



## Jack London and Race Relations in America, 1876-1916; *Accountability and Complexity*

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This essay is a response to the current national and global conversation around racial justice and the call to accountability for organizations who teach and carry on the legacies of historical figures. Today, all aspects of racial inequity and injustice are being deeply examined, better understood, and their origins and causes more thoroughly explored. It is critical now that we expand our knowledge and understanding of Jack London's perspectives on People of Color, as seen through the lens of racial justice and equity. Raised in a world of contradictions, Jack London had conflicting and conflating experiences and views around race relations throughout his life. His story is truly complex. Did Jack London regularly use racist language? Yes. Do people today consider him a racist? Yes. Also... it's complicated. In fact, you could say that he embodies the very complex nature of race relations in our country as a whole. The world he was born into taught him that he and "his kind" were superior, while a lifetime of experiences and personal relationships with People of Color forced him to question some of his strongly held beliefs around white male superiority. As one author puts it, "Jack London's racial philosophy, like the man himself, was mercurial (John Lennon, *London's Racial Lives: A Critical Biography* Review)."

Luckily, we have academic support to help us from authors such as Jeanne Campbell Reesman and others, who have spent years conducting deep research on this very topic. For a comprehensive look at this issue, we highly recommend exploring the resources offered on our website under *Educational Resources*. This essay is meant to be a synopsis of some of the scholarship and articles surrounding Jack London's racist rhetoric and shifting perspectives.

The questions and challenges we receive around Jack London and racism must be honestly and thoughtfully addressed while also embracing the full picture and history of an individual who contributed greatly to the advancement of society through his efforts to preserve and protect the environment, his tireless advocacy for worker's rights, advocacy for animal rights, his incredible work to expose the injustices of wide-scale poverty and his outspoken insistence on holding accountable the capitalist powers that be, demanding justice and fair treatment of people at every level of society. Our goal is not to defend Jack London's racist views and language, for there is no defense of racism. We want to examine his story deeply, learn from it, and hold Jack London accountable while also showing the fullness of his character, contributions, and life experience. We believe that if approached thoughtfully and honestly Jack's story can teach us a great deal about the root causes of his shifting views and thus be better able to examine ourselves and work towards a more just an equitable society moving forward. To be able to learn from history, we must first tell a full story.

### London's Formative Years

Whenever examining an historical figure, it is important to understand the context of the time in which they were born and came of age. This essay endeavors to paint a general picture of the world that shaped Jack London (1876-1916) to help offer some of that historical context. On January 12, 1876, Jack

London was born just 11 years out of the Civil War, at the intersection of multiple turbulent eras in our country. The Reconstruction era (1865-1877) saw groundbreaking progress in the history of civil rights with the passage of the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Amendments and the Civil Rights Act of 1875. In outrage and swift response to this movement, scorned Confederates and their sympathizers rose-up with extreme violence and home-grown terrorist groups like the Klu Klux Klan exacted regular and ferocious acts of violence against African Americans and other People of Color throughout the country. Segregation was unlawfully enforced throughout the South and some northern states, blocking African Americans from exercising their newly won rights. With the presidential election of 1876, federal troops were removed from the last southern statehouses and thus, federal protection of newly freed African Americans dissolved, leaving the way for the Jim Crow laws to take hold. Racial tensions in America were at an all-time high and these pressures would heavily influence Jack London's parents, particularly his mother Flora London, and shape the world Jack London was raised in.

Other minority groups were in the dominant culture's xenophobic "line of fire." Coming into the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the US saw a dramatic jump in immigration with people arriving from southern and eastern Europe in higher numbers than ever before. For many English-speaking, native-born white Americans, the sudden influx of new and different languages, customs and religions sparked fear and anxiety, leading to racial animosity. Many responded with a strong sense of nativism which valued older white families with ties to the American Revolution over more recent immigrants. The dominant culture in America at the time still believed in the ideas of Manifest Destiny and Anglo-Saxon superiority, a perspective that Jack London and so many of his contemporaries would unfortunately hold as their truth. The influences on young Jack were very strong. His mother Flora London was known to be a staunch nativist who expressed pride at being, "...old American Stock and not immigrant Irish and Italians like our neighbors (-Jack London, *An American Life*, Earle Labor 2013)." She regularly warned young Jack against the perceived dubiousness of their immigrant neighbors:

*"First, she steadfastly maintained that brunettes and all the tribe of dark-eyed humans were deceitful. Next, she was convinced that the dark-eyed races were profoundly sensitive, profoundly treacherous, and profoundly murderous... I had heard her state that if one offended an Italian, no matter how slightly and unintentionally, he was certain to retaliate by stabbing one in the back." – Jack London*

In sharp contradiction to these influences, Jack spent the first three years of his life being raised by his wet-nurse and proxy mother, Virginia (Jennie) Prentiss, a previously enslaved African American woman. Jennie was able to provide infant Jack with the sustenance, nurturing, and love that a developing child so desperately needs; nurturing that his mother appeared to be unable to provide at that critical time. Jennie reveals the depth of her attachment to Jack when she states that she knew *"no difference between that baby an' my own Will, I was set on him. It most killed me when I had to wean him, and his folks took him with them out yonder to Bernal Heights (Jack London's Women, Clarice Stasz, 2001)."* Jack lived off-and-on with the Prentiss's for several years and associated regularly with Jennie's African American community and her segregated church. He appeared to return Jennie's affection and loyalties via his life-long financial support of her and her family. As an adult, Jack bought her a house, provided monthly financial support, and made a generous donation to her beloved church, despite being a self-professed atheist. As children, Jack London's daughters also enjoyed an affectionate relationship with Jennie Prentiss, further highlighting the potentially strong bond Jack shared with her. Jack's youngest

daughter Becky shared an insight into this, “Daddy always said that the only love and affection he knew as a child came from Aunt Jennie... Aunt Jennie not only loved Daddy she helped him in many ways, loaned him money, backed him in everything he did. She was wonderful woman and a friend to everyone (Stasz, 2001).”

The juxtaposition of these two divergent mother figures and their significant influences on Jack London the boy and the man, set the stage for what appears to have been a lifetime of duality and potential inner conflict around race relations. This was amplified by years of travel and engagement with different cultures and individuals from around the world who challenged London’s preconceived notions of race and so-called biological and cultural fitness and superiority.

### **Coming of Age in Chaos**

Jack London came of age during the latter half of the Gilded Age (1870s-1900). Born out of the Industrial Revolution, this was a time-period of rapid and unprecedented growth in industry, technology, and the economy. The middle class was growing. There were record numbers of new inventions improving daily life for people who could afford them. However, there was a dark cost for all of this apparent prosperity. Wealthy business owners became increasingly wealthier, living opulent lifestyles built on the backs of the working class who were forced to labor for significantly long hours and often in deplorable and unsafe conditions. Child labor was rampant, and most workers were woefully underpaid, enduring wage cuts with no benefits and suffering long periods of unemployment. Jack London spoke often of working 12-plus hours a day in a cannery for ¢.10 an hour at the tender age of fourteen.

American wages far exceeded those of European businesses and factories which led to a huge influx of European immigrants who would work even longer hours for less money than their American counterparts. Greedy plutocrats took advantage of this by filling their sweatshops with this new workforce and displacing many American-born workers, fueling the fires of racism and xenophobia already burning at the time. This runaway expansion of the abyss between poverty and prosperity came to a tumultuous head during the Financial Panic of 1893, a crisis that threw America’s economy into a tailspin, closing hundreds of banks, thousands of businesses and leaving millions of workers hopelessly unemployed. By the time Jack London turned eighteen, the gap between the rich and the poor was at its greatest in the U.S. and economic and racial tensions in the country were extraordinarily intense.

Rather than scrape for bread as a factory “workbeast” in the city slums of Oakland, Jack took to the road and became a hobo, hopping trains and trading stories for bread. In 1894 he decided to join the growing movement of the great unemployed as they marched across the country in Kelly’s Industrial Army, to demand relief and support from Washington DC. Missing the initial departure in Sacramento, Jack traveled for a while as a drifter until finally meeting up with the group in Omaha, Nebraska. He spent evenings in camp with other members of the movement learning about philosophy and politics and beginning to develop a sense of fairness and justice that would eventually grow into a life-long commitment to socialism. Jack ended up deserting the army a short time later in Hannibal, Missouri and continued traveling throughout the US and parts of Canada on his own. His time as a hobo included a 30-day stint in the Erie County Penitentiary after being arrested for vagrancy. London’s months on the road, homeless and unemployed, dramatically influenced his sense of humanity as he witnessed and experienced first-hand, the economic and social struggles of the time. By age twenty, Jack was giving

nightly soapbox speeches on the virtues of socialism and worker's rights in the City Hall Park in Oakland, CA. He became known as The Boy Socialist of Oakland and would spend the rest of his life speaking out for worker's rights.

### **Scientific Racism/Social Darwinism**

During the Progressive Era scientific racialism was one of the leading pseudo-scientific models of the day, influenced by a popular yet egregious misapplication of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection to human groups and cultural identities. It claimed that there were racial differences between ethnic groups in terms of biology, intelligence, character, etc. that would assert the superiority of one race over another. Of course, as architects of this illogical framework, those of white European decent placed themselves at the top of the evolutionary ladder. The ideology crossed all political and economic barriers and worked its way into even the most elite universities in America where it was taught as the latest "scientific" theory of the day. Along with many other modern writers and thinkers of the time, Jack London did unfortunately endorse many notions of scientific racialism. While he did not believe in the oppression or subjugation of any man, woman, or child, he did admit to believing in the genetic superiority of the white "Anglo-Saxon "race." As many know, the study of eugenics was one of the most diabolical outcomes of scientific racialism and racism in this country during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. While Jack London never expressed agreement with the idea of forced sterilizations, he did feel that selective mating and avoidance of miscegenation would ensure "racial purity" and contribute to the strength and vitality of every race, which is just one aspect of eugenics.

The contradiction between his racist views and his socialist beliefs and activism is another example of London's conflicting perspectives and personalities; perspectives that would continue to be challenged as he grew older and traveled throughout the world. In one of his later works titled *'My Hawaiian Aloha,'* London entirely contradicts his admonition against miscegenation when he refers to the intermarrying of races in the island state by saying, *"little Hawaii, with its hotch potch races, is making a better demonstration than the United States."*

### **A Shifting Voice**

While there are many clear examples of racist language and ideas in most of Jack London's stories and articles, some of his later works share a more modified perspective that hints at a mind that could possibly have been changing as a result of personal experiences with people from different cultures. As an historical figure we will never truly know and we can only speculate here, but there are several examples worth exploring and taking note of:

*The "Yellow Peril"* – The California Gold Rush of 1848 brought thousands of new people to the Golden State, including a large influx of Chinese immigrants who were eager to find their fortunes and a fresh start for their families. Following a series of floods and droughts in China, a major crop failure in 1852 sent 20,000 Chinese immigrants through the gates of San Francisco that same year. Many white Americans felt threatened by this new wave of foreign workers, whom they saw as competition for jobs that were rightfully theirs. They blamed the Chinese and Japanese immigrants for the declining wages and economic ills of the day, even though they made up less than 1% of the population.

The U.S. Congress moved to answer the hysterical and racist demands of these and other workers and to mitigate the dominant culture's concerns about maintaining so-called white racial integrity by passing

the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. This was the first significant law in the United States to restrict immigration. In short, the act banned immigration from China to the U.S. for ten years. Additionally, Chinese who were already U.S. residents were required to always carry with them official residency certificates issued from the IRS. If caught without this special documentation, residents were sentenced to hard labor and even deportation.

Needless to say, the racial tensions against Asian communities in California were very high in Jack London's day. Like most authors and cultural commentators of the time, London was swept up in this milieu and he wrote early on of the "Yellow Peril," an unfounded fear that China would take over the entire world. In 1904 London wrote an essay with this title describing the so-called threat and in 1910 he penned a fictional novel, *The Unparalleled Invasion*, set in a future where China threatens to conquer Earth only to be stopped by the heroic West and their use of biological warfare. Many people understandably point to this story as a very clear example of extreme racism on Jack London's part. However, several scholars question whether it's appropriate to assume that this story accurately reflects his personal belief system or not. Was he simply recording the popular language and culture of his day? He was known to be an author who wrote for the masses and with the specific goal of marketing and selling books. He never shied away from voicing those intentions.

Additionally, London offers very conflicting perspectives about his views through several statements he made in his various writings and correspondence. Regarding *The Unparalleled Invasion* and his fears about China, Jack admits:

*"...it must be taken into consideration that the above postulate is itself a product of Western race-egotism, urged by our belief in our own righteousness and fostered by a faith in ourselves which may be as erroneous as are most fond race fancies."*

Later in his life, London helped found the Pan Pacific Union Club, an association based in Honolulu that worked actively towards achieving peace through ethnic and cultural exchanges. In 1913, when asked about how relations between the East and West can be improved upon, Jack responded to the *Japanese-American Commercial Weekly* with a letter in which he states:

*"In reply to yours of August 16, 1913. First of all, I should say by stopping the stupid newspaper from always fomenting race prejudice. This of course, being impossible, I would say, next, by educating the people of Japan so that they will be too intelligently tolerant to respond to any call to race prejudice. And, finally, by realizing, in industry and government, of socialism—which last word is merely a word that stands for the actual application of in the affairs of men of the theory of the Brotherhood of Man.*

*In the meantime the nations and races are only unruly boys who have not yet grown to the stature of men. So we must expect them to do unruly and boisterous things at times. And, just as boys grow up, so the races of mankind will grow up and laugh when they look back upon their childish quarrels."*

Later in 1915 London delivered his essay, *The Language of the Tribe*, to The Pan Pacific Union Club saying that the club will be a place "where all men of all races can come, where they can eat together and smoke together and talk together. I can't think of anything better that can happen to Hawaii than to have such a club."

### ***The South Pacific and beyond***

London offers us more contrast through his short stories where we can compare the glaringly racist dialogue of *Adventure*, *Jerry of the Islands*, and *Michael, Brother of Jerry*, to his more empathetic portrayal of characters of color like *Koolau the Leper*, *The Mexican*, and *Chinago*. He often portrayed protagonists of color who rebelled against and outwitted their white colonial oppressors. Included in this list is *Mauki* and *Chun Ah Chun*.

Jack London also showed a respectful eye towards the indigenous peoples he encountered around the world through his impressive body of photographic work. He shot images of islanders throughout the South Pacific in natural and un-posed states, such as completing daily tasks, wearing their own cultural garb and regalia, and often with an air of dignity and pride. Through his work, we catch a deferential glimpse of authentic daily life in the islands at that time in history, rather than posed and artificial colonial caricatures. In the Hawaiian Islands, individuals suffering from leprosy were exiled to the island of Molokai to live out their lives away from the eyes and ears of so-called polite society. They were considered damaged and untouchable. More than once, Jack London and his wife Charmian would visit the Molokai leper colony, against advice, and happily sit with people in their homes sharing meals together on the floor. He also photographed the Molokai colony and their activities and events, showing their daily life in respectful ways. While Jack London spoke often in very racist and regrettable ways, his actions did not always reflect or agree with his words. Indeed, he presents a paradox.

***Playing Fair*** - One final example of London's possible evolution through racism can be found in his journalistic coverage of the James J. Jeffries – Jack Johnson Championship fights. As stated, society in turn-of-the-century America was sharply divided by class, economics, and racial distinctions, but boxing was an everyman's sport. It crossed all cultural and economic lines and created a place for men of all backgrounds to share space around the ring. It was the metaphorical stage upon which the proverbial giants could play out the American drama, particularly the drama of race. In the press, Jeffries was touted as the Great White Hope - the bold and manly figure that would uphold the virtues and superiority of the white race against the inferior black boxer. For most white fans, the thought of Johnson beating Jeffries was inconceivable... and then he did. A crushing defeat and blow to the white fans, Johnson wins over Jeffries in an astounding defeat.

Jack London was sent by the Hearst corporation to cover the fight in 1910. As Reesman points out (*Racial Lives*, 2009; pg. 184), Jack's early reporting reflected the typical racist stereotypes of the day, but his voice clearly starts to change over the course of the fight. In time, London came to enthusiastically praise Johnson and his 'coolness.' Changing his tune completely, London openly gave Johnson full credit in his statement:

*"...what won on Saturday was bigness, coolness, quickness, cleverness, and vast physical superiority... Because a white man wishes a white man to win, this should not prevent him from giving absolute credit to the best man, even when the best man was black. All hail to Johnson."*

### **Conclusions**

So why such conflicting perspectives? In one arena Jack London promotes white superiority and staunch Anglo-Saxon pride while in another, namely his many short stories and select commentary, he critically satirizes racism and colonialism. London begins his career with a clear opinion of the inferiority of non-

whites and ends up publicly challenging his own attitudes through his journalistic praise of Jack Johnson the African American prize fighter. While he never sways from his stalwart identification with the “Anglo-Saxon tribe” and their primacy, he does begin to share a more moderated voice later in his life as he speaks on behalf of the Pan Pacific Union Club and stresses the need to temper racists attitudes between East and West and come together in cultural understanding.

What are the cultural structures that created these two voices, indeed, these two Jack’s? We began this essay with the observation that Jack London came into the world at the intersection of several very tumultuous eras marked by civil war, financial crisis, burgeoning economies, urbanization, and rapidly shifting populations, particularly in California. This was indeed a time of shifting identity all around. Much like the country, Jack London’s attitudes were dynamic, always mutable, never static. You could say that he absolutely reflected the complexity of the time in which he lived. As a child born in poverty, London lived life in the trenches, having to scrape and work for every cent. Even after his successes, Jack chose to spend a summer living in the slums of the East End of London to understand first-hand the struggles of the underclass there. His identification with the underdog ran deep and appeared to have imbued him with a natural empathy for the persecuted and downtrodden.

But perhaps his die was cast even earlier. Jack’s first primary caregivers, Flora London and Jennie Prentiss, had profound and formative impacts on the author, as any mother figures would. They were his first guardians and his first teachers. They would be an integral part of his life and identity until the day he died. One teaching life lessons through the racist lens of nativism and one nurturing from the platform of a black woman forging a life and home after American slavery. While he was taught one thing, his life experiences showed him another: intrinsic amalgamating with the extrinsic.

We can continue to speculate and try to understand what drove London and his shifting views but what is perhaps most important to know, is that he could shift at all. His mind appeared willing to hold two perspectives at once and to grow through experience. We acknowledge the racism that Jack London expressed and even promoted at times. It was clear and undisputable. It is the unfortunate shadow that we must hold to account, of a man who contributed so much good and light to the world while he lived in it. We also acknowledge his other voice. The one that called out injustice and who brought attention to the cruelties of colonialism through his writings and his speaking. One would hope that, had he lived longer, his perspectives would have evolved even further.

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