THE POWER TO (RE)PRODUCE: BIOLOGICAL DETERMINISM IN *MCTEAGUE*

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ABSTRACT

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In *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco*, Frank Norris explores life among the working class of Polk Street. Through his unflattering portrayal of all the immigrant characters in the novel, Norris demonstrates his well-documented beliefs in inherited degeneracy. The relationship between Zerkow, a Polish Jew, and Maria Macapa, a Mexican maid, especially highlights these beliefs.

Though many scholars have approached Zerkow and Maria as individual characters, it is the complex dynamic of their relationship which this paper explores. Through the utilization of Marxist notions of commodity and feminist notions of the body and reproduction, Maria's sacrifices as an immigrant woman hoping to achieve the social normalcy of marriage and family become clear. Maria's story (with connections to her racial heritage) and body become commodities, and ultimately her power to (re)produce is compromised. Zerkow's greed, apparent not only in his stereotypical Jewish desire for gold, but also in his desire to possess Maria's story and body, leads to the devaluing of Maria and to her murder.

Maria and Zerkow are two "racially inferior" characters united through a marriage based not on love, but opportunity and convenience. Their story demonstrates not only late nineteenth century ideas about race and immigration, but also Norris's personal contempt for the immigrant population.

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INTRODUCTION

Contrary to its title, Frank Norris's novel, *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco* is not a story of a city; rather, it is a story of the people who inhabit that city. More specifically, it is a story of the residents of Polk Street, a working-class neighborhood occupied mostly by immigrant workers. In this cast of immigrant characters, all of whom are stereotypes of their various racial heritages, Norris voices his well-documented beliefs in notions of Social Darwinism and inherited degeneracy.

Though much attention is paid to the novel's major characters, a dentist named McTeague and his wife, Trina, the novel's subplots are dedicated to two equally interesting couples: Old Grannis and Miss Baker, and Zerkow and Maria Macapa. It is the Zerkow/Maria subplot on which this paper focuses. Exploring the ways in which late nineteenth-century ideas of race and immigration informed Norris's creation of these characters provides a context for understanding what, to the modern reader, is a disconcerting portrayal of immigrants. It is simple to write off the Zerkow/ Maria subplot as merely the "further degenerated" counterpart to the Trina/McTeague plot or to consider Zerkow and Maria as individual characters. In their work, Louis Harap, Gary M. Levine, and Walter Benn Michaels all provide insight into the character of Zerkow as a fictional representation of a Jewish man and the stereotypical Jewish greed that informs many of Zerkow's actions and interactions. Similarly, many scholars writing about Maria Macapa, including Barbara Hochman and Hildegard Hoeller, focus on the psychology of her strange behavior. The relationship that forms between Maria and Zerkow, however, is more than the sum of what each individual brings to it, and their courtship, marriage, and eventual deaths, is a nuanced story of its own.

Marxist notions of commodity and production and feminist notions of the body and reproduction/motherhood clarify the extent to which the Zerkow/Maria subplot is especially relevant in the study of this novel. Maria is an immigrant woman subject to the social pressures of the day: to attract a mate, to marry, to reproduce. In the pursuit of this social "normalcy," Maria sacrifices much: her job, her body, her story of her family's gold dishes, her identity, and ultimately, her life. The magnitude of this sacrifice sets her apart from the novel's other female characters. Donald Pizer explains that during this period, the fear of the immigrant "outsider" in America lead some race theorists to scientifically legitimize this fear by categorizing immigrants based on their race (*American* xiv). In coupling Zerkow and Maria, Norris chooses to unite the two most "racially inferior" characters in the novel. While the characters of other races have somewhat dysfunctional courtships and marriages, there is a clear distinction present: the courtship and marriage of Zerkow and Maria had nothing to do with love, or even physical attraction. Instead, in their "inferiority," they opt for a courtship and marriage based on convenience and opportunity. Norris utilizes the minor character of Maria to illustrate what can happen to an immigrant woman who enters the marriage market with nothing more than a story to attract a mate. A simple market exchange, a story for a husband, becomes significantly more complicated as Maria must sacrifice more and more of herself to maintain her tenuous position as an immigrant woman in American society. The story of Maria and Zerkow reflects not only late nineteenth century societal attitudes regarding recent immigrants, but especially Norris's personal disdain for marginalized immigrant populations.

LATE 19TH CENTURY IMMIGRATION: TRENDS AND ATTITUDES

In 1890s America, immigrants, especially those from certain areas of the world, were being more closely scrutinized than ever before. After an especially large influx of immigrants during the 1880s, Americans were beginning to take note of how the country was changing—both ethnically and economically (Daniels 39). Matthew Frye Jacobson cites an 1894 publication of the American Federation of Labor stating the three sources of "national wealth and greatness" as God, our form of government, and immigrants (61). In spite of this recognition—that the presence and contributions of immigrants and immigrant labor were directly connected to the economic success of the United States—the publication states that immigration should be halted largely due to concerns over the economy. When the 1890s brought an economic depression to the United States, recent immigrants, frequently a source of lower-wage labor, were a target for Americans concerned about their own employment and economic stability. This anti-immigration sentiment grew, resulting, as Jared Gardner states, in a "reawakening of a xenophobia that had lain dormant since the Civil War" (53). In spite of growing public concern about the economic effects of immigrants in the United States, the private sector was unwilling to sacrifice their bottom line to hire people they would have to pay a higher wage. As Jacobson points out, "industry's voracious appetite for cheap supplies of unskilled labor never abated, and...rhapsodic national self-congratulation over the democratic openness that the immigrant so nicely symbolized never died completely away" (61). As a result of this disconnect between industry's desire for cheap labor and many citizens' fears about the wide-ranging effects of immigration, a number of groups formed to combat the influence of immigrants on American society, the most well-known of which was the Immigration

Restriction League. The members of this league pressed for immigration reform that would both limit the numbers of people immigrating as well as the countries from which immigrants came (Daniels 42).

There was especially negative sentiment directed toward Eastern European Jews, who faced scorn both from Americans and from German Jews who had previously settled in the United States. Norris's Zerkow, a Polish Jew, is a radically stereotyped portrait of an Eastern European Jew. As Leonard Dinnerstein and David M. Reimers point out, German Jews, already established in America, had altered their religious practices so that they more closely resembled Protestantism (55). There was a fear among German Jews that the Eastern European newcomers (like the Polish Zerkow), whose exotic appearance and Orthodox religious practices did not conform to American culture, would pose a threat to the relative security they had already created for themselves in this country. Eventually, as both Daniels (72-73) and Dinnerstein and Reimers (55) indicate, German Jews realized it would be in their best interest to help acclimate the Eastern European newcomers to American culture to stem what they correctly predicted would be increased anti-Semitic attitudes toward Jewish immigrants, regardless of country of origin.

Immigrants from Mexico, like Norris's Maria Macapa, faced somewhat less difficult circumstances, at least during the time in which Norris was writing *McTeague*. In Mexico, commercial agriculture was primarily responsible for driving away the peasant farmers (Bodnar 22). It was not until several decades later that the United States began to more carefully control its southernmost border, so the physical journey for Mexican workers in the late 1800s was substantially easier than it was for those emigrating from Europe. That is not to say, however, that emigration from Mexico was an easy feat. As

with Eastern European Jews, Mexican immigrant workers, too, faced stereotypes and discrimination because of their comparative racial inferiority. In the late 1890s, Californians were concerned with "inferior" races—namely Mexicans and Chinese—who were regularly employed as farm laborers and railroad workers because they could be paid less than their American counterparts (Pizer, *American* 17). Maria Macapa, though employed as a domestic laborer and thereby not conforming to the stereotype of a farm worker, would have faced discrimination similar to, if not as severe as, that faced by Zerkow. Of the many immigrants arriving in the United States during this period, those of Mexican and East European Jewish ethnicities were among those least warmly received.

Interestingly, much as the German Jews viewed the arriving Eastern European Jews with scorn, those of Mexican descent who were born in America adopted prejudicial views and were also scornful of later arrivals from Mexico (Bodnar 118). Though historical texts make virtually no mention of other connections between Jewish and Mexican immigrants, the discrimination that members of both groups faced from others of their own ethnicity might begin to explain Norris's decision to include in *McTeague* a relationship between a Mexican woman, Maria, and Zerkow, an Eastern European Jewish man.

Scholars frequently note that Norris was aware of, and influenced by, the views of his contemporaries regarding inherited behavior. Donald Pizer discusses at length the ways in which Norris found inspiration in the works of Emile Zola, especially his notion of inherited degeneracy (*Novels* 55-56). While attending the University of California, Berkeley, Norris studied under Professor Joseph Le Conte, who expressed racist notions about evolution and ethnicity in his published writings. Additionally, Pizer notes that while Norris likely was not exposed to Cesare Lombroso's ideas regarding criminal anthropology

before he began *McTeague*, he had been exposed to them by the completion of his novel (*Novels* 57-58). As many Americans associated Lombroso's notions of criminality with their already significant dislike and distrust of the immigrant population (Gardner 54), it is likely that Norris, too, made that association as he highlighted the atavism of the majority of the characters in *McTeague*, including Zerkow and Maria. George W. Johnson suggests that in *McTeague*, characters are "ranked according to their race or nationality, each accordingly assigned a degree of phylogenic as well as moral development" (59). Maria and Zerkow, the racially inferior counterpart to the Caucasian characters Trina and McTeague, are developed accordingly.

THE COMMODIFICATION OF IDENTITY

Maria—Miranda—Macapa, as she introduces herself, is the maid in the building which houses several of the novel's main characters at the beginning of the novel. As with most of the immigrant population, Maria's opportunities for employment are limited; as an unmarried woman, she would most likely be employed as a domestic laborer. Always following the recitation of her name with "Had a flying squirrel an' let him go" (16), Maria seems rather mentally unstable, both to the reader and the building's residents. Nevertheless, she has maintained her position as maid in that building for many years, since before Miss Baker, the building's longest resident to date, moved in. As Maria is unmarried and has not borne children at the beginning of the novel, her body's only means of production is through her work. As Christine Delphy explains, domestic work "acquires value—is remunerated—as long as the woman furnishes it to people to whom she *is not related or married*" (95). Thus, as long as Maria's work remains outside of her own domestic space, her production/work has monetary value. Though she is paid poorly for her production, she nevertheless has value in the society of this novel.

To supplement the insufficient income that her work provides, Maria scavenges throughout the building every two months, through disposed-of waste and people's apartments alike, searching for items that she might sell to Zerkow, the "rags-bottles-sacks man" (23). She rudely and invasively intrudes into the tenants' apartments, repeatedly harassing them with questions about what "junk" they might be willing to give to her. Most of the residents are reluctant to part with their belongings, in many cases knowing they still have monetary value, but they eventually give in to Maria, sensing that she will not leave empty-handed. This taking of property with the coerced permission of the

victims, what Hildegard Hoeller terms "legal stealing" (86), turns at times to actual theft. During one of her visits to McTeague's dental parlors, Maria manipulates him into giving her a set of valuable tools. As he turns to retrieve them for her, Maria "t[akes] advantage of the moment to steal three 'mats' of sponge-gold out of the glass saucer" (27). If her legal stealing blurs the line between gift and theft, the scene with McTeague, Hoeller argues, is evidence of Maria "capitalizing on the unutterable boundary between gift and commodity, exploiting the moment of gift-giving" (96). McTeague, if reluctant, nonetheless is willing to give Maria the "gift" of the tools for her to do with what she likes; Maria, however, is not satisfied with even a valuable set of tools and takes also the mats of gold, knowing they will increase the overall value of her commodities when she is bargaining with Zerkow.

To make her bi-monthly legal thefts even more morally suspect, Maria does not use this pawning of others' goods to satisfy her basic needs, but to fulfill her materialistic desires. Maria uses the money Zerkow pays her for her legally stolen goods to buy "shirt waists and dotted blue neckties, trying to dress like the girls who ten[d] the soda-water fountain in the candy store on the corner," and of whom she was "sick with envy" (23). Maria envies the soda fountain girls because "they were in the world, they were elegant, they were debonair, they had their 'young men'" (23). By purchasing clothes that mimic those of the soda fountain girls, Maria also hopes to acquire their level of attractiveness to the opposite sex. The adornment of new clothing would allow her to more easily commodify her body; not only will she be able to capitalize on the production of her body through work, but potentially on her body's ability to attract a "young man" whose financial contributions might help further satisfy her material desires. By extension, she

could then escape her role as a female laborer and instead fulfill a more socially acceptable role as wife and mother.

Maria's apparent fixation on the soda fountain girls has both socioeconomic and sexual significance. The young women who tend the soda-water fountain in the candy store are socioeconomically a step above Maria. Even though they work relatively low-paying jobs in a retail setting, their work is removed from the domestic sphere, which lower-class women like Maria had little opportunity to escape. Their low pay, however, keeps them from enjoying the increasing amount of entertainment available to the public in the late 1800s including cheap theater, vaudeville shows, and amusement parks. Joel Shrock explains that as a result of these young women earning less than their male counterparts, the 1890s saw the development of a "system of 'treating'" (39). In this exchange, a man would "treat" a woman to one of the day's various forms of entertainment; a woman would then be expected to reciprocate the expenditure with sexual favors. Though it seems this exchange fits tidily into the age-old expectation that men deserve "repayment" for money spent on a date with a woman, Shrock contends that these women were not being victimized, but were "active agents in negotiating 'treats' and sex" (39). Whether these young women had agency or were victims of men taking advantage of their comparatively lower incomes, this socially acceptable exchange—offering a woman something she might enjoy in exchange for access to her body—suggests why Maria does not hesitate to commodify her body in exchange for something she wants, namely, the financial stability and social acceptance that would follow marriage and, potentially, children. The fact that Maria is willing to break the law, to steal, to satisfy her material desires suggests she is eager to submit herself to this unfortunate cycle of

exchanging one's body for a "treat." She seems to assume that if she dresses like the soda fountain girls, she will attract young men like they do, and in due course, "earn" her way out of her position as maid and into a position as wife.

In addition to the commodification of her body, Maria also commodifies the story of her family's gold dishes. In astonishing detail, Maria recalls the story of these dishes, which her parents supposedly once owned when she was a child in Mexico:

> There were more than a hundred pieces, and every one of them gold. You should have seen the sight when the leather trunk was opened [. . .] There was dinner dishes and soup tureens and pitchers; and great, big platters as long as that, and wide too; and cream-jugs and bowls with carved handles, all vines and things; and drinking mugs, every one a different shape; and dishes for gravy and sauces; and then a great, big punch-bowl with a ladle, and the bowl was all carved out with figures and bunches of grapes. Why, just only that punch-bowl was worth a fortune, I guess. (29-30)

The story of the dishes is initially nothing more than entertainment for the residents of the building; her recitation of the story functions much as the recitation of her name—the residents could get a good laugh out of hearing it time and again. The origin of the story and the purpose it serves for Maria seems ambiguous. It could be a sign of Maria's mental instability, or it could be, as Barbara Hochman suggests, something of a security blanket which insulates Maria from past or present threats to her sense of self (344). I would contend that her constant use of repetition (of her name and her story) provides her with a sense of self, of her past, and of her heritage. Maria is a poverty-stricken immigrant woman who earns a modest wage working as a maid. She has little power and limited

autonomy. It is little wonder that she so frequently repeats her name and the story of valuable objects; the possibility of forgetting who she is, where she came from, and what she (may have) had threatens her identity. Without those things, she would be reduced simply to her status as a poor, immigrant worker—nameless and without worth. Though most of the other characters in the novel doubt that this set of dishes ever existed, Norris leaves open the possibility that her memory is true by calling it "not impossible" (30). Despite its questionable foundation in reality, Maria's story has immense value in the eyes of Zerkow.

GOING FOR GOLD

Zerkow, a perfect example of Norris's inclusion of derogatory, stereotyped characters, is described as "a Polish Jew—curious enough his hair was fiery red. He was a dry, shriveled old man of sixty odd. He had the thin, eager, cat-like lips of the covetous; eyes that had grown keen as those of a lynx . . . and claw-like prehensile fingers" (28). This character, with the stereotypical insatiable greed associated with his Eastern European Jewish ancestry and the red hair of Judas, is considered by many, including Louis Harap (391) and Gary M. Levine (70), to be one of the most anti-Semitic, objectionable portrayals of a Jewish person in American literature. Zerkow's obsession with gold is unparalleled and seems to occupy his every thought and action. Gold was "his dream, his passion; at every instant he seemed to feel the generous solid weight of the crude fat metal in his palms. The glint of it was constantly in his eyes; the jangle of it sang forever in his ear as the jangling of cymbals" (28). It is this stereotypical obsession that drives his business practices.

Though his business is a junk shop, implying the buying *and selling* of junk, Zerkow is actually a miser who does not sell his junk, but instead allows it to accumulate to the point that it has taken over the building. Walter Benn Michaels addresses the issue of Zerkow's miserliness, pointing out that a "junk dealer tries to wring every last bit of exchange value out of nearly worthless commodities, while the miser seeks to deny the exchange value of the most precious commodity" (114). This concept is evident in one of his business transactions with Maria. While he is willing to buy junk from her, he negotiates the price down to an amount that seems unfairly low in compensation for all that she has brought. In denying the exchange value of the junk Maria has brought him,

Zerkow can, once it is his, stow it among the mountains of other junk that has accumulated in his hovel and deny its exchange value even to himself. Michaels explains this disconnect between Zerkow's passion for gold and his failed opportunity to capitalize on his accumulated possessions, saying, "instead of trying to turn his junk into gold by selling it, he keeps it around him as if it already were gold" (114-15). This delusional hoarding becomes problematic when he eventually becomes convinced that the gold dishes of Maria's story are hidden somewhere in his hovel amongst the junk with which he has surrounded himself. Instead of being comforted by the piles of worthless junk, he is later confronted with the worthlessness of these items in his frantic search for "real" gold dishes.

Maria seems to understand Zerkow's psychology and desire for gold when she gathers items to sell to him. Most of what she has brought is damaged in some way—the usual nature of items found in a junk shop. However, she has the small amount of gold stolen from McTeague that she uses as her final bargaining tool, waiting to reveal her possession of it until after she is displeased with initial negotiations. Knowing that Zerkow will not let her leave in possession of gold, she is able to manipulate him into giving her a fair price for the mostly-worthless junk, a price the miser would not otherwise give, by saying, "The gold goes with the others. You'll gi' me a fair price for the lot, or I'll take um back" (29). In this way, Maria is able to increase the exchange value of fairly worthless items, and Zerkow is forced, as Michaels suggests, to surround himself with valueless possessions, wishing or imagining they were all gold instead of the paltry amount he had actually bought. Zerkow's insatiable desire for gold affects not just himself and his business practices, but is realized by and capitalized upon by his clients. It is clear to

Maria, certainly, that Zerkow is willing to compromise in order to possess even a small amount of gold. It is his desire to possess gold which informs their continuing interactions.

Zerkow's desire to be surrounded by gold surfaces again in his response to Maria's story of the gold dishes. In one scene, remembering her story from a previous encounter, Zerkow tempts Maria with whiskey in an effort to encourage her continued presence and elicit another telling. Though initially reluctant, Maria tells the story of the gold dishes in great detail. The effect on Zerkow is immediate and obvious. Norris describes Zerkow as being "ravished with delight" at the thought of someone possessing so much gold (30). The alternate, sexual meaning of "ravished" is significant here, and alludes to Zerkow's future attempts to gain access to Maria's story by way of her body. In this scene, however, the connection to "treating" is clear: Maria has been treated in exchange for her story. Zerkow offers whiskey, rather than an outing to a vaudeville show or an amusement park, and she reciprocates not with sexual favors, but with a story—a story of more gold than Zerkow can imagine owning—which nevertheless brings him sexual satisfaction. This day, however, having concluded her story (and her drink), Maria prepares to leave Zerkow. Like a lover would his mistress, he calls her back to hear the story again, offering her more alcohol for a third time in the course of this short interaction. Though she refuses and leaves, he implores her to return to see him—even without junk to sell—just to tell him more about the gold service. In this scene, the story's value as a commodity is firmly established.

There is an inherent danger in Zerkow's desire for this story and his willingness to offer compensation for it. Unlike the concrete nature of the junk and small bits of gold he accumulates in his hovel, stories are not at all concrete, but are fluid entities, bound to be

altered, to some degree, upon each retelling. Zerkow can touch, manipulate, and control the junk that others have sold to him. Maria's story, however, is something he can never fully possess or physically own as he does his junk. Zerkow's insatiable desire for gold motivates him to make a foolish and risky exchange; he compensates Maria for something he can never touch: a story which he can only hear.

This initial story-for-alcohol exchange forms the foundation for Maria and Zerkow's continuing relationship. Their next contact is in the entryway of the apartment building Maria cleans. Maria, it seems, has accepted that her story has value in Zerkow's eyes, and this time, tells it to Zerkow without so much as alcohol for payment. Though she is speaking in monotone, clearly not enjoying the repetition this time, it takes nothing more than Zerkow's prompting for her to repeat it. Zerkow has not waited for her to visit his junk shop; rather, he has come to her. The shift in power is noticeable—to the reader, and likely to Maria, as well. Her story serves the same purpose as the clothes of the soda fountain girls; she envies the girls' ability to use their appearance to attract young men, but in reality, she does not need new clothes. Though Zerkow is far from young, and far from attractive, Maria has found a way to attract a man in a way that does not require spending money. The emotional toll the telling of the story takes on Maria is alluded to in her monotonous retelling during their second interaction, but it is a toll Maria seems willing to accept as she does not stop the interaction, either then or later in the novel. Much like the young women of her day who might not enjoy the exchange of sexual favors for a day at the amusement park, Maria monotonously retells her story; she has given Zerkow sexual pleasure, and now is waiting for her due compensation.

Maria revisits the junk store one additional time, and it is clear that hearing her story has changed Zerkow. He listens as eagerly as he always has, this time "tormenting" her to tell the story again and again, as the story had become "a veritable mania with him" (75). As during their first interaction, the sexual pleasure that Zerkow derives from Maria's telling her story is clear, but this time is even more pronounced. As Maria tells her story, Zerkow "shut[s] his eyes in ecstasy," "moisten[s] his lips," is in a "fever of excitement...with closed eyes and trembling lips," and experiences a "sharpe[ning]...desire" (74-75). After a third telling of her story, Maria refuses to continue, and Zerkow "awak[es] as from some ravishing dream" (75). The dream ended, Zerkow, crazed, claws at Maria and at himself, verbalizing the probability that these gold dishes are "lost forever" (75). Desperate to maintain the illusion of the gold dishes' possible reality and to extend the sexual "dream" of the dishes to a sexual reality with Maria, Zerkow proposes marriage. Maria's persistence in giving sexual pleasure without an immediate return on her "investment" has paid off. She will receive not a trip to a vaudeville show, but instead, something far more socially valuable: marriage.

THE IMMIGRANT MARRIAGE MARKET

The marriage of Zerkow and Maria is significant for a number of reasons, especially considering marriage trends of immigrants. Historically, immigrants married young, creating families for purposes of establishing a new support system to replace the family they had left behind in their homeland, as well as for purposes of economic stability (Bodnar 75). Zerkow and Maria certainly do not conform to this tradition as they are neither young nor recent immigrants. Additionally, their choice of each other is somewhat illogical considering marriage trends of the late 1800s. In their study of nineteenth-century marriage manuals, Michael Gordon and M. Charles Bernstein conclude that the choice of one's mate was dictated by three central concerns: "(1) religious considerations; (2) constitutional and physical considerations; and (3) moral and character considerations" (667). Additionally, it was highly unusual for immigrants to marry outside either their ethnic or religious group (Dinnerstein and Reimers 186), especially for first generation immigrants like Maria suggests she might be. In fact, intermarriage between people of different religions or ethnicities was so unimaginable to people of the time that the term "intermarriage" was only used to refer to the marriage of a Christian to a non-believer (Gordon and Bernstein 667). The marriage of two people like Maria and Zerkow would have been scandalous; not only were they of different ethnicities, but their marriage was between a Jew and a Gentile. If one assumes that, as a recent Mexican immigrant, Maria was likely Catholic, both she and Zerkow are part of religious traditions that disapprove of marrying outside of the church. Though the characters in the book never bring up these specific objections to the marriage, a conversation between Trina McTeague and Miss

Baker highlights the community's understanding of both the social necessity of marriage as well as the scandalous nature of this particular marriage .

As Trina and Miss Baker discuss the impending marriage, they find they can explain this unlikely coupling only two ways: either Maria is marrying Zerkow because it is her "only chance for a husband, and she doesn't mean to let it pass," or because "she's got some one [*sic*] to talk to now who believes her story" (122). What the women seem to imply is that Zerkow would never have proposed, and Maria never would have married such a man, unless both had ulterior motives or few other options. In Maria's case, the women seem to recognize that, as an unmarried woman near the turn of the century, her value in the eyes of society would be increased were she to take a husband and have children.

If the community, as represented by Trina and Miss Baker, is aware that Maria is defying social norms by marrying Zerkow, it is likely Maria realizes it as well. However, this marriage will also allow Maria to meet social norms. No longer will she be a spinster maid whose only value is in her production as a worker, she will be a married woman who is potentially capable of reproduction. The benefits of social acceptability gained through this marriage are important to Maria and seem more important to her than the racial taboos of the marriage. Through this marriage, Maria recognizes her old dreams of being like the soda fountain girls; Miss Baker reports that Maria requested she make her a dress for the wedding, wanting "something gay, like what the girls at the candy store wear when they go out with their young men" (121). She does not ask Miss Baker to make her a wedding dress; rather, she asks her to make a dress in the fashion of what the shop girls wear when they go out with young men, what they wear on an occasion they might be "treated" in

exchange for sexual favors. Maria's wedding dress emphasizes that she is preparing to leave the domestic sphere as an underpaid laborer only to return to it as a sexually obligated wife.

Her future work as a wife will differ little from her work as a maid in the apartment building; the important distinction, however, is that it will be unpaid. Delphy notes that domestic work performed in a marriage is essentially without value; she equates a marriage contract to a work contract—work that no longer has market value (95). Marriage, in this way, will provide Maria a degree of social acceptance, but will leave her financially worse off than before. In her request for this dress, Maria seems to acknowledge that she is aware of the exchange at the root of this marriage proposal. In this obvious dramatization of the marriage market, on the day Maria "sells" herself, and her story, to Zerkow, she will succumb to conspicuous consumption and wear clothing appropriate to the occasion. As the shop girls, dressed for the occasion, exchange sexual favors for an afternoon out on the town, Maria will exchange her story and her body (and the sexual satisfaction both bring Zerkow) for social acceptability in her role as wife and mother.

The other possible rationale set forth by Miss Baker and Trina to explain the marriage is slightly inaccurate. Trina is confident that Zerkow is a worthy groom because he will listen to and believe Maria's story. Zerkow is valuable to Maria not because he *believes* the story, but because he *needs* the story. Similar to their negotiations in the junk shop, she has something to sell, and as greedily as he purchases her gold, Zerkow is now the willing consumer of her goods. Zerkow, always the miser, negotiates what seems a wise "purchase" when he proposes to Maria. Marrying her not only allows him unlimited, potentially round-the-clock access to her story, but he is able to access it for free. As his

wife, Maria should be willing to share the story with him whenever he asks. No longer will Zerkow have to offer Maria more of his whiskey to encourage her to stay with him and talk; his home will be her dwelling, also. Maria's story is again sexualized in this context and intimately connected to her body: Zerkow will have access to that which sexually pleases him (her story and potentially her body) whenever he chooses.

BIRTH, DEATH, AND...A MALADY OF THE MIND?

After more than a year of marriage, a child is born to Maria and Zerkow. This child, a "strange, hybrid being" containing "in its puny little body the blood of the Hebrew, the Pole, and the Spaniard" does not live even two weeks (135). A product of "inferior" races, this child is condemned from the start. The fact that this act of reproduction has produced a child physically unfit to live is, as Gardner argues, representative of the "mutants" produced by the intermarriage of immigrants in this novel; the few children who are present, including Maria's baby and Trina's brother August, he says, are "further degenerations from their adult prototypes" (57). Le Conte, Norris's professor at Berkeley, wrote in his essay "The Genesis of Sex," published in 1879, that "the mixing of primary races is bad, and such mixed races, as weaker varieties in the struggle for life, must perish" (qtd. in Bender 81). Though Le Conte was writing about the mixing of African Americans and Caucasians, it seems likely that Norris was influenced by his professor's suggestion of the "appropriate" end for a mixed-race child. Zerkow and Maria's child, not only of mixed race, but a product of such poorly regarded races, dies almost before it lives. Additionally, Norris emphasizes their racial inferiority by portraying Zerkow and Maria as unfit parents who considered the child "a mere incident in their lives, a thing that had come undesired and had gone unregretted" (135). Their child, virtually unnoticed by Zerkow and Maria, passes from life into death without as much as a name to call its own.

The birth and death of this child has serious implications for Maria, who falls into a ten-day bout of "dementia" after the birth. She recovers from her dementia just in time to bury their child. The trouble begins when, a week later, Zerkow asks Maria to retell the story of the gold dishes. Maria, cured of her illness and mysteriously "cured" of her story,

denies knowledge of any gold dishes, instead suggesting that perhaps Zerkow had only dreamed of them. Infuriated by this response, Zerkow tries in vain to trigger her recollection. Eventually, he resorts to the whiskey bottle. Seemingly convinced that she is purposefully withholding this story from him, Zerkow tries "paying" her for the story as he did early in their relationship. When even the enticement of the whiskey fails to elicit a telling of the story, Zerkow jerks the bottle away from her; he is unwilling to give up his liquor if he does not receive the satisfaction of the story in return.

As a result of Maria's lost story, Zerkow begins a slow descent into a madness fueled by his greed. Zerkow has reached a point where, as Michaels notes, "the distinction between his desire for the gold and his desire for the description gets lost" (118). Zerkow, after hearing the story repeated so many times, is by this point able to retell it himself. He must, however, listen to *her* telling of it to satisfy his sexual desires. In addition to his infuriation over not hearing the story, he has become convinced that the gold dishes not only existed, but still exist. His delusion has escalated to the point where he believes that Maria knows the dishes' location and is hiding them from him. Despite the fact that Zerkow married Maria, and in a sense purchased unlimited access to her story, the story is still hers. The gold dishes are not real, are not hidden somewhere, and her story is not a concrete object that he can physically wrest from her. Because of the sexualized nature of the story, Maria's giving and withholding of the story functions much like the giving and withholding of sexual intercourse in a marriage. In denying him access to the story, she defies his expectation that she will always share the story of the gold dishes with him and denies him the sexual pleasure that her telling of the story brings him.

What causes Maria's inability to remember her story is the subject of much debate. John J. Condor suggests that Maria was fully in control of her story and chose to discard it; he writes, "that her illusion serves the purpose of achieving social stability is marked by the fact that it disappears after her marriage to Zerkow and the birth of her short-lived child. She no longer needs the illusion once she achieves what she considers to be the stability of marriage, husband, and child" (72-73). George M. Spangler holds the opposite view, suggesting that Maria's story is a sign of her insanity; the loss of her story signifies the emergence of her sanity (95). Barbara Hochman proposes that Maria's story is essentially a coping mechanism used to stabilize reality and avoid potential losses (344). In Hochman's opinion, Maria's loss of memory can be viewed as a release; her relationship with Zerkow and the loss of her child exposes her to reality to a degree that she no longer needs the safety of her repeated story to protect herself and cope with her reality (346-47). Norris does nothing to settle the debate. He, in fact, introduces the reader to both possibilities: forgetting the story was Maria losing her one delusion *or* that she is forgetting a story of dishes that were, indeed, once her reality (136).

Because of the fatal implications of forgetting the story, I would argue that this lost story (so often sexualized as her body might be) denotes Maria's loss of self. The repetition of her name and her story functioned as a reminder of her self—her identity and her history. She loses the identity of her surname when she marries, and never again in the novel repeats the familiar "Maria—Miranda—Macapa." When Zerkow tries to possess a story from her childhood and attempts to turn it into a reality, she loses a part of her history and so forgets her story. Maria has capitalized on her story to elevate her position as a woman in late nineteenth-century society. As she has stopped working when she married

Zerkow and moved with him to his home, Maria finds herself essentially without self and without value. Her body has become incapable of any form of production or, as evidenced by her dead baby, successful reproduction. She no longer functions as a laborer, whose work is exchanged for money, and her body cannot fulfill its primary function, in a late nineteenth century context, of producing a (healthy) child able to survive long outside the womb. Maria is no longer able to produce even the story that she exchanged for a husband and family. Maria has become, in essence, like the objects she used to sell to Zerkow: objects that once had value, but are now flawed, worthless. Zerkow's hovel, after all, was "the last abiding-place, the almshouse, of such articles as had outlived their usefulness" (28). As with these objects, which Zerkow thoughtlessly and carelessly left in every corner of his hovel, she has become worthless and disposable. In this marriage, Maria has lost everything that constituted her sense of self; her name and her story are gone. For these reasons, it seems unlikely that Maria has chosen to simply "forget" the story and to withhold from Zerkow the pleasure he derives from it and the personal safety it afforded her. As Zerkow's mania begins to spiral out of control, it seems likely that if Maria was in possession of the story, she would relent and retell it if for no other reason than to escape his violent brutality.

As Maria continues to deny that the gold dishes ever existed, Zerkow's fanaticism grows into madness. He tears apart the house and yard, always searching for the gold dishes of her story, certain that his wife is hiding them from him. Zerkow reasons that if Maria was able to tell the story in such detail, she must have seen the gold dishes recently; therefore, the dishes must be secretly stashed somewhere in the house or yard. He begins to beat Maria regularly in an effort to extract the gold's location from her. Maria, having

lost her value, not only accepts his beatings, but uses these beatings as a way to bond with Trina McTeague. Without worth and without the ability to leave her cruel husband, Maria ultimately becomes his victim.

THE TIES THAT BIND: MARRIAGE, FRIENDSHIP, AND SEXUALIZED VIOLENCE

Because of the psychological nature of abusive relationships, it is often very difficult for a victim to leave his or her abuser. From a legal standpoint, however, it is curious that both Maria and Trina decide to stay with their violent, abusive husbands. Despite women's somewhat limited autonomy in late nineteenth-century America, they had a great deal more power within marriage than one might expect. Robert L. Griswold emphasizes this point, writing, "Housewives, far from being considered either ornaments or drudges, were seen as important workers laboring at a task deserving respect and admiration" (63). During this time, marriage was beginning to be seen as a partnership where the work of both partners was acknowledged and valued. Women were appreciated for successfully performing their domestic tasks and caring for their children. It is important to note, however, that this appreciation does not equate with economic value. Though marriage was beginning to be considered a more equal partnership, women like Maria, an unpaid laborer in the home whose husband is not financially successful, would have been at an economic disadvantage as a married woman versus as a wage earner. Despite the questionable nature of marriage as equal partnership, in California, if one of the partners reneged on his or her role in the partnership, ending the marriage was surprisingly easy. California's divorce law, which from the start provided comparatively generous latitude in grounds for divorce, underwent a series of changes from 1851 to 1872 that made a divorce even easier to obtain (Griswold 18).

Women like Maria and Trina would not have had to remain in unhappy, abusive marriages. While it is easy to assume that only upper- or middle-class citizens were filing

for and being granted divorces, Griswold reports that this was not the case. In his study, a sizeable number of divorces took place in working class and farming families, something Griswold attributes to the fact that marriage-as-partnership had gained such importance in society that it affected people despite their social class (24-5). Griswold also found that, in the case of an unhappy marriage or after a divorce, women often formed strong connections with other women to help them cope with the difficulties of their situation (83-4). We see such a connection established between Maria and Trina after both experience conflict in their marriage. Instead of leaving their husbands, they rely on their bond with each other to endure the violence they suffer at their husbands' hands.

The new friendship between Maria and Trina does not function altogether as a support system, however. As their beatings continue, their friendship becomes a rivalry. Both Maria and Trina "tak[e] a strange sort of pride in recounting some particularly savage blow" (172). The two women "exaggerat[e], they inven[t] details, and, as if proud of their beatings, as if glorying in their husband's mishandling li[e] to each other, magnifying their own maltreatment" (172). They compare bruises, boasting of particularly bad ones, and compare notes on which form of punishment is most painful, "most effective," when utilized by their husbands (172).

In Trina's case, the violence is sexualized, "arous[ing] in her a morbid, unwholesome love of submission" (171). Though Maria is not similarly affected by her husband's violence, it is Zerkow who suggests the connection between his violence and her sexuality. Zerkow, no longer able to hear Maria recite the story from which he derived such sexual satisfaction, accuses her of cheating on him. Maria wakes one night to find Zerkow digging under the floor of their home searching for the gold dishes that he is

convinced she is hiding. After Zerkow wields a knife and threatens to kill her, Maria escapes to the neighboring building, where she used to be employed as a maid, and ends up at the apartment of Marcus Schouler. When Zerkow arrives and realizes where his wife is hiding, he stands outside Schouler's door shouting, "You're in Schouler's room. What are you doing in Schouler's room at this time of night? Come outa there; you oughta be ashamed" (138). Zerkow shouts this in the hallway, in earshot of the other tenants who gather after hearing the commotion. In these words, insinuating that Maria has been sleeping with Schouler, Zerkow reinforces the connections between Maria's story and Maria's body. If Maria is withholding her story/her body from him, then she must be offering it to someone else. Zerkow, now far from offering her a drink of whiskey in exchange for her story, has resorted to shaming Maria and threatening her with violence in order to extract the story and the location of the dishes from her. Zerkow's desperation to control her story and thus her body, which is and always has been beyond his control, fuels his increasingly irrational behavior.

Though Maria avoids Zerkow's threats to kill her that night, he eventually prevails. Stopping for a morning visit and a cup of tea, Trina walks into the home of Maria and Zerkow to find Maria dead. Appropriately, Maria sits in the female domain of the kitchen, in front of her stove. Her throat is slit, and blood covers the front of her dress. Despite her valiant attempt, through marriage, to escape her life as a maid, as a paid laborer in the domestic sphere, her death exemplifies the futility of her attempt—she dies where she has always labored, whether as maid or as wife. Though rumors abound that Zerkow has skipped town, his body is found late that night, "floating in the bay near Black Point" (177). Driven to madness by his conclusion that Maria is hiding her gold dishes from

him, Zerkow presumably drowns himself, clutching "a sack full of old and rusty pans, tin dishes—fully a hundred of them—tin cans, and iron knives and forks, collected from some dump heap" (177), a sack of dishes that in his delusional mind are the gold dishes of Maria's story.

The consequences of their early exchange—Zerkow offering alcohol for an opportunity to hear Maria's story of the gold dishes—finally becomes apparent. What started out as a simple, innocent exchange has resulted in the deaths of both Maria and Zerkow. At the point when Maria stopped telling the story of the gold dishes, it began to function differently for Zerkow. In the beginning of their relationship, Zerkow wanted simply to hear the story from which he could derive sexual pleasure. Eventually, Zerkow demands multiple retellings, and even marries Maria to obtain unlimited access to her story. By the end of their relationship, the dishes that existed only in the form of a fluid, changeable story have been transformed, in Zerkow's mind, into concrete, obtainable objects. In Zerkow's miserly mindset, the gold dishes are out there somewhere just waiting for him to find and collect, highly valuable objects to add to the other "junk" in his hovel. In a crisis borne of his avarice and miserliness, Zerkow attempts to make the words of Maria's story concrete. Fulfilling his earlier threats, Zerkow kills Maria, gathers the "gold" dishes and kills himself.

NORRIS'S "DISEASED" IMMIGRANTS

There is little doubt that Norris was deliberate in killing off these characters. Their deaths were not accidental; rather, they were the direct result of the racial/cultural stereotypes Maria and Zerkow embodied. A number of critics emphasize the importance of the motif of disease that is especially poignant in the Zerkow/Maria subplot. Maria loses her memory in the dementia following childbirth, and Zerkow loses his mind after Maria forgets the story; their child, sickly from birth, fails to thrive and dies, seemingly, as a result of his or her strange racial mix. Daniel Schierenbeck views this diseased state through the lens of labor and production; he writes that "By elaborating the degenerative disease within his immigrant characters, Norris demonstrates that they are not utilizable as part of the working labor force" (77). To a degree, he is correct: Zerkow hoards the junk he purchases rather than capitalizing on its exchange value; Maria ("legally") steals from the people whose homes she cares for and quits her job for a more traditional, socially acceptable, though ultimately un(re)productive role as wife and mother. I would argue, however, that Gardner more accurately represents the scope of Norris's views on race; Gardner states that "Ultimately, in the immigrants' failure to reproduce and in their violent self-destruction, an innate confidence in natural selection is at work in Norris's conclusion" (59). Though the characters of *McTeague* represent many nationalities, none of them are as closely tied to their racial/cultural heritage as Zerkow and Maria. "Zerkow," after all, is the name of a city in Poland, the country from which Norris's Zerkow immigrated. "Macapa," Maria's surname, is the name of a city in Brazil. Unlike the other characters, who simply present as racial stereotypes, Zerkow and Maria Macapa are inextricably tied to their places of origin; they *are* their race. By having Zerkow and Maria die such tragic and ultimately

preventable deaths, Norris makes clear his views on immigrants: they are flawed, "diseased" peoples whose weaknesses, founded in their racial heritage, cannot and will not ever be overcome, and certainly will not be carried into a successive generation.

While Norris's views on immigration, as evidenced in his immigrant characters, are reprehensible to the modern reader, they were not uncommon during the time in which he wrote *McTeague*. Informed by anti-immigration sentiment of the day, Norris created a cast of characters made "defective" by their racial heritage. Though their story is often overlooked as anything more than an extreme example of Social Darwinism, the Zerkow/Maria Macapa subplot has significant value in the study of this novel. The exchange which forms the basis of their initial relationship and eventually their marriage provides startling insight into the functioning of the marriage market for those of "defective" ethnicities. As Maria's story unfolds, the possibility of social normalcy through marriage spirals into her uncontrolled sacrifice. To obtain and maintain her marriage, Maria must commodify and sacrifice not just her story, but her body, her identity, and her life. Through Norris's construction of the loveless courtship and marriage in the Maria Macapa/Zerkow subplot, we see the lives of people shaped and destroyed by their racial "inferiority" and the lengths to which racially othered women are willing to go to achieve the social normalcy of marriage, production, and reproduction, thus revealing the contempt directed toward marginalized immigrant populations by not only Norris, but his contemporaries as well.

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