The Phenomenology of Species: Jack London and Species-Being

Phillip R. Polefrone

You must not deny your relatives, the other animals. Their history is your history.

—Jack London, “The Other Animals”

History is the true natural history of man.

—Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*

Even if we were to emotionally identify with a word like mankind, we would not know what being a species is, for, in species history, humans are only an instance of the concept species as indeed would be any other life form. But one never experiences being a concept.

—Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses”

### Introduction: *Before Adam* and the Geological Human

Jack London’s *Before Adam* (1906-7) begins with a peculiar act of geological periodization. It comes shortly after he establishes his motif, with the novel’s unnamed narrator explaining that his life has been plagued by the scattered, intrusive memories of “Big-Tooth,” a distant, pre-human progenitor. The object of this periodization is not part of the stratigraphic record, the layers of mineral sedimentation that make up the inorganic archive of the planet. Rather, it is the experiences and memories of the narrator himself, dated on a geological timescale:

My nights marked the reign of fear—and such fear!…[M]y fear is the fear of long ago, the fear that was rampant in the Younger World, and in the youth of the Younger World. In short, the fear that reigned supreme in that period known as the Mid-Pleistocene. (1)

We are asked, from the beginning, to understand this man’s experience in terms well beyond the boundaries of his own life, or even the lives of several generations. We are instead asked to place his visceral fear in a context that defies the capacities of individual experience—told that in order to understand it, we have to not only think but feel, as he is forced to, across the temporal poles that define the ambit of the human species as a whole. The site of London’s geological archive becomes the periodizing consciousness itself, which has gained access to the accreted layers of memory that make up its identity—an identity that in turn encompasses far more than a sum of individual experiences.

Jack London’s geology, in short, is a geology of the human, a geology in which the human is both the subject and object of study. A century later, we have a name for this geology: the Anthropocene. This chapter will explore the ways Jack London uses the narrative techniques of naturalism to represent the experience of species as such, taking a natural-historical category that touches the geological timescale as the basis of an idealized human collective. Focusing particularly on his well known short story “To Build a Fire” (1908) and the less prominent agricultural novel *The Valley of the Moon* (1915), this exploration will ultimately suggest that London had preemptively taken up one of the chief heuristic challenges posed by the Anthropocene as a theoretical discourse almost a century before that discourse began: to consider the place of natural history in human history (and vice versa) by expanding the temporal scope of what constitutes “human history”, rendering the human species itself as an identity that is able to be experienced as such, and using this experience of species as a way to understand the role of the human in the long history of the planet.

In pursuing this argument, I will explore commonalities in the formal techniques that London uses across these works to narrate the human identity from without, particularly his use of typological characters to make the individual subjectivity stand in for a collective and the way he creates distance between the narrator and the subjectivity of the protagonist to identify certain experiences as indicative of the species as a whole. But I will also confront the difficulty of separating London’s confused perspectives on race with his attempts to think through species as a defining category. Finally, I will show that London takes the narration of species experience that he developed over the course of his best-known work and extends it to an analysis of the detrimental influence of human activity on the planet in his late agricultural novels (and in his life on the experimental ranch that inspired them). In short, an understanding of the human based on the geological timescale is a basis for London’s understanding of what causes extensive environmental destruction, but taking the human species as a foundation for positive collective action is also his starting point for remediation.

And yet, thinking the human geologically as London does has until recently constituted a category error. The human is mere biology, and we had thus (until the discovery of the Anthropocene) been assumed to interact with other lifeforms and our immediate environment without so much as scratching the surface of the geological record. What the designation of the Anthropocene recognizes, however, is that despite being barely more than a footnote in the long history of the Earth, the human has now ascended to the scale of a geological force that could well define that planet’s future, leaving many and various stratigraphic footprints as we unwittingly alter the most basic systems of our natural environment. Attempts to confront the Anthropocene, whether conceptually or practically, have found in this most basic premise a considerable stumbling block because of its reliance on an uncomplicated universal “human”, or “Anthropos”. To act in recognition that the human collective has become a geological force, one has to first experience oneself as fundamentally part of that human collective—not even biologically or geologically, but as part of an identity that precedes and exceeds the intellect and the individual. Whether this is possible has been a matter of some debate, but such an experience is precisely what many of the narrative techniques of literary naturalism, and Jack London’s work in particular, attempt to induce.

We can name the thing London seeks to depict “species-being,” adopting the Marxian term for a similar concept. In the Marxian framework to which London subscribed, capitalism engenders a constant and conscious revolutionization of the means of production, as a consequence of which “all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.”[[1]](#footnote-22) Under these conditions of constant change, the “real conditions of life” become both a revelation and a teleologically mutable object, something realized individually and collectively *through its transformation*. Species-being refers to humanity’s conscious transformation of itself in this larger context of revolutionization, a transformation of the collective’s defining nature that is inextricable from that of the means of production. Nature, objects, and systems of production are simply the “inorganic body” of the human that makes this transformative knowledge of the collective self possible.

With the heuristic challenges posed by the “Anthropos” in Anthropocene, species-being as a concept has reemerged with a new resonance, now making it possible to question what role humanness-as-such plays in the environmental crisis.[[2]](#footnote-23) Invoking species-being here can serve to put London at once in the context of the Marxist theory that was central to his own thinking on a number of topics throughout his life[[3]](#footnote-24) and the aspects of the Anthropocene discourse he partially predicts.

In London’s work, as in Marxist and Anthropocene theory, species-being can be taken as the place where questions of the human, technology, and the environment collide, becoming subject to a unified process of historical contingency. Such historical contingency separates species-being from uncomplicated essentialism. The concept of species-being and London’s narration of species both assert a degree of mutual experience and common subjectivity across members of a species without taking that mutuality as totally deterministic of an individual’s nature.  
Just as, for Marx, transformations in the social and technological means of production lead to corresponding transformations in the nature of the human, London describes developments in species-being according to a combination of individuality and changing socio-technological conditions, taking the Promethean symbol of fire as an emblem of humanness and urban environments as sites of catastrophic alienation from self and species alike. Insofar as human species-being itself is responsible for the existential threat to the planet, it will not be due to some immutable essence in this framework, but rather the result of historical developments in the abilities and characteristics that define us.

Considered in terms of humanity’s relationship to our natural environment, species-being can both be grounds for a critique of the human’s role in environmental history and the basis of a mobilization. As an historically contingent essence, species-being adopts technological development and industrialization (common targets of environmentalist critique) as defining aspects of what it means to be human—or to be more precise, as features of what it has meant to be human at certain moments in an extremely *longue-durée* history. This association in turn forces us to ask whether it is humanness itself that is responsible for the environmental damage occasioned by, for example, the industrial revolution, or something else (like capitalism or technological development). Such a proposition might seem to be a particularly cynical determinism, but at the same time an ability to conceive of environmental change in terms of the species itself is the first step in any suitable response to the crisis that is implied by and that gave rise to the term “Anthropocene”, because nothing less than a global remediation of the trends that led to this point will be enough to prevent catastrophic change.

If a conception of the human species is necessary to mobilize for change at the necessary scale, it is also true that this new conception of species is only possible within reach of this self-inflicted threat to our existence as a species. Indeed, it may be that the “Anthropos” in Anthropocene is always already on the verge of extinction at its own hand. Although technically only designating a geological epoch defined by the influence of collective human activity, the Anthropocene has always been more than a passive marker of a temporal boundary, even in its earliest instantiations serving as shorthand at once for anthropogenic destruction of the planet and the need for immediate remediation.[[4]](#footnote-25) Reviving the “human species” as a universalizing concept offers both an explanation of this destruction and a response to it. Indeed, as Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it in his seminal essay “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” “Species may indeed be the name of a placeholder for an emergent, new universal history of humans that flashes up in the moment of the danger that is climate change.”[[5]](#footnote-26) If our “moment of danger” is causing us to reach for the species concept, a biological collective that both exceeds and composes the individual, it is in response to a dual relationship to mass extinction. We recognize that the human collective has become a destructive force by its very nature, but we recognize at the same time that this destructiveness does not come with omnipotence. To think of the human in a superhuman timescale is to take seriously the threat of self-inflicted species death and place ourselves in the long history of lifeforms coming into being and disappearing in a geological moment.

*Before Adam* ends on a similar note of ephemerality, of individual and species alike, defined by equally imminent senses of the species’ coming-to-be and its extinction. The Folk, after all, do not survive to become human. Though we don’t know their fate for certain, it is clear that they are so diminished as to form barely a hereditary trace in the makeup of the modern human compared to the dominant Fire People, a mere eddy in the gene pool. Reflecting on the moment when the few surviving Folk assemble after being routed by the Fire People, the narrator says, “It is like the meeting of the handful of survivors after the day of the end of the world.”[[6]](#footnote-27) As he would again in *The Scarlet Plague* (1912), a post-apocalyptic novel in which a plague wipes out all but a small community of survivors who revert to primitive ways of living, London invokes the end of the world as an occasion to consider the fragility of humanity as a whole.

For London and contemporary thinkers of the Anthropocene alike, ephemerality leads to a more poignant experience of a species identity primarily by imagining it as a community. In this moment of threat, the narrator, speaking for Big-Tooth, subtly changes his focus from the limited perspective of Big-Tooth’s own experiences to the fortunes of the collective, speaking for both Big-Tooth and the species he represents. The usual subject “I” becomes a “we” as the Folk are hounded to the edges of habitable land. “We could not survive in such an environment,” the narrator says, and “the radical change in our diet was not good for us…[w]e were all lean and dyspeptic-looking.”[[7]](#footnote-28) The narrator draws attention to the effects of a changed environment on he Folk, and by extension to the relatively particular conditions they need to survive. The moment becomes, in effect, an analysis of the species from within, for the rapidly dwindling species is composed only of those present.

When his species becomes a community, it becomes possible for Big-Tooth to speak for it. Births and deaths in this species-community, for example, take on a new significance. When he says that “we died faster than new ones were born” and “our number steadily diminished,” it is understood to be an existential threat to the species as a whole. This threat in turn leads to a meditation on the nature of humanity: “I, the modern, am incontestably a man,” we are told; “yet I, Big-Tooth, the primitive, am not a man. Somewhere, and by straight line of descent, these two parties to my dual personality were connected. Were the Folk, before their destruction, in the process of becoming men?…I do not know.”[[8]](#footnote-29) Understanding the species-identity of the pre-human “Folk” is possible in a way that, to the narrator, the identity of the modern human simply is not. London provides the possibility of a species experience in the Folk before creating a speculative gap that invites meditation on the experience of modern humanity in the same terms he sets out for the Folk.

He is not alone in this simultaneous acknowledgement of the need to think about the human collective and hesitation to think about the human species in the same way we think of non- or pre-human species. Though the human species is a universalizing concept that, as Chakrabarty puts it, “flashes up” in an existentially threatening moment, it inhabits a timescale that would seem to be too far removed from that of human experience to be easily apprehensible—or, for that matter, apprehensible at all in any experiential sense. It is Chakrabarty himself who has most influentially voiced this impossibility:

Who is the we? We humans never experience ourselves as a species. We can only intellectually comprehend or infer the existence of the human species but never experience it as such. There could be no phenomenology of us as a species. Even if we were to emotionally identify with a word like mankind, we would not know what being a species is, for, in species history, humans are only an instance of the concept species as indeed would be any other life form. But one never experiences being a concept.[[9]](#footnote-30)

We may be able to conceive of the totality, and we may be able to experience it as a kind of guilt on behalf of that totality. But the phenomenological gap between self and species is too large: species may be always already embodied, but it is not able to be lived except conceptually, or intellectually. The Anthropocene thus presents a moment of crisis in the individual imagination. Thinking our new epoch requires that the individual experience be expanded even further beyond the self than what normal historical consciousness requires, a collectivizing act that is less identification with something larger than interrogation of an identity that is both *a priori* and embodied.

Herein, of course, lies the great danger of species-thinking as a theoretical program. It risks ignoring half a century of critical theory, the very basis of which is opposition to the kind of essentialism a discourse of the human species would seem to imply. At least in the humanities, a proliferation of alternate terms has resulted, among them the Capitalocene, the Plantationocene, and the Cthulucene.[[10]](#footnote-31) These searches for an alternative term have one thing in common: they understand the “anthropos” in Anthropocene as an even distribution of blame for actions the benefits of which have historically been anything *but* even.

But this understandably critical reaction to the term may well mistake one type of universal for another, or at least apply to it a historiographic method that searches for an ethical and economic accounting when the term’s argument is first and foremost about the capacities of an organism considered in natural-historical terms. Ian Baucom, sharing the concerns that cause this discomfort as he considers Chakrabarty’s version of the universal species concept, points out that the Anthropocene’s universalism “seems to wreak havoc on the key principles of historical understanding and political commitment that have animated not only Chakrabarty’s preceding body of work, but the broader project of postcolonial critique to which that work has been dedicated.”[[11]](#footnote-32) But to consider the species concept as a universal of the same type as those that postcolonial critique has opposed in the past, Baucom continues, would be to miss Chakrabarty’s point. It is not the universalism that has been widely opposed in the name of a struggle for the “freedom of difference,” but a “natural–scientific” universalism that presents a new paradigm entirely.[[12]](#footnote-33) As Baucom reads it, in this new paradigm “freedom can no longer be conceived of as the freedom of difference against the power of the globalizing same.” Rather, “freedom” now relies on survival through a collective effort to save the planet by transforming our relationship to it, and this universal concept becomes a requirement of freedom itself. The pursuit of freedom is now “a task of the species, as species, for the species. It is a universal human challenge, a challenge of humanity’s shared natural history and its shared planetary future.”[[13]](#footnote-34) Baucom shifts the universalizing gesture of the “anthropos” prefix onto the commonality of a deep past and the preservation of an equally deep future (one hopes), temporalities that fall beyond the scope of historiographies of the human scale. Doing so makes the human species a collectivizing figure that attempts to encompass everyone without asking for homogeneity. As Gerda Roelvink puts it, “Species, then, might refer to a kind of political collectivity without essence.”[[14]](#footnote-35)

The problem of species, of the “*anthropos*” in the Anthropocene, is thus multifaceted and beset with contradictions. It demands a natural-scientific universalism that takes the species concept as the basis for human history and as the starting point in the struggle for freedom. It requires an understanding of anthropogenic planetary change based on this species history. But in developing such a species history, we risk backsliding into essentialisms, and thus a concerted effort must be made to differentiate a natural-scientific universal of collective survival from the universals of the past that have long been used to justify programs of domination and exploitation.

And yet over all these tasks hovers an enduring paradox: to address the conceptual and practical challenges of the Anthropocene, we must embrace a concept that Chakrabarty claims fundamentally exceeds the capacities of human experience, that has no phenomenology, that is somehow both embodied and inaccessible.

Though differently framed, the defining questions and formal characteristics of literary naturalism speak directly to this set of concerns. In pursuing the well-trodden ground of the “determinism” question in literary naturalism, critics of the genre have debated the role of species characteristics in determining the actions and experiences of the individual, albeit in different terms. The naturalist character is, famously or notoriously, less notable as an individual subjectivity than as a nexus of warring deterministic forces. The most marked conflicts occur between “forces” defined by evolutionary conditioning and those that are a product of a physical and social environment, especially in urban settings.[[15]](#footnote-36)

Introducing the species concept into this discourse merely requires a reminder that speciation is the product of evolutionary variation. But when this common reading of the naturalist character is recast not just in terms of the species concept, but in terms of the species concept with all the resonances it has gained in the discourse of the Anthropocene, readings of the naturalist form and its philosophical underpinnings alike gain added significance. In treating characters as more than individual subjectivities, as typological figures and as products of biological and environmental conditions instead, the narrative strategies unique to naturalist fiction pursue the same imaginative capacities that are required to conceive of the species in the ways Chakrabarty says is both necessary and impossible.

Most notably, despite their aspirations to narrate vast systems of human and non-human “forces”, naturalist novels tend to be insistently visceral in the descriptive details they use to compose this narration. One need only think of Dreiser’s Carrie or Wharton’s Lily Bart to see how the visceral and the systemic intertwine. Both women experience the bodily changes that result from their gruelling labor in clothing production, a process detailed in terms that evoke the lived experience of the labor rather than the theory of it; and yet for both authors, the experiential serves the conceptual, establishing a window into the alienation of labor and the economic systems that lead to it.[[16]](#footnote-37)

While these are historical rather than natural-historical examples—the conditions of labor are historically contingent and understandable within human timescales—the same holds true of the natural historical cases. In *Before Adam*, the narrator’s access to the memories of his deep past comes from feeling, not from contemplation: from fear, a felt and decidedly unscientific experience. To feel the fear of the Pleistocene epoch is to recall a distinctly different humanity, one that has not superceded the bounds of biological agency to become geological—indeed, one that has not yet removed itself from the food chain or secured its sustenance through the soft conquests of agriculture and animal domestication. London establishes the gulf between this pre-human form and the modern human through juxtaposition of the Folk and the Fire People. When Big-Tooth and his friend Lop-Ear stalk the Fire People and investigate the remnants of their fire, the simplest possible moment of dramatic irony results: “I wanted to see what [the fire] was like, and between thumb and finger, I picked up a glowing coal. My cry of pain and fear, as I dropped it, stampeded Lop-Ear into the trees, and his flight frightened me after him.”[[17]](#footnote-38) This moment of pain and fear, though fleeting, is reminiscent of the fears of the “Mid-Pleistocene” in general that London narrates—fears that result not from the external conditions themselves but from the Folk’s inability to confront them using the methods humanity has developed since, like technology and community. In other words, the fear results from being someone like Big-Tooth, who “did not bother to weigh and analyze,” who “was simplicity itself” and “just lived events, without ever pondering why he lived them in his particular and often erratic way.”[[18]](#footnote-39) In imagining not knowing that fire will burn—or not knowing how to use weapons to fight predators, or not knowing to band together to resist a larger enemy—the modern reader must imagine a consciousness without the same type of problem-solving, tool-use, and social capacities that so define human history.[[19]](#footnote-40) But the entry point to this consciousness is the shared visceral feelings of pain an fear.

Where Chakrabarty claims that “one never experiences being a concept”, London attempts to use common feeling as a bridge to an experience of species-being. To recall this earlier state of being in the context of evolutionary history is to draw the outline of the human species history through an experiential link between early and late temporal poles. The result is not an abstract conception but a comparison of ways of being that encompasses a multi-epochal humanness.

The rest of this chapter will take three of London’s works as case studies to show that his engagement with the species concept culminated in an attempt to use species-being as the basis of a unified pursuit of a single principle, increasing the abundance of life on Earth through conscious environmental transformation. First, I will discuss “To Build a Fire” to show how he used non-human perspectives to theorize species-being. The next, brief section will show how London develops a speculative version of future possible species-beings in a late, relatively unknown play called *The Acorn-Planter*. Finally, I will argue through a reading of *The Valley of the Moon* that in order to imagine his vision of species-being enacted practically, London was forced to confront the nativist and supremacist convictions of his moment—convictions that he himself voices at some moments in his work and opposes at others. What results is a progressive agrarianism in which scientific agriculture and cultural exchange realize his vision of the potential for an ecological species-being.

### “To Build a Fire”: Species-Being, Human and Animal

…humankind is self-made in the most literal sense. Our bodies are the product of the tool-using adaptation which predates the genus *Homo*. We actively determined our design through tools that mediate the human exchange with nature. This condition of our existence may be visualized in two contradictory ways. Gazing at the tools themselves, we may choose to forget that they only mediate our labor. From that perspective, we see our brains and our other products impelling us on a historical course of escalating technological domination; that is, we build an alienated relation to nature. We see our specific historical edifice as both inevitable human nature and technical necessity. […] Or, we may focus on the labour process itself and reconstruct our sense of nature, origins, and the past so that the human future is in our hands.

—Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* [22]

It is somewhat surprising, given his systematic pursuit of a way to narrate the human as such, that Jack London is more commonly associated with his depiction of non-human subjects. Indeed, the works in London’s *oeuvre* that are most obviously relevant to the species discussion are also those for which he is most famous: his “dog stories”, as he liked to call them. In *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and *White Fang* (1906), he uses the perspective of two canine protagonists to explore the line between domesticity and wildness. The protagonist of the former, Buck, becomes progressively wilder as he moves from a comfortable existence on a farm to leading a sled team to running free with a pack of wolves. The latter, *White Fang*, presents an inverse situation, tracing its eponymous character’s life from his birth in the wilderness through his coming of age in captivity, where he pulls sleds and is forced to fight in a dogfighting circuit until he is rescued and finally domesticated.

But London’s dog stories are ironically as much about humanity as they are about non-human animals. The individual dog character offers London a lens to explore not only the subjectivity of dogs, but the subjective experience of species more broadly writ. On one hand, he does consider the degree to which the experience of a single dog is the result of its inherent dogness—that is, to what extent species itself can be said to account for individual subjectivity. On the other hand, he uses the dog figure as a mechanism of narrative estrangement, a vantage point from which to consider the human *from without*, and from which to ask whether humanness can be used to define the individual human in the same way that he thought dogness can define the individual dog.

The question was already controversial when he first posed it at the beginning of the twentieth century. Even where his conclusions appeared to be limited to actual dogs, interrogating species as such made trouble for London, involving him in a controversy regarding so-called “nature-fakers” and pitting him against none other than the sitting president and self-appointed authority on all things out-of-doors, Theodore Roosevelt. The controversy began when a scientist named John Burroughs wrote an article called “Real and Sham Natural History,” in which he decried the appearance of sympathetic and above all individualistic animal characters in the fiction of the day. Burroughs claimed that all animal behavior is entirely instinctual, and that the imputation of reason and learned behavior to individual animals, a premise on which he claimed these animal fictions relied, constituted nature-fakery. To Burroughs, the non-human animal is entirely mechanistic, an automaton driven by pure instinct. For his part, Roosevelt leveled petty complaints against *White Fang*: he saw fakery in the claim that a lynx could kill a dog (a claim, incidentally, which does not appear in *White Fang*, as London would later point out) and that a bull dog could beat a wolf dog in a fight.[[20]](#footnote-42) Narrating a theory of species brought London to a fight of his own—one which he did not necessarily relish—about the degree of determinism and universalization implied by the species concept.

When these critiques began to appear, London did his best to keep out of it. As he wrote several years later of the incident in an essay called “The Other Animals”: “when the word *nature-faker* was coined, I, for one, climbed into my tree and stayed there…and a Honolulu reporter elicited the sentiment from me that I thanked God I was not an authority on anything.”[[21]](#footnote-43) When he finally did climb down from his tree, he dismissed Roosevelt’s claims easily enough, describing the president as an “amateur” and saying he “does not understand evolution, and he does not seem to have made much of an attempt to understand evolution.”[[22]](#footnote-44) On this basis, he excused the president’s mistakes and suggested a more careful rereading of the works Roosevelt critiqued.

In responding to Burroughs, London was more comprehensive and more damning, and in the process revealed a continuity between his dog books and his meditations on the human. In “The Other Animals,” he recounts several experiences with his own dogs that bear a clear relation to episodes in his fiction, analyzing them to demonstrate reason triumphing over instinct in the non-human subject. The drives of instinct and reason, he says, come out of an evolutionary succession, with the former a “race-habit” that “is blind, unreasoning, mechanical” and the latter a development that culiminates in, but is not exlusive to, humanness itself.[[23]](#footnote-45) His concluding salvo continues to place human and non-human on an evolutionary continuum, but in doing so also suggests that pre-human natural history continues to exist in the humans of the present:

Mr. Burroughs, though you stand on the top of the ladder of life, you must not kick out that ladder from under your feet. You must not deny your relatives, the other animals. Their history is your history….What you repudiate in them you repudiate in yourself — a pretty spectacle, truly, of an exalted animal striving to disown the stuff of life out of which it is made, striving by use of the very reason that was developed by evolution to deny the processes of evolution that developed it. This may be good egotism, but it is not good science.[[24]](#footnote-46)

Embrace the animal, London tells us, “exalted animal” though it may be. Claiming that human action is driven exclusively by reason contradicts the very conclusions of that reason, which require an admission of *unreason* in the form of atavistic drives. Contrary to the straw-man versions of naturalist determinism that have defined many critiques of the genre for over a century, animalistic drives in the human and non-human alike are non-mechanistic in London’s view. Rather, his naturalism positions these drives as a substratum that exists in a complex mixture with the reason that both derives from and seeks to disown it. The extent to which reason has developed and the sway that it holds is a matter of speciation.

But buried in this conclusion is another telling statement that complicates the traditional boundaries between human history and natural history—the very boundary that Chakrabarty and Baucom say the Anthropocene itself complicates. “You must not deny your relatives, the other animals,” London tells us. He continues: *Their history is your history*. What appears a statement of inter-species camaraderie becomes much more when considered in terms of London’s larger project in relation to species. He uses the species concept as a starting point for a narrative exploration of the natural history of the human—a unique kind of historical fiction, we might say, a natural history fiction.

*Before Adam* is undoubtedly such a fiction, an attempt to bring to life, to bring to experience, the natural history of the human. It experiments not so much with different temporalities as with juxtaposed modes of experience appropriate to different forms of consciousness in the history of the species, just as other naturalist historical novels (Dreiser’s *The Financier*, for example) create the experience of a bygone economic and social moment. But where historical fiction and its narrative modes have a line of precedence as long as that of literature itself, natural history fiction has many of its fundamental questions unanswered: What does it mean to *live* species rather than think it, and not as a transcendent experience but as a quotidian one? What does it mean to experience the species as a defining category contingent on a moment in natural history, in the way that other historically contingent identities can be experienced?

If *Before Adam* fails to address these questions, it is perhaps because it fails to root itself in the experiences of either of the two moments it depicts, fully inhabiting the experience of neither the Pleistocene nor the Holocene. It may model a natural-historical fiction, but this fiction has merely the same narrative requirements as other forms of historical fiction. If he makes the pre-human experience of the Pleistocene more accessible to a modern consciousness, it may paint a clearer sketch of the process of speciation and human development, in the same way that Dreiser opens the economic crisis of the 1870s to experience to form an argument about the crisis-prone nature of capitalism and finance. But neither novel does anything to expand the temporal scale of their narration within its own bounds, an expansion without which any robust experience of species remains out of reach.

In a short story from the same period, “To Build a Fire,” London performs just such an expansion through the classic naturalist tropes of atavism and instinct, narrating a human experience in which multiple temporalities exist at once. In doing so, he also presents a version of the human that exceeds the category of biological species in the nature of its interaction with its environment—and through contrast with a canine character like those of *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*, he shows just how much the species-concept needs to be revised to be experienced on human terms. The story tests the ways the forms of knowledge that came to conflict in the “nature fakers” controversy define the experience of species in canine and human subjects alike. It also pursues an anti-essentialist definition of humanness as plastic and historically contingent—a definition that effectively blends the historical and natural-historical modes in the same manner as Marxian species-being.

What makes these meditations on the human stand out even more distinctly is the fact that they only exist in the second of the story’s two versions—the one written after *The Call of the Wild*, *White Fang*, and *Before Adam*. “To Build a Fire” was first published as a much shorter story in *Youth’s Companion* magazine in 1902. Shortly afterward, in 1903, *The Call of the Wild* was published to popular acclaim, followed by *White Fang* in 1906. Only after exploring the narrative challenges of species in canine characters did London write *Before Adam*, which was serialized in 1906 and 1907, extending to human characters the explorations of species that come more naturally in reference to non-human figures. Finally, in 1908, something he had discovered in writing these books prompted him to return to the events of “To Build a Fire” with a much more nuanced view of the human and a much more ambitious sense of the philosophical vision it implies.

The earlier story forms a clear foundation for the later, canonical version. Both feature a man traveling alone in temperatures less than negative-sixty degrees (contrary to the advice of more experienced travelers) whose foot becomes soaked with water. In both, the man struggles to build a fire to dry himself out and stay alive, fighting the absolute numbness of his extremities to light birch-bark kindling with a book of matches.

But there are differences in the key events of the two versions, inviting a comparative reading. In the earlier story, the man makes it back to camp with scars and an education. In the latter, he dies, and his canine companion (who does not appear in the former version) returns without him to “the other food-providers and fire-providers.”[[25]](#footnote-47) Furthermore, while the protagonist of the early story is individuated, receiving a name and thus an identity, the protagonist of the later story is merely called “the man.” This was a deliberate omission and one that occurred early in the composition process. In the first handwritten manuscripts, it is clear that London had given the man a name before taking it away, writing “John Collins” and “Collins” several times before scratching them out. “Collins” becomes a blank slate for “man”, London’s preferred term for referring to the human in general.[[26]](#footnote-48)

With these changes to the events of the story come more significant philosophical implications about how reason and technology define the nature of the human. Broadly speaking, the story suggests that knowledge as such forms a barrier between the individual organism and death, laying out three forms of such knowledge: instinct, individual reason, and socially transmitted experience. The different proportions of each of these forms of knowledge comes to define the distinct essences of individuals and species alike.

London is inconsistent regarding the extent to which each of these forms of knowledge does indeed constitute knowledge. In some cases, instinct is presented as something other than knowing. When, confronted with wet feet just as the man is, the dog begins licking and biting its toes to break off the ice, London draws a line between apparently automatic action and reason. The dog’s preventative measure “was a matter of instinct. To permit the ice to remain would mean sore feet. It did not know this. It merely obeyed the mysterious prompting that arose from the deep crypts of its being.”[[27]](#footnote-49) In contrast, when the man helps the dog remove the ice from its feet, he does so not out of some coevolutionary impulse, but based on a deduced and self-serving rationale. No, the dog did not know what the ice “meant”: “But the man knew, having achieved a judgment on the subject, and he removed the mitten from his right hand and helped tear out the ice-particles.”[[28]](#footnote-50) Here is a familiar story about the line separating human and animal, not unlike Burroughs’s position in his excoriation of nature fakers. Where the man “achieve[s] a judgment,” the dog merely “obeys” a distinctly embodied sedimentation of ancestral experiences. Dubbing the source of the dog’s instinctual response “the deep crypts of its being,” London renders this action as somehow dead, a stark contrast to the active language of the man’s intellectual achievements.

But this familiar argument that places the non-human on the side of instinct and the human on the side of reason is not London’s, as is clear from his response to Burroughs, and the initial easy division is quickly complicated. In the first place, the dog of “To Build a Fire” has all the same capacity for reason that London saw in his own dogs and that he ascribes to Buck and White Fang. Responding to life-threatening cold, the dog has a learned response that appears simultaneously with his instinctive one: “The dog had learned fire, and it wanted fire, or else to burrow under the snow and cuddle its warmth away from the air.”[[29]](#footnote-51) The dog prefers the fire it has learned to depend on, but failing that, it has a reservoir of instinct to fall back on. The man is not so lucky. Though he singularly fails to benefit from any instinctive knowledge, however, it is not because of a lack in the instinctual capacities of humanity as a species—as is clear in *Before Adam*, London ascribes the same “deep crypts of being” to humans in varying degrees. It is instead a matter of the man’s particular ancestry: “This man did not know cold. Possibly all the generations of his ancestry had been ignorant of cold, of real cold, of cold one hundred and seven degrees below freezing-point. But the dog knew; all its ancestry knew, and it had inherited the knowledge.”[[30]](#footnote-52) We understand by implication that things might be different for the man—*this* man, not “man”—had his ancestors been more acquainted with the kind of cold he confronts in the story. Furthermore, instinct is not a mysterious prompting in this example, but a legitimate source of knowledge. The dog “knew”, and the man “did not know”, because of a difference in their access to instinctual archives.

Finally, both the human and non-human subjects here have social relations that act as yet another source of knowledge. London again and again observes, in both versions of the story, that the man has not appreciated the advice of the “old-timer on Sulpher Creek” who warned him against traveling alone, especially in temperatures below negative-fifty degrees.[[31]](#footnote-53) This, ultimately, is the man’s cardinal sin, a lack of respect for the accumulated knowledge of those who know the extreme environment better than he does. For just as the individual alone in an extreme environment is more fragile than in a group, the knowledge of the individual is more fragile than collective knowledge, subject to gaps due to a lack of both experience and so-called instinctual impulses as well as to simple forgetfulness. Indeed, the man’s demise could well stem from having “forgotten to build a fire and thaw out” before sitting down to eat, which it is implied would not have occurred had he travelled with companions or taken more heed of advice.[[32]](#footnote-54)

What is more surprising is that his relationship with the dog could have provided this social reservoir of knowledge were that relationship more mutually supportive. The dog’s instinctual reserves of wisdom are open to the man, making (in theory if not in this case) inter-species sociality a route to a replacement for those instinctual reserves that humanity lacks. Immediately after drawing a sharp contrast between the man’s lack of instinctual understanding of the cold and the dog’s awareness that “it was the time to lie snug in a hole in the snow”, London momentarily enters the dog’s consciousness to reveal its intentional withholding of what it knows: “there was no keen intimacy between the dog and the man. The one was the toil-slave of the other, and the only caresses it had ever received were the caresses of the whip-lash and of harsh and menacing throat-sounds that threatened the whip-lash. So the dog made no effort to communicate its apprehension to the man.”[[33]](#footnote-55) Cruel treatment and exploitation are poor substitutes for social relationships, so no transfer of information occurs. But the idea that instinct is communicable is, in considering the species, remarkable—because one might presume that instinctual knowledge is either a shared *human* instinct (and does not need to be communicated) or is inaccessible because it belongs to another species and is, *ipso facto*, unable to communicated. London not only imagines a social life that goes beyond the species, but suggests that such a social life is an absolute necessity for mutual survival in certain environments.

The combination of the necessity of instinctual knowledge, the human’s lack of it, and the inter-species sociality as a replacement for it has a startling implication in considering the fitness of humanity for survival, and indeed, the very nature of the human. On its own, the human is incomplete, just as “the man” as an individual is incomplete on his own in the Yukon. He needs either the living sociality of advice and companions, discourse with the dead in the form of a speaking archive of instinctual knowledge, or the inter-species relationships that are enabled by domestication (or symbiosis in the case of other species).

To briefly summarize before moving on, then, London draws the species line according to the availability of different types of knowledge, but he is not absolutist in the way that Burroughs is or others are who claim that reason or socialization uniquely define the human. Rather, London posits that the characters of human and non-human species alike are defined by unique combinations of these types of knowledge and the ways in which they are determinative, or not determinative, of action.

Rendering a comparative definition of species through narrative, however, is not the same as narrating an *experience* of species as such as an identity. This is an experience that is denied to the subjectivity of the character and induced in the audience, through a narrative distancing similar to the one London maintains with the double-subjectivity of *Before Adam*. “The man” never comes to an epiphanic understanding of himself as a member of the species, but juxtaposition with the dog becomes the narrative mechanism by which experiences that define the human species are identified as such. In laying out a knowledge-based theory of species, London creates his concept of humanness; but in narrating these moments in the context of that conceptual framework, London pursues the phenomenology of species itself.

Indeed, the first glimmer of species-thinking in the story is a rejection of the conceptual, but the rejection itself is a telling one: in the absence of meditation on species, there is a more direct access to the behaviors that define London’s concept of the human. Confronted with temperatures more than fifty degrees below zero, the man is entirely unreflective:

The trouble with him was that he was without imagination. He was quick and alert in the things of life, but only in the things, and not in the significances. Fifty degrees below zero meant eighty-odd degrees of frost. Such fact impressed him as being cold and uncomfortable, and that was all. It did not lead him to meditate upon his frailty as a creature of temperature, and upon man’s frailty in general, able only to live within certain narrow limits of heat and cold; and from there on it did not lead him to the conjectural field of immortality and man’s place in the universe.[[34]](#footnote-56)

What defines the man and his narrative function in the story is also the very “trouble with him”. Here London establishes the man purely as a nexus of experience and sensation, devoid of theorization or even imagination. In the same stroke, the narrator assigns duty of both to the reader. The scornful negatives, the litany of all the things the man *did not* do, act as a challenge and establish the lens through which we are to understand the sensory data and impressions conveyed by the rest of the narrative. The human is also removed from a place of mastery over nature, and even from a position of uniqueness among animals, becoming a “creature of temperature”—mere organism, contingent on certain material conditions to arise and persist. What the man expresses as cold and discomfort we are now primed to understand as a specimen straying outside the narrow window of habitability appropriate to its species. And yet it still sets up a narrative emphasis on the phenomenological, the negative statements working to establish a frame of reference while simultaneously refusing to foreground the material out of which that frame is composed.

The title of the story, “To Build a Fire,” takes on a new significance with this “frailty” of the species in mind, as well as the insistent centrality of temperature in the story as a whole and this definition of the human as a “creature of temperature” in particular. The fire serves double-duty as a dramatic conceit and a Promethean symbol, encapsulating the human’s reliance on technology for survival by foregrounding the vulnerability that reliance creates. But when the human is defined by the slim range of temperatures that can support our existence, the fire comes to bear existential weight on the level of the species. The phrase “to build a fire,” an insistent repetition throughout the story, is a statement of humanness itself in a distinctly material sense.

London’s definition of the human by fire is one that is shared by scientists of the twenty-first century. The primatologist Richard Wrangham, for example, argues in *Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human* that cooking increased the amount of energy obtained from food, the effects of which not only aided in the survival of the species, but spurred the development of humanity itself. The energy-hungry, inefficient digestive systems of humanity’s predecessors gave way to smaller digestive systems adapted to a more efficient cooked diet while also leading to a number of other physical adaptations like weaker jaws;[[35]](#footnote-57) this change in the relative costs and gains in energy is in turn thought to have spurred brain growth.[[36]](#footnote-58) Nor were these adaptations limited to the human as a bounded biological agent. As their “bodies responded by biologically adapting to cooked food” and the species, now more resilient, spread across the planet, there were attendant ripples in the area of the human’s effect: “changes in anatomy, physiology, ecology, life history, psychology, and society”—and, we must now add in light of the Anthropocene, in geology. For London and Wrangham both, the development of the human as we know it relied on the ability to exceed the boundaries of the self, encompassing the things we use to define ourselves. “The man’s” fire is thus as defining of humanity as the winter coat is of the wolf.

Consistent with its function as a Promethean symbol, fire in London’s story is merely the representative example of the technological appendages with which London defines the human. The most direct example of this trend is also the most ambiguous and least appealing. The man chews tobacco as he travels, but his frozen beard and numbed lips cause his spit to accumulate in his beard and freeze: “The result was that a crystal beard of the color and solidity of amber was increasing its length on his chin. If he fell down it would shatter itself, like glass, into brittle fragments. But he did not mind the appendage.”[[37]](#footnote-59) The man’s reliance on processed tobacco alters his physical being, making him into a strange hybrid of his natural being and the things he makes use of. But this extra-natural appendage is fragile by nature, and it is hardly introduced before we are supplied with the image of its shattering. This would be no tragedy, the amber beard conferring no imaginable advantage, but other, more common appendages are presented as complementary prosthetics to make up for the natural protections the human lacks. Although “he was a warm-whiskered man,” for example, “the hair on his face did not protect the high cheek-bones,” and the man therefore has to continually agitate “his numb nose and cheek-bones with his mittened hand.”[[38]](#footnote-60) He eventually comes to execute this process “automatically,” putting it in the unthinking realm of natural or instinctual action while simultaneously describing it with the lexicon of industrial technology.[[39]](#footnote-61) Even this appendage is not incorporated firmly enough into the man’s being, however, still requiring a certain degree of attention. He notes with “a pang of regret that he had not devised a nose-strap of the sort Bud wore in cold snaps. Such a strap passed across the cheeks, as well, and saved them.”[[40]](#footnote-62) Lacking a natural protection for his cheeks against the cold, the man’s best hope of survival is to change his physical being with increasingly refined appendages, replacing the natural with the technological.

While these appendages, like the fire, remain external, they are nonetheless constitutive of a human essence—if not as individual prosthetics, then as the process of prosthesis. As Darwin himself put it, “man is enabled through his mental faculties ‘to keep with an unchanged body in harmony with the changing universe’”, which is achieved when “he uses clothes, builds sheds, and makes fires”—whereas non-human animals “must have their bodily structure modified in order to survive under greatly changed conditions.”[[41]](#footnote-63) The uniquely human strategies for survival, which in the eyes of the evolutionist (professional or amateur) are coextensive with a defining human character, are contingent on the degree of technological adaptation in response to a changing environment.

But technology’s role in this story is hardly that of an uncomplicated savior. London goes beyond a purely salutary view of technological humanity, beyond an account in which the human as an intelligent mind fills the gaps of the human as an organism. The fragility of the tobacco-beard, which shatters under the least pressure, is symbolic of humanity’s over-reliance on technology for survival. One metaphor, appearing twice near the end of the story, drives this association home particularly clearly. As the man begins to lose sensation in his fingers, the metaphor that recommends itself is a technological one, just as when the man “automatically” rubbed his cheeks with his mittened hands. But now it is with a sense of fragility that touches the basic makeup of the man’s body: “When he touched a twig, he had to look and see whether or not he had hold of it. The *wires were pretty well down* between him and his finger-ends”; and again, “he closed [his fingers]—that is, he willed to close them, for *the wires were down*, and the fingers did not obey.”[[42]](#footnote-64) The intervention of this technological metaphor marks the man’s loss of contact with his own body, an ultimate separation of mental and corporeal being made manifest by the dissolution of the body while the mind remains active. Whereas earlier the technological appendages appeared as supplements, they are now barriers between the man’s consciousness and his physical self—between the individual intellect and the more basic substratum of being that is determined by species.

Finally, this lost connection has a greater cosmic significance than the death of an individual character. To London, it means a loss of the connection between humanity and our natural environment. In another telling repetition, London suggests that our connection with the planet is bodily rather than intellectual: “He glanced down at first in order to assure himself that he was really standing up, for the absence of sensation in his feet left him *unrelated to the earth*”; and shortly thereafter, as the man runs on feet that are entirely numb, “He seemed to himself to skim along above the surface, and to have *no connection with the earth*.”[[43]](#footnote-65) The statement would draw attention even without repetition, but as when he discusses the “wires” being down, London appears unwilling to let this idea go unnoticed. In both cases, consciousness itself is not enough for a meaningful relationship to one’s immediate environment, and this fact appears to be much of what makes the man’s disembodiment difficult for him to come to terms with. But London’s phrasing here suggests a broader interpretation than one of mere disorientation, a reading that encompasses capital-E-Earth as well as the simpler earth-as-ground that forms the man’s point of reference. The loss of contact with one’s body, the suggestion that the human is pure consciousness without a meaningful physical being, means the loss of perspective regarding the human’s place in the larger collage of planetary systems, including the interrelation of species (like the communication between man and dog) and effects on the environment more broadly conceived.

This body-planet connection is dramatically evoked in a passage that broadens the man’s conception of his place in the universe even further.

His pace of four miles an hour had kept his heart pumping blood to the surface of his body and to all the extremities. But the instant he stopped, the action of the pump eased down. The cold of space smote the unprotected tip of the planet, and he, being on that unprotected tip, received the full force of the blow. The blood of his body recoiled before it. The blood was alive, like the dog, and like the dog it wanted to hide away and cover itself up from the fearful cold.[[44]](#footnote-66)

The effect of this stunning passage relies on a juxtaposition of scales about as violent as it is possible to achieve, from the interior of the human body in one sentence to the movement of astral bodies in the next. As the first sentence depicts the slowing of a single organ, the second takes its vantage from a point beyond the planet itself, depicting the man’s deadly loss of heat in terms of the entire sum of the material systems that have caused it. Just as the dog provides an occasional perspective from beyond the human species, this passage makes itself exterior to the Earth. The man’s insignificance is driven home by the vastness of the universe in which he exists even as he is rendered a part of that universe, one event in a larger chain of causality. In the moment following this mechanistic description of freezing, the narration turns to the purely bodily, imagining human biology as an agent unto itself. This pure physicality, “the blood”, reacts mechanistically, and this mechanism is related to the dog’s prompting from the “crypts” of accreted instinctual knowledge. Even as the man remains unaware of the desires and actions of his physical being, these desires are the source of connection to both the immediate and the cosmic environment, which, with the right frame of reference, are one and the same. To lose one’s connection to the body through technological interventions is to lose all frames of reference beyond the self, to lose the sense of the universal in the individual.

“To Build a Fire”, then, is finally an exploration of the way an ever more technologically mediated essence changes the place of the human in all possible environments, from the most immediate (the relationship with the dog) to the most distant (the place on the planet as a whole). But regarding London’s conception of the species as such, and the notion of an essential species experience, this conclusion raises more questions than it answers. Chief among them: How is it possible for the fundamental characteristic of a species to be defined by technology, something that is historically contingent and external? And what, then, is the proper context in which to seek an understanding of the human species—history or natural history? Finally, how is it possible for the so-called “natural” being of the human to create a separation between the self and the environment in which the self exists?

The questions raised by London’s dog stories speak directly to some of the most debated topics in literary naturalism and Anthropocene theory alike. To narrate a dog experiencing its inherent species-nature, its dogness, is to narrate the phenomenology of determinism itself, or in other words to try to capture the feeling of responding to naturalist “forces” that dictate behavior below the level of conscious choice. Furthermore, splitting the hairs that distinguish the sub-species of the domestic dog from the wolf, *Canis lupus familiaris* from *Canis lupus*, lends a lupine analogue to the naturalist preoccupation with environmental determinism in the city and the country, respectively. The dog character, as is especially evident in a story so dependent on inter-species relationships, is a testing ground for a theory of the human in which our defining humanity arises out of a deterministic, bestial base. By this strategy, London also encounters the complicated universalization of species discourse, which, as has already been seen, is among the first problems the Anthropocene raises for the humanities: to consider the human and the dog in the same terms, one must ask if they have the same relation to species as a collectivizing principle, and what species even means in an ontological sense when the object of contemplation is not *Canis lupus* but *Homo sapiens*.

“To Build a Fire” on its own shows that, for London, species is not an identical concept when applied to humans and non-humans, nor is it an identical phenomenal experience. The distinction he draws between a human and non-human species can be closely described by the Marxian concept of species-being, a term whose very composition seems to challenge Chakrabarty’s contention that the species is not able to be experienced except intellectually.

Developed in *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* and largely abandoned thereafter, species-being refers to the human’s simultaneous transformation of the self and environment through conscious production on a scale that exceeds the individual.[[45]](#footnote-67) On one hand, then, species-being refers to “the historical possibilities of self-development.”[[46]](#footnote-68) On the other hand, “To be human, for Marx, was to remake: to unsettle and reshape the whole of the world.”[[47]](#footnote-69) The two propositions amount to the same thing, because in Marxian species-being, humanity develops its environment as a way of developing itself.[[48]](#footnote-70) Species-being thus posits a uniquely human capacity to define the nature of the individual and the collective through the transformation of external entities: objects, the environment, and social relations.[[49]](#footnote-71)

This combination of self-consciousness and mediation through an external object—Marx at his most Hegelian—makes species-being a uniquely human concept. These two factors distinguish species-being from the “species-life” of animals, by which Marx means the defining “life-activities” that focus primarily on the needs of reproduction and sustenance.[[50]](#footnote-72) All animals produce in pursuit of their defining life-activity; but “Marx’s human […] is a species that knows itself in what it makes.”[[51]](#footnote-73) This distinction is predicated on both a self-knowledge mediated by external objects and a collective identity, a humanness, considered *itself* as a mutable, external object of contemplation. This object-oriented humanism comes from Feuerbach’s original version of species-being in *The Essence of Christianity*: “Man is nothing without an object. […T]he object to which a subject essentially, necessarily relates, is nothing else than this subject’s own, but objective, nature. […] In the object which he contemplates, therefore, man becomes acquainted with himself.”[[52]](#footnote-74) Thus does “the man” of “To Build a Fire” experience the loss of his faculties as downed wires: he is alienated from the external objects by which the human species-being is defined. And likewise, in losing contact with the manipulable materiality of a more hospitable environment and the ability to build a fire, he loses contact with his sense of self and his place on the planet.

This technological capacity is also inherently social, and so, by extension, is human species-being. Marx is unequivocal on this point:

The *human* essence of nature exists only for the *social* man; for only here does nature exist for him as a *bond* with other *men*, as his existence for others and their existence for him, as the vital element of human reality…. *Society* is therefore the perfected unity in essence of man with nature.[[53]](#footnote-75)

And later:

[W]hat I create from myself I create for society, conscious of myself as a social being. My *universal* consciousness is only the *theoretical* form of that whose *living* form is the *real* community, society…. The individual *is* the *social being*. His vital expression…is therefore an expression and confirmation of *social life*.[[54]](#footnote-76)

This link of sociality with the “human essence of nature” echoes with the regretful meditations of London’s man on breaking his social bonds, as he laments ignoring the communal wisdom passed on by the old man and traveling alone. But it also helps make sense of the man’s loss of sociability with his loss of a vital correspondence with the non-human world around him. In rejecting social life, he rejects his own “vital expression,” and in turn, his very vitality.

If the “species” is, for the human, bound up in technological objects and social life, it is also subject to change in the course of both social and technological history. So it is for London, as well: the dramatic separation of the narrator and Big-Tooth in *Before Adam* is a difference of technologically and socially mediated species-beings. The narrator’s frustration at Big-Tooth’s mistakes finds focus in his pre-human inability to understand fire and the failure of the Folk to band together in any form of social organization that could resist their enemies and predators. Similarly, the Fire People and the Folk, providing glimpses of different stages in the development of the human, are defined against each other by their capacities in both of these areas.

While these are arguably differences across different species—the Folk and even the Fire people being not-quite-human—in Marx’s view, the same kinds of difference develop across different degrees of social and technological *human* history: species has a mutable meaning even within a scientific designation of the human. Expanding his inquiry from the external object in general to industry, he writes: “It can be seen how the history of *industry* and the *objective* existence of industry as it has developed is the *open* book of the essential powers of man, man’s psychology present in tangible form.”[[55]](#footnote-77) The “essential powers” of the human develop in complex interrelation with our evolving psychology and defining nature. This degree of correspondence makes it possible to define the state of the human at a given moment by the nature of its production and social organization.

A mutable human essence that transmutes in tandem with the state of production, society, and technology is the key to understanding what is perhaps the most astounding passage in the 1844 manuscripts: “[A]s everything natural must *come into being*, so man also has his process of origin in *history*. But for him history is a conscious process, and hence one which constantly supersedes itself. History is the true natural history of man.”[[56]](#footnote-78) If history has replaced natural history as the determining factor of human species-being, then what it means to be human is not the same at different moments in history. Humanness is only *essentially* defined by the constant transformation of the collective through transformation of external objects, which are understood as the human’s self-made environment.

The same would have to be said of different forms of social and technological organization geographically, as well as temporally. Different societies do not have identical systems of production, at the same moment or ever, making species-being alterable according to place and status. This, however, complicates matters considerably, for it risks creating a hierarchy of humanness according to degrees of technological sophistication, almost a technocratic designation of ontological value. This is a particular risk in the context of Marx’s Hegelian conception of historical progress, predicated as it is on the “supercession” of one era by another, a process that is itself largely technological in its definition of progress.

While caution in this direction should be preserved, it is possible to mobilize species-being as a way to understand difference, individually and culturally, rather than as a way to evaluate such difference as the degree of “progress”. Nick Dyer-Witheford, a particularly systematic commentator on Marxian species-being, reads it as anything but homogenizing in its understanding of difference:

Marx’s account of species-being is not a paean to an organic, functionalist super-being. Beings are not Borgs. Species-being is actualised to the degree that individuals not only contribute to the growth in social powers, but also access these powers as an increase in their own autonomy—indeed, as the very grounds for their intensifying individuation. Species-being is neither individual nor supra-individual: it is ‘transindividual’, both the ground and compound of a multiplicity of ‘particular’ species beings.[[57]](#footnote-79)

Species-being is not a one-size-fits-all essentialist descriptor, but a commonality to which there are innumerable possible relationships and positions. Just as Ian Baucom saw species as collectivity that had the potential to increase the degree of freedom, rather than curtailing it by proscribing difference, so does this reading of species-being see it as the basis of “intensifying individuation” that is simultaneous with an understanding of the self as part of a larger human whole. It is possible to have the same species but particular species-beings, responsive to historically contingnent circumstance, and responsive in different ways. The species thus becomes a mutable and heterogeneous collectivity.

For London and Marx alike, to summarize, the human collective and the “life activity” that supports it are consciously grasped as both the subject and object of transformation. Marxian species-being is the human’s ability to look into the fire and see a larger self reflected back. In “To Build a Fire”, London’s incurious “man” is unable to survive because he has lost touch with this fundamental species-being, his larger sustaining humanness. Where the wolf’s fur protects it automatically and the murmurs from the “crypt” of its instinctual knowledge reservoir determine its behavior, humans can be preserved beyond our proper environment because of the same behaviors that drive technological development and industrialization—and, indeed, environmental destruction, as will become clear in the later agricultural novels. Species-being as a concept shows that London’s use of the species-concept as a collectivizing principle is anti-essentialist precisely because it is historically situated.

As I will argue in my final section, London came to share a more problematic version of this pluralistic conception of the human species that can be developed from Marxian species- being—indeed, his engagement with the species concept led him to seek such a pluralism. But it was an unstable position for him, and its development was complicated by his often troubling and usually contradictory views on race.

### Interlude: *The Acorn-Planter*’s Speculative Species-Being

Yet the productive life is the life of the species. It is life-engendering life. The whole character of a species, its species-character, is contained in the character of its life activity; and free, conscious activity is man’s species-character. Life itself appears only as a means to life.

Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*

“The soil & the world belong to those who make the soil & the world most fruitful & thereby make possible life more *abundant*. […] the duty of life […] is to make life more abundant.”

Jack London, Notes for *The Acorn Planter*

London’s understanding of difference—different species-beings within the same human species—comes to its sharpest point in his attempts to imagine the futurity of species-being. In turning the focus of his species-thinking towards the future rather than the past, he moves beyond the strictly technological, or artificial, prosthetic humanity to adopt a perspective that is more concerned with the human’s influence on the natural world. London’s speculative species-being is still reminiscent of Marxian species-being in many of its basic characteristics. But where the historical version resembles the Marx who says “industry…is the *open book* of the essential powers of man,” the speculative version more closely resembles the Marx who says that “man reproduces the whole of nature” in a form of “life-engendering life.”[[58]](#footnote-81) This vision of the human’s place in the natural world contradicts the unidirectional environmental determinism that is often attributed to the naturalist philosophy. It instead presents a further development on the more complicated version of determinism seen in “To Build a Fire” and Marxian species-being, in which the human is both a determining force and a determined entity.

In his notes for a lecture delivered in Oakland, California, for example, he states his views on environmental determination of the human clearly: “Environment determines absolutely,” he says, causing all forms of life to do the “easiest thing” in all cases, despite the human illusion of volition. And yet it is possible for the actions of individual or collective actions to “have altered [the] environment” such that it determines what the “easiest thing” is. He comes to the point of his elaborations:

We have individual telic actions; in small groups we even have collective telic action, but in society as a whole we do not have collective telic action. Things are helter skelter.

Wherefore the demand is made, that since as individuals, we all perform telic actions, let us collectively perform telic actions, and not go on in the blind, haphazard way we are now going on.

As is clear from the context of the rest of the speech, the “we” here is nothing less than the human species, conceived as a collective. In order to have the capacity for univocal volition, a type of activity is required of the human collective that has not been possible to that point, a type of action that has all the teleology of individual action but on the scale of the human collective. Though framed here as a simple matter of choice (hence the exhortation), by the time of *Before Adam*’s publication London would come to see the capacity for collective teleological action on a smaller scale as an important step in the evolutionary development of human species-being, one of the defining advantages the Fire People have over the less resilient Tree People: time and again the narrator laments the inability of the Folk to come to a collective decision and enact it. By calling for further expansion of the collective capacity for “telic action”, then, London is calling for the next step in the transformation of human species-being as a he understands it.[[59]](#footnote-82)

But to what end? If this is a vision of teleological collective action, what is the *telos*? In the context of his speech, it would probably have been in line with the goals of the Intercollegiate Socialist Society and the rest of the contemporaneous American socialist movement, as these groups composed the audience of many of his public speaking engagements.[[60]](#footnote-83) Where Jack London’s thinking on species comes into contact with his thinking on environmental destruction, however—in other words, where he becomes most explicitly Anthropocenic—is in his vision of a more ecological species-being for the future, with implicit acknowledgement of its shortcomings up to that point.

London mostly developed his ecological species-being in the final years of his life, and so it is no surprise that the most paradigmatic statement appears in *The Acorn-Planter — A California Forest Play*, a play written and published (but never performed) in 1916, the year before his death.[[61]](#footnote-84) His notes towards what he calls the play’s “argument” are more explicit than the final version of the play itself on this point: “The soil & the world belong to those who make the soil & the world most fruitful & thereby make possible life more *abundant*”—and again, “the duty of life […] is to make life more abundant.” In this remarkable note, London defines human species-being according to an ecological ethic. Making life more “abundant” is both the duty of all living things and the conditions for staking a claim to the planet, or indeed, any of the land on it. Though the sense in which he means “belongs to” is ambiguous, it would not be unreasonable, given his political commitments, to take it as a literal theory of property, or rather, as a scheme for the abolition of property in an early eco-anarchist mode. In any case, it is important to note that the version of species-being he presents here is both speculative and teleological, established with an eye toward the next step he hopes humanity will take, while simultaneously acting as a statement defining humanity.[[62]](#footnote-85)

In the play itself, at least superficially, this next step is both ecological and premised on alliances across racial, national, and cultural divides. Red Cloud is the titular “Acorn-Planter,” leader of the Nishinam tribe according to a hereditary line leading from the “first man” and first Acorn-Planter. In the face of a prophecy telling of the coming “Sun Man” who will destroy the Nishinam, Red Cloud promotes peace and the propagation of beauty and life in contrast to the bellicose inclinations of the Nishinam “War Chief”. When European explorers arrive matching the description in the prophecy, Red Cloud and the Sun Man identify themselves according to parallel archetypes of two traditions (at least as London imagines them):

RED CLOUD: I am the Fire-Bringer. I stole the fire from the ground squirrel and hid it in the heart of the wood.

SUN MAN: Then am I Prometheus, your brother. I stole the fire from heaven and hid it in the heart of the wood.

RED CLOUD: I am the Acorn-Planter. I am the Food-Bringer, the Life-Maker. I make food for more life, ever more life.

SUN MAN: Then am I truly your brother. Life-Maker am I, tilling the soil in the sweat of my brow from the beginning of time, planting all manner of good seeds for the harvest.[[63]](#footnote-86)

The first commonality the two assert is identification with the mastery of fire—which for London, as we have seen, is a symbol of human species-being, and thus is tantamount to establishing the human as an identity. Immediately following this affirmed humanity comes their shared commitment to spreading more life. This commitment relies, however, on surpassing the bellicose nature embodied by the War Chief. Once surpassed, a new era of humanity is promised: “Lo, the New Day Dawns, / The day of brotherhood, / The day when all men / Shall be kind to all men, / And all men shall be sowers of life.”[[64]](#footnote-87). London envisions a swords-into-ploughshares moment that will encompass the entire species and transform the planet into a densely cultivated tangle of life.

Considered in contrast with the actual history London overwrites with his simplified version of it, however, this statement’s easy assumption of a unified humanity becomes predictably complicated, for the same reasons many are reasonably skeptical of the Anthropocene’s universalism. In this case, the context is the colonial conquest of the Americas, and London was entirely unequipped to handle it as justly as he (thought he) wanted to. He conceived of the play’s plot in terms of “Indian & White”, “2 motifs that are [in] apparent conflict that is reconciled in the end.” He repeats in his notes that the two motifs are “the same in import” and nominally allies the indigenous peoples and European invaders in service of a common goal of increasing life’s abundance, but in fact he presents a narrative of California’s conquest by Europeans that applies different standards of judgment to acts of violence and life-making alike.[[65]](#footnote-88) Despite the efforts of Red Cloud and the leader of the Sun Men (called only the Sun Man) to form a friendship, the War Chief and his followers kill the explorers with stolen muskets, prompting the dying Sun Man to prophecy the destruction of the Nishinam by his “brothers”: “Many are our brothers and strong. They will come after us. […] When you plant blood you harvest blood.” In the second act, which takes place a century later, the Sun Men return to slaughter the Nishinam and take control of California, after a prolonged exchange with the living incarnation of Red Cloud in which he and the Sun Man agree that white settlers will increase the abundance of life on the land through agriculture better than the Nishinam would have through acorn planting.[[66]](#footnote-89) Stripping the figures of their individual identities by identifying them with mythic figures, London stages an allegorical struggle for the land between Europeans and American Indians in the interactions of these typological figures—as well as a struggle between their respective horticultural imaginaries. He does so through a distorting lens that justifies white violence as a response to the aggression of the Nishinam while making a mockery of the indigenous traditions of the Americas through ludicrous pastiche. The possibility of a defining human *telos* that compels increased abundance of life on the planet is revealed a justifying rationale for colonialism.

This is not the whole story regarding the racial implications of London’s speculative species-being, however, nor even the main one—even if its existence must give pause to any simplistic praise on environmentalist grounds. The *Acorn-Planter* is merely one particularly direct articulation of an idea that he explored in different forms across his late agricultural novels, and the celebration of white colonial conquest at the play’s end is a direct contradiction of his stance in other, more nuanced works in which he challenges the ideologies that he and many contemporaneous commentators espoused to justify such conquest.[[67]](#footnote-90) The racism of *The Acorn-Planter*’s environmentalist vision raises the same questions that are raised by the Anthropocene today: how to understand an ecological conception of human species-being without accepting the racist essentialisms and historical traumas that such universalism has been used to justify in the past.

### The Valley of the Moon: Agriculture, Immigration, Anthropos

“Our species-being is as builders of worlds.”

Mackenzie Wark, *Molecular Red: Theory for the Anthropocene*[[68]](#footnote-92)

*The Valley of the Moon* provides a counter-model to that of *The Acorn-Planter*, taking London’s own rationale that “the soil & the world belongs to those who make [them] most fruitful,” as the basis for an indictment of “Anglo-Saxon” Americans and for praise of more recent immigrants. Contrary to many readings of its racial logics as nativist, I submit that *The Valley of the Moon* is not an uncomplicated vessel for these ideologies, but rather creates the narrative conditions in which they collapse under their own contradictions. But it is the specific narrative conditions in which this collapse occurs that are of interest to an Anthropocenic reading of the novel. The second half of the novel is devoted to the two protagonists’ odyssey in search of not only arable land on which to farm, but responsible and environmentally sound methods with which to farm it; this search in turn leads to a critical analysis of American environmental history that blames aspects of the “Anglo-Saxon” identity for the destruction of the country’s lands. Here, in stark contrast to *The Acorn-Planter*, a more critical depiction of the conqueror leads the characters to develop farming methods that increase the “abundance of life”—and they do so by embracing a collective American wisdom that is premised on cultural pluralism and the horticultural expertise of immigrant communities. They payoff is a plausible realization of London’s speculative species-being. Through hard work on the farm and careful attention to the ramifications of their actions, Billy and Saxon figure out “how to place man in the wilderness, to enable him to live in nature and partake of its restorative essence without contaminating the crystal springs from which he drinks.”[[69]](#footnote-93)

In short, *The Valley of the Moon*’s ecologically oriented and progressive conception of species-being arises out of a critique of a more regressive universalism, while also asking what an environmentalism on the scale of the human species would look like in practice. It is true that his characters espouse nativist and “racialist”[[70]](#footnote-94) ideas about agriculture and land-ownership at various points in the novel. But in addition to his clear attempts to challenge the ideologies of his own characters, he presents a description of the world he sees in the countrysides of California that can be read against the grain of the novel’s nativist moments to see where the logic of racial supremacy breaks down, and where attaining a life-promoting species-being requires the protagonists to go beyond their narrow perspective of racial nationalism and embrace a more pluralist environmentalism.

The structure of *The Valley of the Moon* is split neatly by two distinct settings, and one might even say there is a rift at its center—-a “metabolic rift between town and country,” to borrow Marx’s phrase. With its first half preoccupied by union busting in downtown Oakland and its second narrating an odyssey through the farmlands to the north of the city, the novel formally mirrors a premise that cuts across literary naturalism: the idea that human life is fundamentally and even biologically different in urban and rural environments.

The protagonists, named Billy and (tellingly) Saxon, meet and fall in love in Oakland, where they are married and begin what is briefly a placid life. But Billy’s work as a teamster is not endurable for long, as increasing wage pressure and resultant strikes result in the death and turn to prostitution, respectively, of their two best friends. Billy and Saxon effect a flight from the city of Oakland when teamster union strikes begin to be put down by zealous police violence—and because of Billy’s surrender to alcohol that is the partial result. The second half of the novel chronicles their travels in search of plots of land the government is rumored to provide free to whoever claims it. They idealize the image of such land, imagining that they will find something akin to a “valley on the moon,” otherworldly and perhaps unattainable. As they wander through the countryside living out of the packs on their backs, Billy and Saxon gather horticultural knowledge from a combination of farming operations owned and managed by immigrant communities, market gardeners with upscale clientele, and a set of books and pamphlets that represent a cross-section of London’s own Beauty Ranch horticultural library.[[71]](#footnote-95) At last, they find a valley like the one they have dreamed of, leasing an exhausted farm with the aim of revitalizing it and eventually buying it outright. The pair put their collected horticultural wisdom into practice as they settle into a hard-working but unalienated routine of agricultural labor and living, having escaped the degrading influence of urbanity once and for all. The novel concludes with an image of renewed vitality and propagation of life. Where the trauma of death and poverty in the city caused Saxon to miscarry their first child, in the final scene she turns to Billy, as they look over a hidden canyon deep in their valley, to announce that she is pregnant again and has sent back to Oakland for the baby clothes her brother has kept for her in a chest they associate with their pioneer ancestors. This line having been drawn between their changed fortunes, their reproductive capacity, and their family history, London concludes with a final image connecting them with the vitality of the natural world: “together they gazed far up the side of the knoll where a doe and a spotted fawn looked down upon them from a tiny open space between the trees.”[[72]](#footnote-96)

While the novel adheres to the naturalist motif of environmental determinism and the plot of decline in some senses—Billy’s descent into alcoholism and gambling as a result of his urban environs is an almost wearyingly regular episode in the naturalist canon—it complicates that logic by reversing it, allowing for Billy’s rehabilitation through a “return” to the land (though he personally has never known it). This return is nothing less than a purposive selection of environment as a way of choosing, in turn, the forces that determine their essential nature, thereby reverting to an earlier moment in the historical development of species-being. But the species itself is, at first, too broad a category for the individual consciousness of these characters to connect with, just as Chakrabarty suggests in *The Climate of History*. Their affective historical consciousness is limited by the bounds of their direct progenitors:

And often [Saxon] found herself dreaming of the arcadian days of her people, when they had not lived in cities nor been vexed with labor unions and employers’ associations. She would remember the old people’s tales of self-sufficingness, when they shot or raised their own meat, grew their own vegetables, were their own blacksmiths and carpenters, made their own shoes—yes, and spun the cloth of the clothes they wore. And something of the wistfulness in [her brother]’s face she could see as she recollected it when he talked of his dream of taking up government land.[[73]](#footnote-97)

The fantasy they engage in is uchronistic, a desire to go back to a pre-alienated state of production and *keep* it un-alienated, creating an alternate present and revising their horizon of possible futures. What attracts Saxon is the self-sufficiency that results from laborers owning the means of production; yearning for escape from “labor unions and employers’ associations” is the same wish that motivated London’s revolutionary socialism. In other words, though it is framed as a movement backwards in time, this is no Luddite fantasy nor an intentionally regressive one, for it is coupled later with a scientific and experimental approach to both horticulture and economics. The fantasy, if it is one, is the possibility of choosing a way of relating to one’s environment according to an historical precedent and somehow reconciling that way of life with a modern context. Just as London must imagine a mythological past in *The Acorn-Planter* to develop his speculative vision of a future human species-being, Saxon can only conceive of a change to her own being-in-the-world through the lens of her ancestors’ lives.

At least at the beginning of the novel, however, this identification with immediate forebears is only a proxy for their identification with an imagined “Anglo-Saxon” racial identity. As they set off in search of land, Saxon elaborates a fantasy of a seafaring past through which she understands their impending nomadic existence. While Billy is out of the house, she begins packing family artifacts to be stored by her brother, lingering on one in particular:

She unpacked the scrapbook in order to gaze a last time at the wood engravings of the Vikings, sword in hand, leaping upon the English sands. Again she identified Billy as one of the Vikings, and pondered for a space on the strange wanderings of the seed from which she sprang. Always had her race been land-hungry, and she took delight in believing she had bred true; for had not she, despite her life passed in a city, found this same land-hunger in her? And was she not going forth to satisfy that hunger, just as her people of old time had done, as her father and mother before her?[[74]](#footnote-98)

She delights in identifying their hunt for land with an imagined racial identity predicated on conquest, conquest of the type London attempts to justify in *The Acorn-Planter*. Furthermore, Saxon’s perspective in this moment is defined by racial essentialism and genetic determinism, imagining individual characteristics as arising out of a racial “seed” and embracing an ideal of someone who has “bred true” according to that seed.

Rants like this one, common in the first half of the novel and voiced by Billy and Saxon alike, have understandably motivated criticism of the novel’s nativism. Christopher Gair rightly notes that in depicting Billy and Saxon’s attempts to “retrace the steps both of their parents and of their Anglo-Saxon prognitors,” the novel exposes “an anxiety about race ‘purity’ and the decline of the ‘original’ settlers in California.”[[75]](#footnote-99) Gair goes on to claim that in finding their ideal environment in the Sonoma Valley, they find self-realization—but that it is a self-realization obtained by asserting distinctions between themselves (“real” Americans) and the immigrants who own much of the land around Oakland, whose farms they pass through on their search.[[76]](#footnote-100) Building on the work of Walter Benn Michaels, Gair interprets their journey as a necessary step in their racial self-identification, exercising “a ‘right’ granted [them] by birth but requiring at the same time that [they] lay claim to it.”[[77]](#footnote-101) Gair’s analysis effectively captures the motivations Billy and Saxon voice as they set out from Oakland, as well as the common nativist tropes they embody.

But there is good reason to question any reading of *The Valley of the Moon* that takes the nativist sentiments of the novel’s first half as defining the perspective of the whole, treating Billy and Saxon’s ideology as either stable throughout the novel or as expressions of an uncomplicated perspective on London’s part. Understood in the scope of the entire novel, these sentiments of nativism and celebrations of Anglo-Saxon conquest actually become objects of, if not critique, then structural instability and considerable doubt. Even in Saxon’s fantasy, the uncomplicated celebration of ancestry, and the fixed essence that implies, is set up to be undercut. She does not assert these opinions with full narrative backing so much as posit them while London maintains a degree of distance, less overt than his criticisms of “the man” in “To Build a Fire” but with a similar effect. Saxon’s ideas about her “Viking” ancestry are framed as dubious questions or distant mythic fantasies rather than stable facts: “had not she […] found this same land-hunger in her? And was she not going forth to satisfy that hunger, just as her people of old time had done, as her father and mother before her?”[[78]](#footnote-102) Questions that at first glance appear rhetorical might reasonably be taken seriously as a questioning of the ideology she proposes.

One need not rely on the subtle uncertainty London casts on this passage for clarity, however, for a critique of Anglo-Saxonism erupts more explicitly near the novel’s end at the hands of Jack Hastings, a figure who also gives Billy and Saxon some of the knowledge they need to succeed as farmers (thereby establishing him as a reliable figure). Hastings pierces the misty fantasy of a benevolent Anglo-Saxon conqueror quite definitely. He is prompted directly by “Saxon…speaking of the land-hungry Anglo-Saxons”, presumably in terms like those of the fantasy above, and his patience with her racial fantasy is short:

“Land-hogs,” he snapped. “That’s our record in this country. As one old Reuben told a professor of an agricultural experiment station: ‘They ain’t no sense in tryin’ to teach me farmin’. I know all about it. Ain’t I worked out three farms?’ It was his kind that destroyed New England. Back there great sections are relapsing to wilderness. […] And the same thing is going on, in one way or another, the same land-robbing and hogging, over the rest of the country….[[79]](#footnote-103)

Though Hastings spreads the blame to include other groups later in the passage, it is clear from context that when he condemns “our record in this country,” he means “our” in reference to Saxon’s ideas about the benevolent land-hunger of Anglo-Americans. Her eager appropriation of this identity and the response to land it implies is almost mocked by proximity to the man who thinks exhausting soil is a good working definition of successful farming. What Saxon earlier took as a welcome part of an inherited identity is presented back to her as a cause of widespread environmental destruction.

Overcoming this rapacious wastefulness requires them to overcome nothing less than their sense of racial superiority. As they travel through the country north of Oakland on their way to the Sonoma Valley, their many agricultural epiphanies are occasioned by encounters with immigrants, particularly the Portuguese. Speaking to a local “linesman” laying telephone wire for a farm owned by Portuguese immigrants, they are told that the price of land immediately outside the city is so high because its productivity and vitality have been increased by the labors of primarily Portuguese farmers, who merely by “bein’ wise to farmin’” are able to “get more out of twenty acres than [native-born Americans] could out of a hundred an’ sixty.” The problem is the approach to agriculture and a general lack of horticultural knowledge, the same lack that would soon cause the dust bowl, derived from the same ignorance that caused the British countryside to be disastrously overgrazed. Or, as one interlocutor puts it: “we ain’t got the *sabe*.”[[80]](#footnote-104)

The abrupt shift to Portuguese with the word “*sabe*” is telling, in that it encapsulates a common trend among California farmers of the moment to link racial and national identity causally with horticultural acumen. London kept a file with the manuscripts of *The Valley of the Moon*, currently housed at the Jack London Collection at the Huntington Library in California, containing pages of source material from which he drew liberal inspiration for the novel’s insights on farming and the state of rural California. More of this material will be discussed in the next chapter, but on the connection between horticulture and nationality, several pieces stand out. A *Saturday Evening Post* series entitled “Lessons From Our Alien Farmers” was particularly fruitful for London’s composition of the novel. Written by Forrest Crissey, a regular contributor to the *Post* who would go on to write a book called *The Story of Foods* on similar issues, two articles from October 7 and November 18, 1911 discuss the role of Dalmatian and Portuguese farmers in transforming the burnt-out plots of rural California into thriving farmland. London would paraphrase passages of Crissey’s reports and draw on details of these farmers’ ingenuity in *The Valley of the Moon*. In the November article on the Portuguese, for example, Crissey describes a brace made out of living wood grafted into the crotch of apple-tree branches, which grow with the tree and help the branches withstand the weight of a heavy harvest. London had a habit of making notes for scenes or writing snippets of dialogue directly in the margins of his source material, and in this section of Crissey’s article, he wrote Billy’s response to the live-wood brace: “Billy remarks: ‘What a growth! A curiosity!’” The linesman who mourns Anglo-Americans lack of “sabe” likewise appears in the margins of that page, along with notes toward his speech.[[81]](#footnote-105)

London’s tendency to discuss agricultural principles as racial traits also appears to derive from his reading of Crissey’s articles, both Crissey’s own commentary and that of the farmers he quotes. On the apple orchards where the living braces were found, one farmer remarks, “That’s the nature of the race. They’re sharp—and nobody has to show them a clever thing in the line of better farming methods a second time. […] When one Portuguese has found a better method of doing something worth while, you may depend upon it that the others of his blood will have it in short order and that it will run through the whole settlement.” In the earlier article on Dalmatian farmers, in a section entitled “Hereditary Apple Experts,” Crissey opines that “Insight into fruit-handling is almost a fixed racial trait. It belongs to their race as definitely as do their dark eyes and swarthy skin.” These statements, and the innumerable others like them throughout London’s files, go beyond recognition that farmers from different countries will have learned different agricultural traditions, some more effective than others in the California climate—though this more reasonable perspective is also well represented in the file. Rather, they suggest that success in agriculture is “fixed” and inborn, *literally* hereditary rather than learned. And although the tone and content of these articles is largely admiring and takes spreading agricultural techniques as its explicit aim, racialization of these traits takes on a more sinister sheen in the light of Anglo-American farmers who feel that they are unable to compete with “aliens” who they believe are buying up all the productive land.

That London adopted this racialized view of agricultural competition is undeniable. *The Valley of the Moon*’s nativism shows through in Billy and Saxon’s response, and the responses of other Anglo-American characters they encounter on the road, to the state of affairs they see in the farmland they pass through on the way to Sonoma. Calling the Pajaro Valley “New Dalmatia,” one minor character named Benson says, “We’re being squeezed out. We Yankees thought we were smart. Well, the Dalmatians came along and showed they were smarter. […] It won’t be long before they own the whole valley, and the last American will be gone.”[[82]](#footnote-106) Insistently equating Americanness with Anglo-Saxonism, he interprets as a threat the agricultural acumen of immigrants understood as not-white. Again and again, the novel articulates a panic at the prospect of a non-white America, and environmentally conscious agriculture is the surprising source of the racial sea-change.

Yet the novel does not allow for a simple condemnation of these agricultural methods and their immigrant practitioners, nor could it function narratively without the very pluralism by which its characters are threatened. At the same time that Benson laments the defeat of the “Yankees”, he gives voice to a grudging respect for the horticultural methods by which they were bested. In discussing a valley largely owned and worked by Japanese immigrants, he continues: “But that’s another point where we Americans lose out. There isn’t anything wasted in this valley, not a core nor a paring; and it isn’t the Americans who do the saving.” Billy tries to defend the record of Anglo-American settlers by saying “It was our folks that made this country[….] Fought for it, opened it up, did everything—”, Benson interrupts: “But develop it[….] We did our best to destroy it, as we destroyed the soil of New England.”[[83]](#footnote-107) A nativist perspective is indeed voiced in the discussion of ecological agricultural practices, and repeatedly so, but they are just as repeatedly undercut by a condemnation of the Anglo-American environmental record, which immigrants are undoing through agriculture that builds the vitality of the soil. By the logic of London’s notes toward *The Acorn-Planter*, the immigrants rightfully come to own the soil of their new home by making it more abundant.

Just as America’s land needs immigrants to rescue it from exhaustion at the hands of “Yankees,” so does the novel rely on immigrants to complete Billy and Saxon’s narrative journey, albeit without (as usual) giving them the credit they deserve. The arc of their development as characters is defined by a flight from the city, which has a degrading and dehumanizing influence, to discover an unprecedented freedom and prosperity in ranching. But this freedom and prosperity do not come from Saxon getting in touch with an imagined “Anglo-Saxon” identity. Indeed, we are made to understand that being guided by her conception of that identity would lead to a destruction of the land they hope will save them, merely a new kind of poverty, and probably dispossession by more knowledgeable farmers.

Nor, of course, does such an identity exist in the mythic way she imagines it. London appears to have known as much, for Saxon’s conception of what it means to be an “Anglo-Saxon”, exercising an inner Viking whose seafaring gives way naturally (somehow) to agriculture, appears ironically to have been derived from Crissey’s article on not Anglo-Saxons, but the very Portuguese against whom her Anglo-Saxonism is supposedly defined. Discussing this “seafaring people” without whom in “the old days of plunder and adventure on the high sees no pirate crew was quite complete,” Crissey draws a sketch of the Portuguese that London uses for Saxon’s defining vision of her Anglo-Saxon origins. Crissey describes how their “sea legs have been trained into steady plow legs” as a paradox resolved by a “land hunger” that is their “ruling passion.” London recasts this land-hunger as an Anglo-Saxon trait, but by the time it comes to describe Anglo-Saxonism, it has been stripped of the agricultural wisdom he and Crissey associated with the Portuguese and attached to a uniquely Anglo-American destructiveness. London has, consciously or not, established Saxon’s Anglo-American ideal not *against* their immigrant neighbors, but using the very same terms.[[84]](#footnote-108)

The narrative and its speculative vision of human species-being cannot be fulfilled by identification with a racial identity, at least not with the Anglo-Saxon racial identity Billy and Saxon claim. The only way they can attain what London sees as the duty of human life, which is to increase the abundance of other life on the planet, is through a pluralist American landscape from which they can learn responsible stewardship, a landscape which comes to represent a multi-racial globe in miniature as Billy and Saxon’s interlocutors repeatedly point out farms that one could supposedly mistake for Japan or Dalmatia. In such a landscape, Billy and Saxon are able to read “currants between the tree rows, beans between the currant rows, a row of beans close on each side of the trees, an’ rows of beans along the ends of the tree rows”—an auspicious pattern, given the prevalence of nitrogen-fixing beans that will preserve the vitality of the soil season after season.[[85]](#footnote-109) Terrace-farming transforms groups who are denigrated elsewhere in the novel into keepers of horticultural magic, making productive farms out of nothing: in “Greece, in Ireland, in Dalmatia […] they went around and gathered every bit of soil they could find […] and carried it up the mountains on their backs and built farms—*built* them, *made* them, on the naked rock.”[[86]](#footnote-110) Without learning from immigrant farmers, complicating and undercutting if not renouncing their nativism in the process, Billy and Saxon would have gone the way of Steinbeck’s “Okies” just as the fertile valleys of California would have gone the way of Oklahoma.

Though a simple exchange of horticultural knowledge, these moments can be read as emblems of cultural exchange—maintaining the original resonances of “culture” as cultivation of life in the land. Subtly, or (perhaps more probably) by accident, *The Valley of the Moon* makes a case for an environmental future predicated on global difference. It shows that in an earlier instantiation of the challenge posed by the unifying “*anthropos*” of “Anthropocene,” the freedom of difference was indeed threatened by the universalizing gesture. It also suggests that this threat was not insurmountable, but required a just accounting of environmental history and resistance to racial nationalism.

There is much more to be said about the perspective on sustainable horticulture presented in *The Valley of the Moon*, and more *will* be said shortly. In order to understand the full context of London’s agricultural turn, it has to be placed in the context of other naturalist farm novels—and those novels, in turn, must be placed in the context of another naturalist sub-genre, the novel of finance. In the next chapter, I will place *The Valley of the Moon* and *Burning Daylight* alongside novels by Frank Norris and Ellen Glasgow to ask: Is the naturalist Anthropocene really a Capitalocene?

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1. Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
2. See e.g.: Johnson, “At the Limits of Species Being.; Roelvink, “Rethinking Species-Being in the Anthropocene.; Taylor, “Tennyson’s Elegy for the Anthropocene.; Wark, *Molecular Red*. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
3. See Raskin, “Jack London, Burning Man.. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
4. Crutzen, “Geology of Mankind,” Crutzen, “The ‘Anthropocene’.. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
5. Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History. 221. Nick Dyer-Witheford also picks up on this Benjaminian resonance: Dyer-Witheford, “1844/2004/2044. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
6. London, *Before Adam*, 235. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
7. Ibid., 237. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
8. Ibid., 241. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
9. Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History,” 220. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
10. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*; Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene.” [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
11. Baucom, “The Human Shore,” 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
12. Ibid., 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
13. Ibid., 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
14. Roelvink, “Rethinking Species-Being in the Anthropocene,” 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
15. DRAFT NOTE - I hope to circle back to this and broaden the context of species and determinism with a brief discussion of Frank Norris. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
16. DRAFT NOTE - Similarly, this is another place for richer context in the genre as a whole with some specific passages from Dreiser and Wharton. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
17. London, *Before Adam*, 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
18. Ibid., 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
19. It is clear from London’s notes for *Before Adam* that this was an intentional effect: “”He once found broken gourd, filled with rain-water, drank it, but never thought to use gourd.—He (modern) often watched to see what he (primitive) would do, & he (modern) often vexed & perturbed by foolishness, illogic, obtusity, etc., of him (primitive)“, London, “Jack London Papers” JL507 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
20. London, “The Other Animals.” [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
21. Ibid., 237. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
22. Ibid., 240–1. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
23. Ibid., 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
24. Ibid., 265–6. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
25. London, “To Build a Fire,” 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
26. London, “Jack London Papers” JL1310. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
27. London, “To Build a Fire,” 263. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
28. Ibid., 263–4. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
29. Ibid., 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
30. Ibid., 264. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
31. Ibid., 265. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
32. Ibid., 264. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
33. Ibid., 265. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
34. Ibid., 261. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
35. Wrangham, *Catching Fire [Electronic Resource]*, 38–41. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
36. Ibid., 105–6. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
37. London, “To Build a Fire,” 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
38. Ibid., 261. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
39. Ibid., 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
40. Ibid., 263. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
41. Qtd. in Wrangham, *Catching Fire [Electronic Resource]*, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
42. London, “To Build a Fire,” 268, emphasis mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
43. Ibid., 269–70, emphasis mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
44. Ibid., 266. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
45. In this sense, the concept of species-being forms a link, and a somewhat surprising one, between the vision of the human seen in the work of Charlotte Perkins Gilman (see chapter three). [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
46. Dyer-Witheford, “1844/2004/2044,” 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
47. Johnson, “At the Limits of Species Being,” 277. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
48. Though Marx takes the term species-being from Feuerbach and some of its implications, this aspect of his concept builds explicitly on the Hegelian view of labor. Just as in Hegel’s struggle of the lord and bondsman, self-consciousness comes about through the mediation of labor on an external object. As Marx himself puts it, Hegel “sees labour—within abstraction—as man’s *act of self-creation* and man’s relation to himself as an alien being and the manifestation of himself as an alien being as the emergence of *species-consciousness* and *species-life*.” Marx, *Early Writings*, 395 [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
49. Johnson, “At the Limits of Species Being,” 277. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
50. Dyer-Witheford, “1844/2004/2044,” 4–6. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
51. Johnson, “At the Limits of Species Being,” 278. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
52. Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 4–5. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
53. Marx, *Early Writings*, 349. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
54. Ibid., 350. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
55. Ibid., 354. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
56. Ibid., 391. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
57. Dyer-Witheford, “1844/2004/2044,” 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
58. Marx, *Early Writings*, 329. For a comprehensive account of Marx’s under-appreciated interest in nature and ecology, see Burkett, *Marx and Nature*; and Foster, *Marx’s Ecology*. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
59. London, “Jack London Papers” JL1251. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
60. Raskin, “Jack London, Burning Man,” 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
61. In the front matter of the play itself, London specifies that *The Acorn-Planter* was to “Be Sung by Efficient Singers Accompanied by a Capable Orchestra.” Planned to be performed for the Bohemian Club, of which he and Frank Norris were members, the play’s demands apparently exceeded its context, for the requisite efficient singers and capable orchestra were never found. See Labor, “From ‘All Gold Canyon’ to ‘The Acorn-Planter’.. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
62. London, “Jack London Papers” JL2059. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
63. London, *The Acorn-Planter*, 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
64. Ibid., 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
65. London, “Jack London Papers” JL2059. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
66. London, *The Acorn-Planter*, 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
67. This inconsistency has recently been noted elsewhere: “In any twenty-first-century usage of the word, London could certainly be termed a racist, but…not a very good (that is, consistent) one”, Reesman, *Jack London’s Racial Lives*, 34 [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
68. Wark, *Molecular Red*, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
69. Labor, “Jack London’s Symbolic Wilderness,” 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
70. Jeanne Campbell Reesman uses this term to distinguish racist attitudes from more historically specific engagements with the theories of race that proliferated from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries Reesman, *Jack London’s Racial Lives*, 34–35. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
71. For a fuller accounting of London’s horticultural influences, see chapter two of this work and Tichi, *Jack London*. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
72. London, *The Valley of the Moon*, 425. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
73. Ibid., 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
74. Ibid., 239. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
75. Gair, “‘The Way Our People Came’,” 419. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
76. Ibid., 427. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
77. Qtd. in ibid., 426. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
78. London, *The Valley of the Moon*, 239. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
79. Ibid., 348. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
80. Ibid., 247–9. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
81. London, “Jack London Papers” JL1369. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
82. London, *The Valley of the Moon*, 292. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
83. Ibid., 294–5. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
84. London, “Jack London Papers” JL1369. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
85. London, *The Valley of the Moon*, 250. This passage is a close paraphrase of a passage from Crissey’s November 1911 article on the Portuguese: “One of these town orchards in San Leandro has currants between the orchard rows, beans between the currant rows, a row of beans close on each side of the trees, beans between the trees in the row and beans from the ends of the rows to the wheeltrack in the street.” (Jack London Collection, JL1369.). [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
86. Ibid., 294. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)