Human/Nature: American Literary Naturalism and the Anthropocene

Not long before Frederick Jackson Turner rang the death knell of the American frontier in 1893, Frank Norris would have been sitting in a Berkeley lecture hall, listening to his favorite professor Joseph “Uncle Joe” LeConte elaborate his theory of a human-centered unit of geologic time, the “Psychozoic Era.” If Uncle Joe’s geology course had an assigned textbook, and if Norris’s dubious scholarship extended far enough to purchase it, he might also have been following along in one of LeConte’s two textbooks, *Elements of Geology* (1882) or *A Compend of Geology* (1886), both of which cap off geologic time with an “age of man” defined by the “reign of mind” in place of the brute ferocity that had reigned till then. In some senses, what Norris heard in the lecture might have resembled Turner’s impending thesis: whether one defined it as a garden of paradise or as a wilderness “red in tooth and claw,” “nature” was over; the conditions of the frontier, in which “wilderness masters the colonist” and “the environment is at first too strong for the man,” could not coexist with a planetary state defined by human mastery (#).

But if it followed the textbook, what Norris heard would also have resembled contemporary theories of the Anthropocene, the proposal almost 125 years later for nearly the same thing, a geological epoch defined by human activity. LeConte:

The Quaternary, and, indeed, all previous ages, were reigns of *brute force* and *animal ferocity*. A condition of things prevailed which was inconsistent with the supremacy of man. The age of man, on the contrary, is characterized by the *reign of mind*. Therefore, as was necessary, the dangerous animals decreased in size and number, and the useful animals and plants were introduced, or else preserved by man (LeConte *Elements* 586)

Although in length of time this is not to be compared to an era, nor to an age, nor to a period, nor even to an epoch, yet it deserves to be made one of the primary divisions of time, not only on account of the dignity of man, but also, and mainly, because through his agency there is now going on in organic forms a change as sweeping as any which has ever taken place. This change has been going on ever since the introduction of man, and is going on now, but will not be complete until civilized man occupies the whole earth. (LeConte *Compend* 381)

Less than a decade later, Norris would publish the masterpiece of American literary naturalism, *The Octopus*. His novel is hardly a vehicle for LeConte’s theory of nature or any other—though, as I will show, it most nearly anticipates Jason W. Moore’s theory of the “Capitalocene”—but it is clear that LeConte’s well documented influence on Norris’s fiction includes the theory of the Psychozoic Era. Beneath the human dramas of freight rates, predatory landlords, and sputtering revolutions is the drama of the human supplanting the natural: the brutal intercourse of a mechanized and unified humanity with the “panting” Mother Earth conceives the monster of the Wheat, a resistless cyborg that sweeps over the planet, a force as human as it is nature, and one that leaves only exhausted stubble in its wake (#). Where many critics have seen a romance of human nature, there is also a tragedy of human/nature.

What is true of Norris is true of many of naturalism’s major authors. Jack London’s late agricultural novels attend to the impoverishment of the soil by industrialized farming practices, framing this development not as a temporary or incidental occurrence but as the expression of an inborn species trait. His “Anthropos,” which he problematically gives the visage of whiteness, is thus defined by pervasive environmental despoliation and ruinous population growth, a process that his essays and plays extend to the scale of the planet. London’s papers are filled with clippings on sustainable farming practices and projections of planet-wide despoliation from various scientific, journalistic, and government publications, a scientific and agricultural background to his own extrapolative imagination. Charlotte Perkins Gilman depicted a world-in-miniature in *Herland*, in which the all-female human residents assumed absolute control over the organization, composition, and interactions of non-human and human life. Humanity’s ubiquitous influence on the planet in this schema has the potential to be pernicious and lead to ruination, as is generally implied by invocations of the Anthropocene today; but it is not the case in *Herland* because they have grown into a wiser and more knowledgeable species. Again the human species is the measure of environmental possibilities and futures, an association that ultimately links Gilman’s environmental thinking with her troubling support of eugenics. In the background of this dubious environmental ethos is Lester F. Ward, best known now as the father of modern sociology but then an influential biologist and paleogeologist who likewise linked the future evolution of humanity with planetary environmental transformation.

In contrast to these universalizing—and generally (if differently) racist—accounts of human/nature, Charles W. Chesnutt understands that the universal “human” conjured by the notion of a human-centered geological epoch is more accurately a composite of vastly different naturecultures (to borrow a phrase from Haraway), that exist regionally and defy expected stratifications of race, class, and social status; and yet the emergence of regional difference is threatened by the homogenizing force of plantation capitalism, a social and ecological monoculture that creates profit out of universalization. Despite his interest in Darwinian evolutionary theory, Chesnutt has not been read as a naturalist until recently, with some scholars placing him at the center of a growing conception of “black naturalism” that recognizes the hand of the (usually white, usually rich) human in the supposedly “natural” conditions determining the fortunes of the poor and especially people of color. Understanding his depiction of this co-determinative, multifaceted relationship to nature—and crucially, the ways that relationship was being negotiated and renegotiated across different communities and environments—helps place Chesnutt in the context of a newly nature-focused conception of naturalism.

The purpose of this dissertation is to develop a such conception of naturalism’s environmental thinking by placing it in the context of what I will call the “pre-Anthropocene”: a cluster of related theories of the human-nature relationship that figure humanity per seas a newly powerful geologic force determining the shape of the entire non-human environment, beginning with George Perkins Marsh’s *Man and Nature* in 1864 and capped by Vladimir Vernadsky, Pierre Tielhard de Chardin, and Edouárd LeRoy’s theory of the Nöosphere in 1923. The naturalist conception of humanity’s impact on nature is best understood in the context of these theories, but that is not to say that the response is univocal. The authors discussed in the following chapters are unified not by a single answer but a shared set of questions deriving from a common premise, a recognition of the scale of humanity’s determinative influence on the planetary environment. The diversity of their responses anticipates the same diversity of responses to the Anthropocene in the 21st century, with differing representations of both the causes—humanness per se versus capitalism, for example—and the nature of the effects: whether humanity’s geological status is an apotheosis to be celebrated or a ruinous trend run out of control. The pre-Anthropocene thinkers to whom their responses are most indebted include figures whose influence is generally acknowledged in naturalist criticism, but read in different terms: Joseph Le Conte, discussed above; Lester F. Ward, an important early sociologist; [and Herbert Spencer?]. Especially where sustainable agriculture is involved, the authors discussed below also engage with the nascent conservation movement and the maturing science of ecology.

But there is a problem, one that will not have escaped readers versed in the ongoing critical conversation around literary naturalism: to say that literary naturalism is partially defined by an attention to the pervasive impacts of human activity on non-human nature is to assert the exact inverse of the human-nature relationship normally seen in naturalist novels. Naturalist determinism is often figured as a unidirectional determination of human nature and consciousness by environmental conditions, tracing the losing struggle of internal forces against external ones, leading to a “plot of decline” as protagonists degenerate into primitive immorality or an atavistic bestiality.[[1]](#footnote-1) The Anthropocene and pre-Anthropocene alike propose that such a relationship has been reversed, and that the human is now the overriding environmental force determining all others. If naturalists admit such a high degree of determinative human influence on nature, the terms of the naturalist conversation are not yet expansive enough to account for it.

But then, the terms of the naturalist conversation as they have been traditionally constituted are hardly capable of describing any engagement with non-human nature whatsoever, leading to a common conception—as I will argue, *mis*conception—of the genre as primarily urban. There is room for objection to this characterization. After all, it is a commonplace of naturalist criticism to assert that the genre is defined by an exploration the changing relationship between humanity and nature in the post-Darwinian moment of scientific rationality (cf. Fleissner #, OUP handbooks sources). But this statement and the “redefinition” it promises are generally followed studies primarily of *human* nature as it is depicted in naturalism, with non-human nature being left by the wayside. In a recent collection surveying the state of naturalist criticism, *The Oxford Handbook of American Literary Naturalism* (2011), Eric Carl Link frames naturalists as those authors “who engage, at the thematic level, post-Darwinian reconsiderations of the relationship between humans and nature,” but this ultimately entails a naturalized sense of social laws, atavism, and degeneration, all on an essentially human level (#). In the same volume, Bert Bender begins his discussion of “nature in naturalism” by equating the “idea of studying the human’s place in nature” in naturalism’s scientific context with “study[ing] human nature as a branch of Darwinian natural history” (53). [I guess I can’t avoid Pizer] Innumerable other studies frame the discussion in much the same way, and in many senses, they are right to, as it would be preposterous to suggest that human nature and a post-Darwinian sense of the human do not play a constitutive role in defining naturalism. At the same time, this unremitting focus on the nature in humanity largely eclipsed the place of humanity in nature.

More recent scholarship has begun attending to depictions of non-human nature in naturalist novels, enough to almost constitute an ecocritical turn in naturalism studies. [ Fleissner ] [ the progressive era animality thing ] [ florian Freitag ] [ paul formisano ] [ kevin trumpeter ]

[ I bring the Anthropocene turn, almost accidentally; my definition]

*[Here’s a major question: am I redefining or expanding? I think expanding. Link points out that a definition has to account for a majority of the major works, which seems indisputable, and I’m not sure I’d meet that criterion]*

I join generations of naturalist criticism in defining American literary naturalism as a genre at its height from 1890 to 1915 that engaged post-Darwinian science to reconsider the place of the human in nature and of nature in the human. Where I differ is in my definitions of boundaries, first to the range of post-Darwinian science they engaged, and second the scope of the human-nature relationship that is renegotiated in the literature itself.

What these accounts miss along with most of naturalist criticism is that the context of post-Darwinian thought itself, the birth and early development of ecological science, also played a major part in forming the naturalist environmental ethos, and this context’s account of determinism and the place of the human in nature is almost diametrically opposed to the deterministic human-nature relationship normally ascribed to the genre. Many of the major naturalists may have been influenced by Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and other theorists of human evolutionary dynamics, but they were also influenced by the broader theories of non-human nature and ecology contained in the work of Joseph LeConte, Lester F. Ward, If Jack London concerns himself with hereditary and environmental determinism in “To Build a Fire,” *The Call of the Wild*, and *White Fang*, he is also

[on Pre-Anthropocene: “Pre-Anthropocene might seem to more naturally designate the period before the yet-to-be-determined starting point of the Anthropocene as a geological epoch—at the time of writing not officially ratified stratigraphically, but likely to be placed at the midcentury Great Acceleration. I use the term pre-Anthropocene, and implicitly also Anthropocene, to instead refer to the reign of the theories themselves. This is meant to emphasize their construction as theories of the human-nature relationship without intending to cast doubt on the scientific basis of the Anthropocene theories; I merely study them as intellectual phenomena rather than as scientific ones.]

1. cite. Is this a straw man? [↑](#footnote-ref-1)