

Facing North: Jack London's Imagined Indians on the Klondike Frontier

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"I welcome you
Anyway and again
to see into me
in order that you may see
yourself."

Simon Ortiz, "The following
words are for a white friend. . .",
from *Woven Stone*

In 1996 the city of Whitehorse considered renaming its Two Mile Hill. New signposts would read "Jack London Boulevard," presumably inviting summertime tourists with this reminder of the region's gold rush past.¹ London, a one-time gold rusher, reaped sudden wealth from the stories he later wrote about the Klondike, though he found little gold.

Some long-term residents found the new name troubling, however. The ensuing debate over the street signs signalled a community divided over the memory of Jack London and the gold rush. Recollections of turn-of-the-century adventure clashed with remembrances of an invasion. London would not have anticipated such a protest.

London's social Darwinist views and his race logic determined that Native peoples would simply vanish before the onslaught of a superior Anglo-Saxon civilization. If London had turned up for the argument over naming Two Mile Hill, then he would have been surprised to see politically assertive First Nations people whose very presence contradicted his "scientific" racism. Joe Jack of the Kwanlin Dun First Nation turned to London's personal letters to point out the unabashed racism of this celebrated writer.²

Whitehorse City Council and residents did take the perspective of the Kwanlin Dun into account and decided against using London's

name. The contest over the street name directs us to return to Jack London's gold rush past in order that we might see more clearly the writer's milieu.

Words have significance. Just as street names carry complicated historical associations, so too do Jack London's words, in his letters and his stories, reflect the complicated ideas of the turn-of-the-century past. While Joe Jack turned to London's "non-fiction"—his letters—in order to reveal the writer's past racial outlook, this essay will probe his fiction. For London's fiction, no less than his letters, reflects the racist underpinnings of his times. Historian Peter Gay writes that Jack London was the undisputed leader of a handful of best-selling American writers who trumpeted a racist struggle of the "blonde Teutonic superman" over the Native. "His following was immense," according to Gay, "By the time he died of a morphine overdose in 1916, bloated and worn out by debauchery, he had spread his tales of the unchecked lust for aggression to the millions."³ In London's fiction this "lust for aggression" found the object of its desire in often violent contact with the indigenous people of the Subarctic North. In the writer's representation of "Indians," we might better see into this past.⁴

In July 1897, Jack London shipped out from San Francisco en route to southeast Alaska and eventually to the interior gold fields of the Klondike.⁵ He spent less than a year in the sub-arctic, contracting scurvy during the long winter and returning to California with a token five dollars worth of gold. If the year spent pursuing real paydirt yielded little profit, then London more than made up for this dearth. "It was in the Klondike I found myself. There you get your perspective. I got mine," he reflected.⁶ With this new found identity, London mined his gold-seeking experiences, turning out a remarkable quantity of Klondike-centered writing. This frontier existence, though brief, was for London a world as strongly imagined as it was real. And the budding author was quick to situate himself in a long tradition of American frontiers. "Yes, my name is Jack London," he reflected in an 1899 letter, "rather un-American heritage from a Yankee ancestry, dating back beyond the French and Indian wars."⁷ London went on to describe his father as "Pennsylvania-born, a soldier, a scout, backwoodsman, trapper, and wanderer."⁸ Always adept at self-creation, here he created himself as a son of the frontier. London's northland venture fit neatly into a long trajectory of American westering, turned north.

This Northland experience threw London into a frontier world of new mining settlements, isolated cabins, harsh winter, and contact with the region's native people. Such contact with native peoples would eventually come to form the center of his narratives. Yet London's Yukon Indian characters bear little resemblance to their historical counterparts. Instead, London portrays Indians in his fiction as ideological figures in his anti-modernist critique of industrial civilization. For London these so-called "primitives" embodied the dignity, courage, accommodation with severe nature, innate spiritualism, and strong sense of community that seemed to him so lacking in the "softness" of civilization.⁹ While we cannot hope to find historically accurate native characters in London's fiction, we can gain insight into the ideological construction of Indian Others and hence insight into the intellectual lives of turn-of-the-century European-American men on this gold rush frontier.¹⁰

In the following consideration of Jack London's work, I am less concerned with what "really" happened. Rather, my focus will be upon how late nineteenth-century white men thought about their world and their interactions with native peoples, as revealed in London's Northland short stories. What people *think* about their lives constitutes a powerful historical force that must be reckoned with. This focus on London's imagined Indians must not be seen as a substitute for careful historical studies of actual native communities in the Yukon, or anywhere else for that matter. Instead, the following essay will examine the intellectual lives of European-American men as revealed in London's fiction. Herein we might better understand their world and the ways in which their stories and their histories have obscured the realities of First Nations people for so long. I should point out that in this study of late nineteenth-century ideology, oppositional terms—such as savage and civilized, primitive and advanced, Indian and Anglo, Red and White—constituted the racialist vocabulary of London and many of his contemporaries. I use such language here in order to describe this past perspective.

London's life and his writings offer a window into the *mentalité* of turn-of-the-century Americans. Given the increasingly national scope of late nineteenth century magazine publication, London's first short stories and serialized novels reached an enormous audience. London's contemporary, the writer Frank Norris, proclaimed that the author of the new century would be a "Man of the People." London, this new "Man of the People," offered up whole worlds of experience to a hungry

audience. An inveterate self-promoter, London personified the self-made man. His personal travels writ large in his fiction held open an imaginative world of adventure for his readers. The spread of print-capitalism held new possibilities for an increasingly urban office or factory bound public. In technologies of communication, as historian Alan Trachtenberg observes, vicarious experience began to erode direct physical experience of the world. Viewing and looking at representations, words and images, city people found themselves addressed more often as passive spectators than as active participants.¹¹ London's fictional journeys offered a sort of passive tourism to the reading public.

While one may speculate about the intended meanings of particular stories, it is quite another thing to draw any firm conclusions with respect to how turn-of-the-century readers interpreted these stories. Occasionally, one stumbles upon margin notes, such as the following one written by a reader in a first edition of *The Call of the Wild* (1903). The text reads: "The blood-longing became stronger than ever before. [Buck] was a killer, a thing that preyed, living on the things that lived, unaided, alone, by virtue of his own strength and prowess, surviving triumphantly in a hostile environment."¹² The passage summarizes the core of London's ideas. And the reader's margin note allows us a glimpse at how at least one contemporary reader interpreted London's story: "This is inspiring to a man," the reader marked in careful script, "It appears to all that goes to make a fine animal of a man, appears to that that is the antithesis of feminine." At a time when American men felt threatened by female moral authority, the increasing emphasis on the bourgeois home as the seat of societal foundations, the de-skilling of the workplace, and the increasing prominence of women in public activities, it seems likely that the reader's notes were linked to these turn-of-the-century anxieties—reacting to what cultural historian Ann Douglas calls "the feminization of American culture."¹³ While this evidence may not convince, certainly London's fantastic popular success suggests that his stories hit some common chord in the popular imagination.¹⁴

But his popular following was not monolithic. For working-class readers, London was a "real proletarian writer." According to one observer, he was "the first and so far the only proletarian writer of genius in America. Workers who read, read Jack London. He is the one author they have all read, he is one literary experience they all have in common. Factory workers, farm hands, seamen, miners, newsboys read him and read

him again. He is the most popular writer of the American working class."¹⁵ London himself emerged from an impoverished childhood on the streets of San Francisco. The lineage of London's racial views may be found not in the bourgeois anxieties of men like Theodore Roosevelt, but rather in the labor politics of San Francisco. The rise of the Workingmen's Party with its anti-Chinese agenda, the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act, and the on-going racialization of the California working class dominated the later decades of the nineteenth century.¹⁶ London grew up in this volatile racial climate. A socialist orator, he clearly championed the interests of the industrial working class. But his socialism mixed freely with his social Darwinian logic. Socialism, London wrote, "is devised so as to give more strength to these certain kindred favored races so that they may inherit the earth to the extinction of the lesser, weaker races. . . ."¹⁷ We should not seek philosophical consistency in London's writings. His more than fifty book-length works, produced in less than two decades of writing, reflect the variety and confusion of an era coming to grips with the full implications of industrial development. Readers from a variety of backgrounds found solace in his vigorous narratives that took them beyond the pale of civilization.

London rejected the supposed innate virtues of civilization, choosing instead to focus on what historian Anthony Rotundo has called the "masculine primitive."¹⁸ He joined his contemporaries in suggesting that a return to the savage was necessary if what he called the "Anglo species" were to endure. Confounding Darwinian logic with racist imperial destiny, London echoed the other voices of the era—among them Theodore Roosevelt and Rudyard Kipling—in a call for renewed vigor, expanding empires, and "the strenuous life."

London gave a literary outlet to President Roosevelt's call for vigorous activity and "manly out-of-door sports." According to Theodore Roosevelt, "In a perfectly peaceful and commercial civilization such as ours there is always a danger of laying too little stress upon the more virile virtues."¹⁹ London's writing exemplified what one historian of anti-modernism calls the "recoil from an 'overcivilized' modern existence to more intense forms of physical or spiritual experience."²⁰ London sought more than wealth in his Klondike adventure. His life and writing invites us to reconsider the gold rush as an opportunity for late nineteenth-century men to pursue the "strenuous life."

Jack London's Klondike stories confront this anxiety that civilization

had corrupted men's supposed instinctual virility. An earlier Victorian domesticity had sought to control men's instincts through the imagined virtues of female moral authority. But London and his contemporaries placed men's "animal instincts" in an increasingly positive light, challenging this domestic control. London took this animal magnetism one step further, giving central roles to wolf-like dogs and dog-like wolves in a number of his longer works.

Central to such animal idealizations was London's preoccupation with the tensions and attractions between the savage and the civilized and, especially, the marriage of the two. Given London's reliance on the cult of masculine outdoorsmanship and his vulgarization of Darwinian themes, we should be little surprised that many of his short stories focus on the wedding of white men and native women. In the skewed sex ratios of this northern frontier, by guile, liquor, lust, wealth, or violence, white men expropriated native women. Living in this world of sexual opportunity, "civilized" and now de-Victorianized men pursued their passions outside accustomed constraints.²¹ In London's imagination this commingling of savage and civilized helped to liberate men from their civilized "softness."

For example, in the short story "The Great Interrogation," London puts the recently widowed Karen Sayther on a quest up the Yukon River to find a man she had once loved. The widow finds this first love, David Payne, in a wilderness cabin, living with an Indian woman. London did not invent this liaison of white and native. His Klondike journal entries attest to the evidence of such unions. "Traces of white blood among the papooses everywhere apparent," London noted in his diary during his northern foray.²²

In his fiction, London used such unions as a means to propose "civilized" men's regeneration through sexual relationships with Indian women. In "The Great Interrogation," Karen Sayther, the civilized intruder, urges the white man, David Payne, to return to Dawson and the outside world with her. Of the relationship between the white man and the Indian, she insists. It is only a marriage of the country—not a real marriage.²³ The civilizing white woman pushes her intended,

Come on Dave, you must see. She is not your kind. There is no race affinity. She is an aborigine, sprung from the soil, yet close to the soil. Born savage, savage she will die. But we—you and I—the dominant, evolved race—the salt of the earth and the masters thereof! We are made for each other. The supreme call is of kind, and we are of kind. . . . Your very instinct demands it. . . . Instinct is

stronger than will. The race is mightier than you... let us go... The way is soft.²⁴

But the white man rejects the civilized woman's race logic. He rejects the "soft" and her attempt to control him. In a flash of memory he sees his Indian wife battling with a wounded grizzly bear. Prizing this physical competency in the struggle with wild nature, he chooses the "savage" over the "civilized." He thereby preserves his virility and his honor by remaining in touch with the primitive. Forced to choose between his Native wife and a woman of his own race, Dave determines, "It cannot be. We are not alone to be considered. You must go..."²⁵ London clearly saw some profound virtue in this marriage of Indian and white, civilized and savage. With the pragmatic emotionalism of David Payne and his Indian lover, London suggests that the affinities of savage to civilized might prove stronger than the power of race destiny.

But London did not long abandon his central concern with imperial conquest and Anglo-racial domination. In the short story "The Son of Wolf," London confronted these themes of inevitable conquest explicitly. The prospector Scruff Mackenzie visits a "Stick Indian" camp, searching for a wife. "To the south," London writes, "the nineteenth century was reeling off the few years of its last decade; here [in the north] flourished man primeval."²⁶ In this world Mackenzie cannot merely claim the woman, he must fight for her. In London's racialist imagination, Mackenzie's whiteness gives him the edge necessary to defeat his Indian opponents. London wrote,

An inheritance, . . . gave to [Mackenzie] . . . dominance over the land and sea, over the animals and the peoples of all zones. Single-handed against fivescore, girt by the Arctic winter, far from his own, he felt the prompting of his heritage, the desire to possess, the wild dangerous-love, the thrill of battle, the power to conquer or to die.²⁷

In vivid language, London describes Mackenzie's violent conquest, he slays the priest, reduces the warriors to meek obedience, and then takes the Indian woman as his prize. White men's dominance evolved out of nature itself in London's fictive world. In violent race war, nature has, according to London, predetermined that the stronger race will prevail. The writer leaves no doubt as to which group enjoyed nature's favor. The white man's "lust for slaughter" in this story fits London's ethical system. Violent conquest matched the natural struggle that determined that only the fittest survive; it was therefore right.

London, in his letters, described his social Darwinistic vision, writing,

"The different families of man must yield to law—to LAW, inexorable, blind, unreasoning law, which has no knowledge of good or ill, right or wrong; which has no preference, grants no favor."²⁸ Thus, Mackenzie must subdue wild nature and the savage Indian to make way for white civilization. "My brothers will come," Mackenzie pronounces, "and they are many. . . my people are greater than thy people. It is destiny."²⁹ Racial destiny, buttressed by supposedly scientific Darwinism, sanctioned the ensuing violence.

Jack London's fictional wrangling with the reality of Indian and white intermarriage stood in curious opposition to his own professed views on mixed-blood unions. "God abhors a mongrel," wrote London in a letter, "In nature is no place for a mixed-breed. The purest breed, when they are interbred, produce mongrels. . . consult the entire history of the human world in all past ages, and you will find that the world has ever belonged to the pure breed and has never belonged to the mongrel. . . Remember, Nature permits no mongrel to live—or, rather, Nature permits no mongrel to endure. . ."³⁰ Here London reflected the widely held turn-of-the-century assumption that mixed-blood unions produced eventual sterility.³¹ Such strident racialism in London's personal correspondence was not a momentary aberration. In another letter, London expanded on his amalgamated racial theories:

If the bastard races of one of the richest continents of the world, the South Americans; if the niggers of Africa, the Indians of America, the Blackies of Australia, should for all their confessed inefficiency, continue to perpetuate themselves to the dwarfing, to the shutting-out of the stronger, better races, such as our own, where, I ask are you to draw the line in the whole animal kingdom? Do you know that the physiologists say that the difference between the highest forms of man and the lowest forms of man is greater than the difference between the lowest forms of man and the highest forms of the rest of the invertebrates. . . ?³²

London's ideas on race were not peculiar to him. As Susan Nuernberg concludes, "London's ideas and attitudes on race in general, i.e., racial evolution, social Darwinism, Aryanism, and eugenics, and on the superiority of the English-speaking branch of the Teutonic 'race' in particular, as expressed in his fiction and essays, mirror those held by the majority of well-educated and prominent Americans prior to World War II."³³

In his first two short story volumes, *The Son of the Wolf* and *The God of his Fathers*, London relied on mixed-blood marriages to dramatize white men's conquests of Natives. These white-Indian unions symbolized the

rejection of overcivilized Victorian domesticity and the necessity of savage virility for an imperially destined Anglo-Saxon race. However, there could be no logical resolution between London's belief in rigid racial boundaries and his fictional blurring of these racial lines. An untenable contradiction lay at the heart of London's fiction. Savagery as an antidote to an excess of civilization could not be reconciled with the inevitable extinction of the Indian savage in a Darwinian contest for race survival.

In spite of the contradiction, white identity remained in London's work tied to the Indian, parasitically creating whiteness by distinguishing itself from the white mind's imagined opposite—redness. In an era in which middle-class white men joined organizations like the Improved Order of Red Men and young boys found discipline in the Woodcraft Indians, London's work found an eager readership. In the Woodcraft Indians, founded by Ernest Thompson Seton in 1901, modern youth "donned native costume, constructed tipis and wigwams, made fire with bows and wooden fire drills rather than matches, and democratically elected a ruling hierarchy of chiefs."²³ As historian Gail Bederman writes, "middle-class white men. . . linked powerful manhood to the 'savagery' and 'primitivism' of dark-skinned races, whose masculinity they claimed to share."²⁴ Like the Woodcraft Indian youth, London figuratively donned native costume when, in his third volume of short stories, *Children of the Frost*, published in 1902, he adopts what he called the "Indian perspective."

"The idea of *The Children of the Frost*," London enthused, "is the writing of a series of tales in which the reader will always look at things from the Indian's point of view, through the Indian's eyes as it were. Heretofore the viewpoint in my Northland stories has been of the white man's."²⁵ London "played Indian" in these stories and eliminated the contradictions of mixed-blood unions. The collection's first story, "In the Forests of the North," begins with a surveying party venturing into a remote Indian village, the white explorers intending "to break up these blank white spaces [on the map] and diversify them with the black markings of mountain chains, sinks and basins, and sinuous river courses." The drama of a white man's liaison with an Indian woman lies at the heart of the story. But in contrast to his previous tales, London rejects the possibility of such a union. This story ends with the Indians massacring the entire party of white map-makers. In common with other cele-

brated images of frontier conflict—from the Alamo to “Custer’s Last Stand”—white men became victims of native “savagery.” London has inverted the reality of conquest. The fact of white invasion receded from sight.

From this initial tale of whites attempting to possess the land through the symbol of the map, London charts a chronology of Indian defeat and submission. In “The Law of Life,” the second story in *Children of the Frost* collection, the native elder Koskoosh serves as an emblem of self-control in the face of death. Abandoned by his tribe, the sick and dying Koskoosh accepts death beside a dying fire, ringed by a closing circle of wolves. Koskoosh served as a symbol of indigenous acceptance of mortality and within London’s racialist vision the elder signified native submission to eventual extinction. Having taken on the “Indian perspective,” the tone of London’s Northland stories changed from that of triumphal Anglo-Saxons to one of indigenous submission and death. In the third story, “Nam-Bok, the Unveracious,” the protagonist, lost at sea, ends up in civilization. Upon his return to his remote village, Nam-Bok regales his people with stories of the outside—great steamships, railroads, and magnificent cities. But his people reject him, lapsing into primitive superstition. According to local law, the dead cannot return and so Nam-Bok is sent away. Unable to accept the reality of technology, London insists that these primitives will be doomed by their adherence to outmoded religious views.

In the volume’s fifth story, “The Sunlanders,” the Indians, affronted by the arrival of gold seekers, ask, in London’s chosen native patois, “Why they come?” “Men do not dig in the ground for nothing.”³⁸ The Indians, like their counterparts in the first tale, try to kill the intruders, but fail. The white men prevail and the few surviving Indians “went to work at the hest of the Sunlanders and dug in the ground. They hunt and fish no more, but receive a daily wage. . . .”³⁹ In the remaining stories, London narrated the demise of native peoples in the face of the new mining civilization. Old Indian men recall their former glories to curious white men. Intent on preserving some record of the supposedly vanishing Indians, these note-takers ply their informants with liquor. London wrote, “Now withered repositories of tradition and ancient happenings, they were the last of their generation and without honor among the younger set which had grown-up on the farthest fringe of a mining civilization.”⁴⁰

London's representation of indigenous people in his work present a complicated mix. His Indians represented natural self-control and mastery in the face of harsh wilderness realities. They were uniquely adapted to the circumstances of the sub-arctic forests. But according to London these so-called primitives were no match for the onslaught of a more powerful race. In the final story of *Children of the Frost*, London completed the Indians' storied demise. From initial defiance in the volume's first take, this last story, "The League of the Old Men," confirmed his early twentieth-century European-American readers' expectation that Indians were doomed to eventual extinction. London wrote in a letter, "'The League of the Old Men' is the best short story I have written . . . the voices of millions are in the voice of old Imber, and the tears and sorrows of millions are in his throat as he tells his story; his story epitomizes the whole vast tragedy of the contact of the Indian and the white man."⁴¹ In this story, the elder Imber—a name suggesting the coals of a dying fire—turns himself in to the authorities at Dawson following a murder spree in which Imber killed dozens of white gold seekers. To the Mounted Police and a crowded courtroom, Imber confessed his killings—in London's words,

the epic of a bronze patriot which might well itself be wrought into bronze for the generations unborn. The crowd fell strangely silent, and the square-browed judge leaned head on hand and pondered his soul and the soul of his race. . . .⁴²

Imber's story touched the judge with its ultimate finality. "As I say, one by one, till I alone was left. I am Imber, of the Whitefish people. . . . There are no Whitefish now."⁴³ The cause of this Native demise reflected London's socialist critique of capitalism. In addition to offering a coherent anti-modernist symbol of Native adaptability to a harsh land, Native society served as an example of indigenous communism. And capitalism could be found at the root of Native socio-economic collapse, according to London. Imber lamented this cause, "Trade! Trade! All the time it was trade! One winter we sold our meat for clocks that would not go, and watches with broken guts. . . ."⁴⁴ In a prescient critique of modern society, London rooted Native decline to the symbolic reordering of time by the capitalist discipline of the clock. But this vision of Native extinction also fit neatly into London's racial theory. In a letter, London insisted, "The black has stopped, just as the monkey has stopped. . . .the Negro like the Red, has been passed by. . . ."⁴⁵

Instead of an unqualified acceptance of native destruction in the face

of Anglo-Saxon superiority, London offered his readers a more ambiguous conclusion. Imber reflected, "Here be the strangeness of it, the white men come as the breath of death; all their ways lead to death, their nostrils are filled with it; and they do not die." Imber's word piqued the judge's conscience. But the judge also knew the rule of ultimate law: "The square-browed judge like-wise dreamed, and all his race rose up before him in a mighty phantasmagoria—his steel-shod, mail-clad race, the lawgiver and world-maker among the families of men. He saw it dawn red-flickering across the dark forests and sullen seas; he saw it blaze, bloody and red. . . . And through it all he observed the Law, pitiless and potent, . . . even as it was greater than he, his heart speaking for softness."⁴⁷

The noted naturalist, William Dall, author of the standard reference work on Alaska during the period, attacked the narrowness of London's native representations. Dall, in a high-profile letter to the *New York Times*, maintained that London's Indians were "melodramatic white men in disguise."⁴⁸ London defended the accuracy of his fictional Indians against such attacks. But Dall's critique recognized London's figurative donning of Indian costume in these stories.

London, despite his aspiration in *Children of the Frost* to write from the Indian point-of-view, remained locked in an ethnocentric perspective. It is, perhaps, inappropriate to expect otherwise from a man ill-equipped by the era's ethnography to tackle a culturally relativist perspective. Riding a tide of artistic and intellectual interest in the plight of indigenous North Americans, London was caught within his conflicting world views of free-will socialism, determinist naturalism, and manifest racism. The return to primitive beginnings commingled in London's Klondike works with imperial destinies. In imagining the extinction of Indians, London raised the specter of overcivilized Anglo-Saxons losing contact with "primitiveness." And London's anti-modern sensibility recognized important virtues in Indian Others. The example of native communism would be lost in its contest with aggressive capitalism. London found the image of the "primitive" more powerful than any possible understanding of aboriginal reality. Instead of any accurate indigenous perspective in these stories, we may see into London's turn-of-the-century milieu, his earnest searching for a primordial wilderness in the face of an ever-changing industrial civilization. His brief frontier experience was a world as strongly imagined as it was real. Often this search led to

the sexual conquest of native women in London's stories. Gender, environment, and race were spun into one another. In London's fiction, the frozen white North became a stage for soul-searching white men to recapture their supposed primitive origins.

Wilderness, imperialism, indigenous self-mastery—all of these themes get tangled up in the web of masculine searching that lie at the heart of many of the Northland stories. And I suggest that these themes and this searching lay at the heart of the Klondike gold rushers' motivations. The Klondike Rush occurred at a key moment of economic transformation. At the end of the nineteenth century, workers felt the pressures of corporatized efficiency and increasing monotony in the workplace. Men faced women's demands for more active public lives. And Anglo-Saxon men feared that massive immigration to North America threatened their numerical and racial superiority.

Gold seekers pursued more than economic gain in their northern venture. The Klondike work experience was enmeshed in the cultural meanings attached to that work. As gold and its value were a product of culture, so too was prospecting a cultural production. Klondike gold seekers escaped, if only briefly, the drudgery of industrial work. Claim owners and merchants found profit in far-flung imperial investments. Men indulged in a regenerative exercise of frontier-wilderness living. Women signaled their rejection of domesticity. Whites viewed their northern move as scientific fulfilment of their racial destiny. Natives endured, seizing new work opportunities.

To be sure, Jack London's writing obscured much of the reality of the Klondike rush. His fictive Indians reveal little about the actual experiences of Yukon native peoples. There is a risk in this study of ideology of losing the reality that underlay London's Klondike world. Representative though it is of turn-of-the-century European attitudes, we should not allow London's mythic version of Native peoples to obscure the reality of indigenous persistence in the Yukon. My intention here has not been to duplicate his fictive distortions. Rather, in London's life and writings, I suggest that we recognize an intellectual world that sprang from the era's deep anxieties.

It has been said that a thorough-going liberalism lay at the heart of the phenomena of nineteenth-century gold rushes.⁴⁹ The promise of striking it rich, open to all comers, encouraged industrial citizens that economic independence was possible. Gold represented a myriad of

connections to a wider world beyond the sub-arctic interior of the Yukon. Gold serves as a rich synecdoche. World economies were founded on the substance and yet the average man might dig it from the ground. Gold represented great inequalities of wealth and international control, and yet it was also the great leveler. Gold had, for decades, been held up as the bane of the industrial working class and rural farmers. Following the deep depression of the early 1890s, Populists denounced the control of gold on the world market by a cabal of British bankers and international financiers.⁵⁰ Within a year of the discovery, thousands of men and women would borrow money for grub-stakes and head north in search of the soft metal. A half-century earlier California forty-niners found escape from the burgeoning challenges of the market revolution that transformed the artisans' world into the world of wage workers. Discovery of gold in California provided an answer to the fear of subordination for male artisans, historian Susan Johnson argues.⁵¹ Fear of lost autonomy served as a powerful motivator for California-bound miners, she insists. At the end of the nineteenth century, wage workers now felt the pressures of de-skilling and the rule of the clock in the factory workplace. Gold seekers pursued more than economic gain in their northern venture. In the open "wildernesses" of empire—at Sutter's Mill, the Transvaal, Australia's gold fields, and the Klondike—gold lay in the ground for the taking.

However, the myth of expansion, particularly the frontier version best exemplified in Frederick Jackson Turner's famous thesis, denoted these "new" lands as "free." Of course, these "wildernesses" served as home to many others. "Taking" gold also involved a host of other takings—the conquest of land, the elimination of native peoples by disease, warfare, and attrition.

But to the white citizens of democratic nation-states, gold was seen as an entitlement. Myth, story, history, science—these patterns of late nineteenth-century thought disguised the reality of gold rush conquest. Vulgarized Darwinian science determined that only the fittest would survive. This struggle found its source in the contest of economies. For the nineteenth-century European-Americans, industrial civilization was destined to triumph over indigenous ways-of-life. Such race logic assumed that the proper use of resources like gold should belong to those groups destined to survive. Science commingled with myth to produce an assumption that indigenous societies were destined to extinction.

London's narration of this myth disguised the reality of conquest and the successful persistence of First Nations peoples.

The gold rush trail and mining camp figured prominently in London's stories. In the story "Like Argus of the Ancient Times," London explicitly sets out to address the mythic proportions of the quest for gold. He recognized the continuity of gold rushing as a core experience of American frontier development. In the story, Old Tarwater, who had ventured west as a California goldrusher at age twenty-two, returns to the gold rush frontier in his old age, following the Chilkoot Trail into Klondike country. The mining camp, lying at the center of expansive North American civilization, carried mythic proportions. As a setting for many of London's stories, the gold rush was capable of raising the essential elements of North American "westerling" up to view. But it remains for us to remove the disguise that London unconsciously donned in his stories. London's "trying on" an "Indian perspective" in his short stories only helped to further obscure the realities of the Klondike rush for First Nations people.

A difficult paradox lay at the heart of London's writing and at the core of London's turn-of-the-century world. In order to substantiate itself as modern—as civilized—turn-of-the-century Western culture depended upon its opposition to the imagined savage and to civilization's triumph over the primitive. But in needing to eliminate the primitive, so-called civilized society destroyed the very opposition that had defined what it meant to be civilized. The "civilized" *needed* the Native.

To return to the dilemma of what to name one of Whitehorse's main arteries, it seems less important that Jack London was a racist. More importantly, London represents the vanguard of an invading population whose northern entrance forever recast the lives of First Nations people in the Yukon. If natives have persisted, then so have Anglo ideas of the Klondike Rush—The "Last Great Rush." To the region's original residents the "greatness" of the event is a misnomer. Renaming the Two Mile Hill for Jack London would have compounded a history of misunderstanding.

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Endnotes

1. One might question why Jack London, a United States citizen, whose writings heralded the expansionist energies of that nation, should serve as namesake for a Canadian street. For a discussion of London's imperialism see Susan Kollin's "North to the West: Jack London and the Literature of U.S. Expansion in Canada," *Canadian Review of American Studies*, vol 26, No. 2 (Spring 1996), pp 63-81.
2. Howard Schneider, "Sensitivities Symbolize Clash Around Canada," *Washington Post* [Washington, DC], 4 December 1996, p. A27.
3. Peter Gay, *The Cultivation of Hatred: The Bourgeois Experience Victoria to Freud*, Vol. III (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984), p. 61.
4. Such efforts at understanding should not be interpreted as the saying goes, *Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*. We need not excuse London's racial outlook by assuming he was a "man of his times." While understanding may not lead to forgiveness, it can shed light on how heavily the past can sometimes weigh on the present.
5. Franklin Walker's *Jack London and the Klondike: The Genesis of an American Writer* (San Marino, CA: Henry E. Huntington Library, 1966) covers London's Yukon experience.
6. Earle Labor, et al., ed., *The Letters of Jack London*, Vol. I, 1896-1905 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. xx.
7. *Ibid.*, Jack London to Cloudesley Johns, 10 February 1899, p. 45.
8. *Ibid.*, Jack London to Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 31 January 1900, p. 149.
9. James I. McClintock, *White Logic: Jack London's Short Stories*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wolf House Books, 1975), pp. 100-01.
10. A number of excellent studies consider the history of the Indian image in the white mind. See Roy Harvey Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind* (1953) (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988); and Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man's Indian* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).
11. Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Ages* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), p. 122.
12. Jack London, *The Call of the Wild* (New York: MacMillan, 1903), p. 207.
13. Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977).
14. Benedict Anderson's reflections on the origins and spread of nationalism, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1991), highlights the critical role of print-capitalism to providing a shared sense of nationalist community. "Print-capitalism," Anderson argues, "made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people

to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others in profoundly new ways" (p. 36). The national community of otherwise faceless individuals could be united by narratives of the frontier myth, of which London's work stand prominently. This origin myth provided a secure context for the racial destiny of the nation.

15. Martin Russak writing in the *New Masses* (January 1929), quoted in Philip Foner, ed., *Jack London: American Rebel* (New York: Citadel Press, 1947), p. 7. Carolyn Johnston's *Jack London—An American Radical?* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984) considers London's working-class background and his socialism.
16. For discussions of the links between the racial and labor politics of late nineteenth century and early twentieth century California see Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1971) and Michael Kazin, *Barons of Labor: The San Francisco Building Trades and Union Power in the Progressive Era* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 1987).
17. Labor, *Letters*, Vol. I, Jack London to Cloudesley Johns, 23 June 1899.
18. E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations of Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), p. 227.
19. Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 186.
20. T. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Anti-modernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. xv.
21. Sylvia Van Kirk's *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980) and Jennifer S. Brown's *Stranger in the Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: University of Vancouver Press, 1980) both draw out the complicated mix of lure and alliance that characterized cross-cultural bonds on the fur-trade frontier.
22. Franklin Walter, *Jack London and the Klondike: The Genesis of an American Writer* (San Marino, CA: Henry E. Huntington Library, 1978), p. 185.
23. Earle Labor, ed., *The Complete Short Stories of Jack London*, Vol. 1 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 531.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 532.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 533.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 201.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Labor, ed., *Letters*, Vol. 1, p. 202.
29. Labor, ed., *Complete Short Stories*, Vol. 1, pp. 200-201.
30. Labor, ed., *Letters*, Vol. 3, Jack London to Sprio Organs, 25 January 1916, p.

1533.

31. Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 226.
32. Labor, ed., *Letters*, Vol. 1, Jack London to Cloudesley Johns, 23 June 1899, p. 89.
33. Susan Marie Nuernberg, "The Call of the Wild: Race in Jack London's Fiction," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Massachusetts, 1990.
34. Philip J. Deloria, "Playing Indian: Otherness and Authenticity in the Assumption of American Indian Identity," Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1994, pp. 15-16.
35. Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 23.
36. Labor, *Letters*, Vol. 1, Jack London to George Brett, 30 January 1902; Jonathan Auerbach, in his recent critical study, *Male Call: Becoming Jack London* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), provides a useful discussion of this collection.
37. Labor, ed., *Complete Short Stories*, Vol. 1, p. 656.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 604.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 620.
40. *Ibid.*, "The Sickness of Lone Chief," p. 764.
41. Labor, ed., *Letters*, Vol. 1, p. 275.
42. Labor, ed., *Complete Short Stories*, Vol. 1, p. 816.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 822.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 818.
45. Labor, ed., *Letters*, Vol. 1, Jack London to Cloudesley Johns, 12 December 1899, p. 132.
46. Labor, ed., *Complete Short Stories*, Vol. 1, pp. 821-22.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 822.
48. William H. Dall, "Jack London's 'Local Color'," *New York Times Saturday Review of Books and Art*, 6 December 1902.
49. Douglas Fetherling, *The Gold Crusades: A Social History of the Gold Rushes, 1849-1929* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1988).
50. Michael O'Malley, "Specie and Species: Race and the Money Question in Nineteenth Century America," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 99, No. 2 (April 1994): 369-395. O'Malley insists that "The money question [in the 1890s] needs to be reconsidered in the context of a widespread and deeply

rooted anxiety about value and identity in Victorian American male culture. Late nineteenth-century arguments about money closely mimicked arguments about racial and gender identity" (p. 395). How was goldrushing tied up with late nineteenth-century society's gold and silver debate?

51. Susan Lee Johnson, "The gold she gathered': Difference, Domination, and California's Southern Mines, 1848-1853," Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1993, p. 100.