The Measureless Ranch of Vision - Frank Norris’s Capitalocene Aesthetic

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On Los Muertos Ranch, the primary setting of Frank Norris’s 1901 novel *The Octopus*, the most important piece of machinery is not a thresher, nor Magnus Derrick’s industrial ploughs, nor indeed anything one might expect to see on a farm at the turn of the twentieth century. Nor is the “machine in the garden” of San Joaquin the railroad *per se*, even though the railroad is the focus of Leo Marx’s original formulation of the term.[[1]](#footnote-21) It is, in fact, a stock-ticker.

Installed by Magnus and his son Harran in the farm’s office, the ticker sits alongside a detailed map of the ten-thousand-acre farm, a map not only of elevation but of “the varying depths of the clays and loams in the soil, accurately plotted”—an important document in a valley like the San Joaquin, which was once a vast lakebed.[[2]](#footnote-22) Yet what is most important to the Derricks is less the land of their own farm than its connection to other similar plots of land, less their ten thousand acres of wheat than the hundreds of millions of acres devoted to the global wheat trade. Their displacement is embodied in the ticker itself:

no doubt, the most significant object in the office was the ticker….The offices of the ranches were thus connected by wire with San Francisco, and through that city with Minneapolis, Duluth, Chicago, New York, and at last, and most important of all, with Liverpool. Fluctuations in the price of the world’s crop during and after the harvest thrilled straight to the office of Los Muertos [and the others in the San Joaquin Valley]. During a flurry in the Chicago wheat pits in the August of that year, which had affected even the San Francisco market, Harran and Magnus had sat up nearly half of one night watching the strip of white tape jerking unsteadily from the reel. At such moments they no longer felt their individuality. The ranch became merely the part of an enormous whole, a unit in the vast agglomeration of wheat land the whole world round, feeling the effects of causes thousands of miles distant—a drought on the prairies of Dakota, a rain on the plains of India, a frost on the Russian steppes, a hot wind on the llanos of the Argentine.[[3]](#footnote-23)

Though pages earlier Harran Derrick worries over the wheat seed saved from the last harvest, here it is the “flurry” of transactions in the Chicago Pit that keeps him and his father up at night. Their fortunes are based on the incalculable effects of actions in faraway markets, making not just the farm but the individuals who run it mere elements in a much larger whole. We can see the depth of their incorporation in the sensory language with which these distant deals are transacted in the minds of the ranchers: news “thrill[s]” into the offices, the ticker itself is rendered haptically through its jerking motions (mirroring their own emotional response), and the men seem almost to feel, on their own ranch, the “effects of causes thousands of miles distant” in rains and freezes and a “hot wind.” As the market becomes a vast system, a network in which they are a node, the Derricks in turn become bigger than themselves, their own sense of their capacities increased to the scale of the network entire. As much as they are farmers, they have become the commodities market embodied; and as much as the land is farmed by the Derricks, it is farmed by impersonal market forces.

It must be asked what effect this state of affairs will have on the physical transformations the farmers of the San Joaquin make to their land through agriculture. If they attend more to the markets than to their own farm, what will become of the soil to which markets are indifferent? What are the material effects of thinking of individual farms as an “agglomeration of wheat land the whole world round,” or in other words, of globalization considered as an agricultural phenomenon? If the Derricks lose track of their “individuality,” who is responsible for the monoculture of wheat and its long-term consequences? For that matter, who is really making the decisions here—the Derricks of Norris’s *The Octopus*, or the Chicago financiers of its sequel, *The Pit*? Or—perhaps more probably—does asking about individual actors miss the point entirely in the face of a vast and overdetermined capitalist system?

Asking “Who farms the wheat?” is an especially significant question in a novel where wheat extends over the entire planet, as it does in the imaginations of *The Octopus*’s protagonists, the ambitions of commodities speculators, and, to a considerable extent, literally. What has to be grappled with is not only the wheat itself but the planetary scale of capitalism’s environmental transformations. This set of relations is best captured in the the term “Capitalocene” that many have come to prefer to “Anthropocene.” Coined by Jason W. Moore, the Capitalocene concept disputes the centrality of the “Anthropos,” the human as a collective actor, in framing our planetary crisis, and places responsibility instead with capitalism. The import of this distinction is considerable. The mode of inquiry becomes historical as well as scientific, a matter of a multifarious and shifting communities of actants rather than the human considered as a unified population. The Anthropocene framing is long on a sense of urgency but short on historicity, Moore says, permitting its proponents to “not challenge the naturalized inequalities, alienation, and violence inscribed in modernity’s strategic relations of power and production…*at all”* in their attempts to avert a crisis that remains, to them, purely environmental.[[4]](#footnote-24) Taking those power-production relations as an object of critique extends the horizon of political possibilities for the entire conversation. As Moore puts it, shutting down a coal plant might slow global warming, but shutting down the structures responsible for it can stop global warming for good.[[5]](#footnote-25) We might ask, with *The Octopus* in mind, what the equivalent would be for wheat monocultures that both stabilize the food supply and destabilize the world ecology by decreasing biodiversity and creating the conditions of disease and soil exhaustion, and how a Capitalocene reading of Norris’s *magnum opus* changes the way we see its political critique.

The Capitalocene is a particularly apposite concept for understanding *The Octopus*, so apposite that the inherent anachronism of introducing it in the first nearly falls away. The novel insists on addressing systems rather than people as the agents of environmental destruction—insists on confronting the impersonal market forces that drive agriculture and into which the Derricks are subsumed. The novel presents the transactions between economic and natural systems as a process of what Moore would call “co-determination” in ways that go beyond what even Norris seems to have realized. And beneath this conceptual resonance lies a more tangible historical basis in the form of Joseph LeConte’s “Psychozoic Era,” an anticipation of the Anthropocene that emphasizes the rule of mind and thus humanity’s teleological organization of non-human life on the planet. LeConte was Norris’s favorite professor at Berkeley and an acknowledged intellectual influence in other realms, but the relevance of the Psychozoic theory to *The Octopus* has so far escaped notice. Norris adapts this theory into something resembling the Capitalocene by combining it with an environmental critique of capitalism. He does so through what I will refer to as his Capitalocene aesthetic, a literary landscape aesthetic in which descriptions of heavily modified landscapes make visible the logic of the capitalist system that has transformed them. This aesthetic relies on a paradox: Norris adopts the sublime and its diminution of agency, but he simultaneously invokes the sensation of a limitless increase of individual agency through incorporation into a planet-spanning system. This aesthetic tension makes visible the imaginative crisis of the Capitalocene. We are confronted with a post-nature, transformed by processes that exceed the scale of the imagination, and yet we somehow still experience ourselves as part of the system responsible. Under capitalism, the scale of our transformations exceed even our own imaginations. What terrifies us in this form of the sublime is ourselves.

This reading will implicitly address a rift that exists in Norris criticism separating economic from natural-scientific readings of his works. The rift begins as early as 1963, when Donald Pizer’s attempt to reconcile market-based and proto-ecocritical readings of the novel concludes by instead encouraging a critical “eclecticism” that would seem to discourage further such acts of synthesis.[[6]](#footnote-26) As if in response, these threads have remained largely disparate since. Many critics have accepted the clear invitation to an economic reading of Norris’s work in the gold-obsessions of *McTeague*, the affective responses to market panics in *Vandover and the Brute* and *The Pit*, and of course, the monopolistic freight-rate schemes of *The Octopus*.[[7]](#footnote-27) Others have followed the lineage of Leo Marx into timelier ecocritical readings, finding in Norris’s landscapes queer ecologies, in his settings a landscape built on imperialism, and throughout his work a persistent reference to animality.[[8]](#footnote-28) Recognizing the eco-centric critique of capitalism in *The Octopus* will require a reconciliation of a different sort, one that is more dialectical than synthetic and that recognizes the co-production of natural and human history. It will not be a matter of naturalizing capitalism, but rather of attending to the ways in which nature is capitalized.

The rest of this chapter will argue for a Capitalocene reading of *The Octopus* and develop a theory of a Capitalocene aesthetic based on Norris’s landscape descriptions. The case for the Capitalocene will be made on both historical and thematic grounds, examining Norris’s appropriation of Joseph LeConte’s Psychozoic theory for use in his own environmental critique of capitalism. The aesthetic that erupts from this proto-Capitalocene theory and into Norris’s literary landscapes is based on an implicit critique of earlier aesthetics of nature. These landscapes by turns adopt and subvert the Romantic aesthetics of the sublime, the pastoral, and the picturesque, resulting in a paradox in which the viewer is at once crushed by sublime terror and feels themselves part of the forces that created the sublimity. The viewers are imaginatively incapable of grasping the scale of capitalism’s transformation of nature, but at the same time, feel their own capacities for transformative action increased by integration into the capitalist division of labor. After examining and theorizing this aesthetic, the chapter will conclude with a brief discussion of areas where similar hybrids of financial and agricultural themes arise in the naturalist canon.

### Frank Norris’s Capitalocene

*The Octopus* obsessively returns to illustrations of natural and industrial forces colliding and coupling. More often than not, these passages are of the type extensively critiqued by ecofeminist critics: agriculture is depicted, graphically, as a violent sexual encounter, in the long Baconian tradition of conflating women’s bodies with nature to justify the domination of both.[[9]](#footnote-30) As an endless line of ploughs rolls over the San Joaquin’s wheat land, “the hundred iron hands kneaded and furrowed and stroked the brown, humid earth, the hundred iron teeth bit deep into the Titan’s flesh,” and as they “up-stirred the land, tens of thousands of shears clutched deep into the warm, moist soil.” On one hand, Norris seems to approve, calling it “the vast primal passion, the two world-forces, the elemental Male and Female” and a “caress…for which the Earth seemed panting.” But at the same time, this “primal passion” is characterized by violence, of which he seems at least potentially critical: it is a “rude advance, so robust as to be almost an assault, so violent as to be veritably brutal.” It is a contradictory depiction to its core, outlining “an infinite desire, at once terrible and divine, knowing no law, untamed, savage, natural, sublime.”[[10]](#footnote-31)

Whatever it suggests to a modern reader about Norris’s sexual attitudes, it also reveals a broader ambiguity in the novel’s representation of agriculture as an industrial-natural assemblage. It is at once a rape and, perversely, folded into the life of the planet, both a system of extraction and a system of reproduction. This binary opposition, rendered in terms of uncomplicated “Male and Female” gender roles, suggests a reading of the scene in the Leo Marxian mode many critics of *The Octopus* have adopted, as a conflict between images of the machine and the garden.[[11]](#footnote-32) Elsewhere, however, and perhaps more characteristically of the novel as a whole, this binarism breaks down, and not in the idealized, symbolic reconciliation of the “middle landscape.” In her terror when faced with the farm’s unnatural sublimity, Annie Derrick has a vision of the struggle of humanity against “nature,” but it is a struggle that is ultimately finished by something else entirely, a terrifying and chimeric force with aspects of both. Should humanity “strive to make head against the power of this nature,”

at once it became relentless, a gigantic engine, a vast power, huge, terrible; a leviathan with a heart of steel, knowing no compunction, no forgiveness, no tolerance; crushing out the human atom with soundless calm, the agony of destruction sending never a jar, never a faintest tremour through all that prodigious mechanism of wheels and cogs.[[12]](#footnote-33)

This is the same set of terms used to describe the railroad. The farm becomes just the most local site of a much larger force that can only be defined by breaking the natural-industrial, the natural-human binarism of the sexualized ploughing. That ploughing *is* an assault on the Earth, and it *is* part of planetary reproduction; both are so because the constant assault has fundamentally transformed the processes of reproduction into Annie Derrick’s unforgiving leviathan, which can pass as “nature” until it is suddenly, terribly, machine.

The wheat, as vast as it is, can be taken as metonymic of the larger system of relations that produce it—and hops, and corn, and industrial-scale animal products—the system by which, historically, “wheat frontiers remade the world only through extraordinary movements of capital….aimed at transforming nature’s *work* into the bourgeoisie’s *value*.”[[13]](#footnote-34) The way that this nature-value metabolism operates is less by a struggle with nature than a transformation of it into a new force that embodies the hybrid of nature and capital, which, elevated to a geological and planetary scale, form a theory of the Capitalocene.

The a Capitalocene reading of *The Octopus* will be made in four movements. First, I will make the historical case for introducing the term Capitalocene, elaborating the connection between Norris’s geological-planetary thinking and Joseph LeConte’s theory of the Psychozoic Era. Next, the focus will shift to the abstract “forces” that clash in Annie Derrick’s waking nightmare and throughout the novel—the human, nature, and capitalism—showing that as an assemblage they form a new world-ecological force, a dramatized figuration of the Capitalocene. The third section will then return to the question from the introduction, “Who farms the wheat?”, to show that this new hybrid force is motivated by financial markets and operated through the division of labor, a cyborg with the Chicago wheat pits as a head and the farmers of the San Joaquin and beyond as its hands. The final section will show how the logic of domestication established in LeConte’s Psychozoic theory is extended from the plant and animal kingdoms to labor, an evocative image of capitalism’s exploitation-through-organization of human and non-human work at once.

*THE PSYCHOZOIC AND THE CAPITALOCENE*

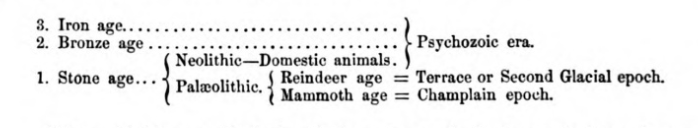
In his time at Berkeley, Frank Norris was hardly a model student. No doubt because he “hated study of the methodical sort and employed every means to avoid it,” he was hopeless in math. Even in history, one of his favorite subjects, he only gradually improved from near-failing grades to a steady mediocrity. He distinguished himself more, apparently, as a “paragon of true fraternity men,” as one of his brothers would reminisce after his early death, and of course by the literary ambitions that were beginning to bear fruit even then. There was at least one course of study to which Norris was especially drawn, however, despite a lack of inclination to the subject matter, and it was led by the well known geologist Joseph LeConte. “Uncle Joe” LeConte was among Norris’s favorite professors, and he took two of LeConte’s year-length courses, geology and “Reproduction” (biology), between 1892 and 1893.[[14]](#footnote-35) In both of these courses, but the first most notably for the topic at hand, he encountered theories of the human and the extra-human that would guide his work in *The Octopus*.

Joseph LeConte’s influence on Norris has been well documented in the context of evolution,[[15]](#footnote-36) but it has an unexplored geological component: in 1879, LeConte proposed a “Psychozoic Era.” Subtitled the “Age of Man,” the Psychozoic theory arose out of the conviction that the “reigns of *brute force* and *animal ferocity*” that had prevailed in “all previous ages…was inconsistent with the supremacy of man.” He therefore defines the new era not according to humanness *per se*, but to the “*reign of mind*” that humanity represents. LeConte found this reign of mind so significant as to constitute not only part of geologic time, but its final act—the end of history, and not just human history: “the history of the earth *finds its consummation, and its interpreter, and its significance, in man*.”[[16]](#footnote-37) “Uncle Joe’s” own teaching materials strongly suggest that Norris would have been exposed to this theory in his 1892-1893 geology course: LeConte included the Psychozoic Era in the two successive geology textbooks he released in 1882 and 1886, at least one of which was reissued in 1891, the year before Norris took his class.[[17]](#footnote-38)

The Psychozoic theory is sometimes mentioned as one of several theories that anticipate the Anthropocene, alongside the Anthropozoic Era proposed by Italian geologist Antonio Stoppani around 1873, and the Noösphere of Vladimir Vernadsky and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in 1926.[[18]](#footnote-39) It is hard to say when the theory fell out of use, but by a quarter-century after LeConte’s death it was still in at least wide enough circulation to warrant a dismissal in the journal *Science*. This dismissal itself is significant, in that its arguments against the Psychozoic are remarkably similar to those now marshalled against the Anthropocene. In 1926, E. W. Berry complained that

a Psychozoic era is not only a false assumption, but altogether wrong in principle, and is really nurtured as a surviving or atavistic idea from the lower holocentric philosophy of the Middle Ages…. There can be no objection to speaking of the present as the Age of Man—or Woman, for that matter—but this is a quite different thing from setting up Psychozoic as a formal era. For this term possesses no qualifications, either with respect to the time involved, the sediments deposited or the distinctness of a lower boundary—either stratigraphic, faunal or floral.[[19]](#footnote-40)

Setting these complaints alongside a recent analysis of ongoing critiques leveled at the Anthropocene, as catalogued and categorized by Jan Zalasiewicz and his coauthors, the similarities are hard to miss. Berry argues that the Psychozoic atavistically recenters the human; contemporary critics note that “it is anthropocentric to suggest that we are special”. The temporal boundaries implied by the Psychozoic are too narrow, just as the “temporal scales of the Anthropocene are insignificant.” Berry did not find a distinct enough boundary in stratigraphy or otherwise for the Psychozoic, while some find the term “Anthropocene” insufficiently stratigraphic in its origins.[[20]](#footnote-41) A common set of problems is a strange metric for comparison, but the recursions across these two conversations are clear.

In comparison with the Anthropocene, however, the Psychozoic Era is at once further reaching and qualitatively, if subtly, distinct. As a periodization, it reaches well beyond the bounds of the Anthropocene epoch in establishing a new era (in geologic time, eras contain periods, and periods contain epochs). Rather than beginning with the Great Acceleration of the twentieth century, it coincides in human history with the Neolithic, a period beginning at around 10,000 B.C. and marked by the invention of agriculture, the domestication of animals, and the use of technologies such as pottery and stone-grinding. Herein lies the qualitative difference: the Psychozoic’s emphasis on the “mind,” implicit in the choice of “Psycho-” over “Anthropo-” as a prefix, draws focus to the capacities for organization, and through it, domination and appropriation of plant and animal life. Domestication is the crucial marker for LeConte’s proposed era, and is made the defining feature of the Neolithic in a chart from the 1986 edition of *Elements of Geology*:  What changes with the Neolithic is that the human started “organizing” populations of other organisms, such that “the dangerous animals decreased in size and number, and the useful animals and plants were introduced, or else preserved by man.” The cataloguing and taxonomization of organisms could also be taken as a natural extension of this logic. In any case, it is the scale and nature of human organization that defines LeConte’s epoch and unifies human history with geological history.

Emphasizing organization as part of humanity’s domination and transformation of the planet makes the Psychozoic Era particularly friendly to integration with a theory of the Capitalocene. It does not take the Anthropos as the driving force *per se*, though its understanding of mind is undoubtedly anthropocentric; organization as a focal point is not a far cry from management, the basis of economic activity; and technology becomes central to both without being constitutive of either. The larger view of human and natural history that drives Moore’s conception of the Capitalocene is based on the premise that humans and environments “co-produce” each other, or in other words, that “humans make environments and environments make humans—and human organization.”[[21]](#footnote-43) This is true of human history beyond the ambit of capitalism, from the point (perhaps the Neolithic) where humanity began increasing its capacities to transform environments. In a certain sense, *all* moments in human history can be defined by the ways in which they organize nature. The difference, and the reason why capitalism rather than human history as a whole defines Moore’s epochal term, is that the relations of production that define capitalism rely on the constant revolutionization of co-produced nature itself to yield “new and expanded sources of unpaid work/energy.”[[22]](#footnote-44) The system as a whole relies on the accumulation-through-appropriation on a global scale of what Moore calls “Cheap Nature,” defined by the “four cheaps” of labor-power, food, energy, and raw materials.[[23]](#footnote-45) Moore takes 1450 as the Capitalocene’s starting point because that was when accumulation through appropriation became the *raison d’être* of an “epochal shift in the scale, speed, and scope of landscape transformation in the Atlantic world and beyond” as agricultural labor was freed for use elsewhere by the agricultural revolution of the low countries.[[24]](#footnote-46) Capitalism is the point at which a particular regime of organization takes hold that is different from all others in both category and scale—because it categorically must continue to increase its scale to maintain growth, and because it must continually increase the efficiency of its exploitation to keep nature cheap in the face of resource exhaustion.

To frame the Capitalocene in the terms of the Psychozoic, then: the Psychozoic is an era defined by humanity’s pervasive and transformative organization of nature, beginning with the Neolithic, whereas the Capitalocene is an epoch defined by the phase beginning in 1450 when our organization of nature became dedicated to discovering and appropriating new forms of Cheap Nature that could be used as capital. There would be no sense in reviving the Psychozoic era as a proposed geological boundary—it is less able to withstand the scientific complaints leveled against it than the Anthropocene is, and is probably less useful anyway. But if the Psychozoic *were* an era, the Capitalocene could be an epochal subdivision within it.

The theories are fundamentally different, however, in their motivations and the tenor of their responses. LeConte, like many of his contemporaries, sees the geologic reign of the human as an improvement to a natural history based on violence and waste. Moore, in touch with the catastrophic outcomes of capitalism’s planetary transformations, frames the Capitalocene as a theory that is necessary to calibrate political resistance, part of a broader tradition of anti-capitalist critique. Norris’s place on this spectrum does not have the clarity of LeConte’s or Moore’s theories, of course, but two things *are* clear. First, that Norris depicts the capacities of human-natural-technological assemblages to transform the environment on a planetary scale, but only when those elements are brought together by economic forces. And second, that *The Octopus*, if not in the programmatic or orthodox manner of someone like Jack London, contains a powerful critique of capitalism’s effects on the planet. With these two threads of his magnum opus, Norris’s interpretation of LeConte’s Psychozoic comes to resemble something closer to Moore’s Capitalocene.

*FORCE AS ASSEMBLAGE: NATURE, HUMAN, CAPITAL*

It is not hard to read *The Octopus* as a story of accumulation through appropriation and the relations of production and power, the basis of any critique of capitalism. It may actually be hard *not* to. But to read the novel as a critique of capitalism’s environmental consequences, especially at a geologic or planetary scale, is another matter, one that has so far eluded most Norris criticism despite building on some of the major trends in that body of work. Here again the split between economic and ecocritical readings is partially to blame. Donald Pizer’s take on “the concept of nature” in *The Octopus*, for example, reconciles the conflict between religious and evolutionary understandings of nature through the evolutionary theism central to LeContian force.[[25]](#footnote-47) Russ Castronovo discusses the “geo-aesthetics” and the tension between democratic and proto-fascist impulses in Norris’s depiction of the globe without touching on the planet, taking up the economic and political without considering their environmental implications.[[26]](#footnote-48) Florian Freitag brings a more agricultural lens to the novel as part of a broader argument about the farm novel as the “natural environment” of American literary naturalism, but for him nature and the corporation are both competing forces determining the actions and “cycles” of the individual—capitalism *becomes* an environmental force in itself, making it hard to read the effects of capitalism *on* the environment.[[27]](#footnote-49) Paul Formisano, in an extended ecocritical reading of the novel, engages more extensively with environmental transformations in the San Joaquin Valley. In the struggle over water and land rights that accompanied the creation of an agricultural oasis in the valley, Formisano reads the broader conflict of distinct cultures and interests over the right to determine California’s future, demonstrating “how violence and conquest…go hand in hand with the state’s economic development.”[[28]](#footnote-50) But without thinking on a planetary-geological scale of space and time, what Norris reveals about the influence of the capitalist system itself on the fate of the planet cannot come into focus. Whereas the competing forces of nature, humanity, and captial seem to contradict each other and remain distinct in the novel, attending to the ways they combine and co-determine each other reveals a logic similar to that of the Capitalocene.

And yet, the case for a Capitalocene reading of *The Octopus* might seem easily dismissed by reference to the following passage, one of Presley’s musings as he contemplates the place of the human set against the immensity of the San Joaquin Valley:

And there before him, mile after mile, illimitable, covering the earth from horizon to horizon, lay the Wheat. The growth, now many days old, was already high from the ground. There it lay, a vast, silent ocean, shimmering a pallid green under the moon and under the stars; a mighty force, the strength of nations, the life of the world. … As if human agency could affect this colossal power! What were these heated, tiny squabbles, this feverish, small bustle of mankind, this minute swarming of the human insect, to the great, majestic, silent ocean of the Wheat itself! Indifferent, gigantic, resistless, it moved in its appointed grooves. Men, Liliputians, gnats in the sunshine, buzzed impudently in their tiny battles, were born, lived through their little day, died, and were forgotten; while the Wheat, trapped in Nirvanic calm, grew steadily under the night, alone with the stars and with God.[[29]](#footnote-51)

Presley is unambiguous. Human agency is just so many gnats, at most an annoyance to something we can never truly affect. Confronted with the sublimity of something as enormous as the Wheat, something on the same scale as the stars and God, the notion that humanity has some capacity to effect a meaningful transformation is surely nothing more than an arrogant overestimation of our powers.

On the other hand, what is the force, the “colossal power,” that Presley confronts here? It is certainly “the Wheat,” but that hardly means he is talking about the planet, or Nature, or even a humbler lowercase-n-nature. Or, as Annixter would put it, parroting his favorite catchphrase: “In a way, it is, and then, again, in a way it isn’t.” The immensity with which Presley is faced is a monocultural planting of a non-native plant, a state of affairs that is a distant cousin of the natural and has almost nothing to do with the wild. It is a hybrid that is a distinct *product of collective human agency*, and in recognizing its enormous power, he is already giving the lie to his own claims about the limited scope of human influence on the natural world in the context of capitalism.

What is most curious is that, despite Presley’s interpretation of the wheat dwarfing human agency, the capitalist (and therefore partially human) origins of wheat are folded deliberately into the consciousness of the novel and Presley’s own consciousness. He overhears a Mexican centenarian observe as much over lunch, discussing the California of his youth: “There was no thought of wheat then, you may believe. It was all cattle in those days, sheep, horses…. Yes, and there was wheat as well, now that I come to think; but a very little…. what would Father Ullivari have said to such a crop as Señor Derrick plants these days? Ten thousand acres of wheat! Nothing but wheat from the Sierra to the Coast Range.”[[30]](#footnote-52) Presley knows shorty after the novel begins, then, that the wheat only exists in California because of the “human agency” of the first colonizers, and that it is only exists at the scale it does because of “Señor Derrick” and his ilk. If he can still claim, four hundred pages later, that human agency cannot touch the immensity of the wheat, one has to ask what different forms of agency are at play here. Perhaps the “squabbles” among individuals cannot touch the wheat, and perhaps not even collective action could do so. But the kind of organization of humanity and nature alike that capitalism represents—the assemblages represented when the Derricks’ “no longer felt their individuality” as they commune with the global wheat markets—demonstrably can.

Indeed, recognizing the multiplicity of forces at play, which come together as an assemblage rather than a unity, allows these contradictions to be reconciled. Another such contradiction arises within the passage itself and suggests that any attempt to read the “colossus” as wild nature or to read human influence as restricted to individual actions will fall short. The sentence in which the wheat is most powerful is also the one in which its hybridity is most apparent: “Indifferent, gigantic, resistless, it moved in its appointed grooves.” The first question this sentence raises is, Grooves appointed by whom? Whoever farms the land, apparently, particularly if the immediate referent for “grooves” is taken to be the furrows of industrial ploughs. There is a distinctly mechanistic character to the metaphor that will recur in other descriptions of the valley’s wheat land and that implies agency on the part of the farmers. And yet, how can the wheat both move within “grooves” appointed by farmers and be out of the reach of human agency? It can only be resolved if the wheat is taken as *already* an assemblage of industrial activity and the properties of the various species of wheat. The wheat as an organism is not resistless, certainly, otherwise it could not have been domesticated; as we have already seen, humanity itself is a mere gnat; but in this industrial-natural assemblage, humanity and wheat become the elements of a colossus.

The term “assemblage” here needs some definition for this context. I take it, as have Haraway and many others, from Deleuze and Guattari to refer to the agencies produced by a combination of abstract relations and concrete material entities.[[31]](#footnote-53) But I use the term primarily as another name for Moore’s “bundles of human and extra-human nature…processes and projects that reconfigure the relations of humanity-in-nature, within large and small geographies alike.”[[32]](#footnote-54) The kind of agency at work in *The Octopus* is unable to be reduced to any of its component parts or a unity of them. Rather, it is the heterogeneous whole organized by capitalism in order to epxloit the relations between human and natural labor. What is produced is meant to be an exchange-value producing machine, but ends up becoming the autonomous force of capitalism itself, destroying the capitalist through recurring crises but becoming indomitable as a force in its own right.

While this heterogeneity might seem to contradict the apparent unity implied by “force,” the inconsistent use of the term itself shows the same logic as an assemblage: parts and relations working as a whole without losing their distinctness. Norris uses of the term to refer first to life, then to the machine, and then to wheat as an interaction between these entities and human labor within the larger systems of the market and world consumption. Though defined by evolutionary theism in the LeContian mode,[[33]](#footnote-55) its signification in the novel tells a slightly different story. In the most quoted passage on the force alone, it comes to signify that which “brought men into the world” as well as “crowded them out of it to make way for the succeeding generation,” that which “made the wheat grow” as well as “garnered it from the soil to give place to the succeeding crop.”[[34]](#footnote-56) It is life and death, but also planting and harvest, population dynamics, and human history— and while force brings these processes into relation, it is also defined by them.

As in Annie Derricks’ vision, the clearest relation in this assemblage is between industry and nature. That first sense in which force is used, the cycle of life, death, and decay that paves the way for more life, is the first one encountered in the novel. After the harvest, the wheat stubble covers the plains, dessicated by the sun, but “the natural forces seemed to hang suspended” and “there was no growth, no life; the very stubble had no force even to rot.”[[35]](#footnote-57) We see natural force *via negativa* in the suspension of the life cycle. But the natural domain of force is quickly extended to the railroad, and, by no coincidence, this extension occurs in a scene in which a train slaughters a straying flock of sheep. Presley hears the train whistle, and sees in his mind’s eye “the galloping monster, the terror of steel and steam” as a “symbol of a vast power, huge, terrible, flinging the echo of its thunder over all the reaches of the valley, leaving blood and destruction in its path.” This mechanical monster has nothing to do with the growth of wheat in a direct sense—it is not one of the steel ploughs—but it nevertheless takes on the mantle of “Force”: it is “the leviathan, with tentacles of steel clutching into the soil, the soulless Force, the iron-hearted Power, the monster, the Colossus, the Octopus.”[[36]](#footnote-58) The force exists as a dialectic between the vitality of nature and the “soulless” entities that extinguish it.

The capitalist relation of nature and technology resolves this dialectical tension into a new agency through assemblage. The novel’s conclusion, perhaps its most famous and controversial aspect, marks the maturation of wheat into its own autonomous force, born out of natural and economic forces but independent of both and bent on asserting its agency over the planet. Wheat is, crucially, not wheat as an organism when it takes on this role. It is wheat the commodity, as it is being shipped overseas to create new markets and fulfill new demand.

When the novel’s villain S. Behrman confronts this new force, it is the first time he has done so as an individual and as flesh. It is not even the wheat itself he means to see, but part of the larger industrial apparatus, the grain elevator. Although he has bought and enlarged the elevator, “he ha[s] never seen it” before this moment: the “work had been carried on through agents.”[[37]](#footnote-59) In other words, he has created it through the various dematerialized operations of the financier, but confronting it on the material plane is categorically different. He has been responsible for planning and executing the accumulation through appropriation that has led to this moment of confrontation, having “watched it harvested…watched it hauled to the railway,” and now intends to revel in his success by watching “as it pour[s] into the hold of the ship” and as that ship sails away—it is a depiction of the entire supply line from the perspective of the financier. But the reduction of Behrman to an individual here—it is the first time he is humanized, the first time his emotions are on view—makes a distinction between the man and the system in which he has played the crucial role. Having created this assemblage, he removes himself from it, and thus sees it from without.

This act of separation shows the extent to which it is capitalism, rather than capitalists, that the force of wheat embodies, for despite being responsible for everything in the situation, he will not make it out of this confrontation alive; the wheat will crush him. The sorcerer has lost control of his spells. His mistake is in unleashing it, apparently, for what distinguishes his operation is the refusal to pay the four cents for bags, and he lets it flow in bulk into the hold of a ship. The other fatal mistake is in letting it get fully beyond the human: it is not that it has reverted to wildness, but that its new form, one that at once encompasses the organism, the processed grain, the elevator, the men working on the docks, the waiting consumers, and of course, the market. It is because of this transcendence of the individual that it is possible for Behrman to observe that “[n]o human agency seemed to be back of the movement of the wheat. Rather, the grain seemed impelled with a force of its own, a resistless, huge force, eager, vivid, impatient for the sea”—*even though* it is his own actions that have caused the wheat to tumble into the hold.[[38]](#footnote-60) The autonomy of this force is finally asserted as, having tripped and fallen into the hold, Behrman is crushed by his own appropriated wheat and the mechanisms used to monetize it. What might appear to be a moment of optimistic determinism—especially given the novel’s final line, that “all things surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good”[[39]](#footnote-61)—is really the creation of a new world-historical, planetary force. It is global capitalism’s appropriation of Cheap Nature embodied.

Finally, then, the “force” is defined by two things. First, it is unable to be considered without recognizing its composition by the many distinct parts of the system—including but not exclusively the division of labor, for it also includes the human-nature relation, raw materials, and as will be discussed further below, the market. And second, the autonomy of capitalist nature as an assemblage, which transcends the conditions that created it in order to create conditions itself. But the assemblage’s autonomy does not negate the responsibility of those whose actions gave rise to it. Who those people are, however, is a more complicated question than it might seem.

*WHO FARMS THE WHEAT?*

If monocultural farming of the land is responsible for this colossal force, that does not mean the buck stops with the farmer, for the farmer exists within a larger market system. The wheat moving within its “appointed grooves” takes on a different cast in light of the commodities market. Commodities traders speculate on the price of “futures,” which are just contracts to deliver a quantity of the commodity at a certain time, fixing a sale through a mechanism that ostensibly guards against fluctuations in price and supply. In practice, futures trading can *itself* create price fluctuations, as speculators who have an incentive to drive the price of a commodity up or down do so by means that are psychological rather than material: influencing the price just means influencing the confidence of other investors and buying stock through the cover of agents. Taking into account Norris’s Epic of the Wheat as a whole, the assemblage that makes the wheat so powerful would be composed not only of the process of production (the domain of *The Octopus*), but also of distribution and speculation (the topic of *The Pit*).

In a short story “A Deal in Wheat,” which anticipates Norris’s epic, he makes clear just where the power lies in this assemblage, and it is distinctly not with the farmer. The commodity market cuts both ways, lowering and raising prices, and in this story the farmer Sam Lewison is hurt by both: he is driven off his ranch by artificially low wheat prices, then sees the breadline closed in his face because the price of wheat has since gone too high. The cause is a speculator’s duel between Truslow, who was driving prices down, and Hornung, who was driving them up. When they go up even further than Hornung wanted, however, Truslow is to blame. Truslow finally profits by a scam that provides the *reductio ad absurdum* of finance’s dematerialization of material goods: he keeps unloading and reloading the same shipment of wheat, selling it many times over to Hornung at higher and higher prices; Hornung is obliged to buy, because he must corner the market or bust. It is fraud, but fraud that works on the normal logic of finance, the radical separation of exchange value from use value, to the point that they are nearly mutually irrelevant. The railroad and the futures market become Truslow’s perpetual-motion investment machine, which runs on the dematerialization of wheat and relies on being able to treat the market as an autonomous zone of action.

But as Lewison, the farmer, reflects on the whole incident, he recognizes that the structures Truslow and Hornung manipulate are not the bounded arena of unlimited agency they think it is. They are entangled with a much larger set of overlapping systems and unintended consequences, which as a whole Norris represents as a single machine:

Caught once in the cogs and wheels of a great and terrible engine, he had seen—none better—its workings.…The farmer—he who raised the wheat—was ruined upon one hand; the working-man—he who consumed it—was ruined upon the other. But between the two, the great operators, who never saw the wheat they traded in, bought and sold the world’s food, gambled in the nourishment of entire nations, practised their tricks, their chicanery and oblique shifty “deals,” were reconciled in their differences, and went on through their appointed way, jovial, contented, enthroned, and Unassailable.

It is clear who runs the show in this thumbnail sketch of the food system, the production-distribution-consumption schema that Norris took as the basis for his would-be Epic of the Wheat trilogy (*The Wolf* was to be the third installment and discuss consumption and food shortages). The farmer and the consumer are along for a ride conducted by the speculators. The “appointed grooves” of the resistless Wheat are appointed by the same people who set up the “cogs and wheels” of the financial machine, the machine going around and around collecting wealth without a thought for what happens on either side.

Of course, this sketch has nothing to say about the actual planting of the wheat, the decentering of which is its entire point; where *The Octopus* picks up the thread is in showing how market logics drive the decisions made about the actual planting and the actual soil. The financial logic of planting decisions becomes visible when Dyke, the laid-off engineer who has decided to take up farming, discusses his decision to plant hops with Harran Derrick. The latter tells him that because of crop failures in Germany and New York, hops are a safe bet: “there’s likely to be a shortage and a stiff advance in the price. They ought to go to a dollar next year.”[[40]](#footnote-62) On one hand, this is unsurprising: cash-crop farmers will plant crops that yield the most cash. On the other hand, the extent to which the language of the commodities market has infused agricultural planning reveals something about the place of the farmer in the food-wealth production system, and it is a little more complicated than the clear boundaries sketched out in “A Deal in Wheat.” The farmers may be subject to the whims of the speculators, but their defense against ruination is to involve themselves in the same operations.

In the end, what *The Octopus* reveals about the relationship between farming and finance is the extent to which farmers, on “bonanza” farms and smallholdings alike, have themselves become speculators. Dyke’s example is a brief one and primarily shows how finance influences agricultural planning and planting. The more explicit argument for the financialization of agriculture comes in the figure of Magnus Derrick and those like him. That he understands wheat first and foremost in market terms is clear from the comparison of wheat with gold. The “miner’s instinct of wealth acquired in a single night prevailed,” and it is by this logic that “Magnus and the multitude of other ranchers of whom he was a type, farmed their ranches. They had no love for their land. They were not attached to the soil. They worked their ranches as a quarter of a century before they had worked their mines.”[[41]](#footnote-63) Rather than being productive, financialized farming becomes extractive, the wheat dematerialized, nothing more than its price on the market. Magnus—by all accounts one of the most successful wheat farmers around—replaces all knowledge of agriculture with extrapolative musings on future markets:

He was no farmer, he hardly knew wheat when he saw it, only he knew the trend of the world’s affairs; he felt them to be setting inevitably eastward…. [H]is very vagueness was a further inspiration to the Governor. He swept details aside. He saw only the grand *coup*, the huge results, the East conquered, the march of empire rolling westward, finally arriving at its starting point.[[42]](#footnote-64)

More than forgiving a lack of agricultural acumen, the market in wheat seems actually to reward it. Magnus’s downfall comes because he is beaten in his market manipulations, not because of his extractive methods *per se*.

In fact, the extent to which the farmers, the ostensible heroes of the fight against the villainous railroads, become indistinguishable from any other sort of capitalist could be taken as evidence that *The Octopus* is not a critique of capitalism *per se* at all so much as it is a critique of monopoly—and the latter would be easily assimilable within an economistic worship of competition and “free” markets. In a certain reading, the defeat of the Derricks and death of the farmers, the novel’s central tragedy, could have been averted had they been able to enact their own plan to exploit Cheap Natures. Their great hope, the way they plan to beat the railroad, is to engage with the markets even more than they already do. Magnus is persuaded of this by a man characterized repeatedly as a “capitalist” who tells him that if wheat growers are to prosper, “we *must have new markets, greater markets*,” integrate the entire operations and “break up the Chicago wheat pits and elevator rigs and mixing houses” not by systemic change but by a profitable scheme of their own.[[43]](#footnote-65) In rooting for the farmers, which it is hard not to do, we would seem to root for a different cog in the capitalist machine.

What such a reading would miss is the extent to which Norris’s critique of capital is inseparable from his environmentalist critique, the combination of which in turn rests on the novel’s sense of planetarity. The “miner’s” mentality has a clear endpoint: “To get all there was out of the land, to squeeze it dry, to exhaust it, seemed their policy. When, at last, the land worn out, would refuse to yield, they would invest their money in something else; by then, they would all have made fortunes. They did not care. ‘After us the deluge.’”[[44]](#footnote-66) The image this policy leaves in its wake is of post-agricultural lands that resemble exhausted mines, denuded and destroyed. The effects of capital investment are abstracted from their materiality as it becomes something like Marx’s famous dictum that under the conditions of capitalism, “All that is solid melts into air.” In this context, the defining statement on dematerialization takes on a new aspect, for the dematerialization of commodities does not make the effects it leaves behind any less material. (We might also ask how much carbon that “melting into air” releases into the atmosphere, but that is another matter.) As we see, through the mind’s eye of Magnus Derrick, the tide of wheat rolling over the face of the planet, we have to also see that tide going out, and what it leaves behind it.

This critique is specific to capitalist agriculture and not generalizable to agriculture itself—for if it is ultimately capitalism that farms the wheat, the novel presents glimpses of an alternative agricultural logic led by a different kind of farmer. Though Annixter also farms wheat and is involved in the same plutocratic politics as everyone else, at least at the outset of the novel his farm works on a markedly different logic. He uses the dead remainder of the wheat crop to feed sheep who in turn leave manure, a multi-species collaboration that ultimately builds the quality of the soil.[[45]](#footnote-67) He sees, as none of the other farmers seem to, the problems inherent in capitalism-driven agriculture: “That’s right, there’s your Western farmer…. Get the guts out of your land; work it to death; never give it a rest. Never alternate your crop, and then when your soil is exhausted, sit down and roar about hard times.”[[46]](#footnote-68) He approaches his farming scientifically, having, as he supposedly does, “brains to his boots,” but in his college years studied finance and political economy as well as scientific agriculture.

This scientific and soil-focused approach presents a symbolic counterpoint to (following Marx) the “metabolic rift” in which capitalist enclosure disrupts the cycle of nutrients in the planetary ecology, preventing crucial elements such as nitrogen and phosphorous from returning to the soil through human and animal waste as well as unharvested plant matter. A similar metabolic metaphor appears in the strange form of Annixter’s compulsive eating of prunes to aid a disrupted digestive system. It is a repeated fact about Annixter, one that receives the most emphasis when his farming techniques are being discussed, and which is simply too strange to mean nothing at all. Furthermore, digestive imagery links his “genius” to his farming methods, as we are told his success results from his acumen in “memorising, devouring, [and] digesting” knowledge. Knowledge and soil health come together in the form of intelligent farming practices, the metabolism of information and agricultural theory leading to a functioning metabolism of material flows through human and natural systems.

Annixter’s farming, compared to the methods of more avowed capitalists like Magnus Derrick, presents an alternative future for farming and an identification of the existing farming practices that could conceivably avert the problem of environmental destruction. It is a duality embodied in the very name of Annixter’s farm, “Quien Sabe.” On one hand, it could be read as “¿Quién Sabe?”—who knows? Who knows what might happen if a sensible farming methodology were adopted for the most basic crops in the global diet? And at the same time, who knows what will happen if it is not? But it is also, and perhaps primarily, “quien sabe,”—“who knows,” as in “he who knows.” Annixter’s methods are indicated as the right answer to the problem of California wheat farming. That this message is presented in Spanish is perhaps a nod to the farming communities and practices that predate American annexation of California as well as the wave of (especially Portuguese) immigrants in whom Jack London saw so many leads for a scientific agricultural practice. Annixter’s ranch embodies the possibilities for alternatives that are broken up by the monocultures of capitalism.

Who farms the wheat, then? It could have been farmer-stewards like Annixter, improving the soil. But it is not. It is the capitalist instantiation of agriculture that is extractive, leaves ruin in its wake, and is in the moment of the *The Octopus* sweeping over the face of the Earth. Financial markets determine planting decisions, but perhaps more importantly structure the collective common sense of the biggest agricultural producers. And their assemblages are not local partnerships between farmer and sheep, sheep and soil, but failed attempts to harness a global crop and division of labor—a failure that produces monsters.

*DOMESTICATING THE PLANET*

In adapting LeConte’s Psychozoic theory into a green critique of capitalism, Norris envisions a planetary force in the form of a natural-industrial-economic assemblage—a force driven by capitalism, not individuals. But what does this force actually do to the Earth? Finally, the issue comes to the fore of domestication, and the human’s—or capital’s—“organization” of the environment entire. The Psychozoic rests on the idea that domestication is the means by which humanity has assumed a geological status, which for him is the defining factor of the Neolithic and speaks to a larger process of artificial selection of useful species over dangerous ones. Over the course of the novel, images recur of domestication-through-organization, a continual making of collectivities out of individual humans and non-human animals, collectivities that can then be harnessed in the larger capitalist, global assemblage. In almost all cases, these images end in slaughter, but the collectivizing act continues regardless. The question is who is doing the organizing, of whom, and to what end. The literal answers vary, but taken as a whole the novel assumes and transmutes images of domestication to link the organization of human and extra-human work, showing that both are ways to exploit Cheap Nature for the benefit of capital gain.

The first such image is the ill-fated herd of sheep who will be slaughtered by the train. Herded by Vanamee on Annixter’s ranch, they represent an almost inconceivable force of their own, “[h]undreds upon hundreds upon hundreds of grey, rounded backs, all exactly alike, huddled, close-packed, alive, hid[ing] the earth from sight.” Innumerability and organization make them a single mass, and they become “alive” in a sense distinct from how they were already alive, namely, as something like a single organism; in becoming so, they “hid[e] the earth from site,” obscuring the natural with the organized-natural. The herd “was no longer an aggregate of individuals. It was a mass—a compact, solid, slowly moving mass, huge, without form, like a thick-pressed growth of mushrooms, spreading out in all directions over the earth.”[[47]](#footnote-69) The control and aggregation is so totalizing here as to abstract the sheep into another form of life entirely, metaphorically in their resemblance to “mushrooms” but, in a certain sense, literally as a domesticated sub-species. And yet, organization itself is not a catastrophic event for the ranch as a landmass. The sheep are herded, yes, and to a certain extent transformed by organization, but they are part of Annixter’s scientific agriculture scheme.[[48]](#footnote-70) Norris seems to reject the idea that domestication itself, or the organization of other beings, is inherently destructive, as would be necessary for a direct critical inversion of the Psychozoic theory. Nor, apparently, is it as persuasive as the capitalist form of coerced organization: it is swept aside in a single bloody gesture by the railroad.

The next in the series of domestication images occurs during the jackrabbit drive. The people of the San Joaquin gather for the ritual, a combination picnic and massacre. The whole community lines up on horses and in carriages to drive the jackrabbits out of their hiding places among the stubble of harvested wheat. By marching in an unbroken line, they drive them into a corral where they are killed to supply a “Homeric” feast.[[49]](#footnote-71) The depiction of this roundup draws on the same reservoir of collectivization imagery that characterized the herd of sheep. Even though “[n]o two acted precisely alike,” the rabbits are able to be made into a single monolith. As the sheep “hid the earth,” so do the rabbits: here and there “what seemed to be ground resolved itself, when seen through the glasses, into a maze of small, moving bodies…. The earth was alive with rabbits.” The language describing them moves from their individual actions to descriptions of them as a population, as their numbers increase from thousands to tens of thousands and the “throng” grows “denser and denser”; they are “a loose mass” and, finally, “a sea…agitated by unseen forces.” The upshot is that “the rabbits, singularly enough, became less wild”—even though their terror means that “[a]t times the unexpected tameness of the rabbits all at once vanished,” they remain, essentially, controlled.[[50]](#footnote-72) The extended scene dramatizes domestication through organization.

This would seem to be another pure expression of the Psychozoic thesis, showing domestication spread over the “earth” both literally (lowercase-e-earth) and figuratively (capital-e-Earth, the planet) as the animals replace the ground itself. When one considers the context of jackrabbit drives in environmental history, however, the image takes a different focus. Why does this ritual exist? Why turn out the entire valley for a gruesome ritual when it could be a normal feast, like the one Annixter holds in his new barn? The answer rests on the specific jackrabbit population dynamics that result from capitalist agriculture. The jackrabbit drive is a cultural form adapted for use in the industrial landscape from prehistoric and pre-colonial indigenous traditions. As European colonies began transforming the landscape, they inadvertently created the conditions for periodic jackrabbit population booms, as shrublands and agricultural fields make perfect jackrabbit habitats—and consequently, the potential for plummeting agricultural yields as they destroy crops.[[51]](#footnote-73) Hence the ability (and necessity) of a line of horses and wagons to whip up a tumultuous “sea” of rabbits: the booming population makes the mass unimaginably vast and the rabbit drive a necessary act to protect their product; it is a fundamentally economic operation that derives from the consequences of other economic operations. And the “nature” they make tame only exists because of other, previous forms of domesticating organization—it is an animal “wildness” that arises out of plant domestication, only to be domesticated itself.

The profit-protection scheme, disguised by a co-opted ritual, ends in slaughter. In an image that will be echoed later in a human context, the rabbits flow *en masse* into the corral. Then, “like an opened sluice-gate, the extending flanks of the entrance of the corral slowly engulf[] the herd” and the mass spreads out “precisely as a pool fo water when a dam is opened.” The domestication has finally succeeded when “[a]ll wildness, all fear of man, seemed to have entirely disappeared”; and “on signal, the killing beg[ins].” The dogs brought there for the purpose have refused to do the killing, in a moment of inter-species solidarity: they “snuffed curiously at the pile, then backed off, disturbed, perplexed.” They appear not to recognize the organized mass as prey. Humans do the killing, a club in each hand. As much as Norris seems to exult in the violence, he also displays its awfulness, albeit through a gauze of racism. The “Anglo-Saxon spectators round about dr[a]w back in disgust” while the Portguese, Mexican, and “mixed Spaniard” are “boiled up in excitement”; most retreat a quarter of a mile away to prepare the barbecue. Norris’s preferred audience, “Anglo-Saxons,” are supposed to be horrified by this display. Like the massacred herd of sheep, capital concerns organize life in ways that are presented simply as violence.[[52]](#footnote-74)

Whether Norris was thinking of the rabbit drive as profit-protection is unclear, but it certainly sets up the final scene of capitalism dominating by organizing, its final target the abortive mass movement against the railroad. In the first example, a sustainability-minded farmer organized sheep for the purpose of revitalizing the soil, and in the second, farmer-capitalists organized jackrabbits for the purpose of protecting their investment. This final example shows how powerful capitalists organize society to enable accumulation through appropriation. They do so by treating labor as another raw material to be organized, another form of what Moore calls “Cheap Nature,” through a process that looks eerily like the domestication seen in the sheep and jackrabbit scenes.

Perhaps the most complicated aspect considering of this climactic march as a site of domestication is the fact that the collective labor movement, “the People,” organizes itself. As with the jackrabbits, this description begins with attention to individuals—pedestrians who stream onto the streets to join the movement—but it quickly begins to deal in aggregates. Finally they become a “crowd, a solid mass” from which “this single unit, this living, breathing organism—the People” is born. Again individuals become a single but distinct lifeform, and again they are motivated to do so by the normal workings of the capitalist system: for it is the railroad’s appropriative actions that compel them into the streets. Whereas the jackrabbits lose their individual differences, Presley’s perspective continues to provide the narrative lens and thus some sense of individuality. But his individual *agency* is stripped from him as he is “caught in the current” with his arms “pinioned to his sides by the press.” Likewise, the individual people become “wave after wave of faces, hundreds upon hundreds, thousands upon thousands, red, lowering, sullen. All were set in one direction.” Particles become wave as terms of liquid dynamics and aggregation provide the operative metaphors: Presley is “an atom on the crest of a storm-driven wave” and is carried off, here by a “groundswell” and there by a “surge.” Finally, there is a direct visual echo to the jackrabbits being herded into the corral. Here the corral is the terminus of the march as it sweeps “up the steps of the Opera House, on into the vestibule, through the doors, and at last into the auditorium of the house itself.”[[53]](#footnote-75) The Opera House becomes the site of a metaphorical taming and slaughter, the disappointing result when the People rise up against the indomitable force of capitalism.

The analogue to domestication here is a co-opting of the existing collective labor movement such that it defeats itself and exploitation can continue apace. The League—the political collective the farmers form to resist the railroad—is defeated for two reasons. First, the plutocratic corruption of the democratic system is such that the only way they can succeed is by buying seats on the commission that controls tariffs. In other words, the political system is so imbued with monetary influence that participating means participating in the corrupt marketplace of that influence. Magnus, as the agent of this scheme once his principled opposition to it is worn down, becomes tarnished, and the railroad successfully runs a smear campaign against him. The march to the Opera House ultimately founders on the rock of its compromised principles, as paid hecklers reveal Magnus’s bribery. In this sense, one leader of the movement is seduced, however unwillingly, by plutocratic politics. The second reason the League fails is that the seat it “buys” on the tariff commission has already been bought by the railroad—even though it is Magnus’s own son, Lyman. Thus another sense in which the movement, and more specifically its legitimation within the existing structures of government, is co-opted in advance by the capitalist basis of political power, just as existing alternative forms of social structure (family and community, both of which Lyman forsakes) are replaced by market relations. It is this replacement of one organizational structure with another—representative politics with the market—that ultimately “tames” labor.

On its own, this course of events might be taken to be a regional issue, a problem framed in terms of a single, historically bounded monopoly in nineteenth-century California, but Presley’s speech in the Opera House enfolds it within the larger, world-historical movements of domination and exploitation. Stirred by news that one more rancher wounded in the shootout with railroad agents has died, he takes the stage to decry the domination of “the People” by everyone from the Pharaos to the “white Czar” to “Bourbon Louis.” Ultimately, he lands on capitalism itself: “They own us, these task-masters of ours; they own our homes, they own our legislatures. … We are told we can defeat them by the ballot-box. They own the ballot-box. We are told that we must look to the courts for redress; they own the courts.”[[54]](#footnote-76) Yet it is not just the corrupting influence of money in government that Presley condemns. Since the death of his friends, he has embraced the perspective of Caraher the “Red” saloon owner and been radicalized into some form of revolutionary collectivist politics.[[55]](#footnote-77) He thus rounds on the monetary structures themselves. “They swindle a nation of a hundred million and call it Financiering; they levy a blackmail and call it Commerce;….they hire blacklegs to carry out their plans and call it Organisation; they prostitute the honour of a State and call it Competition.” Finance, commerce, organization, and competition are the means by which these farmers have been forcibly organized, first for the purposes of appropriation and profit, and now to be funneled into the place where their resistance will be dashed. Such means are the equivalent of the line of horses and carriages driving the jackrabbits. Presley’s speech ultimately falls on appreciative but uncomprehending ears. The People are not educated enough (a party-educated writer like London would probably say not class conscious enough) to understand the meaning of Presley’s speech—he was too “literary.”[[56]](#footnote-78) But the reader, literary by definition, is presumed to have understood.

The control of labor is just one more point in a clear line drawn from the herding of sheep through the marshalling of jackrabbits and all the way to the appointment of “grooves” through which the assemblage that is the force of wheat traverses the globe. Everything that has happened in the novel has been part of a total system of organization for the purposes of profitability. Framing the disruption of labor movements alongside domestication through repeated imagery distinctly suggests that both are part of the same process. As the number of influential actors dwindles and agricultural activity comes further under the control of markets, the possibility for alternatives like those enacted on Quien Sabe fades in the face of a global monoculture. That monoculture is a world-historical and geologic force resulting from what Moore would call a “bundling” of human and natural forces, but it is categorically distinct from both as a result. The creation of this new force takes cues and inspiration from Joseph LeConte’s theory of the Psychozoic Era in its emphasis on organization and domestication, but it replaces “Man” as the defining agent with financial markets and the capitalist system.

### “The Measureless Ranch of Vision”: Landscape and Capitalocene Aesthetics

As Minna Hooven, separated from what is left of her family, approaches a quaint cottage in San Francisco where she has been told she might find work, she encounters an unexpected symbol of capitalism’s unintended natural consequences: alongside the native fan palm and magnolias more characteristic of the southeastern United States, the cottage is shaded by “the inevitable eucalyptus.”[[57]](#footnote-80) It is indeed “inevitable” in *The Octopus*. Norris uses a mixed grove of oak, cypress, and eucalyptus trees to define the setting of the Los Muertos ranch house, which is often seen from a distance as “a roof or two between the dull green of cypress and eucalyptus,” and it seems like someone is always “pass[ing] out from under the eucalyptus trees” or hitching their wagon to one of their sturdy trunks.[[58]](#footnote-81) The textual range of the eucalyptus is far from restricted to Los Muertos, however, whether morally or geographically. Indifferent to the Derricks’ struggle against S. Behrman, eucalyptus groves surround the houses of both, and the tree seems to pop up wherever the action is. It is an invasive species in the text of the novel itself just as it is in the California landscape of today, mentioned more often than any tree other than the California live-oak despite being indigenous to Australia.[[59]](#footnote-82)

To see capital in the landscapes of *The Octopus*—and to begin to see why landscape as an aesthetic matters in the novel more broadly—one has to look beyond the controlled transformations of the wheat growers and into accidents like the eucalyptus tree. If an encounter with the eucalyptus is “inevitable” across California, it is only so because of the close relationship between speculation and American agriculture from the nineteenth century on—and, even more relevant to the context of *The Octopus*, because of the economic impact of the railroad. The blue-gum eucalyptus was introduced to California in the 1850s by farmers “impressed with the splendid proportions and rapid development of the genus in its native habitat” of Australia.[[60]](#footnote-83) Its presence across the state would make it the logical candidate to meet the growing demand for wooden railroad-ties, which progressively increased as the tentacular train routes of the Central Pacific Railroad spread across the American West in the decades to come. California farmers were wooed into planting Eucalyptus trees commercially in anticipation of the coming hardwood shortage—among them, albeit somewhat later, Jack London, who annotated articles on the promise of eucalyptus farming and was even featured in pamphlets extolling the tree’s profitability.[[61]](#footnote-84) Eucalyptus wood was not suited for railroad ties, in the end. It cracked, split, and became twisted too easily to withstand the conditions of the tracks. But long after the scheme collapsed, the trees remained standing.[[62]](#footnote-85) The species became invasive and spread across the state, the side-effects of which have been as disastrous as they were unanticipated. Besides being ill-suited to an environment like the San Joaquin Valley, which gets so little annual rainfall that some argue it should be treated as a desert biome, its bark and sap are highly flammable, and it transformed the fire regimes of the grasslands it invaded.[[63]](#footnote-86) Recently, eucalyptus came back into the spotlight when a viral Reddit post entitled “The Great Australian Shitpost, 100 years in the making” facetiously blamed century-old, unscrupulous Australian profiteering for 2017’s devastating fires. But from the perspective of the Capitalocene, capitalism itself is the more plausible cause than individual capitalists—of the eucalyptus, the denuded environment, and the climate change that combined to cause the fires and will combine again to cause more. In the innocuous-seeming, “inevitable” eucalyptus of Los Muertos we can see the destructive effects of a landscape determined by capital investment, effects that go well beyond the obvious purview.

Norris’s most ambitious novel halts its progress periodically to record the state of the landscape, a structuring device that most obviously traces the growth cycle of the wheat crop, but more subtly reveals the environmental transformations that accompany the actions of the primary economic and agricultural narrative. In the scale of these intentional changes, accompanied by their unforeseen consequences, there arises what can be called a Capitalocene aesthetic. Norris’s Capitalocene aesthetic is defined by landscapes that evoke a tension between natural-seeming sublimity and the increase of humanity’s capacities through aggregation into the global capitalist system. On one hand, in the Kantian mode of the sublime, Norris’s landscapes have the sense of “transcending every standard of the senses” by forcing a confrontation with that “in comparison with which all else is small,”[[64]](#footnote-87) and the related Romantic visual sensibility of the lone figure dwarfed by such an enormity. On the other hand, the very landscapes that he depicts, which are supposedly beyond the reach of human thought, are not beyond the reach of human action—quite the opposite, they are to a great extent *determined* by human action. Norris aestheticizes this paradox in the landscapes that result, reifications of the inconceivable systems that create them. It is the meeting point of Marx’s “sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells” and Wordsworth’s “huge Cliff” that “As if with voluntary power instinct, / Uprear’d its head” over the “bound of the horizon”: it is the former rendered in the latter, and the latter created by the former.

What distinguishes this aesthetic from other theorizations of sublimity in adjacent contexts is the phenomenology of being integrated into a system, opening the possibility of feeling oneself as both part of and crushed by a world-historical, sublime force. Daniel Darvay, for example, similarly recognizes Norris’s assumption of a sublime aesthetic in *The Octopus*, but not the extent to which the characters’ senses of agency are simultaneously increased to the same scale through aggregation. Referring to a “naturalist sublime” in which the individual will is dominated by natural, historical, and economic forces, Darvay points out that naturalist characters are “invariably turned into victims of destructive powers” so vast as to be sublime; but if they exert any agency at all, it is “only to perpetuate and reinvent the very ideology that led to their destruction.”[[65]](#footnote-88) But as in the case of the eucalyptus tree or the vast wheat fields, observers of these landscapes encounter a natural sublimity that is a product of an equally sublime human agency, experiencing both in equal measure. The extension of human agency as part of a sublime aesthetic is more commonly recognized in the economic line of Norris criticism, but is part of the picture in *The Octopus* as well. David A. Zimmerman takes the sense of being integrated into a larger system as part of the feeling of what he calls the “mesmeric sublime,” saying that “market panic invites but defies comprehension (and literary representation), and the pressures of the speculative marketplace…disintegrate[s] the boundaries that distinguish and protect the mind from the market.”[[66]](#footnote-89) This can lead to a sense of controlling the market individually, as Jadwin in *The Pit* tries to do by cornering the wheat trade, but Norris always eventually crushes these individual attempts at control, as Zimmerman rightly points out. Extending these insights to *The Octopus*, it is worth lingering on the moments before the collapse, however, for writ large, that is the situation of the 21st-century, on the precipice of an inevitable-seeming annihilation that has not yet arived.

That the landscape mode is so central to *The Octopus* might seem peculiar, given the treatment Norris gives the one actual landscape painting that appears in the novel; in fact, his critique carefully exhibits the role of landscapes in either concealing or revealing the place of finance in forming the actual land. When Hartrath, an artist “absolutely devoid of even the commonest decency,” presents a landscape painting to be raffled in support of a Gingerbread Fair, the piece is set up for mockery. In “a frame of natural redwood, the bark still adhering,” the painting depicts the Contra Costa Foothills. Nothing in the painting itself appears objectionable: Norris emphasizes technique, demarcating clearly “the foreground” where, “under the shade of a live-oak, a couple of reddish cows” stand “knee-deep in a patch of yellow poppies,” and noting the compositional balanced provided by “a girl in a pink dress and a white sunbonnet.” There are some indications of an impressionistic style in “shadows…indicated by broad dashes of pale blue paint.” But it is precisely this unobjectionable quality, this lack of a serious subject matter—its title indicates that it is just “A Study”—that draws Norris’s ire. We can see it in the derivative commentary of the audience and in Norris’s efforts to make sure we know it is derivative:

The ladies and young girls examined the production with little murmurs of admiration, hazarding remembered phrases, searching for the exact balance between generous praise and critical discrimination, expressing their opinions in the mild technicalities of the Art Books and painting classes. They spoke of atmospheric effects, of middle distance, of “*chiaro-oscuro*,” of fore-shortening, of the decomposition of light, of the subordination of individuality to fidelity of interpretation.[[67]](#footnote-90)

Technical admiration comes necessarily from “Art Books and painting classes” rather than from the minds of the women themselves. This may be, and probably is, an assumption that the female audience cannot possibly have anything original to say. But it is also an implicit critique of the academic art promoted by nineteenth-century France’s *académies* that leaned heavily on classical models and studies like Hartrath’s—a school of thought in which Norris would have been well steeped, having studied art at the Académie Julian from 1887 to 1889.[[68]](#footnote-91) Here, academicism and technical virtuosity come to mean blithe acceptance of, or even complicity in, the economic status quo. When Hartrath expresses hope that his inoffensive painting of a lost Eden will attract “Eastern capitalists” to spend money at the fair and invest in San Francisco, a hostile interlocutor suggests that San Francisco’s own capitalists have already denuded it of any meaningful investment vehicles: “our business men preferred to invest their money in corner lots and government bonds, rather than to back up a legitimate industrial enterprise. We don’t want fairs. We want active furnaces.”[[69]](#footnote-92) An untroubled landscape in the academic mode, arcadian scenes well rendered, are linked with the frivolities of finance, even if they shy away from the more actively destructive industrial enterprises that finance engenders and relies upon. The picturesque works like ideology, concealing the real conditions of exploitation that govern nature and labor alike.

If Hartrath’s landscape invests in the arcadian simplicity of the picturesque, Norris’s insistently repeat the pastoral rejoinder: *Et in Arcadia ego*. And yet even the simplicity of the pastoral mode is symbolically rejected, both the neo-classical pastoral that, as Raymond Williams points out, excises all “living tensions” from rural life and the more complex pastoral of the earlier, Virgilian mode that dwells in the contradiction “between the pleasures of rural settlement and the threat of loss and eviction.”[[70]](#footnote-93) Presley, searching for material for his neoclassical epic of the West, sees the pastoral scenes from which he drew inspiration violently retracted: the herd of sheep that he watches from a high vantage point, which can be taken to symbolize pastoralism, are slaughtered by a passing train, a massacre that Norris lavishes with gory detail—“backs were snapped against fence posts; brains knocked out” and the tracks run with blood. From that point on, understandably, “The sweetness was gone from the evening, the sense of peace, of security, and placid contentment was stricken from the landscape.” Presley’s inspiration and the aesthetic it relied on vanish in an instant. Hartrath’s painting acts as *mise-en-abyme*, inviting meditation on the landscape form in general but rejecting the picturesque; the “slaughter of the innocents” that interrupts Presley’s moment of landscape-making in turn takes pastoralism off the table as a viable landscape aesthetic, with Presley’s epic standing in for Norris’s own.[[71]](#footnote-94) And just as Presley gives up the epic mode in favor of a more accessible, contemporary, and political medium, Norris renounces the neoclassical aesthetic of his Académie training to consciously expose the exploitative relations of capital that inhere in the alluvial soil of the San Joaquin Valley.

Norris’s own literary landscapes are insistently visual and multimedial without replicating the picturesque or the pastoral. Rather, Norris does something that in some senses anticipates documentary landscape photographers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries like Edward Burtynsky or J. Henry Fair, who use distant, often aerial shots to show the effects of industry on the land, and in doing so expose the workings of the capital flows responsible. The first time Norris presents a landscape, any recognizable nature it might have contained, idealized or no, has been systematically rooted out. Riding his bike in search of inspiration, Presley at first sees a wasteland:

All about him the country was flat. In all directions he could see for miles. The harvest was just over. Nothing but stubble remained on the ground. With the one exception of the live-oak by Hooven’s place, there was nothing green in sight. The wheat stubble was of a dirty yellow; the ground, parched, cracked, and dry, of a cheerless brown. By the roadside the dust lay thick and grey, and, on either hand, stretching on toward the horizon, losing itself in a mere smudge in the distance, ran the illimitable parallels of the wire fence. And that was all; that and the burnt-out blue of the sky and the steady shimmer of the heat.[[72]](#footnote-95)

As with many of Norris’s landscapes, this one begins with an invocation of the form: he establishes a point of view and range, the equivalent of a visual frame. But it is almost an empty frame, a mere horizon line of the flat country that extends to the limits of vision. Certainly there are no charming bucolic visions, as in Hartrath’s corral-cum-picnic, nor even crops, exactly—just the “stubble” left over after the harvest. The single tree (the live-oak, a native species) only emphasizes the absence of life in the rest of the scene, invoking *via negativa* what has been taken away. The passage becomes increasingly painterly as Norris delimits his pallet with the sole purpose of excising green: “dirty yellow” stubble, a “cheerless brown” surrounding it, the “burnt-out blue of the sky,” and the unnatural grey of dust that might just as well come from the nearby road as from the earth. Finally, the “smudge” of the distant fence suggests a painting as much as a physical view—while it can indicate a blurry mass in the distance, its primary meaning is a mark on a surface that has been rubbed to indistinctness.[[73]](#footnote-96) The insistent visuality of the passage has as much to do with the painter in front of the canvas as it does with the observer on the hill.

The main visual tension, however, is between the two sources of infinite expanse, horizon line and the “illimitable” wire—in other words, precisely what violates the visual frame. The first indicates the scale of of the altered landscape, while the second, which concludes the passage, points to its source: the husbandry of land symbolized by the fence. While the fence limits, it is itself “illimitable,” a reminder that the situation defining this scene extends well beyond what Presley can see.

This endless expanse may constitute a rejection of the Romantic picturesque and pastoral, but it shares elements of the Romantic sublime. On another of Presley’s journeys, he achieves a similar effect, insistently pushing the frame wider and wider, the horizon further and further back. At first, the aesthetic mode is that of the *rückenfigur*, the outline of a figure contemplating a landscape that leaves a space for imaginative projection of the viewer—or in this case, the author, as Norris himself toys with the Romantic and epic modes by which Presley is consumed. “As from a pinnacle,” Presley looks out over the novel’s geographic range, outlining its key locations in order of proximity: “First, close at hand,” the Seed ranch, and “beyond that…the Mission itself,” “farther on… Annixter’s ranch house,” and “far to the west and north” Bonneville. Everything else is lost in a haze, as “other points” that “detached themselves, swimming in a golden mist, projecting blue shadows far before them,” like Caspar David Freidrich’s “Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog” of a different hue. Were it to stop here, this landscape would stay with the Romantic landscape tradition of the sublime, invoking the feeling of immensity but not doing anything particularly new.[[74]](#footnote-97)

But this second landscape pushes further, as literary extrapolation takes it beyond the frame of the visual—and the only reason it is able to surpass what is unimaginably vast is because the object of contemplation shifts from nature to enterprise. Though dwarfed by the immensity of the scene, Presley nevertheless “dominate[s] the entire country” from his perch on the hill. What was just sublime suddenly “seem[s] to be only foreground, a mere array of accessories—a mass of irrelevant details.” Whereas the first thing Norris does in describing Hartrath’s painting is to delineate foreground and background, in Norris’s own landscapes, these distinctions break down, creating a sublimity that results precisely from a recognition of human agency in the land. The vision goes beyond any limitations, reducing everything to “irrelevant details” in its wake: “Beyond Annixter’s, beyond Guadalajara, beyond the Lower Road, beyond Broderson Creek,” always further beyond. Individual landmarks give way to indistinct expanses of sameness as the bigger (and therefore more industrial) ranches come onto the scene: “infinite, illimitable, stretching out there under the sheen of the sunset forever and forever, flat, vast, unbroken, a huge scroll, unrolling between the horizons, spread the great stretches of the ranch of Los Muertos, bare of crops, shaved close in the recent harvest.” The operative metaphor of the “scroll” here invokes both the materiality of a landscape sketch (like “smudge”) and the image of writing, agriculture becoming in turn a kind of human signature on the land in the form of bare, shaved crops. Further, as in the first landscape, the “illimitable” distinguishes the technological sublime from the natural: through the human signature, the technology of writing breaks the visual frame that contained purely natural sublimity.[[75]](#footnote-98)

As this capitalized agency continues to expand, it does so through reproducibility—and it is this process that creates the new sublimity in tension with the natural sublime. The natural sublime is a confrontation with the whole web of interconnections of which the self is a small part, agency diminished by context. The capitalist process of standardization attempts to reduce the web of interconnections to only those that are profitable, plot by plot, and lets the process multiply. Hence the ability for “a frost on the Russian steppes” and “a hot wind on the llanos of the Argentine” to be part of the same system from the perspective of the stock ticker: the ranch mentality reduces the distinctiveness of these landscapes to a single metric, yield.[[76]](#footnote-99) As the ranches multiply in Presley’s mind, the complexity of the landscape, inversely, collapses; the Broderson Ranch and the “Osterman ranch…carr[y] on the great sweep of landscape; ranch after ranch.” The uniformity caused by monocultural production of wheat allows for the extension of the pattern even beyond the realm of vision, sublimity both contained by and containing the act of reduction:

Then, as the imagination itself expanded under the stimulus of that measureless ranch of vision, even those great ranches resolved themselves into mere foreground, mere accessories, irrelevant details. Beyond the fine line of the horizons, over the curve of the globe, the shoulder of the earth, were other ranches, equally vast, and beyond these, others, and beyond these, still others, the immensities multiplying, lengthening out vaster and vaster.

What was just “illimitable” becomes, somehow, “mere foreground,” because the purview is no longer the framed landscape, but the “measureless ranch of vision”—vision serving double-duty here as literal visual perception and “vision” in the sense of imaginative extrapolation. The ranches spread out in front of Presley, however endless they seem, matter most in what they indicate, the endlessly repeating ranches, the scale of which only becomes apprehensible when the frame is widened enough, encompasses enough, that one can see the “curve of the globe.” In other words, Norris must invoke an image of planetarity to account for the scale of wheat production, an agricultural phenomenon inextricably linked to commodities markets; but it is only in the capitalist organization of nature into Cheap Nature that the planet can be grasped at all.

As Norris’s landscape-making extends beyond Presley and assumes the perspective of those more integrated into the system of production and profit, the passages become something between a landscape and a cyborg self-portrait, depicting the expanse of land as at once beyond the viewer in every sense and an extension of self. Where before the “illimitable parallels of the wire fence” marked the human side of conquest, and were observed from afar, a similar image is repeated as Vanamee joins the line of ploughs—but now he is *part* of that illimitable line. Having been discharged as a shepherd when the railroad killed his flock, Vanamee has joined the workforce on Quien Sabe to help with the ploughing. In the buildup to the moment of *aesthetic* landscape-making, he is brought defintively into the fold of *physical* landscape-making through industrial labor. The landscape mode is initiated as he “climb[s] to his seat, shaking out his reins, and turning about, look[s] back along the line, then all around him at the landscape inundated with the brilliant glow of the early morning.” What he sees, besides the wet earth, revitalized by rain and ready for the sexualized ploughing scene, is the extent of the transformation in which he himself is involved. The ploughs “stretched in an interminable line, nearly a quarter of a mile in length, behind and ahead of Vanamee,” organized “*en echelon*.”[[77]](#footnote-100) Again there is a paradox of measurement: both limitless and a quarter-mile, as the ploughing of Quien Sabe ceases to be merely itself.

Vanamee, too, ceases to be merely himself as the landscape is interrupted by dramatic mechanized action. Just as the Derricks lose their sense of individuality and become market cyborgs, feeling the jerk of the ticker and the hot winds of Argentine plains just as naturally as the ground they stand on, Vanamee’s sensory range extends into the teeth of the ploughs as he becomes part of the wave motion: as the ploughmen receive the signal to begin, a “prolonged movement ripple[s] from team to team” and the clicks, creaks, and clashes of the industrial laborers become of a piece with the cracks, breaths, and commands of the pre-industrial, equine laborers. Here again collective becomes organism as Vanamee feels the “moist living reigns slipping and tugging in his hands” and he loses his own sense of self and humanity in the “confusion of constantly varying sensation”—the “vibrating seat” easily becomes an extension of the “quivering…prolonged thrill of the earth,” and Vanamee himself becomes numb, “enveloped…in a vague, slow-moving whirl of things.” Ultimately, “not a clod was turned, not an obstacle encountered, that he did not receive the swift impression of it through all his body.”[[78]](#footnote-101) What interrupts the landscape, in other words, is Vanamee becoming coextensive with the landscape itself by participating in its total and mechanized transformation. He becomes lost in the mechanical echelon of ploughs, but those ploughs themselves are hard to separate from the earth (and the Earth) that has been made to rely on them in its natural cycle of reproductions—the Earth that is itself, as in the eyes of Annie Derrick, a mechanized terror.

The landscape mode abruptly resumes when the line of ploughs is halted by a mechanical failure; when it does, its scope again becomes global, and with it, the extent of Vanamee’s actions. The logic is similar to the multiplying immensities of Presley’s landscape in which everything becomes mere foreground. Plots of land, individual ranches, concatenate and aggregate until they cover the globe. But there is a key difference. Building on the narration of ploughing and Vanamee’s integration into a vast assemblage of animals, industrial technology, and humans, the increase of scale is now an increase in the scale of transformative action.

At intervals, from the tops of one of the rare, low swells of the land, Vanamee overlooked a wider horizon. On the other divisions of Quien Sabe the same work was in progress. Occasionally he could see another column of ploughs in the adjoining division—sometimes so close at hand that the subdued murmur of its movements reached his ear; sometimes so distant that it resolved itself into a long, brown streak upon the grey of the ground. Farther off to the west on the Osterman ranch other columns came and went, and, once, from the crest of the highest swell on his division, Vanamee caught a distant glimpse of the Broderson ranch. There, too, moving specks indicated that the ploughing was under way. And farther away still, far off there beyond the line of the horizons, over the curve of the globe, the shoulder of the earth, he knew were other ranches, and beyond these others, and beyond these still others, the immensities multiplying to infinity.[[79]](#footnote-102)

Vanamee, a mere “speck” himself when set against the immensity of the globe, sees the rest of his operation as just more “moving specks.” Elsewhere, they fade into indistinctness as Norris again uses painterly description to indicate the failure of perception and imagination: the ploughs become simply “a long, brown streak upon the grey of the ground.” Only moments ago he was an appendage in the machine, induced sensorily into the transformative actions of the whole. Merely halting, becoming a contemplative observer, again induces sublimity, the conditions of imaginative failure and diminution, but it is now with the awareness that he is part of what made that sublimity.[[80]](#footnote-103) It is a shift that reveals the coexistence of the planetary scale of action and the failure of the imagination to conceive of the transformations it induces.

Frank Norris’s Capitalocene aesthetic does something that is of great importance to the twenty-first-century environmental movement. That is, it anticipates a fundamental question about the limits of our environmental imaginaries, posed by Dipesh Chakrabarty: “If, indeed, globalization and global warming are born of overlapping processes, the question is, How do we bring them together in our understanding of the world?” Abstracting his question away from just global warming, which defines the scope of neither the Anthropocene nor the Capitalocene, we can see in Norris’s work an aesthetic attempt to do just that, to bring together the nascence of globalization with the transformation of nature it engenders. Most provocative in Norris’s anticipatory response to this question is its simplicity. He tells us to look at the land, to look at how it got that way, and to read the realization and failures of intentions therein. But he also institutes an implicit meta-discourse on the aesthetic requirements of representing world-ecological processes by simultaneously taking up and subverting the Romantic aesthetics of natural representation that preceded him. What these earlier aesthetics lack in contrast with Norris’s is an understanding that nature is always part and product of human systems, which are themselves always part and product of nature. In other words, that nature is historical and history proceeds *through* nature. Depicting this relationship requires an attention to markets that is simultaneous with attention to the natural world, a mixture that the unfinished Epic of the Wheat is uniquely suited to pursuing.

### Conclusion: Finance and Farming in the Naturalist Canon

[Note: this is a little rough, and I will return to this when the project is done to draw some more connections and flesh out the ones below. This is a combination of hunches and mini- readings, all of which have to be confirmed.]

While *The Octopus* is unique in its direct anticipation of a Capitalocene theory and its translation of that theory into an aesthetic, much of what this discussion can be expanded to reconsider trends in the naturalist canon more broadly. To conclude, I will briefly consider a few possible lines of inquiry.

In the first place, the “metabolic rift” in Norris criticism between economic and natural-scientific studies also characterizes the genre’s criticism as a whole, and there are many more in the former camp than the latter. The reason this can be so in a genre that is still called “naturalism” is the abstraction of Darwinian evolutionary theory to economic contexts through social darwinism, and the resultant obsession (in some naturalist writers and early naturalist critics alike) with understanding cities and markets as a site for evolutionary dynamics. This in turn leads to naturalization of the market. On one hand, naturalizing the market concedes to capitalism’s inevitability in a way that forecloses utopian alternatives like Quien Sabe or, as in the next chapter, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland*. On the other hand, as discussed briefly above, naturalizing capitalism makes it difficult to see the capitalization of nature. While not all naturalist novels operate on the planetary scale required for a ’cene, there are other opportunities in canonical and non-canonical naturalist works to read naturalist settings for the co-deterministic systems that create them. If naturalist novels compulsively chart economic interactions, and economic interactions necessarily occlude the natural conditions that underlie them, there is a considerable ecocritical utility in uncovering the exploitation of nature that economic interactions imply. This is particularly true of novels or clusters of novels where detailed settings and literary landscapes coexist with complex financial operations.

There is perhaps no novel besides *The Octopus* where this is more true than in Jack London’s *Burning Daylight*.[[81]](#footnote-105) Like Norris’s Epic of the Wheat, London’s lesser-known novel moves through three regimes of value production. First, it chronicles the extractive production of value as Elam Harnish, known in the Yukon as “Burning Daylight,” claims lucrative gold strikes and comes away rich. His riches lead him to a speculative mode of value production, reminiscent of *The Pit* or Theodore Dreiser’s *The Financier*, in which he takes the instincts of a Yukon gold rusher to the markets of San Francisco. On one hand, this is a clear naturalization of the market: what he discovers about the survival of the fittest in the frozen north helps him succeed in business. But on the other hand, it leads him to a renunciation of speculative and extractive value production in favor of producing use-value. In love with Dede, a woman who recognizes and despises the ephemerality of speculative wealth, Harnish commits himself to an agricultural life that frees him from his alienation. When he discovers a gold strike on his land in a freak mudslide, he feels the call of extractive value again, but resists it, finally covering the gold back up and pretending it was never there. It is a story of speculation that yields a utopian agriculture like that of Quien Sabe, an alternative to the total system of capitalism that is more connected with the land and repairs the metabolic rift. The themes uncovered in this critique of financial “value” would be expanded in *The Valley of the Moon*’s extended exploration of sustainable agriculture, discussed in the previous chapter.

In Ellen Glasgow’s excellent and under-studied novel *Barren Ground*, scientific agriculture presents an alternative to the systems of value propogated by capitalist exchange.[[82]](#footnote-106) Though it hardly deals with finance directly, Glasgow’s novel resists the logic of short-term manipulations for bonanza gains of which finance is the ultimate extension. Its investments are instead rendered in use value and soil health. Dorinda Oakley grows up feeling trapped in a poor farming community whose farming methods *keep* them poor. They persist in these methods despite the efforts of Dorinda and Nathan Pedler to introduce experimental methods that improve the soil, such as growing clover as a cover crop and ploughing it under at the end of the season. The contrasting figure, broom-sedge, is all over the novel as a symbol of both economic and ecological poverty. It prevents growth of other crops and retakes failing fields, but it also propagates primarily in poor soils, especially those that have been over- grazed or have been the sites of mining. In other words, it thrives on areas ruined by extractive value production. Dorinda’s rise to prominence after a disastrous engagement and fiscal insecurity coincides with replacing broom-sedge—a symbol of extractive, capitalist farming like that of Magnus Derrick—with clover- improved fields that support a lucrative dairy farm. The determinism of capitalism and its natures alike are overcome by creating an alternative system.[[83]](#footnote-107)

Of course, the difficulty of a theory like the Capitalocene is that, whatever its potential for politically astute critique, it often seems to run short on alternatives like those of Dorinda, Annixter, and Burning Daylight. It is from this anti-catastrophist feeling that the “good Anthropocene” arises, a loosely bound set of theories united by the claim that it is possible to respond to the threats of the Anthropocene by embracing humanity’s guidance of nature, and that doing so could have beneficial results for human and non-human alike. And yet, good-Anthropocene alternatives have their own set of difficulties that are at once ethical, practical, and political. In the following chapter I will explore a naturalist version of the good Anthropocene, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland*. While its economic and ecological insights deserve to be taken seriously, so must its drawbacks be. Regardless of its success, it is a notable attempt to address the effects of capitalism on the planet in a way that foregrounds the utopian alternative as a means of critique.

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1. 1. On *The Octopus*, see 343-4. Cf. Freitag, “Naturalism in Its Natural Environment?.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
2. Nitta, “A Tale of Two Water Districts,” 444. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
3. Norris, *The Octopus*, 53–54. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
4. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
5. Ibid., 172. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
6. Donald Pizer’s “Synthetic Criticism and Frank Norris; Or, Mr. Marx, Mr. Taylor, and The Octopus” compares two influential readings of themes in *The Octopus*: Leo Marx’s use of the novel to confirm the trend of conflict between nature and the machine as symbols in the American consciousness, and W. F. Taylor’s theory in *The Economic Novel in America* (1942) that American novelists have a problem “not industrialism *per se*, but the workings of an industrial order administered by a *laissez-faire* capitalism.”[^2] How Pizer attempts to resolve these mainlines is indicative of the difficulty in doing so without a tool to think with like the Capitalocene. He presents a moral reading of nature in suggesting that the “moral center of the novel is…nature, and evil is the failure to understand the processes of nature or the attempt to thwart them.” But somehow, in bringing economic critique to the table, this reading of nature also reads any critique of capitalism straight out of the novel: as well as failing to comprehend the birth-death-rebirth cycle, “the ranchers and the railroad fail to realize the omnipotence and benevolence of the demand which determines the production and the distribution of wheat.”, Pizer, “Synthetic Criticism and Frank Norris; Or, Mr. Marx, Mr. Taylor, and ‘The Octopus’,” 535–6. In other words, in order to reconcile a nature-focused reading of *The Octopus* and an economic reading of it, Pizer has to not only naturalize but celebrate, almost deify, the market logics of capitalism through the “natural” laws of supply and demand. The purpose of this reconciliation, however, is to push back against the “synthetic criticism” that both authors embody in favor of a “critical eclecticism” that would allow both threads to be explored in isolation. That is largely what has happened. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
7. E.g. Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*, Jennings, “The Economy of Affect in Frank Norris’s Vandover and the Brute., Zimmerman, “Frank Norris, Market Panic, and the Mesmeric Sublime., Dorson, “Rates, Romance, and Regulated Monopoly in Frank Norris’s The Octopus.. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
8. Ach, “‘Left All Alone in This World’s Wilderness’., Formisano, “Presley’s Pauses., Lundblad, *The Birth of a Jungle*. Two of the more recent ecocritical readings, discussed in more detail below, do begin to blur these boundaries: Freitag, “Naturalism in Its Natural Environment? and Formisano, “Presley’s Pauses.. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
9. Nor are these passages limited to *The Octopus*. See Cavalier, “Mining and Rape in Frank Norris’s McTeague.. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
10. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, 126–31. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
11. Freitag, “Naturalism in Its Natural Environment?, Pizer, “Synthetic Criticism and Frank Norris; Or, Mr. Marx, Mr. Taylor, and ‘The Octopus’., 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
12. Norris, *The Octopus*, 180–1. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
13. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
14. Crisler and McElrath, *Frank Norris Remembered*, 103, @pizer\_evolutionary\_1961 553. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
15. See ibid., , Pizer, “The Concept of Nature in Frank Norris’ ‘The Octopus’., Feldman, “The Physics and Metaphysics of Caging., Jennings, “The Economy of Affect in Frank Norris’s Vandover and the Brute.. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
16. LeConte, *Elements*, 586–92, emphasis in original. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
17. Ibid., LeConte, *A Compend of Geology*, LeConte, *Elements of Geology;a Text-Book for Colleges and for the General Reader*. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
18. See Clive Hamilton and Jacques Grinevald, “Was the Anthropocene Anticipated? 60. Hamilton and Grinevald seek to downplay the significance of these precursors, for the explicit reason that they fear a “deflationary effect” on the theory of the Anthropocene.] While the Psychozoic is certainly not credible in stratigraphic terms—the “golden spikes” that constitute stratigraphic evidence would not be formed until the Great Acceleration—it is hard to understand why a theory that is explicitly termed an “Age of Man” in geologic time would not be taken as a precursor, however flawed. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
19. Berry, “The Term Psychozoic,” 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
20. Zalasiewicz et al., “Making the Case for a Formal Anthropocene Epoch,” 207, 210, 221. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
21. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
22. Ibid., 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
23. Ibid., 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
24. Ibid., 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
25. Pizer, “The Concept of Nature in Frank Norris’ ‘The Octopus’.” [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
26. Castronovo, “Geo-Aesthetics.” [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
27. Freitag, “Naturalism in Its Natural Environment?” [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
28. Formisano, “Presley’s Pauses,” 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
29. Norris, *The Octopus*, 448. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
30. Ibid., 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
31. Cf. Nail, “What Is an Assemblage?. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
32. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*, 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
33. Pizer, “Evolutionary Ethical Dualism in Frank Norris’ ’Vandover and the Brute’ and ’McTeague’.” [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
34. Norris, *The Octopus*, 634. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
35. Ibid., 13–14. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
36. Ibid., 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
37. Ibid., 639. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
38. Elsewhere, the meanings multiply. In an often quoted passage, the “FORCE,” all in capitals, comes to signify that which “brought men into the world” as well as “crowded them out of it to make way for the succeeding generation,” that which “made the wheat grow” as well as “garnered it from the soil to give place to the succeeding crop.”, ibid., 634. It is life and death, but also planting and harvest. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
39. Ibid., 652. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
40. Ibid., 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
41. Ibid., 298–9. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
42. Ibid., 320–1. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
43. Ibid., 306. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
44. Ibid., 298–9. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
45. Ibid., 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
46. Ibid., 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
47. Ibid., 30–31. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
48. Ibid., 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
49. Ibid., 505. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
50. Ibid., 500–501. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
51. Simes et al., “Black-Tailed and White-Tailed Jackrabbits in the American West,” 506–7. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
52. Norris, *The Octopus*, 499–502. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
53. Ibid., 544–5. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
54. Ibid., 549–52. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
55. Ibid., 535. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
56. Ibid., 551. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
57. Ibid., 584. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
58. Ibid., 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
59. An inventory of plants mentioned in the novel would read: oak/live-oak: 23; eucalyptus: 15; magnolia: 8; chaparral: 7; cypress: 6; manzanita: 3; poplar: 3; palm: 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
60. State Board of Forestry, *A Handbook for Eucalyptus Planters*, 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
61. London, “Jack London Papers” JLE 2639. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
62. Wolf and DiTomaso, “Management of Blue Gum Eucalyptus in California Requires Region-Specific Consideration.” [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
63. Germano et al., “The San Joaquin Desert of California., Wolf and DiTomaso, “Management of Blue Gum Eucalyptus in California Requires Region-Specific Consideration. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
64. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 80–81. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
65. Darvay, “The Naturalist Sublime in Frank Norris’s the Octopus,” 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
66. Zimmerman, “Frank Norris, Market Panic, and the Mesmeric Sublime,” 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
67. Norris, *The Octopus*, 310–1. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
68. Teague, “Frank Norris and the Visual Arts.” [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
69. Norris, *The Octopus*, 302–3. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
70. Williams, *The Country and the City*, 16–18. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
71. Norris, *The Octopus*, 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
72. Ibid., 13–14. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
73. “Smudge, N.1.” [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
74. Norris, *The Octopus*, 45–46. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
75. Ibid., 46–47. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
76. Ibid., 53–54. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
77. Ibid., 126–7. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
78. Ibid., 128–9. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
79. Ibid., 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
80. It is a peculiar inversion of Vanamee’s mysticism, one of the aspects of the novel that most annoys its critics, but now the integration into a holistic organism is part of the systems of capitalism itself rather than part of a misty vision. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
81. London, *Burning Daylight*. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
82. Glasgow, *Barren Ground*. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
83. To be fair, Dorinda’s dairy farm is hardly a complete alternative to involvement in capitalist enterprise. It only is able to support her because her high-quality products attract the attention of luxury buyers in eastern resorts. It is an almost identical setup to that which Billy and Saxon are told to adopt in *The Valley of the Moon*. If anything, these examples show the extent to which anything approaching pastoralism after enclosure requires support by wealth that, somewhere along the way, is probably extractive. Nevertheless, they *do* present an agricultural alternative, which is the extent of my claim here. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)