

Geo-Aesthetics: Fascism, Globalism, and Frank Norris

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A man walks into a bar. So begins the bad joke that Frank Norris plays on an aspiring painter who squanders his artistic talent amid scenes of animalistic gratification. This bar, however, is not simply some stock setting for a sordid tale about taste and creativity cheapened by poor judgment. Instead, this bar is known as the Imperial, located in downtown San Francisco at the turn of the century. Situated along the Pacific Rim, this bar alludes to the pressures created in a prototypical imaginary of globalization when aesthetics—in the guise of the would-be artist—stop in for a drink. To tell properly the joke of *Vandover and the Brute*, one must begin again: a man walks into a highly specific and evocatively named bar. After this point, the story becomes rather predictable, as Norris's hero-artist descends the evolutionary ladder to wind up groveling on the floor. Less predictable is the novel's ability to communicate a critical insight that is the subject of the artist's uncompleted masterpiece, a salon picture of a British cavalryman lost in the Sudan, which renders legible the deep connections between aesthetics and global vision.

This essay attempts to complete Vandover's half-finished artwork by

rounding out the ideological impulses that lead the artist to the Imperial for drink and diversion in the first place. This examination explores how conceptualization of the globe as a single geo-economic unit depends on a historically specific aesthetic formalism exemplified by Norris's fiction. The contradictory nature of this project—that is, a contextual history of aesthetic formalism—captures the logic that ushers an Americanized global sensibility into being. Norris's career sits astride developments in market capitalism that led to an era of global commodities. The story of one historically specific commodity—wheat—encapsulates this transition: as Richard Hofstadter reported over a half century ago, U.S. wheat farmers in the 1890s increasingly relied on world markets to export surplus grain, changing the nature of economic risk. "Agrarian depressions, formerly of local or national character, now became international, and with them came international agrarian discontent," writes Hofstadter.¹ *The Epic of the Wheat* is the title of Norris's trilogy, which begins in 1901 with the publication of *The Octopus*, a novel that does what *Vandover* cannot: it completes the aestheticized portrait of the global. Another contradiction emerges at precisely this point, since Norris's overblown art seems a poor example of aesthetics. Thus, this essay does not rely on *The Octopus* alone and instead engages other portraits of global aesthetics produced by early historians of Manifest Destiny, such philosophers of art as Walter Benjamin and Friedrich Schiller, and contemporary theorists of the global.

Worldwide Unity: Formalism as Geopolitical Art

Imperialism and empire have long been shown to have aesthetic dimensions. A recent analysis of this linkage comes from Henry Schwarz, who suggests that aesthetics offer an "attractive tool" for staging an imperial enterprise.² In 1900, the historian Edwin Sparks adduced a similar conclusion, citing Whitman's "Passage to India" as evidence of the creative spirit that had fueled four centuries of American expansion.³ A year later in 1901, *The Octopus* crossed this terrain where literature serves imperialism to convey a deeper lesson about how aesthetics facilitate the imagination and

1. Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR* (New York: Vintage, 1955), 51. This essay is indebted to the critical insights and generosity of Jonathan Auerbach.

2. Henry Schwarz, "Aesthetic Imperialism: Literature and the Conquest of India," *MLQ* 61, no. 4 (Dec. 2000): 580.

3. See Edwin Erle Sparks, *The Expansion of the American People, Social and Territorial* (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1900), 13.

conceptualization of the globe as a single, perfect form. Turn-of-the-century globalization is an aesthetic project, which is not to say that it is beautiful but rather that globalization became a thinkable concept via certain formal properties. Meditating on the possibility of a “world culture,” Immanuel Wallerstein begins by throwing out some definitions of culture, including “culture as the production of art-forms.”⁴ One critic’s trash is another’s treasure: this essay sifts through the “art-forms” tossed aside by Wallerstein to explore globalization as an exercise of aesthetic imagination. The formal properties of art allow economic and imperial interests to condense dispersed geographies into a single unified form as the beauty of empire.

Such a project offers modernity no small thing: aesthetics hold out the promise of form, explaining how, at the start of the twentieth century, for instance, the international crisscrossing of markets, commodities, and value comes to be conceptualized as a unified structure—the globe. If, as Thomas Peyser argues, global thinking became ascendant in this period to the extent that “*the nation is replaced with the globe as the fundamental unit of human association*,” then, aesthetics enable this historic shift.⁵ My argument, however, is not just that literature serves, critiques, or thematizes imperialism.⁶ Instead, the significance of aesthetic formalism in understanding early globalization is that empire as a global idea—as opposed to a continental or hemispheric policy—relies on notions of symmetry, totality, and balance. Such formalism becomes crucial once a prototypical stage of globalization seemed inevitable in the 1890s as the West was won and the American frontier closed. Expansionism had run out of room until the United States reconceived itself as a unifying power that would make coherent sense of the world by defining it as a globe, that is, as a perfect sphere. An emerging aesthetic sense of the Pacific Rim—a sensibility as local and historically specific as a San Francisco bar named the Imperial—proved indispensable to this process.

Early-twentieth-century histories of Manifest Destiny shoulder much

4. Immanuel Wallerstein, “The National and the Universal: Can There Be Such a Thing as World Culture,” in *Culture, Globalization, and the World-System*, ed. Anthony D. King (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 91–92.

5. Thomas Peyser, *Utopia and Cosmopolis: Globalization in the Era of American Literary Realism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), x; emphasis in original.

6. In addition to Schwarz on this point, see Amy Kaplan, “Nation, Region, and Empire,” in *The Columbia History of the American Novel*, ed. Emory Elliot (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), and John Carlos Rowe, *Literary Culture and U.S. Imperialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), for expression of these ideas.

of the burden in allowing aesthetic formalism to go global. As William Griffis asserted in his 1899 *The Romance of Conquest*, "The United States of America have become, in the full sense of the word, a World Power, and in a double sense, 'the great Pacific Power.'"⁷ Aesthetics run deeper than formatting historiography in the fictive mode of "romance" and "story," however. What makes American incursions in the Pacific so peaceful is an overall harmony of empire that resolves contradiction by treating differences as isolated, particularistic content that achieves greater unity at the structural remove of form. International tension, even hemispheric conflict, seems mere content that can be bracketed off in the realization of a larger isomorphism of form: "The Far East has become the Near West."⁸ A generation earlier, in *Hunt's Merchant Magazine* of 1845, this formula of complete and total identity had been expressed as a purely geometric precept: "For three centuries, the civilized world has been rolling westward; and Americans of the present age will complete the circle."⁹ As ideal form, the circle provides a figure for the imagination both to comprehend the world as a globe and to manage international commerce as globalization.

Historiography is not alone in shouldering the aestheticization of the world as a globe. Theory does its share, too. It is precisely the imagination, according to Arjun Appadurai, that plays a significant role in globalization. Specifically, the imagination packs the promise of an "emancipatory politics."¹⁰ Appadurai seeks to reaccent the imagination as "no longer a matter of individual genius, escapism from ordinary life, or just a dimension of aesthetics. It is a faculty that informs the daily lives of ordinary people in myriad ways," enabling subjects to contemplate forms of collective life that are not dictated by State or corporate interests.¹¹ Even though Appadurai adds a political sensibility to aesthetics, his rhetoric takes on an imagistic hue as it describes the importance of "a world-generating optic," "world pictures," and "our fantasies" in creating a grassroots dialogue about globalization that overlaps geographic and geopolitical divisions.¹²

7. William Elliot Griffis, *The Romance of Conquest: The Story of American Expansion through Arms and Diplomacy* (Boston and Chicago: W. A. Wilde, 1899), 14.

8. Griffis, *The Romance of Conquest*, 14.

9. Quoted in Norman A Graebner, *Empire on the Pacific: A Study in American Continental Expansion* (New York: Ronald Press, 1955), 98.

10. Arjun Appadurai, "Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination," *Public Culture* 12, no. 1 (winter 2000): 6.

11. Appadurai, "Grassroots Globalization," 6.

12. Appadurai, "Grassroots Globalization," 8. Appadurai is not alone in searching for

The competing strains of aesthetics and politics that echo through Appadurai hint at the inseparability of these two discourses in shaping globalization. While critics have been ready to declaim the aestheticization of politics since Walter Benjamin's famous "artwork" essay of 1936, hope remains that their union can also token democratic possibility. Despair that the aestheticization of politics results in fascism is thus offset by a dash of dialectical optimism at the end of Benjamin's essay. Against the destructive tendencies of spectacle, demagoguery, and imperialism that render fascism pleasurable and even beautiful, the politicization of aesthetics offers a utopian prospect. This hope rests on a chiasmus in which Benjamin opposes the fascist takeover of politics to the demystified consciousness of communism, which politicizes art. No doubt, to frame the conjunction of aesthetics and politics with such rhetoric seems out of date.¹³ Communism no longer

democratic strains within globalization. Polly Toynbee claims that global exchange redistributes real, cultural, and symbolic capital, "making the elites distraught but improving the lot of the rest" ("Who's Afraid of Global Culture," in *Global Capitalism*, ed. Will Hutton and Anthony Giddens [New York: The New Press, 2000], 194). James Rosenau shares this insight, suggesting that globalization creates "functional equivalents," including NGOs, city-spaces, and the World Wide Web, that act as democratic mechanisms ("Governance and Democracy in a Globalizing World," in *Re-imagining Political Community: Studies in Cosmopolitan Democracy*, ed. Danielle Archibugi, David Held, and Martin Köhler [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998], see 41–46). David Held supplies evidence for such assertions—"In the mid-1970s, over two-thirds of all states could reasonably be called authoritarian. This percentage has fallen dramatically; less than a third of all states are now authoritarian, and the number of democracies is growing rapidly" ("Democracy and Globalization," in *Re-imagining Political Community*, 11). Even those who would dispute Held's privileging of the state in an era of globalization still see democracy on the horizon. Thus Hutton and Giddens theorize "new forms of global agency" that have the potential to "reproduce globally" the democratic forms that arose in nation-states in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries ("Fighting Back," in *Global Capitalism*, 216, 223). Appadurai contests the idea that easily recognizable currents of globalization—such as the World Wide Web—can be heralded as democratic. He never forgets "the gigantic corporate machineries that celebrate globalization" while remaining committed to the possibility of "globalization from below," in which democratic meanings circulate at lower frequencies of exchange (1, 3).

13. Benjamin concludes with the chiasmus: "This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art" ("The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt [New York: Schocken Books, 1989], 242). Application of Benjamin's argument to American culture necessitates some important stipulations. First, the relevance of the artwork essay depends on its historical specificity to National Socialism. As Lutz Koepnick asks, "How can Benjamin be of use today to evaluate contemporary attractions and simulations with-

appears as a workable alternative since the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989. And fascism, it is said, was stamped out with the Allies' victory in World War II.

With this history supposedly behind us, we may safely wish for democratic art, but Benjamin reminds us to be careful about what we wish for. What has all the trappings of democratization can devolve into fascist spectacle. In seeking popular aesthetics, we may instead get democracy as a mechanically reproduced art form in which the people become monolithic, their heterogeneity standardized. Even if we create democratic art, how do we then evaluate it—on political or aesthetic terms? Speaking at the Institute for the Study of Fascism in 1934, Benjamin wondered if progressive or emancipatory writing could also be “literarily correct.”¹⁴ Can art and politics usefully share the same criteria without, on the one hand, dispensing with aesthetic questions altogether, or, on the other, submerging political content under formalist considerations? Benjamin views this line of questioning as misguided, built on false oppositions between literary and political criteria; instead, he fuses the two in the conviction that the “more correct . . . the political tendency” of a work, then, by necessity, “the higher [its] technical quality.”¹⁵ But this implosion of aesthetic merit and political evaluation also recalls the rise of National Socialism—and it is this history of mass deception and popular unfreedom that troubles contemporary cultural theory, especially in its treatment of the pressures that globalization places on literary studies.

Literature illuminates developments within a world system just as the counterpressure of the global seems likely to alter the institutionaliza-

out advocating impetuous comparisons or belittling the historical uniqueness of Nazi terror?” (*Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Power* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999], 185). Second, the dislocation of aesthetic politics to American contexts can aestheticize the critical impetus of Benjamin's argument by suppressing its historical specificity, thereby construing fascism as an empty, ahistorical form. Such reasons explain why Andrew Hewitt is “wary of any presumption that . . . might lead to the construction of a transhistorical or even transnational phenomenology of fascism” (*Fascist Modernism: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1993], 3). Still, Koepnick and Hewitt each stress the haunting relevance of aesthetic politics to contemporary and postmodern society. This essay keeps their reservations in mind by attending to the historical specificity of American aesthetic politics at the start of the twentieth century.

14. Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 221.

15. Benjamin, “The Author as Producer,” 237.

tion and mapping of the literary. Such points emerge from a recent issue of *PMLA* titled “Globalizing Literary Studies,” which identifies aesthetics as among the nodal points of global exchange and interdependency. But what is the political valence of the aesthetic as it connects to global economic and cultural flows? Paul Jay’s contribution emphasizes that since globalization “counters older notions of the literary as purely aesthetic,” critics would do well to abandon the “essentially aestheticized national character” of literary tradition, a necessary move if indeed cultural production no longer orbits the State so tightly.¹⁶ While the State has faded (though this is debatable), aestheticization still holds fast to the global character of literary tradition. But it is not enough to say that literature may be global instead of national; rather, the more pressing point is that globalization is aesthetic and the political task is to figure out how the aestheticization of the *State* perceived by Benjamin lends itself to and differs from the aestheticization of the *globe*.

The problem with this political task is that progressive commentary often envisions democracy in anti-aesthetic terms. “With socialism there will be no need for art because the people will become their own art,” runs an apothegm that Anthony Easthope attributes to Raymond Williams.¹⁷ Within this counteraesthetic orientation, the demos no longer need choose between the seductive pleasures of artistic representation and the tedium of political representation: the polis is unified as an objet d’art. Once the tendrils of art are cut back, politics presumably will have no need for mediation and will represent the popular directly and immanently. A similar counteraesthetic appeal braces *The Octopus* in its story of a young poet turned young socialist who denounces the triumph of organized capital by scorning art. Among the first literary treatments of socialism in the United States—still new enough to be used only in adjectival form and capitalized as “Socialistic”—the novel suggests “the people” will be rejuvenated by twin attacks on corporate greed and genteel humanism. This counteraesthetic impetus correlates exactly with the young poet’s design to politicize the literary in ways that will advance democracy. But as *The Octopus* collapses aesthetics and politics, it jumbles fascism and democracy. Norris provides *avant la lettre* a theoretical sequel to Benjamin’s account of the forces of authoritarianism, spectacle, and reproduction that propel the populace toward fascism. These

16. Paul Jay, “Beyond Discipline? Globalization and the Future of English,” *PMLA* 116 (January 2001): 36, 43.

17. Anthony Easthope, “The Pleasures of Labour: Marxist Aesthetics in a Post-Marxist World,” in *Post-Theory: New Directions in Criticism*, ed. Martin McQuillan et al. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 63.

forces are global in nature: *The Octopus* locates aesthetics/politics at the site of transnational markets, and it is this totalizing geography that unifies fascist representation and democratic desire.

Fueled by this counteraesthetic impetus, the political novel represents democracy in ways that seem a lot like fascism. Richard Chase first remarked on the eerie intimacy between Norris "the ardent democrat" and Norris "the protofascist."¹⁸ Norris falls short of full-blown fascism because his demagogues are not in bed with any official bureaucratic apparatus. Rather, they remain hopelessly devoted to the people and their art; the poet in *The Octopus*, for instance, seeks no State or elite organs to transmit his Homeric ode of the West. He instead participates in a world poetics of commerce, sailing off to India to fold East into West. It is precisely where the *State* drops out of the picture that the *global* enters in the form of the Anglo-Saxon "race" expanding across the Pacific. The *protofascist* is more properly a *postfascist* who retools the aesthetic politics of unity to a global world where state channels are outmoded by the new connections of world culture. Norris's vision of a universal "white city" that emerges well in advance of any help from the State has a strange currency in our global era when, as many would have it, the State has become increasingly less relevant.¹⁹ For the postfascist committed to democratic forms, political aesthetics and aesthetic politics converge in images of the people as a once disorganized mass that acquires unity under the spectacle of world markets backed up by imperialist aggression.

Under this schema that is both *avant* and *après la lettre* of Benjamin's artwork essay, aesthetics operate as global discourse in a twofold sense. In a formalist sense, the aesthetic object aspires to wholeness and unity, criteria that in a geopolitical sense supply the logic for the expansion of world

18. Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (New York: Doubleday, 1957), 198.

19. Malcolm Walters proposes deterritorialization as a prime effect of globalization (*Globalization*, 2d ed. [London: Routledge, 2001]), 182–92). The specter of a weakened State has been met with dismay by John Gray, who sees global laissez-faire as the new order (*False Dawn: The Delusions of Global Capitalism* [New York: The New Press, 1998], see 100, 207), and Benjamin Barber, who argues that citizenship becomes meaningless if it is pried apart from the State (*Jihad vs. McWorld* [New York: Random House, 1995], see 6–8). A more nuanced view is advanced by Fernando Coronil, who perceives that "the unregulated production and free circulation of primary commodities in the open market [which] requires a significant dismantling of state control" is a neoliberal project that still requires "the helping hand of the state" ("Towards a Critique of Globalcentrism: Speculations on Capitalism's Nature," *Public Culture* 12, no. 2 [spring 2000]: 363).

markets underwritten by U.S. militarism. Art makes globalizing claims that connect with historical developments in transnational capital and cosmopolitanism at the turn of the century. When Norris writes in *World's Work* of December 1901 that a "whole Literature goes marching by, clamoring for a leader and a master hand to guide it," his desire to see aesthetic potential—here cast as a disorganized popular mass—placed under the control of a consummate artist is satisfied by the demagogue who moonlights as a novelist.²⁰ As this fantasy unfolds in *The Octopus*, literature is no longer marching aimlessly: the aesthetic turns to Asia, its mission to sublimate crass empire building under the emergence of world culture. The aestheticization of politics that puts democracy on a slippery slope toward fascism is not simply a domestic event but an international episode. Before Norris sat down in San Francisco and penned manifestos about managing literature to serve the masses' economic and political interests, he sailed as a correspondent to South Africa during the Boer War and then two years later to Cuba when the U.S. military invaded the island. The aesthetic for Norris has its roots in imperial adventure and global exchange. "I really should love to visit you . . . but I think that the course of my Empire will take its way westward," writes Norris to decline a friend's offer to journey to New York after his expedition to Cuba.²¹ "Empire" translates to the project of becoming a novelist: Norris stands as proponent of a global aesthetic that aspires to expansive and unified forms by positioning itself against and finally encompassing elements deemed alien or foreign.

Although the divide separating aesthetics and politics, like the gulf between fascism and democracy or East and West, narrows considerably under a global perspective committed to unity of form, this collapse is inherent to the origins of aesthetic discourse. Frank Norris completes the journey that leads to the art of what he called "my Empire"; Friedrich Schiller stands

20. Frank Norris, "The Need of a Literary Conscience," in *Frank Norris: Novels and Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1986), 1159.

21. Franklin Walker, *The Letters of Frank Norris* (San Francisco: Book Club of California, 1956), 19. Norris was kicked out of South Africa by the Boer government in the wake of the failed Uitlander insurrection in 1896. Norris saw the conflict as spectacle, describing the face-off between the Boers and the British as a "situation [that] was almost theatrical . . . a tremendous story" (Frank Norris, "A Christmas in the Transvaal," in "'A Christmas in the Transvaal': An Addition to the Norris Canon," by Robert C. Leitz III, *Studies in American Fiction* 14 [autumn 1986]: 222). In Cuba, restraint was harder to come by, as Norris wrote after one battle, "Santiago was ours—was ours, ours, by the sword we had acquired, we, Americans, with no one to help—and the Anglo-Saxon blood of us" (quoted in Franklin Walker, *Frank Norris: A Biography* [Garden City: Doubleday, 1932], 199).

at the beginning of aestheticization of world culture. I thus turn to Schiller to resituate the voice of traditional aesthetics within the specifics of American global desire at the turn of the century.

Art and Terror

In 1792, the French National Assembly declared Schiller an honorary citizen of a republic sprung from revolution. But memory of the Terror suggested a need for distance, which Schiller found in an aesthetic experience immune to the excesses and upheavals of the political world. Although his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters* (1794–95) mobilizes “the spirit of philosophical enquiry” to discover formal principles behind “the most perfect of all works of art, the building up of the true political freedom,” Schiller takes pains to safeguard the art of political freedom from the contagion of politics.²²

When aesthetic criteria determine the course of political action, violence often ensues. Yet violence can be reshaped into beautiful forms: the freedom that seemed so threatening in revolutionary France is channeled into art, where it acquires order and predictability. As Lutz Koepnick argues, “Aesthetics are meant to give a differentiated apparatus of domination the look of unified and resolute action.”²³ But not only does art clean up the traces of domination; it also acts as domination. Coherence, unity, and beauty contribute to an artwork’s perfection, but these same qualities invite authoritarian control when translated to a political register. Schiller uses the analogy of a sculptor and a block of stone to suggest the dangers of conducting politics with an eye toward the overarching unity of form. To lend form to the “formless block,” the sculptor resorts to violence, splintering and chipping away at parts of the stone deemed incongruent with the ideal design housed in the artist’s brain (*AE*, 32). At a governmental level, this concern with form sacrifices the citizen to the ideal of the State. In order to achieve perfect functionality and unity, the State “must ruthlessly trample underfoot any such hostile individuality” (*AE*, 33). The annihilation of particularity is the trade-off for political unity.

Once the final product—either in the form of artwork or the State—is unveiled, all traces of violence disappear. The sculptor who chisels the

22. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, trans. Reginald Snell (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1954), 25. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *AE*.

23. Koepnick, *Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Power*, 89.

block “only forbears to show” his attack upon formlessness (*AE*, 32). Gentle lines and polished curves erase memory of the fragments cut away from the marble, shards swept up as so much trash. The State, in turn, forgets its trampling of individuality by celebrating the aftereffects of the struggle for social order, taking pleasure in the sight of a regulated and coordinated citizenry. The State behaves as ruthlessly as the sculptor insofar as each metonymically represents the whole at the expense of the part. Unlike Schiller’s mechanical artist who labors without an idea of the total artwork and cannot see beyond the individual parts, the fine artist ignores the broken parts scattered on the floor and instead concentrates on the whole. So, too, the State is “able to produce unity only by suppressing variety”: aesthetics and politics are incommensurate, and permitting them to appear as equivalent expressions is to court violence and then to destroy all evidence of that trespass (*AE*, 32). Schiller’s analogy stresses the need to maintain clear lines between the worlds of art and statecraft—but it is an impossible effort.

Although the terror of revolution sends Schiller fleeing toward aesthetics, he does not renounce the project of “true political freedom” but rather reconceptualizes freedom as an artwork governed by order and unity. By routing political desire through aesthetics, citizens purify politics: formalist criteria ensure that irregularities or imperfections at the specific level of content are reconciled to an overall unity. Art provides a crucible to siphon off an excrescent influx of human passion. A beautiful State emerges at the end of aesthetic education, a perfectly ordered and law-loving republic ruled by an ethos of implicit consent. Properly instructed in aesthetics, citizens enter the arena of political commotion to introduce form where before there was none; the apparent formlessness of politics takes form as the State. “The communication of the Beautiful unites society” (*AE*, 137), writes Schiller.

Schiller is not thinking of mass “communication” here. Aesthetic education instead targets the subject, engendering a citizen who channels emotion into well-regulated expression. Law operates as an interior ethical program rather than an external disciplinary operation. This lesson is cultivated with the development of aesthetic consciousness as self-governance; art interpellates “the inward man” who “begins finally to take possession of himself” by approaching his own subjectivity with the coolness of the bourgeois merchant who appreciates his possessions, including his own self (*AE*, 136). Just as the sculptor liberates a pleasing shape from the amorphous, unwieldy block of stone, the citizen judiciously crafts ethical, socially utile behavior from an undifferentiated realm of affect: “The lawless leap of joy becomes a dance, the shapeless gesture a graceful and harmonious mim-

ing of speech; the confused noises of perception unfold themselves, begin to obey a rhythm and weld themselves into song" (*AE*, 136).²⁴ Where the sculptor manipulates an exterior object, the citizen molds an interior subject. Aesthetically trained citizens aspire to a generic identity that squelches difference by bracketing off particularistic human experiences and distinctive human accents. Caution sets the tone of the dance distilled from "lawless leap of joy" that once animated the subject; a melancholy note of restraint echoes through the lyrical form that once was "confused noises." As Terry Eagleton remarks, "Schiller's 'aesthetic' is . . . Gramsci's 'hegemony' in a different key."²⁵ The art of repression hinges on a formalist transcendence that rejects the specific content of social antagonism as an impediment to the totalizing beauty of political freedom.

Although formalist criteria of aesthetics promise mass involvement—any person can fill the capacious shoes of a universal political form—the capacity to realize perfect freedom is as limited as the select few invited to become citizens of the aesthetic republic. In this way, the radical impulse of *Aesthetic Education* is also its most conservative effect. While the beauty of freedom is theoretically available to everyone, ultimately, however, most subjects fail to qualify as generic enough to stand in for the individual that Schiller has in mind. The desire for aesthetic form "exists in every finely tuned soul" (*AE*, 140), but how many such souls can a discordant populace boast? Not too many, fears Schiller. "Only in a few select circles where it is not the spiritless imitation of foreign manners [*fremde Sitten*] but people's own lovely nature that governs conduct, where mankind passes through the most complex situations with eager simplicity and tranquil innocence," can we hope to encounter freedom in its purest form (*AE*, 139).²⁶ Freedom is a work of art, but are the people cultivated enough to appreciate—or create—it?

Not nearly as gung ho as Norris's dream of "Anglo-Saxon" culture belting the globe, this prototype of the State as artwork nonetheless mandates a type of "foreign" service, even if only by way of rejection. The aesthetic republic demands cultural self-reliance, which, when translated to the mass dimensions of "the People," looks a lot like nativism. Its citizens relate

24. The disciplinary nature of such beautiful freedom has rightly given critics pause; see David Lloyd, "Arnold, Ferguson, Schiller: Aesthetic Culture and the Politics of Aesthetics," *Cultural Critique* 2 (winter 1985–86): 165–66.

25. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 106.

26. My thanks to Yasemin Yildiz for help with the German original of Schiller's text at this point.

to globalism in paranoid fashion. As Schiller warns of things *fremd*, or alien, he tiptoes around the turmoil of the French Revolution that prompted his initial retrenchment to subsume political freedom under aesthetics. But aesthetics never escape from things unfamiliar and foreign—even if that contact primarily is negative. Although Schiller urges an aesthetic experience that stays safely on the shore of national homogeneity, his thoughts compulsively return to the terror of radical republicanism across the border. In constructing *fremde Sitten* as inimical to the beauty of the State, Schiller practices what Kojin Karatani calls “aestheticcentrism” by locating beauty, not in the object itself but in the repression of any feelings of alterity or strangeness that the object produces. A clampdown on affect is necessary to an aesthetic stance that “gets pleasure not from its object but by bracketing various reactions to the object.”²⁷ When the object in question is a “foreign” culture, the subject gets pleasure in foreignness by ignoring the less than ideologically beautiful effects of inassimilable difference. *Aesthetic Education* at first seeks a type of cosmopolitan pleasure in the freedom erupting in revolutionary France. The Terror, however, threatens to particularize this pleasure in highly politicized and destructive ways. Schiller responds by quarantining freedom, dislocating it from any historical context infected by either *fremde Sitten* or the political. By lodging freedom in a contextual vacuum that removes all particles of foreignness and culture, the citizen distills freedom, pure and simple, a politics so wholly formal that it has no content, no alien customs, no history that need be recognized.

As aesthetic projects, both State governance and self-governance define themselves in opposition to *fremde Sitten*, that is, to particular meanings that disrupt sovereignty by insisting that governance is never completely an insular undertaking and, in fact, always entails contact with specific contents that seem alien to the “organic” form of self or people. The exclusive circle around political membership is drawn tighter to distinguish a “people’s own lovely conduct” from things unfamiliar. The implicit contrast between one’s own behavior and the unfamiliarity of the *Fremd* reveals the aesthetic as always on guard against things foreign, its privileging of certain forms negatively articulated against what lies beyond the horizon of a presumably unified self or homogenous populace.

27. Kojin Karatani, “Uses of Aesthetics: After Orientalism,” trans. Sabu Koshō, *boundary 2* 25, no. 2 (summer 1998): 151.

Literature “as Such”; or, How to Lodge a *Formal* Protest

Unapologetically political, Norris’s fiction can hardly be termed aesthetic in Schiller’s sense. Generations of readers have found plenty to wince at in Norris’s prose, beginning with Van Wyck Brooks, who, a half century ago, labeled him the progenitor of “the ‘cave-man’ tendency in American writing.”²⁸ Norris would hardly take offense at such a judgment, perhaps even salvaging masculinist pride from the accusation. Indeed, he often boasted of his works’ *counteraesthetic* qualities and their rejection of bourgeois standards of taste and respectability. The literary artist’s uncouth reaction to aesthetic education sides with the popular in a democratic maneuver against highbrow culture.

In adopting a counteraesthetic position, Norris is not too distant from theorists who dismiss traditional aesthetics and instead advocate revisionist aesthetics as an avenue for democratic social change. To this end, Laura Kipnis locates hopes for a “radical democratic Left” in “radical aesthetics,” which transform commodity culture into popular culture.²⁹ Progressive politics invite the contradiction of an aesthetics opposed to art: democracy necessitates a counteraesthetic response. Even as aesthetic ideology provides a last refuge to bourgeois apologists and other scoundrels, it also potentially supplies, according to Herbert Marcuse, a “counter-consciousness” that deconstructs a “dominant consciousness.”³⁰ Theodor Adorno similarly describes art as a “counterpressure to the force exerted by the *body social*.”³¹ The “need for a ‘counter-image’ of a given everyday life” is supplied by art, according to Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér.³² While

28. Van Wyck Brooks, *The Confident Years: 1885–1915* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1952), 199.

29. Laura Kipnis, *Ecstasy Unlimited: On Sex, Capital, Gender, and Aesthetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 29. See also George Yúdice, who probes the degree to which the “aesthetic dimension . . . can contribute to change across the terrain of the social formation” (“For a Practical Aesthetics,” in *The Phantom Public Sphere*, ed. Bruce Robbins [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992], 219).

30. Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon, 1978), ix, 8.

31. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 33, emphasis in original. Where Marcuse comes closer to idealizing art as distinct from ideology, Adorno situates art as always within it and always bound up with “extra-aesthetic productive forces” (33). Adorno moves beyond somewhat static oppositions between art and politics to claim aesthetic discourse as always connected to the *socius*, even if that connection is to critique the established order and expose its empty individualism.

32. Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér, “The Necessity and Irreformability of Aesthetics,” in

Norris's cultivation of the middlebrow presents a serious challenge to what these theorists, particularly Adorno, mean by art. *The Octopus* exerts considerable counterpressure on a body social in which dominant consciousness and everyday life are manipulated by the antidemocratic conniving of corporations and trusts. For all his supposed inattention to the delicacies of form and style, Norris's deficiencies come across as democratic impulses. Deriding art for its cloying imitation and effeminacy, Norris cultivates a counteraesthetic steeped in a masculinist style cocky enough to represent "the People" in all its less-than-genteel behaviors. But the terrain in which counteraesthetic bravado struggles with aesthetics becomes political quicksand as the contents of his naturalist image of democracy—"the People"—acquire a totalizing and global form. As political aesthetics and aesthetic politics become liquid terrain, democratic positions evolve with postfascist tendencies.

The poet in *The Octopus*, Presley, comes west with the mission of contributing to political aesthetics by writing an epic about "the People." But it is not immediately clear whether his "great poem of the West" will be a popular (and, in the political terms of the 1890s, Populist) performance or an expression of imperial power: "Oh, to put it all into hexameters; strike the great iron note; sing the vast, terrible song; the song of the People; the fore-runners of empire!" exclaims Presley as he imagines—but fails to write—his masterpiece.³³ Indecision about the purpose of modern epic poetry stems from Presley's lack of clarity about his own purpose: will his makeover from fawning aesthete to hardy champion of Populism be successful? This uncertainty derives from the uneasy transit between aesthetics and citizenship: if a people's poetry is politicized, what should its politics be? As art becomes a medium for democracy, should it expand to spread still further westward across the Pacific Rim to wind up in the East? *The Octopus* never settles whether "the People" or "empire" should be advanced, because these two political projects—one about nurturing a people's capacity for self-government and the other about denying self-government to other people—ultimately converge under the beautiful prospect of global civilization.

Despite a trajectory that impels Presley from California's San Joaquin Valley to a clipper ship bound for India, his epic limits its compass to circles

Reconstructing Aesthetics: Writings of the Budapest School, ed. Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 3.

33. Frank Norris, *The Octopus: A Story of California* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 40. Hereafter, references to this work are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text by page number only.

no more expansive than the select society Schiller invites to an aesthetic State. Eager to compose a paean to the toilers of the land, he settles down in an artist's garret at the swank ranch of the county's largest landowner. While assiduously loafing about the valley's farms, the poet renounces traditional aesthetics. Abandoning genteel verse along with the "cluttered bric-a-brac and meaningless *objets d'art*" (371) associated with the feminine world of the landowner's wife, Presley cultivates a counteraesthetic and pens a "Socialistic poem" (394). Where he once sent verses to small literary journals, he now prints his manifesto in the popular press, specifically, a daily newspaper. As he imbibes radicalism from a saloonkeeper who quotes Mill and Bakunin, Presley's emerging political consciousness derails his earlier aesthetic tendencies to write dainty verses. Aesthetics become the site of political affect. Denouncing the corrupt tactics of the railroad, Presley "saw red," his emotion (or is it a political orientation, a code word for communism?) finding outlet in poetic creation. But the poet as producer finds his aesthetic labor appropriated as his socialist composition becomes the topic of literary debate, fodder for political speeches, and copy for advertising slogans.

The Octopus opens up a rift in the logic of representation by virtue of its counteraesthetic stance. If art traditionally brackets material and cultural considerations in its articulation of a disinterested universal subject, then the "anti-aesthetic logic of naturalism," according to Donald Pease, recuperates once disavowed contexts of race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender.³⁴ The beauty of generic identity, unfettered by historical contingencies or social associations, collides with an anti-aesthetic orientation that wrests the subject away from a fantasy of hermetic identity to "multiple sites wherein alternative social, political, and economic identities have emerged."³⁵ The anti-aesthetic performs radical democratic critique. In Pease's eyes, Jack London's *Martin Eden* exemplifies an alternative form of aesthetic judgment that does not blindly reproduce the ideals of disinterest and transcendence that allow the subject to cozy up to the State. For Norris's *The Octopus*, the theoretical payoff is less clear: a narrative written to protest the power of corporate capital mounts a counteraesthetic assault that, in the end, abides by traditional aesthetic assumptions. Formal criteria overtake political democracy as concerns for unity manage the popular, subsuming heterogeneity under the universal placeholder of "the People."

34. Donald E. Pease, "Martin Eden and the Limits of the Aesthetic Experience," *boundary 2* 25, no. 1 (spring 1998): 144.

35. Pease, "Martin Eden," 151.

However wide the rift between counteraesthetics and aesthetics, a deeper unity abides and cancels out the contested, unpredictable nature of popular democracy by romanticizing the demos as a beautiful project whose beauty consists in adherence to formal principles of balance, proportion, and totality.

Although counteraesthetics impel him to political action, Presley lapses back into a complacent and uncritical disposition. Even as he composes his "Socialistic" poem, "the artist in him reasserted itself. He became more interested in his poem, as such, than in the cause that had inspired it" (372). His politics never cease to be aesthetic at core; literature's formal properties—its "as such-ness"—outweigh the specific history of its contents. The avant-garde sensibility that allows Presley to distinguish counteraesthetics from traditional aesthetics, exemplified by the railroad's efficiency of purpose and unified control of markets, also leads him paradoxically to locate his "red" social vision within a tradition of formal order. Unable to control his indignation at the railroad, searching for a vessel to manage his outrage, Presley begins to write. Much as Schiller's aesthetic education guides citizens to route ecstatic movement into dance or to shape untutored expression into song, Presley's denunciation of corporate capital takes poetic form. "As his prose grew more exalted, it passed easily into the domain of poetry," writes Norris. "Soon the cadence of his paragraphs settled to an ordered beat and rhythm, and in the end Presley . . . was once more writing verse" (372). Out on a radical limb farther than anything rhyme has prepared him for, Presley yearns for the safety of aesthetic formalism where regularity reels in a type of affect too close to the red end of the spectrum. The triumph of aesthetics is hardly unexpected given the scene where Presley first weds social protest to the beautiful: stumbling across a painting in a shipping magnate's gallery, he is inspired to shape populism into a poetic form. His composition engenders radicalism along with conservatism, its phrases quoted in "revolutionary sermons" as well as "reactionary speeches" (394). Also "distorted so as to read as an advertisement for patented cereals and infant's foods," his socialist ode is appropriated by consumer capitalism to reveal how the divided lines of politics/aesthetics are united in the same source—the market (394). Once political sentiment is exalted (reduced?) to pure formalism, literary protest readily contains even the most historically dissimilar contents.

Fed up with poetry, the poet turns anarchist and attempts a synthesis of counteraesthetics and revolution. Where he once moped about the landscape seeking inspiration, he now delivers impassioned speeches

denouncing a monopoly that feeds on “the People”; where he once wrote verse, he now tosses a pipe bomb into the dining room of a railroad official. His reaction against aesthetics seems complete. Still, something remains missing from these incendiary acts. What they lack, *The Octopus* implies, is poetry. At a protest against the strong-arm tactics of the railroad, Presley jumps on an opera house stage, lays out a case against the plutocrats’ oppression of the populace, and invokes the American, French, and Russian Revolutions as precedents of popular democratic uprisings. Yet, highbrow aestheticism still wraps radical politics in formal structures: elevated above the crowd in an institution of upper-class culture, he warns against political excess, lest liberty personified as “the Man in the Street” be seduced by “the Red terror” (552). His call for a new insurgency takes the familiar form of a tragic aria. Amid the cheers of the overflowing opera house, Presley remains indifferent about political activities organized loosely on socialist principles—much as he has been ambivalent about his poetic activities all along. His speech falls short of raising the crowd’s political consciousness precisely because its reliance on radical affect numbs the aesthetic judgment that Schiller, at the time of a different revolution, sought to instill in citizens: “A prolonged explosion of applause followed, the Opera House roaring to the roof, men cheering, stamping, waving their hats. But it was not intelligent applause. Instinctively as he made his way out, Presley knew that, after all, he had not once held the hearts of his audience. He had talked as he would have written; for all his scorn of literature, he had been *literary*” (552, my emphasis). The interlude with demagoguery is both not enough and too much: his performance is too aesthetic to be appropriately democratic *and* too political to educate the people. Trembling at the specter of popular turmoil, Presley seeks refuge in art as a means of restraining sentiment. While he upbraids himself for not electrifying the people, the poet is secretly pleased that he has not done so. His “scorn of literature” enables a retreat to a predictable aesthetic posture; counteraesthetic impulses slide easily enough into the managed domain of the “literary.” Although Presley’s emotional alienation from the crowd betrays his distance from popular democracy, estrangement lends form and order to an otherwise frenetic social outcry. He brackets democratic energy to appreciate politics solely as an aesthetic effect: lukewarm about popular will, the formalist as politician invokes politics—the “Red terror”—only as a last resort. Far better to have mediocre speeches than revolutionary unrest. In a world where “the people” of California will merely repeat the cry “à la Bastille” that “unleashes Revolution,” just as Schiller feared, and democratic politics seem a powder keg

waiting to explode, art provides a bunker of safety (550). The judicious citizen looks to aestheticize—to make “literary,” in Presely’s case—the popular and the democratic.³⁶

Without the “literary,” the art of political freedom, like a populist speech delivered at an opera house, is liable to erupt into anarchy and terror. According to this phobic logic, the final destination of affect should be nonpolitical: only by recognizing the awesome power of politics—and this is what aesthetic education warns citizens about—can we be spared the excesses of democracy incarnate. Norris draws on a historical collision of the “literary” and the popular by basing Presley’s socialist ode on Edward Markham’s “The Man with the Hoe” (1899), a populist poem written “after seeing Millet’s World-Famous Painting” (5). When Presley gives his creation to the newspapers, he merely follows the example of his historic prototype, who sent his poem to the San Francisco *Examiner* and used the popular press as an organ of protest. Presley’s performance at the opera house repeats the lesson of Markham’s poem, which seems calculated not to rouse the oppressed or court the “Red terror” but rather to throw the masses a bone by gently scolding the privileged. The final stanza reads:

O masters, lords and rulers in all lands
 How will the Future reckon with this Man?
 How answer his brute question in that hour
 When whirlwinds of rebellion shake the world?

 When this dumb Terror shall reply to God,
 After the silence of the centuries?³⁷

Like Schiller, who feared the *Terreur*, and Presley, who halfheartedly invokes the “Red terror,” Markham ominously casts revolution as the “dumb Ter-

36. The “Red terror” endangers political stability because it has the status of *fremde Sitten*, a foreign influence that disrupts an autonomous, sovereign republic. As Paul Buhle argues, socialism in the United States was a “multi-ethnic” movement developed and sustained by immigrant populations (*Marxism in the United States: Remapping the History of the American Left* [London: Verso, 1987], 49). In contrast, John Diggins states that the “American Left was born in the United States. Contrary to popular belief, it was not the product of foreign powers and alien ideologies” (*The Rise and Fall of the American Left* [New York: Norton, 1992], 17). Diggins’s claims about homegrown radicalism, however, sound a lot like Schiller’s desire to preserve the aesthetic State from “foreign manners.” To what extent, then, do aesthetic notions shape Diggins’s historical narrative?

37. Edward Markham, *The Man with the Hoe and Other Poems* (New York: Doubleday, 1899), 17–18.

ror” waiting to articulate an unspeakable message. Terror—whether French, Red, or dumb—is a scary political prospect that in each case is tamed by a counteraesthetic sensibility that scorns literature but prefers the literary, that hates art but loves its form.

Geo-Aesthetics

Bombing the dining room of a capitalist meets with even less success than writing poems or delivering impassioned political speeches. As Presley wraps up loose ends before sailing to Asia, his path crosses the railroad flunky, S. Behrman, who escaped the blast. Suspecting the poet as the culprit, Behrman seems amused by the botched attempt on his life and offers only a mild rebuke: “Well, that don’t show any common sense, Presley. . . . What could you have gained by killing me?” (626). He evaluates the poet’s bomb-throwing as an aesthetic performance, critiquing the act for its overblown quality, its ostentatious and useless display of political passion. Appealing to “common sense,” Behrman invokes Kant’s ideal of *sensus communis* to judge Presley’s extremism. As this critique evaluates political action in terms of aesthetic value, the specific causes of social unrest melt into air. Formalist considerations empty politics of history and content (in the poet’s case, a protest against corrupt governmental machinery and economic exploitation) to leave only a dehistoricized scaffolding with no context to explain anarchism. Presley accepts this Kantian critique of radical politics and agrees that his actions lack the beauty of common sense: “It don’t seem as though you could be brought to book, S. Behrman, by anybody, or by any means, does it? They can’t get at you through the courts,—the law can’t get you . . . and you even escaped . . . six inches of plugged gas pipe. Just what are we going to do with you?” (626–27). Justice remains an aesthetic proposition as Presley’s idiomatic use of “book” to signal the despair of ever finding legal redress implies. The capitalist cannot “be brought to book,” and in a different sense neither can the poet, who, at the end of *The Octopus*, remains as far as ever from completing his epic to “the People.”

This is not the first time that Presley agrees with the formalist criteria of capitalists. Earlier, Presley visits the central offices of the P. S. and W. Railroad, where the corporation’s president dismisses the poet’s socialist ode not because of its radical message but because of its aesthetic deficiency. The landscape that inspired Presley receives higher marks because it is an

original painting rather than a knockoff in verse. "You might just as well have kept quiet," he tells Presley, who not unexpectedly agrees with this critique of his futility and lack of common sense (574). But the railroad president overstates his case; "The Toilers" is not without social effects. At a soiree thrown by the wife of yet another railroad mucky-muck, Presley is told, "Just because of that poem, [we] have started a movement to send a whole shipload of wheat to the starving people in India. Now, you horrid, *réactionnaire*, are you satisfied?" (605). Presley should be satisfied: poetry in the salons of the elite produces results, which, no matter how shallow, elude partisan agitation on an opera house stage. Whereas the aimless emotion at the populist rally soon dissipates, famine relief plays a stabilizing role in a cosmopolitan theater of supply and demand. At the opera house that sets the stage for the mob meeting, the people overflow the highbrow aesthetic institution that shapes them as a mass; in contrast, India is far away enough that its specific content is already bracketed, trivialized as a minor distraction to the overall humanitarian project conducted in the name of world civilization. India—as it exists in the aesthete philanthropic imagination—is the incarnation of *fremde Sitten*, a geography of the foreign that falls outside the aesthetic State. But this outside is quickly encapsulated by the elite, who, in appreciating Presley's poem, reconcile the specific locale of foreignness to the abstract feeling of global consciousness. As an instance of politics routed into aesthetic education, Presley's poem educates the select few of drawing room society to mobilize a rational response to hunger. Literature argues for the redistribution of resources (here, a commodity as basic as food), but in ways that are always in line with principles of order and unity. These criteria find their geopolitical analogue in U.S. expansion into Asia that establishes equilibrium between the starving East and the overproducing West. The poet's formalism embellishes globalization, suggesting its design as a rationale of economic justice.

Although *The Octopus* takes a dim view of the elite and its latest cause célèbre, Norris suggests the opening of Asian markets as the ultimate achievement of the aesthetic State. Humanity forms a perfect circle: as Western-style capitalism reaches the "Orient," the Anglo-Saxon finds himself back at the birthplace of civilization. Manifest Destiny appears on the Pacific Rim not so much as an imperial mission but as a transhistoric return in which nationality and race pale before the great idea of a new human unity engineered by world markets. Not surprisingly, it is the shipping magnate whose art collection inspires Presley's "The Toilers" who first

spouts this idea: "The great word of the twentieth century will be—listen to me, you youngsters—Markets" (305). As the United States pushes empire-capitalism eastward, the globe achieves unity under a political economy so orderly and totalizing that it seems a work of art.

Turn-of-the-century globalization, with its drive toward consolidation and coordination of markets, adheres to formalism's ideal of unity and balance. Globalization has always structured aesthetics: from Schiller's "foreign manners" to Norris's utopian sense of "Markets," criteria of wholeness and proportion resonate with early geopolitical concerns that frame U.S. interests as transnational. But it is not just that aesthetics hinge on "global claims" and the "totalization of culture" to justify universalist claims for what is in actuality the particularity of the State. More to the point, aesthetics envision the globe as both a perfect shape and a beautiful concept, giving ordinary expression to ideas of wholeness, synthesis, and perfect completion carried out on a world scale. Literature "as such," as formalist enterprise, is also the specific historical expression of what we might think of as geo-aesthetics at the start of the twentieth century. The criteria of unity that underwrite traditional aesthetics supply the logic of expanding markets. Norris's image of world trade that pours the bounty of American wheat into the gaping mouths of Indian peasants initially crops up at an art gallery where landowners, captains of industry, and aesthetes brainstorm about ways to reinvigorate American enterprise and art in a single stroke. The devotees of art intuit that excess is a political problem (as it is in the opera house) unless it is redefined as surplus (as it is within the new religion of "Markets") and shipped off to Asia. Equilibrium of form prevails: excess meets up with scarcity, famine solves the problem of overproduction, and West folds into East in a series of transnational flows.

Dejected by the railroad's victory, Presley signs aboard a clipper ship laden with California wheat bound for Calcutta. The world market has its aesthetic representative; under the poet's guidance, global trade takes shape as an artwork. As the owner of the shipping line predicts, "We'll carry our wheat into Asia yet. The Anglo-Saxon started from there at the beginning of everything and it's manifest destiny that he must circle the globe and fetch up where he began his march" (647). This long-awaited white homecoming represents unity as the achievement of a global project—just as Norris would later cast global aspirations in aesthetic terms when he writes about the future of the novel. Norris's blueprint for literary production anticipates the structure of what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in the twenty-

first century theorize as the force of imperial sovereignty: “the concept of Empire united juridical categories and universal ethical values, making them work together as an organic whole.”³⁸ As Norris contemplates the state of the American novel, he imagines human civilization as a single continuum where the only unit of geography is the globe as West meets up with East, and the only unit of time is a human history that unfolds like chapters in a novel. While this literary formula seems a lot like Hardt and Negri’s formula for empire, it is also the case that Hardt and Negri’s empire echoes Norris’s aesthetics. Like Norris’s literary crusade, empire “exhausts historical time, suspends history, and summons the past and future within its own ethical order.”³⁹ No clash of cultures erupts from this total vision because there is no conflict to begin with: rather, an aesthetic sensibility ensures horizons of greater unity. The “beauty” that lingers in Hardt and Negri’s account of empire is matched by the global form that suffuses Norris’s literary manifestos.

In a series of essays written in the wake of *The Octopus*, Norris identifies the lack of a global horizon as a major obstacle to the evolution of American literature. While he grumbles that the novel narrowly focuses on the parlor and not the workaday world of the street, Norris also intends his complaint as a call to arms for a national literature that has run out of room. Mindful of the frontier’s closing, Norris wonders where the novel—like the nation—will expand and flex its muscle. He takes heart in a view of civilization as organically bent on empire, eternally moving westward until it ends up back in the East where, presumably, the seeds of Anglo-Saxon cultural superiority first sprouted. After sweeping across the Middle East into Europe and then leapfrogging to North America, Anglo-Saxons stand on the shores of the Pacific, a step away from belting the globe with Western culture. Humanity is realized as a perfect circle:

Suddenly we have found that there is no longer any Frontier . . . at last after so many centuries, after so many marches, after so much fighting, so much spilled blood . . . the Anglo-Saxon in his course of empire had circled the globe and had brought the new civilization to the old civilization, had reached the starting point of history, the place from which the migrations began. So as soon as the marines landed

38. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 10.

39. Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 11.

there was no longer any West, and the equation of the horizon, the problem of the centuries for the Anglo-Saxon was solved.⁴⁰

Like the balanced image of world markets supported by Presley the poet, the idea of a single cosmopolitanism finds a champion in Norris the novelist. This unity may at first require blood and aggression, but eventually militarism transcends war itself and becomes an aesthetic project. In elaborating his vision, Norris thus refers to U.S. Marines who entered Peking in June 1900 to confront anticolonialist Boxers laying siege to foreign legations. As American troops force a transnational unity that has been centuries in the making, empire winds up clustered about the future of the American novel.

Although Norris conceives of the global village as an armed camp, he looks forward to a day when an aestheticized global consciousness will break free of jingoism, to be replaced by the nascent harmony of cosmopolitan capital unifying cultures. A "new patriotism, one that shall include all peoples," he predicts, will become the dominant force in a world where not only the American frontier but also national frontiers have lost significance.⁴¹ *The Octopus* expresses this hope as jocular Yankee optimism for profit that sees commodities as the building blocks of total cultural synthesis. As the shipping magnate bids farewell to Presley, he licks his chops over the new markets that the poet will encounter on Asian shores: "My respects to the hungry Hindoo. Tell him 'we're coming. . . .' Tell the men of the East to look out for the men of the West. The irrepressible Yank is knocking at the doors of their temples and he will want to sell 'em carpet-sweepers for their harems and electric light plants for their temple shrines" (648). Cosmopolitan promise masks Orientalist threat; humanitarian mission primes the development of overseas markets. *The Octopus* employs aestheticcentrism to sweep the conflictual nature of empire capital under the rug of organic unity. "As the West disappears into the market, it melts and solidifies at once," writes Fernando Coronil. "The image of a unified globe dispenses with the notion of an outside."⁴² Norris's jaunty prediction of 1901 anticipates Coronil's analysis, but without seeing how the blending of West and East occurs on the West's

40. Frank Norris, "The Frontier Gone at Last: How Our Race Pushed It Westward around the World and Now Moves Eastward Again—The Broader Conception of Patriotism as the Age of Conquest Ends," in *Frank Norris: Novels and Essays*, 1183, 1185. Later in the essay, Norris expresses the same faith in "Markets" as the shipping magnate in *The Octopus*: "the great word of our century is no longer War but Trade" (1185).

41. Norris, "Frontier," 1188.

42. Coronil, "Towards a Critique of Globalcentrism," 368.

terms. Imagined as a unified form, world culture subsumes cultural difference within a single fabricated community, in effect, representing civilization as a total system. Aestheticism suppresses the complexities of content to concentrate on form: what proves appealing is an emerging economic order, transcendent and totalized, that organizes once-distinct cultures and separate nations into a single concept—the globe.

The world circulation of commodities pivots on aesthetic criteria. Overproduction in the West finds its “natural” point of balance in Asian famine. Ruthless business tactics and military intervention in the Pacific are small and forgettable in comparison to the beautiful infinity of global exchange. Aesthetic perfection brackets any unharmonious or foreign matter in the novel’s final image of wheat pouring out of a grain chute into an “ever-reforming cone . . . the rushing of the Wheat that continued to plunge incessantly from the iron chute in a prolonged roar, persistent, steady, inevitable” (646). Whether it is the marines who opened China’s door or wheat growers hurt by international destabilizations of the 1890s, the never-ending formalism of the cone of wheat eliminates bodies of tension and conflict. Totalizing and complete, this cone is global in more ways than one: the cone of wheat rises in the hold of a ship bound for the East. Ceaseless form overrides less universal, less beautiful details, such as the asphyxiated body of S. Behrman, buried alive beneath the always perfect cone. Flowing over the suffocated corpse that figures as an anti-Semitic condensation of a worldwide economy, the wheat abides by criteria that privilege aesthetic form over the specific horror of political content suggested by the capitalist’s body. The materials of the economy—for Norris, grain is the fundamental stuff of transnational exchange—become a dynamic artwork, exemplifying how aestheticization “becomes the means through which the discontents in contemporary civilization are to be answered—or stifled.”⁴³ Nothing can stop the cone from returning to the form of a cone, just as nothing can prevent the Anglo-Saxon form of civilization from advancing westward until arriving at the East, in effect, returning civilization to its birthplace. Like the cone of wheat that suffers neither break nor interruption, West flows into East without leaving so much as a trace of suture or conflict. Literary sensibility comprehends the globe as an “ever-reforming” geopolitical circle. “The space of imperial sovereignty,” write Hardt and Negri, “is smooth.” However seamless, the globe (or cone) as an aesthetic object is “crisscrossed by so many fault lines that

43. Russell Berman, *Modern Culture and Critical Theory: Art, Politics, and the Legacy of the Frankfurt School* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 32.

it only appears as a continuous, uniform space.”⁴⁴ The form of the wheat, from the seed of resurrection to dynamic cone of world commodity, is whole and perfect in the end because each is a totalizing experience, condensing East and West into the unitary kernel of one big market.

Postfascist Form

Aesthetics are doubly global. Formalist concerns for shape, structure, and unity enable the agglomeration of populations into a single conceptual unit. Meanwhile, imperial expansion seems as beautiful as an “ever-reforming cone,” assembling the detritus of cultures and the ruin of centuries into the grander project of civilization. An unstoppable market force, the invasion of Asia occurs with neither clash nor conflict, since the migration of capitalism and militarism only augurs the return of the West to its ultimate origins in the East. This prehistoric unity reveals the world system as an objet d’art.

And no useless piece of art is this. Global aesthetics educate citizens in an inclusive politics, its lessons encapsulated in the wheat that provides “the sustenance of a whole world, the food of an entire People” (177). Discrete peoples become “the People,” their bodies and spirits sustained not so much by a single vision as a single commodity. Global form installs the demos as the crucial criterion of production and distribution. The “entire People” are unified and beautiful: they represent the only demographic that unites aesthetic judgment, economic rationality, and moral sense. When *The Octopus* celebrates the wheat’s ability to feed the masses, it assumes the role of Presley’s abortive epic to represent “the voice of an entire people, where all people should be included” (9–10). If the world is hungry, let it eat wheat and seek satisfaction in an unwritten poem of the West. The aestheticized globe—a development beyond Schiller’s aesthetic State—need not fear the distractions of *fremde Sitten*, because foreignness no longer signifies when the people attain an all-inclusive form that permits no outside. This appeal to the popular prettifies a system that also exploits the popular. Beneath this schizophrenic logic that alternately redeems global capitalism and indicts its antidemocratic mechanisms lies the deeper unity of an “entire People” nourished and abused by production. At once the beneficiary of industrial production and the victim of markets, the demos as an

44. Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 11.

aesthetic category achieves a unity that proves elusive in the material terrain of history.

This literary take on early-twentieth-century globalization claims the activities of the consummate artist as the ethos of the world citizen. As Norris surveyed the possibility of a world without frontiers, he looked forward to a dawning cosmopolitanism when “we who now arrogantly boast of ourselves as Americans . . . may realize that the true patriotism is the brotherhood of man and know that the whole world is our nation.”⁴⁵ This world citizen is the artist whose aesthetic sensibility allows for conceptualization of humanity as a single united form. Like the shipping magnate who heralds “Markets” as the watchword of a new era of international capital, Norris locates the future of the American novel in the writer who “would have sounded the world-note; he would be a writer not national, but international, and his countrymen would be all humanity, not the citizens of any one nation.”⁴⁶ With its comprehensive pretensions that make nation-states anachronistic, the “world-note” of mass democracy echoes with postfascist tones. Yet the utopia that includes “all people” is also an obligatory order that leaves no choice to opt out of a total system of representation. As the sole locus of political identity, the global conception of humanity reduces multivocality to the singularity of voice that herds the demos into the enclave of “all.” Democracy is mobilized for authoritarian purposes under the spectacle of the popular as a global unit.

Such is Benjamin’s worry in observing how potentially egalitarian forms of technological reproduction eventuate in fascist representation. The newsreel that elevates “everyone . . . from passer-by to movie extra” also de-individuates the demos by capturing persons as a mass movement.⁴⁷ Form predominates: it matters only that the people are united and not what they are united for or against; the people exist simply as an aesthetic object. Wholeness and unity do not relate to the content of history; instead these formal properties, as Schiller first recognized, answer to the impassive criteria of the beautiful: “In a truly beautiful work of art the content should do nothing, the form everything . . . only from the form is true aesthetic freedom to be expected. Therefore, the real artistic secret of the master consists in his *annihilating the material by means of the form*” (*AE*, 106). The people dis-

45. Norris, “Frontier,” 1189–90.

46. Frank Norris, “The Great American Novelist,” in *Frank Norris: Novels and Essays*, 1181–82.

47. Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 231.

play a capacity for freedom only when the content of their specific identities is encapsulated, regulated, and managed by form. Form, as Norris would later insist, establishes totalizing criteria in which abstract aesthetic principles converge with the historical conditions of international commodities at the turn of the century: just as “everything” flows into the formal properties of the artwork, the pressures of globalization force every political tendency from democracy to fascism into alignment.

Yet the question of force remains—but only its erasure. The struggle between form and content turns on a power of annihilation that reveals itself when all traces of materiality are effaced. Although Norris’s *The Octopus* originates around an actual 1889 shoot-out between railroad deputies and ranchers, the final economy of the novel envisions the beauty of trade and markets—the “ever-reforming cone”—as the sublimation of violence. Such is the final challenge of a critique of aesthetic politics: to recognize that the threat of annihilation, while ever present, disappears under globalization’s postfascist form.