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## ***The Octopus* and the Other: Capitalocene Contradictions in the Symbolic Order**

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### **Abstract**

*This article exercises a Lacanian psychoanalytic intervention into ecocriticism through examining the contradictions of the Capitalocene within Frank Norris's 1901 novel, *The Octopus*. Drawing upon Jason Moore's dialectical framework in *The Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History and the Crisis of Capitalism* (2016) and Philip R. Polefrone's "The Stock Tucker in the Garden: Frank Norris, American Literary Naturalism, and Capitalocene Aesthetics" (2020), this article examines the contradictory naturalization of capitalism in nature within the novel's depiction of the wheat and railroad industries in California through the ideology of the Capitalocene. This article then analyzes the novel's pairing of Angèle's sexual assault with the industrial assault of the land. Read through a psychoanalytic framework, the assaults in the novel together illuminate how the search for the other in the novel effectively obscures the psychoanalytic understanding that "there is no big Other," or the understanding that the Capitalist symbolic order is inherently contradictory.*

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism; Capitalocene; Ideology; Psychoanalysis; Lacan

### **Introduction: *The Octopus* and its Others**

In the first book of his uncompleted Epic of the Wheat trilogy, Frank Norris introduces a narrative as sprawling as the Pacific and Southwestern (P&SW) railroad he depicts. Within *The Octopus* (Norris, 1901), this fictional railroad monopoly operates throughout the San Joaquin Valley in California "with tentacles of steel clutching into the soil," as "the soulless Force, the iron-hearted Power, the monster, the Colossus, the Octopus" (p. 51); and, as "A Story of California," the novel functions similarly with storylines unfurling as curious tentacles themselves, each grasping for meaning under "the soulless Force" of the market economy. As inspired by the historic Mussel Slough Tragedy of 1880, a violent confrontation between ranchers and law agents representing the interests of the Southern Pacific Railroad that left seven dead, *The Octopus* follows a fictional community of San Joaquin valley ranchers working within the wheat industry in their plight against the railroad company's rising shipping rates. Nearly all narrative plots are structured around the market economy in the novel: Presley, an aspiring poet, attempts to make sense of the ranchers' conflict through his work, "Song of the West"; Dyke, a former railroad engineer fired for refusing a pay cut, searches for solutions to his financial woes; and the members of the ranchers' league, including characters Magnus Derrick and Annixter, attempt to bribe state legislators and infiltrate the railroad board in order to protect their financial interests. Perhaps the most unique struggle however, both

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within the narrative plot and from a Lacanian perspective, is held by Vanamee, a wandering shepherd searching for clarity after the traumatic sexual assault and loss of his lover, Angéle. Whereas the other characters all indirectly raise questions of accountability in their plights, none come near Vanamee's direct quest to discover unknown "the Other" from the ranching valley whose assault of Angéle led to her premature death during childbirth. As Presley recalls of Vanamee early on in the first chapter, a "terrible drama [...] had uprooted his soul, which had driven him forth a wanderer, a shunner of men, a sojourner in waste places" (Norris, 1901, p. 35). Since then, Vanamee has remained fixated on the one question: "Who was the Other?" (Norris, 1901, p. 38). The answer to this question would constitute the "Answer," for which he "prayed, with what words he could not say, for what he did not understand—for help, merely, for relief, for an Answer to his cry" (Norris, 1901, p. 151). Set within a novel otherwise concerned with corporate accountability, Vanamee's search for this absent other stands out for how it foregrounds a question of embodiment; in other words, Vanamee's endless search for the other illuminates how similarly fruitless the league's search is for someone for them to hold accountable from within the railroad company. Exercising a psychoanalytic intervention into contemporary ecocritical discourse within the environmental humanities, this article examines Vanamee's search for the unknown other in the novel through the Lacanian notion of the nonexistent big Other.

### **Recentering Subjectivity: Ecocriticism's Lesson in Lacan**

In this article, I aim to attend to the theoretical exigency of our current situation amidst anthropogenic climate change. New materialist philosophies today reign supreme within the environmental humanities and share in my same intentions. In theorizing the Anthropocene, or the proposed geological epoch we now find ourselves in as defined by the predominance of human impact upon earth's geological systems, the assorted ecocritics working under the new materialist umbrella pursue horizontal ontologies that claim to reassert the importance of materiality as part of a larger project of combating environmental collapse. In thinking materiality, to include also the materiality of the human, new materialisms at large therefore endeavor to decenter the Anthropos, or human, from the Anthropocene and thereby challenge the anthropocentrism, or the centering of the human within environmental discourse. This attempt to decenter the human, however, inadvertently also collapses racial and class differences between humans, as many postcolonial and feminist theorists have already rightly argued. Even more, as anthropologist Zoe Todd writes in "An Indigenous Feminist's Take On The Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' Is Just Another Word For Colonialism" (2016), the "newness" of this materialism raises similar alarms, as the contemporary movement often obscures its theoretical basis in the longstanding history of indigenous environmental thought. As for Marxist critics like Anna Kornbluh in her essay "Extinct Critique," new materialisms together also constitute a "ruling horizontalism" that, through flattening out differential agencies in consideration of the agential capacity of all things, prove incapable of producing productive structural critique and thereby fail humanity (2020, p. 771). One might even imagine a new materialist reading of *The Octopus* wherein critical attention is paid toward the agential capacities of the wheat itself in determining the total crop harvest of the valley ranchers. In this light, it would then be the materiality of the dry natural environment that would inform the ranchers' conflict. As this hypothetical reading demonstrates, however, new materialism is here unable to offer insight into the dialectical conditions structuring the wheat industry. What I aim to accomplish in my Lacanian



materialism is instead to highlight how the agential capacity of this wheat is itself already delimited by capitalist over-cultivation in the wheat industry, meaning that capitalism occurs within an ecology as well as that ecology informs capitalism within their dialectical relation. The new materialist tendency toward horizontality in consideration of the materiality of all things, I would contend, functions to obscure this vertical capitalist structure. Consequentially, the new materialist attempt to decenter the subject has instead only forestalled the problem of human subjectivity. In its fantasy of a material network without a subject, new materialism instead reinforces the modern capitalist subject since it does little more than distract us from real material social relations in the dialectical sense. What Lacan offers to the environmental humanities is ultimately the ability to understand how the real, material condition of anthropogenic climate change is the product of a certain ideology, and for there to be ideology there must be a subject.

For this reason, Hegelo-Lacanian critics have also recently entered into the conversation, as is exemplified by Russell Sbriglia and Slavoj Žižek's collection *Subject lessons: Hegel, Lacan, and the future of materialism* (2020). As Sbriglia and Žižek contend in their introduction, while new materialists seek to counter the cultural turn through turning toward material reality itself, "the materialisms and realisms that Bennett and Bryant advocate alongside Coole, Frost, and Harman [...] nonetheless not only share in but also *advance* the cultural materialist project of placing the subject under erasure" (2020, p. 7). Worse yet for Sbriglia and Žižek, new materialisms also fail to understand how subjectivity undermines itself already. In other words, there is no need to decenter subjectivity when, as Freud articulates it, "the ego is not the master in its own house" (1955, p. 143). Countering the new materialist position on anthropocentrism, Sbriglia and Žižek therefore insist on the "necessity of continuing to "think subject" for any robust materialism or realism going forward, the subject that we would continue to think is not the (consciously) thinking subject, but the subject thought by the unconscious" (2020, p. 8). Following this Lacanian logic, any attempt to consciously think material reality must also contend with how this reality is constructed by the unconscious. As Sbriglia and Žižek articulate it, we cannot grasp things in themselves independent of our own subjectivity "since the reality we reach in this way is, as Lacan pointed out, always based on a fantasy which covers up the cut of the Real" (2020, p. 16). The Lacanian position therefore follows that materialism needs to think through subjectivity in order to grasp material reality precisely because the subject is always already present within the construction of reality, as is echoed by psychoanalytic thinkers Joan Copjec in her call for an object a ontology and Alenka Zupančič for an object-disoriented ontology. In the article that follows, I join into this Lacanian incision into the environmental humanities through taking seriously one of the social ways in which fantasy covers up the cut of the Real: ideology.

Why then exercise this intervention through a book from the very beginning of the twentieth century? I turn toward *The Octopus* not only for its eerily contemporary subject matter in raising the question of corporate accountability but also for how the novel explores the shifting relationships individual subjects take on in relation to capitalist ideology as they encounter its contradictions. These contradictions in capitalism have long been noted in scholarship on the novel, including by Daniel J. Mrozowski in "How To Kill a Corporation: Frank Norris's *The Octopus* and *The Embodiment of American Business*" (2011) on the paradox of corporate personhood and James Dorson in "Rates, Romance, and Regulated Monopoly in Frank Norris's *The Octopus*" (2017) on the contradictory theory of the natural monopoly. Even more,

Phillip R. Polefrone expands upon the importance of these contradictions in his recent work “The Stock Ticker in the Garden: Frank Norris, American Literary Naturalism, and Capitalocene Aesthetics” (2020) through identifying contradiction as a constitutive element of what he deems Capitalocene aesthetics. Formulated in response to the Anthropocene, the Capitalocene instead is defined by the predominance of the capitalist system’s impact upon the Earth as the primary cause of anthropogenic climate change. More specifically, in his book *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (2015), ecocritic Jason Moore begins to articulate this framework for addressing contradiction as an attempt at overcoming Cartesian dualism in the Anthropocene. For Moore, “Green Thought”, or what he identifies as the ecocritical movement to think humans and nature together, has importantly succeeded in illuminating the ways in which nature impacts humans as much as humans impact nature; however, for Moore, this critique of Cartesian dualism’s simple nature-culture binary fails to successfully break from Cartesian logic in how it still employs its binary conceptual framework. To “move beyond the environment as object,” Moore instead proposes a new ecocritical methodology that shifts analysis from “the interaction of independent units— Nature and Society—to the dialectics of humans in the web of life” (2015, p. 45). Taking up his own call to think humanity-in-nature *and* nature-in-humanity, Moore then builds upon this in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (2016). Here, his proposed Capitalocene marks an attempt to conceptualize world-ecology beyond the Anthropocene’s frameworks of dualism and instead engage with a “world-ecology, joining power, nature, and accumulation in a dialectical and unstable unity” (Moore, 2016, p. 4). Capitalism is here conceived not just as an economic system of accumulation but instead also as a “way of organizing nature—as a multispecies, situated, capitalist world-ecology” (Moore, 2016, p. 6). Within this dialectical framework, capitalism itself then becomes paradoxically naturalized. This article therefore invests itself in Moore’s framework of the Capitalocene not only for the ethical reason of identifying capitalism as a system of differential power as responsible for anthropogenic climate change that affects people differentially but also for the way it lends itself to thinking contradiction dialectically. Even more, the novel addresses capitalism as a structure, rather than as the result of individual capitalists, and chronicles how its individual characters struggle to reckon with this system through confronting individual capitalists. *The Octopus* and the Capitalocene therefore here prove mutually-illuminative.

In my own Lacanian materialist approach, I more specifically attend to the capitalist ideology covering over the contradictions of the Capitalocene within the novel. Following in Žižek’s conception of ideology as a fantasy of noncontradiction, I also adopt his same Hegelo-Lacanian approach toward embracing contradiction. As Todd McGowan articulates in his essay “Objects after Subjects: Hegel’s Broken Ontology” (2020) in *Subject Lessons*, “According to Hegel, the contradiction doesn’t mark reason’s failure but its success. The moment at which reason runs into contradiction indicates a contradiction in being itself that reason grasps through its own contradiction” (2020, p. 72). In other words, encountering contradictions within the fantasy of capitalism’s noncontradiction is how we encounter the cut within reality itself, or the cut of the Real. In analyzing the novel’s exploration of capitalist ideology, I will focus in on the capitalist symbolic order as the big Other. Equated with both language and the law, the Lacanian big Other constitutes the register of the symbolic order within psychoanalysis as well as it marks a radical, unassimilable alterity. Within this register, signification always also marks its failure to signify the Real, or the register from which we are



barred as subjects upon our entrance into language, precisely because it designates that which cannot be signified. For this reason, the symbolic order relies upon a master signifier for its signifying system to function. Referring tautologically inwards toward itself rather than pointing outwards toward other signifiers, a master-signifier refers to a sign without a signified in the Real and is therefore itself empty of meaning. Despite this, master signifiers organize meaning within the symbolic order through relying upon what Lacan calls the “point de capiton,” or the quilting point that halts the slippage of meaning. Nazi Germany, for example, served as a master signifier through its reliance upon the excluded figure of the Jew to quilt its meaning. Whereas Nazi Germany is itself devoid of meaning—Nazi Germany means Nazi Germany—the Jew provides a quilting point that enables meaning to retroactively stabilize for Nazi Germany. The quilting point can here be understood to stitch up the holes or the constitutive lack in the big Other by allowing the symbolic order to make meaning. In his work *Žižek and theology* (2008), Adam Kotsko summarizes Žižek’s instructive analysis of how money here functions similarly within the capitalist symbolic order:

“Money refers to value as such, and all other commodities are thought of in terms of how much money one can get for them. That is, money as a commodity becomes self-referential -- money is worth (signifies) money, instead of being worth X number of commodities -- and all other commodities are worth (signify) money.” (Kotsko, 2008, p. 30)

At the level of meaning, the capitalist symbolic order is then already inherently contradictory in how it requires this tautology to quilt its meaning. For this reason, the Lacanian creed “the big Other does not exist” refers to how there is no symbolic order beyond contradiction.

In reading *The Octopus*, this psychoanalytic insight is also useful in how it insists upon structural critique; not only is there no one embodied other to hold accountable within the capitalist system, there is also no big Other to hold together the contradictions of the capitalist symbolic order altogether. Even more, as Polefrone argues, the same chapter surrounding Vanamee’s search for an Answer to understand this trauma equally raises the question of “the industrial rape of the natural” and the contradictions birthed by the Capitalocene (2020, p. 493). Building upon Polefrone’s understanding the novel as Capitalocene fiction, a Lacanian psychoanalytic approach further enables a reading of the shared struggles together to locate the Others—respectively the unknown other to Vanamee and the Lacanian notion of the big Other to the capitalist symbolic order—in relation to the twin assaults. Though Vanamee’s capitalized “Other” nicely reflects the psychic investment in the big Other, I will differentiate between the two respectively as the unknown other and the psychoanalytic big Other throughout the rest of this paper for the sake of clarity. Read together in this way, the assaults in the novel illuminate how the search for the other effectively obscures the psychoanalytic understanding that there is no big Other, or that the understanding that the capitalist symbolic order is inherently contradictory. Through modeling a Lacanian approach to the environmental humanities, this article reframes the Capitalocene also as an ideological problem that can only be addressed through thinking subjectivity.

### **Ideology in *The Octopus*: Confronting Contradictions in the Capitalocene**

To begin where the novel does, the capitalist marketplace serves as the big Other in and as the symbolic order of the text through which all understandings are mediated. As Presley bikes through the barren and dusty landscape, where there “had not been much a crop to haul

that year” due to over-cultivation of the monoculture by the wheat industry, he is confronted with this organizing presence (Norris, 1901, p. 4). On an “all but finished” sign he passes by, an advertisement reads “S. Behrman Has Something To Say To *You*” (Norris, 1901, p. 50). Behrman’s advertisement, introducing him as the predominant capitalist figure in the text, stands in here for the capitalist marketplace as big Other; and, as a contradictory framework, its representation need not be finished because it can never be complete. Instead, the contradictions within the capitalist symbolic order are elided through money as a quilting point. As the advertisement also suggests in its direct address to the “you” reading it, this contradictory symbolic order nevertheless mediates subjectivity. For the ranchers, this ideological force is most apparent in discussion of the wheat industry and their relationships as subjects constituted by it. As Polefrone explains, this “force of the Wheat comes to contain the entire system of relations that produce it” and is best symbolized through the stock ticker on Los Muertos ranch (2020, p. 496):

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. [...] 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. (Norris, 1901, pp. 53–54)

In no longer feeling their individuality, the ranchers here experience something like Freud’s notion of oceanic feeling, or an illusory feeling of wholeness experienced by the subject with the world; however, for Freud, this feeling, if it exists at all, exists only in the primitive-ego feeling of infancy (2010, p. 11). That is to say, the oceanic feeling of wholeness does not exist for subjects in the same way that a symbolic order of wholeness beyond contradiction does not exist. Despite this, the novel’s exposition here betrays the ranchers’ ideological investment in the capitalist marketplace.

As the plot against the railroad company progresses, the question of contradiction in the capitalist symbolic order is first raised within the text through the question of accountability. As Daniel J. Mrozowski argues in “How To Kill a Corporation: Frank Norris’s *The Octopus* and *The Embodiment of American Business*” (2011), this question of embodied accountability—or, as Mrozowski poses it in reference to *The Grapes of Wrath*, the question of “who to shoot”—was central also to real ranchers at the end of the nineteenth century. Though Norris drew his inspiration for the novel’s climactic shoot-out scene between ranchers and railroad representatives primarily from the historic Mussel Slough Tragedy of 1880, Mrozowski contextualizes the novel further within corporate history: “Though no one individual decision or jurist can be said to have authored the personhood of the corporation,” Mrozowski explains, “the 1886 case of *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad* has traditionally been cited as a turning point in the conception of the corporation” (2011, p. 163). In its ruling, the railroad corporation effectively “became an economic being independent from its individual members” (Mrozowski, 2011, p. 164). It is this paradoxical nature of



corporate personhood that constitutes the symbolic order Norris captures in his novel. As a banker, real estate agent, and political boss, Behrman also works for the railroads, and he therefore comes closest to embodying the cruelty of the P&SW corporation to the ranchers in the novel. Remarking also upon Behrman's advertisement, Mrozowski compares the passing reference to Behrman's sign, signaling his work with the railroad, to the novel's drawn out metaphors for the railroad itself as "the leviathan . . . the soulless Force, the iron-hearted Power, the monster, the Colossus, the Octopus" (Norris, 1901, p. 51). "Overloaded and obscured by registers of mythic and monstrous power," the train is for Mrozowski "emblematic not only of the vast physical violence of the novel, but also of the current of symbolic confusions running through it" (2011, p. 169). Even more, he argues that this unequal attention "suggests the various confusions caused by the absence of a clear legitimate public persona for the corporation" (Mrozowski, 2011, p. 169). Later on, when the ranchers do attempt to hold Behrman accountable for the corporation's cruelty, the novel veers its closest toward satire. Most dramatically, near the novel's close, Presley even throws a bomb into Behrman's home that miraculously leaves Behrman unharmed. *The Octopus* here all but laughs at the ranchers' struggle for accountability from the slippery paradox of unembodied corporate personhood. Rather than through Dyke or Presley's violent actions, it is instead the wheat itself that eventually defeats Behrman through suffocating him when he falls into its piles; however, even without him, the force of the wheat industry continues on. For this reason, this raised question of accountability remains looming throughout the length of the novel, thereby revealing its understanding of contradiction.

Within *The Octopus*, the Capitalocene paradox is evidenced also throughout the depiction of industries' naturalization, or how the corporate structures come to be accepted as natural within the capitalist world-ecology. This is immediately apparent within the subject-matter in how both the railroad and wheat industries are equally naturalized despite their respective artificialities as a corporate monopoly defying the natural market laws of supply and demand and as a nonnative industrial monoculture poorly faring in the over-cultivated landscape. Regarding the railroad monopoly by P&SW, Walter Benn Michaels argues in his oft-cited work *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (1987) that "the law of supply and demand is the law that sets rates in a free market, but the railroad, as a monopoly, doesn't operate in a free market. [...] The whole point of monopolies, like the railroad (what makes them 'monstrous'), is that they transcend the mechanical laws of the market" (p. 209). In his essay "Rates, Romance, and Regulated Monopoly in Frank Norris's *The Octopus*," James Dorson (2017) clarifies this point further that this is "the market paradox involved in the theory of natural monopoly" (p. 54). Emerging naturally through competition in the marketplace, monopolies subsequently eradicate market competition and thereby result in market failure. Regarding this failure, the marketplace must then paradoxically regulate competition to safeguard "the regulatory function of competition" (Dorson, 2017, p. 54). Whereas Dorson ultimately regards the novel's embrace of contradictions as "regulatory fiction committed to saving capitalism from itself," Polefrone instead argues that this is how the text successfully anticipates the Capitalocene in both understanding and aesthetics (2017, p. 54).

Articulating this aesthetics further as one of "contradiction in individual and collective agency," Polefrone locates this tension in *The Octopus* through the naturalization of the wheat industry (2020, p. 485). Regarding American literary naturalism more broadly, Polefrone

complicates common understandings of the genre in its depictions of agency. Traditionally, the genre has been characterized by its emphasis on “determinism, in which overwhelming environmental conditions are understood to unidirectionally (if still complexly) shape human nature and consciousness” (Polefrone, 2020, p. 487). For this reason, naturalism is largely thought to maintain its focus on the human, meaning that “the only “nature” that concerns naturalism [...] is “human nature”” (Polefrone, 2020, p. 488). Countering this, Polefrone instead points toward Norris and other authors’ depictions of “humanized nature” to understand what he argues is “the countercurrent in the period’s environmental thinking in which humanity’s planetary agency was beginning to be recognized” (2020, p. 489). For Polefrone, this latent understanding of Capitalocene contradictions manifests within the novel in the strange sublime of individual laborers engaging with the natural Californian landscapes ravaged by the wheat industry they labor within, as with Presley looking out over the expanse of farmland: “As from a pinnacle, Presley, from where he now stood, dominated the entire country. The sun had begun to set, everything in the range of his vision was overlaid with a sheen of gold” (Norris, 1901, p. 45). From this vista, Presley looks across all the ranches in the San Joaquin Valley: Los Muertos, the Broderson ranch, the Osterman ranch, and so on. “Then, as the imagination itself expanded under the stimulus of that measureless range of vision, even those great ranches resolved themselves into mere foreground, mere accessories, irrelevant details” (Norris, 1901, p. 46). This reveals another of the Capitalocene’s paradox: “individuals are insignificant in the fate of this collective force and yet through it experience a seemingly limitless extension of agency over the natural world—an extension that arises and becomes sensible, in Norris’s hands, through the structures of capitalism” (Polefrone, 2020, p. 486). Though Polefrone is correct in arguing that these contradictions in the Capitalocene illuminate the problems of differential agency and therefore also of differential culpability, this revelation occurs here only on the larger level of the novel for readers. For Presley as a specific character, he here has yet to confront the contradictions of the marketplace as symbolic order precisely because he has yet to experience his own insignificance relative to the railroad industry. Instead, as his subjectivity is here constituted by the capitalist symbolic order at the novel’s outset, this experience reaffirms his own ideological investment in the wheat industry as “the nourisher of nations, the feeder of an entire world” (Norris, 1901, p. 47). Identifying with the big Other, Presley experiences a “sudden uplift, a sense of exhilaration, of physical exaltation” as he “seemed to dominate a universe, a whole order of things” (Norris, 1901, p. 47). Though the novel characterizes him here as “drunk with the intoxication of mere immensity,” a more apt description might be that Presley is here experiencing the illusory wholeness of capitalist ideology (Norris, 1901, p. 47).

Moreover, the wheat industry is here importantly naturalized through the metaphor of sexual assault. Polefrone draws attention to this metaphor in his reading of Capitalocene aesthetics through Norris’s naturalism depicting “capitalism and nature in ways that show their increasing inseparability and the birth of a planetary force defined by their combination” (2020, p. 492). Following Moore’s framework, the Capitalocene here highlights the dialectical relationship of humanity-in-nature and nature-in-humanity. Even more, Polefrone argues, this is where “the industrial rape of the natural produces an assemblage of the human and the natural [in the novel] that is at once of the earth *and* a threat to it” (2020, p. 493). That is to say, within the contradictory framework of the Capitalocene, industrial capitalism is here refigured as natural. The narrative of this assault is as follows:





It was the long stroking caress, vigorous, male, powerful, for which the Earth seemed panting. The heroic embrace of a multitude of iron hands, gripping deep into the brown, warm flesh of the land that quivered responsive and passionate under this rude advance, so robust as to be almost an assault, so violent as to be veritably brutal. There, under the sun and under the speckles sheen of the sky, the wooing of the Titan began, the vast primal passion, the two-world forces, the elemental Male and Female, locked in a colossal embrace, at grapples in the throes of an infinite desire, at once terrible and divine, knowing no law, untamed, savage, natural, sublime. (Norris, 1901, pp. 130-31)

In emphasizing the “two-world forces” of industry and nature, gendered here respectively as “the elemental Male and Female,” this sexual assault progresses in its logic from the additive Green Thought arithmetic of Cartesian dualism to the dangerously dialectical sublime, “terrible and divine,” of capitalist world-ecology in “infinite desire.” Directly following this, the narrative pivots toward Vanamee’s own suspended state of infinite desire following Angéle’s sexual assault and subsequent death during child birth. In providing these paralleled assaults within the same chapter, *The Octopus* suggests a paralleled meaning as well as it raises a series of questions: how do we read Angéle’s assault alongside the industrial assault of the land? What is the relationship between the unknown other and the big Other of the capitalist symbolic order? And how does this pairing engage with the novel’s larger question of accountability?

### **The other and the Other: Questions of Accountability**

To the first of these questions, many scholars have taken up Angéle’s assault as a mystery to be solved. Beginning first with the essay “The Rapist in Frank Norris’s *The Octopus*” (1971), Stuart L. Burns here makes the case that Father Sarria, the priest at the old Franciscan Mission, is the unknown other within the novel. To support this claim, Burns draws upon several pieces of circumstantial evidence in the narrative, including Vanamee’s claim that the other must have been familiar with his and Angéle’s meeting schedule as well as the information that Father Sarria regularly visited the bench during the day that the two lovers would frequent at night. Even more, after the assault, “The whole country rose, raging, horror-struck. Posse after posse was formed, sent out, and returned, without so much as a clue. Upon no one could even the shadow of suspicion be thrown. The Other had withdrawn into an impenetrable mystery. There he remained” (Norris, 1901, p. 38). For Burns, this continued mystery “supports the contention that the rapist escaped detection in the same way Poe’s Minister D— hid the purloined letter: merely by continuing in a role so conspicuous as to be above suspicion” (1971, p. 567). In his essay “The Genesis of the Rapist in *The Octopus*” (1982), John Jolly pushes this logic even further by countering, “What role could be more conspicuous, yet less subject to suspicion, than that of the lover prostrated by grief?” (p. 202) Jolly’s argument directs attention back toward the initial assault: “One moonless night, Angéle, arriving under the black shadow of the pear trees a little earlier than usual, found the apparently familiar figure waiting for her. All unsuspecting, she gave herself to the embrace of a strange pair of arms” (Norris, 1901, p. 38). For Jolly, Angéle is here unsuspecting of the apparently familiar figure precisely because she was familiar with Vanamee. Even more, he argues, Vanamee “unwittingly acknowledges his role as “the Other” when he views himself as “another person”” (Jolly, 1982, p. 209). Later on, Vanamee’s supernatural experiences in the garden can then be understood as his attempts at “reliving that night in an attempt to rectify it”; and,

after symbolically effacing this assault, Vanamee “resumes life with Angéle” (Jolly, 1982, p. 210). Lastly, in “Sympathy’s Sliding Scale: Individuals and Large Forces in Frank Norris’s *The Octopus*” (2018), Ashley Gangi argues that the novel’s shifting scale on both the spatial and narrative level serves as the “overarching moral principle, reconciling the inconsistencies of the ending by suggesting that moral truth is a question of perspective” and “these inconsistencies encourage readers to confront both the limitations and power of the individual’s perspective” (p. 131). Regarding Vanamee’s search for the other, Gangi importantly reads Vanamee’s quest as one for understanding rather than for solving Angéle’s death. Pointing toward Father Sarria’s religious insight on perspective, Gangi quotes his message to Vanamee:

Your grain of wheat is your symbol of immortality. You bury it in the earth. It dies, and rises again a thousand times more beautiful. Vanamee, your dear girl was only a grain of humanity that we have buried here, and the end is not yet. But all this is so old, so old. The world learned it a thousand years ago, and yet each man that has ever stood by the open grave of anyone he loved must learn it all over again from the beginning. (Norris, 1901, pp. 144-45)

Within Gangi’s reading on the sliding scale of sympathy, Vanamee is only able to understand this larger perspective about the “cyclical pattern of growth and decay associated with the seasonal rhythm of crops” once Angéle’s is restored to him through the figure of his daughter (Gangi, 2018, p. 141). Furthermore, for Gangi, inconsistencies within the text can then be understood as “descriptions of the balancing act individuals attempt to strike between their narrow perspectives and a larger understanding” (2018, p. 148). To this, a Lacanian psychoanalytic reading would instead counter that the novel’s inconsistencies instead reveal inconsistencies within the symbolic order itself. As subjectivity is mediated by the symbolic order, the subject internalizes this dynamic as if it was an individual struggle. Even more, beyond the individual constitutively lacking subject, all other subjects are equally lacking, and no perspectival shift could overcome the existent gaps within the symbolic order or within subjectivity itself. For this reason, the question surrounding the other has never been a puzzle for scholars to solve; instead, this unknowability suffices as its own answer within a psychoanalytic framework.

To return now to Vanamee’s suspended state following the sexual assault of the land, we are confronted, among other things, with his deadlock of his desire. After his work as a shepherd in the ranching valley is done for the day, Vanamee ruminates upon his lost love: “the mingling of their lives was to be the Perfect Life, the intended, ordained union of the soul of man with the soul of woman, indissoluble, harmonious as music, beautiful beyond all thought, a foretaste of Heaven, a hostage of immortality” (Norris, 1901, p. 134). In this vision of his life with Angéle, Vanamee imagines a union of wholeness through a love transcending lack, in himself and in Angéle. In this way, Vanamee positions his lost love as the *objet petit a*, or the object-cause of his desire. Within psychoanalysis, this paradoxical object emerges in being-lost as a positive negativity, thereby embodying lack. As an impossible object, it thereby stands in for an ontological completeness the constitutively lacking subject can never obtain, and its emergence thereby occurs only through the retroactive production of the illusion of former wholeness, as in the vision of ontological completeness figured by the infant with the maternal body. While visiting the Mission garden where he and Angéle had met, Vanamee’s love emerges as this being-lost as a lived recollection: “his love for Angéle rose again in his heart,



it seemed to him never so deep, so tender, so infinitely strong” (Norris, 1901, p. 149). This objet petit a of his lost love then informs his object of desire in discovering the identity of the unknown other who sexually assaulted Angéle. After being away for years, this desire drives him to seek out Father Sarria at the Mission. Immediately, Vanamee asks him: “I have been away a long time, and I have had no news of this place since I left. Is there anything to tell, Father? Has any discovery been made, any suspicion developed, as to—the Other?”; and, in response, Father Sarria answers no: “Not a word, not a whisper. It is a mystery. It always will be” (Norris, 1901, p. 145). Despite this, it is still this search for meaning that drives Vanamee forward. “It was upon that, at length, that his disordered mind concentrated itself, an Answer—he demanded, he implored an Answer. Not a vague visitation of Grace, not a formless sense of Peace; but an Answer, something real, even if the reality were fancied” (Norris, 1901, p. 151). For Vanamee, however, actually obtaining the object of desire in learning the identity of the other would do little to comfort him; instead, Vanamee would be confronted with the reality of his desire’s basis in lack. Actually obtaining the object of his desire would mean risking awareness of the object-cause of his desire as a central void. In how *The Octopus* pairs the two assaults of the earth and of Angéle in Vanamee’s chapter, a similar pairing might also be found here in Vanamee’s search for the other and the novel’s cast of characters’ search for meaning as well as accountability with and within the capitalist marketplace as the big Other. Just as the question of the other remains unresolved in the novel, the problem of contradiction within the symbolic order remains unresolvable; and, ultimately, it is the search for the other for the purpose of embodied accountability that perfectly obscures this psychoanalytic understanding that there is no big Other to hold accountable.

Betraying an understanding of how money stabilizes meaning within the symbolic order through meaning money, the continued search in the novel for an embodied other of corporate personhood to hold accountable for the contradictory cruelty of the capitalist marketplace as the big Other is then also a search for stability. More specifically, Vanamee’s search for the unknown other within the novel later informs Presley’s search for the big Other in his confrontation with Shelgrim, the president and owner of the P&SW railroad company. Through a psychoanalytic reading of the Capitalocene, Presley’s attempt at stabilizing meaning here can be understood as an attempt at locating a quilting point within the capitalist system’s implication of all those involved within it. That is to say, Presley searches for an embodied other within the unembodied big Other to halt the slippage of implication within the Capitalocene and to provide a final answer to the novel’s enduring question of accountability. These contradictions of the Capitalocene, however, cannot be elided through locating a quilting point metonymically in a single capitalist figure to blame. To Presley’s accusation that he is indeed a “grand old rascal,” Shelgrim pushes back:

You are dealing with forces, young man, when you speak of Wheat and the Railroads, not with men. There is the Wheat, the supply. It must be carried to feed the People. There is the demand. The Wheat is one force, the Railroad, another, and there is the law that governs them—supply and demand. Men have only little to do in the whole business. [...] If you want to fasten the blame of the affair at Los Muertos on any one person, you will make a mistake. (Norris, 1901, pp. 575-76)

In this way, Shelgrim as the master relative to the railroad rejects Presley’s attempt at identifying him as a quilting point through the master-signifier of capitalism to halt the

question of accountability within the capitalist symbolic order. As Mrozowski insightfully concludes, this “confrontation in corporate headquarters is staged not for the answers it might provide but rather for the symbolic revelation of the profound vacancies Norris suggests are at the center of the corporate form” (2011, p. 177). Presley, in response, falters as Shelgrim insists that he “can *not* control it. It is a force born out of certain conditions, and I—no man—can stop or control it” (Norris, 1901, p. 576). In this way, Shelgrim betrays an understanding of the contradiction of agency within the Capitalocene. Rather than embracing these contradictions, as the psychoanalytic position would demand, Shelgrim instead defers to his ideological vision of wholeness through the force of the marketplace. Being confronted with these two paths forward—embracing contradiction or returning to the ideological illusion of noncontradiction—Presley also recedes, reflecting: “Forces, conditions, laws of supply and demand—were these then the enemies, after all? Not enemies; there was no malevolence in Nature. [...] Nature was, then, a then, a gigantic engine, a vast cyclopean power, huge, terrible, a leviathan with a heart of steel” (Norris, 1901, p. 577). In this way, the Capitalocene naturalizes itself as well as it forestalls any reckoning with its central contradictions. The final lines of the novel endorsing a “larger view” are then endorsements of capitalist ideology, a return to the illusion of non-contradiction: “The larger view always and through all shams, all wickedness, discovers the Truth that will, in the end, prevail, and all things, surely, inevitably, resistlessly work together for good” (Norris, 1901, p. 652). *The Octopus*, in its final embrace of “the WHEAT [that] remained,” therefore both undermines and exceeds itself as a capitalist ideological project through drawing attention towards the central lack in the capitalist symbolic order. In this same manner, the novel thereby also underscores the importance of a psychoanalytic approach toward understanding the big Other of the Capitalocene. In other words, Lacanian psychoanalysis is essential to our shared ecocritical project in how it provides us with the tools needed to unstitch the ideological quilting points of the Capitalocene.

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