

The Pleasures of Conspiracy: American Literature 1870-1910

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(English Language and Literature)
in The University of Michigan
2011

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To Donald R. Beringer, a lover of knowledge and masterful teacher

Acknowledgements:

It has been an absolute privilege to collaborate with such an inspired group of advisers in my time at the University of Michigan. My greatest intellectual and professional debts are to my dissertation chair, Gregg Crane, whose consistent generosity with commentary, frank advice, and intellectual energies were unparalleled. I am perpetually in awe of Gregg's erudition on subjects ranging from pragmatist philosophy to 18th century theology to American legal history (all this, before we even get to literature). Howard Brick provided insights on American republican traditions with virtuosic recitations of intellectual history, extending from Plato to Obama. Jonathan Freedman introduced me to an exciting, subversive side of Henry James, which proved formative to this project. In addition to 11th hour readings of article drafts, June Howard was as brilliant and engaging in conversations about genre methodology and the political unconscious as she was in discussions of the latest episode of *24*.

I would also like to thank for their comments and encouragement Julian Levinson, Anne Curzan, Alisse Portnoy, Thomas Toon, Robert Levine, Gordon Hutner, Scott DeGregorio, Manan Desai, and Jane E. Schultz. It was my absolute pleasure to work with The United States Literatures and Cultures Consortium at the University of Michigan, particularly, Sarah Ehlers, Danny Mintz, David Morrill Schlitt, and Alex Olson. The undergraduates in my "Introduction to Fiction" course provided more than a few "aha"

moments in discussions of Melville, Ellison, and “Hot Fuzz.” I am especially grateful to my dissertation group, Korey Jackson, Mike Tondre, Brian Matzke, and Nate Mills for their diligent readings of my work.

This project benefitted from several fellowships and travel grants from the Rackham School of Graduate Studies at the University of Michigan. I am indebted to librarians at Fisk University, Minnesota State Historical Society, Wisconsin State Historical Society, University of North Carolina, Duke University, and the University of Michigan where I conducted research. Sections of this dissertation appear in or are forthcoming from *Arizona Quarterly* and *Studies in American Fiction*. A huge thanks, of course, to Edgar Dryden editor of *Arizona Quarterly* and Maria Farland editor of *Studies in American Fiction* for their input and support. I have presented works-in-progress from this dissertation at The Great Lakes American Studies Association, The Nineteenth-Century Studies Association, Midwest Modern Language Association, Northeast Modern Language Association, and The United States Literatures and Cultures Consortium.

Some personal thanks and acknowledgements are also in order. I will never forget Anita and Ron Flagstad’s hospitality during my research trip to Nashville. My gratitude to every coffee shop employee in Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti, especially Jimmy Starlight and Ed Renollet at Café Ambrosia. John Burke’s guitar lessons provided lasting relief from the daily grind of studying and writing. Donald R. Beringer provided an ear to bend and thoughtful reflections in our frequent phone conversations about the dissertation. My deepest appreciation to Mary K. Burke for showing me how to enjoy my studies with indispensable lessons on achieving balance between work, personal life, and play. Visits to the best Milwaukeeans ever, Matt and Sara Beringer, were consistently the highlight of my breaks from graduate school. Tim Beringer’s performances taught me all about spectacle, a crucial

category in this dissertation. And finally, I cannot begin to express my love and gratitude to my constant and co-conspirator Jessica Zychowicz, whose dazzling intelligence and unwavering compassion were my greatest sources of inspiration and support throughout the writing of this project.

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Abstract

This dissertation reconsiders late-nineteenth-century American literary history by showing how American writers between 1870 and 1910 developed and responded to a distinctively literary language of conspiracy. This study provides both a new perspective on how authors responded to the deep sense of social and economic crisis following the Civil War and a clearer sense of the cultural reception of events, such as the rise of monopoly capitalism, the Haymarket Affair, and even questions surrounding the identity of William Shakespeare. For late-nineteenth-century writers and their audiences, the term “conspiracy” did not simply describe a crime, but became a vehicle through which suspicions about modernization and industrialization were channeled into exhilarating sensations of romance and mystery. A guiding ambition of this project is to develop a critical paradigm for conspiracy fiction that rigorously engages the aesthetic, affective, and cognitive pleasures of conspiracy narratives.

Following a theoretical and historical introduction, four case studies reveal the influence of conspiracy thinking across diverse literary and cultural contexts. Analysis of Ignatius Donnelly’s fiction and elaborate conspiracy theories on subjects including anarchist terrorism, Shakespeare’s identity, and suspicions that British bankers had caused the Civil War, I propose that Donnelly’s writings exemplify an aesthetic and philosophical investment in conspiracy in Gilded Age populist culture. Close-readings of Henry James’ non-fiction writings on terrorism, his novel, *The Princess Casamassima* (1885), and “dynamite novels”

elucidate James' ambitious narrative experiment through which he found something akin to the sublime in speculation on modern terrorism. Explorations of Charles Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (1900) and *The Colonel's Dream* (1904) reveal Chesnutt's effort to use conspiracy narratives as a corrective to fraudulent histories of the Post-Civil War South in the context of a debate including W.E.B. DuBois, Albion Tourgée, and Thomas Dixon. Finally, analysis of Maria Ruiz de Burton's *The Squatter and the Don* (1885) against the backdrop of "The Colton Scandal" (an incident known as "the Rosetta Stone of bought government") reveals Ruiz de Burton's use of conspiracy as a framework for symbolizing the social upheavals, accompanying U.S. imperialist expansion into California.

CHAPTER I. Introduction

There is a surprising and funny moment in Edward Bellamy's novel *Looking Backward* (1888) in which Dr. Leete, a character from the year 2000, makes the startling revelation that the labor activists of the 1880s were in league with a vast corporate conspiracy. He catches a glimpse of an old newspaper account of a violent labor clash and offhandedly remarks, "the subsidizing of those fellows was one of the shrewdest moves of the opponents of reform." The narrator is understandably shocked and skeptical as Leete casually continues, "certainly...no historical authority nowadays doubts that they were paid by the great monopolies to wave the red flag and talk about burning, sacking, and blowing people up in order to alarm the timid." "What astonishes me most," he says, "is that you should have fallen into the trap so unsuspectingly." Although Bellamy's narrator remains skeptical at this interpretation, he admits "the difficulty of accounting for the course of the anarchists on any other theory."ⁱ

Bellamy's scene is more than a critique on the dangers of corporate power or labor activism, it is also a commentary on the place that conspiracy theory had taken in Americans' imaginations as a vibrant and complex form of sensationalist folklore. Although the idea of a vast clandestine conspiracy was not new, in the late nineteenth century, it gained prominence as a device for making sense of the increasing presence of networks of corporate and bureaucratic power in everyday life. Writers from across the political and social spectrum

responded to mysteries and anomalies in public life with conspiracy theories on subjects ranging from terrorism and corporate corruption to the causes of the Civil War and even suspicions about the identity of William Shakespeare. Bellamy's vignette on anarchists captures the paradoxical mixture of anxiety, contemplation, and playfulness that frequently accompanied this public passion for conspiracy.

Like many of Bellamy's contemporaries, Leete gravitates to the idea of conspiracy because it resolves chaos and satisfies a deep longing for philosophical order. The world becomes a readable text in which everything can be decoded and understood in terms of its relationship to a vast conspiracy among corporate titans and anarchist terrorists. Leete, similar to his late-nineteenth-century counterparts, can then indulge in a bit of self-congratulation at a sophisticated view of history. At the same time, Bellamy's episode reveals the potential for play and pleasure within this conspiratorial interpretation of history. Leete's interpretation implicitly calls to mind a train of images that deliver a sensationalist buzz in its invention of a counterfactual history: a robber baron hands cash to a mad bomber while grizzled anarchists join the Chicago police force in rehearsals of the Haymarket riot. Although Bellamy makes light of the idea of a secret alliance, he nevertheless puts the image of it in front of readers, at once negating and suggesting its possibility. With this litotic sleight of hand Bellamy invites a lingering sense of indeterminacy in his playful suggestion that there might just be a conspiracy at work after all. The scene thus seems less an indictment of political paranoia than Bellamy's own participation in a literary culture capable of converting politics into objects that could at once heighten consciousness and invite contemplation even as they thrilled and delighted.

This intersection of historiographic, philosophical, and aesthetic dimensions of conspiracy theory forms the basic premise of my study. I argue that American writers

between 1870 and 1910 developed and responded to a distinctively literary language of conspiracy. My study focuses on works by Ignatius Donnelly, Henry James, William Dean Howells, Jack London, Charles Chesnutt, Thomas Dixon, Frank Norris and Maria Ruiz de Burton. For these authors and their late-nineteenth-century audiences, the language of conspiracy did not simply describe a crime, but it became a language through which dark suspicions about modernization and industrialization were channeled into exhilarating sensations of romance and mystery. In their works, conspiracy theory is not simply a warning of danger, but a system of observation that offers, on the one hand, a means of envisioning sublime and threatening forms of modern power and, on the other, narratives that challenge conventional forms of rationality in ways that provided emotional and cognitive pleasures. The legacy of this development in American literary culture is tangible in twentieth century and contemporary depictions of conspiracy extending from the postmodern fiction of Thomas Pynchon to popular novels and films such as Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* and Oliver Stone's *JFK*.

In tracking this story in American literary history, a guiding ambition of this project is to develop a critical paradigm for conspiracy fiction that rigorously engages a couple of relatively simple questions: What is the appeal for writers and audiences of fictional depictions that make us feel suspicious? And why are conspiracy narratives such an enduring means of inspiring and resolving suspicion? In doing so, I follow the calls of scholars such as Rita Felski who advocate a criticism that “engages seriously with ordinary motives for reading—such as the desire for knowledge or the longing for escape—that are either overlooked or undervalued in literary scholarship.” To that end, we might speak of conspiracy narratives as a vital and interesting part of this story because they demand a phenomenology of suspicion. In contrast to the critical paradigm of a hermeneutics of

suspicion, a phenomenology of suspicion involves alternate styles of aesthetic engagement that are prevalent in (but perhaps not always limited to) the conspiracy genre. The hermeneutics of suspicion directs critics to be suspicious of literature itself—looking for hidden ideologies and moments of slippage. But much less attention has been paid to those moments when literature directly asks its reader to feel suspicious. To that end, literary fiction about conspiracy offers an especially productive case study, as this fiction so frequently promises readers access to an intensity of feeling and an intensity of thought that is not readily available through the humdrum rhythms of daily unsuspecting life. In some cases, conspiracy fiction is about a desire for knowledge; in other cases, it is shock; in others, a sense of enchantment; and in still other cases the recognition of ideas about identity and self in the subjects of conspiracy fiction.

The Conspiratorial Imagination

When I speak of “conspiracy theory” and “conspiracy thinking” in American political and literary discourse, I mean a very specific strand of thought in intellectual history. Conspiracy itself is typically defined as an illicit agreement between individuals to do harm to a community and its values. And this figure has often inspired dramatic associations and reactions in American political culture and folk imagination whether we refer to the earliest instances of alarm over Illuminati societies, turn-of-the-century fears of corporate and government collusion, McCarthyist red scares, or the hyperbolic rants of Glenn Beck. In each of these cases, conspiracy occupies overlapping spaces among politics, history, and myth that defy easy classification.

The larger-than-life quality of conspiracy thinking becomes less surprising when we consider the distinctive puzzles and dilemmas posed by conspiracy allegations. Since the essence of a conspiracy lies in a mental act, those who allege conspiracy tend to find themselves speculating on human intentions along networks of influence. Conspiratorial agreements present threats to other forms of consent because they create allegiances that can preclude standard social and ethical norms. Like a mobster kissing the boss' rings, conspirators consent to adopt the interests of fellow-conspirators in place of the community's reigning values and, in doing so, they can metastasize, laying the foundations for networks of group action that are beyond government control and often escape public knowledge. As one Supreme Court Justice put it, conspiracy entails a sort of "habitual education" which can surreptitiously multiply into thoroughgoing dangers posed by activities such as terrorism, racketeering, and insider trading.ⁱⁱ As a discourse overdetermined by these problems of perspective and wide-ranging implications, conspiracy theory often emphasizes vivid speculations about the possibilities for how conspiracies might grow and metastasize out of public view. As I discuss below, scholars have varied widely in their estimation of its role in American culture and politics.

Richard Hofstadter was among the first scholars to call for serious examination of conspiracy theory in American intellectual history. Hofstadter's Cold War-era essay, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics" (1963) discerns an "old and recurrent" pattern of conspiracy thinking in American political culture. He notes that American writers from the 1760s onward have regularly conjured up the dark republican melodrama that identifies a "vast' or 'gigantic' conspiracy" as "the motive force in history." Akin to "an [artistic style such as] the baroque," the paranoid style was less the province of an ideological concern than "a way of seeing the world and expressing oneself." For Hofstadter, the spoken and

written genre of “the Paranoid Style” then tends to be distinguished by “an intensely rationalistic obsession” with collecting evidence to support “grandiose theories of conspiracy.” From there, the “paranoid spokesman” makes a “characteristic leap into paranoid fantasy,” which could leave audiences with a sense of fearful wonder at contemplating infinitely large networks of enemies to the public welfare. Writing in the wake of the McCarthy-era, Hofstadter specifically identified the conspiratorial style of thought and expression as a “political pathology,” common in (but not limited to) conservative and reactionary groups’ fears of social progress. Hofstadter referred to conspiracy theories of the late-nineteenth century as the “folklore of populism,” suggesting the extent to which conspiracy theory tended to offer populists and other Americans a highly personalized, melodramatic means of accounting for political causality.ⁱⁱⁱ

Hofstadter’s description of conspiracy as irrationalist political pathology has been met with substantial criticism. Where Hofstadter tends to pathologize conspiracy thinking, Fredric Jameson and Ed White have argued for a “methodological rehabilitation” of conspiracy theory on the grounds that it frequently offers a kind of vernacular historiography for symbolizing the operation of structural power. Jameson describes conspiracy narratives as a “degraded attempt...to think the impossible totality of the world system.”^{iv} Similarly, White argues for “the value of conspiracy theory” on the grounds that it offers “a model of structural analysis from within that assesses and creatively directs innovations within developing ensembles, always attuned to the ways in which early citizens sensed the shakiness or restrictiveness, or potentialities of emergent social structures.”^v Hence, when the structural causes of events on the scale of the French Revolution, slave insurrection, or financial panics escaped immediate perception, individuals might look to the secular explanation of conspiracy to fill these gaps in ways that utilized the intellectual

resources of the Enlightenment. Jameson and White push us beyond the simple pathologizing of conspiracy thinking as sickness by pointing out that conspiracy offers a melodramatic plot structure capable of allegorizing complex economic and social structures. However, in describing conspiracy theory as a somehow “degraded” or “vernacular” form of social analysis, Jameson and White implicitly dismiss these narratives as mere precursors to more advanced forms of rationality. Consequently, they neglect the affective elements of conspiracy theory and, in doing so, reduce the status of conspiracy thinking both in literature and public culture to a mere rejoinder to discursive power.

By contrast, I argue that the persistence of conspiracy theory in American culture depends precisely on the tension between these rationalist investigations and elements that *resist* conventional forms of rationality as a means of accounting for all that happens to us. Conspiracy theories more typically ask audiences to cultivate a skeptical orientation towards the established social order and dominant systems of thought. In this light, the appeal of conspiracy narratives goes far beyond a vernacular attempt to salvage some basic “truth” about power relations as White and Jameson have suggested, but they also constitute as fantasies about overcoming the limits of cognition and rationality and of overwhelming the senses. Conspiracy narratives tend to push toward the realm of the outrageous and confrontations with sublime mystery. They satisfy a need for explanations beyond the immediate narratives handed to us by the powers that be and validate suspicious emotions. To be sure, much of the staying power of conspiracy theories in American culture is due to their ability to dramatize subjects and situations that do succeed in breaking out of conventional styles of rationalization and find a heterodox means of viewing things.

Conspiracy thus engages readers and listeners in flights of imagination that trouble the boundaries between orthodox, commonsensical readings of the political field and

sensations that cast us into the realm of epistemological uncertainty. The point is not to treat these irrationalist dimensions of conspiracy theories as mere kitsch or indicative of a lack of sophistication, but to understand that, as with so many narratives, cognition is almost always intermingled with emotion. In this light, conspiracy emerges as a multi-textured literary convention that encourages audiences to feel smart, thrilled, and terrified all at once. And to miss this quality—to negate emotion and sensation from this picture—is to misunderstand the broader significance of conspiracy thinking in American literary, political, and cultural history more generally.

An Evolving Romance

The vision of a nation assailed on all sides manifests in a number of typological accounts of American nationhood. Aside from anxieties over British invasion, writings from the early national period show a great deal of concern over a range of secret threats the fragile new nation. Ideological responses to the French Revolution and the notorious XYZ affair warned that secret societies such as the Illuminati and the Freemasons were controlling the government and kidnapping anyone who would attempt to reveal their secret rituals and agendas. By the 1830s Americans were being told by prominent figures such as Lyman Beecher that Mormons were threatening American freedom and liberty in the Western frontier, and that Roman Catholics were making plans to install popish rule in America.^{vi} Leading up to the Civil War, abolitionists and eventually mainstream politicians including Lincoln envisaged an unholy “slave power” taking control of the American republic while Southern conservatives countered in almost perfect symmetry, pointing to John Brown’s

siege of Harper's Ferry as an example of a larger conspiratorial undercurrent in the antislavery movement.

These sometimes-fantastic visions formed the basis for a robust literature of conspiracy prior to the Civil War including works by many of the antebellum period's major writers including Charles Brockden Brown, George Lippard Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville. In these early novels, conspiracy theory figures centrally as a means of explaining moral agency and group identity. Robert Levine's *Conspiracy and Romance* provides a thoughtful treatment of conspiracy in early American novels' engagement with early civic republican ideology. Levine observes that literary romancers drew their allegories of American nationhood from conspiracy narratives in pamphlets, journalism and political speeches. "Though varying in precise meaning and function among different social groups, and no longer strictly classical, republicanism, nevertheless offered many Americans a system of beliefs, a conceptual paradigm, for defining their ideal community and identifying conspiratorial threats to it." Conspiracy was "itself a version of 'American Romance'...and it was a discourse regularly appropriated by America's romancers."^{vii} According to Levine, early literary allegories of American nationhood were then founded on a drama of white Protestant identity, counterposed to ethnic, racial, and cultural outsiders who embodied a collective sense of anxiety about the early attempts at building national community and consensus.

The post-Civil War era marks a time when the republican melodrama of conspiracy shifted in response to the changes of modernization and industrialization and acquired new force and vividness from actual events. Where early American and antebellum conspiracy narratives usually hinged on the question of outsiders and insiders in the new republic, postbellum and gilded age narratives dealt with a crisis in faith over the republican project

that emerged with the country's economic and social modernization. As Walter Lippmann described it, the last decades of the nineteenth century seemed to many observers a moment in which "the honeymoon" of traditional American consensus and optimism "was over," and its place was "an alert and tingling sense of labyrinthine evil."^{viii} Lippmann's analysis attributed these paranoid sensibilities to the "rack and strain of modern life" at the paired experiences of the growing anonymity of American social life and the increased visibility of corporate and industrial influence over the day-to-day lives of Americans. Many were indeed convinced that American society had become a battleground for a secret campaign being waged by forces of capital and labor and that evidence of the consequent radical transformations could be located by sifting and searching for signs and symptoms of conspiracy.

The postwar era's conspiracy theories also reflected a reorganization of perceptions with Americans' increasing recognition for the possibilities for deception and propaganda in modern life. As Michael Leja has noted, the postwar era engendered a remaking of cultural perceptions in which habits of viewing with suspicion, or "looking askance," became an essential element of day-to-day existence in America. The scale and scope of "mysteries of the city" grew into figures of spectacle, as individuals came to grips with the daily challenge of unraveling the social codes and potential perils of urban life. Life in Post-Civil War America thus required alertness to various forms of propaganda and deception whether it be in the act of consuming mass culture, considering the effects of Wall Street finance on housing foreclosures, or the disconcerting experience of walking through an anonymous urban crowd. As we shall see, hints of conspiratorial intrigue were newly present in each of these experiences as individuals simultaneously became more alert of the possibility for

conspiratorial dangers in modern life and painfully aware of their inability to perceive those dangers.

In literature, politics, and popular culture, the antebellum uproar over Masonry, slave-owners, and other conspiratorial threats were thus gradually displaced by narratives and explanations that looked to conspiracy as the prism through which to view a modernity in which the individual self was becoming wrapped up with large networks of interdependence and increasingly attuned to possibilities for mass deception. If authors such as Brockden Brown, Lippard and Hawthorne imagined labyrinthine underworlds of freemasons, Illuminati societies, and Catholic cloisters, later conspiracy narratives imagined their underworlds to be in secular, economic, and political terms. The later generation conceived of the threat of a vast conspiracy thus more frequently seemed to emerge in the dread figures of malign corporations, unscrupulous financiers, tightly-disciplined terrorist cells, and indeed, the U.S. government itself.

The notion that conspiracy could help to explain modern life was at play in many of the interpretations of events that have come to define our understanding of the culture and history of the late nineteenth century. The Populist Movement as it emerged in the People's Party and the Farmer's Alliance movement interpreted postwar politics as a series of victories by an international money power over the American populace. Accounts of labor radicals splashed across middle class periodicals in the form of iconic figures such as the mad-bomber or the anarchist newspaper editor. The perceived failure of Reconstruction was attributed by some to supposed conspiracies of radical republicans and by others to the white supremacist terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan and other groups. Similarly, in the West, some blamed corrupt railroad companies for the loss of an agrarian frontier paradise, and others, such as the evangelical minister Josiah Strong, sounded the alarm that Mormons,

socialists, and Native Americans were scheming to halt progress at any cost. The Lincoln assassination, itself a product of a plot by Confederate sympathizers, was linked to figures ranging from British bankers to Radical Republicans to Lincoln's own Vice President, Andrew Johnson. As diverse as these cultural motifs were, they were unified by a common set of anxieties emerging out of the reorganization of perceptions around a new socially defined self, sensitive to new hierarchies of social control and pressures on vision.^{ix}

Perceived conspiratorial histories also filled a certain void in late nineteenth century American life by providing a means of continuing to seek out suggestions of sublime mystery that had traditionally been fulfilled by superstition and religion. In this regard, conspiracy thinking is a significant element of what Alex Owen has termed the "reworking of the idea of the mysterious." As Owen observes, although the newly conceptualized modern subjectivity may have "refused the idea of the supernatural or necessarily 'mysterious'" it could at the same time retain "the concept of the numinous."^x Moderns believed that it was possible to master the world through rationalist thought and technology, yet, as Max Weber famously argued, they suffered from a sense of "disenchantment" insofar as experience of "living in union with the divine" had died off as gods, spirits, and magic had lost credibility.^{xi} In the face of this Weberian "disenchantment" of the world, conspiratorial language suggested the possibility of larger-than-life subjects and networks of power that seemed to verge on the supernatural. We can see this re-envisioning of the numinous in various metaphors that were applied to conspiracy in the form of references to "monster corporations," a shadowy "money power," and the "invisible empire" of the Klan. Henry James, for example, referred to his personal speculation on anarchist and Fenian terrorism as a "mystic solicitation" that enlivened the experience of walking through a city. For James, the "general looming possibilities" of an invisible anarchist underworld opened up the

frightful, yet thrilling suggestion that the middle class flâneur's tranquil sense of the world could dissolve at any moment and be replaced by the rush of emotions that came from contact with danger and with social and ethnic others.^{xii}

Conspiracy thinking thus cut a parallel course to many of the period's other images of modernist sublimity, such as Henry Adams' iconic description of feeling the "revelation of mysterious energy" of the electric dynamo "much as the early Christians felt the Cross."^{xv} But in contrast to the impersonality of Adams' technological sublime, the conspiratorial sublime typically remained tied to the idea of an orderly intentions, whose discovery remained perpetually forestalled. We can see this in various metaphors that were applied to conspiracy in the form of references to "monster corporations," a shadowy "money power," and the "invisible empire" of the Klan. Henry James, for example, referred to his personal speculation on anarchist and Fenian terrorism as a "mystic solicitation" that enlivened the

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This combination of the rational, the shocking, the bizarre, and the transcendent brings up a paradox in the language of conspiracy at the turn of the century. On one hand, conspiracy was closely identified with distinctively rationalist modes of skepticism. To speculate on clues and signs of conspiracy was to identify oneself as being savvy to the perils of an increasingly diverse press where propaganda could flourish and the connection between everyday life in a city or town with new forms of bureaucratized and organizational power. In many cases, this merely constituted thoughtful observation, as there were frequently good reasons to be afraid of the role of conspiracy in modern life. After all, a string of highly visible conspiracies were responsible for a number of major changes in the political and social landscape of late-nineteenth-century America. On the other hand, the public had a habit of using conspiracy thinking as an extension of folklore and irrationalist thinking. Allegations of conspiracy provided cathartic relief at Populist camp meetings, plotlines for pulpy detective novels, and fodder for muckraking newspaper articles.

Where an increasing association with sensationalism relegated conspiracy to a place of non-respectability in political and social discourse, it created a host of possibilities for what it could signal to the public. For artists and for ordinary people, conspiracy theory could offer a means of expressing skepticism towards the official dogmas of professional science, the mainstream press, and educational officials, and cause people to favor individualist thinking and a romantic openness to surprise. In my reading of the era’s

conspiracy fiction, I focus on how the reciprocal relations between developments in America's conspiratorial imagination and the terms and tropes that American writers used in order to envision historical and national experience. A guiding question of this dissertation is thus how attention to the slippery and at-times contradictory structures of feeling and styles of vision associated with conspiracy discourse can illuminate the richness and complexity of late-nineteenth-century American literature.

Several recent studies of literary criticism have argued that conspiracy is central to the politics of late-nineteenth-century American literature. Jeffery Clymer's *America's Culture of Terror* offers a thoughtful account of the prominent role of conspiracy thinking in late-nineteenth-century American novels about anarchist, white supremacist, and Fenian terrorism. In each case, Clymer traces the significance of conspiracy narratives to their ability to offer "discursive coherency." According to Clymer, conspiracy thinking creates "a simple and absolute 'us vs. them' binary" that condensed complex social problems to a simple melodramatic plot" that provided the basis for novelistic readings of politics. For instance, in his reading of James' *The Princess Casamassima*, Clymer observes that conspiratorial depictions of Eastern European anarchists offered a cognitive map for white Protestant anxieties about increasing ethnic heterogeneity and urbanization in America and Western Europe.^{xvii} David Zimmerman's *Panic!* puts a distinctively pedagogical spin on this insight. Where Clymer sees conspiracy as sociology, Zimmerman emphasizes how writers such as Frederic Isham and Upton Sinclair turned to narratives of finance conspiracy "to make sense of new economy's confounding matrix of expectations, intentions and actions" by "tracing economic outcomes no matter how embracing or diffuse, to the villainous intentions of specific groups." These authors, Zimmerman insists, did so with the understanding that they were simplifying and

condensing specific economic processes into terms that would have been comprehensible to popular audiences.^{xviii}

As these studies show, the language of conspiracy was deeply intertwined with how novels represented national consciousness and negotiated racial, ethnic, gendered, and socioeconomic difference. In each case Clymer and Zimmerman productively illustrate how novelists used conspiracy thinking as an interpretive for late-nineteenth-century modernity. Novelists used conspiracy as an interpretive paradigm to illuminate terrorism and capitalistic finance, the failure of Reconstruction, labor uprisings, and the development of the frontier among other things. But Clymer and Zimmerman's readings of conspiracy in the novel, much like Jameson and White's, seem rigid when it comes to accounting for emotional and philosophical readings of conspiracy thinking because they place so much emphasis on the conspiracy narrative's ability to map the complexity of economic and social structures amidst the dizzying rise of industrial capitalism. To that end, Clymer and Zimmerman leave little room in their criticism for conspiracy thinking as a source of spectacle, shock, or source of contemplation. If we really want to speak of the "politics" of postbellum and gilded age American literature, we must therefore look to the broader picture of conspiracy narratives as discourses that combine social allegory with the more elusive elements of imagination and emotion.

As my discussion of Edward Bellamy's *Dr. Leete* suggests, novelistic appropriations of conspiracy narratives could include something akin to a subversive style of play. Conspiracy in the novel turned the criticism of those like Lippmann on its head by celebrating the paranoid subject as a romantic, open to sensations unavailable to most individuals. To that end, late-nineteenth-century novels abound with excursions into heterodoxy—scenes and situations in which knowledge of a vast conspiracy initiates feelings

of doubt or alienation over habitual common sense notions of the world (what Pierre Bourdieu calls “*doxa*”). Paranoid heroes such as Chesnut’s Colonel French, and Ruiz de Burton’s Don Mariano are all jarred out of a comfortable sense of complacency and introduced to a very different world after learning that some aspect of society is being run by a vast conspiracy. Such figures dramatize a questioning the legitimacy of dominant or doxic notions of common sense. They do not locate a transcendental notion of “truth” or a “degraded sociology” (as critics such as Jameson, White, Clymer, and Zimmerman might suggest) as much as they discover a catalyst that knocks them into a state of epistemological uncertainty. They are introduced to the possibility for alliances between disparate groups and unexpected configurations of power in modern life. In Chesnut’s *The Colonel’s Dream*, for instance, Colonel French finds that he must reconsider his perception of racial harmony in the post-Reconstruction South when he discovers the presence of peonage conspiracies, forcing African Americans into a “system worse than slavery.” Chesnut is deliberately ambiguous about the extent to which French is able to see a larger pattern at work. However, the knowledge of the conspiracy unsettles French’s worldview just enough to leave him in a state of indeterminacy, open to possibilities and expectations that challenge his initial epistemological framework.

For James, Chesnut, Bellamy, Ruiz de Burton, and Donnelly such excursions into heterodoxy depended on the way conspiracy discourse inspired a skeptical style of vision. In this respect, conspiracy discourse in late nineteenth century novels parallels the course taken by other forms that catered to a public appetite for deception and illusion as entertainment such as Barnum’s freak shows, detective novels, professional magicians, and Trompe L’Oeil paintings.^{xix} The work of Karen Haltunnen, James Cook, and Leja has shown that the cultural mythology of deception offered a crucial point of departure for American

entertainment, art, and literature. The picture of American artistic and literary culture that emerges out of this scholarship controverts the traditional interpretation American art and literature as characterized by a dry, anti-modern realism that lagged behind their more sophisticated counterparts in Britain and Europe.^{xx} American artists and writers dove into modernity with an awareness of the possibilities for deception and an epistemological flexibility. Conspiracy in fiction and popular culture was distinct from these other spectacles because it so directly engaged issues of power and control in public spaces. Where the pleasure of the mystery novel was that it embedded clues to its solution in its plot, and the reader vicariously lived through the detective's mind (seeing the painting out of place, the thumbprint in the unexpected location), the pleasure of the conspiracy novel was that it made a similar move, but with the clues already embedded in the public sphere.

Throughout this project, I trace a number of recurring motifs in which authors experimented with deception as a theme and narrative technique in order to dramatize and, in some cases, invite heightened states of consciousness and skeptical styles of vision. Conspiracy-themed novels typically featured labyrinthine plot structures in which readers followed protagonist who peeled away layer after layer of deception to uncover the hidden agendas and identities of the conspirators controlling the action of the novel. Some of the works I discuss incorporated documents such as newspaper articles and speeches into their plots in order to invite readers to sift through these documents for hints and clues of conspiratorial deception. Still others encouraged skeptical viewing styles with counterfactual histories that invited questions about how much or how little readers actually knew about the workings of politics in society.

To further illustrate what I mean here, I turn to Jack London's spy novel, *The Iron Heel* (1907). Among novels of the turn of the century, there are few that more directly

engage this fantasy of witnessing a vast clandestine conspiracy. Like the other writers that I discuss in this project, London uses conspiratorial fantasy as a means of initiating a vertiginous system of observation that resembles the experience of trying to sort through the mysteries surrounding public confrontations between labor and capital. *The Iron Heel* features the frame story of “The Everhard Manuscript,” the diary of Avis Everhard, a student-turned-secret agent. The manuscript recounts a failed insurgency against the repressive government regime and it includes commentary from a fictitious archivist who has recovered the document. Over the course of the novel, Avis, once a comfortable, complacent daughter of a University of California professor, becomes a skeptic who recognizes “a tacit conspiracy” running through society. After she witnesses a suspicious industrial accident, Avis writes, “I shrank back from my own conclusions...I was beginning to see through the appearances of the society in which I had always lived, and to find the frightful realities that were beneath.”^{xxi} London’s narrator can be said to be paranoid in Sianne Ngai’s sense of the word, “not as mental illness but as a species of fear based on the dysphoric apprehension of a holistic and all-encompassing system.”^{xxii} Here, the “dysphoric apprehension” is Avis’ disillusioning realization that the capitalists have stacked the deck against labor.

On the face of it, Avis’ radicalization would seem to point to a relatively standard allegory of class inequality. However, in addition to dramatizing capitalist corruption, London’s novel stages a play of perspectives that converts conspiratorial mystery as a form of spectacle. For instance, when Avis goes undercover as an agent for the insurgency, her observations reveal the inadequacy of conventional ways of seeing and interpreting society. Subjects and settings must be continually recalibrated because of the continuing possibility of intrigue and deception:

We took our place at once as agent-provocateurs in the scheme of the Iron Heel. By oligarchs and comrades on the inside who were in high authority, place had been made for us, we were in possession of all necessary documents, and our pasts were accounted for. With help on the inside, this was not difficult, for in that shadow-world of secret service, identity was nebulous. Like ghosts the agents came and went, obeying commands, fulfilling duties, following clues, making their reports to officers they never saw or cooperating with other agents they had never seen before and would never see again.^{xxiii}

London invokes a scenario where the observer must let go of virtually all assumptions about how history operates. One cannot trust appearances of individual subjects for “all identity” in this setting is “nebulous.” London creates this figurative re-enchantment by means of his metaphorical description of the secret service agents in terms of the supernatural (“ghosts” who inhabit a “shadow world”); however, he does so through the basic rationalist activity of sifting and searching through the spy world for the source of power in modern society.

As it turns out, Avis’ conversion to this heightened state of alertness is only part of London’s narrative conceit. We receive another layer of perspective from the commentary of London’s fictitious archivist who, *in addition to* restoring the diary, has added commentary from the perspective of someone who knows of the insurgency’s failure. Readers are thus encouraged by London to identify with the narrator/archivist’s activity of separating fact from illusion through the gathering of evidence. It is, in fact, only through the interplay between the footnotes and Avis’ own partial account that the full terms of the novel’s plot emerge, as the archivist’s footnotes and commentary remind us that Avis “lacked perspective” and that events that were “confused and veiled to her, are clear to us.”^{xxiv}

London closes the distance between the narrator/archivist and his audience by inviting them

to sift and search right along with him. The formal pleasures of *The Iron Heel* thus seem to lie less with the idea of discovering any actual conspiracy, but with the fantasy involved in identifying with the archivist's infinitely repeatable process of questioning orthodoxy and commonsensical ways of seeing the world. In doing so, *The Iron Heel* creates a literary effect somewhere between rationalist puzzle-solving of the detective novel and the heightened tingling sense of enchantment and terror in gothic fiction. Ultimately, London's text thus embraces conspiracy thinking as a mode of affect that heightens awareness to the possibility for a multiplicity of interpretations of reality.

Throughout this project, I explore how this basic fantasy of defamiliarized surfaces offers a lens for a broad array of texts that are not necessarily as obviously fixated on conspiratorial modes of inquiry as London's. From a critical perspective, much of the value of a text like London's is that it is suggestive of a larger culture of reading and writing that saw conspiracy as a generic resource with the potential instigate an alienated "paranoid" vision. Each chapter presents a case study that sketches and distinguishes in greater detail different elements of the conspiratorial styles of viewing and pleasure seeking that I have introduced in broad strokes so far. Sometimes this will involve extensive discussions of how extra-literary genres created distinctive conspiratorial styles of knowledge production and therefore fresh possibilities for imagining society as a form of spectacle. In doing so, this project looks to reveal a continuity of the conspiracy narrative: its cognitive claims and affective attractions across cultural contexts.

I begin with a chapter on the Populist activist and novelist Ignatius Donnelly. Donnelly's style of knowledge production offers an archetype for a relatively new model of authorship in American popular and literary culture. Nicknamed "The Prince of Cranks" by his critics, Donnelly understood conspiracy as a near-mystical force in modern life that could

account for virtually all of life's mysteries. He produced a stunning body of speculative works that made use of conspiracy theories on Shakespeare, the lost city of Atlantis, and "money power" conspiracy. Donnelly's novels, *Caesar's Column* (1890) and *The Golden Bottle* (1892) use his own fantastic and bizarre theories as the basis for a brand of fiction that was meant to awaken a heightened consciousness in his readers. Directed towards individuals who wished to overcome mass-deception by learning to "read between the lines," *Caesar's Column* and *The Golden Bottle* speculate that American life is suffused with the conspiratorial influence of secret human forces.

Rather than writing Donnelly off as a quack or a crank, I look to understand how his particular form of thinking constituted a brand of intellectualism that appealed to working-class and rural publics, valuing esoteric and arcane knowledge and heterodoxy. This style of thinking offered a satisfying set of explanations that opposed the "official" version of history and in part because it fed a fascination with esoteric forms of knowledge and a taste for ecstatic sensations that often seemed absent in the modern world. As historians and cultural critics have long noted, the conspiracy thinking of the Populist Movement exercised a significant influence over movement politics and popular culture in the United States. For that reason, I discuss Donnelly's role at the forefront of the raucous culture of late-nineteenth-century Populism as it emerged in groups such as the People's Party and the Grange Alliance. In addition to Donnelly's novels, I trace the evolution of conspiracy thinking in Frederick Upham Adams' *President John Smith* (1896) and William "Coin" Harvey's *A Tale of Two Nations* (1894) and *Coin's Financial School* (1895), non-fiction texts such as Sarah Emery's influential silver tract *Seven Financial Conspiracies Which Have Enslaved the American People* (1887) as well as Donnelly's novels.^{xxv} This broader conspiratorial strand in

Populist thinking, as I will discuss, combined vigorous political protest with the affective pleasures of religious revivalism.

My second chapter describes Henry James' *The Princess Casamassima* (1885) as a narrative experiment with the problems of perspective and heightened states of consciousness accompanying the emergence of modern terrorism. Newspapers announced that terrorists and dynamite bombs were lurking behind every corner in the world's major cities while a sensationalist subgenre of "dynamite novels" dramatized these suggestions, offering readers a voyeuristic glimpse into the criminal underworld of modern terrorism. Where Donnelly emphasized these styles of vision as a sort of mystical "cipher" for all life's mysteries, James adopted the ironic position of using conspiracy narratives as a distinctively modern form of pleasure-seeking. As his invocation of a "mystic solicitation" would imply, James was interested in how the very suggestion of conspiracy seemed to plunge the individual into curious and restless states of mind. In exploring James' playful meditation on conspiracy thinking, I join an increasing number of critics who replace the conception of James as a disengaged "master formalist" with the picture of an author fascinated by the potential of the human imagination to produce "the dream of intenser experience" that James defined as the basis for literary romance. Similar to the title character of *The Princess Casamassima*, James turned to stories about anarchist conspiracy as a form of literary slumming. These popular narratives offered him a philosophical and aesthetic alternative to strenuous Victorian modes of rationalism.^{xxvi}

Chapter three describes Charles Chesnutt's efforts to use conspiracy narratives as a means of making sense of the consistent pattern of political dysfunction and violence that followed the Civil War in the American South in his novels *The Marrow of Tradition* (1900) and *The Colonel's Dream* (1904). As an alternative to turn-of-the-century historical accounts

representing Reconstruction as the victimization of white Southerners, Chesnutt described Klan-like white supremacists, peonage scams, and secret networks of African Americans to meditate on paranoid habits of mind and continuing patterns of political divisiveness between blacks and whites in Southern society. In doing so, Chesnutt pursued something much more elusive than a mere replacement for wrong-headed histories. He instead looked to capture the pervasive sense of uneasiness in Southern life at the turn of the century—the strange experience that DuBois would refer to as the “phantasmagoria” in which the “the unrest and bitterness of postwar lawlessness were gradually transmuted into economic pressure.”^{xxvii} With that in mind, the effect that Chesnutt looked to create was not so much a direct account of the sources of inequality, but to cultivate in his readers an openness to heterodox interpretations of Southern history.

Where past critics have observed that Chesnutt’s novels are incisive analyses of postbellum Southern politics, they have yet to really grapple with the way Chesnutt’s work was written in conversation with a broader culture of literature, politics, and popular media that viewed Southern history through the lens of conspiracy theory. My chapter fills this gap by situating Chesnutt’s text among a rich body of material including conspiracy-themed novels like Albion Tourgée’s *A Fool’s Errand* (1879), Thomas Nelson Page’s *Red Rock* (1899), Sutton Griggs’ *Imperium in Imperio* (1899), and Thomas Dixon’s *The Leopard’s Spots* (1902). In reading Chesnutt’s work in against this backdrop, I reveal a rarely-discussed side of Chesnutt that dabbled in popular ferment.^{xxviii}

I conclude with a chapter that traces Maria Ruiz de Burton’s conspiratorial interpretation of the United States’ annexation of California from Mexico in her novel, *The Squatter and the Don*. Critics typically characterize Ruiz de Burton in terms of her articulation of the nuances of identity on the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Instead, I put her work in the

context of the literary tradition, which includes the Gilded Age political exposés and novels by Henry Adams and Mark Twain. From this perspective Ruiz de Burton emerges as an author who adds a distinctive transnational dimension to the ubiquitous late nineteenth century narratives of encounters between principled agrarian traditionalists and a corrupt Yankee economic order. To that end, *The Squatter and the Don* Ruiz de Burton recasts U.S. expansion to California as a disturbance in which a shadowy collection of financial elites disrupt the patriarchal order of Californian culture as it had been established by Spanish empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In this manner, Ruiz de Burton attempted to write the story of an imperial-industrial complex into the annals of American folk memory.

In particular, I read *The Squatter and the Don* against the backdrop of the famous scandal surrounding the Colton letters in 1883. Known to historians as “the Rosetta Stone of bought government,” the Colton Letters were a series of correspondences between Collis Huntington and David Colton that exposed a massive system of bribes and corruptions behind the operation of the Southern and Central Pacific Railroads. Despite the centrality of the Colton letters in *The Squatter and the Don*’s plot and themes, Ruiz de Burton’s treatment of the scandal has received scant scholarly attention. I address this omission by arguing that the powerful image of the Colton scandal provided Ruiz de Burton a framework for symbolizing the reversals and upheavals in racial and social order that accompanied the U.S. annexation of California. In this sense, *The Squatter and the Don* uses the suggestions of bribery and corruption of the Colton scandal in order to articulate a form of status-thinking that attempts to reassert Spanish Californios’ claims to the social and economic privileges of “white” racial subjects.

CHAPTER II.
“Some Unsuspected Author”:ⁱ The Paranoid Vision of Ignatius Donnelly

Regularity does not grow out of chaos. There can be no intellectual order without preexisting intellectual purpose. The fruits of the mind can only be found where mind is or has been.
--Ignatius Donnellyⁱ

And Donnelly himself puzzles me. It is a question in my mind, whether the dash of insanity which Plato permits—even insists upon—for the poet...does not damn, the lawyer, the critic, the advocate, the man whose bent and necessity is cold logic.
--Walt Whitmanⁱⁱ

Ignatius Donnelly, the Populist politician, bestselling novelist, and armchair historian, was never short on sensational revelations. Nicknamed, “The Prince of Cranks” and the “Apostle of Discontent,” he often seems to embody the conspiratorial imagination of late-nineteenth-century Populist culture. Donnelly’s novels, speeches, and essays abound with a startling array of offbeat theories and speculations. His works include a pseudo-scientific history of the lost continent of Atlantis; two massive volumes claiming that Shakespeare’s plays contained a secret code; three conspiracy-themed novels; and extensive writings claiming that international bankers had used the Civil War as a pretext for enslaving the American people. Donnelly’s conspiracy theories and sensational revelations were rooted in the essential belief that hidden human forces are at work all around us, shaping seemingly disparate events, and that these forces are discoverable through careful attention to our surroundings.ⁱⁱⁱ

Donnelly's fiction, much like Donnelly himself, epitomizes a philosophical and aesthetic investment in conspiratorial styles of vision for late-nineteenth-century American literary culture. His works were meant to and frequently did offer readers an outlet for converting the language of conspiracy into a kind of literary detective work that set his publics in a heightened state of alertness to the possibilities for deception and conspiracy in modern life. Donnelly's primary work of fiction, *Caesar's Column* (1890), was a major bestseller, with an estimated 700,000 copies sold in the United States, Britain, and Germany during the 1890s.^{iv} *Caesar's Column* is a wild science fiction tale that speculates that in the year 1988 a Jewish plutocracy would be at war with an anarchist secret society known as "The Brotherhood of Destruction." Extending the detective story's characteristic investigation of a clue in pursuit of the solution to an individual crime, *Caesar's Column* constructs a setting in which clues and hints of the dueling plutocratic and anarchist conspiracies recur in public life. Donnelly interspersed dime novel plots with actual documents, newspaper articles, sociological statistics and long speeches that strung together coincidences that seemed to confirm Donnelly's underlying conclusion of a coming cataclysm. The resulting text is an eccentric fusion of literary fiction, pseudo-sociology, and sensationalist conspiracy theory in which Donnelly encourages his reader to imagine the conspiracy narratives of the fiction tale as distinct possibilities that can be detected through attention to aberrations in public life. In this sense, Donnelly's novel finds pleasure in a kind conspiratorial detective work.

In its time, Donnelly's formula was so shocking and alienating that, when he first submitted *Caesar's Column* for review, the publisher A.C. McClurg feared that it would have workers rioting in the streets. In what must be one of the great rejection letters of all time, the publisher warned Donnelly, "it is very possible to make people believe that evils exist that do not exist, and that brutal and frightful remedies must be plotted instead...Whatever

the intent may have been in writing this book, my mind is very clear that its effect, if published, would be nothing but bad, and very bad.” He closed his letter by advising Donnelly that, if he insisted on releasing *Caesar’s Column*, he should, at the very least, make sure that the book would not be sold at a price less than \$1.00, so as to keep it out of the hands of those “whom it would only harm.”^v

Although the degree of Donnelly’s enthusiasm for conspiracy theories sets him apart from his contemporaries, many of the era’s major writers shared his conviction that the rapid pace of capitalization and internationalization had given rise to secret conflicts between the powerful and the powerless. Conspiratorial readings of incidents such as Black Friday and the Haymarket Affair were central to works that have become touchstones to criticism of the period’s literary attempts to envision the nation. Texts such as Henry Adams’ essay, “The New York Gold Conspiracy” (1869), William Dean Howells’ *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), Frank Norris’ *The Octopus* (1901), and Thomas Dixon’s infamous *Leopard’s Spots* (1902) responded to and participated in deeply ambivalent public attitudes over the possibility of conspiracy: a simultaneous dread at the civic nightmare of corporate and terrorist forces in the imagined space of the nation *and* a fascination with these very forces as a source of sublime awe. In these works, the term “conspiracy” did not simply describe a crime, but became a vehicle through which dark suspicions about modernization and industrialization were channeled into exhilarating sensations of romance and mystery. These writers added a modern twist to the conspiratorial puzzles of Edgar Allan Poe and the “dens of iniquity” that appeared in George Lippard’s dime novels.

Modern critics have found Donnelly’s fascination with conspiracy to be an incredibly mixed legacy. For Richard Hofstadter, Donnelly is the poster child for the political pathology that Hofstadter termed the “paranoid style” in American politics. *Caesar’s Column*,

Hofstadter writes, is a “desperate work” that appealed to “the kind of thinking” that emerges when “those who have attained only a low level of education” are “so completely shut out from access to the centers of power” that they come to perceive “unlimited manipulation by those who wield power.”^{vi} Recent assessments, such as Martin Ruddick’s 2003 annotated edition of *Caesar’s Column*, generally subsume the issue of conspiracy thinking into a discussion of the utopian/dystopian genre. Ruddick writes that Donnelly’s text is a prescient indication that “the dystopian would largely supersede the utopian vision” in “fiction about the future of civilization in the twentieth century;” however, Ruddick generally underplays Donnelly’s fascination with conspiracy as a somewhat embarrassing side note.^{vii} In either maligning or discounting Donnelly’s use of conspiracy as a narrative form, critics have thus tended to displace the source of his broad appeal to late nineteenth century audiences and the underlying importance of conspiracy thinking as an organizing theme of his work.

Donnelly was clearly an eccentric; however, this is no reason to dismiss him or assume that he was incapable of producing provocative and valuable art. On the contrary, “crank,” in the slang of the period, denotes “an enthusiastic preoccupation with eccentric notions or impracticable projects” is much of what makes Donnelly and his work so interesting to a broader critical discussion of conspiracy discourse in American literary history.^{viii} My discussion of Donnelly’s fiction does not attempt to rescue him from accusations of anti-Semitism or nativism (though, as critics like Oscar Handlin and others have shown, this is an incredibly complex issue). Instead, I want to show that there was more than just paranoia or madness at work in Donnelly’s interest in conspiracy. For Donnelly and his readers, the figures and themes of conspiracy an endless means of imaginative speculation. The appeal of conspiracy theory for Donnelly was thus not only that it allowed one to access a heterodox reading of American history but that it also

facilitated an endless proliferation of investigative and narrative processes. According to Donnelly, modern life was subsumed under a complex fog of modern propaganda and bureaucracy. As a result, there would always be another deception to uncover or another puzzle to solve, and thus another chance for shock and surprise as one's view of the world was disrupted.^{ix}

Donnelly's fiction dramatizes this conspiratorial detective work by reimagining everyday surroundings as the basis for a sublime spectacle in which every sight and sound can serve as a clue to a hidden set of forces guiding postbellum history. Donnelly, in other words, establishes a *semiotic system*, which encourages readers his nineteenth century readers to search and sift through the public sphere for signs of hidden conspiratorial causes behind mysteries in public life. Consider, for example, Donnelly's description of his fictional plutocracy's war-room from *Caesar's Column*:

This is the real center of government of the American continent; all the rest is sham and form. The men who meet here determine the condition of all the hundreds of millions who dwell on the great land revealed to the world by Columbus. Here political parties, courts, juries, governors, legislatures, congresses, presidents are made and unmade; and from this spot they are controlled and directed in the discharge of their multiform functions. The decrees formulated here are echoed by a hundred thousand newspapers and many thousands of orators; and they are enforced by an uncountable army of soldiers, servants, tools, spies, and even assassins. He who stands in the way of the men who assemble here perishes. He who would oppose them takes his life in his hands. You are, young man, as if I had led you to the center of the earth, and I had placed your hand upon the very pivot, the well-

oiled axle, upon which, noiselessly, the whole great globe revolves, and from which the awful forces extend which hold it all together.^x

Each aspect of Donnelly's description takes on a slightly allegorical quality in its potential linkage to a larger set of ideas and anxieties about the course of history. The newspapers that Donnelly's protagonist reads, the outcomes of elections, even strange expressions in the eyes of the people at his hotel—each of these things creates a vantage point from which to view the underlying powers in society in the form of “the very pivot on which the whole great globe revolves.” The passage offers a perspective from which his protagonist can simultaneously affirm his own modernity (in his canny ability to overcome modern forms of deception) *and* indulge in a variety of sublime experience (through his visions of incalculably large power). In this manner, Donnelly's conspiracy fiction dramatizes and fantasizes a hermeneutic position from which one can read aright the signs of power in late-nineteenth century modernity.

Populism's “Coming Cataclysm”

Donnelly's politics, his fictional writings, and his non-fictional writings were intertwined with conspiracy thinking of the late nineteenth century Populist movement as it emerged in groups like the People's Party and the Farmer's Alliance. Populism was an eclectic and colorful political movement of the latter decades of the nineteenth century that coalesced around working class and rural reformers' moral outrage at the enormous material inequalities that had accompanied American industrialization. As Michael Kazin notes, the Populists were inheritors of a longstanding rhetorical and intellectual tradition in American politics that typically celebrated “ordinary people as a noble assemblage” in opposition to

“self-serving and undemocratic elite opponents.”^{xi} Like the antebellum artisan classes, Jacksonians and Radical Republicans before them, late nineteenth century Populists embraced a version of civic republicanism, fearful of undue influence of elite classes.

In their somewhat mythic version of American history, the Populists saw the end of the Civil War as a moment in which conspiracy had become endemic to industrial society. According to this “Economic/political conspiracy theory” interpretation of American history, “money power” made up of bankers, financiers and politicians had usurped the structures of American government and commerce, leading to the period’s intense economic and social inequalities. Prominent figures including Mary E. Lease, Jerry Simpson, and even William Jennings Bryan promoted the notion that economic modernization and urbanization had opened a Pandora’s box of threats against the American republic including vast economic inequalities, which, it was said, radicalized immigrants who in turn became terrorists.^{xii} In *The Arena*, James Rhodes Buchanan observed this emerging tension as he wrote of a “feeling growing in intensity among hundreds of thousands” of a “coming cataclysm of America and Europe.” Describing the pervasive atmosphere of suspicion, Buchanan noted, “the financial managers of our politics do not realize what a vast multitude do now believe most earnestly and angrily, that the legislation of financiers and politicians has destroyed their prosperity,” that corruption had furnished “princely fortunes that tower above the common plane of humanity and threaten the stability of the republic.”^{xiii}

Populist conspiracy theory occupied an uneasy space between legitimate public outrage and instances of paranoid nativism and Anti-Semitism. As Jeffrey Ostler notes, “Populist conspiracy theory mistakenly personalized the forces responsible for the creation of adverse policies. However, it did this in the context of a tradition which identified the class interests (analytical radical republicanism) which, arguably at least, explained agrarian

hardship.”^{xiv} From one standpoint, concerns over vast “economic/political conspiracy” could thus be reasonable investigative hypothesis. Events including the General Strike of 1877, The Credit Mobilier Affair, and the Haymarket Riot furnished the grand background to the period’s conspiracy thinking and the subject matter for some of its most important exposés including the work of Henry George and Ida Tarbell. From another standpoint, the Populist movement’s conspiratorial culture just as easily lent itself to malign fantasy and paranoia, sometimes taking a virulently anti-Semitic form. During the 1880s and 1890s dozens of wide-circulating pamphlets made the preposterous claim that the major political events of the late nineteenth century had been directed by British and Jewish bankers to relegate American workers to a state of permanent servitude.

While the rural and agrarian Populists have often garnered the most attention as proponents of an “economic/political” conspiracy theory of American history, variations of this interpretation of American history also flourished in a variety of texts across the political spectrum. Henry Adams, a veritable embodiment of the values of the antebellum establishment, wrote one of the period’s most significant pieces of writing on political and economic conspiracy, “The New York Gold Conspiracy.” Of Jay Fisk and John Gould’s collusion with officials in the Grant administration to corner the gold market, Adams described the Black Friday conspirators as “An Empire within a Republic” whose power was unprecedented in American life.^{xv} In a famous article, Henry Demarest Lloyd documented the corroboration between Standard Oil’s John D. Rockefeller and the railroads’ Cornelius Vanderbilt to eliminate competition in the oil market.^{xvi}

A primary factor motivating Populist conspiracy rhetoric was the movement’s broad-based attempts to develop patterns of thinking and affect that would be accessible to farmers and workers. Rural and working classes were understandably suspicious of members of the

intelligentsia who, like Frederick Jackson Turner, snidely accused agrarian reformers of being “primitives” and an educational system that emphasized the training of doctors and lawyers while neglecting the development farming techniques.^{xvii} Conspiracy theory constituted a way out of this dilemma insofar as it offered a style of investigation whereby the public sphere could be converted into a rich bed of clues for navigating the quintessentially modern problems of propaganda and deception. In this sense, conspiracy thinking offered a solution to the Gramscian problem of the failure of working classes to give rise to an “organic intellectual.”^{xviii} In supplying the amateur with a means of viewing the underlying forces structuring modernity, conspiracy thinking offered a style of investigation that seemed to make intellectualism available to the uneducated classes. The heterodox version of American history was typically constructed as the province of organic intellectuals who were free of the biases that went along with being too closely tied to mainstream political and financial establishments. According to this logic, those who could take the existential leap of understanding this unpopular version of American history were initiating themselves into a host of skeptical orientations.

The Populists’ challenge to mainstream intellectualism and the “subsidized press” relied heavily on emotional appeals mingling the spectacle of evangelical Christianity with vivid political critiques of the nation’s financial and social elites. As Robert McMath writes, “a new surge of Christian revivalism—a Third Great Awakening in American History—provided the context” for Populist attempts to “evoke the scale of the problem “ and “incite the upheaval needed to set it right...Most insurgents used a Christian vocabulary because it was the only way they knew to speak with great emotion about the ultimate social concerns.”^{xix} At Populist camp meetings, speaker after speaker would stir crowds into a frenzy that resembled the emotional outpourings of ecstatic revelation, moving audiences to

tears and seemingly heightened states of consciousness. These well-coordinated events typically lasted four to five days and drew thousands of audience members. The underlying appeal of Christian enthusiasm for Populist activists had less to do with theology than with its ability to relate to audiences on an emotional level by conveying the sense of direct connection to an overwhelming power.

Few individuals were more skilled than Donnelly himself at mobilizing narratives about investigation and hidden human intentions in order to the Populists' passions. Donnelly's appearances on the lecture circuit earned him a substantial reputation as an arresting speaker. It was not uncommon for Donnelly's appearances to inspire fanatical levels of enthusiasm among followers. In one speech in St. Paul Minnesota, the audience was, according to Martin Ridge, "so deeply moved and so completely captivated by his personal magnetism" that they "applauded for a full five minutes when he appeared upon the platform, throwing their hats into the air, stamping their feet until the building shook," interrupting Donnelly with "yells and whoops typical of western camp meeting."^{xxx} Donnelly's oratory and political thought inspired such passionate responses precisely because they wove partisan politics into a compelling and urgent narrative that responded directly to many of the underlying currents and suspicions. This was exemplified by Donnelly's preamble to the People's Party platform, a piece that Robert McMath describes as a "distillation of Populist thought" of the 1870s-1890s.^{xxi} The preamble created a minor sensation when Donnelly delivered it as a speech at the 1892 People's Party convention. Donnelly suggested a world in which the old idyllic relations of the early nineteenth century had been replaced by a frightening new world order:

We meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political and material ruin. Corruption dominates the ballot box, the legislatures, the Congress,

and touches even the ermine of the bench. The people are demoralized. Many of the States have been compelled to isolate the voters at the polling place in order to prevent universal intimidation or bribery. The newspapers are subsidized or muzzled; public opinion silenced; business prostrate, our homes covered with mortgages, labor impoverished, and the land concentrating in the hands of capitalists...A vast conspiracy against mankind has been organized on two continents, and it is rapidly taking possession of the world. If not met and overthrown at once it forebodes terrible social convulsions, the destruction of civilization, or the establishment of an absolute despotism.^{xxii}

As he does in his fiction, Donnelly's oratory combines a secret history of the late nineteenth century while whipping his audiences into a frenzied rush of emotions. In this sense, Donnelly's oratory made use of an internal tension in the language of conspiracy. On one hand, Donnelly's conspiracy hypothesis suggests a rational investigation of historical causality, searching for clues, such as fudged elections and bad mortgages as evidence of conspiracy. On the other hand, Donnelly's accusation of "a vast conspiracy against mankind" sways his audience less through logical reasoning than through a visceral brand of sensationalism.

Donnelly's fascination with sensational revelations and conspiracy extended beyond his claims of "vast combinations" of monopolists and corrupt politicians. He also had, for instance, a conspiracy theory about Shakespeare, which appeared in his book, *The Great Cryptogram*. Here Donnelly claimed that Shakespeare's plays concealed an elaborate code revealing Francis Bacon to be their true author and a hidden "Cipher-story" about the inner-workings of the Elizabethan court. Donnelly had not studied cryptography and, in order to compensate for gaps in his cipher, he adjusted certain numbers, rearranging his decoded

texts until they fit his final expected narrative.^{xxiii} At first, it may seem odd that a professed egalitarian like Donnelly would argue in favor of the nobleman Bacon, this thematic issue was less important to Donnelly than the fact that the suggestion of a cipher validated a skeptical style of knowledge production. No small part of the appeal here was the implicit suggestion that anyone—especially an open-minded amateur—could apply a critical reading in order to discredit official dogma. Not only does he confront a hyper-canonized body of works whose beauty is considered unimpeachable by the critical establishment, but he suggests that in

order to truly appreciate the beauty of these works, one must understand the complex mathematical structures and hidden political

agendas that supposedly

underpinned their creation. The version of sixteenth century England that emerges in Donnelly's cipher is a thinly veiled, if unintentional, allegory for late nineteenth century politics. Queen Elizabeth resembles the head of a modern police state while Bacon is a frustrated politician who shares Donnelly's own passion for democratization in his efforts to

Observe, here, how precisely the same number brings out *seas* and *ill*; compare the numbers in groups; — 516—516; — 167—167; — 349—349; — 22 *b & h*—22 *b & h*; — 327—327; — and going up the first column of page 76 with 327, we find *seas*; while going up the first column of page 75 with 327 brings us to *ill*.

	Word.	Page and Column.	
516—167—349—22 <i>b & h</i> —327—284—48. 447—48 —404+1—405+8 <i>b</i> —408.	408	75:1	that
516—167—349—22 <i>b & h</i> —327—254—78—15 <i>b & h</i> — 58. 448—58—390+1—391.	391	76:1	More
516—167—349—22 <i>b & h</i> —327—50—277—50 (74:2) —227—1 <i>h</i> —228.	228	74:1	low
516—167—349—22 <i>b & h</i> —327—254—78—50 (76:1) —23—1 <i>h</i> —23.	23	76:1	or
516—167—349—22 <i>b & h</i> —327—30—297—254—48 —15 <i>b & h</i> —28.	28	75:2	Shak'st
516—167—349—22 <i>b & h</i> —327—248—79. 198—79 —114+1—115+ <i>b & h</i> —(121).	(121)	75:1	spur
516—167—349—22 <i>b & h</i> —327—254—78—15 <i>b & h</i> — 58. 498—58—440+1—441.	441	76:1	never
516—167—349—22 <i>b & h</i> —327—50—227—7 <i>b & h</i> — 516—167—349—22 <i>b & h</i> —327.	220 327	76:2 76:1	writ a
516—167—349—22 <i>b & h</i> —327—145 (76:2)—182. 498—182—316+1—317.	817	76:1	word
516—167—349—22 <i>b & h</i> —327—198—184. 248— 184—114+1—115.	115	74:2	of
516—167—349—22 <i>b & h</i> —327—254—78—15 <i>b & h</i> — —58—5 <i>b</i> —58.	58	74:1	them.

Figure 2.1. Chart from Donnelly's *The Great Cryptogram*

“make history familiar to the common people” and hence “prepare the way for the day when Charles I was brought to trial and the scaffold.”^{xxxiv}

Donnelly’s Baconian theory offers a striking example of how Donnelly’s mode of conspiratorial thinking entailed a form of mental-work-as-pleasure through the endless proliferation of investigative practices and puzzles. One almost needs to physically handle *The Great Cryptogram* to appreciate the extent of Donnelly’s fixation on the investigative intricacy of his theory. At nearly 1000 pages, it is the size of a large hardbound dictionary and it features a staggering number of charts, graphs, and calculations that explode across the text’s pages. Like a modern detective novel (*Figure 2.1*), *The Great Cryptogram* offers the pleasures of vicarious investigation and deduction. Throughout the book, he argues that cryptography can reveal a heretofore unappreciated beauty in the plays in “wonderful complexity.”^{xxxv} For Donnelly, the cryptogram represented the appealing possibility of continuing the process of revealing the covert intentions and agendas that push history along. It is thus fitting that Donnelly’s *Great Cryptogram* does not conclude with a final revelation, but with the promise that future decoded portions of the “Cipher story” will continue to expound on his startling discoveries. As long as he could keep decoding, he could maintain his audience’s suspenseful expectation.

Although Donnelly’s theories about Shakespeare might at first seem far afield from either literary fiction or populist outrage over “money power,” they illustrate the extent to which his thinking tended to recognize power in society as essentially conspiratorial. Whether describing invisible bureaucratic networks of government and business or the centuries-old schemes of Elizabethan aristocrats, Donnelly assumed that covert and subversive combinations of individuals were the essential force driving events in society. This metaphysics of power, moreover, could be discerned through styles of investigation

that seemed heterodoxical to the public. By this logic, excursions into heterodoxy provided a means of establishing a form of investigation available to the non-expert and thus a means of establishing forms of intellectualism that assailed the primacy of expertise and professionalism.

Caesar's Column

Caesar's Column was the high water mark of Donnelly's conspiracy writing. Both the actual text of novel and the sensational marketing campaign stated that *Caesar's Column* would equip readers—and particularly working classes—with a means of discerning both anarchist and plutocratic agendas in American society. Donnelly's publisher released the book under the pseudonym “Dr. Edmund Boisgilbert M.D.” and worked to surround it with an air of mystique by leaking to newspapers the suggestion that author was “a man of wealth and high social position” who “takes as his text the dangerous tendencies of our age.”^{xxxvi} Donnelly's preface deepened these ambitious claims by announcing that *Caesar's Column* would serve as “an instrumentality of good for mankind [sic]” by providing audiences with a behind-the-scenes glance at the workings of power. Donnelly claimed that his book would expose the “cancer” of “rank corruption, mining all beneath” American society and illustrate “the acceleration of movement in human affairs.”^{xxxvii} Initial reviewers saw *Caesar's Column* as a landmark book precisely for its ability to inspire skepticism in its readers. An early sympathetic review identified it as a work “likely to attract a class of readers hitherto beyond the reach of thoughtful men who have tried to awaken them to the dangers menacing the country and society.” This was, the review continued, because the various elements of “adventure, scheming, plotting, tragedy, strategy, political economy, science, [and]

philosophy” were “so interwoven that the reader must read the one to get the other.” This characterization of *Caesar’s Column’s* as a book that would “awaken” this “class” of unreachable readers suggests a great deal about what was considered popular taste and how conspiracy narratives fit into this picture. With the novel positioned as a sort of tutorial on “political economy, science, [and] philosophy,” the review imagines a readership wanting a deeper interpretation of history in a literary form that appealed by virtue of its suspense and melodramatic excess.^{xxviii}

The events of the novel are seen primarily through the eyes of Gabriel Welstein, a sheepherder from the Swiss colony of Uganda who comes to modern New York to sell his wool. As the story progresses, Gabriel recounts his recognition of the false utopia of the city’s futuristic exterior, which masks a darker underside of oppressed masses. In order to untangle this web of conspiratorial deceptions, Gabriel must explore an eclectic body of knowledge about politics and human relations, science and technology, and human nature. At one moment he searches the vacant eyes of hyper-evolved humans for physiognomic evidence of how human evolution helped create the plutocracy; at another, he discovers anomalies in building architecture give rise to secret passages that lead into secret lairs; at another, he rifles through newspapers to find signs of propaganda and deception. The affective qualities of Donnelly’s novel hinge heavily on the notion that the surfaces of the everyday world contain a nearly endless array of puzzles to be solved and consequently surprises to be encountered. In this manner, Donnelly dramatizes a semiotic system in which anomalies and irregularities in everyday life serve as a structure of clues and symbols for making recent history legible.

Donnelly’s futuristic New York City of 1988 is the most prominent object of investigation. In the novel’s opening scenes, Gabriel skips from one techno-wonder to

another in the ultra-modern paradise of late twentieth century New York. Magnetic energy keeps the city streets illuminated while people are carted about in fish-shaped zeppelins on the city's elaborate public transportation system. At the center of the city is the ironically named Darwin hotel, a massive, climate-controlled monument to the perceived progress of this society. Guests of the hotel walk about in perfumed indoor gardens, feast on exotic game, and use an internet-like communications system that projects news and information from around the world onto large upright mirrors. This euphoric picture quickly dissipates as Gabriel becomes entangled in the sinister conflict, taking place beneath the city's serene façade. Following a run-in with the police, a member of the Brotherhood whisks Gabriel away to the city's dungeon-like "Under-World." In contrast to the ornate buildings and hyper-evolved humans, he finds a race of undersized degenerated humans living in a lawless squalor. "It seemed to me," Gabriel remarks, "that I was witnessing the resurrection of the dead ...mere automata, in the hands of some ruthless and unrelenting destiny."^{xxxix} Here, the Brotherhood is a near ubiquitous presence and their various technologies provide Gabriel with a sort of conspiratorial funhouse in which he can press an array of spring-loaded buttons that give him access to all manner of surveillance, disguise, and communication. When Gabriel touches one button, his appearance instantly transforms to that of an aristocrat. When he touches another, he finds himself sliding down into a subterranean hideout where he witnesses Caesar, the Brotherhood's leader, describe plans to hijack the plutocracy's fleet of airships.

Donnelly uses this intricate setting to reinterpret irregularities in the everyday world as a collection of signs and symbols that, similar to his cryptography in *The Great Cryptogram*, imagines that the public sphere might offer a semiotic system that allow it to function as an endlessly interpretable text. *Caesar's Column* abounds in episodes that take a small aspect of

the physical setting as the occasion for unfolding surprising dualities in American life. For example, the description of the Brotherhood's armory offers, as Gabriel explains, a glimpse into 'the marvelous nature of the organization and its resources:'

You can see how cunning is all this system. A traitor cannot betray more than nine of his fellows, and his own death is certain to follow. If the commander of a squad goes over to the enemy, he can but deliver up nine men and ten guns, and perhaps reveal the supposed name of the one man who, in a disguise, has communicated with him from the parent society. But when the signal is given a hundred million trained soldiers will stand side by side, armed with the most efficient weapons the cunning of man is able to produce, and directed by a central authority of extraordinary ability. Above all this dreadful preparation the merry world goes on, singing and dancing, marrying and giving in marriage as thoughtless of the impending catastrophe as were the people of Pompeii in those pleasant August days in 79, just before the city was buried in ashes...and more than once the rocking earth had given signal tokens of its awful possibilities.^{xxx}

History, we learn, is directed and controlled by a sublime, even providential, "central authority" that seems mysterious to a "merry world" that, in its ignorance, thoughtlessly continues "singing and dancing" in the face of the "impending catastrophe." Donnelly's image of the central authority is not, in other words, merely an image of power on a sublime scale and scope, but also an occasion to engage in a style of mental work that yields spectacle and surprise at seemingly every turn.

Donnelly's drama of shifting appearances throughout *Caesar's Column* allows him to create a literary conceit in which the terrorist conspiracy at first appears to be a mysterious, even supernatural, entity that exists at a distance from the rest of society. Then Donnelly

returns us to the sense that conspiratorial forces of terrorism and plutocracy are pervasive in the everyday world and that they are products of secular, explainable forces. Indeed, even the “Old-World beliefs” in “ghosts, spirits, fairies” are explained by means of Donnelly’s speculation that scientists could eventually use radio waves to discover “intelligences all around us...forms of life which our senses were not fitted to perceive.”^{xxxix} Gabriel’s reaction to these hidden worlds of technology and politics dramatizes the intellectual and emotional effects of possessing esoteric knowledge. For example, standing in the empty boardroom of the plutocracy, Gabriel remarks, “It was as if mighty spirits even then inhabited that dusky and silent chamber: hostile and evil spirits of whom mankind were at once the subjects and the victims.”^{xxxix} The vision intensifies even further as Gabriel imagines that he sees a “sordid flood of wrath and hunger pouring through the hallway” and “bursting through every door and window.” Characteristic of Donnelly’s novel, Gabriel’s awakening to this occult sensibility is more an internal change than a fundamental change to the landscape all around him. Gabriel *does not*, in other words, ever see “mighty spirits” or a “sordid flood” breaking down doors or pouring through hallways as much as he sees a landscape freighted with arcane and occult significance. In this respect, what eventually comes to separate Gabriel from the ignorant public is his sensitivity to the possibility for conflicts and warfare beneath the seemingly tranquil surface world.

“Signs Everywhere”

By appealing to the reader with intimations that cast suspicion on the public surroundings, conspiracy fiction creates some exceptional possibilities in terms of how it muddies the waters over what is being reported as fact and what is reported as fiction. In

doing so, it makes these categories of fact and fiction into grounds for a perpetually unstable hybrid of play and politics. To that end, David Zarefsky has described how popular conspiracy texts such as Oliver Stone's *JFK* increased levels of public belief in conspiracy theories about the Kennedy assassination.^{xxxiii} Deliberate ambiguity over fact and fiction was commonplace in late-nineteenth-century fiction that dealt with conspiracy. Frederick Upham Adams' *President John Smith* features a conspiratorial history of late nineteenth century American law in its argument that businessmen and politicians had conspired to demonetize silver. Others, such as Thomas Dixon's novel *The Leopard's Spots*, used conspiratorial caricatures of Thaddeus Stevens and Charles Sumner as a vehicle for characterizing Reconstruction as an extension of big business' attempts to control American politics.

Donnelly, even more than Adams or Dixon, was eager to use ambiguity over factual reportage vs. fiction in his novels in order to prompt suspicions in his audiences about the possibility for conspiracies in their daily lives. Donnelly was so preoccupied with the asserting the realism of his fictional setting that he had actually pasted physical news clippings into his manuscript page at various points throughout the novel. In the chapter entitled "How the World Came to be Ruined," Gabriel and Max, examine an archive of documents from the 1890s showing how "even a hundred years ago the air was full of prophecies" that revealed "the shadow of plutocracy." In the scene, Gabriel queries, "How did this dreadful state of affairs, in which the world now finds itself, arise? 'Were there no warnings uttered by intelligent men? Did the world drift blindly and unconsciously into this condition?'"^{xxxiv} In response, Max rushes off to the library and, returning with a stack of old magazines and newspapers that seem to foretell the emergence of plutocratic and anarchist conspiracies as forces in American life. As the original manuscript page shows (*Figure 2.2*), Donnelly wrote the frame narrative of the character's conversations in longhand and then

pasted newspaper articles into the original manuscript.^{xxxv} In the published version of the novel, the news articles are presented as block quotations in regular type with citations of the original publications' date, issue, and page numbers cited.

The interpolation of bits of newspaper articles with the novel's dialogue functions as a sort of tutorial on how to read for evidence of conspiracy in late-nineteenth-century life.

Max's commentary on the archive progress from his quotation of *Century* magazine's reports of "the growing disposition to tamper with the ballot box" to the *North American Review's* description of corporate financiers' "octopus-grip" on transportation and the food supply to

The Forum's description of "the agrarian difficulties of Russia, France, Italy, Ireland, and of wealthy England." The section then closes with a dramatic page-length excerpt from the Boston newspaper, *The Progress*, which gives a long litany of statistics, juxtaposing the vast material inequalities of late-nineteenth-century America with similar facts anticipating the demise of the Egyptian, Babylonian, Persian, and Roman empires.^{xxxvi}

Donnelly's extensive quotation of such documents is

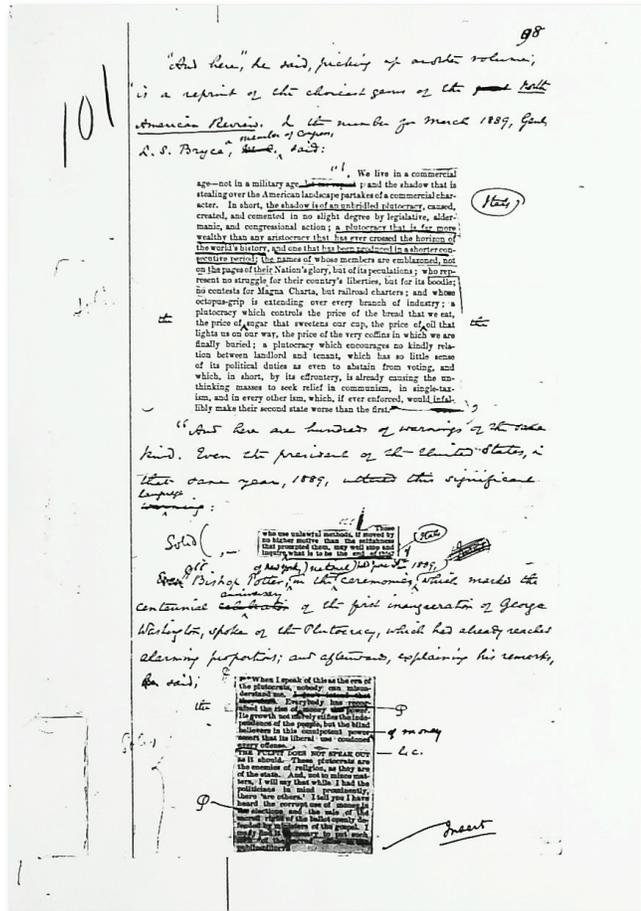


Figure 2.2. Manuscript Page from *Caesar's Column*

central to the novel's project of introducing an heterodox semiotic system. By offering up actual archival documents Donnelly encourages his reader to consider the reliability of his claims and then imagine how this arrangement of documents might challenge conventional ways of organizing historical narrative. This innovative tactic inculcates a hermeneutic of suspicion by suggesting that newspapers and other sources of information in day-to-day life are anything but straightforward and demand close attention from their readers. Indeed, the most tantalizing suggestion in Gabriel and Max's discussion of the newspapers is the implication that the documents Donnelly inserts into his novel are a mere fraction of a much larger body of documents that, like Max's archive, could yield surprising and interesting revelations. In doing so, he implicitly suggests that his reader too might search through other, new periodicals for signs of the looming catastrophe.

Caesar's Column thus gestures towards something more than merely informing or tutoring its readers on what constitutes "the real" in American politics and society. Rather, it draws the reader into the methods of investigating the hidden trajectories and semiotics of power in late- nineteenth-century American society. The readerly experience, Donnelly hopes, then only *begins* with the actual book, *Caesar's Column*. Every utterance, every landscape, every document in the public sphere becomes an object of suspicion and, accordingly, a chance to re-create this invigorating experience of sifting and searching for evidence of a sublime underlying system.

As it turns out, Donnelly's highly interactive engagement with his readership opens up some very liberating possibilities for his working class subjects and readership. The detective work Donnelly wages on his readers only requires a sharp mind, acute powers of observation, and a healthy skepticism of hegemonic narratives of power and politics. In this manner, Donnelly implies that detection practices might offer working class subjects a

means of transcending the social and cultural boundaries that keep them ignorant of and frustrated by political and financial elites. After all, Gabriel is himself a mere shepherd who, while intelligent has no special training in detection and *he* is able to gain a birds-eye view of the mechanisms driving American politics. So, Donnelly asks his audience, why couldn't an ordinary reader do the same?

“Wheels Within Wheels”

Where the early sequences in *Caesar's Column* use detective-like investigations to raise doubts and anxieties about the symbolic order of late-nineteenth-century modernity, the novel's dramatic climax culminates with a cathartic burst of violence that brings the figures of terrorists and plutocrats out into the open. In the final sequence, the Brotherhood hijacks the plutocracy's fleet of war zeppelins. The Brotherhood succeeds in their anarchist revolution, but only at the cost of unleashing tremendous violence and destruction upon the city. In order to dispose of the mounting human carcasses and to provide a demonstration of his power, Caesar, the Brotherhood's crazed and depraved leader erects “Caesar's Column,” a gruesome obelisk, constructed out of concrete and dead bodies. In the end, Gabriel and Max flee with their wives to Uganda to start an isolate utopian community that might someday form the foundation for a renewed human civilization. The apocalyptic scale of Donnelly's conspiracy thinking distinguishes *Caesar's Column* from virtually anything that appears in early nineteenth-century writing. The grisly conclusion of *Caesar's Column* dramatizes a fundamentally new kind of conflict in which human actions seem capable of astounding levels of destruction as the climax's gruesome images dramatize what Donnelly took to be the logical, even inevitable, outcome of looming patterns in American political life.

These images of mass violence and catastrophe were at once the most shocking elements for Donnelly's Gilded Age audience and the very elements that have felt the most modern and relevant to later critics. The initial review from *The Chicago Tribune* contrasted the ending of *Caesar's Column* favorably to Bellamy's *Looking Backward*. Where *Looking Backward* seemed "highly respectable and highly dull," *Caesar's Column* was at least "full of go, nerve and dash" with "lurid descriptions of blood curdling orgies, fiery wheels within wheels, plots and counter plots that make even Mrs. Radcliffe and Monk Lewis seem commonplace"^{xxxvii} Later critics saw it as prophetic. As Alexander Saxton noted in 1967, the image "still hits the reader today under the fifth rib" for its eerie resemblance to twentieth century mass violence such as the mounting bodies at Dresden or the German death camps. In the twenty-first century we might well extend this chain of associations to the World Trade Center attacks and the Iraq War.^{xxxviii}

Like the emotional appeals of Donnelly's fiery oratory, the novel's keynote relies on a prodigious mixture of idioms that range from the lurid violence of the mysteries of the city genre to the language of Christian Millennialism to motifs that would have reminded his readers of the Atlanta riots, Haymarket, and the Paris Commune:

Behind them are dust, confusion, dead bodies, hammered and beaten out of all semblance of humanity; and, worse than all, the criminal classes—that wretched and inexplicable residuum, who have no grievance against the world except their own existence—the base, the cowardly, the cruel, the sneaking, the inhuman, the horrible! These flock like jackals in the tracks of lions. They rob the dead bodies; they break into houses; they kill if they are resisted; they fill their pockets. Their joy is unbounded. Elysium has descended upon earth for them this day. Pickpockets, sneak-thieves, confidence-men, burglars, robbers, assassins, the refuse and

outpourings of grogshops and brothels, all are here. And women, too—or creatures that pass for such—having the bodies of women and the habits of ruffians—harpies—all claws and teeth and greed—bold—desperate—shameless—incapable of good. They too, are here. They dart hither and thither; they swarm—they dance—they howl—they chatter—they quarrel and battle like carrion-vultures, over the spoils.^{xxxix}

With this spectacle of violence and destruction, Donnelly effectively presents his readers with a concentrated impression of the sum of the various hints and clues that have been accruing in the preceding episodes. The gruesome images of dead, bodies, and burglars have been indirectly suggested up to this point as dormant plutocratic and anarchistic infrastructures; however it is only in this final overwhelming scene that they coalesce and confront the reader in the form of a melodramatic vision of hell.

For Donnelly, conspiracy thinking needs this cathartic burst—the shot of adrenaline—that comes as the whole world lays itself out as something extraordinary and unexpected. The modern world is a space fraught with dangers, yet, those very dangers allow Donnelly to perpetuate a process of discovering ever-higher levels of knowledge that implicitly sets the stage for sublime spectacles like that which concludes *Caesar's Column*.

Gold-as-Cipher in *The Golden Bottle*

With his next major novel, *The Golden Bottle* (1892), Donnelly took on the topic of currency conspiracy and the famous “Crime of ’73.” Few narratives roiled agrarian activists more than the story that the nation’s currency had been manipulated by British and Jewish bankers with the passage of the 1873 Coinage Act—popularly known as “The Crime of

'73"—under the Grant administration. For Donnelly and many in the Populist movement, currency conspiracy theory provided more than just an account of financial crime; it also offered a rallying point for those who suspected a pattern of mass deception in American and European history. Indeed, agrarian activists used the currency issue as the central point in a constellation of many other conspiracy-tinged critiques. In this respect, currency was an almost inevitable topic for Donnelly.

The Golden Bottle was itself written as a part of a larger campaign by Donnelly to raise awareness about currency manipulation. He released *The Golden Bottle* within months of his own version of the Crime of '73 story, an extended essay entitled *The American People's Money*.^{xl} *The Golden Bottle* fashions the currency issue into a means of celebrating what Donnelly refers to as "extravagant and heterodoxical ideas" as a means of achieving political agency. Indeed, in his preface, Donnelly says little about currency, instead preferring to note that he hoped his book "should set his readers *thinking*; and thereby, perhaps open new gateways to better conditions of life for the multitudes."^{xli} Where *Caesar's Column* pursued this encouragement towards the eccentric and unusual through the mode of dystopian tragedy, *The Golden Bottle* tended to make this point through a darkly comic revenge fantasy. The result is a text that, while ostensibly a political tract, can also be read as a late-century celebration of conspiracy thinking as a means of recapturing the lost sense of unity of the pre-Civil War era.

Scholars such as Walter Benn Michaels and Michael Germana have persuasively argued that the currency issue was a major preoccupation among late-nineteenth-century American writers, bringing up, as it did, questions about how modern capitalist society assigned value to labor and the self.^{xlii}

For many Populist activists, suspicions about the American currency system, and particularly the gold standard, provided the basis for incredibly elaborate narratives about the workings of power in the United States after the Civil War. According to populist folk mythology, the London banker, Ernest Seyd, had been sent to America in 1872 with £100,000 in bribe money to make sure that Congress would demonetize silver and put the United States onto the gold standard. Some alleged, recognized that putting America on the gold standard (after the use of silver currency during the war) would create a deflationary financial atmosphere, making payments of debts nearly impossible, hence tipping the scales in favor of the wealthy.^{xliii} Iterations of this theory were set forth in a variety of texts. William Hope Harvey enjoyed substantial publication runs with his book *Coin's Financial School* and his novel *A Tale of Two Nations*, which depicted a Rothschild-like British Jew “Baron Roth” who bribes an American politician to back gold standard legislation. E.J. Farmer and Alexander Del Mar published lectures from Populist conventions that reiterated Emery’s claims. Thomas Dixon, the infamous author of *The Klansmen*, helped to edit a pamphlet entitled *The Great Red Dragon*, which repeated the allegations about Seyd.^{xliv}

But the best-known text in this vein was Sarah Emery’s *Seven Financial Conspiracies Which Have Enslaved the American People*. With 400,000 copies in circulation, Emery’s pamphlet was easily among the most widely read document to come out of the Populist movement.^{xlv} According to Emery, British and Jewish bankers had realized that chattel slavery had become an untenable system and had orchestrated the war in order to force American workers into debt slavery. Emery claimed to be in possession of the “Hazzard Circular” which was supposedly a confidential piece written to English and U.S. bankers in 1862 by “one Hazzard,” an agent of “English capitalists.” In the fictitious document, Hazzard counsels American capitalists to have patience and to support the war because it will offer the

opportunity to take an even firmer control over the American economy. He tells his American counterparts that he and his “European friends” are in favor of abolition because “slavery is but the owning of labor, and carries with it care for the laborer; while the European plan, led on by England, is capital control of labor by controlling wages.” Emery concludes her piece with another fictitious document in which Abraham Lincoln supposedly warns of the dangers of money power.^{xlvi}

To those who followed Emery, the crime of ’73 thus meant more than just an explanation for gilded age inequality; it also meant accepting a worldview that identified the end of the Civil War marked a conspiratorial moment in American history. The underlying draw of this theory of postwar history was the way it seemed to offer the possibility of ideological unity that many believed had been ruptured following the death of Lincoln. As Jeffrey Ostler explains,

By recalling the GOP’s original purpose of overthrowing the slave/money power, the Hazzard circular allowed third party advocates to claim the legacy of the GOP, which had become corrupted by the slave/money power. It was no longer the legitimate vehicle for resisting all forms of slavery and for promoting human freedom. Since the present money power and the ancient slave power were one, it was necessary for true friends of liberty to resist the new manifestation of English designs by rallying to a new party of the people.^{xlvii}

By this token, the Hazzard Circular set forth a powerful restorative vision for the postwar era. It represented access to an alternate epistemology, which revealed that the war on slavery had never really ended, but had only modulated into a much more insidious conflict. By exploding the fiction of gold’s inherent value, one could conceivably take the first step in

becoming attuned to the larger set of deceptions in the postwar era and thus reclaim the legacy of Lincoln in the crusade against a common enemy of the republic.

For Donnelly, this scenario must have seemed a powerful confirmation of his faith in conspiracy thinking as a liberatory style of thought and observation. The evidence is mixed on the extent to which Donnelly believed the story of the Crime of '73. While Donnelly's personal papers feature several writings on currency, the specific allegations about the Hazzard Circular do not seem to have been a great concern. However, in 1892, when Emery's pamphlet was at the height of its popularity, Donnelly seemed more than willing to use these allegations as a means of propounding a skeptical orientation towards big business and government. Accordingly, Donnelly's novel tends to emphasize his suspicion that the belief in gold's inherent value was knitted together with a host of other deceptions in modern life.^{xlviii}

The Golden Bottle uses these various narratives about gold conspiracies as the basis for a revenge fantasy in which a farmer is able to turn the tables on the nation's financial and social elites precisely by dispelling the notion that gold had an inherent value. In the book Ephraim Benezet, the son of a Kansas farmer, is visited by an old man who gives him a magical "golden bottle." When Ephraim pours water from the bottle onto any object, he finds that it instantly turns to solid gold. Ephraim rapidly becomes a rich man and uses his wealth to lend money to farmers at a low interest rates. Almost instantly, things turn around for the country when it is freed from the "false idolatry" of the idea of gold's inherent value and a monometallic system. Wealth becomes plentiful, farmers are able to work together, and Ephraim stages a successful run for the Presidency. In response to these utopian conditions, the bankers retaliate by attempting to incite another civil war, but are exposed and embarrassed by Ephraim who has outflanked them by serendipitously purchasing the

newspapers. With the defeat of the bankers, Donnelly figures the recognition of the false ideology of the inherent value of gold as the initial catalyst by which an entire postwar epistemology might be unraveled as people reexamine other a whole host of narratives handed to them by the powers that be.

This revenge fantasy of *The Golden Bottle* hinges heavily on the notion that an informed, skeptical public would have instantaneous self-making capabilities. For example, Donnelly renders the dramatic moment in which the public becomes cognizant of the plutocracy's fictions as a kind of sudden intoxication that washes over the streets of New York:

There are no words that can paint the utter astonishment of the people of New York when they rose from their beds and read the morning papers. They had to peruse the editorials two or three times over to get the meaning into their inner consciousness. The old gentlemen rubbed their spectacles vigorously and looked through the glasses carefully, as if they had been bewitched. The multitude began to gather and murmur, in knots, on the street corners...No man thought of accusing the newspapers of inconsistency, any more than they would have complained of the fences, because they did not have the same showbills plastered over them today that they had yesterday. But the wrath against the bankers rose high.^{xlix}

That power can shift “as if by magic” and “as if bewitched” underscores Donnelly’s quasi-utopian hope that the dissolution of the fiction of the gold standard might lead to other recognitions that would in turn uproot the entire postwar world view. In this respect, the recognition of a currency conspiracy becomes the central term around which the unity of the pre-Civil War era can be recaptured and galvanized in the service of the people.

The later sections of the novel extend this logic to a full-scale revolutionary consciousness. Here, *The Golden Bottle* takes a bizarre turn as Ephraim ascends to the Presidency and organizes a counter-conspiracy named “The Brotherhood of Justice” in order to systematically expose and dismantle money power. Like the former plutocracy, Ephraim’s Brotherhood of Justice comes to occupy a deeper logic running world affairs in secret. They orchestrate assassinations and install their own leaders on the thrones of European countries. These efforts eventually lead to an imperialist military campaign in which Ephraim’s army conquers Europe, Russia, and Canada. One by one, each of these countries is revealed to have been ruled by an arm of a secret organization of plutocratic bankers. And, one by one, each is defeated by the substantial armies of the Brotherhood. Following the defeat of Russia, the Brotherhood establishes a “Universal Republic” that sets up its headquarters in the Azore islands, which as Donnelly explains, have special significance as “the mountain peaks of the drowned Atlantis.”

This foray into empire raises an interesting problem about the nature of Donnelly’s conspiracy thinking. Why the urge to extend the logic of conspiracy? Why the need to reinstall an all-encompassing conspiratorial power as opposed to an anti-conspiratorial form of government? The answer, I think, is that Donnelly tends to conceive of power almost exclusively in conspiratorial forms. To be sure, he describes the need for this imperialist adventure in terms of a Hobbesian demand for vigilance against self-interest. “The ambitions of bad and able men; and the natural wickedness and meanness of the human animal,” Donnelly exclaims, “was the spirit of evil which seems to be woven into all the warp and woof of the universe.”¹ In this assumption, Donnelly seems especially swayed by the changes of the Post-Civil War era in which the model for government in the United States shifts towards a much stronger central government. Where the prewar generation may

have been able to imagine a weak, transparent confederation as the basis for government, the decisive victory of the Union and the Federal government made it increasingly difficult to conceive of American government in any terms outside of a powerful, unifying force.

To a figure like Donnelly, the perceived intensification of conspiratorial power in the post-Civil War era then warranted a strange optimism. If postwar politics created an increased scale and scope of conspiratorial power, this also created opportunity. Donnelly's novel conceives of conspiratorial power as reaching a sort of critical mass wherein it would become increasingly difficult for financial and political elites to conceal their power. In this respect, Donnelly imagines a revolutionary tipping point in which capitalist control overreaches and becomes unsustainable. In making this point about the self-destructive tendencies of high capitalism, Donnelly, as we might expect, has something far more idiosyncratic in mind than a run-of-the-mill materialist critique. *The Golden Bottle* thus extends the dissolution of false consciousness to a very broad range of historical mysteries including the fate of the lost city of Atlantis, the extinction of dinosaurs, and, of course, the mystery of Shakespeare's plays.

So, while *The Golden Bottle* begins as a story of the realignment of a strong antebellum people's movement, it ends as a fantasy that a single catalyst—such as the gold conspiracy—would act as the beginning of a broader skeptical orientation among the public. This premise becomes explicit in the novel's conclusion. Here, Ephraim awakens in his bedroom in Kansas to find that all of the novel's events were a dream; however, the impression of a radical consciousness remains with him. Although Ephraim learns that his adventures were only a dream, these dreams have made him sensitive to “worlds of vivid phantasmagorias.” What follows is a bizarre collection of Donnelly's pet projects as Ephraim is visited by a strange, unnamed visitor in Colonial dress, who encourages him to keep pursuing his vision.

The visitor is reticent to admit to a conventional vision of “Heaven,” but does say that Francis Bacon, King Poseidon, and Isaac Newton are watching from above, laughing at the “false idolatry” of the gold standard (these figures of course represent Donnelly’s pet historical fancies).^{li}

Ephraim’s new sense of alertness resides less in his specific knowledge of money power conspiracies than in his newfound awareness and sensitivity to the possibilities for mystery in all aspects of life: “The mind we carry is an unknown world; man can fathom its depths or possibility of sound or unsound action. It is indeed, impossible to say what is sanity or insanity.” As if to confirm this epiphany, the spirit directs Ephraim to pursue teaching school precisely because it is a style of intellectualism that is freed up from the strictures of official culture: “A very ordinary school-teacher will make a first-class professor” since the average professor “would rather hang himself than indulge in original thought.” By intertwining conspiracy thinking with a broader program esoteric knowledge, Donnelly advocates for a program of imagination and epistemological openness against what he saw as a flat-footed rationalism. With this, *The Golden Bottle* concludes with a call for “heterodox and extravagant ideas” as a form of social and intellectual empowerment for reassembling an American psyche after the ideological and intellectual fallout of the Civil War.^{lii}

Cranky Romanticism

The celebration of heterodoxy that concludes *The Golden Bottle* evinces a romantic undercurrent that recurs throughout Donnelly’s work. And this in turn poses something of a problem for attempts to psychologize Donnelly’s conspiracy thinking as mere manifestations

of “desperation” or “paranoia.” Donnelly’s claims of “wonderful complexity” of his quixotic cryptography, the ecstatic outpourings of his spellbinding rhetoric, and the detective work of *Caesar’s Column* often come across more like giddy excursions into philosophical heterodoxy than last-ditch attempts to assert agency or moral clarity in the face of lost social and economic agency. By this logic, the pleasures of the conspiracy narratives resided specifically in the way that they could unlock a state of mind where it seemed possible to let go of one’s assumptions about the way history operates and plunge oneself into surprising and sensational possibilities.

In its own time, the romanticism in Donnelly’s attraction to conspiracy theory extended beyond the narrow appeal of the Populist movement. Indeed, it caught the attention of no less a figure than Walt Whitman. Musing on a public appearance by Donnelly in Philadelphia, Whitman described Donnelly as having that “dash of insanity which Plato permits—even insists upon—for the poet.”^{liii} Whitman’s poem about the cryptogram, “Shakspere-Bacon cipher” meditates on the way that a figure like Donnelly could generate an iconoclastic energy that was, for Whitman, worthy of admiration. At first, Whitman gently pokes fun at Donnelly and the spectacular failure of his attempt at cryptography: “I doubt it not—then more, far more/In each old song bequeath’d in every noble page or text some unsuspected author.” Then, in a classic Whitmanesque move, this suggestion of “some unsuspected author” provides the catalyst for a Platonic idealism that sees all of nature as full of wonder as a “mystic cipher waits infolded” in “every object, mountain, tree, and star—in every birth and life/As part of each—evolv’d from each.”^{liiv} Whitman may not have believed Donnelly’s claims about Shakespeare, Atlantis, or Jewish Plutocracy but this perpetual state of heightened awareness did, at the very least, generate an iconoclastic energy that was preferable to a dull complacency.

As Whitman would recognize, Donnelly's books appealed to a streak in the American public imagination, fascinated by conspiracy thinking not solely as a political tactic, but as a pattern of affect. Whether uncovering secret codes in Shakespeare or rendering a vast plutocracy, Donnelly's work repeatedly dramatizes moments where the public sphere can be reinterpreted in ways leading to the recognition of the sublime in the suggestion of a conspiracy. The proverbial puzzle pieces could at any moment fall into place, the scales could drop from our eyes, and we could find ourselves privy to a view of history that overwhelms, surprises, and threatens to overturn even the most basic expectations about the operation of power in society.

Looking beyond the late nineteenth century, Donnelly's style of detective work often seems prescient for the way it anticipates the visions of an all-encompassing sense of control in American society that would often come to define twentieth- and twenty-first century popular and literary culture. Similar preoccupations with conspiracy have gripped American writers and filmmakers ranging from the postmodern aesthetics of Don DeLillo to the novels of Dan Brown and even to the polemical tirades of Glenn Beck or Keith Olbermann. Each of these sources, like Donnelly, dramatizes a kind of conspiratorial subjectivity: a vision of the self as deeply entangled with invisible networks of human control, especially as they emerge in modern bureaucracies of government, business, and labor organization can be discovered through close attention to anomalies, clues, and signs in one's everyday surroundings. This possibility of a vast hidden conspiratorial power symbolizes for these figures—as it did for Donnelly—an emotional and intellectual release from the terms of rationalism. Taking these texts seriously as social and cultural documents should not involve expunging their “cranky” or heterodoxical elements as much as understanding how the

language of conspiracy is incorporated into the underlying methods and textures of these works.

CHAPTER III
“The Vast Smug Surface”: Henry James’ *The Princess Casamassima*

“Shouldn’t I find [a defense of my ‘artistic position’] in the happy contention that the value I wished most to render and the effect I wished most to produce were precisely those of our not knowing, of society’s not knowing, but only guessing and suspecting and trying to ignore, what ‘goes on’ irreconcilably, subversively, beneath the vast smug surface?”
--Henry James, Preface to *The Princess Casamassima*ⁱ

A still underestimated element of Henry James’ oeuvre is a certain relish for feelings of overwhelming surprise and alienation. Works such as *What Maisie Knew* (1897), *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), and the texts of James’ “major phase” are all characterized by an approach to consciousness, which finds exhilarating forms of pleasure at having one’s expectations about the world overturned. James’ writings reveal, as Ross Posnock puts it, “a desire to experience contemplation as action” through the rendering of subjects striving to achieve certainty in the face of realities that only yield further uncertainty and estrangement.ⁱⁱ Far from the disengaged “master formalist,” this aspect of James’ work tends to place him as a “peripatetic cultural critic” attuned to the rhythms and sensations of public culture.ⁱⁱⁱ

Perhaps the common perception of James as a disengaged master formalist is partly to blame for the cool reception that has surrounded *The Princess Casamassima* (1885), James’ tale of anarchist terrorism and conspiratorial intrigue, *The Princess Casamassima* has often been regarded as a misguided experiment or somehow “eccentric contribution” to the literature of terrorist conspiracy in the nineteenth century.^{iv} To see it this way, however, is to

misunderstand both this novel and its importance within James' larger body of work. In *The Princess Casamassima* James explored the manner in which conspiracy narratives offered a quintessentially modern form of pleasure—a relief from the doldrums of everyday life through irrationalist forms speculation and wonder. Far from a detour, James' brief encounter with conspiracy narratives marked a stylistic turning point towards the experiments with perspective and psychological realism that would come to define his work years afterwards.

James wrote *The Princess Casamassima* while he was in London during an intense period of terrorist activity in Britain and the United States. The years of 1883-86 witnessed a rash of bombings and assassination attempts that prompted many observers to speak of a new sense of immediacy between the calm façade of daily life and the fiery politics of class conflict. For instance, following a particularly spectacular series of bombings in 1883, the *London Times* called for the end of an era of self-deception, noting that readers need only look to “the assassination literature of America” for signs of an impending class “war carried on with all the appliances of modern science.”^v As the passage from the *Times* suggests, many saw incidents of terrorism as clues of a criminal underworld, containing elements wanting to wipe out the existing cultural and social establishment.^{vi} On one hand, these terrorist incidents seemed to give credence to fin de siècle fears of the decline of traditional modes of social and cultural authority in British and American society. On the other, even as these incidents were described as the emergence of a frightening, anarchic modernity, they became the objects of sensationalist spectacle. Journalistic exposés and the sub-genre of “dynamite novels” purported to expose the machinery of secret societies of conspirators and in doing so raised the thrilling possibility of rendering history readable.^{vii}

The specific context of anarchist conspiracy captured James' imagination because it raised doubts about the reliability of perspective, prompting a continuing reassessment and speculation. As he described it, "the suggested nearness" of "some sinister anarchic underworld" invited the individual to use his or her imagination to fill in ethical and cognitive gaps in speculating on the frightening and occult possibilities being concealed from public view. An awareness of conspiracy opened an uncanny vision of the cityscape as something strange in asking (as my epigraph states), "what 'goes on' irreconcilably, subversively, beneath the vast smug surface." Daily observations become occasions to speculate on the frightening and occult possibilities that lay beneath the pristine surface; each local saloon becomes a potential revolutionist's lair; each crowd conceals an assassin's pistol; each overcoat conceals a stick of dynamite and everywhere "subterraneous politics" and "occult affiliations" secretly occupy the thoughts of individuals in the city.^{viii} By appropriating the uncertain language of conspiracy theory as his narrative framework, James thus reached for a brand of psychological realism that could merge the perspective of his reader with the curious and restless states of mind that one experienced from contemplating the possibility of an invisible conspiracy.

So, if we take James at his word, *The Princess Casamassima* is not a novel that merely depicts terrorism as much as it is an ambitious experiment that works to initiate its readers into the restless states of mind that follow from this publicly shared activity of guessing and searching for clues of conspiracy.^{ix} As I will discuss, this brief episode at once provides a vital chapter in James' development toward increasingly innovative forms of psychological realism and (surprising as it may seem) it situates him among the most self-conscious and insightful critics of the late-nineteenth-century Anglo-American culture of conspiracy theory.

Within the larger scope of American culture, James' approach sets him at odds not only with other writers who dealt with the question of terrorism, but with many late-nineteenth-century treatments of conspiracy theory more broadly conceived. For instance, where a figure like Ignatius Donnelly could see conspiracy theory as a mystical cipher for all life's mysteries and declare "regularity does not grow out of chaos," James looked to conspiracy theory for its ability to introduce an element of romance and mystery into everyday life, offering an exhilarating sense of proximity to events of historical significance. In this sense, James' fiction and criticism marks an important counterpoint to more literal uses of conspiracy as in Donnelly's writings. As a kind of "peripatetic cultural critic," James wanted to understand the prominent role that conspiracy theory itself had taken on in Anglo-American society as a cultural imaginary charged with describing and dramatizing an entire network of secret agendas and actions.

"As Much Experience As Possible"

A good deal of scholarship over the last fifty years has been devoted to *The Princess Casamassima* in no small part for its direct, explicit engagement with the politics of terrorism and class struggle. *The Princess Casamassima* stands out in James' fiction for its thematization of terrorism and its extended treatment of working class characters. To write about anarchism and the fear it inspired, James undertook a process of research, walking the streets of London, dropping by pubs, listening for "the social ear" or "some gust of hot breath."^x Yet James was less interested in actual documentation of terrorist secret societies than in the "play of energy" in others' speculations about conspiracy. (He even boasted of his avoidance of firsthand documentation. For instance, following a somewhat farcical research trip in

which James visited Millbank prison, he famously and sarcastically declared, “You see, I am quite the naturalist!”).^{xi} Critics have almost inevitably gravitated towards this novel searching for evidence of James’ politics and what has often been described as an attempt to map some underlying social order. By grafting *The Princess Casamassima* so neatly onto a political agenda or set of social phenomenon, however, past interpretations have never really given much serious attention to the playful irrationalist elements of James’ treatment of conspiracy thinking. Rather than mere excess, these elements are in fact central to the philosophical and psychological complexities of *The Princess Casamassima*.

Most of the earlier criticism of the book debated how successfully or unsuccessfully James’ novel documented the incidents of anarchist and Fenian terrorism that dominated headlines in Britain and the United States in the 1880s. Lionel Trilling revived critical interest in *The Princess Casamassima* with his provocative argument for the “brilliantly precise representation of social actuality” and “the solid accuracy of James’ political detail of every point.” Soon after, Oscar Cargill picked up this thread with his claim that James learned a great deal about anarchist politics and ideology from his association with Ivan Turgenev.^{xii} W.H. Tilley’s pamphlet *The Background to The Princess Casamassima* (1960) compiles an impressive body of archival material, attempting to recreate the newspaper articles and political essays that James might have encountered in his research for *The Princess Casamassima*. Tilley, in fact, makes a convincing argument that the Hyacinth/Hoffendahl plotline was patterned on a widely publicized attempt by anarchists to assassinate the German emperor.^{xiii} Irving Howe doubted suggestions of a documentary strand in *The Princess Casamassima*, maintaining that James was “skittish in his treatment because he is uncertain of his material.”^{xiv}

Subsequent readings of *The Princess Casamassima* have been influenced most heavily by Mark Seltzer's Foucauldian interpretation. Seltzer argues that James' novel creates a panoptic "fantasy of surveillance" inspired by the repressive effects of police and detective work. Apart from the novel's "explicit and local representations of policing power," Seltzer concludes, "there is a more discreet kind of policing that the novel engages, a police work articulated precisely along the novel's line of sight."^{xv} Seltzer's reading has in turn inspired a number of discussions of the novel which, more or less, see it in these terms of surveillance and, in particular, an attempt to map the social world with an exacting eye. Jeffory Clymer describes a tension between "increasingly variable interpretations in the media's different forms" and James "politically conservative effort to contain the cultural meanings attributed in the 1880s" to "conspiratorially plotted acts of violence."^{xvi} Similarly, Elizabeth Miller's discussion of gender and criminality in Victorian culture cites the failure of terrorist acts in *The Princess Casamassima* as James' attempt "to symbolize the negligible power individuals actually have to effect social change in the modern world."^{xvii}

As these studies have shown, *The Princess Casamassima* certainly grapples with issues of criminality and surveillance in ways that reflect James' skepticism of radical politics and his interest in the way police practices structured perception in the late-nineteenth-century city. However, in focusing so tightly on the politics of class struggle and crime, critics have elided James' still-more profound engagement with the politics of imagination and emotion. Indeed, much of what has sustained conspiracy thinking as an enduring trope of American and British fiction—and what drew James' attention—is precisely its ability to exist at the liminal space between the public realm of politics and the private realm of emotion and sensation. In contrast to past interpretations, I would thus argue that James' novel harnesses the iconoclastic energy he observed in the vibrant sensationalist folklore of conspiracy

theory. Although terrorist conspiracy is hardly a typical Jamesian theme, it coheres closely to his longstanding project of forging fiction that could convey “as much experience as possible” by drawing readers into direct identification with “the subjects of bewilderment.”^{xviii} James’ determination to take pleasure in conspiracy narratives resists the attempt to find an Archimedean place from which to view the world. Instead, he turns to the wild and exhilarating skepticism of conspiracy thinking as an aesthetic and philosophical alternative to the complacency that he sensed in more conventional forms of realism. Rather than a “fantasy of surveillance” we might then say that *The Princess Casamassima* was a playful meditation on the very impossibility of surveillance.

While it is invested in the affective potential of conspiracy, *The Princess Casamassima* is also invested in exploring the underlying political conflict. To be sure, evidence of terrorist activity resonates so deeply in *The Princess Casamassima* because it gives the drama of the failing Anglo-American capitalist and imperialist projects a sense of emotional immediacy. In the novel, we follow James’ sensitive protagonist, Hyacinth Robinson, through heightened states of consciousness at speculating on the presence of anarchist conspiracy. At first, he entertains himself by imagining conspiratorial intrigues all around him. By the end, Hyacinth’s playing at danger turns deadly, and he finds himself entangled in an anarchist plot to assassinate a nobleman. Hyacinth and other characters in the book entertain the subtle belief, common to conspiracy thinking, that they are part of an elite group who see through media propaganda and conspiratorial deceptions to get to a truer version of how history operates. From this perspective, James’ novel is at once concerned with a skeptical relationship to historical narrative and with emotion and sensation.

The Princess Casamassima is suffused with moments that highlight how speculation about anarchist conspiracy can lead the mind to thoughts of the uncanny and the fantastic.

For example, in one of the book's pivotal episodes Hyacinth believes that he has established proof of the anarchist conspiracy. He describes this to Christina Casamassima, and this provokes the sensation of seeing the London cityscape transformed into a rich text that can unlock an entire conspiratorial history:

Nothing of it appears above the surface; but there's an immense underworld peopled with a thousand forms of revolutionary passion and devotion...on top of it all society lives! People go and come, and buy and sell, and drink and dance, and make money and make love, and seem to know nothing and suspect nothing and think of nothing...All that's one half of it; the other half is that everything's doomed! In silence, in darkness, but under the feet of each one of us, the revolution lives and works. It's a wonderful, immeasurable trap, on the lid of which society performs its antics. When once the machinery is complete there will be a great rehearsal...The invisible impalpable wires are everywhere, passing through everything, attaching themselves to objects in which one would never think of looking for them. What could be more strange and incredible for instance than that they should exist just here?

The cityscape appears to him as a theatrical performance furnishing special access to the motive forces in history even as it thrills him with spectacle. Hyacinth imagines a "great rehearsal" in which the workaday world stands directly on top of an "immense underworld peopled with a thousand forms of revolutionary passion and devotion." James casts this vision in terms of a revolutionary future, complete with sublime technologies of "machinery" and "wires...passing through everything." What Hyacinth sees in his mind's eye is a bifurcated vision of a stage in a theater divided into two parts. On the top half, he can see people in the everyday world, dancing and going about their lives as they would over

the top of a metal platform under which stands this spectacular underworld where terrorists and police are pulling invisible wires to manipulate the actions above.

This type of voyeuristic image was characteristic of many late-nineteenth century novels about terrorism, including *Caesar's Column*. But what makes James a particularly innovative figure here is how he experiments with these conventions and incorporates them into a form of psychological realism. Thus, on a second look, there is a curious paradox in Hyacinth's sublime experience. Unlike other sublime experiences such as natural wonder or apocalyptic catastrophe, Hyacinth's conspiratorial sublime is driven largely by uncertainty. Even as Hyacinth imagines the veil falling from his eyes, any sure knowledge seems utterly elusive. Accordingly, James' rich language does not illuminate the secret anarchist plot, but instead evokes images of concealment and suppression: "in silence, in darkness, under the feet of each one of us...immeasurable...invisible impalpable wires." Even the wires that Hyacinth sees are paradoxically "everywhere" and nowhere at once because of their lack of specificity.

Hyacinth's split vision of a calm façade and subterranean warfare underscores how, in addition to rendering conspiratorial thought, this speculative process in *The Princess Casamassima* establishes a psychology and limited perspective that models the response James works to elicit in his readers. In this sense, the uncertainty of James' character becomes a principle of readerly response as Hyacinth's confusion mirrors the evasive and unreliable nature of James' narration. Hyacinth's split vision of a calm façade and subterranean warfare underscores James' engagement with the sensationalist pleasures associated with the sense of "not knowing" that surrounded the idea of conspiracy. In this sense, James refuses the conventional realist imperative to mirror society in its local, highly specific details in favor of a literary realism that foregrounds psychological struggle as its basis for notions of the real.

Niederwald and Paranoid Play

Several scholars have identified a failed assassination attempt known as the “Niederwald Affair” as the likely source material for the Hyacinth/Hoffendahl plotline in *The Princess Casamassima*.^{xix} In September 1883, Friedrich August Reinsdorf dispatched a young saddle-maker named Friedrich Rupsch to detonate a bomb in the path of the German Emperor’s carriage at the unveiling of the Niederwald monument. According to Rupsch’s testimony in court, he said that he never wished to kill the emperor, but instead placed an unlit cigar at the bomb’s fuse to convince his fellow conspirators that the operation had failed through an accident. At first, most sources reported the explosion as an act of vandalism directed at the monument itself; however in the year that followed, rumors circulated wildly as investigators and the press gradually came to the conclusion that the thwarted explosion had been meant for the German emperor.

Aside from the literal similarity of the thwarted assassination attempt, the discourses surrounding the Niederwald Affair evoke the narrative qualities that I have been describing as the basis for these Jamesian pleasures of conspiracy. The British and American presses seized on this incident for the way it seemed to offer an oblique glimpse into the workings and history of terrorism at the turn of the century. As one dispatch put it, many came to “expect [the trial] to lay bare the whole scheme of organization of the anarchists.”^{xxx} This broader history, however, appeared mainly in indirect references and insinuations, suggesting the faint outlines of an international terrorist network operating across Britain, Europe, and the United States. Like the “loose appearances” and “just perceptible presences” James’

described in his meanderings through London, much of the coverage of the Niederwald plot provides only the faintest outlines of a larger criminal underworld.

The press' intense reaction to Niederwald cannot be understood apart from the myriad sources in public culture that propounded conspiratorial forms of observation. In the mid-1880s, writers from a variety of perspectives insisted that access to the inner-sanctums of anarchist and Fenian terrorist organizations might offer an insider's view into forces driving society towards class conflict, degeneracy, revolution, and the collapse of traditional institutions and modes of authority. For example, Lyman Abbott wrote a piece in *The Century*, which warned a "warfare by anarchy against all property" was well underway; however, with the advent of the dynamite bomb, "modern science" had rendered such threats invisible. With dynamite "carried in a carpetbag or contained easily in a concealed cartridge," the modern terrorist could without warning "destroy in an hour the products of a century's industry."^{xxi} In the meantime, scientists such as Cesare Lombroso and Max Nordau directed readers to look for evidence of terrorist conspiracy in physical signs of biological degeneration. In 1883 Nordau's *Degeneration* identified the "the dynamiter" with the "same somatic features" and "anthropological family" as other quintessentially "modern" degenerates including "nosophiles and necrophiles," "injectors of morphine and cocaine," and "passivists" who "clothe themselves" in "feminine apparel."^{xxii} Even anarchists themselves encouraged this conspiratorial system of observation. Johann Most, the radical writer and newspaper editor was among the most influential figures in the United States through his promotion of "propaganda by deed" and "bomb talk." Most used his weekly newspaper, *Freiheit*, to build up a cult of celebrity around the out-sized personalities of anarchist leaders such as Mikhail Bakunin, Sergei Nechayev, and Most himself.^{xxiii}

These sometimes-elaborate conspiracy narratives about anarchism carried a duality in their ability to inspire a sense of mystery and romance at the same time that they inspired fear. Anxious images such as Abbott's invisible dynamiters and Lombroso's theories of biological degeneration were shadowed by a kind of mystique. Where the celebrity status of terrorist leaders was ostensibly founded on the threat they posed to the public, it also inspired a certain mystique as Most and Bakunin, with their haggard appearance and audacious rhetoric, evoked an exhilarating return to the romanticism of the French revolution with its emphasis on human agency as the engine shaping the course of human events. Furthermore, the explanatory dimensions of conspiracy narratives giving the privileged insider's access to the secret workings of power in society. If, as many of the theories claimed, anarchist terror operatives were pervasive, invisible, and working side-by-side with "normal" people, this implicitly guided the reader to experience a radical defamiliarization. Seemingly unremarkable settings and subjects are then suggested as objects of intrigue and fanciful speculation for their potential relationship to motive forces in history.

This paradoxical combination of fear and fascination can clearly be detected in *The London Times'* coverage of the Niederwald affair. The *Times'* article of December 16, 1884 reads more like an adventure novel than a news report. The article's intense descriptions invite readers to see the event as a brief glimpse into a much larger set of historical circumstances. For instance, the account of Reinsdorf's career as an agitator implies the existence of a heretofore-concealed terrorist underworld:

Reinsdorf, a clever and daring agitator has the credit of being the originator of all the schemes, and is believed to be in possession of a dangerous power of moulding others to his will. He has long been under police surveillance, and has suffered

imprisonment for circulating seditious literature and for falsifying his papers.

According to his own account, given in court, he has traveled over a great part of Europe in search of work, and has been turned out of several towns for teaching his revolutionary principles. He has appeared under a great variety of assumed names and with numerous false passports, generally obtaining the latter by purchase from his fellow-workmen. In appearance he is tall, thin, and haggard with keen and deep-set eyes and the lean and hungry look that is popularly supposed to mark the conspirator...It came out in the course of his examination that he had dealings with Hödel who attempted to assassinate the Emperor in 1878 and with Most, the editor of *Freiheit*; but he denied having ever been an emissary of the latter.^{xxiv}

Here the *Times* directs its readers to look for clues of a potential conspiracy everywhere. The *Times* writer sets up an implicit chronology casting Reinsdorf as a melodramatic anti-hero who embodies many of the anxieties and nightmare images suggested by Abbot and others. He shifts shape, foments class conflict, and seems to float in the background of every major terrorist event in recent years. Reinsdorf, we are told, has “long been under police surveillance,” appeared under multiple aliases, and has been observed traveling “over a great part of Europe,” having been “turned out of several towns for teaching his revolutionary principles.” It is hinted that his alleged connections to Hödel and Most suggest some kind of cooperation among Reinsdorf and the various terrorist factions that *Times*’ readers would have encountered elsewhere. He is described as possessing a seemingly occult power of “moulding others to his will” and changing his identity with “a great variety of assumed names” and “numerous false passports.” Readers are even directed towards Reinsdorf’s physical features for clues and signs of his connection to a vast conspiracy in his “deep-set eyes” and “lean and hungry look.”

By bringing these indirect clues to bear out the *Times*' account renders the anarchist network much in the way a painter uses negative space. The outlines emerge by talking around the object. Paradoxically it is invisible and yet the shape is very clear. Reinsdorf's appearance in court is then figured as a momentary rupture in the machinery of the anarchist organization that briefly brings it to the surface where it can be glimpsed from the perspective of the average person. This type of description invites a subtle sensationalist pleasure by redefining seemingly unremarkable surfaces as potential objects of suspicion, therefore offering the possibility for infinite speculation. We are implicitly directed to look to faces, cityscapes, and newspapers for potential evidence. Thus, when every observation becomes a potential clue, the implicit possibility of a vast conspiracy seems to infuse the terrain of the everyday world with a sense of mystery and romance.

James was keenly aware of the highly literary quality and counterintuitive potential for playfulness in accounts of incidents like Niederwald. His ambivalent sense of terror and fascination is, for instance, evident in a letter he wrote to Grace Eliot Norton following an attack on Westminster by "Irish Dynamiters." James reflected, "I can imagine no spectacle more touching, more thrilling and even dramatic, than to see this great precarious, artificial empire" contending with "forces which perhaps, in the long run, will prove too many for it."^{xxxv} To James, the activity of reading, contemplating and imagining the potential intrusion of this "spectacle" into the daily life offered a whole realm of surprising sensations that served to wrench the individual out of a comfortable sense of complacency and into a wild mindset, alert to the possibility of such "thrilling" and "dramatic" experiences as the potential unraveling of empire.

James' 1905 preface to *The Princess Casamassima* lays out an extensive explanation of how he worked to capture the sense of uncertainty that had surrounded anarchism in the

1880s. James described his novel's "simplest origin" as "proceed[ing] quite directly from "the habit and interest of walking the streets." In the city, James maintained, the individual could be subject to a kind of "mystic solicitation" in the "urgent appeal on the part of everything to be interpreted and, so far as may be, reproduced" for "there are London mysteries (dense categories of dark arcana) for every spectator." Out of this evocative setting, James said that he arrived at a "scheme" that "called for the suggested nearness (to all our apparently ordered life) of some sinister anarchic underworld heaving in its pain, its power and its hate."

Such "dark arcana" were interesting less for their ability to provide documentation of conspiratorial politics than to produce a heightened consciousness of one's own surroundings in the faintly "suggested" proximity of danger.^{xxvi} The crucial thing about the language of conspiracy was less what it did to show an actual conspiracy than its ability to alter the way in which the individual related to the surfaces of the everyday world. James claimed in his preface that he disregarded—even actively avoided—firsthand documentation of "authentic" information:

I recall pulling no wires, knocking at no closed doors, applying for no 'authentic' information; but I recall also on the other hand the practice of never missing an opportunity to add a drop, however small, to the bucket of my impressions or to renew my sense of being able to dip into it. To haunt the great city and by this habit to penetrate it imaginatively in as many places as possible—*that* was to be informed, *that* was to pull wires, *that* was to open doors, *that* positively was to groan at times under the weight of one's accumulations.^{xxvii}

By suggesting that the immediate surroundings were indeed connected to the larger political situation, stories about anarchist conspiracy disrupted any sense of comfortable

complacency. Consequently, people did not need to witness the inner-sanctum of an anarchist den to experience excitement and terror. On the contrary, the real source of exhilaration came in looking out upon the city and simply not knowing what information was being held back—not knowing what “wires” were being pulled or what was behind closed “doors.” James appropriately uses terms evoking a gothic sensibility when he speaks of “haunt[ing]” the city, “mystic solicitation,” “dark arcana,” and “occult associations.” This state of uncertainty renewed the way an individual would need to think as he or she gazed. After the suggestion of its connection to a highly significant, yet vaguely defined political conflict animating “the great city,” the world is to reappear as something strange, sinister, alien, and different.

James and the Dynamite Novel

James’ tendency to see conspiracy in terms of deferral put him slightly at odds with many of the novelists who dealt with terrorist conspiracy in the period. Where James found indeterminacy exhilarating, turn-of-the-century novelists more commonly offered scenes of voyeuristic scenes of backroom deals and conspiratorial agreements as a means of resolving uncertainty. In more conventional novels, the author appears to be capable of guiding readers into the workings of terrorist secret societies and the police operations charged with shutting them down. These include works by canonical authors such as Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Dynamiter* (1885) and Arthur Conan Doyle’s “A Study in Scarlet,” as well a host of lesser known novels such as Edward Jenkins’ *A Week of Passion* (1884) and Mathilda Betham-Edwards’ “The Flower of Doom or The Conspirator” (1885) Such fictional

portrayals of terrorism consistently suggested a close proximity of a concealed, extensive international terrorist conspiracy.

The typical plot of the terrorist novel at the turn of the century featured an uninitiated protagonist such as a dabbler in socialist politics or a policeman finding him/herself caught in the crossfire of a secret war between a highly organized secret society and law enforcement. Many of these works included actual sermons, political speeches, and news articles within the pages so as to suggest a close correspondence between the day-to-day workings of the nation and the hidden activities of the various terrorists, secret agents, and other individuals caught up in the plot. This is not to say that the more conventional treatments of conspiracy are devoid of the process of speculation that James describes in his preface. However, they eventually move toward a confident and clear revelation of the terrorist's operatives, offering a comfortably clear vision of forces driving the course of history together with their authors' social judgments.^{xxviii}

Frank Harris' *The Bomb* exemplifies the exposé-like qualities of the dynamite novel genre to act as a form of exposé. *The Bomb* is a fictionalized account of the Haymarket affair in Chicago. Harris, a political radical not directly involved with the Haymarket incident, extrapolated the plot of his book largely from the sensational accounts of the Chicago newspapers, using the real names of the alleged terrorists and filling in gaps in the coverage with educated guesses. The Haymarket affair was far and away the most notorious clash between law enforcement and anarchists in late-nineteenth-century America. In 1886 an unidentified individual threw a bomb into a large May Day rally at Haymarket Square in Chicago, prompting a riot and gunfight in which eight policemen and an unknown number of civilians were killed. In the days and weeks that followed Chicago was thrown into a frenzy of paranoia as newspapers featured startling allegations of violent anarchists around

every corner and police carried out a furious campaign of arrests. The whole affair culminated with a sensational show-trial in which seven anarchists were hanged for their alleged (but largely unproven) role in instigating the riot.^{xxix}

The Bomb is told from the perspective of Rudolph Schnaubelt, a German immigrant who lies on his deathbed in Bavaria, claiming to have been the one to actually throw the bomb. Schnaubelt describes how he came to the United States with high hopes for employment and upward mobility, only to be thwarted by a series of crooked employers and thus pushing him into the arms of the eventual celebrity anarchists in the Haymarket incident, Albert Parsons, August Spies and Louis Lingg. Schnaubelt eventually comes to occupy the stereotypical place of the cold, singly directed revolutionist; like Nechaev's "enemy of the world," he describes how he is "alienated" from all relationships except the "emotions and sensations, which the wild struggle called to life." Harris' plot posits a radical split in perspective between a conventional public view of the event and that of the criminal underworld. As the novel progresses, Schnaubelt's fly-on-the-wall narration initiates a voyeuristic perspective in which the chain of causality in the Haymarket affair seems transparent and patently obvious. Harris thus spends long passages meticulously detailing the construction of the bomb, the complex planning, and the backdoor disagreements between the alleged terrorists themselves (which often read like the grandstanding speeches delivered in the court case). This effect of rendering the confusion of Haymarket transparent comes to a climax with the semi-fictional Lingg's "astonishingly correct...forecast of what would happen." Harris' character anticipates the cycle of violence, arrests, and paranoia, all leading up to his messianic fantasy of standing up in "the courtroom of this robber society" and achieving martyrdom with the declaration "you have pronounced sentence on yourself, damn you!" Within Harris' narrative scheme, Lingg's apparent clairvoyance provides a

vicarious pleasure of being close to events of historical significance, looking down upon the unsuspecting public from a perspective of power, knowing and anticipating the disorder and violence that would follow. Harris' somewhat heavy-handed gesture engages a potent fantasy of explaining social causality in easily digestible terms of a clear chronology of events and melodramatic characters. In this sense, Harris' book takes on a highly teleological structure of a "whodunit" mystery in its clear progression from uncertainty to certainty as the book's various clues systematically progress towards a neatly contained conclusion that purports to resolve the mystery of urban disorder in Chicago.

An important subcategory of novels about terrorism utilized science fiction in order to carry out the documentary and expositional project of texts like Harris' *The Bomb*. In imagining futuristic dystopian scenarios, these authors followed conspiracy narratives and theories of degeneration to their logical conclusion of a society pervaded by conflict and deception. The genre of science fiction was particularly well-suited as a medium for exposition because it allowed authors a means of claiming a scenario in which those elements of terrorist conspiracy that remained concealed to public notice would become widely known and thus validated.

Jack London's *The Iron Heel*, perhaps the best known of these texts, makes extensive use of these types of manipulations of perspective. *The Iron Heel* imagines a dystopian future in which relations between capital and labor have devolved into all-out warfare between a massive secret terrorist secret society and a totalitarian plutocracy known as "The Iron Heel." *The Iron Heel's* features the elaborate frame story of "The Everhard Manuscript," a document supposedly recovered by members of a utopian society in the distant future. Towards the end of the book the protagonist, Avis Everhard infiltrates the plutocracy's Gestapo-like secret service, observing not only the workings of the secret service, but an

entire world of conspiratorial intrigue, deception, and conflict that conceals itself to an unsuspecting public:

We took our place at once as agent-provocateurs in the scheme of the [oligarchy]...With help on the inside, this was not difficult, for in that shadow-world of secret service, identity was nebulous. Like ghosts the agents came and went, obeying commands, fulfilling duties, following clues, making their reports to officers they never saw or cooperating with other agents they had never seen before and would never see again.^{xxx}

Yet, even Avis' special knowledge is limited by her close involvement with the conflict. The fictitious editor's opening commentary reminds us that "[Avis] lacked perspective." The events that were "confused and veiled to her, are clear to us...She was too close to the events she writes about. Nay, she was merged in the events she has described." Thus, it is only through the interplay between the footnotes and Avis' own partial account that the full terms of the novel's plot emerge. As readers, we enjoy a bird's-eye view to a society where everyone's lines of vision are obstructed by the deceptions and secret activities of dueling conspiratorial intrigues of the totalitarian government and revolutionist insurgency.

In the meantime, a number of writers worked to chip away at assumptions about a vast anarchist conspiracy, focusing, as James did, on the inconsistencies and uncertainties surrounding allegations of terrorism. William Dean Howells was one of the most dramatic examples. During the Haymarket trials, Howells risked his public reputation by taking a courageous public stance against the shame of "this free Republic kill[ing] five men for their opinions."^{xxxi} While Howells disagreed with anarchist ideologies, he abhorred what he saw as the injustice of the Haymarket affair and trials. In *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, Howells' ambivalence comes to the surface in the characterization of Berthold Lindau, an old

disillusioned political radical who dies “in a bad cause” after being injured by a policeman in a labor riot. Howell’s Lindau and other labor radicals are tragic figures in the sense that “men like Lindau,” as the character Basil March puts it, “renounce the American means as hopeless and let their love of justice hurry them into sympathy with violence.” Unlike the elaborate “warlike” labor organizations described in sensational news reports, there is no conspiracy or military structure behind the labor activism that leads to Lindau’s death, but only a collection of confused, poorly organized, and severely mistreated people. Lindau’s death then begs the question of why the public, March, and perhaps Howells himself to gravitate towards ethnic stereotypes of conspirators despite their better judgment. Hence, rather than the all-encompassing sense of intentionality that we see in works such as Harris’ *The Bomb*, Howells instead leaves us to contemplate the messy, chaotic nature of human activity.^{xxxii}

G.K. Chesterton’s *Man Who Was Thursday* satirized the stereotypical conventions of public discourses surrounding terrorism. Chesterton also used the pervasive fears of anarchist cells as an occasion to meditate on the craving for and frustration of clear, direct epistemologies. In his very funny novel, Gabriel Symes, an undercover police agent infiltrates a secret society of anarchists and nihilists, only to find that the entire organization is made up of undercover police agents. Each member of the secret society has a code name taken from days of the week and are led by the mysterious criminal mastermind named “Sunday.” As the novel unfolds, the reader finds that the absurd situation raises questions over the role of artful representation in creating perceptions of an anarchist threat. In one of the book’s most revealing scenes, we meet an agent posing as the “great Nihilist” Professor de Worms. As it turns out, the agent/imposter has a meeting with the real Professor de Worms, but has no trouble dispatching his rival because his impersonation of a

nihilist professor is seen as much more convincing by an audience that has thoroughly internalized the stereotypes and conventions of mass culture. The fake Professor de Worms explains, “an old man in poor health, like my rival, could not be expected to be so impressively feeble as a young actor in the prime of life. You see, he really had paralysis, and working within this definite limitation, he couldn’t be so jolly paralytic as I was.”^{xxxiii} The audience’s preference for the imposter underscores Chesterton’s larger critique that police surveillance and widespread circulation of conspiracy theories had been much more effective in terrorizing the public than any actual terrorist. For Chesterton the fear of terrorism thus suggested less about actual danger in society than it did about a deep human need for certainty in the face of indeterminacy.

The common thread that runs through these novels is that they turn to anarchism as a heuristic for decoding the terms of what was seen as a broader social revolution. This is highly apparent in Harris and London who rendered the inner-workings of terrorist activity in order to present prophecies of violent class warfare. But the drive for a conclusive explanation of “the real” was also at play in the skeptical views of those like Howells and Chesterton who pulled back the curtain and found hidden complexities and nuances to the conflict between labor and capital. Small moments of exposure as in the Niederwald incident figured into this basic logic because they offered clues—the material—for piecing together a much larger story. On some level, then, these writers found in reports of anarchist terror as an imperative to proceed towards a telos with a definite conclusion. James, as we shall see, resisted this imperative to expose and reveal “what goes on” underneath the surface.

Playing at Danger

If Harris, London, Chesterton, and Howells treated the indeterminacy surrounding anarchist conspiracy narratives as a problem in need of solution, James, in his whimsical determination to take pleasure in the idea of conspiracy, turned this narrative structure on its head. Where these other authors crafted characters who typically attain certainty by penetrating secret lairs and backroom deals, things tend to become *less* certain for James' characters as the narrative progresses. Rather than a teleological epistemology, their sense of reality shifts and readjusts, fixing belief at some points and losing it at others. In this sense, James' novel is less a book about conspiracy per se than one about the process of talking around conspiracy.

The Princess Casamassima is arranged as a sort of tour through the sensationalist culture prompted by the threat of anarchist terrorism. Hyacinth's overheated responses to anarchist conspiracy in *The Princess Casamassima* closely follow the script set forth by highly publicized conspiracy theories and allegations insisting on the possibility of "an immense underworld." Over the course of the book, Hyacinth internalizes the popular novels he reads in his youth, partakes in the gossip at the local tavern where the men blow "hot and cold" over fantasies of class warfare, and he is enraptured by the dour revolutionist agent Paul Muniment who entices him with the possibility of becoming "an associate of a high type, in a subterranean crusade." In each case, we are reminded how imagination, inflected by fascination and anxiety, and *not* firsthand knowledge gives life to suspicion. Over the course of the book, Hyacinth internalizes the popular novels he reads in his youth, partakes in the gossip at the local tavern where the men blow "hot and cold" over fantasies of class warfare, and he is enraptured by the dour revolutionist agent Paul Muniment who entices him with the possibility of becoming "an associate of a high type, in a subterranean crusade."^{xxxiv} At each

stop, we are reminded how imagination, and *not* firsthand knowledge, gives life to the broader set of practices and experiences associated with conspiracy thinking.

One of the first stops in this itinerary is James' wry episode in which the older Frenchman Eustache Poupin reminisces about days as a revolutionary activist and foretells of a coming revolution. Here, James imagines conspiracy theory as a form of improvisational tale telling. For Poupin, speculations about a secret war among capital and labor allow him to imagine himself in the fray of the social revolution that he participated in as a young activist in the Paris Commune. James tells us that for Poupin, such "machinations" are "a matter of habit and tradition like his theory that Christopher Columbus, who discovered America, was a Frenchman, and his hot footbath on Saturday nights."¹ This whole scene turns outlandish and farcical when Poupin makes the bizarre suggestion that Vetch, the elderly violinist who looks after Hyacinth, might be a spy for the government. Alluding to the possibility that Vetch conceals a secret life, Poupin observes that Vetch harbors "mysterious affinities of another sort, reminiscences of a phase in which he smoked cigars, had a hat-box and used cabs" and even made furtive visits to "Bologne." So Poupin constructs an invisible subterranean war between secret police agents and terrorist operatives who walk unnoticed among the public dressed as bums and elderly street musicians like Vetch. And when he sees that his stories are exciting to the impressionable Hyacinth, he, like any good storyteller, embellishes in order to play to his audience's thirst for drama. Poupin exclaims that the politics of the situation "will go on till the reintegration of the despoiled and disinherited, is ushered in with irresistible force." "We may not see it, but *they'll* see it." Noticing Hyacinth's interest, Poupin ratchets the story up even further. He says, "But what do I say, my children? I *do* see it, ...'It's before my very eyes, in its luminous reality, especially as I lie here—the revendication [sic], the rehabilitation, the rectification."¹

If the revolution is just barely out of sight, Poupin remains free to imagine it in any terms he wishes, thus engaging in an activity of tale-telling, improvisation and performance as the situation demands. And it is with this gentle irony that James points to imagination—not observation—as the form of activity that Hyacinth and Poupin so eagerly share. James guides us to ask, how can Poupin possibly see *more* of the “luminous reality” while lying on his back? Where do such visions come from? In response, James seems to imply that Poupin’s visions emerge first and foremost out of his desire to tell an exciting story that adds a sense of adventure and a feeling of agency in the face of frustration and boredom. Thus, as much as James pokes fun at the crackpot tendencies and excess in Poupin’s flights of imagination, he also seems to delight in Poupin’s taste for mystery and intrigue.

From the Dickensian banter of Hyacinth’s encounter with Poupin, James moves on to explore a rebellious individualism in conspiracy thinking with our introduction to Christina Casamassima. Christina is the bored wife of an Italian prince who relieves her ennui with fanciful thoughts of anarchist revolution. We are told that she reads Schopenhauer, “a heavy volume on Labour and Capital,” and that she “swear[s] by Darwin and Spencer and all the scientific iconoclasts as well as by the revolutionary spirit.”^{xxxv} When Hyacinth engages her friendship, he becomes a kind of plaything to her, and his involvement in the anarchist plot becomes a prop for her fantasies. As Milicent Bell observes, James’ Christina seems loosely patterned on certain tragic elements of Hawthorne’s Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance*.^{xxxvi} Here I would add that, in spite of each character’s tragic fall from grace, James seems especially to admire a certain transgressive quality in both Zenobia and Christina. Both characters are thoroughly dissatisfied with the predictability of social convention. They seek out a radical skepticism, which ultimately offers not only a release from boredom, but also a chance to assert individual agency apart from the roles prescribed

to them by society. James even appears to have Christina's rebelliousness in mind when, in his 1897 essay on Hawthorne, he calls Zenobia a "passionate patroness of causes who plays as it were with revolution," and who is "not least touching" for her "looking, with fine imagination, for adventures that, under the circumstances were not to be met."^{xxxvii}

Christina's playing at danger is thus the cause of some ambivalence in James' novel. On one hand, her radical interests occasionally seem a vapid kind of parlor talk vacillating between a fascination with the spectacular and the mundane: "Is all this going to burst forth some fine morning and set the world on fire?...Then suddenly, she added in a different tone of voice, 'Excuse me, I have an idea you speak French.'" This unevenness might lead us to suspect, as Madame Grandoni does, that Christina is merely "turning somersaults" in search of cheap thrills. But, on the other hand, this same impetuous quality can indicate an intellectual curiosity and a refusal of codified norms that James seems to appreciate. Although this excitable, paranoid attitude results in near-catastrophic self-destruction, it nevertheless offers a richer, more interesting way of living and perceiving the world than the hollow satisfaction of a state of mind, closed to skepticism or possibilities. Christina's startling visions of "fire" and her agitated states of wonder ("I want to know *à quoi m' en tenir* [where I stand]") are, at the very least, preferable to the dull complacency or "disinterested airs" of Captain Sholto who is repeatedly shown to be "one of those strange beings produced by old societies that have run to seed, corrupt, exhausted civilizations."^{xxxviii}

James' ambivalent rendering of Christina underscores a more general state of ambivalence in *The Princess Casamassima* over James' attraction to the aesthetics of conspiracy. In counterposing Christina, Poupin, and other conspiracy buffs to insipid Old World such as Sholto and the Prince, he joins the company of Emerson and Whitman in criticizing strenuous Victorian repression. The radical skepticism represented by Christina captures a

certain feeling of exhilaration and transgression that James appreciates. But this sense of exhilaration is tempered by James' own conservative leanings. Although he welcomes the way that dabbling in revolution seems to plunge the mind into a society without boundaries or strictures, he also sees how this frequently resolves in misguided and downright vacuous responses. For James, conspiracy then gives voice to a deep yearning for relief from the monotony of mainstream culture; however, like Christina's vapid regurgitation of Schopenhauer, it seems to offer very little as a viable political or ideological alternative.

Paranoia and Providence

One of James' most pressing insights concerns the role of conspiracy theory in filling an emotional and philosophical void left by the figurative death of God in modern thought. Here James precedes the writings of contemporary scholars and writers such as Leo Braudy, Gordon Wood, and Ed White who have occasionally argued that conspiracy narratives in drama, fiction and popular culture functioned as secular replacements for forms of superstition and religion. Braudy, for example, writes, "as the order of God loses explanatory force, there arises a longing for other orders. To embody that longing the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century summon up a parade of world-historical hero-villains, no longer the enemies of God who populated Jacobean drama but a group of men willing to focus on the limited and therefore controllable group of others who now defined the secular world."^{xxxix} By Braudy's logic, conspiracy narratives in post-Enlightenment thought hence provide a means of re-enchanting the world by restoring the possibility for transcendent sensations and all-encompassing explanations to mysteries in public life. James' novel parallels Braudy's argument not in the sense that James presents his readers with

conspiratorial “hero-villains” (such figures never appear in *The Princess Casamassima*). Instead, James dramatizes the influence that the idea of conspirators could exert on his own characters’ imaginations as almost-mystical figures.

James presents this grasping for cosmological order primarily through his characters’ process of talking about and around the anarchist conspiracy. At the center of these speculations is Hoffendahl, the anarchist criminal mastermind. Hoffendahl’s reputation among Hyacinth, Christina, and the workmen at the tavern reminds one of the cult of celebrity surrounding famous anarchists leaders such as Mikhael Bakunin and Johann Most. Like Bakunin, “the sublime Hoffendahl” is reputed to handle “all things, persons institutions, ideas as so many notes in his great symphonic revolt” with “exactly the same mastery of them that a great musician” has “of the keyboard of the piano.” While listening to the men at the pub gossip and fantasize about Hoffendahl, Hyacinth feels physically “seized” by a “state of inward exaltation” in what has by now become his “intense desire” for physical contact with Hoffendahl, “to hear his voice, to touch his mutilated hand.”^{xl} As we might expect, James is interested in the almost mystic undertones represented by this Bakunin-esque figure because of the way that it highlights a longing for deeper forms of order in modern belief. Although Hoffendahl is, many ways, the central figure of the novel we only catch the slightest glimpse of him. We learn of him and of his mysterious secret society through a filter of hearsay and speculation. As a result, he tends to act as a cipher onto which Hyacinth and Christina project a deep yearning to feel a higher power.

These religious and mystical undertones become even more explicit in the episode in which Hyacinth attempts to seduce Christina following his oath to the secret Anarchist brotherhood. Hyacinth implies that he has taken a “Jesuit” vow “of blind obedience” in order to present himself as a man of mystery with privileged knowledge of a divine,

overwhelming power. He tells her, “I have a far other sense” of reality “from any I had before.” “I was hanging about on the steps of the temple, among the loafers and gossips, but now I have been in the innermost sanctuary—I have seen the holy of the holies.”^{xli} Particularly with his application of the term “Jesuit,” James stages the attempted seduction as a burlesque on the pulpy literature of Catholic seduction and mystery. As Susan Griffin tells us, anti-Catholic authors such as Catherine Sinclair popularized the label “Thugs of Christianity” to refer to Jesuits as a shadowy secret society with “unnatural—perhaps even supernatural” qualities. The use of this slur extended beyond even the usual anti-Catholic motifs of seduction and Papal conspiracy to the suggestion that the Jesuits were “a European equivalent to the Asiatic death cult.”^{xlii} Bearing this history in mind, Hyacinth’s association of himself with the Jesuits carries the not-so-subtle implication of exotic sexual virility, on the one hand, and a dangerous brush with the occult on the other.

The appeal of this guise of the exotic “Jesuit” man of mystery is ultimately much less about exposition than maintaining a sense of mystery and intrigue. Hyacinth’s description of his transformation seems to have its intended effect of beguiling Christina with suggestions of excitement and wonder at the possibility of uncovering some underlying mystical order. Excited, she presses Hyacinth for more information: “and it’s very dazzling...Then it *is* real, it *is* solid?...That’s exactly what I have been trying to make up my mind about for so long.” Ironically, when Hyacinth finally unfurls the terms of Hoffendahl’s plot, it is the very *absence* of “data for appreciating it” that forms the basis of Hyacinth’s excitement. He confesses that he “knew nothing, and didn’t want to know, except that it was marvelous the way Hoffendahl kept [the various threads] apart.” Hyacinth’s language focuses on the “innumerable” quality” of the conspiracy; he says, he “hadn’t the data for appreciating it” and that “his little job” is part of “a very large plan, of which he couldn’t measure the

scope.”^{xliii} The fact that each clue begets other clues suggests the possibility of endless occasions to anticipate covert intrusions of revolutionary politics into everyday life. By emphasizing Hyacinth and Christina’s embrace of uncertainty, James casts the pleasures of conspiracy theory both in the Catholic and anarchist context in terms of its ability to provide a narrative structure that opens the individual up to the possibility of overwhelming feelings of surprise and shock. But such sensations of euphoric vision paradoxically require that the narration remain incomplete—that the “final” discovery always seems one clue away. For if the answer is always one clue away, we are held in a perpetual state of suspense and are therefore left to imagine the terms of the Providential mystery for ourselves.

If the shadowy anarchist secret society represents an archaic and supernatural energy to Hyacinth, it also represents something quintessentially contemporary and scientific in its resemblance to modern bureaucratic authority. As Posnock observes, Hoffendahl’s obsession with order calls to mind the “social pathology of bureaucratic rationality” that fascinates and terrifies James in *The American Scene*.^{xliv} In *The American Scene*’s section on the Waldorf Astoria hotel, James describes the simultaneously enthralling and terrifying creative power of bureaucratic management as “the hotel spirit,” which invisibly directs the Waldorf’s various employees to do their roles with stunning predictability as if some “high-spirited orchestral leader” were “waving the magical baton.”^{xlv} Similar to the overwhelming power of the hotel’s central bureaucracy, Hoffendahl is said to have “classified and subdivided” humanity “with a truly German thoroughness,” and to hold “in his hand innumerable other threads” of the vast organization. Aside from the awe-inspiring scale of this bureaucratic sublime, James also reveals darker, coercive effects of the conspiracy’s centralized discipline. Muniment, for example, defers to the idea of pure bureaucratic authority in his reminder that Hyacinth “must only know very vaguely” the effect of his

assignment, as it is a mere “detail in a scheme of which the general effect will be decidedly useful.”^{xlvi} Muniment’s sniveling excuse reveals a troubling, depersonalizing undertone to the conspiracy in its substitution of human will for the self-perpetuating mechanisms of Hoffendahl’s organization.^{xlvii}

These depersonalizing tendencies initiate a shift to a much more austere tone in the final sections of the book, as Hyacinth contemplates the frightening consequences of the anarchist conspiracy. In order to prepare himself to carry out the yet-unnamed terrorist act, Hyacinth uses money from his inheritance for a retreat to Venice and Paris. But this retreat is really a retreat inward to personal contemplation as he ponders the possible consequences of Hoffendahl’s shadowy scheme. The knowledge of the terrorist plot, which at first washed over Hyacinth’s senses as a “dazzling” view of an “immense underworld,” comes to terrorize his senses. In this manner, James dissects the catastrophic nightmare images propounded by figures such as Lyman Abbott, the longtime editor of *North American Review*, who warned readers of “warfare by anarchy against all property.”^{xlviii} Far from diminishing anything, the turn to this catastrophic strand of conspiracy thought trades the narcotic highs of wonder and delight for an equally potent experience which disaster and terror becomes the sublime spectacle in question.

As before, Hyacinth sees the cityscape as a battleground for a vast revolution, but his prophetic sense of the “destruction was waiting for [society]” makes him silently “conscious of a transfer, partial if not complete, of his sympathies.” He secretly fears that the inevitable result of the terrorist plot is the destruction of “the monuments and treasures of art, the great palaces and properties, the conquests of learning and taste, the general fabric of civilization as we know it,” solely because these things which “make life more tolerable” emerged out of “the despotisms, the cruelties, the exclusions, the monopolies, and the

rapacities of the past.”^{xxix} Just as the illusions of grandeur come from a perpetually deferred sense of proximity to an overwhelming, vaguely defined power, so too do the anxieties about the catastrophic consequences of revolution. He is unable to look upon the London landscape without the paranoid sensation that “darkness had become a haunted element; it had visions for him that passed even before his closed eyes—sharp doubts and fears and suspicions, suggestions of evil, revelations of suffering.”¹

These vertiginous sensations come to a climax of sorts as Hyacinth contemplates Christina’s level of involvement in the anarchist scheme. The tiniest irregularity of Christina’s sealed correspondences prompts Hyacinth to speculate wildly on her activities. In one of *The Princess Casamassima’s* most frequently quoted passages, James’ language foregrounds the fact that Hyacinth is, if anything, becoming less secure in the status of his own beliefs as he gets deeper into the conspiracy. His thought drifts from the minor detail of the letters to a dizzying array of conjectures:

It would have been easy for Hyacinth to smile at the Princess’s impression that she was ‘in it’...had not the vibration remained which had been imparted to his nerves two years before, of which he had spoken to his hostess at Medley—the sense, vividly kindled and never quenched, that the forces secretly arrayed against the present social order were pervasive and universal, in the air one breathed, in the ground one trod, in the hand of an acquaintance that one might touch or the eye of a stranger that might rest a moment on one’s own. They were above, below, within, without, in every contact and combination of life; and it was no disproof of them to say it was too odd they should lurk in a particular improbable form. To lurk in improbable form was precisely their strength.ⁱⁱ

Critics have typically treated this passage as the strongest evidence that James' realism enacts strategies of containment and domination. Seltzer, in particular, finds a panoptic "fantasy of surveillance" in Hyacinth's sensation of conspirators watching him from afar. While I agree that fear of surveillance is at play, I would argue that this passage is most directly concerned with the way this fear creates occasions for flights of imagination that lend Hyacinth a means of accessing intenser realms of experience and a sensation of heightened mental acuity.

In Hyacinth's thought process, the faint "vibration imparted to his nerves" quickly explodes out to the hyperbolic terms of "pervasive and universal...forces secretly arrayed against the present order" in "the air one breathed, the ground one trod, in the hand of an acquaintance." To exist in "every contact and combination of life," is paradoxically to be everywhere and yet nowhere since it is by definition impossible to distinguish between the normal and the harmful anomalous elements. As the description continues, the repetition of vague references to "they" and proliferation of visions produces a dizzying effect that makes it increasingly unclear what "they" refers to. These possibilities for reconsideration effectively empty the term, "the forces secretly arrayed," of even its hazy original meaning. In creating such substantial narrative instabilities, James sets up a scenario where the idea of "authentic" political consciousness gets thrown into radical doubt as two key realizations are exposed. First, that so many of Hyacinth's convictions are based on speculation over these faintest of suggestions and hints. And, second, that these heightened sensations of a vast providential force emerge out of a Gordian knotting of imagination and fact, which neither Hyacinth nor James' reader have the proper perspective to untangle. These vertiginous sensations initiate a curiously rewarding sense of alienation. Although James' protagonist is utterly bewildered at this point, he nevertheless enjoys a strange sublime feeling of being

swept away by overwhelming “strength” simply through his own terrifying flights of imagination.

The payoff of James’ virtuoso performance is thus far less straightforward than surveillance. James uses the conspiracy genre to establish infinite possibilities for revision of the senses and the self. Each faint hint of dissonance and each coincidence could lead one to clues of conspiracy, thus allowing for a perpetual state of restive anticipation. In this sense, conspiracy serves as the exemplar of how the imagination of danger—whether in suspecting an anarchist lair on the city streets or standing in a parlor—can offer a heightened state of feeling and cognition.

“Mysteries Abysmal”

If James’ fictional protagonist is bewildered by the end of the novel, so too is the reader. In episode after episode the much-vaunted secret terrorist society seems to be revealed, only to be undercut by James’ elusive narration. In the end, there is no journalistic or documentary insight into what goes on in the secret lairs of terrorist operatives. James’ narration of even basic details about the conspiracy is riddled with lacuna and evasions. The extent of the much-contemplated terrorist network, the significance of the unnamed Duke targeted for assassination, Hoffendahl’s political objectives, and even the envelope carrying Hyacinth’s orders remain literally and figuratively sealed off from the view of James’ limited third person narrator. Instead, James reveals only the extensive process through which Hyacinth first fills in these gaps through speculation and then commits suicide based in large part on conclusions derived from guesses and implications. Immersed by James’ prose in the paranoid psychology of 1880s conspiracy culture, the best the reader can do is venture a

guess at what is going on and then think and feel accordingly even as the idea of certainty becomes increasingly elusive.

By leaving his readers in the dark about so many details of the anarchist plot, James also leaves them to guess about whether Hyacinth's dread is grounded in fact or whether it is merely an extension of a paranoid fantasy. This is not to say that James identifies Hyacinth's concerns about the destruction of civil society as necessarily paranoid or incorrect. Indeed, James himself is often justifiably held up as someone repulsed by radicalism and at the thought of revolutionary violence. However, at the same time, James was mesmerized by the intricate gothic aesthetics that he perceived in tales of terrorist conspiracy.

We might then ask, what of *The Princess Casamassima's* conclusion with Hyacinth's suicide? Why does James so abruptly pull the plug on the novel's action at the very moment when the "subterranean politics" of the secret society are likely to go aboveground? I would argue that Hyacinth's death functions as a kind of admission on James' part of the limitations of his own narration. For the logical outcome of the conspiracy genre as James conceives it is not some final revelation, but a perpetual deferral of contact with the "dazzling" and "sublime" that the novel's characters so eagerly anticipate. As in so much of James' other fiction, the central conceit hinges on utterly immersing readers in a character's private struggle to make sense of chaos. The paradox of this project is that this process of searching for facts often yields fewer facts than an explosion of new questions and uncertainties. By the time James wrote *The Princess Casamassima* he does not quite have this formal problem worked out. But a clean resolution is really beside the point for James next to the greater imperative to take pleasure in restless states of curiosity.

As an episode within James' oeuvre, this development of a limited third person narrative presages the innovations on narrative style and perspective of his later fictions. We

can locate a somewhat obvious correspondence between James' use of conspiracy narratives in *The Princess Casamassima* and his frequent habit of appropriating narrative frames and situations that inspired similar cognitive guesswork as in *The Turn of the Screw* (ghost stories), *What Maisie Knew* (life through a child's eyes), and "In the Cage" (work at a telegraph office). As James described it, all of these works' protagonists are distinguished first and foremost as "intense perceivers" of "their respective predicaments."^{lii} Even more significant than his experimentation with frame narratives is James' general emphasis on using these heightened states of consciousness to initiate a restless curiosity. We see this, for instance, in *The Ambassadors* (1903). The subject matter of *The Princess Casamassima* is obviously far a field from *The Ambassadors*' plot of Strether perambulating through Paris to advise and retrieve the younger Chad Newsome; however, the two novels share a common emphasis on submerging their readers' in the intense inner-life of the imagination as their protagonists readjust the way they understand the world around them. Not unlike Hyacinth, Strether finds himself awakened, jolted into curiosity in scenes like his visit to the telegraph office when he suddenly finds himself open to youthful renewal of the self at suspecting the secret sexual lives of his neighbors with the "vibration of the vast strange life of the town."^{liii} This emphasis on self-perpetuating speculation exemplifies James' effort to forge a style of fiction that renders experience down to its very purest essence. For James, fiction is, at base, a narrative form defined by its ability to unmoor people from their collective sense of complacency and in doing so provide a potentially subversive questioning of one's own senses. By this logic, the novel is not so much a localized intervention as a way of conveying a sense of the real in the overwhelming sensations of uncertainty that haunt all humans.

In terms of this broader pattern of narrative innovation, James' alignment of himself with the paranoid subjectivities of the 1880s constitutes an ironic, even Pynchonesque,

celebration of paranoia as a means of feeling things more deeply and therefore experiencing life more fully. He thus looks to conspiratorial modes of reading the world for their ability to rescue the imagination from complacency. This is something akin to the “wisdom” that James used as the closing line of *The Princess Casamassima*'s preface: “if you haven't...the penetrating imagination, you are a fool in the very presence of the assured and the revealed; but that if you *are* so armed you are not really helpless, not without your resource, even before the mysteries abysmal.” For James, political and social states were perhaps ephemeral and slight compared to the permanence of “the penetrating imagination.” Although paranoia causes certain category mistakes about the nature of facts, it at the very least initiates flights of imagination and psychological struggle, which, in the end, constitute for James “the assured and revealed.”^{iv}

Consequently, the pleasures of the conspiracy theory as James conceives them are more than mere documentation of political motive or a voyeuristic glimpse at the inner-workings of terrorism. These pleasures are about creating a mode of reading the world that opens the self to possibilities for surprise and turning over of one's expectations. They are about engendering imaginative processes, through, as James termed it “slashing” through states of “bewilderment,” and in doing so, maintaining a provisional, revisable sense of the self. Conspiratorial forms of language and thought then become “happy” occasions to keep “guessing and suspecting what ‘goes on’...beneath the vast smug surface.” Sensations of terror and awe are central to this as anti-rationalist expressions of a deep longing to look beyond surface level facts of existence. In this respect, the profound hold that conspiracy theory takes over Hyacinth's imagination can serve as a metaphor for James' desire to experience contemplation as action. As he looks to the vast smug surface for the uncanny and the fantastic, James' characters flirt with life outside of the conventional. By locking his

readers inside this perspective, James tried to offer a similar escape into states of restless curiosity.

CHAPTER IV

Charles Chesnutt and “The Propaganda of History”

In Charles Chesnutt’s novels, the American South is depicted as a region teeming with secret combinations, conspiratorial meetings, and long histories of distrust and rumor. Conspiracy narratives offered Chesnutt a way to excavate a hidden, transgressive side of Southern politics and life. *The Marrow of Tradition*, recounts the true story of a successful white supremacist plot to carry out a coup d’état in Wilmington, North Carolina. His works on racial passing such as *Mandy Oxendine*, *The House Behind the Cedars*, and *Paul Marchand F.M.C.* feature recurring scenes of secret combinations among blacks and whites as furtive resistance to the prevailing racist social mores. Chesnutt’s genre-bending experiment, *The Colonel’s Dream*, takes up the issue of the convict-labor scandals or “peonage,” depicting Southern law enforcement and business teaming up to reproduce the conditions of slavery. Even his short stories about slave conjurers and tricksters casting spells on their masters and rivals in love often become indirect references to secret pockets of conspiratorial subversion in the antebellum South.

Chesnutt used a conspiratorial vision of the South in his efforts to combat a revisionist history in which the Civil War and Reconstruction were recast in ways that provided ideological support for Jim Crow laws and disfranchisement of African Americans. As W.E.B. DuBois would note years later, “the real frontal attack on Reconstruction as interpreted by leaders of national thought in the 1870s and for some time thereafter, came

from the universities.” DuBois referred to the manner in which historians, novelists, journalists, and popular writers described the history of the Civil War and Reconstruction in terms of a victimized Southern aristocracy. These revisionists recast Reconstruction as a revenge plot by Radical Republicans backed by “money power.” They promoted the “retrogression thesis” that African Americans were regressing to a brute-like state following their release from bondage. And finally, these revisionists reinterpreted the Ku Klux Klan as part of a civilizing mission to restore order to the South.ⁱ

Chesnutt’s conspiracy narratives challenged this fraudulent view of Southern history. With works describing secret intrigues by a host of Southerners, Chesnutt’s fiction creates the suspicion that much of the politics of the South operated on a conspiratorial wavelength. For instance, in *The Colonel’s Dream*, Chesnutt’s depictions of “upstanding” citizens secretly participating in conspiracies and counter-conspiracies relating to peonage has the effect of defamiliarizing the polite façade of Southern society. The white conspirators in *The Colonel’s Dream* lead secret lives and are loyal to a regime of Southern “custom” that precludes their commitments to the nation. In the meantime, African Americans in the novel engage in their own conspiracy to protect black criminals through secret networks that date back to the time of slavery. Both storylines explore a fantasy of a cosmopolitan vision; they imagine what it might be like to be a cultural insider who is attuned to the region’s subterranean politics. In doing so, they work to pique interest in the possibility of hidden histories and genealogies at play, thus initiating a deconstruction of notions of “respectability” in Southern life.

Despite (or perhaps because of) their close engagement with the vibrant public folklore of conspiracy theory, Chesnutt’s last two published novels, *The Marrow of Tradition* and *The Colonel’s Dream* have often been thought of by critics as a departure from Chesnutt’s attempts to forge fiction that would translate overlooked histories of Southern life for a

popular Northern audience.ⁱⁱ Mathew Wilson has argued that Chesnutt's "turn to an increasingly pessimistic critical realism" marked the invention of "a post-Howellsian, African-American critical realism" that threw off the earlier "experiments in the culturally sanctioned genres available to him" such as the "dialect tale, color-line short stories, and the tragic mulatta novel." Wilson writes, "I believe that, at this moment, [Chesnutt] abandons his abiding faith in what Richard Brodhead has termed 'the novel as agent of social change.'"ⁱⁱⁱ In contrast to Wilson and others, I argue that this development towards a "critical realism," need not be characterized as abandonment of he might have imagined as his public's shared cultural desires. If we consider *The Marrow of Tradition* and *The Colonel's Dream* as works in conversation with the sensational publicity surrounding the milieu of Southern conspiracy theory, it becomes apparent that Chesnutt continued an ongoing experiment with narratives that would not only reach an audience, but would allow him to expand his project of articulating a system of counter-memory that captured otherwise overlooked aspects of the postwar and Post-Reconstruction experience.

Chesnutt, a remarkably subtle and thoughtful author, was pursuing something much more elusive than merely propounding a conspiratorial interpretation of Southern history. For Chesnutt, the figure of conspiracy captures the pervasive uneasiness of Southern life at the turn of the century—the way in which race and class conflicts in the postbellum South could seem powerfully present, but intangible and invisible. White terrorism and peonage conspiracies represent the intense sense of uncertainty that resulted from the transmutation of the slave system into more disparate forms of social and economic power. With that in mind, the effect that Chesnutt looked to create was not so much a direct account of the sources of inequality, but to cultivate in his readers an openness to heterodox interpretations of Southern history. As I discuss, Chesnutt often uses conspiracy to create a sense of the

uncanny by introducing us to characters who, at first, seem drawn from the realm of sensationalist melodrama and African American folk mythology, but, as we proceed, are shown to be more realistic. The result is that Chesnut's fiction often reveals the supposed paranoid figures of Southern conspiracy fears to be grounded in lived experience

Chesnut's engagement with conspiracy as a mode of representing the South's politics offers an important point of overlap with Henry James' experiment with conspiracy as a style of psychological realism. Like James, Chesnut perceived an iconoclastic energy in the way that a cosmopolitan connection with heterodox states of mind and the suggestion of esoteric knowledge could suspend conventional modes of belief. Chesnut's conspiracy narratives potentially overturned readers' expectations by merging his/her perspective with ex-slaves and carpetbaggers, white supremacists and peonage masters who possibly (but only possibly) possessed insights, otherwise unavailable to the outside world. For Chesnut, this cosmopolitan curiosity, this sneaking suspicion that voices were being silenced, was precisely the missing link in most accounts of Southern history.

Postbellum Intrigues

Conspiracy was a central theme and figure in debates about Southern politics and in Southern regionalist fiction. The persistent patterns of violence, poverty, and corruption that following the Civil War and Reconstruction suggested to many people across the political spectrum speculated that conspiratorial intrigue might be behind the turmoil. Democrats, like Henry Grady, routinely raised the suggestion that Republicans had teamed with "money power" and African American henchmen to rob the South of its wealth and exact revenge for the Civil War. Conversely, texts by liberals such as Edward Dixon's *The Terrible Mysteries*

of the Ku Klux Klan (1868) and Albion Tourgée's *A Fool's Errand* (1879), cited the Ku Klux terrors, subversions by local political bosses, and Democratic political corruption as evidence of an ongoing effort to perpetuate the social and economic customs of the slavery era, thus effectively nullifying the outcome of the Civil War.^{iv} At the fringes, certain public figures even held that American history since the Civil War had been determined by a single monolithic plot. The Populist, John Dent, for instance, spoke to impoverished Georgian Farmers of a design among Radical Republicans, "money power," and African Americans to carry out a revenge plot against the South for the Civil War.

Conspiracy narratives about the postbellum South were particularly invested in providing a means of fantasizing a dark, hidden side of the economic and political modernities that resulted from the Civil War. To many individuals at the turn of the century, the image of continuing political dysfunction in the South (whether it was the lament of a "Lost Cause" or of thwarted social progress) was powerful because it seemed to exemplify a pattern of venality and corruption in the postwar era. Americans from a variety of political perspectives expressed the belief that corruption, crude force, and extralegal expedients had become the new standard of politics in the nation. And, nowhere did this pattern of dysfunction seem more apparent than in the turbulent politics of the Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction Southern governments.

The figure of conspiracy often floats in the background even in the most seemingly apolitical Southern regionalist literature from the late nineteenth century. In this manner, conspiracy thinking often constituted a topical and political interlude in texts that announced themselves as apolitical works of romance. For instance, John Esten Cooke, Thomas Nelson Page, and Sara Pryor enjoyed enormous success among Northern readers precisely because they adopted a conciliatory tone, offering their audiences nostalgic escape to a pre-modern

agricultural utopia. They wrote not about the Civil War or failed Reconstruction efforts, but about the chivalry and romance of a harmonious antebellum agrarian culture populated by sophisticated white aristocrats and faithful African American slaves.^v However beneath the romantic façade and conciliatory tone, the rhetoric of plantation mythology was often accompanied by suggestions of conspiracy to parallel the populist appeals of Dent and others. In addition to offering a sentimental excursion into a site of pre-modern grace, these texts implicitly appealed to the persistent suggestion that subversive modernizing forces had led to the demise of an agrarian paradise.

The conspirators that appear in many of these works are often fashioned as signs of the tragic incorporation of the South into a modernized economy as conservative Southern writers fantasized an unholy trinity of backroom deals by Radical Republicans, black empowerment through pro-Republican paramilitary organizations like the Union Leagues, and opportunistic scalawag Southern republicans. In doing so, they articulated the increasingly common viewpoint that African Americans had become pawns for a plot among white Northerners to exploit Southern economic resources.^{vi} In the meantime, these works looked to white supremacist movements as a counter-revolution to a perceived revolution that occurred within the government in the postbellum period. In this manner, their work implies a kind of conspiratorial dialectic in which subversive modern forces and romantic white supremacist counterrevolutionaries engage in an invisible war.

The conspiratorial imagination within Southern regionalist writing became increasingly apparent in the late 1890s as white supremacist movements came to be absorbed into mainstream culture. The popular novelist Thomas Nelson Page was somewhat typical of the path of conservative white Southern authors in his turn to a more extreme brand of conservatism. By 1900, Page's works focused less on the image of the idyllic plantation than

on sorting out the causes for its apparent demise. His novels and political writings increasingly featured stereotypes and caricatures of venal Republicans making shady backroom deals. Likewise, the faithful, childlike figures of African Americans that appeared in his plantation romances increasingly gave way to representations of African Americans as opportunistic demagogues, “retrogressed” brutes, or some combination of the two. Page’s 1898 historical romance, *Red Rock*, traces Southern history from the beginnings of the Civil War to the end of the nineteenth century. When the story comes to the crucial rupture of the war, Page turns away from the agrarian utopia to a melodrama of struggle against an unholy combination of venal Northern politicians, big business, and opportunistic African Americans. Leech, a carpetbagger, orchestrates a scheme to install a lascivious ex-slave named Moses as the head of the county. The scheme works until Leech and Moses are flushed out by the Ku Klux Klan. Page’s novel is reflective of a common pattern among conservative Southern writers who saw African Americans as pawns to much larger, more insidious schemes of white Northerners.

While Page’s work repeated the view of moderates who tended to hint at subversion, the radical white supremacist Thomas Dixon engaged in a brand of fiction about conspiracy that reimagined Southern politics as the basis for an outlandish and elaborate conspiratorial fantasy. His white supremacist take on Southern history created a kind of explanatory myth that blamed his Republican political enemies, Northern capitalists and African Americans for the apparent failures and frightening changes of late nineteenth century industrialism and modernity. *The Leopard’s Spots*, the first novel of Dixon’s trilogy, resurrects Harriet Beecher Stowe’s melodramatic villain, Simon Legree to represent an anti-Southern, anti-American conspiracy. Dixon uses Legree as a cipher onto which we projects his fears about late-nineteenth-century modernity. In *The Leopard’s Spots*, Legree’s participation in a variety of

different conspiracies connects him to virtually every imaginable modern vice. Legree is the head of the freedman's bureau and an abusive labor boss; Legree's actions stir up unrest among European laborers who turn to anarchism. Corrupt Republicans aid Legree in his scandalous run for the governorship. And finally at the end of the novel, Legree returns as a powerful railroad magnate who "commands millions with his money."^{vii} The sheer outlandishness of Dixon's Legree reveals much about how Dixon's use of conspiracy indulges heavily in the sensationalist undertones associated with conspiracy theory. In merging these various terrors into the single figure, Dixon invites a potent (if crude) fantasy of omniscience by providing his readers with an image that can tie together various strands of complex social world.

As Walter Benn Michaels notes, Dixon's fear of an African American empire was indicative of the emergence of a larger strand of white supremacist thought that conceived of itself as a victim of imperialism. By this peculiar logic, the Civil War and Reconstruction were themselves acts of imperialism inflicted upon Southern whites. Hence, in addition to fears of carpetbaggers and Union leaguers, Dixon entertained a thoroughgoing interest in conspiracy in American society. As I mentioned in chapter one, Dixon was, at various times, preoccupied with allegations of British and Jewish banking conspiracies, even editing a piece entitled *The Great Red Dragon*. Later in life, he also became obsessed with various Red Scares and warnings of Russian domination, compulsively collecting newspaper clipping and pamphlets alleging coordination among African American groups and Communists. This strand of white supremacy was as much nationalist as it was xenophobic. By conceiving of oneself as constantly under siege by foreign imperialists, this logic held, one could constantly act out and reenact the American revolution.^{viii}

Dixon's bizarre iteration of Simon Legree is powerful evidence of this alignment of conspiratorial interpretations of the postbellum South with a broader spectrum anxieties about U.S. modernity. Dixon notes that his Simon Legree is a general sign for modern times. "He is an idea," Dixon says, that "represents everything that the soul of the South loathes and that the Republican party has tried to ram down our throats—Negro supremacy in politics and Negro equality in society."^x But then, the history turns literal as Dixon tells of how the Republicans "inaugurated a Second War" and committed a "conspiracy against human progress" with their attempts to use the "bayonet" to establish "an African barbarism on the ruins of Southern society." He plainly describes the actions of the Radical Republicans as "the blackest crime of the nineteenth century," mentioning Thaddeus Stevens, Charles Sumner, and Samuel Butler by name.^x Some of the most bizarre scenes of the book (and, indeed, one of the most bizarre scenes in all of *fin de siècle* literature) come in the conversations between these real-life politicians and Dixon's melodramatic character, Legree. This vacillation between allegorical and journalistic modes of expression reveal a set of instabilities that Dixon seems to find exhilarating. By incorporating these two modes, Dixon works to merge them into a hybrid narrative that at once claims a documentary license for recounting facts and the romantic license to tell what he saw as the deeper truths of the circumstances.

Where Dixon's and Page's works fashioned white terrorism as a revolutionary response to a web of Republican, "money power," and African American intrigues, Chesnut, Tourgée, Sutton Griggs, and others reacted to the crisis with their own brand of conspiracy fiction. Here, however, the conspiratorial dialectic was reversed. In the liberal version of the narrative, secret combinations of white supremacists and Confederate sympathizers were responsible for the tragic failure of the Federal project to transform and

rehabilitate the South. Liberal Republicans and African Americans' resistance to the Southern insurgency then formed their own counter-counterrevolution in many of these narratives.

No group or event better personified fears of a creeping, conservative reaction to Reconstruction than the Ku Klux Klan. The nineteenth-century Klan was primarily a loosely organized set of local terrorist groups. But together, these small interlocking organizations formed a broader phenomenon with a coherent ideology and well-defined set of political goals. As Eric Foner puts it, the net effect was “a military force serving the interests of the Democratic party, the planter class, and all those who desired the restoration of white supremacy.”^{xi} At the heart of this political program was the tight control of African Americans' labor and social existence in many Southern communities. A Republican judge in Alabama reported that the Klan began among whites who could not “control the labor...through the courts” and coerced African Americans to “do by fear what they were unable to make them do by law.”^{xii} The realization that the Reconstruction state was either unwilling or powerless to provide meaningful protection from the Klan's terrorism became an everyday reality that left a lasting impression on how African Americans and many white liberals viewed a breathtaking variety of issues in Southern politics. The Klan's violence seemed like confirmation that proponents of white supremacy were intent on restoring themselves to power.^{xiii}

The intent and effects of white supremacist subversion were by no means consistently acknowledged as historical fact. When reports of the Ku Klux terror first surfaced in the late 1860s, major newspapers dismissed the allegations of a vast conspiracy as mere folklore. *The New York World* called the stories of a vast Southern conspiracy “myth” and “poppycock.” South Carolina's *Daily Phoenix* compared the terrors to “ghosts,

hobgoblins” and other “witches of New England” germinating in the minds of Radical Republicans and ex-slaves.^{xiv} By 1870, when Congress held hearings on the terror, it became clear from the testimony of hundreds of Southerners that some kind of major conspiracy was at play; however instead of a clear picture of the terror, what emerged was a kaleidoscopic assortment of conflicting hints and allegations. Although it was undeniable that a broad-based pattern of resistance and terrorism was taking place, the exact terms of the scheme (or schemes) eluded public discourse.^{xv}

Tourgée’s *A Fool’s Errand* was probably the most widely circulated novel to describe the Klan and white supremacist resistance as a single coherent political movement. Published in 1879, *A Fool’s Errand* was a fictionalized account of Tourgée’s experiences as a carpetbagger judge in North Carolina. Tourgée himself was highly conscious of the battle to control southern history. His descriptions of the state of Southern culture often seem to foreshadow the extensive account given by DuBois thirty years later. For instance, in an 1888 essay, Tourgée observed that the nation’s literature and culture had become distinctly “Confederate in sympathy” in ways that encouraged Northerners and others to ignore the injustices of Jim Crow laws.^{xvi}

A great deal of *A Fool’s Errand* is devoted to exploring the historical origins and activities of the Ku Klux Klan during Radical Reconstruction. In contrast to many who dismissed the seriousness of the threat posed by the Klan, Tourgée maintained that they were a highly organized secret political organization, devoted to thwarting the Federal government’s attempts to rehabilitate and transform the South. In the story, Tourgée’s semi-autobiographical character Comfort Servosse purchases a decaying plantation in an unnamed Southern state. When he arrives, Servosse, an ex-Union soldier, immediately has trouble adjusting to conservative customs and racism. Servosse gains notoriety as a radical advocate

of Civil Rights and Reconstruction governments among local conservatives. As the story progresses Servosse increasingly becomes involved in defending the rights of ex-slaves and liberal white Republicans against the terroristic activities of the Ku Klux Klan. In the novel's climax, Servosse's daughter Lily discovers a plot by the Klan to murder Servosse and a prominent white Republican. In her attempts to get word of the plot to her father she is aided by Melville Gurney, the son of the ringleader of the plot. Tourgée gives his readers copious access to corrupt agreements and conspiratorial meetings of the Klan, showing the extent of the threat.

Tourgée invokes conspiracy theory as a challenge to dry or pedestrian versions of rationalism that would doubt the possibility of invisible or exotic forms of political power. In the chapter, "A New Institution," he recounts how misplaced skepticism about the Klan caused many to underestimate the seriousness of threats posed by reemerging Confederate sentiments. The chapter begins by remarking that the Ku Klux terror was viewed by the public as folklore or superstition. Rumors of a "strangely mysterious organization" with the "usual intangibility of the secret society" and "element[s] of grotesque superstition" is at first dismissed. "Northern newspapers unwittingly accustomed their readers to regard it as a piece of the broadest and most ridiculous fun." As it turns out, these skeptics are woefully ill-served by their dismissive attitude and unwillingness to suspend disbelief. The remainder of the chapter makes this point by juxtaposing the initial figure of "the Northerner laughing himself to tears" with a brutal episode in which Bob, an African American, is ambushed and beaten savagely by a group of Klansmen.^{xvii} In addition to revising the history of Southern politics, Tourgée hints that his audience should keep an open mind to stories that cut against the grain of "official" or dominant accounts of history. For, as his parable would seem to demonstrate, there is often a rational, reasonable explanation in what seems irrational or

anomalous. In this sense, conspiracy theory serves as more than just countermemory. It also serves as the basis for encouraging a skeptical style of vision and a romantic openness to surprise.

At the time of its publication *A Fool's Errand* stirred up a significant amount of public debate. Tourgée appealed to Radical Republicans as someone who would rekindle abolitionism's spirit of "irrepressible conflict." In the meantime, *A Fool's Errand* came under fire from a variety of detractors. William Royall, a Confederate veteran then practicing law in New York City, wrote a rebuttal entitled, *A Reply to A Fool's Errand*. Royall's book amasses a litany of events, statistics, and anecdotes in order to dispute the accuracy of Tourgée's claims. *A Fool's Errand* was so dangerous to Royall's worldview precisely because it troubled the commonplace assumption that white Southerners were willing to repress their old allegiances for the sake of national reconciliation. Tourgée's account proffered a heterodox image in which the agendas of the Confederacy remained a potent force in Southern politics that could potentially tear the nation asunder. Where the peaceful scenes of plantation romances implied that loyalty to the South did not threaten the postwar reconciliation, Tourgée's account insisted on a much more complex political world in which the drill exercises by old Confederate veterans and the activities of the Klan were not the actions of harmless romantics, but significant evidence that these men were part of a continued element of resistance to federalism and thus national reunion.

These various conspiracy narratives cast Southern politics as holding the possibility for the exotic and the bizarre. As I have tried to show thus far, the rhetoric of Page, Dixon, Tourgée and others used the figure of conspiracy in the South to alert readers to the possibility of invisible human forces at work not just in the South, but in the nation at large. Stories about conspiracy offered an unconventional way of recounting history. In crafting a

distinctively conspiratorial version of the postwar romance, these melodramatic texts presented the problem of dysfunction in the South as a morally unambiguous situation. Whether assailing “money power,” Union Leagues, or Klansmen, each of these authors maintained that the nation could be reunited and purified if only good people could summon up the courage to expunge subversive forces in their midst.

Like these predecessors and contemporaries, Chesnutt appropriated the discourse of Southern conspiracy theory as a means of instigating a brush with the heterodoxical and the strange. As he wrote in an unpublished speech, Chesnutt believed that, in an attempt to convey a “broad humanity,” authors should not be afraid to write about “the underworld” because, he said, criminals and subversives were, after all, “mighty interesting people.”^{xviii} In his efforts to capture this broad humanity Chesnutt presents a much more complex vision of a subversive underworld than his predecessors. Rather than a monolithic explanation for causality in Post-Reconstruction governments, Chesnutt’s fiction navigates an uneasy balance of the forms and figures conspiracy-as-sensationalist-folklore and a nuanced realism, dealing with a conspiratorial logic in postbellum Southern politics.

Conspiratorial Genealogies in *The Marrow of Tradition*

The 1898 Wilmington Affair, the subject of Chesnutt’s *The Marrow of Tradition*, was a touchstone of late nineteenth century race politics. The affair began on the morning of November 10, 1898 when a white mob, including some of Wilmington North Carolina’s most prominent citizens, lashed out at the city’s African American population. As many as three hundred African Americans were killed or exiled with thousands of people forced to flee their homes, taking refuge in the adjacent swamps. The violence was the culmination of

a group of leading Democrats known as “The Secret Nine” who had been meeting behind closed doors for nearly a year with the intent of inciting violence as a pretext for a coup d’état of the Republican-controlled municipal government. Within a day of the riot many of the same white supremacist leaders who had participated in the violence took control of the city and celebrated the return of “law and order” to Wilmington.^{xix}

The Marrow of Tradition’s fictionalized account of the riots populates the terrain of Wilmington’s politics with personalities and personal histories that tie the various events to influences and agendas that date back to the Civil War. Throughout the novel, depictions of meetings among the white supremacist conspirators create a melodrama in which splintered elements of the old slaveholding and Confederate regimes realign. By amassing evidence which, as it turns out, was largely accurate, Chesnut compiles a bird’s-eye view that validates suspicions about a larger systematic attempt to restore the pre-war slave-holding forces to power in a new forum. Chesnut’s ability to convey the political and emotional history of Wilmington was due in no small part to a process of painstaking research. In 1901, he undertook a furtive research trip to Wilmington where he met with and interviewed locals and individuals such as John Dancy, the African American collector of ports who had become a focal point of white supremacist rage.^{xx}

I would argue that the violence at Wilmington was significant to Chesnut specifically because it seemed to represent a moment in which the curtain was pulled back and one could observe the hidden political machinery driving a larger concerted agenda to roll back the advances in Civil Rights, replacing them with Jim Crow and disfranchisement policies. To that end, the riot brought up an intense dilemma for Chesnut insofar as it marked a moment when the exotic conspiratorial interpretations of Southern history seemingly leapt out of the realm of rumor and came into full material view.

Indeed, the accounts of the Wilmington affair collected by historians such as Leon Prather suggest that these interviews with white Republicans and African Americans in Wilmington would have evoked a truly extraordinary scenario for Chesnut.^{xxi} We can see this, for instance, in an archive of letters written by exiled citizens of Wilmington, appealing directly to President McKinley for help. As a whole, these letters urge McKinley and the American public to look past a smokescreen of white supremacist propaganda to reveal the insidious design behind the violence. One such letter written by a Wilmington schoolteacher gives a stunning account:

The outside world only knows one side of the trouble here. Whites moved from settlement to settlement searching everyone...searching the Negro churches [for] guns or ammunition, banishing all property owners...Every white man and boy from 12 years up had a gun or pistol... Companies came from every little town, came in to kill the Negro...How can this Grand and noble nation leave the Secessionists and born rioters to slay us?^{xxii}

References to “Secessionists” here and elsewhere reveal a tangible sense among those in the African American community that the riot offered a window into the networks of connections between factions of white supremacists and former Confederates. The terrifying images of “companies coming from every little town” and “secessionists” coming out of the woodwork to slay African Americans creates the suggestion that the strife in Wilmington was seen by victims as an uncanny return to the violent scenes and conflicts of the Civil War. Indeed, much of what is so provocative about the letters is thus the way they prompt their reader to question the line between reasonable and fantastic interpretations of reality when it comes to the issue of whether the power of the Confederacy really subsided with the end of the war.

The Marrow of Tradition's stirring dramatization of the Wilmington affair utilizes the form of the novel as a means of imputing such uncanny inducements and transgressive lines of questioning for its reading public. Chesnut's novel accomplishes this by inviting his public to engage in an activity of digging and detecting conspiracies surrounding Wilmington. Chesnut encourages readers to imagine themselves as skeptics who, like cultural insiders such as the letter-writers, can slice through layers of deception and manipulation. The result is a novel that intertwines an account of the history of white supremacists in Wilmington with a probing inquiry into the tense and, at times, paranoid psychology of postbellum Southern life.

The basic narrative structure of *The Marrow of Tradition* is vital to Chesnut's inquiry into postbellum Southern psychology. About a third of the chapters are devoted to the machinations of "The Big Three" (white supremacists conspirators in Welling, Chesnut's fictionalized version of Wilmington, North Carolina). In the intervening chapters attention turns to a corresponding series of episodes that explore racial tensions in Wellington. Some figures suspect that a plot is behind escalating tensions in the community while others simply react. The sensation that tends to emerge out of the alternation between these voyeuristic "fly-on-the-wall" scenes and the intervening chapters is a kind of correspondence between a surface world where many things seem unexplained and a conspiratorial underworld that seems to offer at least partial explanation for the disturbances and conflicts that we see on the surface.

In each scene involving "The Big Three," a little more of the background behind the plot is revealed—each time we return to their secret meetings, we learn that the conspiracy extends deeper and is more sinister than previously suggested. Their meetings begin with only minor intimations of the trouble to come. They grumble about liberalizing reforms and

toast to the memory of John C. Calhoun. But as the conversations continue, the grumbling and toasting turns to concrete plans. By the last of these backroom conversations, the Big Three are selecting specific politicians and community leaders for exile or assassination and discussing a broader vision of white supremacist rule throughout the state. The conversations then seem to confirm the Republicans' very worst possible suspicions. Outbursts of violence and rollbacks on Civil Rights are hardly isolated incidents, and are in fact two different nodes within a coordinated effort to expunge blacks from American society. Consequently, readers are invited to witness not just the contemplation of a riot or even a coup d' état, but the Big three serve as synecdoche for a broader trend sweeping the South.

Consider, for instance, the following scene in which Chesnutt emphasizes the correspondence between the local conspiracy in Wellington and events in the nation at large:

By fraud in one place, by terrorism in another, and everywhere by the resistless moral force of the united whites, the negroes were reduced to the apathy or despair, their few white allies demoralized, and the amendment adopted by a large majority...[Some colored men] knew they had been treated unfairly; that their enemies had prevailed against them; that their whilom friends had stood passively by and seen them undone. Many of the most enterprising and progressive left the state, and those who remain still labor under a sense of wrong and outrage which renders them distinctly less valuable as citizens.

Drastic as were these "reforms" were...they moved all too slowly for the little coterie of Wellington conspirators, whose ambitions and needs urged them to prompt action....The committee decided, about two months before the fall election,

that an active local campaign must be carried on, with a view to discourage the negroes from attending the polls on election day.”^{xxiii}

The riot in Wellington is not simply an isolated incident, but represents a broader phenomenon of “united whites” working “by fraud in one place and terrorism in another.” In the meantime, the “Big Three” looks on, waiting for their moment to fall into their role with the larger network of white supremacist influence which, importantly, can help account for the larger patterns of political dysfunction in the South.

The meetings among “The Big Three” provide a veritable genealogy of white supremacist ideas after the Civil War. Major Carteret, loosely based on Josephus Daniels, is an energetic newspaper editor and politician who marries into money and fervently pursues disfranchisement of African Americans because of his sincere belief in white supremacy and the cause of the former Confederacy. General Belmont, the former aristocrat, opportunistically exploits Carteret’s romantic nostalgia with reminders of the “divine right of white men and gentleman, as his ancestors had believed in and died for the divine right of kings.” Belmont’s postwar history is specked with political ambitions and an excursion with William Walker’s conquest in Nicaragua, both of which seem to belie his status as the agrarian gentleman of the Southern plantation romance. And finally, Captain McBane “[springs] from the poor-white class, to which, even more than the slaves, the abolition of slavery had opened the door of opportunity.” After the war, McBane amasses a small fortune through “questionable political services” of “negro-baiting,” “election frauds,” and “convict labor” (a subject that Chesnut dealt with extensively in his next novel, *The Colonel’s Dream*)^{xxiv} With these three representatives of postbellum era’s strange political bedfellows, literally sitting in an oaken room, chomping cigars, Chesnut portrays the secret power struggles of the post-Reconstruction South. *The Marrow of Tradition’s* conspiracy theory

account seems in this case to confirm the very worst possible suspicions that several white classes have aligned in ways that account for disfranchisement.

The Big Three's disagreements and deliberations expose not a happy marriage of revolutionary elements, but a tenuous coalition, organized around crass materialism.

Carteret, the upwardly mobile newspaper editor, imagines himself as the defender of the old aristocratic plantation culture only to find his nostalgic fantasy exploded by McBane and Belmont who have decidedly different perspectives on the idea of a white supremacy.

McBane, indifferent to Carteret's romantic ambitions, sneers, "What's the use of all this hypocrisy, gentlemen?...Every last one of us has an axe to grind! We'll never get a better chance to have things our way!" Recoiling at these words, Carteret complains to himself at how McBane's characterization of the plot "rob[s] the enterprise of all its poetry" and puts "a solemn act of revolution upon the plane of a mere vulgar theft of power."^{xxv} Belmont, in the meantime, delivers a jab of his own as he sarcastically attributes McBane's "honest and direct" approach to McBane's father, an uncouth antebellum slave overseer.^{xxvi} Chesnut's suggestion that the conspirators cannot keep their story straight creates an incredibly sly and insightful critique of the postwar revision of history. Far from the champions of the old establishment of Dixon and Page fame, Chesnut's white supremacists are then a loose confederation of conflicting ideologies and motivations. They fabricate these flimsy and inconsistent myths to compensate for this void. Where Dixon casts his white supremacist conspirators as racially pure inheritors and defenders of an ancient legacy against a modern capitalist scourge, Chesnut imagines his white supremacists as modern in the sense that they each have different axes to grind and must retroactively invent mythologies in order to present a united front.

The paradoxically modern character of this Confederate revival is likewise evident in the crucial role that new and mystifying methods of propaganda seem to play in the scheme. At one point, General Belmont, the white aristocrat, says that, in order to go back to “the good old days of slavery,” the conspirators must adjust to “modern times” where the battle for hearts and minds is the real key to regaining power. He observes that in the past, “direct and simple methods might be safely resorted to,” as he refers to times when slaveholders could openly pursue his methods of oppression. But “this,” he says, “is the age of crowds, and we must have the crowd with us.” He continues, commenting on the seemingly mystical quality of modern forms of propaganda through newspapers: “The man who would govern a nation by writing its songs was a blethering idiot beside the fellow who can edit its news dispatches. The negroes are playing right into our hands,—every crime that one of them commits is reported by us.”^{xxvii} We then watch how Wellington and the rest of the state transforms from a relatively liberal, harmonious environment into a hotbed of racial conflict with the final violent scenes of the novel. This entire course of events, Chesnut notes, “went on without any public disturbance...A stranger would have seen nothing to excite his curiosity.”^{xxviii} Belmont’s faith in new methods of propaganda then serves to reveal a set of affairs in which the old, reactionary slaveholding regime maintains its grip on power, but does so by adapting and changing.

It is significant that the general outlines of the Wilmington conspiracy would not necessarily have been unfamiliar territory for Chesnut’s readers, even if they were unfamiliar with the specifics of the Wilmington incidents. Consequently, the conspiracy in *The Marrow of Tradition* is less an occasion for exposition that might tell readers something shocking or new, than a chance to dramatize and validate feelings of suspicion. Through this repetitive game

of perspective, Chesnutt facilitates a fantasy of understanding of why Radical Reconstruction governments failed and gave way increasingly conservative administrations.

The Marrow of Tradition's conspiratorial account serves to do much more than provide a melodramatic explanation of the motive forces behind the riots. It also uses the paranoid psychologies emerging out of Wilmington as the basis for an emotional history of the postwar era. By witnessing this elaborate web of causal factors behind the riots, readers are invited to step out of their everyday selves into a way of seeing that transcends the limits of normal experience. Apart from understanding the solution to any particular mystery, the novel dramatizes the experience of slicing through layers of false ideology to find oneself alienated from conventional rationalism.

Chesnutt's primary channel for illustrating this process of alienation from orthodox perspectives is the semi-autobiographical character, Dr. Miller. Like Chesnutt himself, Miller is a light-skinned African American who moves North for his education. And, like Chesnutt himself, Miller seems to struggle to remain optimistic in the face of circumstances that push him toward an increasingly pessimistic view of Southern politics. Miller's devotion to racial integration and his hopeful project—the colored hospital—arguably require him to maintain his ignorance of white supremacist movements and thus keeps him locked in a kind of solipsistic box. But as he encounters subject after subject who seems hemmed affected by racial conflict, he finds himself increasingly open to conspiracy theories that, similar to the stories of the Klan that appeared in newspapers in the 1870s, might at first seem like the stuff of folktales or dime thrillers.

Miller's encounters with Josh Green, the militant African American leader, are especially significant along this trajectory. Josh's disillusionment and anger exemplifies the feelings that Miller will eventually discover within himself as he is forced to admit the truth

about Wellington's politics. Midway through the book, Josh, after having been injured in a fight, comes to Miller for medical attention. Conversation quickly turns to Josh's harrowing brush with the Ku Klux Klan in childhood. "White folks with masks" stormed into his home, he tells Miller, shooting his father and terrorizing his mother. These experiences leave Josh hell-bent on exacting revenge against the perpetrators. At this early stage in the book, Miller, who seems intent on shielding himself from the harsh realities of white supremacist influence, dismisses these allegations as the psychosis of a peculiarly "Southern product." He thus remarks on the "childish awe" that he feels "at the sight of one of God's creatures who had lost the light of reason." Miller, in a moment of wishful thinking tries to remind himself that "the Ku-Klux movement was merely an ebullition of boyish spirits, begun to amuse young white men playing upon fears and superstitions of ignorant negroes." And rather than taking Green's fears as prophetic warnings of a coming disaster, Miller tries to dissuade him. "You had better put away these murderous fancies," he tells him, "you're feverish, and don't know what you're talking about. I shouldn't let my mind dwell on such things, and you must keep quiet until this arm is well, or you may never be able to hit anyone again."^{xxix} Miller's unwillingness to let his mind "dwell" on unpleasant thoughts highlights the subtle unsustainability of his self-assured pity of Josh as a "Southern product."

By the end of the novel, Miller's ability to maintain his own illusions necessarily dissipates when the Big Three's conspiracy comes to the surface, plunging Wellington into chaos. Miller's encounter punctures his confidence in his own perceptions and assumptions about life in Wellington. Hence, as the following passage reflects, Miller gradually drifts towards an acceptance that "any horror" could be possible, He imagines "good Christian people" transforming into uncanny conspiratorial versions of themselves:

To one unfamiliar with Southern life, it might have seemed impossible that these good Christian people, who thronged the churches on Sunday, and wept over the sufferings of the lowly Nazarene, and sent missionaries to the heathen, could be hungering and thirst for the blood of their fellow men; but Miller cherished no such delusion. He knew the history of his country; he had the threatened lynching of Sandy Campbell vividly in mind; and he was fully persuaded that to race prejudice, once aroused, any horror was possible. That women or children would be molested of set purpose he did not believe, but that they might suffer by accident was more than likely.^{xxx}

Miller's admission that he "can cherish no such delusion" about the churchgoers' innocence exemplifies his subtle evolution from progressive optimist to guarded cynic. Miller (and I think Chesnutt too) may not see Klansmen everywhere like Josh does; however, by the end, Miller cannot fight the suspicion that the paranoid viewpoint of the Josh Green may, in its own way, be closer to reality than Miller's own former optimism. Paradoxically, Miller's only certainty then comes with his awareness that there are elements of the conflict that are entirely outside of his immediate perception. In dealing with these conspiratorial politics, he can no longer afford "delusions" that allow him to dismiss prophetic warnings like those of Josh Green. To Chesnutt, this disillusioned insight suggests the need for a certain philosophical cosmopolitanism, open to the possibility of frames of experience, like Josh Green's, outside of accepted orthodoxy. To really understand what happened at Wilmington, Chesnutt suggests, one must dispense with the comfortable illusions that Miller initially harbors and adopt a more rigorous empiricism, which includes the voices of outsiders like Josh and Sandy.

The Marrow of Tradition uses Wilmington to make a point that transcends specific historical interpretation of the post-Civil War era and instead delves into deeper epistemological problems. Instances like Miller's encounter with Josh Green suggest a need for a philosophical pragmatism that acknowledges the validity of experiences that puncture a comfortable sense of complacency. This is not to say that Chesnutt merely trades rationalist analysis for thoroughgoing belief in conspiracy theories about Southern life, no matter how outlandish. Rather, it is to say that Chesnutt embraces a more expansive rationalism, one that takes seriously the seemingly "feverish" appeals of Josh Green and the letter-writers from Wilmington when they speak of a deeper logic to Southern politics.

In this respect, Chesnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* ultimately lands on a position that parallels that of Henry James when it comes to conspiracy thinking and discourse. While the belief in pervasive conspiracies may not have provided a comprehensive code for postbellum political chaos, it at least captured a heightened state of awareness that would have been elusive in more orthodox realist narration.

Chesnutt's "Heart of Darkness": *The Colonel's Dream*

Chesnutt's next novel, *The Colonel's Dream*, was his most direct engagement with the conspiracy genre. Where *Marrow of Tradition* could be described as a cautious, if sobering, revision of Southern history, *The Colonel's Dream* indulges in raucous sensationalism. As he had done in *Marrow of Tradition*, Chesnutt trained his attention on reactionary, backward-looking forms of authority reemerging in subtle and insidious ways. And once again the question of conspiracy was both factual and figurative in terms of its ability to describe a political history of the South. This time, however, he looked to the Southern "peonage"

scandals as an example of the economic and legal subtext of Jim Crow politics. Peonage practices were quite literally restoring a form of slavery conditions in the South, as thousands of African Americans were surreptitiously forced into hard labor, sometimes on the very same plantations where their families had formerly been owned as chattel. The conspiracy theories and speculation swirling around this “new slavery” provided Chesnutt with a crucial metaphor for describing the subtle economic and emotional subtext of Jim Crow ideology as legal corruption, terrorism, and violence were used to reestablish control over the black labor force—the strange experience that DuBois would later refer to as the “phantasmagoria” in which the “the unrest and bitterness of postwar lawlessness were gradually transmuted into economic pressure.”^{xxxix} Chesnutt’s account of peonage in *The Colonel’s Dream* is a meditation on the continuing influence of slavery on Southern labor patterns in the twentieth century.

Apart from its explicit social critique, *The Colonel’s Dream* indulges in the more fantastic elements of the conspiracy genre. Where *The Marrow of Tradition* relies primarily on a stark realist mode, *The Colonel’s Dream* vacillates between realist exposé and a bitter theater of the absurd, featuring both documentary dramatizations of peonage and outlandish and grotesque scenes of latter-day slave auctions and peonage masters. Chesnutt uses this strategy as a means of simultaneously expressing the “phantasmagorical” quality of Southern labor practices as something that seemed to defy commonsensical notions of Southern politics while at the same time affirming their basis in reality. Chesnutt accomplishes this by imagining a radical and liberating sense of alienation from mainstream society through his protagonist, Colonel French. French’s gradual discovery of the details of the peonage conspiracy costs him his comfortable place in the Southern patriarchy. Estranged from his romantic associations with the South, French’s life takes on a new cast. He not only gains a new perspective on Southern politics, but he adopts a new skepticism about the status of his

own identity and the way that knowledge is produced in American life. By the end of the novel French has been transformed from a passive optimist to a cynic whose pessimism derives from his ability to recognize the presence of evil based on subtle clues that the untrained individual would miss. In this sense, *The Colonel's Dream* might then be described as having escapist and transcendent qualities as French's dysphoric apprehension of the peonage scandals initiates his breaking out of the sheltered existence of middle or upper class life in the North.

Chesnutt drew inspiration and source material for his novel from a watershed anti-peonage campaign. In the summer of 1903, the American newspapers nationwide reported "serious and horrifying" accounts of "a powerful and wealthy organization of men who have for years carried on their slave trade in absolute security" in the state of Alabama. What came to be known *The Peonage Cases* (1903), revealed an elaborate system of conspiracies in which law enforcement officials systematically arrested African Americans and poor whites on false charges and sold them into hard labor on many of the very same plantations when they and their ancestors had been bound as slaves.^{xxxii} The ensuing press coverage, spearheaded by the efforts of Oswald Garrison Villard, editor of the New York *Evening Post* and grandson of William Lloyd Garrison, marked the first time that peonage had been a national political issue. By the end of the year, newspapers and magazines across the country rushed to cover a flurry of similar cases in other Southern states that had been prompted by the attention to the events in Alabama. In exposing this extensive system, the editorial crusade against peonage unearthed not only the atrocities committed in the "backwoods districts of Alabama," but an entire secret history of Southern politics and labor. According to the reports and editorials, sons of former overseers and other upwardly mobile poor whites seized the apparatus of the old slave system in the wake of Reconstruction's demise

and maintained “absolute master[y] of the local politicians and minor courts,” as they established large regions where “the Emancipation Proclamation and Thirteenth Amendment did not ‘go.’”^{xxxiii}

Literary scholars have tended to neglect conspiracy narratives about peonage and convict leasing s despite their significance to Southern history and culture. Among the most significant effects of the 1903 cases was how they revealed the public’s vulnerability to propaganda and deception. For years Americans had been told by figures such as Booker T. Washington and Henry Grady of the emergence of a socially and economically modern “New South” where old race and class rivalries had been set aside and prosperity was no longer be dependent on slave labor, but instead thrived on Northern-style industrialism. But the revelations of what newspapers referred to as this Southern “Heart of Darkness” imbued the reports with an eerie quality that challenged any easy sense of complacency about Southern labor practices.^{xxxiv} Similar to Ida Tarbell’s exposés on Standard Oil or the Fisk and Gould conspiracy to corner the gold market, peonage outrages were etched into American folk memory as proof that modern Southern society was replete with pockets of conspiratorial mystery. Echoes of this anxiety about the disparity between the appearance and the reality of Southern labor can be found not only in *The Colonel’s Dream*, but in literary works ranging from Sutton Grigg’s militant Civil Rights polemic, *The Hindered Hand* (1905), to Margaret Mitchell’s romance of the Lost Cause, *Gone With the Wind* (1936).

A crucial distinction of the 1903 anti-peonage campaign from previous efforts was its use of peonage as the basis for an exoticization of labor practices in the South. Many of the articles’ efforts to cast peonage as a national problem lay with a defamiliarization of the domestic space of the United States, showing peonage to have set up pockets where “a few men dominate” as “overlords, holding jurisdiction by wide possessions and by being quick at

the trigger.”^{xxxv} John Pace, a wealthy landowner in Coosa and Tallapoosa counties, was a particular focal point of Villard’s coverage. At six feet and 275 pounds and dressed in “a homespun shirt without a collar and a broad-brimmed black hat,” Pace, in particular, was a symbolic icon for the narrative of the slovenly former overseer run amok. *The Evening Post* correspondent referred to Pace as “a sort of combination of feudal baron and wholesale slavedriver...a grave, animal-like person, with two feet almost eaten off with disease, with fingers, which are expected to drop away within a year...quite like the slave-whipping characters of Uncle Tom’s Cabin.”^{xxxvi} With Pace as the figurehead for peonage, readers were thus asked to confront the terrain of the South as a strange and alien place where postbellum ideas of law and morality held little sway and men who might otherwise cohere to civilized standards regressed to barbarism, reminiscent of the most distressing stories of antebellum slavery.

Paradoxically enough, some writers used the brutal images of John Pace and other peonage masters as occasions for expressing nostalgia for the social order of the “aristocratic” plantation while lamenting the infiltration of Northern-style capitalism into the South. Herbert Ward’s retrospective of the editorial crusade in *Cosmopolitan* magazine likened the crass materialism of the postbellum peonage masters to the problem of greed in capitalist markets. Ward remarked that “peonage, like slavery,” is a “labor problem that has nothing to do with either race or color, section or locality” and that “the company’s store at the mouth of our mines and quarries” was the “original cause of a state of peonage.” Referring to the Coosa and Tallapoosa defendants, Ward said that “such slimy upstarts,” shared less in common with “the old gentlemen of broad estates,” than they did with “the capitalist” who is “always eager to be creditor to poverty and ignorance.”^{xxxvii} In this light, Pace and other peonage masters could simultaneously embody the specter of the discontented working

classes who regularly appeared in headlines about labor riots and strikes in this period *and* stand-in for a class threat from above in their implicit link to the widely reported greed of robber barons like Vanderbilt and Rockefeller.^{xxxviii}

Chesnutt's response to the peonage scandal reveals his fiery, militant side. In the 1904 essay "Peonage, or The New Slavery," Chesnutt railed against the use of convict labor in the South. While Chesnutt is typically characterized as a sober-minded rationalist and political moderate, the peonage essay revels in sensational allegations against some of the most powerful figures in late-nineteenth-century Democratic politics. He paints a bleak portrait of mysterious forces controlling Southern society. Similar to Hofstadter's description of "the paranoid style," Chesnutt relies almost entirely on implication about the possibility of untoward connections among the various players in Southern politics in order to create the suspicion of a vast web of influences at work in American politics. In bringing these allegations to light, Chesnutt evokes a vast, frightening web of influences that extends from local bosses all the way up to the highest seats of power in the nation. These individuals who "bribe constables and justices to arrest ignorant and friendless negroes" were, Chesnutt said, "the very same men who, in a more northern latitude would exploit imported foreign workmen in factories and sweatshops, or immature white children in the cotton mills and bribe legislatures and city councils to betray the rights of the people."^{xxxix} From the initial clue of "facts from the news dispatches," Chesnutt extrapolates from the startling physical condition of "a worse form of slavery" to fraudulent local schemes organized around "the artificial solidarity of the white South" and finally to a national plot in the possibility of a "cabinet dominated" by the Southern Democratic establishment. In this manner, peonage provides animus for a deep skepticism of surface appearances and conventional accounts of history. Peonage, Chesnutt seems to say, is only the tip of a much larger system of

deceptions and intrigues directed against the entire public. The article then exemplifies the Hofstadterian use of omission and implication to insinuate the presence of a vast sinister evil taking hold in the nation.

In *The Colonel's Dream*, Chesnutt uses the mystique of the peonage conspiracies as a point of departure for his own attempt at dispelling romantic nostalgia surrounding the antebellum plantation. The plot of *The Colonel's Dream* hinges on the gradual uncovering of a peonage conspiracy. The protagonist Colonel French, patterned loosely on Judge Thomas Jones who adjudicated *The Peonage Cases*, is a Southern aristocrat-turned-Northern-businessman who returns to the South imagining that he will return to a pristine agrarian paradise resembling the nostalgic images of chivalrous society and columned mansions of the plantation romances. Instead, he finds a white and black society terrorized and imprisoned by a peonage conspiracy carried out by his old childhood rival, Bill Fetters. The climactic terrorist act against Colonel French reveals that the persistence of the peonage system and the ascendance of men like Fetters are symptomatic of deep-seated race and class-based ideologies. The white conspirators in *The Colonel's Dream* lead secret lives and hold allegiances precluding their commitments to the nation. In the meantime, African Americans in the novel engage in their own conspiracy to protect black criminals through a code of silence that date back to the time of slavery.

French's gradual discovery of the peonage conspiracy forms the basis for excursions into heterodoxy like what we saw in *Marrow of Tradition* with Dr. Miller. Parallel to Miller's observations of the riot, French's explorations act to jar him out of a comfortable, though deeply flawed, position that romanticizes plantation life while repudiating the practice of slavery. Throughout the novel, French finds himself in situations and settings that eerily resemble the scenes of the slavery era. As he investigates life in Clarendon, he is shocked to

find slave auctions and forced labor on plantations, operating as an open secret. In each of these scenes, French is faced not only with a throwback to the old antebellum days, but also with the intractability of Southern whites, engaged in what seems to be a community-wide conspiracy. His discovery of the hidden combinations of Clarendon's politics then shatters both his optimism for the New South as well as his comfortable place in polite middle class society. Prior to his return to the South, French is able to believe the myth of the "Lost Cause" and that Northern industrialization might offer a panacea for continuing patterns of poverty and violence. After witnessing the hidden machinery of Southern politics in the form of the peonage and other local subversions, French finds himself utterly divorced not only from his initial idyllic view of the South but also his formerly comfortable place in middle class society.^{x1}

We see the dissolution of French's romantic illusions, for instance, in an early episode that begins as a scene out of a stereotypical plantation romance, but quickly devolves into a theater of the absurd as French finds himself in the middle of a latter-day slave auction. Walking down main street, "feeling at peace with all mankind" and having "breakfasted on boiled brook trout [and] fresh laid eggs," French's picturesque scene is interrupted when he hears whooping and yelling from the courthouse. At first, he looks on with mild consternation as the exuberant judge, acting the part of auctioneer and huckster, exclaims "Now, gentlemen, here's Lot Number Three...not much to look at, but will make a good field hand, if looked after right and kept away from liquor." When French attempts to intercede one of the onlookers mocks French, suggesting that he might perhaps prefer to purchase "somethin' on the Uncle Tom order." Significantly, from French's perspective, the most jarring part of the situation is the "unconscious brutality of the proceeding" and particularly way it is all so readily accepted by the men as a simple, unremarkable business

transaction despite the legal changes of the previous fifty years. Consternation, however, soon turns to horror when he finds that Peter, his own former slave and boyhood friend is up for auction, having been arrested for vagrancy. French offers to pay the fine, but the warden responds that “in order to keep the docket straight,” he must “bid” on Peter instead. Finally agreeing to bid, French learns that he has unwittingly purchased Peter’s services for the remainder of his life and has therefore made the very “purchase which his father had made, upon terms not very different, fifty years before.” This final irony serves to explode French’s desire to simultaneously idealize the antebellum plantation culture while ignoring the labor practices that went with it.

French’s apprehension of previously unthinkable circumstances like that of the modern slave auction sends him into an epistemological tailspin where the absurd seems possible. Where French initially only saw columned mansions and Southern cooking on his arrival, he now focuses on the gothic aspects of Fetters who “seemed to brood over the country round about like a great vampire bat, sucking the life—blood of the people.” French thus begins to change from a character who blithely accepts the myths of his childhood to one who increasingly recognizes that his upbringing in the South and his life as a businessman in the North has saddled him with a false optimism. By and by, French comes to recognize that his paired beliefs in the plantation myth and the power of Northern-style industrialism are merely comforting myths that do not bear out when tested in lived experience.

Chesnutt, however, describes this shift as somewhat incomplete. Much of the novel is devoted precisely to French’s attempts—with varying levels of success—to break out of the narratives of his childhood, which romanticized the antebellum South. Through this subtle twist, Chesnutt stages a critique of the grotesque images of the 1903 campaign.

Although French begins to achieve a cosmopolitanism of thought with his awareness of the limitedness of his former perspective in New York, his new perspective is fairly one-dimensional insofar as he is now only able to conceive of South in terms of a rather shallow gothic horror. Chesnutt's narrator hints at the incompleteness of this transformation just prior to French's meeting with Fetters:

So thoroughly had Colonel French entered into the spirit of his yet undefined contest with Fetters, that his life in New York, save when friendly communications recalled it, seemed far away, and of slight retrospective interest. Everyone knows of the "blind spot" in the field of vision. New York was for the time being the colonel's blind spot...he lived in the Clarendon yet to be, a Clarendon rescued from Fetters, purified, rehabilitated; and no compassionate angel warned him how tenacious of life that which Fetters stood for might be—that survival of the spirit of slavery, under which the land still groaned and travailed—the growth of generations which it would take more than one generation to destroy.^{xii}

While French gains perspective through his recognition of counter-narratives to the plantation romance with his life in New York, he acquires a new "blind spot" in his conflation of peonage with the monstrous John Pace-type of brute that he imagines Fetters to be. The implication of French's new perspective is that he essentially trades a romantic stereotype of the South with a conspiratorial stereotype. This push and pull between perspectives creates a dilemma in *The Colonel's Dream* vis-à-vis Chesnutt's incorporation of the gothic images of Villard's campaign. On one hand, the perception of a Southern "Heart of Darkness" could serve to dispel the propaganda of a U.S. culture that romanticized the antebellum plantation. On the other, it did not necessarily offer a coherent historiography either as Villard too presented a one-dimensional view of the Southern politics (even if it was

a view sympathetic to the plight of ex-slaves). Just because these powerful images could explode postwar ideology did not, in other words, necessarily mean that they could capture the complex tangle of historical rivalries, emotions and customs that Chesnutt wished to depict through his examination of peonage.

Particular in the later sections of *The Colonel's Dream*, Chesnutt works to weave these phantasmagorical sensations and encounters with alterity into scenes that affirm a realist complexity in human behavior. In this manner, Chesnutt then shifts tack to deconstruct many of the very same gothic figures that he builds up in the early parts of the novel in order to show how they are knitted into everyday life. This is apparent in French's eventual standoff with Feters. As French prepares himself to finally meet with Feters, he expects to find "the typical Southerner of melodrama...in a slouch hat and a frock coat, with a loud voice and a dictatorial manner." But instead of the retrograde brute that he expects, French encounters a man who "except for a few little indications, such as the lack of a crease in his trousers" looks like "any one of a hundred business men whom the colonel might have met on Broadway in any given fifteen minutes during the business hours."^{xlii} With Feters' appearance as a conventional businessman, Chesnutt's anti-climactic twist shifts the emphasis of the whole episode away from the cathartic release of the cultural "other" (i.e. the John Pace type-as-retrograde brute) and instead emphasis falls on the insidious sensation that the criminal element is woven into the very fabric of respectable, polite society. Replacing the expected Simon Legree/John Pace type with a relatively commonplace businessman, Chesnutt thus renders the institution of peonage as a problem that is both invisible and more difficult to combat than previously imagined.

As *The Colonel's Dream* approaches its climax, Chesnutt continues this strategy of deemphasizing the exotic in order to absorb peonage into a broader spectrum of issues

regarding the question of progress (or lack thereof) in Post-Reconstruction society. Hence, where the first sections of *The Colonel's Dream* suggest that the resolution will lie solely with foiling of Fetters' plot, the latter sections focus on the intractability of the broader Southern populace when a host of smaller conspiracies driven not by transcendent evil, but by "primitive passions" and "mob spirit" are exposed as the engine behind attempts to terrorize French. When French's stay in the South, the reader sees that the lines of mistrust still run deep and that the real power in Clarendon lies with those who work to intimidate and maintain the racist power structure. With this, Chesnutt pursues the logical conclusion of his broader historiography: that the peonage issue was the product of a profound, systemic failure that could not simply be blamed on the alien presence of upwardly mobile overseers.

In the complex series of subplots that provide the book's denouement, French wages a last-ditch campaign against Fetters' conspiracy in the form of an attempt to free Bud Johnson, a victim of the peonage ring. Bud has been accused of murder, the black community conspires to shield him; however through French's prompting, the school master Charles Taylor resolves to turn him in with the hope that this will improve relations among blacks and whites in Clarendon. As it turns out, Bud is guilty, but this does not stop overzealous whites from dispensing with the formalities of a trial and lynching him. As a result of the revelation of Bud's guilt, French, Taylor, and the cause of social progress all suffer a crushing and discouraging embarrassment. The tragic turn in the Bud Johnson episode is in turn compounded by the near-simultaneous death of French's son Henry and of his former servant Peter. Owing to his recognition of his personal and material debt to Peter, French resolves to bury Peter and Henry in side-by-side plots in the white cemetery. When both Henry, French's son, and Peter, his ex-slave both die, French insists on having them buried together in the family plot in the cemetery. The terrorists exhume Peter's body

and then deliver a threatening note to French. Parallel to Taylor's apparent regression to a primal state, the white supremacist terrorism proves symptomatic of deep historical patterns.

In the closing sections of *The Colonel's Dream* where the novel departs altogether from the melodramatic Fetters plotline, Chesnut's exploration of Southern economic politics eschews melodramatic conspiracy narratives like those, which appeared in Dixon's fiction or the 1903 anti-peonage campaign. The African Americans who engage in a conspiracy to shield Bud Johnson from the police do so not out of malice, but as part of a long tradition of defending their rights through the use of secret codes and other modes of deception, reminiscent of the Underground Railroad of antebellum days. At one point, French gains the trust of Henry Taylor, the schoolteacher, and is therefore able to break through a code of silence. Lapsing "in his earnestness, into bad grammar," Taylor explains to French that "we ain't always shore that a coloured man will get a fair trial, or any trial at all, or a that he'll get a just sentence after he's been tried" and so they must resort to extralegal schemes and intrigues in order to assure the safety of the community. Here Taylor's sudden reversion back to "bad grammar" implies that the conflict instigates a fleeting and involuntary exposure of his double-identity as a man linked to old patterns of black resistance to power. The fact that even the normally-sophisticated Taylor would harbor these secrets and impulses leaves us with the suggestion of even greater complexities in the conspiratorial performances of Clarendon's African American community.^{xliii}

Ironically, the plight of African Americans seems to pale in comparison to the tragic circumstances of white supremacist terrorists. And this marks a still-further deconstruction of the John Pace-type. The terrorists exhume Peter's body and then deliver a threatening note to French. When Chesnut reproduces the threatening note for his readers, revealing

that rather than active agents of political changes, the terrorists themselves are objects of a deeper conspiratorial logic:

Kernell French: Take notis. Berry your ole nigger somewhar else. He can't stay in Oakk Semitury. The majority of the white people of this town, who dident tend yore nigger funarl, woant have him there. Niggers by there selves, white peepul by there selves, and them that lives in our town must bide by our rules. By order of

CUMMITY^{xliv}

With its obvious misspellings and clumsy attempts to invoke official authority of a “Cummitly,” the letter serves as a physical clue to the manner in which the terrorists are themselves really victims of a postwar ideology that paradoxically romanticized the slave plantation. While the terrorists present themselves as defenders of Southern order, their childlike address (“niggers by there selves, white peepul by there selves”) implies that they, the terrorists, are themselves caught in a somewhat awful ideological trap. The fact they are uneducated and downtrodden, it would seem, only serves to make them cling more tightly to the existing social order of the South through their rivalries with African Americans. The retrograde brute of John-Pace fame does finally appear in *The Colonel's Dream*. But rather than the slovenly monster of the anti-peonage campaign, this figure is himself a victim of the combination very same forces that continue to oppress African Americans.

In this respect, Chesnut's engagement with peonage grapples with a set of epistemological questions arising from the historical legacy of slavery. We are left to ask, how is it possible to conceive of human agency, given what we know of history? Are we bound to repeat the social customs of slavery because we have been given a setting in which politics are saturated by conspiracy and corruption? Or is there room for change? On Chesnut's part, this is indeed a pessimistic reading of the possibilities for Southern society.

Chesnutt looks to the present situation and sees only the persistence of the tensions and intrigues of the antebellum era. This final glimpse of the hidden political intrigues in Clarendon is reminiscent of *Marrow of Tradition's* anti-climactic ending. As in *Marrow of Tradition*, the solution to one conspiratorial puzzle ultimately yields a deeper cultural pathology. The absurd and the gothic emerge not out of the dread images of the Klan or the John Pace-types of brutes, but out of the humdrum surfaces of everyday life in the South. To that end, Chesnutt's fiction imagines conspiratorial intrigue as embedded in daily rhythms and customs of Southern society and thus imbues the setting of the South with a sense of mystique.

With their insistence that anti-republican agendas remain not just a force in Southern culture, but a natural fact of its collective consciousness, both *The Marrow of Tradition* and *The Colonel's Dream* communicate a pointed skepticism of narratives that would celebrate reconciliation or national unity under any terms. In these shifts from the initial convention of melodrama to this self-consciously realist statement, Chesnutt imparts an emotional and philosophical complexity to the gothic convention of Southern conspiracy. What begins as a domestication of Southern social problems through the romantic and melodramatic plotline of conspiracy ends with the stark picture of average, believable characters like Carteret, Josh Green, Henry Taylor, and the white supremacists engaging in a conspiratorial politics because they find themselves trapped by a collective failure to imagine any other way of life. As detectives of Southern society, Miller and French thus do not discover a vast providential force in these conspiracies as much as a series of failures of imagination. What Chesnutt finds at the base of Southern conspiracy narratives, then, is not the vast diabolical plot that one might anticipate, but instead a much more elusive and troubling web of deceptions, rumors and intrigues, woven into the very fabric of Southern society. Here, conspiracy

signifies not only hidden gaps and fissures in the project of the South's reunion with the republic, but an even deeper state of epistemological uncertainty in the inability of Chesnut's subjects to escape conspiratorial patterns of politics and thinking.

Chesnut's skillful exposition of an alternate historiography of Southern politics would, in and of itself, establish his foray into conspiracy writing as a significant episode in American literary history. However, as I have tried to show, Chesnut's concept of skeptical viewing grapples with a deeper set of epistemological questions. By building to a cathartic release and then reimagining this convention through these ironic turns, Chesnut creates a literary effect that differs substantially from *exposé*. Rather than the cathartic release of works like Donnelly's *Caesar's Column*, Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots*, Chesnut's novels leave us with the haunting and somber suggestion of a conspiratorial logic in Southern politics. Chesnut's refashioning of a conspiratorial Southern gothic seems at once more realistic and more daunting than that of his predecessors since it involves average individuals who, due to historical circumstances, are forced into a cycle of corrupt politics. In this manner, Chesnut offers a stark portrait of the American South where the prospects of conspiratorial intrigue seem to scatter in a thousand directions, able to reappear at any moment.

CHAPTER V
“A Brilliant and Most Appropriate Chaplet”: Maria Ruiz de Burton’s *The Squatter and the Don*

As I have discussed, the Civil War often seemed to mark a “conspiratorial moment” in the grammar of late-nineteenth century American literature and popular culture. In particular, many writers identified the paired incidents of the Union’s victory and Lincoln’s death as disturbances that unleashed a Pandora’s box of “money power” and ethnic and racial “others” on American society, putting an end to the perceived harmony of an antebellum agrarian paradise. This was certainly the case for Donnelly and Sarah Emery who suspected that the war itself was a pretext for an elaborate currency conspiracy. In the previous chapter, we saw how Chesnutt found himself working against the “propaganda” of this basic narrative as he wrote against Dent, Grady, Dixon, and Page who interpreted Reconstruction as a conspiracy amongst carpetbaggers, corporate interests, and African Americans. For Chesnutt, digging deep into the gothic recesses of a conspiratorial logic in Southern culture offered the necessary tonic to show that power struggles and disharmony were nothing new in Southern or American society.

In this chapter, I track a similar imaginary of a conspiratorial moment in my discussion of Maria Ruiz de Burton’s *The Squatter and the Don*. Ruiz de Burton traced the disturbance in American society not to the end of the Civil War in 1865, but instead to 1848 with the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the initiation of the United States’ annexation of

Mexican lands. *The Squatter and the Don* recasts U.S. expansion to the Western territories not as a progress narrative (as backers of “Manifest Destiny” would have it), but as a disturbance in which a shadowy collection of financial and political elites disrupt the patriarchal order of Californian culture as it had been established by Spanish empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In Ruiz de Burton’s story of U.S. expansionism, pernicious capitalist interests push the U.S. government towards increasingly aggressive measures to expand westward. And rather than victimized Confederates or Grangers as her martyred agrarians, Ruiz de Burton situated the Spanish Californio population as the victims and first responders to the crisis ushered in by U.S. expansionism. “The Spanish population of the [California],” she announces, “are proud of their countryman, Reginaldo del Valle, who was one of the first to take a bold stand against the monopoly.”ⁱⁱ Conspiracy thinking offered Ruiz de Burton a means of dramatizing the sea change in political and economic authority that took place in California post-1848.

Published in 1885 under the pseudonym “C. Loyal,” *The Squatter and the Don* tracks the declining fortunes of the Alamars, an aristocratic family of Spanish Californios and assailed the “Hydra-headed Monster” of monopoly capitalism. The early sections of the novel focus on the Alamars’ attempts to defend their property against the legal wrangling and threats of intimidation from Anglo squatters who claim their rancho and seek to invalidate Mexican Land Grants. But *The Squatter and the Don* develops into an exploration of the effect of the corporate monopoly over the lives of Spanish and Anglo Californians alike. Tracking events close to her own experience, Ruiz de Burton narrates how the “Big Four” rail magnates, Collis Huntington, Leland Stanford, Mark Hopkins, and Charles Crocker, use bribery and coercion to influence Congress to favor a rail line running through Oakland rather than Col. Tom Scott’s competing Texas-Pacific line which was set to terminate in San

Diego. The effect of the monopoly's maneuver is devastating for Californios and Anglos who had invested their savings in land in San Diego, under the assumption that Congress would approve a trans-continental railroad. Isolated from national markets, the San Diego economy is stilted for ten years. This proves to be a literal and figurative deathblow for the Californios who are forced to vacate their ranch. In the novel's stark conclusion, the patriarch Don Mariano dies in distress while his children are forced into hard labor as "hod-carriers" for millionaires' homes in San Francisco. The demise of the Alamar family at the hands of the monopoly marks a symbolic culmination of the trajectory launched in 1848 to overturn California's traditional social and economic order.

Ruiz de Burton's heartfelt plea for the rights of Californios has, in the last decade, increasingly enjoyed a critical revival because of its status as a milestone in the history of subaltern literature of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. As Ramon Saldivar puts it, Ruiz de Burton writes "against the grain of dominant U.S. historiography and represents the cultures of U.S. imperialism not only as a territorial and economic fact, but also inevitably as a subject-constituting project."ⁱⁱ As an author engaged in "the fantasy work of transnational identity," her represented history of Alta California intermingles "diverse kinds of memories and counter-memories, knowledges, and discourses." In this light, her fiction thus suggests that conceptualizing the American civic imagination necessarily entails a hemispheric view of "America" and a serious engagement with the political and economic displacements created by U.S. expansion into California.

If Ruiz de Burton's critical revival has rested on her status as a complex mediator between U.S. and Mexican national identifications, this has included relatively little attention to her status as a fierce critic of Gilded Age excess.ⁱⁱⁱ We might ask, what would it look like to place Ruiz de Burton within a literary tradition organized not solely around ethnicity or

nationalism, but around a tradition centered on Gilded Age financial and political corruption? This would involve putting her in conversation with figures as disparate Henry Adams, Mark Twain, Henry Demarest Lloyd, Thomas Dixon, and Frank Norris. Ruiz de Burton then emerges as an author captivated by the rhetoric of secrecy and the prospect of teasing out dark political and emotional undercurrents in the increasing capitalization of American culture. In exploring Ruiz de Burton's close engagement with conspiracy discourse, I will focus particularly on the manner in which Ruiz de Burton yoked the tradition of Gilded Age political exposé to California's homegrown protest against U.S. policy concerning the railroads (an eclectic group that, in addition to Spanish Californios, included Anglo populists and a robust muckraking press).

Ruiz de Burton's primary subject matter in this endeavor was the scandal that emerged after the infamous "Colton Letters" were leaked to the press in 1883. Termed by one historian as "the Rosetta Stone of bought government," the Colton Letters were a series of correspondences between Huntington and his financial director David Colton that were leaked to the press and exposed a massive system of bribes and corruptions behind the "Big Four's" organization. The absence of any extended discussion of the Colton letters has been a glaring omission from modern criticism of *The Squatter and the Don*. The scandal is absolutely central to both the composition of and themes that appeared in *The Squatter and the Don*. References to the Colton letters are laced throughout the novel and the novel's plot features many events from the letters such as Huntington's propaganda war with Col. Tom Scott, the alleged bribery of Congressman James Luttrell, and the Big Four's elaborate system local bosses and operatives in California politics. In each case, Ruiz de Burton makes the Colton letters an emblem of the new economic order, causing chaotic reversals of authority and the rupturing of the "patriarchal sort of life" that Ruiz de Burton had idealized.

As a literary device, the utility of Colton scandal was then really twofold for Ruiz de Burton. On one hand, the scandal lent a ripped-from-the-headlines credibility to her illustration of the new *modus operandi* of California's politics with its strange reversals of hierarchy and status. Even more importantly, Huntington's bald-faced admissions of bribery and wide-reaching ambitions to control national policy suggested that the railroad question in California held the key to the broader pattern of Gilded Age corruption. By Ruiz de Burton's reckoning, the Colton letters put to rest, once and for all, any doubts about a dark undercurrent in the region's politics. Despite its appearances as a remote, agrarian outpost, California was, from this perspective, at the very center of the fight between the traditional values and the emergent *laissez faire* ideology of postbellum American capitalists.

Indeed, *The Squatter and the Don* gives us one of late-nineteenth-century American literature's most spirited experiments with conspiracy-tinged narrative in the book's final chapter, "Out With the Invader." Similar to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, this final chapter of *The Squatter and the Don* breaks from the plot of her historical romance of Spanish California and presents her reader with a tour de force of documentary evidence, affirming the veracity of her claims about monopoly capitalism in the West and illustrating the various reversals and displacements of authority in California in the 1870s. This final section includes excerpts from the Colton Letters, speeches of various orators around California, excerpts from the railroad's accounting ledgers, and personal accounts from Californians that all seem to provide signs and clues of an economic new world order forming within California, displacing the proper chain of being. In a classic move of conspiracy rhetoric, she implores her audience to look at seemingly isolated facts and asks whether, instead of it all being coincidence, there might be some larger agenda at work.

The Squatter and the Don's narrative conceit is thus best summed-up by Ruiz de Burton's parting sentiment that "all [these historical facts] strung together would make a brilliant and most appropriate chaplet to encircle the lofty brow of the great and powerful monopoly."^{iv} This final metaphor—a "chaplet" or wreath with fibers of "historical facts" woven together to reveal the likeness of the Big Four—is a striking demonstration of the conspiratorial style of vision that Ruiz de Burton implores her reader to adopt. Like the activity of weaving a chaplet, reassembling California's chaotic politics involved the lacing and interlacing of seemingly unconnected strands by an expert weaver until they formed a design, readily apparent to any lay observer. For Ruiz de Burton, the discourses surrounding the Big Four and the Colton scandal provided exactly the kind of interlacing pattern that one could follow to make meaning out of the seemingly chaotic and random course of California politics after 1848.

Confronting "The Demon of Republicanism"

While modern critics seldom consider Ruiz de Burton to be an especially "conspiracy-minded" author, her writings and biography reveal a writer who was both interested in uncovering Gilded Age corruption and exceedingly well-positioned to do so. Ruiz de Burton's contemporaries seem to have viewed her in precisely these terms. An 1888 *Los Angeles Times* article, for instance, printed a revealing (though ultimately specious) rumor that she was the author of *Democracy*, the popular *roman à clef* of corruption and moral vice in Washington D.C., a novel that would later be attributed to Henry Adams.^v At first glance, this mistake will seem exceedingly strange in light of literary criticism that primarily sees Ruiz de Burton as an author primarily concerned with imperialism and Mexico's relationship to

the United States. But if we revisit Ruiz de Burton's biography and writings for their conspiracy themes, the *Times*' impression that Ruiz de Burton (and not Adams) was the "insider" to write such a biting exposé makes perfect sense in retrospect. As the wife of Union General, Ruiz de Burton enjoyed a surprising amount of personal access to political figures in both Washington D.C. and California, which would have given her the access required to write a novel like *Democracy*. Even more importantly, the *Times*' mistake clues us in to the fact that Ruiz de Burton had established herself within Californian culture as a defender of the old economic order who (like the then-anonymous author of *Democracy*) made use of insider knowledge in order to bring her audiences to behind the scenes of corruption and debauchery in D.C. politics.

Although she was born into an influential Californio family, Ruiz de Burton spent years in Washington D.C. where her husband, Henry Burton, worked for various high-level military and government jobs. Through the 1860s and 1870s, Ruiz de Burton compiled an impressive list of friends and acquaintances including numerous legislators, Jefferson Davis' wife, Varina, and Mary Todd Lincoln, and had even corresponded with Abraham Lincoln himself. Ruiz de Burton was similarly well connected in California politics. Both she and Henry had long been active in municipal and state government as advocates of a competing railroad to San Diego. Both, moreover, had been embroiled in a series of legal conflicts over Rancho Jamul, nearly identical to the events depicted in *The Squatter and the Don*. Surprisingly, she was also acquainted with Leland Stanford and Collis Huntington who would later become the two key targets of *The Squatter and the Don*. She even engaged in a failed attempt to negotiate with Huntington personally over dinner.^{vi}

Ruiz de Burton's specific preoccupation with conspiracy in American government seems to have been fueled by a general skepticism with republican democracy rather than

imperialism per se. Her letters regularly lament what she saw as the fall of a steady moral to what she termed “the demon of republicanism” in both the contexts of the U.S. and Mexican governments.^{vii} The dismantling of the old monarchical powers had, in Ruiz de Burton’s view, left the U.S. and Mexico vulnerable to opportunistic incursions by emerging modern interests of money, demagoguery, and mob rule. Ruiz de Burton voiced this strident opposition to republicanism, for instance, in numerous letters to the great chronicler of Californio history (and the model for Don Mariano in *Squatter and the Don*) Mariano Vallejo. In one of her more scathing pieces she simultaneously lamented “thieves” in the U.S. Congress and the execution of emperor Maximilian by Mexican republicans:

What do you think of the dispute between the thieves in Congress and the President? Very pretty—I suppose—since all is very pretty if only in a republican government, no?...What shame—if they had it—to declare so much respect to the laws, even after trampling them! But that is the hypocrisy of the crowd, ever vile, ever base, course, shameless...and their justice? What is it?...That of the tribunal of Pilate...that which Maximilian had...and all in the name of the most sublime of the human thoughts...liberty!...what blasphemy! Horror!^{viii}

Ruiz de Burton’s conflation of U.S. and Mexican republicanism here suggests that she held a somewhat unorthodox perspective on the dangers of republicanism and conspiracy in American statecraft. Conspiracy in Ruiz de Burton’s work reveals a hidden history of the American West, but this history was less an “anti-imperialist” counter-narrative than an attempt to forge an awareness of common struggles among Anglo and Spanish people living in North America; her critique was more focused, in other words, on the vulnerabilities in democratic forms of government than on a racial or ethnic standoff.

In each of her works, Ruiz de Burton typically idealized the patriarchal agrarian communities populated by yeomen farmers, Confederate sympathizers, and Spanish ranchers as an alternative to the terror of mob rule potential in democracies seeking to cast all hierarchies aside. Her unpublished play, *The Vril-ya in the Big Bonanza* (1876), sharply criticized capitalist influence in American government. A review in the San Francisco *Daily Alta California* described the play as a “keen satire indirectly pointed at the money-getting people of San Francisco.”^{ix} Her first novel, *Who Would Have Thought It?* (1872) follows the misadventures of a family of principled rural New Englanders who come to Washington during the Civil War and witness the beginnings of a rampant culture of corruption. In particular, this earlier novel tracks “The Cackles,” a group of characters based on Benjamin Butler’s and other radical Republicans’ efforts to impeach President Johnson, expand federal power, and industrialize the South in the postbellum era. In Ruiz de Burton’s interpretation, the ascendance of Butlerism/Cacklism essentially sweeps Lincoln’s memory aside and, in the process make way for the “Railroad Kings” (1872).

Who Would Have Thought It? also foreshadows the interpretation of a transnational pattern of mob rule and corruption throughout the North American continent that would emerge more fully in *The Squatter and the Don*. In the climax of *Who Would Have Thought It?*, Ruiz de Burton offers Mexico’s aristocracy as a potential replacement to the lost moral force of American democracy. Here, Isaac Sprig, one of the main protagonists, travels to Mexico where he meets Don Luis and Don Felipe, two aging Spanish aristocrats, who share similar concerns about the direction of U.S. democracy. Like Sprig himself, the old aristocrats approve of people having some voice in the government, but they see a mania for democracy and equality influencing Mexican citizens to work against their own interests. Don Luis laments, the “despotic sway” of “the influence of the United States...over the

minds of the leading men of the Hispano-American republics.” “If it were not for this terrible, this *fatal* influence—*which will eventually destroy us*—the Mexicans... would be proud to hail a prince who... will cut us loose from the leading strings of the United States.”^x The views expressed by two old Dons in *Who Would Have Thought It?* uncannily anticipate Sprig’s future perspective on the grim course of American democracy.

Where Ruiz de Burton’s earlier works only provide oblique references to this transnational imaginary of a shared struggle against a new economic and political order in the U.S. and Mexico, *The Squatter and the Don* pursued this project in a much more sustained fashion. Unlike *Who Would Have Thought It?*, *The Squatter and the Don*’s main protagonists are themselves former Mexican nationals and Anglo settlers in California who, through their contact with the machinery of Yankee capitalism, come to interpret U.S. democracy as a form of conspiracy sweeping across the North American continent. More importantly, this later novel absorbed the shared interests of Anglo and Spanish interests into a common conspiratorial mythology beginning with the crisis moment of 1848 with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

The Squatter and the Don dramatizes a recognition of this common fate in a conversation between Don Mariano and the Anglo squatter, Clarence Darrell. When Don Mariano narrates the history of California’s conquest by big business, Clarence, blinded to the vulnerabilities of U.S. republicanism, is aghast and proclaims that Americans must know the truth: “It makes me heart-sick to think how unjustly the native Californians have been treated. I assure you, sir, that not one American in a million knows of this outrage. If they did, they would denounce it in the bitterest language; they would not tolerate it.” Don Mariano, savvy to the political dynamic of the situation responds that it is no use because Anglo-Americans are themselves in the much the same situation as the Californios: “I used

to think as you do, that the American people had a very direct influence upon the legislation of the country. It seems so to hear public speakers in election times, but half of all their fire goes up in smoke, and Congress is left coolly to do as it pleases.”^{xi} For Clarence, this parallel proves to be an earth-shattering revelation that, similar to that of Sprig, leads him to a state of disillusionment with democratic rule. But even more so than Sprig’s encounter with the Mexican aristocrats, Clarence’s encounter with Don Mariano provides him with a clear chronology that resituates the beginnings of a rupture of tradition not in 1865 with the end of the Civil War (as many Anglo agrarian populists experienced it), but in 1848 with the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Hence, where *Who Would Have Thought It?* only uses the example of U.S. expansion into Mexico as a cautionary tale for those who fear corruption in Washington, *The Squatter and the Don* takes on the ambitious task of escalating this imaginary of a conspiratorial capitalist influence to a transnational scale, including subjects and scenes in both the United States and Mexico.

Ruiz de Burton uses this image of a culture of corruption originating in Washington D.C. and then sweeping across the North American in order to reveal a discreet connection between Gilded Age material excess and U.S. expansionism. While skepticism of American republicanism may have come from her with the Spanish monarchy, her apprehensions over the dangerous alchemy of big business and American democracy translated across these geographic boundaries, revealing connections between the disparate contexts of Washington D.C., the former Confederacy, and Alta California. As I discuss in the section that follows, the heated political climate and conspiracy allegations of 1870s and 1880s California provided Ruiz de Burton with the vocabulary for her critique of Gilded Age government.

The Big Four and Borderlands Conspiracy Theory

Ruiz de Burton's notion of a conspiratorial force behind U.S. expansionism resembles other anti-monopolist literary protests in California. The idea that California's calm agrarian landscape concealed conspiratorial secrets is one of the most enduring themes in literary representations of California. Authors such as Frank Norris and C.C. Post as well as the state's lively muckraking press insisted that the calm agrarian appearances of California's landscape in fact concealed the site of a fierce, secretive battle over land and resources. The Californian pastoral has regularly featured what George Henderson terms a brutal "rural realism" as writers developed literary discourses "that depicted, subserved and responded to the rhythms of the circulation of capital through the countryside."^{xii} This trend persists through much later depictions of California, including Roman Polanski's depiction of the secret cabal of businessmen who plot to control the coast's water supply in *Chinatown*. Real and imagined conspiracies of the railroad monopolies formed the background for all attempts to reread California's pastoral in terms that reflected the region's heated competition for land, resources, and political power.

The swirl of conspiracy allegations surrounding the Big Four became a focal point for anxieties that California was on a crash course with industrial capitalism. As was the case in other famous economic conspiracies, such as Black Friday, the economic power and political influence of big business, here the railroads, fueled suspicions that American democracy was under threat from forces that seemed new and quintessentially modern. Ruiz de Burton hints at the severity of these fears near the end of *Squatter and the Don* when she invokes the words of an orator who warns "they have set up within our borders an *imperium in imperio*; that they had avowed and declared themselves free from the laws of the State under which they hold their organization."^{xiii} As Charles Edward Russell observed in his

1912 exposé on the railroad, claims that the capitol had been moved from Sacramento to the office of the Central Pacific were fairly indicative of the tenor of public opinion. Russell thus recalled that “when in 1885 Leland Stanford was elected to the United States Senate,” Californians were so accustomed to corruption that “the state laughed and discussed the price [of buying California’s government] as it would discuss the orange market.”^{xiv}

Generally, people worried that the railroads were irresistibly replacing the old ranching culture of the early nineteenth century with a highly consolidated industrial capitalism. Henry George eloquently described this dilemma in his essay “What the Railroads will Bring.” “The new era will be one of great material prosperity, if material prosperity means more people, more houses, more farms and mines, more factories and ships...The truth is, that the completion of the railroad and the consequent increase of business and population will not be a benefit to all of us, but only to a portion...The locomotive is a great centralizer...It kills little towns and builds up great cities, and in the same way kills little businesses and great ones.” George’s words summed up the paradox of the railroad in California. Although it seemed the great hope for progressing towards new and increasing prosperity, it did so to the exclusion of small-scale ranching and the social mores of what many imagined to be California’s idyllic past.

There was certainly enough evidence to support these bombastic allegations of corruption and fears that the arrival of the railroads meant an end to California’s old order. In building the Central Pacific and Southern Pacific railways, the Big Four undertook one of the most ambitious political and technological feats in American history. To achieve this project, the Big Four’s organization functioned less like a commercial alliance than a well-oiled political machine. In general, the Central Pacific and Southern Pacific maintained their venture by acquiring federal grants through the controversial Pacific Railroad Act of 1864.

The U.S. government would pay lavish subsidies between \$16,000 and \$48,000 for each mile of track laid, depending on whether the road was located on flatlands or in the mountains. At any given time, the Southern and Central Pacific had 20,000 workers employed, laying over 700 miles of track in the process.^{xv} The railroad company kept a local political manager who was responsible for making sure that local officials favorable to the railroads were chosen. On a national level, they spent millions dollars maintaining a stable of congressmen and senators who took direct instructions and bribes to push through legislation favorable to the monopoly and to kill any bills that might threaten it. When it came to the press, Huntington boasted of his control, “I have but little trouble to get favorable things said of us by any of the papers by giving the local editor a box of cigars.”^{xvi} Even churches and schools were reportedly in on the fix; Huntington was known to distribute annual rail passes to the clergymen, educators, and orators who traveled, extolling the benefits of the railway.^{xvii}

Apart from bribery and manipulation of the papers and public figures, the Big Four were also involved in the more serious crimes of coercion and fraud. In some cases, they arranged detours of roads in order to avoid towns and regions where politicians were hostile to the monopoly’s interests.^{xviii} In other cases, their operations devolved into an elaborate ponzi scheme that involved doctoring financial records and exaggerating revenue losses in order to funnel money into the corporation’s coffers and the associates’ personal bank accounts. They even had their own version of the Credit Mobilier scandal; their “Central Pacific Credit and Finance Corporation” charged the Federal government ninety million dollars for about thirty million dollars worth of work. When suspicious reports appeared in unfriendly newspapers, the building that housed the financial records mysteriously burned down.^{xix}

The image that Huntington, Stanford, Crocker, and Hopkins projected to the public only served to add fuel to the fire for anti-railroad protesters. The Big Four often seemed to embody the very worst of the many “rags-to-riches-to-robber barons” stories of the 1870s and 1880s. In the California press, the Big Four were usually depicted as obese men with ostentatious tastes for mansions and predatory attitude towards the public. Charles Crocker’s “spite fence” was a notorious example of such gratuitous displays of wealth and scornful attitude towards the public. In 1876 Crocker attempted to purchase all of the land surrounding his mansion on Nob Hill, overlooking San Francisco; however, Nicholas Yung, an undertaker of Chinese descent refused to sell to him. In response, Crocker erected a three-story fence on three sides of Yung’s property, shutting out all sunlight. Yung would die in 1880; however, Crocker’s fence remained for years afterwards, gaining notoriety in the early 1900s as a tourist attraction for visitors to San Francisco.^{xx}

The flamboyant conspiracy literature about the Big Four was often emphasized a kind of skeptical vision not unlike that which we saw in chapter two with Henry James’ meditations on the problems with perspective created by modern terrorism. Depictions of the Big Four as a “hydra-headed monster” and, more famously, “the octopus,” flexing its “tentacles of steel” were mainstays of anti-monopoly newspapers, fiction, and oratory. This strand of American literary and cultural history is perhaps best known to modern readers through Frank Norris’s iconic novel *The Octopus* (1901). But Norris was certainly not the only—or even the primary—exponent of conspiracy discourse surrounding the railroads in his time.

The “octopus” metaphor itself owes much of its iconic status to the San Francisco-based *Wasp*, a lavishly illustrated magazine that produced cartoon after cartoon protesting



Figure 5.1. G. Frederick Keller, “The Curse of California.”

the Central Pacific and Southern Pacific’s monopoly. One of the best known and most elaborate was G. Frederick Keller’s “The Curse of California” (Figure 5.1) Keller’s illustration portrays the Big Four’s monopoly as a fearful, almost occult, influence on Californian life. In the cartoon, a giant red sea monster in the likeness of Stanford and Hopkins coils its tentacles around various members of the California’s old ranching polity, ranging from farmers to fruit growers to the Mussel Slough settlers to stage coach lines. It is distinguished in particular by Keller’s attempt to show the full range of people who felt that their way of life was being deliberately and rapidly swept away by the railroad monopoly. Hyperbolic images like “The Curse of California” invited their viewers to imagine the railroad companies as entities that were alien to everyday rationality and cognition. Accurately perceiving the railroad and the new economic order that represented entailed making a leap of imagination; one needed to suspend conventional beliefs and be open to

possibility that the railroad companies represented a new and monstrous kind of power that had been previously unknown in California.

California novels often depicted the railroads as mysterious and alien presences in the pastoral landscape. The two years prior to the release of *The Squatter and the Don* witnessed a surge of novels featuring the Mussel Slough tragedy, an incident in which seven settlers were killed after local marshals tried to evict them from lands claimed by the railroads. Works including William Morrow's *Blood Money* (1882), C.C. Post's *Driven from Sea to Sea* (1884), and Josiah Royce's *The Fend of Oakfield Creek* (1887) used Mussel Slough as an occasion to foreground the largely untold struggle between railroads and representatives of California's older social and economic order. These works tended to suggest that incidents like Mussel Slough provided readers with a means of breaking out of their complacency about the course of Californian politics. Morrow's book is especially fascinating for the way that it blends the modern conspiracy narratives about the railroads with local Californian folk legends. Morrow took the analogy of the railroad-as-curse one step further as his book interwove his discussions of "the tentacles of the octopus" with the tale of a curse and a bandit's buried gold. In the book, Morrow's young protagonist, John, arrives in California in search of adventure, imaging the dangers and riches to be had in the story of a bandit's cursed treasure. While the mystery of the bandit's curse remains unsolved by the end of the book, the violence at Mussel Slough convinces John that the dangers of the railroad monopoly are very real indeed.^{xxi} Morrow's analogy of the bandit's curse with the railroad companies exposes the deeper motivations of the culture of protest surrounding the Big Four. The encroaching presence of the railroads, Morrow implied, were a sort of modern counterpart to the idea of a bandit's curse insofar as they exerted an invisible influence on the California's settlers in the form of seemingly inexplicable bad luck and misfortune.

The famous “Colton Letters” scandal—the incident that supplied the backdrop of the events in *The Squatter and the Don*—was cause for alarm not only in Californian politics, but in American politics, more generally. For the briefest of moments, California found itself in the center of a firestorm of debate over government corruption in the United States. On December 23, 1883 the *New York Sun*, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, and *San Francisco Chronicle* published the correspondences after David Colton’s widow sued the Big Four for depriving her of assets that had belonged to Colton. The letters provided readers an unprecedented view into the system of bribes and manipulations that Collis Huntington had used to build and defend the Central and Southern Pacific’s railroad’s monopoly. Particularly damaging was the portrait of Huntington, who came off as a relentless, even megalomaniacal, competitor with a sincere ambition to establish absolute control over California’s government and commerce.^{xxii}

In the correspondences Huntington addressed his letters to “Friend Colton” and spoke about his schemes in frank terms, usually in the euphemistic language of “fixing” bills and acquiring “the right men.” Huntington speculated to Colton on how much it will cost to “persuade” or “switch” Congressional votes, often boasting about haggling with various officials and legislators in order to acquire their services at the lowest possible prices. At other times, Huntington mused wistfully about his desire to buy off hostile agents of the press, “is it not possible to control an agent for the Associated Press in San Francisco?” Nothing short of complete and total cooperation from the California congressional delegation satisfied him. In a particularly illustrative set of exchanges, Huntington raged that “a different [Railroad Committee] was promised me” upon the meeting of the Forty-Fifth Congress. “If we are not hurt this session,” he fumed, it will be because we pay much money to prevent it, and you know how hard it is to get it to pay for such purposes...Every year the

fight grows more and more expensive.”^{xxiii} Indeed, his sharpest, most venomous barbs were reserved for Congressmen who refused bribes or failed to fall into line. William Piper, a favorite target of Huntington’s, for instance, is repeatedly referred to as a “cuss” and “a worthless dog.”^{xxiv}

Nationally, the Colton Letters were received with a sense of ambivalence common to sensational conspiracy allegations. On one hand, they seemed to crystallize the very worst suspicions that American government had been so systematically and easily purchased. On the other, the spectacle of Huntington’s megalomaniacal ambitions and his ornate system of intrigues inspired a perverse fascination. Of the revelations, Henry Demarest Lloyd wrote, “The public is not often favored with so clear a view of the way in which ‘the strong men’ of the country run its corporations and Legislatures. The manipulation of Congress and State and Territorial Legislatures, the matching of wits and mendacity by great corporate managers, the intrigues and contests of the reckless race for wealth, the corruption of the press and of officials of all kinds—all this is laid bare to the public eye by the unexpected disclosure of these letters, dashed off for the confidential perusal of one of his accomplices by the chief actor in the play.” Lloyd’s characterization of the scandal as a “play” encapsulates the theatrical quality that many of the reports associated with the scandal. Much of the underlying appeal of the scandal derived from the voyeuristic glimpse it offered into Huntington’s debauched psychology. Here “the intrigues and contests of the reckless race for wealth” played out for audiences as a spectacle of megalomania acted out by the real-life players of Huntington and Colton.^{xxv}

For Ruiz de Burton, the spectacle of Huntington’s appalling behavior and twisted psychological profile provided a starting point for illuminating the differences between the old agrarian world that she idealized and the new economic order of ruthless and corrupt

capitalism. Huntington never actually appears in Ruiz de Burton's book; instead he hangs over the seemingly calm Californian landscape like an insidious cloud of influence. As in other anti-railroad texts, *The Squatter and the Don* presents the letters as a means of deciphering the hidden forces working on and in California. However, rather than just representing the "circulation of capital through the countryside," Ruiz de Burton portrays the Colton letters as emblematic of an ideological pathology, involving clashing nationalisms and cultural identities and working silently to undermine the traditional moral and ethical sense of order.

Ruiz de Burton illustrates her vision of a Janus-faced California through a two-tiered plot structure, combining the romance plotline (the personal dramas of Alamars, the Mechlins, and the Darrells in their struggles to hold onto the old economic and social order of California) and a second plotline which recounts the war of propaganda, bribery, and influence-garnering that takes place between Col. Tom Scott and the Big Four. Throughout *The Squatter and the Don*, Ruiz de Burton interrupts the book's dominant narrative mode of historical romance with a series of editorial interjections that unfurl ripped-from-the-headlines accounts of the Huntington-Colton scandal. As the novel proceeds, the sporadic interruptions grow into increasingly sustained discussions of the workings of the monopolists' conspiracy. As a result, the main action in *The Squatter and the Don* is always shadowed by invisible developments of the railroad's conspiracy.

What emerges in these brief conspiratorial interludes is a portrait of *The Squatter and the Don* as a novel that works to imbue American expansionism with a melodramatic quality, drawn from sensationalist Gilded Age exposés. We can, for example, see this interpolation of excess and melodrama in the chapter entitled "Why the Appeal Was Not Dismissed." Here, Clarence Darrell, George Mechlin, Elvira and Mercedes Alamar dine and drink wine

aboard a steamer headed for San Francisco as they discuss the problem with squatter laws and the prospects for a railroad that will connect San Diego to the transcontinental line and, in the process, break the Central and Southern Pacific's monopoly in California. Ruiz de Burton's narrator interrupts the scene with a discussion of the characters' blissful ignorance of the conspiratorial forces working to destroy their way of life:

At the time when this moon-lit picnic of four took place on the steamer's deck, as it glided northward over the glassy surface of the immense Pacific, the people of California had not yet heard about the disclosure of the famous *Colton suit*. This suit was hidden in the mists of a distant future, and therefore the famous "*Huntington Letters*" had not come forth to educate the American mind in the fascinating, meandering, shady ways of "*convincing*," or of "*bribery and corruption*," as the newspapers and committee reports have harshly stigmatized Mr. Huntington's diplomacy(!) At that time, 1872, people yet spoke of "*bribery*" with a degree of shamefacedness and timidity. It was reserved for Mr. Huntington to familiarize the American people with the fact that an American gentleman could go to Washington with the avowed purpose of influencing legislation by "*convincing*" people with money or other inducements, and yet no one lose caste, or lose his high social or public position, but on the contrary, the *convinced and convincer* be treated with the most distinguished consideration. So after drinking half of his second glass, George said:

'I don't believe the stories about Washington being such a corrupt place, where people get everything by bribing.'"^{xxvi}

This scene is characteristic of the novel's other conspiratorial interludes, where Ruiz de Burton shifts into the sensationalist register in her language and imagery. In typical fashion, Ruiz de Burton situates the talk of optimism against sarcastic meta-commentary on the

elaborate system of corruptions, as Huntington's secret transactions hover above the action below. For example, the "glassy surface" of the Pacific is strikingly contrasted with the "meandering shady ways of 'convincing'" hidden "in the mists of a distant future." These sudden shifts in register serve to add a dark, atmospheric dimension to Ruiz de Burton's novel, and thus invokes the eerie, verging on gothic, associations that emerged in certain press accounts of the Big Four.

The real substance of the assault for Ruiz de Burton is not just the threat to California's resources or land, but the far greater threat to "caste" that a figure like Huntington creates. The letters offer proof here that Huntington can show an utter disregard for how "an American gentleman" ought to behave without losing "caste" or "his high social or public position." To be sure, Huntington's creeping presence means an end to the thoroughgoing optimism of George Mecklin who assumes that there is some higher moral and ethic order to the hierarchy in American government. Such apprehensions that it is capital and not "caste" driving post-1848 California politics then ultimately shape Ruiz de Burton's sense of what it means to truly perceive the California society.

Ruiz de Burton's Decadent West

The Squatter and the Don propounds a kind of status-thinking that counters popular sources such as Hubert Howe Bancroft's *Chronicles of California* and John Bourke's "American Congo," which characterized the shift in power from native Americans to Spaniards to Anglos as a "natural" process.^{xxvii} In Ruiz de Burton's conspiratorial interpretation of California's politics, the crisis moment of 1848 is thus less a culmination of order (as Bancroft and Bourke would have it), than a disruption of a natural chain of being.

The Squatter and the Don uses the faint suggestions of bribery and corruption that appeared in the Colton Letters as a catalyst for her elaborate melodrama of reconfiguration of power. “These monopolists,” she writes, “are dangerous citizens not only in being guilty of violation of the law,” but also in the sense that “they *lead others* into the commission of the same crimes.” “Their example” is “poison to Californians,” because it “incites the unwary to imitate the conduct of men who have become immensely rich by such culpable means.”^{xxviii} As the novel proceeds, the self-replicating quality of the corruption becomes an organizing logic of Ruiz de Burton’s account of the strange and unwholesome reversals in status and hierarchy in California’s new economic order.

In charting these reversals in status and hierarchy, Ruiz de Burton introduces us to a host of characters who are misplaced and misguided and who need a solid hierarchy, undergirding their sense of place in Californian society. At the local level, we have the deceived Anglo squatters who misrecognize the Spanish Californios as enemies and their racial inferiors. Bosses such as Roper and Judge Lawlack—drunkards who Ruiz de Burton implies should be sweeping floors—enjoy kickbacks from the railroad for helping stack the deck in local elections. Lawlack “unblushingly” describes his manipulation of judicial power as “political factotum.”^{xxix} This exploration also takes them to Washington D.C. where we meet John King Luttrell, a principled Congressman who was coerced into joining Huntington’s coterie. And finally, this exploration involves charting the decadent, obsessive psychologies of Stanford and Huntington themselves. The unifying feature in this bleak sketch of California politics and society is the way that the new conspiratorial order seems to have displaced of authority and tradition. Thus, as Ruiz de Burton’s book digs deeper beneath the calm façade of the California pastoral to reveal what she deems the true powerholders in California, the new hierarchy of authority seems increasingly chaotic.

The Squatter and the Don traces the development of this culture of corruption through a long history that begins with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. In Ruiz de Burton's account of U.S. expansionism, the introduction of democratic rule plunges California into a state of political gamesmanship and influence-garnering. The "patriarchal sort of life" that Californians led under Spanish rule, in which "viceroys and governors" were guided by "judicious policy" is displaced by the "foolish extravagance" that emerges out of the new culture of corruption in which monetary gain is the sole aim of statecraft.^{xxx} This tends to set up a dynamic in *The Squatter and the Don* in which the older patriarchal system is always held up as a sort of prelapsarian state in which conspiracy did not seem possible because the authority and actions of those in power affected a higher order.

Post-1848 California politics represent the antithesis of the predictable and stable patriarchal hierarchy idealized by Ruiz de Burton. We see this, for instance, in a discussion between Clarence Darrell and Don Mariano in which the Don recalls how he watched, over the years, as California politics devolved into a kind of electoral shell game whereby legislators follow whatever policies would provide them the largest personal and financial benefits. He tells Clarence of how California's politicians first used the Spanish as a scapegoat that allowed them to stoke popular outrage. "Because California was expected to be filled with a population of farmers, of industrious settlers who would have votes" and since "the Spano-American natives had the best lands, and but few votes, there was nothing else to be done but to despoil us, to take our lands and give them to the coming population." Then, once it becomes politically convenient, the Anglo-American Squatters become the victims as "this same economical far-seeing Congress...on the plea that such large tracts of land ought not to belong to a *few* individuals," "goes to work and gives to railroad companies millions upon millions of acres of land."^{xxxix} The erratic quality of this prehistory suggests that

the new political order is driven entirely by self interest without any regard for the higher order or vision of a stable society. In Ruiz de Burton's pessimistic reading of post-1848 California, law and status become highly malleable depending on the whims and impulsive desires of officeholders.

The issue of race is an absolutely crucial to Ruiz de Burton's vision of the stunning reversals in racial hierarchies. Analogous to Page and Dixon's lamentations over the Civil War, Ruiz de Burton then tends to posit 1848 as a moment that throws the favored status of whiteness into a state of disarray. *The Squatter and the Don* dramatizes this reversal of racial and social order most directly in the attitudes of William Darrell who, due to the manipulation of political demagogues, comes to regard the Spanish as racially inferior "greasers." For most of his life, the hot-tempered Darrell subscribes to claims by politicians who exploit his racism over Spanish, lashing out violently against what he mistakenly images as a threat to his interests. Darrell repeats the rhetoric of opportunistic politicians who tell him that the "inferior" Mexicans have been "better off than Americans." These scare tactics prove to be an effective means of keeping him and his fellow Anglo squatters in line with the interests of the railroad companies. Perhaps even more importantly, Darrell's inability to comprehend a proper racial hierarchy pits him against his wife and children. Clarence, for example, identifies these beliefs as "the bane of [Darrell's] life for many years" while Mrs. Darrell chastises her husband that "it is enough to see one of those Alamar ladies to learn that they are inferior to nobody."

Darrell repudiates these beliefs in his tearful apology towards the close of the novel in which he admits his misrecognition of the Alamars as racial "inferiors" transformed Darrell himself into a criminal element. "My wickedness," he confesses "helped the wickedness of others to kill him ...The good, the best of men, was right when, in his dying

moments, he said: *'The sins of our legislators brought me to this...A wrong legislation authorized us squatters, sent us, to the land of these innocent, helpless people to rob them.'*^{xxxii} Given this recognition, Darrell's position is revealed to have important parallels to Don Mariano and the Mechlins. Like these figures, his optimism about the good intentions of politicians tends to drive him into a fog of propaganda that conceals the claims to racial and ethnic purity of the Alamars. Having solved the puzzle of the conspiracy that guides him to see "the best men" as inferiors, Darrell then achieves the sense of equilibrium that he might have achieved much more easily under the clearly defined sense of authority of the pre-1848 monarchies.

Ruiz de Burton's fable-like account of John King Luttrell's fall from grace provides another stark illustrations of essentially good men turned bad by the new economic logic of California's politics. Here, she dramatizes Luttrell's real-life attempts and failure to introduce criminal charges against the railroads on the floor of Congress in a brief entitled *Preamble and Resolutions*. "Enough was said by Luttrell," the narrator explains, "to prove those railroad magnates most culpable, and yet, with their record still extant, their power in Congress seems greater every year."^{xxxiii} But, these indictments prove, by the end of the book to be little more than "a flash in the pan" as Luttrell's proposal is tabled by Congressmen under the control of the Central Pacific.^{xxxiv}

Ruiz de Burton's choice to highlight this episode is particularly interesting, given the historical background surrounding the failure of Luttrell's bill. Ironically, Luttrell himself became a symbol of corruption in Californian politics after his name turned up in "The Colton Letters" as one of the congressmen taking bribes from Huntington. In 1874, two years following the episode depicted in *The Squatter and the Don*, Huntington wrote to Colton inquiring his interest in trying "persuade" Luttrell "to do what is right in relation to the C.P. and S.P." "But," he warned Colton, "some political friend must see him and not a railroad

man.” Huntington and Luttrell’s relationship was seemingly cemented when Huntington sent money and support to Luttrell, describing his hope that it be “generally understood” in Washington that “our hand was under one and over the other.” While the strength of the evidence against Luttrell is perhaps debatable today, the combination of Huntington’s apparent obsession with Luttrell and sudden change of tone were more than enough to turn the Congressman into an emblem of corruption in the eyes of Californian anti-monopolists.

xxxv

Perhaps out of sympathy for the real-life Luttrell, Ruiz de Burton treats this dramatic fall from grace indirectly, illustrating only the pressures that were already mounting against Luttrell in 1872. The Luttrell we see in *The Squatter and the Don* is still a firebrand crusader against the railroads who comes up against harsh resistance from his fellow Congressmen. The bill’s predictable failure foreshadows Luttrell’s own eventual fall from grace. We are meant to see this power play mainly through inferences and guesswork. Hence, although the Luttrell that we see in *The Squatter and the Don* never explicitly betrays his early anti-monopolist position, Ruiz de Burton provides many hints that he is under intense pressure to drop the charges. The narrator alludes, for instance, to the ubiquitous “rumors” in the halls of Congress that “the bribes of the Central Pacific monopolists have more power with some Congressmen than the rights of communities.” Ruiz de Burton’s conspicuous silence on which exact players carried this act out serves as a subtle demonstration of the corrupting influence of the railroad’s presence in California.^{xxxvi}

The Squatter and the Don’s depictions of Huntington and Stanford exemplify the perversion of order and sense of chaos that the novel imagines as the new modus operandi of California politics. But Ruiz de Burton’s railroad magnates are neither dread-inducing corporate titans nor goliaths, as much as they are relatively weak, desperate figures—men

“behind the curtain”—rather than innately powerful heads of industry. This places *The Squatter and the Don* at a very sharp contrast to well-known portraits of corporate tycoons in Naturalist fiction such as Norris’ Shelgrim or Theodore Dreiser’s Yerkes. Rather than the sublime awe of a mental and physical “giant” (as in Norris), the depraved, paranoid psychologies of Huntington and Stanford form the basis for a voyeuristic spectacle based on their compulsive delusions and obsessions.

Consider, for example, a pair of similar scenes from Norris’ *The Octopus* and *The Squatter and the Don* in which ranchers plead their case to an unsympathetic railroad executive. In Norris’s book, Presley engages in a verbal battle with Shelgrim, the president of the railroad company. Planning to appeal through moral arguments about the suffering of settlers, Presley initially believes that his logic is unassailable. However, before he can get a word in, Shelgrim interrupts with a compelling lecture on the inevitability “force” of the market, telling Presley that “the railroads will build themselves” in his absence and that he must “blame the conditions, not the man.” Presley, finds himself “stupefied, his brain in a whirl” after hearing “the clear reverberation of truth” in the president’s admonition. For Norris, this tends to underscore the extent to which morality, human intention and sentiment seem to have been evacuated with the recognition that the world is driven by impersonal market forces. By contrast, Ruiz de Burton’s ranchers consistently maintain the moral and ethical high ground against Leland Stanford, for whom arguments about market forces serve as thinly-veiled justifications for conspiratorial behavior. In *The Squatter and the Don*’s climactic scene, Stanford offers up multiple justifications for the monopoly; and, at every turn, is thwarted by Mariano, Mechlin, and Holman. Like Shelgrim he invokes market forces, arguing “if I don’t cause distress, someone else will.” However, when Stanford invokes Herbert Spencer’s social Darwinism, his rhetorical façade starts to crumble. Mechlin

counters with a more thorough reading of Spencer and corrects Stanford's interpretation, showing him that the monopoly will self-destruct if it carries on in this manner: "Mr. Herbert Spencer also, in elucidating his principles reminds us of the fact that 'Misery is the highway to *death*, while happiness is added life, and giver of life.'" At this, Stanford is dumbfounded, only able to mutter a few brief words about Mechlin's "vivid imagination."^{xxxvii} And so, where Norris presents the logic of market forces as an unassailably pragmatic assessment of the situation, Ruiz de Burton reads Stanford's interpretation of market forces as a mischaracterization of the yet-higher law of "fundamental morality." The effect here is to reframe the debate not in terms of inevitability of markets, but in terms of status based on blood-ties and traditional values.

With the spectacle of the debauched figures of Stanford and Huntington as the bosses of a corrupt scheme of government in California, Ruiz de Burton ultimately lands on a picture of California politics that strongly counters any attempts to justify the new political order. Instead, Ruiz de Burton's depictions of Stanford and Huntington belong firmly to that class of villains in late-nineteenth-century literary and popular culture who had usurped government power and effectively taken American democracy off its intended course in the Spencerian terms invoked by Shelgrim and Stanford. She thus reinterprets their rationalizations away from a reading of railroad control-as-providence and towards an interpretation that situates their power as an accident of history. By this logic, U.S. expansionism is thus driven not by patriotism, national interests, or Manifest Destiny, but instead a crass principle of self-interest while invocations of evolutionary "destiny" become mere masks for violence and fraud. The most stinging irony in all of this for Ruiz de Burton is that, in claiming the mantle of "destiny" for themselves, Gilded Age capitalists have taken North America off what she considers the more natural course of Spanish aristocratic rule.

“An Ocular Demonstration”

So far I have talked a great deal about how *The Squatter and the Don's* portrait of California's conspiratorial civic landscape creates a series of reversals in status and ethics from what Ruiz de Burton regarded the proper relations of California's old patriarchal system. But Ruiz de Burton's alternate history of California is also as much about the evolution of a skeptical psychology as it is about any particular conspiratorial development in California's new politics. In this manner, she defines the primary challenge of a post-1848 modernity as the task of cultivating a skeptical style of vision and thus accomplishing the imaginative work of perceiving trajectories of political power in American life.

Given this emphasis on an expansive, conspiracy-minded vision, we might align Ruiz de Burton's appeal for the rights of Californios with a prominent strand in American fiction that repeatedly returns to scenes of principled agrarian subjects encountering and becoming aware of a corrupt industrial capitalist culture. Variations of this theme occur in works ranging from Twain and Warner's *The Gilded Age* (1873) to Thomas Dixon's white supremacist polemic *The Leopard's Spots* (1901) and, later on, to films such as Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939). In each of these works, principled agrarian subjects engage in a kind of conspiratorial tourism in which travel leads them to perceive a correspondence between events transpiring in their pastoral homes and the debauched metropole of Washington D.C. (or some other center of government and finance). More than mere nostalgia for times gone by, these conspiracy-tinged narratives were deployed as a means of asserting the possibility of heterodox interpretations of history and American nationalism independent of the dominant nationalist narratives of the post-Civil War era. In

Ruiz de Burton's hands, this allegory of a paranoid agrarian observer of decadent capitalism tends to provide the basis for an expansive vision of American politics that merges the disparate contexts of Alta California, the former Southern Confederacy, and Washington D.C.

One of the key sites for this conspiratorial tourism is in the long interlude in the middle of the novel in which the Darrells, Alamars, and Mechlins travel to Washington D.C. At first, Washington society seems little more than a playground to the Californians. The Darrells, Mechlins, and Alamar girls walk the grounds of Mt. Vernon, lunch in the President's parlor, are pampered by French maids and attend a masked ball where they charm the D.C. elite with their manners and wit.^{xxxviii} But these pristine appearances gradually give way to a series of episodes that reveal D.C.'s dark underside of corruption by lobbyists. Thus, even as the Alamar girls, Clarence Darrell, and the Mechlins enjoy the various amenities of D.C. society, subtle clues emerge to suggest that the state capitol is controlled by sinister influences. We see a hint of this, for example, when the Alamar girls encounter a group of white-bearded, veterans from the Mexican war who are met with "perfect indifference" when they tell members of Congress that they are starving. George and Lawrence Mechlin likewise encounter seemingly inexplicable intransigence to their appeals for a terminus in San Diego, thus being forced to conclude, "after all our reluctance to believe that our Congressmen can be improperly influenced, we will have to submit—with shame and sorrow—and accept the fact that bribery has been at work, *successfully*."^{xxxix}

Ruiz de Burton's narrator telegraphs the D.C. interlude as if the revelations of corruption and bribery were the materialization of a figure from gothic horror. She compares the monopoly to a "monster" whose "influence shall be felt, and shall be shaping the destinies of unborn generations, after he shall be only a ghastly skeleton." The Mechlins

echo this phrasing as their experience of the session of Congress suddenly takes a bizarre turn into the arena of gothic myth. George describes how, although he had “heard strange rumors about Congressmen being ‘bribed with money,’ and...improperly influenced by ‘a certain railroad man,’” he is “loth to believe that bribery would be so openly used.” Lawrence too exclaims, “pshaw! The thing is too preposterous” so as to confirm the sentiment that the scale and scope of the findings defy common sense perceptions.^{x1} These juxtapositions of the sensational language of “monsters,” “skeletons,” and “strange rumors” with D.C. politics have the effect of reframing the excursion into the capitol as a foray into weird and even supernatural terrain. The trip to D.C. thus initiates a baptism by fire in which the innocent, naïve assumptions are stripped away and they reemerge as jaded, cynical subjects, aware of the way that capitalist interests structure power in America. For Ruiz de Burton, this paranoid re-envisioning of the Capitol as a gothic house of horrors becomes a vehicle for illustrating the process through which the Darrells, Mechlins, and Alamars are jarred out of their comfortable sense of complacency and come to an awakening about the possibilities for heterodox interpretations outside of the stories and narratives immediately available in California’s public sphere.

If the Mechlins and Don Mariano enjoy the dubious distinction of having a more “modern” perspective than other American agrarians, this distinction places them in a form of kinship with Southerners who, according to *The Squatter and the Don*, are about to become victims of the very same creeping process of displacement and reorganization of society around material wealth. And so Ruiz de Burton’s Californians look on at the events in the South as if they were watching their own fate replay itself. James Mechlin, for instance, interprets the news of Guller’s trip with the wizened anxiety of a former victim, watching his attacker strike again: “The Southern people and the Southern Press have fallen into the trap.

They never doubted, never could doubt, the veracity of ex-Senator Guller, who had espoused their cause during the war of the rebellion.” Continuing on, Mechlin recoils at the thought of “those unfortunate, betrayed Southerners...listening in the sincerity of their hearts to the atrocious concoctions he is pouring upon their unsuspecting heads.”^{xli}

Mechlin’s sense of déjà vu at watching the South’s demise serves not only to align the South and California against a common enemy, but it also sounds a prophetic note of warning that this pattern threatens to spread to other agrarian peoples. With Mechlin-as-prophet, Ruiz de Burton thus positions California’s experience as a sort of case study in the likely outcome of industrialization in the South. In this manner, conspiracy theory about California gets cast as a mechanism for deciphering the future.

In addition to these glances into other regions’ futures, Ruiz de Burton also proffers this heterodox vision as offering the basis for reflection on past history. For this, the conspiratorial tourism of *The Squatter and the Don* takes yet another turn in Clarence Darrell’s sojourn into Mexico and South America and discovery of Mayan ruins. In this episode, Clarence heads to Mexico ashamed that his “rough blood” and his father’s rivalry with Don Mariano will prevent him from ever marrying Mercedes. Here he encounters the Mayan ruins of Urmal, which seem “symbolical of his ruined hopes.” He cannot help but notice the parallel between the crumbling ruins and the beleaguered social order in California (which, unbeknownst to Clarence is under further attack by local political bosses Gasbang and Roper). “The ruins,” Clarence thinks to himself seem “the irrefragable witnesses of a past civilization, lost so entirely that archaeology cannot say one word about its birth or death.”^{xlii} If Clarence does indeed see the silenced civilization of California’s future, this perception tends to align his growing awareness of the conspiracy as analogous to culling or divining arcane knowledge from the ancient Mayan past. The loose analogy between conspiracy

theory and the supernatural then indirectly positions narratives like the conspiracy allegations against the Big Four as a means of getting in touch with epistemologies that contradict Yankee interpretations of expansionism. Ruiz de Burton creates this loose analogy between the fall of the Mayans and the looming fall of the Californios in order to suggest that the solution to mysteries and subversions of the present might lie in the esoteric knowledge of the distant past.

The conspiratorial imaginary of *The Squatter and the Don* is most directly aimed at cultivating the capacity to see the post-1848 world as having a quality of the absurd. This reaches its culmination in the penultimate chapter of *The Squatter and the Don* where these visions turn from tragedy to grotesque absurdity. Following the foreclosure on the ranch the autobiographical figure of Doña Josefa (like Ruiz de Burton herself) is forced to move to San Francisco. At a moment of utter despair, she looks out across the San Francisco skyline to descry a party being thrown by one of Nob Hill's millionaires. At the bizarre spectacle that transpires, a railroad millionaire invites San Francisco's most dignified citizens to his mansion where he celebrates his own wealth with a mock wedding. Masquerading as a bridegroom, the millionaire makes a mockery of traditional life, marching down the aisle with his wife and delivering a drunken oration in which he crows about his own resourcefulness and perseverance. The mock wedding features yet another level of masquerade, as the wedding guests sip champagne and scoff at the millionaire's ruse.

The paradox that emerges in this highly theatrical scene is the way that seeing clearly—cutting through the “subtle sophistry”—entails gaining a heterodox vision whereby the immaculate mansions can seem grotesque and strange (rather as an indication of “plucky” Yankee ingenuity). It is thus in the context of this spectacle of the wedding-turned-

masquerade that Doña Josefa receives her “ocular demonstration” of the principles driving American society:

No subtle sophistry could blur in her mind the clear line dividing right from wrong. She knew that among men the word BUSINESS means inhumanity to one another; it means justification of rapacity; it means the freedom of the man to crowd and crush his fellow-man; it means the sanction of the Shylockian principle of exacting the pound of flesh. She knew all this, but the illustration, the ocular demonstration, had never been before her until now in that gay house, in that brightly illuminated mansion.^{xliii}

Ruiz de Burton’s deliberate ambiguity over the realism of the scene highlights an impressionistic quality, often missed in critical assessments of *The Squatter and the Don*. Is the grotesque scene in Nob Hill a figment of Doña Josefa’s imagination or realistic narration of an absurd situation? Ruiz de Burton’s answer seems to be that it is a little both. Doña Josefa’s “ocular demonstration” depends precisely on her ability to look at glitzy surfaces of the mansion and perceive them not as beauty or prosperity, but as the stuff of urban legends. That is, Ruiz de Burton’s idea of “clear” vision of California politics depends precisely and primarily on cultivating a suspicious imagination and suspending disbelief.

The passing reference to “Shylock” is especially significant because it invokes a favorite conspiratorial motif of late-nineteenth-century Populism. Populist writers and orators, including Ignatius Donnelly and Sarah Emery, used the term “Shylock,” not unlike references to “Rothschild,” as shorthand for the figure of a transnational financial conspiracy. Shylock and Jewishness represented less a well-defined set of individuals than a linguistic placeholder for the creeping sense of a shadowy conspiracy among financial elites. The Farmers’ Alliance newspaper, *The Southern Mercury*, was typical of this discourse,

contending that English “shylocks” had conspired with President Buchanan in 1858 to “cause a great national debt and issue bonds and establish National banks, which would give them power to contract the currency of the country.”^{xliv} By using the term here Ruiz de Burton does not refer to any particular conspiracy as much as she asks her audience to put themselves in a suspicious mindset, open to the possibility of imagining intrusions of the grotesque, the foreign, and the debauched.

And this intense emphasis on a suspicious imagination, I think, brings us back to my opening question of what it means to see Ruiz de Burton within a literary tradition organized around narratives of Gilded Age corruption rather than a strictly ethnic canon. To readers of Ruiz de Burton, this should offer a version of her as a writer who was deeply engaged not just with questions about statecraft, ethnicity, or status, but also fascinated by the phenomenology of modern politics. As her central image of a “chaplet” of “historical facts” woven together would suggest, Ruiz de Burton was thoroughly preoccupied with the value that the heterodox style of vision of conspiracy thinking might offer in terms of illuminating a means of seeing and thinking. From this vantage point, the incorporation of historical documents, voices, and discourses from the Colton scandal are about more than just substantiating the credibility of her protest or even illustrating a conspiratorial logic to post-1848 California society. Rather, the conventions of conspiracy thinking offered a kind of imaginative grammar that opened the self up to feelings of suspicion and thus a willingness to weave together seemingly improbable connections into a singular portrait. For Ruiz de Burton, it was only through this lacing and interlacing of perspectives that the self could perform the imaginative work of leaping from Washington D.C. to the former Confederacy to Mexico to Alta California.

Epilogue

In these pages I have argued that late-nineteenth century American writers developed and responded to a literary language of conspiracy. I have emphasized how the idea of conspiracy acquired new meaning in the second half of the nineteenth century both as a means of making sense of the era's political modernities and increasingly as part of the era's engagement with spectacle and pleasure-seeking. The turn to conspiracy narratives in fiction was not simply a thematic choice, but it signaled an attempt to engage with a conspiratorial culture of reading and writing. As we saw in James' playful meditations on the "touching, thrilling spectacle" of the public's "guessing and suspecting" at anarchist terrorism or Ruiz de Burton's attempts to summon the spirit of California's colorful protest culture, references to conspiracy in fiction were as much about signaling engagement with the shared sensibilities of conspiracy-minded publics and subcultures as they were about addressing a localized political issue. Writers presented a parade of new villains and anti-heroes, including terrorist organizations, malign corporations, corrupt politicians, and hooded Klansmen, all under the aegis of "conspiracy." But what, in the end, connected these figures and forms was their association with skeptical styles of viewing and structures of feeling that cast suspicion on surface appearances on the public sphere.

As a response to developments in post-Civil War politics and society, conspiracy in American fiction contained compelling explanatory dimensions that could inspire skepticism about "official" hegemonic accounts of history and, indeed, attune individuals to an

awareness of *actual* conspiracies. Voyeuristic access to backroom meetings and the workings of secret societies provided occasions for late-nineteenth century readers to envision hidden forms of human agency as motive forces behind the startling postwar changes such as the period's staggering material inequalities, unprecedented levels of political corruption, and the rise of modern forms of terrorism. They also offered a more figurative set of engagements with the period's politics. As much as conspiracy narratives created engagements with politics, I have also shown that they created a source of romantic form of escapism. Suggestions of esoteric knowledge, exhilarating confrontations with disaster and the possibility for subversive overturning of expectations created outlets for relief from the sometimes-rigid terms of Victorian rationalism and doldrums of everyday, unsuspecting life.

At the same time, conspiracy fiction also functioned as a key form of entertainment within a postbellum American society, fond of art and spectacles that utilized suspicions about hypocrisy and manipulations of perspective as their primary organizing aesthetic. As Michael Leja tells us, artful deceptions were formative to emerging conceptions of modernity in art and entertainment, as they mingled an interest in rationalist investigation with sensations of surprise and enchantment.ⁱ The late-nineteenth century is of course famous as the era of P.T. Barnum's humbugs, spirit photography, mystery novels, and Trompe L'oeil paintings. But it was also the era of Donnelly's "cryptogram," "the dynamite novel," and the "The Terrible Mysteries of the Ku Klux Klan." Conspiracy-as-artful deception encourages a thrill of enchantment at the suggestion of esoteric or controversial knowledge. This is to ask, as Jack London's *Avis Everhard* does, are the figures on the street just businessmen or "ghosts" inhabiting a "shadow world" of secret agents, obscure clues, and earth-changing forces? In revealing conspiracy narratives' role in this story of artful deceptions, I have argued for their centrality in the continuing development of aesthetic and affective categories

of modern art and entertainment; categories such as “spectacle” and “terror” were forever changed for their association with conspiracy narratives.

My discussions have generally placed writers and conspiracy-minded subcultures in America in terms of a gradient, blending elements of rationalist investigation and carnivalesque spectacle. At one extreme, we saw how Donnelly, deserving of his nickname “The Prince of Cranks,” injected a sense of the fantastic and phantasmagorical into populist political culture with his relentless pursuit of offbeat and unlikely theories in texts such as *Caesar’s Column*, *The Great Cryptogram*, and *The Golden Bottle*. Donnelly’s works had the effect of creating their own peculiar conspiratorial sublime as Donnelly, like some paranoid Captain Ahab, followed perpetually elusive theories to endlessly self-perpetuating heights. In other cases, the terms of this gradient have been more understated. On the surface, Chesnut’s depictions of the Wilmington Affair and the peonage outrages would seem to operate as relatively straightforward documentary-style fiction; however, as we have seen, Chesnut encouraged a subversive reconsideration of hegemonic narratives of these events through characters such as Dr. Miller and Colonel French who find their commonplace assumptions about Southern life overturned and defamiliarized by the encounters with strange and unexpected conspiratorial alliances. In doing so, Chesnut prompted his own variety of the conspiratorial sublime in his subtle directive to engage in a self-perpetuating process of questioning the “respectable” surfaces of Southern society for evidence of terror and subversion.

Looking forward in American literary history, conspiracy rhetoric and fiction of the late-nineteenth century provided the foundation for new forms of speculation and play with the idea of conspiracy. A great deal of scholarship has explored the language of conspiracy in twentieth and twenty-first century American culture. Popular literary motifs of the 1910s and

1920s often incorporated the older figures such as bomb-throwing anarchist and plutocrats into visions of German destruction and perceived forced entry into the first World War by financial elites.ⁱⁱ Such concerns famously provided fodder for the modernist poet Ezra Pound.ⁱⁱⁱ Technological changes likewise augmented the scale and scope of conspiracy discourse to globalizing proportions. Just as the dynamite bomb created the possibility of a cityscape in which a few individuals could create mass spectacles of violence, the nuclear bomb brought with it a cosmic scale.

Even further ahead, the conspiratorial motifs of the Post-WWII eras and late-twentieth century increasingly dealt with the challenges of envisioning the totality of social controls in the world system. As Timothy Melley writes, “the term ‘conspiracy’ rarely signifies a small, secret plot” in late-twentieth-century parlance, but instead refers to “the workings of a large *organization, technology, or system*—a powerful and obscure entity so dispersed that it is the antithesis of the traditional conspiracy.” This newer sense of the term was, for instance, what allowed J. Edgar Hoover and Joseph McCarthy to describe Communism as a “conspiracy.” As Melley points out, this more dispersed sense of the word “conspiracy” has been central to works that dramatize postmodern feelings of political passivity as in Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* (1961) and Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973).

These later developments powerfully confirm that the topos of conspiracy in American culture often functions to manage uncertainty about new and befuddling aspects of modernity, regardless of the era. But aside from just a shifting assortment of villains and anti-heroes, the *forms* associated with conspiracy also continued to evolve since the late-nineteenth century. America’s culture of conspiracy, in other words, progressed and developed not only in terms of changing politics, but also in terms of changing tastes, new

regimes of viewership, and an increasingly robust means of distributing, texts, information, and art.

Yet for all of these changes, many of the conspiratorial forms and figures that inspired suspicion in post-Civil War literary culture seem a persistent element of American life. We can indeed cite many contemporary figures and rhetorics that echo the forms and themes of my four main case studies. For example, Glenn Beck, with his latticework of allegations about Obama's birth certificate, socialist propaganda, and Rothschild's involvement in the Federal Reserve, is not unlike Donnelly insofar as Beck organizes his public persona around his ability to generate conspiracy allegations.^{iv} Indeed, Beck's media empire of conspiracy-themed television shows, websites, speaking appearances, and books seems like the logical conclusion of Donnelly's pamphlets and camp meetings. Don DeLillo's sensitive treatment of New Yorkers' apprehensions following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 in the novel, *Falling Man* (2007), resonates closely with James' invocation of the post-terrorism scenario as one in which every aspect of domestic life seems permeated with suggestions of terrorism. Spike Lee navigates challenges similar to those faced by Charles Chesnutt with controversies surrounding Lee's recent documentary, which broaches the possibility that the U.S. Army deliberately flooded African-American neighborhoods during Hurricane Katrina. In combating claims of paranoia, Lee's defense, "you have to look at what happened in this country," strikingly reaffirms Chesnutt's appeals to keep an open mind to allegations that may initially seem preposterous.^v And while the Southern Pacific railway's monopoly is largely a distant memory, the metaphors of "the hydra-headed monster" and "the octopus" that originated in Ruiz de Burton's California have become central to the grammar of anti-capitalist rhetoric worldwide.

Pundits and commentators from time to time make the declaration that we are living in a new era, suddenly fearful with conspiracy or that the fascination with conspiracy is somehow a new or shocking phenomenon. Even as I write, the latest book on conspiracy theory by Jonathan Kay, *Among the Truthers* (2011), raises the specter of “America’s growing conspiracist underground.”^{vi} But as these correspondences between post-Civil War and present day forms and figures make clear, the conspiratorial imagination is a longstanding and evolving element of American literary, popular, and political culture.

And I hope that my own narration of a relatively short section of this broader literary and cultural history has begun to suggest that the enduring appeal of works making us feel suspicious of conspiracy has been due neither solely to their capacity to perfectly explain history nor to give voice to delusions, their appeals to extreme emotions nor to rationalist puzzles, their ability to cast skepticism on hegemonic narratives nor acquiescence to nativist anxiety. But it has been an uneasy alchemy of these qualities, envisioned by a host of articulate and imaginative writers from exceedingly diverse literary and cultural contexts. Accordingly, any critical paradigm for conspiracy narratives in fiction and popular culture should recognize that it is precisely the intensely liminal status of conspiracy narratives that makes them such a consistently tantalizing subject of literature, popular culture, and politics. Conspiracy thinking is neither entirely delusion nor rationalist investigation nor philosophical statement nor political extremism, but instead an uneasy alchemy of detective work, political engagement, and fascination with the overwhelming and transcendent. Are we following blind alleys of paranoia and delusion? Or have we discovered networks that threaten to overturn common wisdom about the forces driving society? Or has it just been a playful manipulation of perspective all along? Such questions continue to provide the basis for the pleasures of conspiracy.

Notes

Chapter One, Introduction

ⁱ Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (Boston: Ticknor & Company, 1888). Pp. 351-3.

ⁱⁱ *United States V. Rabinovich*, 238 US 78(1915); Thomas J. Davis, "Conspiracy and Credibility: Look Who's Talking, About What--Law Talk and Loose Talk," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 59, no. 1 (2002); Wayne LaFave, "Conspiracy," in *Criminal Law, Hornbook* (St. Paul, MN: Thomson West, 2003).

ⁱⁱⁱ Richard Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics," in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966).

^{iv} Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981). P. 38.

^v Ed White, "The Value of Conspiracy Theory," *American Literary History* 14, no. 1 (2002). p. 26.

^{vi} Lyman Beecher, *Plea for the West* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Truman & Smith, 1835). David Brion Davis, "Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 47, no. 2 (1960).

^{vii} Robert S. Levine, *Conspiracy and Romance: Studies in Brockden Brown, Cooper, Hawthorne, and Melville*, Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture (Cambridge England ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989). p. 12.

^{viii} Walter Lippmann, *Drift and Mastery; an Attempt to Diagnose the Current Unrest*, A Spectrum Book: Classics in History Series, S-Ch-2 (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1961). Pp. 2, 5.

^{ix} Discussions of conceptual changes in the language of conspiracy are too numerous to list comprehensively. For canonical discussions see Leo Braudy, "Providence, Paranoia, and the Novel," *ELH* 48, no. 3 (1981).; Hofstadter, "The Paranoid Style in American Politics."; David Brion Davis, "Some Themes of Counter-Subversion: An Analysis of Anti-Masonic, Anti-Catholic, and Anti-Mormon Literature," in *National Development and Sectional Crisis, 1815-1860*, ed. Joel Silbey (New York: Random House, 1970). and Gordon S. Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century"," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 39(1982).; Jameson, *The Political Unconscious Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Significant recent accounts include Charles Flynn, "Procrustean Bedfellows and Populists: An Alternative Hypothesis," in *Race, Class and Politics in Southern History: Essays in Honor of Robert F. Durden*, ed. Jeffrey J. Crow, Paul D. Escott, and Charles Flynn (Baton Rouge:

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- Louisiana State University Press, 1989); Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000); Jeffrey Ostler, "The Rhetoric of Conspiracy and the Formation of Kansas Populism," *Agricultural History* 69, no. 1 (1995); and White, "The Value of Conspiracy Theory."
- ^x Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). p. 7.
- ^{xi} Max Weber, "Science as Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946). Pp. 139-41.
- ^{xii} Henry James, "Preface to the Princess Casamassima," in *The Art of the Novel*, ed. Richard Blackmur (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934). Pp. 75-76.
- ^{xiii} Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern*. p. 7.
- ^{xiv} Weber, "Science as Vocation." Pp. 139-41.
- ^{xv} Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*, Modern Library (New York: Random House, 1999). Pp. 381-83.
- ^{xvi} James, "Preface to the Princess Casamassima." Pp. 75-76.
- ^{xvii} Jeffery A. Clymer, *America's Culture of Terrorism: Violence, Capitalism, and the Written Word*, 1 vols., Cultural Studies of the United States (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003). p. 53.
- ^{xviii} David A. Zimmerman, *Panic! Markets, Crises, and Crowds in American Fiction*, Cultural Studies of the United States (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006). p. 34.
- ^{xix} James W. Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001). Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870*, Yale Historical Publications. Miscellany. 129 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982). Michael Leja, *Looking Askance: Skepticism and American Art from Eakins to Duchamp* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
- ^{xx} Cook, *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum*. Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870*. Leja, *Looking Askance: Skepticism and American Art from Eakins to Duchamp*.
- ^{xxi} Jack London, *The Iron Heel* (New York: Grayson Pub. Corp., 1948). p. 66.
- ^{xxii} Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005). p. 299.
- ^{xxiii} London, *The Iron Heel*. p. 305.
- ^{xxiv} Ibid. p. ix.
- ^{xxv} William Hope Harvey, *Coin's Financial School* (Chicago, Ill.: Coin publishing company, 1894); ———, *A Tale of Two Nations* (Chicago: Coin Publishing Company, 1894). Sarah E. Van de Vort Emery, *Seven Financial Conspiracies Which Have Enslaved the American People*, American Series ; No. 1 (Lansing, Mich.: R. Smith & Co., 1894). Frederick Upham Adams, *President John Smith: The Story of a Peaceful Revolution* (Chicago: C. H. Kerr & company, 1897).
- ^{xxvi} Henry James, "The Art of the Novel; Critical Prefaces," Scribner. p. 32.
- ^{xxvii} W.E.B. Dubois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1935). Pp. 673, 705.
- ^{xxviii} Thomas Dixon, *The Leopard's Spots; a Romance of the White Man's Burden--1865-1900* (New York: Doubleday, Page & co., 1903); Sutton Elbert Griggs, *Imperium in Imperio*, Modern Library Classics (New York: Modern Library, 2003); Thomas Nelson Page, *Red Rock; a Chronicle of Reconstruction* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons,, 1898), xv, 584 p; Albion Winegar

Tourgee, *A Fool's Errand*, The John Harvard Library (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1961).

Chapter Two, "Some Unsuspected Author": The Paranoid Vision of Ignatius Donnelly

ⁱ Ignatius Donnelly, *The Great Cryptogram: Francis Bacon's Cipher in the So-Called Shakespeare Plays* (London: S. Low Marston Searle & Rivington, 1888). p. vi.

ⁱⁱ Horace Traubel, "With Walt Whitman in Camden,"

<http://www.whitmanarchive.org/criticism/disciples/traubel/disciples_credits_9.html>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Donnelly's major conspiracy theories on Shakespeare are contained in *The Great Cryptogram* (1888) and *The Cipher in the Plays and on the Tombstone* (1899). His Atlantis research can be found in *Atlantis: the Antediluvian World* (1882) and *Ragnarok: the Age of Fire and Gravel* (1883). Donnelly's theories about Jewish and British banking conspiracy can be found in *The American People's Money* (1895) and are dramatized in his novel *The Golden Bottle* (1892). For further background see especially Martin Ridge, *Ignatius Donnelly; the Portrait of a Politician* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

^{iv} Nicholas Ruddick, "Introduction " in *Caesar's Column: A Story of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Nicholas Ruddick (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2003). p. xiii.

^v Ignatius Donnelly, "Ignatius Donnelly Papers," (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society, 1966). Reel 90. All citations of *Ignatius Donnelly Papers* refer to individual rolls in microfilm version of this archive published in 1966 and housed at the Minnesota Historical Society in St. Paul, Minnesota.

^{vi} Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955). Pp. 70-71.

^{vii} Ruddick, "Introduction ".p. xvi.

^{viii} "crank" n² def. 5." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. 10 September 2010 <<http://dictionary.oed.com/>>.

^{ix} For discussions of anti-Semitism among populist activists at the turn of the century see Oscar Handlin, "American Views of the Jew at the Opening of the Twentieth Century," in *Anti-Semitism in America*, ed. Jeffrey S. Gurock (New York: Routledge, 1998).; Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Pp. 49-50. Donnelly's views on Judaism were exceedingly complex and often contradictory. For example, although he wrote *Caesar's Column*, a text that preemptively blamed Jewish for instigating the apocalypse, he would spend his last years actively protesting the anti-Semitic motivations behind Alfred Dreyfus' scandalous imprisonment. Donnelly's attempt to reconcile this position in *Caesar's Column* was the common justification of a sympathetic social Darwinism. *Caesar's Column* narrates a scenario in which years of oppression had sent Jews on a disastrous evolutionary trajectory. In this regard, Donnelly falls into a category of populist writers who turned to anti-Semitism as a convention for resolving fears over urban life and motivating activism. Jews may not have been the primary concern of Populists, but agrarian protesters used references to "Rothschild" and "Shylock" as a means of tying their economic arguments to Christian fundamentalist typology. On Donnelly and Dreyfus see Ridge, *Ignatius Donnelly; the Portrait of a Politician*. Pp. 95-98.

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- ^x Ignatius Donnelly and Nicholas Ruddick, *Caesar's Column: A Story of the Twentieth Century*, The Wesleyan Early Classics of Science Fiction Series (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2003). p. 50.
- ^{xi} Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998). Pp. 1-3.
- ^{xii} Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*. Ostler, "The Rhetoric of Conspiracy and the Formation of Kansas Populism." Robert McMath, *American Populism: A Social History 1877-1898* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993).
- ^{xiii} Joseph Rodes Buchanan, "The Coming Cataclysm of America and Europe," *The Arena* 2(1890). Pp. 293-94, 297. Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*. Pp. 60-93.
- ^{xiv} Ostler, "The Rhetoric of Conspiracy and the Formation of Kansas Populism." p. 24.
- ^{xv} Henry Adams, "The New York Gold Conspiracy," in *Historical Essays* (New York: Hildesheim, 1970). p. 325.
- ^{xvi} Henry Demarest Lloyd, "Story of a Great Monopoly," *The Atlantic*, March 1881.
- ^{xvii} Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). Pp. 243-64.
- ^{xviii} Antonio Gramsci, *The Prison Notebooks*, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). P. 202.
- ^{xix} McMath, *American Populism: A Social History 1877-1898*. Pp 151-53. Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*. p. 32.
- ^{xx} Ridge, *Ignatius Donnelly; the Portrait of a Politician*. p. 117.
- ^{xxi} McMath, *American Populism: A Social History 1877-1898*. p. 161.
- ^{xxii} Ignatius Donnelly, "Preamble to the People's Party Platform," in *A Populist Reader; Selections from the Works of American Populist Leaders*, ed. George Brown Tindall (New York: Harper & Row, 1966). Pp. 90-1.
- ^{xxiii} Ridge, *Ignatius Donnelly; the Portrait of a Politician*. p. 198.
- ^{xxiv} Ignatius Donnelly, *The Great Cryptogram: Francis Bacon's Cipher in the So-Called Shakespeare Plays* (Chicago ; New York ; London: R.S. Peale, 1888). p. 239.
- ^{xxv} *Ibid.* Pp. 639, 719.
- ^{xxvi} ———, "Caesar's Column Scrabpook," in *The Ignatius Donnelly Papers* (St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society, 1966). Reel 133.
- ^{xxvii} Donnelly and Ruddick, *Caesar's Column: A Story of the Twentieth Century*. p. 4.
- ^{xxviii} Donnelly, "Ignatius Donnelly Papers." Reel 163.
- ^{xxix} Donnelly and Ruddick, *Caesar's Column: A Story of the Twentieth Century*. Pp. 23, 32.
- ^{xxx} *Ibid.* p. 56.
- ^{xxxi} *Ibid.* Pp. 138-41.
- ^{xxxii} *Ibid.* p. 50.
- ^{xxxiii} David Zarefsky, *Lincoln, Douglas, and Slavery: In the Crucible of Public Debate* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). p. 68.
- ^{xxxiv} Donnelly and Ruddick, *Caesar's Column: A Story of the Twentieth Century*. p. 71.
- ^{xxxv} Donnelly, "Ignatius Donnelly Papers." Reel 133.
- ^{xxxvi} Donnelly and Ruddick, *Caesar's Column: A Story of the Twentieth Century*. p. 73.
- ^{xxxvii} Donnelly, "Caesar's Column Scrabpook." Reel 133.
- ^{xxxviii} Alexander Saxton, "'Caesar's Column': The Dialogue of Utopia and Catastrophe," *American Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (1967). p. 224.
- ^{xxxix} Donnelly and Ruddick, *Caesar's Column: A Story of the Twentieth Century*. p. 199.

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- ^{xi} Ignatius Donnelly, *The American People's Money* (Chicago, Ill.: Laird & Lee Publishers, 1895). Featuring a cloth binding and elaborate illustrations *The American People's Money* was a lavish volume when compared to other Populist political pamphlets. One startling illustration from Donnelly's book depicted bankers as puppet-masters who used newspapers to manipulate the public.
- ^{xli} ———, *The Golden Bottle*, Series in American Studies. (New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1968). p. 4.
- ^{xlii} Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). Michael Germana, *Standards of Value: Money, Race, and Literature in America* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009).
- ^{xliii} Walter T. K. Nugent, *The Money Question During Reconstruction*, [1st ed., Norton Essays in American History (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967).
- ^{xliv} L.B. Woolfolk, *The Great Red Dragon or the London Money Power* (Cincinnati: George E. Stevens, 1889). See Thomas Dixon Papers, Duke University Library Special Collections, Durham North Carolina. E. J. Farmer, *The Conspiracy against Silver; or, a Plea for Bi-Metallism in the United States* (Cleveland, O.: Hiles & Coggs, 1886). Harvey, *Coin's Financial School*; ———, *A Tale of Two Nations*.
- ^{xlvi} Ibid. p. 9, Emery, *Seven Financial Conspiracies Which Have Enslaved the American People*. p. 63
- ^{xlvii} Ibid. p. 10-11.
- ^{xlviii} Donnelly, *The American People's Money*.
- ^{xlix} ———, *The Golden Bottle*. 197-98
- ^l Ibid. p. 274.
- ^{li} Ibid. pp. 302, 308, 312.
- ^{lii} Ibid. pp. 312-14.
- ^{liii} Traubel, "With Walt Whitman in Camden."
- ^{liv} Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: Deathbed Edition* (New York: Signet, 2000). p. 445.

Chapter Three, "The Vast Smug Surface": Henry James' *The Princess Casamassima*

- ⁱ James, "Preface to the Princess Casamassima." Pp. 77-8.
- ⁱⁱ Ross Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). p. 86.
- ⁱⁱⁱ For more James criticism in this vein see Joseph Litvak, *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).; John Carlos Rowe, *The Other Henry James* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).; Mary Esteve, *The Aesthetics and Politics of the Crowd in American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).; Peter Brooks, *Henry James Goes to Paris* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007).
- ^{iv} Mark Seltzer, *Henry James and the Art of Power* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984). p. 27.
- ^v *London Times* March 16 1883. p. 9.
- ^{vi} As Jeffery Clymer notes, "emergent means of narrating industrial capitalism and classed identity were deeply intertwined with the way modern terrorism was imagined as a form of violence in turn-of-the-century America. For some writers, the 'terrorist' materialized in

these decades as a blameworthy, violent figure onto which the disruptions and chaos of a rapidly capitalizing economy could be projected and displaced. Alternatively, for other authors and commentators, the invisible, shocking, and unpredictable nature of terrorist violence offered a material, symbolic, and fitting response to both the seemingly veiled workings of corporate capitalism.” Clymer, *America's Culture of Terrorism: Violence, Capitalism, and the Written Word*. Pp. 5-6, 21. See also William Phillips, *Nightmares of Anarchy: Language and Cultural Change, 1870-1914* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2003).. For a discussion of attempts to use physiognomics to detect political terrorists see Isaac Land, *Enemies of Humanity: The Nineteenth-Century War on Terrorism*, 1st ed. (New York, N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). Pp. 117-136. Primary sources with commentary can be found in Walter Laqueur, ed. *Voices of Terror: Manifestos, Writings, and Manuals of Al Qaeda, Hamas, and Other Terrorists from around the World and Throughout the Ages* (New York, New York: Reed Press, 2004). David Brion Davis, *The Fear of Conspiracy; Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present* (Ithaca N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1971). Pp. 50-93; and 161-79.

^{vii} Barbara Melchiori undertakes an exhaustive survey of the “dynamite novel” subgenre, compiling descriptions and summaries of about fifty titles written in the years 1880-1910. Melchiori argues that these novels had an enormous influence on the public, claiming that “a whole range of requirements now dealt with by television” such as news reporting and social commentary were served by these “dynamite novels.” She is critical of the genre because of what she sees as the various authors’ contribution to the “slant” on public opinion “to reinforce the powers that be, and to breed suspicion of the rapidly spreading movements toward socialism.” Barbara Arnett Melchiori, *Terrorism in the Late Victorian Novel* (London: Croon, 1985). Pp. vii-viii.

^{viii} James, "Preface to the Princess Casamassima." Pp. 76-8.

^{ix} Ibid. Pp. 76-78.

^x Ibid. p. 76. Leon Edel, *Henry James: A Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985). p. 324.

^{xi} Edel, *Henry James: A Life*. p. 61.

^{xii} Oscar Cargill, "Princess Casamassima: A Critical Reappraisal," *PMLA* 71(1956). Pp. 97-105.

^{xiii} W.H. Tilley, *The Background of the Princess Casamassima* (Gainesville, Florida: University of Florida Press, 1960).

^{xiv} Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Viking, 1950). p. 74. Cargill, "Princess Casamassima: A Critical Reappraisal." Tilley, *The Background of the Princess Casamassima*. Irving Howe, *Politics and the Novel* (London: Stevens & Sons, 1961). p. 146.

^{xv} Seltzer, *Henry James and the Art of Power*. Pp. 29, 52.

^{xvi} Clymer, *America's Culture of Terrorism: Violence, Capitalism, and the Written Word*. p. 74.

^{xvii} Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, *Framed: The New Woman Criminal in British Culture at the Fin De Siecle* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press and the University of Michigan Library, 2008). p. 150.

^{xviii} James, "Preface to the Princess Casamassima." p. 64.

^{xix} See Miller, *Framed* 152; Barbara Arnett Melchiori, *Terrorism in the Late Victorian Novel* (1985): 37-40; W.H. Tilley, *The Background of the Princess Casamassima* (1960): 37-8. Another secondary source on the incident is Richard Bach Jenson “Daggers Rifles and Dynamite:

Anarchist Terrorism in Nineteenth Century Europe,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16.1 (2004): 130.

^{xx}, *Globe-Democrat*, November 16 1884. This account went on to state that the trial would reveal that the “outlines of the plans” had been furnished by Johann Most, the famously inflammatory editor of the British and American anarchist newspaper *Freiheit*. (*Globe-Democrat* 3). Another typical account from London’s *Pall Mall Gazette* said “the disclosures of the trial made it quite evident that these Anarchist principles are widely disseminated” and made him “feel very vividly what a huge amount of festering discontent there is below the surface of German society” (7). Similarly *Trenman’s Exeter Flying Post* noted that “though the motive for the outrage” was not known, “taken with others of a similar kind that have lately occurred,” Niederwald showed that the operations of anarchists were “beginning to have serious results, no less in Germany than in England” (3). For a further sampling of representative newspaper accounts see *London Daily News* December 16 1884: 5; *Milwaukee Sentinel* December 17 1884: 2; *The Graphic* December 20 1884: 4; *Reynold’s Newspaper* December 21 1884: 4.

^{xxi} Lyman Abbott, "Danger Ahead," *The Century* 31, no. 1 (1885). Pp. 51-9.

^{xxiii} Max Nordau, "From Degeneration," in *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*, ed. Vassiliki Kolocotroni, Jane Goldman, and Olga Taxidou (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). Pp. 22-3.

^{xxiii} Walter Laqueur, *A History of Terrorism* (New York: Transaction Publishers, 2001). Pp. 56-7.

^{xxiv} "Trial of German Dynamitards," *London Times*, December 16 1884. p. 3.

^{xxv} Leon Edel, ed. *The Letters of Henry James*, vol. 3 (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1974). Pp. 113-14.

^{xxvi} James, "Preface to the Princess Casamassima." p. 59, 62, 76.

^{xxvii} Itals. James. *Ibid.* p. 47.

^{xxviii} Melchiori undertakes an exhaustive survey of this subgenre, compiling descriptions and summaries of over fifty titles from 1880-1910. Melchiori argues that these novels had an enormous influence on the public, claiming that “a whole range of requirements now dealt with by television” such as news reporting and social commentary were served by these “dynamite novels.” (vii-viii). See also Miller’s account of the genre (149-226).

^{xxix} James R. Green, *Death in the Haymarket: A Story of Chicago, the First Labor Movement, and the Bombing That Divided Gilded Age America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006). Pp. 174-208.

Carl S. Smith, *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief: The Great Chicago Fire, the Haymarket Bomb, and the Model Town of Pullman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). Pp. 101-174.

^{xxx} London, *The Iron Heel*. p. 305.

^{xxxi} Mildred Howells, ed. *Life in Letters of William Dean Howells*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1928). p. 402. Garlin Sender, *William Dean Howells and the Haymarket Era* (New York: American Institute for Marxist Studies, 1979). Howard A. Wilson, "William Dean Howells' Unpublished Letters About the Haymarket Affair," *Illinois Historical Journal* 56(1963); Timothy L. Parrish, "Haymarket and Hazard: The Lonely Politics of William Dean Howells," *Journal of American Culture* 17, no. 4 (1994).

^{xxxii} William Dean Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976). p. 393.

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- ^{xxxiii} G.K. Chesterton and Martin Gardner, *The Annotated Man Who Was Thursday* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999). p. 141.
- ^{xxxiv} Henry James, *The Princess Casamassima* (Harmondsworth Eng. ; New York: Penguin Books, 1977). Pp. 152, 291.
- ^{xxxv} *Ibid.* pp. 185, 251.
- ^{xxxvi} Millicent Bell, *Meaning in Henry James* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991). p. 178.
- ^{xxxvii} Henry James, *Literary Criticism*, 2 vols., Library of America (New York, N.Y.: Literary Classics of the United States: Distributed to the trade in the U.S. and Canada by Viking Press, 1984). p. 464.
- ^{xxxviii} James, *The Princess Casamassima*. pp. 200, 352.
- ^{xxxix} Braudy, "Providence, Paranoia, and the Novel." p. 622.
- ^{xl} James, *The Princess Casamassima*. pp. 291, 334.
- ^{xli} *Ibid.* pp. 330, 333.
- ^{xlii} Susan M. Griffin, *Anti-Catholicism and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Pp. 134-5. As Griffin explains, the term "Thugs of Christianity" here refers specifically to British and American fears over the stock type of the Hindi thuggee, which, like Jesuits, was simultaneously associated with both criminality and anxieties over mystical powers. Griffin also documents James' history of disdain for anti-Catholic discourse. In an extremely negative review of Benjamin Disraeli's novel, *Lothair* (1870), James complained that the work subscribed to a simple and flawed "ruling idea" of exposing "the secret encroachments of the Romish Church," and that Disraeli neglected the "serious" interests of using fiction to probe the psychology of political intrigue in favor of a mere "anti-Romish enthusiasm" (qtd. 183). See also Jenny Franchot, *Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism*, New Historicism ; 28 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
- ^{xliii} James, *The Princess Casamassima*. pp. 330-34.
- ^{xliv} Henry James, *The American Scene* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1969). Pp. 266-70.
- ^{xlv} Qtd. in Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge of Modernity*. p. 266.
- ^{xlvi} James, *The Princess Casamassima*. p. 444.
- ^{xlvii} With this indirect treatment of the conspiratorial effects of bureaucracy, James momentarily anticipates authors such as Joseph Heller, Don DeLillo, and Thomas Pynchon who explicitly liken bureaucratic culture to conspiracy. Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America*.
- ^{xlviii} James, *The Princess Casamassima*. pp. 51-9.
- ^{xlix} *Ibid.* pp. 382-83, 396.
- ^l *Ibid.* p. 591.
- ^{li} *Ibid.* p. 486.
- ^{lii} ———, "Preface to the Princess Casamassima." p. 71.
- ^{liii} Henry James, *The Ambassadors* (Harmondsworth ; New York: Penguin, 2003).p. 472.
- ^{liv} James, "Preface to the Princess Casamassima." p. 78.

Chapter Four, Charles Chesnutt and the Propaganda of History

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- ⁱ Dubois, *Black Reconstruction in America*. Pp. 718-19.
- ⁱⁱ William Dean Howells, "Psychological Counter-Current in Recent Fiction," *North American Review* 173(1901).p. 882.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew Wilson, "Charles W. Chesnutt's "The Colonel's Dream:" The Failure of Critical Realism," *Prospects* 25(2000). p. 367, 382.
- ^{iv} Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920*, Making of America (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967). p. 5. Heather Cox Richardson, *West from Appomattox* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). p. 208-9, 338. Flynn, "Procrustean Bedfellows and Populists: An Alternative Hypothesis."
- ^v David W. Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory & the American Civil War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002). p. 103.
- ^{vi} Dixon, *The Leopard's Spots; a Romance of the White Man's Burden--1865-1900*. p. 203.
- ^{vii} *Ibid.* p. 403.
- ^{viii} Woolfolk, *The Great Red Dragon or the London Money Power*. Thomas Dixon Papers, Duke University Library Special Collections, Durham North Carolina.
- ^{ix} Dixon, *The Leopard's Spots; a Romance of the White Man's Burden--1865-1900*. p. 196.
- ^x *Ibid.*
- ^{xi} Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1988). Pp. 426-27.
- ^{xii} Qtd. in *Ibid.* p. 428-9.
- ^{xiii} *Ibid.*
- ^{xiv} Qtd. in Wyn Craig Wade, *The Fiery Cross: The Ku Klux Klan in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987). p. 83.
- ^{xv} Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*.
- ^{xvi} Cited in Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993). p. 275.
- ^{xvii} Tourgee, *A Fool's Errand*. p. 181.
- ^{xviii} Charles Chesnutt, "Unpublished Speech," in *Charles Chesnutt Papers* (Nashville, TN: Fisk University Library).
- ^{xix} H. Leon Prather, *We Have Taken a City: Wilmington Racial Massacre and Coup of 1898* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1984). Pp. 1-12, 49-51.
- ^{xx} Charles Chesnutt Papers, Fisk University, Nashville Tennessee, Box 13, Folder 5.
- ^{xxi} The letter-writing campaign to McKinley was orchestrated in part by the African American journalist Thomas L. Fortune with whom Chesnutt maintained a consistent correspondence. On Chesnutt's correspondences with Fortune see Charles Waddell Chesnutt, Joseph R. McElrath, and Robert C. Leitz, *"To Be an Author": Letters of Charles W. Chesnutt, 1889-1905* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997). On Fortune's role in the campaign see Prather, *We Have Taken a City: Wilmington Racial Massacre and Coup of 1898*. p. 155.
- ^{xxii} Prather, *We Have Taken a City: Wilmington Racial Massacre and Coup of 1898*. p. 155-56.
- ^{xxiii} Charles Waddell Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition*, Bedford Cultural Editions (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2002). p. 192.
- ^{xxiv} *Ibid.* pp. 64-5.
- ^{xxv} *Ibid.* p. 199.

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- ^{xxvi} Ibid. Pp. 94-96.
- ^{xxvii} Ibid. p. 95.
- ^{xxviii} Ibid. p. 199.
- ^{xxix} Ibid. Pp. 113-15.
- ^{xxx} Ibid. P. 214.
- ^{xxxi} Dubois, *Black Reconstruction in America*. Pp. 673, 705.
- ^{xxxii} *Peonage Cases*, 123 F 678-81(1903). Charles Waddell Chesnutt, *The Colonel's Dream* (Miami: Mnemosyne Pub. Co., 1969). *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 28 1903. For an excellent account of the *Peonage Cases* and the concomitant press crusade see Pete Daniel, *The Shadow of Slavery* (Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois Press, 1972). Pp. 43-65.
- ^{xxxiii} , *New York Evening Post*, June 25 1903.p. 6.
- ^{xxxiv} , *Ibid.*, July 7.
- ^{xxxv} , *Ibid.*, June 25. p. 2.
- ^{xxxvi} , *Ibid.* p. 2.
- ^{xxxvii} Herbert Ward, "Peonage in America," *Cosmopolitan* 39, no. 4 (1905). Pp. 25-30
- ^{xxxviii} *New York Evening Post*, June 25 1903.
- ^{xxxix} Charles Waddell Chesnutt et al., *Charles W. Chesnutt: Essays and Speeches* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999). p. 207-8.
- ^{xl} Chesnutt, McElrath, and Leitz, "*To Be an Author*": *Letters of Charles W. Chesnutt, 1889-1905*. p. 233
- ^{xli} Chesnutt, *The Colonel's Dream*. pp. 119-120.
- ^{xlii} *Ibid.* Pp. 223-226.
- ^{xliii} *Ibid.* Pp. 243-4.
- ^{xliv} *Ibid.* Pp. 264-5.

Chapter Five, "A Brilliant and Most Appropriate Chaplet": Maria Ruiz de Burton's *The Squatter and the Don*

- ⁱ Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton and Jennifer M. Acker, *The Squatter and the Don* (New York: Modern Library, 2004). p. 371.
- ⁱⁱ José David Saldívar, *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies*, American Crossroads 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). p. 168.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Certainly, critics like Saldívar and others mention the fact that Ruiz de Burton's fiction invoked classic motifs such as the "railroad kings" and "hydra-headed monster" of monopoly capitalism; however, conspiracy is generally treated as peripheral within the project of forging stories of Mexican-American peoplehood.
- ^{iv} Ruiz de Burton and Acker, *The Squatter and the Don*. p. 374.
- ^v "A Sketch of Mrs. Burton," *Los Angeles Times*, March 8 1888. p. 2.
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- ^{xxiv} Qtd. in Lewis, *The Big Four: The Story of Huntington, Stanford, Hopkins, and Crocker, and of the Building of the Central Pacific*. Pp. 316-17.
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- ^{xxix} Ibid. p. 280.

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- ^{xxx} Ibid. p. 144.
- ^{xxxi} Ibid. p. 143.
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- ^{xxxix} Ibid. p. 190.
- ^{xl} Ibid. Pp. 178, 183.
- ^{xli} Ibid. Pp. 296-97.
- ^{xlii} Ibid. Pp. 299, 344.
- ^{xliii} Ibid. p. 364.
- ^{xliv} Cited in Ostler, "The Rhetoric of Conspiracy and the Formation of Kansas Populism." p. 18. See also Donnelly, *The American People's Money*. Emery, *Seven Financial Conspiracies Which Have Enslaved the American People*.

Epilogue

- ⁱ Leja, *Looking Askance: Skepticism and American Art from Eakins to Duchamp*.
- ⁱⁱ Davis, *The Fear of Conspiracy; Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present*. Pp. 205-10.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Barry Ahearn, "Ezra Pound and Otto Kahn," *Journal of Modern Literature* 32, no. 2 (2009).
- ^{iv} On the commodification of conspiracy theory in the 2000s see Clare Birchall and ebrary Inc., "Knowledge Goes Pop from Conspiracy Theory to Gossip." (Oxford ; New York: Berg, 2006), <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/umich/Doc?id=10233382>
<http://libproxy.umflint.edu:2048/login?url=http://site.ebrary.com/lib/umich/Doc?id=10233382>.
- ^v Hal Grant, "Episode 4.13," in *Real Time with Bill Maher* (United States: HBO, 2006).
- ^{vi} Jonathan Kay, *Among the Truthers: A Journey through America's Growing Conspiracist Underworld*, 1st ed. (New York: Harper, 2011).

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