

Bitter Tastes: Recognizing American Women's Naturalism

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RÉSUMÉ

À la fin du XIX^e siècle, sous l'influence des théories darwiniennes et du naturalisme zolien, des auteurs américains publient des textes de fiction visant à expliquer le comportement de l'homme en fonction de l'hérédité et de l'environnement, des besoins physiques, ou de pulsions inconscientes.

Émergent au XX^e siècle deux groupes d'écrivains: les écrivains masculins blancs dits naturalistes (Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, Stephen Crane, Jack London) et les écrivains "régionalistes" (Edith Wharton, Kate Chopin, Willa Cather, Ellen Glasgow), c'est-à-dire des femmes.

Le positionnement de femmes écrivains de ces époques au centre plutôt qu'à la périphérie de la littérature permet d'élargir l'idée du naturalisme et d'inclure, au côté des classiques, des versions "déviantes" jusqu'alors exclues du canon. Tandis que sont réévalués d'autres auteurs – ainsi des femmes écrivains de couleur moins connues (Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Angelina Weld Grimké, Ann Petry) – et d'autres modes de production culturelle (écrits journalistiques, films), une thématique plus large incluant l'imagerie du déchet et du corps de la femme devient constitutive du genre. Envisagé dans le contexte du film *Where are my children?*, le roman *Summer* d'Edith Wharton, qui allie les questions du nationalisme et du corps féminin au déterminisme classique du naturalisme, permet d'offrir une vision plus large du mouvement.

At the end of the nineteenth century *The Atlantic* published a piece of fiction that in its outlines seems familiar. It is the tale of an elderly Native American man abandoned by his tribe in harsh conditions. He has not been forgotten but is being deliberately left behind because he cannot keep up, a necessary adjustment given the tribe's nomadic way of life. As he listens to the tribe preparing to move to better camping grounds, he reflects that his abandonment was the law of his clan, and he recalls seeing the same process played out with other old men when he was young. Now it is his turn, and he accepts the coming of his death philosophically.

Readers guessing that this is Jack London's "The Law of Life" would be nearly right. In London's classic story, published in *McClure's Magazine* in 1901, Old Koskoosh waits for death after being left behind. As his fire dwindles, he waves a burning brand at a nearby wolf before recognizing the futility of the gesture. It is the law of nature, the law of life, and between the slow death of the approaching cold and the swift death at the hands of the wolf pack, he has no choices left. In fact, the story described was published five years before Jack London's "The Law of Life," appearing in the prestigious *Atlantic Monthly* in 1896. It is (Annie) Batterman Lindsay's "Abandoned: A Tale of the Plains," and it is as stark in its naturalism as London's story. But Lindsay's story has a difference: the old man has a disabled wife, who, being blind and unable to survive after his death, commits suicide after she has sung the proper death songs for him. No one survives to sing the songs for her, for she is doubly discarded, a remnant of the

man who is himself the remnant of the tribe. Without downplaying London's artistry and his well-deserved reputation as a naturalist writer, it is time that we looked at the woman, or women, left behind, as in Lindsay's story, and, in life, like Lindsay herself.

Like Jack London, Annie Batterman Lindsay was a popular writer from the late nineteenth century to the early years of the twentieth. Like London, she wrote of the West and the Northwest, focusing on its mining camps, its wilderness, and its dangers. Her best stories are those that chronicle the lives of Pacific Northwest and California tribes, stories that show a special fascination, as in "Abandoned: A Tale of the Plains," with the seemingly cruel but eminently practical customs that order rituals of birth, marriage, and death. Also like London, Batterman Lindsay was a prolific writer, with syndicated work appearing in many of the same periodicals as his: *The Atlantic*, *The Black Cat*, and *The Overland Monthly*, where one of her stories appeared in the same number as his "To the Man On Trail" in 1899. She was on the editorial staff of *The Land of Sunshine*, later *Out West* magazine, which published London's stories and praised his work in reviews, and she, too, was a progressive thinker. Yet in contrast to London's forty-one books, Batterman Lindsay published one slim collection of her Native American stories, *Derelicts of Destiny* (1899), and she is unknown today. She is the woman writer whose naturalistic stories have gone unacknowledged: the Jack London who never became a celebrated author.

Like her better-known contemporaries Edith Wharton, Ellen Glasgow, Kate Chopin, and Willa Cather, Lindsay was part of a new generation of American writers born in the 1860s and 1870s that questioned Victorian orthodoxies and challenged the genteel realism of the day. Armed with the biological theories of Herbert Spencer, Charles Darwin, and Ernst Haeckel, these writers sought to expose the biological underpinnings of social behavior. In the critical assessments of twentieth-century literary history, however, the writers of this generation were divided into two groups. Writers in the first group, consisting primarily of Crane, Dreiser, Norris, and London, were called "naturalists." It is their work that set the limits of what we know as American naturalism: the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century period in which it was written; its practitioners, who were by and large white, male, and young; its settings, typically urban jungles or an unforgiving wilderness; its characters, often poor and ill-educated, victims of primal forces that they could neither control nor understand; and its deterministic philosophy of heredity and environment. What drives classic naturalism's characters is desire in all its forms: for food, shelter, sex, and addictive substances, and, more abstractly, for objects, revenge, power, and dominance. What drives its plots are the ways in which these desires are thwarted by internal and external forces. The inevitable consequences of this pursuit are the classic naturalistic plotlines of struggle, violence, addiction, and degeneration, all played out in a landscape of extremes: of climate, of environment, of poverty, and of violence. The characters' struggles with these forces comprise the narrative trajectories of naturalism.

Writers in the second group, among them Edith Wharton, Kate Chopin, Willa Cather, and Ellen Glasgow, were called, variously, regionalists, novelists of manners, or local colorists, different names that all signified the same thing: "women writers." Taking its title from Edith Wharton's comment that Americans preferred the "ice-cream soda" of popular fiction to the "bitter taste" of writing that told the truth, this essay questions this division and outlines the ways in which late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American women writers wrote naturalistic fiction.¹ As Lisa Long has asked, would works like Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Sport of the*

¹ Edith Wharton, "The Great American Novel," *Yale Review* 16 (1927): 648.

Gods (1902) remain outside the “purview of traditional (read: white) literary genealogies” if African American literature were considered integral to naturalism?² By focusing on women’s naturalism in the interdisciplinary contexts of journalism and of early film, which, like naturalism, claimed the ability to represent elemental social truths through a documentary method, a more expansive and inclusive version of naturalism emerges.

Like their male counterparts, women wrote naturalistic works that included all the classic themes – determinism, Darwinism, and death, to put it succinctly – but they adapted their treatments both in subtle and in major ways. Women writers of naturalism challenge naturalism’s celebration of physical and evolutionary strength by including disabled characters. They critique its fascination with sexual violence by staging tableaux of women victimized by that violence. Moreover, they complicate naturalism’s interest in an economy of consumption by focusing on an economy of waste. The catalogues of waste that pervade many classic naturalistic works – the filthy space under the sink that Norris’s Vandover must clean in *Vandover and the Brute* (1914) and Crane’s leering “fat man” in *Maggie, a Girl of the Streets* (1893) – support Georges Bataille’s point that “one best understands a society through its waste, its by-products, its unproductive accessories.”³

Women writers add to this list the waste products of desire: abandoned or abducted children, abused wives and mistresses, and women disabled by addiction, disease, or age. They emphasize women’s bodies traded as commodities, as in the white slave narrative, and discarded as waste in a commercial culture that has no further use for them. They depict women laboring in the fields and women laboring in childbirth, as in Edith Summers Kelley and Evelyn Scott; women disfigured or discarded by commercial culture, as in Ann Petry and Edith Wharton; and elderly women living on the edge of poverty and starvation, as in Mary Wilkins Freeman. Taking naturalism beyond male writers’ interest in women’s sexuality, women writers also describe characters who are grotesque and unappealing, quite unlike Dreiser’s attractive young Carrie Meeber or Jennie Gerhardt. They capitalize on the uneasy tension between naturalism’s professed objectivity and its heavy reliance on the affective dimensions of sentimentalism, the gothic, and melodrama.

Placing women’s naturalism at the center rather than the periphery of American literary naturalism reveals a divergence between two types of naturalism that could open up the canon: classic naturalism, which follows the rules, and an expanded or unruly naturalism. “Unruly” naturalism transgresses the rules by its unevenness or excess. It includes novels not regarded as classically naturalistic because they have too much social protest, like Paul Laurence Dunbar’s *The Sport of the Gods*; or too much mysticism or sentiment, like Fannie Hurst’s *Lummo*; or characters too elevated in social class, like Frank Norris’s *The Pit*; or too many themes or storylines, like Wharton’s *The Fruit of the Tree*, Chopin’s *At Fault*, or Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*. As is evident from these examples, pairing novels of classic naturalism like *The House of Mirth*, *McTeague*, or *The Awakening* with their “unruly” counterparts – *The Fruit of the Tree*, *The Pit*, or *At Fault* – reveals new facets to naturalism unavailable to those judging them against a checklist of classically naturalistic categories. Treated as a logical extension of the spirit of

² Lisa A. Long, “Genre Matters: Embodying American Literary Naturalism,” *American Literary History* (2007): 171. See Elizabeth Ammons’s call for an expanded definition of realism in *Conflicting Stories: American Women Writers at the Turn into the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). Kenneth Warren argues for the importance of considering race in realism in *Black and White Strangers: Race and American Literary Realism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

³ Peter Brooks paraphrases Bataille using this phrase in *Realist Vision* (New Haven, USA: Yale University Press, 2005) 123.

excess inherent in naturalism, “unruly” naturalism brings with it with a restless energy that pushes the boundaries of naturalism past conventional limits.

To test these ideas, even in a preliminary way, we need to ask three questions. First, what was the perspective on naturalism of the four American women authors most closely identified with movement? Second, does the expanded context provided by the “classic” and “unruly” model allow more twentieth-century women writers to be considered as naturalists? Finally, given the prevalence of women writers in early cinema, how does the interdisciplinary context of film affect the way we read naturalism?

The American women writers most frequently called naturalists are Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, Ellen Glasgow, and Willa Cather. Writing within and against the context of Zola's work, all four published fiction in the 1890s that was influenced by evolutionary theory, employed a scientific perspective, and transgressed the conventional boundaries of literary subjects to show the expression, or repression, of sexuality as a driving force in women's lives. In addition, all four wrote both in the classic naturalist mode and also in the “unruly” mode. But they were not necessarily eager to be identified as naturalist authors. During the “Realism War” of the 1880s and 1890s, when even as genteel a realist as William Dean Howells was attacked for *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) as an “Epidermist, one who investigates only the surface, the cuticle of life – usually with a preference for very dirty skin”⁴ –, being called a naturalist was not necessarily a compliment, especially for women writers. As Nancy Glazener observes, even in reviews “naturalism barely surfaced in influential journals except with reference to Zola.”⁵ Women were sometimes compared with their male counterparts, as Ellen Glasgow was with Harold Frederic or Edith Wharton with Henry James and David Graham Phillips, but with no naturalistic “school,” no praise attached to the appellation, and frequent condemnation of Zola in the high-culture magazines, identifying with French naturalism had no great advantages for women writers.

Kate Chopin credited her reading in Darwin, Spencer, and Huxley, her “daily companions” in “the study of the human species,” as central to her work, although she “quarreled” with Darwin's theory of female passivity in the matter of sexual selection.⁶ In the stories of Guy de Maupassant, which she translated for publication, she found “life, not fiction,”⁷ and she studied his techniques closely. Yet although Chopin kept a notebook and took notes until she felt as though she were “wearing Zola's coat,” Zola's methodically detailed naturalism was antithetical to her own.⁸ In fact, she attacked Zola's *Lourdes* because the reader can never “lose sight of the author and his note-book,” and she criticized Zola's clumsy editorializing through characters whose words express “what the author himself thinks of those things.”⁹ Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) has long been considered classically naturalistic, but her first novel, *At Fault* (1891), illustrates the characteristics of an unruly naturalism: a socially conscious, if inconsistent, portrayal of race; industrial displacement of populations; and a female alcoholic who is neither degraded or monstrous, as she would be in a Dickens novel.

⁴ William Roscoe Thayer, “The New Story-Tellers and the Doom of Realism,” *The Forum* 18 (December 1894): 477.

⁵ Nancy Glazener, *Reading for Realism: The History of a U.S. Literary Institution, 1850-1910* (Durham, USA: Duke University Press, 1997) 6.

⁶ Quoted in Emily Toth, *Unveiling Kate Chopin* (Jackson, USA: University Press of Mississippi, 1999) 89.

⁷ Kate Chopin, “Confidences,” in Per Seyersted, ed., *Complete Works of Kate Chopin* (Baton Rouge, USA: Louisiana State University Press, 2007) 700.

⁸ Kate Chopin, “In the Confidence of a Story Writer,” in Per Seyersted 704.

⁹ Kate Chopin, “Émile Zola's ‘Lourdes’,” in Per Seyersted 697-98.

While Edith Wharton incorporated naturalism's evolutionary principles into her work, she disdained its formulaic applications. She had, of course, read Zola and devoured not only volumes of Darwin and Spencer but of T. H. Huxley, Ernest Haeckel, Robert Lock, William Lecky, and Hippolyte Taine, whom she called "one of the formative influences of my youth – the greatest after Darwin, Spencer & Lecky."¹⁰ She incorporated Darwin's theories of sexual selection and adapted his concepts of survival, competition, inheritance, evolutionary development, and extinction to the system of social mores in her novels.¹¹

Yet Wharton did not hesitate to criticize what she saw as the limitations of naturalistic subject matter. In a late essay, "Tendencies in Modern Fiction," she notes that the "feebler [realists] beat their brains out against the blank wall of 'Naturalism'," drawing "helpless puppets on a sluggish stream of fatality." Her solution is to apply what she sees as the true foundation of literary art, the selection and transformation of the raw materials: "Transmutation is the first principle of art, and copying can never be a substitute for creative vision."¹² With their themes of psychological and environmental entrapment, Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905), *Ethan Frome* (1911), and *The Age of Innocence* (1920) exemplify the features of classic naturalism, but *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907) and *The Mother's Recompense* (1925) are unruly: in *The Fruit of the Tree*, a dizzying array of social issues including divorce, professions for women, drug addiction, labor troubles, blackmail, and euthanasia lead to what Henry James thought of (but did not call) its thematic overload; and in *The Mother's Recompense*, an incestuous situation is avoided only when the mother, whose lover the daughter wishes to marry, is cast off by her society as surely as London's or Lindsay's elders of the tribe.

In *The Woman Within* (1954), Ellen Glasgow recalled that she "could have passed successfully an examination on every page" of *The Origin of Species*.¹³ This distressed her pious family, including a sister who quietly offered her a gold piece to "exchange Lecky's *History of Rationalism in Europe* for some 'nicer book like *The Lives of the Poets*'" (93). Glasgow's two earliest novels, *The Descendant* (1897) and *Phases of an Inferior Planet* (1898), are classically naturalistic. *The Descendant*, for example, follows Darwin in its section titles and in its ruthless protagonist Michael Akershem, who declares: "Circumstances are mighty and man is weak. The wheel of the potter grinds on and the clay is moulded into symmetry or distorted by mishap. If it is misshapen by the mishap and regains not its rounded form, is it the fault of the potter or of the clay?" – a philosophy later echoed in Theodore Dreiser's play *The Hand of the Potter*.¹⁴

¹⁰ Edith Wharton, "To Sara Norton," 16 March 1908, in R. W. B. Lewis and Nancy Lewis, eds., *The Letters of Edith Wharton* (New York and Toronto: Collier Books, 1989) 136.

¹¹ On Wharton and sexual selection, see Bert Bender, *The Descent of Love: Darwin and the Theory of Sexual Selection in American Fiction, 1871-1926* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996); Linda Kornasky, "On 'Listen[ing] to Spectres Too': Wharton's *Bunner Sisters* and Ideologies of Sexual Selection," *American Literary Realism* 30.1 (1997): 47-58; and Tricia M. Farwell, *Love and Death in Edith Wharton's Fiction* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006). On Wharton and evolution see Jennie A. Kassanoff, *Edith Wharton and the Politics of Race* (Cambridge, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Judith P. Saunders, *Reading Edith Wharton through a Darwinian Lens: Evolutionary Biological Issues in Her Fiction* (Jefferson, USA: McFarland & Co., 2009); Paul Joseph Ohler, *Edith Wharton's Evolutionary Conception: Darwinian Allegory in Her Major Novels* (New York: Routledge, 2006); and Laura Saltz, "'The Vision-Building Faculty': Naturalistic Vision in *The House of Mirth*," *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 57.1 (2011): 17-46.

¹² Edith Wharton, "Tendencies in Modern Fiction," in Frederick Wegener, ed., *Edith Wharton: The Uncollected Critical Writings* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) 171-72.

¹³ Ellen Glasgow, *The Woman Within* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980) 88.

¹⁴ Ellen Glasgow, *The Descendant* (New York: Harper, 1897) 50.

As a journalist for the *Lincoln Courier*, and the *Nebraska State Journal*, Willa Cather believed that Zola would not “last,” although she “thought well of Norris’s *McTeague* and *Blix*,”¹⁵ described herself as “Maupassant-mad,” and admired Stephen Crane to the point of hero worship.¹⁶ The lyrical surface of Cather’s prose in novels such as *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *My Antonia* (1918) obscures the naturalistic vision at the heart of some of her novels. For example, stripping away the elegiac tone of *A Lost Lady* (1923) reveals a fully naturalistic story of a woman’s decline and fear of aging as she loses one lover, begins to drink excessively, and then sells herself to another lover who supports her financially, all with a dark undercurrent of “festering” sexuality beneath the surface of her charm. With its imagery of surfaces and depths, its incidental cruelties, and its exploration of female sexuality and male disillusionment, *A Lost Lady* is an unruly naturalistic novel concluded by a deliberately unconvincing happy ending.

Twentieth-Century Women’s Naturalism: “Classic” and “Unruly”

In the 1910s and 1920s, a host of unruly novels by women adopted naturalistic themes without being wholly naturalistic. For example, Mary Austin’s *A Woman of Genius* (1912) explores Darwinian evolution, desire, and female sexual selection yet lacks the plot of decline or stasis common to naturalism; the same holds true of Mary Wilkins Freeman’s stories of New England obsessions. The African American novelist Pauline Hopkins’s *Of One Blood* (1903) features naturalistic themes of racial inheritance and Darwinian theories of courtship until its protagonist departs for a mythical African kingdom.

A broader scope for naturalism that includes journalism and drama opens the field to women’s semi fictional narratives of other types, an important feature when reading works of the Progressive Era. Although women wrote fewer novels featuring prostitutes than did their male counterparts, the missing context for Norris’s, Crane’s, and Dreiser’s stories of fallen women lies in the journalistic stories that culminated in the Progressive Era’s “white slave” scare. “White slavery” was the term used for “the traffic in young girls,” when young women were lured from the countryside and forced into prostitution in the cities. Mobilizing the public to a near-hysteria through a combination of investigative reports by crusading social reformers and superheated rhetoric, the epidemic of white slavery journalism led to white slavery novels and films by women, such as Elizabeth Robins’s *My Little Sister* (1913) and prostitution memoirs by successful madams such as “Madeleine.” Socially progressive plays, such as Rachel Crothers’s *Ourselves* (1913), and films like Mrs. Wallace Reid’s *The Red Kimona* [sic] (1925) challenged the hypocrisy of a culture that preached purity and uplift but provided no means of rehabilitation for women driven into prostitution.

The white slavery panic largely ended before World War I, but after the war, a wave of rural novels and films in the 1920s spurred derisive reviews from modernists such as Dorothy Parker and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald ranted to his editor Maxwell Perkins about “Christy, the Hired Man,” his name for the rural novels that were crowding out his own fiction by celebrating “the Great Beautiful Life of the Manure Widder.”¹⁷ Fitzgerald and Parker had a point. In 1925, the year when *The Great Gatsby* was published to modest sales, Edna Ferber won

¹⁵ Mary Lawlor, *Recalling the Wild: Naturalism and the Closing of the American West* (New Brunswick, USA: Rutgers University Press, 2000) 169.

¹⁶ Willa Cather, “When I Knew Stephen Crane,” in Sharon O’Brien, ed., *Willa Cather: Stories, Poems, and Other Writings* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984) 933.

¹⁷ F. Scott Fitzgerald, “To Maxwell Perkins,” c. 1 June 1925, in Matthew J. Bruccoli, ed., *F. Scott Fitzgerald: A Life in Letters* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994) 119.

the Pulitzer Prize for fiction with *So Big* (1924). *So Big* is a farm novel of the type that Parker and Fitzgerald had ridiculed, featuring a “big-hipped, level-eyed woman,”¹⁸ in Parker’s words – a “Manure Widder,” in Fitzgerald’s – who triumphantly puts the farm on a paying basis.

But women’s naturalistic rural novels emphasized the brutality, not the beauty, of life on the farm, including cruelty toward animals and women as work beasts. The heroines of Ruth Suckow’s *Country People* (1924) and Emanuel and Mercet Haldeman-Julius’s *Dust* (1921) are virtual slaves to the farm and to their husbands; Edith Summers Kelley’s *Weeds* (1923) chronicles the crushing of an artistic sensibility under endless work and childbearing; and Cornelia James Cannon’s *Red Rust* (1928) and Ellen Glasgow’s *Barren Ground* (1925) pit efficiency in the breeding of crops against emotional happiness. Dorothy Scarborough’s *The Wind*, published anonymously in 1925 and filmed three years later, features a heroine driven mad by the Texas wind. In all, the naturalistic novels of the 1920s were far from the triumph of the “manure widder.”

African American women writers of the Harlem Renaissance such as Nella Larsen, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and Angelina Weld Grimké published naturalistic fiction and drama. For example, the first nineteen chapters of Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928) are a novel of manners centered on race and restlessness, but the last five chapters, which find her heroine Helga Crane living in squalor and exhausted with perpetual childbearing, are naturalistic even in their devolutionary imagery. By the end, Helga has become a servant to her husband and children. Alice Dunbar-Nelson’s “Tony’s Wife,” a tale of domestic violence, and the slum stories designated as “The Annals of ‘Steenth Street’” are naturalistic, and the cumulative effects of racism end in violence in Angelina Weld Grimké’s birth-control drama *Rachel* (1920) and “The Closing Door.” Set in Harlem, and influenced by the novels of Theodore Dreiser and Richard Wright, Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946) featured Lutie Johnson as a heroine trapped by her environment and by the pervasive economic forces and sexual violence that she cannot escape.

Nor does modernist style preclude naturalistic subject matter. In writing of servant women who become the waste of the families they serve, Gertrude Stein’s “The Gentle Lena” (1909), Evelyn Scott’s *The Narrow House* (1921), and Fannie Hurst’s *Lummo* depict the cruelty of domestic drudgery and self-abnegation, although Ellen Chesser of Elizabeth Madox Roberts’s *The Time of Man* (1926) finds some level of satisfaction in rural rituals. In the 1930s, proletarian or working-class fiction like Meridel Le Sueur’s *The Girl* (1939) and rural novels such as Josephine Johnson’s *Now in November* (1934) continued the tradition of women’s naturalism.

The Context of Early Film: Edith Wharton’s *Summer* and Lois Weber’s *Where Are My Children?*

Women writers in the early twentieth century were a significant presence in the motion picture industry, working as scenario writers, directors, and producers, with some, including Nell Shipman, Lois Weber, and Alice Guy-Blaché, heading their own production companies. Indeed, film historian Cari Beauchamp estimates that women wrote half of all the films produced up through 1925,¹⁹ and Hilary Hallett states that by the early 1920s, women made up 75% of motion

¹⁸ Dorothy Parker, “Re-Enter Miss Hurst, Followed by Mr. Tarkington,” *The New Yorker* 28 January 1928, rpt. in Brendan Gill, ed., *The Portable Dorothy Parker* (New York: Viking, 1973) 486.

¹⁹ Cari Beauchamp, ed. and introd., *Adventures of a Hollywood Secretary: Her Private Letters from Inside the Studios of the 1920s* by Valeria Belletti (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006) 205.

picture audiences.²⁰ In this particular era of visual culture, women writers of naturalism addressed the same sorts of social problem issues as women in the film industry, including poverty, birth control and abortion, and prostitution.

In addition, the conventions of early film and naturalism arose nearly in tandem. Early naturalistic sketches and film repeatedly portray the viewer's bearing witness to acts of violence, spectacles of death and disability, and scenes of individuals treated as the discarded elements or waste of a culture. Like their naturalistic counterparts, photographers and filmmakers staged portraits of human beings, including children, as nearly indistinguishable from their cluttered backgrounds, often with trash or waste containers prominently in the picture. For example, babies are portrayed as isolated, sometimes posed near trash as if they have been discarded as excess by parents too hard-pressed to keep them, something Jack London's picture "A Descendant of the Sea Kings" from *The People of the Abyss* makes clear by capturing the child's woe-begone expression.

Zola argued in *Le Roman expérimental* that a "transparent screen" constitutes the "naturalist's view of the world",²¹ and the screen or window is by analogy another form of camera lens, subject to the same distortions of emphasis, perspective, and depth of field. In film and in text, naturalism literalizes Zola's "transparent screen" through its use of apertures – doors and windows that signify the visual frame –, its disruption of the conceptual frame by those who return the gaze, and its scenes of moviegoing. Edith Wharton's *Summer* (1917) and Lois Weber's 1916 drama about birth control *Where Are My Children?* employ these conventions – women and children as waste, the breaking of the conceptual frame to challenge the audience, and, in Wharton's novel, a scene of moviegoing that orients the reader to the context in which her heroine's actions must be read.

In Edith Wharton's *Summer*, her heroine, Charity Royall, attends the movies with her lover, Lucius Harney. When Harney reluctantly agrees to accompany Charity to the movies, the two enter a "glittering place" with a "velvet-curtained auditorium packed with spectators."²² This space in itself signifies modernity, for the concept of the "moving picture palace" was less than a decade old at that point; previously, motion pictures had been shown in empty stores or other buildings after hours. Indeed, prior to this excursion, Charity has seen only the pictures shown "in an austere Y.M.C.A. hall, with white walls and an organ." It is fitting, then, that Charity, who has scarcely been beyond the small village of North Dormer, is at the movies exposed to the imaginings of empire: "All the world has to show seemed to pass before her in a chaos of palms and minarets, charging cavalry regiments, roaring lions, comic policemen and scowling murderers."²³

The true significance of the scene, however, lies in the description of the almost hypnotic effect that the film has on Charity and "the crowd around her, the hundreds of hot sallow candy-munching faces, young, old, middle-aged, but all kindled with the same contagious excitement" who "became part of the spectacle, and danced on the screen with the rest."²⁴ In the Progressive Era, when the medium of film and the dynamics of film spectatorship were as much

²⁰ Hilary A. Hallett, *Go West, Young Women!: The Rise of Early Hollywood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013) 15.

²¹ Brooks 183.

²² Edith Wharton, *Summer*, in Cynthia Griffin Wolff, ed., *Edith Wharton: Novellas and Other Writings* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1990) 228.

²³ Wharton, *Summer* 228.

²⁴ Wharton, *Summer* 229.

the subject of discussion as the films themselves, Wharton was not alone in commenting on the ability of a film, however ludicrous in plot, to merge the audience momentarily into a single whole. In its early years film was seen as a medium for national assimilation, a form that could unite disparate, polyglot, and often illiterate immigrant populations and educate them in American values. For example, in her essay “Some Picture Show Audiences” for *The Outlook* in 1911, Mary Heaton Vorse noted that “[t]he American-born sat next to the emigrant who had arrived but a week before” and “for the moment they were permitted to drink deep of oblivion of all the trouble in the world.”²⁵

In addition to its evocations of nationalism and empire, Americanization and modernity, moviegoing in *Summer* may have suggested to the novel’s first readers an allusion to contemporary birth-control dramas. As Kevin Brownlow explains in *Behind the Mask of Innocence*, the Progressive Era was an extraordinarily rich period for social problem dramas, including plays about birth control such as *The Miracle of Life* (1915), *The Question* (February 1916), and Lois Weber’s *Where Are My Children?* (1916), the only one that still survives. *Where Are My Children?* endorses birth control but condemns abortion, both of which were illegal at the time of its release, and it also promotes eugenics. Its writer and director, Lois Weber was noted for her socially conscious films: *Hypocrites* (1915), in which a fully nude woman embodies the spirit of truth and confronts social hypocrisies; *Shoes* (1916), in which the naturalistic “girl goes wrong” plot occurs because she cannot afford a pair of shoes; and *The Blot* (1921), another tale of poverty in which an ill-paid college professor and his family nearly starve.

Where Are My Children? is the story of crusading District Attorney Richard Walton, whose home life would be happy, the audience is informed through an intertitle, if only he and his wife had children. Played by Tyrone Power, Senior, Walton conveys his longing for children by his wistful looks at the children of the family next door in their well-to-do Los Angeles suburb. The film also emphasizes Walton’s admiration for his sister’s “eugenically born” healthy baby, with cross-cutting between lingering shots of the baby and Walton’s heavy sighs that he has no child of his own. Its eugenics and birth-control message resounds forcefully when Walton must prosecute Dr. Homer, a crusader accused of prescribing birth control to the poor. In scenes that evoke Margaret Sanger’s stories of poor women desperate not to become pregnant again and as in photographs by London and Jacob Riis, Weber inserted vignettes of poverty-stricken homes overburdened with children. The visual space of the room establishes the child’s position as beloved in individual terms but waste in society’s eyes, part of the clutter of poverty that characterizes naturalism.

Walton does not know the reasons for his own family’s childlessness, however: that his wife has had repeated abortions so that her social life will not be disturbed. When Mrs. Walton, arriving early for a bridge party, sees that her hostess is distressed, she asks about the problem; learning that pregnancy is the issue, she accompanies her friend on a trip to her abortionist Dr. Malfit. Weber conveys what has happened through an imaginative device used throughout, a special effect of winged children, shown in gauzy soft focus, being wafted back up from earth to the heavenly gates.

²⁵ Mary Heaton Vorse, “Some Picture Show Audiences,” *The Outlook* 24 June 1911: 441-47, rpt. in Antonia Lant and Ingrid Periz, eds., *Red Velvet Seat: Women’s Writing on the First Fifty Years of Cinema* (London and New York: Verso, 2006) 71- 72.

In the film's naturalistic subplot, the housekeeper's daughter, Lillian, is not as fortunate as Mrs. Walton's fashionable friends: seduced by Mrs. Walton's brother in a plot that recalls the upper-class man/lower-class woman plot of *Summer*, she despairs of her pregnancy and is taken by Mrs. Walton for an abortion. Unfortunately, as a title card informs us, this time Dr. Malfit bungles the operation and Lillian dies. Knowing he will be prosecuted, Dr. Malfit blackmails Mrs. Walton into trying to make Mr. Walton drop the case, but to no avail. After his conviction, Malfit dashes from the witness box toward Walton, asking Walton, "Are you sure your own house is in order?" Upon looking in Dr. Malfit's account books, Walton discovers multiple payments from his wife and her society friends for services rendered. Crushed, he returns home, throws the society women out of his house, and asks his wife accusingly, "Where are my children?" Mrs. Walton's stricken glance at the camera breaks the conceptual frame and challenges the audience to recognize her guilt, a melodramatic but effective visual technique. In a scene at the end, a double-exposed shot shows the Waltons sitting alone by their empty fireplace as their imagined children frolic around them; in another such shot, they are then seen as an old couple who imagine the handsome grown children they would have had but for Mrs. Walton's actions.

Where Are My Children? was an extraordinarily successful film for its time. Despite efforts by the Board of Review to ban the film and complaints by critics over its confusing message (was it a pro-birth-control film or an anti-abortion film?), it was shown across the country, even in Boston, where two thousand patrons were turned away on its opening night there in July 1916.²⁶ As writer Henry MacMahon reported in 1920, it was said to have "earned one million dollars" a huge sum for the time.²⁷ But the film was threatening for more than its controversial subject matter. The prominent British birth-control advocate Marie Stopes publicly protested the film on the grounds that it was *too* educational, and in the wrong way, for she heard a woman in the audience saying "I did not know before that if you were in trouble you could get out of it in this way," thus missing the moral point opposing abortion and learning instead the practical one that it solves problems.²⁸

Where Are My Children? and its promotion of eugenics suggests the interest of writers like London and Norris in Anglo-Saxon racial stock and also Theodore Roosevelt's concerns over race suicide, the failure of white women to have enough children. According to Roosevelt, "When men fear work or fear righteous war, when women fear motherhood, they tremble on the brink of doom."²⁹ Bearing children, according to Roosevelt, was the woman's equivalent of risking her life in battle, and refusing to do so was un-American. Anxiety over race suicide was the rhetorical flip side of the panic over white slavery, with both centered on xenophobia and the contested ownership of white women's bodies. The national narrative insisted that if "foreigners" were not seducing pure American girls and luring them into prostitution in the big city, they were busily intent on corrupting city women by subverting the natural processes of childbearing. By insisting that their bodies belonged to themselves and not to the state for the purposes of childrearing, the society women in Weber's film are as unpatriotic as they are selfish.

²⁶ Shelley Stamp, *Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture after the Nickelodeon* (Princeton, USA: Princeton University Press, 2000) 283.

²⁷ Lant and Periz 549.

²⁸ Lant and Periz 320.

²⁹ Theodore Roosevelt, "The Strenuous Life," in *The Strenuous Life: Essays and Speeches* (New York: The Century Co., 1903) 4.

In their lack of patriotism, society women are in league with doctors like Dr. Malfit, whose name suggests his evil intentions in helping the women to practice race suicide. The visual rhetoric of his appearance codes Dr. Malfit as foreign, probably French, by virtue of his name, his well-dressed, hence clearly un-American, appearance, his pointed, Satanic beard, and his wild gesticulations on the witness stand. If Charity had seen *Where Are My Children?* or another film purporting to educate young girls, she would have understood that her visit to an abortionist, Dr. Merkle, to confirm her pregnancy, was a mistake, since foreign doctors, the movies warn, are prone to blackmail. Both the film and Wharton's book suggest that ethnic Others are in the business of preventing eugenically desirable – or, in the Progressive Era context, white, Anglo, and American – babies from being born. By refusing to submit to a foreign abortionist, Charity not only fulfills her love for Lucius Harney but in Rooseveltian terms performs a patriotic act, a message that Lois Weber, in *Where Are My Children?* inserts into a film naturalistic in content and didactic in intent – unruly naturalism.

Conclusion

In considering American women as writers of naturalism, it becomes clear that they are addressing many of the same issues as their male contemporaries. The larger issue is that in thinking about women writers as naturalists, it is essential to adopt a flexible model that recognizes what they may be doing differently, writing “unruly” as well as “classic naturalism.” The question, then, is not whether American women writers were writing naturalism. It is, rather, whether, as in the case of Batterman Lindsay, we are able to recognize when they are doing so. By adopting a flexible approach to reading them, we have the opportunity to expand the canon of naturalism in ways that encourage not only reading new writers but also new ways of thinking about established ones.