ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dana Luciano, my advisor, for her unwavering belief in this project and her careful reading of drafts; Patrick O’Malley, who served on my exam committee; Lori Merish, whose graduate course sparked my initial interest in this topic; and my family whose support means the world to me.
# Table of Contents

Introduction: The Rattle of Pebbles ................................................................. 1

Chapter 1: Compulsion and Naturalism: Returning (to) the Male Body .................. 25

Chapter 2: Violent Form: _Vandover and the Brute_ and _The Sea-Wolf_.................. 64

Coda: Becoming Men.......................................................................................... 99

Bibliography ....................................................................................................... 109
Introduction: The Rattle of Pebbles

I.

Following Henry Johnson’s defacement during a fire at the Trescott family’s house in Stephen Crane’s short story, “The Monster” (1899), Dr. Ned Trescott escorts his “companion,” the once-dandified black stableman, Johnson, to the home of a black family that lives on the edge of town and has agreed to board Johnson for pay (33). Anticipating his departure from Johnson, Dr. Trescott promises to visit him, to which Johnson (“The figure”) responds incoherently:

Trescott hesitated for a moment, and then went on insistently, “I am taking you to Alek Williams, Henry, and I—’
   The figure chuckled again. “No, ’deed! No she! Alek Williams don’ know a hoss! ’Deed he don’t. He don’ know a hoss from a pig.”
   The laugh that followed was like the rattle of pebbles.
   Trescott turned and looked sternly and coldly at the dim form in the gloom from the buggy-top. “Henry,” he said, “I didn’t say anything about horses. I was saying—”
   “Hoss? Hoss?” said the quavering voice from these near shadows. “Hoss? ’Deed I don’t know all erbout a hoss! ’Deed I don’t.” There was a satirical chuckle. (Crane 33-34)

Despite the fact that Trescott is one of the few citizens in Whilomville unafraid of Johnson’s “monstrosity” (most characters respond hysterically to his “monstrous” body or lack-of-face after the accident), this exchange between Trescott and Johnson represents an important moment of narrative disconnect for the two men. Johnson’s nonsensical laughter (and response) coincides with his narrative transformation from a black dandy to a sub-human “monster” or, more simply, from a person to a “thing.” In
this scene, the narrative—like Dr. Trescott—cannot make sense of Johnson’s nonsensical words; his explosive interruptions, in fact, prevent the narrative from moving forward and eventually closing.

This moment reveals a flash of Johnson’s traumatic counter-narrative or what Ulrich Baer describes as a “counter-memory” (52). As readers, we see a glimpse into Johnson’s past trauma, which threatens to disrupt the linear trajectory of the story, so it is overridden again by the dominant narrative (Alek Williams comes out of the house to greet his visitors). In other words, the story’s narrator is careful to never fully relinquish narrative control to Johnson. As Dr. Trescott does in this scene, for example, Johnson is interrupted or corrected by Dr. Trescott (“Henry...I didn’t say anything about horses”). With this in mind, “The Monster,” as several critics have argued, remains a decidedly “white” story: the dominant narrative is primarily concerned with the fall of Dr. Trescott, who, as a result of his loyalty and friendship to Johnson, loses clients and his social standing in Whilomville. He even risks losing his family. This reading of Crane’s story subordinates Johnson to the margins of the text, like the monster that the town imagines him to be. What is paradoxical about this reading of Crane’s story, however, is that while Johnson is further relegated to the margins of the story and the town after his accident, he becomes more present and hyper-visible in the story: a haunting, embodied specter that is always seen though never identifiable. Regardless of the narrator’s attempt to suppress or erase Johnson’s distorted body (he is de-personified and described, as in the passage above, as “the...
figure,” “the dim form,” “a quavering voice”), Johnson speaks. In particular, his voice and the repetition of singing mournful hymns become the way in which Johnson’s “rattle of pebbles” and his personal trauma are remembered in the story. The “rattle of pebbles,” I suggest, signifies Johnson’s ultimate oscillation between trauma and survival or, to be specific, the trauma of his survival.

While “The Monster” is perhaps an unusual place to begin a discussion on American naturalism and sexuality, Crane’s story directly asks questions related to the body and trauma: what are the origins of trauma; how is trauma culturally diagnosed; and how does it surface or appear on the body? As a working-class black character, Johnson’s body is arguably dispensable in the story: he can be the narrator’s experiment (like Trescott’s “creation” [Crane 32]) in exploring the relationship between loss and male subjectivity. Crane’s story de(con)structs the male body after it is exposed to physical trauma (chemicals burning his face) and examines its corroding effects on the body and mind. As the “chuckl[ing]” voice in the above-referenced passage, Johnson’s body and voice embody:

[the] wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is

---

known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language. (Caruth 4)

In Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma, Narrative, and History, Cathy Caruth’s Freudian approach to trauma looks at the relationship between the body and memory in forgetting and remembering past traumas. Caruth’s reading of trauma specifically influences my interpretation of Johnson’s “monstrous” body: what does it mean, for example, that Johnson’s body is repeatedly returned to—by the narrator and the town—as a site of trauma, signifying loss? My reading of Henry Johnson and other traumatized male subjects in the following chapters focuses on the ways in which male bodies in American naturalism repeat previous traumas in order to make narrative sense of their male lack. My work explores the attempts by naturalist fiction— Influenced by turn-of-the-century American culture—to override these men’s traumatic experiences in order to regulate their hyper-embodiment, which Lauren Berlant describes as “the erotic, the sensational” or that which hyper-emphasizes the visual frame (111). In addition, these works strive to suppress the non-normative desires, both sexual and social, that these male subjects exhibit as a result of experiencing trauma. Yet no matter how hard these narratives try to override or silence the stories (and bodies) of traumatized male subjects, the counter-narratives remain incorrigible: “explosive, instantaneous, distinct,” naturalism’s counter-narratives complicate a narrative’s drive for closure (Baer 6).
II.

Literary and cultural studies has widely coded American naturalism as a hyper-masculine and heterosexist literary genre, which is perhaps the reason the genre is rarely addressed or included in queer studies or discussions. As critics have noted, women are often displaced in American naturalism, epitomized by Grace Trescott, the doctor’s largely absent wife in Crane’s “The Monster.” Grace’s role as the mother and domestic caretaker is usurped by Trescott who becomes Johnson’s “man-mother” (Morgan 81). The few times Mrs. Trescott appears in the story, she is either selfishly crying over her fallen social status or performing her prescribed role as the “maniacal woman,” flailing around melodramatically while her family’s house burns down and her son’s life is in danger (Crane 21).

Only recently have critics begun to re-explore the position(s) of women in naturalist texts. Jennifer Fleissner aptly observes that female characters in American naturalism perform an “ongoing, nonlinear, repetitive motion,” constituting what she identifies as acts of compulsion (9). While Fleissner’s argument relies upon men performing what she terms “sentimental nostalgia” (or male subjects’ attempts to “remasculinize” American culture by returning it to the past [17]), I advocate that male characters, in fact, are also compelled to perform what Fleissner codes as acts of (female) compulsion as forms of survival. Notably these male characters, such as Henry Johnson and his repetitive acts of “compulsion”—for example, his “satirical chuckle” and his singing mournful slave spirituals (Crane 56)—are often discussed in
terms of sexual identity and male lack. For instance, while American naturalists
generally depict traumatic events that “toughen up” weak or feminized male subjects
and make them more sexually virile or definitively “heterosexual,” I would suggest
that counter-narratives rupture or deflate this notion, not by presenting male
homosexuality as a viable alternative to heterosexuality, but rather by de-essentializing
and disembodying sexual identities all together. Thus, we may consider male
compulsion, as an adaptation of Fleissner’s argument, as a way for male characters to
cope with their traumatic pasts and masculine identities.

While many earlier critics, including June Howard, Lee Clark Mitchell, and
Donald Pizer, have written extensively on gender politics and masculinity in
naturalism, they tend (with the exception of Howard) to read American naturalism
outside the confines of psychoanalysis.² It perhaps may appear paradoxical or slightly
unorthodox to approach naturalist fictions which, according to Mitchell, have “nothing
to do with the character’s ‘self’” (8), as fractured narratives themselves. Yet I would
suggest that while Crane’s Henry Johnson or other naturalist male subjects do not
appear as psychologically deep or accessible as other nineteenth-century literary
figures (say Henry James’ Isabel Archer, for instance), their bodily “instincts” and
corporeal responses, in fact, reflect their psychological states. My aim is not to

² For earlier writings on American naturalism, with a particular focus on depictions of
masculinity or gender relations, see June Howard’s Form and History in American Literary
Naturalism (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1985), Lee Clark Mitchell’s Determined Fictions:
American Literary Naturalism (New York: Columbia UP, 1989), and Donald Pizer’s Realism
reconstruct or (re)imagine the personal or aesthetic theories naturalist writers employ in their texts; rather, my goal is to examine where these works converge and, perhaps more importantly, depart from theories of trauma and sexuality at the turn of the century looking at Freudian psychology and the writings of pre-Freudian psychologists.

My thesis looks specifically at what I am calling “traumatized masculinity” at the end of the nineteenth century by examining the following works of fiction: Frank Norris’ *Vandover and the Brute* (written in 1894-5, published posthumously in 1914) and *The Octopus* (1901); Stephen Crane’s “The Monster” (1899); and Jack London’s *The Sea Wolf* (1904). Despite naturalism’s interest in and classification as a genre that narrativizes scientific and philosophical theories of determinism and social Darwinism, I would add that naturalist writers are united by their attempt to rectify the fractured male subject, such as Crane’s Johnson or Norris’ Vandover, whose previous masculine identities and ideologies have been ruptured by traumatic personal and/or historical events.

Writing on the Second World War and collective masculine trauma in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, Kaja Silverman describes “historical trauma” as:

any historical event, whether socially engineered or of natural occurrence, which brings a large group of male subjects into such an intimate relation with lack that they are at least for the moment unable to sustain an imaginary relation with the phallus, and so withdraw their belief from the dominant fiction. (55)
We may position Silverman’s term “historical trauma” in relation to naturalist texts by considering large cultural events, such as significant social or political changes in the nineteenth century including massive changes in industrialization, gender relations, and the effects of the Civil War and Reconstruction, as experienced by men on both national and individual levels. That is, while these larger cultural “traumas” are “felt” personally by individual men, they are also symbolically experienced on a national or collective level in a post-Civil War America. In this view, we may consider male subjectivity at the end of the nineteenth century as related to public subjectivity, to modify Berlant’s discussion of hyper-embodiment as it relates to race and gender. As Berlant explains in “National Brands/National Body: Imitation of Life,” the white, male body “is the relay to legitimation, but even more than that, the power to suppress that body, to cover its tracks and its traces, is the sign of real authority” (113). While Berlant discusses embodiment in terms of femininity and race (African Americanness, in particular), male subjectivity, I contend, directly corresponds to men’s hyper-embodiment at the end of the nineteenth century. No longer abstracted, the wounded male body—publicly memorialized in newspapers as T.J. Jackson Lears observes (120)—becomes what Mark Seltzer describes as “dematerialized materialism.” Here, Seltzer refers to naturalism’s insistence on the physicality of bodies and their simultaneous abstraction: that is, men’s bodies, Seltzer demonstrates, are abstracted into other non-human forms (“models, numbers, maps, charts, and diagrammatic representations”) in naturalist fiction (14). Therefore, as women’s bodies are
commodified—particularly African-American women’s bodies, as Berlant argues—the late nineteenth-century wounded male body also becomes “unabstractable,” embodying a cultural significance that is “simultaneously personal and national in scope” (Berlant 133). Hence, the sign of real authority or the ability to “suppress that body” is denied to men who do not correctly perform their masculinity (Berlant 113).

To further illustrate my point, let me return to Crane’s “The Monster,” in which I initially argued that Trescott’s and Johnson’s stories are at times unrelated and seemingly disconnected. I would amend this argument, in light of Silverman’s notion of collective “historical trauma,” by considering Crane’s characters’ stories as simultaneously disconnected and shared. By this I mean that Johnson’s interruption and verbalization of his pain haunts the text as the “wound that cries out” (Caruth 4) or, to use Crane’s own terminology, “the rattle of pebbles.” The verbalization or articulation of pain and trauma also unifies Johnson and Trescott. In some ways, Johnson speaks for Trescott, representing the loss that he cannot grieve. Both men’s private and public worlds are disrupted after Johnson’s accident; Johnson’s verbal outpourings—singing melancholy slave spirituals and compulsively repeating nonsensical phrases—de-center the dominant narrative, but also destabilize gender and sexual identities for other characters in the text. That is, Johnson’s physical trauma and “monstering” narrativize other men’s feelings of masculine lack or inadequacy at the turn of the century. The important idea of “the rattle of pebbles” will relate to my close readings of texts by identifying moments in which counter-narratives briefly
surface, revealing sites of narrative and masculine “rupture” that threaten to prevent the story’s closure.

III.

Writing on masculinity, John Dudley identifies the “inherent instability” between naturalism and decadence, represented in the writings and cultural celebrity of Oscar Wilde. Dudley observes that naturalism performed a constructed version of “masculine ethos” in response to decadence (20). It is useful to emphasize, then, the ways that both literary genres and traditions promote “the cult of masculinity” as a form of social performance (136). Looking at the rise of spectator sports at the end of the nineteenth century, Dudley considers the “impossible” positioning of the spectator and the naturalist writer as spectator and participant: involved in the action, therefore positioned subjectively, yet attempting to observe and record events objectively (20). Dudley recognizes the complicated subject positioning of masculine figures in naturalist fictions and refers to “failed spectators” as men who cannot progress and are sidelined—to continue Dudley’s sports analogy—thereby becoming “failed men” (137). For Dudley, any form of alternative sexuality, such as Vandover’s hypersexuality, is viewed as “an unfortunate overextension of normal masculine sexual desire” (34, emphasis added). Dudley fails to consider the existence of non-normative (or queer) sexualities in naturalist texts; he does not, for instance, respond to Mark Seltzer’s claim that naturalism disrupts the myth of “normal,” reproductive
heterosexuality, through what Seltzer terms the “naturalist machine,” which “project[s] an alternative to biological reproduction...by which (re)production is displaced or disavowed and rewritten in another register” (32).

Therefore, building on Dudley’s description of naturalism’s “failed man,” in relation to Seltzer’s discussion of the naturalist machine, I would go a step further by arguing that the dual (or impossible) subject positioning of men as viewers and participants in masculine culture challenges conceptions of sexuality and masculinity as “essential.” Attempting to reform their masculine subjects and mold them into a heterosexual ideal, as we see with Norris’ Vandover and London’s Humphrey Van Weyden, naturalist works emphasize the male body and its susceptibility to trauma or what Freud calls “shocks.” Thus relying upon both psychoanalysis—Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920) and Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (1905)—and pre-Freudian scholars, whose writings are more historically-specific to the 1890s, I attempt to show the ways in which American naturalists challenge notions of fixed sexual identities by primarily relying upon a (perhaps troubled) discourse of trauma and (male) hysteria at the end of the nineteenth century.

In what Lear calls the “crisis of cultural authority,” some naturalist writers participated in the antimodern movement between 1880 and 1920 seeking to “remasculinize” American culture (5). Examining violence in American culture after the Civil War, Lear looks at what he calls the “pornography of pain” (a term taken from historian Neil Harris) in which the male body could be viewed perhaps erotically
at sites of “gratuitous killing and maiming”; late nineteenth-century newspapers, furthermore, exploited “human suffering caused by railroad and steamship accidents, fires, floods, and other disasters…violence allayed the lust for immediate experience” (Lears 120). As further example, Lears cites the “stricter socialization of children through athletics and military” as cultural attempts to remasculinize American boys (102). Also, the antimodern movement responded to (mostly women’s) “domestic realism” and literary decadence by emphasizing a “literature of action,” which privileged a national, masculine ethos: a return to the outdoor (heterosexual) romances written earlier in the century (Lears 102). Considering late-nineteenth century fiction as countering cultural threats of over-civilization, Lears explains:

In literature, as the vigorous outdoor romance gave way to the modern mode of domestic realism, action lagged while characters lapsed into endless self-analysis. Many attribute this enervation to the increasing dominance of a female audience in a society where women had become the keepers of the cultural flame...“The oppressiveness of modern novels,” they felt, reflected not merely “feminization” but the more general malaise of “a civilization grown over-luxurious, over-inquiring, too languid.” (49)

Paradoxically, as part of the search for “cultural authority,” naturalist fictions emphasize the male body’s susceptibility to violence and trauma. Scott Derrick refers to men’s transfer from a mostly female-centered, childhood sphere to an exclusively male “public” world of adulthood as a source of masculine “rupture” (12). Within these ruptured identities, Derrick identifies “imperfectly apprehended desires [that] must be explored” (28). In what he calls “the prehistory of homosexuality,” Derrick
looks at fiction’s “half-buried, half-emergent associations, whether memories, characters, or events, that do not get carried out and enacted at the level of plot” (27-28). Thus, Derrick’s work is important in constructing a trajectory of sexuality which links sexual desires to sexual identities, by taking into consideration larger cultural changes or “historical traumas.”

However, my reading of naturalist texts, including Crane’s “The Monster,” suggests that writers like Crane do not construct (consciously or not) a “prehistory of homosexuality,” or any sexuality for that matter, but are, in fact, deconstructing fixed sexual roles and desires. Simply put, the trauma these male subjects experience, which seemingly (re)masculinizes or re-inducts them into a homosocial, male culture in the U.S., alternatively liberates the male subject from any previous sexual categorization. The inclusion of the word “queer” in my title, then, is to be understood considering its variable meanings together and separately: to spoil, to change, to de-familiarize, to turn, to “unman.” The definition, I think, varies depending on its context in naturalist texts. I do not mean to imply, however, that these naturalist writers were subversively trying to promote alternative sexualities or homosexuality, in particular. Yet like the “wound that cries” or the “rattle of pebbles,” naturalist texts foreground the male subject and his psychic fracturing, represented, in some cases, through physical deformity and “monstering.”

The idea of imagining male fracture is not new to American literature or culture. As Dana D. Nelson observes, all-male organizations formed between 1790
and 1860, including “labor unions, political parties, and fraternal lodges…Christian and reform groups…[and] professional organizations and sports clubs” (178), created safe spaces for men to (re)enact “rewarding subjection” or “traumatic pleasure” in which they performed fantasies of relinquishing social control and power (520-22). This notion of imagining “democracy…as a fraternal, homogenous space” informs naturalist and late-nineteenth century concepts of manhood and masculine identity (Nelson 516). Nelson explains that the culture of male ritualism:

seems to have provided men not so much the equipment to “confront” the disparities of the world outside…as a standpoint that naturalized the emotional dissonances they experienced because of political and economic imbalances “outside” the lodge…Fraternal rituals allowed groups of men to act in unison, as a single, coherent body. (520)

Nelson’s argument emphasizes the inherent dualities of the (arbitrary) divisions in American culture between masculine and feminine; public and private; and body and mind. Her work breaks down conceptions that the private space was a distinctly “feminine” realm in the nineteenth century; hence, men historically created a private space to maintain social order and express their “white male melancholy that registers the multiple foreclosures of human exchange that structure white brotherhood in U.S. culture” (529-30). She goes on to explain that all-male rituals “exterminate[d] a debased, sinful, unmanly, and dirtied self” through ritualistic reenactments (519). In some ways, we see this ritualism reinforced in American naturalism, as well. Men, generally, are toughened up or de-sissified and do so, paradoxically, through their (corporeal) submission to other men.
Jennifer Travis’ reading of male injury departs slightly from Nelson’s work because she focuses exclusively not on *imagining* pain, but on the cultural interpretation of men’s “real” pain, namely wounds inflicted from the Civil War and other traumas, including railway and factory accidents. Travis argues that bodily injury, or what she specifically identifies as “male injury,” served as a means through which men could express their emotions or sense of loss. She cites several examples of post-Civil War public expansion and exposure of the male body, taking place in public forums such as courts and classrooms. Thus, men’s writing at the end of the nineteenth century did not depart from the “effeminate” sphere of sentiment, as Lears and Dudley suggest, but rather it expanded the definition of sentimentality by reconceptualizing “war injuries as mental battles” (Travis 46). The de(con)struction of men’s bodies by the end of the nineteenth century was not imagined in an all-male, ritualized space, as Nelson’s work in the early-nineteenth century indicates, but becomes literalized after the Civil War and “culturally rendered” as socially acceptable, serving as a “lesson of masculine emotional success” (Travis 165-67). Building on Travis’ notion of male injury, my thesis examines hyper-embodying the male body—making men’s wounds and body visible and “susceptible” to future (psychic) harm or loss—and its direct relationship to “queering” or “othering” the male body in naturalist fiction. Hence, my reading of male loss reflects not only on the psychic loss of a conventional masculine identity (and its complicated relationship to
the body), but also considers the historically specific fracturing of male identity compelled by a post-war American culture.

IV.

Lawrence Rothfield makes an important distinction between realism and naturalism as literary genres in his work, *Vital Signs: Medical Realism in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. Describing the “writer-as-scientist,” Rothfield compares realism to clinical medicine, whereas he associates naturalism with nineteenth-century experimental medicine and medical theorists like Claude Bernard. Further aligning naturalism with science, rather than an “ideology” as June Howard suggests, Rothfield states:

> once we understand naturalism not as a myth, nor even as a (reified) ideology, but as a cognitive practice that stipulates at once an object of knowledge (the elementary functions of the body as flesh), a set of rules for elaborating knowledge (the rigid demarcation between hypothesis and observation, narration and description), and a knowing subject (the experimentalist), we may better grasp the intensity of the will to truth that runs through those myths and the historical specificity of naturalist thought. (129)

As Rothfield observes above, naturalism emphasizes “the elementary functions of the body as flesh,” privileging the body and its “response to stimuli,” further uniting the discourses of psychology and other natural sciences with literary naturalism.

I begin this section with remarks from Rothfield to accentuate the ways in which naturalism, as I will briefly explore, is strongly influenced and aligned with
historical discourses of trauma and the body in medicine and psychology. At the advent of modernity, what become known as “male hysteria,” or neurasthenia, was theorized to be the result of such influences as “rail travel, factory production, and warfare” (Micale and Lerner 23). Additionally, by the 1880s doctors considered male hysteria to be tied to an elite urban male population as the result of social factors such as “overwork, sexual excess, overambition, sedentary habits, and abuse of alcohol or drugs” (Showalter 65).

As Elaine Showalter discusses, male hysteria and its visible, bodily symptoms also became signifiers for a “thrilling secret performance” of male homosexuality. She explains, “Like femininity, decadent male artists at the end of the century believed homosexuality was a form of hysterical posing” (100). While she contends that some decadents (like Oscar Wilde) embraced the pathological elements of homosexuality as an illness and transformed it into a “secret performance,” American naturalism, I believe, challenges the notion of aligning hysteria with sexual perversions or inversion itself. While some of the traumatized male subjects I discuss appear to perform their queer sexualities as a form of illness (or as relating to their illness), as Norris’ Vandover does, I am also interested in the ways in which works like London's *The Sea-Wolf* challenge this notion by aligning non-normative sexualities with an active, masculine subjectivity—sometimes transcending to a fixed “heterosexual” identity, as with Humphrey Van Weyden—rather than with a feminine, passive identity.
As sexologists like Havelock Ellis and Richard von Krafft-Ebing produced writings in the 1890s that coded male (homo)sexuality as a quantifiable, identifiable behavior or identity, American naturalists engaged with this discourse to show that sexuality, at least as it is performed on the body, is capable of mutation. Sexologists and physicians of the 1880s, in America and Europe, first considered sexual perversions, and sexual inversion in particular, as hereditary, not acquired. Their examination of same-sex desire was framed within a medical discourse of genetics: they hypothesized that non-normative sexualities were the result of “[a]n ‘organic brain defect,’ ‘congenital perversion of the sexual instinct,’ ‘a disease of the central nervous system,’ ‘hereditary taint,’ a ‘perversion somewhat analogous to hysteria,’ a nervous father, a hysterical mother,” all seemingly rooted in the body (Knoper 128). Counter to this argument, theories of trauma, building from pre-Freudian psychologists and leading to Freud, connected traumatic experiences to psychological causes, rather than something genetic or innate in the body. As Sander Gilman claims, the development of psychoanalysis at the turn of the twentieth century rejected “the rigid representationalism of nineteenth-century theories of understanding mental processes” (45). Thus, the discourse of psychoanalysis challenges conceptions of the body as the sole signifier of marking disease or social difference.

However, naturalism’s relationship to psychoanalysis (and its discourse) is more complicated than this simple assertion. As Cathy Caruth shows in her adaptation of Freud’s theory of trauma from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trauma’s relationship
to the body is problematic: as Caruth explains, although trauma is psychologically experienced, the somatic response “occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive experience of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (11). Caruth goes on to state that the traumatized subject experiences the traumatic event(s) repeatedly, reliving the death the subject almost experienced or witnessed: “What causes trauma, then, is a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind’s experience of time” (61). Caruth builds on Freud’s definition of trauma by focusing on its effects on temporality or, quite literally, its evasion of time altogether. In other words, Caruth argues that the “break in the mind’s experience of time” prevents the subject from making sense of the death almost experienced. It is not merely the incomprehensibility of death, she suggests, but the incomprehensibility of survival that defines trauma (64).

Pre-Freudian psychologists in the late nineteenth century also privileged the body in finding the source(s) of identities. In 1892, in Psychology, The Briefer Course, William James observes that “[a] disembodied human emotion is a sheer nonentity” (246-47). In other words, all emotions are filtered or affected through the body; we cannot easily divide the actions (or responses) of the mind and the body. Herbert Spencer’s work, “The Principles of Psychology” (first edition in 1855), argues that “mental actions” are rooted outside the body—in the form of touch, hearing, and seeing; thus, we “feel” or develop emotions externally as well as internally. He describes the importance of the eye and touch in stimulating feelings: “Sensations of
touch initiated at points on the skin very near one another, form parts of consciousness that are separate though adjacent,” Spencer declares, later identifying the retina and the “tips of the fingers and the tip of the tongue” as the body parts having the “greatest among the sensations of touch” (511-12).

While pre-Freudian psychologists, including James and Spencer, largely do not discuss sexual instincts, their works normalize a set of behaviors, thus coding some emotions (melancholy, for example) and bodily responses (what James calls “irritable weakness” or hysteria) as non-normative. Freud builds on nineteenth-century psychologists who privileged the body as the source of origins for identity and social (and sexual) behavior. Although my study primarily relies on a Freudian framework, I also suggest that pre-Freudian psychologists and their discussion of instincts and the body (influenced by social Darwinism) certainly offer a fuller reading of the male body and male subjectivity in American naturalism. That is, rather than consider a historically-specific reading of naturalist texts (which would discount Freud) or rely exclusively on a Freudian interpretation of naturalism, I wish to employ these texts in union with one another. Thus, I read conceptions of turn-of-the-century manhood not as a coherent or unified process, but as a fractured re-structuring of the male body and subjectivity, both of which were publicly staged at the end of the nineteenth century.

As Leo Bersani smartly points out:

Psychoanalysis is the unprecedented attempt to psychologize that biology, to coerce into discourse, to insist that language can be “touched
by,” or “pick up,” certain vibrations of being which move us back from any consciousness of being. (39-40)

As Bersani suggests, Freud’s work on sexuality is compelling because of its limitations: as Christopher Lane declares, “psychoanalytic theory falls between constructivist and essentialist theories of sexuality” (xviii). While Freud does classify three kinds of “sexual inverts” in the Three Essays, he rejects the notion that sexual inversion represents moral degeneration, which is often the argument for interpretations of Vandover’s social and physical “demise.” Rather, Freud explains inversion as an acquired aspect of the sexual drive, which pre-exists objects. Therefore, “Freud consistently elaborated on the psychic and political repercussions of instances in which same-sex desire is congruent and incongruent with same-sex identification” (Lane 38-39). Lane’s observation is especially useful when considering the ways in which naturalism anticipates this theoretical move by ultimately showing the (perhaps impossible) challenges of locating an origin for sexual behaviors and desires.

My two chapters focus on textual passages in which central male characters perceive and remember traumatic events, specifically considering Freud’s emphasis in Beyond the Pleasure Principle on trauma as the “confrontation with death” (191). In other words, following traumatic events, men’s bodies become hyper-embodied throughout the texts as sites of traumatic identification. My first chapter looks at Crane’s “The Monster” and Norris’ The Octopus and what I am calling “returning (to)
the male body.” In this chapter, I focus on examining physical trauma—the loss of Johnson’s face and the violent rape (and loss) of Vanamee’s female love interest—as rupturing the bodies of the male subjects (they physically reenact their traumas) and the dominant narratives themselves. The title of the chapter, therefore, refers to the male characters’ desires to compulsively repeat unpleasurable traumas. In Norris’ *The Octopus*, Vanamee even depicts Freud’s death drive by desiring to return to the grave. Additionally, this chapter also emphasizes each narrative’s compulsive return to the men’s bodies as sites of trauma.

My second chapter looks at the relationship between violence and male subject formation at the turn of the twentieth century. By looking at Norris’ *Vandover and the Brute* and London’s *The Sea-Wolf*, I contend that male characters in each text subject themselves to brutal forms of violence in order to experience male intimacy. Thus, men can only desire men and, thereby identify with them by appropriating a violent touch and gaze. Thus, men’s attachments to other men transcends an “easy understanding or articulation” of sexual desire or subjectivity (Derrick 127). My reading looks at issues of childhood trauma and the tenuous relationship between sexual instincts, or what Freud codes as self-preservation, and ego-instincts, which Freud codes as part of the death drive (and related to sadism/masochism in the *Three Essays*). Finally, my discussion of male subjectivity and non-normative desires in naturalism concludes by looking at gender melancholy—particularly heterosexual melancholy as theorized by Judith Butler in *The Psychic Life of Power*. Simply put,
Van Weyden’s eventual heterosexual identity, at the novel’s conclusion, incorporates the queer desires and identities that he cannot acknowledge or grieve. Vandover, similarly, only comes to his identity at the end of Norris’ novel through the violent acquisition of his “softer” side. Both endings, I suggest, exemplify American naturalism’s problem of depicting sexuality, gender, and the body: to be “male” means to be heterosexual, yet both texts resist this simple equation by dually depicting the violence of male sexuality and male subject formation at the turn of the century.

All of the texts I discuss emphasize the physical representation and deformity of the male subject who does not believe in the dominant fiction of male subjectivity. To not perform conventional masculinity and its heteronormative desires results in physical “othering.” Regardless of naturalism’s inherent homophobia and misogyny (representative of cultural homophobia and misogyny pervasive at the turn of the twentieth century—and, arguably, also the twenty-first), these texts struggle to suppress the counter-narratives and the bodily representations of “failed men”: men who do not prescribe to a naturalist formula for masculine identification. While naturalist writers attempt to evade or erase the bodies of “failed men,” these bodies prove to be “unabstractable,” unlike the ideal male citizen whose cultural authority is represented in his lack-of-body (Berlant 113). Therefore, naturalism’s “othering” of the male body that is traumatized and wounded replicates the “othering” of other hyper-visible bodies at the turn of the twentieth century: African-Americans, immigrants, working-class subjects, women. However, Berlant explains that the false
promise of participation in the “public sphere has emancipatory potential for the historically overembodied.” The paradox of this reading, then, is that the “unabstractive” bodies of male subjects, I contend, become inextricably linked to their gendered and sexual identities. Therefore, on the one hand, the “monstering” or queering of male bodies permits these men to act on their non-normative desires; yet it also imprisons them within culturally-prescribed, fixed subjectivities which Berlant smartly calls “the body’s burden” (133). It is exactly this burden that I wish to unpack.
Chapter 1: Compulsion and Naturalism: Returning (to) the Male Body

I.

Freud begins his second chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) by asserting that traumatic neurosis, which he describes as the result of “severe mechanical concussions, railway disasters and other accidents involving a risk to life,” is not, in fact, attributable to “organic lesions of the nervous system” (10).¹ Unlike hysteria, Freud contends, traumatic neurosis “seems to rest upon the fact or surprise, or fright” or what is also identified as “shock” (11). Despite his attempt to separate the discourse of trauma from other disorders, including hysteria, Freud confirms that the symptoms of trauma are “strongly marked [by] signs of subjective ailment (in which it resembles hypochondria or melancholia)” (10). Thus, while Freud emphasizes the psychic effects of trauma (the “disturbance of the mental capacities” [*BPP* 10]), his theory of trauma underemphasizes the physical effects or repercussions of trauma, which surface on or through the body or what Jane Thrailkill describes as “the testimony of the body” (86).

Although Freudian psychoanalysis privileges the mind’s effect on bodily behavior (that is, one’s interior state—or psyche—affects the body’s visible response), there are moments in Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* which closely align the somatic response to external stimuli that almost seems inextricably linked to the mental

¹ Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is hereafter cited as *BPP*. 25
state. For example, Freud’s primary examples of (male) trauma result from physical experiences: war, railway accidents, and the (industrial) workforce. While psychoanalysis typically underemphasizes the role of the body in interpreting external stimuli, Freud’s explanation for how we deal with trauma considers the role the body plays in repeating a traumatic event. Explaining the desire to return to a previous state of things before the trauma occurred (“an initial state”), Freud contends that the traumatized subject is always “striving to return by the circuitous paths along which its development leads” (45). What is interesting about Freud’s theory of repetition compulsion—a direct response to trauma—is that it is not a development at all, but rather a desire to turn back, therefore, a regressive behavior. Freud’s writing, then, repeatedly identifies moments in which traumatized subjects return to the past, fighting “normal” (i.e., healthy) instincts to create coherent selves, and instead, regress to an earlier state, always looking back through a pattern of forgetting and remembering.

The paradox remains, however, that most naturalist fictions resist letting the reader into the minds of its characters. How, then, can we read naturalist characters psychoanalytically? My reading of Freud’s theory of repetition compulsion reconsiders the important role the body plays in acting out previous traumas. In my reading of male subjects in American naturalism, the subject’s body becomes testimony for his interior state, which further complicates the distinction between mind and body that psychoanalysis generally relies upon. The compulsive returning to earlier traumatic events, thus, is staged through the theatricality of the body, which is
what this chapter seeks to explore in the works of Stephen Crane’s “The Monster” and Frank Norris’ *The Octopus*.

In her work, Jennifer Fleissner identifies a pattern of (female) compulsion in American naturalism which complicates reading naturalist characters as exclusively predetermined for tragic conclusions. Fleissner attaches compulsion to the figure of the modern woman (or the “new woman”) in naturalism (11), though we might think more broadly about how naturalism associates compulsion with male lack, “in which every attempt at a more perfect order leads inexorably to order’s failure (and thus to the repetition of the attempt)” (10). Fleissner associates “sentimental nostalgia,” or looking back to the past, with male subjects and naturalism’s collective desire to remasculinize American culture, returning the “cultural flame” to men (Lears 49). Fleissner makes an important connection between women’s compulsion and the staging of this compulsion in visible forms, namely on and through their bodies (“cleaning, eating, locking the doors” [22]). Although compulsive behavior, Fleissner says, is historically coded as dangerous or “hysterical,” it narratively allows for women’s survival in naturalist fiction.

Extending Fleissner’s argument, I want to examine the treatment of male compulsion in Crane’s and Norris’ works and emphasize the ways in which patterns of repetition reflect male trauma. In what Cathy Caruth describes as “double telling,” the traumatized subject’s experience oscillates between “a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the
story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (7). My chapter, therefore, explores the way in which these male subjects return to traumatic pasts in order to (falsely) master them and, additionally, how Crane’s and Norris’ stories are not only narratives of trauma, but are traumatized narratives themselves. By this I mean that the narrative voices in these works repeatedly return to sites of trauma, which sometimes includes the male body itself, in order to understand or make sense of what has been lost. A major difference between Fleissner’s discussion of compulsion and my own is that for her, compulsion is a survival technique in which women characters are able to look forward, “toward the future” (166). The male subjects I discuss—Crane’s Henry Johnson and Norris’ Vanamee—are ultimately defeated heroes, constantly looking to the past for ways to return to “an initial state” (BPP 45).

Because Freudian psychoanalysis does not fully explicate the role of the body in interpreting past traumatic experiences, my readings of Crane’s and Norris’ fiction also draw from pre-Freudian psychologists, who more specifically rely on theories of affect in terms of the mind-body divide. Thus, their theories privilege the role the body plays in interpreting external stimuli (a “shock,” for example) and even deconstructs the body’s response to stimuli. For instance, John Dewey describes the components of physical response as (1) sensation; (2) idea; and (3) motor response; he identifies these as “three disconnected existences” (361). We may consider Dewey’s theory of the “sensori-motor apparatus” as further deconstructing the mind-body divide; not only does it posit a division between the body and the mind, but Dewey’s theory also further
categorizes the body’s response into “sensory stimulus,” “central connections,” and “motor responses.” Hence, Dewey concludes that the “sensori-motor apparatus” is “not a comprehensive, or organic unity, but a patchwork of disjointed parts, a mechanical conjunction of unallied processes” (358).

Dewey’s theory of affect and response is important if we consider it in relation to Freud’s discussion of the body (or “organic lesions of the nervous system”) as not the source of personal trauma. I would suggest, therefore, that both theories of affect and Freud’s theory of trauma emphasize the “unnatural” or inorganic elements of bodily responses: insisting that they are culturally produced or rendered rather than completely innate. Furthermore, while we cannot control some of our responses to external stimuli, or “shocks,” such as burning a finger on a flame, for example, our bodies—and their responses—are to some degree culturally influenced or structured. Culture, thereby, codes our behavior or responses as acceptable (or not), whether referring to somatic responses (coding behavior as “hysterical” versus rational) or sexual desires (marking some desires as non-normative, dangerous, or different). Although pre-Freudian psychologists failed to theorize the origins of sexualities or sexual desires, Freud is one of the first writers to contend in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* in 1905 that sexual inversion “is an acquired character of the sexual instinct” (5-6).

My argument that naturalism necessarily separates biology and the body is arguably an interesting and unusual one to advance, particularly since naturalism, as a
literary genre, is largely based on the pseudo-scientific discourse of heredity and predetermination (that characters are narratively fated for destruction based on their genetic make-up or a chain of uncontrollable events). I am interested in examining, however, the ways in which cultural forces, particularly relating to trauma and loss, affect male sexual identities and reshape the male body in naturalist texts. The male body in American naturalism represents a literal embodiment of larger historical traumas pertinent to men at the end of the nineteenth century, which my introduction briefly outlined. Most notably, we see this in the emergence of Freud’s repetition compulsion in which the male body represents larger historical traumas and attempts to articulate his individual (and collective) loss(es), which may or may not be known or consciously rendered by the traumatized subject (BPP 19-20). Therefore, I contend that using a psychoanalytic framework forces us to reconsider this definition of naturalism as being entirely predetermined, or rooted in the body; the inherent instabilities of naturalist texts, directly and indirectly, refer to larger cultural tensions and changes at the end of the nineteenth century as reflected on and through the de(con)struction of the traumatized male body.

My readings focus on key passages that represent moments of narrative rupture which often display or exhibit the de(con)structed male body and the narrative’s emphasis on the act of “returning.” That is, the ruptured male body in these naturalist fictions mirrors the narrative rupture of the story overall and emerges during counter-narrative moments that, in fact, mimic the compulsive response of the traumatized
subject, who yearns to return to the past. Furthermore, these male subjects—Crane’s Henry Johnson and Norris’ Vanamee—in different ways “return” their bodies to previous traumatic occurrences; in addition, the narrative voices tend to “return” repeatedly to these sites of trauma, often fixating compulsively on the material bodies of the traumatized men. For instance, Johnson remains hyper-embodied throughout the entire text, particularly after the fire; and despite Vanamee’s desire to transcend his physical form (“to rise upward from out his body” [390]), the narrative repeatedly returns to Vanamee’s material form to reenact his loss of (male) identification. These counter-narratives that the dominant narratives (which confirm the “dominant fiction” of male adequacy) attempt to over-ride are repressed narratives themselves that surface during important moments in the text. Mirroring Freud’s theory of trauma, we might consider that these counter-narratives “break through the protective shield” of the dominant narrative in order to be heard (33).

In short, traumatic events allow both male characters to experience non-normative sexual desires. In Crane’s “The Monster,” after Johnson is portrayed as a non-person, a “monster,” Dr. Trescott is finally able to care for him and claim that “nobody can attend to him as I do myself” (63). Johnson must fully become an unmanageable, non-human “thing” in order to enter into an intimate relationship with another man. And in Norris’ *The Octopus*, Vanamee reenacts his emotional loss of Angéle (and his own masculine identity) by physically reenacting the act of her rape (and death) by returning his male body to the traumatic site of her grave and also, in
essence, returning his body to the male rapist through incorporating the “Other’s” identity into his own as a form of non-normative identification and (sexual) desire. While my analyses of both these texts rely primarily upon a Freudian reading of the repetition compulsion, I will, in some cases, supplement my work by looking at more historically-specific theories of affect in the late-nineteenth century. These theories more fully explicate what Thrailkill identifies as the “intelligent, feeling human body” and corporeal responses to external events. Thus, considering these male subjects’ bodies and (male) compulsion using Freudian and pre-Freudian psychology resists making “overly simplistic distinctions between objective and subjective experiences” (Thrailkill 26).

II.

Physical injury is most fully and literally realized in Crane’s “The Monster,” in which Henry Johnson, as mentioned in my introduction, is defaced during a fire at the home of the Trescott family. Discussing the politics of trauma and identity in “The Monster,” Bill Brown observes the differences between war and physical injury, noting that “the latter isolates the incoherent and deformed body while the former memorializes the violent production of a coherent, re-formed body politic” (202). Although Freud’s work on trauma does not necessarily differentiate “kinds” of trauma (for example, how are the traumas of a soldier at war and a victim of a railway accident similar and/or different?), Brown importantly distinguishes the public reception or
cultural interpretation of different traumas. As Crane shows us in “The Monster,”
despite Johnson’s heroic actions in rescuing Jimmie in the burning house, Johnson’s
physical deformity erases his heroism by making him an unmanageable “other” in
Whilomville, subject to haunt the margins of the town and the margins of the story so
that “the predicament of the story remains a white predicament throughout” (Morgan
73). In this view, the loss of Johnson’s face is not only his personal trauma, but the
trauma of the town and the narrative as a whole as I attempt to prove.

Johnson’s peripheral haunting throughout the text mirrors Cathy Caruth’s
description of trauma as the “delayed, uncontrolled repetitive experience of
hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (11, emphasis added). Caruth’s
discussion of trauma, based on Freud’s Beyond the Pleasure Principle, almost implies
that there is something lodged inside the victim’s body that he attempts to dislodge
through repeated actions or language; “Every fresh repetition [of unpleasure] seems to
strengthen the mastery they are in search of,” thus disregarding the pleasure principle,
according to Freud (BPP 42). Freud describes trauma as “any excitations from outside
which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield” of the ego (BPP
33). Hence, the subject’s forgetting of the traumatic event mimics a “stream whose
main bed has been blocked” (BPP 36). The literary moments I am interested in
exploring, however, focus more on the repetition of Johnson’s trauma or the ways in
which Johnson desires “to return to the inanimate state” or the time before the fire
(BPP 46). What is slightly problematic—and I state this upfront—is that the narrator

33
of “The Monster,” quite literally, reconfigures Johnson as an inanimate object through the course of the story. Therefore, we, as readers, must ask the question about the narrator’s reliability: who is the narrator; is it Dr. Trescott or another white Whilomville resident, for instance? Many critics note Johnson’s lack of dimensions or emotional complexity. William M. Morgan, for example, declares that Johnson is “never more than a montage of stereotypes” (73). But for the purposes of my argument, I treat Johnson’s repetition compulsion as related to the narrative structure; that is, he is not a fully-developed character because the narrative itself is fractured and constantly returns to the site of trauma (Johnson’s body) in order to try to “master” it or make it complete (again). So while Johnson is unable to tell his story or express his personal desire (to live or die, for example), I focus more on the narrator’s (de)construction of Johnson’s inanimateness and the way in which his classification as “a thing,” rather than a person, narrativizes Freud’s death drive while simultaneously complicating sexual and social codes for the residents of Whilomville.

The opening line of Crane’s short story focuses on substitution and temporality, two of the story’s most important themes: “Little Jim was, for the time, engine Number 36, and he was, making the run between Syracuse and Rochester” (9). Here, Jimmie not only becomes a mechanized thing—a train car—but the narrator stresses the marking of time: Jimmie is only a train car for as long as the game endures (“for the time”). The game immediately comes to an end when he experiences a destructive “shock,” crashing into “the flower-bed, a wheel of his cart destroyed a peony” (Crane
This opening scene emphasizes the physical nature of “the factor of surprise” (BPP 11); Jimmie can only experience trauma, not by anticipating it, but through surprise. As referenced in the introduction, trauma is, indeed, caused by “shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind’s experience of time” (Caruth 61). Caruth goes on to explain that the traumatic event, in effect, erases the “real time” that takes place, so the event produces a gap in memory and “has not been fully known” or absorbed into the subject’s consciousness (61-62).

We see Jimmie’s failure to articulate what has happened (possibly suggesting that he does not fully comprehend the “shock”) when he finds his father, who is busy mowing the lawn “as if it were a priest’s chin” (9), and is unable to speak. Instead, Jimmie points to the broken flower, and the narrator notes: “It seemed that the importance of the whole thing had taken away the boy’s vocabulary. He could only reiterate, ‘There!’” (10). Despite Jimmie’s gesturing, however, the doctor “could make nothing of it” (10). Contrasting Jimmie’s disconnectedness with his father, “The Monster” emphasizes Jimmie’s ties to Johnson. Described as “the negro who cared for the doctor’s horses,” Johnson also takes care of the doctor’s son. Discussing Johnson and Jimmie, the narrator explains, “In regard to almost everything in life they seemed to have minds precisely alike” (11), suggesting an almost genetic similarity or bond between the two characters. In other words, Johnson could almost be Jimmie’s father if he weren’t a black stableman. The story, perhaps inadvertently, asks questions about genetics (who is the father; who is the care-taker?) while ultimately challenging

35
traditional ideologies of gender and gender roles as part of the “dominant fiction.” Simply put, Johnson acts more as a father (and mother) figure to Jimmie than the child’s biological parents do. The narrator later shuffles these paternal categories even further by constructing Trescott as the ultimate care-taker (and father figure) for Johnson after his accident. Johnson, therefore, stands in for Trescott as Jimmie’s father, not only after the broken flower scene, when Jimmie seeks Johnson to find solace, but also when the narrator tells us that Johnson, running through the Trescott’s burning house, knows the home (“the long-familiar routes among those upper chambers”) as well as Trescott does (21).

Quite importantly, Johnson’s paternal-like union with Jimmie is confirmed through the act of (repetitive) touch. For instance, when Johnson rescues the child, Jimmie “flung his arms about his neck and buried his face in the blanket. He called twice in muffled tones: ‘Mam-ma! Mam-ma!’” (22-23). In this excerpt, by holding Jimmie in his arms, the narrator substitutes Johnson for Jimmie’s mother. (It is interesting to note for my later discussion on gender politics that Johnson is cast both as mother and father at different times in the story.) In essence, Johnson becomes the mother protecting his child at this moment. However, while Jimmie calls for his mother or misrecognizes Johnson as his mother, Grace Trescott, Jimmie’s biological mother, is outside, wailing like a “maniacal woman” (21). Related to my argument about male-on-male touch, women in Crane’s story are relegated to the sidelines and are often untouched by the male characters. Grace Trescott is nearly absent for most of
the text and emerges at the end, “curled in an arm-chair,” crying over her social ostracism (64), and the majority of the town gossip is spread and conducted in private, domestic spheres between women. (The one notable exception is Martha Goodwin—the narrator describes her as “an invincible being like Napoleon” [50]—who challenges the feminine gossiping and vilification of Johnson; yet she, too, is untouched as an old maid living with her sister.)

Furthermore, Johnson has important standing in the Trescott home, occasionally substituted for the father or the mother, as I have established, and the town considers him “a light, a weight, and an eminence” (11). Prior to his defacing, Johnson is free to move publicly around town. As the narrator explains, Johnson “dressed himself with much care…No belle of a court circle could bestow himself more mind on a toilet than did Johnson” (13). Johnson’s redressing from stableman’s clothes to a dandy’s attire (“lavender trousers…[and a] straw hat with its bright silk band”) elicits a new identity (and sense of self-worth) for Johnson. The narrator notes that with the change in dress, “the change was somewhere far in the interior of Henry” (13).

Despite his gender-crossing performance in public as a dandy, Johnson remains “unscathed and untouched” by the public (Merish 335). Glenn Hendler identifies a dandy as “a man who performs his sentiments publicly” (179); however, Hendler does not view dandified masculinity solely as a performance, but “also an aspect of his [the dandy’s] personality” (151). If we apply Hendler’s argument to “The Monster,” we

37
see that although Johnson never declares his sentiments publicly, his performance or parading through town indicates his internal desires. Hence, with Johnson’s public exposure as a dandy, which arguably breaks down class, racial, and sexual boundaries, the narrator tells us that Johnson “always had an eye for the demonstration. With a face beaming with happiness he turned away from the scene of his victories into a narrow side street…” (Crane 15). We learn from this passage, first, that Johnson is self-aware of his gendered performance as a dandy (or as Reifsnyder, the barber, calls him, “a taisy” [14]), and, second, that he considers it a form of public subversion that unnerves the residents of Whilomville (white and black). Importantly, it is his “beaming” face, which is later effaced, that informs us of his pride. Johnson’s “victories,” then, include his ability to cause others to respond when he publicly elicits his interiority by wearing gentlemen’s clothes. I would suggest, therefore, in contrast to some other critics, like Elaine Marshall who claims that we never know the “true” Johnson, that while Johnson’s performance as a dandy is culturally constructed and interpreted, the narrator suggests that this change in Johnson (“somewhere interior”) reveals private non-normative (sexual) desires.

Although Johnson’s parading through Whilomville riles up the townspeople who watch him (“you ought to see the coon that’s coming!,” a town lawyer yells [Crane 14]), Johnson is safe from their (possibly violent or persecuting) touch. Marshall hypothesizes that Crane’s short story is based on the actual lynching of a black man accused of raping a white woman in Port Jervis, New York, in 1892.
Marshall argues, however, that Johnson serves as a “stereotypical minstrel-like ‘coon’” posing no sexual threat to the townspeople, particularly the white men in Reifsnyder’s barbershop who watch him (Marshall 213). My reading of Johnson’s “safety,” in effect, differs from Marshall’s: Whilomville’s townspeople (white and black) do not vilify or literally place their hands on Johnson because they do not know how to classify or regulate him as a dandy and, later, as a “monster.” That is, by dressing up as a dandy and displaying his non-normative, gentlemanly dress (and desires), Johnson defies and merges identifiable stereotypes. He defies stereotypes by performing not as the “coon” that the townspeople call him (or as they want him to behave), but instead, his “graceful form” (Crane 14) rewrites his bodily performance as a black man. It is important to note that while I am stressing the sexual politics of “The Monster,” I do not want to underemphasize the complicated racial politics of the story. In many ways, the sexual and racial politics coincide, yet my reading of the text primarily focuses on the way in which the story constructs and later, deconstructs sexual identities as they relate to gender performance.² “The Monster,” is not openly a story about sexuality, however, I am interested in engaging with areas of the text that merge and expose the cross-sections between discourses of race and gender/sexuality.

Johnson’s dandyisms, I would argue, are not part of a “minstrel-like ‘coon’” role that he plays for the enjoyment of the white public (Marshall 213). In contrast to

² For recent scholarship on the racial politics in “The Monster,” see footnote 1 in my introduction.
both Brown’s and Marshall’s readings of Johnson, I contend that he merges racial and sexual stereotypes in a way that makes him unidentifiable to the mass public. Throughout the beginning of the story, Johnson is cast as a working-class black stableman as well as a class-crossing, gender-defying dandy. For the black residents, who live on the perimeters of Whilomville, Johnson’s dandification and gender transgressions are disconcerting. When Johnson travels to the home of Miss Bella Farragut, a woman he is potentially courting, Bella and her two parents “bowed and smiled and ignored and imitated until a late hour…they could not have been more like three monkeys” (16). This scene not only reinforces the narrator’s inherent racism (we see this again with the treatment of the Williams family, Johnson’s original caretakers, as bumbling minstrel figures), but it also separates Johnson from the other working-class, black citizens of Whilomville. Thus, even from the beginning of the novel, the narrator makes it clear that while others identify Johnson as a “coon,” he never does so himself. His identity, furthermore, is largely based on standing apart from the working-class black characters—namely, Bella and her parents—who act “like monkeys” in trying to wed their daughter to a black “gentleman.” Through his dress and behavior, Johnson defies acting the way that Whilomville’s (white and black) residents expect him to behave. While I agree with Marshall that Johnson is not literally a sexual threat to Whilomville’s female residents (is the dandy ever a sexual threat to women?), he does, in fact, challenge social codes and order, thereby
disturbing the status quo of the town. His transgressive behavior, as we see later in the story, warrants the town’s compulsive social regulation and control.

Johnson is most dangerous after the accident because of his ambiguous relationship to Dr. Trescott as it is characterized by insinuations of male touch (and care). I will take a moment, then, to discuss the role touch plays in nineteenth-century theories of affect. Psychologist and philosopher Herbert Spencer, who likely influenced American literary naturalists, contends that feelings are both initiated within the body (what he calls “emotions”) and are externally experienced (what he calls “sensations”). Most useful in my discussion of naturalism in Spencer’s work is his emphasis on the importance of touch in creating feelings. Spencer explains:

Sensations of touch initiated at points on the skin very near one another, form parts of consciousness that are separate though adjacent...Moreover the definiteness of their mutual limitations, in space if not in time, is greatest among the sensations of touch proceeding from parts of the surface which have, in a sense, the greatest externality—the parts which, like the tips of the fingers and the tip tongue, have the most frequent and varied converse with outer objects. (511-12)

Therefore, touch alone can shape or determine “parts of consciousness.” Spencer goes on to add that what he calls “visual feelings,” which arise from seeing, are “above all others distinguished by sharpness of their mutual limitations, [and] are absolutely coherent” (514).

Crane’s short story, overall, fixates on the compulsion to touch by portraying men touching men. Most public scenes take place in the town’s barbershop where men
(intimately) shave one another, and simulating masturbation, Judge Hagenlothrobe rubs and “smooth[es] the white top [of his cane] with slow movement of his hands” (30). The narrator, on a few occasions, refers to the judge’s (queer) state as a bachelor living with his sister. Interestingly, the story does not exhibit much touching between Tescott and Johnson, although we are informed of their special bond: Tescott “slept and ate almost every meal in the long nights and days of his vigil” (31), and he later informs the judge, “Nobody can attend to him as I do myself” (63). The one time we are informed of their touching is when Tescott helps Johnson walk into the Williams’ home (“The doctor turned and held both arms to the dark figure. It crawled to him painfully like a man going down a ladder” [34]), yet it is done at night, out of view from Whilomville’s white residents and their potential condemnation.

Despite the two men’s lack of (visible) touching, nonetheless, the narrator (and the town) codes Johnson and Tescott’s relationship as dangerous and unspeakable. For example, when John Twelve, the grocer, and Judge Hagenlothrobe try to warn Tescott of the damage he is doing to his reputation and medical practice, neither man can speak the name of the “problem.” Twelve only alludes to the “problem” of Tescott’s indecent relationship to Johnson (who is “purely your creation,” the judge earlier tells Tescott [32]). Here, Twelve identifies the “problem” as “what nobody talks of—much...It’s about Henry Johnson” (62). This moment is perhaps an example—to apply Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s terminology—where historically “one particular [non-normative] sexuality...was distinctively constituted as secrecy”
(Epistemology 73). That is, “The Monster” recognizes non-normative sexualities or sexual desires by specifically not naming them. As Johnson becomes the secret that nobody talks about publicly (yet repeatedly discusses behind closed doors), the unusual and somewhat clandestine relationship between Trescott and Johnson also becomes the secret that everybody knows. As I will discuss momentarily with the de-humanization of Johnson (and his transformation from a person to a “thing” without a name), sexuality in “The Monster” remains elusive and undefined, yet almost always present. Furthermore, Johnson is not a threat to the stability of Whilomville’s society until he transgresses sexual boundaries in a way that makes him worthy of being expunged from the town. Although the reader cannot fully witness or understand the relationship between Johnson and Trescott (whose motives for keeping Johnson alive, apart from gratitude for saving his son’s life, are murky at best), we can, as Scott Derrick suggests, examine areas of the text that “repeatedly furnish a space in which the bliss of imperfectly apprehended desires” emerge (Monumental Anxieties 27).

When Trescott states to the judge that “It is hard for a man to know what to do” (33)—seemingly in reference to whether or not to let Johnson live—I propose that Trescott, here, is referring to his conflict between loyalty to his family and his commitment to Johnson. “It is hard [for Trescott] to know,” that is, whether to remain with his family and obligations as a father and town doctor or choose to rehabilitate and “tend to” Johnson. The statement above epitomizes the problem of masculinity that my project, overall, attempts to address. As we have already discussed in terms of
Johnson’s dandyisms, “The Monster” frames a discussion of gender politics intertwined in a racial discourse; in addition to the racial strife in the story, the underlying tensions are also framed around questions of gender and sexual politics. The narrator establishes Whilomville as a town divided on gender norms and codes of behavior. As already established, Johnson seems to defy these expectations in his public performance as a dandy. By transgressing these social codes, as I suggest Johnson and Trescott both do, these male characters expose the cracks or division in Whilomville’s social order and codes. We see this rupture no more pointedly than in the last scene in which Trescott discovers his wife upstairs, crying, “curled in an armchair” (64). Even while Trescott attempts to comfort his grieving wife, he remains distracted, “trying to count the cups. There were nineteen of them” (65). The unused tea cups signify his disconnectedness from the domestic, feminine realm; the tea cups, like the women in the story, remain untouched. Trescott’s ultimate allegiance, we learn, is to Johnson, and his wife’s grief, particularly in contrast to Johnson’s suffering, seems petty and superficial by the end of the story, like the tea cups themselves.

The repetitive elements of the text require the men of the Trescott family to re-experience earlier traumas. Namely, for Dr. Trescott, even though he is unharmed physically in the fire, he is “ruined” by the decisions he makes to save Johnson. Also, Jimmie recreates the flower-bed scene from earlier in the text, although this time, the broken flower on display is Johnson’s mutated body. When Jimmie invites a group of boys over to view Johnson, the narrator says, “Jimmie seemed to reap all the joys of
the owner and exhibitor of one of the world’s marvels, while his audience remained at a distance—awed and entranced, fearful and envious” (Crane 53). The boys challenge each other, in a test of adolescent bravery, to touch Johnson, who is harmlessly “seated on a box…basking in the rays of the afternoon sun” (52). Despite his previous bond with Johnson, Jimmie is the first to approach Johnson on the box and touch him. And while the narrator increasingly treats Johnson (as Jimmie does) as an inanimate object, as something to be viewed and touched, rather than as a thinking, feeling person, we may consider Johnson’s nonverbal response as represented through his bodily action. After being touched by the boys, Johnson, ambiguously pleading to or celebrating God, turned “its black crepe countenance toward the sky, and was waving its arms in time to a religious chant” (56). While the boys’ game exemplifies the town’s response to Johnson (of shock, disgust, wonder, etc.), in the moments in which Johnson is most victimized or objectified, we see evidence of what Freud codes as the compulsion to repeat (to return to an earlier time in order to master it). Singing spirituals, which occurs periodically throughout the story, Johnson seems to be mourning an ungrievable or unidentifiable loss. Lee Clark Mitchell persuasively argues that Johnson’s facelessness is an example of a “negative instance” in which we want to restore the missing object, or deformity, to its previous condition of completeness (“Face, Race, and Disfiguration” 175). Hence, Johnson’s repetitive behavior, specifically his unpressed orality—his “crooning a weird line of negro melody that was scarcely more than a thread of sound” (Crane 53)—literalizes the speaking wound as a “parable
of trauma and its uncanny repetition” in search of returning to a previous time or condition (Caruth 9).

While I have stressed, in my reading of “The Monster,” the importance of touch—both as a sign of desire or connection (between Jimmie and Johnson initially, for example, or the judge’s cane-stroking) and a sign of violence (when Jimmie later touches Johnson as a dare)—I want to emphasize the power of naming in “The Monster.” Speech, overall, plays an important role in the text. In the beginning of the story, Jimmie loses the ability to speak when he cannot tell his father that he has run over the flower bed. And, following the fire, the narrator fails to settle upon the appropriate terminology for coding or naming Johnson or for identifying the nature of his relationship with Trescott. In other words, Johnson no longer maintains his masculine subjectivity, but is somehow so intrinsically changed after the accident that he becomes entirely de-humanized: throughout the story, the narrator refers to Johnson as “a monster,” “the creature,” “it,” “the dark figure,” and “the thing.” All the meanwhile Johnson remains hyper-embodied or more visible to Whilomville’s residents than ever after he loses his face. He is unattached from his previous self and masculine identity and instead becomes an unidentifiable, transient character that haunts and shapes the narrative structure. “The Monster” is not solely a narrative of trauma; rather, it is a traumatized narrative in which the narrator himself compulsively returns to Johnson’s body as the site of trauma in order to master what occurred or what has been lost. What is perhaps most frustrating following Johnson’s traumatic
accident is that we are waiting for Johnson to speak; we expect him to name his loss or apply blame to another party for his defacement. Yet, continually, Johnson refuses us this information, and, instead, he embodies the “wound that cries out” incomprehensibly.

Johnson’s behavior, such as the oral recitation of spirituals and waving his hands in the air, may be coded as erratic or “hysterical” by the town (therefore, worthy of extermination), yet psychologist William James, writing in the 1890s, indirectly illustrates how culture (or morality, in his case) influences our interpretation of repeated behavior. For instance, although James identifies habits as being rooted in the body (even “the most complex habits…[are] nothing but concatenated discharges in the nerve-centers,” James writes [4]), he distinguishes between “healthy” habits of repetition (like a person brushing his teeth or hair) and “unhealthy” impulses, which he describes as the result of “irritable weakness” or a person having an unstable or weak character (305-6). James’ discussion signifies the important role culture plays in determining behavior: Johnson is simply hysterical because the town says he is, and those characters who question this collective assumption, like Martha Goodwin or Trescott, are silenced or marginalized.

I bring in James near the end of my discussion of “The Monster” because it unites the themes of the text’s emphasis on the physicality of Johnson’s body (and its incompleteness after the accident) and the ambiguity inherent in labeling or identifying others because of social or behavioral differences. After Johnson scares a little girl in a
window at a party, the narrator asks, “Was it a man? She didn’t know. It was simply a thing, a dreadful thing” (46). Therefore, just as the town cannot name or identify Johnson or explain his inexplicable bond with Tresco—t- one that certainly violates racial, class, and, as I have suggested, sexual boundaries—the narrator cannot either. The narrative’s struggle to define Johnson’s identity is a struggle to define his sexual identity. Now, faceless, Johnson is no longer the “graceful form” (14), a masculine beauty for the town to enjoy and mock, but instead is an unnamed thing in need of regulation and expulsion.

The narrative’s repetitive nature, then, is not only located in Johnson’s mournful wailing as the faceless voice that haunts Whilomville. Rather, we may also regard the narrator’s constant returning to Johnson’s body as an attempt to name it, mirroring Johnson’s trauma and repetition compulsion. The nature of Tresco’s relationship with Johnson remains veiled in the text just as Johnson’s face remains veiled or hidden; Tresco and Johnson’s story is the secret that “nobody talks of.” Although the residents of Whilomville are determined to set up boundaries and definitions for others, the narrator shows cultural and linguistic ambiguities by failing to pin down terms and conditions and is content, it seems, to allow Johnson remain “a thing.” Yet this conclusion problematizes the structure of the story overall: rather than creating a trajectory that clarifies the narrative or set of events, it simply distorts the behavior of the town until everything appears uncannily repetitive. For instance, coming into contact with Johnson, characters are described as responding with
hysterical, animal-like behavior—barking like dogs, for example—mirroring Johnson’s nonsensical “satirical chuckle” (34). The narrator compulsively returns to Johnson’s body after the fire, conforming to Freud’s theory of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, signifying the narrative attempt to make sense of Johnson’s incompleteness. As Mitchell explains, “to be confronted with disfiguration is to desire precisely what is now gone, to want nothing more than the deformed object restored to its original state” (“Face, Race, and Disfiguration” 175). With this in mind, we may consider the ways in which the narrative voice not only returns to Johnson’s body in order to restore it or make sense of Johnson’s physical loss, but also as a way of returning Johnson to an inanimate state, as something other-than-human, as the ultimate form of narrative containment. In this view, the narrator usurps Tresscott’s role as the “creator” of Johnson’s (perpetual) “monstering”: Johnson will remain an “other” as long as the narrator keeps returning to his body and de-humanizing it in efforts to control or suppress Johnson’s non-normative and expansive desires.

III.

Frank Norris’ *The Octopus* further examines the relationship between Freud’s compulsion to repeat and non-normative sexualities in American literature. Eighteen years before the novel opens, Vanamee arrives too late to meet his female love interest, Angéle, who is raped by an unknown “Other” and later dies after childbirth (Norris 38). Seeking to return to a time before (or during) the rape in order to understand or
potentially stop it, Vanamee turns his desire towards inanimate objects in order to resurrect the memory (and body) of Angélé. Paradoxically, by Vanamee returning to and sexualizing Angélé’s grave, not only does Norris replace the female body with a grave (one in which Vanamee seems to desire to crawl inside, literally acting out Freud’s death drive), but Vanamee also seems to desire to inhabit both subject positions of the rapist and the raped, thereby enacting a non-normative sexuality by submitting his own body to the unknown male “Other” (the rapist) who never returns. Consequently, Vanamee repeatedly reenacts the “fort-da” game that Freud hypothesizes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as re-experiencing a loss “so as to make oneself master of it” (16). Compulsively returning to Angélé’s grave allows Vanamee to experience what Caruth describes as “the continual reappearance of a death…not quite grasped” (36-7). Furthermore, in attempting to make sense of her death (which, I contend, is also the loss of his coherent, “heterosexual” identity), Vanamee constructs his masculine, non-normative identification in relation to his desire for the mysterious “Other,” only to dangerously embody his non-normative desires.

In *The Octopus*, Norris focuses on three main male subjects who all perform non-normative models of masculine sexuality. First, Presley, the “morbidly sensitive” poet (8), has traveled out West to write a great epic poem depicting the plight of the working-class ranchers. Presley’s contribution, therefore, is purely intellectual or artistic; unlike the ranchers, he does not actually own any land or cultivate any produce. He is literally and figuratively non-reproductive. Annixter, the most virile
and hyper-masculine of the ranchers (we are told he is “diametrically opposed” to Presley [27]), is strangely plagued with a (femininely-coded) stomach disorder and “a fierce masculine nonchalance” towards women; he is more or less a misogynist (80). Anniixer eventually marries a woman and conforms to her domestic standards, but the domesticification and feminization of Anniixer shows a change in his identity from the ultimate, woman-hating bachelor to a domesticated, impotent husband. Vanamee, therefore, is perhaps the most interesting male figure in terms of how his masculinity is narratively (re)shaped as a result of personal trauma. He defies typical codes of masculine behavior regarding work and labor and, following the loss of Angèle, remains stuck in the past. As the narrator explains, with Angèle’s rape (and death), Vanamee’s “life had suddenly stopped at a certain moment of its development” (34). Vanamee’s stasis or lack of development mimics Freud’s theory of perverse sexualities in the Three Essays—that is, non-normative sexual desires result from the failure to develop fully into heterosexuality. Vanamee’s emotional stagnation also complicates the dominant narrative’s emphasis on (and privileging of) productivity and all forms of (re)production: sexual, agricultural, biological, and artistic, to name a few. As mentioned in the introduction, Mark Seltzer describes “the naturalist machine” as that which transplants “the threat posed by the ‘women people’ (the reduction of men to ‘mere animalcules’ in the process of procreation)” by “project[ing] an alternative to biological reproduction” (32). Thus, the emphasis on the agricultural production (of the ranchers’ wheat) in The Octopus comes to represent a perverted form of non-
biological reproduction, one that essentially removes the “women people” from the equation, making Norris’ text an exclusively all-male arena.

While Vanamee’s storyline is arguably centered on the breaking of a heterosexual pairing (Vanamee and Angéle), I contend that this trauma results not only in Vanamee’s fractured masculinity, but also allows for the narrative to erect Vanamee’s non-normative sexual desires through his (queer) identification with and attachment to the “mysterious” male rapist. Not knowing the identity of the rapist, who we are told “had withdrawn into an impenetrable mystery” following the rape, Vanamee strives to achieve the invisibility or abstraction of the rapist’s body; in essence, Vanamee mimics the Other’s disappearance by doing so himself (38). After Angéle’s death, Vanamee retreats into the wilderness much like the mythologized and abstracted “Other” (a “prowler of the night, this strange, fearful figure, with an unseen face” [38]). However, the narrator emphasizes Vanamee’s hyper-embodiment as a traumatized man by focusing, when Vanamee returns, on his marked face: “stamped with an unspeakable sadness, a deathless grief, the permanent imprint of a tragedy long past, but yet a living issue” (34). I am suggesting, thus, that as a result of his loss of Angéle, Vanamee inhabits the identity of the unknown rapist—paradoxically, an abstracted identity he can never fully achieve.

My reading of Vanamee’s trauma is influenced by Caruth’s reading of trauma as a “double telling,” as referenced previously, in which trauma is not only a story of loss, but also “the story of the unbearable nature of…survival” (7). While Angéle is
the one who is raped and dies, the event has a larger, reverberating effect on Vanamee’s subjectivity whose entire future and well-being are stifled by the loss of Angéle and his heterosexual union with her. Thus, utilizing the Greek myth of Pyramus and Thisbe in which young lovers mistakenly kill themselves due to an error in timing (a prototype for Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet), Norris perverts the myth by having one of the lovers remain alive. Consistent with Freudian theory of sexual development, we may consider that Vanamee arrives to the scene of the rape both “too late” and “too soon.” Greg Forter explains a form of trauma as:

…the psychic result of a (sexual) knowledge that comes at once too soon and too late. It comes ‘too soon’ in that the event communicating this knowledge happens before the infant can grasp its significance; and it comes ‘too late’ because, by the time that infant is old enough to understand what has befallen him, it has, quite simply, already befallen him… (264)

Although Forter (using Freud) discusses trauma in terms of infantile sexuality, we may more broadly consider the temporal issues at hand here in relation to Vanamee and his compulsive desire to return to the traumatic site in order to master it. Vanamee arrives “too soon” upon the sexual knowledge of intercourse because he has not yet consummated his relationship with Angéle: like the child viewing the primal scene before he is “ready,” Vanamee “stumbled over her prostrate body, inert and unconscious, in the shadow of the overspiring trees” (38). Thus, he witnesses the (sexual) experience before he can make sense of it or process what has happened: “at the formative and most impressionable period of his life” (36), we are told he remains
“half conscious of what was going forward” (38). Similarly, the narrator remains traumatized afterwards, unable to construct a coherent narrative, claiming, “It was impossible afterwards to reconstruct the manner of its occurrence” (38).

At the same time that Vanamee arrives “too soon” upon the sexual knowledge (of Angéle’s de-virginizing), he also arrives “too late”: both literally and figuratively. Indeed, “arriving but a score of moments later” (38), Vanamee is too late to save Angéle from the sexual violence of the rapist, who pretends to be Vanamee in the dark in order to seduce her (“All unsuspecting she gave herself to the embrace of a strange pair of arms” [38]). Also, he arrives too late in the sense that he will never be able to consummate his sexual relationship with Angéle and, instead, his ego incorporates the loss: “The long, dull ache, the poignant grief had now become a part of him” (39).

(The theme of arriving “too late” resonates throughout much of The Octopus, also referring, for example, to Presley’s repeated statements that he was “born too late” to write a great epic poem (41); his artistic sensibilities, the narrator suggests, belong in an earlier literary era.)

Regarding sexual development and Freud’s “stages” of sexuality, it is important to consider the discussion of sexual perversions in Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality. Freud argues that perverse sexualities (or what I am calling non-normative sexualities) are the result of either:

(a) extend[ing], in an anatomical sense, beyond the regions of the body that are designed for sexual union, or (b) linger[ing] over the
intermediate relations to the sexual object which should normally be traversed rapidly on the path towards the final sexual aim. (16)

By having his sexual life “stopped,” as the narrator informs us, Vanamee exemplifies Freud’s theory of sexual perversions. That is, Vanamee was not born “a wanderer, a shunner of men, a sojourner in waste places” (35), but rather, because of cultural events (the rape and death of Angèle), he reverts to a life separate from the other male ranchers. The stagnation in his sexual development (failing to get over Angèle’s rape, which he discovers “too soon” and yet “too late”) prevents Vanamee from proceeding “normally” to his “final sexual aim”: ideally, a (heterosexual) woman. If Vanamee’s sexual desires are not enacted upon, or fully developed, then they materialize in the form of neurotic symptoms, as Freud contends. As we see with Norris’ brutish Vandover, Vanamee develops “veritable hysteria” in which he suffers from “violent illusions” and a “diseased” imagination in pursuit of rectifying his loss(es) (147).

Vanamee’s disappearance and reappearance in the novel also dramatizes Freud’s “fort/da” game in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The novel begins with Vanamee’s return to the ranch after several years. Describing Vanamee’s first meeting with Presley, the narrator states, “It was six years since Presley and Vanamee had met…Then, as abruptly, as mysteriously as he had come, Vanamee disappeared” (33). Not only does the narrator perform the “fort/da” game with Vanamee’s character (and body), but Vanamee also repeatedly returns to Angèle’s grave in the Mission Garden (a church garden) in false attempts to “master” his loss. In these erotically-charged
scenes, Vanamee seems to substitute the grave for Angéle’s now intangible body, thus stalling his development towards his “final sexual aim” of heteronormativity:

He bent down, dropping upon one knee, a hand upon the headstone, and read again the inscription. Then instinctively his hand left the stone and rested upon the low mound of turf, touching it with the softness of a caress; and then, before he was aware of it, he was stretched at full length upon the earth, beside the grave, his arms about the low mound, his lips pressed against the grass with which it was covered. The pent-up grief of nearly twenty years rose again within his heart, and overflowed, irresistible, violent, passionate...Vanamee was no longer master of himself—no longer knew what he was doing. (152-53)

This scene replicates the sex act that he was unable to perform with Angéle before her death; it reads like one lover seducing another (willingly or not) by “touching it with the softness of a caress” and even shows his union with nature (kissing the grass that covers the grave). As this passage indicates, Vanamee’s grief is replaced with sexual frustration and, arguably, sexual relief as his heart eventually “overflow[s]” with emotion. Ironically, Norris’ most spiritual and ephemeral character (“all his heart was in the little coffin in the Mission garden” [39]) is also his most materialized. Vanamee’s body, that is, speaks the grief of his trauma. Through Angéle’s rape and death, Vanamee’s body becomes the wound that cries out by inhabiting the “mysterious” performance and the sexual role of the rapist “Other” and also by substituting Angéle’s grave for her material form and returning to it compulsively on several occasions.

In his reading of the novel, John Jolly hypothesizes that Vanamee is Angéle’s rapist (341). Jolly contends that Vanamee has erased the rape from his mind and that
his grief is “the outward manifestation of the struggle between the fleshly and the spiritual elements of his being” (211). In this reading, Vanamee blocks the memory because it confirms his worst fears: that he is violent, that his material body takes precedence over the spiritual, and that he is not harmonious with nature. Alternatively, we may consider a reading of the text that holds that Vanamee is not the rapist, but rather by returning to the site where the rape occurs, Vanamee performs the sex act (with Angéle’s grave, for instance) in an attempt to identify as the rapist. This form of identification, as I have suggested, indicates Vanamee’s paradoxical desire to transcend his own “fractured” male identity and inhabit both the rapist’s as well as Angéle’s subjectivities. For example, later in the text, when Vanamee visits her grave, he desires to be touched (arguably, the “passive” role of Angéle): “he demanded, he implored an Answer...something real, even if the reality were fancied...a hand in the dark clasping his groping fingers, a breath, human, warm, fragrant, familiar, like a soft, sweet caress on his shrunken cheeks” (151). Quite simply, Vanamee, at this moment, demands the reciprocation of touch, though the grave cannot touch him back. (He says at another point in the text that in the garden, “I see nothing, nothing touches me” [217].) Because of this lack of reciprocation, Norris portrays Vanamee as a sexual oddity, unable to fulfill his sexual needs or roles. As Seltzer explains, Norris’ text upholds an image of an “inexhaustible masturbator, spilling his seed on the ground...[which] places power back into the hands of the immortal and autonomous male technology of generation” (31). Considering Seltzer’s argument, Vanamee
reasserts his sexual power as a man by simulating a sex act with Angéle’s grave, acting the part of the rapist, as an attempt to reassemble his fractured masculinity, while also, in other moments, acting the part of Angéle and desiring to be sexually touched and dominated.

The questions I have raised regarding Vanamee’s identity and sexuality all center on the performance of his body and his relationship to other men. The simulated rape scenes, for example, are complicated by his relationship to Father Sarria, the priest of the Mission church. Following the rape and death of Angéle, Vanamee disappears for two years, and Father Sarria is the first one to see him again, “returning from a visit to the sick at Bonneville, [Father Sarria] met him on the Upper Road” (39). Later, when Vanamee is visited by what the narrator describes as “the Vision” (“she rose into light and life, divinely pure” [391]), the narrator explains, “Father Sarria was there,” and it is Father Sarria who explains that the Vision is not Angéle’s ghost, but her daughter (the product of Angéle’s rape). Thus, Norris sets up scenes in which we are expecting a heterosexual union between a man and a woman (or a female “Vision”) and, instead, he concludes the scene with two men. Also, the narrator reveals Vanamee’s strange mental strength that allows him to call forth Father Sarria only using his mind. After one of these episodes, Father Sarria tells Vanamee, “I—I had to come. I do not know why. It is a great force—a power—I don’t like it. Vanamee, sometimes it frightens me” (138). Like the (sexual) “secret” that is unnamed in “The Monster,” I suggest that the narrator perverts Vanamee’s unnamed
telepathic power (a “sixth sense” [387]) as a marker for his queer sexuality or sexual desires: his ability to draw men (and their bodies) to him with his mind. His strange “power of attraction” does not work on (the now-dead) Angéle, and when he believes that it does with the resurrection of the Vision, we are told by Father Sarria that she is Angéle’s daughter, not Angéle’s resurrected ghost. Thus, despite earlier claims that Vanamee only wants Angéle to return in a material form (“I don’t want her spiritualised, exalted, glorified, celestial. I want her” [143]), when Angéle metaphorically appears—in the form of her daughter—Vanamee de-materializes her, so that she is “divinely pure” and a “creation of sleep…a dream” (391).

As Jolly explains, the two scenes (Vanamee’s “raping” of the grave and later, the appearance of the Vision):

represent a sort of cinematic technique, wherein a scene is performed twice, with unlike resolutions. Vanamee’s recollection of Angéle in the garden reveals a preoccupation with the sensual, whereas he views the daughter as the supernal creature. Having triumphed over the flesh, he remains in a posture of adoration… (210)

What Jolly defines as “adoration” is an explanation for why Vanamee does not consummate his relationship “Angéle” during her (re)appearance in the garden. He contends that Vanamee has “triumphed over the flesh” and “fleshly” sexual desires. Yet I suggest that the narrator’s inclusion of the “fort/da” theme reinforces Vanamee’s internal fracture. That is, as Freud suggests in the Three Essays, “the tension of sexual excitement is counted as an unpleasurable feeling, we are at once brought up against the fact that it is also undoubtedly felt as pleasurable” (75). Freud even mentions that
fixating on sexual tension, which produces pleasure/unpleasure, can result in compulsive behavior (77). Therefore, for Vanamee in the garden (as with the child playing the “fort/da” game), the disappearance, in some ways, is the more important feature of the game. The narrator fixates on Vanamee’s loss in such a way that arguably renders it pleasurable; his suffering becomes titillating and “pornographic,” as T.J. Jackson Lears suggests in regards to photography and wounded soldiers’ bodies during and after the Civil War. Similarly, both Vanamee and the narrator become fixated on the myth of the “Other”; we are told that “Vanamee could not forget the tragedy of the Other; the terror of many years ago” (388). The “Other” in many ways is resurrected or memorialized in a way that Angéle never is: Vanamee performs the role of the “Other” by remaining elusive and distant from the other characters and, in addition, he reenacts the role of the rapist with her grave, arguably desecrating her memory (and grave) rather than honoring it.

It is important to note that the narrator considers Vanamee’s ending as victorious. As the narrator informs us, Vanamee “triumph[ed] over the grave” (393). Quite simply, this statement signifies that Vanamee has “won” by defeating his corporeal (or “primal”) urges and is able to live at peace with himself. Additionally, he has “triumphed” by literally remaining alive at the end of the text, one of the few male characters to do so. The narrator certainly wants to resurrect Vanamee as a symbol of hope in the novel. In his final speech to Presley, Vanamee declares, “good…in the end remains” (636). I want to complicate this notion based on a few points: first, it is
Vanamee’s non-normative masculine subjectivity (mirroring the “Other”) that allows him to survive. Simply put, he is distant from the other ranchers because he is not concerned with biological reproduction or marriage following the loss of Angéle. Instead, he inhabits a queer masculine identity unlike the other ranchers. Therefore, regarding evolutionary reproduction, the novel seems to suggest that it stops with Vanamee. In his final speech, Vanamee describes death and grief as “only negatives…There is only life, and the suppression of life, that we, foolishly, say is death” (635). Vanamee’s final words mark the strategy he adopts to reconcile his traumatic losses or, more specifically, how he thinks about death: along with the narrator, Vanamee suppresses details of Angéle’s rape that never surface. The question remains, however: who raped Angéle? The identity of the “Other.” I suggest, does not ultimately matter, but rather the act of forgetting and remembering the tragic experience shapes Vanamee’s non-normative behavior and queer masculine subjectivity and, additionally, influences the narrative’s traumatized structure. We are told earlier by Vanamee, “Hope, after all, is only memory seen reversed” (143). If the future is an indication or imprint of the past “reversed,” as Vanamee’s observation alludes to, then we are left with a world in which memory and traumatic memory, in particular, continually haunt us (like a haunting visual image that we cannot forget). As the narrator explains earlier in the novel, trauma has the effect of producing “a hideous blur, a bloat, a vague, terrible confusion” (38). Vanamee’s final words,
therefore, are not optimistic. Rather, the text focuses on the haunting of the past—even into the future—which remains limitless and unresolved.

IV.

In his introduction to Freud’s the *Three Essays*, Steven Marcus proposes that it is Freud’s “most truly Darwinian work,” stating:

[The *Three Essays*] occupies the boundary that both separates and connects the biological and the psychological realms of existence, and it touches unavoidably upon the complex relations that obtain between phylogenesis and ontogenesis. It is about ‘origins’ in more ways than one, and is written from a consistently evolutionary point of view. (xxxiv)

As I have suggested, Freud is concerned with origins and categories in the *Three Essays* and, to a lesser extent, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, yet both works—in opposition to Darwin’s emphasis on heredity—accentuate the roles that both family and culture play in shaping sexual and gender identifications. Disputing that trauma is rooted in biology, Freud makes a similar case about adult (male) sexual perversions in the *Three Essays*: Freud asserts that neither trauma nor sexuality can be identified as originating solely in the body. American literary naturalism reinforces this point, I suggest, by challenging conceptions of essentialism and heredity. Both Crane’s “The Monster” and Norris’ *The Octopus* create male characters who exemplify fractured masculinities. The characters return repeatedly to sites of trauma in order to master their losses and obtain a sense of completion by seeking out previous states of
inanimateness. I have also suggested that the narrative voices in both these works reinforce Caruth’s discussion of the “wound that cries out”: not only are the male subjects’ bodies marked as traumatized, but the narrators compulsively return to the characters’ bodies in order to classify or regulate their non-normative desires or behavior. However, it is a paradox that while the male traumatized subjects remain stifled (unable to develop fully into “heterosexuals,” according to Freud’s trajectory of sexual development), the narrators themselves repeat a similar pattern by failing to create a narrative trajectory and instead, produce fractured narratives that are cyclical and repetitive, replicating the “individual stuckness” of the characters themselves (Fleissner 166). Ironically, this “stuckness” provides for the characters’ survival: rather than socially “declining,” male compulsion allows these characters to remain stagnant or in place. Male compulsion, therefore, is reinforced not only in the characters’ repetition compulsion, but also in the narratives’ repetitive patterns of remembering and forgetting, exemplifying the literary and philosophical fragmentation that makes American naturalism so provocative and contradictory.
Chapter 2: Violent Form: Vandover and the Brute and The Sea-Wolf

“The sexuality of most male human beings contains an element of aggressiveness—a desire to subjugate; the biological significance of it seems to lie in the need for overcoming the resistance of the sexual object by means other than the process of wooing... in which satisfaction is entirely conditional on the humiliation and maltreatment of the object.”

-Sigmund Freud, Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (1905)

I.

The field of trauma studies relies upon a discourse of violence. As referenced in the first chapter, Cathy Caruth describes the subject’s psychic trauma as a bodily infliction (a “wound”). Similarly, Kaja Silverman identifies the “unbinding of the coherence of the male ego” as the dissolution of the denial of castration (121). Conventional masculine identities, according to Silverman’s reading of Freud, depend on the male body—specifically, the phallus—remaining intact in order to perpetuate or maintain the culture’s dominant fiction (15-16). Scott Derrick, like Caruth and Silverman, employs a discourse of violence when discussing the “rupture” male Americans experienced in the mid to late nineteenth century as a result of cultural changes, notably industrialization, which involved the male child’s move from “a female-centered, domestic world of childhood...[to] a non-domestic outside world of masculine economic, political, and recreational activity” (Monumental Anxieties 12). The “social separation of masculine and feminine spaces and activities,” Derrick notes, had a particularly traumatizing effect on historical male subjectivity. Separated from
childhood’s female-centered sphere, the masculine psyche further incorporated the primary signifier of the myth of maleness: the privilege of the phallus. Both Silverman’s and Derrick’s work on male subjectivity identifies moments illustrating “a crisis of self-definition” in which the dominant fiction of male adequacy is shattered (Monumental Anxieties 13).

The previous chapter looked at compulsion and, specifically, the repetition of unpleasure in order to make sense of past events. In particular, I attempted to focus on the relationship between the male body and narrative structure: both in terms of the narrator reconstituting the site of the male body as the site of trauma (as with Henry Johnson) and the way in which the male body returns itself to the site of trauma (or as the site of trauma) in order to master an irreparable loss (as with Vanamee). This chapter builds on that previous discussion by looking specifically at the connection or interplay between theories of sexuality and sexual response pertinent to the turn of the twentieth century and the violence of male subjectivity. I am not proposing, as Greg Forer does in his essay, “Freud, Faulkner, Caruth: Trauma and the Politics of Literary Form,” a systemic reading of trauma as indicative to sexuality—that is, that Freud’s model for sexuality as traumatic is somehow a transhistorical condition inherent in all identity formation. Rather, my reading of Freud’s model of sexuality as inherently traumatic emphasizes its psycho-historical resonance at the turn of the twentieth century. In other words, a cultural understanding of male subjectivity significantly influenced Freud’s model of sexuality as traumatic, I suggest, and this reading of
subjectivity unites the reflexive, historical relationships between discourses of sexuality and psychoanalysis in the first parts of the twentieth century.

Freud is writing at a time when a post-Civil War American culture commodified and exploited the male body. In what he describes as “the gratuitous killing and maiming” of men’s bodies in American journalism post-Civil War, T.J. Jackson Lears describes newspapers’ “lurid dwelling on the human suffering caused by railroad and steamship accidents, fires, floods, and other disasters” (120). Men’s bodies, as mentioned, became an accepted yet quasi-pornographic site for public dissemination and exploitation. Also discussing male injury and its public exposure, Jennifer Travis argues, “The narrowing of culturally acceptable forms of physical difference, which pathologized physical disability, corresponded with the expanding recognition of pain and ‘disabling’ emotional distress of able-bodied white middle-class men” (164). Therefore, as Travis contends, white, middle-class men, primarily as a result of the Civil War, were able to reconstruct and control notions of emotional loss, thereby affecting the ways in which injury, and male injury in particular, were “culturally rendered” (Travis 167). As a result of the Civil War and other causes of physical injury at the end of the nineteenth century, including injury from “rail travel, factory production, and warfare” (Micale and Lerner 23), American literature and culture commodified male injury and commercialized the reproduction of its visual representations.
Discussing the commodification of the female form in American naturalism, Lori Merish argues that the gaze “is authorized by a masculine aesthetics underwritten by male economic power” (320-21). Both Norris’ *Vandover and the Brute* and London’s *The Sea-Wolf* affirm Merish’s argument that the viewed object or body is commodified and regulated through the gaze; yet, additionally, the male-on-male gaze, while violent, also creates a textual space for non-normative sexual desires or fantasies. Thus, rather than policing desire, as Merish contends, the male gaze in the naturalist works I explore partly defies this expectation by breaking open the exclusively heterosexual paradigm from which it originates. In other words, through male violence, Norris’ and London’s texts create a literary space for male desire and identification through the “dangerous” exploration and exploitation of men’s bodies. Thus, *Vandover and the Brute* and *The Sea-Wolf* celebrate the textual “carnival of brutality” (London 86).

Eroticizing violence, the male subjects I examine in this chapter make pain and sexuality visible and manageable through the pornographic display and identification with other men’s bodies. In other words, because of cultural restrictions, these male subjects identify through other men’s bodies, simultaneously desiring to inhabit (or incorporate) *and* destroy those bodies. My reading primarily stems from Freud’s theory of sexuality and its inherent violence, particularly in the forms of masochism and sadism, as referenced in the epigraph, yet builds on Freud’s hypotheses by further exploring a historical understanding of male subjectivity in the nineteenth century and
its relationship to what Leo Bersani identifies as the “shattering nature of sexuality” (89-90). In addition, I conclude my textual readings by looking at Judith Butler’s discussion of gender melancholy as it relates to male subjectivity and heterosexual identity formation in naturalist texts.

II.

In his discussion of the “fort/da” game in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud describes his grandson’s attempt to master the disappearance (and reappearance) of the child’s mother. The game, produced in the form of a wooden toy standing in for the mother’s body, reenacts the mother’s departure which “had to be enacted as a necessary preliminary for her joyful return” (15). Norris’ *Vandover and the Brute*, which was primarily written between 1894-5 (although Norris had drafted earlier short stories involving a “Vandover” prototype since 1889), narrativizes Freud’s “fort/da” game through the disappearance of Vandover’s mother and the consequent childhood trauma he never seems to master or overcome. The novel depicts the title character as a young male artist and recent college graduate, who, returning to his hometown of San Francisco, contracts syphilis from a “loose” woman. Falling lower in the social ranks, Vandover ends the novel economically impoverished and physically decrepit. Suffering from a degenerative condition called “lycanthropy-pathesis” (147), Vandover experiences "nervous attacks" and, at times, believes himself to be a wolf. A famous, related case study, despite its discrepancies, is Freud's the “Wolf Man.”
Although the case study was not published until 1918, Freud began treating Sergei Pankejeff (the “Wolf Man”) in 1910. Suffering from nervous attacks and depression, Pankejeff sought the help of Freud who interpreted his suffering and nightmares as the result of having witnessed his parents during a primal scene involving copulation from behind (ambiguously anal or vaginal). The immediate link between Freud’s patient and Norris’ character is the emphasis on wolves and exposure to and incorporation of “primal” sexuality: Vandover eventually gets on all fours, naked in a hotel room, in front of a male friend, and growls, “Wolf—wolf—wolf” (Norris 146-47). Like the “Wolf Man,” Vandover experiences early childhood trauma—both in the form of his mother’s death and in his exposure to female sexuality “too soon.” Both of these experiences, I suggest, influence his sadistic treatment of women and the over-development of his internal “brute”—a repeated trope in naturalism—representing the eventual masochistic destruction of his body and mind.

While discussed by critics primarily as a morality story (or a male version of the “fallen woman” narrative), Vandover informs readers of important issues relating to the “desire of vice, the perverse, blind, and reckless desire of the male” (110). Some literary critics, such as Sherwood Williams, contend that the novel reinforces the innateness of perverse sexualities, including homosexuality. My discussion of Vandover’s traumatic loss of his mother, influenced by a Freudian reading, counters Williams’ argument by challenging the “nature” of naturalism and arguing that the portrayal of male sexualities in Vandover enforces their fluidity and flexibility and
their ability to defy linguistic barriers and coherent narrative structures. Norris’ text shows that male sexualities are constructed through the performance of the male body and its eventual violent textual de(con)struction.

In “Frank Norris and Romance,” George W. Johnson describes Vandover as the “attempt to reconcile in a work of realistic romance his [Norris’] era’s ambiguous pursuit of rugged individualism and feminized nobility” (61). Williams more thoroughly examines the strain between these two ideologies in Norris’ novel by arguing that Vandover’s decline as an artist and aesthete—or what Williams identifies as prescribing to the logic of decadence or, as Johnson describes, Vandover’s “feminized nobility”—affirms an atavistic view of sexuality as rooted in the body, or biology, rather than in culture. As evidence, Williams contends that the physicality of Vandover’s “brutishness,” which the narrator identifies as the source of Vandover’s corporeal desires (sexual or otherwise), confirms that Vandover’s “lycanthropic metamorphosis” (in which he eventually believes himself to be a wolf) is a “reversion to a prior stage of evolution” (725). In other words, the “natural” brute—and his sexual desires (same-sex or not)—win over the “contaminating” decadent model, which historically emphasized “the purely mental, antinatural status of homosexuality” (Williams 721).

Through Vandover’s mental and physical “degeneration,” Norris shows that sexual desire is somehow “natural”; however, this does not mean that the direction of our sexual desire (or what we might today label as “orientation”) is innate. My reading
of Vandover’s sexuality and its development (rather than “degeneration”) looks at the destructive nature of sexuality and examines the cultural construction of the “brute” as sexually perverse. It is problematic that while naturalism “naturalizes” non-normative sexualities, as Williams contends, the hyper-masculine, hyper-sexualized “brute” is nevertheless a historicized, cultural construct (as June Howard’s work foregrounds). This emphasis on corporeality does not imply, as William asserts, that Vandover’s (non-normative) sexuality is innate. Rather, we may consider the ways in which his early childhood traumas affect his corporeal and physical responses. Because of early traumatic losses, Vandover’s sexuality is aligned with violence: with women, Vandover enacts his sexual desire in the form of sadistic violence, and with men, he corporeally subjects himself in a degrading and destructive manner. I will briefly discuss the sexual politics of the novel before I examine the masochism in the text, as Vandover’s “brute” overpowers his sensitive, “feminine” side, which is an example of, as Freud describes in the *Three Essays*, the sexual instinct turning “upon the subject’s ego” as a result of loss (66).

As referenced in the beginning of this section, *Vandover* portrays Freud’s “fort/da” game; yet when Vandover’s mother disappears (in the very first scene in the novel, she dies on a train platform in Boston), she never returns. Barbara Hochman indirectly confirms Bersani’s alignment of sexuality with violence by proposing that Vandover repeatedly experiences loss in the novel (the deaths of his mother, father, and Ida Wade, the woman he “seduces,” who later commits suicide), saying that he “is
internally driven to reenact his basic formative experience [the death of his mother]. Even if one stops short of saying Vandover actively seeks loss, it is undeniable that he not only experiences all losses as punishments, but quite explicitly sees them as deserved, as well as caused by him alone” (7).

After Vandover witnesses the death of his mother (he is eight years old) at the beginning of the novel, the narrative establishes itself as a fractured one. Following her death, Vandover attempts to reassemble the pieces or memories of his mother’s death to make psychological and narrative sense of her departure. We may also read her death as signifying her belonging to the past, not in the modernizing American “western” future that Norris depicts with the family’s relocation to California. The move marks not only the shift in setting from a more developed city to a less developed one, but it also affirms notions of the American West as ruggedly masculine and male-centered. Despite the move (or perhaps as a result of it), the novel remains fractured; as the narrator explains:

[Vandover] could recall nothing after this for nearly five years…[he] could remember nothing connectedly. What he first imagined to be the story of his life, on closer inspection turned out to be but a few disconnected incidents that his memory had preserved with the greatest capriciousness. (3)

Vandover is unable to decipher important events from trivial ones; his fragmented memory, therefore, shapes the narrative structure and style of the remaining text, which jumps from scene to scene, often eclipsing (and failing to explain) episodes and passages of time or events between chapters. These omissions and places of repetition
are areas where the narrative mimics the violence Vandover later enacts on himself (and receives from other men) as forms of punishment. Indeed the “flaws” or omissions of *Vandover* reinforce the central traumatic losses Vandover suffers.

I would also suggest that *Vandover* is loosely structured as a narrative version of Freud’s development of childhood sexuality in the *Three Essays*. While Norris’ novel skips the infantile stage, we witness Vandover’s pubescent stage (and earlier pre-teen years). Vandover primarily interprets the female body—and, arguably, his male body and identification—through scenes of reading in his father’s library as a child. Void of any “feminine influence,” Vandover discovers “old-fashioned plates and steel engravings” featuring medical descriptions and illustrations of obstetrics (6). Upon viewing the engravings, the narrator explains: “Even his mother, whom he had always believed to be some kind of an angel, fell at once in his estimation. She could never be the same to him after this, never so sweet, so good and so pure as he had hitherto imagined her” (5-6). The novel fails to describe the engravings and only mentions that Vandover “read [them] from beginning to end,” and, subsequently, he had “the perverse craving for the knowledge of vice” (6-7). This textual omission of the plates’ descriptions, it seems, conforms to the novel’s overall practice of withholding information from the reader. We are forced to imagine what Vandover sees based on his corporeal response. The one case in the story in which we do receive a detailed description of women’s bodies (or heads) is when Vandover, as a pre-teen, views his father’s magazines: “There were a great many full-page pictures of lonely women,
called ‘Reveries’ or ‘Idylls,’ ideal ‘Heads’ of gipsy girls, of coquettes, and heads of little girls crowned with cherries and illustrative of such titles as ‘Spring,’ ‘Youth,’ ‘Innocence’” (7). The narrator continually returns to female images (or idols) throughout the course of the novel, which both enforces Vandover’s attachment to and dependence on the feminine as a result of losing his mother. For Vandover, women are transformed into idealized images or degraded ones: there is no middle ground.

After Vandover “seduces” (or rapes) Ida Wade, he leaves San Francisco, upon his father’s urging, on a ship called the Mazatlan. While Vandover is on board, the ship wrecks, allowing Norris to display the grotesqueness of the (female) human form and, more importantly, reveal Vandover’s corporeal response to female bodies. In a life boat after the wreck, Vandover “suffered too keenly…[experiencing] anguish which he shared with the whole boat”; yet the “half-clad women, dirty, sodden, unkempt, stirred him rather to disgust than to pity” (75). This passage refers back to Vandover’s memory of a “loose” girl he meets earlier at Harvard and his repulsion/titillation by her (“her tawdry clothes, her sordid petty talk, her slang, her miserable profanity, soon began to revolt him” [13]). Noticeably, Vandover’s repulsion by the shipwrecked women and their bodies goes even further back to his discovery of obstetrics in his father’s library (6). The repetition of these images of women as “dirty” bodies emphasizes the text’s violent attitude towards women, which leads Vandover to enact further violence against women and eventually against himself masochistically.
How, then, does Vandover come to inhabit the role of his (victimized) mother? And what does this say about sexual identities? After his mother’s death, Vandover discovers “Memories,” a photograph in one of his father’s perhaps pornographic magazines of a woman “handsomely dressed...[lying on] a *Louis Quinze* sofa, weeping...on the floor was a heap of opened letters” (7-8). Around this time, Vandover performs an androgynous game of masquerade as he “dress[ed] himself in an old smoking-cap, a red table-cloth...[to] pose before the long mirrors ranting and scowling” (7). By the end of the novel, Vandover embodies not the photographed feminine idols, but his mother’s dying body. Near the conclusion of the novel, at his lowest point, Vandover is “tall, thin...with tired, heavy eyes and blue-white face,” reminiscent of how Norris describes Vandover’s mother at the train station (“weak...very pale, her eyelids were heavy, the skin of her forehead looked blue and tightly drawn” [3]). Rather than transcending to the feminine ideals in the portraits, Vandover incorporates feminine lack into his identity or, to apply Silverman’s terms, the “destabilizing knowledge of female castration” transforms Vandover into an ineffective, powerless version of his mother (45). As Bersani claims, the desire to dominate a trauma is “inseparable from an impulse for revenge.” Discussing the role of the mother in the “fort/da” game, Bersani contends that “by making his mother disappear, the child has just as effectively deprived himself of her presence as he has deprived her of his...mastery is simultaneous with self-punishment; a fantasy of omnipotence and autonomy (the child both controls his mother's movements and
doesn’t need her) is inseparable from a repetition of pain” (58-9). Therefore, by repeatedly calling forth female images—and eventually “becoming” his mother, in a sense—Vandover enacts a masochistic game of painful self-punishment: rather than experiencing the joy of his mother’s (re)appearance at the end of the “fort/da” game, Vandover simply re-experiences her departure and impossible return.

The complicated sexual politics of the novel, furthermore, enforce the constructed performance or transience of gender and sexual roles. In Vandover, Norris forces readers to consider gender norms within a traditional paradigm that associates physical power and corporeality with masculinity and docility and submission with femininity (as the ideal heads that Vandover admires represent). Ironically, as Vandover enters an all-male homosocial sphere—Harvard University—he becomes more “womanly.” Norris’ text plays with gender binaries by masculinizing femininity or female sexuality, in particular. With homoerotic undertones, Norris describes Flossie, the prostitute that Vandover and Dolliver (“Dolly”) Haight, a male friend, each has sex with, as their physical equivalent (“an immense girl, quite six feet tall, broad and well-made” [27]). Even Ida Wade, the woman Vandover “seduces,” is masculinized (“drink[ing] California champagne…smok[ing] cigarettes”). Both Ida and Flossie must take their sexuality to public venues (“on Kearney Street, at theatres, at the Mechanics’ Fair, and at baseball games” [36]), hence eroding the division between the domestic, female space and the sexualized, male-dominated, public realm.
The female characters that conform to feminine standards or moral codes are essentially invisible or written out of Norris’s text (as in The Octopus). Turner Ravis, Vandover’s one-time fiancée, best depicts Norris’s critique of “over-cultured” women in nineteenth-century America. While morally and sexually chaste, Turner is powerless in Vandover’s society, as she is unable to protect or heal the two men she cares for—Vandover and Haight—from sexual “vice.” Turner discusses her incompetence with Haight: “I don’t know a thing, I can’t do a thing. I couldn’t cook the plainest kind of meal to save me… I’m not good for anything. I’m not a help to anybody” (44). Turner is the product of a material culture that has falsely promoted her femininity as a useful commodity. Even her domestic role has been usurped by a servant class, so that Turner, as the primary female figure in the story, is merely an aesthetic object to be looked at (consistent with Lori Merish’s reading of female characters in naturalism). However, Norris complicates this link between femininity and material/visual culture by depicting Vandover as inhabiting a dual subject/object position: he is the viewer and the viewed, replacing Turner as the sexual and aesthetic object for men to observe and visually (and, arguably, physically) consume.

By portraying femininity as culturally irrelevant and the cause of men’s social and moral decline (“it’s the women’s fault,” Vandover claims [51]), Norris’ novel reinforces a transgressive, homoerotic subtext that men must rely on each other for social/sexual partnering and advancement. When Vandover states that if women “demanded a higher moral standard the men would come up to it,” the text reveals a
cultural tension or concern that women, in some domesticating way, regulate men’s bodies and their social habits (51). (Ironically, this regulation is appropriate or accepted when delegated by men, as Dana D. Nelson’s work observes.) On the other hand, Vandover advocates for social and sexual equality between the sexes, arguing that women deserve to know about “vice” or sexual knowledge: Charlie Geary, Vandover’s hyper-masculine college friend, declares that the danger lies in withholding information or “the truth” from women (52). The novel complicates this assumption, though, when Vandover claims that women are somehow morally superior to men: he says they are “born with a natural intuitive purity that will...protect [their] virtue,” whereas men are intrinsically “bad” and more susceptible to negative, external influences (52-53). While Norris attempts to diagnose Vandover’s degeneration as the result of external social causes—“loose” women, a sexually-repressive culture, heteronormative standards—Vandover is consumed by an internal force: himself or “the brute.” Only after he breaks his relationship with Turner (and other women) does Vandover have the freedom (physically and narratively) to express his masochistic fantasies and terrors through his bodily submission to the masculinized “brute” and, also, other men.

In order to discuss male masochism in Vandover, I will first elucidate the mind-body divide that Norris aptly depicts in the novel. Prior to Vandover giving himself bodily to the brute and then, to Geary, we must first see how Norris (de)constructs the body in relation to the mind. Jane Thrailkill’s discussion of the “hyper-symptomatic
male” (86) is especially useful if we cross-examine it with Vandover’s repeated “nervous attacks” and his transgression from a spiritual, intellectual character to one who is physically and materially driven. Discussing Oliver Wendall Holmes’ novel A Mortal Antipathy (1885), Thrailkill claims that Holmes’ protagonist’s visible “dandyisms” are the result of “infantile terror, in absence of a visible physical injury” (86). Thrailkill describes the “forensics of the self,” or the “body as testimony,” as when the body responds to external stimuli and produces memory-triggering emotion, such as fear, anger, or wonder, thereby privileging the somatic response to trauma and other external events (114). Her theory applies neatly to Vandover: his body serves as the site of signification for his invisible and non-physical trauma, and when corporeally stimulated by external events or aesthetics—witnessing his mother’s death, hearing about Ida’s suicide, or finding his father’s dead body (the three events are described as “the springing of three successive mines beneath his feet” [95])—his emotional reactions surface on the body. When he hears of Ida’s suicide, for example, Vandover reacts hysterically (historically, a “feminine” response, as Elaine Showalter’s work notes). The narrator describes Vandover’s corporeal, self-punishing response as: “his long white arms agitated and shaking...At time an immense unreasoning terror would come upon him all of a sudden, horrible, crushing, so that he rolled upon the bed groaning and sobbing, digging his nails into his scalp, shutting his teeth against a desire to scream” (55). After admitting his “crime” of seducing Ida to his father, Vandover begins to cry about Ida “as if it had been a mother or a dear sister. The
prodigal son put his arms around his father’s neck for the first time since he had been a little boy, and clung to him and wept” (58). This moment signifies the surfacing of Vandover’s memory of his mother’s death; he is not grieving for Ida, but for his mother, we can assume. However, only through a bodily response (his violent reaction) and an emotional one (sadness or anger) is Vandover able to resurrect the event of his mother’s death. A similar substitution takes place when Vandover grieves his father’s sudden death. He imagines his father’s hat as representing his father’s (formerly material) presence and body: “he could almost see the kind old face underneath the broad curl of the brim…he put his arms clumsily about the old hat, weeping” (82).

Though Vandover is further feminized throughout the text, his queer behavior is not the result of having a “feminine” mind, I would suggest. Rather, Vandover’s non-normative sexual desires (manifested in the form of masochism or sadism) can only take place once the feminine disappears from Norris’ text. Thus, after experiencing multiple traumas, Vandover abandons his “feminine” or artistic side and gives up his mind’s “entire possession” to the corporeal brute (147). This self-inflicted violence elicits Vandover’s “perverse” sexual desires: to give up his bodily/sexual control to another man is “to be loved as his father had loved him” (84). Vandover’s masochistic surrender to the brute provides a way for him to replicate a heterosexual pairing of a man and a woman. Vandover’s fantasy of what it means to “be” a woman is submitting to a male subject. His body, represented as the male “brute,” disobeys
his feminine mind as when he tries to draw: “in his imagination he saw just how the outlines should be, but somewhere he could not make his hand interpret what was in his head” (119). Thus, Vandover’s punishment from the brute serves a dual purpose: first, to re-enact what he thinks is a typical male-female partnering (his feminine mind must submit to his masculine body); and second, to punish or “correct” himself for his sexually-transgressive, “decadent” tendencies and desires to submit corporeally to another man. It is unavoidable, then, to see cultural homophobia at play in the text; non-normative sexual desires or identities are viewed as degenerative. Yet I want to stress that, in opposition to Williams’ argument about Vandover’s fixed sexuality, the novel enforces the cultural effects—the deaths of his mother, father, and Ida, and his near-death experience on the Mazatlan—as influencing Vandover’s subjectivity.

We see Vandover’s identity and sexual desires come to fruition in the final scenes in the novel. His masochistic fantasies are finally acted out when Geary violates Vandover physically and economically. Throughout the text, Vandover sheepishly obeys Geary, who tells him what to eat, what college courses to enroll in, and even what (ill-advised) actions to take when Ida’s father sues Vandover over his daughter’s suicide. However, Vandover stays in this abusive or unequal relationship voluntarily: “willingly, weakly, [Vandover] submitted to the dictatorship of the shrewder, stronger man [Geary] who smoothed out his difficulties for him” (125). But the masochism reaches a climax at the end, when Geary, who “devour[s] with an incarnate ambition” (172), “sacrifice[s] Van” (133) for personal economic gain,
convincing Vandover to sell him his property, which Geary turns around for a larger profit. Geary has a titillating, almost orgasmic response to victimizing Vandover:

Geary began to tremble once more, and this time his excitement was so great that he hardly dared to trust himself once more...his breath grew short, his hands in his pockets twitched nervously, and curled themselves into fists, his heart seemed to beat high in his throat. (140)

Thus, Geary—not only Vandover—has a sexually perverse relationship to other men in the text. Later, in a strange, ritualized scene, the two men go to a notary so that Vandover can sign over his property to Geary, mimicking a marriage ceremony done “almost hastily...the transfer was made,” implying something clandestine about their business/bodily transactions (142).

What makes Geary’s force attractive to Vandover is that this relationship upholds the gendered patriarchal system that aligns physical strength and business savvy with men and delicacy and obedience with women. In the most explicitly homoerotic scene in the text, Vandover asks Geary to come upstairs and sleep in bed with him (“The idea of passing the night alone terrified Vandover [121]). Yet Geary responds by saying that he has work to do, thus showing that Geary’s ultimate loyalty is to his business endeavors—not Vandover. Near the end of the novel, Vandover, in need of money for food, offers to bark for Geary if he’ll pay him (175). Instead, Geary offers him a menial job cleaning tenant houses in a dirty slum. Thus, Geary rents out Vandover’s labor and working body to other people. As a female tenant informs him, “Mister Geary said it was to be done to my satisfaction, and that you were to stay here
until everything was all right” (183), the novel reminds us of the subjection of male bodies who transcend social orders and normative behaviors.

For Norris, the materialization of sexual dominance can only be associated with its masculinization, as with depictions of masculinized femininity (Flossie and Ida, as examples) and the hyper-masculinization of Geary and the mannish “brute.” In nineteenth-century masculine culture, Vandover’s only option for same-sex desire is represented through his subjection and brutalization. Through this (sexual) role-playing, Vandover is able to recall idealized—and largely, victimized—women: Ida, his mother, and the lonely women or “ideal heads” in the photographs he emulated as a child. While Vandover cannot master the disappearance of his mother (he cannot bring her back after her death), Vandover embodies her by constantly returning to a perverted form of the feminine. Norris’ novel, overall, is about role-play and fantasy: contorting the body in order to simultaneously conceal and reveal non-normative sexual desires. Vandover’s perverted fantasy of femininity as powerless and submissive does not defy patriarchal standards or the “boys club” of Nelson’s work. Rather, his masochistic dreams and behavior directly affirm historical, cultural, and sexual norms in American culture by illustrating Vandover’s own incapacity or failure to satisfy or voice his sexual demands and needs. By representing this pattern—of a man willing to submit his body to another man—Norris shows the paradox of turn-of-the-century naturalist texts in terms of sexuality. On the one hand, Vandover is a homophobic text that degrades and deforms Vandover’s body so that he, like Stephen
Crane’s Henry Johnson, is no longer a person, but a monstrous “thing,” in order to act out his non-normative (masochistic) fantasies. Simultaneously, the text challenges limitations of men’s sexual expressions and their bodily representations by creating a textual space for queer possibility. Although Vandover remains alive at the end of the novel (unlike the previous century’s literary depiction of the “fallen woman”), Vandover ends the novel on his knees, “under the sink, in the sour water” (184), suggesting that even as the text creates a space for queer possibility, it does so in a way that reinforces a culture’s homophobia and the limitations of queer identity formation for turn-of-the-century men.

III.

With the growth of spectator sports in nineteenth-century American culture, male writers feared that “the act of gawking at the sight of almost naked working-class men engaged in mortal combat” would result in male effeminacy (Dudley 41). In relationship to the growing popularity of spectator sports in the nineteenth century, John Dudley defines “the hero” of American naturalism as the male character who is able to navigate the delicate terrain between viewing and participating in the action itself. In other words, the hero can navigate around the “impossible” subject positioning of “spectatoritis” (described above as gawking too much at half-clad working-class men): that is, the hero must “stand apart from” the brutish, working-class fighter, but he must almost not become complacent in his position as a white,
middle-class voyeur of men’s bodies (Dudley 34). Dudley goes on to explain that “sporting discourse sublimated the sexual component of the homosocial by simultaneously emphasizing the warlike violence of sport and its relationship to the games of young boys” (43-44). I contend, however, that these homoerotic scenes between men in naturalist texts do not sublimate the sexual for the violent; consistent with Bersani’s interpretation of Freud, sexuality and violence are inextricably linked with a historical reading of turn-of-the-century male subjectivity.

Consistent with my reading of men’s bodies in naturalism, Derrick contends that violence is a way through which men could “experience their mutual matters of the body.” He explains that the “wounded man…may be looked at and touched” (Monumental Anxieties 29). My discussion of voyeurism, exhibitionism, and violence in Jack London’s The Sea-Wolf relates to the previous discussion of Vandover’s sadism/masochism and chapter one’s discussion of compulsion in relation to the male body. Naturalist texts allow for male subjects to view and explore the wounded (and wounding) male bodies as homoerotic sources of pleasure and possibility, a tendency which relates, as we will later see in The Sea-Wolf, to Judith Butler’s conception of heterosexual melancholy or the incorporation of “the ungrieved loss of the homosexual catheisis” (136). While many critics have described the “making” of Van Weyden into a virile heterosexual as London’s ultimate championing of heteronormativity (it is important to note that Van Weyden, prior to his masculine transformation, is 35 years old when he comes aboard Larsen’s ship, appropriately named “the Ghost”), Van
Weyden is only fully appropriated into the male homosocial culture (via a “heterosexual” identity) once he becomes an active viewer of the male body and its exploitation in “spectacles of brutality” (25). That is, Van Weyden’s ultimate identification with and desire for other men is effectively and violently enacted through his melancholic “straight” identity. Furthermore, the novel’s concluding scenes—depicting Larsen’s death and Van Weyden’s “rebirth” as a heterosexual—confirm the melancholia of (male) heterosexual identification.

Earlier in the novel, Van Weyden learns to identify with other men through the gazing of their bodies. Early in the text, Van Weyden, who also serves as the narrator, describes Larsen’s gaze as “intense and masculine, luring and compelling, which at the same time fascinate and dominate women till they surrender in a gladness of joy and relief and sacrifice” (21). Therefore, the male gaze is an agent of active sexual domination, a way in which Larsen dominates others (including the men on the ship, who are his subordinates), and it is precisely the male-on-male gaze that Van Weyden appropriates in order to mimic Larsen’s masculinity. Real men, the text seems to suggest through Larsen’s gazing, can look at another man and not be sexually attracted to them. London’s narrative, however, complicates this assumption by depicting Van Weyden’s sexual response to Larsen’s body and Larsen’s reciprocated, quasi-orgasmic response to being watched. Somewhat early in the novel, Larsen undresses in front of Van Weyden after being injured in a fight with a crew member. Van Weyden explains he was “fascinated by the perfect lines of Wolf Larsen’s figure, and by what [he] may
term the *terrible beauty of it*...Wolf Larsen was the man-type, the masculine, and almost a god in his perfectness” (110-11, emphasis added). I am particularly interested in the narrator’s use of the phrase “terrible beauty” to describe Larsen’s god-like “perfectness.” The conventional reading of this phrase is that Larsen’s hybridity—part man, part machine—offends Van Weyden’s senses and some sort of natural law. In this view, the “terrible beauty” is nature’s “unnaturalness” or its over-development. Larsen, in a sense, represents an atavistic throwback that challenges over-civilization in late-nineteenth century American society, which London criticizes through the vilification of Van Weyden’s effeminacy. The paradox remains, however, that while London’s text advocates for a return to “nature” (that is, men should not be too over-civilized as Van Weyden is at the beginning), it also shows the danger in reverting too far back. The paradox of a phrase like “terrible beauty,” I would suggest, also refers to Van Weyden’s *attraction to* Larsen’s hyper-masculinity. The “terrible” aspect is not Larsen’s over-development or machine-like muscles, which transcend the laws of nature, but rather it refers to the repression Van Weyden feels in viewing Larsen’s body. In other words, he appropriates the male gaze too well and recognizes the gaze’s inevitable sexualizing of the body: the “terrible beauty” of it.

While the moment described above is an example of what Freud identifies in the *Three Essays* as scopophilia, or the desire to look as sublimation for touch, the passage above stresses the limits of male expression of same-sex desire or identification. As Dana D. Nelson suggests in looking at all-male, private spaces in the
nineteenth century, “ritualism seems to have provided men not so much the equipment to ‘confront’ the disparities of the world outside…as a standpoint that naturalized the emotional dissonances they experienced because of political and economic imbalances ‘outside’ the lodge.” All-male ritualized spaces, as the Ghost certainly is, permit men the illusion of “act[ing] in unison, as a single, coherent body” (520). Although the Ghost is highly hierarchical, as are the spaces that Nelson investigates in her work including “labor unions, political parties, and fraternal lodges…Christian and reform groups…[and] professional organizations and sports clubs” (178), the hierarchy has two dual roles: first, it allows men to temporarily relinquish social control or power (Nelson calls this their “traumatic pleasure”), and, second, it gives the illusion of a sense of wholeness or completion. Yet what is interesting about London’s text and treatment of male homosociality aboard the Ghost is showing its internal fracture: violence between men (which is deemed culturally acceptable in this realm) exposes the “shattering nature of sexuality” that Bersani discusses in terms of male identity formation in Freud (89-90). So while London arguably makes a “heterosexual” out of Van Weyden as some critics contest, the text identifies the inherent loss in sexual identification and the consequent haunting of non-normative identities or desires.

Early in the text, London classifies the gazing of male bodies as both appropriate and inappropriate. Derrick identifies in the text “a splitting of desire [which] allows an ‘innocent’ gaze at clean, white male bodies, though the erotic may be punished through apocalyptic violence” (“Making a Heterosexual Man” 111).
Therefore, because of Larsen’s racial “purity” as a Scandinavian, the narrator permits Van Weyden’s staring, Derrick contends, as something other than purely “erotic.” Yet I want to emphasize that while Van Weyden initially stares (and is sexually titillated by Larsen’s masculine body), over the course of the novel and time aboard the Ghost, he becomes indoctrinated into the male culture so that he learns to view violence as a form of erotic pleasure. In other words, violence is the only way in which men on board the Ghost can touch one another—and the only way the reader can appropriately “view” male-on-male touch. Initially watching a fight between Larsen and crew members, Van Weyden experiences “that old sickness at the pit of the stomach, caused always by the spectacle of physical violence” (105). London emphasizes how Van Weyden is somehow more cultured (and perhaps more feminine) because of his repulsion towards violence. London’s text suggests, therefore, that our “natural” attraction towards violence conforms to Freudian theory (and Bersani’s reading of Freudian theory) that unites sexual identity (and its formation) with violence.

In his essay, “The Sexual Aberrations,” Freud codes the desire to look as active and the desire to be looked at as passive. What is interesting about Larsen is that he inhabits dual subject positions: he is both the voyeur and the exhibitionist at different times in the text. For instance, in the scene where he undresses before Van Weyden, Larsen becomes erotically charged by exhibiting his body. Responding to Van Weyden’s viewing of him, Larsen’s body simulates an orgasm, as the narrator explains:
And I observed, also, that his whole body had unconsciously drawn itself together, tense and alert; that muscles were softly crawling and shaping about the hips, along the back, and across the shoulders; that the arms were slightly lifted, their muscles contracting, the fingers crooking till the hands were like talons; and that even the eyes had changed expression and into them were coming watchfulness and measurement and a light none other than of battle. (111-12)

This passage not only relates Van Weyden’s pleasure in looking to Larsen’s pleasure in being looked at, but it also aligns sex with violence. Specifically, as the narrator informs us, Larsen’s eyes, which portray sexual excitement, also reveal “a light none other than of battle.” Thus, for Larsen, his somatic response to sexual excitement and violence are seemingly interchangeable.

Despite homoerotically-charged moments as referenced above, Derrick argues that Van Weyden—and the novel overall—is “saved” from homosexuality. However, Van Weyden's passage to heterosexuality “requires a dangerous bodily identification with other men” (127). Thus, in order for Van Weyden to “master” heterosexuality, his desire for Larsen, as in the Oedipus myth, “hides behind a facade of mutually maintained competition, hatred, and even violence” (126). This reading, on first glance, might seem persuasive and conforms to the narrator’s suggestion that the “toughening” or hardening of “Sissy” Van Weyden (a childhood nickname) is “wholesome” and somehow necessary for all young men (120); yet I want to suggest that Van Weyden’s “passage” to heterosexuality is ultimately destructive and melancholic. Van Weyden’s heterosexual union with Maud Brewster at the end of the text reinforces London’s emphasis on culture’s influence on (hetero)sexual identity.
Simply put, the Ghost “makes” Van Weyden a man, ready to marry a woman (Brewster), thereby stressing the construction of Van Weyden’s gender and sexuality. However, there are moments in the text, even after Van Weyden’s “passage” into heterosexuality, that expose his attachments to men and their eventual incorporation into his melancholic “straight” identity.

Brewster, a female poet who comes aboard the Ghost after she is shipwrecked on a trip to Asia for a mental vacation herself, is masculinized in order to be an adequate and dominant partner for Van Weyden. As Derrick claims, Brewster appropriates “some piece of the male technology of violence” (115). Regarding her masculinization, Brewster wears men’s clothing when she comes aboard (to which Van Weyden sexually responds) and later clubs seals alongside Van Weyden. Despite Van Weyden’s (re)masculinization, therefore, “Maud's assertiveness translates into his passivity” (Derrick 115). Drawing on the work of feminist scholars including Gayle Rubin and Luce Irigaray, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes the male-male-female erotic triangle and its asymmetrical power relations, which relates to Brewster’s role aboard the ship. Women, Sedgwick contends, have historically been treated as “property for the primary purpose of cementing the bonds of men with men” (Between Men 26). The introduction of Brewster onto the Ghost, therefore, is an interesting and, arguably, necessary addition to the homoerotic relationship between Larsen and Van Weyden. Christopher Gair argues that Brewster’s appearance “guarantees Hump’s renunciation of male homosocial desire” (139). In other words, Brewster’s
incorporation into the story “brings out the ‘masculine’” in Van Weyden so that he “finds a role ‘appropriate’ both to his culture and to the generic logic of the naturalist text” to the point where he renounces not only his homoerotic desires, but his desires for homosociality as well; an all-male space, London via Van Weyden seems to suggest, is against nature (Gair 141-42).

Furthermore, Brewster serves as the conduit between the two men and their intimate relationship. For example, near the end of the novel when Larsen is dying and is both deaf and mute, Brewster reaches out and touches his lips in order to speak for him. Earlier in the scene, Larsen scribbles a “spirit message” on a piece of paper that says, “But I am still here, all here” (271). Following this message, “The fingers spread slightly, falling apart of their own weight, and the pencil rolled away.” The narrator writes:

“Do you still hear?” I shouted…There was no response…
“I noticed the lips slightly move,” Maud said.
I repeated the question. The lips moved. She placed the tips of her fingers on them. Again I repeated the question. “Yes,” Maud announced. We looked at each other expectantly.
“What good is it?” I asked. “What can we say now?”
“Oh, ask him—”
She hesitated.
“Ask him something that requires ‘no’ for an answer,” I suggested.
“Then we will know with certainty.”
“Are you hungry?” she cried.
The lips moved under her fingers, and she answered, “Yes.” (272)

This moment literalizes Sedgwick’s discussion of a woman acting as the conduit between men. Because Larsen cannot speak for himself, and, as a man, Van Weyden
cannot touch his lips (or at least not in a way that is culturally rendered as acceptable), Brewster plays the integral role of translator and intermediary for the two men, who have no other way of communicating with each other at this point. Following this interaction, Brewster almost seems to speak for Larsen, for his mute, dying body, when she cries out, “Oh, Humphrey…when will it all end? I am so tired, so tired” (272). Brewster’s melodramatic outbursts, I contend, stand in for the grieving words Larsen cannot utter.

In one of the final scenes, the text distorts the previous male gaze experienced between the two men when Van Weyden, like a spectral “ghost,” stands in front of the now-blind Larsen. The narrator explains:

> I felt myself a ghost, what of my invisibility. I waved my hand back and forth, of course without effect; but when the moving shadow fell across his face I saw at once that he was susceptible to the impression…He slowly moved his head back and forth under it and turned from side to side, now in the sunshine, now in the shade, feeling the shadow, as it were, testing it by sensation. (241)

Thus, even in his blind and weakened state, Larsen tries to identify the person or object in front of him by using his other senses. Here, pre-Freudian scholars, like John Dewey, would emphasize the role the body plays in responding to external stimulus. Naturalism, as a genre and philosophy, simplifies the body’s responses to stimuli: “from sensibility to reflex-like sensations (hunger, cramps, pain)” (Rothfield 128). Yet, in this moment, Larsen’s body and its sensations fail him; he cannot identify Van Weyden’s (haunting) presence. (Paradoxically, Larsen’s death seems to haunt Van
Weyden and affect his heterosexual melancholic identity later in the novel.) This moment for Van Weyden, and for the reader, not only marks an important shift in power: finally through the failing of Larsen’s physical body is Van Weyden able to get a hand up in their relationship, however the loss and death of Larsen marks a melancholic narrative conclusion. Constructing Larsen as a fallen hero, the narrator recognizes Larsen on his death bed by saying, “‘To be’ was all that remained to him—to be, as he had defined death, without movement…[he was] in the flesh…quite dead” (265). The death of Larsen’s physical capabilities—his ability to see, touch, and sense Van Weyden (and other men)—signifies his metaphorical death. In other words, Larsen’s identity is his masculine body, and the death of it (“the flesh”) signifies the death of homoerotic possibilities for Van Weyden.

Despite Van Weyden’s newfound heterosexual union with Maud, the narrative focuses on the loss and death of Larsen. Although the novel ends with Maud snuggling up against Van Weyden and declaring him “[her] man” (280), Van Weyden’s gaze is focused on the boat that comes to rescue them (“I looked toward the cutter. It was very close. A boat was being lowered” [281]), which almost seems to imply that Van Weyden is looking for or anticipating Larsen. Building on Freud’s discussion on melancholia (taken from the essay, “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), and its inclusion in The Ego and the Id [1923]) in which the ego turns in upon itself in response to an ungrieved loss, Judith Butler argues in The Psychic Life of Power that (male) heterosexual melancholy is specifically the act of internalizing an ungrieved
loss—for “the man he ‘never’ loved and ‘never’ grieved” (147)—as a form of dual preservation and prohibition of homosexuality. As she explains, “Internalization preserves loss in the psyche; more precisely, the internalization of loss is part of the mechanism of its refusal” (134). Gender and sexuality, therefore, are acquired through the prohibition or “the repudiation of homosexual attachments” (136). In this view, Van Weyden’s eventual arrival at heterosexuality—the promising image of him and Brewster being rescued by a ship at the end of the novel—results in his repudiation of all attachments to his homosocial and homosexual pasts, both on the Ghost and before. (The novel begins with the ambiguous assertion that Van Weyden’s shipwreck is the result of his visiting a male friend, Charley Furuseth, the “cause” of the narrative’s chain of events [3].) Therefore, by incorporating or mimicking Larsen’s masculinity, Van Weyden is fully appropriated into the heterosexual culture that Larsen, paradoxically, stood apart from. While, as I have alluded to above, the final scene of Van Weyden watching the rescuing boat seems remorseful of his past with Larsen (and its impossible replication), Van Weyden’s heterosexual identification is melancholic: by prohibiting his non-normative, or homosexual, desires, Van Weyden is ultimately preserving them. Whether or not we really trust that Van Weyden fully converts to heterosexuality, the novel ends with him believing that he is playing that part, reminding us that, as Butler explains, “the ‘truest’ gay male melancholic is the strictly straight man” (147).
Eroticizing touch, sight, and pain, The Sea-Wolf reveals cultural limitations to male expression at the turn of the twentieth century. Yet the novel concludes, as I have mentioned, with the non-egalitarian, heterosexual pairing of Brewster and Van Weyden. Unlike Norris’ novels, we are left with the hope that there is a possibility for heterosexual marriage and reproduction in The Sea-Wolf. Although Van Weyden seems to appreciate his subjection to Brewster’s dominance (replicating his masochistic fantasies aboard the all-male Ghost), the text ultimately memorializes the life and death of Larsen’s hyper-masculinity which Van Weyden incorporates in order to become “heterosexual.” Thus, some of Larsen’s last words—“I am all here and more than here” (270)—are especially true if we consider Larsen’s masculinity living through Van Weyden’s sexual transformation. The narrator describes Larsen’s body as a “mausoleum” before his death, stating, “And there, in so strange sepulture, his spirit fluttered and lived. It would flutter and live till the last line of communication was broken, and after that who was to say how much longer it might continue to flutter and live?” (270). Hence, the conclusion of The Sea-Wolf emphasizes Van Weyden’s incorporation and preservation of Larsen’s masculinity, which, paradoxically, allows him entrance into a heterosexual identity “haunted by the love it cannot grieve” (138).

IV.

Indirectly, the previous sections of this chapter have focused on the issue of memorializing and haunting in relation to gender and sexual desire. Butler’s
discussion of gender melancholy specifically refers to death, as she considers grieving for the male homosexual as it relates to the national discourse of grieving for AIDS victims. Butler explains the challenge in grieving AIDS as the problem of “finding a public occasion and language in which to grieve this seemingly endless number of deaths.” This discursive search, she contends, originates in the dilemma over whether “it [is] regarded as a ‘true’ love, a ‘true’ loss, a love and loss worthy and capable of being grieved” (138). Both texts discussed in this chapter—Vandover and the Brute and The Sea-Wolf—pose important challenges and questions in relation to sexual identification and homophobia (and, more broadly, issues of misogyny). Although both texts certainly secure a space for non-normative sexual desires—men gazing (dangerously) at each other and subjecting to their internal sadistic/masochistic fantasies—these examples of non-normative sexual behavior and possibilities reflect the inherent violence of male sexuality, primarily due to cultural and historical limitations and prohibitions on expressing same-sex desire. Therefore, while these texts have traditionally been categorized as exclusively homophobic or heterosexist, I would alter this generalization by looking at the ways in which naturalist texts show the possibility for queer identities and expression—whether acquired or innate. No matter how hard these masculinist writers attempt to suppress non-normative desires and homoerotic relationships between male characters, there are explosive moments that break from heteronormativity—albeit primarily through violent forms and the de(con)struction of the male body.
While both *Vandover* and *The Sea-Wolf* depict the complexities of gender anxieties at the end of the nineteenth century, they also reveal what Butler terms as “the terror of homosexual desire,” which she describes as the “terror of being construed as feminine, feminized, of no longer being properly a man, of being a ‘failed’ man, or being in some sense a figure of monstrosity or abjection” (136). It is especially revealing that—consistent with my first chapter—the “othering” of non-normative desires, or a terror of these desires, results in what Butler describes as “monstrosity or abjection.” Not only does Stephen Crane’s Henry Johnson, therefore, become the “monster” that terrifies Whilomville’s residents, but Vandover’s transformation from an artist into a wolf and even, arguably, Larsen’s “animal-like” monstrosity (London 68) suggest that men who desire outside the heterosexual paradigm must physically be remade into something other-than-men as a result of their non-normative desires. It is their violent mutation that marks them as dangerous and visible to the culture at large.
Coda: Becoming Men

In late-nineteenth century France, Jean-Martin Charcot, recognized as one of Freud’s mentors, photographed hysterical patients which he published in the three-volume *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* in the early 1880s. As Ulrich Baer describes, the published photographs—all of which depict women (although Charcot did photograph and “treat” male patients)—exhibit “somatic ‘disturbances’ of a remarkably wide range” (26). The photographs depict women in various stages of seizures: in some photographs, their bodies are erect and standing, apparently captured mid-action, while others present the women’s bodies as limp and lifeless, inertly lying on beds or sofas. Baer aligns the women’s hysterical responses to the camera’s flash as triggering or mirroring the hysterical condition itself: “The doctor triggered something that reproduced the presumed cause of the hysterical condition (an event in the patient’s past)” (45).

What unifies these photographs, however, is their emphasis on transforming one’s interiority—namely the patient’s “hysteria”—into visible or “readable signs” (Baer 45). In what Baer describes as the “illusion of objectivity,” the camera, he argues, does not merely document an experience but enacts as a separate traumatic event itself (33). That is, the photograph “creates and captures simultaneously an instance that hovers between movement and immobility, memory and trauma, narrative and shock...Charcot’s camera freezes neither the body in motion nor a moment in
time. Instead, it captures an instance in which there is no distinction between bodily symptom and temporal condition” (42). The paradox of Baer’s reading of Charcot’s work is that rather than presenting the hysteric as “a unified being”—showing that all her movements and actions are somehow part of a larger narrative that unites her body and mind—Charcot’s photographs raise questions about the mind-body divide that nineteenth-century theories of affect and discourses of medicine and neurology had failed to previously address. Charcot’s photographs of female hysterics, contorting their bodies in what appear to be painful positions (in some photographs), ask the questions: what “is real and what [is] imagined? What, in hysteria, is truth and what [is] deceit?” (Baer 43). Photography mirrors trauma, Baer suggests, because it presents itself through a series of surfaces or visual representations, only later asking questions about memory and the mind: did this event really happen, for example, and how does meaning change or emerge with time?

The idea of the photograph as a “counter-memory” (Baer 52) relates to my discussion of the male body’s visual presentation of trauma and the constructedness of non-normative desires. It is important to note that in many of the naturalist texts discussed in my previous chapters, the bodies of male subjects serve as counter-memories to the dominant narratives and culture’s dominant fiction, which sustains the notion of male adequacy (Silverman 15-16). In this view, male subjects in naturalist texts fail to perform the dominant fiction, instead revealing their male lack and inadequacies (and anxieties) in performing a conventional masculine identification.
What does it mean, then, for a man at the turn of the century—or today—not to perform as or “be” a “man”? What are the cultural and biological implications? What does this mean for heterosexuality and biological reproduction? The discovery or awareness of this lack is perhaps what I most closely want to align with naturalism. Naturalist texts, that is, not only portray the trajectory of human dejection and failure; rather, the works precisely identify moments at which this lack is realized and incorporated into the (male) subject’s identification. In many ways, then, my reading of naturalism considers it an important precursor to modernism, which more directly addresses crises of the body and social identity in the early twentieth century. The ruptured male body—as with Henry Johnson’s lack-of-face or Vandover’s syphilitic demise—depicts deeper interior states in which male subjects fail to identify with a conventional masculinity or the dominant fiction, one that associates masculinity with privilege and cultural authority. In essence, these masculine subjects relinquish the myth of masculinity (whether consciously or not) in order to form new, alternative masculine identities. What I want to stress, however, as seen in my discussion of texts by Frank Norris, Jack London, and Stephen Crane, is that this rejection of conventional masculinity is not necessarily an intentional or conscious one. Rather, the narratives themselves tenuously grapple with issues of non-normative masculinities or same-sex desires and their somatic representations. Therefore, my readings of naturalist works by turn-of-the-century male writers, who arguably attempted to “remasculinize” American literature and culture, emphasize the complexities of sexual desires and
issues of gender identification that American men faced at the end of the nineteenth century.

While the texts previously discussed are narratives of trauma, they are also traumatized narratives. By this I mean that not only do they depict fractured masculinities and men searching to regain a sense of “wholeness” through a conventional masculine identification, but the structures of the narratives also replicate the nature of trauma itself. As Baer says in regards to Charcot’s photographs:

Just as a traumatic event is only rarely reintegrated into memory, the photographic presentation of an event never achieves the status of a full presence. In presenting the subject’s disastrous future (her finitude), photography presents a trace of the referent in its disappearance; the referent…the hysterical body— is present in the picture’s “condition of that long-past minute,” but it will disappear in the same picture’s “future yet to come.” (53)

I do not want to imply that the naturalist narrative itself is a form of trauma; like Charcot’s photographs, naturalist narratives “never achieve the status of a full presence.” Rather, their (re)production of the male body uncannily mirrors the nature of trauma. In Charcot’s photographs, Baer argues, the images or events are never fully integrated into the subject’s memory or consciousness. Therefore, the photograph retroactively makes meaning out of something that originally did not have meaning or significance. The male body in turn-of-the-century naturalist narratives does the same thing. Before feelings are verbalized (either by the character or the narrator), the body acts as the dominant signifier in relaying meaning; rather than creating a coherent narrative, then, the body reveals counter-narrative moments that are “explosive,
instantaneous, distinct” (Baer 6) and draws attention to the contrived “nature” of naturalism. By this I mean that naturalist narratives acknowledge and even partially participate in the continuation of dominant ideologies relating to identification and power: on the surface, these texts work to replicate cultural assumptions about conventional masculinity and sexual desires, yet these works also participate in an ultimate game of performance and performativity by showing the flexibility and fragility of male identity and its unnatural alignment with sexual identity. As Christopher Lane mentions, “the male-identified man and the woman identified woman…veil much psychic and conceptual turbulence.” Lane explains that either term refers to a wide spectrum of identities—a “male-identified man,” he suggests, “could refer to an effeminate heterosexual or a virile homosexual…[and] all conceivable shades of masculinity between” (38-9). If we apply Lane’s observations to naturalism, we see the ways naturalist texts challenge the unity of the body with sexual identification. While naturalism is concerned with the hyper-masculinity and virility of “rugged individualism” (Johnson 61), it also seeks to challenge historical conceptions of the gendered divide of the mind and body, as we see with the classic model of (male) sexual inversion in which a man’s body possesses a female mind.

Baer’s above-mentioned quote about the hysterical body’s “disappearance”—it no longer exists in the past, as the photograph suggests, and will “disappear in the same picture’s ‘future yet to come’”—relates to visual representations of the body in American naturalism and their relationship to temporality. In Jack London’s Before
Adam (1906-7), a text that was originally published serially, an unnamed narrator dreams that he is a pre-historic man. Most of the novel, in fact, is set during these dream sequences when “Big Tooth,” the narrator’s pre-historic doppelganger, is kicked out of his childhood “nest” and must fend for himself. London’s novel incorporates naturalism’s conventional themes: childhood trauma, male violence and competition, sexual discovery and repression. The novel coincides with Freud’s discussion of traumatic dreams in Beyond the Pleasure Principle: “Now dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident,” Freud suggests, “a situation from which he wakes up in another fright” (11). Freud theorizes that we might suspect dreams to be more hopeful or wishful, but instead, because of masochistic tendencies of the ego, our dreams recreate previous trauma that we must relive. What is interesting in London’s text is that an early childhood trauma—the narrator is scared into a “hysterical” fit at the age of five when he sees a caged lion at a circus—results in what London calls a “semi-dissociation of personality” (7). The breaking apart of the narrator into an imaginary character named Big Tooth indicates a split in the narrator’s active and passive personalities. That is, in his dreams, as Big Tooth, he is more capable of actively confronting his terrors: the text implies that as a pre-historic man whose instincts are less suppressed, Big Tooth is better equipped to overcome personal and historical traumas.
The novel, strangely enough, parallels the pre-historic man’s condition to the “modern” man at the turn of the twentieth century. Following the death of Big Tooth’s father, which Big Tooth witnesses as a child, his new step-father evicts him from his mother’s home. This masculine dislocation mirrors what Scott Derrick describes in *Monumental Anxieties* as male “rupture”: “symbolized by a change of dress and by the social separation of masculine and feminine spaces and activities” (12). In addition, London describes how the “atavistic” man is similar to the “modern bruisers and prizefighters,” thereby aligning atavism (and violent biological instincts) with stereotypes relating to class and race. John Dudley discusses the nineteenth-century habit of coding working-class and racialized bodies—African Americans and immigrants from Ireland, Italy, and Eastern Europe—as “atavistic versions of middle- and upper-class whites...[that] represented the primal essence lurking beneath Anglo-Saxon civilization” (31). On a related note, the narrator/Big Tooth criticizes the “Folk people” for their lack of sexual monogamy, switching partners, similar to the modern state of divorce, he contends (39). The text identifies biological drives, which seem to visibly surface on the body—indeed, in London’s text, the more virile men, like Wolf Larsen in *The Sea-Wolf*, are more muscular—as needing to be repressed or conditioned. The paradox of London’s text, therefore, is that in “becoming men,” a phrase the narrator/Big Tooth repeats numerous times, the male characters in *Before Adam* must essentially repress or modify certain sexual and biological desires or instincts. Therefore, London identifies masculinity not as a primitive urge, but as
suppressing these urges so that, with time, they will be obliterated from man’s genetic makeup. The narrator/Big Tooth says at the end of the novel:

I often wonder about this line of descent. I, the modern, am incontestably a man; yet I, Big Tooth, the primitive, am not a man. Somewhere, and by straight line of descent, these two parties to my dual personality were connected…One thing only is certain, and that is that Big Tooth did stamp into a cerebral constitution of one of his progeny all the impressions of his life, and stamped in so indelibly that the hosts of intervening generations have failed to obliterate them. (118-19)

What is the “modern” man’s chance for survival, then, if he is programmed for (self) destruction? London’s narrator describes himself as a “freak of heredity” (11), “different from [his] kind,” and “tormented” because of these dreams (3). He goes on to explain that these dreams are violations because he views images or scenes that he has never witnessed or seen before (4). Unable to distinguish reality from fantasy, the narrator says that he is “unable to tell what age [he is] living in” (118). Rather than providing insight into the “modern” man and his evolutionary attributes, the dreams further shatter the narrator’s masculine identity and sense of reality. Unlike The Sea-Wolf’s Humphrey Van Weyden, the narrator of Before Adam never fully (re)masculinizes. The dreams haunt him in a sense, like Charcot’s photographs, so that they create a separate, stand-alone event that transcends narrative or temporal linearity. London’s narrator seems to yearn for a past that unites his present self. That is, the dreams serve as a way of attempting to create a unified being—the same way that Charcot’s photography attempts to resurrect the coherence of his patients’ beings in visual portraits.
In the 1890s, American naturalists strove to discover something essential about masculinity. As *Before Adam* implies, there must be *something* that ties the turn-of-the-century man to his historic ancestors. There must be *something innate* about sexuality and masculine behavior that links all men together. While I have not necessarily emphasized the relationship between national identity and masculinity, I wonder to what extent contemporary notions of “Americanness” derive from a desire for homogeneity and, more specifically, from historical attempts to secure a masculine “essence.” As scholars before have suggested, American citizenship becomes associated with a certain race and class of men (white, privileged, heterosexual, etc.) with abstractable bodies; yet as the naturalists sought to do, contemporary American culture maintains the pervasive myth of heterosexuality as the only form of “true” masculinity. To be a “good” American, as any army recruitment or Ralph Lauren clothing advertisement proposes, one can only identify with masculinity through heterosexuality. Judith Butler’s work on heterosexual melancholy, which ended the previous chapter, emphasizes the performance of loss coded through the body and its visible signifiers: “the straight man becomes (mimes, cites, appropriates, assumes the status of) the man he ‘never’ loved and ‘never’ grieved” (236).

It is perhaps reductive to claim that the underlying unifier for American literary naturalism is its enforcement of cultural homophobia. The texts by Crane, Norris, and London are structured, indirectly or directly, around notions of conventional masculine identification—that is, to marry (a woman) and reproduce. To return to the
introduction’s conversation on Crane’s “monstering” of Henry Johnson, we see the ways in which normative desires and identities will repeatedly be haunted by non-normative desires and their bodily representations. Therefore, while narrators in “The Monster” and other naturalist texts attempt to “naturalize” heteronormativity through the (re)masculinization of its male subjects, counter-memories or counter-narratives momentarily reveal themselves and frustrate the dominant narrative’s drive to closure. It is not accidental, then, that these non-normative desires and identities take the form of sub-human or spectral figures that haunt naturalist fictions: ghosts, wolves, dogs, God. Applying Butler’s theory of heterosexual melancholy, American naturalist texts unconsciously return to these spectral images arguably to make sense of the loss inherent in male heterosexual identity formation. With the (re)appearance of non-normative sexual desires and their embodiment in male characters who remain narratively marginalized, American naturalism refuses to completely purge itself of what cannot be fully assimilated or openly desired. In other words, what haunts us defines us.
Bibliography:


