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From the Selected Works of Cara Erdheim Kilgallen

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“Naturalism’s Exercise in Physical Fitness: Aging Athletes, Broken Bodies, & Social Reform in Jack London’s Prizefighting Prose.”

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Aging Athletes, Broken Bodies, and Disability in Jack London's Prizefighting Prose

Cara Kilgallen, Sacred Heart University

Jack London's name often conjures up images of dogs plowing through Alaska's desolate wilderness, or of robust men journeying into the wild; however, pictures of broken bodies struggling for survival in a boxing ring less readily come to mind. Few think of London as a sports writer, yet his illustrations of prizefighting reveal an author interested not only in able-bodied athletes but in disabled and weakened ones as well. Although he is best known for his Klondike stories, nautical adventures, and socialist sentiments, the author's fascination with fitness shows that sport and the body are just as central to London's evolving aesthetic and ideology.

Even stories taking place beyond the ring exalt able-bodied individuals while remaining sensitive to those who suffer sickness and setbacks. At the beginning of his semi-autobiographical novel *Martin Eden* (1909), for instance, London's eponymous protagonist insists that he "ain't no invalid" (43). Eden later emerges, however, as a sympathetic figure plagued by mental illness. Similarly, in his famed *The Sea-Wolf* (1904), the physically fit Wolf Larson ends up immobilized and paralyzed by the novel's end. Indeed, the author's idealization of selective strength seems at odds with his concern for the injured and the ill.

London wrestled as a writer between expressing eugenic sentiments of Anglo-Saxon superiority and reflecting socialist concerns for underprivileged people; sport became a means through which his stories communicated this struggle. On the one hand, London's naturalist narratives reveal a social Darwinist rhetoric that idealize racial fitness, masculine strength, physical conditioning, and supreme normalcy. On the other hand, his stories about prizefighting

and boxing contain a socialist vision that promote radical reforms for marginalized communities. Considering these seemingly divergent perspectives, what are we to make of the complex ways in which London's writings approach adversity and deal with difference?

We might answer this question by looking not only to race, gender, ethnicity, and class but also to disability and the body. *The Game* (1905), "A Piece of Steak" (1909), *The Valley of the Moon* (1913), and *The Abysmal Brute* (1913) expose through sport the author's conflicted views on whiteness, masculinity, and normalcy. In one respect, London's boxing fiction elevates able-bodied white men while marginalizing frail fighters, female figures, and African American athletes. Indeed, a Progressive Era rhetoric about conditioning and cleanness predominates here. At the same time, these stories give attention to the least physically and racially fit by expressing some sympathy for broken boxers and by empowering minorities who triumph in the ring.

How, then, do readers reconcile a racialized rhetoric with the inclusive concern for social justice that London's literary works promote? Further complicating this question is the author's occasional occupation as a sports journalist, one who reported on the first American black heavyweight champion, Jack Johnson; the author's coverage in *The San Francisco Call* of Johnson's historic fights shows a writer deeply divided about race. Overall, his sports narratives vacillate between glorifying champions of exceptional ability and sympathizing with overworked athletes or burdened boxers. I argue that London's prizefighting prose, in particular, captures a divide in American naturalism between social Darwinian or eugenic ideas about racial fitness and socialist sentiments promoting the progress of those who have been cast aside. Furthermore, the author's writings about boxing and the body reveal a previously unexplored connection in literary naturalism between sport, physical culture, and disability.

Through the critical lens of disability studies, this essay rethinks Jack London's naturalist narratives as American sport stories focused on physicality. In order to clarify London's contributions to disability discourse, readers must first deepen their understanding of social Darwinism and eugenics, two overlapping movements with extensive critical histories. Also, to consider the role of evolutionary rhetoric in London's early essays and letters, an analysis of early twentieth-century masculinity and manhood in relation to race, gender, and sexuality is helpful. This essay concludes that London's prizefighting prose shows a writer in conflict between his own commitment to personal conditioning and a larger concern for public health.

Sport Stories and Disability Discourse

Masculinity and whiteness have long been topics of interest for Jack London scholars; however, recent efforts to rethink naturalism have led to new readings of London's writing from the perspectives of race and gender in particular. My work participates in this novel approach to American naturalism but makes innovative contributions through an emphasis on exercise, athletics, and the body. Lawrence J. Mitchell's 2004 study of "Jack London and Boxing" launched a discussion about the author's fascination with prizefighting; however, there have been so sustained studies of sport in literary naturalism from the perspective of disability.

Considering the author's focus on fitness and physicality, disability studies surely will deepen our understanding of London's fiction, American naturalism, and the Progressive Era. Lennard Davis argues that in order to understand disability fully, one must deconstruct ideal standards of what the Western world and privileged populations deem *normal*. While those in positions of power and privilege declare what constitutes normalcy, one becomes disabled when he or she lacks those features that fall into this definition. Furthermore, Lamarck's theory about

the “inheritance of acquired characteristics,” which affirmed Spencer’s belief that social progress would ultimately bring about the “ideal man” (Hofstadter 39), suggests that the perfect human would come about through a breeding out of weakness and an elimination of difference, thus informing the social Darwinist context in which London writes.

In London’s world, bodies become broken by boxing or by being worn down by injury and age. To an extent, tragic figures like Joe Fleming of *The Game* and Tom King of “A Piece of Steak” come across somewhat sympathetically as they lose their mobility and biological functioning. It is crucial to note here that freakish accidents or struggles in sport disable London’s characters. The author’s abysmal brutes are not born with bodies that differ from the norm, but rather they become exhausted and weakened by excessive exercise or pure defeat. This idea resonates with Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s suggestion that disability is a social construct, which encompasses “acquired physical differences,” “fatal and progressive diseases,” “temporary and permanent injuries,” and more (*Extraordinary Bodies* 13). Furthermore, readers can understand London’s failed fighters as “product[s] of cultural rules about what bodies should be or do” (6). If we are to accept Garland-Thomson’s argument that disability is a cultural construct, then we can view prizefighters such as Pat Glendon Jr. of *The Abysmal Brute* as disabled by their sport.

Disability does not always equal weakness, however, particularly if one views the author’s exceptional athletes as what Garland-Thomson calls “extraordinary bodies.” London’s literary figures do not always embody disability in the traditional sense, but their exceptional displays of physicality in the boxing ring and beyond can qualify as representations of “nonconformity incarnate” (*Extraordinary Bodies* 44). With their athletic achievements on display, the author’s prizefighting performers become tragic spectacles for a consuming public.

Through an extensive exploration of bodily difference, Garland-Thomson explains how “corporeal otherness” has become associated in American aesthetics with “monstrosity,” freakishness, and the grotesque (5). To what extent then do London’s beaten boxers qualify as monsters, and what would it mean to understand prizefighters as participants in a freak-show?

Prizefighting incorporates elements of the nineteenth-century freak show, as expressed by physical displays of human excellence that transcend the limits of normalcy in London’s sport stories. Descriptions of Fleming as “hard all over” (*The Game* 44), King as animal-like (“A Piece of Steak”), and Glendon, Jr. as brutish (*The Abysmal Brute*) all reinforce the subhuman or superhuman (depending upon how one reads it) nature of Progressive Era athletic competition. Garland-Thomson claims that nineteenth-century circus performances and the like became replaced by twentieth-century medical rhetoric about physical deformities (*Extraordinary Bodies* 75). My contention is that London’s naturalist narratives about boxing capture a transition from freak show performance to social Darwinism and eventually to the world of eugenics.

Social Darwinism, Evolution, and Eugenics

Jack London scholars often debate the author’s complex and sometimes contradictory stance on social Darwinism. This American movement, influenced by Herbert Spencer’s ideas about “survival of the fittest,” resulted from the efforts of social theorists to understand human nature in evolutionary terms. Although some view London’s writings as explicitly Spencerian, others see his work rejecting the social Darwinian discussions of his day. Lawrence I. Berkove attributes London’s seemingly conflictual attitudes toward race, masculinity, and “survival of the fittest,” to “rapidly changing reactions to his broad reading and wide variety of firsthand experiences” (6). Berkove goes on to examine debates and discussions between Spencer and

Huxley, which surfaced in London's fiction (9-14). While evolutionary language characterizes the writings of London, Dreiser, Norris, Sinclair, and others, little scholarship exists on the way that corporeal discussions of fitness influenced this period of American literary production. Still, while few scholars look to disability in London's literary naturalism, several recent studies have examined the author's work within the context of Progressive-era physical culture.¹

In his seminal study of human nature and evolution, Carl Degler explores the origins of both eugenics and social Darwinism by offering a useful distinction between the two. Degler explains that while Francis Gaulton's eugenics (a term coined in 1883) had reformist intentions, the social Darwinian ideals of Spencer, Lamarck, Ricardo, and others "sought to defend the status quo" (42). It is thus possible to place London's writings, particularly his prizefighting prose, at a crossroads between eugenic reform and social Darwinism. The author's sports stories reveal a reformist commitment to public and personal health, for sure, at the same time that they engage in conversations about heredity and survival. Frequent comparisons, throughout these naturalist narratives, between African Americans and nonhuman animals can furthermore be crystallized by Degler's exploration of "racist evolution" (14).

As a primarily nineteenth- and twentieth-century effort to erase the "defective" and to "eliminate" the disabled (Davis 7), eugenics took Darwinian ideas about survival and procreation to a dangerous extreme. In fact, many social Darwinian theorists promoted the "careful elimination of the unfit and dependent, chiefly by eugenic methods" (82). In *American Eugenics*, Nancy Ordover links the latter movement to "racism" and "reform-oriented liberalism" (xxvii). Focused on the ways in which "nationalism" and "homophobia" informed conversations surrounding sterilization, Ordover looks at how these initiatives coincided chronologically with immigration acts (xv).

The eugenics movement was characterized by a fear of the outsider, as well as an effort to breed out all forms of difference. As incoming immigrants were evaluated for mental and physical weaknesses, insufficiencies, or disabilities, sterilization laws were enacted to prevent mothers from producing potentially unfit offspring (Ordovery 12-13). Above all, the movement was invested in protecting and preserving “the jobs of eugenically fit American workers” (14), a sentiment that unfortunately rings true today.

At the center of the eugenics movement were issues of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and disability. Eugenicists attributed poverty to heredity (and vice versa) by claiming that the cost of caring for the impaired would wreak unnecessary havoc on society (Ordovery 147). To put this point in simple economic terms, many viewed the disabled as expensive burdens that required elimination. Sterilization initiatives would lighten the load by eradicating difference and curing the disease of poverty, eugenic thinkers reasoned (148).

In some respects, London echoes this view of the disabled and ill as waste to be discarded. In “The Tramp,” a chapter from *The War of the Classes*, London contends that the population of persons able and willing to work exceeds the number of available jobs. While he sometimes seems sympathetic to the homeless vagrants populating America’s urban centers, at other moments the author writes candidly of those who lack the physical and mental abilities to survive the nation’s unforgiving Capitalist economy. Using the rhetoric of disability to describe this underclass, he argues that “clowns and idiots” have no place in a world of “skilled and steady employments” (73). Indeed, the author reiterates that there exists neither opportunities nor “encouragement for the unfit, inefficient, and mediocre” (83-84). They become, in essence, waste to be discarded. The degree to which London embraces or endorses eugenics is debatable, but its rhetoric certainly permeates his early twentieth-century writings.

Ideas about maintaining racial and bodily fitness surface strongly in London's early nonfiction, which often analogizes the mental work of writing to physical activity and exercise. In a 1903 essay about English author Rudyard Kipling, London associates the "sweat and blood and toil" of writing with "the genius of the [Anglo-Saxon] race" ("These Bones" 68). Describing his own arduous composition process in an 1899 essay published in *The Editor*, the author claims that writing and publishing require "proper nutrition" and conditioning ("On the Writer's Philosophy of Life" 7). One year later, in a letter to publisher Houghton Mifflin, London insists that he is "healthy, love exercise, and take little" (14). Writing once again in *The Editor* about "Getting into Print," London offers the following advice: "See that your pores are open and that your digestion is good" (57).

Normative identity, whiteness, masculinity, and an able body can be maintained, suggests London, with dedication to personal hygiene and wellness. Specifically, he instructs others "to be clean and strong and to walk upright and manlike" ("These Bones" 70). London establishes heterosexuality as a natural norm from which the fittest never deviate. In a 1911 letter to female friend Maurice Magnus, the author claims that a "sexually normal" man feels drawn to women in ways that homosexuals do not (133). Although London's narrators often identify with those on the margins, the author draws the line here at sexual identity and proudly proclaims that he has "never dreamed of drawing a homosexual male character" (133).

Masculinity, Manhood, and Romance

A distinction between manhood and masculinity seems necessary to situate London's fiction within its proper historical context. In *Manliness and Civilization*, Gail Bederman traces the term "masculinity" back to the 1890s (6), which coincide contextually with the start of

literary naturalism. Although not as specifically associated with a particular time period, “manhood” is malleable and can thus be remade by sexuality, race, gender, and class (16). Bederman examines a remaking of manhood that occurred from the Victorian to the Gilded Age; after 1890, one’s manhood was measured more by one’s roughness rather than by one’s refinement (23). This late nineteenth-century culture of physical toughness, combined with the evolutionary idea of “intellectual human progress” (24-25), influenced Theodore Roosevelt’s blend of “primitive masculinity” with “civilized refinement” (44).² Bederman explores the centrality of physical education (90-91) to this time period, and attributes bodily conditioning to race, gender, and class. Through disability studies, scholars can better understand how an overwhelming anxiety about neurasthenia, or weakness brought on by inactivity, adversely affected the way that the white middle-class perceived male bodies (14).

London’s illustration of masculinity remaking manhood in physical terms seems most explicit in *The Abysmal Brute*. This narrative tells the tale of Pat Glendon Jr., a prodigious boxer who, despite a lack of formal training, possesses a natural ability to overpower opponents. Boasting of his son’s blend of physical prowess and artistic sensibility, the elder Glendon (Pat’s father) persuades Sam Stubener, a successful sports manager, to represent the athletically gifted young boy. From the moment that Stubener takes the youthful, exuberant, and innocent athlete under his wing, Pat proves victorious in every competition that he enters. Soon after the novel begins, it becomes apparent that Stubener has fixed the fights. Then, after readers discover the manager’s dishonest practices, Pat learns through a female reporter, Maud Sangster (who becomes his love interest), that his manager has paid off Pat’s opponents to lose at precise moments during the matches. Innocent and clean, the young Glendon initially refuses to believe that corruption exists in the sport. The boy, who leaves his rural home to train and compete in the

city, ends up feeling polluted by prizefighting, which he condemns to a packed crowd that has come to view his final fight; following this public condemnation, he quits the sport for good.

Although the dirty and uncivilized world of boxing ultimately pollutes Glendon Jr., the narrator and characters comment throughout the story on how whiteness and masculinity make Pat simultaneously strong and clean; this sentiment is expressed by the following dialogue between Glendon Sr. and Stubener: “Look at the slope of the shoulders, an’ the lungs of him. Clean, all clean, to the last drop an’ ounce of him” (79). Here, the elder Glendon takes pride in his son’s optimal health and extraordinary physical ability. By contrast, London’s narrator describes the African American boxer, Kelly, whom Glendon Jr. also fights, as “black and hairy, with huge, knotty muscles (85). Progressive Era publications such as David Starr Jordan’s *The Strength of Being Clean: A Study of the Quest for Unearned Happiness* (1900) surely influenced London’s depictions of racial fitness in this story. As Jeanne Reesman notes, Jordan’s book merged “social Darwinism [with] eugenics” and increased London’s fascination with Bernarr Macfadden’s Physical Culture movement (44).

Physical Culture Magazine, to which London’s contemporary Upton Sinclair contributed essays,³ perpetuated a fascination with fitness. London’s sport stories show a sustained effort to rid the body, as well as the natural and social environments in which athletes compete, of excess food and alcohol. Similarly, Macfadden’s *Physical Culture* spoke of eliminating tobacco, liquors, patent medicines, and other materials likely to cause bodily harm (“Editor’s Viewpoint”). The cultural climate surrounding the temperance movement, and later Prohibition, which critics too rarely consider in conversations about naturalist appetite, certainly comes into play here. As William Little explains, laws of the Progressive Era involved an “elimination of waste” (20). Nowhere is this aversion to waste more apparent than in London’s boxing fiction,

which exposes corruption in the sport at the same time that it illustrates racial purity and a commitment to cleanliness.

Jordan's social Darwinist doctrine is ultimately about preserving masculinity, privileging whiteness, and promoting the physically strong. At the same time, *The Strength of Being Clean* reflects a Progressive Era preoccupation with the eradication of moral vice. While commenting on public health and the removal of urban waste, Jordan asks the following rhetorical question: "Who shall say that moral sanitation is not as much the duty of the community as physical sanitation?" (8). Rather than directly answer his own question, the author goes on to envision a future utopian city that prohibits "the existence of slums and dives and tippling-houses" (8). Here, Jordan's thinking is consistent with early twentieth-century efforts to eradicate prostitution and other social ills. While illicit sex is condemned by this document, Jordan's book invokes a Spencerian interpretation of sexual selection when he argues, ultimately, that the strength of one's "manhood" is determined by the female mate that he seeks (7).

Sexual selection likewise drives *The Abysmal Brute's* romantic subplots. Once the younger Glendon confesses to Sam's fight-fixing, he "retire[s] from the ring forever" (142) to begin a new life of middle-class domesticity with Maud Sangster. Although seemingly a peripheral female figure, Maud is the one who exposes prizefighting scandals through her honest reporting about the sport. Pat is London's least tragic prizefighter, in large part because he selects "civilized refinement" over "primitive masculinity" (Bederman 44). What are we to make of this slightly sentimental ending to a story so heavily steeped in an ableist discourse of physical fitness? Perhaps Pat's exit from boxing reveals the novel's efforts to condemn the racial and gendered determinisms characteristic of sporting culture at this time.

Labor, Leisure, and Performance

Sport became a means through which literary naturalists like London exposed evolutionary struggles for survival. Through his definition of authorship as a “man’s game” (4), John Dudley identifies an American “anti-aesthetic” in literary naturalism. Like the sporting competitions that drive their plots, male authors such as Crane, Norris, and London redefine literary production as a profession with its own set of rules and regulations (4). Within this “professional culture of authorship” (7), sports reporting spearheaded the careers of naturalist novelists. Norris’s coverage of collegiate sports and London’s accounts of boxing matches coincided chronologically with the “rise of professional spectator sports” (15), which became “public performances of manhood” (9). Dudley’s central argument is that Progressive Era anxieties about the relationship between “masculinity and authorship” (15) led writers like London to reject the “feminized aestheticism” of the Victorian age (3). Through sport, American naturalists sought to “perpetuate a definition of writing as an essentially male enterprise” (15).

While Dudley’s study emphasizes the relationship between art and sport, the discourse of disability can deepen our understanding of athletic competition and performance in London’s boxing stories. Interested in “athletics as entertainment,” London and other sports writers/reporters used their narratives to “[mediate] between violent events” in the ring and “middle-class audience[s]” (Dudley 15). Prizefighting plots allowed sideline spectators and educated readers to take part, albeit at a distance, in the brutish and savage struggles of the game. Indeed, “the naturalist writer must simultaneously occupy a space inside and outside the ring” in order to reconcile the “primitive” with the “civilized” (21) impulses of human nature. At the same time, bare-knuckled prizefighting developed new rules and regulations that naturalist novelists like London and others displayed for a consuming reading public (28). Dudley’s

analysis of spectator sport, combined with Garland-Thomson's reflection on the "freak-show," frames London's first piece of prizefighting prose as a disability narrative.

The Game tells the story of a young working-class couple who take pride in their ethnic and racial roots, despite fierce financial struggles. Joe Fleming and Genevieve descend from a long line of hearty Anglo-Saxon stock, which the narrator juxtaposes against the Jewish ancestry of Mr. and Mrs. Silverstein.⁴ Orphaned at a young age, Genevieve has grown up under the care of this elderly couple with whom she lives and works; it is at the Silverstein shop where she first encounters Joe, the powerful prizefighter. While Mrs. Silverstein remains weary of their romance, her husband endorses the union; he has bet consistently on the boxer's fights, which have remained fixed. In an ironic twist, during what Joe claims will be his final fight prior to marriage, the reluctant Genevieve agrees to observe the prizefighter in action, only to see her soon-to-be husband crushed by a series of strange events.

At the start of the story, London's narrator describes the bold boxer and his innocent fiancée in evolutionary language: "He was twenty, she eighteen, boy and girl, the pair of them, and made for progeny, healthy and normal, with steady blood pounding through their bodies" (35). Health and normalcy become attributed not only to the couple's youth, but also to their race. This elevation of whiteness as an ideal becomes most explicit when the narrator says that "[Genevieve's] was a beauty in color, the blood spraying her white skin so deliciously as to earn for her the apt description, 'peaches and cream'" (26). In this respect, racial fitness becomes synonymous with supreme physical conditioning and sexual normalcy. The couple's Anglo-Saxon blood, combined with their fervent heterosexual desire, makes them most suitable for survival and procreation. Indeed, social Darwinism is alive and well.

A rhetoric of cleanness permeates this novel, which is focused on physicality and the body. In this world of *The Game*, prizefighters pride themselves on living free from physical impurities. Fleming is no exception. In an early conversation with Genevieve, during the initial courting stages, Joe boasts that he has “to live clean to be in a condition like this” (19). In place of toxic substances like cigarettes and alcohol, the prizefighter proudly proclaims to his young lover that he partakes in therapeutic practices such as “baths and rub-downs” (19). While these therapies may seem like luxuries, sport in this story is more equated with labor than with leisure. According to Jonathan Auerbach, “journeying through whiteness and maintaining masculinity requires hard work and tireless exercise” (56). Boxing, with all of its physical conditioning, functions not only as a livelihood but also as a struggle for simple survival.

Readers view this sporting spectacle, and the boxer’s breaking body, through the eyes of London’s female protagonist. Masked as a man, Genevieve observes the athletic competition through a small hole in the wall, and only in a male disguise can the woman achieve her “status of a ringside spectator” (Dudley 37-38). Genevieve’s observation of the fight, as well as her telling of this tale, results in an “inverted gaze between feminized spectator and masculine object” (38). As she watches her lover fall to the ground, Joe’s body becomes a sort of Grotesque spectacle (38) reminiscent of the nineteenth-century freak show. Boxing breaks down Fleming’s once “extraordinary body,” to appropriate Garland-Thomson’s term, and makes him most unfit to reproduce with Genevieve. As someone disabled by death in the ring, Joe functions as a figure whom readers ultimately pity and whose fate they fear.

The title of London’s novel seems rather ironic, since the *game* of prizefighting proves deadly in the end. During the concluding moments of Joe’s final fight against rival John Ponta, the roles shift as Fleming transitions from a powerful prizefighter to a weakened warrior. As the

beaten down boxer “struggle[s] to his feet [with] legs trembling and bending under him” (61), Joe’s fight becomes real in the most primal way. At this point, Genevieve observes in horror as her loved one, a fierce fighter until this point, becomes within seconds a lifeless body:

“Genevieve saw his muscles relax while he was yet in the air, and she heard the thud of his head on the canvas” (61). Oddly, Joe’s death results from random chance as a puddle of water intervenes to cause his fatal fall. While not all of London’s fighters suffer Fleming’s fate, a point where “there was nothing human left in him” (60), the large majority become scarred both physically and mentally by the sport in which they partake.

The author continued to capture boxing’s disabling and dehumanizing effects. Six years later, London explored the limited lifespan of boxers in “A Piece of Steak,” a story about the fate of former heavyweight champion Tom King. Similar to Joe Fleming and Pat Glendon Jr., King returns here for the final fight of his life. While Fleming dies and Glendon willingly quits the game, King falls from greatness when he is defeated by Sandel, a more youthful fighter: “Yes, Youth was the Nemesis. It destroyed the old uns and reeked not that, in so doing, it destroyed itself. It enlarged its arteries and smashed its knuckles, and was in turn destroyed by Youth. For Youth was ever youthful. It was only Age that grew old” (329). By personifying and juxtaposing the two, London’s narrative illustrates an allegorical struggle between innocence and experience where the former triumphs over the latter. There is a clear sense, by the end of this story, that fitness has an expiration date; if fortunate enough to stay in the game as long as Tom King has, the once unbreakable body will become replaced by a physically superior one. Able-bodied identity has a truly limited lifespan and, in the words of Garland-Thomson, “Disability affects us all, if we live long enough” (“Integrating Disability” 4).

Long life can disable an individual by making him or her age and become ill; however, in London's prizefighting prose, male boxers often become destroyed by the brutality of sport or the physicality of manual labor. London's working-class characters do the fighting here, with middle-class readers viewing the competitions as entertainment. Through his analysis of athletics in terms of labor and leisure, Thorstein Veblen identifies an "addiction to athletic sports" as a central "characteristic of the leisure class" (166). Those in positions of privilege are attracted to the brutality of sport, says Veblen, but they tend to observe on the sidelines rather than partake directly in the action, and their spectatorship is a sign of the "conspicuous consumption" that marks the leisure class.

Interestingly enough, Genevieve's spectating is most inconspicuous; she is a working-class woman who cannot participate openly in either the male gaze or the masculine activity of sport spectating. Experiencing the leisure of athletic observation is off-limits to Genevieve, in part because of her gender and also due to her subordinate social class. Females are excluded from the game, unless they work hard to pass as Genevieve has done. Nevertheless, as Joe's tragic death affirms, this game is not particularly fun for its players. Through his study of performative play and religious ritual in relation to sport, Christian Messenger refers to *The Game* when describing the grip of athletic competition on white male American audiences: "Boxing was widely denounced by America's pulpits," but no sport was so eagerly followed and wagered in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries (93).

Black Boxers & Racial Representation

In addition to gender identity and class, London's fiction and nonfiction capture the national appeal of prizefighting through a nuanced illustration of racial stereotypes. In fictional

prizefighting pieces like “A Piece of Steak,” the author draws upon historical events from his sports journalism days to communicate a complex attitude toward racial difference. When persuading Stubener to take on his son as a new prodigy, the elder Glendon describes Young Pat as a racially superior human being who offers great promise: ““Talk about the hope of the white race. This is him. Come and take a peep. When you was managing Jeffries you was crazy about hunting. Come along and I’ll give you some real hunting and fishing that will make your moving picture winnings look like thirty cents. I’ll send young Pat out with you”” (70). The predictions of Pat’s father about the young boxer’s success ultimately prove partially correct: by the end of the novel, the boxer has earned his manager money; however, his fortune has resulted from Sam’s fight fixing, rather than from the athlete’s own successes within the ring.

Through a repeated mention of the “great white hope,” *The Abysmal Brute* alludes to Jim Jeffries, a boxer whom whites placed faith in to defeat the superior Jack Johnson during the buildup to a 1910 monumental match in Reno, Nevada. Jack London first reported on Johnson’s victory two years earlier, in 1908, when he defeated Canadian Tommy Burns to become the first African American heavyweight champion; the author’s coverage of this fight in *The San Francisco Call* reveals his conflicted attitude about the emergence of a black boxing champion. In a December 1908 contribution to *The Call*, London at times expresses enthusiastic admiration for Johnson’s superior skills; the article’s headline pinpoints the emerging fighter’s “golden smile,” which tells the story of a true champion (“London Describes”). At other moments in this piece, however, London describes the African American athlete in explicitly racial terms. When Johnson gets framed as a “playful Ethiopian,” this racist rhetoric becomes especially apparent; indeed, London seems to romanticize the black boxer as a “carefree” prizefighter akin to the happy slave depicted by plantation fiction.

Reesman emphasizes the manner in which black boxers like Johnson posed serious threats to ideals of white masculinity, identity, selfhood, and respectability (181). When Johnson defeated Jeffries in 1910, the racial line between civilization and savagery became increasingly blurred. Furthermore, working-class white men felt threatened by the black male body, as well as the prospect of African Americans and immigrants taking their jobs (181). These Anglo-Saxon anxieties played out in the ring. Reesman goes on to explain how London's attitudes toward class and race intersected in complex ways; while the author certainly did not "trivialize" the African American's tremendous success, London sought to reconcile his conflicting opinions of Johnson by viewing him as a superior individual athlete apart from his race (184). Although critical race theory and disability studies have distinct aims that sometimes conflict, black bodies can identify as disabled because they do not represent the cultural norm.

London's black characters are often minor spectacles in his stories, similar to the way that individuals with disabilities exist on the peripheral sidelines in normative narratives (Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 9-10). Yet, as we have seen with Jack Johnson, the black male body became a primary subject in the author's reporting, which reflects some fascination with blackness. In order to begin making sense out of London's inconsistent illustrations of race, gender, and the body, one must look to the reform-oriented ethos of Progressive Era America.

Sport, Sustainability, and Public Health

London's sport stories are very much a product of the reformist culture in which they were produced. As London penned prizefighting fiction and covered epic boxing matches, early

twentieth-century advocates promoted exercise and fitness through public programs, agricultural projects, and urban initiatives. Sport became a vehicle for social change, as many Progressive Era activists fought tirelessly for the rights of workers, farmers, and athletes alike. In fact, as reflected by novels like *The Valley of the Moon*, athletic and agricultural reformers shared common aims and incentives. Many of London's boxing narratives (including *The Abysmal Brute*) were published in *Sport and Play: An Illustrated Labor Sports Magazine*; this particular publication advocated for the health and wellness of workers at the same time that it campaigned on behalf of small-scale farmers and underprivileged athletes alike.

Sport merged smoothly with socialism at this time. Advertisements in *Sport and Play* frequently featured the Farmers Sports Leagues, which offered “young workers and farmers” recreational opportunities to unite against capitalist corruption (Morris 14). Also, the Labor Sports Union called upon wage earners to boycott “boss-controlled sports organizations” (Henderson 8). The LSU reminded union members that their “bosses [were not] out to improve [their] health” unless executives could profit from doing so (Roberts 6). If laborers became more “physically fit” and less “exhausted” (6, 7), LSU organizers reasoned, productivity would increase as would the population's overall health. Despite the social Darwinian ideals of the day that preached ideals of rugged individualism, early twentieth-century reformers—in the world of athletics and beyond—were committed to communal wellness and the common good.

Reforms in agriculture and athletics became focused not only on workers' rights and class immobility but also on the promotion of racial justice and gender equality. As one of six principles identified by Henderson, the LSU emphasized “the right of Negro athletes to participate equally with white athletes in all athletic and social affairs” as well as to oppose vehemently “racial discrimination in any form” (9).⁵ During the early days of the twentieth

century, public health became a priority for activists committed to reforming cities. Ecological and agricultural projects, such as rooftop gardens and farm schools for young women, took root in urban areas like Chicago and New York. Gradually, these agrarian programs migrated west. London participated actively in local agriculture, as evidenced by his 1905 purchase of tracts that became the Beauty Ranch where he modeled “sustainable farming” (Tichi 157). While wellness “became rooted in a muscular, white male ideal” (161), labor unions gradually took an interest in protecting the rights of marginalized workers like those in the African American communities.

As with the naturalist movement itself, London’s prose is informed as much by evolutionary rhetoric as it is influenced by a collective commitment to social justice. In addition to the social Darwinian discourse present in London’s writings, a deep-seated concern for the economic underclass is prevalent. In *The People of the Abyss* (1903), for example, the author experiments with living among London’s underclass. Likewise, London’s leftist politics emerge in *The Iron Heel* (1908) through which he articulates socialist ideals and makes predictions about inevitable revolution.

London’s socialist treatises show his growing sensitivity to difference and his awareness of adversity. In a 1905 essay, he explained his conversion to socialism in terms of physical conditioning. Reflecting on his pre-conversion days, London describes his youthful body as “healthy and strong, bothered with neither aches nor weaknesses” (“How I Became a Socialist” 268). London juxtaposes his “good health and hard muscles” with the “aches [and] weaknesses” that he did not have to consider while in prime shape. The mature and socialist London acknowledges in this essay that until he confronted abnormality and illness, which was to plague him in later years, he could not truly understand weakness and defeat. To use a sports analogy, he was the winner who thought little about losing.

The author's socialist conversation has been a topic central to naturalist studies, but the role that athletes play in labor politics has received surprisingly little attention. As evidenced by "The Mexican" (1911), the author's athletes often became activists (and vice versa), showing a dynamic interplay between sport and social justice. As Michael J. Martin explains, boxing provided a path toward political action; without his prizefighting earnings, "The Mexican's Felipe Rivera could not have participated in the Revolution (72).

One of the most overlooked illustrations of prizefighting occurs in *The Valley of the Moon*, where the subplot of sport drives much of the story. This 1913 novel is based upon the romance between Billy and Saxon Roberts, as well as their ultimate journey from city to country. Some scholars have read this novel as a pastoral escape from urban class struggle to middle-class domesticity,⁶ but few have examined the roles that prizefighting and boxing play in this journey. Cecilia Tichi is one who looks at sport in this story, and she does so specifically through the lens of race. According to Tichi, *The Valley of the Moon* expresses through boxing anxieties about the decline of "Anglo-Saxon civilization and physical vitality" (671), as well as the rise of "physical degeneration and racial instability" (672). Just as Saxon (a fitting name) holds on tightly to her whiteness, so too does Billy work hard to maintain his masculinity.

In London's boxing fiction, women tend to observe rather than participate in physical competition. During an early scene from *The Valley of the Moon*, however, women become involved in the fight, despite Billy's claim to Saxon that rowdy sporting events are "no place for a girl" (27). Nevertheless, the two spend one of their first outings together observing a fierce physical contest in a public park, as described by the narrator in the following passage.

A stout, middle-aged woman, carried beyond herself by the passion of the contest, seized the rope and pulled beside her husband, encouraged him with loud cries. A watcher from

opposing team dragged her screaming away and was dropped like a steer by an ear-blow from a partisan from the woman's team. He, in turn, went down, and brawny women joined with their men in the battle. Vainly the judges and watchers begged, pleaded, yelled, and swung with their fists. Men, as well as women, were springing in to the rope and pulling. No longer was it team against team, but all Oakland against San Francisco, festooned with a free-for-all fight. (29)

This scene begins with a vision of sport as entertainment, but the athletic competition here slowly descends into violence. Initially, Billy and Saxon derive enjoyment from the spectacle; however, as the narrator proclaims, the mood rapidly shifts when the observing crowd become engaged in their own sort of struggle and vicious rivalry. As soon as spectators intervene by “tear[ing] hand-holds from the rope,” they are thrust into a violent battle. Specifically, the “jaws of the watchers” become “impacted” by repeated blows of the original competitors. Watching in horror as her lover, Bert, gets pummeled and begins to bleed uncontrollably, fellow observer and friend Mary declares repeatedly to Billy and Saxon that “this ain't sport,” but rather a “dirty shame” (30). Ultimately, this passage proves significant since the scene causes Saxon to feel pride in Billy's ability to fight.

As the narrative progresses, sport becomes less aligned with urban labor and struggle and more associated with rural leisure and healing. Similarly, physical activity shifts from fighting on city streets and in professional arenas to farming, hiking, and bicycling in the California countryside. When Billy and Saxon first leave Oakland to explore local farm communities, the narrator comments on the collaborative and communal process of working the land: “On every hand was activity. Women and children were in the field as well as men” (315). This scene, a utopian model of sustainable family farming, can be juxtaposed against the earlier one involving

the gritty street-fight that Saxon encounters. In this present moment, however, with Saxon's encouragement, Billy seriously considers trading in his boxing gloves for a life on the farm so that prizefighting can become a thing of the past.

Thus far, I have used the terms *prizefighting* and *boxing* interchangeably; however, the subtle distinction between these two is apparent in *The Valley of the Moon*. According to Reesman, professional *prizefighting* functioned as “the game of the [proletariat] masses,” whereas Progressive Era *boxing* was relegated to “the [recreational] realm of the gentleman” (182). Indeed, for the first half of this novel, characters experience sport as survival; Billy fights in large part to put food on the table. After observing him in his first unofficial fight, Saxon revels in the romance of Billy's bravery; however, he responds with the assertion that street-fighters “‘don't know [real] boxing’” (27). By the end of the novel, the couple is boxing recreationally, and thus experiencing sport as leisure, much like the recreational matches that occurred between Jack and Charmian.

Although many settle into lives of middle-class domesticity, the large majority of Jack London's characters, particularly those in his prizefighting prose, remain childless. With the exception of “A Piece of Steak,” London's athletes do not reproduce. In some cases, like *The Game*, the athlete dies before he has an opportunity to procreate with his mate; however, even when prizefighters quit the game like in *The Abysmal Brute* and *The Valley of the Moon*, neither Maud nor Saxon bears children. To what extent are examples of these childless couples coincidental? Furthermore, what might this relative lack of reproduction in London's fiction reveal about the physical capacity (or lack thereof) to propagate the human species? Until the time that London produced his boxing narratives, fictional athletes existed in fragmentary form, not as central characters in stories (Messenger xi). Similarly, literary representation of disability

has tended to result in undeveloped characters or minor players in the game (Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 10). Ironically, London's prizefighting protagonists often become less physically fit as a result of their sport and they wind up in some cases as tragic figures. Yet, through their superhuman abilities, London's athletes become performers and grotesque spectacles for a consuming public to enjoy. If anything, Jack London's literary portrayals of boxers and the game itself generate questions related to race, gender, and the body about what defines disability and how athletic defeat complicates this definition.

Notes

¹ See Paul Baggett's recent piece, "Jack London and Physical Culture" in *The Oxford Handbook of Jack London* (ed. Jay Williams (January 2017)).

² To place this discourse on physical fitness and culture in a further historical context, see Roosevelt.

³ Upton Sinclair published pieces on fasting, raw foods, and vegetarianism. In particular, see "The Ideal Diet—How May We Find It?"

⁴ For a comprehensive look at representations of racial and ethnic minorities in naturalist narratives, see Pizer.

⁵ The other five principles are as follows: 1) "More public athletic facilities, gyms, playgrounds, fields, parks, pools, etc. free of charge for workers' and workers' children; 2) [A stand] against professionalism in athletics; 3) [Resistance to] bosses' control of sports and [advocacy for] workers' control of sports; 4) [Opposition to] the bosses' Amateur Athletic Union and Industrial Athletic Leagues; and 5) Unity of all worker sportsmen of all races and nationalities under the banner of the Labor Sports Union of America" (Henderson 9).

⁶ See Watson, especially chapter 9 on "Urban Discontents: *The Valley of the Moon* (pp. 187-210).

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⁶ See Watson, especially chapter 9 on "Urban Discontents: *The Valley of the Moon* (pp. 187-210).