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The New Naturalism

*Cormac McCarthy, Frank Norris, and the
Question of Postmodernism*

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Michael Bérubé's claim that "there really isn't any such thing as postmodern fiction—at least not in the terms that most literary critics have proposed so far" is typical of a growing skepticism among literary critics about the category of the postmodern. Not only does Bérubé challenge the concept on the grounds that stylistic definitions of postmodernism are equally definitions of modernist fiction, he also argues that realism remains the dominant stylistic mode among contemporary American writers. Similarly, Wendy Steiner challenges the neglect of female and minority authors in traditional accounts of postmodernism, arguing that the typical understanding of postmodernism as "stylistically innovative writing" perpetuates a problematic modernist overvaluation of high art that perpetuates a corresponding overvaluation of literature by white men (428). Taking up the challenge of integrating minority authors into contemporary literary history, John Duvall divides contemporary U.S. literature into two main branches: the experimental, metafictional branch conventionally labeled postmodernism, and multicultural literature. In perhaps the most sophisticated and extended effort to categorize contemporary U.S. literature, Mark McGurl identifies three streams: technomodernism (the literature conventionally labeled "postmodernism," including work by John Barth, Don DeLillo, and Thomas Pynchon); high cultural pluralism (essentially ethnic modernism, including work by Toni Morrison, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Sandra Cisneros); and lower-middle-class modernism (including work by Raymond Carver and Joyce Carol Oates) (*The Program Era*).

While all of these arguments have the virtue of acknowledging the complexity of contemporary U.S. literary production, they share the problem of ignoring the continuing presence of naturalism. This neglect is understandable as a consequence of the development of literary history. As

the name suggests, postmodernism has been understood and defined as a rejection, reconsideration, or re-evaluation of its predecessor in traditional literary history: modernism. As a result, much of the recent discussion over postmodernism—whether produced by scholars attempting to define postmodernism or scholars attempting to challenge those definitions—has focused on the similarities and differences between contemporary and modernist literature. Similarly, modernism is characteristically defined in relation to realism rather than naturalism. The consequence of both these forces in literary historiography is that recent debates overlook the relationship between contemporary American literature and naturalism.

This essay is engaged with the increasing body of scholarship that is skeptical of the postmodern paradigm and is searching for a new way to understand and classify the contemporary period in American literature. The work of Cormac McCarthy in particular suggests we may be witnessing a resurgence of naturalism. Comparing McCarthy's late fiction and early naturalism, especially Frank Norris's novel *McTeague*, I argue that the economic conditions supposedly defining and producing postmodernism are not unique to the late twentieth century, a finding that challenges the foundational arguments of Fredric Jameson, who claims that recent economic conditions justify periodizing the late twentieth century as postmodern. While the similarities between McCarthy's late fiction and Frank Norris's *McTeague* are revealing, the differences are equally intriguing, particularly differences in their treatment of determinism and their use of the naturalist plot of decline. Those disparities challenge not only literary histories of postmodernism but also the progressive literary histories of American globalization that are currently supplanting theories of postmodernism. In place of both histories, this essay proposes a recursive and pluralist view of the contemporary period in U.S. literature—a view that may in fact be relevant for many periods in literature.

Despite the neglect of naturalism in discussions of contemporary U.S. literature, there are striking similarities between recent American fiction and turn-of-the-twentieth-century naturalism. A renewed interest in determinism is a prominent feature of much contemporary American literature, for example. "We are who we are because we are who we were made," insists the character Okon in Chris Abani's 2004 novel *GraceLand* (312). "A person's path through the world seldom changes and even more seldom will it change abruptly. And the shape of your path was visible from the beginning," says the character Chigurh in Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* (259). Several scholars have discussed the strain of determinism in the works of Don DeLillo and Richard Powers.¹ Of-

ten the determinism of contemporary fiction is attributed to the legacy of post-structuralism; as one critic has remarked, post-structuralism has ushered in “a new age of determinism. . . . The status of the individual and human agency has suffered greatly in recent decades” (Harris 104). I will suggest later in this essay that there are other forces at work, particularly economic ones.

Whatever the source, the consequence of such loss of agency and free will in purportedly postmodern fiction, as in naturalism, is that characters are often flat, stereotypical, or passive. Indeed, Fredric Jameson has suggested that flatness, depthlessness, and superficiality are widespread characteristics of postmodern art (*Postmodernism* 9).² Both postmodernism and naturalism often resist complex psychological exploration of characters; in both, interior views of characters are often thwarted and emotions ambiguous. One can see this in the fiction of Ishmael Reed, Donald Barthelme, and others. The flatness of characters is apparent, too, in the films of the Coen Brothers, Quentin Tarantino, and some of Woody Allen’s more postmodern movies (e.g., *The Purple Rose of Cairo*).

Contemporary literary settings often allow little agency for their characters, and in this sense they duplicate the constricting nature of naturalist settings. In David Mamet’s original script for *Glengarry Glen Ross*, for example, there is no domestic or public space outside the claustrophobic business world of the play. The two men who govern the sales office, Mitch and Murray, never appear, and characters have as little power to negotiate with their bosses as they do to alter the terms of their existence in other ways. As the post-structuralists might argue, language itself is controlling, limiting, and repetitive in *Glengarry*, a manifestation of a world that is inherently controlling, limiting, and repetitive. A similar sense of entrapment occurs in a wide range of contemporary fiction; John Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse* is a particularly noteworthy example. Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*, Philip Roth’s *Operation Shylock*, Kathy Acker’s *Blood and Guts in High School*, parts of David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, Thomas Pynchon’s *Crying of Lot 49*, and Christopher Nolan’s film *Memento* all share this characteristic.

In *After the Great Divide*, Andreas Huyssen argues that contemporary literature resists the high art/low art division, and many scholars have subsequently developed or reacted to his argument. In an eclectic pastiche of styles, contemporary avant-garde fiction pilfers equally from the high modernists and popular genres, according to many critics. Charlie Kaufman’s film *Adaptation* blends the self-reflexive art book with the psychological thriller; Cormac McCarthy channels Faulkner, Melville, and

the popular western. While one might argue that this represents a reaction to modernism, from another perspective it looks like a continuation of naturalism. Jack London, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and Stephen Crane all disregarded the division between high and low literary forms, and all welcomed sales in the mass market.

Finally, many scholars of postmodernism have argued that the movement represents an attack on Enlightenment beliefs, particularly the beliefs in progress, human perfectibility, and the coherent, self-possessed, rational subject.³ Yet the same has been said of naturalism. Lee Clark Mitchell has argued that naturalism is an assault on coherent selfhood and moral responsibility (*Determined Fictions*), while Mary Papke has suggested that these features make naturalism a “post-Enlightenment . . . movement” (viii).

In many ways, Cormac McCarthy’s work is exemplary of the new naturalism. McCarthy’s fiction contains all the features of naturalism mentioned above: a preoccupation with determinism and fate; a flat, depthless writing style that focuses on exteriors of characters and rarely provides interior views; constricting and entrapping environments that tend to dwarf and overpower characters; a rejection of the high art/low art division; and an assault on the Enlightenment beliefs of progress, human perfectibility, and the rational subject.⁴

In fact, one might go further in tracing the similarities between McCarthy and naturalism. Many of McCarthy’s stories involve fierce Darwinian struggles (e.g., *Blood Meridian*, *No Country for Old Men*, *The Road*, and various scenes of fights-to-the-death in the Border Trilogy). There even seem to be direct references to Darwinian images and tropes from early naturalist fiction. The cuchillero’s tattoo of the “blue jaguar struggling in the coils of an anaconda” in *All the Pretty Horses* (198) not only foreshadows the knife fight between the cuchillero and John Grady Cole, it also evokes the early scene in Dreiser’s *The Financier*, the battle between the lobster and the squid in the aquarium.

There are several consequences of this Darwinian conception of the world. One is that for McCarthy, as for the early naturalists, the distinction between human and animal collapses. This takes a particularly sinister form in *No Country for Old Men* as Chigurh uses a slaughterhouse implement to kill his victims like cattle. And this suggests the second consequence of a Darwinian conception of the world: a pervasive emphasis on hunting or, as one critic of naturalism calls it, a pervasive “predatory theme” (Zayani, “From Determinism” 345). In the opening scene of *No Country for Old Men*, for example, Moss is hunting antelope, and

this foreshadows the subsequent narrative, where people persistently hunt each other. Similar dynamics occur in *The Road*, where humans hunt other humans literally as food.⁵

Aside from the Darwinian tropes, McCarthy, like the early naturalists, typically focuses on the lives of the impoverished and the marginalized. He frequently utilizes the figure of the brute (including such characters as Chigurh in *No Country*, the captain and Pérez in *All the Pretty Horses*, Eduardo in *Cities of the Plain*, the Glanton gang in *Blood Meridian*, and the cannibals in *The Road*). His writing style relies on repetition, linear and chronological plot structures, spectatorial third-person narration, and a preoccupation with quotidian, material detail. He gravitates toward primitive, masculine adventures in the style of Jack London and Frank Norris. His stories almost always involve plots of decline. One could go on; it is easier, in fact, to identify similarities between McCarthy's late fiction and naturalism than differences.

It is puzzling, therefore, that critics are so uncertain how to classify his work. In his essay in *American Literature*, Dana Phillips suggests McCarthy's work "is difficult to periodize." It is published "after the heyday of modernism. . . . Yet it avoids the apocalyptic tone and the jaded manner of much postmodern fiction." While he does not consider the possibility that McCarthy may be a naturalist, Phillips does conclude that McCarthy's "allegiance to either the modernist or postmodernist paradigm . . . is doubtful" (435–36). That has not discouraged other critics such as Robert Jarrett, Nell Sullivan, and Jason Ambrosiano from labeling McCarthy a postmodernist. David Holloway, one of the most subtle of McCarthy critics, acknowledges that "[t]here is something almost naturalistic here" ("Modernism, Nature, and Utopia" 4), but he shrugs off this insight and concludes that McCarthy is a "late modernist" whose work simultaneously shares and resists many features of postmodernism.⁶

Typical of many scholars of postmodernism, Nick Monk claims the determinism in McCarthy is a response to "the seeming inevitability of global capitalism" today (99). Monk is among the numerous critics influenced by Fredric Jameson, who views postmodernism as an effect of late capitalism. Such scholars argue that the shift from a Fordist-Keynesian economy to an economy of flexible accumulation—that is, from a system of relative employment stability, legal recognition of unions, and a viable social safety net to one of temporary employment, corporate mobility, rapid global shifts of factories and capital, erosion of the U.S. safety net, and attacks on unionization—has led to an emphasis on ephemerality, instantaneity, disposability, and flux in cultural production.

David Harvey is less certain than Jameson, however, that such changes are genuinely new. In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Harvey suggests that current conditions are merely accelerations in long-term trends in capitalism that Marx and Engels described as early as *The Communist Manifesto* when they argued that “the bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society.” Marx and Engels recognized the global character of nineteenth-century capitalism as well: “The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe,” they argued. They concluded that a comparable ephemerality was characteristic of the culture of capitalism in their day: “All that is solid melts into air,” they famously wrote (12). Harvey is uncertain, in the final analysis, whether so-called postmodern culture is really new or merely the latest face of a *modern* culture that arose in the eighteenth century in response to the rise of capitalism.⁷

Certainly Frank Norris was aware of the constant social disruptions and global dimensions of capitalism in his day; both of these things are central to the plot of *The Octopus*. Early in its pages the novel contains a strikingly contemporary image of a stock market ticker bringing reports from all over the world to a farm office in California, and we are told that at such times “[t]he 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” (619–20). The bulk of the novel documents the decimation of a stable farming community in California, and the narrative ends with an image of American wheat heading on a ship for Asia. Indeed, as June Howard has argued, naturalism was a response to rapid shifts in the U.S. economic landscape that were propelling equally dramatic social disruptions and transformations. As Frank Norris knew, these changes had global implications.

In another respect, one could argue that the economic context of both early naturalism and contemporary literature is similar. Naturalists like Norris, Dreiser, and London were writing at a time when capital was centralizing into larger and larger business aggregations. This enabled individuals like Morgan, Rockefeller, and Carnegie to amass huge fortunes, and it produced widening class divisions. Writers and social critics of the day were particularly concerned about the rise of a plutocracy that had the potential to undermine liberty and political equality for the majority of

Americans. A common view of naturalists' interest in determinism is that it was inspired by economic changes: the apparent loss of individual freedom accompanying the turn from an agrarian, Jeffersonian economy to a hierarchical, corporate, urban, industrial one and the associated concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a small economic elite. The same concern is apparent in McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men*, which is set in 1980, the beginning of a similar concentration of wealth initiated by Reaganite neoliberalism. As Sheriff Bell suggests at the end of the novel, "There is fortunes bein accumulated out there that they dont nobody even know about. . . . Money that can buy whole countries" (303). Bell suggests that this amassing of fortunes has produced widespread apathy and the self-doping of the masses, which we might read as a sign of capitulation to economic powerlessness: "People dont just up and decide to dope themselves for no reason. By the millions," says Bell (303). After dwelling on the decay of the nation's morality, infrastructure, and security throughout the novel, Bell finally blames the contemporary crisis on a "breakdown in mercantile ethics" (304).

Given the connection between the economy, naturalism, and determinism, it is hardly surprising that fate is so often tied to money in Cormac McCarthy's fiction. One of the principal symbols for fate in *All the Pretty Horses* is the image of the coin stamper. Alfonsa says that her father's understanding of fate was "of a tossed coin that was at one time a slug in a mint and of the coiner who took that slug from the tray and placed it in the die in one of two ways and from whose act all else followed, cara y cruz" (230–31). The image of a coin toss as an arbiter of fate returns in more sinister form in *No Country for Old Men*, where Chigurh flips coins to determine whether his victims will live or die. The plots of McCarthy's novels consistently reinforce the message that money determines fate; in *All the Pretty Horses*, for example, John Grady Cole is rescued from certain death by Alfonsa, who pays to release him from prison.

The idea that money determines fate was typical of early naturalism as well. Money has a similar irresistible power in Frank Norris's *McTeague*, for example. Gold is the ruling obsession of the Jewish character Zerkow, and as if by contagion other characters steadily become obsessed with it as well. Trina falls further and further under the hypnotic sway of money. After her husband leaves her, she goes so far as to sleep naked with the gold coins she won from the lottery, "taking a strange and ecstatic pleasure in the touch of the smooth flat pieces the length of her entire body" (515). Gold seems to operate as a deterministic force; characters lose their self-control and even their sanity when it beckons.

But gold is a complex symbol in the novel. Two central images in the story are the giant gilded tooth that McTeague uses to advertise his dentistry practice and the gilded birdcage that remains with him miraculously throughout the novel, even as he plunges into Death Valley to escape the law for murdering his wife. Like the giant gold tooth, McTeague is a blond giant, and like the canary in the bird cage, McTeague ends the novel trapped in a gilded cage, possessing the \$5,000 in gold coins in the middle of Death Valley where the money can do him no good.⁸ The complexity of these symbols is due in part to their contradictions. The giant tooth suggests McTeague's enormous strength, while the tiny, caged canary suggests his powerlessness. The tooth is a symbol of fixity and rootedness, linked to McTeague's domesticity in the first part of the novel; the bird is a symbol of freedom and flight, related to McTeague's homelessness and flight from the law in the second part of the book.

That complexity is also apparent in the images themselves, particularly the giant gold tooth. The gilt tooth is a hybrid image, figuratively an alloy of gold and flesh and literally an alloy of gold and some cheaper substrate. It symbolizes McTeague's divided self, the conflict between his bestial and civilized identities.⁹ But that symbolism is ironic in many ways. If the tooth represents bestiality and gold symbolizes civilization, gold is also the thing that represents the undoing of civilization: various characters are fatally compromised by their obsession with gold.

As Donald Pizer has pointed out, the movement was rarely as deterministic as many critics outside the field assume (see *Theory and Practice*). The hybridity and complexity of the symbols for McTeague suggest the potential for different paths rather than a singular, incontrovertible fate. He and other characters make many choices throughout the novel; their decisions are rarely predictable, and they rarely make the same choice twice. Early in the novel McTeague chooses to follow his better instincts and resists raping Trina while she is unconscious from ether. Later he abuses and murders her. Early in the novel Marcus altruistically chooses to give up his claims on Trina and encourage McTeague to pursue a relationship with her. He comes to regret that decision, and eventually he betrays and attempts to murder McTeague because of it. The tension in the book, in fact, centers on the question of which paths characters will follow: in McTeague's case, will it be the dictates of the flesh or his more civilized self?

McCarthy's work is arguably more deterministic than early naturalism.¹⁰ In spite of widespread claims about the fragmentation of identity in contemporary literature, moreover, McCarthy's characters are relatively

undivided and internally consistent compared to Norris's. In *No Country for Old Men* Carla Jean says Moss will never change: "he's who he is and he always will be" (127).¹¹ The story proves her right. Twice Moss has the chance to follow or ignore his conscience—first in bringing water to the dying drugrunner in the desert, second in allowing Chigurh to live after Moss has lured him into the hotel with the transponder. He acts mercifully both times, making the same mistake twice, and this pattern is ultimately his undoing. Likewise, Sheriff Bell repeats the same decision when hunting Chigurh as he made during World War II—the decision to give up a losing fight. He does this even though the original decision has haunted him throughout his life and motivated him to try to make up for his self-perceived war failure by becoming a police officer dedicated to protecting others even at the cost of his own life. Characters rarely change in McCarthy's novels. Instead, in what has come to be regarded, erroneously, as true naturalist style, McCarthy's characters repeat the same actions and decisions over and over again. McCarthy, we might say, is even more determinist than the original naturalists.¹²

The simplicity and self-consistency of characters is duplicated in McCarthy's representation of money. In *No Country for Old Men*, as in *McTeague*, money often represents characters. Chigurh tells the gas station attendant that both he and the coin have arrived at this location and time by mysterious design. "Now it's here. And I'm here," he says, as if Chigurh and the coin are interchangeable, driven by the same destiny (56). Similarly, when Moss first sees the money in the briefcase, he sees himself: "His whole life was sitting there in front of him. Day after day from dawn till dark until he was dead. All of it cooked down into forty pounds of paper in a satchel" (18). The bills represent the days of his life, identical and indistinguishable, "day after day from dawn till dark until he was dead," an endless, murderous repetition that is reinforced by McCarthy's alliterative use of the letter "d," which makes *dawn* equivalent to *dark* and *days* equivalent to *death*. Unlike the hybrid image of the gold tooth in *McTeague*, the money in the satchel is a unified image, no longer a reflection of a divided self; money represents continuity, consistency, and sameness. There is also a flattening of symbolic richness. The money in *No Country for Old Men* has a singular materiality rendered with scientific precision. We know exactly how much the money weighs (40 pounds), exactly how big each bill is (\$100 banknotes), exactly how much money is contained in each packet of bills (they are "fastened with banktape stamped each with the denomination \$10,000" [18]). The money does not represent multiple symbolic possibilities the way the gold tooth did. Instead of richness and

possibility, both in terms of fluidity of identity and symbolic multiplicity, money is associated here with uniformity and the death of the individual.

If the economic context is important to the thematic preoccupation with determinism and to conceptions of identity in Norris's and McCarthy's fiction, the economy is also crucial to the plot of decline favored by both authors. According to June Howard, the plot of decline in naturalist fiction reflects and acts upon middle-class readers' fears of proletarianization (96). The figure of the brute, the common protagonist of naturalist fiction, partially relieves anxieties that the plot of decline arouses, Howard adds, because middle-class readers can distance themselves from these coarse, violent lower-class characters. The distance between characters and readers is encouraged and reinforced on a formal level by a narrative voice that itself views characters from a distance. According to Howard, while naturalist texts offer various explanations for the degraded character of the brute, McTeague is the most common type, a victim of "tainted heredity," and thus he is acted upon inexorably by genetic forces beyond his control (91). Although Howard does not make this point, hereditary determinism also distances middle-class readers from lower-class brutes and simultaneously eases readers' fears about proletarianization by proposing a biological grounding and justification for class differences.

While Howard's argument about the plot of decline as a representation of the fear of middle-class proletarianization is compelling, her claim that McTeague is a brute because of tainted heredity, and that this hereditary stain has a "determining force" in his life, is less convincing (91). To support the latter assertion, Howard quotes the scene in which McTeague struggles to resist his desire to molest Trina while she is etherized in his dentist chair.

. . . [T]he brute was there. Long dormant, it was now at last alive, awake. . . .

Below the fine fabric of all that was good in him ran the foul stream of hereditary evil, like a sewer. The vices and sins of his father and of his father's father, to the third and fourth and five hundredth generation, tainted him. The evil of an entire race flowed in his veins. Why should it be? He did not desire it. Was he to blame?

But McTeague could not understand this thing. It had faced him, as sooner or later it faces every child of man; but its significance was not for him. To reason with it was beyond him. He could only oppose to it an instinctive stubborn resistance, blind, inert. (285)

Yet the description of McTeague's hereditary taint is highly ambiguous in this scene. For one thing, the brute is merely one part of McTeague's

divided identity, an internal enemy opposed to “the fine fabric of all that was good in him” and against which he struggles with “an instinctive stubborn resistance.” Indeed, this last clause suggests that McTeague has competing hereditary “instincts”: sexual aggression and resistance to it. It is unclear, furthermore, whether McTeague’s “hereditary evil” is a unique inheritance or the common inheritance of “an entire race,” of “every child of man” (by which Norris presumably means specifically all *men*). Moreover, McTeague ultimately triumphs over the brute within him in this early scene, which could (although it ultimately does not) foreshadow an ending to the novel in which he achieves a final victory over the brute that is merely one half of his identity.¹³

The formal structure of the novel mirrors McTeague’s internal division. The novel is divided in two, the first part building toward the comfortable, lower-middle-class domesticity of Trina and McTeague, the second half narrating the rapid disintegration of their stable life. If the first half is an upward mobility tale, the second half is clearly, as Howard suggests, a proletarianization tale that invokes and exaggerates all the direst middle-class fears. McTeague loses his (faked) professional credentials and his career, and from there the whole house of cards tumbles: he loses his home and his possessions, he begins drinking to excess and turns violent, his marriage crumbles, he murders Trina in the act of stealing her money, he becomes a tramp and a hunted criminal, and he ends trapped in a desert and almost certain to die. The turning point separating these two parts is not, however, some incident in which McTeague’s bestial inner self triumphs, as Howard’s theory of genetic determinism implies. Instead, it is the result of a personal conflict and betrayal. The growing animosity between Marcus and McTeague leads Marcus to report McTeague’s unlicensed work, and the state subsequently bars him from practicing dentistry. It is only when McTeague loses his career because of Marcus’s scheming, in other words, that the brute within him triumphs. “The fine fabric of all that was good in” McTeague evidently flourishes in comfortable circumstances, while the brute governs in poverty, and in this regard the story is a critique of—or melodramatic warning about—social conditions that impoverish some and enrich others.¹⁴ It is especially difficult to see how genetic determinism caused McTeague’s downfall when a similar fate occurs to other men in naturalist fiction who lose their careers but do not have McTeague’s intellectual (or genetic) weaknesses. I am thinking particularly of Hurstwood in *Sister Carrie*, who has little in common with McTeague and is not a typical naturalist brute but who nevertheless experiences a fate similar to McTeague’s: he loses his career, becomes financially dependent

on his wife Carrie, subsequently loses his wife, becomes a tramp, and finally dies. The similarity in these plots suggests that the principal fear in naturalist fiction is not proletarianization per se but male unemployment, from which a host of subsequent horrors inevitably follows.¹⁵

I am not suggesting that Norris is uninterested in the possibility of genetic determinism. Clearly his reference to McTeague's "hereditary evil" suggests otherwise. Rather, I am suggesting that Norris is equally interested in social and environmental circumstance, including the effects of these things on identity and personality.¹⁶ Ultimately it is unclear where the determining force lies, if anywhere. Both genetics and environment have certain deterministic properties. Perhaps one might say that social circumstances govern the expression of genetic inheritance in *McTeague*: the brute only surfaces in conditions of poverty. In any case, genetics and environment interact in such complex ways that the question of determinism is probably finally irresolvable.

Cormac McCarthy remains interested in the consequences of masculine downward mobility, and plots of decline are as central to his fiction as to Norris's. Yet there are significant differences. The most obvious is that genetic determinism no longer plays a substantial role. McCarthy's novels meditate instead on the question of divine responsibility in individual fate. Quijada in *The Crossing* is but one of many McCarthy characters who ponder God's role in human destiny. "If people knew the story of their lives how many would then elect to live them?" he asks. "People speak about what is in store. But there is nothing in store. The day is made of what has come before. The world itself must be surprised at the shape of that which appears. Perhaps even God" (387). Opposing Quijada's doubt about predestination is the hermit living in the ruined Mexican church who has been "seeking evidence for the hand of God in the world" (142). He accepts that God shapes human fate but concludes that the God who does so must be utterly incomprehensible to humans. "The man could see Him bent at his work. . . . Weaving the world. In his hands it flowed out of nothing and in his hands it vanished into nothing again. Endlessly. . . . Here was a God to study. A God who seemed a slave to his own selfordained duties. A God with a fathomless capacity to bend all to an inscrutable purpose" (149). Like Norris on the question of genetic determinism, McCarthy repeatedly raises but never resolves the question of divine responsibility.

A more complex difference between McCarthy's and Norris's use of the plot of decline is the way the two authors poise individual narratives against national backdrops. As suggested by the subtitle, *McTeague: A Sto-*

ry of *San Francisco* is the story of the rise of San Francisco and the consequences of that development for the nation. The principal symbol of the region's economy and its intervention in the national sphere is the gold mining industry, a rough brute resembling McTeague and a source of McTeague's character.¹⁷ This correspondence suggests an allegorical element to McTeague's story. The upward mobility portion of McTeague's life represents the rise of a brute (California and its rough mining industry) to national prominence.¹⁸ The downward mobility portion of the story—McTeague's loss of middle-class status—represents the cultural changes for the nation as a whole attendant on the rise of San Francisco and its economic culture: the loss of a virtuous middle class in the shift toward an economy sharply divided between wealthy owners and brutalized miners. Norris tells the same story, in various forms, over and over again in his novels. *The Octopus*, for example, describes the rise of railroad magnates and the decimation of middle-class farmers and their core values. Throughout his fiction, Norris is consistently concerned about the emergence of a deeply class-divided nation and the loss of a stable, buffering, virtuous middle class. While Howard suggests that Norris's plots of decline play on middle-class readers' fears, I would suggest, in a slight revision of her argument, that his plots play instead on national fears about the decline of the middle class as a whole. Because middle-class values are assumed to be *national* values, his stories *appear* to target a specific, narrow group of readers when in fact they presume to represent national concerns as a whole.¹⁹

While the story of the fall of the middle class returned in the late twentieth century and remains to this day, and while McCarthy's novels are self-consciously regionalist in the same way as Norris's (that is, simultaneously regionalist and national), there is a component to McCarthy's novels—particularly his southwest novels—that is largely missing from Norris's *McTeague*: an emphasis on international borders, specifically the border with Mexico. While the backdrop of Norris's novels is a rising national economy, McCarthy's stories are set against a crumbling national economy. This is particularly evident in *No Country for Old Men* as Bell laments the moral decline of the nation and attributes it to the "breakdown in mercantile ethics" (304). When McCarthy's characters undergo a proletarianization experience, moreover, that experience is frequently linked to the crossing of the Mexican border. After his mother sells his family's ranch, John Grady Cole travels to Mexico and takes up proletarian labor as a ranchhand on a deeply class-divided hacienda. When Billy Parham's parents are murdered, he abandons his family ranch and drifts down to

Mexico, living with and off the Mexican poor in a destitute, hunger-filled, beggarly existence. While Moss is hardly wealthy, nor even middle class, at the beginning of *No Country* (he's a welder living in a trailer home with a wife who works in a Wal-Mart), he encounters a whole new level of poverty when, shot and bleeding, he crosses the Mexican border and offers money to a street-sweeper who treats an American hundred-dollar bill like a religious icon. The character Travis in *Cities of the Plain* explains that poor Mexicans "would take you in and put you up and feed you and your horse and cry when you left" even though "[t]hey didnt have nothing. Never had and never would" (90). In the way McCarthy's novels imagine a crumbling national economy, in the way proletarianization frequently involves a crossing of international borders, and in the way deep poverty is linked with Mexico, the focus has shifted from proletarianization as a middle-class concern to proletarianization as a national issue—in short, from the fall of the middle class to the fall of America. To put it even more simply, the fear underlying proletarianization narratives in McCarthy's fiction is the fear that the U.S. will become—or is becoming, or has become—Mexico. The pimp Eduardo in *Cities of the Plain* evokes the fear dramatically as he taunts John Grady during their knife fight. Mexico, he prophesies, "will devour you. . . . You and all your pale empire" (253). This is clearly not a vision of Mexico rising but of America falling.

With the shift from class concerns to the fate of the nation in a global context, the dynamics of the use of the brute and of narrative distance have shifted in McCarthy's fiction. Brutes no longer serve to ease readers' anxieties about the plot of decline because brutes are no longer central characters who undergo proletarianization. Instead, brutes (e.g., Eduardo in *Cities of the Plain*, Pérez in *All the Pretty Horses*, and especially Chigurh in *No Country*) are now the villains who ensure or contribute to protagonists' decline while themselves frequently enjoying upward mobility. McCarthy's fiction allies readers with protagonists, and brutes are now viewed at a distance, characteristically as malign and implacable forces equated with the devil. The forces conspiring to ensure downward mobility are no longer genetic or intellectual, as in *McTeague*; on the contrary, Moss, John Grady Cole, and Parham are all quite clever and resourceful in their own ways. The forces ranged against the heroic individual are systemic ones (e.g., Mexican political and legal corruption and the white slave trade in the Border Trilogy, quasi-corporate, transnational drug cartels in *No Country*) merely personified in villainous brutes who carry out the mandates of the system. These systemic forces are linked to divine forces in their implacability, figures perhaps for a global economy that seems imperturbable and omnipotent. The embodiment of systemic, in-

stitutional, incontestable forces in brutish villains helps to explain why a character like Chigurh seems indestructible and immortal, a devil serving a shadow economy (the drug trade) that mirrors the regular economy, down to its corporate aliases (The Maticumbe Petroleum Group), its offices in skyscrapers, and hitmen like Wells who carry business cards and think of themselves as private contractors. Indeed, Chigurh, who has no clear nationality or ethnicity (McCarthy simply describes him as “faintly exotic” [112]), is the perfect incarnation of the generalized American fear of downward global mobility and the generalized American anxiety about global competition and the global other. Disaster—downward mobility and death—is now indiscriminate and unpredictable, and the mood of McCarthy’s fiction is accordingly deeply ominous and suspenseful; the experience of reading a McCarthy novel involves an expectation of looming horror that is unmitigated by a sense of distance from protagonists.²⁰

Moreover, there is no deep and pervasive class bias in McCarthy’s fiction as there is in Norris’s work. One would never see a sentence demeaning a protagonist in McCarthy’s fiction the way this sentence in *McTeague* so starkly demeans Norris’s title character: “This poor crude dentist of Polk Street, stupid, ignorant, vulgar, with his sham education and plebeian tastes, whose only relaxations were to eat, to drink steam beer, and to play upon his concertina, was living through his first romance” (282). McCarthy consistently treats his characters with an even, distant, objective narration. It is not simply that McCarthy is a better writer or that classism has vanished in contemporary fiction (the latter is particularly doubtful). Rather, this difference suggests that the primary concern in McCarthy’s fiction is not class divisions in the U.S. and the relative virtues of particular classes (i.e., the middle class) but instead a sense that Americans are united across class in a common (national) experience of downward mobility.

Finally, there is no longer an emphasis on the way poverty or wealth makes people into certain kinds of individuals or behave in certain ways. National origin, on the other hand, *does* have a deterministic power in McCarthy’s fiction. In *All the Pretty Horses*, for example, the rich and poor in Mexico equally believe in a kind of national determinism. “One country is not another country,” observes Alejandra’s land-owning father as he meditates on the insurmountable differences between Mexicans and French (146). Likewise, the vaqueros of his ranch believe that “it was no accident of circumstance that a man be born in a certain country and not some other . . . the weathers and seasons that form a land form also the inner fortunes of men in their generations and are passed on to their children and are not so easily come by otherwise” (226). All of this serves as

backdrop to the central plot tension in the novel: the illicit relationship between John Grady and Alejandra, which revolves around different national attitudes toward romance, a Mexican class-based conception and a democratic, individualist American conception. The Other in McCarthy's fiction is characteristically Mexicans rather than the American lower class, and the fundamental division, the principle border, in his work (at least his late, southwestern fiction) is not between classes, as it was in early American naturalism, but between nations. This does not mean, however, that class and wealth are irrelevant. In McCarthy's fiction Mexico stands for a political and economic system in which poverty is systemic and insurmountable. As I have suggested above, the underlying fear of the U.S. becoming Mexico is a nationalized proletarianization fear, a fear of national decline in which affluence is no longer a possibility for most Americans and the best—and perhaps the worst—a character like Moss can hope for is to stumble upon a satchel full of cash in the desert.

In her essay "The Ends of America, the Ends of Postmodernism," Rachel Adams argues that U.S. postmodernism has lately been superseded by "the globalization of American literature" (249). The different representations of Mexico in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* reflect the differences between postmodernism and globalism, according to Adams. Pynchon, she argues, regards Mexico as an extension of the U.S., a stifling dead-end no different from the entrapping, claustrophobic labyrinth of California—a place where revolution is exhausted, political agency is lost, and "ordinary citizens feel alienated and disempowered" (256). In contrast, Yamashita represents the U.S.-Mexico border as a dynamic zone of cultural trade, revitalization, and "global interconnection," according to Adams (252). In Yamashita's novel, Mexico is a place subject to "the most destructive aspects of globalization" but also "the inspired fusion of people and cultures," a place of human agency rather than a confining, deterministic space, a place of community rather than atomistic exhaustion and paranoia (262). Thus, Adams offers a progressive history in which U.S. literature, under the influence of globalization, has become ethnically inclusive and counter-cultural with respect to U.S. culture, facilitating greater human agency and community formation. As if to underscore this progressive narrative of U.S. literary history, Emilio Sauri takes Adams to be suggesting that "American literary globalism succeeds where literary postmodernism had failed, its success [lying] squarely in the multiplication of positions and perceptions that locate the national and cultural-political situation of the U.S. within more global processes" (475).

Cormac McCarthy's late fiction tells a different story. The comparatively strict determinism in his work challenges Adams's argument about the increasing human agency in contemporary U.S. literature, and McCarthy's representation of Mexico challenges her arguments about the value of foreign nations for U.S. national revitalization. While my argument is obviously selective in that it only deals with the late fiction of Cormac McCarthy (albeit no less selective than Adams's argument, which deals only with two novels by two writers), it nevertheless challenges the progressive literary history of critics like Adams who imagine the globalized consciousness of contemporary American literature as a salutary change from postmodernism. McCarthy's late fiction, in fact, suggests something more sinister in the globalizing consciousness of contemporary American literature: an anxious narrative of globalization as the fall of America. In opposition to progressive historical narratives that celebrate U.S. literature's turn to globalism, the resurgence of naturalism, with its investment in plots of decline, suggests that the contemporary American globalizing consciousness is preoccupied with its own international loss of power and authority.

Whether other contemporary naturalist fiction figures proletarianization as a class concern, as in Norris's work, or a national concern, as in McCarthy's, is an open question beyond the scope of the present essay.²¹ Nevertheless, several conclusions might be drawn at this point. The most basic is that similarities between early naturalism and McCarthy's fiction are sufficiently abundant to justify the classification of his work as naturalist. Indeed, there are enough similarities between naturalism and recent American fiction generally that we might speak seriously about a contemporary resurgence of naturalism. One explanation for this development might be found in the economy. Both early and recent naturalism derive from similar circumstances, particularly a disruptive global capitalism producing, in the U.S., widening class divisions and a growing concentration of wealth and, globally, increased power in the hands of corporations. Those scholars like Fredric Jameson who claim that recent shifts in capitalism justify periodizing the contemporary moment as postmodern exaggerate the uniqueness of present conditions. One sign of that overstatement is that both McCarthy's fiction and early naturalism are marked by a sense that our fates are increasingly determined by large, global economic powers and forces. McCarthy and Norris both use money as an important symbolic scaffolding on which to build a philosophical meditation on fate.

The differences between McCarthy's fiction and early naturalism are equally intriguing. While early naturalism was preoccupied with but ul-

timately undecided on the question of determinism, McCarthy's work is far more decisive on the subject. This is particularly apparent in his representation of identity. McCarthy's characters are undivided and self-consistent, and identity in his work is far more stable than in Norris's. While it is debatable whether McCarthy's fiction is representative of contemporary American literature as a whole in this regard, his work nevertheless suggests that the claims of Philip Brian Harper and others about the fragmented nature of postmodern subjectivity may be exaggerated. McCarthy's late fiction also challenges more recent literary histories that claim greater human agency in post-postmodern, globalized U.S. fiction. Finally, while the naturalist plot of decline remains important in McCarthy's novels, its significance has shifted. Where it once stood for anxieties about proletarianization and male unemployment, it now stands for national decline in a global economy.

There are two observations about literary history that might be made here. First, there is a curious renewal of determinism in our recent theories of literary history. In suggesting that changes in capitalism have inspired a new mode of cultural production called postmodernism, Fredric Jameson is arguably relying on an old-style vulgar Marxist assumption that changes in the economic base necessarily produce changes in the cultural superstructure. Even assuming the economy has changed in significant ways—a view I have contested—this does not mean cultural production must necessarily change along with it. That logic is often described as historical determinism, with good reason.²²

The second observation about literary history is related to the first. Many critics argue that postmodern culture embraces a new attitude toward history. Postmodern (and presumably post-postmodern) culture supposedly rejects linear notions of history and grand meta-narratives like the idea of progress. It is difficult to find evidence for this claim in literary history, however. Many scholars of U.S. literature still prefer to view literary history as linear and progressive, flowing smoothly from realism to naturalism to modernism to postmodernism to globalism.²³ Evidently some of us have failed to internalize the lessons of postmodernism. In our understanding of the development of literature, we need to account somehow for the fact that history often repeats itself, and we need to be careful of the reflexive urge to pigeonhole individual writers according to dominant literary historical paradigms. There is a kind of cultural determinism at work when critics call a contemporary piece of literature postmodern regardless of its formal features and philosophical tendencies.²⁴ Such has been the case with McCarthy. There are many similar examples.

At both the theoretical and operational levels, then, there appears to be a renewed influence of determinism in literary history. This may be strong evidence, coming from within our discipline, for a reinvigorated naturalism in contemporary culture. The legacies of cultural studies, feminism, and popular culture studies, with their emphasis on critically neglected but often market-dominant texts, should confer a greater suspicion of traditional literary history, which characteristically ignores the vast majority of literary production in the U.S. The legacy of New Historicism, with its skepticism of historical narratives generally, should confer an increased interrogation of traditional literary history as well. We have seen criticism and interrogation of the category of the postmodern in recent years, but rarely has this been driven by the problems inherent in a selective, unified, linear history; more often it has been driven by skepticism about the definitions of postmodernism and claims about the uniqueness of its characteristics,²⁵ and debates over postmodernism are quickly yielding to debates over globalization that repeat the same problems in discussion of postmodernism. In harmony with the few critics who have acknowledged the diversity of forms and modes in contemporary literary production, this essay suggests that naturalism is alive and well and that it has a significant place beside the persisting forms of romanticism, realism, modernism, and avant-garde experimentation. The obvious pedagogical value of a simplified literary history should not constrain our scholarship nor obscure the fact that pluralism is arguably a feature of every age in American literature.

I will conclude with a modest proposal about the classification of contemporary U.S. literature intended as an alternative to theories of postmodernism and post-postmodernism. I propose that contemporary U.S. literature has been marked, from about 1960 to the present, by the national cultural focus on multiculturalism. That is to say, writers embrace a diversity of literary styles unapologetically, and the notion of cultural (or stylistic) hierarchy has diminished, a relic of an era that unapologetically embraced racial hierarchy. Hierarchy in the cultural realm has succeeded to a notion of market segmentation: writers write for particular audiences, whether academics, aesthetes, new age spiritualists, science fiction fans, self-helpers, urban readers, rural readers, young readers, old readers, middle class readers, black readers, or whatever, without any conviction that a hierarchy ought to exist among those different readers (even if such hierarchies do undoubtedly remain). The logic of multiculturalism is consistent in important ways with the logic of globalization. Like multiculturalism, globalization encourages, promotes, and thrives on stylistic and cultural diversity, and globalization's terms, such as "developing world"

and “developed world,” suggest a chronological multiplicity or simultaneity that promotes a comparable plurality of historical styles, amounting perhaps to what Jameson describes as historical pastiche. Thus, there is little contradiction between the assessment of contemporary American literature as multicultural and the designation of the period as globalized; on the contrary, multiculturalism and globalization go hand in hand.

It should be clear that this proposal about contemporary U.S. literature has similarities to all the existing models and is meant to reconcile them. From theories of postmodernism it takes the idea that the divisions between high and low art are diminishing. From theories of globalization it takes the idea that a globalized consciousness is informing contemporary U.S. literature. From theories of multiple streams (e.g., McGurl’s proposal in *The Program Era* of three divisions in contemporary U.S. literature) it takes the idea that there are diverse styles (realist, modernist, etc.) but encompasses them under a unifying cultural logic of diversity (i.e., multiculturalism).

If my proposal seems to undermine my resistance to a unified literary history, let me clarify that the concept of multiculturalism, like the concept of *e pluribus unum*, inherently holds unity and multiplicity in tension. If my proposal seems to undermine my resistance to linear history, let me clarify that the proposal allows for recursivity in the sense that it allows for multiple historical modes (e.g., naturalism and modernism) to coexist at the same time. If my proposed literary history looks suspiciously progressive, representing a salutary alternative, for example, to the racism of modernism, let me reiterate that there are unquestionably anti-progressive elements in contemporary multicultural literature; as I hope I have demonstrated, McCarthy’s late fiction is hardly progressive in its conceptions of globalization or human agency, for example.²⁶ The plurality of literary production in contemporary America, as at any time, challenges any effort to impose a unifying progressive narrative, and I will leave it to the many other scholars who have criticized the politics of multiculturalism to demonstrate its failed progressivism in other ways.

NOTES

1. See Civello; Harris; and Pizer, “Is American Literary Naturalism Dead?”
2. More recently, James Wood has reaffirmed the “crisis of character” in recent fiction: an ongoing “critique and parody of the idea of character,” he argues, has led to characterization that is too often “shiny externality” and mere “caricature” (42).
3. The idea that postmodernism represents skepticism toward Enlightenment

metanarratives originated in Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition*, and numerous critics have accepted and developed this argument. Ross and the contributors to his *Universal Abandon*, for example, followed up on the political implications of this possibility.

4. McCarthy's assault on Enlightenment beliefs is nowhere more apparent than in Judge Holden's speeches in *Blood Meridian*. In contrast to many critics who regard Judge Holden as a strikingly original character, I believe he may be modeled on Wolf Larsen in Jack London's naturalist classic *The Sea-Wolf*. Both characters espouse a Nietzschean or Spencerian survival-of-the-fittest philosophy, and both are anti-Enlightenment figures deeply read in Enlightenment philosophy. For further discussion of Holden as an anti-Enlightenment figure, see Cant 170–74; Monk; and Shaviro.

5. Andrew Hoborek dismisses the possibility that these devices may be naturalist. He acknowledges that the scene of the father's and son's escape from the cannibals occupying the mansion in *The Road* suggests that humans are like hunted animals in the novel. He argues, however, that the novel undercuts this "bleak naturalism" because the main characters are not in fact animals (this is only a simile in the scene, he says) and because actual animals in the novel are symbols of "a previous world of abundance and life" rather than "symbols of heartless nature" ("Cormac McCarthy and the Aesthetics of Exhaustion" 493). Hoborek does not defend his odd claim that humans are not in fact animals, nor does he defend his equally odd assertion that animals cannot be symbolic simultaneously of abundance, life, and heartless nature in naturalist fiction.

6. See also Holloway's *Late Modernism*. Similarly, Frye recognizes the naturalist elements of McCarthy's work but concludes that he writes principally in the tradition of the American romance embodied in such writers as Cooper, Melville, and Hawthorne (see chap. 1 and pp. 77–79). John Cant arrives at a similar conclusion: "McCarthy's fiction follows the tradition of American Romance, of Melville and Hawthorne," although he contends that "neither realism nor naturalism is of particular relevance to McCarthy" (11). One of the few scholars willing to label McCarthy "a contemporary literary naturalist" (150), Link suggests that "the energies contained within literary naturalism . . . remain influential . . . right to the present moment" (151). Link does not explore the implications of this idea for literary history, nor does he explore the differences between McCarthy and the early U.S. naturalists. Unlike this essay, Link's article also claims that "the cultural conditions that gave rise to the 'classic' American literary naturalism of the late nineteenth century" have changed (153). James Giles combines Frye's view of McCarthy as a romantic writer with Link's view of McCarthy as a naturalist and describes *Outer Dark* as "a gothic romance that incorporates ideas and motifs of literary naturalism" (95).

7. See also Smith, who locates the origins of contemporary globalization at the turn of the twentieth century; and Kelly, who suggests that recent scholarship and recent American fiction have both challenged the notion that postmodernism was or is a "rupture between past and present" but rather "continuity . . . emerging from identifiable historical and technological shifts over a long durée" (393).

8. Both Walter Benn Michaels and Jennifer Fleissner argue, on the other hand,

that the gold pieces in the story are symbolic of Trina (*Gold Standard* 136; *Women, Compulsion, Modernity* 214–15). Their readings are additional evidence of the complexity of the imagery of gold in the novel.

9. Norris makes this division clear: “Within him, a certain second self, another better McTeague rose with the brute; both were strong, with the huge crude strength of the man himself” (283). The gilded tooth also resonates with the idea of the Gilded Age, which McTeague himself might symbolize. For historians as well as many people living at the time, the Gilded Age was distinctly not a Golden Age but rather a period with a superficial veneer of wealth and civilization concealing a corrupt core.

10. We might regard this intensified determinism as a result of the current triumph of capitalism over its rivals. In Norris’s day, socialist, Communist, and anarchist movements were active in the U.S. While there are striking economic similarities between the turn of the twentieth century and our current turn of the century, the two periods differed in this respect. In this regard, I disagree with Holloway, who suggests that the diminishing sense of resistance and opposition in contemporary culture derives from the way the contemporary “capitalist mode of production has become so pervasive as to have expunged from itself the last vestiges of ‘precapitalist’ experience” (*Late Modernism* 2). It is not that different economic modes, let alone different forms of capitalism, have disappeared (Holloway assumes that only one mode of capitalist production exists), but rather that significant macro-economic alternatives to capitalism have come to seem unattainable and unworkable.

11. A similar passage describes John Grady Cole at the beginning of *All the Pretty Horses*. “All his reverence and all his fondness and all the learnings of his life were for the ardenthearted and they would always be so and never be otherwise” (6). The excessive repetition in the passage (the repetition of the word “all,” the repetitive structure of the clauses beginning with “all,” and the redundancy of the clause “always be so and never be otherwise”) mirrors the fixed character of this young man, not yet past his teens, and it foreshadows the repetition of his actions in the Border Trilogy. It is no exaggeration or self-deception that makes Grady say later, “How I was is how I am” (155). Indeed, he might justifiably have added, “and how I will be.”

12. While I agree with Pilkington’s assessment of McCarthy as a naturalist, I disagree with his comparison between early naturalism and McCarthy, which is based on a faulty notion of early naturalism as wholly deterministic and an equally faulty assessment of McCarthy as less deterministic: “unlike Crane and the other turn-of-the-century naturalists, McCarthy does not posit a wholly deterministic universe. Humans do make choices—frequently bad choices, but choices nonetheless—that critically affect their destinies” (315). I disagree with James Giles on similar grounds. Giles argues that the determinism in McCarthy’s *Outer Dark* is not the “largely uncomplicated biological determinism of Norris’s *McTeague* . . . or the economic determinism of Stephen Crane’s *Maggie*.” Instead, McCarthy’s is a “multilayered determinism” combining “psychological, social, and economic forces,” which “is not as total in its controlling power” (97–98).

13. Significantly, what enables him to overcome his brutish instincts is immersion in his work: “Terrified at his weakness at the very moment he believed himself strong, he threw himself once more into his work with desperate energy. By the time he was

fastening the sheet of rubber upon the tooth, he had himself once more in hand" (23). Work and unemployment are the poles around which fears of male brutality revolve.

14. This is not to say that the story offers a valuable argument about the costs of economic inequality. It clearly demonizes the poor even as it acknowledges a social system that distributes wealth unevenly.

15. At least that is the case for naturalist novels with male protagonists. Crane's *Maggie* suggests the central naturalist fear regarding women is prostitution. Of course, Maggie's prostitution follows from Pete's unwillingness to marry and support her, so there is a connection to male breadwinning.

Unlike Howard, Fleissner suggests that the typical scholarly view is that the male plot of decline in naturalist fiction is attributed to women's economic independence. According to this view, she suggests, "the money-making woman becomes the agent of decline" (203) and working women become aligned with the "pitiless natural forces" that threaten men and masculinity (21). She suggests instead that male characters are victimized "by their own embodiment" and that the common expectation of a plot of decline (or, its reverse, the plot of "sheer triumph") in naturalist fiction does not hold true for female characters (22). I have the same reservations about Fleissner's assumption that McTeague's fall is due to his "embodiment" that I have about Howard's assumption that his fall is due to genetic determinism; both are predicated on a character flaw that is not borne out by the story. With regard to Fleissner's assertion that the plot of decline does not pertain to female characters in naturalist fiction, such a conclusion may be reasonable in the case of Carrie in Dreiser's novel, but it's nearly impossible to conceive of Trina's story as anything but a plot of decline.

16. While Howard argues that McTeague is a victim of his heredity, in parts of the novel Norris attributes McTeague's character to environmental rather than genetic forces. When McTeague returns to the California mountains of his childhood, for example, we learn that he resembles the landscape, as if his appearance and character have been molded by his early environment. Norris compares the two in this way: the mountains' "immensity, their enormous power, crude and blind, reflect[ed] themselves in [McTeague's] own nature, huge, strong, brutal in its simplicity" (533–34).

17. See, for example, pp. 528–34, where the California mining territory is described as "a vast, unconquered brute" (528) reflecting McTeague's "own nature, huge, strong, brutal in its simplicity" (533–34). In this same passage, Norris explicitly compares the gold mining industry to McTeague's dental practice: "there was a resemblance between [McTeague's] present work [mining] and the profession he had been forced to abandon. . . . It was the same work he had so often performed in his 'Parlors,' only magnified, made monstrous, distorted, and grotesqued, the caricature of dentistry" (533).

18. Fleissner argues that "McTeague's very physical strength unfits him for life in the twentieth century"; he is "a throwback to an earlier time" (218). I would argue instead that McTeague's rise is symbolic of the rising economic importance of a form of industry that, according to the logic of the novel, is integral to the twentieth-century American economy, however primitive it may be, and thus the question of its (or his) fitness or atavism is in a sense irrelevant. Elsewhere Fleissner notes that atavism and progress are never clearly separable in fin-de-siècle American culture (see 220). The rise of the primitive mining industry is clearly a case in point.

19. Of course, because middle-class Americans are presumed to be singularly virtuous, squeezed between a brutal lower class and a malicious, power-hungry elite, Norris's fiction may in fact target readers who conceive of themselves as middle class or embrace middle-class values. But given the historical penchant for Americans of all socioeconomic stations to identify as middle class, which is understandable given the unparalleled virtue ascribed to middle-class identity, such readers need not in fact be middle class in a strict sociological or economic sense. The ultimate goal of Norris's fiction is not to play on the fears and anxieties of middle-class readers but rather to sanction the necessity of an American middle class and the importance of its values and virtues. These are goals that many readers might ascribe to, regardless of their socioeconomic position. Ultimately, I am not sure that it makes much sense to try to identify the readership of naturalist fiction or to assume, as so many critics reflexively do, that audiences of American literature of various kinds are middle class.

20. This varies depending on the novel. John Cant is certainly right to assert that "we are not able, or indeed required, to identify with any of the . . . characters" in *Blood Meridian*, and this certainly mitigates our sense of intimacy with and compassion for its protagonists—although even in this text, he admits, we likely experience horror as readers (160). In McCarthy's later novels, however, the sense of distance from characters is diminished, I would argue, and part of the horror that many readers likely experience is connected to a degree of intimacy and identification with characters. This is particularly true in *The Road*.

21. Tentatively I would suggest that most contemporary naturalist fiction is consistent with McCarthy's view. Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* retains the early naturalist anxiety about downward class mobility and male unemployment, while Powers's *Gain* and DeLillo's *Underworld* are more concerned with the fall of the nation. Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* incorporates both concerns.

22. For further discussion of the recent trend toward economic determinism in literary criticism, see Zayani, *Reading*. I realize I am also suggesting in this essay that McCarthy's fiction is shaped by economic developments. While I did not emphasize this in my essay, it seems to me likely that there are other factors involved in the recent return of naturalism, particularly the advent of post-structuralism, and writers other than McCarthy may very well be more influenced by these factors than by economic ones. It just happens to be the case, in my view, that McCarthy's fiction is shaped by economic forces more fully than that of other writers. I chose to focus on his work as exemplary of the new naturalism because it resembles the old naturalism most fully.

23. Hoborek suggests that two models of literary history exist today: the dominant view of a linear, progressive history moving from realism to modernism to post-modernism, and a less influential model of an ongoing dominance by realism despite the presence of an avant-garde dedicated to "continual stylistic innovation" in the twentieth and twentieth-first centuries ("Cormac McCarthy and the Aesthetics of Exhaustion" 486). Hoborek proposes that both models ignore the possibility that many major writers of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries are simultaneously committed to realist representation and stylistic innovation; an example is McCarthy's merging of genre forms like the western with stylistic experimentation in the

spirit of Faulkner. It is unclear, however, why Hoborek equates realist representation with genre fiction. Much of the genre fiction that was pioneered in the twentieth century (e.g., the western, the mystery, the fantasy, and the romance) represents a form of literary innovation, at least in its beginnings, and a great deal of genre fiction in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries employs modernist stylistics (e.g., Dashiell Hammett's mysteries). Rather than illustrating the inseparability of the two major models of literary history, Hoborek's argument illustrates how both major models of literary history are profoundly selective, ignoring the presence of the dominant forms of literary production, i.e., popular and genre fiction.

24. As Hoborek puts it, postmodernism should not be "a category into which all contemporary fiction must be made to fit by main force" ("Introduction: After Postmodernism" 241). The same principle obviously applies to designations of globalism, although fewer such designations exist yet.

25. Wendy Steiner is a noteworthy exception to this rule. Literary history, she argues, should be based on the law "that history is more properly a plural than a singular subject" (450).

26. My inclusion of McCarthy within "multicultural literature" should make it clear, by the way, that the term is not meant to separate so-called "ethnic" writers from "white" writers. My proposal borrows from whiteness studies the idea that whiteness is also a race or ethnicity.

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