

Introduction

The Alchemy of Capital and Nature

Though he was already dead, Frank Norris had a good year in 1909. His epic novel *The Octopus* (1901) was brought to the screen by visionary film artist D. W. Griffith—no other filmmaker has touched it since. Titled “A Corner in Wheat,” the film is a confident, bare-bones distillation of the novel’s hundreds of pages into fewer than fifteen minutes of viewing time. It is of course no substitute for the original, a point compounded by the fact that Griffith drew on a second Norris novel, *The Pit* (1903), also a rather long book. Griffith’s work is such a treat for Norris’s readers because it superbly confirms that Norris was an expert craftsman of signature tableaux, devices that regularly punctuated his narratives and that allowed him to tie together the worlds of meaning he had been summoning up. Of several exemplary scenes that structure the two novels, one from *The Octopus* was perhaps guaranteed to be filmed. This was an especially macabre sequence involving a conniving grain speculator, who is destined for live burial under the tons of wheat he has amassed. Thrashing about in a pelting rain of wheat, choking on grain dust, and trying desperately to stay alive, he inevitably succumbs. The wheat continues to pile up around him, until only one hand is able to poke through in a final, gruesome salute. In Norris’s hands, the speculator, also an urban sophisticate, has tumbled into the hull of a ship while the wheat was being loaded. In the film, he happened to have plummeted to the bottom of a grain silo. But no matter the difference in detail, the scene is a brilliant summation of the novel’s back and forth movements between San Francisco and its startlingly productive hinterland, the San Joaquin Valley. As such, it establishes a host of disquieting theories and questions.

For one thing, here is a man who has been profiting without producing: What sort of economy could properly allow that? Who could call watching the ticker tape “work” and why, up to the point of the speculator’s demise, should it have brought such riches? But assuming this man is actually a legitimate creation of

his economic environment, and yet still he comes to an untimely end, what sort of economy would eat its own progeny? Does it need people like this, or want to do away with them? Perhaps both. Or first one and then the other. For the sake of the overall good of the economic machinery, perhaps the machine must kill a portion of itself in order to move on. But move on where? Where did it come from in the first place and what will be its wellspring in the future? The urban sophisticate, for example, apparently specialized in things “rural.” Was he out of his element, or was the polis the uncontested master of a far-flung geography? Maybe the rural is best served by suffering the whims of urban capital and urban aspirations. Or, perhaps we have it reversed; it’s the wheat that has its grasp on the speculator. It’s rural economy, not urban whims, that make time and place endure, that create wealth, settle populations, and build cities. But what is it about rural economy that offers attractions to capital and its circuits? And on what basis would this appeal last?

The kicker is that all these seemingly disparate entities—the speculator versus his wheat, finance versus production, city versus country—are far more alike than one might think at first. Speculative profits tend toward the unpredictable, but so too does the rural economy. Agricultural production is notoriously sporadic. Bumper crops are followed by lean years, while, in any one year, late frosts or torrential storms may stunt the harvest. The inconsistencies are legion. Speculators are compulsive and so is nature. What initially seems like the clash of opposites in Norris’s story, therefore, is better read as the complementary energies of regional political economy. Somehow, casualties aside, the rhythms of capital and the rhythms of nature find each other.

It is no stretch, then, to say that lurking behind the image of the speculator’s death in the wheat, there is more than a hint that conditions transcend this one individual. The speculator is not just a speculator, nor the harvest just a pile of grain. When there are speculators, there must be something speculative about economy itself. And when this character drowns in the harvest, there must be something risky about nature that needs to be taken into account. (In fact, one truth behind the mass of grain is that the soil has been mined of its nutrients.) The point, it would seem, is that capital and nature are webs of constraint and confinement that must be carefully recast as fields of opportunity. To be sure, the resulting alchemy can be as volatile as it can be profitable.

In California, these are old and defining themes, nature and capital. Most famously, they began with gold. Or rather when the gold gave out—for post Gold Rush California clarifies what those few heady years were all about. When the placers grew scarce and the hoses that flushed the Sierra hillsides of their riches grew flaccid, the unity of money and nature in California (what gold most essentially *was*) was rent asunder, ensuring that desire for more of that unity held fast. This book focuses on the period during which pride of place and visions of alchemy next came to agriculture,¹ and did so by virtue of an enveloping capitalist economy. A major arena of emphasis here is how—as a desired end—the capitalist transformation of California was narrated and represented, by whom and through what rhetorical means. The result is a work of historical geography, political economy, and literary criticism.

Some of what I have written about here is taken for granted now, especially the explosive growth of irrigation and the fantastic levels of California’s farm

output. It is easy to forget, however, that a crop does not only spring from the soil. Since the 1850s, California agriculture has partaken of the dynamics of a capitalist economy whose circuits surrounded and supported, encroached and exploited. The result was not one countryside but many, each with its own trajectory but all shot through with the more general process of capital circulation. It is deeply ingrained that America's agricultural regions are places that "settlers" made and less appreciated that at times money got there first. Then it was money, and labor, that had to be coordinated, cajoled, and disciplined. For whose benefit? It is doubtful that rentiers and grain kings, orchardists and engineers greeted quite the same dawns. And surely all (or a large part anyway) of the Arid West by now appreciates the hydrological feats of the last hundred-plus years. But to say that getting water from where it was wet to where it was dry presented problems is to venture a serious understatement.

My assumption is that none of those doings *had* to happen, but were instead the results of particular opportunities and constraints. I will argue here that a large part of California's development in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was structured by the uneasy relations between capitalism and agriculture. An important theme here is that agriculture embodies capital and simultaneously resists it. In part one I examine the implications of this for California's economic history, as a history of capital, while in part two I do the same for certain aspects of bourgeois cultural production. (That at least is a convenient shorthand. In fact, both parts of the book are concerned with political-economic and cultural trajectories.) Pivotal to part two is an engagement with the California novel, a rich repository of geographical imaginations and a densely expressive outlet for the expression of alchemic desires. In the early 1880s, California writers began to turn in earnest to the subjects of rural land and water development and its financing. Along with promotional tracts and the production of certain archetypal landscape images, some of which are also treated here, their novels were efforts at theorizing bourgeois economy in ways sympathetic to bourgeois anxieties.

I have turned to this literature, then, not in search of illustrations with which to decorate the "real" doings of Californians, nor with the claim that literature "realistically" documents lived experience back then, but with a question: what did it mean that this fiction was written at all? The idea of turning nature into money was an ideology that had to be bolstered. And it didn't solve any problems so much as state what the problem was.

The framework I wish to propose for the study of these novels and of California is the very phenomenon with which the writings themselves are concerned: social and geographical processes of uneven development and the circulation of capital. For my purposes here, uneven development is understood as one of capitalism's calling cards; it is the hallmark of a system that periodically tends toward crisis.² A discussion of three manifestations of uneven development are woven into these pages. One is temporal—the tendency for capitalist development to be expressed through cycles of boom and bust, which various politics continually try to navigate. The second is social—capital develops differently in different sectors, say agriculture versus industry; it positions groups of people differentially with respect to the "benefits" of capitalism; and it positions individuals differently with respect to their relations to circulating capital.³ The third aspect of uneven development is spatial—while capital needs a physical produced land-

scape for the perpetuation of its own operations, this is capital taken out of immediate circulation, often quite anxiously.⁴ Such a landscape—sometimes rural and agricultural, sometimes urban and industrial, sometimes voiding distinctions between the two—becomes not only the solution for capitalism’s survival but the source of some of its most dire problems.

Why the late Nineteenth-Century Countryside?

Uneven development is always instantiated locally (though it be a multiscaled process). It alerts us to capitalism as not just a mode of production but a mode of production that is also about place making. To prize it apart and to see it in economic, geographic, *and* cultural terms demands a sharp focus.

Social and economic historians of California have long recognized that the 1880s were a turning point. Convention holds that the departure away from the political and economic obsession with mining was definitive. As for a signal event, some historians prefer to focus on the collapse of the Cornstock and the Bank of California in the mid 1870s, and others on the legal proscription of hydraulic mining in 1884. The important point is that after the decline of mining, agriculture picked up the slack in California’s economic lifeline. (I review the basic developments in chapter 1, while in chapters 2 and 3 I isolate two themes for special treatment: respectively, the circulation of financial capital in agriculture, and the circulation of variable capital through migrant labor and the awkward social-cultural position this implied for farmers as what I call “capitalist laborers.”) The reconstitution of the economy in the countryside, so clear in the 1880s, was manifest in multiple but related directions: in rising crop production, in the economies of rural real estate and land and water development, in bold manipulations of the physical environment, and in an elaborate migrant labor market. Hardly abstract forces, the events underlying what Frank Norris called the “new order of things” were riddled with social struggle. Money, too, defined the new order. Nor was money all an abstraction. Money’s rearrangement in space and its investment in different economic sectors represented conscious (if sometimes self-deluded) acts. Investors in California’s cities, primarily San Francisco and Los Angeles, plowed their profits into the fertile lands of the San Joaquin Valley, Southern California, and the Imperial Valley. But, in turn, each of these regions generated its own turnover and reinvested it locally. A portion of these investments, both local and not, were directed at the development of irrigated agriculture. Irrigation generated a font of wealth and valorized much subsequent diversification of California’s regional economies. Water, like land, was an essential venue for the geographic circulation of capital. The hitch was that capital brought to the irrigated countryside a turbulence all its own.

In short, no account of California’s experience in the late nineteenth century can ignore the rise of the “new” agriculture. Agriculture describes not what was fading from view but what lay, to a substantial degree, on California’s horizons—and this, curiously enough, following a previous phase of industrialization. Although they were hailed as a panacea for unemployed miners, for out-of-work urban laborers—not to mention the financial big guns in search of a place to put their surplus—the state’s farms were lashed to the fits and starts of capital, which

they in fact embodied. And Californians, regularly on intimate terms with the jolts of boom and bust, came to know it.

If the declining incomes of the 1870s (a decade of mining speculation, failed banks, and ruination in the stock market) gave agriculture and irrigation their allure in the 1880s, too much production too soon raised problems again by the 1890s, until the willful formation of new commodity sectors, new markets, and improved production and distribution technique brought California's producers into the limelight again. Caught in a classic cost-price squeeze in the 1920s, however, with the additional debt burden after years of rapid irrigation expansion, California agriculture, like that in much of the nation, again began to slide into depression (see the excellent overview in California Development Association 1924).

To the obvious fact that agricultural profits were not won overnight is the corollary that they were not made in one place. Rural California, as chapters 4 through 7 relate, was not an undifferentiated outback. (See the introduction to part II for an overview.) Revenues emerged from select locales, with capital shuttling between them. In their sometimes dramatic moves to plug the gaps of spatially uneven flows of capital, bankers, investors, and speculators tied these locales together—for example, San Francisco to the San Joaquin Valley or Southern California to the Imperial Valley—seeing to it that portions of the money that had been made in one time and place would appear in the form of credit or venture capital to help fund rural development somewhere else.

And to the successive historical and geographic “frontiers” of capital is an added corollary: these were sources of cultural meaning in their own right. There was a real catch here. Money was perceived to be a troubling and, ironically, meddling presence to bourgeois culture. I have said that money was not all that abstract, but, if a small anthropomorphism may be permitted, this ran counter to its furtiveness, that is, the apparently mysterious ease with which it appeared, disappeared, and fluctuated in value. This was an affront just as it was the *sine qua non* of bourgeois society. Rural smallholders ached for a steady stream of credit and then strained to master their growing indebtedness. Bankers, speculators, and railroad heads doled out funds only to wring their hands over payment schedules. The literati and the pulp writers, too, wondered how to map the elusive geography of money. Time and again what they thought would be perfectly transparent agrarian landscapes turned out to be dense and duplicitous thickets. One need look no further, perhaps, than to Norris's *The Octopus* or Harold Bell Wright's 1911 bestseller, *The Winning of Barbara Worth*, to realize that landscape for them explained little. Instead it had to be explained.

The Discourse of Rural Realism

Land and irrigation development, as wedded to sources of financing and larger circuits of capital, were eagerly recruited as subjects for California fiction. (I hope readers will consider it a reasonable balance that while much of this fiction is today little known, it actually concerns reasonably well known [to historians at least] events—the Mussel Slough affair, the Southern California 1880s land boom, the Imperial Valley flood, and the San Francisco-Hetch Hetchy and Los Angeles-Owens Valley controversies.) In such fiction, novels for the most part, what I call

the discourse of *rural realism* was concertedly invoked. There, in fiction, because it was embedded in narrative, rural realism was most seamlessly joined to other species of discourse, just as its fragility was most easily apparent.

Rural realism is, on the one hand, not unlike what Michael Schudson notes about the “capitalist realism” of advertising art—both realisms visually idealize capitalist production and spheres of consumption (Schudson 1984; see also Marchand 1985). It seems to me that something very like this idealization happened with a certain class of California novel. I am not summoning realism in the usual literary sense then (although I am concerned that the urban bias of historians and theorists of nineteenth-century literary realism be disturbed⁵). Instead, what I have in mind is the fabrication of a discourse that depicted, subserved, and responded to the rhythms of the circulation of capital through the countryside. Arising from that impulse, rural realism was the amalgamation of characters, plots, settings, and narrator voices mobilized for the purpose of totalizing the ideals of the liberal capitalist market. Rural realism was the desire to extend that market to its geographical conclusion, excluding no place and bypassing no one—save those upon whom “Anglo-Saxon” disfavor fell. It was one of the dream images of white (mostly) California that its outsized portion of western spoils would bring about that conclusion.

Apologia for capital though it was, rural realism was, conversely, Janus-faced. It was, for example, hostile to competing (read urban or eastern) capital formations. It was also a critique: instead of taking capitalism to task *prima facie*, it made an issue of how to make capital less crisis ridden (temporally, socially, spatially), or at least make it seem so. Rural realism was a discourse that could see through reasonably well to some of capital’s repeating, and bound to be repeated, flaws, but was so *borne* of capital that its critique stopped short and safe. As such, rural realist discourse does not so much open a window onto California’s political economy because it somehow “represented” or “documented” it, but because rural realist discourse was an aspect of bourgeois political economy.

By the same token it should be noted what rural realism was not. I am not arguing that it was a literary genre. Nonetheless, since the period covered here witnessed the production of what are commonly called the genres of realism, regionalism, and romance, I explore how rural realist discourse was refracted, aided, and abetted by those genres, such as I understand them.⁶ The novels represented here (see the list of sources for an overview). I would want to add, are in no sense reducible to rural realist discourse. Many of them are equally Anglo-Saxon preoccupations with supposed racial superiority (at the expense of Latinos especially), nationalism, and gender. But such preoccupations were hardly inimical to fixations on the problems of money and class that underwrote rural realism. Quite the contrary, they helped to reproduce those fixations and counted heavily upon them.

From Frank Norris and Mary Austin to Harold Bell Wright, the writers who trained their eyes on the California countryside did not set their sights thus because the California farmscape was an exotic residual in an otherwise industrialized America. I see these authors as writers who understood what geographer Stephen Daniels calls the “duplicity of landscape” (Daniels 1987). That is, they were not taken in by the aesthetic pleasures of the rural to the extent of missing

the fact that the rural was the scene of some of the most sophisticated (and for them, sublime) manipulations of capital. One ought not read, for example, Sarah Orne Jewett's Maine idyll, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, and Mary Austin's cavil about Los Angeles rummaging around the Owens Valley in *The Ford* and assume they share the same sensibility, however rural the settings of both books. Or as Frank Norris's main character in *The Octopus* would discover, writers, bred on sentiment and local color, might gravitate to "pastoral" California, and, intending to romanticize its marginality, find that the rural was the very picture of everything that was contemporary and modern about the Far West. The economic status of the rural differed vastly from place to place in the post-Civil War decades. In the case of California, the rural was nowhere near being economically residual and represented futurity in many ways. Its appeal in California fiction was its economic primacy, rather than its romanticized marginalization, as was often the case with evocations of the former plantation South in the late nineteenth century. In California fiction, then, a new structure of feeling fixated on the countryside, not because the countryside was being left behind, but because it had become a dominant arena of accumulation.

Why Rural Realism, Why the Novel?

Attention to texts as fully imbricated with the "world outside the text" is no longer much of a dare, except to those who think no such world exists or to those who assert that texts have no place in that world. Instead, the exact arrangements and the finer points are what stick in the craw. While I will not claim to have settled these imbrications, I will say that my way of thinking through them owes much to the sort of close readings of narrative and historicity (for me, a historical spatiality) performed by New Historicism (e.g., Veesser 1989). including its extraordinarily patient exegeses of the logics that undergird specific narratives (e.g., Michaels 1987).

For New Historicists, when it comes to meaning, plurality reigns. Meanings may be cultural, social, economic, or political, or some combination of these, but The point, or one point, is less to keep these domains separate than to expose their arbitrary boundaries and seek out the projects these boundaries serve in the first place. For a *New York Times* interviewer, Stephen Greenblatt summed up the New Historicism as folding the history of texts and the textuality of history into each other. Lest there be fears of a return to idealism therein, these words are not to be taken to mean that history (or geography) can be reduced to a set of representations but that theories of the world must be and have been built *with* representations. And it makes as little sense to deny the existence of these as it does to deny the existence of on-the-ground events. But I take the real critical move of New Historicism to be that it employs close readings as a mechanism for returning readers' attention to the material world. It has the intention of evoking the social and cultural density that gives birth to texts in the first place, looking to texts not with the expectation that they will clarify that density and afford a glimpse into the zeitgeist, but with the assumption that they will bear social and cultural relations out in language, narrative, and character. Any presumed social theoretical

clarification *in* literature (let's say, the presumption that the novel is a diagnosis) is in the end really a player within those very relations (a socially, culturally bred diagnosis).

All of which does not necessarily make the task of interpretation any easier. New Historicism may, for example, make it rather difficult to decide what kind of "commentary" a given novel offers. It gives rise, for example, to the question of whether or not it is very meaningful for a novel to register ambivalence about capitalism when, as Michaels argues, the available array of ambivalences are constituted by one's position within capitalism. (I take this issue up in the introduction to part two.) I should say, however, that one poses this particular question to certain kinds of books and not others. Perhaps it is especially appropriate for that stream of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century novel that engages the gritty, crushing realities of modern life (e.g., Bradbury and MacFarlane 1976). But, as the New Historicist approach will also allow us to recognize, other types of books would turn the question almost completely around: If writers actually did want to register their fondness for capitalist political economy, how would they do it?⁷ (In the case of *The Octopus*, Norris at first takes a critical stance toward capitalism and then, famously, abandons it. This is less a contradiction than a rhetorical maneuver through which Norris produces his own version of rural realism.) What would they have to emphasize and what would they feel compelled to ignore? And if they were to hail capitalist political economy when *agriculture* had essentially *rescued* regional capital (a two-fold conundrum), how might matters be complicated?

At the surface, rural realist discourse applauds agriculture's importance for capital (and vice versa, for in the discourse each was good for the other) in the Far West. Deeper down, rural realism expresses a structural problem peculiar to agriculture's relationship to the capitalist mode of production. To wit, in the decades following the Civil War, industrial capitals increasingly took over aspects of production—such as implement making and milling—that had been historically relegated to on-farm manufacturing or small-scale, decentralized craft production (see Pudup 1987). But these ballooning industrial sectors could not replace natural processes *per se* (e.g., plant growth and reproduction). In blunt terms, factories could make a plough but they could not manufacture an ear of corn (see Goodman et al. 1987). Agriculture was a site that capital could not fully make its own and was yet that site which capital intently strove to capture—an irony for the mode of production whose origins were *so* intensely agrarian. In chapter 2, drawing upon work in rural sociology, Karl Marx's *Capital*, and the work of geographer David Harvey, I argue at length that this gap created an enormous opportunity for finance and rentier capitals to develop through American agriculture—California representing a special case, in that it represents both the westward tilt of finance capital and the development of some of the most sophisticated financial structures of the early-twentieth-century United States. That is, if nature posed an obstacle to one faction of capital, as rural sociologists Mann and Dickinson (1978) insist, other factions of capital, whose earnings were based on the appropriation of values through sale of farm credit and mortgages, were busy indeed.

The not-quite duality of capital and agriculture lent to rural realism the formidable energies of ambiguity: agriculture was of importance to and yet separate from capitalism proper, and here was a gap that was resoundingly productive for

discourse. Because agriculture was not completely capitalist, in the industrial sense, but because it was clearly articulated with the circulation of capital in the wider sense, it could be a cultural site for thinking through—and worrying about—what was desirable in one kind of capitalist trajectory as opposed to another.⁸

Moreover, if the glare of industrialization was never quite outshone, neither was the cultural luminosity of a pre-capitalist rural past. Not quite “sunshine” and not quite “noir”—apologies to Mike Davis (1990)—the rural realist gambit could not be ventured lightly. It always signaled the potential displacement of the myth it competed against and thereby had to also keep alive. Agrarian and “middle landscape” images, redolent of the historical tensions between the countryside and the city or technology and nature, have long operated on European and Euro-American soil, as Leo Marx and Henry Nash Smith once told about. To California, such images, by simply focusing attention on the hinterland, constituted a readily available set of references through which the bourgeois ambivalences over, but ultimate desire for, intensified circulation of capital in the late nineteenth century could gain further expression. In ways that I hope to make clear, ruminations over the despoliation of older, simpler ways of life gave way in rural realism to the bourgeois desire for capital’s own redemption by “going rural.” Rural realism appropriated stock images—of fruited plains, embowered farmsteads, glistening rivulets—only to better assert that the “rural” in rural realism would be no refuge from capital but would be one of the most desired places for it. (Moreover, rural realism is more about the dynamics of capital itself, not just “machines in the garden” [Marx 1964].) More than once are the characters who bring rural realism to life led to the fields and orange groves *by* bankers and developers rather than running there to get away from them. Capital could *bring the rural into being and, recursively, would be the better for doing so.*

Let us say also that the discourse of rural realism was sustained specifically by the mode of representation which carried it. Chapter 3 will give a foretaste of this in its discussion of three short stories written in the early 1890s as a promotional campaign to encourage urban investment in California farmland. Part two extends the point: one does not only look for rural realism in novels; one looks through novels (or other representations) at rural realism. Much can be made of the novel as a distinct cultural form (e.g., Bakhtin 1981). While it is beyond the scope of this book to offer a theory of the novel, it is appropriate to say that “the novel” was a narrative vehicle in which rural realist discourse could be tested among other discourses. This testing could be prolonged (refuted and reasserted, and refuted and reasserted again). Rural realism could be developed as an organic, self-evident presence in characters’ everyday lives; it could be the very mode of storytelling. It could make the transition from idea and assertion to a *sine qua non* of narrative and historical, geographical logic. I’m not sure that any form other than narrative fiction could hold rural realist discourse up in quite that way.

Stalking the Interdisciplinary Wilds

This book, like any other, is the result of conscious selection—with a larger goal in mind. I want to better understand the practices of capitalism. These practices are insistent and many-branched, intentional but often not. While I am loathe to

argue, grand narrative style, that these practices are all-constitutive of motive, identity, and outcome, it would be foolish to ignore that there was little they did not brush up against and that there is still much to be learned from tracing their circuitous pattern.

California and the Fictions of Capital is therefore by necessity a work of hybrid scholarship. That it has depended on the findings and insights of disciplines other than my own field of geography has made for a highly enjoyable venture, while of course suggesting to me many times the cumbersome nature of academic departmentalization in the first place. It must be said, however, that for all its rewards, working across disciplines imposes a double burden. By definition it requires navigating unfamiliar waters, which to me has meant plying the currents of cultural and literary studies and American history. Such a search for new insights and their subsequent translation into one's own project raise the possibility of vulgarizing the refinements in perspective that only accompany long familiarity with a particular field. So, while it has been my goal to produce a work that borrows less than it adds something new, I must acknowledge there in plenty of the former, my desire having been to not have to reinvent the wheel. In this regard, the economically inflected histories of California and the American West, written by William Cronon, Donald Worster, Donald Pisani, Gerald Nash, Mansel Blackford, and Richard Orsi, for example, have been essential. Kevin Starr's nonstop histories of California are also important touchstones, even if my sentiments are closer to those of Carey McWilliams.

Potentially riskier is undertaking the second burden, that interdisciplinarians enter into their labors ignorant of who their audience really is and will be. Sure, we make our guesses and plot our intentions, but the whole point is to be partly wrong. (But not too wrong.) We cast the net widely, hoping for a new and unsuspected audience, only to overshoot those whose interests dovetail most closely with our own—from them we learn of our most important sins of omission. Which is to say that fellow geographers have presented to me the best of guardrails: compass points that indicate room to move and musical notes when I have careened into the metal. I will never be able to thank Dick Walker and Don Mitchell enough for timely, thoughtful, and generous readings of these chapters. And this does not compare to what I have learned from each, both personally and in their published work, about capital, California style. Many other people have read this book in whole or in part. I thank them all for their criticism and encouragement: Susan Craddock, Lucy Jarosz, Mona Domosh, James McCarthy, Bernie Herman, Chandos Brown, Kirk Savage, Terry Whalen, Bob Gross, Chris Leland, Sallie Marston, and Miranda Joseph.

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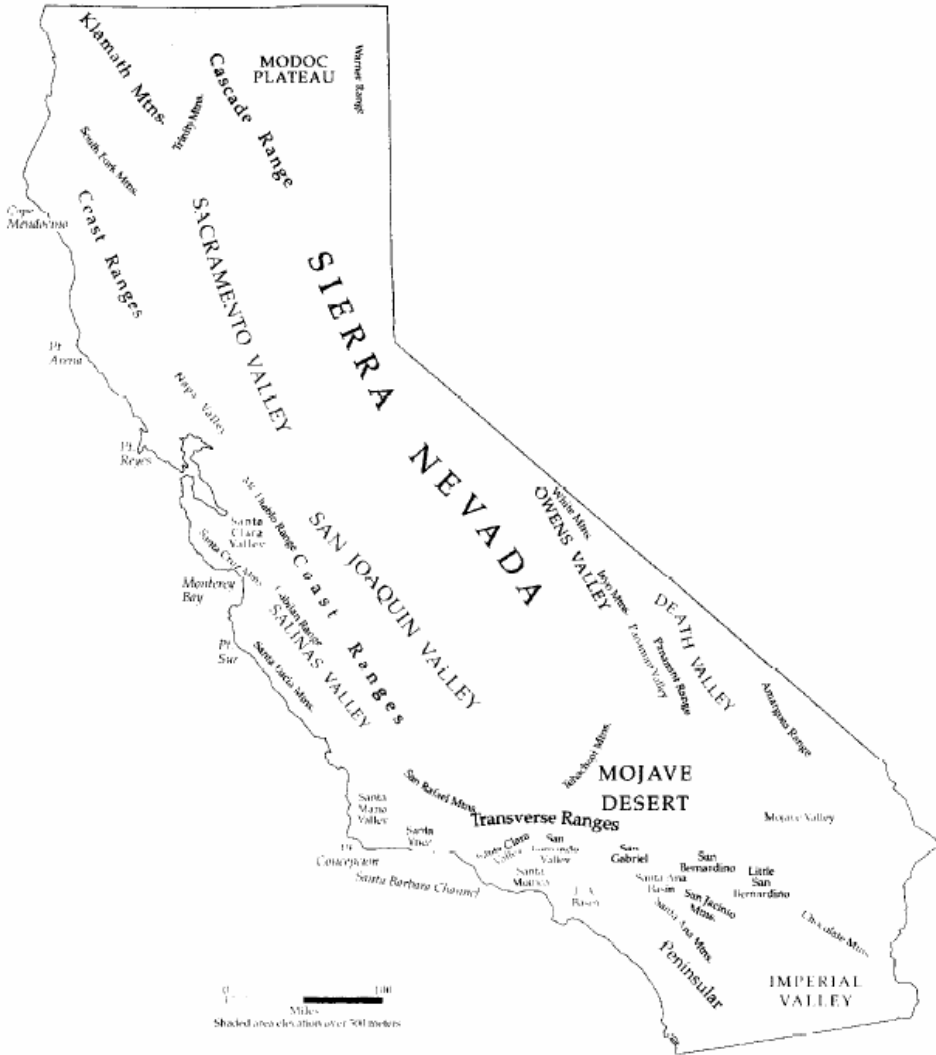
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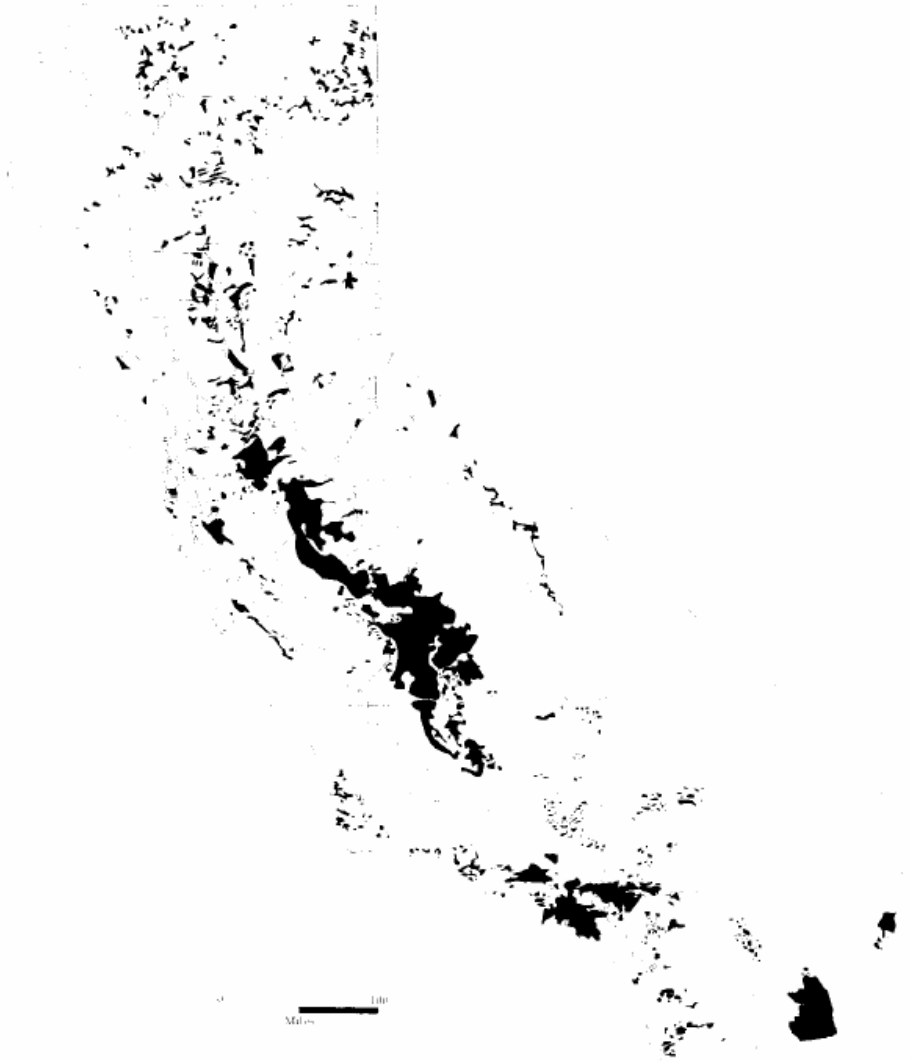
California Counties. (Courtesy of Tina Espinoza).



Land Features of California. (Courtesy of Tina Espinoza).



Major Rivers, Lakes, Towns, and Cities of California. (Courtesy of Tina Espinoza).



Approximate Location of Irrigated Areas of California, 1920. (Courtesy of Tina Espinoza).



Approximate Location of Irrigated Areas of California, 1930. (Courtesy of Tina Espinoza).



Hetch Hetchy Aqueduct and Los Angeles Aqueduct. (Courtesy of Tina Espinoza).

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Rural Commodity Regimes

A Primer

It has become something of a truism that after the 1840s, California's development was radically foreshortened—"telescopic," as Carey McWilliams has said (1976). From mining to livestock and grain ranches, to irrigated specialty cropping—in a matter of decades it seems that rural California reinvented itself several times over without ever looking back. In reality, these production regimes, the very stuff of California's rise to national prominence, were monetarily and otherwise connected. The crisis of the mining economy in the Sierra foothills in the 1870s, for example, was in part resolved as a massive shift to wheat in the Central Valley, just as profits from the grain economy were pumped into Southern California's struggling ranch lands and then surfaced as fabulously productive orange orchards. Around each of these transitions, each resolution of crisis, arose a new labor system, a new built environment, a new production apparatus, and widening division of labor (including California's highest-grossing industries in the early twentieth century—sugar refining, flour milling, meatpacking, canning, and packing).¹ California was a virtual laboratory for successive rounds of investment, disinvestment, and reinvestment of capital, far surpassing any place west of Chicago and its hinterland (cf. Cronon 1991).² Boosted by the periodic migration of new money, California's surplus values not only circulated in place, allowing single commodity sectors to prosper, but were switched from one sector to another in an intensifying brew of rural commodity production and innovation.

No single essay can do anything near justice to the story of these commodity revolutions. The point of this chapter is to simply tease out for unfamiliar readers a thumbnail sketch of rural California's commodity history through discussion of its major features—the shift to and out of wheat; large-scale and sometimes hyper-commodified appropriations of land and water; the rise of high-value specialty crops and the economy of land subdivision; the problem of markets; the uneven development of the irrigation apparatus; and the wider social division of labor,

which connected rural and urban economies to each other. This thumbnail sketch is drawn with the next, much longer, and more detailed chapter in mind. For if, as I've suggested, rounds of investment and movements of surplus value moved commodity production along, we will see in chapter 2 that farm production in California and the United States relied increasingly, from the late nineteenth century onward, upon massive infusions of spatially mobile finance capital, especially in the form of farm credit. This forward moving capital enmeshed California farms in circuits of finance that tried to exploit (not always successfully) rising agricultural values and underwrote those values at the same time. These circuits saw California farmers through as commodity producers (including their time as employers of wage labor, a subject I will primarily take up in chapter 3), just as it held them fast to the rules of the credit-commodity purchase. The single most important rule of that game, quite obviously, was that although credit fueled production, it always would have to be validated and undergirded by production. For this reason, it is essential, even for already knowledgeable readers, to keep a production history close to mind. We turn now to production and its means.

The Logics and Illogics of Production: The Shift to and out of Grain

In the latter 1860s, after a stunning collapse of California's cattle economy and looming insecurity in the mines, rural lands were planted to bonanzas of wheat acreage.³ Though an *un*-sustainable solution to the cattle crash, as it would be to mining, it was nonetheless gold for a while—and in volume. California wheat lands grew to spectacular dimensions in the '70s, when twice they led the United States' annual output of wheat and ran a very close second all the way up to the 1890s. During the best harvests, wagon trains, loaded down with sacks of wheat, stretched for a mile or more, at the dozens of warehouses dotting the San Joaquin Valley. Drivers in back of the lines waited two and three days to reach the front, and sometimes a week (Smith 1939: 247). In the middle of this accelerated production, which helped nudge California out of the 1870s depression, the state's banks, primarily those located in San Francisco, backed this straw gold by moving ten million dollars of their loan capital out of the mines and onto the ranches (California Bank Commissioners 1881). But by the end of the seventies, production declined. Due to international overproduction—Ukraine, Australia, Argentina, and Canada all being major competitors—prices dropped, thus making the wheat economy more cutthroat than ever. It was then that large producers, more mechanized, more able to command harvest labor, and better connected to sources of financing, beat out many of the small farmers, who in the thousands had been successful wheat growers in the competition for wheat profits (Liebman 1983). Isaac Friedlander was one of those dominant few who, as kingpin of a multinational consortium of warehouses, grain-sack factories, transport companies, and banks, commanded thousands of acres (Bloom 3983). Typical of the wheat years was that California tapped foreign markets, principally Britain, since the eastern United States was glutted with Great Plains wheat. (Later, when California turned to high-value, perishable specialty crops, farmers would learn how to effectively elbow in on those eastern markets.) The glutted East was only one factor that kept growers tied

to the international trade. In fact, there was substantial precedent already laid down. The distant markets and the routes to them had been defined during the Civil War, when California was forced to buy manufactures from Europe (Hardy 1927). With doses of British capital and California's own growing indigenous sources, wheat thrived (Paul 1973 and 1958).

Wheat production made sense, given the context of the development of and wheat could be raised in the Central Valley without it. Before railroad car refrigeration, wheat was the only major crop that could be exported. (Defying the logic of the *transcontinental* railroad system, the local branch lines and a network of ocean-going vessels connected the new growers of wheat to local merchants and distant markets.) Wheat cultivation required little in the way of skilled labor and was popular with growers precisely because there was so little labor to be had. In this context, wheat production was mechanized in the state almost from the onset of the American takeover. And wheat did not demand much from its largest growers. The fact that labor requirements on the mechanized farm were low was socially and spatially liberating for the landowning class; it reinforced the tendency of land barons to set up residences among the bon ton of Stockton, San Francisco, and Oakland. From these heights, they redoubled their earnings as merchants and shippers and as investors in industries other than grain (Pisani 1984).

Compared to the specialty agriculture of later decades, profits per acre were small. This reinforced a land-extensive agriculture. Because few improvements were necessary, grain production made double sense in a period when land titles were still embroiled in disputes over land grant verification. Finally, Frank Norris's observation in *The Octopus* that large-scale wheat ranching amounted to soil mining created an apt analogy with placer and hydraulic mining: when the harvest was bountiful, the realization of value was quick (Pisani 1984; Hardy 1929; Norris 1901).

The logic of wheat production was not, however, uncontested. Rapidly solidifying, lopsided social relations in agriculture forced large wheat growers to fight for their economic and class interests. Contemporary critics recognized that wheat production retarded the spread of the small family farm and forestalled the growth of viable rural communities, that it degraded rural labor and created a permanent class of dispossessed harvest workers (Pisani 1984). How to eliminate the class conflict that emanated from opposing social poles, land rich and land poor, preoccupied the social conscience of the Far and Middle West (see Smith 1978). But it was not a preoccupation for everyone in these regions, or at least not in the same way. Large wheat farmers (with some exceptions, such as William S. Chapman) opposed small farming well into the 1890s, in fear of the increase in property values and taxes that ostensibly would follow population growth. In the end, despite year after year of political skirmishes and a muckraking media, the decline of wheat production had less to do with class conflict than with shortsightedness and structural change: overproduction in a limited market; declining per-acre yields; the increasing land values that did indeed follow the beginnings of diversification into higher value crops; and cheaper credit money, which eventually made the high costs of specialty agricultural cropping more viable (Pisani 1984; Hardy 1929; Rhode 1995).