her husband's ghostly biological hold on their son, I believe Kate is more so haunted by the unpredictability of (re)possession, of physical temptations that seek to own her family instead of provide outlets to honest ownership. And Wharton conveys Kate's anxiety in terms of control and containment; her family's dishonorable acts need "private disposal" for the purposes of "self-preservation" (38).

Throughout the novella, Wharton appears to be thinking about the consequences of ownership and human/object relationships. For example, the interference of inheritances continually drives the plot. When the novella begins, Denis receives a "spontaneous" inheritance from his step-brother Arthur, whom Kate knows very little about. But the more she probes the situation, the more she finds that his half-brother's pregnant wife had come forth to lay a "shadowy" claim upon Arthur and his property (8). The courts deny the "wicked" woman because it is assumed "[t]hat kind of woman is always trying to make money out of the heirs of any man" (13). Although the estate conflict is quickly resolved, Kate is haunted by the aftermath: Arthur's alleged wife refuses to be humiliated or silenced by Denis's offering of a severance cheque, so she drowns herself and her child in the lake behind their estate. Her husband's intentions - family security - leave his family with a hearty inheritance that functions as a deadly curse. Kate is "imprisoned with [Denis] in this dreadful thing," (25) and their son would be "born to an inheritance of secret weakness, a vice of the moral fibre" (40). Kate considers the child's make-up before its own conception; it is an idea, not even a material organism, that she chooses to protect with her own self-sacrificing throughout the rest of the novella. For Kate, integrity

weighs heavier than material wealth.

But the "inherited tendencies" toward self-interest from his father are enough to trump his mother's "love and lifelong vigilance," and the novella becomes a battle over whose biological material will produce the best outcome for Dick (46). Dick is confronted with a second inheritance when he enters an architecture competition to design a new museum of sculpture in which contestants were judged by their designs, not their names. When his friend Dallow, a much more skilled architect who is guaranteed to win, is sickened with pneumonia, Dick assumes the customary duties of managing his friend's estate. Upon doing so, he finds a letter from Dallow relinquishing his finished architectural plans for Dick to use in the competition. The novel ends with the pressure from his mother not to accept such an inheritance - "She saw Dick yielding to his opportunity, snatching victory from dishonor, winning love, happiness and success in the act by which he lost himself" (75) - and his final indecision about his entitlement. With this final exchange of property, there is no question that Wharton wants us to think about property out of place. Wharton was deeply interested in topics of heritage and inheritance, as well as what these types of exchanges meant for both ancestral families and rising classes; in *Sanctuary*, inherited property favors no one. Because of mental or physical sickness, both the alleged wife and Dallow are denied a property that would allow for them to live a new life of economic security. Wharton's satirical point here is that because they do not have "strong" inherited characteristics, they cannot own a strong and healthy property. Wharton felt similar limitations in her inability to access the wealth and space of some upper-class societies, so her commentary on belonging to a worthy social circle bleeds through a cold vein of rejection and antagonism.

Her contempt for "new money" is why *Sanctuary*'s characters are all cursed by their new

property, and why no one is able to get ahead by the things they have not created themselves. It is revealed that Denis "had managed to squander the best part of the fortune he had inherited…so that, at his death, his widow and son were left with a scant competence" (44). Kate's life is built upon providing exclusively for her son and his education, herself surviving "on queer food and in ready-made boots" (44) and without "ornamental leisure" (45). She is also burdened by trying to motivate an entitled son who lacks the enthusiasm and composure of a young man capable of making something of himself in the Gilded Age. Both Dick and Kate end the novella sad, weak, and alone; the ending is hopeless in their inability to prosper or procreate. Wharton punishes an entire lineage for Denis's original property theft, even Kate for her compliance in appropriating the "wrong stuff."

Kate Orne's mental and ethical anguish then manifests through a language of ownership; she proves that she cannot know herself without understanding what she does (or does not) possess. Kate is a highly imaginative character with a "visualizing habit [that] gave precision and persistency to the image she had evoked" (17). Most commonly, her visualizations are rooted in tangible substances or geometrics that model life's drama. She describes conflicts as "labyrinths" (18), she envisions her engagement as a union of "anguished shapes" (17), and she describes her love as "a vain edifice reared on shifting ground" (95). Wharton's heroine is always apprehensive about her own biological and social materiality. When she first becomes engaged to Denis Peyton, "she began to enter into possession of her kingdom, to entertain the actual sense of [happiness] belonging to her" (5). As she thinks about her new emotional security, she sits within her new kingdom in the Peyton estate surrounded by the finest material objects - a "fine traditional air of spacious living…violets in a glass on the writing-table" - that will soon belong

to her. Her presence amongst the objects seemingly convinces her to inhabit a state of contentment that "she had never before felt" (5).

Kate's peaceful cognizance is fragile. After the inheritance ordeal, she is troubled by her husband's (and her father's) idle reaction to the scandal, and she finds it much harder to forget the murder-suicide, in addition to the lack of ethics and sincerity demonstrated by the Peyton estate. Kate even begins to see her husband not as a man, but as an object: "What she saw now was that, in a world of strangeness, he remained the object least strange to her" (21). She sees Denis as a newly acquired marital possession, although not a valuable one. Like Dreiser's Hurstwood, Wharton represents the male suitor as an interchangeable object, giving the woman the consumer-like privilege of choosing the product she desires most. Unfortunately, this choice is a bad one. In coping with these transgressions, the narrator states, "The most she could hope was a few hours' respite, not from her own terrors, but from the pressure of outward claims: the midday halt, during which the victim is unbound while his torturers rest from their efforts" (20). Kate shares these feelings of lost agency, which are verbalized through a sense of lost ownership where Kate no longer owns the kingdom but is rather a prisoner within it. She is consumed by her duty as a wife, her role as a compliant woman, and the stress of moral ambiguity. Kate soon after admits: "she had not fully repossessed herself, had felt herself entangled in [Denis's] fate by a hundred meshes of association and habit" (28). Here, Wharton represents Kate as emotionally, physically, and biologically dispossessed. Kate imagines her own genetic composition "entangled" with her husband's undesirable DNA; she feels contaminated. Not until the end of the novella do we see Kate come to terms with the fact that she has in turn contaminated her son "with some hidden physical taint" (40): "All his successes and failures, his exaltations and inconsistencies, were recorded in the warm huddled heterogeneous room. Everywhere she saw

the touch of her own hand, the vestiges of her own steps" (95). Aside from finally laying claim to her own influence over her son's nature/nurture, the word "heterogeneous" is an important clue that Wharton intended to implicate Kate as guilty of also contributing to Dick's biological determinism. Dick is not "homogenous" with his mother but a different form, a body composed of different genes and fibers and chromosomes that act out in ways that Kate cannot control. Kate imagines that her "useless hateful life had struggled to force itself into his empty veins" (48), and although her language abdicates a conscious effort to control her son, she verifies her material impression upon her son's *tabula rasa*.

So what if Dick *is* contaminated? What if a "vast system of moral sewage" is ignored and undocumented by the family (37-8)? The answer to these questions is the same: then there is a big mess. The final way that Wharton appears to be thinking about human/object relationships is written in her ominous attention to disposability. Kate's first epiphany about reality's moral pressure is composed in the language of sanitation:

> She had begun to perceive that the fair surface of life was honeycombed by a vast system of moral sewage. Every respectable household had its special arrangements for the private disposal of family scandals; it was only among the reckless and improvident that such hygienic precautions were neglected. Who was she to pass judgement on the merits of such a system? The social health must be preserved: the means devised were the result of long experience and the collective instinct of self-preservation. (36-7)

There is no doubt that Wharton had in mind her era's ethics of cleanliness and fear of breached contamination. To be clean was to be pure, well-bred; to be unkempt was to be poor. The growing waste and filth of American cities was not unknown to Wharton or her readers, and neither was the wave of reactive social reform and public health issues. The organization of this passage falls directly in line with contemporary rhetoric on hygiene, such as in Susan Burr Barnes' *Hygiene of the Home* (1887), which preached: "[Hygiene] is preventative of disease and consequent suffering; preventative of crime and criminals; of pauperism; of insanity and idiocy;

preventive of broken hearts and ruined souls. Can any branch of work be more important than leading those who have it to desire its preservation…?" (12). There is no proof that Wharton read Barnes's text, but the two passages are nearly identical, first in their equation between hygiene and morality, and second in their rhetorical questioning of the importance of preserving a belief system that prevents and protects. Kate, like Barnes, realizes that all families must dispose of ugly and unclean incidents as a moral duty to preserve the family and the self; Kate scolds herself for doubting her own role in a lineage of housekeepers that have maintained a clean face. The murder-suicide, her husband's perjury, and the betrayal of rightful heirs is contemplated as *stuff* instead of action because their culture of disposability confirms that *stuff* can be easily thrown away. There is no responsibility beyond the disposal of an object; it is out of use, out of sight, out of mind. Interesting, too, is Wharton's attention to the management of household waste, not a more public urban waste as in *McTeague*. No upstanding individual would dare to openly discuss their own "uncleanliness," so Kate's exposure of a most private space forces the audience to think about their own domestic sewage and the sacrifices that must be made in order to dispose of it.

It is also Wharton's intention to enforce Kate's compliance because if she is not compliant, then she is "reckless and improvident." And if Kate is negligent, then she does not belong within the system. As Gary Totten argues, "'Use' summons the idea of disposal: neither is thinkable without the other" (*Memorial Boxes* 161), and Kate cannot understand her place within the system without also realizing what it means for her to *not* have a place. At the root of her anxious meditation over the inheritance is her fear of being disposed of by the Peyton family and her own father. Her wedding has not yet happened, her son has not yet been conceived, and even with the knowledge that her husband has acted immorally, she commits herself to marriage

and motherhood. Ending the engagement is never even an option for Kate because she imagines that Denis "would marry some one else" and "their child would be born: born to an inheritance of secret weakness" (39-40). Kate may understand herself as a martyr, but she also wants to save herself; and in her previous financial and dysfunctional state, she cannot survive alone. After pledging allegiance to the system's preservation, Kate seems to warn herself of the alternative: "life lay before her as it was: not brave, garlanded and victorious, but naked, groveling and diseased, dragging its maimed limbs through the mud" (38). This life is a lifeless body, a McTeaguian "crawling black object" put out of use. And Kate is aware that if she does not cooperate, she will become the disposable pariah she so aggressively fears.

Wharton's preoccupation with disposability recalls the anxiety and distractions she felt at the beginning of her career, when *Sanctuary* was first written. In what she describes as "a period of groping," Wharton struggled to write with confidence the more she was rejected by publishers (Lee 4). When *The Greater Inclination*, her book of short stories, was finally released in 1898, she described the text as a salvaged collection: "The poor little stories have been reclaimed, as it were, inch by inch, from almost continuous ill-health & mental lassitude" (qtd. in Lee 5). Her creative labor and the end product were resurrected by publisher Charles Scribner, but only after relentless persuasion and the patient "nursing" of both herself and the stories. Wharton demonstrates in the careful handling of her manuscripts a "stewardship of objects," according to historian Susan Strasser in *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (1999), or a care of objects to prolong use value. Whereas the ethics of disposability rely on a "wasteful" relation between persons and objects - a mode of acquisition that Wharton vocally denounced -, the ethics of "stewardship" toward objects indicated the repair and recycling of possessions for as long as possible (Strasser 10). As the need to habitually reuse decreased with a rise in readymade

goods and conspicuous consumption, original, handcrafted, repaired, or upcycled items lost their value. For Wharton, advertising dime novel reproductions was financially desirable, but intimately handcrafting and organizing her writing in her own way was more of a fundamental duty. Like Kate in *Sanctuary*, Wharton spent her adult life deciding whether or not to comply with a system that disposes of those who do not participate in the dominant culture. Could Wharton critique (and save?) a society which thought very little and very highly of their conspicuous consumption? Did her laborious drafting and tactile rendering of life disappear as a decorative spine on a shelf? Are human histories and literary productions as readily disposable as the publishers who reject them, and if so, is it possible to reanimate yesterday's waste?

The answer to this last question is suggested by the textual history and thematic makeup of "Bunner Sisters." Like *Sanctuary*, the plot is driven by conflicts of possession, but "Bunner Sisters" further complicates human/object relationships when they enter a marketplace setting. Wharton favored her short story so much that she tried once in 1892 and again in 1893 to find a publisher. She was rejected by Scribner, who refused to publish it as a separate novella because it was "just a little small for the best results in separate form" (qtd. in Lee 4); and she was rejected by publisher Edward Burlingame because the effect of its serialization would be "one of 'dreariness'" (Lewis 66 qtd. in Selman 16). As aforementioned, the story would not be published until 1916, in her wartime volume *Xingu*. Of all the manuscripts and stories Wharton had written in those twenty-four years, the author resurrected and published this "poor little story," which is argument enough that Wharton felt the text was significant and still relevant for her audience to consume.

The story of two poor shop-owners, Ann Eliza and Evelina Bunner, who live in the basement of a Stuyvesant Square tenement house, has the makings of an urban Naturalist text

written at the turn of the century. When German immigrant Herbert Ramy enters the shop to sell the sisters a clock, he forever changes their lives. Ramy proposes marriage to Ann Eliza because he is "too lonesome," but Ann Eliza refuses him and encourages him to marry Evelina. Ramy woos Evelina away from the shop into a life of abuse, "drug-taking," poverty, and eventually death, forcing Ann Eliza to recognize "the inutility of self-sacrifice" - an epiphany that Kate Orne in *Sanctuary* never fully realizes (100). But the fact that the sisters own their own shop is impressive and a power move in a male-dominated urban job market. The store's name is their own - "Bunner Sisters" - written on the display window "in blotchy gold on a black ground," and for outsiders who did not frequent the shop, the sign's brevity made it difficult "to guess the precise nature of the business carried on within" (12). The allure of the department store window's vagueness, its indication of women shop owners, and its displayed goods all inspire self-reflection in the shoppers who pass by; there is a uniqueness about their shop window that permeates the dull city streets and allows the store to survive in a retail world that considered second-hand shops like theirs obsolete. In a high-paced, New York setting:

> The sole refuge offered from the contemplation of this depressing waste was the sight of the Bunner Sisters' window…their display of artificial flowers, bands of scalloped flannel, wire hat-frames, and jars of home-made preserves, had the undefinable greyish tinge of objects long preserved in the show-case of a museum. (14)

The dusty shop is described as an oasis against the "depressing waste" of dilapidated tenements and "red-nosed men" (14) but also against literal waste build up in the city streets. Wharton here acknowledges that she is aware of New York's sanitation and trash problem, but also there are still humans hard at work to "keep themselves alive and out of debt" (14) - and unsullied in a sector of the city weathered by rubbish. At the end of a work day, "the fissured pavement formed a mosaic of hand-bills, lids of tomato-cans, old shoes, cigar-stumps, and banana skins, cemented together by a layer of mud, or veiled in a powdering of dust" (14). So by

contrast, Bunner Sisters' merchandise appears new, valuable, and protected within the glass shop window that revealed "a background of orderly counters and white-washed walls" (14). As in *The House of Mirth*, where the counterfeit, mass-produced culture of the *nouveaux riches* is mocked, the sisters' window display is filled with original and handcrafted items that are appreciated more than the main street department store goods. The novella illustrates conflicts between preservation and consumption, between traditional and recycled materials and disposable consumer waste, and the shop itself is the locus of all these tensions. [62] Like Kate, these women and this shop are survivors who will do whatever they can to stay afloat; they refuse to deteriorate like the world around them.

This passage also reveals Wharton's fascination with museums. In her article "'Use Unknown': Edith Wharton, the Museum Space, and the Writer's Work," Karin Roffman overviews Wharton's appreciation for, visitations to, and skepticism of museum culture throughout her lifetime. Roffman points out an underlying question that surfaces each time Wharton wrote about museum spaces: "does one's experience of these objects transcend their economic relation, or are all art objects only an expression of the economy that has brought them there?" (213). Handmade flowers and flannel ribbon are hardly museum fodder, but they do inspire the same line of questioning that Roffman sees Wharton contemplating in her writing: do these objects invite us to experience the window display as an exhibit of common yet beautiful proofs of everyday urban life, or are these objects representative of a dying pre-industrial retail community that survives on the savaging and hard labor of working-class citizens like the sisters

[62] Gary Totten's article "'Objects Long Preserved': Reading and Writing the Shop Window in Edith Wharton's "Bunner Sisters" (2011) provides one of the only other comprehensive studies of this novella that focuses on concepts of objects and preservation. Totten argues that Wharton's shop windows are equated to human lives and relationships (134) and can be read for the social dilemmas they display.

who have jarred preservatives in order to pay the rent? It is difficult to ignore the socioeconomic narrative of each object that Wharton has chosen to utilize.[63]

The most important object in "Bunner Sisters" is undeniably a gifted clock, although the large number of clocks mentioned throughout the story further emphasizes Wharton's attention to life's most precious commodity: time. When we first meet Ann Eliza, she is described as shrouded in "sacramental" triple-turned black silk, wrapping in paper a "round nickel clock of the kind to be bought for a dollar-seventy-five" to give to her sister as a birthday present (16-17). Evelina is shocked by her sister's gesture, which Wharton makes a point to define as selfless and a product of labor. "I paid for it out of a little extra work I did the other night on the machine," Ann Eliza confesses; "ain't you had to run around the corner to the Square every morning, rain or shine, to see what time it was, ever since we had to sell mother's watch last July?" (17). The clock confirms nineteenth century's "commodification of time" (Pratt 41), as Ann Eliza's late night hours are sacrificed in order to exert the labor necessary to buy a leisure object for her sister. But the clock also represents a class of individuals who (a) cannot even know what time it is unless they physically move to a public space (like the market square, a place that owns time, so to speak) and (b) cannot maintain family heirlooms or prized possessions because they lack the utility of new shoes or rent. Time is a luxury the poor cannot afford. The previous sale of the deceased mother's valuable erases its function "to weave, quite literally by means of narrative, a significance of blood relation at the expense of a larger view of history and causality," as Susan Stewart argues (137). If the heirloom is "a statement of membership," then the erasure of such -

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[63] I also find it interesting that in all the studies written about Wharton's fascination with museums, not one scholar, including Roffman, has thought to apply Wharton's own questions about museums to her own body of work. I believe that Wharton worries about the same type of attention paid to her literature: do we enjoy her writing as it delivers us reality and moral, or is her literature only a historical and biographical marker that represents a female author who struggled to publish in a chauvinistic marketplace?

or rather its violation because it now exists outside the family - indicates that the two women are loners without a tangible family narrative (Stewart 137). In *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), Thorstein Veblen writes that the "possession of goods, whether acquired aggressively by one's own exertion or passively by transmission through inheritance from others, becomes a conventional basis of reputation" (37). So not only have the sisters disposed of their history in order to survive, they have forfeited any reputation or status provided by the original watch's possession.

Ann Eliza's replacement of this heirloom, however, demonstrates that she values the maintenance of family tradition, which once again recalls Wharton's own desire for her heritage to survive. Wharton displays the sisters' respect for handmade goods, ceremony, and gift giving because these are values of her "old New York" ideal.[64] Even in a secondhand shop in a depleted urban environment, these values/valuables have the power to resurrect a more stable and genteel time, and the clock is representative of a desire to time travel backward. Turning back the clock and its material use value would allow Wharton's characters a second chance, more time to make something of themselves (or not settle for someone like Ramy). Ann Eliza is figuratively gifting her sister new and accessible time, but she is literally handing over an object that will seal her fate for two reasons: (1) the clock introduces the sisters to Herman Ramy, who will abuse Evelina and cause her death, and (2) the clock ticks on and every minute that passes, the sisters age and become less valuable and less desirable. Wharton confirms the importance of the clock

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[64] Sara Elisabeth Quay's article "Edith Wharton's Narrative of Inheritance" (1997) spends much more time discussing objects as inheritances in Wharton's major works like *The Custom of the Country* and *The Age of Innocence* in the context of Wharton's own value of heritage and inheritance as detailed in *A Backward Glance*. Quay does not touch on any of Wharton's earlier or shorter works, but I can apply her conclusion here that Wharton's works uphold a version of history that "builds upon, rather than erases, the past. The narrative with which an inherited object is attributed, in other words, can be altered without precluding the original story; the re-telling does not have to be static" (42). In "Bunner Sisters," a new inheritance is gifted with a narrative that includes the original object's history.

when the narrator says, "The purchase of Evelina's clock had been a more important event in the life of Ann Eliza Bunner than her younger sister could divine" (21). The object is said to control what will happen to the sisters next, thereby interacting as an active agent. The clock becomes a harbinger of death, and as in *McTeague* and *Sister Carrie*, the object is capable of changing the course of action while also putting its owner out of use.

A clock is always ticking in the background of the text, suggesting both the object's literal command of action and emblematic threat of time's unrelenting passage. Historians like Lloyd Pratt have argued that the ticking of a clock "has no existential relationship to time itself," but rather that it dictates labor extraction and signifies a temporal passage of being (41). For the Bunner sisters, the ticking does not always accompany the appearance of a clock, which supports the idea that they are not worried the time so much as they are concerned about its loss or futility. At the height of Ann Eliza's anxiety about her sister's whereabouts and her suspicion that Ramy is a fraud, she visits the shop where he claimed to supervise the clock department. First, she is able to identify the shop from her memory of the green bronze clock in the window representing a Newfoundland dog with a paw on an open book" (87). This exact description is repeated twice and appears to haunt Ann Eliza, as it does Wharton. The icon is hyper-masculine: a giant English working dog dominating a leisure object that is self-referential. Wharton imagines an intimidating power hovering over her work and applies that feeling of oppression to Ann Eliza, who has come to pull her sister out from beneath the paw's control. The clocks become even more threatening once Ann Eliza enters the department store and she is confronted and overwhelmed by a "great hall full of the buzzing and booming of thousands of clocks" (85). In a surreal scene, Ann Eliza is an object surrounded by living clocks: "clocks of all sizes and voices, from the bell-throated giant of the hallway to the chirping dressing-table toy; tall clocks of

mahogany and brass with cathedral chimes; clocks of bronze, glass, porcelain, of every possible size, voice, and configuration" (85). The clocks are overpowering in their aural hostility and their temporal and spatial confrontation; Ann Eliza literally cannot escape time. As McTeague's canary chirps as a reminder that it will outlive its owner, so do the clocks tick on through Evelina's death and Ann Eliza's failed attempts to create a better life for her family.

At the end of "Bunner Sisters," Ann Eliza is forced to shut down her namesake shop and attempts to find work at a department store on Broadway (a cleaner, more refined part of the city). She is turned away because the saleslady explains, "We want a bright girl: stylish, and pleasant manners. You know what I mean. Not over thirty, anyhow; and nice-looking" (112). The saleslady reads Ann Eliza's underclass and aging face as "unstylish" and lacking manners (once again in line with behavioral assumptions when unclean bodies). The saleslady declares that Ann Eliza is un-hirable and thus useless. Passing time has erased her utility, and she cannot be upcycled or refurbished the way objects are throughout the story. While Wharton tries to save the women who value old traditions and create original things with their hands, she also recognizes that time will dispose of all human bodies - including her own.

In a way, Wharton is reminding herself of her own mortality. This text was written at a young age when Wharton felt an undeniable pressure to write what she knew (women in New York) and to do so in an inhospitable, male-driven marketplace. The fact that she resurrected this text and fought for its publication twenty years later confirms that Wharton herself refused disposability; she desired to be stylish but also ageless. "Bunner Sisters" haunted Wharton, as we can see not only in its resurrection but through its borrowed thematic patterns in *The House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920). And the concept of disposability lingered with Wharton throughout her life, as she explained in her autobiography:

> one *can* remain alive long past the usual date of disintegration if one is unafraid of change, insatiable in intellectual curiosity, interested in big things, and happy in small ways. In the course of sorting and setting down of my memories I have learned that these advantages are usually independent of one's merits, and that I probably owe my happy old age to the ancestor who accidentally endowed me with these qualities. (*A Backward Glance* 10)

Wharton ruminates over what has "kept her alive," so to speak, and she concludes that it is her power to "settle down memories" and to inherit the "right stuff" from her ancestors. The inheritances mentioned in both "Bunner Sisters" and *Sanctuary* struggle to survive and outlast their owners because Wharton believes in the power of objects. And while she too may have felt threatened by an object's ability to change the course of human narrative, Wharton recognized that her legacy could outlive her body so long as it found sanctuary within a book.

Forgotten Things

The urban underclasses do not fare well in the battle between humans and things, animate and (seemingly) inanimate objects. A drastic shift in literary style as well as the uber-industrial environment that demanded capitalist output and trashed inutility triggered an understanding of urban objects as overwhelming and lethal. The hand-me-downs, the trash, the legal documents, and the commodities all take on a menacing agency when represented in Naturalist fiction examined here, but we are able to see how this apprehension toward material things has evolved both in the posthuman materialist turn and in novels like Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996). In fact, these two postmodern novels about the delinquencies of consumerism and incorporation include representations of hazardous waste dumps or toxic airborne clouds that cannot be avoided, and therefore act trans-corporeally on the bodies of citizens who live in and around the contaminated environments. Like Wharton, Dreiser, and Norris, twentieth century authors also find that the material of our lives is always

agentic and transmutable, with or without human consent. This chapter's attention to representations of the underclass as less powerful than their possessions contributes to my dissertation's intent to acknowledge the underclass as having a unique relationship with concepts of ownership, but also to analyze the literary depictions of things as they alter the drama of human life.

Wharton's representation of underclass bodies at the mercy or urban environments and their industrial, consumerist materials segues into Chapter 4's attention to the American immigrant experience. As millions of foreign bodies arrived on our nation's Eastern shores without the language or cultural awareness to navigate such busy and cluttered spaces, a larger, more fearful reaction to contamination and disorder in America reverberated throughout the nation's political and literary rhetoric during the twentieth century. The Naturalist fiction analyzed throughout this chapter interacted with its fair share of immigrant characters that are both seen and unseen, stereotyped but adaptable. Herman Ramy, the German deadbeat, was a common character at the turn of the century because he represented the immigrant type that upper-class citizens like Wharton believed were polluting the city streets with their bodies, disregarding American democratic values, and openly living criminal lives. Dreiser, Norris, and Wharton were all hard at work to establish a singular nationalism through their literature, so characters like Ramy, Zerkow, and the Irish and German types that heckle Hurstwood during his decline worked as the antitheses to bootstrap American narratives. In Chapter 4, I turn my focus to these looming types and the immigrant authors who experienced a different, even more conflicted relationship with objects upon entrance into the United States. Immigrant authors also contemplate the shifting ideologies about subjectivity and objectivity as things exerted an anxiety upon humans in a foreign place, but they do so with greater concerns about *belonging*: what did

it mean to belong to America? What must be sacrificed to belong? How do physical belongings impede or confirm national belonging?

My purpose in studying representations of material environments and belongings in immigrant literature is to determine that vibrant, foreign matter stimulates resistance to the dominant hegemonic forces that sought to perpetuate a singular and oppressive national consciousness that has so far dominated this project's considered texts. The field should aim to widen the scope of this materialist focus on underclass literature in order to demonstrate that while things mean different things to different people, *all* people are at the mercy of objects in motion.

CHAPTER 4

FOREIGN THINGS: REMAKING AMERICA IN IMMIGRANT LITERATURE

In January 1919, Ex-President Theodore Roosevelt wrote a letter to the President of the American Defense Society in which he made clear his firm advocacy for an immigration system that fully Americanized every immigrant body that came into the country and confirmed their primary national allegiance to the United States of America:

> In the first place, we should insist that if the immigrant who comes here in good faith becomes an American and assimilates himself to us, he shall be treated on an exact equality with everyone else, for it is an outrage to discriminate against any such man because of creed, or birthplace, or origin. But this is predicated upon the person's becoming in every facet an American, and nothing but an American…We have room for but one flag, the American flag, and this excludes the red flag, which symbolizes all wars against liberty and civilization just as much as it excludes any foreign flag of a nation to which we are hostile. We have room for but one language here, and that is the English language, for we intend to see that the crucible turns out people out as Americans, of American nationality, and not as dwellers in a polygot boarding house. (Roosevelt 474)

Aside from his threatening tonality, Roosevelt's idea that America did not have "room" for noncompliant immigrants and their things hinges on a spatial anxiety about a crowded and cluttered America that would threaten the very materiality of the country. He supposes that immigrants never arrive empty handed, so to speak; that they carry with them a language and a flag, even if synecdochic metaphor, that would then threaten not only the smooth process of assimilation but the very social fabric of America. It is warned that if not contained, emptied, or disarmed, immigrants will break the well-oiled machine of homogenization and instead create a rented space here associated with the cacophonic slum life well-feared by the American imagination. Roosevelt is threatened by immigrant physicality. He "insists" that multicultural citizenship is not an option; the nation must hold total sovereignty over immigrant bodies, their dwellings, their expression, and their possessions in order to accept and acknowledge them as citizens. Roosevelt and other rising nativists sought the "right *kind*" of immigrant to be "properly

distributed in this country," and therefore "make good American citizens" (*State* 164).[65] The wrong kind of immigrant was one who carried with him or her any sign of difference or danger, and this apprehension about what an immigrant *might* possess and unload within the American interior - personal objects, red flags, disease, anchor babies, "drugs and crime," - has reverberated and reaffirmed anxieties about the Other well into the twenty-first century.[66]

Much of what we understand about nationalist politics and rhetoric in America begins with Roosevelt's mission to "express…lead and guide the soul of the nation" with an "art and literature…distinctly our own" (qtd. in Taubenfeld 3). His engagement with arguments about inclusion and exclusion, his reinforcement of a shared understanding of national identity as predicated upon a position of authority and institutional power, and his naturalization of race hierarchies that encouraged mass prejudice and xenophobia can be traced to the very formation of modern democratic norms of American identity. He publicized in his essay "True Americanism," a sense of urgency "to check and regulate our immigration…to keep out races which do not assimilate readily with our own, and unworthy individuals of all races - not only criminals, idiots, and paupers, but anarchists" (qtd. in Taubenfeld 5). At the same time that he called upon other writers to craft an Americanness of virility, loyalty, exceptionalism, and race, he published his own historical narratives of domination and masculine autobiographies. This national literary project became a vehicle for teaching and understanding American culture, transmitting information about the economic, social, political and cultural status quo, and

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[65] Roosevelt discusses the "right" and "wrong" kinds of immigrants in 1903 and 1904 State of the Union Addresses, further illustrating a publically anxious taxonomy of foreign person's seeking refuge in America.

[66] President Donald Trump's presidential announcement speech notably included the attack on Mexico and its immigrants, conveying the population as a dangerous mob of drug dealers and rapists. He argued, "They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime," again asserting that immigrants are imagined as entering the American boarder with baggage and the intent to "infest" or unpack an unwanted foreignness. See Time's reproduction of the speech at <http://time.com/3923128/donald-trump-announcement-speech/>.

arguing for loyalty and assimilation. A standardized and syndicated national literature advanced by the white male authors discussed in previous chapters - Harte, Garland, Norris, and Dreiser - was already hard at work to establish an authorial chauvinism and an aggressive sociopolitical outspokenness in the literary marketplace. But Roosevelt also looked to immigrants of the “right ideals” to actively promote assimilation and domestic narratives that would gloss over biological nativity and convince the public that new Americans could uphold old American principles (Taubenfeld 9). “By pressing the foreign immigrant into service on behalf of the nation and its iconic economy, community, family, and liberal individual citizen,” argues Bonnie Honig, “the myth positions the immigrant as either a *giver* to or a *taker* from the nation” (99, original emphasis). Roosevelt turned to Jacob Riis, Elizabeth Stern, and Finley Peter Dunne, among other European descendants, to help mold the myth of content and conforming immigrants who gave back to the nation that took them in as productive members of society - and *not* as “takers” of resources or property.

Using the vocabularies of Americanization rather than transnationalism, immigrant writers told their readers to eagerly carry the American flag and learn to speak one English language because of the opportunity (and safety) it allowed newcomers. To become American meant to secure lucrative employment and relocate to more “respectable” and less crowded urban dwellings and to consume American goods and fashions.[67] Immigrants were encouraged to adopt American habits of consumption in the land of abundance - domestic furnishings, appliances, fashionable clothing, specialty foods, entertainment, literature. Their exodus, after

[67] See Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Special Sorrows: The Diasporic Imagination of Irish, Polish, and Jewish Immigrants in the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). Jacobson explores the political, ethnic, and nationalist attachments to the Old World for immigrants entering the United States at the turn of the century that negate conclusions that immigration was swift and eager. Jacobson also argues, “Immigrant nationalisms did not simply go to the grave with the members of the migrating generation; on the contrary, a cultural thread links the diasporic political vision of the immigrants with the ethnic gestures of their grandchildren” (5). Inherited possessions and narratives deploy the transnational context of these American diaspora communities.

all, was chiefly motivated by "a laudable ambition for better things," as stated by a 1911 U.S. Immigration Commission report (qtd. in Glickman 194). Most immigrants demonstrated and wrote about their satisfaction with assimilation, often sacrificing everything - their heritages, religious rituals, and familial connections abroad - in pursuit of the American Dream. Improving one's standard of living meant improving America, as much as it meant homogenizing the population and eradicating cultural difference. The pressure to conform was reiterated by "fables of abundance," which sold bodily and national refinement via cheap and attainable media outlets: advertising, magazines, newspapers, and literature (Lears 166). Participating in a mass consumer society not only bolstered the inclusion and morale of the arriving class, but their new purchasing power allowed for the whitewashing of their new national identities.[68] Outward signs of nostalgia or ethnic difference might be considered anarchism or insurgence, punishable by further social stratification and in most cases violence, and so those things were commonly replaced by fashionable, Americanized things. "For conformity is the appearance of security," Horace Kallen argues; "it feeds the delusion of safety, even when the real conditions of safety do not obtain" (146). Roosevelt fed to the world the mythic unity of Americans and a land of equal opportunity, and this transmission of a nationalist rhetoric held safe the myth that forfeiting one's heritage was more valuable than clinging to the past.

And yet there exists in immigrant literature vital counter discourses that resist assimilative forces through the memory and physical possession of personal, native objects brought to America during migration. Priscilla Wald argues that "contradictions, rhetorical disjunctions, and even expressions of discomfort…mark the impossibility of a fully successful

[68] This process of adaptation was also referred to as "greening oneself out" ("oysgrinen zixh"), which meant to become more American via more sophisticated and frequent consumption. See Andrew R. Heinze, "From Scarcity to Abundance: The Immigrant as Consumer" in *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity* (New York: Columbia UP, 1990), 33-48.

conversion" (243) in immigrant literature, and those narrative disjunctions, I argue, tend to manifest most clearly in the form of belongings. When immigrant authors imagine Old World objects in a new, increasingly modernized world, they find that coexistence with such religious, cultural, and personal objects prevents subjects from fully realizing America or fully forgetting their motherland (243). Contemplations about the alien things they carried and still possess are common, as I show, but in many cases immigrant authors subversively describe their connection to "home" through a language of materiality, by emphasizing an invisible bond through physical metaphor that evokes a withstanding mental possession and offers rebuttal against the vicissitudes of assimilation. For example, Elizabeth Stern's *Mother and I* (1918) is an autobiographical novel endorsed by Roosevelt as Americanization propaganda for its "profoundly touching story" about the "starved and eager souls who have elsewhere been denied what here we hold to be, as a matter of course, rights free to all," but upon study, her narration of an assimilating woman as a Polish-Jewish writer complicates the concept of total mental assimilation (9). Stern begins, "The mere writing of this account is a chain, slight but never to be broken; one that will always bind me to that from which I had thought myself forever cut off" (11). An imaginary line between Russia and America is only visible through the evocation of an unbreakable chain. By comparing her physical "writing" to a material object that is "always" present in and tied to both spaces - despite its slightness or the previous supposition that it had been severed -, Stern is offering a subversive declaration about the inability to let go of native things. Without the tangible remnants of her foreign past, there is no American narrative, and I argue that this is a conjunction seen frequently and most clearly in descriptions of and interactions with personal possessions.

This chapter examines the documentation of both real and imagined objects brought into

the United States by immigrant characters; those possessions transported from foreign homelands that secure birthplace memories amid poor, marginalized conditions. Sustained ownership grants immigrants the power to preserve their heritage and brave a newly impoverished status abroad by seeking refuge within their belongings that do not *belong* in America. Writers like Jacob Riis, Anzia Yezierska, and Hilda Satt Polacheck all probe their insecurities and skepticisms about identity through their characters inheriting or keeping personal possessions when living within the United States. Their status as immigrant writers affords us keen insight into the shifting ideologies about subjectivity and objectivity beginning in the late-nineteenth century as things exerted an apprehension about belonging in a foreign place. We are able to witness the effect that material traces bear in imagining and manufacturing the self, particularly in works formerly recognized as inattentive to the power of the imagination to recognize *all* forms of agency (Appadurai 31).[69] By re-imagining and re-collecting the social sphere, immigrant literature speaks to the thorny dynamics of cultural homogenization that open dialogue for the next century of modernity and globalization (Appadurai 32). My purpose in studying representations of objects and ownership in immigrant literature is to demonstrate that vibrant, foreign matter is compelling enough to stimulate a mental resistance to the dominant hegemonic forces that sought to perpetuate a singular and oppressive national consciousness.

The four texts analyzed here - Riis's *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (1890) and *The Making of an American* (1901), Yezierska's *Bread Givers* (1925), and Polacheck's *I Came a Stranger: The Story of a Hull-House Girl* (1989) - are

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[69] A few scholars have already argued that the Modernist turn in Immigrant writing begins with Jacob Riis and Anzia Yezierska. Specifically, Nihad M. Farooq argues that by embracing the chaos, fragmentation, and performance of immigrant life in America, Yezierska and Riis combine literary and scientific forms of expression to centralize the duality and displacement of immigrants and thereby act as "cultural commentators" enacting the "subversive power of manipulating and speaking from within the language of the majority" (80). Farooq's comparison of speech patterns and audience assists my later discussion of Riis's and Yezierska's texts circulating in an American literary marketplace.

typically studied as propaganda for Americanization, which is why I have chosen to analyze their recurring rhetorical resistance to marginalization and assimilation.[70] These authors are themselves Eastern European immigrants who all arrived in the United States and navigated the crowded urban spaces; they all have endured poverty and prejudice. Their firsthand participation prevents the process of looking at or fantasizing about the poor immigrant and demands a more complex insight to the agency and authenticity of lower class citizens. These authors also all uniquely belong to what Gustavo Perez Firmat describes as the intermediate immigrant generation: those who spent their adolescent years in foreign homelands but grew into adulthood in the U.S.[71] They face the crisis of coming-of-age in a foreign territory while also undergoing the process of assimilation, and thus this group is doubly marginalized, belonging wholly to neither their native nor adopted spaces (Firmat 7). These authors also prove that they are acutely aware of the discrepancies between foreign things and domestic things that reveal a significant conflict in the way they perceive and represent identity; that is, things communicate particular allegiances to ethnicity and nationality that are resistant to the rhetorical power set in motion by President Roosevelt. These particular texts work as important testaments to the subversive loyalty authors felt toward their native homelands whilst assimilating to "white" middle-class America. By submitting texts that *looked* like Nationalism, argues Matthew Frye Jacobson, these authors "appropriated, contested, and reappropriated" popular nationalist imagery in order to "counter New World patterns of ethnic hierarchy, to salve immigrants' sense of having

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[70] Tom Buk-Swienty connects the political rhetoric of Roosevelt and Riis in *The Other Half: The Life of Jacob Riis and the World of Immigrant America* (2008). Aviva Taubenfeld's *Rough Writing: Ethnic Authorship in Theodore Roosevelt's America* (2008) is written upon the very premise that at the turn of the century, most literary definitions of Americanness were created, influenced, and established via Rooseveltian discourse, and therefore carried forth his nationalism.

[71] Although Perez-Firmat's study addresses a much later and specific discussion on the Cuban-American experience, his descriptions of "biculturation" are applicable in explaining the relationship that earlier Eastern European immigrants felt toward their new sociocultural environment.

abandoned their compatriots to an unkind fate in the Old World, and to galvanize group members for a number of political social aims" (7). The fervor of Nationalism produced a language that could also represent the ways that immigrants felt about their homelands while enthusing fellow immigrant readers who saw within these texts a sense of communal belonging that would appease feelings of loneliness or estrangement. Revisiting this resistant dialogue serves the purpose of restoring a rich history that has been subdued under nationalist and racist biases, not to mention the masculine-driven canonization of American literature. Their authorial positions are sites of empowerment and their texts are loci of resistance that directly confront the importance of memory as ingrained in and revisioned through the material world, and thus offer counter-narratives of history.

Subversion is most readily visible in the representation of foreign and domestic things that compete, confuse, and persuade allegiances between immigrants and America. Books, flags, religious ornaments, and home furnishings are the Latourian actants - things that "modif[y] a state of affairs by making a difference" - that serve as a kind of *punctum* in portraits of the migrant poor (Felski 582).[72] These things make us pause and picture the juxtaposition of an alien thing in a domestic space; they remind us of a life lived outside of the Americanization frame, beyond the pages of the paperback. Not surprisingly, these authors designate American things as machine-made, impersonal, mass commodities; foreign things, enter their texts as colorful, handmade, one-of-a-kind fineries that are much more haunting. American things and foreign things offer competing narratives that confuse cultural and personal identity. Whereas economic objects (commodities, money, dry goods, machines) exist in the filth and debris of poverty, cultural objects (handmade domestics, religious relics, patriotic symbols, colors) are brilliantly

[72] See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. (Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 27.

displayed and unavoidable in the homes and minds of immigrant characters and writers. These collections appear to compete for attention. We cannot know these characters without their things, nor should we attempt to do so when authors have consciously and carefully integrated their presence into their respective narratives. Because immigrant things allow us to time travel and to access a system of value where foreign objects and inheritances never depreciate or disappear amid the shiny, new American marketplaces, these things are considered to be actants. "An actant never really acts alone," Jane Bennett argues; "[An actant's] efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces" (21). The immigrant narrators and characters themselves are only part of the narrative's "assemblages," or "living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within" (Bennett 23-4). In order to reconsider the ways in which immigrant authors come to terms with the concepts of "foreignness" and "naturalization," I believe that objects must be brought to the foreground and read as coercive forces that remind authors and characters alike of their ancestral past.

Although I only focus on Riis, Yezierska, and Polacheck, these authors offer insight into a larger dialogue about the displacement and relocation of both people and material objects. Studies on material culture and consumption in migratory or diasporic contexts are aplenty, but in terms of a theoretical model for how to appreciate the material homesteads of American immigrant narratives of the nineteenth century, no such thing exists. For example, in his in depth studies on Willa Cather's "migratory consciousness," Joseph R. Urgo argued that a writer's imagination is constantly reshaped by its physic mobility, and that at the core of American migration narratives there is a constant psychic flux between the urge to move and the need to settle (57). This dichotomy between "homelessness and rootedness" is thoroughly applied to

Cather's body of work, but only vaguely extended to narratives that share the same restlessness as Cather's migrants (Urgo 48). I believe that Riis, Yezierska, Polacheck all grapple with this same sense of disjointedness and fail to fully cope because of the cultural and familial fragments replanted within the new American home. From an anthropological stand point, we enter a conversation about "migratory grief," or the experience of intense homesickness for people, places, and things.[73] Olena Nesteruk argues that mourning can be impeded by nostalgia and idealization of objects left behind or brought abroad, and therefore the construction of a new life in a new place is still networked and built upon transnational and transcultural belongings (1014). Through the process of recovery and reorganization, a new, amalgamated identity is formed, but always unhinged. Because Riis, Yezierska, and Polacheck are all immigrants themselves, and have confessed to experiencing similar migratory grief in their works, this chapter must consult multidisciplinary studies in order to better understand why things have been carried across the Atlantic and how they affect immigrant narratives that quietly rebuff total assimilation. By tracing a fuller network of actors - both human and nonhuman - I want to better understand the power that things impart upon the psyche of the owner as well as the writer. We then will be able to formulate a more vibrant image of this particular time period and the particular individuals who arrived in America seeking freedom and asylum. If we can read these discarded, poor, and foreign things as possessing dynamic and vibrant agency, we will change the ethics of objectifying and ostracizing discarded, poor, and foreign humans, then and now.

[73] There is no shortage of anthropological or sociological studies on migratory grief. Studies that particularly tackle grief through storytelling or narrative experience include: Roni Berger, *Immigrant Women Tell Their Stories* (New York: Routledge, 2013); H.M. Henry, W. B. Stiles, and M. W. Biran, "Loss and Mourning in Immigration: Using the assimilation model to assess continuing bonds with native culture" in *Counselling Psychology Quarterly* 18.2 (2005), 109–119; and Olena Nesteruk, "Immigrants Coping with Transnational Deaths and Bereavement: The Influence of Migratory Loss and Anticipatory Grief" in *Family Process* 57.4 (2018), 1012-1028.

“The Mirror with a Memory”: Jacob Riis’s Collection of the Poor

Jacob Riis’s literary reputation as a xenophobic agitator has always obscured the competing reality of his life as an immigrant from Ribe, Denmark, who arrived penniless and alone in New York in June 1870 (Buk-Swienty 54). Although he migrated and crammed into the Lower East Side with 334,000 fellow foreign tenants looking for employment and food, Riis’s empathy and discernment for those who walked in his footsteps is never readily available in his body of work (Hughes 321). The social reformer’s triumphalist posture is much more noticeable, which is why many scholars label his record of the immigrant experience as faulty, unethical, anti-Sematic, and “dangerous as well as seductive” (Ryan 192). Susan M. Ryan argues that Riis’s “rhetorical violence” (191) perpetrated a long history of imaging stereotypical Others who were victimized by his invasion, surveillance, and publishing of their ethnic and poor lifestyles. Her study recognizes Riis’s own superiority, assertion of “white mastery,” and public overcompensation for his true foreign origins. There is no doubt that Riis’s objectification of the indigent is insensitive, that his work reflects sensationalism, and that his Social Gospel became a foothold for middle-class audiences to separate themselves from, and thus fearing, the other half.[74] However, Riis’s legacy endures in the American literary canon in part because of his groundbreaking modernization of documentation, photography, and voyeurism. In such works *as How the Other Half Lives* (1890), *The Children of the Poor* (1892), and *The Battle with the Slum* (1902), Riis united prose with pictures to intensify the pathetic appeal of his subjects/objects, so much that Roosevelt paraded Riis as his personal friend and progressive liaison, calling him “the

[74] For literary and cultural critics who have condemned Riis’s social and ethnic representations and the prejudicial legacy he left behind, see Reginald Twigg’s “The Performative Dimension of Surveillance: Jacob Riis’ How the Other Half Lives” in *Performance Quarterly* 12 (1992), 305-328; Maren Stange’s *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890-1950* (Cambridge UP, 1989); and Gregory S. Jackson’s “Cultivating Spiritual Sight: Jacob Riis’s Virtual-Tour Narrative and the Visual Modernization of Protestant Homiletics” in *Representations* 83 (2003), 126-166.

most useful citizen of New York" for acting as "the most formidable opponent" to the "countless evils which lurk in the dark corners of our civic institutions, which stalk abroad in the slums" (qtd. in Alland 33).

But the truth is that Riis came a stranger seeking work as a carpenter, and when he failed to find work and fell into poverty, he desperately turned to the editor of the *New York Tribune* for a job as a police reporter - and was given a chance to work the long and dangerous hours despite his lack of experience (Buk-Swienty 133). As a reporter and photographer - a self-proclaimed "war correspondent" (*Other Half* 71) in the trenches of the slums -, Riis aligned himself with institutional authority and established his career as a reformer hovering above and apart from those needing reformation. At the same time that he created a narrative about himself that heralded self-sufficiency, honest perseverance, and proud nationalism, and he publicly condemned any poor man or woman who acted illegally or undomesticated. Riis did everything in his power to not be seen as Other, to instead publish collections of others whom he could master with autocratic impulses and grit. And Riis did this for rest of his life: collect the poor and display his objects to the world. His fascination with stories and photography, with reporting and inventing for the public a class of poor and foreign people who lived in a stale and sunken place, never failed him; he became part of America: white, rich, and merchandized.

Riis rose to power because of his impulse to collect things. William Davies King defines collecting as "a constant reassertion of the power to own, an exercise in controlling otherness, and finally a kind of monument building to insure survival after death" (38). Putting Riis's actions into a language of collecting helps us to reconsider his conflicted relationship with objects and ownership, and therefore his own definition of self, but it also helps us consider the sort of metaphorical death involved in leaving one homeland and one culture behind and starting

a life anew in another. Riis first survives in America with the things (money, clothing) that he carries with him, but he continues to build this new identity with both his ability to collect other things (photographs, narrative) but his keepsakes that remind him of his purpose for finding success (tokens from his wife, letters). On one hand, in *How the Other Half Lives*, Riis acts as a powerful collector with an inability to recognize himself in his objects despite the fact that (1) his objects are mirroring immigrant experiences, and (2) the collector's self is always "extended and enlarged by his or her collection" (Belk 90). Grappling with his proximity and the publication of an object that defines his economic and political success, Riis's text is riddled with questions about whether or not these objects make him more of an insider or an outsider. In his autobiography, *The Making of American*, however, Riis *is* an insider, unable to mute the memories of his life as an immigrant, and unable to ignore the objects that have traveled with him. Embedded in these objects are representations of himself as a nostalgic man whose loyalty to his family and his sweetheart are unwavering and human. Those objects are described as the final remnants of his Danish ancestry, and yet they are not destroyed or hidden; they are recollected and immortalized in yet another commodified book. Reading these texts in contrast illustrate a subtle yet significant resistance to the ideal assimilation process that cannot be fully committed so long as sites of (re)collection physically and psychically exist for the author and his characters. It is this staunch denial of his ethnicity paired with his narrative memories of ethnic objects that makes Riis's texts formidable sites to consider the psychological tension of assimilation, even for the most dutiful, Americanized individuals.

With the advent of the detective camera and the refinement of halftone photoengraving in the 1880s, Riis's collection could be mass-produced and widely circulated, making it possible to print photographic images not only within *How the Other Half Lives*, but also in newspapers and

illustrated book advertisements where the American public could easily access such new and realistic visual culture. Keith Gandal labels Riis's work as part spectacle; a sort of "ethnic and social sight-seeing" sold during a time when middle-class America became engrossed with looking at others and wanting to be looked at in return (62).[75] Gandal further points out that the text is part travelogue; details about fashions, objects, customs, and habits help the reader "appreciate the oddities of the photographic object" (70). The book directly responds to the American cultural zeitgeist of exhibitionism, and Riis's collection is another traveling freak show, a cabinet of curiosities with a paid admission and an escape from middle-class life. Riis sold 1,656 copies of *How the Other Half Lives* within the first six months, and as a result, Scribner's released an additional 2,000 copies of a smaller, more affordable edition in 1891 (Leviatin 6). Several more editions were pressed over the next four years, and its continued accessibility spoke volumes about the commonplace desire to indulge in a private pictorial tourism through the urban slums.

How the Other Half Lives is methodically organized and packaged for an American public fascinated with Otherness, but also for the purpose of empowering himself as proprietor of the photographic lens, as engineer of the immigrant experience in America. By taking on the role of collector, Riis widens the social and ethnic gap between his subjects and himself. He never recalls his own Danish ancestry or his arrival memories, but he does place himself within the narrative as actively watching, investigating, and questioning the inhabitants of the tenements. While he is in fact a foreign participant, he rhetorically performs as a native observer

[75] For studies on exhibit culture and public interest during the Progressive Era, see Jeffrey Trask, *Things American: Art Museums and Civic Culture in the Progressive Era* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); Susan Tenneriello, *Spectacle Culture and American Identity, 1815-1940* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); and Philip McGowan, *American Carnival: Seeing and Reading American Culture* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001).

of “this queer conglomerate mass of heterogeneous elements” (74). Tenement dwellers are described as morally vacant, brutish, “shiftless, destructive, and stupid” (207) in comparison to his own “organized, systematic charity” (80). His stereotyping and racisms - “the Jew,” “John Chinaman” (67), “Irish hod-carrier” (75) “German rag-picker” (75) “English coal-heaver” (176) - further distance Riis from being racially distinguished as anything other than a white, middle-class American.

His superiority is reinforced by his rhetorical intention: charity, pity, and reform. In his autobiography, Riis explains his observation of the immigrant poor via the metaphorical language of materialism, where he is the heroic reformer of broken things: “I love to mend and make crooked things straight…My office years ago became notorious as a sort of misfit shop where things were matched that had got mislaid in the hurry and bustle of life, in which some of us always get shoved aside. Some one has got to do that, and I like the job” (*American* 253-54). He understands his job as mending “crooked things” by organizing them, “matching” them to categories or institutions that might offer assistance (although this is rarely actualized in the text), and thus we begin to witness the lexicon of a true collector. Riis is aware of his power to control things, but he verbalizes his privilege as a sacrifice - “someone has got to do it,” and he happily obliges.

But misfits and cooked things run rampant in *How the Other Half Lives,* no matter how organized or controlled the text may appear. Riis frequently describes “a hustling of things from the street into dark cellars” (141). “Lives, like clothes, are worn through and out before put aside,” he remarks upon observing the “unthinking mass” of immigrants (158, 104). In an environment defined by lack, Riis’s tenements are conveyed through a vocabulary of excess - crowds, clusters, bulks of buildings, “teeming masses” (60), “a nest of dangerous agitators” (83),

"scores of back alleys" (98), "army of tramps" (99), and "incessant chatter" (99). He shuffles through his scenes as if showing off an art gallery, pointing at a "companion picture from across the hall" (149); "The picture is not overdrawn" (151); "give the picture its proper shading" (161). It is no coincidence then that the *Chicago Times* regarded Riis's book as "a gallery of pictures, each one reeling with horror of its own kind" (qtd. in Leviatin 6).

Accompanying the narration of this dark mass are photographs and pictorial sketches of the Other Half, further eliciting "something predatory" about Riis's collection (Sontag 14). "To photograph people is to violate them," Susan Sontag famously argues, "it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed" (14). For Riis, photographic realism provided great reliability of visual representation with a heightened sense of persuasiveness; a valuable solution to what critic Cindy Weinstein sees as the ideological, affective, and ontological inadequacies of statistics and scientific data (196). In forty-two illustrations, Riis displays what his words cannot adequately describe: lodgers, tramps, Jews, cigar makers, street Arabs, newsboys, children, coffee drinkers, homes, bed bunks, and tenement blueprints, for example. Some photos are candid and some posed; some are blurred as to capture the chaos of the tenements and some are detailed with clean lines that elicit the environmental details of subterranean landscape. All images are carefully arranged and rationalized by a collector who fashions himself as a creative overseer of an army of things that articulate and serialize experience within the closed system of the documentary. All images incite both active and passive viewing; they demand moral and social justice for the poor but encourage voyeurism and fear of the fantastical tenements.

Riis is also afraid that he will slip into this underworld and disappear as a member of the poor immigrant class. And his anxiety is in line with the rationale of collecting. Collecting, according to Werner Muensterberger, begins with an individual's need to control and perceive

some degree of order and stability in what feels disordered or chaotic (4). Thomas Tanselle adds that the process of collecting can be analyzed into several components: “creation of order, fascination with chance, curiosity about the past, and the desire for understanding” (9). The latter part of this process - acknowledging the past and understanding the objects - is the part that Riis is rhetorically suppressing. We are not supposed to understand his objects so much as we feel titillated by them. And to acknowledge their past means to learn about their cultures and empathize with their relocation, which of course had no place in a Rooseveltian text. The reality, though, is that Riis has quietly seen the past and understood the objects as reflections of himself once upon a time. By relying on the grossness and the fantastic of the poor immigrants, Riis hides within his own collection, fearful someone might remember his past state of poverty.

Riis reinforces the power of collecting late in *How the Other Half Lives*, by watching his objects collect themselves. When observing a street beggar, Riis writes, “The ways [the beggar] finds of ‘collecting’ under the cloak of undeserved poverty are numberless, and often reflect credit on the man’s ingenuity, if not on the man himself” (232). Most character introductions detail the things they carried in mass: the Jews pedal wagons of clothes, the Chinese men “lounge behind their stock of watermelon” (125), the Bohemians roll cigars; pauper women carry “bogus babies” (233) or piles of rags to play the role of poor mother; an old granny watches a “wheel-barrow load of second-hand stockings” (101); and “Men stagger along the sidewalk groaning under heavy burdens of unsewn garments, or enormous black bags stuffed full of finished coats and trousers” (146). Riis records the Italians who specialize in collecting the waste and useful debris from the ash-scows before it is dumped at sea. These men are paid “for sorting out the bones, rages, tin cans and other waste that are found in the ashes” (95-6). The Italians capitalize on this undesirable collection and become independent dealers, leveling the

relationship with their contractors and making enough money to be self-sustainable.[76] Riis's attention to immigrants collecting and keeping things that most readers would find odd or exotic is a mirror reflection of his own practice and product. "Someone has to do it" once again echoes in the depiction of these collectors, and we can see Riis both pulling back from and falling into the memories of poverty and immigration.

But in order to solidify "their" foreignness versus his citizenship, Riis capitalizes on the fear of alien invasion. Riis documents The Bend's urban environment as alive and overpopulated with foreign things: "a fish-stand full of slimy, odd-looking creatures, fish that never swam in American waters" and "[b]ig, awkward sausages" decorate a passageway (100); "every day yellow and red notices are posted upon it by unseen hands" (130); Mott Street boasts "a splash of dull red or yellow, a sign…[of] Chinese characters" (124); and "Red bandanas and yellow kerchiefs are everywhere" (102). These foreign things are not directly imported from overseas, but they appear to have been reconstructed in a new space that now appears un-American: the space is unclean, unrefined, and unruly. By recreating their native homes in The Bend, Riis's immigrants have erased the familiarity of the Great American City while still utilizing America's free market and available wealth. Foreign things therefore challenge the great homogenizing mission of Americanization and illuminate the presence of hybrid identities and "unseen" intentions. This new world of excess breeds the vocabulary of anarchy, which Riis mentions time after time when pointing to what is really at stake in ignoring the tenements. Riis represents a revolutionary "army of tramps" that are loyal to their cultural things as much as their origins of culture. Instead of a great Americanized body, we see a splintered and foreign metropolis

[76] Hilda Satt Polacheck in *I Came a Stranger* details a similar set of poor employees paid to collect trash: "The city gave contracts to private scavengers to collect the garbage" that piled up behind and around Hull-House (71). If time and space allowed, a closer look at this population that lived in and made a living out waste would surely contribute to this project's concern with vibrant matter.

capable of “breeding poverty,” “corrupting politics,” and “fostering crime” (224). And although Riis articulates his mission to “fix” the tenements and reform the underclasses, the tenements appear stuck in a transplanted Old World aesthetic that undermines any popular, Progressive, utopian vision of the New World.

We can learn a lot about Riis’s own physical and sentimental attachments to foreign things in his autobiography, *The Making of an American*. The immense success of *How the Other Half Lives*, as well as the subsequent interest in both tenement house reform, helped *The Making of an American* to sell out two editions in just three weeks in the summer of 1901 (Lane 154). His narrative is part sentimental love story, part rhetorical escapade about the journey to attain American citizenship. Riis recounts his childhood in Ribe, an ancient town seemingly frozen in time that has rejected progress and seethes with environmental markers of historical dynasty and legend. His love for country is innate, he confesses, and his memory of place is always sublime: “Through forest and field, over hill and vale, by the still waters where far islands lay shimmering upon the summer sea like floating fairy-lands, into the deep, gloomy moor went my way. The moor was ever most to my liking. I was born on the edge of it, and once its majesty has sunk into a human soul, that soul is forever after attuned to it” (247). Riis is no longer denying his “attunement;” “it” is in him forevermore. Riis’s memory of place gives way to a commentary on the environmental differences between urban America and pastoral Ribe. There is only one tenement (Rag Hall), “the furnaces and rolling mills were hidden away in a narrow winding valley” (41) as to not disrupt the beatific landscape, and the city functions with a simplistic tri-class system of officials, tradesmen, and working people who held “a real neighborliness that roamed unrestrained and without prejudice” (17). The community’s highest drama, however, revolves around social stratification: Riis’s courtship of a young woman,

Elizabeth Gjortz, is forbidden because her father, a wealthy cotton mill owner, deems Riis an unworthy husband who lived on the "wrong side of the bridge," so to speak. This main difference in opportunity and class begins his pursuit of an American dream and a social status more satisfactory for his future wife.

Upon entering the New World, Riis narrates the trauma of "uprooting" and finding a "place in the procession" of disoriented immigrants looking for work and food (27). He charts his failed occupations on the road to economic redemption, working as a coal miner, a carpenter, a bricklayer; a cradle maker, a boatyard shipper, a hunter/trapper; a lecturer, an editor, a newspaper owner, and finally a reporter turned Progressive reformer. We witness intimate vulnerability, hunger, homelessness, and rejection along the way until he is deemed both a proper husband and an upstanding American citizen. Riis's autobiography is a rocky text, flashing forward to his present-day fortunes then backward into the depths of his memory, pausing ever so slightly to dwell in nostalgia for his homeland, then offering more polemical dialogue on the condition of poverty and urban deterioration in America while also allowing Elizabeth's voice to briefly enter the text and frame her own version of his story. However, Riis concludes the autobiography with the same anxious efforts to make this a narrative about assimilation and Americanization. In a lengthy soliloquy that illustrates "The American Made," as the final chapter is titled, Riis describes his epiphany of allegiance:

> I have told the story of the making of an American. There remains to tell how I found out that he was made and finished at last. It was when I went back to see my mother once more and, wandering about the country of my childhood's memories, had come to the city of Elsinore. There I fell ill of a fever and lay many weeks in the house of a friend upon the shore of the beautiful Oeresund…I lay moodily picking at the coverlet, sick and discouraged and sore - I hardly knew why myself. Until all at once there sailed past, close inshore, a ship flying at the top the flag of freedom, blown out on the breeze till every star in it shone bright and clear. That moment I knew. Gone were illness, discouragement, and gloom!...I had found it, and my heart too, at last. I knew then that it was my flag; that my children's home was mine, indeed; that I also had become an American in truth. And I

> thanked God, and, like unto the man sick of palsy, arose from my bed and went home healed. (263)

Despite Riis's third-person that awkwardly separates him from the conversion narrative, the "disease" of dual allegiance is cured, it appears, when he sees the American flag and arises from his sickbed, realizing that "the flag of freedom" is not only worth living for, but also capable of traveling to the far ends of the earth.[77] Here, America is a haunting and pervasive force so powerful that sight of its flag can rouse a Christian faithfulness. It is this façade of nationalistic fervor and mythic power of America to *heal* those who are "sick" that undoubtedly attracted mass readership and Rooseveltian praise.[78]

Within weeks of the autobiography's publication, a reviewer in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* wrote, "It is a book belonging to this age and this country - the record of a modern knight errant, destined to encounter dangers greater and more difficult to overcome than the dragon slayer and grail pursuer of other days" ("The Making" 20)." Edith Kellogg Dunton of *The Dial* wrote that the text "is the work of a man who deals not with words *per se*, but with the things behind the words. It is the work of a man, too, who never forgets his past in his present, nor loses sight of his defeat because he has turned it into a victory" (8). These two contemporary reviews speak volumes about Riis's text as an immigrant autobiography, which William Boelhower defines as a genotype of American autobiography, one that recapitulates the mythic exercise of American history as much as it destabilizes the notion of Americanization.

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[77] The average American reader would have thought Danish Øresund to be an obscure part of the world, but it was in fact a busy sea lane since the 1400s.

[78] Although not one scholar has exclusively focused on Riis's autobiography, nor does any study on Riis's work review the correlation between his efforts to convert immigrants into Americans and his own anecdotal transformation, I am not alone in calling Riis's conversion a façade. Horace Kallen originally noted that within most immigrant writing, "their 'Americanization' appears too much like an achievement, a tour de force, too little like a growth" (86). Taubenfeld also provides an enlightening albeit brief critique of Riis's prose as a failed effort to claim an entirely American identity because he ultimately cannot help but reveal "a repressed ambivalence and insecurity about his success" (66). Finally, Priscilla Wald criticizes Riis's climactic conversion because his use of third-person calls attention to "the disavowed alienation of this moment," that underscores his otherness and estrangement (251).

Boelhower argues that each "metacultural perspective" begins with a moment of "dream anticipation" in the Old World followed by the protagonist's transformation and ultimate confrontation of two cultural systems: "a culture of the present and the future and a culture of memory" (20).[79] *The Making of an American* follows such a script and fashions the archetypal hero that perpetuated a culture of upward mobility and the promises of economic success in America. Readers like the *Tribune* reviewer easily recognized the makings of Arthurian legend in Riis's combat against the slums. As Jennifer Hochschild argues, "Americans prefer the self-image of universal achievement to that of a few stalwarts triumphing over weaker contenders," which is exactly what *The Making of an American* provides for its audiences: Riis is every "good," pale-skinned immigrant working to build the nation, not step on fellow brethren (25). Riis perpetuates the "official narrative" of Americanization by fostering the traditional assurances of Anglo-Saxon power, humbly acknowledging "the overlordship and ideality" of mainstream taste, and performing a complacency that countered any public doubt about his singular American loyalty (Kallen 145). His chameleon character is rewarded with Roosevelt's continued approval when the President responded to Riis's final conversion scene as the "most striking" and "touching" he had ever read from such an "ideal American citizen" (qtd. in Taubenfeld 69). And Riis acknowledges the utility of such a friendship, stating in his autobiography, "I value the good opinion of my fellow-men, for with it comes increased power to do things" - including the ability to straddle the line between American and European (252).

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[79] Boelhower's *Immigrant Autobiography in the United States: Four Versions of the Italian American Self* (1982) is the first attempt to define the immigrant autobiography by its narratological devices and is typically applied to late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century narratives because of the temporal proximity to the original Puritan experience. There is also a category of "ethnic autobiography," first conceptualized by Laura Browder that determines the authentic voice of a minority group of color to a primarily white readership. The emphasis on color would seem to reject Riis from this category (since he is not Italian, Irish, Jewish, Greek, or Chinese – all considered "non-white" at times). See Browder, *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

Upon first look, Riis seems determined in his quest to make Americans and to sell the American Dream, a popular discourse already operating long before James Truslow Adams first coined in the term in 1931.[80] The American Dream, Walter Fisher contends, is itself composed of two myths: "the rags to riches, materialistic myth of individual success and the egalitarian moralistic myth of brotherhood" (161).[81] Every American learns to believe that they stand a reasonable chance at reaping the social and economic benefits of his or her own efforts, at transforming status with will power, and thus this Dream discourse has worked to produce non-essentialist class identities that place the responsibility for success (and failure) on the shoulders of the individual. As Rottenberg argues, "American Dream discourse has helped to erase or at least camouflage systemic sources of class inequality, since it has promoted the belief that anyone can move up the class ladder if only he/she works hard and maintains a certain level of integrity" (8). Therefore, this official discourse (re)produces and justifies class inequalities by connecting individual value to their own work ethic. By this logic, the immigrant working class - a class that rhetorically "built America" - should have socially mobilized without problem. Riis, however, is obviously a white, hard-working, compliant male who can realize and embody the American Dream much more comfortably than Yezierska or Polacheck - or any other African American author discussed in the following chapter.

This is all to say that Riis's nonthreatening, white, Progressive, Christian, American

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[80] In his book *The Epic of America* (1931), Adams defines the American Dream as "a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position" (215).

[81] This is but one definition of "the American Dream," but one that I believe encapsulates the two major cultural beliefs in individualism and nation building. American Dream rhetoric has evolved since Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* and Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, since Karl Marx argued that America's class system is "in a constant state of flux" (25). The American Dream continues to be probed by scholars including but not limited to: Robert Fossum and John Roth in *The American Dream* (London: British Association for American Studies, 1981); Jennifer Hochschild in *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of a Nation* (1995); and Melanie E. L. Bush and Roderick D. Bush in *Tensions in the American Dream: Rhetoric, Reverie, Or Reality* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015).

persona is the reason that his texts and his true intentions are rarely scrutinized or given the proper attention by readers then or now. His propagation of the American Dream is an imitation of Rooseveltian rhetoric in order to thrive in America and to obtain status and acceptance without economic or ethnic persecution. *The Making of an American* is a controlled performance but an inconsistent one; while the text should stand by America the Great, it does more to confer a competitive "culture of memory" that cannot be forgotten by *any* immigrant and thereby threatens the exercise of assimilation. Riis's obsession with Denmark's social and economic simplicity, its cleanliness and kinship, its culture and environment, and its material features far exceeds any expression of American superiority and prosperity provided in any text he created. Riis's nostalgia and memory of his homeland is the thread that unravels *The Making of an American* from its tangled mythic language, and I want to consider how that nostalgia resists complete assimilation.

The autobiography opens with a third-person romance about two lovers meeting on a bridge. He imagines an idyllic Danish space where "it is always summer…bees are droning among the forget-me-nots that grow along shore, and the swans arch their necks in the limpid stream" (9). He imagines the first meeting with his wife forty years prior, but his memorial is abruptly halted and the narrative becomes overtly self-reflexive:

> As she stands one brief moment there with the roguish look, she is to stand in his heart forever--a sweet girlish figure, in jacket of gray, black-embroidered, with schoolbooks and pretty bronzed boots--
>
> "With tassels!" says my wife, maliciously--she has been looking over my shoulder. Well, with tassels! What then? Did I not worship a pair of boots with tassels which I passed in a shop window in Copenhagen every day for a whole year, because they were the only other pair I ever saw? I don't know - there may have been more; perhaps others wore them. I know she did. Curls she had, too - curls of yellow gold….Why, I have carried one of your mother's, miss! All these - there, I shall not say how long - and carry it still. (9-10)

Riis opens his autobiography with a playful lover's quarrel over a shared memory because this is

a text dedicated to memorializing life in Denmark. And those memories are clearest when they live within material objects belonging to Danish citizens. Before Elizabeth's voice punctures the narrative, Riis remembers his wife with a distinctively "roguish look," a word choice that suggests mischief in the Danish woman and a surprising choice given Roosevelt's public fear of anarchical behaviors from incoming immigrants.[82] Elizabeth is introduced to the reader by way of the unique collection she adorns: hand sewn, couture clothing, educational materials, specialty boots, and styled hair.[83] Riis is emphasizing her sophistication, her economic ability to maintain such an elaborate appearance, and her singularity when he evokes the things that fashion his memory. He values Elizabeth's collection - even taking a piece for himself with the hair clipping he carries - as much as her voice, as he welcomes her intrusive revision here. Riis and his wife empower things as evidence of one's unique existence *and* as memorial vessels that facilitate a shared identity. Both husband and wife are quick to forget the means of their separation: economic disparity, patrilineal hegemony, and the defeated state of Denmark in the wake of the Second Schleswig War. Instead, Elizabeth wears the fringed boots "in his heart forever," and Riis imagines he belongs to Elizabeth, in Demark, as his place of origin, which is exactly what confuses his ability to describe a full emancipation from Denmark. The tassels, also, that are vocalized by both characters and memorized by Riis's autobiography are significant actants that obstruct Riis's full "love" of country and transform Denmark into a familial, idolized place.

[82] Roosevelt and the American public read this autobiography in the wake of President William McKinley's assassination by Polish-American anarchist Leon Czolgosz in September 1901. Public anxieties were widespread and government officials were on high alert of revolution.

[83] I assume the embroidery is hand crafted because Denmark was recognized as a producer of fine needlework including Tønder lace and Hedebo embroidery in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. If the embroidery was indeed dyed, the jacket would be seen as a garment reserved for upper class women. See Catherine Amoroso Leslie's *Needlework Through History: An Encyclopedia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007).

Additionally, he represents himself as confused and preoccupied by the things he brings with him into America, as well as those things he purchases upon arrival to a strange place. A single packing list is never provided in full, most likely because Riis wanted to wear the mythic apparel of one who arrived in America with only the clothes on his back. However, Riis makes several references to "shouldering his trunk" and keeping a "gripsack" that indicates he possessed much more than originally conveyed. Moreover, Riis maintains, collects, and loses approximately fourteen things throughout the autobiography: a linen duster, a pair of socks, top-boots, a revolver, a locket containing Elizabeth's curl, some $40 collected by friends in Ribe, diary, a copy of Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*, a packet of letters from family and Elizabeth, a woolen birthing blanket, a watch, a brush, a gold Crusader's cross awarded from King Christian of Denmark, and a passport issued by Governor Roosevelt. This collection contains both American and Danish things, purchased and gifted things, and memorabilia. It is its own melting pot of assimilation and allegiance that exerts influence upon Riis's psyche as he imagines the cultural and personal value of each material entity.

For example, the revolver is a cultural misstep purchased upon arrival to America in order to "follow the fashion of the country" and because he expects to see "buffaloes and red Indians charging up and down Broadway" (29). Instead he immediately encounters a policeman who "advised me to leave it home, or I might get robbed of it," and reveals he was "secretly relieved to get rid of it" because it was "quite heavy to carry around" (29). No longer a mechanism for protection or intimidation, in this network, the revolver is a sign of cultural disorientation and punitive recoil that reminds the reader that he is an outsider.[84] Too, this

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[84] Riis's encounter with the policeman marks an occasion of contingency, "the chance interruption – that disclose a physicality of things," according to Brown's essay, "Thing Theory" (4). These occasions teach individuals that the body is a thing among things, and when things assert their presence and power, the occasion is sudden (Brown 4). This helps define the moment in which Riis is suddenly caught off guard by the revolver's physical weight. It also

misfire derives from the fantasy of the American West: Riis was sold the narrative of machismo gun slinging and adventure, but the revolver itself corrects his perception and mediates a new identity wherein he is policed and beneath a social hierarchy on the streets of New York. Riis mentions the revolver four more times - pawning it, buying it back, using it to hunt wild ducks, then firing it at a pile of packing-boxes when filled with "sudden patriotic ardor" on the Fourth of July - and it would appear that he has trouble "letting go." (59). Riis uses the weapon for nonviolent purposes, so the revolver seems to represent for Riis a sense of belonging; he, too, can have the freedom to bear arms and to celebrate the nation's birthday as an American citizen. Most collectors, Muensterberger argues, "require symbolic substitutes to cope with a world he or she regards as basically unfriendly, even hazardous. So long as he or she can touch and hold and possess and, most importantly, replenish, these surrogates constitute a guarantee of emotional support" (21). The revolver makes Riis feel powerful and in control, specifically in the way he is able to pawn and retrieve it at will. But the narrative accompanying the revolver reveals his inability to wear the appearance of a rugged and patriotic American, as well as his exclusion from late Victorian, middle-class fashion. The revolver actually denies his belonging and demonstrates his status as an outsider, no matter how many times he fires it on the Fourth of July.

Along with the revolver, Riis carries Elizabeth's lock of hair, a wool blanket he was born in from his mother, and the Cross of Dannebrog, which is allowed several pages of explanation and evokes a narrative of respect and loyalty for King Christian of Denmark (37). Riis describes the cross as a substantial marker of cultural and personal identity:

> It is the old Crusader's cross, in the sign of which my stern forefathers conquered the heathen and themselves on many a hard-fought field. My father wore it for long and

marks Riis's "confrontation" with "the thingness of objects" when the revolver stops working for him (Brown 4).

> faithful service to the State. I rendered none…But though I did nothing to deserve it, I wear the cross proudly for the love I bear the flag under which I was born and the good old King who gave it to me. (255)

He again defends his adornment of the cross a few pages later: "I wear it gladly, for the knighthood it confers pledges to the defence of womanhood, and of little children, and if I cannot wield lance and sword as the king's men of old, I can wield the pen" (257). Although the cross, like the revolver, signifies masculinity, Riis's justification for wearing and celebrating the foreign thing is riddled with anxiety upon telling the reader twice that it is an emblem of morality and service instead of Danish loyalty. But here is a conscious declaration of love for Denmark's flag within the rhetorical contours of Roosevelt's 1894 demand for one flag, one loyalty - "no other flag should even come second." Riis is directly and publically challenging the notion that immigrants can deny their origin and reject homogenization as socially expected to do upon arrival. He cannot accept a singular American identity because of the magnetism of things that remind him of his ancestry that he desires to retain. With these things in mind, Riis illustrates a contradiction in ownership. Riis might be acquiring an American identity through the accumulation of property (the revolver, the top-boots, the passport), but he is also hard at work preserving a Danish identity through the retention of religious, familial, and foreign things.[85] The heterogenetic nature of his personal collection ultimately perplexes Riis and complicates his lecture on citizenship and the American Dream fulfilled.

Riis's representation of his personal things reveals several important factors that we can read into *How the Other Half Lives*: (1) Riis is a purposeful and interested collector himself seeking to control things as they in turn control him; (2) he recognizes the immigrant's stress of

[85] Even the Dicken's novel *Hard Times* that is still in his possession at the end of the text is written and published in a European context by a European author. This thing cannot be considered an American component to Riis's collection, therefore the only American possession he maintains is the Roosevelt passport, which he summarizes in two sentences and is not detailed in the same way that he celebrates the Cross of Dannebrog.

importing a migratory collection that is defended but compromised in an alien environment; and (3) when he imagines losing part of his collection under such stress, it is never considered 'dead' or forgotten; rather, things lost take on a more powerful agency, finding their way back to Riis and reminding him of where they - and he - came from. For example, in order to obtain transportation out of Buffalo, Riis narrates that he was forced to sell the clothes he wore upon arriving in America. A French pawnbroker pries away his watch, clothes, and brush, but Riis optimistically obliges that these objects no longer withheld their utilitarian value (the watch is broken, the brush cannot brush clothes that he no longer owns). He later returns to Buffalo and the pawnshop in order to retain his belongings. Riis reveals an intimate connection to this collection in that he wants to know the fate of his things, and of course, see them returned to their rightful owner. When this fails, he once again mourns their loss and overcompensates for their disappearance by blaming their seizure on the deceptive Frenchman. The fact that he asks for his "foreign" things back is significant; these are Danish things that made him look and feel Danish, ergo the effort to retrieve this look contests the very idea of being "nothing but an American." His appearance, his keepsakes, his library, and his narration all preserve his European genesis and his Danish identity in the end, thereby resisting assimilation and delivering the (hardly subliminal) message that immigrants "were good citizens, better for not forgetting their motherland" (256). With the agency and discrepancy to carry forth things that are imported, nostalgic, and resistant to the dominant culture, Riis' persistently considers and values the immigrant, and himself, as collector throughout his works, and thus establishes a mode of resistance for later writers such as Yezierska and Satt-Polecheck to carry into the twentieth century.

"A world still in the making": Anzia Yezierska Makes a New American

Published in the wake of the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act on 1924 - a federal law that significantly restricted Eastern Europeans from free flowing into the United States and created new legal instructions for the deportation of immigrants - Anzia Yezierska's novel *Bread Givers* (1925) confirmed that eastern European Jews also desired to assimilate and celebrate themes of Americanness. As an Eastern-European Jewish immigrant from Płońsk, Poland, who entered the United States with her family as a child around 1890 and uncomfortably settled into New York City's Lower East Side, Yezierska dramatizes pieces of her own life through the bildungsroman of Sara Smolinsky, an independent working girl fighting her traditional father, Reb Smolinksy, for the right to pursue an education and learn the opportunistic knowledge of the New World. [86] Like most of Yezierska's young female protagonists, Sara embodies the rebellious New Woman, attending public school, rejecting her father's arranged marriages, living alone by her own financial support, and ultimately succumbing to love but on her own terms. These themes and characterizations became Yezierksa's commonplace material, which audiences enjoyed and publishers endorsed. Yezierska published five additional books between 1920 and 1932, composed countless cross-country circulating articles, and signed a Hollywood contract for an adaptation of *Hungry Hearts* (1920). But America's "Sweatshop Cinderella" suddenly quit Hollywood and fell into obscurity until 1950, when she published *Red Ribbon on a White Horse,* a difficult autobiographical text in which she confessed, "Without a country, without a people, I could not live only in a world I had created out of my brain. I could not live unless I wrote. And I could not write any more. I had gone too far away from life, and I did not know how to get back" (127). Yezierska repeats this sentiment in *Century Magazine* story entitled "Wild Winter Love"

[86] Biographers are uncertain about her exact date of birth, but Yezierska herself has estimated it to be October 19, 1883, which would make her approximately seven years old when arriving in America (*Bread Givers* 4).

(1927): “I’m a woman without a country. I’m uprooted from where I started; and I can’t find roots anywhere” (*How I Found America* 274). Despite her contemporary success in America, both reflections reveal a longing to “get back” to an origin place and an inability to mentally or physically do so. Yezierska mourns the loss of her homeland and the inadequacies of her memory; she feels mentally void of community, content, and home, despite the fact that America has been her home for more than thirty years.

Much like Riis, Yezierska sells America as the land of opportunity while subversively holding tight to her “roots.”[87] Recently, Kevin Piper has suggested that immigrant novels “discover ways to be American without excluding the cultural contributions of American ethnic groups” (113). Horace Kallen’s “Democracy Versus the Melting Pot: A Study of American Nationality” first appeared in the *Nation* in February 1915, which ensured that great republics must consist of a symphony of difference and that a “commonwealth of nationalities” that must work together not against one another (219). As cultural pluralism infiltrated the American imagination, Yezierksa emerged with own her version of the American Dream that detailed how her cultural and religious upbringing actually made it difficult for her to achieve it. With every other challenge the average immigrant felt arriving stateside without money or kinship, her frustration at home with her father and her family’s orthodoxy reveals a more somber sense of homelessness and discomfort in her new country. Yezierska’s texts parse through what it feels like to honor a dual allegiance, but they are more conflicted by what it feels like to not understand one’s self. Yezierska’s work pushes further the consequences of materiality, not only

[87] For responses to the sincerity of her Americanization and the pressures to assimilate, see Martin Japtok, *Growing Up Ethnic: Nationalism and the Bildungsroman in African American and Jewish American Fiction* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005); Douglas J. Goldstein, “The Political Dimensions of Desire in Anzia Yezierska’s ‘The Lost Beautifulness’ and *Salome of the Tenements*” in *Studies in American Fiction* 35.1 (2007), 43-66; and Ljiljana Conklin, “Between the Orient and the Ghetto: A Modern Immigrant Woman in Anzia Yezierska’s *Salome of the Tenements*” in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women’s Studies* 27.2 (2006), 136-61.

as representations of cultural heritage but as the key force in the author's construction of what it means to "make herself into a person" (*Bread Givers* 172). Whereas Riis is reflective on how things confuse his loyalty, Yezierksa writes in a state of crisis about how her identity is shaped. But much like Riis, Yezierska habits the language of collecting and physical creation - "making" - to convey the process of assimilation, but also to illuminate how writers "must either be real or nothing" (*America* 140). And in order "to be real," Yezierska discovers that humans - especially displaced, disenchanted immigrants - must "create their own world of liberty," not just expect "to find it ready made" (*America* 152). Yezierska's self-creation manifests most prominently when actual collections of things are being created.

I want to identify Yezierksa's attraction to material things as vibratory, influential, and alive in her earliest fictions and editorials as collected in *Hungry Hearts* (1920) and *Children of Loneliness* (1923). These works provide insight into the blends of autobiography and fiction that Yezierska wrote, which allowed the author space to reinvent her self and her experiences through a hybrid narrative form. "Fiction is a mirror of life as it is being lived at the moment," Yezierska theorizes in the essay, "Mostly About Myself" (*America* 143); thus we might read her characters as undeniably expressive of Yezierska's own relationship with the materiality of her immigration experience. In one of her earliest published stories, "Wings" (1920), Yezierska features Shenah Pessah, another young working female protagonist like herself who falls in love with a sociology professor whom she wants to impress despite her status as a working-class student. Shenah heads to a pawnshop to sell her dead mother's featherbed and quickly becomes offended when the pawnbroker offers only five dollars in exchange for it. She clutches the bed dearly "as if it were a living thing" (*America* 10). As it bears the physical sweat and energy of her mother's working hands, the bed *is* her mother, and Shenah appears very much aware of its vibrant matter. Shenah

pauses to reflect on the pawnshop's interior and becomes "panic-stricken" at the sight of discarded jewels, second-hand clothing, and the "weird tickings that came from the cheap clocks on the shelves…[that] seemed to her like the smothered heart-beats of people who like herself had been driven to barter their last precious belongings for a few dollars" (*America* 10). Not only does she understand that the cultural value is worth much more than the economic value as determined by an outsider, but she falls prey to the poor exchange rate out of desperation. Here she feels that capitalism has failed her and the other poor people who have come to sell their goods for a fair price. The shelving of the featherbed for another consumer to purchase also mirrors Shenah's revelation that she felt "shelved aside as an unmated thing" in her community (*America* 4). Yezierska represents Shenah as able to articulate her feelings of loneliness and sexual repression (specifically in regard to the professor and his denial of her). The foreign thing must be surrendered for a domestic life, and she communicates this trade in sacrificial terms: "with a shawl over her head and a huge bundle over her shoulder…laying her sacrifice down on the counter, she stood dumbly and nervously" (*America* 10). The scene resembles a funeral, and the thing retains a new life as it is put to rest in the pawnbroker's shop.

Shenah sells her prized possession in order to participate in conspicuous consumption, which Americanizes her as much as it "promises" her the professor's admiration. For the money she receives for a one-of-kind, irreplaceable (because of her mother's death), and handmade possession, Shenah immediately purchases prêt-à-porter American fashions "that would voice the desire of her innermost self": a straw hat "with cherries so red, so luscious, that they cried out to her 'Bite me!'," and a green organdie dress (*America* 10). Again, her sexuality is only expressed through the descriptions of her new possessions, which she imagines as having the power to "make" her desirable and real. This scene is similar to Carrie Meebler's prosopopoeic

conversation with her collar and shoes in *Sister Carrie*, as previously discussed. In both cases, both women are trying to create a new sense of self in order to be socially and sexually desired, but they also hear and see objects for what they are: vibrant matter that is capable of changing the course of their lives. Conversely, though, Yezierska seems to reprimand Shenah for forfeiting the featherbed because its loss results in Shenah's lost subjectivity. She searches for the professor in her newly sexualized outfit in order to woe him, only to find that he has only used her as a statistic for his thesis on the "Educational Problems of the Russian Jews." The professor only sees Shenah in simplified - "'Poor lonely little immigrant!" he tells her (15) - and objectified terms - "[he] congratulated himself at his good fortune in encountering such a splendid type for his research" (*America* 5). While the story ends with Shenah's resolve to "show him you're a person," there is no confirmation that she *feels* like a person (*America* 16). Instead, she responds with self-detriment, her broken English revealing, "You owe it to him the deepest, the highest he waked up in you" (*America* 16). Shenah reacts to the professor's cruelty and dismissal with quashed gratification, but moreover, she performs the gender-specific conventions of reservation and silence that she now assumes as an "American" woman. Her identity is repressed, and she is all alone; there is no lasting object or human that can help define her.

Here, Yezierska represents the self as helpless, disordered, and static material at the mercy of a new environment. The fact that her protagonists and narrators are all foreign-born immigrants who are pressured to economically, culturally, and socially assimilate adds tension to their reconciling of the self as a "new American." In *Children of Loneliness* (1923), a collection of ten short narratives, Yezierska articulates the idea of a one-of-a-kind self becoming a mass produced thing when it enters America. In the memoir-like reflection, "America and I," she writes, "'My head is so lost in America! What's the use of all my working if I'm not in it? Dead

buttons is not me" (*America* 148). Yezierska's narrator is responding to a job she takes sewing on buttons, day after day, in a tiny sweatshop where she envisions her earnings buying her new clothes; not her self making a new life, but "*My* dollars that would make me feel with everybody alike!" (*America* 147). Here, Yezierska realizes that a mechanized, fast-paced America has turned her into a "dead button," replacing that which she had arrived with: a "young, strong body, my heart and soul pregnant with the unlived lives of generations clamoring for expression" (*America* 144). Liveliness is once again associated with foreign bodies, deadness with American material; her Americanization is root cause for such devastating estrangement.

In "An Immigrant Among the Editors," again with autobiographical voice, Yezierska writes, "Sometimes I'd see my brain as a sort of Hester Street junk-shop, where a million different things - rich uptown silks and velvets and the cheapest kind of rags - were thrown around in bunches. It seemed to me if I struggled from morning till night all my years I could never put order in my junk-shop brain" (*America* 155). Once again, the physic environment mirrors the physical environment; her mind has become a cluttered marketplace of excess and disorder. Her "inhuman busy-busyness" is to blame for her inability to maintain her humanity; she mourns the loss of a brain space that can access the "stuff" she values (*America 161*). In "Mostly About Myself," she also contemplates her own 'thingness' when constructing texts for the general American public:

> The minute a manuscript gets into print it's all dead shells of the past to me. I know some people who hate the books I write, and because they hate my books they hate me. I want to say to them now that I, too, hate the stuff I write. Can't we be friends and make the mutual hatred of my books a bond instead of a barrier? My books are not me…I am alive and the only thing real in my aliveness is the vitality of unceasing change. (*America* 134)

Yezierska needs her mind to actively work - making things - because it grants her visible agency, consciousness, and vibrancy. She is discontent when that work stops, when it is

deadened by type and bind then circulated without the opportunity for revision. Yezierska hates her output because the authenticity and intimacy of her physical work becomes Americanized, automated, reproduced stuff. Increasingly alienated from her labor, the organicism and creativity of her artisanal work is lost in the world of mass manufacturing. Despite a book's ability to freely circulate in a literary marketplace, Yezierska understands print to be as static as typesetting; but when she is able to revise her voice and communicate with others, her self is alive. At the time, Yezierska was under commercial pressure to produce formulaic, mass-market fiction, and here we see her raging against that machine in order to condemn a literary self that produces empty unrealities and cliché assimilationist stories. [88]

Published two years after this collection, *Bread Givers* is a full-length novel that expresses a similar ambivalence about "making" the self. With more space to explore the consequences of making one's self an American or making one's self a hybrid citizen, Yezierska represents her characters as taking divergent paths and meeting separate fates. These paths are littered with two distinct types of things and costumes - American and Jewish/Polish - and by choosing which things to keep or display, characters choose whether or not to fully Americanize or to retain their roots; and this decision is not only physical, but a mental and irreversible. Yezierska observes both paths and finds that the American way of life is plagued with unreal expectations and tragic circumstances. The novel's chief victims are the Smolinsky sisters, Fania and Mashah, who would choose to pass as Americans instead of preserve their heritage by engaging in conspicuous consumption, husband chasing, and the cult of domesticity. Mashah is consistently portrayed as spending her family's money on pink paper roses for her hat or white

[88] For more on Yezierska's personal and economic conflict with the production of *Hungry Hearts*, see Delia Caparoso Knzett's "Administered Identities and Linguistic Assimilation: The Politics of Immigrant English in Anzia Yezierska's Hungry Hearts" in *American Literature* 69.3 (1997), 595-619.

starched petticoats in order to attract suitors and eventually a husband. She is creative and flamboyant, two characteristics of which Yezierska approves, but there is something unrealistic about her appearance. Her sister Sara, the novel's heroine, at times has difficulty recognizing Mashah as a family member: "[Mashah] was no more one of us than the painted lady looking down from the calendar on the wall" (4). Confusing her sister's body for both a painting and an advertisement accentuates Mashah's character as fabricated and reproduced, a copy, not an original. Imagining Mashah's posture as "looking down" at the family also illustrates the illusion of social distance that she hopes to attain in finding a white, American husband. Her suitor creates this illusion for Mashah and her family, as he arrives on the scene claiming to be a diamond-dealer. A lowly salesman, he loses his job the day after their wedding, and Mashah becomes starved, "so crushed, so broken," and chained to her husband's poverty. The once colorful woman now appears unrecognizable, but also unhuman: "Her back humped like an angry cat's as she flung into the tub. Again, the grind of poverty hardened her face" (149). Mashah becomes a "worn-out rag" as a result of choosing an alluring alternative lifestyle, one that erases her cultural roots and thus physically disconnects her from her familial support system (149). In this punishing outcome, Yezierska does not appear to approve of Mashah's decision to perform Americanness instead of maintain her authentic roots.

Fania is luckier in love when she marries what appears to be a well-to-do man who successfully gambles with his fortune. As discussed in Chapter 2 of my dissertation, gambling is a social evil but also a self-reliant method of capital subversion; her husband makes her own luck, which makes Fania believe that he is more powerful than the system that has rejected her family. But quickly after their marriage, he becomes abusive and controlling Fania becomes miserable, a lonely figure draped in jewels, an objectified status symbol of her husband's wealth;

“So lonely did she get, that she wanted to leave all the riches of cloaks and suits, and the beautiful houses with fruits and flowers of that dream city, and come back to our black, choking tenements in New York” (85). All the color of the American Dream versus the “black, choking” of the American tenement still persuade Fania to stay with her husband and reject her Sara’s attempts to bring her back home. She carries on in her unhappy domestic role, downplaying her sister as an “old maid” and committing to a life of dependence on her husband’s hegemonic rule (90).

Unlike her sisters, Yezierska’s heroine learns to appreciate her culture via cultural things and attuning herself to her parent’s habits of collection. Sara retells the story of their emigration to America in terms of what they were able to bring from their homeland: “When we came to America, instead of taking along feather beds, and the samovar, and the brass pots and pans, like other people, Father made us carry his books. When Mother begged only to take along her pot for *gefulte* fish, and the two feather beds that were handed down to her from her grandmother for her wedding presents, Father wouldn’t let her” (8-9). These are the only details provided by Sara about the family’s immigration. She recognizes the shared importance of taking one’s cultural and domestic belongings to America, as well as the spatial limitations of traveling abroad. Emphasis on the collection is pushed further when she remembers her father’s response to her mother’s remorse leaving behind such fine and meaningful things: “But my books, my holy books always were, and always will be, the light of the world. You’ll see yet how all America will come to my feet to learn” (9). While the books cannot provide physical sustenance or shelter or warmth, Reb recognizes his collection as offering survival through social mobility in the New World. His reason for maintaining his collection is that the books are timeless; whether in the past (in Płońsk) or in the future (in America), the books will conjure yet another faithful

audience that will lionize Father as a religious leader. And instead of evaluating the practicality of the books over the lost feather bedding, Sara respectfully obliges: "It was like a law in the house that nobody dared touch Mashah's things, no more than they dared touch Father's Hebrew books, or Mother's precious jar of jelly" (5). Each character is illustrated as having a set of "things" that are specifically their own, as well as untouchable; their domestic protection is equated to legal jurisdiction and intimidation ("nobody dared"). Sara adopts this learned behavior when she develops a love for her own set of secular books she borrows or purchases for school. In the same way that her father chooses his books over eviction, Sara chooses her books over marriage: "I seized my books and hugged them to my breast as though they were living things" (201). In both cases, the books act as mediums for overpowering conformity by way of choice, thus enabling a sense of agency that allows both Sara and Reb to live out their desired identities.

Moreover, the Smolinsky family respects Reb's book collection despite its menacing presence within the flat where "there weren't enough places" to put things: "the front room was packed with Father's books. They were on the shelf, on the table, on the window sill, and in soapboxes lined up against the wall" (8). The family conducts their daily chores by tiptoeing around the book collection that uplifts both the family and "the world." Upon reading from the Torah or scriptures, the family gathers time and again, "[e]yes widened, necks stretched, ears strained not to miss a word" (11). Mother resigns her anger always at the sight of Father's "two white hands on either side of the book," her "earthy worries" lost at the sound of his chanting and singing (16). The collection of books solidifies the familial, communal, and religious bond while creating peace amongst the frustrated and hungry group. Too, it is the books that reconcile Sara and Reb at the end of the novel. When Reb becomes ill, Sara becomes his caretaker; the two

read together from “his beloved book of Job” on what appears to be his deathbed, and Sara remembers of her father, “In a world where all is changed, he alone remained unchanged” (296). Her father’s unfaltering allegiance to his books and therefore his heritage rejects all forces of assimilation and confirms within his daughter a sense of self-importance that their distinguished cultural matter is survived and transmitted into the future.

Yet the collection creates estrangement among those unwilling to respect nor understand the power of Reb’s books. Sara narrates how the landlady arrives to collect rent, and upon not receiving payment, she throws Father’s book out of his hands and desecrates the pages with her foot. Father slaps the landlady across the face; physical harm to his things validates physical harm to another human being. Sara says, “Father hitting the landlord’s collector lady was like David killing Goliath, the giant,” thus relying on the religious content of the precious books in order to convey the significance of the incident (26). The reader too empowers the books by recognizing the biblical parable, further validating Father’s violent defense of his things, even as it is an offensive and violent act against a woman. Reb is arrested but eventually acquitted when the lawyer shows to the court “the page in the Bible where her wet, muddy foot stepped” (25). Reb alongside fellow tenants celebrates the victory for weeks, engulfed in a communal “pleasure of getting even, once in their lives, with someone over them that was always stepping on them” (26). Again, the physical appearance of the footprint on the book illuminates for the community that they are being trampled upon as well; the thing delivers an epiphanic resistance that the mob had not yet recognized before this conflict. Reb’s fervor for and protection of books spawn radical discourse within the tenements as each rants about his or her own landlord they would rather see dead. The family’s standard of living also improves, and Sara confirms that she feels the makings of upward mobility: “Things began to get better with us…Mother began to fix up

the house like other people. The instalment man trusted us now. We got a new table with four feet that were so solid it didn't spill the soup all over the place" (28). To trace the family's social escalation back to the books and to recognize that foreign things have enabled a new kind of "American Dream" is to consider how the materiality of our world is much more magnetic and influential than the rhetoric of a nation. And as an immigrant author whose novels all interrogate the relationship between consumption and Americanness - between commodity display and citizenship -, Yezierska is articulating here how foreign things have the potential to disrupt Americanization, but also replace it with a unique cultural pluralism that upholds a contended individualism that cooperatives with its close-knit communities.

Mother's feathered pillow collection also embodies this utopian pluralism by intertwining her cultural practice with American material. Mother explains to her daughters that her dowry included six feather beds and twelve pillows; she recalls, "I used to sit up nights with all the servants to pluck the down from the goose feathers" (32). "There ain't in America such beautiful things like we had home," Mother mourns, "In America, rich people can only buy, and buy things made by machines. Even Rockefeller's daughter got only store-bought, ready-made things for her dowry. There was a feeling in my tablecloth - " (33). A "feeling" in her tablecloth is something she can hardly express, hence the hyphenated pause that silences the thing's reiteration. Mother's defense of her dowry signifies her recognition of an aesthetic and emotional difference between things from Poland and things made in America, an assertive preference for one over the other because of both "feeling" and modes of production, where hand-crafted construction overrides the mass-produced copy; and finally, that she values her tablecloth over anything Rockefeller, an icon of uber-elitism, could provide for his daughter. These remembrances demonstrate Mother's pride and dedication to foreign things, but also her pain in

losing irreplaceable things in order to pay off the Tsar of Russia whom demanded her husband enlist. These prized possessions are sacrificed for her family's safety; they are a stonewall against persecution and endangerment. While her dowry is never replaced, Mother recreates the feather bed and pillow when Sara resolves to live alone, against her family's wishes. A sign of peace and familial bond, Sara accepts the gift and recognizes the importance of her mother's love: "All the bitterness of my heart was forgotten. I laughed when I thought of poor dear old Mother - coming so far with that big feather bed on her back" (172). The collection's bestowal from mother to daughter is a significant one. The feather bedding serves the typical purpose of domestic need, but it also provides comfortability, warmth, and reiteration of heritage.[89] The craft is resurrected and acts as a cultural inheritance, thereby reminding Sara that in pursing an independent future (living alone) and understanding physical reminders of the past (accepting the gift), she is "making" a new version of herself - a new American character.

Bread Givers is a bildungsroman, and Sara comes of age in America as much as she comes into personhood. Yezierska means to capture in Sara a psychic transformation from thing to person. "I've grown dead and inhuman myself," Sara mourns; "Will I ever lift myself to be a person among people?" (186, 220). Sara is always attuned to her struggle against poverty and prejudice, but also to the seemingly impossible feat of "making" one's self the "right way." The circumstance of displacement and the expectation of assimilating both anticipate for Sara a life of effort, where she must work to create and to understand her new identity: "when a nobody wants to get to be somebody she's got to make herself terribly hard" (231). Sara's determination to build herself into a person capable of possessing, creating, knowing, and changing the material

[89] Mark McWilliams connects the representation of well-kept homes by those in poverty to be a form of rebellion against the difficulties of the urban environment; nostalgia for "republican simplicity" drives this reaction and serves as an antidote to the poor ethic of tenement culture in the nineteenth century (161). We see similar nostalgic celebrations of simple living in Mother's collected and created things throughout the novel.

she encounters is reminiscent of Yezierska's own struggle in America. Her weary contemplation of subject-object relationships is more complex than what we see in Riis, but her solution to the immigrant experience is more realistic: you must be both American and European, but you also must be independent. Yezierska valued individuality as a human trait, a characteristic that allowed for the amalgamation of culture and time without being deadened or manufactured. Yezierska's voice is one that actively claims the future and reminds her audiences that immigrants will continue to arrive stateside looking for a space to make a new life, but more importantly, to make a new America.

Hybridity and Transculturation in Hilda Satt Polacheck's *I Came a Stranger*

Immigrants like Hilda Satt Polacheck also arrived at the golden door, looking for opportunity and finding poverty, as well as a lost sense of self. Polacheck's case is a curious one; her bibliographic history is riddled with rejection and anonymity despite her participation in suffrage activities, her social politicking over class disparity, and her unique literary treatment of Jewish American communities struggling to become Americanized at Chicago's Hull-House. Coming to America in 1892 from Wloclawek, Poland, with her parents and twelve siblings, Polcheck suffered the reality of the American Dream, as well as the difficulties coming of age in a strange New World. A relatively prosperous family in Poland, the Satts sought protection instead of economic relief in America after the Russian government began to systematically exclude Jews from education, employment, and landownership (Weiner xii). Fearing oppression and violence, roughly two million Jews left the czar's regime between 1880 and 1924; Satt's family was among the first to depart, as their high status and esteemed reputation allowed for an easy transition into the United States (Weiner xii). The erasure of such status and reputation upon arrival in Chicago, however, became quite difficult to bear, and Polacheck revealed her

disappointment and disillusionment in autobiographical articles and stories published in micro-publications during her lifetime.

When Polacheck's father died in 1894, the family suddenly faced poverty. The Satt children went to work instead of school, and the family moved into tenement housing without a breadwinner to keep a mortgage. During her decline, Polacheck found Hull-House, and she became an active participant for the rest of her life. She worked as a receptionist and tour guide at the Labor Museum where she met the infamous Jane Addams whom had co-founded Hull-House as a way to nurture working-class consciousness while acculturating immigrants with middle-class values (Weiner xv). Polacheck's exposure to the Labor Museum educated her about the evolution of modern industry, as much as it socialized her to feel contentment and democratically in control of her community (Wald 343).[90] Polacheck wrote about her experiences at Hull-House, where she was encouraged to learn about literature, art, and social service, attend the University of Chicago, and befriend Addams despite their class and fame disparities. Between 1935 and 1939, Polacheck joined the WPA's Illinois Writer's Project as a collector of Jewish heritage, childhood games, folk songs, and tree specimens, amongst other things.[91] In her memoir she recalls the work of the WPA as "the blood that flowed through the veins of cultural America" (*Stranger* 173).

Dissatisfied with the lack of recognition she received from her hard work colleting stories for the WPA, Polecheck began work on her memoir, offering a historical and personal account of

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[90] For Jane Addams' philosophy and autobiographical reformation, see *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (New York: New American Library, 1981).

[91] Aniza Yezierska also participated in the WPA between these years, although her coverage remained in New York. Both authors' participation in such a widespread "collecting" project illuminates how the government program facilitated poor, immigrant writers as hunter/gatherers of people and places for guide books and histories. The WPA presents a unique moment in history where the act of collecting was paid for, widely read, and federally endorsed by Americans; WPA collectors, in most cases, were people like Yezierska and Polacheck who were poor, different, and determined to rise above. For more on the WPA, see David A. Taylor's *Soul of a People: The WPA Writer's Project Uncovers Depression America* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2010).

immigrant working-class life. In 1953, her finished manuscript was rejected by publishers who demanded to hear less about her experiences as a Jewish immigrant and more about Jane Addams's virtuous reformation of America. After Polacheck's death in 1967, her daughter Dena J. Polacheck Epstein collected her mother's seven different incomplete manuscripts, loose sheets of paper that marked snippets of memories, letters, and extracurricular historical data to "document the accuracy of Hilda's memory" (239); and thus she posthumously published the autobiography in 1989, as *I Came a Stranger: The Story of a Hull-House Girl*. The memoir failed to attract much critical attention, and much like her contemporaries, most scholars have acknowledged Polacheck as only a lens through which to intimately view Hull-House and Jane Addams.[92] Aside from Bridget O'Rourke's assessment that Polacheck's work "revealed important truths about the perceptions and experiences of 'future Americans'" (23), *I Came a Stranger* is hardly a text that many would argue as significant. Betty Ann Bergland argues, though, that Polacheck "enjoys relative fulfillment as an immigrant Jewish woman in America" by positioning herself within "traditional patriarchal discourses of wife and mother" (250). And here is what sets Polacheck apart: not only do we experience the immigrant experience from a drafted perspective without the original authorial intentions published, but we also learn how this experience looked from a mother's periphery, watching a new generation of Americans embrace an ancestral past without ever really knowing it.

Polacheck's memoir manages the 'cultural connections' made between American and Polish-Jewish values in order to imagine a new and inclusive American national identity. For Polacheck, cultural identity is retained through an identification of things that are carefully

[92] For criticism that utilizes *I Came a Stranger* as supplemental research for shaping the life and philosophy of Jane Addams, see Barbara Sicherman, *Well-read Lives: How Books Inspired a Generation of American Women* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), and Marilyn Fischer, *Jane Addams and the Practice of Democracy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

created and manufactured by hand, particularly by members of her family who "earn a living" through their trades. Like Yezierska, Polacheck reads material in terms of shared Americanness and Polish/Jewishness; she provides the memory of a thing in communication with its present and future state of operation. The result is a competitive energy that exists *within* each thing instead of competing with other objects. Things convey an ideal hybridity that Polacheck desires for herself, and the effect is a tonality that inspires and encourages those who feel "homeless." *I Came a Stranger* is infused with the hope that immigrants like herself can find pieces of "home" in a strange place thereby realizing a transnational citizenship that is comfortable, creative, and indicative of the globalization to come in the twenty-first century.

Like Yezierska and Riis, Polacheck provides a full catalogue of her family's imported belongings, as well as the cultural possessions that adorn their home in Chicago, because she too represents how the process of immigration dislocates both people and things. In her second chapter, "The Voyage to America," Polacheck remembers her mother selling her possessions so that all thirteen family members could be reunited with their father who had already departed for America to secure employment and housing. Her mother is fraught with the responsibility to safely and economically carry the family abroad; her power here sets the pace for how Polacheck sees women, specifically mothers, as carriers of the household. Polacheck articulates the evaluation of what could be left behind and what must be loaded and carried abroad:

> The partings with favorite toys were tragic events. They were eased somewhat by the promise that I could take my doll and that Father would buy us American toys. While most of our possessions were sold or given away, there were certain things with which Mother would not part. She insisted on taking all the feather beds and pillows. Had she not stripped all those feathers with her own fingers? The bulky pillows and covers were packed in burlap bags and then put into huge hampers. Glassware and silver and brass and copper kettles were packed in large wooden cases. Our clothes were carefully packed in trunks. (22)

The children leave their toys because they are distracted by the gilded promises of a new country. However, Polacheck reveals that she hides a single doll within her luggage, which we can infer as a child's inability to "let go" of a treasured object, but also her memory indicates that the doll needed a new home in America too, amongst new American toys, thus creating a patchwork collection of imaginative play things that reminds Polacheck of Wloclawek while appreciating her father's consumption of American goods. Her mother, however, demonstrates a loyalty for and control over *all* of her prized possessions at any cost. Like Yezierska, Polacheck repeats her mother's fondness for feather bedding based on a history of hard work and intimate handcrafting. Her careful double packing of the bedding and its "bulky" (and most likely expensive) presence during their travel abroad secures the assumption that there is no bedding quite like mother's available in America - neither is there serving ware and kitchen supplies that could seemingly replace these foreign things.[93]

Additionally, we see the family's preserved possessions when Polacheck describes their new home in Chicago. She first details a domestic sphere filled with American middle-class furnishings - a kitchen stove, a red plush sofa, an elegant rug, lace curtains, an "imposing" parlor stove, and wallpaper colored with bunches of purple grapes and flying birds (33).[94] Alongside these new furnishings, the family displays multiple Polish-Jewish remnants. Polacheck describes

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[93] Polacheck makes three additional references to the family's importation of "trunks, boxes, hampers, and bags" all loaded into the wagon to leave Poland (Stranger 22). When they leave the detention camp in Montreal, she mentions the "baskets, suitcases, bundles" (27) that must be brought along, and finally when they arrive in Chicago, "[t]he bags, boxes, hampers, suitcases, and children" are loaded one last time for their final destination (28). The psychological burden of displacement is reiterated by the physical burden of displacing things.

[94] Polacheck also recalls that there were no pictures of anyone or anything in her new home, as her father "had an aversion to having people photographed," which may have had something to do with "false idols" (Stranger 3). There are also no known photographs of Louis Satt or of his family taken together. This is interesting in light of Riis's obsession with photographing the poor and immigrant classes, to which the Satt's would have denied participation for seemingly religious and philosophical purposes. It also begs the question if others whom Riis photographed felt the same apprehension about photography and being photographed. Asserting one's denial to be "captured" is a power move not demonstrated in Riis's text.

a cabinet that fit into the corner of the room that kept and displayed “the family treasures”: “a beautiful music box that played Brahms’s ‘Lullaby’,” hand painted cups and saucers, and “a hand-carved snuff box that had belonged to a revered member of the family” (33). Mother is obviously a fond collector, valuing both American and Polish fixtures but celebrating those that are made by hand, gifted, and have never circulated in an American economy. Polacheck carefully observes these habits of amalgamated accumulation, which in turn affects the way she reads her mother’s carved sideboard in the dining room, which “displayed the lovely pieces of glass and china that my mother had brought from Poland. There was a handsome wine decanter and twelve wine glasses on a beautiful glass tray that I used to admire” (34). Following these details, Polacheck jolts her linear timeline to update the reader: “Twenty-eight years after we came to Chicago, I attended an exhibit of glassware and china that had been taken from the palace of the czar of Russia, and there I saw a duplicate of Mother’s decanter and wine glasses” (*34*). While she is using this later experience to brag about the exceptional and upper class characteristics of her mother’s things, she is also situating those personal, family things in the context of an American exhibition.[95]

As her tonality is positive and paying tribute to her mother’s tasteful possession, Polacheck ignores the fact that these objects have existed prior to her perception and that her mother owns material *similar* to that on display the czar of Russia. The possessions in the setting of institutionalized display (as opposed to domestic display) become *art objects*: objects that submit to “conceptual order and physical arrangement,” resist obsolescence, have nothing to do

[95] Satt Polcheck was known to frequent The Art Institute of Chicago, thus I infer that this might be where she saw the glassware and china exhibit around 1920. If this be the case, her mother’s possessions would be considered both institutionalized art and museum culture, thereby draining the personal, familial value from the things and replacing that affection with an exhibitory fetishism accessible by all paying patrons. See O'Rourke’s “Hilda Satt Polacheck and The Urban Folklore of Chicago's Hull-House Settlement” (2002).

with use or labor value as they demonstrate the illogicalities within capitalism, and involve "human subtlety, skill, and feeling, which along with other qualities, unite under the rubric of aesthetics" (Hepburn 6-7). Polacheck does not narratively (or negatively) consider the exigency of this transformation, rather she expresses her "enchantment" with the objects. Allan Hepburn argues that "enchanted objects" are those that beguile viewers, encourage "looking again" to resurrect the historicity and craftsmanship from a faded deadness; "objects that inhabit the real world, but they promise access to enchanted kingdoms adjacent to the real world" (16). In turn, "individuals make themselves susceptible to miracles and personal redemption," Hepburn argues; "To narrate stories about artworks in contemporary fiction is to refute the claim that the past is knowable only through signs…History does not happen only *in* objects; it also happens *to* objects" (18). In this scene, Polacheck is indeed enchanted due to the duplicity of ownership, the adjacent temporal memoires of the decanter set, as well as the fact that she celebrates the fusing of the two identities, appreciating their shared reverence by her mother *and* American curators and thereby conceiving of a modern sense of belonging to the past, present, and future. If material can withhold two narratives, two locations, and two spots of time without failing or floundering in transmission, then Polacheck is also capable of expressing a newborn identification with both cultures and both identities.

A similar conflict between museum culture and immigrant-produced materials occurs when the family attends and participates in the World's Columbian Exposition in May 1893. Polacheck documents how family from overseas came to enjoy the "a world of enchantment," filled with Ferris wheels, electricity, and exhibitions (40). The Exposition itself was a boisterous cultural statement, an argument for American power, and an expression of the convergence of technological, economic, and political forces that eventually shaped modern America. As Alan

Trachtenberg argues, “controversies over the meaning of America symbolized struggles over reality, over the power to define as well as control it,” hence the Exposition sought to glaze over the everyday confusions of a transitional age (8) Trachtenberg’s assessment of the World’s Fair as a cultural gallery of “Not Things, but Men,” indicates that “art provided the mode of presentation, the vehicle, the medium through which material progress manifests itself, and manifests itself precisely as serving the same goals as art: the progress of the human spirit” (213). Such progress is exactly what Polacheck felt and experienced upon visitation. Polacheck remembers how her name was attached to a small canvas bag that she had made for the Jewish Training School’s exhibit and how her sister’s embroidered white silk cover and pillow for a doll’s bed was displayed alongside her own work. She writes, “We were very proud of our work and very proud of our school and even more proud of America, where all these wonderful things were happening” (40). Once more the author does not acknowledge the spectacle of her art, even as a physical spectator to her own project. Instead, she reads her participation and handcrafted material as contributing to the four hundred years of American history in which her family is now expressively privileged to play a part. The author’s pride in “our work” and “our school” suggests a feeling of inclusion to the wonderful things “our country” was creating. Polacheck does not recognize her sewn canvas bag and her sister’s miniatures as symbols of foreignness, but of her contribution and transculturation. This also evokes her intention with the memoir’s past-tense title: she “came” a stranger, but is now a citizen.

Like Yezierska, Polacheck’s faith in objects and curiosity for creation derives from her parent’s habits and careers. Polacheck’s father works as a Jewish tombstone carver who advises his daughter to consider how material and craft provide opportunity in America. The only tombstone carver in Wloclawek, Father learned to carve from a long family line of craftsmen and

owned his own shop, which provided a healthy income in Poland, as well as in America. Polacheck takes a lively interest in her father's prideful craft, asking, "Why were different designs carved on different tombstones? What did the words mean? Why were some stones small and large?" (6). Father is remembered as patiently and proficiently answering each question, explaining the symbols used to depict the life and death of the deceased.[96] When the family arrives in America, Father discovers that there is no Jewish tombstone carver in Chicago, and he easily supplies the demand knowing, "To all Jews the marking of the grave of a departed relative was a religious responsibility. And since thousands of Jews were coming to Chicago from Europe, tombstones were needed with Hebrew inscriptions" (35).

Not only does Father's skill migrate to America, but so does the demand for his trade. His work's purpose is culturally hybrid: out of American marble and sandstone, Father upholds a sacred tradition for his community while also participating in a marketplace economy that demands his employment. German, Polish, and Russian immigrants all wanted their "mother tongue carved on the stones," so Father made ten dollars a day, worked his own hours, and still kept the Sabbath because his employer knew of no other skilled carver that could take the man's place (35). Father utilizes the proximity of his shop to the Jewish Training School to send all of his children to a prestigious school, thus his craftsmanship makes the American Dream possible for his family, although the author clearly does not realize this until her father's death: "I did not connect the carving of these tombstones with the food I ate, or the clothes I wore, or the toys that I enjoyed" (32). In order to supplant her father's lack, Polacheck looks for employment in the Want Ads, and becomes tangled in an epiphanic moment that reiterates her attunement to

[96] Polacheck's editor/daughter, Dena Epstein, offers an elaborate footnote on the historical symbols associated with Polish-Jewish funeral art. Epstein offers this information because it appears that she would prefer to educate her audience about the correctness of these religious symbols, but also because of her generational reverence for the craft as transmitted through her mother (*Stranger* 197n4).

ambiguous material: "I began to look at all these commodities that we used every day in a different light. I had just taken things for granted…now I began to realize that somebody had to make all these things before they could get to the stores, that everything we wore and used in our daily routine of living had a little bit of human effort in it" (61). Not only does she visualize commodities as "vibratory" - "'[things] at one moment disclosing themselves as dead stuff and at the next as live presence" -, but this also illuminates for Polacheck that everyday American things are infused with immigrant life (Bennett 5). In each job she holds, she hears the echoing call for immigrant workers: "Give me the 'greenhorns' - Italian girls, Polish, girls, Jewish girls" (62). Immigrants surround the author in her factory employments, and therefore she witnesses her own human effort in the American apparel she sees at Marshall Fields. And while Polacheck becomes jaded by her inability to earn a steady wage, she does celebrate the idea that immigrants "were to play a significant part in the pattern of American life," recognizing that from her lowly position she was still a productive agent of nation-building (74).

Polacheck emphasizes the hybridity of things - and thus of herself - on several other occasions throughout the text. Even Polacheck's last memory of her grandmother is augmented by American iconography: "She sat there in her best blue silk dress with a cap made of the same silk, edged with narrow lace ruffles. In later years, when I saw pictures of Martha Washington, I thought of my grandmother's cap" (22). Polacheck collapses the memory of her grandmother with a historical portrait of the First Lady of the United States, an admired symbol of the American Revolution, once again reiterating a blended identity influenced by memories in both America and Poland.[97] Another fused memory is rendered when Polacheck describes her favorite

[97] In Robert P. Watson's article, "Remembering Martha" in *OAH Magazine of History* 14.2 (2000), 54-56, he writes that Martha Washington was well known for possessing social grace, impressive domestic skills, and astute political relations that elevated her as both a powerful leader and an icon of domestic stewardship (Watson 55). Polacheck's identification of her foreign grandmother in portraits of Martha, then, reads as both subtle praise for her

and first teacher in America; she remembers, "I noticed that she was writing with a golden pen point…At one time I had visualized that only the czar could have a golden pen. Then I thought I would rather that she had it" (38). Her perception of a golden pen point is forever altered by this experience as the favorite teacher appropriates the czar's imagined possession. Polacheck's first impression is a foreign comparison, but she corrects herself and the rightful ownership but realizing her own affinity for this new leader over her old one; then pen becomes more American than Russian. Thus Polacheck "gives" this thing to America (and to her own consciousness) as a representation not only of power, but also of charity and goodwill.

A disadvantage to this hybridity, however, is the experience of America's international conflicts that overwhelmed mainstream propaganda, as well as Polacheck's own philosophy about war and outsiders. She narrates her awareness of the Spanish-American War via her experiences at the Jewish Training School:

> In February 1898, I began to realize that America was at war…now the children came to school wearing huge buttons pinned to their dresses and coats with the words 'Remember the Main; to hell with Spain.' What confused me even more was that Mrs. Torrance did not object to the buttons. I recall an assembly where we were told that our country was at war and we must do everything we could to help. I kept thinking, What can I do? It seemed that the only thing I could do was to wear a button with the forbidden word on it. That button bothered me. Why did I have to be profane to be patriotic?...I was told that in time of war things were different. I accepted her explanation, but I felt that I was giving up a certain decency on account of the war. Then I tried to justify this by thinking that it was my patriotic duty to hate Spain, and perhaps the only way I could show my hatred was to wear the button. (47)

This passage is fraught with dubious logic and childlike naivety, but moreover plagued by questionable authenticity when her daughter, Dena Epstein, claims in a footnote that the event's timeline could not have possibly occurred as recorded. Epstein argues, "Either the episode took place somewhere else or it was a fictional detail in keeping with her lifelong opposition to war"

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grandmother's character and as indication that she belongs to both national histories.

(204n7). While this notation to some extent undermines the entire memoir's reliability, it suggests that Polacheck recognized subject-object relationships as so effective in illustrating the nuances of a hybrid identity that she employed materialisms like the button in her narrative to demonstrate her beliefs. Be this a fictive device or not, this tiny thing has a significant impact on her political subjectivity, and the button teaches Polacheck how to probe her established beliefs (on profanity, on religion, on war), how to demonstrate patriotism in America via the institutionalized pressure of material-political things, and how to dangerously assume that if she loves one country, she must hate others. We might assume that Roosevelt's rhetoric of "us" versus "them" is at play here, forcing Polacheck's hand to make visibly certain that she is with her American audience. Perhaps this is why the button "bothered" her, as it indicates erasure instead of amalgamation. The button's daunting display on her own dress expunges her identity as an outsider because it implies a hatred for outsiders; she is excluding Spaniards and justifies this action solely based on wanting to appear patriotic.

Polacheck's compliance mirrors the fear mongering and backwards xenophobia with which this chapter began, and which we see resurrected ten-fold in the twenty-first century. This is not to say that Polacheck endorsed bigotry or scorned her Polish-Jewish heritage - I have argued the contrary-, but here is a weighted moment when "America First!" rhetoric is recapitulated through the eyes of a new generation of Americans who wanted nothing more than to freely fit in, pursue happiness, and avoid persecution. This scene contributes a dim reality about the anxious ambivalence experienced by immigrants who wanted nothing more than to secure asylum and prosper alongside individuals who began their transformation into "real Americans" and who defended their home against "outsiders." Polacheck is deciphering here

how far one might go (mentally or physically) to become an American (including the denial and exclusion of others as to not be denied or excluded).

Herein lies the psychological tension of assimilation and transplantation, highlighted through a discourse of materiality. By recognizing the utility of describing possessions, both foreign and domestic, Polacheck, like Riis and Yezierska, developed a modern kinship with the material world that diversified and recreated fragmented senses of identity in a new place. Collectively, the texts analyzed here confirm how immigrant identities are represented in a constant state of flux, challenged by a persuasive comingling of Eastern-European and American things but determined to observe an ethnic and social identity that promised success. These experiences remain a source vibrancy in the history of American life, at the same time that they confront what it means to be an American.

CHAPTER 5

BLACK THINGS: OWNERSHIP AND INHERITANCE IN THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

In Danzy Senna's novel *Caucasia* (1998), the biracial narrator Birdie Lee inherits a box of "Negrobilia" by her black father when he disappears with her sister for Brazil. The box initially contains a collection that Birdie possesses as a reminder of her African American heritage: a Black Nativity program, a fisted pick, a black Barbie doll head, a tourist pamphlet on Brazil, a gifted Egyptian necklace from a museum, a James Brown eight-track cassette, and her black sister's Golliwog doll (127). Birdie not only treasures the box, but carefully adds to it: a photo of her white mother and black father on their wedding day, a picture of Exu ripped from a library book, a postcard from her aunt in a desperate attempt to locate Birdie, a family heirloom from her grandmother. Birdie's anxiety about the missing parts of her family and therefore knowing "how it all had come together" (31) throughout the novel translates into both recovering her family history and reconstructing a racial identity that is both visible (she appears white) and invisible (she is of black ancestry). This collection becomes her cornerstone, signs of her identity that the social and racial world cannot identify for her. Her persistent manipulation of the collection liberates her as a conscious agent in control of the historical narrative that informs her identity, and she becomes self-aware by rebuilding and revising the visible evidence that validates her very existence in a world where she once felt invisible.

In many ways, Senna revives the "tragic mulatto" genre by developing a character who consults tangible evidences - manuscripts, inheritances, and blood - in order to navigate intangible racist ideologies and expectations; a character similar to those developed by James Weldon Johnson, Jessie Redmon Fauset, and Zora Neale Hurston who all considered how identity could be better understood through the recovery and revision of material. Senna's

protagonist is representative of depictions of biracial identity crises in African American literature published throughout the twentieth century, and as a biracial author herself, she evokes questions about the nature of that identity still lingering after her predecessors. Mainly, what constitutes racial identity: physical matter or social construction? How do these two measurements of race coexist? What happens when the real materiality of life confirms one identification and the abstract social world endorses another? Is the concept of materiality valued - aesthetically, economically, functionally - in the same way by black citizens as it is for white?

My aim in this chapter is to examine how both African American authors and biracial characters negotiate identity through possession and ownership, but also how they address racial and national *belonging* through the physical belongings they inherit or create. Whereas the previous chapter demonstrates ownership as a method of embracing hybridity and dual nationalism, this chapter focuses on twentieth-century authorial skepticism about how black ownership and personal possessions function in a country historically and economically driven by proprietary whiteness. And whereas this dissertation has thus far engaged in exploring representations of ownership as a leisure (although revolutionary) activity associated with conspicuous consumption, this chapter finds that no such leisure, much less access, existed for the black underclass citizen. In fact, African Americans are typically stereotyped in political and social rhetoric as showing little to no interest in personal acquisition, inheritance, or proprietorship because of the effect of slavery's long denial of black power, property, or kinship. Early twentieth century Americans seldom saw representations of black consumers in national advertisements, magazines, or popular culture. Roland Marchand argues that African American bodies were more likely to be illustrated as participating in the domestic help market, as service employees, or as primitive non-Americans in travel guides for exotic places (193). Alissa G. Karl

also suggests that "widespread exclusion of blacks from consumer marketplaces concurrent with racial and political disenfranchisement sheds a critical light on the promises of a so-called consumer democracy" (116). Not only were mainstream representations of black ownership made to appear uncommon and problematic, but the potential autonomy and intimacy with consumer products and material possessions appeared unavailable to an entire race of American citizens who, in reality, were just as capable of purchasing, collecting, inheriting, and creating things as anyone else.

Moreover, American literature has long shaped what Toni Morrison calls an "Africanist presence" (*Playing in the Dark* 5), a stereotypical grab-bag of marginal and passive black characters who lack any desire "to have;" thus we have been conditioned to overlook instances of property aspirations unless the scene involves theft, scavenging, piracy, or looting, instances of abrupt property seizure that represent the black property owner as menacing and criminal.[98] This stereotype derives from Frederick L. Hoffman's *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro* (1896), which argued, "with a greater tendency to crime and pauperism than the whites, the negro race has also, as shown by the facts just given, a far lower degree of economic activity and inclination towards accumulation of capital and other material wealth" (308). Hoffman's text solidified modern rhetoric on race-relations, and his "statistical data" of racial criminality reinforced the need for high incarceration rates, the policing of blackness, and the violent enforcement of Jim Crow laws across the nation. W. E. B. Du Bois argued in 1932, "Nothing in the world is easier in the United States than to accuse a black man of crime," which

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[98] Lovalerie King provides a legal perspective in literature on race and theft in her book *Race, Theft, and Ethics: Property Matters in African American Literature* (2007), arguing that, "the stereotype of the black thief is an inevitable byproduct of the American legal system" (5). Additionally, interdisciplinary scholars continue to produce work that studies the racial dimensions of propaganda when covering looting and property violence in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, a stigma that remains with the black American population. See Kirk A. Johnson, Mark K. Dolan, and John Sonnett's "Speaking of Looting: An Analysis of Racial Propaganda in National Television Coverage of Hurricane Katrina" in *Howard Journal of Communications* 22.3 (2011), 302-318.

had everything to do with white control, and nothing to do with actual crimes committed (*Selected Writings* 126).[99] Moreover, despite the success of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), many white readers missed the sympathetic point that Bigger was a victim of oppression and systemic racism and instead saw his intended robbery, aggravated assaults, and murder as inevitable because of his race. Dispelling representations of African American criminality appeared impossible, even in the twenty-first century, but between 1910 and 1940, great efforts were made by black authors to illustrate hard-working, socially-mobilizing, upstanding black citizens who were free to own and operate personal possessions, and I demonstrate how this counter-rhetoric on black ownership worked to both terminate racial stereotypes and claim an identity of control.

This chapter salvages the relationship between African Americans and *rightful* claims to ownership by analyzing representations of lawful acquisition and gifted inheritances that allow authors to confront the transformation of African Americans from property to personhood in their fictions. Twentieth-century African American authors express a desire to reclaim a language of materialism that subjectively meditates identity, autonomy, and legacy. Representing subject-object relationships in their literature creates the opportunity to contribute to and revise the discourses of ownership from which black Americans have been barred for so long. If race is "an active, dynamic idea or principle that assists in the constitution of social reality" (*Against Race* 57), Gilroy argues, not an indicator of essential identity, then this chapter intends to focus on the dynamics of identity that are influenced by external forces - both environmental and social - and vibrant matter, in order to identify the network of assemblages that constitute human

[99] The emergence of popular (white) crime fiction during these crucial decades of racial anxiety and widely circulated preconceptions about black criminality is also, according to Theodore Martin, "how the narration of crime might be linked to the criminalization of race" (704).

existence. "The body circulates uneasily through contemporary discussions of how one knows the group to which one belongs" (24), Gilroy adds, so it is also my intention to also analyze representations of "black things," not only black bodies, that populate narratives of race and radically alter character feelings of belonging to racial, social, familial, and national communities.[100] Too, we must be conscious of how *all* types of Americans contribute to the narrative of underclass experience, so by valuing these voices as indictors of a unique but similar social condition, we are attuning ourselves to a more complete portrait of the materiality that confronted and enlivened underclass citizens.

Although historians and critics alike have often noted the systemic denial of black participation in American capitalism throughout Reconstruction and into the twentieth century,[101] few literary scholars have directly addressed black property ownership as a dominant trope in modernist African American fiction. Many critical inquiries survey the history of black ownership in relation to the tradition of white property rights and privilege, perceiving consumerism to be a "vehicle of oppression" for black Americans (Gibson 3). In *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* (2006), for example, George Lipsitz stresses that "[w]hite settlers institutionalized a possessive investment in whiteness by making blackness synonymous with slavery and whiteness synonymous with freedom" (3). The legal system confirmed this language of division and difference in 1898 with the *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision, which notoriously determined that "separate but equal" accommodations for black and whites did not

[100] My phrase, "black things," as used in this chapter and stated in the title, indicates those things belonging to or in the possession of literary characters that recognize or express themselves as being black or biracial. Moreover, most "black things" in these texts are recognized as indicating blackness; for example, Johnson's ragtime music sheets, Fauset's Bible inscriptions, and Hurston's collection of folklore are all considered "black things." I further elaborate on each and others later in the chapter.

[101] See James C. Davis, *Commerce in Color: Race, Consumer Culture, and American Literature 1893-1933* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007) and Mary Patillo-McCoy, *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril among the Black Middle Class* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999).

violate the Fourteenth Amendment's guarantees of equal citizenship and due process. The uneven legacy of slavery and segregation manifested in a self-perpetuating system of discrimination that "protect[ed] the privileges of whites by denying communities of color opportunities for asset accumulation and upward mobility" (Lipsitz viii). Whiteness became a legally recognized identity that conferred entitlement and material privilege, and because underclass African Americans lacked the social and economic capital needed to thrive during the Jim Crow era, they were continually persecuted and denied space within the white capitalist community.[102]

This chapter confronts existing scholarship on the literary significance of black property ownership by examining the representation of material objects as a vehicle for agentic identity formation (instead of oppression) in three African American works: James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Jessie Redmon Fauset's *There Is Confusion* (1924), and Zora Neal Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935). These authors, all important figures of the Harlem or New Negro Renaissance, blended fiction with autobiography in order to create counter-narratives to racist discourses on blackness while also participating in a process of self-creation and self-emancipation. By focusing on texts that span three decades, we are able to appreciate a continual and common consideration of property value in black narratives. These three texts specifically provide pivotal examples of the era's inability to engage with material objects without considering how they have been socially constructed to signify race. The possessions detailed here are themselves attached to some racial history or memory that

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[102] In *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004), bell hooks argued much later, "At the center of the way black male selfhood is constructed in white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy is the image of the brute – untamed, uncivilized, unthinking and unfeeling" (x). Her skepticism lead to the conclusion that black men should must turn away from the fantasies of "hedonistic materialism" (16) meant to trap African Americans, but rather invest in sharing resources and self-actualization (31).

complicates the relationship between the thing and the character's identification with the thing. In calling on the Proustian *objet trouvé*, Maurizia Boscagli argues,

> Memory is set in motion, and the past "opened up" by an object and by the sensations produced on the body of the subject of remembrance. The subject is no longer the spectator of a past scene that he recalled contemplatively as an image; instead, the past happens to the present-day subject as tactile experience. (193)

A similar corporeal effect is described in these texts where an object's memory physically frustrates the subject because they must mentally rehearse a long history of enslavement; the collective trauma of the past conjures the oppressive experiences of the present. The past is not even past, so it seems, and the subject expresses feelings of helplessness and "irresoluteness" (Fauset 297) because of the interconnectivity between the subject and the object, between the past and the present. But while characters see their things as narrating some scene or memory that defines who they are, these authors also imagine a "plasticity possible" (Boscagli 4) in the subject-object engagement where the character can choose to hide, confront, or dispense of the possession and render it a relic instead of active matter. These authors imagine their subjects as *owning* a new narrative. In doing so, new meaning materializes within the manifest object, and the subject is freed from its tunnel-vision, or the supposition that the subject is chained to the past, so to speak. The representation of this powerful revision of object memory allows black authors to demonstrate both the power and potential for black and biracial subjects to reshape their identity through the reconfiguration of a possession's narrative. By taking apart the pieces of one's environmental stimuli and laying them out for us to see, Johnson, Fauset, and Hurston focus on dismissing the thingness of identity and emphasizing the agency of ownership as a viable source of empowerment. Their purpose in rendering subject-object relationships is to deny the reification of persons and to illustrate instead a community capable of controlling the national narrative with the assertion of their human rights.

In developing this argument, I have drawn on scholars who fuse critical race theory with material culture studies in examining how material ownership relates to identity and agency. In particular, Sandy Alexandre's recent work on the historic and symbolic modes of property shares this chapter's related concerns. She argues that when material things and bodies are characterized and considered as chattel in literature, it reveals "the importance of preserving, reclaiming, and creating black property, irrespective of how entangled in black abjection that property may be" ("[the] Things" 75). The properties upon which Alexandre focuses are specific and violent: lynching photographs, trees, and the land where black people were formerly lynched, as represented in African American poetry and prose. Her work demands that readers consider how "the eventual feat of self-possession encourage[s] a revision of the notion of property that incorporates rightful claims to ownership of one's very person" (*Properties* 5). This project broadens Alexandre's scope of possession by examining the distinctive ways in which everyday things mediate race, identity, belonging, as well as how the power to produce or revise the legacy of possessions affects the future of cultural representations of racial identity in America. Additionally, I look closer at the manifestation of inheritances that authors consider in their fictions both biologically and materialistically, and how this transaction both binds and unravels conceptions of family and self. If the one-drop rule determined black racial identity in the United States, did *all* inherited matter have the power to transform one's identification? Are the historical and political implications of black men and women inheriting "white objects" as contentiously imagined as black men and women inheriting white genes?

My analysis monitors how Johnson, Fauset, and Hurston reinterpret agency through the recovery and consideration of personal material and inheritances that signal the continuity of black ownership. In *The Claims of Kinfolk* (2003), Dylan C. Penningroth argues that when

tracing inheritance practices in black families from slavery into the twentieth century, "[i]t is difficult to pick out one consistent inheritance rule because kinship itself was flexible" (90). His study supports the notion that black property and inheritance are not simply defined by use value, exchangeability, or traditional vertical transfer, but by the social relationships and racial identities embodied in these personal effects. Concerns about materiality and textuality then become central to these explorations of identity politics. Each author destabilizes racial categories by exposing how inheritances revise or erase "whiteness" and "blackness" as they move through time and space. In *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man,* Johnson allows the reader to consider a full trajectory of inheritances that shape the black family by looking at both the narrator's ten-dollar gold piece worn around his neck that suggests allegiance to a white paternal lineage, and then his "black music" manuscripts that he refuses to pass to his son. The adaptation and rejection of these materials determines a racial identity that rejects blackness but demonstrates control with choice. However, the white and black Bye families of *There is Confusion* are indivisible within a family Bible. Fauset's personal effects chart Peter Bye's identity as transformed from passive servitude to active insurgence, from lost to found. In recognizing his ancestor's power to change the narrative by marking out his name in the Bible, as well as his own, Peter is able to pronounce a sense of freedom and belonging he has searched for all of his life. After looking at material things represented within texts, we might consider how these texts themselves are things. Hurston's *Mules and Men* is a testament to the process of collecting folklore, and this chapter closes with a discussion of the author's consideration of her own role in the American literary marketplace, both as a relief worker for the WPA Federal Writer's Project and as a Southern black woman. While developing characters who reclaim and preserve their identities through everyday things, African American authors reflected on how

their literary works would do the same: would their literary things communicate an "authentic blackness" for future generations to inherit? Or would their work be misinterpreted by both black and white audiences; dismantled, repackaged, and distributed as stereotypical, "dead stuff"?[103] Would their investment in publication reinforce the entire system of capitalism as just another commodity, or would it be able to represent some kind of subversive domain within the system?

To answer such questions about the (im)mortality of their writing, Johnson, Fauset, and Hurston mediate on how collections made up of black things fare within and outside of white environments. Collections of property present in these fictions are considered not only for how they drive a character to reassess his or her racial identity, but also for what they reveal about the systematic denial of economic and cultural capital for those marginalized bodies that must then discover new strategies for acquiring or creating personal assets. Under the heavy rhetorical pull to produce a literary art of "New Negroes" during the Harlem Renaissance, these authors express apprehension about being collected themselves within both mainstream and subsidiary marketplaces, thus reflecting an ambivalence toward the literary marketplace and its own habits of laying claim to a new generation of black property.

Materializing the Harlem Renaissance

From the outset, American citizenship was founded on the basis of a person's ability to own property, and the end of slavery transformed a generation of "things," legally and constitutionally owned and operated, into a new body of citizens. For example, in 1705, Virginia law "provided that a slave might be inventoried as real estate…Before the law he was no longer

[103] In Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928), the protagonist's friend Ray denounces racial uplift politics and his educated background, as he believes it to be second-hand futility: "We out to get something new, we Negros. But we get our education like – like our houses. When the whites move out, we move in and take possession of the old dead stuff. Dead stuff that this age has no use for" (243).

a person but a thing" (Franklin and Moss 26). The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 made it such that anyone, North or South, could "trade the souls and bodies of men as an equivalent to money, in their mercantile dealings" (Stowe 624 qtd. in Best 2). Not only did white lawmakers certify the black body into a thing, but went so far as to include the soul as legal and material property as well. Similarly, the same man who drafted the American Constitution also wrote publically on his suspicious that "the blacks…are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind" (Jefferson 262 qtd. in Baer 17); *all* of Thomas Jefferson's words have since been reflected in American law and creed, but also in the way that we imagine the African American body: as "un-endowed" with the proper, white materials needed to for dominance. At the close of the Civil War, although emancipation had been proclaimed, the South was unprepared to abandon the labor system that had supported its economy (and the country) for so long. The Southern aggression that ensued prevented the occurrence of immediate civil progress, from President Andrew Johnson's opposition to the Fourteenth Amendment to the Black Codes passed by Southern States to restrict African American freedoms, as well as the Klu Klux Klan's development and insurgence that threatened both government and local bodies with its power and white supremacy. The issues publically held with the Reconstruction amendments and the Civil Rights Act (1866) included the limited definition of rights ("equal" rights seemed too bold a statement for some lawmakers)[104], federal oversight (which caused President Johnson to veto the amendment and the bill), and the fear of equal claims to personal ownership, which included the right to bear arms and "the same right in every state and territory…to inherit, purchase, lease,

[104] See Judith Baer's analysis of the drafting of the Fourteenth Amendment and the inherent problems with its language and confirmation of rights in her book *Equality Under the Constitution: Reclaiming the Fourteenth Amendment* (1983). See also Stephen P. Halbrook's *Freedmen, The Fourteenth Amendment, and The Right to Bear Arms, 1866-1876* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1998).

sell, hold, and convey real and personal property."[105] The effect of this transformation, according to Robyn Wiegman, meant "the literal and symbolic loss of the security of the white patronym and an attendant displacement of the primacy of the white male" (92), which also encouraged a violent and legal backlash against the very idea of egalitarianism.

Fear of black resurgence or rebellion - of a "shared" American experience that made white Americans feel at a social and economic disadvantage - consequentially led to the outcome of *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which upheld the constitutionality of racial segregation laws that denied black bodies occupation or ownership of white things and spaces. For African Americans, life became a cycle of reading "colored" or "white" signs, utilizing separate facilities, and feeling physically excluded from equal opportunities, goods, and services for decades. An anxious but sharp mindfulness to the materiality of one's public environment (toilets, water fountains, passenger cars), as well as to what one could physically possess in one's private sphere (handguns, style, schoolbooks) is the affective response to segregated America at the turn of the century. In Karen Simecek's review of recent studies in affect theory, she defines "affect" as "felt stuff, which ranges from an intentional state (a feeling towards, about, or in relation to something other) to something that forms the background of felt experience, which shapes our subjective experience and engagement with the world" (419). Affective responses are both linguistic and corporeal; a sense of embarrassment is communicated by a diverted eye, or a silent nod is recognized as apprehensive respect without enough engagement to be noticed. Simecek adds that "intersubjective emotional response[s]" (424) are binding to communities or masses of people who experience and respond to similar stimuli, in this case, segregation and systemic injustice. Simecek also highlights Nick Salvato's work in *Obstruction* (2016), where he labels

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[105] The Civil Rights Act of 1866, 14 Stat. 27–30, chap. 31 (April 9, 1966).

affective “obstructions” as “any constraints which could represent a block to cognition” that should not be averted, but approached creatively as “something of value,” or as useful provocations that support alternative modes of intellect (420). The subject alters their phenomenal experience of the obstruction, not by going around the wall, so to speak, but by clinging to it and modifying its shape and orientation; by “rethinking thinking itself,” the subject uncovers new modes of thought and reaction that can rematerialize the felt world (Salvato 14 qtd. in Simecek 420). We can read an affective response to the obstruction of racial segregation within the African American literature published during the era, but we can also see the collective approach to such an obstruction as the communal migration to Harlem and the cultural birth of the “New Negro Movement.”[106]

The Great Migration relocated hundreds of thousands of African Americans to more industrial, racially tolerant, and opportunistic corners of the country, including the Harlem section of Manhattan, where black intellectuals and artists alongside unskilled laborers and middle-class youths could freely express and identify themselves as proud and progressive. Between 1910 and 1935, Harlem became home to self-determined African Americans like Josephine Baker, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, and Nella Larsen, who could gain access and opportunity to new spaces, commodities, and experiences that had never before been available.

[106] To clarify: I am not arguing that the obstruction of racial segregation is a valuable historical moment that inspired the Harlem Renaissance, nor am I downplaying racism and the denial of human rights as a simple “obstruction” that needs “clinging to.” I am arguing that there is undeniably a collective affective response to both race as a felt identity and the experience of “separate but equal” environments that physically and phenomenally moved differentiated bodies apart and away from one another. This felt movement and identity, I argue, produced a generation of black Americans who sought out equal economic opportunity and found it in Harlem, where they had the freedom to create their own cultural expressions. As far as I know, no scholar has studied the affective responses to Jim Crow laws in African American literature during this time period; there is much work to be done on the presence of racial affect in American literature. Benjamin Lamb-Books’s *Angry Abolitionists and the Rhetoric of Slavery: Moral Emotions in Social Movements* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) discusses how affect impels rhetoric in abolitionist discourse only; and Divya P. Tolia-Kelly and Mike Crang’s “Affect, Race, and Identities” in *Environment and Planning* A 42 (2010), 2309-2314, very briefly reviews the capacity of “racialized affects” (2313) to create fluid instead of fixed social categories.

With their own publishing companies and nightclubs and storefronts, African Americans participated in commodity exchange, demonstrated a Lockean "possessive individualism" with employment and craft, and expressed the desire to take back their bodies and strive for upward mobility.[107] Davarian Baldwin argues that the class of "New Negros" embraced the practice of consumption in order to create new forms of modernity while appropriating a level of control in mass-produced industries of sound, visual, and print culture (6). A broader public marketplace emerged where black culture, resistance, and identity could be openly debated and consumed in the form of art and artifact. Leaders like Du Bois saw such strategic consumption and production to be a "new instrument of democratic control," and a way of "securing a level of autonomy for black cultural production by wresting some power away from white media houses and cultural industries" (Baldwin 234). Houston A. Baker Jr. would later confirm the success of the movement as "a family affair" that left a lasting expressive legacy of "blues geography" for future black generations who would need a distinctive cultural heritage (*Modernism* xviii). Baker's recognition of the Harlem Renaissance in terms of inheritance - as a felt sense of familial belonging - reiterates the importance of recuperating and valuing heritage, both in physical and aesthetic form, as a vehicle for identity formation. The Harlem Renaissance's body of work forever exists as an heirloom itself that imagined race from a new vantage point that could again be reimagined by future African Americans.

However, many writers of the Harlem Renaissance expressed their concerns for the growing commodification of culture facilitated by new media technologies that allowed for mass

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[107] John Locke's labor theory of property verified that every man had a single "Property in his own Person," that the "Labour of his Body, and the Work of his Hands…are properly his" (288). C. B. Macpherson clarifies that Locke's reasoning proved fundamental the concept of "possessive individualism" where "the human essence is freedom from dependence on the wills of others, and freedom is a function of possession." See Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988) and C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1962), 3.

production and distribution, as well as for the rampant consumerism that effected a new type of black identity. Few political leaders like Booker T. Washington argued for "heroic materialism" and "industrial education," to accept the economic benefits of capitalism even if it meant accepting segregation. Alain Locke also acknowledged a sort of sacrificial participation in American capitalism in *The New Negro* (1925) upon indicating "a new vision of opportunity, of social and economic freedom, of a spirit to seize, even in the face of an extortionate and heavy toll" shared by the black masses (6). Locke understood urbanization as an economic and communal catalyst of "rebirth" for the "New Negro" (271), a platform for black pioneers to permeate white marketplaces, and an ultimate gateway toward material progress (16). Langston Hughes argued that any investment in mass-produced commodities or cultural "whiteness" meant the black consumer forfeited his distinctive "blackness;" he rejected "the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American Standardization" (1268) and to rather recreate the monolith obstruction blocking authentic expression by standing on top of it to sing, "free within ourselves (1270). Writers like George S. Schuyler and Zora Neale Hurston also expressed skepticism about the assimilation and commercialization of blackness in America during the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston feared the erasure of black vernacular and culture in the face of mass consumerism and racial primitivism that began to peak consumer interest in the 1920s.

Public demand for the "exotic" and "uninhibited" life of African American as imagined and experienced in the Harlem cabaret allowed for a commodified blackness to be recycled in the literary marketplace and sought after by major white publishers such as Alfred Knopf, Paul Kellogg, and Horace Liveright. White publishers and audiences alike insisted that black authors represent the race as primitive and exotic thereby restricting and distorting self-expression. Gina M. Rossetti's chapter on the "racial exotic" in *Imagining the Primitive in Naturalist and*

Modernist Literature (2006) examines the dialogic imagination of racial primitivism as both fearsome and attractive in Western culture at the turn of the twentieth century; as "a means to suggest both the African Americans' important separation from a deadening modern culture and their intellectual and emotional unsuitableness in this fast-paced culture" (143). Rossetti reveals the emergent "vogue of the Negro" in both white and African American literature, the fetishizing and sterilization of blackness, as well as the perpetuation of a exploitive voyeurism that robs black culture "of its particular history, context, and materiality if it is simply a convenient literary metaphor" (156). As Hurston feared, any written break from stereotypes perpetuated by a white marketplace - the tragic mulatto, the exotic primitive, the brute, the comic - could prove fatal to one's publishing opportunities. Sterling Brown observed in his essay "The Negro Author and His Publisher," that "the more truthfully we write about ourselves, the more limited our market becomes…When we cease to be exotic, we do not sell well" (qtd. in Bloom 201). Gilroy confirms the endurance of this cultural exploitation throughout the twentieth century: "Black culture is not just commodified but lends it special exotic allure to the marketing of an extraordinary range of commodities and services that have no connection whatever to these cultural forms or to the people who have developed them" (*Against Race* 214). The "allure," the aesthetics, and the artistry of blackness were ultimately molded together to create something alien, something towards which African Americans felt they did not belong.

By 1935, very few black writers were being published by large publishing houses, including Johnson and Fauset, because most black intellectuals turned their attention to race promotion instead of producing caricatures and therefore white mainstream readers lost interest in black literature. The ideological chasm between racial uplift propaganda and artistic narrative freedom created a confusing tension in the literary output that was supposed to define a single

Harlem Renaissance movement. Disturbed by the commodification of blackness and by methods of racial surveillance, African American literary production during the Harlem Renaissance exposed the complicated ways in which racial identity was revised, repackaged, and resold sometimes without the intentionality of the author. Black artists saw the adaptation and standardization of ragtime music and jazz in Tin Pan Alley productions; they saw blackface performances in vaudeville acts and heard minstrel skits on radio shows. The wildly popular *Amos 'n' Andy* show allowed for the syndication of exaggerated racial stereotypes and the reproduction an "authentic blackness" that white creator Freeman Gosden designed based on his childhood memories with an African American nanny.[108] Cherene Sherrard-Johnson also focuses on these problems of commodified race, especially for the mulatta who became a public portrait of "mediation, desire, transcendence, tragedy, respectability, and transgression" (17). The mulatta entered the cultural imagination as an "ambiguous symbol of racial uplift" (xx), a sign of hybridity that discounted the historical implications of miscegenation, but became the "connection between the commodification of the black female body and the aristocraticizing of the black race" (11). Sherrard-Johnson points to specific examples of visual and literary art plagued by misinterpretation: Archibald Motley's paintings of mixed-race women and the critical attention paid not to his talent, but to the racial classifications of his subjects; the exhibition of hyper-sexualized models, actresses, and singers in advertisements and magazines; and Nella Larsen's effort to demonstrate the fetishizing exoticism of mix-raced women who could not escape the white gaze. Those who fought "whiteness" from seeping into their literary materials and protected their black things from white possession were always considering the

[108] For additional insight into the debate surrounding the Amos 'n' Andy show, as well as its later years as a television show that featured black instead of white men, see Juan González and Joseph Torres's chapter, "Other Voices," in *News for All the People: The Epic Story of Race and the American Media* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2011).

complicated nature of owning an "authentic" form of their racial identity. African Americans wrestled with the cultural pressure to participate in a rich media industry, as well as with the reality of publishing black literature for a mass audience: could the one-dimensional form of print culture ever really capture the full aesthetic and affective experience of racial difference and identity in America? What was the value of vulnerability and modernity in a country that always felt socially unprogressive? Would America forever be a space that relied on the tradition of controlling black bodies?

Despite differing perspectives over capitalist participation, representation, and authorial intent, a common trend of provocation in the visual and literary culture of the Harlem Renaissance materializes in the form of personal ownership and exchanges of inheritance. This is why the tropes of ownership are so important to the study of African American literature: by looking at the material objects that equipped and influenced the lives of black Americans, we can fully understand how vibrant matter functions in the lives of marginalized social groups that wanted to resist objectification and therefore developed subversive strategies for acquiring or creating personal assets that could be generationally transferred as affirmation of their power and control over circumstance. To leave a lasting mark of resistance and authority was to engineer a new American narrative full of possibility and belonging; to withhold that mark was to accept the systemic racism but nevertheless a commanding gesture in determining one's own fate and position in the cosmos. Johnson, Fauset, and Hurston each experienced their own claims to property, witnessed what happens when property is redistributed, and represented subject-object relations in their literature in attempts to claim a proprietary discourse for their race while considering what is at stake in maintaining materials that symbolize both a violent past and an optimistic future. Their attunement to the networked agency of the material world shows how

black modernists utilized the everyday stuff of their environments to read the very fractures and revolutions of their racial history as to determine their own place within it. By textually analyzing personal and private possessions imagined during the Harlem Renaissance, we are able to clearly identify vital moments of mental and physical negotiation between identity and legacy.

White Fathers and Black Things for an "Ex-Colored Man"

In *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), James Weldon Johnson tells a fictional passing narrative in which a light-skinned mulatto man forsakes his black heritage for the opportunity to safely and more successfully navigate white America, thereby calling into question the constructed and distorted nature of racial identities. Johnson and his original white publishers marketed the novel as nonfiction without the author's name until it was reprinted in 1927. Johnson himself expressed a demand for and pleasure in publishing anonymously because he believed reviewers "accepted it as a human document" about human racialization that doubled as literature and sociology (*Along* 238). This authorial confusion combined with stern intimacy - the narrator begins the novel, "I know that in writing the following pages I am divulging the great secret of my life" (1) - and voyeuristic intrusion - "The Publishers" of the preface explain, "In this book the reader is given a glimpse behind the scenes of this race-drama which is being here enacted (ii) - intrigued both white and black readership. The novel's scenes of prejudice, lynching, and jazzing aroused white appetites for the exotic while critics lauded the text for revealing "the inner life of the Negro" (ii). Aldon L. Nielsen argues that Johnson's text is historically profound because "it exists in a state of suspension between racial realms of cognition," and therefore is "exemplary of the instability, the impossibility, of American racial definition" (173-74). This felt "suspension" that Nielsen refers to derives from Du Bois's distinctive influence on Johnson, which frames the idea of double consciousness in the narrative.

Johnson characterizes his narrator as both black *and* white, a dual personality with an ability to cross the color line quite literally, as well as entertain white people in white spaces with an "elusive undertone" (178) of a colored man's song. Even when occupying black spaces and congregating with black church members, the narrator is at once "gathering material for work" that is derivative of his native birthright, as well as "trying to catch the spirit of the Negro in his relatively primitive state" (169), an indication of his awareness that he cannot be seen or known as *being* the primitive Negro. The narrator is constantly in a state of "two-ness," and his mission to create tangible art in America with both selves that neither "bleaches [the] Negro soul" nor "Africanize[s] America," drives the narrative and ultimately obstructs his ability to function in society (Du Bois 3). In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois establishes what will become the Johnson's narrator's greatest "striving": "to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius. These powers of body and mind have in the past been strangely wasted, dispersed, or forgotten" (3). And despite his strivings, the narrator finds that he must give up both efforts and retire from social life in order to protect his children from what he ultimately calls a "brand" of suffering (206). In not being able to create the "thing" that embodies both selves, the narrator becomes "thing-like:" he is both inactive and "wasted."

Most critics, like Nielsen, focus primarily on the mechanics of the *Autobiography* as a passing narrative, the narrator's role as a "privileged" manipulator or "perfect informant," and the process of "public self-denial and psychological self-doubt" that prevents any self-empowerment from being fully reached.[109] In her essay on the novel's racial performances,

[109] These critics include Donaghy, Daniel, *Writing through Resistance: African -American Writers and their Audiences, 1912–1932* (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2006), 44; Lesley Larkin, *Race and the Literary Encounter: Black Literature from James Weldon Johnson to Percival Everett* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2015), 37; and Jennifer L. Shulz, "Restaging the Racial Contract: James Weldon Johnson's Signatory Strategies" in *American*

Samira Kawash argues that passing narratives are less about a "strategy of subversion" that upends constructed racial identities but rather painful stories about an individual's desire for a "stable, coherent identity" (63). This argument taps into the "human document" that Johnson wanted to create and focuses on the novel's crucial thematic concerns about agency and self-actualization. The narrator's private meditations about privilege and autonomy are symptomatic of his interactions with white and black things that aesthetically and socially affect his quest for belonging. By structuring this quest from boyhood to manhood with pieces of culture or inheritance, Johnson is exploring how things work at odds with one another when a subject identifies with neither and both races throughout the course of his life. While the narrator's passing involves a social and psychological identification with white ideology, he expresses profound attention to cultural manifestations and racial artifacts that he cannot suppress or deny, proven by his desire at novel's end to be among the "men who are *making* history and a race" (207, my emphasis). Because race is demonstrated as socially constructed in the novel, we must apprehend the "social life of things" within the text (Appadurai 5).

As we hear about the narrator's life in retrospect, tapping into his memory is at once a challenge because of his "dream-like," "faint recollection" (2) of boyhood that lacks a sense of lucidity. His initial memories, however, revolve around two material landmarks used to describe his home: "a hedge of vari-colored glass bottles stuck in the ground neck down" and "two or three wooden wash-tubs" (2). Both represent punishment and pain: the narrator digs up the bottles because he "became curious to know whether or not the bottles grew as the flowers did" and thus receives a "terrific spanking" for his actions, and the tubs held his naked body that was "scrubbed until my skin ached," while he experienced "the pain caused by the strong, rank soap

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getting into my eyes" (2). These two incidents are more clearly remembered and described than the "several people who moved in and about this little house," or any proceeding memory about the mechanics of his family life (3). The trauma and physical pain embedded in these two sets of things, as well as the detail that revolves around them, introduces how the narrator will respond to *all* material things throughout the narrative: with skepticism and "distinct mental image" (3), almost like a tunnel-vision that blurs the edges of context or history. Instead, the information he possesses about himself and race is enhanced by memories of interactions with various objects: pianos, sheet music, a photo album, a bible, and a copy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The formation of his identity is mediated through these material things. But as he matures, he becomes more frequently attuned to *who* is able to freely consume or exchange things. For example, as a young man, the narrator works in a cigar factory to earn money where he learns "not only to make cigars, but also to smoke" (70). By experiencing the immigrant-driven, "sedentary occupation" of cigar rolling and then witnessing white millionaires pass around cigars at leisure, he adopts a desire for roles of consumption instead of production (109). The narrator's naïve relationship with things becomes tainted by capitalism.

But his self-education and self-making is further complicated by what is represented as belonging to the narrator, which is a limited but significant collection of things: a ten-dollar gold piece necklace, a piano, and box of yellowing manuscripts. In the beginning, he is guaranteed a certain personal freedom through the ownership of these specific things - he has access to and control of his collection at any given time -, and therein lies their value. However, the narrator's possessions are acquired through strained, interracial exchanges, the most jarring of which are those with his white father. Despite his father's physical absence throughout the majority of the novel, his father's gifts are visible, valuable, but also confusing. The piano particularly

encourages the narrator's musical expertise which later provides him with economic and social opportunities, as well as access to white spaces and white alliances. In this context, his gifted heirlooms seem to provide white privilege and tradition. But rarely in history or literature do white fathers gift property to their black, dispossessed sons, much less acknowledge them. The novel's representations of white-black bequeathal allow Johnson to question the social norms of inheritance during the Jim Crow era. Johnson scripts an interracial network in which commodities or inheritances flow freely from white to black hands, where white things (the ten-dollar piece, the gifted piano, even the glass-doored bookcase and "horse-hair covered chairs" (4) in his mother's cottage) become comfortably owned by black men. And yet these heirlooms are represented in contrast to what Susan Stewart argues is their function: "to weave, quite literally by means of narrative, a significance of blood relation at the expense of a larger view of history and causality" (137). Even though they share the same blood, the narrative about the relationship is always fragmented or left unshared between the narrator's father, the narrator, and the narrator's own son. Therefore, the novel's heirlooms are important not as symbols of bloodlines but, rather, as emotional stimulants that breed anxiety about blood.

Without his father or the narrative of his relationship, the narrator is underexposed to and confused by models of patriarchy and masculinity; these are concepts that the material world fails to embody, although the narrator tries to read the signs. "[A] tall man with a small, dark mustache," whom he does not recognize as his father, visits his mother's small cottage two or three times a week during the narrator's boyhood, as he can hardly recall, but it is his father's shiny shoes, gold chain, and great watch that seize his attention (3). Using the word "admiration" to describe his feelings for the clothing, Johnson makes clear the narrator's inclination to feel and show love for things instead of people, certainly because of their absence in his life. For

example, he is allowed to "play" with the great gold watch, but he is "appointed" to the "service" of bringing his father a pair of slippers in exchange for a gold coin (4).[110] Whereas his father initiates a systemic relationship resembling that of employer and servant, the watch provides the boy pleasure and amusement. The narrator is driven not by patrilineal respect but by a capitalist ethic to repeat the hospitable routine; while this could be because he does not know the man is his father, it also appears that he has developed a relationship with the shoes and their aesthetic and economic value. The father, however, is unclassifiable, "an impetuous young man" (40) whom he "examined…with more curiosity, perhaps, than politeness" (33). "Who knows?" the narrator rhetorically responds when digesting his parent's love story (41). Upon a second meeting, the narrator "stopped and looked at [father] with the same feelings with which I had looked at the derby hat…he was an absolute blank to me until my eyes rested on his slender, elegant polished shoes" (30). Again, the shoes generate memory, vivid detail, and aesthetic pleasure; they are endowed with their own liveliness to which the narrator is more drawn. The narrator's father, however, is described without regard for his patriarchal, white, or even human status; nor does the narrator even think "he was different from me" (34). The narrator's failure to see his father or his clothing as racially (or socially) different speaks to his sheltered miseducation, but it also represents his freedom to evaluate people and things, to "uncolor" the world in the way he later wishes to "uncolor" himself. This possessive agency protects the narrator from feeling or appearing like another one of his father's things.

[110] Later in the novel, when the narrator finds work playing music at the Club, the millionaire's behavior mimics his father's demand for service when the millionaire drops in a few times every week and the narrator reports, "each time after I played, he gave me five dollars" (74). The millionaire wants to act as a patrilineal influence for the narrator, but the narrator becomes more focused on the types of music, sounds, and audience he creates by way of the millionaire's resources (much like his father's piano and books).

And yet that is exactly what his father sees in his son: property. Upon what appears to be his last visit, his father drills a hole in a ten-dollar gold piece and ties it around the narrator's neck, much like a "brand." As the gold pieces loses its economic value and its inability to further circulate as capital, the narrator feels like becomes valuable by the token's presence. The narrator does not recognize the capitalist or racial symbolism but instead remembers how much he treasured the gift: "I have worn that gold piece around my neck for the greater part of my life, and still possess it, but more than once I have wished that some other way had been found of attaching it to me besides putting a hole through it" (4). The fact that he wears it at all is surprising considering he still does not recognize the man as his father when this exchange occurs; he appears to be clinging to the image and action of a male role-model and learning from this "generosity" how to formulate his own manhood. The gift, in fact, has nothing to do with his father and everything to do with what it is used for and what it demonstrates: affiliation and belonging. As a child, his need for belonging is social and familial; as an adult, in the wake of watching "a rope placed about [the] neck" of a black man at a lynching, his need for belonging is racial, as he reflects on the necklace with the wish that he could wear it as skin instead of a shackle.

The necklace is what Robert Stepto calls a "bondage image," an object most critics agree is a damaging influence on his quest for autonomy and self-respect (49).[111] Donald Donaghy argues that the coin is emblematic of the narrator's life, "a mysterious totem connecting the narrator to neither the present nor the past, and to neither white nor the black race" (71). I agree with these readings, but also want to focus on the "hole"/"whole" homophone that Johnson is

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[111] See also Irina C. Negrea, "*This Damned Business of Colour": Passing in African American Novels and Memoirs* (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2005); and Valerie Smith, *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1987), 60-61.

utilizing. The hole in the coin is a flaw and a deficiency that mimics the narrator's "split-ness"; instead of inheriting "wholly" white blood, he inherits a "hole" in his life created by miscegenation and a social world that denounces interracial unions and blackness. The narrator remembers, "On the day after the coin was put around my neck my mother and I started on what seemed to me an endless journey" - toward a literal and figurative filling of the "hole" left by his father (4). The necklace as an inheritance does not confirm a lineage between father and son; it produces doubt that any lineage, past or future, will be able to exist without wholesome blood.

The necklace is not inherited by the narrator's son, nor are any of his possessions that indicate blackness. His son has inherited whiteness, "fair like his mother, a little golden-headed god," and he will never know about his grandmother's blackness (205). The narrator's promises to keep a tangible, material marking off his family's bodies: "there is nothing I would not suffer to keep the brand from being placed upon them" (206). As a brand penetrates the skin like an animal, so does the narrator determine that this inherited imprint is more violent and confining than a white body. Ultimately the narrator's decision leads him to suffer as "an ordinarily successful white man" who "drop[s] out of social life" and retires from contributing to the contemporary movement of men "who are making history and a race" (207). The novel ends as tragically as it began: with the ex-colored man "removing" himself from his black identity and secretly assimilating not only himself but his mixed family within the white world, and he presents this consequential verdict in the form of banishing his prized possessions to a box where they can no longer function or circulate in his life. His final decision to become "all white" is "difficult for me to analyze" and to cope with: "I have been a coward, a deserter" (206). Instead, he is able to express his grief and his desire to keep his birthright in the form of keeping the material possessions that have thus defined his authentic identity as a Southern black man. He

resolves to secure and stash away the fragments of his black voice in a little box "in which I still keep my fast yellowing manuscripts, the only tangible remnants of a vanished dream, a dead ambition, a sacrificed talent" (207).

The fact that he cannot bring himself to destroy the manuscripts nor share them with his family leaves the possessions in limbo, much like his inability to unite his double consciousness. Even if the "white" narrator gave his "white" son the box, it would still contain cryptic "black" materials that would jeopardize the racial and social identification of future progeny. The narrator's decision is also indicated as a learned trait of denial, as it recalls an earlier passage in which the narrator argues:

> Negroes themselves do not fully appreciate these old slave songs. The educated classes are rather ashamed of them, and prefer to sing hymns from books. This feeling is natural; they are still too close to the conditions under which the songs were produced; but the day will come when this slave music will be the most treasured heritage of the American Negro. (178)

This "natural" feeling of shame for the sake of racial uplift is an affect similarly felt not only at the end of Johnson's narrative, but throughout the Jim Crow era by those black Americans that still experienced circumstances "too close" to the conditions of slavery. And like those "educated classes" who prefer to sing from hymnbooks but "treasure" the music belonging to a distinctive black heritage, the narrator also treasures his manuscripts but guards his admiration. In this comparison, the hymnbooks, like the manuscripts, are also subversive materials that both hide and confirm blackness: without advertising blackness because it is contained by form and text, the song remains essentially black in tonality and performance. The material agent can only come to life with the human inflection of its creator; without this network, "the most thrilling emotions which the human heart may experience" (178) are lost upon the subject and the world.

Despite their painful reminder that he is a “deserter” of his racial lineage, the tangible materials that represent the narrator’s “authentic” racial identity continue to be visited and valued for their ability to provide emotional catharsis - but only so long as they remain private things that are not privileged beyond the concealment of a tiny box. In this, Johnson is commenting on the reality that black property is only allowed to socially exist in small spaces or with the right audiences, but even so, the lure of some material may curtail any attempt to banish one’s birthright. The narrator confesses: “I am possessed by a strange longing for my mother’s people” (206). The perceived “strangeness” stems from both his sense of nostalgia and his feeling of possession.[112] “The nostalgic is enamored of distance, not of the referent itself,” Susan Stewart argues; “For the nostalgic to reach his or her goal of closing the gap between resemblance and identity, *lived* experience would have to take place, an erasure of the gap between sign and signified” (145, original emphasis). The narrator cannot “get back” to his mother’s people both because the temporal gap can never be erased or repeated (as it would cancel out the affect itself), but also because he refuses to experience his mother’s blackness moving forward. In his statement, the narrator is detaching himself completely from *his* people and expressing a sense of longing that is “strange” because it is finite; he no longer belongs to those who have come before him. Additionally, the narrator feels “possessed,” himself. He is so consumed by his longing that he feels controlled by it, helpless and inanimate in the wake of his decision. By framing the narrator’s possession in the context of his own hidden possessions, Johnson indicates that both black and white selves are “lost,” and have been reduced to an oppressiveness without allegiance or identification. By turning his back on reconciling his “two-ness,” the narrator “drops out” of

[112] This also recalls DuBosian language about the talent of black men that has been “strangely wasted, dispersed, or forgotten” (Du Bois 3). A kind of “wasting” is also happening in this scene.

society all together; he can no longer function aside from denying his children the truth about their identity.

Johnson's portrayal of disinheritance conveys that both generations of men and generations of material possessions are deeply permeated with the physical and psychological trauma of racism and social tyranny in America. When the narrator sacrifices his birthright, he sacrifices all inheritances endowed with personal or racial narratives, and Johnson uses this tragic ending to illustrate a systemic racism that continues to deny colored and ex-colored men alike the freedom to govern their own possessions without social repercussions. The consequence, Johnson illustrates, is the erasure of not only the self, but of a cultural and familial heritage that ultimately succumbs to an irreversible whitewashing.

The Living Testament in *There is Confusion*

While James Weldon Johnson represents the conflicted relationship between white fathers and black sons, Jessie Redmon Fauset illustrates how twentieth-century American families contain generations of black *and* white fathers within their bloodlines. Fauset composed her novel *There Is Confusion* (1924) in direct response to T. S. Stribling's *Birthright* (1922), which offered a white author's presentation of the dangers of white privilege when racial ambiguity and interracial taboo exists. Stribling's tragic mulatto Peter is trusted by whites because they imagine his "white blood" to indicate good and trustworthiness, only to find that indolence, hatred, and animalism are inherent in blackness and jeopardize any whiteness that he may possess. Fauset inverts this popular stereotype in her novel by representing her Peter Bye as faulted because of his "strain of white blood," not his black, and because he does not know about his white great-great-grandfather until the end of the novel, he spends much of his time questioning the nature of his patrilineage, his masculinity, and his cynical temperament. *There Is*

Confusion is not a widely read or studied novel because it is itself confusing. Critics have dismissed Fauset's first novel as stylistically and structurally tiresome, "not without formal weaknesses," or too reliant on complicated genealogies that distract the reader (x).[113] The novel follows two families - the Marshalls and the Byes - and the interconnectedness of their black and white ancestors and acquaintances that complicate both social engagements and genealogical origin stories. Among the numerous characters and subplots, the novel's drama focuses most frequently upon Joanna Marshall's talent and ambition to became a famous performer and her love for Peter Bye, a contemptuous, lost young man who struggles to prove his social and biological legitimacy until the end, when the two join forces to fight racism and pursue alternative modes of success in America.

The novel is as much about race as it is about being American. Joanna is driven by notions of racial uplift and equality, but also by her mission to share her Americanism with the country: "'I want to show *us* to the world. I am colored, of course, but American first. Why shouldn't I speak to all America?'" (76, original emphasis). When she is rejected by her dance teacher because "'the white American public ain't ready for you yet, they won't have you'" (148), Joanna joins Peter's effort to understand how they both belong to a country that denies them opportunity and vocational freedom; together they seek to undermine the system and be seen as part of an aspiring new American class. Hazel V. Carby argues that Fauset's contribution in developing an ideology for an emerging black middle class included the need for a new relation to history, thus representing protagonists who "revise the irrelevant history of their parents, a history tied to the consequences of slavery" (167). Mary Dearborn agrees that Fauset's

[113] Thadious M. Davis's forward to There is Confusion presents a brief history of the text's formation, significance, and reception, while at the same time sounding critical of the novel's structure. See also Carolyn Wedin Sylvander, *Jessie Redmon Fauset: Black American Writer* (Troy, NY: Whitston Publishing Co., 1981).

characters "are motivated by the search for familial identification and lost inheritance" (145), and yet neither of these scholars reflects upon the physical materials and environments that induce epiphanic reflections about the fluctuating boundaries of race and the reestablishment of black patriarchy. Like Johnson, Fauset demonstrates a tendency to imagine belonging and race as part and parcel of those everyday possessions in domestic spheres that taunt their owners into revisiting the past in order to better understand the present. Fauset's possessions activate memory *and* confusion, and therefore they agitate more than they settle lingering concerns about identity and nativity. And unlike Johnson, Fauset's "edits" to heirlooms are resistant to the historical narrative of racial subjugation in America and thus powerfully in favor of upholding the black race as a capable race that could break away from a white institutionalized control.

Fauset, herself, became part of the emerging black middle class she illustrates in *There Is Confusion*, in part because of her participation in the Harlem Renaissance and her reputation as a major "literary midwife" for the movement.[114] She herself discovered and published writers such as Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, and Claude McKay in *The Crisis*, served as chief editor of *Brownies' Book: A Monthly Magazine for the Children of the Sun* (1920-21), and produced four novels between 1924 and 1933 that accentuated the aspirations of the black middle class, thus aligning herself with W. E. B. Du Bois's vision for the Talented Tenth. Most scholars and transcripts claim that the famous Civic Club Dinner was originally arranged in celebration of *There is Confusion*, although many others including Charles S. Johnson and Alain Locke denied such intention, claiming the group congregated to honor a "newer school of writers," most of

[114] Fauset and her novel are the only exceptions to this dissertation's study of underclass literature, but I defend my decision to keep her as a pivotal perspective to the underclass experience because (1) Fauset grew up in poverty and with a family that struggled financially after the death of her father, and (2) she imagines an up-from-slavery social history within the Bye family heritage that demonstrates underclass black men and women generationally struggling to climb the social ladder.

which were young and male (qtd. in Pochmara 72). Leaders like Locke and Wallace Thurman wanted to focus the movement's momentum on male writers who would produce a more pragmatic primitivism and traditional, regenerative African aesthetic, thereby "remasculiniz[ing] black American expression" (Pochmara 103). They understood most female writers like Fauset and Nella Larsen to be committed to a DuBoisian black bourgeois aesthetic that sentimentalized the race and embodied a gentile respectability that read as banal and subservient. With the double burden of racism and sexism, Fauset's literary career only temporarily thrived without much attention paid to how her novels characterize the progressive and modern experiences of black life in America.

Like Johnson, Fauset explores how black and white ownership function as the result of patrilineal control. Similarly, both Johnson's ex-colored man and Fauset's Peter Bye are victims of missing narratives that affect the way they know their fathers and understand their bloodlines. John Edgar Wideman argues, "American history can be read as a long paternity suit" and that people of color "walk under a cloud of unsettled paternity" (82). Wideman comments on the status of black proprietorship in America and its effect on intergenerational possessiveness: "Whites own the country, run the country, and in this world where possessions count more than people, where law values property more than person, the material reality speaks plainly to anyone who's paying attention, especially black boys who own nothing, whose fathers relegated to the margins, are empty-handed ghosts" (Wideman 65). While Peter's father Meriwether is present in the novel, he is a "fallen" man, a penniless, gambling alcoholic who preaches to his son about "the futility of labor and ambition" (32-3). "The world owes you a living" is Meriwether's creed, and Peter absorbs all of his cynicism and dislike for white people "in the form of a constant and increasing bitterness" (33-4). The omniscient narrator reveals, "the dying

of Meriwether Bye was about the best thing he could have done for his son," not only because his paternal influence would no longer stifle his son's identity, but, rather, Peter would now rightfully inherit his ancestral possessions and take his turn at reading and decoding the rebellious life of his black ancestors. The transmittal of the heirlooms is rendered more important than Meriwether's life and death.

Peter's enlightenment begins and ends with the acquisition of two family inheritances: a family bible and a black testament. He is fascinated by the documented markings of written and erased names, revised family mottos, and photographs of vineyards owned by white Byes and labored by black Byes. But without a distinctive narrative attached to the possession, Peter must hypothesize why and how a white patriarch bequeathed the black family his heirlooms. Peter receives the heirlooms without anyone to tell him what they mean; they come to him only with the memory that his father "took such pains to put it out of his reach" that he decides that the things must be something "off color" (36). Ideally, as heirlooms pass from one generation to the next so do their attached narratives, and therefore they continue to serve their purpose: "a conventional basis of reputation" (Veblen 37). In this sense, the Bye heirlooms protect history, offer the promise of continuity, and preserve familial standards and memories as they change owners. Susan Graves, the woman who house Peter after his father's death, only does so because "Bye belonged to old stock and must, she thought, make good eventually" (38). The Byes are well known and respected amongst "old Philadelphians" (36) who know something of the family's heritage but do little to help Peter understand where that reputation comes from. Miss Susan also wishes Meriwether would have left Peter some money, but acknowledges that "she would have very much rather have had the Bible with its absolute assurance of the former standing and respectability of the black Byes" (36). More than money, Miss Susan values the

heirloom, its confirmation of reputation, and its record of lineage; Peter, however, fails to understand its worth and its defense of his own respectability that he is also unable to see.

Therefore, these heirlooms are vulnerable to neglect and obliteration in the same way that Johnson's manuscripts are denied and arrested in a box. Unbeknownst to Peter upon acquisition, the heirlooms withhold proof of a biological inheritance that is both black and white; but because the authenticating narrative is missing through the majority of the novel, Peter instead acquires the impression that his family is confused (there are revisions on both dedication pages) and the objects are rendered unimportant. And yet Peter keeps the possessions, returning to inspect and read them ever so often. "Don't know why I lugged that along with me," Peter says, but it seems that the Bible has become part of him so much that he subconsciously carries it along with him throughout the novel. Aside from Peter understanding that the bible is old and thus a material that interconnects himself to his past, he also holds on to it because it is sign of his father. Although their relationship is defined by estrangement and stoicism, Peter fondly remembers his father reading to him from old anatomy books and teaching him how to pronounce the taxonomies so that he might reciprocate the reading. "Narratives about African American fathers are characterized by gaps and silences that haunt their sons," Scott Gibson argues, and as a result, "black male characters' attempt to understand these silences by examining artifacts of their fathers' lives" (32). Artifacts of paternal ancestry, Gibson argues, mediate father-son relationships across generations while also representing a black cultural heritage that rectifies the vulnerability and rejection experienced in fatherlessness (89). Fauset's heirlooms function in similar ways; Peter's "constant and increasing bitterness" (34) dissipate once he invests in his possession's meanings.

Peter's increasing knowledge about his roots and identity aims to organize the novel's

confusions. Although Fauset briefly provides a heritage for her protagonist Joanna Marshall, she painstakingly accounts for Peter's family narrative, explicating the historical interventions between white and black Byes. As opposed to Joanna who was "too young to understand the power of that great force, heredity," Peter is characterized as "the legitimate result of a heredity that had become a tradition, of a tradition that had become warped, that had gone astray and had carried Peter and Peter Bye's father along in its general wreckage" (21-22). In Peter, Fauset exposes the lasting effects of slavery on the black nuclear family, as well as the wreckage of one's personal sense of entitlement to economic and familial recognition.

When we meet the real history of the white Byes and the black Byes, we also meet the value attributed to the testament and the Bye family bible.[115] The little black testament is narrated as a gift from original patriarch Aaron Bye to his young former slave, Joshua Bye (Peter's great-grandfather), whom he had freed and educated upon the vineyard plantation. Aaron Bye inscribed "'The gift of Aaron Bye'" within the book before he taught Joshua how to write his own name under the inscription. Joshua excitedly shows his parents: his black mother Judy (whom we find at the end of the novel to be Aaron Bye's mistress and thus all black Byes are direct descendants of Aaron Bye) and a hardworking black man named Ceazer whom Judy marries. Fauset alludes to this final truth of paternity by placing Aaron's name at the top of what becomes an inscribed Bye family tree:

> Underneath her boy's name [Judy] fashioned in halting crazy characters her single attempt at writing, her own name, Judy Bye. Nothing would serve Joshua then but that he must have Ceazer's name in the book, too. Remembering that his father could not write,

[115] It is worth mentioning that even the discrepancies between the bible and the testament are confusing, as the two are both conflated and separate materials throughout the novel. For example, Peter only references carrying the bible with him, but the testament is among his father's possession that he refers to at the end of the novel in order to see Ceazer's marking. Additionally, the heirlooms are both given their own narratives, which Peter seems to collapse and confuse as he confronts them. Fauset possibly could have incorporated this additional confusion between the two heirlooms in order to develop a multi-dimensional past that is never straightforward and always messy, in the same way that reflects many black family lineages with descendants of slavery.

> Joshua wrote out himself with a fine flourish ‘Ceazer Bye’ and showed the name to its owner, entreating him to make his mark beside it. Ceazer took up the pen in his strong, wiry fingers...Ceazer made a mark, it was true, but it was a thick broad line drawn through his name with a fury which almost tore the thin page. *He* was no Bye! It was not long after this that he disappeared, a strange, brooding, intractable figure. (23)

Ceazer’s physical and emotional denouncement of Bye patrilineage is something that neither Joshua, nor his son Isaiah, nor his son Meriwether, nor his son Peter are able to do outright because they are never made aware of the conflicted affair. Ceazer is the only one who knows he did not procreate Joshua. From here, the family inherits confusion. Ceazer’s revision has no history until the final pages of the novel; it is a puzzle piece that haunts Peter even after he finalizes the truth of his heritage, but he is still able to conclude, “*He* would have been an ancestor worth having” (297; original emphasis). Peter’s preference for an illiterate but proud soldier of the American Revolution, a “strange truculent character” (22) instead of his educated and middle class forefathers that descended from Judy and (white) Aaron Bye indicates that even with a newfound optimism for the enduring potency of black paternity, there is a lingering despondency that blackness is forever tied to whiteness. The savagery and coercion of slavery has birthed generations of Peters who struggle with what Du Bois denounced as “the red stain of bastardy…[that] meant not only the loss of ancient African chastity, but also...the obliteration of the Negro home” (9). Ceazer “vanish[es] finally into legend” (22), leaving behind nothing other than “a firm black line…drawn with a pen that dug down into the thin paper” (245); the historical trauma of slavery has all but erased another black father’s existence. The black testament delivers a raw history of Peter’s black and white lineage while also providing contextual periphery of black men like Ceazer who refused to bear witness to Peter’s future confusion. Fauset inserts both the powerful, black mark of resistance and the testament inside

which it lives as a representation of “legendary” resilience in order to speak to Peter about his race’s potential.

The Bye family bible is another site of contention and revision. Upon his marriage to Belle Potter, Aaron Bye gifts his son, “a huge Family Bible, bound in leather and with an Apocrypha. On the title-page was written in a fine old script: *To Joshua and Belle Bye from Aaron and Dinah Bye. ‘By their fruits ye shall know them’*” (24). Via flashback, it is not Joshua but his son Isaiah who “pore[s] absorbedly” over the book with its the family photographs of vineyards and peach orchards owned by the white Byes (24). He acknowledges that his father “spent his life in making those orchards what they were,” but he cannot understand alone what the inscription means (24). Isaiah relies upon playmate white Meriwether, the legitimate son of Aaron and rightful heir to the Bye name, to reveal that the inscription is in fact his family motto. Isaiah probes him as to why a white Bye motto is in *his* black Bye book. Meriwether explains with a prophetic hypothetical: “’Now when I grow up, I’m going to be a great doctor…but nobody will be surprised…and I’ll be good fruit. That’s the way it always is: good trees, good fruit; rich, important people, rich important sons’” (25). Isaiah still questions what that means for him, to which Meriwether responds that because Joshua is a servant, “’that’s what you’ll be, a good servant’” (26). This scene is significant for various reasons, all of which stem from human reactions to the material possession. First, the inscription is so deep-seated in the imagination of both black and white lineages of the Bye family that both men recognize it and have a reverence for it; Meriwether expresses a physical dominance over the moto when he traces the letters with his finger and formally educates Isaiah on his position within the hierarchy. Then, the white father privileges his white son with the knowledge of the past; Meriwether is able to feel a sense of momentum forward because of the motto, while Isaiah feels “stuck” when he reads it. Finally,

the passage speaks to the lack of opportunity for black men in America, not because they are unskilled or incapable but because they are black, and because they did not stem from a recognized hierarchy of white bodies that have passed along the narrative of privilege. The white Byes are only "rich important people" because of the crops yielded by black slaves and underpaid laborers year after year, so a sense of his ancestors' alienation from their labor and his own rejection from an "egalitarian" society who refuses to recognize their potential beyond "serving" others are root cause for Isaiah to act out.

Isaiah dedicates his life to proving Meriwether's words false; instead, "[l]ike Ceazer he developed a dislike for white people and their ways" (27). Isaiah names his son Meriwether as if to tempt fate and revises the family motto in the book: "'By *his* fruits ye shall know - *me*,'" so that his son "born like himself in freedom, would know nothing but that estate" (29, original emphasis). There is agency and ambition in Isaiah's physical revisions that proclaim a familial shift from servitude to control. Inscribing a black family motto into a white family bible is a historical hijack in physical form. The action seeks to erase a narrative of black inequality and bondage, as well as any memory of white prestige belonging to the fruits (and capital) of their labor. But because the motto is not blotted from the title page but rather palimpsestic, Fauset makes clear that the new narrative of black uprising cannot be written without the memory of oppression. Peter must know both Isaiah's resistance *and* the ancestral black labor exploited by white forefathers if he is to understand the full spectrum of his family's - and his nation's - heritage.

Peter's only communications with direct family members are through these revisions and writings until he meets (yet another white) Meriwether, his cousin and grandson of the original Meriwether Bye, during his time serving in the Great War. The two conveniently meet on the

same Army ship, resembling and immediately drawn to one another before realizing they share the same last name. Meriwether is a progressive, contemplative white man who acknowledges guilt and remorse for the "monstrous thing[s]" white Byes had done to black Byes for years (242). Peter is impressed with his penitence but surprised by his fatalism. As Peter later narrates their last moments on the battlefield together, Meriwether tells him, "I knew as soon as I saw you on the ship that my job was finished, but you would have to carry on. You'll have to finish my life, Peter" (283). Meriwether is figuratively killed by his past as he expresses the "shock" of realizing that his wealth and position "were founded quite specifically on the backs of broken, beaten slaves" (245-46). In his confession to Peter, Meriwether believes, "I have paid my debt," and he prepares to die (246). The convenience of their meeting and the unexpected, dramatic regret from a white relative almost detracts from the earnestness of Fauset's representation of white atonement and racial progress in America. Despite Peter's bitterness, he has still enlisted and found for *his* country, indicating a sense of national belonging that lies submerged within his consciousness. The image of two races fighting together for their shared country with a rare opportunity to communicate freely without racism or shame is a symbolic gesture for equality and brotherhood that Fauset optimistically submits to her readers in the final moments of her novel. This is a raw, human interaction that the bible nor the testament are ever able to provide for the black Byes. So in light of two separate moments that involve intimate answers about the past, Fauset presents a skepticism toward the pages of history that lack the human element necessary to teach empathy and compassion.

In an act that defies the progression of his family's heirlooms, Meriwether decides to offer his material inheritances to Peter; the transaction purports to physically alter the racial narrative that has separated these two families for multiple generations. Meriwether bestows

upon Peter a pocket case with pictures and his mother's locket, both of which he requests that he bring to his grandfather to reveal that a white Bye has died and a black Bye will live on. Upon this acquisition, Peter takes out his own heirlooms and shows them to Meriwether, finally resolving to "put my name in" to the testament that has plagued him for so long; the addition feels ceremonial with an intimate (and familial) audience (245). With the Great War as their backdrop, the men reconcile a great peace. The Byes share both the mental and material makings of their bloodlines; together they identify the differences, the interceptions, and the communion of their amalgamated identities.

A final white inheritance is offered when Peter delivers the heirlooms to white grandfather Meriwether, who finally reveals the truth about the family's history. He offers Peter's son an inheritance of wealth and proper education as the rightful heir of the Bye estate, but under the condition that no acknowledgement of blood relation be made to the public. This is a move, in part, generated by anxiety about the end of the white Bye lineage; with no one to carry on the family name and estate, the "rich important people" will begin to disappear, their memory only recorded in Peter's family heirlooms and in the legal will that now has no white male body to transfer the belonging(s) to. Peter refuses the inheritance without its proper narrative of atonement and biracial ties, thereby rejecting a future of confusion or silence that has prevented a sense of self-determination in Peter that he finally attains through his mastery of the estate. After the denial of the white family under false pretenses, Peter feels liberated: He concludes, "there is the source of all I used to be. My ingratitude, my inability to adopt responsibility, my very irresoluteness come from that strain of white Bye blood. But I understand it now, I can fight against it. I'm free, Joanna, free" (297). Jane Kuenz argues that Peter ends the novel as "the new figure of the American citizen: black, professional, young, and now married,

the quintessential New Negro male" (105). Not only does Peter reach catharsis about his family history and a sense of "freedom" from his biracial identity, he is able to begin anew with a proud confirmation that his African blood has and will produce a nobler, proud race in his marriage to and procreation with Joanna. With this ending, Fauset chooses to sell an optimism in the autonomy of the black nuclear family that now has control over their own material property and familial narrative; the ambiguity of the past and in the property will no longer vex and control the new Bye family.

Inheriting Mules and Men

The most appropriate way to end this chapter, and this dissertation, is by examining what I argue to be the most important collection of materials created by a literary artist in the twentieth century: Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935). The text is a tribute to the significance of collecting and property within the American literary imagination because it represents what has been historically and culturally lost over time as much as what is now found and shared. Hurston capitalizes on the idea that the collector is never separate from her collection - and nor should she be because the craft is personal and the material is pedagogical. *Mules and Men* is constructed as a collection of materials/people/voices with a cataloguing system developed by its collector for a public audience that is invited to appreciate the novelty of material as much as the labor of creation. The text behaves as a valuable material collection should, according to William D. King: as "a kind of monument building to insure survival after death" (38). Hurston's monument is one built for herself, her race, and the continuity of black studies in America. Her work prevents the impending erasure of racial memory, recovers cultural disinheritances, and reinstates familial and communal traditions. We simply cannot study the aesthetic, sentimental,

or economic value of material property as represented in literature without looking closer at the collected stuff in *Mules and Men*.

Every writer studied throughout this dissertation has produced literary art with the hope that it will be inherited by and influential to future generations of readers - as proven by the countless representations of scavenging, owning, and creating that characterize larger anxieties about class, belonging, and now race. Hurston's project, however, seeks to recover material that might not be inherited by anyone without the help of a trained and determined "insider" willing to immerse herself in the African diasporic cultural geography from which she sprang. Hurston's employment by private publishers and later as a federal relief for the Work Progress Administration's Federal Writers' Project gave her such opportunities. Both literary productions are significant for the parallels and tensions that arise between the sort of collecting of material that Hurston is reporting on and the sort that she herself is undertaking, especially under different socioeconomic circumstances: as a well-paid folklorist and then an underpaid relief worker. Hurston's dedication to the recovery of black things, however, is constant throughout her body of work, which also reveals the labor pains undertaken in order to manifest memory into material for new generations of Americans to experience and appreciate.

"I was glad when somebody told me, 'You may go and collect Negro folk-lore,'" Hurston writes in her introduction of *Mules and Men*, indicating both her enthusiasm for her project, as well as the limitations in completing it on her own because "somebody" needed to financially back her travel writing (1). Commissioned by Charlotte Osgood Mason and under the tutelage of Professor Franz Boaz, Hurston returned to her native home of Eatonville, Florida, neighboring Polk County, and New Orleans in order to access and record "the intimate setting in the social life of the Negro" (xiii). After years of field research, Hurston's work as a trained anthropologist

and skilled novelist produced a narrative collection that allowed her readers to experience authentic folklore material within the real contextual spaces of barn parties, fishing holes, or around tables sharing gingerbread. While as a child Hurston heard many stories about religion, human creation, or animals, as an adult she applied the "spy-glass of Anthropology" (xix) through which she discovers that the folktales of her ancestors were actually living forces and survival strategies used for dealing with power inequities and painful histories. These tales are pedagogical tools encoded with lessons about how black Southerners once resisted the bondage of slavery and now manipulated Jim Crow laws, but they also satisfy (and encourage) a broader need for considering and representing American cultural diversity.

But in order to be shared with mass audiences, Hurston recognized that the maintenance of African memory and folk requires the material containment of writing and book form. Her introduction also makes clear that the collected folklore is hardly intended for white audiences, nor was it ever owned by or inherited from white people. She explains "our" tactics of public storytelling in metaphoric form:

> 'The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song.' (3)

This moment represents black folklore as valuable and worth protecting from exploitation or white theft; it emphasizes that once the white man is distracted, the American Negro can still control "my song" without further white intrusion. Daphne Lamothe argues, "For Hurston, making visible the process of collecting folklore and writing culture was the counter-narrative, the alternative to totalizing, simplistic, and dehumanizing representations of blackness found in so much of popular American culture" (2). Intimately accessing the sources and printing the oral

materials of friends and strangers demanded from Hurston an authenticity of and accountability to her race that would correct the racial primitivism commodified by American culture.

But herein lies the problem: *Mules and Men* features the filtered representation of "real" people, it erases inflections of voice, contemplative silences, and physical aura that are consequential to oral tradition, and it invites the objectifying stare of white audiences and publishers who may not be patient enough to "'seek out de inside meanin' of words'" (125). The project is idealistic and not without its publication and production woes, which is why we should consider: What is lost and what is gained when orality and humanity are thingified in book form? If *Mules and Men* is an authenticating text that sympathetically represents oral black culture in a tangible form that is recollected and passed down through future generations, what is at stake in Hurston's decision to take the "play toy" out of the white man's hand and replace it with "the soul" of black folk? What happens to the value of this black property if white men and women can now own it?

Hurston's own freedom to complete and communicate her project in published material form is always burdened by white authorization. Her conflicted relationships with Charlotte Osgood Mason and Franz Boaz placed both her and her work at the mercy of their artistic licenses. Hurston's material collections acquired during 1928 and 1930 belonged to Mason, who financed Hurston's travels south under the condition that she would have discretion over the use of the material (Frydman 109). When Hurston became convinced that the stage and a performative context would be better for *Mules and Men*, Mason reeled her back to publishing in book form, writing to her in a letter: "remember that it is vital to your people that you should not rob your books, which must stand as a lasting monument" (qtd in Frydman 110). Mason capitalized on both Hurston's loyalties to her race and lack of financial security in the same way

that Franz Boaz also sought to control her fieldwork by treating her as an aid. During his time working with Hurston, he assumed the role of a "paternal white overseer" instead of professor (Holloway 2). Boaz wanted Hurston to spend more time attending to the diction and movements of African Americans than the content of their stories; he believed African culture retained significant mannerisms whereas their lore relied too much on Americana (Hill 139). Hurston again understood that she must wear the mask and "set something out the door of [her] mind" in order for Boaz to approve publication, but this in turn affected the narrative persona she would have to adopt in order to bypass censorship and unsympathetic white readers.

What is lost, then, are Hurston's *real* interactions with black folk and intimate black settings because she is under surveillance in the way that her subjects are. Hurston becomes "Hurston" with her narrative framing device that demonstrates a certain naiveté and cunning that critics such as Carby understand as romantic and performative instead of authentic. As biographer, Robert Hemenway asks, "Is *Mules and Men* about Zora Hurston or about black folklore?" (167). Hurston scholars have answered the question both ways, critiquing her amalgamation of genres while assessing her framing narrative as both empowering and troubling (167).[116] Even Sterling Brown criticized Hurston's narration and her representation of her subjects as too "easy-going" and concluded that the book would be "nearer the total truth" if it possessed a more "bitter" tonality (qtd. in Hemenway 219). But much like her recorded subjects that rely on storytelling for survival, Hurston performs a "lovable personality" that Boaz praised in his written Foreword and credited for the project's realization (xiii). She paints herself as nonthreatening, entertaining, and experimental, like an Uncle Remus figure that her white

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[116] See Cheryl Wall, "Mules and Men and Women: Zora Neale Hurston's Strategies of Narration and Visions of Female Empowerment" in *Black American Literature Forum* 23.4 (1989), and Barbara Johnson "Thresholds of Difference: Structures of Address in Zora Neale Hurston," in *"Race," Writing, and Difference* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

readers would recognize and accept. Hurston embeds her tales and her own narrative voice with a multifaceted humor that has "a hundred meanings" (23), but also a "feather-bed resistance" common amongst those who share their stories: "the Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive" (2). Houston A. Baker Jr. recognized her victory in evading white control when he wrote of her narratives, "But Zora has not merely slipped the yoke or "turned the trick" on a limited anthropology by the conclusion of *Mules and Men*…She has rectified the theft of the "soul-piece" and become her own patron's superior" (*Workings* 96). So while we lose the sights and sounds of Hurston's real time spent with sawmill workers or Hoodoo doctors, Hurston still managed to control her collected materials with her own field work by speaking directly to as many black folks as she could, observing all the stuff that they owned, and recording all the vibrancy that could be formatted into print for circulation and revival. Gathering "the great mass of material that has accumulated in this sort of culture delta" is difficult enough without having to decide how to justify its entrapment within her collection (*Go Gator* 70).

The collection itself argues for a reevaluation of the black folk aesthetic and what it means for a population which lost much of its history and culture to the trauma of slavery - and were continuing to lose in an overtly racist America. Being able to access a collection that can "talk it again" lends us the opportunity to learn from the folklore "on its own terms," not in relation to white experience (Garvey 148). "Folklore is not as easy to collect as it sounds," Hurston writes in her introduction, "The best source is where there are the least outside influences and these people, being usually under-privileged, are the shyest. They are most reluctant at times to reveal that which the soul lives by" (2). Hurston indicates a covetous relationship between the poor black Floridians and their "soul-pieces" (3) that are retained and

untainted, and therefore more valuable possessors/possessions for Hurston. She indicates that these "soul-pieces" are God-given and more potent than bodily material through her own retelling of an old creation myth: God said, "Don't aim to waste none [souls] thru loose cracks. And then men got to grow strong enough to stand it. De way things is now, if Ah give it out it would tear them shackly bodies to pieces" (3). By setting up the text as a collection of "soul-pieces" and emphasizing these materials as divine, inherent, and powerful, the collection itself withholds an aura of privacy and sacredness that must be honored upon access. As Hurston's subjects are embodied by the folk, so is the collection embodied by their souls.

Hurston's acquisition of this folk, however, is not always welcome. When Hurston and her friends go to Wood Bridge, the town is described as "lacking in Eatonville's feeling of unity" because "a white woman lives there" (13). Without ever being present, this white woman's intrusion changes the narrative landscape; there are no stories shared, just a private dinner party with a mournful ballad sung with the verse, "Ruther be in Tampa with the Whip-poor-will / Than to be 'round here" (17). The party ends abruptly, and Hurston heads home without any material, and while this letdown is not a result of her presence, she shares a feeling of being unwelcome where white citizens - even just one - might threaten the freedom to share subversive narratives in open spaces. At a party in Polk County, however, the men will hardly speak to Hurston: "This worried me because I saw at once that this group of several hundred Negroes from all over the South was a rich field for folk-lore, but here was I figuratively starving to death in the midst of plenty" (60). Hurston equates their stories with nourishment at the same time she reminds us that she's doing field research; there is a conflicted relationship between "research" and "reminiscing" that is always attached to Hurston's body as collector, and this explains why at times she is met with "ole feather-bed tactics" herself (60). The fact that she includes these

moments, or sometimes confesses to forgetting things told to her, is also to illustrate herself as a human altered by outside influences. She finds that she has to lie about why she is even there from time to time (calling herself a "bootlegger" at one point), and early on, she curses her fourteen-dollar Macy's dress because she "did look different and resolved to fix all that no later than the next morning" (63). The material of her appearance jeopardizes her project. Hurston's distance and urban influence has transformed her rural, working-class look, and thus her ability to be immediately trusted and accepted. Hurston reveals how she must work at these relationships and on her social performances in order to acquire the "richness" that hides beneath these casual, commonplace gatherings.

For the most part, though, there is a shared excitement amongst Hurston's participants who all want a chance to share their tall tales. Together, the visited communities create a manual for explaining everything: split churches, preachers, weather patterns, blackness, facial features, hunger, faith, poverty, animals, laughter, and trauma. On several occasions men and women interrupt each other, like James Presley: "'Hurry up so somebody else kin plough up some literary and lay-by some alphabets" (86). He imagines storytelling with the vocabulary of hard labor, "ploughing" and "laying" down the materials in order to build a final product; these stories are understood as both work and product for each speaker. Then, without context or much explanation, the next speaker steps up to convey a "lie," lore, or allegory once transmitted to them without indicating much about how they came to possess their contribution. The stories are relayed as heard through experience, memory, or generational story-telling, but they are always prided for how they are imaginative without "need for outside help," or for how they reappropriate white, European, or biblical narratives with "slight local variations" (20). For example, "a woman called Gold" shares that on the day God was handing out color to all the

people, all the black people were "stretched out sleep on de grass under de tree of life," and when they heard that God was calling them, they jumped up and fought over one another to get to him first: "So God hollered 'Git back! Git back!' And they misunderstood Him and thought He said: 'Git black,' and they been black ever since" (30). This undoing of the racist legacy of Cain's marking or Ham's curse is both subversive and protective; in this narrative, their blackness is not a punishment or a taint but an accident, a misinterpretation that mimics social misinterpretations of the Bible. Redrawing blackness in this light as told by a black woman attempts to erase the negative connotation associated with biological difference, as well as empower a female voice in controlling the "real" story behind her own color. "Her tongue is all de weapon a woman got" (30), a listener responds in jest, but he reiterates the militancy imagined behind this kind of storytelling that alleviates and agitates the memory of sociocultural subjugation. The narrative material, as well as her body, is weaponized with the intent to prove its existence and its power to alter conventional ways of knowing.

Women are frequently praised or narrated in respect to how they possess a different kind of material and strength that originates from celestial sources. Hurston's attention to these women empowerment narratives is undoubtedly derived from her own gender affiliation, but also in a concerted effort to elevate female storytellers who have struggled against the violence and negation of both social and misogynistic oppression as the "lesser sex." Mathilda from Eatonville relays a story about how and why women always take advantage of men. With help from both God and the devil,[117] a woman is granted three keys to help her fight the strength and

[117] In many of the stories, the planes of heaven, hell, and earth are permeable and accessible for subjects who wish to ask God or the devil for something back on earth. And for the most part, all three entities – God, the Devil, and the human – are all in collaboration with each other in a nonthreatening way, counter to what any white myth, biblical story, or allegory has ever revealed about the fight between good and evil. And rather than being omnipresent, infallible deities, God and the devil are human-like characters who make mistakes, take naps, or get distracted. It appears there is an egalitarianism between these forces, both sacred and profane, that allows for a re-scripting of the

abuse of her husband: one to the bedroom, one to the kitchen, and one to the nursery. The devil understands that if a woman controls a man's nourishment, his sexual appetite, and his ability to procreate, then a woman will always be stronger than a man. The fact that hunger and sex are valued with regeneration ("he don't want to be cut off from his generations at all") speaks again to the importance of heritage and inheritance within the human mind (34). Ultimately, the devil is proven correct: "de man had to mortgage his strength to her to live. And dat's why de man makes and de woman takes" (34). Because the female has physical control over these physical elements - both in the form of keys and her reproductive body - she is the stronger force to be reckoned with. Additionally, Hurston spends an entire section of her hoodoo and conjure tales looking for and retelling material about Marie Leveau, a famous hoodoo practitioner whose biography is generally unknown but imagined as mythical and occult. Hurston capitalizes on Leveau as a powerful seer of opportunity and divine intervention; she is "not a woman," but a god" who will "help you find peace and happiness" (195). During the five months that Hurston studies under a Leveauian hoodoo doctor named Luke Turner, she shares several incidents in which women come to them for help in keeping their husbands true, or killing off their brothers "before he tell lies, lies, lies" (203). Women seek more solace and safety in Marie Leveau and her legacy than they do in their husbands, doctors, churches, or institutions, and therefore Hurston takes great effort in conveying Leveau's sociocultural, spiritual significance not as a deviant, but as a savior of women in distress. The materials recorded here are meant to heal, unify, and inspire other women more so than any medicine, religion, or law that she could find elsewhere.

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way in which circumstances are controlled or predetermined.

As much as Hurston's collection focuses on control and creation, the stories also comment upon shared misgivings about property and privilege, exchange and inheritance. There is no modern capitalism, industrialism, or consumer marketplace illustrated within the stories told, aside from the mechanics of slave labor and master ownership that are the very cornerstone of most narratives. But the monetary exchange, debt, and consumerism that have populated Johnson's or Fauset's narratives are mostly absent from Hurston's text for three primary reasons: (1) Hurston's goal is to retain folklore from rural backcountries that are symptomatic of their local, pastoral settings and experiences, (2) the exchange of material possessions usually occur between white and black people in premodern ways (finding, scavenging, stealing), and (3) the narratives utilize a language of trickery, subversion, and loss that indicates an aversion to gifts, allowances, or rewards. Simply put, physical material exchange cannot be imagined without black disadvantage. In "Why the Sister in Black Works Hardest," God completes his creation of the world by placing a mysterious bundle in the middle of the road, which lures the attention of a white slave master, who asks his slave to retrieve it; the slave then asks his wife to do it for him. This chain of command (and social hierarchy) forces the woman to agree, but she, too, is attracted to the box "''cause there's nearly always something good in great big boxes'" (74). As she is conditioned to see gifts as "good," she opens the box only to find that it is "full of hard work," and will now live and pass on a life of burdensome labor (74). Another version of this story follows in "De Reason Niggers is Working so Hard," which also involves a series of bundles planted by God and opened by both a white and a black man. In the white man's bundle, he receives "a writin'-pen and ink," and in the black man's, "a pick and shovel and a hoe and a plow and a chop-axe" (75). The two characters have inherited a division of labor and social status that represents antebellum norms as much as it mimics 1930s America. The two gifts are

tricks planted by God and reinforced by white men that force black men and women to always labor without any reward. The fact that both stories imagine labor in the form of gifts speaks to a conditioned skepticism felt toward moments of relief, even when ordained by God.

Without divine intervention, though, white men continue to trick black men into taking their rightful possessions. In “The Turtle-Watch,” a black man finds a gold watch and chain in the street; he does not know what to do with it (perhaps because has never found anything so free and valuable in his life) so he asks a white man how to handle the finding. The white man tells him, “‘next time you find anything kickin’ in de road put in yo’ pocket and sell it’” (84). The white man then proceeds to take the watch from the black man, leaving him with nothing. Soon after, he finds a turtle in the street, oddly ties a string around it, and pockets it, in accordance with the white man’s advice. When a black man asks him the time, he takes out the turtle and says, “‘It’s a quarter past leben and kickin’ lak hell for twelve’” (85). Although a humorous illustration, the black man has learned to pocket his findings only after losing his treasure to a white man, and his ignorance forces him to be the butt of the joke. And instead of being able to keep a valuable object, the man makes a “turtle-watch,” a silly imitation that has no monetary (or functional) value, aside from its ability to mask the loss with humor. In a darker narrative, “The Fortune Teller” is about a slave named John who claims that he can tell fortunes. His “Ole Massa” tells his neighboring landlord who bets his entire plantation and all his slaves “dat he can’t tell no fortunes” (81) and so now John’s claim is worth the cost of an entire white man’s worth - and his life. John’s misery and fear suggests that his claim was a lie, but the white man keeps on, promising his slave riches, clothes, and “independence” if he tells the right fortune (81). In a convenient twist of fate, John is able to guess what is under a wash pot at the same time that he surrenders: “‘Well, you got de ole coon at last’” (81). A raccoon is under the wash

pot and John gets to live free with new clothes and a new horse. His traditional vernacular saves him from death, but he is still haunted by the bounty placed upon his lie so that the reward feels undeserved. And although he had no intention in using his words to survive, their subconscious usage validates their rhetorical value. Similarly, in "How the Negros Got Their Freedom," another John is saved from a lynching because of his ability scare Old Massa with his narratives of divine punishment (111). With the help of his friend Jack as he awaits the block to drop, John prays to God to strike down the Ole Massa's family with lightening. Jack lights a match that spooks the family all the way out of town, leaving the slaves to their own freedom. Nine other folktales share narratives about a John who can trick his Old Massa into possessing his freedom, and despite their parallels, each story relays new information about survival strategies and subversive rhetoric that is personal and communal, uncomfortable but invaluable.

So this is what is gained by *Mules and Men*: a cultural and communal inheritance recorded "[b]efore everybody forgets" (8) so that generations of black readers are able to remember, use, or contest their shared past. Materializing these stories and legends guarantees permanence and conjoins fellow community members who recognize themselves and their families in versions of these stories as they too navigated a racist and unjust world. Hurston writes, "God made stones for memory. He builds a mountain Himself when He wants things not forgotten" (184). While there is no doubt that there are technical and aesthetic problems in capturing the orality of folklore that Hurston combatted when composing her collection, the text is a memory that must be made into stone, according to her own cultural imagination. And as such, it received a warm reception from black readers who saw *Mules and Men* as family property. Trudier Harris argues, "Hurston's ideal audience would have been part of the metaphorical porch-sitters drawn into forms they recognized and accepted" (15). In this respect,

the collection is an exercise in cultural reclamation that would have enabled such readers to repossess and re-identify with the diasporic culture from which they (and their ancestors) had migrated (Harris 15). Alice Walker echoed this in describing her own experiences with *Mules and Men,* which she praised for giving her family "back all the stories they had forgotten or of which they had grown ashamed (told us years ago by our parents and grandparents)" (83); her family rejoices that Hurston's work proves them all "descendants of an inventive, joyous, courageous, and outrageous people: loving drama, appreciating wit, and, most of all, relishing the pleasure of each other's loquacious and *bodacious* company" (92). Walker's reaction speaks to Hurston's effectiveness in conjuring intergenerational and contemporary cultural communities through the recollection and transmission of the past.

Mules and Men does not end on its last page. Because it is a cooperative and communicative text, it demands a community outside of its pages that will keep the collection animate and ever changing. "Negro folklore is not a thing of the past," Hurston argues in "Characteristics of Negro Expression;" it is alive through resurrection and recollection.[118] The validation of its publication reaffirms the centrality of African American culture to American literature. *Mules and Men* emphasizes black power, resistance, and the right to ownership in its characters, its collector, and its readers. It is a collection with an authority and agency to furnish its black descendants with a treasury of dynamic discourse that is both intimate and loud enough to erase a historical silence.

Hurston never stopped collecting folklore or valuing the material property belonging to her race. When royalties from her publications could no longer support Hurston, she received two Guggenheim grants that funded her field work of hoodoo in Jamaica and Haiti, published

[118] Characteristics of Negro Expression." *The Sanctified Church*. Berkeley, Turtle Island Press, 1983, 56.

Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), and found that she still could not support herself nor find relief without joining the Florida FWP as a writer and "Negro Editor." There she received government welfare support needed to travel and publish more circulating periodicals and journals about black culture in America until 1939. In "Go Gator and Muddy the Waters," a forgotten text defending the perseveration and appreciation of folklore, Hurston writes, "Folklore is the art of the people before they find out there is any such thing as art, and they make it out of whatever they find at hand" (*Go Gator* 70). Folklore is just a word the same way *Mules and Men* is just a text: we are able to consume this art by categorizing or specifying its type, but behind it, there is a much more complicated tactility and essentialism, born of distinctive experience and environment. "Making" art out of the raw materials at hand is exactly the process that Hurston traces throughout her collections of folklore - and what this dissertation has intended to illuminate across generations of American writers who applied to their literary art "whatever they [found]" in their own rural and urban underclass spaces.

Final Things

This chapter's examination of how African American authors negotiate identity through material ownership and possession has addressed also how racial and national belonging is embedded in the belongings they inherit or create. Johnson, Fauset, and Hurston contributed representations of material things and their vibrancy in nuanced ways that offered these authors a way to confront the transformation of African Americans from a position of servitude to autonomy. By examining the possessions, exchanges, and inheritances of everyday life, these authors found that black property value was subjective and volatile across generations in a way that apprehended black owners and challenged their very conceptions of identity, memory, and belonging. The developing concepts and concerns about ownership and material things are not

limited to the texts analyzed here, but rather echo throughout the Harlem Renaissance and into the twenty-first century. Similar to Fauset, Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928) represents protagonist Jake's exploration of alternatives to capitalist materialism and upholds a moral code that rejects exploitation and crime. McKay uses Jake to demonstrate how marginalized, poor black men like Jake are capable of being resistant to the socioeconomic norms of mainstream America.

Moreover, Victor Hugo Green's *The Negro Motorist Green Book* (1936), an annual segregation-era guide meant for black New York residents who sought to avoid overt racism on their travels, was created with the intent to safely guide African Americans to establishments free of harassment and discrimination, as much as it formed communities of black travelers and business owners who worked together to establish safe havens in uncomfortable and violent spaces. The possession of such a guide networked African Americans across the nation, and it functioned as way to experience the leisure and freedom of everyday road trips without threat or discomfort. *The Green Book*'s entrepreneurial innovation and its sense of security confirm the value of everyday material things as a way to feel empowered to travel, as well as connected to others facing discrimination on the open road.[119]

The literary renderings of discrimination and belonging at the end of the Harlem Renaissance predicted the sociopolitical crisis of Mrs. Henrietta Lacks and her "immortal" cell line that became not her property, but the property of a commercial interest with capitalist intentions without her or her family's compensation or consent. Mrs. Lack's "blackness" was

[119] *The Negro Motorist Green Book* has recently gained attention and new representation in the Oscar-winning film *Green Book* (2018), which tells the story of African-American jazz pianist Don Shirley's tour across the Deep South with the aid of his white bodyguard and *The Greek Book*'s guidance. The book's relevance and the conversation surrounding its ability to protect and navigate African American bodies reiterates the significance of this material thing's vibrancy and narrative for a new generation of Americans.

overlooked when utilized in the most important cellular advancement of the twentieth century, used in developing the polio vaccine, gene mapping, and in vitro fertilization for both white and black people across the world. But her "blackness," some also suggest, as well as her impoverishment, was root cause for her silent exploitation that opened up a line of discourse on bioethics in the American health and research system.[120]

Seventy years later, considerations about what constitutes black property or what black ownership looks like are as misconstrued and misunderstood as ever in the public sphere. On his campaign trail in August 2016, President Donald Trump criticized black communities even as he lobbied for their support: "Poverty. Rejection. Horrible education. No housing, no homes, no ownership. Crime at levels that nobody has seen" (O. James). These are exactly the preconceived notions of black identity in America that motivated Johnson, Fauset, and Hurston to write into their literature the corrective illustrations of possessive black and biracial characters that refused to be dispossessed or depressed by their socioeconomic position in America. Instead, these authors left to twenty-first-century African American authors like Colson Whitehead, Michael Thomas, and Danzy Senna a lasting legacy of thinking about their relationship with material things in subversive and empowering ways.

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[120] See John D. Lantos, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at Henrietta Lacks" in *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, 59. 2 (2016), 228-233.

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