

## “There Is No There, There”: The Spiritual Magnetism

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In an early essay, published on May 22, 1897, and written while Frank Norris was still an “associate editor,” according to its masthead, for the San Francisco *Wave*, a slick-paper weekly which his good friend John O’Hara Cosgrave had been industriously editing for seven years “for those in the swim”—socially, intellectually, politically, and literarily—in San Francisco, Norris observes that “certain cities in the world . . . are adaptable to the uses of fiction, and . . . others . . . are not. Things can happen in some cities and the tale of them will be interesting; the same story laid in another city would be ridiculous” (“Opening” 7). While chiefly trumpeting the literary possibilities of his adopted native city—he sub-titled this essay “Great Opportunities for Fiction-Writers in San Francisco”—Norris indicates that other American cities had previously enticed writers searching for suitable material to set their fiction in, or, better yet, tell the stories of them: “New Orleans [had] her Cable, New York her Davis, Boston her Howells”; regrettably, Norris laments, “San Francisco still waits for her novelist” (7). A few months later, Norris echoes this regret in a short story, “The House with the Blinds,” also published in *The Wave*, on August 21, 1897, when he states categorically that “there are just three big cities in the United States that are ‘story cities’—New York, of course, New Or-

leans, and best of the lot, San Francisco,” charting in the next paragraph both his awestruck fascination for the mysterious city and all that it harbors and the incipient disquiet it provokes for him:

Here . . . you shall see life uncloaked and bare of convention—the raw, naked thing, that perplexes and fascinates—life that involves death of the sudden and swift variety, the jar and shock of unleashed passions, the friction of men foregathered from every ocean, and you may touch upon the edge of mysteries for which there is no explanation—little eddies on the surface of unsounded depths, sudden outflashings of the inexplicable—troublesome, disquieting, and a little fearful. (5)

Similarly, in “An Opening for Novelists” four months earlier, he had foreshadowed the city’s endless attraction:

Where is the man who shall get at the heart of us, the blood and bones and fiber of us, who shall go a-gunning for stories up and down our streets and into our houses and parlors and lodging houses and saloons and dives and along our wharves and into our theaters; yes, and into the secretest chambers of our homes as well as our hearts? (5)

In retrospect, one realizes that Norris, even as he wrote these pieces, was answering the plaintive query, “Who shall be our Kipling,” which concludes the earlier *Wave* essay (7). Already, he had probably completed the first of his own novels to take place in San Francisco, *Vandover and the Brute*, written for the most part in the fall of 1894 during a course in creative writing Norris took at Harvard, but not published until two decades later in 1914, long after the author’s untimely death; nearing completion was *McTeague* (1899), one of America’s most influential novels, a work which, according to William Dean Howells, “scarcely ever leaves the shabby San Francisco street” where *McTeague* lives (637); Norris’s first published novel, *Moran of the Lady Letty* (1898), which opens at a “coming out” afternoon tea in San Francisco’s

haute society (9), would begin serialization in January 1898, just a few short months away; finally, *Blix* (1899), his third published novel, an idyll of an afternoon, champions the city more overtly than does any of his other works, as Norris follows the romantically inclined Condy and his more pragmatic friend Travis, or Blix, who also happens to be “a corking fine girl” (42), to the city’s waterfront, its exotic Chinatown, its charming Mexican “Quarter,” its quaint Presidio, its startling shore, its harbor islands, as well as many of its other haunts, precisely, in fact, the very sites Norris recommends to would-be authors in “An Opening for Novelists”—

Kearny street, Montgomery street, Nob Hill, Telegraph Hill, of course Chinatown, Lone Mountain . . . the Barbary Coast . . . the Mission, the Bay . . . the Presidio, Spanish town, Fisherman’s wharf.

There is an indefinable air about all these places that is suggestive of stories at once. You fancy the names would look well on a book’s page. The people who frequent them could walk right into a novel or short story and be at home (7),

as indeed Zerkow, the Polish Jew, and Maria Miranda Macapa, the half-demented Mexican “maid of all work,” do on Polk Street in *McTeague* (21), or Jack Hoskins, the retired sea captain, and K. D. B., the wife Condy and Blix secretly manufacture for him, do at their light-boat station in San Francisco Bay. Norris in his novels, then, suits his literary output to his earlier authorial complaints that San Francisco had no writer doing her fair environs justice, for after reading the paeans to the city which suffuse the pages of even a book like *McTeague*, significantly sub-titled “A Story of San Francisco,” no longer can one realistically bemoan the absence of a writer who would “grip . . . hold upon and impress . . . this life” of San Francisco “between the covers of works of fiction” (“Opening” 7), for surely Norris himself is that writer. In his hands San Francisco even entices a character with the limited imagination of the bumbling *McTeague*: the city’s streets

never failed to interest him. . . . There were corner drug stores with huge jars of red, yellow, and green liquids in their windows, very brave and gay; stationers' stores, where illustrated weeklies were tacked upon bulletin boards; barber shop with cigar stands in their vestibules; sad-looking plumbers' offices; cheap restaurants, in whose windows one saw piles of unopened oysters weighted down by cubes of ice, and china pigs and cows knee deep in layers of white beans . . . the huge power-house of the cable line . . . a great market. . . . [F]arther on, over the chimney stacks . . . the glass roof of some huge public baths glittered like crystal in the afternoon sun. (5)

Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., comments that “[o]ne knows *The Wave* via Frank Norris; and one knows Norris principally via *The Wave*” (*Frank* 1); perhaps one could as accurately characterize Norris’s association with San Francisco, for assuredly one “knows” the city well from reading any of Norris’s novels set therein, and, after reading them, one will forever “know” Norris as a San Francisco writer.

But Norris would go on to write three other novels—*A Man’s Woman* (1900), *The Octopus* (1901), and *The Pit* (1903)—after departing his beloved California to relocate in New York, none of which, significantly, occurs primarily in San Francisco, although some key scenes in *The Octopus* are set there; furthermore, at his untimely death he was embarking on research for “The Wolf,” the projected third volume of his “Trilogy of the Wheat,” a work on the consumption of that grain to take place in an international locale, possibly India, and he had announced an even more ambitious, though still embryonic, plan for a second trilogy centered on the battle of Gettysburg, one novel for each day of that crucial Civil War struggle. Since San Francisco figured as neither the actual nor the proposed setting of any of these prospective works, an interesting question arises: did Norris alter his opinion regarding America’s “story cities,” or did this ever excitable author simply gear his writing to the possibilities, the “opportunities” for fictional treatment he saw in life around him, regardless of where that life occurred; that is, did his familiarity with a specific location continue to affect him spiritually, as clearly his knowledge of San

Francisco had?

Certainly, his writing pattern suggests a positive response to the latter possibility. While at Harvard in Lewis E. Gates's English 22 creative writing course commencing in the fall of 1894, Norris, recalling with nostalgia the lovely city he had left, began *Vandover* and, during the following winter, *McTeague*, submitting excerpts from each to fulfil course assignments that academic year. On November 19, 1894, for example, in a student theme, he describes Van Ness Avenue in considerable detail, its servants "washing down the front steps" of its great houses, its air redolent of "loaves of French bread and small jars of milk" in some entry ways, its cross-streets jarred by the noise of "chittering sparrows and . . . cable-cars," and its "blue vista of San Francisco Bay" visible in the distance (Hart 58), a description he later incorporates into the fourth chapter of *Vandover*, just as he would work other student themes written that academic year into both *McTeague* and *Blix*. *Yvernelle* (1892), Norris's first book, a vanity publication promoted by a dotting mother, grew out of his experiences in museums and study of medieval painting during a year spent in Paris at the famous Académie Julian as an art student, as did "Clothes of Steel," an article on armor published in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1889, and several poems and short stories, all rooted in the Middle Ages, appearing in the *Occident*, a student literary magazine at the University of California, and other Bay area periodicals. Later, as McElrath chronicles, Norris also captured the regional sights, sounds, and delights he encountered during his pastoral travels in northern California to obtain copy for his *Wave* pieces ("Beyond"). The point here is that Norris readily employed what was to hand as grist for his ever active writing mill: a visit to a "Country Club at Del Monte" translated into two short articles as felicitously as "The Uprising in the Transvaal" became one of several travel pieces based on a journalistic foray he made to South Africa in 1896. Norris took life as he found it, making both the nonfiction and the fiction it afforded him and thence his readers passionate, lively, readable; if he found no obvious subject matter, he concocted it, solidly grounding all he wrote in the setting, inextricably breathing life into it.

Did he thus abandon San Francisco as potentially the greatest "story" city? No, but he did mature as a writer. Consider *The Pit* in

this context. Where Norris had once scoffed at the idea of a novel about Chicago, a city whose “hopelessness” as a fictional setting loomed as large as places as defiantly unpicturesque as Buffalo or Nashville (“House” 5), in his last novel he embraces Chicago’s prospects. He had, after all, been born there, and, despite his later blithe disregard of this fact when in a letter, dated December 1, 1898, to Isaac F. Marcossou, a columnist and reporter in Louisville, he boldly states he “was ‘bawn ’n raise’ in California” (Crisler 57), he both remembered his boyhood to age fourteen in Chicago well and benefited from his research on the city itself during a month spent there in March 1901 en route to San Francisco for a brief vacation with his wife, as attested by the eerie description of the Chicago Board of Trade Building which closes the first chapter of *The Pit*, as startling a passage as any in Norris’s fiction delineating romantic and intriguing California:

a sombre mass, unbroken by any lights, rearing a black and formidable façade against the blur of light behind it . . . black, grave, monolithic, crouching on its foundations, like a monstrous sphinx with blind eyes, silent, grave,—crouching there without a sound, without sign of life under the night and the drifting veil of rain (41),

an image he uses deftly to illuminate Laura Dearborn’s nameless stupefaction at encountering for the first time the “drama of the ‘Provision Pits,’” which had only a little while earlier in the novel bid fair to spoil the other drama of her night at the opera by its intrusion:

Suddenly, it loomed portentous in the eye of her mind, terrible, tremendous . . . where the rush of millions of bushels of grain, and the clatter of millions of dollars, and the tramping and the wild shouting of thousands of men filled all the air with the noise of battle! Yes, here was drama in deadly earnest—drama and tragedy and death, and the jar of mortal fighting. (40)

Norris's portrait here is no less intense than his nostalgic limning of the Presidio in *Blix* ("The Reservation itself was delightful" [210]), his satirical ridicule of "pink" teas in *Moran* ("This is the story of a battle, at least one murder, and several sudden deaths. For that reason it begins with a pink tea" [1]), his acute representation of Vandover's final pitiful plight ("By this time Vandover was so tired that he trembled all over, his spine seemed to be breaking in two" [*Vandover* 343–44]), or his minute depiction of Trina's self-seduction, as she "bur[ies] her face . . . with unspeakable delight" in her "gleaming heaps of gold pieces" in *McTeague* (359).

Clearly, in exactly the ways in which Norris ties his San Francisco novels to the specific place that that city symbolizes to him after his teen, college, and young adult years devoted to sampling its always changing but ever renewing panorama, so he also anchors *The Pit* to the recollected place that Chicago had once provided his own childhood and would supply Laura as a young woman there. Clearly, as well, where early in his career Norris could not "imagine a novel of Chicago" ("Opening" 7), *The Pit* reveals that he had revised his opinion in positive terms but at no expense to San Francisco, which still remained for him a striking "story" city. Chicago is "the great grey city" which interests Laura "at every instant and under every condition" (59). Unsure of her real feeling for it—"she could not forgive its dirty streets," for example, "the unspeakable squalor of some of its poorer neighborhoods," nor "the black murk . . . of the business streets [that] oppressed her"—she yet admits to herself that the city's vibrant "life was tremendous"; a place of "impalpable dust, of cumbersome schooners . . . of grimy rowboats," Chicago "clashed and thundered from dawn to dark and from dark to dawn" (60), and that ferocious clash simultaneously stimulates Laura and furnishes a superb backdrop to the personal clash raging within her as she first must select the best mate from a disparate trio of suitors and then learn to live with her choice.

Yet Laura's new position as wife of Curtis Jadwin, one of the city's wealthiest businessmen, sits on her uneasily at best: "For very long she

found it difficult . . . with all her pleasure in her new-gained wealth, to adapt herself to a manner of living upon so vast a scale” (211–12). That fear presages her desire to flee a house which she has never thought of as her own in favor of spending restless hours riding her horse, Crusader; in turn, these rides against the solemn stage of Chicago’s chilly North Lake, forbidding Linné monument, and staid La Salle statue poignantly position her illicit meeting with Sheldon Corthell, recently back from Europe, a place Laura’s marriage had thwarted her ambition to see, forcing her instead to be content in Chicago, both a poor and a provocative substitute. Colder than San Francisco, more established in what it expected of its residents, more exacting in the payment it received from those who dwelt in it, Chicago nonetheless draws Laura in, allowing a dalliance with Corthell as San Francisco never would have.

Not that no one in San Francisco enjoyed wealth—Norris’s own family remained upper middle-class even after his parents’ divorce in mid-1894, and his audience for his *Wave* writings had money to burn—but San Francisco in Norris’s creative hands graces his pages as a kinder, gentler city than the austere lakefront metropolis. Where the former is exotic, the latter is refined; where San Francisco spawns adventures for Condy and Blix, Chicago offers Jadwin evenings at home listening to Laura read Howells and George Meredith; and where eccentrics such as Old Grannis and Miss Baker, or, for that matter, McTeague and Trina, flourish in San Francisco, Chicago prefers regularity over oddity: Hargus, the bankrupt speculator who shuffles senilely through the Board of Trade, for instance, lacks the fire with which Norris imbues singular characters such as Mr. Siette or Moran Sternerson in his western novels; though Norris casts Hargus as a near-Dickensian caricature, complete with “rusty top hat,” “faded and dirty frock coat,” “shoestring tie straggling] over . . . frayed shirt front,” and “bare, thin wrist between cloth and linen” (337), Hargus still appears more predictable than Zerkow, another Norrissean parody in *McTeague*. Even so, Norris makes Chicago, like San Francisco, into a memorable, even a captivating city, for *The Pit* proffers passages every bit as compelling as those found elsewhere in Norris’s canon.

Similarly, place also figures consequentially in *A Man's Woman*. The "immeasurably vast" Arctic waste, "a wilderness beyond all thought, words, or imagination . . . [that] stretched out . . . forever and forever—ice, ice, fields and floes of ice, laying themselves out . . . league after league, endless, sombre . . . infinitely formidable" (4–5), commands the reader's lasting attention just as relentlessly as does the "sturdy little sea-going tug" on which Lloyd Searight accompanies a dogged Ward Bennett back to sea, once again to try his hand at subduing the northlands (284). Though many aspects of this severely flawed novel are best left unremarked, Norris's description of desolate Arctic barrens is not one of them. The inescapable lure of place gives the book what life it possesses.

As for *The Octopus*, Norris's emphasis on the preeminence of place continues in it. In 1912, Arnold Bennett, a highly respected novelist on both sides of the Atlantic, praised *The Octopus* for its vigorous power, suggesting that "[i]t is almost the only novel yet produced that deals with the activities of modern American life in a manner at once large, serious and romantic" (83). Presumably, Bennett, like most contemporaneous critics and their successors, fell under the spell of Norris's sweepingly comprehensive descriptions in his longest work such as Presley's vision of Vanamee's herd of sheep thoughtlessly annihilated by a train at the close of the novel's opening chapter:

A confusion of lamentable sounds . . . rose into the night from out the engine's wake. Prolonged cries of agony, sobbing wails of infinite pain, heart-rending, pitiful. . . . The pathos of it was beyond expression. It was a slaughter, a massacre of innocents. The iron monster had charged full into the midst, merciless, inexorable. . . . [B]acks were snapped against fence posts; brains knocked out. Caught in the barbs of the wire, wedged in the bodies hung suspended. . . . The black blood, winking in the starlight, seeped down into the clinkers between the ties with a prolonged sucking murmur.

Presley turned away, horror-struck, sick at heart. (50)

Presumably, as well, such scenes also captivated Howells, who two months later challenged Bennett on almost every point save his praise of *The Octopus*, which Howells found forceful because Norris was “vital intimate with his scene and action” in California (637).

And it is California, not San Francisco, which seduces readers and critics of this novel. Norris’s rhapsodic tone-poems of El Rancho de Los Meurtos and the land surrounding it nearly beggar the imagination:

The whole gigantic sweep of the San Joaquin expanded, Titanic, before the eye of the mind, flagellated with heat, quivering and shimmering under the sun’s red eye. . . . It was the season after the harvest, and the great earth, the mother, after its period of reproduction, its pains of labour, delivered of the fruit of its loins, slept the sleep of exhaustion, the infinite repose of the colossus, benignant, eternal, strong, the nourisher of nations, the feeder of an entire world. (*Octopus* 46–47)

Woven inextricably into this landscape are the novel’s characters: Presley—precious, volatile, idealistic—the dreamer Vanamee, the independent, bookish, intelligent Annixter, and a host of others who fill its pages; indeed, to conceive of this novel without its remarkable setting is to attempt to tell a story without a point. Norris may have thought, as he wrote former fraternity member, Harry Manville Wright, on April 5, 1899, that he was writing a “very long, very serious and perhaps a very terrible” exposé of the reprehensible position occupied by the Southern Pacific railroad in California (Crisler 75), but what he actually wrote is an anthem to the land itself, a land which he pictures as resistless in its force, controlling in its embrace, encompassing in its allure, spiritual in its mystery.

Easily, of course, and perhaps rightly, Norris’s extravagant prose in *The Octopus* supports the claim of many critics that he, like his good friend, painter Ernest C. Peixotto, whose always ebullient work, *Romantic California* (1910), crystallizes not only his but also Norris’s own feeling for his adopted state, was at heart a local colorist, a regionalist,

most at home in the West generally and in San Francisco specifically (McElrath "Beyond" 37). Yet that conclusion tells only part of this young writer's story. Enamored of San Francisco, her denizens, and her marvels he definitely was, but he was not blind to what lay beyond the hilly city—in northern and central California, in Chicago, in the Arctic, and in New York. That he intended to push his narrative powers even farther afield in future works should come, therefore, as no surprise, for his career proved to himself as it also demonstrates to his reader that, while he found San Francisco the "best" of "story cities," he had also discovered that effective tales could be set in other locales, provided such places mystically attracted their would-be expositor. A contemporary of Norris's in age though not in outlook, Gertrude Stein, who had also sat in Gates's Harvard English class when he did, once commented about Oakland, California, that "there is no there there" (239); Norris's work refutes Stein's declaration by showing that any setting could be "there," if handled well. By his death the "local colorist," consumingly aware of both the spiritual dimensions and ramifications of place in his work, had transformed himself into a national author and was apparently thinking globally as well.

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