



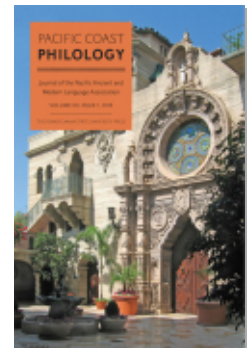
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“In the Thick of It”



The (Meta)Discourse of Jack London’s Russo–Japanese War Correspondence

KEVIN R. SWAFFORD

Abstract: This article analyzes London’s work as a war correspondent during the early phase of the Russo–Japanese War as something other than simply an account of his experiences as a Western correspondent. I make the case that London’s war writing attempts to meta–discursively problematize many of the typical dimensions of war correspondence as it was practiced and represented in the “yellow press” at the close of the nineteenth century. Whereas other war correspondents often attempted to reify various similar ideas concerning war and the role of the correspondent through a writing practice that habituates an overall displacement of its discursive contingencies, London works to foreground such things in much of his Russo–Japanese War correspondence.

Keywords: narration; war reporting; Russo–Japanese War; critique of ideology

Several months before the first shots were fired in early February of 1904, the now relatively forgotten war between the Russians and the Japanese had been greatly anticipated in the North American and Western European press. Constructed as myth before it had even begun, the conflict was loosely framed in the “yellow press” as a defining, archetypal struggle between East and West.¹ For the Hearst and Pulitzer papers in particular, the brewing conflict promised to be something unique, if not entirely exotic. In some ways, the yellow journalism was not incorrect: the Russo–Japanese War was unique

as an infamous precursor to the more broadly horrific and destructive wars of the twentieth century. At the time, it was articulated as something more than simply a regional struggle over control of Manchuria and the Korean peninsula. Nationalist fervor mixed with the rhetoric of Imperial expansion made both sides eager for battle. As it turned out, the Russians had underestimated the Japanese military and their defeat was felt as a shock throughout the West.² Why Jack London decided to become a correspondent during the initial phases of the war is not entirely clear—though many have argued that his decision was based in part on interpersonal conflicts, financial difficulties, and a desire for adventure.³ In her “unconventional” biography of her father, Joan London claims that the complexities of London’s personal life in 1903 made him “eager for at least a temporary change of scene and occupation” (*Jack London and His Times* 281). Scholars of London’s work such as King Hendricks, Earle Labor, Jeanne Campbell Reesman, Russ Kingman, Clarice Stasz, James L. Haley, and Andrew Sinclair (among others) have all suggested similar reasons. Certainly, by late 1903 London’s first marriage was in shambles and many aspects of his private life were characterized by vicissitudes. However, whether or not London in fact needed a “change of scene” for personal reasons, his willingness to leave California and travel half the world to write about war was most certainly rooted in a serious artistic concern. Despite his various troubles, 1903 was a good year for Jack London. Having written two of his most popular novels, *The Call of the Wild* and *The Sea Wolf*,⁴ as well as publishing *The Kempton-Wace Letters* and *The People of the Abyss*, London had established his reputation as an important writer and he approached the correspondent assignment for William Randolph Hearst’s papers as an opportunity to further distinguish himself.⁵ According to Jonathan Auerbach, London’s work as a correspondent provided him with a “chance to emulate adventurous reporters such as Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Richard Harding Davis” (117).

As a writer, London was often in the practice of situating himself and his writing in relation to other highly influential writers and texts. In varying degrees, all of Jack London’s autobiographical, nonfiction prose is deeply relational and this is certainly the case in the writing that makes up his Russo-Japanese War correspondence, where we find a fundamental meta-discursive and dialogic aesthetic at work.⁶ As a correspondent, London was eager to witness and write about war, but from a perspective that would critically situate some of the paradigmatic, conventional tendencies of war reporting as it was practiced (most characteristically in the “yellow press”) in the United States at the time. London considered the emerging tensions between the Japanese and the Russians as yet another instance of an unnecessary (though seemingly inevitable) conflict between two imperialist/capitalist countries.

As a socialist, he believed he could offer a perspective that would not only clarify the foundational socioeconomic aspects of the war, but also the political and ideological terrain of its narrative framing. London also knew that observing and experiencing the various facets of war would be important to him as a writer—and, more to the point, *as a writer in relation to other contemporary writers*.

At the close of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century, the heroic and romantic image of the war correspondent was a mainstay of popular literary culture in the United States, Great Britain, and Western Europe. Mass circulation daily newspapers turned many war reporters into national heroes. As John Maxwell Hamilton observes, “home from the field of battle, the correspondent was a celebrity,” who was often able to turn his experiences into “a quick book for the armchair adventurer” (1).⁷ George Lynch, Frederick Palmer, Melton Prior, Percival Philips, and James H. Hare were just some of the names that conjured images of the daring and heroic war correspondent. In the United States, Stephen Crane, Richard Harding Davis, and British novelist, Rudyard Kipling had elevated the popular image by representing and embodying the adventuresome-romance of the war correspondent. They were among the most celebrated writers in America and Britain; and often at the heart of their writing practice was the experience of soldiers and war. Kipling’s melodramatic, first novel *The Light that Failed* (1891), Stephen Crane’s adventurous Spanish-American War correspondence, stories, and sketches and Richard Harding Davis’s many pieces on the Greco-Turkish War (1897), the Spanish-American War (1898), and the second Boer War (1899–1902) were enormously popular and influential. Among contemporaries, Kipling and Crane were considered to be innovative writers of a heightened realism and Richard Harding Davis was known for his direct, descriptive style. Equally important, Kipling, Crane, and Davis were seen as adventure-seeking, semi-heroic writers who communicated objective truths through their narrated, lived experiences (for many of their readers, there was often a blurring of distinction between fiction and reality, authorial performance and objective truth).

There is no doubt that London was influenced and impressed by the correspondence work of writers like Lynch and Palmer, Kipling, Crane, and Davis.⁸ It is certain that he had hoped to be able to communicate his own war experiences in an engaging narrative style, not unlike his predecessors. Unfortunately for London, his experiences as a war correspondent resembled very little of that which others had narrated in their popular accounts of war. Objective forces and realities determined much of London’s experiences in ways that disallowed him from generating the type of narratives/reports that he had initially envisaged and intended. On arriving in Japan in late

January 1904, after a rough and wearisome Pacific crossing on the S.S. *Siberia*, London quickly discovered that war reporting happens, in part, only to the extent that it is allowed by those engaged in battle. The Japanese were not eager to relinquish control over the narrative framing and reporting of the war. Censorship and strict regulations were enforced; and Western correspondents were refused open access to battles and combatants.⁹

Faced with the inescapable fact that war correspondence is a form of writing that is contingent upon real and dynamic relations of power, London was forced to write and represent a very different kind of war correspondence than that popularized by earlier writers. In his dispatches, London emerges as a writer consciously concerned with the discursive aspects of war reporting. Restricted to “watching the machine work,” London had to modify his intended role as an author-adventurer (and, as a result, his conception of the task and function of the war correspondent). Because he was limited in what he could witness and write about, London was convinced that his writing, despite its humane and meta-discursive qualities, was not very good. His disappointment and frustration signify by implication what he hoped to accomplish. Four months into the war, he wrote to Cloudesley Johns: “My work? It is rot. Am hugely disgusted with it, but the insane state of affairs I find myself in, the restrictions, the inability in any way to get in touch with things (& not my fault)—make my stuff the rot it is. It will require another war, & a white man’s war, for me to redeem myself. I’ll never do it here” (*The Letters of Jack London; Volume One: 1896–1905* 428). Similarly, on the same day, London wrote to George Sterling: “I am clean disgusted. My work is rotten. I know it, but so circumscribed am I, so hedged about with restrictions, that I see little, hear but little more (& that unsatisfactory & oftentimes contradictory) and in no way can manage to get in intimate touch with officers or men. I am an outsider, pent in one portion of the machine and from that restricted view watching the machine work” (428). The realization that he would not be able to perform an adventurous role as an active participant-witness in the thick of battle between the two nations at war was, no doubt, a disappointment to London, who felt that he needed various kinds of experiences in order to establish a foundation for the representational, performative, and discursive aspects of his writing.

What we discover in Jack London’s Russo-Japanese War writing—significantly and on first appearance somewhat ironically—is that most of it *is not actually about war* (that is, the pathos and drama of battle); but rather, it is often about the contingencies of getting a war story (the central thing that London struggled with as a correspondent). In his first dispatch, “How Jack London Got In and Out of Jail in Japan,” London begins with a brief description of his troublesome travel from Yokohama to Moji to catch a steamer to Chemulpo Bay

(site of the Japanese Navy's preemptive strike against the Russian fleet), but then London quickly moves into a reflexive account of the censorious, legal troubles he found himself in for taking pictures of mundane things:

Having bought my ticket at the Osaka Shosen Kaisha office, I tucked it into my pocket and stepped out the door. Came four coolies carrying a bale of cotton. Snap went my camera. Five little boys at play—snap again. A line of coolies carrying coal—and again snap, and last snap. For a middle-aged Japanese man, in European clothes and great perturbation, fluttered his hands prohibitively before my camera. Having performed this function, he promptly disappeared.

“Ah, it is not allowed,” I thought, and, calling my rickshaw man, I strolled along the street.

Later, passing by a two-story frame building, I noticed my middle-aged Japanese standing in the doorway. He smiled and beckoned me to enter. “Some chin-chin and tea,” thought I, and obeyed. But alas! It was destined to be too much chin-chin and no tea at all. I was in the police station. The middle-aged Japanese was what the American hobo calls a “fly cop.”

Great excitement ensued. Captains, lieutenants and ordinary policeman all talked at once and ran hither and thither. I had run into a hive of blue uniforms, brass buttons and cutlasses. The populace clustered like flies at doors and windows to gape at the “Russian spy.” At first it was all very ludicrous—“capital to while away some of the time ere my steamer departs,” was my judgment; but when I was taken to an upper room and the hours began to slip by, I decided that it was serious. (*Jack London Reports* 27)

London's style here belies the seriousness of the event—demonstrating how experience is transformed by narration, while also revealing an ironic authorial disposition and perspective.¹⁰ Ultimately, London self-reflexively narrates how the war story, the seeming thing that the war correspondent needs to write, is displaced by the story of the writer struggling to get a story—which in turn becomes *the* story. In this and throughout London's Russo-Japanese War correspondence, there is a consistent concern with the ideological and performative dimensions/limitations of narration and perspective. In multiple instances, the writing grapples with and illustrates some of the ways in which the determinants, contingencies, and repression of one (intended and projected) narrative leads to another that is radically different. In the above dispatch, London suggests that he intended to write a story about getting to Chemulpo (Inchon) and witnessing the opening salvos between the Russians and the Japanese—but that intended story is supplanted by the story of Japanese censorship and the comedic clash of cultural and social mores. Here as elsewhere, illustrating how the familiar war story (of blood and glory; triumph and tragedy) is never simply an act of literary mimesis—but an

ideological (narrative) performance that is governed, in part, by the dictates of genre and a host of objective realities—London’s writing is relationally critical of many of the typical dimensions of war correspondence as it was practiced and represented at the close of the nineteenth century. Moreover, using an autobiographical realism as his primary form of narration, London makes it clear that the war correspondent is never simply on the scene, ready to observe and faithfully communicate the truths of experience (a foundational assumption of the genre itself). Rather, the writer is always already inscribed in and determined by a complex sociohistorical dynamic of competing, relational forces, not the least of which is the discursively determined desire of the writer to perform a conscious role (e.g., the adventurous, courageous correspondent) or to act and perform a role in a determined social field (e.g., truth teller as opposed to propagandist or fiction writer). Thus, part of the central interest and critical concern of London’s Russo-Japanese War writings is not the account of bloody battle *per se* (the thing that sells newspapers and establishes the reputation of a war correspondent)—but with the struggles of the writer as such.

Through the core, differential aspects of his war writing, London situates himself and emerges as a different kind of war correspondent—whose task includes critical reflection on the function and genre of war writing. What we find, time and again, in the typical and most successful war dispatches published in the “yellow press” at the close of the nineteenth century is an overarching representation of militarism as romance and adventure and war reporting as thrilling sport. The predominant image and practices of the war correspondent were thus essentially ideological (in the service of nationalism, imperialism, and newspaper circulation, among other things). In one of his last dispatches just before leaving Japan and heading home to California, London provides a clear sense of what was generally found (in terms of style and content) in the war writings of many celebrated correspondents:

Personally, I entered upon this campaign with the most gorgeous conceptions of what a war correspondent’s work in the world must be. I knew that the mortality of war correspondents was said to be greater, in proportion to numbers, than the mortality of soldiers. I remember, during the siege of Khartoum and the attempted relief by Wolsely, the deaths in battle of a number of war correspondents. I had read *The Light that Failed*. I remembered Stephen Crane’s descriptions of being under fire in Cuba. I had heard—God what was there aught I had not heard?—of all sorts and conditions of correspondents in all sorts of battles and skirmishes, right in the thick of it, where life was keen and immortal moments were being lived. In brief, I came to war expecting to get thrills. My only thrills have been those of indignation and irritation. (*Jack London Reports* 122)

London's "disappointment" is, in part, a form of rhetorical performance—and yet the critical tone reveals how thrills and adventure *are not*, in fact, the defining aspects of a war correspondent's daily life. This was, of course, a discovery that London was forced to make while in Japan, Korea, and Manchuria. The war correspondent's experience may very well be keen in the realm of romance narrative and the popular press, but not so much in everyday reality. In the process of seeking the story of war, London's writing reveals that there is a fundamental gap between representation and actual experience. Indeed, the separation and tensions between narration and the experiential, communicative acts and phenomenal realities are central to the meta-discursiveness of London's writing. Certainly, dangers and so-called "thrills" of war were lived by correspondents who came before London, but the account of those experiences override the totality and thus transform their nature. Indeed, in seeking the romantic life of the correspondent and the so-called adventure of war, London discovered such things to be fabrications (or, at best, partial realities/truths) of a particular form of narration. In and through London's writing, we are encouraged to become aware of the fact that war correspondents typically fail to tell about the other, sometimes traumatic and often mundane realities that accompany the "immortal moments." The indignation and irritation, the boredom and frustration, the fear and shocks that are a part of daily life, for example, are largely ignored or transformed into something else.

But this begs the question why this is the case. The glaringly obvious answer is that war correspondence at the end of the nineteenth century, as a popular genre and practice, was decisively *not* about narrating multiple levels of reality and providing the multifaceted truths of experience. Indeed, describing the tedious and mundane aspects of daily life among combatants or "debunking heroes, exposing incompetence, or describing the horrors of war" were not realistic (or desirable) objectives for the typical war correspondent (Knightly 73). Simply put, the popular press who employed correspondents would not tolerate a too critical or representational realism. Rather, at its most basic level, war correspondence was propagandizing entertainment, intended to help sell newspapers and books (Hearst's wealth and empire was based in large part on such writing).¹¹ Dramatic war stories and reports would make it to the front page of *The New York Journal* (Hearst's paper) or the *New York World* (Pulitzer's publication)—whereas those without drama or romance might not be published at all (Spencer 107). Part of the main duty of the war correspondent was to know the proper perspective (i.e., the ideological bent of their employers), and to reduce and transform (sometimes significant) historical realities and inter-subjective experiences into the realm of romance and adventure; and thus generate and reproduce a host of interconnected ideologies. Acceptable topics such as the "glory of the grave" or "a

dog following its master into battle and staying by his body when he fell, of lucky escapes, of gallant charges and heroic retreats” would likely find easy publication—but anything too critical or reflective was doomed to obscurity (Knightly 73).

Implicitly, London’s correspondence suggests that such writing is always discursively contingent and ideologically situated; the representation of context, scene, and event is always already motivated and structured by the pressures of publication and reception, the strictures and limitations of genre, and the dynamics of ideology. By narrating the frustrations and difficulties of witnessing and writing about war, how the ‘event’ of battle is only one dimension in a larger coded reality, and how the correspondent is essentially a narrative device and a fictional construct, London’s war correspondence intimates that “successful” war stories and reports are ideological precisely in their refusal to communicate these things. Or to put it in a slightly different way, they are, foremost, *overdetermined discourses*. By reflexively illustrating the performative essence of war writing, London obviates this point and writes against the grain of a reifying narrative practice.

But this, of course, is not how the majority of London’s readers have approached his Russo-Japanese War writings. The pervasive scholarly tendency has been to read the writings for their biographical significance or for what they reveal about London’s racial politics. The critical and meta-discursive aspects of the writing have been utterly ignored. Joan London considered the writing to be largely undistinguished, though in defense of her father’s efforts (as opposed to his actual writing as a war correspondent), she tells us that London was not alone in this: “None of the foreign correspondents,” she writes “distinguished themselves during the Russo-Japanese War, but few made more determined efforts to get to the front and report events than Jack London. As a writer he appreciated the opportunity to obtain the rich material the conflict would offer; as a Socialist he was equally desirous of witnessing the struggle between the two capitalist countries for the possession of Manchuria” (281). Although certainly correct in her assessment of her father’s endeavors and interests, Joan London’s comment on the failure of foreign war correspondents to distinguish themselves is only provisionally or conditionally accurate. The primary assumption behind her comment is that “distinguished” war reporting requires specific kinds of action and representation (this was certainly the expectation of the yellow press). Presumably, the pathos of battle punctuated with tales of heroism and no small measure of romance are just a few of the necessary hallmarks of successful war writing. In order to generate this type of writing, it was expected that a worthy war correspondent would place himself in the “thick of battle” and risk life itself (war stories themselves often produced and reinforced this idea). Very few

correspondents during the Russo-Japanese War did this, since much of their time was spent being entertained in places like the Imperial Hotel, Tokyo (this was part of the Japanese tactic of controlling Western journalists). Thus, according to a common line of thought, the correspondents were not able to distinguish themselves. This, of course, reflects a fairly limited assessment and understanding of the practice and genre of war reporting—though it illustrates precisely how the genre was typically approached. Ultimately, Jack London “distinguished” himself as a correspondent in two very important ways: (1) by writing about the terrible costs of war on the lives of common people and soldiers, and (2) by attempting to create an overall form of writing that challenges many of the images and underlying ideas and assumptions concerning war reporting and war correspondents (despite all the pressures placed on London to “play the game,” as he described it).

Since he was not able to witness but one battle scene (and this at a great distance), London’s sympathetic representation of people caught in the tragedy of war often focuses on everyday realities—on the difficult aspects of life that are inevitable and yet must be endured during times of war. As Jeanne Campbell Reesman, Sara S. Hodson, and Philip Adam demonstrate, many of London’s dispatches (and photos) are “vignettes of the lives of the villagers and soldiers around him” that draw out their humanity and communicate a deep compassion (62).¹² They also often provide a scathing critique of war, by illustrating how the victims of war are generally those least interested in waging it. We get a sense of this, for example, when London writes of the various forms of bureaucratic corruption and war profiteering that he witnessed. In every war there are circumstances that allow some to profit at the expense of others—but for London this common fact seemed particularly troubling, given the pervasive poverty of the Korean people, who were “squeezed” in various ways by corrupt leaders. Here is one example that London provides: “When the Japanese military authorities want food for the soldiers, the Korean officials demand and receive from each family, say, two measures of rice. The Japanese soldier eats the rice, the Korean people furnish the rice, the Japanese Government pays for the rice and the Korean officials pocket the money” (*Jack London Reports* 51). If war invites varying degrees of profiteering and corruption, it also disrupts and changes the normalcy of daily life—transforming it into something surreal. London offers various instances of this, but perhaps most clearly when he writes of the displacement of villagers and the new normalcy in Sunan, Korea, after the Japanese military commandeered it:

Sunan, and it must have contained four or five thousand inhabitants, is practically deserted. Already the doors and windows have begun to disappear, and inside the houses are quite bare.

A captain, with a company of men, is in charge of the town; and each day it is his duty to make arrangements and billet the soldiers which arrive each night from the south and push on next morning into the north. Naturally, the houses thus occupied by the never-ending procession of troops have been abandoned by their owners.

But the rest of the villagers have fled as well, even those living on the outskirts. Ten years ago, when the Chinese came down the self-same road, the villagers learned what occupation by soldiers meant. This time the Russians scouts came down and went back, and the Japanese are going up; while the villagers are hitting the high places for their hiding-places in the hills. (*Jack London Reports* 73)

Some of the more deeply felt passages in London's war dispatches are concerned not only with destitute common folk, but also with the conditions of common soldiers. More often than not, these personal portraits are coupled with critical reflection. We can see this, for example, in London's account of soldiers marching to the front in new boots:

The Japanese had tramped solidly on day after day on their festering feet, making no effort to relieve the chafes and pressures, and not ever washing the dirt from the sores. . . . If my feet were half as bad as those of the soldiers I saw I am sure that I should elect to remain on my back for a day or so to give the misused tissues a chance to renew themselves. But next morning I beheld the "sore feets" charging across the paddy fields and up to the crest of mountains bearing what to many of them must have been excruciating pain. So one pays the penalty of being a twentieth century soldier, of being unpracticed in the science of footgear and of being compelled to carry his destroying energy in heavy cartridge boxes slung outside his body instead of inside in the arm and shoulder muscles. (*Jack London Reports* 81)

In this and other similar passages, London's tone is reflective, appropriately serious, and precisely critical. The idea that emerges in writing such as this is singularly clear: *war is no adventure*. Rather, it is a phenomenon that embodies a fundamental irrationality (it only becomes adventure when artists/correspondents represent it as such). London communicates this point in various, nuanced ways, but in the following, after witnessing the work of surgeons on the bruised and injured bodies of soldiers, he foregrounds it by reflecting on ironies of human intelligence and creative effort inscribed with the sinister logic inherent in circumstances of war:

A pleasing operation, this patching [soldiers wounds], and one that recommends itself to the intelligence. And yet—how shall I say?—there seems another side to it. Here is man, a rational creature, a creator of wonder and beauty, and of marvels. He has

enslaved the blind elements and forced them to do his work for him. . . . Having done these things, he devotes his intelligence to the manufacture of machines of destruction, to systems of government and taxation which will enable him to equip himself with many of these machines and to use them. Also, he takes a man and instructs him in the humanities of medicine and surgery. This man becomes skilled in the alleviating of pain and the mending of injuries. And this man, with a lot of other men and with many machines of destruction, are dispatched to Korea to travel up the Pekin Road to Manchuria. His business is to see that the other men undergo the minimum of pain consequent upon such a journey. The object of this is to enable them to reach Manchuria, with their machines of destruction, in condition to inflict the maximum pain upon some Russians they expect to find there. In brief, he mends the men that they may mar other men. The Russian surgeons, on the other hand, are doing precisely the same thing. (*Jack London Reports* 81–82)

If London thus “fails” to write about the “thrills and adventures” of war, it is because they do not exist for him—which returns us to the meta-discursiveness and reflexive critical tendencies of his writing. Whereas other correspondents often attempt to reify various similar ideas concerning war and the role of the correspondent through a writing practice that habituates an overall displacement of its discursive contingencies, London works to foreground such things. He thus *approached his task as a war correspondent from a radically different epistemological ground*. The overall form of London’s war correspondence emerges within the broad terrain of narrative realism, which, for London is always a kind of rhetorical/artistic performance—and never simply “representation.” As a realist, London did not confuse literary realism with reality—nor did he believe in the possibility of writing from an “objective” vantage point (i.e. to capture the real as it might exist beyond a determined perspective). Rather, writing is an *act* that reveals particular (inter)subjective, ideological positions and dispositions. Thus, the correspondent as “witness” is not a participant-observer whose task is to exclusively testify to the essence or truth of actions and events. Rather, the witness is an active agent who shapes meaning and perspective in a process of discursive exchange and narration. In varying degrees of explicitness, all of London’s nonfiction prose intimates these ideas, but in his Russo-Japanese War correspondence they are illustrated most clearly through the attitudinal, tonal qualities of his writing. Textual intonation is one of the primary means by which we can understand ideological positioning. It is also one of the central methods that London uses to situate his writing in relation to other forms and practices of writing. We can see this in the following, where London, well into his experience as a correspondent, describes war and the political dynamics of the relationship between

the “host” country (Japan) and the foreign war correspondents as something similar to a tea party:

A war is like a tea party—whichever gives it runs it, and the guests must smile and be polite, no matter how bored they may be. At present Japan is running the war, with Russia a lagging assistant, while the correspondents are trying to smile and be as polite as they can. They began to arrive in Japan early in January, and here, at the end of March, the majority of them are still in Japan. They are still in Japan because their kind hosts, the Japanese, have not yet given them permission to proceed to the front. (*Jack London Reports* 90)

Comparing war to a tea party is, of course, an absurdity—if the function of the description is simply to represent an objective reality. But this is not London’s intent. Rather, London’s characterization and description embodies what M. M. Bakhtin classifies as a “double voiced” and dialogically directed discourse (communicating different discursive positions through style, intonation, and content). The tonal quality in the above is marked with critical scorn and a humorous incredulity. London clearly finds the relationship between Japanese authorities and the foreign correspondents as insufferable and ludicrous—but as such, it is, nevertheless, a revealing absurdity that reminds readers of what they might otherwise miss or forget: namely, that witnessing and reporting war is not a neutral act and the correspondent is never simply a free agent merely on the scene to give an unbiased or unmotivated account. Certainly, London provides an observation (an assessment of experience)—but it is not neutral or objective; rather it is inscribed with and marked by a decisive *attitude*. Moreover, by likening a war to a tea party, London radically undermines standard narrative approaches to war and construes it, satirically, within the terrain of social dynamics (associated primarily with power and highly regulated conventions). A tea party does not typically offer masculine actualization, thrills and adventure, or opportunities of existential and epistemological epiphany (important things we might expect from the lived experiences of a war correspondent); rather it is an arranged, “staged” event that follows various rules and conventions, where participants willfully agree to perform and witness specific roles. London’s point, of course, is not to denigrate or minimize the complexity of the experience of war—but rather to defamiliarize and shift the perspective concerning representational practices in order to highlight the fundamental aspect of power at the core of war’s narrative framing. Far from heroic, the image of the war correspondent that London provides here is that of a functionary attempting to curry favor—which reminds us that *what* the correspondent is allowed to see and *how* he

communicates his experience must be negotiated within various discursive-social dynamics and power relations. The following comedic example obviates the point even further:

Every little while—so I am given to understand—they [Western war correspondents] get together and pass resolutions. Then they proceed in a body to one or another of the Japanese officials who are guiding their destinies, and a conversation like the following takes place:

Correspondents: “General So-and-So, we have held a meeting and decided that we must proceed immediately to the front.”

General So-and-So: “By the way, the Japanese newspaper men are getting up a dinner for you.

Correspondents: “When may we proceed to the front?”

General So-and-So: “This dinner is six days off.”

Correspondents: “We have made up our minds, permission, or no permission to leave Japan.”

General So-and-So: “You will all wear evening dress at the dinner.”

Correspondents visibly angry.

General So-and-So: “And by the time the dinner takes place we will have news for you concerning your departure.”

Correspondents go away mollified and encouraged, and when six days are past and the dinner is dined, the thing is repeated and they find themselves lingering on in Tokyo for another dinner.

And at last, when the Asiatic indirection can no longer hold them, they are promised, definitely, that on a certain date they will receive their permits. The day arrives, the permits are received, but—the permits are the first of a string of permits. Attached to each permit is a slip which attests its worthlessness until further permits are obtained. (*Jack London Reports* 90–91)

Deconstructing the image of correspondents as heroic, transcendent, vital witnessing agents, London portrays them (as well as himself) as relatively powerless players reduced to bit parts in a larger historical drama. But this is not simply to disparage war correspondents as mere functionaries. Rather, the essential objective of London’s critique is twofold: (1) to illustrate how war reporting is always discursively contingent and ideologically situated, and (2) to explode the dominant reifying narrative practice of evading or denying the performative essence of war writing (which displaces any disclosure of its ideological foundations). *London writes against the grain of what is expected in the genre by attempting to draw and keep our attention to the inter-structural dynamics of discourse, representation, and power.* London’s writing consistently shows that what is offered as neutral or truthful representation illustrates

determined points of view that embody and reflect largely unequal dynamics of power. Take for example the following account of the censorious limitations placed on Western war correspondents:

The functions of the war correspondent, so far as I can ascertain, is to sit up on the reverse slopes of hills where honored guests cannot be injured, and from there to listen to the crack of rifles and vainly search the dim distance for the men who are doing the shooting; to receive orders from headquarters as to what he may or may not do; to submit daily to the censors his conjectures and military secrets, and to observe article 4 of the printed Army Regulations—to wit: “Press correspondents should look and behave decently, and should never do anything disorderly, and should never enter the office rooms of the headquarters.” (*Jack London Reports* 121)

Most readers of London’s Russo-Japanese War writings have read comments such as these as essentially a reflection of London’s frustration with the circumstances he found himself in and nothing more. No doubt, the writing reflects something like frustration in its tone (most of London’s letters home to friends and future wife Charmian Kittredge indicate that he was unhappy with his circumstances), but it also indicates how communicative acts like war reporting are negotiated in and through dynamics of power. Passages such as the one above reflexively account for some of the social-political conditions of the possibility of war writing itself, while, once again, “double-voicing” different perspectives. London illustrates at least three fundamentally different approaches and perspectives toward the circumstances (each of which are determined by competing ideologies and political objectives). The satirical, authorial perspective transforms the scene into something nearly surreal, bringing to the fore the frustration and necessitated complacency of the foreign war correspondent, while offsetting the restrictive, nuanced position of the Japanese authorities. The style of the writing does not necessarily invite an overt judgment of the Japanese for seeking to control “the guests”—but rather an understanding of the nature of the game. In instances such as the above, which are fairly common as a stylistic form in London’s correspondence, we are asked to consider the rhetorical and performative essence of the text. Lived experience becomes reflexively stylized (and thus transformed) through writing.

Although London’s foundational artistic epistemology is rooted in the experiential, his nonfiction prose often implies a fundamental gap between the nature of experience and the communicative acts that seek to embody it. This is one of the primary starting points for those characteristically de-familiarizing aspects in his writing. If London’s art as a correspondent is fundamentally performative and meta-discursive, then it follows that his

diverse use of tonality and stylized writing signifies discursive positions that must be understood as related to others that are different (this is the essence of a dialogic writing practice). The writing, overall, asks us to consider the grounds of perspective (that is, what informs/determines it and which world views it seeks to affirm, negate, and/or qualify) within contentious discursive differences. Ultimately, the overarching tendency of London's Russo-Japanese War correspondence is political. However, this is not to claim that the writing is absolutely univocal or consistent in its discursiveness and critical intentions. London was in fact discovering his critical role as a correspondent through the practice of writing itself. Thus, there are certain times when it is difficult to see *how* London's writing is not simply a replication of hegemonic forms of ideology—rather than a critique. This is primarily the case in terms of London's racial comments. In a few instances, mostly in the writing done at the end of his stint as a correspondent, London positions himself as a white man identifying with white men:¹³

Into the windows of large Chinese house I saw many Japanese soldiers curiously peering. Reining up my horse at a window, I too, curiously peered. And the sight I saw was a blow in the face to me. On my mind it had all the stunning effect of the sharp impact of a man's fist. There was a man, a white man, with blue eyes, looking at me. He was dirty and unkempt. He had been through a fierce battle. But his eyes were bluer than mine and his skin as white.

And there were other white men in there with him—many white men. I caught myself gasping. A choking sensation was in my throat. These men were my kind. I saw myself suddenly and sharply aware that I was an alien amongst these brown men who peered through the window at me. And I felt myself strangely at one with those other men behind the window—felt that my place was there inside with them in their captivity, rather than outside in freedom amongst aliens. (*Jack London Reports* 106)

According to Philip S. Foner, passages such as this were “grist to the mills of the Hearst press then engaged in a campaign against the ‘Yellow Peril’ . . . but the socialists in this country found London's accounts of his Japanese experiences revolting” (59). Certainly, London's racial views and politics were complex; and yet, what is interesting about the more troublesome examples of London's apparent racial jingoism is that, as *texts*, they often undermine and deconstruct themselves. To whatever extent London attempted to naturalize racial ideas, the form of his writing tends to problematize any “racist” aspects. For example, in the passage cited above, London avows identification with the Russians through race—but the structure of the writing highlights the questionable nature of racial identification and judgment. London tells us that to be a “white man” is to be an alien—seen as the *other* by the Japanese.

The normative sense of “whiteness” is denaturalized. As prisoners of war, the captured Russian soldiers are forced into a position of alterity that undermines the notion of (and perhaps London’s implicit desire for) European superiority. The Japanese do not see the Russians (or London) as they wished to be perceived—rather, in the dialectic and literality of the Russian’s subjugation, their subjectivity is reduced to the category of an alien enemy to be controlled and vanquished. The inescapable fact of this leads London to draw some interesting conclusions regarding the nature of inter-subjective communication between the Japanese and Western correspondents. On first appearance London seems to conclude that there is a fundamental difference—grounded in race and culture—between Westerners and the Japanese:

The Japanese cannot understand straight talk, white man’s talk. This is one of the causes of so much endless delay. The correspondent talks straight to the Japanese, but he cannot realize that it is straight talk. He feels that there is something at the back of the correspondent’s mind, and the Japanese must have a day or a week to meditate upon what is at the back of the correspondent’s mind. Having done this, he has another talk; but again he must go away and meditate upon what is behind this new talk, and so nothing is accomplished from the correspondent’s point of view. (*Jack London Reports* 125)

And yet, things may not be what they seem. “White man’s talk” here becomes synonymous with a severely limited understanding of language and communication. The enigmas of meaning and intention are removed and words are understood to be miraculously transparent. “White man’s talk” thus reflects a “literalist” belief that words simply correspond with knowable reality and language usage is fundamentally instrumental, reflecting, directly and unambiguously, intentions, meanings, and phenomena; whereas the Japanese view is dialectical, provisional, rooted in the contingencies of social relations and cultural differences. It is not that the Japanese “cannot understand straight talk”—it is, rather, that they refuse such “talk”; they are, as represented in London’s text, deeply and cautiously aware that “talk” with Western correspondents is a game of sorts that is motivated and determined, to varying degrees, by competing and opposing desires and objectives. Approaching “talk” as somehow “straight” could lead to real trouble, at least from the Japanese perspective; and Jack London knew this very well. Thus, in truth, it would seem that it is the “white man” who cannot accept or understand such a politically shrewd—marginally philosophic and meditative—approach to “talk.” London tells us that there is motivation behind “straight talk” (the fact that “nothing is accomplished from the correspondent’s point of view” indicates that the correspondent is seeking something that is being resisted

by the Japanese). Impatient with getting the story, the correspondent who just wants to engage in “straight talk” is certainly not someone disinterested or entirely honest, failing to perceive or to acknowledge what is in fact intersubjectively and sociohistorically real: that is, that talk in matters of war representation is never “straight” and that narrative intentions, of framing and communicating events, are complex, at the very least, and always reflective of oppositional positions and dispositions. In other words, straight talk is a matter of ideological struggle and rhetorical strategy. Once again, London’s writing brings us back to the situational discursiveness of this.

In the last instance, London’s Russo-Japanese War correspondence critically undermines certain ideological aspects of the task and image of the war correspondent at the opening of the twentieth century. By writing against the grain, London’s work during the Russo-Japanese war challenges readers to think of the narrative framing of war (and the projection of the correspondent as hero) as expressive of and inextricably bound to discourse and ideology. In this, the writing is not only meta-discursive—but dialogic in the most critical way.

NOTES

1. The Russo-Japanese war was extensively covered by many European and North American newspapers. As for its “mythic” framing, see Mary Mander’s *Pen and Sword: American War Correspondents, 1898–1975*, David R. Spencer’s *The Yellow Journalism: the Press and America’s Emergence as a World Power* and, most importantly, Phillip Knightly’s *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth-Maker from the Crimea to Kosovo*.
2. For an interesting and readable history of the Russo-Japanese war, see David Walder’s *The Short Victorious War: The Russo-Japanese Conflict, 1904–5* and Richard Connaughton’s *Rising Sun and Tumbling Bear: Russia’s War with Japan*. The war was relatively short (roughly, eighteen months in duration: February 4, 1904, to September 5, 1905), though the tensions between the Russians and the Japanese existed for a decade before the war began. In the 1890s, the Russians had expanded their empire eastward; and with the building of the trans-Siberian Railroad had hoped to increase their sphere of influence into Manchuria and Korea. Meanwhile, Imperial Japan had its own ideas concerning who should dominate the region. After the Russians completed the trans-Siberian Railroad and established a fleet of ships at Port Arthur, Manchuria, the Japanese prepared for war, though they offered the Russians a compromise: Japan would recognize Russia’s presence and interests in Manchuria if the Russians would do the same toward Japan in regard to Korea. Not believing that the Japanese would challenge, let alone defeat in battle, a powerful European nation, the Russians rejected the idea. War was seemingly inevitable between the two nations. Ultimately, the Japanese were victorious over the Russians because of their tactical and technological superiority.

As for the “shock” felt by Westerners after Russia’s defeat, there is no doubt that it was, in part, rooted in racism and fears of the “Yellow Peril.” For a discussion of this aspect of the war and London’s complex literary involvement in the public hysteria concerning the “Yellow Peril,” see John R. Eperjesi’s *The Imperialist Imaginary*. For an opposing assessment, see Daniel A. Metraux’s “Jack London: The Adventurer-Writer who Chronicled Asian Wars, Confronted Racism—and Saw the Future,” which makes the case that London was not in fact a proponent of “Yellow Peril” racism.

3. Jack London departed from San Francisco on the S.S. *Siberia* on 7 January 1904, and arrived in Tokyo on the twenty-fifth. He would spend the next five months, largely frustrated, trying to witness, understand, and write about the war between the Russians and the Japanese, before returning to California in June, feeling that he had mostly wasted his time abroad. There are numerous biographical accounts of London’s adventures and frustrations during his time as a Russo-Japanese War correspondent, but Joan London’s *Jack London and His Times: An Unconventional Biography* and Earle Labor’s *Jack London: An American Life* are particularly engaging.
4. *The Sea Wolf* was completed during the first week of January 1904, just prior to London’s departure for Japan and Korea and it was sent to George P. Brett (London’s editor at MacMillan) on 7 January, the day London left California for Japan.
5. En route to Yokohama, London wrote to Cloudesley Johns that he had bargained for the “best offer” when negotiating his services as a correspondent and it was the Hearst papers that provided the most alluring contract: “could have gone for *Harper’s*, *Collier’s*, and the *New York Herald*, but Hearst made the best offer” (*Jack London Reports* 3). Privately, London was critical of William Randolph Hearst, considering him a ruthless ideologue and a powerful enemy of progressive, socialist politics (which London had been vigorously championing at the time); but, for whatever reasons, Hearst’s reactionary politics (and eagerness to exploit war for increased press circulation) were not a hindrance to London’s decision to report on the conflict between the Russians and the Japanese.
6. I am using the term *dialogic* here in the Bakhtinian sense—however, this is not a point of theoretical contention that I will elaborate extensively. What M. M. Bakhtin actually means by “dialogic” is notoriously ambiguous and of considerable philosophical debate. My use follows the understanding articulated by Ken Hirschkop, who argues that the term designates an “intertextual configuration” that brings together different discourses (or ways of seeing and knowing) into a single text, whose meaning is, in part, dependent on the relational dynamics between represented discourses (*Mikhail Bakhtin: An Aesthetic for Democracy*). To write “dialogically” is thus different than simply being in “dialogue” with others. As Sue Vice states, the distinction between “dialogue” and “dialogism” “is precisely that the latter is a representational term, the former merely descriptive of an everyday activity” (51). Much of London’s Russo-Japanese War writing is “dialogic” in that it seeks to critically

represent, differentiate, and respond to the predominant practice of war correspondence at the beginning of the twentieth century. When London writes as a war correspondent, he has other writers in mind; and he is attempting to relate and differentiate his writing dialogically. In doing this, London's writing practice is, also, a form of ideological critique that is directed, as a determined artistic-rejoinder and response, toward the discourses of others. Famously, Bakhtin articulates the dialogic as resistant to all "final words" (i.e., attempts to end discourse) in its insistence on the fundamental relational aspects of all meaningful discursive processes. London's Russo-Japanese war correspondence is not a final word (concerning his own experiences or the realities he discovered)—but a relational response to a host of interconnected discursive phenomena.

7. For an excellent example of the kind of war correspondence/remembrance intended for "armchair adventurers," see the updated edition of George Lynch and Frederick Palmer's edited collection, *In Many Wars, by Many War Correspondents*.
8. Of these writers, Rudyard Kipling was the one that London admired the most. In the autumn of 1901, on hearing the false news that Kipling had died, London wrote, "These Bones Shall Rise Again" (later published in London's *Revolution and Other Essays* [1910]) in which he characterizes Kipling as one of the preeminent "voices" of the late nineteenth century. As a stylist and as a specific type of literary personality, Kipling was enormously influential.
9. For various detailed and descriptive accounts of London's difficulties and frustrations with Japanese censorship see Michael S. Sweeney's "Delays and Vexation: Jack London and the Russo-Japanese War"; Earle Labor's "The Wages of War," in *Jack London: an American Life*; Reesman, Hodson, and Adam's second chapter in *Jack London, Photographer*; and James L. Haley's ninth chapter in *Wolf: the Lives of Jack London*.
10. It is tempting to think of London's various uses of humor and satire as aesthetically reflective of his socialist politics. London's humor and satire embody a critical attitude and discursive practice that is consistently aimed at figures of power and authority. Indeed, in the humorous and satirical transfiguration of authority, a realm of freedom and insight is glimpsed. Paradigmatic passages such as the one I quote above reflect an attitudinal disposition that seeks to symbolically undermine or topple the serious ethos of power and authority. Indeed, in London's war writing, Japanese power and authority (along with the self-importance and complicity of other correspondents) are frequently metamorphosed into the absurd. By undermining the seriousness of power, London's writing opens the possibility of alternative perspectives (opposing those sanctioned by authority). Indeed, the ethos of power is denaturalized in its satirical reconfiguration.
11. See Evan Thomas's *The War Lovers: Roosevelt, Lodge, Hearst, and the Rush to Empire 1898*, especially chapter 6, "Selling Papers."
12. Not only was London writing about his experiences, he was also capturing what he saw through photography (which, in Japan, got him into trouble with the Japanese police). As Earle Labor states, "People dominate London's

photographs, people in every walk of life" (*Jack London: An American Life* 197). In fact, according to Reesman, Hodson, and Adam, London filled "nearly twenty albums with photographs of these 'human documents'; only during the cruise of the *Snark* did he make a larger batch of photographs" (62). London's photos document his compassion and concern for his subjects. As Reesman, Hodson, and Adam's state London's photographs "preserve the dignity of even the most destitute subjects" (65). Many of London's poignant and affecting photographs make his artistic intent and integrity all the more apparent.

13. At one point well into his experiences as a correspondent, London, utterly frustrated by Japanese censorship, wrote to his employer, Hearst, imploring to be allowed to switch sides and travel with the Russians.

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