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Tentative Title of Dissertation:

Beasts of Burden: Animals, Labor, and the Formulation of Industrial Identity in Fin de Siècle U.S. Fiction

Abstract:

Fin de siècle America was a time and place wracked by socio-economic unrest and profound alterations in the cultural landscape. It was also a period in which nonhuman animals became peculiarly prominent within the nation's collective imaginary. The purpose of this project is to interrogate the connection between these phenomena, to explore how the era's economic conditions helped fuel an acute preoccupation with the nonhuman, both in its literal and figurative forms, and to consider the different ways in which this formative interaction between economy and zoology was articulated in contemporaneous works of fiction. To that end, this project will examine four such texts in detail: Frank Norris's *McTeague*, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman*, and Owen Wister's *The Virginian*. While far from being aesthetically or rhetorically uniform, these works do share a common vision of a trans-human industry in which interactions with nonhuman animals shape characters' orientation towards particular forms of labor, informing what they can and cannot do, and, in so doing, helping to carve out their respective positions within the broader socio-economic schema. Moreover, these cross-species associations also serve to render such positioning socially intelligible, the figure of the animal serving as a kind of ligament binding the individual character to specific spheres of industry, both literally and symbolically. But if these four authors agree on the function of this hybrid assemblage, they fundamentally disagree on its fundamental politics: for Norris and Wister, it serves to impose conventional notions of order on an unruly economic landscape; for Chopin and Chesnutt it represents a site of invention in which the dominant order can be challenged.