Ties That Bind: American Fiction and the Origins of Social Network Analysis

DISSESSATION

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Abstract

Under the auspices of the digital humanities, scholars have recently raised the question of how current research on social networks might inform the study of fictional texts, even using computational methods to “quantify” the relationships among characters in a given work. However, by focusing on only the most recent developments in social network research, such criticism has so far neglected to consider how the historical development of social network analysis—a methodology that attempts to identify the rule-bound processes and structures underlying interpersonal relationships—converges with literary history. Innovated by sociologists and social psychologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including Georg Simmel (chapter 1), Charles Horton Cooley (chapter 2), Jacob Moreno (chapter 3), and theorists of the “small world” phenomenon (chapter 4), social network analysis emerged concurrently with the development of American literary modernism.

Over the course of four chapters, *Ties That Bind* demonstrates that American modernist fiction coincided with a nascent “science” of social networks, such that we can discern striking parallels between emergent network-analytic procedures and the particular configurations by which American authors of this period structured (and more generally imagined) the social worlds of their stories. For instance, I argue that Henry James’s works of psychological realism dramatize early theories about the dynamics of mutual acquaintanceship. Frank Norris’s naturalist “Epic of the Wheat”
novels invoke period discourses of a densely networked “mind of the world.” John Dos Passos’s panoramic *U.S.A.* trilogy models “sociometric” systems for quantifying the fleeting contacts of modern life. Finally, the hard-boiled crime stories of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler engage imaginatively with network-analytic procedures by representing detection itself as a form of social network analysis.

An important but understudied facet of modern American fiction, this convergence—between assemblages of characters in fictional narratives, on one hand, and foundational network concepts, on the other—suggests that literary and social-scientific treatments of social networks are more closely interrelated than scholars have so far assumed. Outlining a genealogy that reveals some of these interrelations, my project argues that the study of character groupings in fictional texts and research on the early developments of social network theory can be brought into a productive, mutually informing dialogue with one another. In this way, I sketch an approach that integrates formal with historical and cultural methods of inquiry, probing how attention to character configurations in modern American fiction can shed light on some of the basic questions motivating network science, and not just vice versa.
To Christine
Acknowledgments

Ever since my research for this project led me to Robin Dunbar’s *How Many Friends Does One Person Need?*, a related question has been at the back of my mind: “How Many Friends Does One Person Writing a Dissertation Need?” From my own experience, I can attest that the answer is: a heckuva lot.

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Table of Contents

Abstract......................................................................................................................................ii
Dedication......................................................................................................................................iv
Acknowledgments......................................................................................................................v
Vita..............................................................................................................................................vii
List of Figures..............................................................................................................................x

Introduction: Character Configurations and/as Social Networks................................. 1
  What is a Social Network?...........................................................................................................3
  Narrative Theory, Digital Humanities, and Network Approaches to Character......................5
  Network Constraints: From Theme to Form.............................................................................15
  Why Then?: Some Historical Context....................................................................................20
  Why Now?: Network Analysis and Methodology.................................................................23
  Outline of the Chapters............................................................................................................26

Chapter 1: “The link had snapped”: Henry James and the Emergence of Social Network Theory..................................................................................................................35
  Georg Simmel and the Study of Network Dynamics..............................................................38
  Narrating the Forbidden Triad: “The Friends of the Friends” ..........................................44
  The Princess Casamassima and the Politics of Mutual Acquaintanceship.........................63
  James’s Tragic Hubs..................................................................................................................80

viii
Chapter 2: The Mind of the World: Imaginative Contact in
Frank Norris’s Wheat Novels ................................................................. 91

Alan Palmer and the Social Mind in Fiction ......................................... 96

Literalized Intermentality in The Octopus; or,
Why is Vanamee Telepathic? .............................................................. 99

Unconscious Relations in The Pit ......................................................... 119

James, Norris, and Divergent Branches in the Genealogy of
Network Studies .................................................................................. 134

Chapter 3: Who’s Who in Dos Passos: Sociometry and the U.S.A. Trilogy ........ 140

Sociometry and the “Problem” of Human Interrelations...................... 145

“Making Contact”: Dos Passos’s Sociological Imaginary ..................... 153

U.S.A. and the Difficult Business of Networking ................................. 165

Moreno, Marx, and Dos Passos’s Literary Collectivism ......................... 186

Chapter 4: Network Noir: Multi-Character Configuration in the American
Hard-Boiled Detective Novel ................................................................. 195

Guilty By Association: Metonymic Relations in Red Harvest ............... 201

Against “Whodunit”: The Small World of The Big Sleep ................. 218

Majorness, Minorness, and the Strange Case of Owen Taylor .............. 232

Social Fragmentation, and Other Red Herrings ................................. 238

Coda: Basic Cables .............................................................................. 253

Meta-Narrative Sociograms in The Wire and Mad Men ...................... 255

Bibliography ....................................................................................... 273
List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>A Moreno Sociogram</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>Wired’s <em>Mad Men</em> Sociogram</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td><em>Mad Men</em> Seasons 1-4 Explained (“I Love Charts”)</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>MacKendrick’s Organizational Chart (AMC)</td>
<td>267</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction: Character Configurations and/as Social Networks

In his 2002 book *Linked: The New Science of Networks*, the network theorist Albert-László Barabási suggested that “network thinking is poised to invade all domains of human activity and most fields of human inquiry” (222). One decade later, this invasion (or, to put it in less ominous terms, expansion) is already well underway in literary studies. Under the auspices of the digital humanities, scholars have recently raised the question of how current research on social networks might inform the study of fictional texts, even using computational methods to “quantify” the relationships among characters in a given work. Much of this scholarship—from critics such as Franco Moretti, Nicholas Dames, Caroline Levine, and others working at the nexus of networking and narration—is wonderfully provocative and compelling, and I will discuss their research in greater detail below. At present, however, I simply want to note that such criticism, by focusing on only the most recent developments in social network research, has so far neglected to consider how the historical development of social network analysis converges with American literary history. Yet social network analysis—a methodology that attempts to identify the rule-bound processes and structures underlying interpersonal relationships—actually has a rich history. Innovated by sociologists and social psychologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including Georg Simmel (chapter 1), Charles Horton Cooley (chapter 2), Jacob Moreno (chapter 3), and foundational theorists of the “small world”
phenomenon (chapter 4), social network analysis emerged concurrently with the development of American literary modernism.

_Ties That Bind_ demonstrates that American fiction writers of the period 1886–1939 converged on a set of issues and concerns also being explored by the pioneers of social network research, albeit with different aims and through distinct registers of discourse. The sociologist Albion Small observed in the first issue of the _American Journal of Sociology_ (1895) that “the fact of human association is more obtrusive and relatively more influential than in any previous epoch” (1). Focusing my project on how this influence extended to (and from) the domain of literature, I contend that American fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries coincided with a nascent “science” of social networks, such that we can discern striking parallels between emergent network-analytic procedures and the particular configurations by which American authors of this period structured (and more generally imagined) the social worlds of their stories. An important but understudied facet of modern American fiction, this convergence—between assemblages of characters in fictional narratives, on the one hand, and foundational network concepts, on the other—suggests that literary and social-scientific treatments of social networks are more closely interrelated than scholars have so far assumed. Outlining a genealogy that reveals some of these interrelations, my project argues that the study of character groupings in fictional texts and research on the early developments of social network theory can be brought into a productive, mutually informing dialogue with one another. In this way, I sketch an approach that integrates formal with historical and cultural methods of inquiry, probing
how attention to character configurations in modern American fiction can shed light on some of the basic questions motivating network science, and not just vice versa.

What Is a Social Network?

Because this study takes up the question of how social networks are configured in fictional works, and, more specifically, how the origins of social network analysis intersect with American literary history, it is important to clarify from the outset what a social network is, exactly. In developing the concepts, definitions, and methodologies I now go on to review, social analysts have built on the foundational contributions to network theory that I bring into dialogue with the fictional works discussed in subsequent chapters. Thus one of the aims of the genealogy I present over the course of my study is to trace these current conceptions of networks back to their modern-day origins, and to show how the earlier ideas about networks targeted some of the same issues and phenomena being targeted by American modernists in the techniques and themes they used to elaborate multi-character configurations.¹

First, a social network is more than just a group of persons. Network theorists explain that while “a network, like a group, is a collection of people, it includes something more: a specific set of connections between people in the group” (Christakis and Fowler 9). For instance, one might reasonably call a collection of strangers riding in the same elevator a “group,” but one likely assumes too much in labeling them a “network”; the passengers might in fact have no connection with one another aside from sheer physical proximity. The relations among persons, then, are essential to

¹ The most comprehensive resource on the history of social network studies is Linton C. Freeman’s The Development of Social Network Analysis: A Study in the Sociology of Science (2004). Freeman defines social network analysis as a social-scientific, structural discipline “based on the study of interaction among social actors” (2).
understanding the functionality of social networks. Indeed, the basic premise of social network analysis is that “social life is created primarily and most importantly by relations and the patterns formed by these relations” (Marin and Wellman 11).

Yet network researchers also point out that “a network cannot be reduced to a simple sum of relations” (Degenne and Forsé 6). Rather, a network encompasses not only the links among persons, but also the “further linkages of the ‘links’ themselves,” to the extent that “what happens between one pair of ‘knots’… must affect what happens between other adjacent ones” (Nadel, qtd. in Degenne and Forsé 57). In other words, networks impose constraints on the individuals within them. This central feature of networks has led sociologists to conclude that the relations among individuals are “often more important than the individual people themselves” (Christakis and Fowler 9). In this sense, society’s networked structure necessarily undermines or at least qualifies individual autonomy.

Another basic premise of network theory is that “far from random… networks are structured by fundamental laws” (Everett 162). Since networks are complex and dynamic phenomena by definition, the thrust of social network analysis is to reveal the rules dictating the particular forms of their complexity and dynamism. This fact holds important implications for any investigation of social networks in fiction, including the present one. While literary critics who have examined network-oriented narratives tend to conflate those texts with “tales of coincidence”—for instance, by attending to

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2 Social network theorists sometimes refer to interpersonal links as “edges” and to persons themselves as “nodes.” I will occasionally use these terms in discussing network structures. To refer to the discipline that strives to understand these structures, I will refer interchangeably to “social network theory” and “social network analysis.” While the former term arguably emphasizes a kind of philosophical approach to networks, and the latter more of a methodological praxis, both contribute to the same, shared project. When in the remainder of this study I employ critical terms from the domain of social network theory—“balance,” “transitivity,” “centrality,” “density,” “multiplexity,” etc.—I will not only define these terms, but also ground each in its historical context, i.e., its specific place in the genealogy of network studies.
the trope of the “chance meeting”—the fictional stories I examine in this study are by no means centered on random encounters. Rather, my analysis focuses on how the fictional narratives of Henry James, Frank Norris, John Dos Passos, Dashiell Hammett, and Raymond Chandler exemplify—and also reflexively explore—the rule-systems governing social networks.

*Ties That Bind* proposes a bi-directional model for understanding the relationship between (1) the formal innovations and thematic foci of modern American fiction and (2) the origins and early development of modern-day social network theory. Specifically, I argue that modern American fiction writers staged formally investigations of some of the same issues/phenomena that then-contemporary social scientists engaged with analytically, or even empirically. To put this same point another way, authors’ treatment of character assemblages can be seen as narrative strategies for engaging with the same phenomena being theorized, in a separate register of discourse, by the intellectual founders of social network analysis. In order to understand the nexus of fictional narrative and the origins of social network studies, we must first take stock of the range of theoretical approaches to character germane to this convergence.

Narrative Theory, Digital Humanities, and Network Approaches to Character

It is safe to say that “character” is currently experiencing a resurgence as a point of interest in literary studies. Across recent approaches within the domain of narrative theory, the concept of character has increasingly come to be regarded as inextricable from the larger functional assemblage of the narrative as a whole. Possible-worlds theorists such as Lubomír Doležel, Uri Margolin, and Marie-Laure Ryan have explored
the diverse modes of interaction available to storyworld participants. Emphasizing the
typical particulars that distinguish characters from actual persons, these theorists
demonstrate how assemblages of storyworld participants, or “agential constellations,”
contribute to readers’ reconfigurations of possible worlds.⁴ Similarly attentive to forms
of characterological interaction, recent studies of consciousness representation (and
especially Theory of Mind) have shown how a character’s individual consciousness is
shaped by the presence of other minds. Alan Palmer’s Fictional Minds, for instance,
demonstrates how viewing consciousness representation primarily in terms of
characters’ “private” thoughts has caused scholars to neglect how literary works present
the social nature of mind. Meanwhile, rhetorical approaches to narrative, such as James
Phelan’s Reading People, Reading Plots, have stressed the significance of characters’
mimetic, synthetic, and thematic functions to readers’ experience of fiction. In this
account, multiple characters and their functions necessarily interact during the act of
narrative communication; thus, turning to Pride and Prejudice, Phelan demonstrates how
the thematic function of one character (Charlotte Lucas) can play an important role in
the narrative progression by affecting how readers respond to another character
(Elizabeth Bennett) and her situation. Finally, neo-Marxist analyses such as Alex
Woloch’s The One vs. the Many have treated characters as potentially autonomous beings,
and historically-oriented scholarship such as Deidre Lynch’s The Economy of Character

⁴ For more on possible-worlds approaches to character constellations, see Eder’s, Jannidis’s, and
Schneider’s introduction to Characters in Fictional Worlds. In a sign of scholars’ increasing attention to
this concept, Eder, Jannidis, and Schneider devote an entire section of their introduction to character
constellations, noting that the study of this phenomenon has “proved particularly useful in the analysis of
novels, TV series or transmedial narrative universes that contain complex social networks” (27).
has emphasized the relationship between literary configurations of character and economic history.  

Such research represents something of a break from an older tradition of scholarship on literary character, typified by such vital works as E.M. Forster’s essays in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), W.J. Harvey’s *Character in the Novel* (1965), and Baruch Hochman’s *Character in Literature* (1985). In exploring what makes characters distinct from one another (and from actual persons), these treatments dealt primarily in categories: “round vs. flat” (Forster); “protagonist vs. background figure vs. intermediate figure” (Harvey); “stylized vs. naturalistic,” and many others (Hochman). Aiming to bring “the human element” of character back into the critical conversation, Hochman’s study provides an explicit rebuttal of structuralist analyses which, in his view, had tended to “reduce” characters to actants. The more recent investigations I have cited in the preceding paragraph take a different set of approaches. Indeed, rather than attempting to isolate individual characters in order to examine their unique attributes and functions, each of the more recent studies emphasizes interaction or circulation among configurations of characters. And rather than creating taxonomies in order to understand how individual characters might be distinguished from one another, each of these studies embraces multiplicity, indicating that characters’

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4 For another account of multi-character configuration that draws on the Marxist framework, see Frederic Jameson’s discussion of “character systems” in *The Political Unconscious*. Over the course of this study, I will further explore several of the theoretical approaches discussed in this paragraph, including Palmer’s (chapter 2), Margolin’s (chapter 4), and Woloch’s (chapter 4).

5 While a possible counter-example to this claim about "characterological gestalts" would be the “one-person” narrative worlds that Lubomír Doležel has discussed (see *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds*), I would argue that the very term “one-person world” itself reinforces my point that a fundamental component of any literary character is her part within a broader assemblage of characters. In the case of the “one-person” narrative world, a reader’s understanding of that single character is simply colored, or even—for Doležel—defined, by the fact that the character field otherwise consists of no one else at all; apart from the one character at issue, it is a null set.
contiguity and trans-personal connectedness can be viewed as essential to readers’ experience of fiction.

Network approaches to literary narrative—and to “character,” more specifically—have the potential to add substantially to this discussion. In “Mutual Friends and Chronologies of Chance” (2008), his masterful study of cinematic “network narratives,” the film scholar David Bordwell has written that (excluding rare cases such as Robinson Crusoe) “nearly all narratives are about social networks,” since nearly all narratives follow characters who are placed in some relation to one another. As Bordwell rightly observes, however, different narratives “can highlight this social network to varying degrees” (192). According to Bordwell, then, “network narratives” can be defined as those stories that foreground their own networked configuration, often by focusing the audience’s attention on character interconnections “with an elaborateness seldom seen” in more traditional narratives.6

Hence network narratives, in Bordwell’s definition, tend not to follow the standard “single- or paired-protagonist plot,” but instead underscore social multiplicity, tracking numerous characters who are separated by one or more mediating links (191). Generating “a social structure of acquaintance, kinship, and friendship beyond any one character’s ken” (190), such stories also tend to highlight fiction’s spatial dimensions: according to Bordwell, one mark of a network narrative is its seeming mappability—

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6 Taking stock of recent film criticism, Bordwell notes that “network narratives” have been variously referred to as “mosaics,” “criss-crossers,” “web of life” tales, and many other names (191). In the remainder of this study, I will follow Bordwell in using the term “network narrative” to signify these kinds of stories. I should be clear, however, that I do not view the “network narrative” as constituting an “either/or” generic category—i.e., the view that “a story either is or isn’t a network narrative”—but rather regard network narration as a spectrum along which individual narratives might be situated, depending on the degree to which each emphasizes its own networked configuration.
that is, its suggestion of “geometry or choreography, or boxes-and-arrows diagrams, or schematic circuits” (193). Citing such examples as Short Cuts (1993), Magnolia (1999) Crash (2004), and Syriana (2005), Bordwell notes that in contemporary cinema network narratives “have become remarkably common, with nearly 150 films using the network principle” released between 1990 and 2008 (191). Yet even these kinds of stories might be said to have a long history: as scholars including Bordwell have acknowledged, nineteenth-century triple-deckers like Middlemarch, War and Peace, Our Mutual Friend, and the novels comprising Balzac’s La Comédie humaine would likewise seem to foreground networked sociality (194).

While Bordwell’s work provides the most comprehensive account of contemporary network narratives, his descriptive-formalist approach to characters as mediating “connectors” or “links” itself has a long history in literary criticism. During the first decades of the twentieth century, the Russian formalists Vladimir Propp and Viktor Shklovsky considered the possibility that characters could function as devices for linking otherwise disjointed components of narrative structure. Amidst his discussion of the concept of “motivation” in Theory of Prose, Shklovsky refers to particular characters—like Stiva Oblonsky in Anna Karenina—as “stepping stone[s]” to other characters, or as “thread[s]” capable of binding together otherwise disconnected figures.

Charles Dickens, especially, is a prominent figure in this history. Throughout the writing of this dissertation, in fact, I’ve been struck by the frequency with which colleagues, friends, and readers both professional and casual have invoked Dickens’s name whenever the subject of narrative networks arises. The fact that Dickens has become more or less synonymous with this narrative phenomenon—even more, that his name has been brought to bear on very different kinds of narratives and very different kinds of networks—suggests to me that there is room here to make some important distinctions. That is, our analysis of a given narrative needn’t stop at the general observation that it foregrounds networks—“like Dickens.” Rather, for every way that the networks I’m examining are like those found in Dickens, there are other, and I would argue more significant, ways in which these networks are not like those in Dickens.
Further explicating *Anna Karenina*, Shklovsky suggests that characters’ relations with one another are pure products of form; Tolstoy “made the elder Bolkonsky the father of the brilliant young Andrei,” Shklovsky argues, simply “because it is awkward to describe a character who bears no relationship whatsoever to the rest of the novel” (64). In a related vein, in his *Morphology of the Folk Tale* Propp, in addition to providing an influential taxonomy of characters that includes seven kinds of dramatis personae, observes that there exist in folk tales non-functional characters who might be called “connectives.” Although these linking roles have received less critical attention than his seven functional characters, Propp believed “connectives” acted importantly “to establish some immediate relation between two characters... whereas circumstances in the story would have made possible only an indirect relation” (151).

As I hope that even this brief sketch of formalist approaches to character indicates, theorists such as Shklovsky and Propp laid important groundwork for the “digital humanists” of the twenty-first century. For example, as part of his broader project to promote the use of quantitative data in literary research—a practice he has elsewhere referred to as “distant reading”—Franco Moretti has recently explored the possibility that network theory might allow literary scholars to “quantify” narrative plots. In his 2011 essay “Network Theory, Plot Analysis,” which attempts to chart the social network of *Hamlet*, Moretti concludes that a network approach to narrative calls for “a radical conceptualization of characters and of their hierarchy” (Moretti 5). Indeed, when one reconceptualizes characters as nodes in a social network, the traditional binaries often used to understand characters—protagonist vs. minor character, “round”

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8 In chapter 4, I will take up Shklovsky’s notion of “threading” in greater detail, in the context of Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep.*
vs. “flat”—tend to lose their sway (5). We begin to conceptualize the individual character less “for its essence,” Moretti suggests, than “for its function in the stability of the network” (5). In other words, we begin paying less attention to the character’s attributes and more to his or her positioning in the storyworld. Hence, in his analysis of Hamlet, Moretti argues that the characters who are killed over the course of the play die not because of who they are but simply because they are the unfortunates “chained to the warring poles of king and prince.” “What is truly deadly,” Moretti concludes, “is the characters’ position in the network” (4).

What Moretti ultimately appreciates about the network approach to a narrative like Hamlet is that it allows for a new mode of “visualization: the possibility of extracting characters and interactions from a dramatic structure, and turning them into a set of signs that I could see at a glance, in a two-dimensional space” (11). Other literary researchers, likewise, have begun to use computational methods to produce sociograms that purport to “map” the social networks of fictional storyworlds. (Sociograms, i.e., graphic visualizations of social networks, were originally developed in the 1930s by the psychiatrist and social philosopher Jacob Moreno; I address this methodology in greater detail in chapter 3). For instance, Nicholas Dames, a professor of English at Columbia University, and David Elson and Kathleen McKeown, two professors of computer science, have worked collaboratively to innovate a computational method “for extracting social networks from literature,” which they apply to sixty nineteenth-century novels.⁹

⁹ See also Robin Dunbar’s, Daniel Nettle’s, and James Stiller’s essay “The Small World of Shakespeare’s Plays,” which uses “the mathematics analysis of networks as a basis for exploring the dramatic world of ten plays” by Shakespeare (398). I take up some of Dunbar’s cognitive-anthropological insights in my discussion of Dos Passos’s U.S.A. trilogy, in chapter 3. For another example of literary scholarship that
To be sure, Moretti’s and Dames’s methodologies are groundbreaking and provocative. It is important to note, however, that each of their procedures imposes its own “principle of interconnection” onto the texts under investigation. In fact, both studies employ the same principle: “dialogue interaction.” Dames’s, Elson’s, and McKeown’s methodology defines a network tie as occurring “when two characters are in conversation”; Moretti’s sociogram, similarly, only registers two characters as being linked “if some words have passed between them” (9). This seems to me an unnecessarily narrow and rather arbitrary definition of a social network. A tight focus on “dialogue interaction” runs the risk of failing to register network theory’s basic observation that causal relationships can sometimes be understood only at a remove of two or more degrees, and that persons are often affected by individuals with whom they have never spoken or even shared the same space. My own argument is that fictional narratives tend to set their own rules when it comes to what constitutes a “link,” or even a network; in fact, it is just this divergence among stories that I find to be most compelling.

I should be clear that large-scale, quantitative analyses of fictional networks such as those presented by Moretti or Dames, Elson, and McKeown do not automatically entail the imposition of a priori assumptions about what constitutes a network. For instance, one could imagine a data-driven study that seeks to quantify the very principles of interconnection underlying networks across a corpus of texts, rather than determining those principles in advance. Nonetheless, my initial foray into digital humanities research has not uncovered any actual examples of such a study. More draws on Dunbar’s research, see Lisa Zunshine’s chapter on characterological “triangulation” and Theory of Mind in The Emergence of Mind, ed., David Herman.
persuasive to my mind, then, is Caroline Levine’s 2009 essay “Narrative Networks: Bleak House and the Affordances of Form,” which argues that Dickens’s novel captures “the complexity and power of networked social experience” (517). Levine’s analysis is neither computational nor quantitative; and she does not claim to “extract” Bleak House’s social network. Instead of investigating dozens of novels at once, Levine’s essay offers a more traditional “close reading” by focusing on just one. And instead of enlisting assumptions about which principle of interconnection (i.e., “dialogue”) best represents Bleak House’s networked storyworld, Levine’s first move is to consider which principles of interconnection the novel itself emphasizes.

In point of fact, Levine finds that in Bleak House these principles are multiple: the novel’s dominant points of interconnection include the sprawling Jarndyce lawsuit, the circulation of disease, philanthropic networks, aristocratic society, rumor, the space of the city, kinship, etc. (518). I concur with Levine that the best “first move” in analyzing social networks in fiction is to determine what constitutes “interconnection” for the specific narrative(s) at hand. Hence, in the present study I attempt to let each literary work under consideration set its own parameters for what constitutes a “link” within its storyworld. This will allow me to demonstrate how American fiction writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries configured social networks via widely varied—and ideologically multifarious—principles of interconnection.

Ties That Bind extends the work of the scholars I’ve cited immediately above by examining characters primarily in their relation to one another, not in isolation. To be a character—for Levine and Bordwell, as for Moretti and Dames—is necessarily to be part of a wider cast of characters, even part of a social network. Indeed, despite their
somewhat different methodologies, these critics agree that network approaches to narrative entail major consequences for traditional understandings of literary character. Levine echoes Moretti’s argument that viewing characters in the context of networks transfers the critic’s attention from “essences” to “positions”:

I’m tempted to say that by organizing itself around networks rather than persons, *Bleak House* does for character what Marx did for commodities: casting narrative persons less as powerful or symbolic agents in their own right than as moments in which complex and invisible social forces cross. Characters are not centered subjects but points of social intersection. (519)

While I share these researchers’ interest in re-conceptualizing literary character around insights from network science, I do not utilize algorithms or apply computational procedures in the chapters that follow. Rather, I limit my focus to the convergence between the early development of social network analysis and instances of modern American fiction that I treat as paradigmatic. Moreover, as will become clear in the chapters that follow, attending to network configurations in fiction contributes not only to a re-conceptualization of literary character, but also to a rethinking of narrative plots, which are simultaneously revealed through and shaped by network-theoretical constructs. To reach his conclusions about *Hamlet*, Moretti claims that he “did not need network theory; but…probably needed networks” (11). By contrast, my own view is that social network theory can add much to our understanding of literary works and the narrative techniques characterizing them, especially if we situate this discipline within the context of its socio-historical development. Reciprocally, literary treatments of multi-character configuration can illuminate some of the key issues—issues such as the forms and functions of acquaintanceship, the influence of sociological rule-systems, and the challenges and affordances of living in an interdependent world—with which early
network theorists also grappled. In this sense, *Ties That Bind* can be said to reorient digital humanities research by historicizing one of its increasingly familiar tools: social network analytics.

**Network Constraints: From Theme to Form**

Although a large cast of characters, like that found in *Bleak House*, is often a sign of a narrative’s investment in exploring networked sociality, I want to stress that “network narratives,” as I’ll be defining them, are not finally synonymous with stories involving a large number or wide range of characters. In turn, rather than being a methodology suitable only for texts with large casts of characters, social network analysis is a natural fit for the study of literary character precisely because it presumes that “there is a constant feedback between structure and behavior” (Kadushin 11).

While social network analysis leaves significant room for the concept of “the person,” it simultaneously underscores how interpersonal ties constrain individual agents. Thus narratives built around network principles tend also to emphasize some notion of mutual interdependence, situating multiple characters’ fates in either direct or inverse correlation with one another—and subsequently highlighting this correlation.¹⁰

We might render such mutual influence in the form of the conditional: If Character X wins, then Character Y loses (an inverse correlation). Or: If Character X dies, then Character Y dies, too (a direct one). A vivid example of this dynamic can be found in *Moby-Dick* (1851), during the scene in which Ishmael and Queequeg are literally connected to each other by what’s called a “monkey-rope.” The novel makes

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¹⁰ For a related idea, see also Doležel’s possible-worlds model for understanding agential “cooperation” versus “conflict” in *Heterocosmica*. 
clear that if Ishmael falls to his death, then so does Queequeg, and vice versa. Ishmael narrates:

Being the savage's bowsman, that is, the person who pulled the bow-oar in his boat (the second one from forward), it was my cheerful duty to attend upon [Queequeg] while taking that hard-scrabble scramble upon the dead whale's back. You have seen Italian organ-boys holding a dancing-ape by a long cord. Just so, from the ship's steep side, did I hold Queequeg down there in the sea, by what is technically called in the fishery a monkey-robe, attached to a strong strip of canvas belted round his waist.

It was a humorously perilous business for both of us. For, before we proceed further, it must be said that the monkey-robe was fast at both ends; fast to Queequeg's broad canvas belt, and fast to my narrow leather one. So that for better or for worse, we two, for the time, were wedded; and should poor Queequeg sink to rise no more, then both usage and honor demanded, that instead of cutting the cord, it should drag me down in his wake. So, then, an elongated Siamese ligature united us. Queequeg was my own inseparable twin brother; nor could I any way get rid of the dangerous liabilities which the hempen bond entailed.

So strongly and metaphysically did I conceive of my situation then, that while earnestly watching his motions, I seemed distinctly to perceive that my own individuality was now merged in a joint stock company of two; that my free will had received a mortal wound; and that another's mistake or misfortune might plunge innocent me into unmerited disaster and death. Therefore, I saw that here was a sort of interregnum in Providence; for its even-handed equity never could have so gross an injustice. And yet still further pondering—while I jerked him now and then from between the whale and ship, which would threaten to jam him—still further pondering, I say, I saw that this situation of mine was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes; only, in most cases, he, one way or other, has this Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals. If your banker breaks, you snap; if your apothecary by mistake sends you poison in your pills, you die. True, you may say that, by exceeding caution, you may possibly escape these and the multitudinous other evil chances of life. But handle Queequeg's monkey-robe heedfully as I would, sometimes he jerked it so, that I came very near sliding overboard. Nor could I possibly forget that, do what I would, I only had the management of one end of it. (255-6)

Although Moby-Dick precedes my period of interest by half a century, this scene powerfully dramatizes what one cultural historian has called the nineteenth century's “dawning recognition that social interdependence had fatally weakened individual autonomy” (Lears 34). In recognizing that he “only had the management of one end” of
the rope, Ishmael acknowledges his lack of independence and subsequently reflects on his interdependent relationship—not just with Queequeg, but with what can be seen as a networked world at large.\textsuperscript{11}

Moreover, the monkey-rope provides an excellent example of how fiction writers prior to the modernists tended to approach the concept of interpersonal connectedness: Ishmael and Queequeg’s connection to one another (the rope) is visible and immediate; they are quite literally bound together. For Melville’s audience, as for Ishmael, the monkey-rope is a material object that comes to stand figuratively for the less immediate connections that mark an increasingly networked American society. In effect, Ishmael’s evocative meditation on the subject of the social world’s interconnectedness allows Melville to thematize the networked social organization that modernist narratives more often enact on the level of form. To put this same point another way, I want to argue that whereas Melville embeds some idea of a social network within his protagonist’s consciousness—allowing Ishmael to imagine, if only abstractly, the nature of the world’s interconnectedness—modernist authors more often challenge readers to map social networks cognitively.

To take just one example, contrast Melville’s literal monkey-rope with Henry Blake Fuller’s novel \textit{The Cliff-Dwellers} (1893), which follows several characters more or less immediately connected to the business offices located in one Chicago skyscraper. Approximating the passage I’ve cited from \textit{Moby-Dick}, \textit{The Cliff-Dwellers} thematizes

\textsuperscript{11} Since part of my aim in this dissertation is to consider convergences of literary narrative and social science, I should point out that Melville’s description of Ishmael’s predicament anticipates the commentary of Edward Ross, an American sociologist. Invoking similar forms of social interdependence and vocational specialization, Ross writes in 1905: “Under our present manner of living, how many of my vital interests must I entrust to others! Nowadays the water main is my well, the trolley car my carriage, the banker’s safe my old stocking, the policeman’s billy my fist…” (qtd in Lears 34).
networked sociality; at one point the narrator even poses questions directly to the reader:

How has humanity contrived to endure so well the countless ills of countless ages? Because society has been, in general, loose-knit, so that each unit in it has had room for some individual play. What so increases and intensifies the agonies of today? The fact that society has a closer and denser texture than ever before; its fine-spun meshes bind us and strangle us. (296)

The moment is reminiscent of Ishmael’s rope-inspired meditations: as readers we are urged to reflect on what it means to live in an interdependent world. *The Cliff-Dwellers* does not stop there, however; rather, Fuller’s novel goes on to dramatize some of these “denser binds” in human terms, thus contributing to our sense of the modern social network’s expansiveness and complexity. When one character visits Chicago from the “provinces” of Minnesota, she is happy to find herself “so near to the future husband of the sister of the man who had just presented a letter of introduction to her own brother-in-law. The chain was long, to be sure, and some its links were rather weak—but it served” (30). Significantly, Fuller actually presents this “chain” to readers by quickly listing each of its human nodes; the passage is quite deliberately difficult to follow on first reading. What is more, in most instances *The Cliff-Dwellers* configures intricate, chain-like interconnections among persons *without* giving even the sort of jesting summary provided above. *The Cliff-Dwellers* contains dozens of characters, and Fuller’s readers are most often left to supply the various mediating “chains” on their own.12

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12 In fact, literary scholars interested in the evolutionary functions of storytelling have recently suggested that the social worlds engendered by literary texts exercise readers’ capacity to track complex social domains. According to these accounts, “network stories very likely tap some fundamental human capacities.” “As primates,” Bordwell writes, “we’re social animals and thus sensitive to hierarchy, status, and coalitions…. Our skills in tracking social relationships and surmising what others thing are aroused by nearly all narratives, but we get a real workout in [network narratives]” (196). See also Zunshine’s *Why We Read Fiction*. For a mainstream account of how network stories potentially contribute to audiences’ “social intelligence” (191), see Steven Johnson’s *Everything Bad is Good For You: How Today’s Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter.*
The shift from Melville at mid-century to the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century narratives I investigate in subsequent chapters suggests that the onset of modernism entailed a concurrent shift from metaphorical expressions of networked sociality (the monkey-rope) toward theoretical, technical ones—in effect, toward narrative enactments of rule-bound social networks. Not coincidentally, this trajectory aligns with the historical development of social network analysis. As the network scholar Charles Kadushin observes, the origins of social network analysis can be traced back to that turn-of-the-century moment when “the idea that social relations consisted of webs of affiliations and networks of interaction was turned from a metaphor into a set of specific concepts, theories, and operations” (201). Hence, to the extent that American fiction writers including Fuller, James, Norris, Dos Passos, Hammett, and Chandler not only thematize network constraints but also perform or concretize them on the level of form, their narratives contribute to the very same cultural logic that precipitated the emergence of social network analysis. For this reason, rather than merely using early ideas about social networks to read literary texts, over the course of this study I argue that the formal innovations of modern American fiction and key developments in social network theory were significantly interwoven with each other—occupying opposite ends, one could say, of the same monkey-rope. By studying accounts of network phenomena developed by social scientists in conjunction with treatments of these same phenomena in narrative fiction, I aim to show how literary history and the genealogy of social network studies prove mutually illuminating.13

13 While the historical context I briefly provide in the next section suggests the existence of a common Zeitgeist informing the development of both social network analysis and American literary modernism, I’m ultimately less interested in connecting these two genealogies to any third cause or catalyst than I am in exploring how fiction writers and foundational network thinkers converged on a common set of issues,
Why Then?: Some Historical Context

Literary scholars and cultural historians alike contend that, to Americans of the late nineteenth century, society appeared “more interdependent and interconnected than ever before while the connections between people appear[ed] more invisible and elusive” (Kaplan 43). Indeed, the American *fin de siècle* witnessed increased interconnectedness among persons even as these connections became progressively more mediated: by distance, by technology, by money, by media, by other people. Increasingly industrialized, increasingly urbanized, and increasingly modern, the United States was becoming “a network of intense dependencies,” one that included “vast numbers of people, most of them strangers who will never encounter each other on a face-to-face basis” (Haskell 29). The character of interaction was itself changing: more persons came in contact with more persons, yet in ways that were “pervasively impersonal” (Hofstadter 225). By 1925, the American sociologists Robert Ezra Park and Ernest Burgess proclaimed that modern transportation and communication technologies had “multiplied the opportunities of the individual man for contact and for association with his fellows, but they have made these contacts and associations more
transitory and less stable” (qtd. in Degenne and Forsé 50). Whether speaking over the telephone, bumping into each other at an urban corner, or dealing with each other through the mediations of the capitalist market, interpersonal contact had come to feel less immediate, less intimate, and less “real.”

The resulting paradox was emblematic of the modernist experience: an apprehension of the world as fragmented not despite but precisely because of society’s newly dense network of connections, a web so sprawling that it surpassed the comprehension of any one individual. At the end of the nineteenth century, that is, “a discourse celebrating individuality collided with an ideology of connectedness” (Otis 7). Nowhere was this collision more violent than in the United States, where the individualist ethos has for so long reigned supreme in the cultural imagination. The historian Robert Wiebe has described the cumulative effect of these contradictory impulses as a kind of national existential crisis: “As the network of relations affecting men’s lives each year became more tangled and more distended, Americans in a basic sense no longer knew who or where they were” (42-3). In the American social imaginary, the phenomena that Raymond Williams has termed “knowable communities” were being supplanted by more or less “unknowable” ones; and events that had once seemed thoroughly local, self-contained, and comprehensible “now began to be seen as merely the final links in long chains of causation that stretched off into a murky distance” (Haskell 40).

From one angle, the emergence of the social sciences, which found a particularly receptive audience in the United States, can be read as a compensatory response to just this sense of murkiness. Sociology in general and social network analysis in particular
provided a set of critical tools by which Americans could begin to understand both the
does and the effects of this new, interdependent world order. (In fact, the first
professional organization devoted to the study of sociology was the American Social
Science Association, founded in 1865.) Thus, as scholars of literary modernism have
recently observed, “the widespread ideology of networks that we recognize today are
not the exclusive domain of a digitized society, but… are also part of a trajectory that
reaches back into the earliest decades of the twentieth century” (Beal and Lavin). It
makes a certain intuitive sense that Americans of the modern era were drawn to
network models for conceptualizing the social. Indeed, the logic of networks affords a
view of the world as deeply interconnected, though not centered. Hence even as it
acknowledges the modernist truism that “the centre cannot hold,” the figure of the
network suggests a kind of social unity; it thereby performs an “important mediation of
the period’s impulses toward totalization and dispersal” (Beal and Lavin).

The questions driving sociological inquiry may have changed during the
intervening century, but the concept of the network has only gained in prominence as a
subject for social-scientific (as well as literary) research. By attending to characters’
networked interactions with one another, this dissertation could be said to partake of
the critical “turn” toward what the literary scholar Heather Love has called the twenty-
first century’s “new sociologies of literature” (373). In charting a course for this new
line of research, Love leans heavily on the work of the French sociologist Bruno Latour,
especially his discussion of “actor-network-theory” in Reassembling the Social (2005).
Actor-network-theory aims to imagine a more pragmatic, descriptive, and observation-
based sociology, one capable of avoiding the wizened debate over which phenomenon
offers more explanatory power: actor or system. Focusing “neither on individual agency nor on deep social structure,” actor-network-theory eschews the hunt for “underlying drives or essences” in favor of examining “gestures, traces, and activities” (375). These operations collectively comprise what Latour calls the “assembly” of the social, and his prevailing model for this assembly is textual—even literary. As Love explains, Latour explores “the potential of literature to account for the complexities of social life,” even as his work maintains “little time for traditional human categories of experience, consciousness, and motivation” (375). At first this seems to be something of a paradox: after all, what is more “literary” than “experience, consciousness, and motivation”? For Latour, however, the force of literature stems from its unique capacity to “trace networks” (378). Latour even implores social scientists to be “as disciplined, as enslaved by reality, as obsessed by textual quality, as good writers can be” (Reassembling 126). By staging this convergence of sociology and literature, Latour’s actor-network-theory—and the modes of literary criticism that have recently sought to draw on it—help set the parameters for my own methodology, which (as I now go on to explain) seeks to investigate and describe points of convergence between modern American fiction and foundational network research.

Why Now?: Network Analysis and Methodology

Love’s thesis about the “new sociologies of literature” speaks to a methodological tension at the center of my dissertation. As the bi-focal nature of this introduction suggests, Ties That Bind aims to balance formal with historical and cultural approaches to literary analysis. This balancing act is, admittedly, easier said than done. But in attempting to integrate (1) a study of the formal innovations associated with networks
in modern American fiction with (2) work on the origins and early development of social network analysis, my research complements some current trends in literary studies.

One of these trends has been dubbed the “New” or “Neo-” Formalism. Differentiating New Formalism from its “old” formalist predecessors—particularly New Criticism, which they regard as overly hermetic—scholars associated with the New Formalism have expressed an aim “to show how literary forms matter in the social world” by combining an “attentiveness to the workings of aesthetic form” with “the political and historical impulses of cultural studies” (Levine and Ortiz-Robles 3). Taking its cue from the Marxist tradition, which tends to view form as ideology, New Formalism strives “to bridge the gap between intrinsic and extrinsic criticism, historicist and formalist models of reading” (7). But unlike Marxist critics, who ultimately read form symptomatically—by exploring how form signifies apart from or despite authorial intent—the New Formalists instead see writers as “deliberately deploying literary forms to engage in self-conscious political and social projects” (5, emphasis in the original).

It is tempting to describe this “new” socially- or sociologically-conscious formalism, then, as a happy reunion: a kind of Prodigal Son tale in which the House of Cultural Studies and Historicisms throws open its doors to welcome back the stubborn heir Form, finally returned after so many years out there doing God-knows-what. At the same time, a different but associated reconciliation is taking place within the domain of narrative theory, as narratologists have increasingly begun opening their research to “methodological, thematic, and contextual influences from outside” (Alber and

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14 For an introduction to New Formalism, see Levine and Ortiz-Robles’s introduction to Narrative Middles; see also Levine’s “Strategic Formalism” and Marjorie Levinson’s “What is New Formalism?”
Following David Herman’s coinage of the term, this set of critical practices has come to be known as “postclassical narratology.” Broadly speaking, postclassical narratology replaces “classical narratology’s aim to provide a ‘poetics of fiction’” with the more adaptable practice of “putting the analytical toolbox to interpretive use” (Alber and Fludernik 6). Concurrent with the growth of interest in New Formalism, then, narrative theory has seen the rise of historical, context-sensitive approaches to stories of all sorts, a mode of inquiry that foregrounds “the question of narrative’s function in social, historical, ideological, or psychological” domains (Alber and Fludernik 22).

It seems to me that New Formalism and postclassical narratology express the same impulse—a desire for a more holistic criticism, a methodology capable of re-integrating form and content, or structure and history—from opposite sides of these hoary divides. Indeed, the two fields stand to complement and sharpen each other: postclassical narratology can help New Formalism to achieve finer-grained analyses of texts’ formal features, even as New Formalism can assist postclassical narratology in answering “so what?” questions by clarifying the socio-cultural stakes of narratological insights. Recruiting literary configurations of social networks as a useful starting point for exactly this kind of project, Ties That Bind stresses that a study of American modernism can illuminate contemporaneous developments in social network theory, and not just vice versa. The stakes of this investigation are thus two-fold: while ideas from narrative theory will clarify the forms and functions of social networks in the particular

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15 For an introduction to postclassical narratology, see David Herman’s “Scripts, Sequences, and Stories: Elements of a Postclassical Narratology” as well as his introduction to Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis. See also Postclassical Narratology: Approaches and Analyses, eds., Jan Alber and Monika Fludernik.
stories under examination, close analysis of these fictional texts will conversely underscore how ideas from narrative theory—about plot, space, theme, and especially character—need to be grounded in particular historical, cultural, and intellectual contexts. If, as Lubomír Doležel contends, “the semantics of narrative is, at its core, the semantics of interaction,” then exploring how American writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries imagined “interaction”—particularly in the context of an emergent network science—will also help us better to understand the narrative plots and multi-character configurations typical of this period (97).

Outline of the Chapters

Each chapter that follows provides a case study in which I read specific works of American fiction alongside pivotal moments in the genealogy of social network analysis. My framework operates from the premise that certain signal developments in the history of network analysis are more salient for some authors/works of fiction than others, and vice versa. To be sure, there are other ways of matching developments in social network theory with the particular texts under consideration. One could imagine, say, a study that explores Frank Norris’s The Octopus in the context of John Atkinson Hobson’s turn-of-the-century work on “corporate interlocks” (= the “links of individuals to companies”) (Freeman 19); or that investigates John Dos Passos’s fiction vis-à-vis the groundbreaking research on “clique” membership and social stratification begun at Harvard in the 1920s (Freeman 43). In Ties That Bind, I pursue those instances of convergence that seem particularly relevant given the formal profile and thematic concerns of my literary case studies.
Chapter 1, “The link had snapped’: Henry James and the Emergence of Social Network Theory,” examines Henry James’s fiction within the context of the sociologist Georg Simmel’s contemporaneous work on interpersonal dyads and triads, often cited as the originating point for social network studies. I suggest that James’s fiction dramatizes what network theorists building on Simmel’s scholarship have come to call the “principle of triadic closure,” which holds that “two strangers who possess a mutual friend will tend to become acquainted in time.” In “The Friends of the Friends” (1896)—perhaps the most egregiously understudied of James’s short tales—the narrator’s increasingly frantic efforts to keep her two friends apart get stymied by nothing less than the insuperable logic of triadic closure. For its part, The Princess Casamassima (1886) represents this same sociological process but on a much grander (and more complex) scale. As in “The Friends of the Friends,” James connects the tragedy at the end of the narrative—here Hyacinth Robinson’s suicide—with his protagonist’s particular position in an evolving network. Indeed, the novel implies that it is precisely the contiguity of the modern social world—the way each of Hyacinth’s acquaintances, both “high” and “low,” are linked in one grand chain—which results in his death.

In each of these works, James engages both formally and thematically with the “problem” of social interconnectedness, especially the self-perpetuating nature of mutual acquaintanceship as theorized by Simmel. Both “The Friends of the Friends” and The Princess Casamassima dramatize the social and psychological consequences attached with specific network dynamics, and each narrative equates the development of a social network with the downfall of the protagonist. Thus, reading James’s fiction in the
context of an emergent social network theory is a fruitful endeavor because James’s foregrounding of sociological law or principle stands in direct contrast to literary scholars’ typical characterization of network-oriented narratives as being driven primarily by coincidence, for example, through “chance” meetings. In this sense, James not only emphasizes social networks in his fiction, but even more, converging with Simmel’s rule-focused sociology, enacts on the level of form something like an actual network theory.

In chapter 2, “The Mind of the World: Imaginative Contact in Frank Norris’s Wheat Novels,” I examine manifestations of what the narrative theorist Alan Palmer refers to as “the social mind” in *The Octopus* (1901) and *The Pit* (1903), the two completed novels in Norris’s unfinished “Epic of the Wheat” trilogy. Pursuing the same line of inquiry as chapter 1, I explore how these narratives’ techniques and thematic foci help illuminate issues that were also of concern to founding network theorists, and vice versa. Rather than elaborating complex paths of mutually acquainted persons, à la James, Frank Norris’s fiction purports to show how, as one self-described “psychic philosopher” of the era put it, “mind is in connection with all other mind” (Bray 80). Tapping into philosophies of mind emergent during his epoch—including period discourses of telepathic communication and theories about the existence of a densely interconnected “mind of the world”—Norris configures his characters as participants in far-reaching and powerfully determinative intermental networks. Suggesting that literalized forms of intermentality provide a kind of spiritual communion among otherwise isolated or remote individuals, Norris attempts to illustrate in the Wheat novels how all people are connected to one another based on their relative positions
within a global mental whole. Thus, far from being disinterested in the mental lives of his characters, as some accounts of his naturalism have suggested, Norris actually represents cognition as a vital point of contact in an increasingly distended world.

My point of entry into The Octopus is Vanamee, a telepathic shepherd whose inclusion in the novel has long been a source of critical debate. In my analysis of The Pit, I focus on Norris’s configuration of large-scale intermentality by considering the downfall of speculator Curtis Jadwin (another character said to have “sixth sense”). I contend that the striking contrast between these two characters speaks to the inversely related emphases of the two novels: The Octopus stresses the actual interconnection of minds that might at first seem dissociated, whereas The Pit underscores how literalized (or otherwise capacious) intersubjectivity can lead to a dissociation from ostensibly proximate minds. Converging with the work of psychical researchers, philosophers of mind, and network scholars such as Cooley, who claimed that “social experience is a matter of imaginative, not of material, contacts,” Norris ultimately represents the mind as socially efficacious—in fact, as the very “Force” that binds the world together.

In chapter 3, “Who’s Who in Dos Passos: Sociometry and the U.S.A. Trilogy,” I demonstrate how the three novels of John Dos Passos’s U.S.A. trilogy (The 42nd Parallel, 1930; Nineteen Nineteen, 1932; The Big Money, 1936) explore many of the same issues pertinent to sociometry, a network-analytic procedure that reached its zenith in the 1930s. Founded by the psychiatrist Jacob Moreno, sociometry represented the first sustained attempt to practice social network analysis using quantitative methods. Moreno’s methodology gained national prominence with the publication of his book Who Shall Survive? A New Approach to the Problem of Human Interrelations (1934). In that
volume Moreno also introduced the concept of the “sociogram”: a graphic representation of interpersonal connections. By viewing geographic space primarily in terms of a human network of relations that might be visualized graphically, and by attending to how an individual’s quantifiable “acquaintanceship volume” determines his or her social status, sociometric discourses frame modernity’s networked social organization as a profoundly determinative force in the lives of individuals.

Converging on this same set of issues, albeit via the medium of narrative fiction, Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* trilogy demonstrates what I call a “sociometric aesthetic.” Indeed, Dos Passos’s formal techniques—in particular, his extensive use of what Donald Pizer has called the “interlacing” of characters—encourage readers to visualize the nation as a massive sociogram, one featuring dynamic, and sometimes chaotic, networks of interaction. Moreover, like Moreno, who promised that sociometric procedures would someday allow sociologists to chart the social networks of “a whole city or a whole nation,” Dos Passos focuses his audience’s attention on systems for conceptualizing the more or less fleeting (yet quantifiable) contacts of modern life. And like sociometry, which framed empirical sociology as having the potential to advance freedom for the individual, Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* trilogy suggests that the analysis of modern networks—even beyond any one political program—is a viable starting point for reform.

Thus, examining the convergence between Dos Passos and Moreno is additionally important because it brings clarity to Dos Passos’s secure-but-marginalized place in the literary canon as well as the polarized critical responses to his work. Demonstrating how Moreno’s notion of “acquaintanceship volume” anticipates the anthropologist Robin Dunbar’s theory regarding the cognitive limitations on the
number of acquaintances one person can maintain, I show how Dos Passos engages with this issue on two distinct levels. In effect, Dos Passos both dramatizes within the storyworld of *U.S.A.* the cognitive strain wrought by social multiplicity (by introducing readers to characters who are more or less confused by their position in the social world) and enacts this same cognitive strain through formal means (by including so many characters, and combining them so intricately, that it becomes difficult for readers to keep track). The tension between these levels leads to a particularly thorny reading experience: *U.S.A.* at once challenges its audience to navigate the novels’ complex networks—and associates any degree of success in this endeavor with the hollow forms of networking practiced by capitalist oppressors like the propagandist J. Ward Moorehouse.

If the development of sociometry both illuminates and is illuminated by Dos Passos’s invention of a distinctly modern literary aesthetic, chapter 4, “Network Noir: Multi-Character Configuration in the American Hard-Boiled Detective Novel,” reveals the crucial role of social-network configurations in distinguishing the American hard-boiled detective story from the British whodunit. In the chapter’s first section, I examine the problematic status of the individual in Dashiell Hammett’s *Red Harvest* (1929). I propose that *Red Harvest*’s densely interconnected social world becomes, paradoxically, a significant vehicle for individual characterization, as Hammett’s novel conflates knowing “who is who” with knowing “who is associated with whom.” In *Red Harvest*, that is, the hard-boiled genre’s oft-cited metonymical logic extends to metonymic relations among fictional characters, such that Hammett’s narrative equates
the work of detection with network-analytic practices similar to those discussed in chapters 1, 2, and 3.

Chapter 4’s second half explores how Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* (1939) dramatizes the sometimes irresolvable complexities of modern social networks. Here I aim to revise the prevailing notion that a distinguishing characteristic of American hard-boiled detective fiction is its pessimistic vision of how modernity precipitates social fragmentation and alienation. In fact, Chandler crafts the plot of *The Big Sleep* in a manner that configures—as well as elucidates the wide-ranging consequences of—the social structure that network theorists have more recently called a “small world.” Simultaneously expansive and densely clustered, a “small world” is defined as a social network “within which virtually anyone can be connected to anyone else” via a relatively short number of intermediary persons (Watts 82). I use an analysis of *The Big Sleep’s* “small world” to contend that, far from being preoccupied with social fragmentation, Chandler actually reserves his most pointed critique for particular forms of modern interconnection: the binding of people together via “hidden” relations that are as difficult to perceive as they are nefarious.

Attending to Hammett’s and Chandler’s intricate treatments of character networks illuminates both the narrative techniques associated with the hard-boiled novel and the genealogy of social network analysis as it approached the mid-century. By enacting social complexity on the level of form, each of these debut novels encourages readers to participate in a “game” of social network analysis. Indeed, by making the audience’s engagement with convoluted networks a central part of the reading experience, Hammett and Chandler systematically undermine readers’ attempts
to assign individual guilt, an endeavor fundamental to other forms of detective fiction (including the whodunit). Anticipating the popularization of small-world theory as a prevailing model for understanding social organization in the twentieth century, both narratives ultimately represent detection itself as a form of social network analysis.

I conclude with a brief coda titled “Basic Cables,” in which I offer a few reflections on how my methodology might contribute to future research into the convergence of network analysis and narrative fiction, across a range of storytelling media. Specifically, I argue that nowhere has the ascendance of network-analytic frameworks become more fully integrated into narrative form than in the contemporary American television serials. In comparison to the works of modern American fiction I examine in chapters 1–4, contemporary television narratives are uniquely suited, through the affordances of visual media, to provide viewers with graphic representations of social networks. These network visualizations, or sociograms, have in fact become a recurring feature of contemporary serialized television dramas, including Homeland, Rubicon, The Wire, and Mad Men.

While television storytellers enlist sociograms for a variety of effects, what is most remarkable about this trope is how fully the tools of network analysis have been absorbed into the storyworlds of these narratives, such that they have tangible effects on characters and plots. In The Wire, a show that Anmol Chaddha and William Julius Wilson (two sociologists) have described as capturing the “complexity of urban life in ways that have eluded many social scientists,” the sociogram comes to viewers in the form of a large corkboard onto which detectives map a vast web of criminal interrelations (166). Functioning like an embedded image of the audience’s own
cognitive activity, this graph evolves throughout the series, as the detectives continually add to, subtract from, and rearrange the network under consideration.

In a similar fashion, Mad Men uses the figure of the sociogram to provide viewers with a powerful instance of *mise en abyme*—in effect, a tele-visual metaphor for the very process of engaging with serial narrative itself. This technique comes to the fore in one highly dramatic scene from Mad Men, in which the denizens of the advertising agency Sterling Cooper are forced to confront their positions on a newly proposed organization chart—that is, to see themselves through a lens provided by social network analysis. My claim is that the way contemporary television narratives have begun regularly embedding the very instruments of network analysis into their storyworlds affirms the ascendancy of social network studies in the digital age. Indeed, the proliferation of sociograms in television serials suggests that the network approach to character has become a dominant mode of engagement with narratives of this kind, and, moreover, indicates that the relationship between narrative innovation and network science continues unabated in the twenty-first century.
Chapter 1

“The link had snapped”: Henry James and the Emergence of Social Network Theory

“Every one has had friends it has seemed a happy thought to bring together, and every one remembers that his happiest thoughts have not been his greatest successes…”

--- from James’s “The Friends of the Friends” (331)

“Their acquaintance would be a solid friendship or it would be nothing at all.”

--- from James’s The Princess Casamassima (326)

An Introduction to this Chapter

In his 1907 preface to the New York Edition of Roderick Hudson, Henry James penned what would become one of his most famous critical proclamations in a career hardly short of them:

Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so. He is in the perpetual predicament that the continuity of things is the whole matter, for him, of comedy and tragedy; that this continuity is never, by the space of an instant or an inch, broken, and that, to do anything at all, he has at once intensely to consult and intensely to ignore it… (vii)

Literary scholars have typically read this passage as one of James’s many testaments to the primacy of aesthetic form, or as a distillation of James’s belief that art “enacts the formal illusion of life’s limitability” (Hale 80). From this perspective, novelistic form simultaneously delimits readers’ experience of the real (all books must stop somewhere) and frames the partial experience that has been selected for representation as totalizing. In other words, if it is “really” the case that “relations stop nowhere,” James must be content to settle for a narrative in which “they shall happily appear to do so.”
Although critics have enlisted this familiar passage in the service of a wide range of readings, it remains the case that James’s meditation on how “relations stop nowhere” has almost always been read in the context of a synchronic, spatially oriented understanding of this “continuity of things.” Surely much of James’s diction in the passage—for instance, his gesture toward the artist’s “geometry”—reinforces a synchronic reading: the novelist’s project is to frame, hence set spatial parameters for, continuous relations. However, it seems equally as clear that James regarded such relations as functioning in time as well as in space; that for him the “predicament” of being a novelist included having to deal with not only synchronic but also diachronic continuities. James claims, after all, that “continuity is never, by the space of an instant or an inch, broken” (my emphasis). Thus, while critics have focused so far on how “relations stop nowhere” at any given moment, in this chapter I take up the possibility that for James the temporal continuity of relations was equally as suggestive, particularly when those relations are social or interpersonal ones.\(^{16}\)

The present chapter situates James’s fiction in the context of late nineteenth-century sociology, especially the origins of social network studies. As I will demonstrate via analyses of his novel *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) and his short story “The Friends of the Friends” (1896), James was inclined to view the field of social relations as fundamentally dynamic in nature. Both formally and thematically, his fiction emphasizes how interpersonal networks evolve through time according to

\(^{16}\) For instance, examining James’s novella *In the Cage* (1898), Richard Menke suggests that James was the innovator of a kind of “telegraphic realism,” a mode that, according to Menke, renders space as a vast “network of connections” (987). By prioritizing issues of space over issues of time critics tend to overlook how thoroughly James’s fiction meditates on the manner in which these connections originate and evolve—as opposed to simply existing. As this chapter aims to demonstrate, however, James’s fiction explores how such modernist “circuitry” gets built person-by-person, node-by-node, and moment-by-moment.
principles that were then being identified in a different discourse register: that of the emergent field of social network theory.

Examined in tandem, “The Friends of the Friends” and *The Princess Casamassima* provide excellent starting points for this kind of analysis. In “The Friends of the Friends,” which dramatizes the bizarrely protracted process by which two individuals sharing a mutual acquaintance finally come to meet, James explores how the field of social relations tends toward (1) ever more numerous contacts (more acquaintances beget more acquaintances) and also (2) more direct forms of contact (mutual acquaintanceship begets unmediated, face-to-face meetings). As if configuring in fiction a kind of sociological case study, “The Friends of the Friends” investigates how, and with what consequences, strangers become “friends of friends” and “friends of friends” become friends of each other. For its part, *The Princess Casamassima* represents this same process but on a much grander (and more complex) scale: the novel follows a young bookbinder named Hyacinth Robinson as his roster of acquaintances expands, one person at a time. Here my argument is that James connects the tragedy at the end of the novel—Hyacinth’s suicide—with his protagonist’s particular positionality within the network. Hyacinth comes to function as the hub or bridge connecting two distinct social classes, as his acquaintanceship with the eponymous Princess is the crucial link holding together the novel’s elaborate person-to-person chains. In each of these narratives, James depicts how sociological processes have psychological effects, and how the development of a social network leads to the downfall of the individual protagonist.

In the section that follows, I outline some of the foundational principles of social network analysis, particularly the pioneering work of the German sociologist Georg
Simmel, James’s contemporary. I then turn to close readings of “The Friends of the Friends” and *The Princess Casamassima* to explore how and to what effect James’s fiction engages imaginatively with these principles.

**Georg Simmel and the Study of Network Dynamics**

While modern social network theory could reasonably be said to have multiple points of origin, contemporary network researchers most often look to the philosopher and early sociologist Georg Simmel, sometimes called the “first sociologist of modernity,” as the founder of their discipline (Frisby, *Georg Simmel* 27). A prolific scholar throughout the 1890s and into the first decades of the 20th century, Simmel is perhaps best known today for his studies of urban subjectivity, a topic he takes up, for instance, in his widely anthologized essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903).  

What often goes remarked in examinations of Simmel’s scholarship, however, is his propensity to connect his analyses of city life with his broader interest in what he called the social world’s “web of group affiliations” (Allan 160). Challenging the conventional wisdom of his era, Simmel suggested that “society” should be regarded neither as an

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17 I have not found the “smoking gun” that would prove Henry James had read his contemporary Simmel’s work, so I cannot go so far as to make the claim that James had Simmel specifically in mind during his writing of “The Friends of the Friends.” Still, while my argument in this essay does not depend on James having read Simmel, there is plenty of circumstantial evidence to suggest that James would have been familiar with Simmel’s distinct brand of sociology. According to David Frisby, Simmel’s work “exceeded the availability of the work of any other European sociologist” of his period (qtd. in Spykman ix). In fact, thirteen articles authored by Simmel were published in English between the years 1893 and 1910; several of these appeared in American periodicals, including *The American Journal of Sociology* and *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. That William James’s philosophical and psychological work overlaps in certain respects with Simmel’s sociology further adds to the likelihood that Henry James would have had some familiarity with Simmel. In the late 1880s, George Santayana wrote to William James that he had “discovered a Privat Dozent, Dr. Simmel, whose lectures interest me very much”; he went on to tell James that Simmel was “the brightest man in Europe” (qtd. in Levine, Carter, Gorman 815n.4). In 1904, William James would himself refer to Simmel as “a humanist of the most radical sort” (863). Meanwhile, Simmel’s and William James’s writings were beginning to be thought about in conjunction with one another; for example, Dickinson Miller’s article “Professor James on Philosophical Method,” published in *The Philosophical Review* in 1899, briefly puts the two thinkers into dialogue with each other.
“autonomous entity” nor as a wide-scale field of “isolated atoms” (i.e., individual persons), but rather as a matrix of reciprocal relationships evolving through perpetual interaction (Frisby, *Georg Simmel* 36). Far from a reified institution that might be studied in and of itself, “society” signified for Simmel “only the name of the sum of [social] interactions,” or the cumulative dealings of a whole “constellation of individuals” (qtd. in Frisby, *Simmel and Since* 8).

To elucidate this idea, Simmel turned to the metaphor—one familiar to those who study literary “texts”—of weaving, or the thread. Stressing that the monadic subject should be viewed as “but the crossing-point of social threads” (qtd. in Frisby, *Simmel and Since* 40), Simmel argued that then-contemporary sociology must take greater “consideration of the delicate, invisible threads that are woven between one person and another” (qtd. in Frisby, *Simmel and Since* 10). He subsequently used this conceit to illustrate that society constitutes less a static formation than a dynamic process:

> On every day, at every hour, such threads are spun, are allowed to fall, are taken up again, replaced by others, intertwined with others. Here lie the interactions… between the atoms of society which bear the whole tenacity and elasticity, the whole colorfulness and unity of this so evident and so puzzling life of society. (qtd. in Frisby, *Simmel and Since* 10-11)

For Simmel, then, society is fundamentally protean: a web of relations that evolves through the perpetual tying or cutting of interpersonal “threads.” Hence Simmel functioned as a pivotal figure in the emergence of social network theory largely because his turn-of-the-century scholarship laid the groundwork for further research not just on the structure but also the dynamics of social networks.
At the heart of Simmel’s nascent theory of network dynamics is his juxtaposition of dyadic (two-person) with triadic (three-person) relations. More than merely contrasting these two structures, Simmel aims to illuminate the process by which dyads become triads. This innovative point of focus—on the creation of the triad—further explains why contemporary network researchers situate Simmel as an intellectual founder of their discipline. As Charles Kadushin writes in *Understanding Social Networks* (2012), “network analysis really begins with triads” (22); in fact, the triad can be considered “the most elementary network” (23). Emphasizing that triads (unlike the dyads from which they’ve evolved) are characterized by a constant threat of instability, Simmel claims that “no matter how close a triad may be, there is always the occasion on which two of the three members regard the third as an intruder” (*Sociology* 135). He explains his reasoning:

For among three elements, each one operates as an intermediary between the other two, exhibiting the twofold function of such an organ, which is to unite and to separate. Where three elements, A, B, C, constitute a group, there is, in addition to the direct relationship between A and B, for instance, their indirect one, which is derived from their common relation to C. (*Sociology* 135)

To paraphrase Simmel, the indirect or mediated relations afforded by triadic structures inevitably affect the direct relations also located therein. In other words, Person A’s relationship with Person B cannot but be altered by their mutual acquaintanceship with Person C.

This line of thinking is central to modern social network theory, which assumes that the local ties between persons are deeply influenced by their relative position within a wider network of relations. However, as Simmel himself observes, the nature of this influence varies widely: while a triad’s indirect relation “may strengthen the
direct one,” it “may also disturb it” (*Sociology* 135). Sometimes the addition of Person C to the dyad A-B reinforces the strength of that dyadic bond, but there are other instances when three really does become, as the cliché suggests, “a crowd.” In either case, whether the addition of a third party proves positively or negatively determinative, Simmel refers to this development as “the expansion of the dyad,” and in his view this metamorphosis constitutes the most significant process in the formation of society *qua* society. Indeed, for Simmel and his intellectual descendants—and also, as I will demonstrate, for Henry James—this phenomenon of the “expansion of the dyad” has far-reaching implications for social networks and the individual persons within them.18

Although Simmel does not explicitly coin the term, his notion that society develops through the perpetual completion of triads anticipates what contemporary social network theorists now refer to as the “principle of triadic closure.” This principle holds that “two strangers who possess a mutual friend will tend to become acquainted in time” (Watts 58). Alternately, the principle of triadic closure can be stated as the following formula: “If A knows B and B knows C, then C is much more likely to know A than just anyone picked at random” (Watts 60). By increasing the odds that two persons acquainted with a common third party will themselves become acquainted, the principle of triadic closure reinforces the important fact that changes in social networks

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18 By claiming that a three-person acquaintanceship structure is inherently different than a two-person structure, Simmel radically suggests that *numbers* largely determine the *nature* of relations, or that, in the social world, form largely determines content. It comes as no surprise, then, that mine is not the first study to find parallels between Simmel’s work and that of Henry James. Generally considered the “founder of ‘Formal Sociology,’” Simmel has been read as offering a sociological equivalent to James’s engagement with literary formalism (Allan 165). Ross Posnock, for example, has argued that both Simmel and James believed in “the primacy of form and representation as constraints that give meaning to human conduct” (97). In contrast to such studies, however, my own argument in this chapter is less concerned with elucidating the correlation between Simmel’s sociology and James’s aesthetics than with making the claim that James’s work was itself profoundly sociological. In my view, scholars have not yet turned enough attention to the way in which James uses narrative fiction to explore some of the very issues that Simmel was likewise exploring via nascent sociological methods.
do not happen completely, or even mostly, at random. Rather, new relationships tend to develop from the pre-existing structure, according to the dictates of a rule-bound system: individual C meets individual A not by chance, but instead because individual B, who already knows both, functions as an intermediary. As the network theorist Duncan Watts puts it, “Not all potential relationships are equally likely. Who I know tomorrow depends at least to some extent on who I know today” (72).

For its own part, the principle of triadic closure complements social network theory’s more general concept of “clustering,” or the idea that an individual’s acquaintances have a propensity also to be acquaintances of each other (Watts 40). The network theorist Mark Newman, striking a rather Jamesian note, has defined clustering as the notion that “the friend of your friend is also likely to be your friend” (“Structure” 183). As a particular form of clustering, then, triadic closure helps to explain how and why social networks evolve over a given period of time: that unclosed triads tend toward closure precipitates increased connectivity within the whole of a networked system.

But why, one might ask, do triads tend toward closure? Why does social clustering occur in the first place? While Simmel approaches this question only indirectly, social scientists building on his work have more recently suggested that the answer has to do with relational “balance,” which “functions as a deep-seated goal of human interaction” (Kilduff and Corley 214). Turning to principles associated with Gestalt psychology, these scholars suggest that unbalanced social structures tend to produce anxiety, conflict, and interpersonal dissonance. The quintessential example of an unbalanced social structure is the “unclosed” triad: the asymmetrical configuration
wherein “individual A has strong links to B and C but the latter two share none” (Degenne and Forsé 198). (Here the visually inclined might picture a triangle with one missing edge.) The social scientist Mark Granovetter has gone so far as to refer to the unclosed triad as “the forbidden triad.” (Despite the appeal of sounding like the title of a wildly improbable Indiana Jones tale, this term has not yet entered the popular lexicon.) Such triads are “forbidden,” Granovetter clarifies, only in the sense that they are “unnatural and improbable.” They are improbable because, according to the principle of triadic closure, “a triad with two strong links is very conducive to developing a third strong link” (qtd. in Degenne and Forsé 198-9).

Forbidden triads, then, are triads that resist, at least temporarily, the principle of triadic closure. Predictably, such interpersonal triangles become increasingly unstable as tie strength increases between the two members who do share a direct connection. To conceptualize this latter point, consider the example of a marriage in which Spouse A and Spouse B could be said to share a strong tie. The principle of triadic closure suggests that the stronger Spouse B’s link to a third party—say, Person C—the more social pressure exerted on Spouse A and Person C also to form a link of comparatively strong proportion. If Spouse B maintains a close friendship with Person C yet Spouse A has never even met Person C, this configuration would constitute an example of the “forbidden triad”—and, indeed, it’s not difficult to imagine the various forms of social (not to mention narrative) tension potentially resulting from this kind of arrangement.

My reading of Henry James’s “The Friends of the Friends,” to which I turn in the next section, contends that James’s odd tale stages formally some of the very network dynamics with which Simmel was engaged theoretically during the same
period. In performing a narrative enactment of the process that Simmel called the “expansion of the dyad,” James’s story explores the phenomenon of triadic closure in relation to issues that recur in his work—issues including sexuality, psychology, and individual autonomy. Underscoring the power of triadic closure, and of emergent social-network principles more generally, James’s story presents readers with a character-narrator who actively attempts to preserve a forbidden triad—that is, to prevent triadic closure from occurring—and fails spectacularly. Hence even as reading “The Friends of the Friends” in the context of Simmel’s network theory allows us to appreciate the sophistication of James’s sociological insights in the tale, the way that James engages with triadic closure helps shed light on network phenomena of interest to Simmel and many network scientists that were to follow him.

Narrating the Forbidden Triad: “The Friends of the Friends”

In an entry of his notebook dated 21 December 1895, Henry James describes his idea for

a scrap of a tale, or a scrap of a fantasy, of 2 persons who have constantly heard of each other, constantly been near each other, constantly missed each other. They have never met—though repeatedly told that they ought to know each other, etc.: the sort of thing that so often happens. They must be, I suppose, a man and a woman. At last it has been arranged—they really are to meet: arranged by some 3rd person, the friend of each, who takes an interest in their meeting—sympathetically—officiously, blunderingly, whatever it may be: as also so often happens. (Notebooks 231, emphases in the original)

This “germ” would culminate in the magazine publication, in May 1896, of James’s short story “The Way it Came,” which James subsequently re-titled “The Friends of the

19 “The Way it Came” originally appeared in the Chap Book (1 May 1896) and in Chapman’s Magazine of Fiction (May 1896).
Friends” for its inclusion in the New York Edition. Under neither designation has the narrative received much attention since its publication more than a century ago. Literary critics have generally regarded “The Friends of the Friends” as an “unimportant tale” (Putt 395), and James himself admitted, in his notebook, to thinking the tale “a rather thin little fantasy” (231).

Despite the fact that “The Friends of the Friends” has been relegated to the status of “minor work,” reading James’s tale alongside Simmel’s foundational theorizations of dyads and triads yields a much higher estimation of the story’s project and its achievement. Particularly now, with the proliferation of social-network media and network-oriented discourses in the twenty-first century, “The Friends of the Friends” demands renewed attention. (Surely, one would be challenged to think of a title in all of American literature that sounds so much like a link on Facebook.)

Published during the same period that witnessed the historical emergence of social network theory, “The Friends of the Friends” illustrates how particular network dynamics affect—here tragically—the individual person. Moreover, as will become clear in what follows, one of the narrative’s most fascinating (and controversial) qualities is its sudden shift, approximately two-thirds of the way in, away from psychological realism and toward the Gothic. Here, too, reading James’s narrative in

20 Patricia Laurence has suggested that the changed title enhances readers’ sense of what she calls “psychological vertigo” (119), since calling the story “The Friends of the Friends” leaves open the question of which characters in the story constitute the “friends” and which constitute the original friends’ friends (that is, the “friends of the friends”). While I agree with Laurence’s broader point regarding the elusiveness of this title, I would suggest that the dynamic she describes might just as easily be termed “sociological vertigo,” since James’s narrative, as this chapter will show, seems at least equally concerned with the ever-evolving nature of social relations. In other words, I think it likely that James altered the title so as better to emphasize what I maintain is the narrative’s pronounced sociological orientation; more so than “The Way it Came,” “The Friends of the Friends” foregrounds the story’s exploration of networked relationship structures, the chain-like continuities connecting friend with friend—and their friends with each other.
conjunction with Simmel’s network model proves useful. Indeed, while network theory does not resolve the story’s ambiguous ending—which provocatively raises the possibility that a supernatural haunting has occurred—it does allow us to see James’s sudden swerve into the territory of the Gothic as flowing logically from his project to explore the power of particular network processes, namely triadic closure.

Meetings and introductions often function as crucial plot points in James’s fiction, and nowhere is this more conspicuously the case than in “The Friends of the Friends,” the whole plot of which revolves around a meeting—or, rather, around the mere possibility of a meeting. “The motif of meeting,” Mikhail Bakhtin claims in his essay on the chronotope, is “one of the most universal motifs… in literature” (98). Particularly in narrative, Bakhtin observes, it is often the case that a meeting “fulfills architectonic functions: it can serve as an opening, sometimes as a culmination, even as a denouement (a finale) of the plot” (98). By focusing so intently on a single meeting, “The Friends of the Friends” pushes Bakhtin’s motif of meeting to the edge of parody.

The story is narrated by an unnamed female character who relates the tale of her two friends: one a man, the other a woman, both also unnamed. By all accounts these two individuals should have met long ago, yet they continually fail to cross one another’s path. Sometimes pensive, at other times patently absurd, James’s tale recounts the “several years” during which the narrator’s two friends attempt, unsuccessfully, to make one another’s acquaintance (333). Then the twist: when the female friend dies suddenly at the end of the narrative, we learn that she and the male friend have met one another, that each of these characters goes unnamed extends the narrative’s resemblance to a kind of scientifically “objective” sociological experiment. Readers might even be put in mind of Simmel’s descriptions of the hypothetical individuals “A, B, C…” I strive for clarity in the remainder of this chapter by referring to the three principal characters in James’s tale as (1) “the narrator,” (2) “the female friend,” and (3) “the male friend” or “the fiancé” as consistently as possible.

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albeit under decidedly bizarre, and possibly supernatural, circumstances. The narrator’s recounting of her two friends’ vexed journey from non-acquaintanceship to acquaintanceship comprises the bulk of the narrative, and in this sense James’s story, by dramatizing the very procedure by which an unclosed (“forbidden”) triad becomes a closed one, takes as its principal subject the same “expansion of the dyad” that Simmel was elsewhere conceptualizing.

Converging with Simmel’s foundational theories about networked relations, and, moreover, anticipating advances in network research that would build on Simmel’s scholarship, the plot of “The Friends of the Friends” reveals points of overlap between James’s fiction and then-contemporary social-scientific discourses. From the beginning of the tale, the narrator’s emphasis—hence James’s, too—falls upon (1) the process by which the narrator’s two friends come to know one another; (2) the agent or mode of agency responsible for setting this process in motion; and (3) the social and psychological consequences of their meeting, especially on the person of the narrator. In other words, “The Friends of the Friends” takes up the interconnected questions of how, why, and with what consequences the two friends finally make contact. The narrator opens her story as follows:

I know perfectly of course that I brought it on myself; but that doesn’t make it any better. I was the first to speak of her to him—he had never even heard her mentioned. Even if I had happened not to speak some one else would have made up for it: I tried afterwards to find comfort in that reflection. (325)

As she reflects on the dramatic events that have instigated her narration, the narrator initially holds herself accountable for all that has transpired, since she had been the first to mention her two friends to one another. Yet while the narrator castigates herself for drawing her two friends into one another’s orbit, she also “tried… to find comfort” in
the likelihood that her two friends would eventually have met anyway, even without her personal involvement (325). The very first lines of the narrative, then, dramatize the narrator’s mental “going-over” of sociological processes: that her two friends would eventually make one another’s acquaintance, the narrator assures herself in retrospect, was inevitable in any case.

The reasons for the suggested inevitability of the two friends’ meeting constitute points of great interest in “The Friends of the Friends,” underscoring James’s engagement with issues germane to the social sciences in general and social-network dynamics in particular. Initially, the narrator suggests that her two friends are bound to meet because they are, in her words, “birds of a feather.” In fact, each attests, however improbably, to having encountered one of their parents in ghostly form (325). (The female friend claims to have seen her father’s apparition; the male friend claims to have seen his mother’s.) It is this strange similitude of experience that moves the narrator to mention her two friends to each other in the first place, reasoning that “certainly they ought to meet… certainly they would have something in common” (328). Because her friends’ experiences overlap in this remarkable way, the narrator believes they are sure to form a strong connection of their own. Thus, after mentioning each friend to the other, the narrator takes advantage of her intermediary position by agreeing to broker an introduction.

Yet while their parallel experiences suggest to the narrator that a meeting between her two friends is the natural and appropriate course of action, “The Friends of the Friends” also invokes the sociological concept of clustering (more specifically, the principle of triadic closure) in explaining why such an acquaintanceship is bound to
happen. When the narrator tells her female friend that it is simply “too preposterous one shouldn’t somehow succeed in introducing one’s dearest friend to one’s second self,” her words speak to the strong force exerted by—and social utility of—triadic closure: it is simply untenable for one’s fiancé not to meet one’s dearest friend (337). (Midway through the story the narrator accepts her male friend’s marriage proposal; I return to this development below.)

In this sense, social clustering—a concept developed from Simmel’s pioneering work on triads—significantly informs the trajectory of the plot in “The Friends of the Friends.” Although the narrator plays the critical role in bringing her two friends together (she was, after all, “the first to speak of her to him—he had never even heard her mentioned”), it is not only the narrator who has mentioned each to each. The two persons, it so happens, have a multitude of mutual acquaintances, and, as we’ve already seen, the narrator retroactively “find[s] comfort” in the likelihood that her two friends, being disconnected points in other social triads, would have met in due course even without her involvement. The narrator says of her female friend:

She made, charming as she was, more and more friends, and... it regularly befell that these friends were sufficiently also friends of his to bring him up in conversation. It was odd that without belonging, as it were, to the same world or, according to the horrid term, the same set, my baffled pair should have happened in so many cases to fall in with the same people and make them join in the droll chorus. She had friends who didn’t know each other but who inevitably and punctually recommended him.22 (330-331)

At such moments James seems to anticipate what social network theorists, building on Simmel’s study of the expansion of the dyad, have since demonstrated: that networks

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22 This passage might be usefully compared to a similar sentiment in James’s “The Beast in the Jungle” (1903), when John Marcher becomes reacquainted with May Bartram after a period of many years: “They were reduced for a few minutes more to wondering a little helplessly why—since they seemed to know a certain number of the same people—their reunion had been so long averted” (66-67).
are diachronic and evolving structures; that social acquaintanceship is self-perpetuating; that more friends beget more friends, exponentially. If the tendency of the social world is to become ever more clustered, as dyads become triads, then it follows that although the narrator’s two friends don’t know each other at the beginning of the tale, they are very likely to meet *in due time* because they share so many mutual acquaintances, any one of whom might act as intermediary.

Yet for much of the story it seems that James invokes these sociological principles only to undermine them. Early on, the narrator signals in advance that “no meeting [between the two friends] would occur—as meetings are commonly understood” (328). As her admission suggests, the first twist in James’s narrative is that, despite the hypothetical inevitability of the two friends’ meeting, for a long period of time—in fact, “several years”—it remains impossible to make this meeting actually happen. The story’s suspense emerges almost entirely from the question of whether or not Simmel’s “expansion of the dyad” will finally occur. Indeed, as if lampooning the significance of scenes of meeting in narrative fiction, James ratchets up the anticipation of a meeting between the narrator’s two friends even as he perpetually defers it.

At first, the circumstances conspiring against the two friends appear to be largely accidental, the work of pure “Chance.” As the narrator remarks, “the very elements” seemed intent on her friends not becoming acquainted: “A cold, a headache, a bereavement, a storm, a fog, an earthquake, a cataclysm, infallibly intervened” (333). The narrator bemoans how “all the lively reasons” why her two friends should and must meet were somehow

reduced to naught by the strange law that made them bang so many doors in each other’s face, made them the buckets in the well, the two ends of the see-saw,
the two parties in the State, so that when one was up the other was down, when one was out the other was in; neither by any possibility entering a house till the other had left it or leaving it all unawares till the other was at hand. They only arrived when they had been given up, which was also precisely when they departed. They were in a word alternate and incompatible… (332-333)

The narrator’s metaphors reflect her sense that her two friends, though they have not yet made face-to-face contact, are still somehow connected, albeit in a way that causes them always to be inversely positioned in regards to one another. (The “buckets in the well” are of course linked by a single rope, the “two ends of the see-saw” by a single board.) Thus, as represented by the narrator at this point in the story, the interpersonal situation is a paradoxical one: the two friends are vaguely connected to one another, yet the narration also implies that it is precisely the nature of this connection (the rope, the board) that prevents them from making direct contact with one another. No wonder that this “strange law” (332), as the narrator calls it, rings of the absurd: “the whole business,” she observes, “was beyond a joke” (333).

The tension between “Chance,” on the one hand, and some “strange law,” on the other—these being the narrator’s two distinct explanations for why her two friends can’t seem to meet—becomes a significant thematic issue over the course of James’s narrative, and attending to Simmel’s network theory allows us to observe why. James goes out of his way to show that all three members of the story’s triad, but especially the narrator’s female friend, are prone to a kind of philosophic fatalism when it comes to the processes of social acquaintanceship. Upon initially telling her female friend about her male friend, for instance, the narrator is surprised that the female friend does not say “Oh bring him to see me!” but rather “I must meet him certainly: yes, I shall look out for him!” (330). James portrays the female friend as determined to leave the meeting
up to Chance, preferring to “look out” for the male friend rather than actively seek him out, or even allow herself to be introduced to him. As near-miss follows upon near-miss, the narrator begins to sense that her two friends might actually be starting to dread “the last accident of all… the accident that would bring them together.” After all, the narrator realizes, so much anticipation can only breed anti-climax: by this point, “a mere meeting would be mere flatness” (333).

While the deferral of meeting perturbs the two friends, James illustrates that the anticipation of triadic closure weighs most heavily on the mind of the character-narrator herself. Indeed, the narrator’s desires, and therefore arguably the plot in its entirety, are largely determined by her evolving perspective on the intermediary position she holds in relation to her two friends. When the narrator accepts her male friend’s marriage proposal approximately halfway through the narrative, James’s tale takes yet another sudden turn. Acting from what she refers to as her own “dread of jealousy,” the narrator, who had until this point been trying to bring her two friends together, now determines to take an active role in keeping them apart (337). Retroactively interpreting her two friends’ series of accidental misses as a providential sign meant for her, and fearing that the closing of their triad will negatively affect the stronger tie she now shares with her fiancé, the narrator decides to take matters into her own hands. She describes her changed outlook in a remarkable passage:

What had the interference been but the finger of Providence pointing out a danger? The danger was of course for poor me. [The friends’ meeting] had been kept at bay by a series of accidents unexampled in their frequency; but the reign of accidents was now visibly at an end. I had an intimate conviction that both parties would keep the tryst. It was more and more impressed on me that they were approaching, converging…. If the reign of accident was over I must take up the succession. (338)
And “take up the succession” she does. When it appears that the two friends are finally about to meet at the narrator’s residence, the narrator deceives her fiancé by writing him a false note that beckons him away, thus preventing him from keeping the engagement.

By constructing “The Friends of the Friends” in this manner, James displays an uncanny grasp of how interpersonal relationships are shaped by the rule-bound dynamics of social networks. The narrative’s progression not only dramatizes an “expansion of the dyad,” but, even more, allows James to explore how the principle of triadic closure affects the social and psychological destinies of individual persons. Perhaps counter-intuitively, it is precisely the increasing strength of the tie connecting the narrator and her male friend that provokes the narrator to prevent her two friends from meeting one another. This point of tension in the story presumes a particular set of network dynamics: when the narrator and her male friend become engaged, the pressure for the narrator’s two friends to make one another’s acquaintance is ratcheted up even further (in accordance with the principle of triadic closure), yet the narrator suddenly has a personal incentive to prevent this meeting from occurring (since she fears that the closing of the triad will impair her newly strengthened dyadic relationship with her fiancé). That is, while in one sense the engagement draws the narrator’s two friends closer together, increasing the likelihood that they will (and should) meet, it simultaneously provides the narrator with a strong impulse to keep them apart. As a plot point, then, the engagement functions dramatically to pit the principle of triadic closure against the narrator’s self-protecting desire to thwart her friends’ meeting. In this sense, “The Friends of the Friends” capitalizes on the dramatic potential of
Simmel’s theory about the “expansion of the dyad.” By rendering the narrator’s attempts to keep her friends apart, James interrogates the extent to which individuals can resist sociological principles, or, put differently, the degree to which network dynamics effectively determine individuals.

Hence “The Friends of the Friends” offers a provocative meditation on the risks and rewards of being the intermediary person (or “hub”) in a forbidden triad. James was fully aware of this tension at work in the narrative—between the logic of network constraints, on the one hand, and individual agency, on the other. In his notebook he asserts that the narrator’s two friends finally must meet “because of [the engagement],” yet he also acknowledges that the engagement has changed the narrator’s perspective on her friends’ meeting. He assumes her voice on the page of the notebook, writing: “I’m engaged—if now at the last moment something should intervene!” (Notebooks 244, emphasis in the original). In accordance with Simmel, James thus demonstrates that the intermediary individual’s situation is a paradoxical, possibly even self-negating one, since by introducing two of her acquaintances the intermediary simultaneously embraces the full power of her position and risks limiting her own structural necessity, her own centrality and social capital.23 Once an introduction is brokered and a direct tie established between the two friends, the narrator’s intermediation will no longer exist.

23 The narrator’s intermediary position here speaks to what contemporary network theorists refer to as “betweenness centrality,” or the degree to which an individual node, because of its role as a hub, becomes “indispensable to certain transactions” in the network (Degene and Forsé 136). In “The Friends of the Friends,” James seems less concerned with the sheer number of links these characters maintain with their social counterparts (what network researchers call “degree centrality”) than with the intermediary value attributed to particular positions within a linked acquaintanceship structure (“betweenness centrality”). Social scientists, observing that “social capital is inversely proportional to the redundancy in [one’s] network,” have argued that such capital has more to do with positionality—does the individual fill a structural hole that no one else does?—than it does pure volume (Degene and Forsé 118). I will speak more to social network theory’s notions of capital and redundancy in my discussion of The Princess Casamassima. For more on the connection between social capital and network positionality, see my discussion of Dos Passos’s U.S.A. trilogy in chapter 3.
That she deceives her fiancé to prevent the friends’ meeting from occurring reinforces James’s representation of the narrator as maintaining an unhealthy attachment to the capital afforded by her central position in this triad.

“The Friends of the Friends” in fact manages to suggest that, apart from any relationship with a specific person, the narrator’s position in the network itself elicits gratification—even a kind of erotic pleasure. For instance, one particularly powerful dramatization of the psychological consequences attendant on the hub position occurs after the narrator has deceived her fiancé, thus preventing her two friends from meeting. The scene concludes when the fiancé, having arrived after the female friend’s departure (foiled yet again!), bestows a kiss upon the narrator. The narrator’s striking reaction to this kiss is to recall that her female friend had also kissed her just “an hour or two before,” and to feel “for an instant as if he were taking from my lips the very pressure of hers” (343). This moment is all the more remarkable for the fact that the narrator describes her feelings—in particular, her recognition that she operates here as a kind of erotic intermediary—in a conspicuously neutral register. Perhaps the most intuitive way to read this scene is to interpret the narrator as saddened or frustrated by the fact that her fiancé is taking from her own lips the impression of another’s. Significantly, however, neither James nor the narrator provides enough evidence for us to conclude this with any certainty. The narrator’s noticeable lack of comment on the emotional effect of these two kisses opens up the possibility that her feelings concerning her place in this triad are more various and complicated than “mere” jealousy. Instead, James writes the scenes as if deliberately to leave room for a reading in which the narrator gains pleasure from her service as an erotic go-between, fetishizing her role as
social intermediary for its own sake. Until the two friends manage to establish direct contact between themselves, anything transferred between them (even kisses) must pass through the narrator.

Hence, attending to the convergence between James and Simmel also helps to clarify what is distinct about the narrative’s representation of sexuality in the context of triadic relations. Such instances of erotic intermediation, especially those figured in the form of a social triangle, recall Eve Sedgwick’s groundbreaking work in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1992). Aiming to elucidate the prototypical “love triangle” narrative, Sedgwick demonstrates how male characters’ homosocial desires tend to get routed through their shared connection with a female beloved; the female character, in this sense, functions as an intermediary through which male homosocial bonds can be formed in an indirect, hence less exposed or “threatening,” way. Sedgwick frames her argument as a re-contextualization of the philosopher René Girard’s “insistence that, in any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved” (Sedgwick 21).24 While James evidently shares their interest in the functionality of social triads, “The Friends of the Friends” complicates Sedgwick’s (and Girard’s) framework by inverting the gender dynamics involved. Indeed, James’s narrative eschews male homosociality in favor of focusing on how the female narrator’s desire for her female friend gets re-routed through the figure of the male friend. (This is to say nothing of the female friend’s potential desire for the narrator—a desire that

24 Girard’s idea of “mimetic” desire, outlined in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1961), posits that all desire is mediated by or “borrowed” from other desiring subjects—i.e., one desires a given object because that object is already desired by another (the rival). The triangular structure of Girard’s model provides an additional lens through which “The Friends of the Friends” can be viewed as exploring the features and functions of triadic relations.
remains even less explicit than the narrator’s own. For all of the narrator’s seeming jealousy that incites her to keep her relationship with her fiancé closely guarded, the narrator is equally as careful to guard her “particularly precious” acquaintanceship with the female friend (331).

Another of the narrative’s most fascinating and controversial qualities is its sudden shift, approximately two-thirds of the way into the tale, away from the genre of psychological realism and toward the Gothic. Indeed, it is at this point in “The Friends of the Friends,” after the narrator has successfully prevented the friends’ impending meeting from occurring at her home, that things begin to get screwy—by which I mean the narrative begins to resemble *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). Like the latter novella, “The Friends of the Friends” evokes Tzvetan Todorov’s notion of “the Fantastic” by wavering continually between two possible readings, one grounded in a natural and the other in a supernatural interpretation of the story’s concluding events, which I’ll now briefly describe.25 After the male friend fails to appear, the female friend leaves the narrator’s residence once again disappointed that no meeting has occurred. Later that very evening she suddenly dies from what the narrator calls a “weakness of the heart” (345). The next day the narrator’s fiancé (the male friend) shares with the narrator some surprising news: he has finally met her female friend; she had come to his residence the previous evening; he has, he claims, seen in her in the flesh. This revelation shocks the narrator. She denies that her fiancé’s story could be true, adamant

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25 “The Friends of the Friends” further resembles *The Turn of the Screw* in that both are constructed as “one-sided” frame tales. “The Friends of the Friends” opens with an unnamed but presumably male narrator who relates (to a similarly mysterious narratee) how he has been reading the female narrator’s diaries with an eye toward “the possibility of publication” (323). The story that follows, he explains, is one “fragment” of the material he has at his disposal. In his assessment, this particular narrative is “nearly enough a rounded thing, an intelligible whole,” albeit a story recorded “evidently… years ago” (323). After this brief and elusive preface, the frame narrator’s voice does not return to “The Friends of the Friends.”
that her female friend had already died by the time the fiancé claims to have met her. The fiancé insists that the female friend was alive when she visited him, ensuring the narrator: “I saw her living…. I saw her as I see you now” (347).

Anticipating James’s characterization of *The Turn of the Screw*’s governess, the narrator of “The Friends of the Friends” now begins to offer especially dubious interpretations of the story with which she has become involved. She rejects her fiancé’s account of the meeting, instead substituting her own bizarre explanation: “She had been to him—yes, and by an impulse as charming as he liked; but oh she hadn’t been in the body!” (351). Clinging to the belief that her female friend was already dead at the time of the presumed meeting, the narrator insists that what her fiancé witnessed was either the product of a dream or a supernatural apparition. This explanation, she argues not very persuasively, hinges on the “simple question of evidence” (351).

James’s rendering of the narrator’s perspective as she grapples with her fiancé’s story is characteristically nuanced in its depiction of psychological angst and self-deception. In fact, James further reinforces our suspicion of the narrator’s interpretation by implying that the narrator doesn’t quite trust it herself. For while maintaining her “theory” and “conviction” that her two friends have “still never ‘met’,,” in telling the narrative that is “The Friends of the Friends” the narrator offers some surprisingly self-aware observations (357). She acknowledges, for instance, that her supernaturally-oriented interpretation is perhaps the version of the story that her own “reviving jealousy found easiest to accept” (351). Moreover, the narrator confesses that she sometimes cannot help feeling a “vivid sense that… there was indeed a relation between [her two friends] and that he had actually been face to face with her” (347). When at
the end of “The Friends of the Friends” the narrator refers to her two friends’ relationship as an “inconceivable communion” (364), what these words imply is the likelihood that the narrator would rather conceive the inconceivable—that is, a ghostly visitation—than allow herself to conceive what’s all too conceivable: that her friends might actually have made direct contact “in the flesh.”

On the few occasions when “The Friends of the Friends” has been investigated in any sustained way, scholars have tended to focus on these final enigmatic scenes, situating the story in the context of James’s appropriation of traditionally Gothic motifs. Some critics suggest that “The Friends of the Friends” should be considered one of James’s ghostly tales, a generic sibling to “Sir Edmund Orme” (1891) or “The Jolly Corner” (1908). Millicent Bell, for example, unequivocally describes “The Friends of the Friends” as a ghost story, one that, in her view, sees James using phantasmal encounters to meditate on the “persistence of the might-have-been” (27). Other critics, however, are understandably less certain about the narrative’s status as a ghost story. This uncertainty is on display in a reading offered by John Pearson, who asserts that “The Friends of the Friends” is a story in which “the real and the irreal connect (perhaps even copulate)”—but then immediately backs off the full implications of this argument by adding the rather significant qualifier that “practically speaking, the union occurs only in the narrator’s imagination” (128). For still others, “The Friends of the Friends” remains staunchly ambiguous, offering “two alternative possibilities,” one natural and the other supernatural: “either the woman was alive when she came to visit the man or it was her spirit” (Tintner 358-359).
My own reading of “The Friends of the Friends” does not intend to resolve the story’s ambiguous ending, which provocatively raises the possibility that a supernatural haunting has occurred. Rather, I mean to suggest that James’s prevailing interest lies more in tracing the social and psychological effects of the two friends’ meeting than in clarifying the ontological nature of that event. Locating James’s fiction at the origins of social network theory allows us to see his narrative’s abrupt swerve into the territory of the Gothic as flowing logically from his project to explore the power of particular network processes. Indeed, despite the narrator’s self-protecting insistence that her two friends “had still never met,” the force of James’s story is to suggest that the two friends have made contact, even if the question of whether the female friend was alive or deceased at the time of that meeting remains an open one. Whichever the case, the narrator’s relationship with her betrothed has been utterly transformed by the closing of this triad—or so the narrator argues, remarking to her fiancé that “we must reconsider our situation and recognize that it had completely altered.” More specifically, the narrator laments that her structural position as “hub” has been replaced, telling the fiancé: “Another person has come between us” (360). “The Friends of the Friends” thus concludes on a melancholic note, indicating that the two friends’ meeting has had severe consequences: the narrator’s engagement with the male friend ruptures, the lovers split, and six years later the (now former) fiancé himself dies from mysterious causes.

In the end, James constructs “The Friends of the Friends” in such a way so as it to make it difficult, if not impossible, to sort out whether the narrator’s engagement has been doomed by sociological or by psychological causes. Were the narrator’s fears
legitimate ones? Would the meeting of her two friends have fundamentally changed the triad and undermined her relationship with her fiancé in any case? If “yes,” the reasons for the engagement’s dissolution are more decidedly sociological: the “expansion of the dyad” represented in the narrative necessarily reorients and destabilizes the interpersonal ties involved. In this reading, network dynamics such as those theorized by Simmel are absolutely determinative: the friends’ meeting changes everything. Or, instead, was the narrator’s conclusion that the engagement would falter if the two friends were to meet simply an instance of self-fulfilling prophecy? Might not the critical obstacle to the narrator’s union with her fiancé actually be the narrator’s own psychological instability, her obsession with what she perceives as the looming threat of triadic closure? In contrast to the former explanation, this reading locates the source of the engagement’s dissolution more in personal, psychological circumstances than in social, structural ones.

Undoubtedly, “The Friends of the Friends” cues readers to call into question the reliability of the narrator’s interpretations. Yet the narrative’s conflation of sociological and psychological issues—its blurring of the line between these two areas of concern—is, I want to suggest, precisely the point. “The Friends of the Friends” explores how one’s structural position in a given network, in tandem with one’s perception of that position, affects the individual psyche, and thus plays a significant role in shaping reality. In this way, too, Simmel’s sociology illuminates James’s aesthetic. Despite sometimes attempting to distinguish the social from the psychological in his own work, Simmel concedes that “all societal processes and instincts have their seat in minds,” and that “sociation is, as a consequence, a psychical phenomenon” (qtd. in Frisby,
“Foundation” 337). David Frisby explicates Simmel’s dilemma thus: “Insofar as Simmel... maintains that explanation of the smallest interactions is necessary in order to explain the major constellations of society, he thereby traces his sociological thematic back to psychological variables” (“Foundation” 337). For James, in similar fashion, sociology would seem to be always already psychological. That is, the two are inextricable: as the narrator of “The Friends of the Friends” tragically discovers, sociological theories carry personal implications, just as individual persons cannot be completely understood apart from the social networks encompassing them.

My reading of “The Friends of the Friends” suggests that literary critics have not yet acknowledged the full extent to which pioneering work from the social sciences, especially the nascent field of social network theory, contributed to the formation of James’s vaunted psychological realism, and vice versa. Yet network dynamics of the kind studied by Simmel—and explored by James, using the resources of fictional narrative—assumes that one’s place in a networked social structure is inextricably connected to one’s psychological profile and one’s “character,” even one’s fate. As evinced by the narrator’s increasingly unstable conjectures, to believe that one can prevent triadic closure is for James akin to madness: new acquaintanceships are nothing if not inevitable, and in resisting this principle one may as well be attempting to resist the pull of gravity. The principle even trumps fate: describing in his notebook how he would conclude the tale, James affirms that the narrator’s two friends will “meet, in spite of fate” (231, emphasis in the original).

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26 In chapter 2, which investigates the convergence between turn-of-the-century philosophies of mind and Frank Norris’s “Epic of the Wheat,” I further explore this connection between social processes and psychical phenomena.
In fact, triadic closure is shown to be so firm a principle in the world of James’s story that, depending on how one interprets the elusive ending, James might even allow for the possibility that the “strange law[s]” governing social acquaintanceship constitute a kind of supernatural force in their own right. In this reading, although the narrator’s two friends never meet in life, they are still destined to meet in due course, even if this means becoming acquainted after death. Ultimately James’s narrative cannot, in my view, be categorized as a clear-cut ghost story. Yet by invoking the prototypically Gothic trope of phantasmal visitation to figure emergent sociological theories, “The Friends of the Friends” maintains that social networks evolve according to identifiable—and, in this tale, spectacularly binding—principles.

Building on Simmel’s premise that “complex social formations are merely extensions of the simplest interactions between human beings,” I next turn an analysis of James’s *The Princess Casamassima*, a novel which, although drastically longer than “The Friends of the Friends,” and involving dozens more characters and subplots, can be productively viewed as a more complex working out of the same sociological issues James examines in his shorter tale (Frisby, *Simmel and Since 41*). As I will show, *The Princess Casamassima* engages both formally and thematically with the “problem” of social interconnectedness, especially the self-perpetuating nature of mutual acquaintanceship. In a manner that recalls the narrator’s defeat at the end of the “The Friends of the Friends”—a downfall that James associates with her “hub” position—the highly networked individual in *The Princess Casamassima*, namely Hyacinth Robinson, also becomes the novel’s tragic figure.

*The Princess Casamassima* and the Politics of Mutual Acquaintanceship
Since its 1886 publication, *The Princess Casamassima* has never quite managed to shed its reputation as perhaps the least “Jamesian” of James’s major works. Walter Dubler noted in 1966, in a statement that still might be accepted as valid today, that “the starting point for virtually all criticism concerning *The Princess Casamassima* has been the assumption that the book stands as a kind of freak among James’s other novels” (44). Describing a shadowy underworld of conspiratorial anarchists, and featuring the sensational story of a young bookbinder (Hyacinth Robinson) who enlists himself as a political assassin only to reconsider his decision, *The Princess Casamassima* does seem, on the surface, decidedly un-Jamesian. Today few readers would consider *The Princess* to represent James at the height of his powers, and this kind of response is nothing new: despite William Dean Howells’s calling the book “incomparably the greatest novel of the year in our language,” *The Princess Casamassima* was published to generally mixed reviews (193).

However, for all its supposed narrative weaknesses (some of which I will discuss below), *The Princess Casamassima*, like “The Friends of the Friends,” is remarkably perceptive about the dynamics that shape a highly networked society. While critics have come to very different conclusions about the novel’s generic status, casting the book variously as a work of realism, naturalism, melodrama, or anarchist fiction—even questioning its classification as a novel—a network-oriented analysis of James’s fiction allows us better to appreciate *The Princess*’s distinctively sociological explorations. As with my analysis of “The Friends of the Friends,” my reading of *The Princess*

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27 Several critics point to the sprawling social world of James’s novel in order to suggest that the book reads less like standard James than an “homage to Dickens” (Kaplan 349). This idea is perhaps bolstered by the fact that James makes explicit reference to Dickens’s work in *The Princess Casamassima*: on two separate occasions, Hyacinth Robinson notices a gentleman who reminds him of *David Copperfield’s* Mr. Micawber.
*Casamassima* aims to show how attending to the convergence between James and Simmel clarifies the novel’s distinctive achievements as well as recurrent debates surrounding its generic status. Like the narrator of “The Friends of the Friends,” *The Princess’s* primary “hub” and focalizer, Hyacinth Robinson, meets a tragic outcome. Yet there is also an important difference here: more explicitly than the shorter tale, *The Princess* investigates the issue of interclass acquaintanceships. Dramatizing how the phenomenon known as triadic closure operates on the scale of a whole society rather than just a single three-person group, *The Princess* explores the ramifications of network processes when they traverse class boundaries. Hence, in stressing the diachronic dimension of social networks by focusing on how networks expand over time, James brings his interest in network dynamics to bear on nineteenth-century politics: a product of James’s political pessimism, *The Princess* suggests that increased social connectivity will inevitably amplify class conflict.

One of the most frequent complaints about *The Princess Casamassima* is that it contains too many characters, and that these individuals are connected to one another too tenuously. At least one of James’s contemporary reviewers faulted the book for providing an overly convoluted representation of society, conceding that while “the world is not an easy matter to understand…. the tangles [in James’s novel] are made more conspicuous than they are in real life” (Hutton 189). Conversely, other commentators faulted *The Princess* for adhering too *faithfully* to the unruly social tangles found in “real life,” singling out for critique the novel’s surplus cast of characters: “Of course in real life we see a good deal of a great many people whose existence cannot be said to have any perceptible effect on our fortunes, but a literal transcript of real life
does not necessarily make a novel any more than a faithful rendering of a view makes a picture” (Athenaeum 175). To his credit, James seems to have recognized early in the writing process that the sheer number of characters might pose a problem. The 10 August 1885 entry in his notebook reads as if the Master was giving himself a pep-talk:

“I have plunged in rather blindly, and got a good many characters on my hands… but these will fall into their places if I keep cool and think it out” (68).

Still, to the disapproval of some commentators, the novel eschews the mechanics of traditional plotting for an elaboration of the complexity of a densely networked social world: nearly the entire plot consists of a series of meetings. For this reason, the verdict of some of his contemporaries was to question the very classification of The Princess Casamassima as a novel. One reviewer insisted that The Princess was not a novel but “simply a bringing into relation of certain interesting characters under circumstances calculated to develop their peculiarities, and the abandonment of them in mid-course of the narration without having settled anything” (“The Princess”). Another suggested that if The Princess was a novel then it was “one of a very unique kind. It has hardly any incident, unless the tendency of the whole network of circumstance and character to the tragedy with which the third volume abruptly closes, may be regarded as in itself constituting a single massive incident” (Hutton 186).

I want to argue that there is a discernible plot in The Princess Casamassima, one that basically follows Hyacinth’s trajectory from having no “connexions” to his immersion, one person at a time, into a highly clustered social world. Over the course of the novel, Hyacinth gradually comes into contact with a conspiratorial anarchist network he imagines to be both “pervasive and universal, in the air one breathed, in the
ground one trod, in the hand of an acquaintance that one might touch, or the eye of a stranger that might rest a moment on one’s own…. In every contact and combination of life” (486). How exactly Hyacinth becomes absorbed into this world of “contact and combination” is the crux of The Princess Casamassima. For James, the answer to this question would seem to reside once again in the network phenomena being studied by Simmel, namely triadic closure. At the beginning of the novel, Hyacinth Robinson considers himself “an obscure little beggar,” a lonely bookbinder with “no help, no influence, no acquaintance of any kind with professional people…” (112). However, while Hyacinth initially lacks a social “constellation,” his potential for networking weighs heavily upon him from the start: that his father was an aristocrat suggests that significant “connexions” surely await him, if he can only sniff them out. Miss Pynsent, the “little dressmaker” who has been serving as Hyacinth’s guardian since his natural mother was imprisoned for killing his father (this all happens prior to the novel’s opening), continually expresses her feeling that Hyacinth might yet prove “to be connected—by way of cousinship, or something of the kind—with the highest in the land” (73).

Reading The Princess Casamassima in the context of an emergent network theory allows us to see how the novel’s plot configures, on a grand scale, Simmel’s theory of dyadic expansion. Stressing that social networks tend to expand over time—i.e., that networks can be said to evolve diachronically—The Princess engages imaginatively with the same network dynamics that “The Friends of the Friends” explored on a much smaller scale. Indeed, as if to underscore the important role of introductions in the novel—even for those characters who would seem, on the surface, to require no
introduction to one another—the first person James arranges for Hyacinth to “meet” in the book is his own birth-mother, Florentine. That Hyacinth initially resists this interview out of a self-aggrandizing notion of their class difference—“She must be very low; I don’t want to know her”—only adds to the scene’s ironic anticipation of the many other cross-class introductions that are to follow in the novel (80). Even those characters who were said to know each other prior to the time period framed by the narrative discourse of *The Princess* also have their own moment of “introduction” within it: not only does Hyacinth “meet” his mother, he is likewise “introduced,” or rather re-introduced, to his childhood friend Millicent Henning, who he now finds “was like a stranger, a new acquaintance” (107). And James makes a point to note that for Miss Pynsent, too, seeing Florentine again after a period of nine years felt like “approaching a perfect stranger” (84).

That the skeleton of the novel’s plot consists chiefly of social meetings becomes apparent as early as chapter 6, which begins to propel the narrative forward via a swift succession of introductions. The chapter opens with a description of Eustache Poupin, “an extraordinary Frenchman” with socialist leanings, who has taken on the role of Hyacinth’s “protector” at the book bindery where both men work (114). The story of how Poupin and Hyacinth had first come to know one another involves Mr. Anastasius Vetch, a republican-minded musician who functions as a kind of surrogate father to Hyacinth. Vetch, it turns out, had introduced Hyacinth to Poupin so that Hyacinth might take up work at the bindery. By the end of chapter 6, James has established that the Hyacinth/Poupin bond is a strong one: the narrator states that Hyacinth has “completely assimilated [Poupin’s] influence,” and, moreover, that Poupin “made a very
considerable mark on the boy’s mind” (120). Through Poupin, Hyacinth also meets Madame Poupin, whom he comes to regard “as a second, or rather as a third, mother” (120).

To return to Simmel’s network theory, we can say that here James traces the process by which two dyads (Hyacinth/Vetch and Vetch/Poupin) merge to become a closed triad. Foregrounding the diachronic dimension of social networks, James represents this procedure time and again throughout The Princess: Hyacinth keeps coming into contact with new characters through mutual acquaintances, until by the end of the novel (even by the end of the crucial chapter 6) he finds himself in much different company than that in which he began. For instance, when Hyacinth visits an ill Poupin at his home, he is surprised to find a stranger already at Poupin’s bedside. The narrator describes this “young man unknown to Hyacinth” (121) as a personage “with whom M. Poupin exhibited such signs of acquaintance as to make our hero wonder why he had not seen him before, nor even heard of him” (125). Like the neglected third member of a forbidden triad, Hyacinth feels “slightly aggrieved… that M. Poupin should not have thought his young friend… worthy, up to this time, to be made acquainted with him [the stranger]” (126). Foretelling the forms of non-meeting or missed connection that would become a prominent motif in “The Friends of the Friends,” Poupin reassures Hyacinth by telling him it was “an accident that he hasn’t met you here before” (129).

As the novel traces Hyacinth’s expanding network, James suggests—in accordance with Simmel and the theorists of social clustering who would build on his work—that the single most important effect of an introduction is how it lays the
groundwork for further introductions. The stranger at Poupin’s bedside turns out to be Paul Muniment, a Scottish chemist and coldly rational proponent of the conspirators’ nominally socialist cause. Having met Hyacinth through their mutual acquaintanceship with Poupin (the Frenchman, Paul tells Hyacinth, “says we ought to know each other”), Paul will come to play a major role in Hyacinth’s fate (130). In this connection, the narrator informs us that “by the time [Hyacinth] had enjoyed for three months the acquaintance” of Paul Muniment, “the whole complexion of his life seemed changed” (159). Yet, for all his influence, Paul is himself only an intermediary link in the social chain that Hyacinth steadily traverses over the course of the book. Through Paul, Hyacinth also meets Paul’s sister, Rosy Muniment, who, in turn, promises Hyacinth that Paul still has more “low, wicked friends” Hyacinth must meet. Not included among these “low” ranks is Lady Aurora, a genteel aristocrat who strives to cultivate cross-class friendships. Hyacinth comes into contact with Lady Aurora through Rosy Muniment, with whom she “slums,” and James frames Hyacinth’s introduction to her as a particularly significant moment, since this is “the first time [Hyacinth] had encountered, socially, a member of that aristocracy to which he had now for a good while known it was Miss Pynsent’s theory that he belonged” (136). To sum up, then: Mr. Vetch introduces Hyacinth to Poupin, who introduces him to Paul Muniment, who introduces him to Rosy Muniment, through whom he meets Lady Aurora.

This series of introductions, which began when the benevolent Mr. Vetch secured Hyacinth a job with Poupin, culminates in a meeting between Hyacinth and Diedrich Hoffendahl, the mysterious leader of the socialists’ conspiratorial network. Yet instead of telling us anything substantial about the Hyacinth-Hoffendahl relationship,
James stresses the dynamic network process that brought Hyacinth into contact with Hoffendahl in the first place—a process that, constituting the very plot of the narrative, unfolds in time, as mutual acquaintances perpetually close ranks. Indeed, Hyacinth’s only face-to-face encounter with Hoffendahl is a classic instance of Jamesian elision: readers are not granted access to their meeting, so they can only partially infer what was said during their interview. However, it is clear that Hyacinth leaves their meeting having agreed to participate in a political assassination. Hyacinth has met Hoffendahl by traversing a network, node by node, and now he agrees to become a functional part of it: “The day would come,” our narrator promises, “when Hyacinth, far down in the treble, would feel himself touched by the little finger of the composer, would become audible (with a small, sharp crack) for a second” (334).²⁸

Hyacinth’s introduction to Hoffendahl can be juxtaposed with the other pivotal meeting in the novel, that which occurs between Hyacinth and the eponymous Princess, Christina Light. The Princess Casamassima is divided into six “books” or segments, and Book Second opens with a scene in which Hyacinth and Millicent together attend a theatrical performance. During intermission, Captain Godfrey Sholto, a dandy who has been watching Hyacinth from a nearby box, approaches the pair. He tells Hyacinth:

²⁸ It is revealed that the Princess has also met Hoffendahl. How has this contact come about? Once again James seems intent on explaining that such contacts occur systematically, one step at a time, even if this entails invoking a kind of interpersonal infinite regress: the Princess says she came to know Hoffendahl “through a couple of friends of mine in Vienna,” but, alas, “it would take long to tell you how I made their acquaintance, and how they put me into relation with the Maestro” (332). Here James could be said to “have his cake and eat it, too,” simultaneously limiting the number of relations included in his tale and gesturing toward how such relations extend indefinitely. James uses the same tactic—a gesture toward a kind of infinite regress—in explaining how Lady Aurora had originally become acquainted with the Muniment siblings through a mutual friend: “She had made their acquaintance, Paul’s and [Rosy’s], about a year before, through a friend of theirs...” (143) The full story of who this intermediary friend is, exactly, does not find its way into James’s novel. Yet the assurance that Lady Aurora and Rosy Muniment haven’t met purely by chance would seem to matter to James, enough so that he makes this fact known to his audience.
“One of my ladies has a great desire to make your acquaintance!” Surprised to be the recipient of such social favor—“To make my acquaintance?” Hyacinth repeats, incredulously—the bookbinder’s initial reaction is to assume that the introduction being brokered must have “something to do with his parentage on his father’s side” (185). When Hyacinth accompanies Sholto back to the Captain’s box, and into Christina’s company, he finds himself once again surprised—this time by how the Princess chooses to begin their conversation: “[Hyacinth] expected she would make some remark about the play, but what she said was, very gently and kindly, ‘I like to know all sorts of people’” (193). Fittingly, these are the Princess’s first words in the novel, immediately marking her as something of a *connoisseur* of interclass relationships. Neither Hyacinth nor readers can be expected to recognize at this point that Christina’s desire “to know all sorts of people” will create for Hyacinth such turmoil, or that it will contribute to his impending tragedy.

The scene of meeting between Hyacinth and the Princess illustrates James’s recurring strategy of replacing superficially “coincidental” encounters with introductions that occur via the systematic, rule-driven processes articulated by an emerging network theory, such as that proposed by Simmel. In this sense, *The Princess* is similar to “The Friends of the Friends,” which also demonstrated that acquaintanceship has little to do with Chance. Literary scholars have recently begun to explore more fully the important role of coincidence in narrative fiction, an interest that has made its way into readings of *The Princess Casamassima*. One critic, for example, has made the claim that “Hyacinth’s initial introduction to the Princess is secured simply through the chance of his being an available poor person at the opera house” (Puckett
This reading would seem to miss James’s implication that identifiable social
dynamics affect whom we meet and how we meet them. While there is certainly an
element of randomness to their encounter—Hyacinth happens to be in attendance at the
theater on the same night as the Princess and the Captain—it is not “simply through…
chance” that Hyacinth makes the grand woman’s acquaintance. Rather, James goes to
great lengths to demonstrate how existent chains of social acquaintanceship have laid
the foundations for this new relationship between the bookbinder and the Princess.

For in fact, far from mere chance, James has meticulously established the
groundwork for the meeting between Hyacinth and the Princess, whose intersection
becomes only the latest connection point in a chain of relations that stretches back at
least as far as Mr. Vetch’s introduction of Hyacinth to Poupin. Although their class
difference might make them seem unlikely associates, Hyacinth and Christina have a
mutual acquaintance (Captain Sholto) capable of brokering an introduction. And one
mutual acquaintance is all that is required, in the world of James’s fiction, to make
meaningful contact. As the scene progresses, James gradually reveals that Hyacinth
had already known Sholto even before their encounter at the theater. Hence when at
the beginning of the scene Hyacinth and Millicent notice a “mysterious observer”
watching them from a nearby box, Hyacinth suddenly realizes that this person is not a
stranger, but rather that “he [Hyacinth] recognized him” (179). The narrator
intercedes at this point to inform us that Hyacinth and Sholto had previously “met three
times,” having “conversed in a small occult back-room in Bloomsbury [a socialist
meeting-place called the “Sun and Moon”],” where “the Captain had given [Hyacinth]
his card” (182-183). Why had Hyacinth been in the “Sun and Moon”? He’d been
introduced to the “back-room in Bloomsbury” by Paul Muniment (who, as we’ve already seen, Hyacinth met through Eustache Poupin, who he knew through Mr. Vetch...)

Thus, James makes it clear that Sholto does not approach Hyacinth arbitrarily:
Hyacinth is not just any “available poor person,” but rather a particular person who, unwittingly, is already one node in the unclosed triad that includes Sholto and the Princess.

James uses both “The Friends of the Friends” and The Princess Casamassima to demonstrate that triadic closure is inevitable, but in the latter work he also explores the ramifications of interclass relations. Whereas “The Friends of the Friends” uses a character-narrator to explore the hub-position within what is primarily a romantic triad, in The Princess Casamassima the point of focus is an unlucky hub (Hyacinth) upon whom the burden falls to connect distinct social classes. In this sense, The Princess explores the potential political consequences of network dynamics that precipitate meetings. The novel suggests that systematic social processes are ultimately responsible for bringing the upper and lower orders into increased contact. As the Captain approaches, Hyacinth imagines—not inaccurately, it turns out—that Sholto “would bring with him rare influences” (183). Hyacinth pointedly thinks of Sholto as his “insinuating friend,” and, indeed, the Captain maintains an important function in the context of the novel’s overarching network (223). Serving as the intermediary link between some persons and deliberately bonding others to the Princess—for instance, he is said to have “collected” Hyacinth for her—Sholto is a master of the art of the introduction, the novel’s networker par excellence (346). He frustrates Hyacinth by making Paul’s acquaintance without going through the bookbinder. Conjecturing how
his two acquaintances managed to make contact without his own mediation, Hyacinth blames Chance, imagining that Sholto and Paul “must have met at the ‘Sun and Moon’… some accident smoothing the way” (223). For his part, Sholto tells Rosy that “it was as common friends of Mr. Hyacinth Robinson that Mr. Muniment and he had come together; they were both so fond of him that this had immediately constituted a kind of tie” (224). Even more grating to Hyacinth is the fact that Sholto brokers the introduction between Paul and the Princess that Hyacinth had assumed he himself would broker. The narration describes Hyacinth’s shock: “Almost before Hyacinth had had time to wonder how [the Princess] had found the Muniments out (he had no recollection of giving her specific directions), she mentioned that Captain Sholto had been so good as to introduce her…. It was rather a blow to him to hear that she had been accepting the Captain’s mediation” (408).

Hyacinth’s introduction to the Princess has far-reaching effects, becoming the catalyst for many more interclass meetings throughout the remainder of the novel. Hyacinth’s lower-class companions—Miss Pynsent, Millicent Henning, and Mr. Vetch—begin to forge acquaintanceships with members of the upper orders because Hyacinth functions as the hub or cross-point suturing together these two social circles. Indeed, Hyacinth’s connection to the Princess accelerates this clustering process exponentially, such that even the poor fiddler Mr. Vetch comes personally to know Christina, and the shop-girl Millicent Henning expresses her pleasure “at being brought even into roundabout contact” with her (268). (Millicent also takes up the company of Captain Sholto, to Hyacinth’s disapproval.)
As does the narrator in “The Friends of the Friends,” Hyacinth ultimately finds that the hub-position is a powerful but tenuous one, and that its power, once expressed, is paradoxically self-negating. In James’s fiction, being a hub means facing immense pressure, risking one’s psychological health, even going insane: the narrator of “The Friends of the Friends” pushes her fiancé away due to what is likely a misguided conviction that he has seen a ghost; Hyacinth kills himself. Thus, while Rosy Muniment relishes in “the glory she had drawn upon herself by bringing [Lady Aurora and the Princess] together,” even fancying them alluding “to the occasion on which ‘we first met, at Miss Muniment’s, you know,’” Hyacinth eventually recognizes that being a hub is rarely about glory (438). Hyacinth’s journey in the novel—a trajectory that James dramatizes as an essentially tragic one—follows the bookbinder’s shift from few acquaintances to many: he begins the book without much of a network at all, then becomes a crucial hub, then ends as a redundant node amidst a highly clustered social set.

When Hyacinth is the sole mediating link between the lower-class world and the Princess’s world of privilege, he fills a structural hole and thus holds social capital: he is the only one in position to connect the Princess with his socialist compatriots, so everything passed between these groups must go through him. Yet with every connection Hyacinth brokers between members of these two circles, his necessity as a hub is reduced; his role becomes redundant; other intermediary links are established. This is especially true in regards to Lady Aurora and Paul, each of whom Hyacinth seeks to introduce to the Princess. Yet when Lady Aurora and the Princess have successfully met, and, to Hyacinth’s mind, are “on the point of striking up a tremendous
intimacy,” Hyacinth finds that the new relationship he has brokered “made him sad, for strange, vague reasons, which he could not have expressed” (435).

Such is even more profoundly the case with the Hyacinth/Paul/Princess triad, the closure of which forces Hyacinth once again to acknowledge a basic truth theorized by Simmel: that the growth of the network changes his own place in it. From their very first meeting at the playhouse, the Princess expresses a strong desire to meet Hyacinth’s chemist acquaintance, Paul Muniment. At first, Hyacinth attempts to bring Paul into contact with the Princess, even passing along her reasons to Paul: “You’re a friend of mine—that’s enough for her” (207). Yet once this meeting actually has been achieved, James dramatizes how the new connection between Paul and the Princess undercuts the relationship Hyacinth had maintained with her, even as Hyacinth tries to rationalize away any negative effects: “Hadin’t he wanted Paul to know her, months and months before, and now was he to entertain a vile feeling at the first manifestation of an intimacy which rested, in each party to it, upon aspirations that he respected?” (535)

In a further parallel with “The Friends of the Friends,” near the conclusion of the narrative Hyacinth comes to the awful realization that in his relation to the Princess he has been “superseded indeed” (570). James has carefully prepared readers for this development: other characters had spoken of Paul as a potential “successor” to Hyacinth on at least two separate occasions. In the first instance, Madame Grandoni asks the Princess whether she is grooming Paul to be Hyacinth’s “successor”; the Princess insists that this idea is “absurd,” since Paul is Hyacinth’s “greatest friend” (457). Later, when the marginalized Prince asks Madame Grandoni whether Paul is Hyacinth’s “successor,” Madame Grandoni hesitates before answering: “I think that this case is different. But I
don’t understand; it was the other, the little one [Hyacinth], who helped her to know the Scotchman [Paul]” (513). As if James is himself puzzling through this issue, Madame Grandoni is left wondering whether—and why—Hyacinth had brokered an introduction that was in effect self-obliterating.

For James, though, Paul’s supersession of Hyacinth’s role clearly says less about Paul, or about Hyacinth, than it does about the force of network dynamics more generally. Indeed, it is not long after Paul has become Hyacinth’s successor that he also gets succeeded. In the final pages of the novel, James gestures to the perpetual nature of network growth: Paul admits to the Princess that “a communication which I should have expected to be made through me has been made through another person.” It turns out that this other person is Schinkel, a German socialist who has rather mysteriously haunted the margins of the novel, and who now threatens Paul’s own intermediary position. Schinkel, Paul tells the Princess, is “a mere medium of transmission” (580). However, the German’s role as “medium” is exactly what makes him increasingly important to the plot, and in fact the novel closes with a scene in which the Princess and Schinkel (conspicuously, not Paul) together discover Hyacinth’s body.

By dramatizing the conspiratorial network’s self-annealing properties, James emphasizes that over and above the success (or even survival) of any one person exists the insuperable logic of the network, which predominantly functions to protect itself.

The network researchers Christakis and Fowler make the compelling argument that

29 The use of the phrase “medium of transmission” is of interest here, since in fin-de-siècle spiritualist practices it was the spirit guide or “medium” who purported to function as the vessel of communication between the living and the dead. The triadic nature of spiritualist practice thus offers an additional discourse that dovetails with Simmel’s network theory and James’s fiction—perhaps especially “The Friends of the Friends,” which takes up the spirit theme. In chapter 2, I explore some of these issues through an analysis of Frank Norris’s treatment of telepathy.
social networks are “self-replicating in the sense that they outlast their members: the network can endure even if the people within it change, just as cells replace themselves in our skin…” Or, to use a different metaphor, social networks close up around their gaps, in the same way that the edges of a wound come together. One person might step out of a bucket brigade, but then the two people he was connected to will move closer to each other, forming a new connection to fill in the gap. As a result, water will continue to flow. In more complicated, real-life networks, it seems likely that the very purpose of redundant ties… is precisely to make the networks tolerant of this kind of loss, as if human social networks were designed to last. (291)

As early as 1886, James illustrates this deterministic quality of networks in *The Princess Casamassima*, which establishes via Hyacinth’s demise how the logic of a social network functions primarily to protect the whole of the network—not necessarily the lives of its individual members.

Attending to the destiny of the whole network in fact makes visible one of the great ironies of *The Princess Casamassima*: that even while the anarchists publicize their intention “to break up society,” they are actually building “society” (as Simmel defines it) piece-by-piece and person-by-person (511). That is, while the conspirators view “society” as a reified structure that must be imploded, their methods for achieving this implosion (the Princess’s cultivation of cross-class acquaintanceships, for instance) actually precipitate social interconnectedness by expanding and solidifying the constellation of relations. An exemplary scene in this regard occurs when the Princess is visited by Lady Marchant, the “wife of a county magnate,” and her three daughters. The Marchants are wealthy neighbors to the Princess, said to be living in “a great house” a few miles away. Since Hyacinth is with the Princess when the Marchant ladies come to call, the Princess, thinking she’s “playing a trick upon society,” purposefully
brokers an introduction (317). By arranging an acquaintanceship between Hyacinth and the Marchants, the Princess believes herself to be undermining the organization of society. But James suggests that the joke is on her: far from tearing down the prevailing social structure, she is only furthering the processes of interaction that, according to Simmel, collectively constitute society *per se*. The tension here is telling: in James’s view triadic closure, and network growth more generally, leads invariably to interclass chaos and conflict, so much so that the desire to “break down” society becomes confused for and conflated with efforts to build it up.

**James’s Tragic Hubs**

In both “The Friends of the Friends” and *The Princess Casamassima*, James’s treatment of triadic closure is all the more striking for his pessimism about the consequences of living within a densely networked social world. His deeply negative assessment of modern interconnectedness sets his work apart from that of his contemporaries, the more hopeful of whom were inclined to believe that social connectivity encouraged moral development. One scholar describes this logic as follows: “If people could see themselves as cross-points in a social network instead of as isolated particles, they might overcome their intrinsic selfishness and develop the higher

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30 The idea that mutual acquaintanceship could be deployed strategically had entered the cultural consciousness of late nineteenth-century America. In a fascinating 1889 article from *The Daily Picayune* titled “Getting Into ‘Society’: Some of the Tricks and Devices Resorted to,” the author states that “to puzzle out why [undeserving persons] have been bidden to the feast would be to disclose a network of business and social relations quite unsuspected before. To be taken up and introduced into society by one of its leaders on the score of a schoolday acquaintance with one’s grandmother is one way that many carry a point.” The article goes on to discuss the “trick” of sending out wedding announcements so as “to include many persons whom it has been considered desirable to know”; another such “trick” involves a woman using her infant as bait: “I send him near the persons I want to know. They speak to baby, a conversation invariably follows; I am drawn into it as a matter of course, and then the acquaintance is made.” The article seems to imagine “acquaintanceship” as a potentially subversive phenomenon, a way that “undeserving” persons might game the system by exploiting the contiguous nature of a networked society.
moral quality of sympathy” (Otis 81). This kind of reading of interpersonal connectedness—a reading that foregrounds the social network’s role in the production of sympathy—provides a powerful juxtaposition to The Princess Casamassima precisely because, for James, networks would not seem to facilitate moral growth or increase social privilege for marginalized persons. In fact, just the opposite: far from reinforcing the socialist ideal of equality or precipitating the emergence of a Utopian “human family,” the increasingly networked structure of modern society as it is represented in The Princess Casamassima leads only to even greater levels of interpersonal conflict and social disparity. For James, dense social networks, and the self-perpetuating processes of mutual acquaintanceship contributing to them, are reasons for grave concern: Hyacinth’s “connexions” do not provide an effective avenue for bridging class differences, but only make such differences more acute. As The Princess illustrates, a highly networked world ultimately lends itself to the kind of tragedy engendered in Hyacinth’s suicide.31

My claim that James’s inclusion of so many characters (and his configuration of them in such an expansive, intricate network) indicates his deep pessimism about the social world’s increasing connectedness cuts against the more common assumption that James’s weaving together of this social fabric speaks to his humanist inclinations. In a well-known essay on The Princess Casamassima, Lionel Trilling defended James from the charge that he was “impotente in matters sociological” by claiming that the novel was “a brilliantly precise representation of social actuality” (74). Taking stock of the novel’s interclass relationships, and reading these as signs of James’s concern with “the equality

31 For a nineteenth-century examination of suicide’s sociological dimensions, see Émile Durkheim’s Suicide (1897), which attempts to connect suicide rates with variations among social environments and identity categories, including gender, religion, and education level.
of the members of the human family,” Trilling argues that the novel’s sociological
dimension emerges from James’s humanistic concern for social justice. Trilling expands
on this point:

“In *The Princess Casamassima*] people at the furthest extremes of class are easily
brought into relations because they are all contained in the novelist’s affection.
In that context it is natural for the Princess and Lady Aurora Langrish to make
each other’s acquaintance by the side of Rosy Muniment’s bed and to contend for
the notice of Paul. (87)

To be sure, Trilling’s observation about the central role of interclass acquaintanceships
in the novel is an important one, and—as this chapter aims to demonstrate—James was
certainly far from naïve regarding matters of sociology. However, while Trilling
suggests that James brings his manifold characters “into relations” out of his own
(James’s) magnanimous desire to break down class divisions, I read the novel as a
pessimistic meditation on the consequences of modern interconnectedness: Hyacinth’s
personal tragedy is shown to be inextricable from the highly clustered social world in
which he has increasingly found himself enmeshed.

For readers of *The Princess Casamassima*, the question invariably lingers at the
end of the novel: What has led Hyacinth to his tragic fate? From what motivation(s)
does he commit suicide in the book’s final pages? Any interpretation of the novel must
eventually confront this question, and scholars have generally answered it by pointing
to Hyacinth’s mixed heritage: the son of an aristocratic father and a plebian mother,
Hyacinth turns a pistol on himself in a final act that allows James to indicate the depths
of the bookbinder’s self-division.

Yet Hyacinth’s self-division comes as much from the world outside of himself—
in fact, from the very social web he has helped to arrange—as it does from anything
inside or essential to him. As the narrative progresses inexorably toward Hyacinth’s suicide, Mr. Vetch begins to grow aware that his young friend has “taken up with strange company.” In particular, Vetch begins to hear rumors that there was a “remarkable feminine influence” in Captain Sholto’s life; Vetch assumes that Hyacinth, “for good or for evil, was in peril of being touched” by that same influence, since “Sholto was the young man’s visible link” with aristocratic society (365). Vetch is not the first of Hyacinth’s acquaintances who fears that the young bookbinder Hyacinth might “be contaminated by the familiar of a princess”: ironically, Lady Aurora has also expressed reservations about their interclass acquaintanceship (267). When Mr. Vetch and the Princess meet in order to discuss how Hyacinth’s promise to turn political assassin might be circumvented, Mr. Vetch re-traces the chain of relations that James has spent the narrative steadily building. When the Princess remarks that Mr. Vetch himself is one of Hyacinth’s “influences,” Mr. Vetch responds:

Unfortunately, yes! If it had not been for me, he would not have known Poupin, and if he hadn’t known Poupin he wouldn’t have known his chemical friend [Paul Muniment]… (469)

This is the novel’s most overt explanation for why Hyacinth comes to tragedy. That it is Mr. Vetch—an analytical, upright, and basically reliable character—who reconstructs this chain of acquaintanceship in order to explain Hyacinth’s life-or-death situation further underscores James’s interest in considering the dilemma of the networked self. Indeed, since James’s audience has access to information that Vetch does not, we might extend Vetch’s comments by adding that had Hyacinth not known Paul, he likely wouldn’t have met Hoffendahl, or Sholto, or (by extension) the Princess. No sociologist
himself, Vetch is even more right than he knows: over the course of the novel, and over
the course of time, one introduction has begotten many—with severe consequences.

By showing us the diachronic formation, step-by-step and person-by-person, of
the social chain of which he’s a part, James dramatizes how these network pressures pull
Hyacinth in different directions. The bookbinder finds himself in the position of a hub
or bridge connecting divergent branches of society: on the one hand, he is connected to
Miss Pynsent, Mr. Vetch, and his socialist friends; on the other, he has begun mingling
with the Princess and additional members of the aristocracy. Were Hyacinth’s social
acquaintances (both high and low) not linked within one grand, contiguous chain—i.e.,
were these social circles entirely separate and self-contained—then Hyacinth would not
find himself in such a precarious position. In Hyacinth’s downfall, James thus intimates
that no one person is capable of holding a society this multifarious together without
suffering—psychologically, physically, even fatally—in the process.

In figuring Hyacinth’s self-destruction, James yet again conflates one’s internal
life with one’s place in a broader network, thus underscoring the far-reaching
ramifications of social interconnectedness: Hyacinth’s consciousness, James suggests, is
inextricable from his network positionality. By the time Hyacinth comes to realize his
redundant position in the network, he “had a very complete sense that everything was
over between them; that the link had snapped which bound them so closely together for
a while” (568). “Snapped” is the crucial word here, an echo of the “small, sharp crack”
that Hyacinth had imagined himself making at the revolutionary Hoffendahl’s behest,
now ironically transformed into the sound of being cut loose by the aristocratic
establishment. In “snapped” we hear the suddenness of disconnection: the breaking of a social tie by way of a discourse also used to describe psychological breakdown.\(^{32}\)

For James, the chief problem posed by the modern world’s increasing interconnectedness is that while diverse persons became ever-more-clustered—while the “small world” comes to be felt as ever smaller—it does not follow that access to “privilege” increases correspondingly. As he states in his Preface to the New York edition of the novel, what had initially drawn him to this story about the relation between a bookbinder and a princess was the fact that their “connexion… however intimate, couldn’t possibly pass for a privilege” (35). Hyacinth finds himself personally connected to the Princess—bound to her in what he knows to be a precarious social relation—yet still their class differences remain. If anything, his link to the Princess only makes Hyacinth more conscious of the unbridgeable gap between them. Looking at himself in one of the Princess’s extravagantly long mirrors, Hyacinth thinks that “in a place where everything was on such a scale it seemed to him more than ever that [he] was a tiny particle” (301).

In this sense, an increasingly networked society, far from providing a space where “the human family” triumphantly coheres, only heightens individuals’ awareness of the great divergence between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” Carolyn Betensky has argued that *The Princess Casamassima* provides a “critique of the ideology of interclass friendship,” and, indeed, I think this formulation comes much closer to James’s purposes

\(^{32}\) Compare this to a similar passage from *In the Cage*, another of James’s tales concerned with the networked structure of society (especially the role of telegraph networks). In that novella, James describes his female telegraphist as facing a situation akin to Hyacinth’s, since she longs to retain a social connection with one of her “betters,” a certain Captain Everard. James renders the telegraphist’s consciousness of this relation in discourse strikingly parallel to that found in *The Princess*: “Never so much had she felt the precariousness of their relation…. It hung at the best by the merest silken thread, which was at the mercy of any accident and might snap at any minute” (186).
in the novel than does Trilling’s notion of James’s wide-ranging “affection” (150).

Hyacinth meets the Princess, but James makes it very clear that the bookbinder will never meet her on a level playing field: his acquaintanceship with her entails only a fuller observation of her aristocratic lifestyle, not meaningful participation in it. His suicide underscores the tragic outcome of such social mingling. In James’s novel, Hyacinth—bookbinder, aesthete, and redundant tie—becomes the sacrifice required by modernity’s networked organization.

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I conclude this chapter by turning to a fascinating scene in *The Princess*, in which James pushes the notion of the “chance meeting” into comically absurd territory. When midway through the novel Hyacinth encounters Captain Sholto at a pub in Mayfair, the Captain greets him: “Why, my dear boy, what a remarkable coincidence!” (273) Only minutes later, when the Captain and Hyacinth run into Millicent just outside the pub, the coincidences seem on the surface to keep piling up. Millicent, suggesting that she is off to meet a friend, claims not to place the Captain; meanwhile, Hyacinth, who is genuinely confused, tries to rationalize these “chance” encounters: “There was a sharp shock in the girl’s turning up just in that place at that moment…. Yet… he recognized that there was nothing so very extraordinary, after all, in a casual meeting between persons who were such frequenters of the London Streets” (276). Though he can’t help feeling “that he was being bamboozled,” Hyacinth considers that “one must allow, in life, for the element of coincidence” (277). But Hyacinth is wrong: the narrative makes clear that Millicent’s presence is no coincidence; the pretense of a chance encounter serves only to cover up (and, on the level of discourse, function as an ironic counterpoint to)
Millicent and Sholto’s secret liaison.³³ Hence in this scene James highlights the disjunction between how our protagonist understands network processes to work and the more accurate assessment made available to readers: that Hyacinth’s “chance meeting” is actually no such thing.

Bearing witness to the sociological principles that ultimately trump “Chance,” James’s readers—though not necessarily his characters—learn to recognize the rule-bound dynamics that determine the evolution of social networks in time. In *Six Degrees: The Science of a Connected Age* (2004), Duncan Watts, taking up an issue that Simmel’s scholarship instigated over a century ago, states that one of social network theory’s most pressing concerns lies in determining the degree to which social networks strike a balance between “randomness and order” (73). To illustrate his point, Watts asks his readers to imagine a variety of possible worlds existing at different places on this continuum. “At one end of the spectrum,” he writes, “individuals *always* make new friends through their current friends, and at the other end, they *never* do” (73, emphasis in the original). In the former kind of world, the network is characterized by “order” and emerges via a rule-driven system: new friendships develop via existing friendships, through the continual completion of triads. In the latter world, however, absolute “randomness” reigns: here new friendships are forged only by chance, through an unpredictable process not beholden to the existing acquaintanceship structure. Watts makes clear that imagining worlds marked by such extremes is simply a thought-

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³³ The same could be said for another “chance meeting” in James’s *oeuvre* that is actually no such thing. In *In the Cage*, the telegraphist pretends to run into Captain Everard coincidentally; in actuality, however, she has been stalking him, a practice she rationalizes away by considering that in the city “somebody was always passing and somebody might catch somebody else.” The narrator continues: “It was in full cognisance of this subtle law that [the telegraphist] adhered to the most ridiculous circuit she could have made to get home” (158). Eventually she does run into Everard “by chance”—that is, exactly as she’d planned.
experiment meant to demonstrate the stakes of considering social networks from this angle. In our actual world, of course, the answer lies somewhere in the hazy middle: while it is generally true that persons more often make new acquaintances through existing intermediaries, purely chance meetings also do happen.

In parallel with Simmel’s nascent theories about the functionality of triads and how people come to meet, Henry James’s fictional worlds tend to approach the first extreme, eschewing chance meetings for the predictability provided by triadic closure.34 The fact that James dramatizes coincidental encounters so infrequently is a striking feature of his work, made all the more unique for the fact that coincidence figures prominently in so many other nineteenth-century narratives. In James’s fiction, however, meetings tend not to be coincidental so much as inevitable: the expected outcome of systematic network dynamics of the kind being studied by Simmel. Rather, for James it is precisely the failure to meet that seems arbitrary, the work of Chance, “beyond a joke.”

Indeed, reading James’s fiction in the context of the historical emergence of social network studies is a fruitful endeavor precisely because his foregrounding of sociological law or principle stands in direct contrast to literary scholars’ typical characterization of network-oriented narratives. It is something of a commonplace in literary studies to demonstrate how fictional narratives so often rely on “chance meetings” to drive their plots: critics regularly point to the function of coincidence in

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34 One of the most notable exceptions occurs in James’s *The Ambassadors* (1903), which opens with a random encounter: Lambert Strether and Maria Gostrey, strangers, make one another’s acquaintance in the lobby of an English hotel. Interestingly, though, this exception perhaps supports my argument: in his Preface to the novel, James famously condemns Maria Gostrey’s “false connexion” to Strether’s narrative. Would James’s retrospective opinion of this “connexion” have been different had Strether and Maria met via an introduction brokered by a mutual acquaintance? Is it possible that James conceptualized the chance meeting—even in his own fiction—as a form of narrative cheating?
bringing together characters who would seem on the surface to be unlikely associates (for instance, due to differences of class, ethnicity, geography, and the like). In his essay “Mutual Friends and Chronologies of Chance,” David Bordwell articulates the dominant view, which holds that in “network narratives” the “action is usually triggered by coincidence” (204):

If [characters] A and B have met, and B and C have met, the logic of the network tale suggests the need for a scene in which A encounters C—whatever the causal pretext that might bind them…. The plot structure [of what can be described as social-network narratives] therefore must find ways to isolate or combine characters in compelling patterns that will replace the usual arc of goal-directed activity. The principal source of these patterns… is chance. (199)

However, James uses both “The Friends of the Friends” and The Princess Casamassima to illustrate how new acquaintances are nearly always forged through existing acquaintances. In The Princess Casamassima, James demonstrates how the Princess’s circle and Hyacinth’s lower-class cohort become thoroughly (and tragically) intermixed, one introduction at a time; in “The Friends of the Friends,” a narrative that can be said to foreground “chance non-meetings,” James dramatizes the determinative influence of network dynamics via a tale that frames the principle of triadic closure as fait accompli.

The operative element in James’s social imaginary, then, is not Chance, but rather the principle—a principle that Simmel was conceptualizing during the same period, albeit in a different register of discourse—that all it takes for two people to meet is 1 Mutual Acquaintance + Time. Hence James’s interest lies not just in the

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35 For a representative study of coincidental relations in Dickens, see Neil Forsyth’s “Wonderful Chains: Dickens and Coincidence” (1985). For a good introduction to the coincidence plot in narrative fiction more generally, see Hilary P. Dannenberg’s “A Poetics of Coincidence in Narrative Fiction” (2004) as well as her more elaborated account in Coincidence and Counterfactual: Plotting Time and Space in Narrative Fiction (2008).
synchronic structure of networks, but in how they originate and evolve diachronically, according to principles such as those being concurrently theorized by Simmel. In each of the narratives I analyzed in this chapter, James represents the way that social networks change over time, via the “expansion of the dyad,” or through other processes—for example, *The Princess’s* dramatization of how one redundant hub gets discarded in favor of another—that affect a wide range of individuals within the network. Yet, unlike Frank Norris, whose turn toward psychical or mind-oriented networks I will examine in the next chapter, James abstains from any sustained meditation on the functionality of mediated social relations; rather, James’s characters are more often drawn, inevitably and methodically, into face-to-face contact with one another.

By attending to the convergent concerns linking James’s fiction and Simmel’s sociology, we can see how the fundamentally dynamic process of triadic closure informs the structure of James’s fiction; and that, in fact, James leans on triadic closure as a basic principle driving narrative progression. Moreover, by highlighting the regular, rule-bound nature of network processes, James’s fiction envisions social acquaintanceship less as the product of modern life’s randomness than as a testament to the power of basic and general principles of social organization. In this sense, James’s fiction not only represents social networks, but, even more, leans on the affordances of narrative to approach something like an actual network theory.
Chapter 2

The Mind of the World: Imaginative Contact in Frank Norris’s Wheat Novels

“The unity of the social mind consists not in agreement but in organization, in the face of reciprocal influence or causation among its parts, by virtue of which everything that takes place in it is connected with everything else, and so is an outcome of the whole…. Certainly everything that I say or think is influenced by what others have said or thought, and, in one way or another, sends out an influence of its own in turn.”


An Introduction to this Chapter

In 1897, two years before he would begin work on *The Octopus*, the first novel in his projected “Epic of the Wheat” trilogy, Frank Norris wrote a three-page dramatic narrative titled “The Puppets and the Puppy.”36 Using a seriocomic dialogue among children’s toys to consider a wide range of existential questions, Norris suggests in the play that social interdependence is an inevitable, and essentially tragic, circumstance of modern life. When the toys turn to a solemn discussion of the Lead Soldier’s tendency to “Fall-down,” the Mechanical Rabbit observes that when the Lead Soldier topples he also “drags with him the whole line of other soldiers.” Implicitly making the argument that the Lead Soldier’s position within a networked world must be taken into account, the Mechanical Rabbit reminds the other toys that the Lead Soldier’s action “does not stop with himself—it communicates itself to others,” such that a single Lead Soldier’s falling-down can become “a taint that progresses to infinity” (270).

36 “The Puppets and the Puppy” was originally published in *The Wave* 16 (May 22, 1897) and also can be found in *The Apprenticeship Writings of Frank Norris, 1896-1898.*
The Mechanical Rabbit’s words point to an anxiety that the cultural historian Thomas Haskell has identified as characteristic of the late nineteenth-century United States: that individual persons, inescapably linked to other persons in the social world, are “constrained by forces transmitted through adjacent links” (36). In Haskell’s account, Americans living at the turn of the century increasingly recognized themselves as interdependent components of a sprawling social network—one that included “vast numbers of people, most of them strangers who [would] never encounter each other on a face-to-face basis” (29). One need only imagine life from the perspective of the last Lead Soldier in line to understand how lengthy or otherwise complex interpersonal chains might contribute to the formation of a deterministic worldview: the last Lead Soldier falls through no fault or agency of his own, and yet he falls. He feels the effect of an action, perhaps without even knowledge of its cause.

This chapter considers how Frank Norris, American naturalism’s “most conspicuous and overt proponent” (Bell 115-6), explores social interconnection in the two completed novels of his Wheat trilogy: The Octopus (1901) and The Pit (1903). In chapter 1, I observed Henry James’s propensity to use the chronotopic device that Mikhail Bakhtin termed the “motif of meeting.” I contended that one of James’s dominant fictional strategies is to present readers with an extended series of face-to-face encounters among characters, thereby growing, one mutual acquaintance at a time, the networks in his socially complex narrative worlds. In the analysis that follows, I argue that Norris imagines social networks in a very different mode than that of James—a mode that is most succinctly described by invoking the viewpoint of Charles Horton Cooley, an American sociologist and Norris’s contemporary, who claimed that “social
experience is a matter of imaginative, not of material, contacts” (HN 139, emphasis added).

In parallel with the work of sociologists and philosophers of mind who conceptualized social interdependence in the context of a “larger mind” or “mind of the world,” Norris’s fiction sought to expand his turn-of-the-century audience’s idea of what a social network could be. More specifically, Norris configures social networks around a liberal or capacious treatment of intersubjective experience. As I will demonstrate, many researchers of Norris’s period considered networks to be mental or “imaginative” phenomena in two distinct ways: first, in that, apart from any real-world contact, social networks also exist in the mind as cognitive constructs; second (and more radically), in that it was believed that consciousness might literally connect people, binding them together through far-reaching and/or concretized intermental transfers such as telepathic communications. Thus, even as locating Norris’s fiction at this early moment in the development of social network analysis helps to illuminate his work’s formal features and thematic foci, attending to how the Epic of the Wheat explores network phenomena via the affordances of narrative raises another possibility: that fiction writers contributed to the widening scope of network studies by imagining

37 Over the course of this chapter, drawing on the frameworks of several different philosophers, I will use a few different terms to denote this large-scale network of interconnected minds: “the mind of the world,” the “Universal Mind,” and “cosmic consciousness.” Though Carl Jung’s notion of the “collective unconscious” could be said to have emerged from this same matrix of ideas, my understanding of Jung’s theory suggests that he is less concerned with a “network” of minds, or the exchange of consciousness among contemporaneous individuals, than he is in considering how certain structures of the psyche are diachronically inherited and consequently common to all members of the species. The “collective unconscious” is thus a distinct phenomenon that I will not be treating in this chapter. See Raymond Landon Bridgman’s World Organization (1905) for more on early twentieth-century conceptualizations of the “mind of the world.”
interconnections that potentially exist independent of direct acquaintanceship or face-to-face contact—namely, intermental links.\textsuperscript{38}

Norris investigates these issues by embedding in each novel at least one pivotal character who maintains an enhanced ability to make “imaginative contact” with others. My focus in \textit{The Octopus} is Vanamee, a telepathic shepherd whose inclusion in the novel has long been a source of critical debate. In my analysis of \textit{The Pit}, I highlight Norris’s thematization of imaginative contact by analyzing the downfall of speculator Curtis Jadwin (another character said to have “sixth sense”). By investigating these two figures in conjunction with each other, I also propose a new approach to the relationship between Norris’s two completed Wheat novels, which are most often viewed as starkly different books. For instance, one critic has argued that \textit{The Octopus} focuses on “vast geographical space” while the latter maps “spaces that are more… psychological” (Eby, “Domesticating” 154). My own argument, however, is that, viewed together, these two novels compel readers to come to terms with a different kind of geography, one that accommodates “cognition at a distance,” or the mind’s capacity to overcome social atomization through phenomena such as telepathy and the existence of an intricately networked mind of the world. For Norris, that is, “psychology” is itself geographical, such that multiple minds literally intermingle in and across the physical spaces

\textsuperscript{38} It is worth clarifying the distinction between the discourses I have been discussing above and Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities.” Anderson’s framework illuminates how a nation constitutes an “imagined community” since “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” Anderson thus claims that “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined” (6). For Anderson, then, communities are “imagined” because individuals connect themselves to unmet others based on assumed similarities in terms of values, identity, etc. For Norris, “imaginative contact” as I’m describing it entails not just the imaginatively projected idea of social connection, but also (more radically) and actual exchange of consciousnesses between or among individuals. In other words, I’m arguing that Norris envisioned the formation of large-scale networks as relying primarily on the interpenetration of consciousnesses—i.e., an actual network of minds.
separating individual persons. By investigating this phenomenon in both novels, this chapter highlights the connected but inversely related emphases of the two works: *The Octopus* stresses the interconnection of minds that might at first seem dissociated, whereas *The Pit* underscores how one’s capacity for far-reaching, concretized, or otherwise capacious intersubjectivity can lead to a dissociation from ostensibly proximate minds.

Examining fictional configurations of intersubjectivity in the context of Norris’s naturalist Wheat novels is an important endeavor precisely because literary critics and historians tend to be fairly dismissive of the mental life of naturalist characters, which are more often viewed as “brutes” than introspective, self-communing “persons.” Scholars have generally pitted naturalism’s characteristic determinism against intentional thinking, illustrating how, in works such as Norris’s, impersonal forces circumvent the agency of individual consciousness. Subsequently, naturalism is often seen as marginalizing, if not altogether effacing, the mental life of its characters; in this view, “the difference between such figures as Carrie Meeber and Isabel Archer… or between Clyde Griffiths and Huck Finn… lies most significantly in… the ‘thinness’ of the former [naturalist] characters’ consciousness” (Mitchell 10). Realist characters, this story goes, have fully-formed minds; naturalist characters can hardly be said to have minds at all.

However, far from being disinterested in the mental lives of his characters, in his unfinished Wheat trilogy Norris seems to be deeply invested in representing the mind as a vital point of contact in an increasingly distended world. By drawing on historical discourses that anticipate ideas about social cognition and networked consciousness, as
well as contemporary frameworks for studying fictional minds, I argue that Norris’s Wheat novels imagine social networks primarily in the context of intermentality—that is, in the context of what the narrative theorist Alan Palmer, leaning on recent developments in social psychology, the philosophy of mind, and other areas within cognitive science, calls the “social mind.” Indeed, Palmer’s groundwork allows us to consider the possibility that Frank Norris does not so much neglect the minds of his characters as jettison representations of private thinking in favor of depictions of a (preternaturally expansive) social mind in action.

Alan Palmer and the Social Mind in Fiction

To consider how Norris engages with emergent discourses of intersubjectivity in his two Wheat novels, I draw on Alan Palmer’s conceptual framework for understanding the functioning of social minds in narrative fiction. My purposes in introducing Palmer’s work are two-fold: first, to reinforce my argument that Norris’s fiction explores the possibility of a distinctly liberal or capacious rendering of intermental experience, and, second, to begin to reconcile the sociological and psychological theories informing Norris’s era with the contemporary cognitive perspectives articulated by Palmer and others. Palmer’s two major studies, *Fictional Minds* (2004) and *Social Minds in the Novel* (2010), speak to a broader development in scholarship on characters in narrative. This recent trend emphasizes that characters necessarily exist within a wider cast of characters, and thus “can only be fully

39 Following Palmer, I will use the terms “social mind,” “intermentality,” and “intersubjectivity” interchangeably to denote any manifestation of shared cognition among two or more minds.
understood as elements in complex social networks” (SMN 63). Palmer’s focus, however, is slightly different: his chief claim is not that characters in fiction are influenced by the presence of other characters, but rather that minds in fiction are affected by the presence of other fictional minds. Arguing that “we will never understand how individual minds work if we cut them off from the larger, collective units to which they belong,” Palmer has made the provocative claim that “the study of the presentation of consciousness in fiction should take place not only within individual characters but also in the spaces between them.” For Palmer, then, the most basic operations of a novel’s plot depend on its author’s configuration—and its readers’ successful reconfiguration—of the “extended cognitive network” underlying characters’ activities and relations in the narrative (SMN 26-7).

Allow me to explicate the concept of the “social mind” as Palmer understands it. First, in speaking of fictional minds, Palmer aims to move literary scholarship beyond discussions of fictional “consciousness” alone. Favoring the broader term “mind,” Palmer suggests the need for a greater inclusiveness in critical accounts of fictional mental functioning. Thus, his work calls for a literary scholarship that examines “all aspects of our inner life: not just cognition and perception, but also dispositions, feelings, beliefs, and emotions” (FM 19). Moreover, by regarding the mind as

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40 For a more detailed discussion of this trend, which I would argue touches scholarship across a wide range of narrative theoretical approaches, see the introduction to this study.

41 An important component of Palmer’s argument, but one that I do not have space to discuss at length, is his critique of classical narrative theory’s traditional approach to fictional representations of consciousness, sometimes called the “speech-category approach.” Palmer persuasively makes the case that the speech-category approach, which maps representations of consciousness onto types of spoken discourse, fails to capture fully the representations of minds in fiction, since much mental activity (to take just one example, the inarticulate “impressions” often found in naturalist novels like Norris’s) exists apart from or beyond language. See Dorrit Cohn’s Transparent Minds (1984) for the foundational study of the “speech-category” type.
intrinsically social in nature, Palmer makes a persuasive case that narrative theory, and literary studies more generally, have traditionally given “undue emphasis to private, passive, solitary” consciousness at the “expense of all the other types of mental functioning.” In other words, while critics investigating representations of consciousness have tended to focus their inquiry on characters given to introspection and prolonged self-communing, Palmer, by contrast, promotes an understanding of mind in which “the social is primary and the individual is secondary” (FM 164). Palmer’s reversal suggests that the study of fictional minds might need to be reoriented around scenes of “joint, group, shared, or collective cognition”—that is, intersubjectivity or the social mind (SMN 41).

Palmer has proposed that literary critics interested in fictional minds should embrace interdisciplinarity by turning to “parallel discourses on real minds,” including neuroscience, psycholinguistics, psychology, and the philosophy of mind (SMN 9, emphasis in the original). Palmer’s own framework, however, makes use of only the most recent scholarship from these fields, thus leaving open the question of how historically embedded discourses on minds—those contemporaneous to the particular texts under investigation—inform the construction of social minds in fiction.42 Hence part of my project in this chapter is to begin to reconcile historicist and cognitive-narratological approaches to the fictional minds represented in Norris’s Wheat series. Beyond merely constructing instances of what Palmer terms “cognitive narratives,” in which one character ascribes mental activity to another (by “reading” their bodily cues,

42 While he does not himself historicize these discourses of mind, Palmer has called for a more thoroughgoing consideration of “how fictional minds are constructed within fictional texts of different historical periods; how fictional minds are constructed within various genres of fiction,” etc. (FM 240).
for instance), Norris’s fiction, converging with period discourses, represents individual consciousness as literally transferable, that is, capable of intermingling with other consciousnesses in and across physical space. Some of these discourses exemplify the era’s corresponding interest in parapsychology; others blur the line between spiritualism and the philosophy of mind. Each reflects a moment in intellectual history dominated by the questions of whether, how, and why a large-scale—even world-wide—population might be regarded as an interconnected whole.

For Norris, then, intersubjectivity entails not just a set of inferential processes or general ways of “knowing” another’s mind, but, more emphatically, a literalized transmission of cognition between or among individuals, such that consciousness is imagined to circulate across the breadth of large-scale interpersonal networks. In this sense, Norris’s Wheat novels literalize at the level of storyworld phenomena what for Palmer are more abstract components of the metalanguage of cognitive narratology. Of course, by suggesting that an elemental linkage among individuals is the transference of cognitive “stuff” itself, Norris represents intersubjectivity in a manner that most readers would recognize today as being exclusive to fiction—given modern-day skepticism toward telepathic connectedness of the sort dramatized by Norris. Thus, whereas Palmer’s scholarship connects fictional representations of mind with the most up-to-date research on real minds, this chapter explores the ramifications of studying fictional representations of mind in the context of concurrent, historically-situated theories of consciousness.

Literalized Intermentality in The Octopus; or, Why is Vanamee Telepathic?
The sheer scope of *The Octopus* (1901) has long been one of its most discussed features. William Dean Howells, a mentor to Norris, praised *The Octopus* as “an epic of Zolaesque largeness” (“Editor’s” 824). More recently, scholars have cited the novel’s “enormous panoramic power” (Chase 203), calling Norris’s story of Californian wheat ranchers “one of the few American novels of its period to depict society with some attempt at an epic range and complexity” (Pizer 157). Yet the size of *The Octopus* arguably provides only a pale shadow of the grandiosity of its author’s ambitions. In personal correspondence, he speculated that American railroad companies’ increasing impingement on Western ranchers’ livelihoods provided him with an unique opportunity to do a “big, Epic, dramatic thing” (75). 43 Conceiving of a trilogy in which the first book (subtitled “A Story of California”) would depict the “producer” of wheat, the second book (subtitled “A Story of Chicago”) the “distributor” of it, and the third (the never-completed *The Wolf*, “A Story of Europe”) its “consumer,” Norris aimed to represent in fiction the economic interdependence of a global population.

Attending to the relationship between Norris’s narratives and contemporaneous philosophies of mind elucidates Vanamee’s role in the novel and clarifies recurrent issues surrounding the novel’s generic status and ideological commitments. Indeed, no character in *The Octopus* is more controversial than Vanamee, the mysterious shepherd who functions for large segments of the novel as a kind of spiritual mentor to Presley, an educated, introspective poet aspiring to write the great “Song of the West.” Along with Annixter, a pragmatic rancher who ultimately gets martyred at the hands of the Railroad, Vanamee and Presley are the central characters in *The Octopus*; collectively,

43 Norris’s letter to Harry Manville Wright is dated April 5, 1899 and is included in *Frank Norris: Collected Letters*, compiled and annotated by Jesse Crisler.
these three men account for most of the novel’s discursive attention. Yet even here Vanamee is set apart. Conspicuously racialized by his skin tone, which the narrator calls “brown as an Indian’s,” Vanamee impresses Presley as a “young seer,” reminding the poet of “the half-inspired shepherds of the Hebraic legends, the younger prophets of Israel, dwellers in the wilderness, beholders of visions, having their existence in a continual dream, talkers with God, gifted with strange powers” (32-3).

Critical opinion has tended to take a dim view of Vanamee’s inclusion in the novel, and even defenders of the mystic’s presence in The Octopus don’t always know what to make of him. Indeed, the shepherd and his attendant subplot, which involves Vanamee’s pining for his deceased love Angèle, are commonly identified as among “the most puzzling aspects” of the book (Crow 131). In Donald Pizer’s assessment, Vanamee’s anomalous standing within The Octopus constitutes “perhaps [its] most important flaw” (160). Because Vanamee does not participate directly in the conflict between the ranchers and the railroad, Pizer argues, the shepherd “has no role in the novel’s social substructure” and is therefore superfluous to The Octopus’s dominant themes (156). Moreover, unlike the novel’s other characters, who are constructed within a more traditionally “realist” mode, Vanamee seems to have drifted into The Octopus from a different genre altogether. Reminiscent of the “quintessential romance hero,” Vanamee, to some critics’ disparagement, seems less engaged with the novel’s prevailing social action than with his own “inward quest for meaning” (Machor 47).

Vanamee’s characterization may be jarring, but it was far from unintentional. Indeed, Norris was fully aware of the apparent disjunction between the novel’s conventionally realistic social concerns, on one hand, and Vanamee’s numinous qualities,
on the other. The author even notes in correspondence that the Vanamee subplot “is
pure romance—oh, even mysticism, if you like, a sort of allegory—I call it the
allegorical side of the wheat subject…” Still, despite Norris’s deliberation, the general
critical consensus has been that the shepherd’s arc does not yield much of a narrative
payoff. This strain of critique can be traced back to the novel’s earliest reviews; many of
Norris’s contemporaries also found the Vanamee subplot, “poetic and engrossing though
it may be,” to have “no possible relevance in this work, nor is it any way bound up with
the rest of it” (Rice 126). Thus there is a long critical history of regarding “the world of
Vanamee’s kind of Romance” as fundamentally different from the other characters in the
novel—“a thing wholly apart” (Vance 120).

In a related debate, critics are also divided on the subject of whether and to what
degree Norris intends for his readers to embrace Vanamee’s metaphysical
interpretations of the narrative’s major events. In fact, this remains perhaps the major
critical dispute surrounding Norris’s novel. When at the end of The Octopus Presley
comes around to Vanamee’s hopeful, utilitarian-leaning admonition that “if your view be
large enough… it is not evil, but good, that in the end remains,” the novel seems
abruptly to contradict the pessimistic philosophic determinism that Norris had just
expended hundreds of pages evoking (636). A lengthy series of individual tragedies,
each of which Norris has described in great detail—several ranchers being fatally shot
by Railroad corporatists, a mother and young daughter starving to death, a young
woman’s descent into prostitution, and a good man’s desperate turn to a life of crime—
appear in the book’s final pages to get shrugged off as ultimately of little concern. For

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44 Letter to Isaac Frederick Marcosson, September 13, 1900, included in Frank Norris Collected Letters.
many scholars, this elaboration of Vanamee’s worldview, and Presley’s seemingly conclusive identification with it, together comprise an implausibly optimistic ending tacked onto a narrative that seems to call for anything but optimism.

Hence interpretations of *The Octopus* often hinge upon how critics position Norris’s implied authorial stance in relation to Vanamee’s (and finally Presley’s) adherence to this “larger view.” While some interpretations of the novel maintain that Vanamee provides a “more reliable philosophical frame of reference for the author than is usually granted” (Davison 107), others are more inclined to agree with the assessment of Vanamee proffered by the engineer-turned-criminal Dyke: “No doubt, the fellow’s wits were turned” (342). At its most extreme, the argument that Norris intends to undercut Vanamee’s philosophical optimism also maintains that Norris means for readers to recognize the shepherd as “emotionally unstable and rationally unhinged,” offering little more than a “lunatic denial of mortality” (McElrath and Crisler 352-3).

And so the questions multiply. What is Vanamee’s functionality within the novel’s broader network of characters? Should we regard Vanamee’s “larger view” as indicative of Norris’s own philosophical inclinations, or, conversely, are we meant to reject that view as the product of an unstable consciousness? Does Norris’s inclusion of the Vanamee subplot constitute, as one review put it, a representation of “the most modern psychological thought, the shadowy world of the mind” (*Overland Monthly* 135)? Or should the Vanamee scenes be regarded as flaws in *The Octopus*’s overarching design, Norris’s unfortunate recourse to “the most artificial and unconvincing supernaturalism”(*Independent* 146)? Finally, if Norris intended Vanamee to be—to use the author’s own word—“allegorical,” what did he mean for the shepherd to be allegorical of, exactly?
Such questions, I want to argue, are best approached by considering Vanamee and his telepathic abilities within the context of the novel’s broader engagement with historically-situated conceptualizations of “imaginative contact.” In this connection, although Alan Palmer’s scholarship has recently made the social mind a principal topic of conversation within the field of narrative theory, it is again important to stress that ideas concerning intersubjectivity—ideas from the disciplines of sociology, psychology, and parapsychology—had already begun to emerge by the early years of the twentieth century.

In particular, Norris’s treatment of telepathy in the Wheat novels indicates the author’s intention to explore how individuals might be connected to another in influential ways, even when they are not acquaintances or engaged in face-to-face interaction. First theorized as a distinct phenomenon by Frederic Myers in 1882, telepathy was defined by the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in that same year as covering “all cases of impression received at a distance” (60).\(^45\) Literally signifying a “distant” (tele) “touch” (pathos), telepathy provided one means by which fin-de-siècle thinkers could begin to conceptualize the thoroughly modern paradox of “intimate distance” (Luckhurst 3).\(^46\) Telepathic communication was known alternately at this time as “thought-transference,” a term Sir Oliver Lodge, one of the most eminent

\(^{45}\) Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy, 1870-1901*. The SPR attempted to create a scientific discipline that might examine and explain what were otherwise held to be supernatural occurrences, including such phenomena as telepathy, clairvoyance, mesmerism, and phantasmal visitations, among many others. Attracting to its cause such notables as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and William Butler Yeats, the SPR garnered much public attention during the final decades of the nineteenth century and into the early years of the twentieth.

\(^{46}\) “Intimate distance” has been used to describe the paradoxical sensation evoked not only by telepathic phenomena, but also by modern communication technologies such as the telephone and telegraph, which allowed people to “connect” with those at a great distance from them. See also Stephen Kern’s *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918* for a look at how the telephone, in particular, “expanded lived space” (215).
writers on the subject, preferred to define as the “connection between mind and mind, by means other than any of the known organs of sense” (“Thought-Transference” 56). In 1897, Charles Newcomb, a self-described “psychic philosopher,” suggested that “the study of telepathy” might “explain the mysterious influences through which human minds dominate each other in the complex relations of life” (228). Significantly, Newcomb does not frame telepathy as a catalyst for social leveling—the word “dominate” makes clear that in his view social hierarchies remain intact despite any transference of cognition—but he does suggest, underscoring his work’s connection with contemporaneous network theories like those being offered by Georg Simmel, that telepathy provides a vital means for social linking. In fact, he posits that the modern world’s interdependence is the by-product of an underlying “circulation of mind”:

May we not fairly claim that the discovery of the circulation of mind is the greatest discovery of the nineteenth century, as that of the circulation of the blood was perhaps the greatest of the seventeenth? We are beginning to understand that not only are all men of one blood, but that all are of one mind,—not only that all are of one origin, but also of one destiny. The solidarity of the race is one of the great lessons of the day. Every human being is a nerve centre of humanity, a ganglion of the universal body, and sensitive to all the vibrations of the human system. (228, emphases in the original)

Belief in telepathy, then, provided an important pathway for imagining social interconnection. If thought-transference was real, so the thinking went, this would “prove” that a network of connected minds—in sum, a “mind of the world” or “Universal Mind” (Newcomb’s term)—undergirds all human interaction, functioning to bind together otherwise unconnected individuals and to precipitate invisible cognitive exchanges such as telepathic communications (236). To put this same point another way, if one assumes that “all minds whatsoever are telepathically connected”—as some members of the SPR did—then it follows that any thought, no matter who produced it,
is from the moment of its origin “radiating… towards all other minds” (Gurney, Meyers, Podmore 302). Hence Sir William Barrett, a co-founder of the Society for Psychical Research, framed telepathy as indicative of a global or even cosmic network: We are not isolated in or from the great Cosmos, the light of suns and stars reaches us, the mysterious force of gravitation binds the whole material universe into an organic whole, the minutest molecule and the most distant orb are bathed in one and the self-same medium. But surely beyond and above all these material links is the solidarity of mind. (Threshold 102, emphasis added) Thought-transference was thus taken to be sign and symptom of the world’s essential interdependence, a particularly powerful example of the notion that “a change in the mental condition of an individual… must affect…. [the] mental conditions of others” (Stuart-Glennie 13, emphasis in the original).

These ideas were not exclusive to European philosophers of mind; such discourses were likewise widely circulating in the turn-of-the-century United States. A forerunner of modern social network analysis, the American sociologist Charles Horton Cooley was an early proponent of the view that society could be viewed as having a “mind” of its own. By stressing what he termed “imaginative” contact, Cooley argued that the modern world was becoming ever more cognitively (not just socially) interconnected. For example, in his landmark volume Social Organization (1909), which he subtitled “A Study of the Larger Mind,” Cooley claimed that the basis for social interdependence is the fact that “all mind acts together in a vital whole” (3, emphasis 47

In theorizing the ways in which one person’s mind might influence another’s, other psychical researchers joined Barrett in reaching for material analogues, such as that provided by electrical currency. The philosopher Charles Bray, for example, makes this comparison as early as 1866:

We have no difficulty in conceiving of electricity as existing freely throughout space; but thought or mind, and electricity, are the same force in different forms or modes of manifestation…. We know that physical force everywhere is in direct communication; that the remotest star is influencing our earth and our earth it; that every centre of force or body is acting upon every other body. It is not less so in the force which we call mind. Mind is in connection with all other mind. (80)
added). Although Cooley does not refer explicitly to telepathy in his work, he does frame expansive forms of intermentality as the most significant basis for global interconnection. A possible line of inquiry would be to explore how Cooley’s mind-focused sociology in the early years of the twentieth century anticipates Alan Palmer’s framework for studying social minds in fictional narratives, since in certain ways their priorities seem remarkably similar. What’s important for my present argument, however, is simply to note how the kinds of social cognition Palmer addresses in fiction were in fact being explicitly theorized by Norris’s own contemporaries—indeed, that Norris was writing during a period heavily interested in telepathy, imaginative contact, and the social mind. Even Mark Twain, himself an honorary member of the Society for Psychical Research, weighed in on this subject. In an essay on thought-transference, which he preferred to call “mental telegraphy,” Twain called telepathic exchange “a thing not rare, but exceedingly common,” and professed his belief that “mind can act upon mind in a quite detailed and elaborate way over vast stretches of land and water” (“Mental Telegraphy” 95).

48 For instance, consider Cooley’s notion of “reciprocal imagining,” which in the following formulation clearly anticipates such notions as embedded consciousness (which Palmer terms “cognitive narratives”) and Theory of Mind: “I imagine your mind, and especially what your mind thinks of my mind, and what your mind thinks about what my mind thinks about your mind…” (Cooley, LS 200) What is more, asserting that “the mind is all one growth,” Cooley claimed that therefore “we cannot draw any distinct line between personal thought and other thought. There is probably no such thing as an idea that is wholly independent of minds other than that in which it exists; through heredity, if not through communication, all is connected with the general life, and so in some sense social” (HN 134).

49 Twain, who confessed to reading pamphlets produced by the SPR “with avidity as fast as they arrived,” became an honorary member of the organization in 1884. His letter accepting membership and offering his thoughts on “mental telegraphy” is reproduced in the October 1884 edition of the Journal of the Society for Psychical Research under the title “Mark Twain on Thought-Transference.” Twain also wrote several essays documenting his fascination with psychical phenomena, including “Mental Telegraphy, a Manuscript with a History” (1891) and “Mental Telegraphy Again” (1895). In his Autobiography, Twain notes: “Certainly mental telegraphy is an industry which is always silently at work—oftener than otherwise, perhaps, when we are not suspecting that it is affecting our thought…. I imagine that we get
Twain’s connection to this intellectual history reflects the convergence between literary practitioners and philosophers of mind, and returns us to Norris’s creation of Vanamee in *The Octopus*. I want to argue that, far from being an unnecessary or irrelevant figure in the novel’s social imaginary, the telepathic shepherd functions as a synecdoche for a modern world that Norris imagined as increasingly interconnected via imaginative contact. A loner who is paradoxically “in touch” with all, Vanamee rarely interacts socially in the novel with anyone other than a few close acquaintances (including Presley); yet despite this lack of social contact Vanamee comes to represent *The Octopus*’s intermentalist *par excellence*. Vanamee communicates telepathically with another character on at least two occasions: the first time with Presley, and the second with the mission priest Father Sarria. In one of the novel’s earliest scenes, Presley watches a far-off shepherd who appears from his distant vantage point as little more than “a single note of black, a speck, a dot.” This is Vanamee’s first appearance in the narrative, and, not coincidentally, the manner of his introduction already anticipates his adherence to a philosophical “larger view,” one that regards individual persons as but “dots,” or tiny atoms in the great stream of history. As Presley watches this outlying figure, the poet suddenly “thought he had heard some one call his name” (31). When Presley finally draws close enough to recognize Vanamee (they’d once been “devoted friends” before Vanamee disappeared for a period of several years), the poet describes the sensation of having been called: “I knew that some one wanted me. I felt it. I should have remembered that you could do that kind of thing” (33). In constructing this scene, Norris foregrounds the fact that Vanamee’s telepathic communing with Presley results most of our thoughts out of somebody else’s head, by mental telegraphy—and not always out of heads of acquaintances but, in the majority of cases, out of the heads of strangers; strangers far removed…” (429)
in a loss of agency for the poet, who begins to act without any conscious deliberation: “Without knowing why, [Presley] looked toward the shepherd; then halted and looked a second time and a third. Had the shepherd called to him? Presley knew that he had heard no voice” (31, emphasis added).

From the novel’s first instance of telepathy, then, Norris connects thought-transference with the variety of deterministic forces working upon individuals in naturalist fiction. A later scene in which Vanamee communicates telepathically with Father Sarria continues this trend by again associating Vanamee’s mode of intersubjectivity with philosophical determinism. When Vanamee telepathically summons him, Father Sarria expresses trepidation about the loss of his personal autonomy. “It troubles me,” he tells Vanamee, “to think that my own will can count for so little. Just now I could not resist. If a deep river had been between us, I must have crossed it.” Sarria goes on to call Vanamee’s power “occult,” and urges the shepherd to forsake it (138-9). That Vanamee has commandeered a priest—someone who is ostensibly submissive to the will of God—only adds to the scene’s power, reinforcing how individuals can be affected in significant ways by another’s mind, even at a distance. The intersubjective encounters made possible by Vanamee’s telepathic communings therefore function as iterations of deterministic “Force,” effectively limiting individual agency.50

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50 Although Norris makes it clear in The Octopus that Vanamee’s telepathic powers emanate from his own will, turn-of-the-century philosophers of mind sometimes believed that even the telepathist’s autonomy could be superseded. According to these accounts, the circulation of consciousness often occurred unconsciously to the persons involved. Moreover, some held that this process was perpetual; as members of the SPR would contend, “something of a diffused telepathic percolation is probably always taking place” (Gurney, Myers, and Podmore 302). See also Newcomb, who argued that telepathy often occurs completely within the “unconscious field, in which the thought passes from one mind to the other at a distance, without intention…” (234, emphasis in the original)
In describing the shepherd’s telepathic powers, Norris also accentuates the fact that Vanamee’s mind literally extends beyond his body, such that Vanamee’s fictional consciousness roams around within the storyworld. For Palmer, the social mind in fiction is a significant object of study precisely because so much of our thought is accessible to others; in his view, the body shapes (and affords access to) the mind, which is made visible in gestures, facial expressions, and other embodied actions. However, converging with then-contemporaneous philosophies of mind, Norris actually concretizes the mind’s social dimensions within the storyworld: in the Wheat novels there is often no need for a mediating body, because one’s telepathy or “sixth sense” effectively circumvents it. Hence in contrast to the critical commonplace I cited above—that Vanamee’s trajectory in the novel follows an “inward quest for meaning”—it turns out that Vanamee’s mind is primarily outward-focused, even materially functional in the world external to the body (Machor 47). As Norris lingers over a scene in which Vanamee “sent his mind out from him across the enchanted sea of the Supernatural,” to a destination where his “groping mind far-off there, wander[ed] like a lost bird over the valley” (382-3), The Octopus enacts the idea that “thought can be projected to great distances”—a notion likewise being explored via parallel discourses of mind emergent in Norris’s epoch (Newcomb 233, emphasis in the original). At one point in the novel, Vanamee feels himself capable of a “nameless sixth sense” which allows “his mind [to be] sent out from him across the night, across the little valley… speeding hither and thither through the dark” (157-8); at yet another, the shepherd feels “his mind begin to rise upward from out of his body” as he strives to commune with the dead Angèle (390).
Because Norris’s construction of intermentality suggests how minds can be engaged with beyond the boundaries of face-to-face interactions, the configuration of his narrative networks does not depend on constructing elaborate paths of individuals linked by mutual acquaintanceship: by treating cognition as literally transferable, Norris imagines telepathy or “imaginative contact” as uniquely capable of extending and concentrating interpersonal networks. During the scene in which Vanamee telepathically calls to Presley, the shepherd, cognizant of his own power, tells Presley that his telepathy “helps with the sheep,” allowing him through sheer cognition to “hold the entire herd for perhaps a minute” (33). The image here is an especially significant one because at other moments in the novel, most notably when several members of Vanamee’s herd are crushed by an oncoming train, sheep function as figurative stand-ins for human collectivities. Vanamee’s ability to hold the herd together through telepathy likewise points to an assumption permeating Norris’s Epic of the Wheat: that what most effectively binds individuals together into a unified and stable collective is not social, face-to-face contact so much as intersubjective experience, the circulation of mental “Force.” The narrative makes a similar point through the way that Vanamee’s telepathic calling of Presley and Father Sarria works simultaneously as a summons, drawing the interlocutors closer together in physical space. Norris emphasizes that the practical import of Vanamee’s telepathy is its ability to connect disparate individuals, effectively maintaining the (sheep or human) herd.

Vanamee’s telepathy also affords insight into the trajectories of The Octopus’s other two protagonists: the poet Presley and the rancher Annixter. These two men, we are informed at the beginning of the novel,
were diametrically opposed in temperament. Presley was easy-going; Annixter alert. Presley was a confirmed dreamer, irresolute, inactive, with a strong tendency to melancholy; the young farmer [Annixter] was a man of affairs, decisive, combative, whose only reflection upon his interior economy was a morbid concern in the vagaries of his stomach. (27)

As this passage suggests, for much of *The Octopus* Norris characterizes Presley as “all thought and no action,” while he characterizes Annixter, conversely, as “all action and no thought.” Representing Norris’s imaginary resolution to this opposition, Vanamee’s role in the narrative is to break down the thought/action binary: the shepherd’s cognition is literally active in the world, and most of his action in the novel is performed (inter)mentally.

Presley’s narrative arc traces his shift from an over-indulgence in individual, private consciousness to his burgeoning recognition of the dynamic power of the social mind: in order to produce his populist art, the poet must learn to connect authentically with “the People.” Whereas he begins the novel celebrating the work of the ranchers in an idealistic, abstract way, Presley also views individual ranchers as “odious to him beyond words. Never could he feel in sympathy with them, nor with their lives…” (5)

Temperamentally passive and of a “highly sensitive nature,” Presley, the novel’s “poet by training” (36), is characterized as “nervous,” “introspective,” and “morbidly sensitive”; the narrator explains that the poet’s “mental life was not all the result of impressions and sensations that came to him from without, but rather of thoughts and reflections germinating from within” (8). Thus, marked by what Norris implies is an unhealthy inwardness and over-education, Presley considers himself to be “thinking” when in fact, according to the narrator, he is only “brooding” (9).51 Under Vanamee’s mentorship,

51 Interestingly, Presley’s “bad” introspection aligns with Norris’s ideas about the function of literature and the “responsibilities of the novelist.” Barbara Hochman has argued that Norris placed notably high
however, Presley gradually begins to take the “larger view,” and at the same time becomes actively involved in the ranchers’ struggle—engaging in a more authentic poetry, inspired public speaking, and even violence against the railroad. Annixter, for his part, moves toward a deeper mindfulness, as his love for Hilma Tree eventually culminates in his epiphany: “I was a machine before, and if another man, or woman, or child got in my way, I rode ‘em down, and I never dreamed of anybody but myself. But as soon as I woke up to the fact that I really loved her, why, it was glory hallelujah all in a minute, and, in way, I kind of loved everybody then, and wanted to be everybody’s friend” (467, emphasis in the original).

Hence, whereas one tendency in critical analyses of *The Octopus* is to regard Vanamee’s telepathy as fundamentally separate from the book’s social concerns, I suggest that Norris intended Vanamee’s capacious intermentality to be read as a kind of Utopian ideal, representing a potential “next stage” in human development, the telos toward which increasingly expansive forms of “imaginative contact” were driving the modern world. In this reading, far from being an outlier—a figure “wholly apart” from the novel’s social imaginary, Vanamee, the novel’s embodiment of expansive intermentality in action, reflects Norris’s assumptions about the networked structure of the social world. “The whole,” Vanamee tells Presley at *The Octopus’s* conclusion, “is, in the end, perfect” (636); the narrator, likewise, ends the novel by urging readers to see that “Annixter dies, but in a far distant corner of the world a thousand lives are valued on a novelist’s mental “receptivity”—that is, his or her capacity for “acute sensitiveness” (12). And indeed, Norris tends to envision the ideal relationship between the novelist and his or her reading public as essentially a contact among minds based on mutual interdependence. Counteracting the belief that the “novelist, of all workers, is independent, that he can write what he pleases,” Norris argues in his essay “The Responsibilities of the Novelist” that the novelist must “feel ‘his public,’” deferring to the needs of the audience (3-4). Likewise, in “The True Reward of the Novelist,” Norris leans on what is by now a familiar metaphor, writing that the true novelist must have that “nameless sixth sense or sensibility” – in other words, must demonstrate an aptitude for intersubjectively engaging with the public mind (21).
saved…” (652). By offering a macrosociological view of modernity’s interdependent global system, Vanamee promises to integrate the various and often conflicting projects of the Epic of the Wheat’s characters—the ranchers and politicians and railroad men (not to mention The Pit’s speculators and The Wolf’s consumers)—in a manner that helps to explain The Octopus’s optimistic ending.

As I’ve already shown, however, Vanamee not only imagines the social whole; Norris also suggests, more radically, that the shepherd makes telepathic contact with other characters, such that Vanamee’s literalized intermentality actually promotes social wholeness. From the cephalopodan imagery of The Octopus, which emphasizes how the tendrils of the powerful (the Railroad magnates) affect even distant communities (the ranchers and consumer of Wheat), to the alternatively centripetal and centrifugal forces of the eponymous “pit,” which dramatizes how one person (a speculator) can affect many, Norris’s Epic of Wheat emphasizes the phenomenon that cultural historians have called “action at a distance” (MacDougall 716). The term “action at a distance” refers to the way in which modern subjects increasingly felt that their lives were determined by forces originating in far-off peoples and locales. However, my analysis of Vanamee’s role in the Wheat series raises the possibility that Norris intended to explore not only “action at a distance,” but also what we might call “cognition at a distance.” To take one particularly significant example from The Octopus, Vanamee’s telepathic takeover of Presley’s agency, which provides one example of “cognition at a distance,” functions as a synecdoche of how the matters in far-off cities affect the California wheat ranchers. Early in the novel, the narrator describes a scene in which the ranchers anxiously watch a stock-ticker:
The offices of the ranches were thus connected by wire with San Francisco, and through that city with Minneapolis, Duluth, Chicago, New York, and at last, and most important of all, with Liverpool. Fluctuations in the price of the world’s crop during and after the harvest thrilled straight to the office of Los Muertos, to that of Quien Sabe, to Osterman’s, and to Broderson’s. During a flurry in the Chicago wheat pits in the August of that year, which had affected even the San Francisco market, Harran and Magnus had sat up nearly half of one night watching the strip of white tape jerking unsteadily from the reel. At such moments they no longer felt their individuality. The ranch became merely the part of an enormous whole, a unit in the vast agglomeration of wheat land the whole world round, feeling the effects of causes thousands of miles distant—a drought on the prairies of Dakota, a rain on the plains of India, a frost on the Russian steppes, a hot wind on the llanos of the Argentine. (54)

Responsive to the pressures of the market, the California ranchers of The Octopus are forced to imagine, albeit vaguely and with incomplete knowledge, their industry counterparts in Chicago (who will themselves become the subject of The Pit) and across the globe. In a manner reminiscent of Presley’s response to Vanamee’s telepathic summons, which had also traveled a great distance before its arrival in the receiver’s mind, the ranchers in this passage undergo an extreme reduction in autonomy in the face of telegraphic communication. The scene effectively captures what T.J. Jackson Lears has described as the dawning recognition in late 19th-century American culture “that social interdependence had fatally weakened individual autonomy” and that, far from self-determined, the self was now primarily “defined according to the needs and demands of others” (34).

52 The scene of the ranchers closely reading the stock ticker in The Octopus stands in marked contrast to scenes featuring the stock ticker in The Pit. In the latter novel, Norris tends to emphasize how his fictional speculators feel no need to look at the ticker in order to understand current market fluctuations. (This fact reflects the speculators’ “sixth sense,” which I will discuss in greater detail later in this chapter.) For example, The Pit’s “Great Bear” Calvin Crookes listens to the “ticker chattering behind him,” but doesn’t get up to examine it because “he knew how the tape read” (287). In another scene, the speculator Landry Court’s instincts tell him to sell wheat immediately, “hardly before the ticker… had signaled the decline” (93). Only Charles Cressler, a man with a history of suspect speculations and who is rarely attuned to the “mind” of the market, is shown in the act of reading the ticker tape; when Cressler hears the ticker, “he faced around quickly, and, crossing the room, ran the tape through his fingers” (289).
Norris’s implicit comparison of Vanamee’s telepathy with telegraphic communication would not have been unfamiliar to the turn-of-the-century reader. Indeed, the conflation of the telepathic and the telegraphic was part of a broader trend in fin-de-siècle American culture that understood “the human nervous system… to be analogous to and influenced by systems of rapid communication and transportation such as the train and telegraph” (Thrailkill 366). This analogy is at hand in The Octopus: Norris calls the ranchers’ communications office “the nerve-centre of the entire ten thousand acres of Los Muertos,” and, not surprisingly, the stock ticker is “the most significant object in the office” (53). Moreover, Norris had been exploring the connection between telepathy and telegraphy even before his writing of The Octopus. In an article titled “The Postal Telegraph: Its Web of Wire Extends the World Around” (1897), Norris wrote that

> it would be hard to find a corner of the world which could not be reached by the Postal Telegraph Company. The office is a ganglia, a nerve center on the body of the earth not only for the transmission, but also for the reception of news and messages. Not an important event happens between the five oceans that the reverberation of it is not instantly felt in the Market-street office.” (234, emphasis added)53

The passage’s conflation of anatomical references (“ganglia,” “nerves”) with communications technology points to the way in which these two discourses—scientific understandings of the human brain, on one hand, and ways of imagining modern technologies like the telegraph, on the other—were closely intertwined at the turn of the century. In the same article Norris comes very close to positing explicitly a “mind of the world,” writing that if every telegraph wire were cut tomorrow—“or even half of them”—“it would have much the same effect upon the world at large as a stunning blow

53 “The Postal Telegraph: Its Web of Wires Extends the World Around” was originally published in The Wave 16 (18 December 1897) and is included in The Apprenticeship Writings of Frank Norris, 1896-1898.
on the back of the head has upon an individual. It would not be far from paralysis” (234-5).

Even in The Octopus’s moments of purest introspection, instances in which Norris’s characters seem to be exclusively self-communing, the novel goes to lengths to show the force of intermental contact. In the latter half of the novel, Norris builds up to a moment in which both Vanamee and Annixter reach an epiphany on the same night that the wheat sprouts from the ground. These two characters, who never share more than a few words with each other in the novel, and who only know each other through their mutual acquaintanceship with Presley, do not speak at all in this scene. In fact, Annixter is not even conscious of Vanamee’s presence, as the shepherd deliberately avoids being seen by the rancher. Yet the novel demonstrates that, despite their lack of direct interaction, the two men, each lost in his own personal meditations, are connected in what seems for Norris to be a profound (if rather abstract) way:

For a moment, the life-circles of these two men, of so widely differing characters, touched each other, there in the silence of the night under the stars. Then silently Vanamee withdrew, going on his way, wondering at the trouble that, like himself, drove this hardheaded man of affairs, untroubled by dreams, out into the night to brood over an empty land. (381)

The word “brood” recalls Presley’s “bad” introspection. In this new context, however, Norris’s use of the word reflects the novel’s implicit argument that even what feels like hermetic introspection can be said to contribute to the diffuse contact wrought by overlapping “life-circles.” In underscoring this moment of synchronicity, Norris suggests that Vanamee and Annixter are connected by something more than mere proximity—indeed, something closer to a shared mental experience.
An even starker dramatization of thought-transference occurs in *The Octopus*’s penultimate chapter, which famously intercuts back and forth between two divergent scenes: in the first set, we follow the newly widowed Mrs. Hooven and her daughter Hilda as they slowly succumb to starvation on the streets of San Francisco; in the second set of scenes, we witness a grand banquet at the mansion of Mr. Gerard, Vice-President of the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad. Beyond simply juxtaposing scenes of abject poverty with those detailing the excesses of the immensely rich, Norris attempts to illustrate how these characters on opposite ends of the social spectrum are part of the same causal network: “Because the farmers of the valley were poor,” Presley considers, “these men were rich…” (608, emphasis added) Yet beyond even indicating this causal, economic relationship between the characters in each scene, Norris implies that there is in fact a kind of telepathic communication at work. Dying for lack of food or drink, Mrs. Hooven begins to hallucinate curious figures, huge crystal goblets of the most graceful shapes, floating and swaying in the air in front of her, almost within arm’s reach. Vases of elegant forms, made of shimmering glass, bowed and courted toward her. Glass bulbs took graceful and varying shapes before her vision… (600)

On the very next page, Presley sits down to dinner in the Gerards’ “banquet hall,” in which “glitter[s] an array of heavy silver dishes and heavier cut-glass bowls and goblets” (602). This is not to say, of course, that Norris characterizes Mrs. Hooven as a mystic figure in the mode of Vanamee; but it is to suggest that the novel cuts between

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54 Presley is in attendance at the dinner because “he had known the [Cedarquist] family from his boyhood, Mrs. Cedarquist being his aunt” (312). Though I have not seen this mentioned in scholarship—a notable fact in itself—*The Octopus* suggests that Presley is also related to Shelgrim, the President and owner of the Pacific and Southwestern railroad. Indeed, soon after we learn of the relation between Presley and Mrs. Cedarquist, the narrator also adds that Mrs. Cedarquist “was rich in her own name, even before her marriage, being a relative of Shelgrim himself and on familiar terms with the great financier and his family” (315). Interestingly, this is the book’s only mention of Presley’s being tied to Shelgrim by way of extended family.
these scenes in a manner which encourages us to notice how Mrs. Hooven begins to see in her “mind’s eye” exactly what the Gerards are seeing at that same moment in actuality: the paraphernalia of abundance.

In this section of the chapter I have examined how historically-embedded theories of a “mind of the world” connecting all persons helps to explain Norris’s dramatizations of telepathic communication. By configuring Vanamee’s mind as being literally linked to other minds, Norris explores the possibility—as Cooley was also exploring in a different but parallel register of discourse—that “all mind acts together in a vital whole from which the individual is never really separate” (SO 3). In this sense, Vanamee’s telepathy provides Norris and his readers with a pathway to imagine social networks as existing apart from (or “beneath”) the interconnections produced by the capitalist market. Norris thus treats Vanamee’s “larger view” optimistically because it purports to replace an impersonal economic system with something approaching mystic, global communion: a mind of the world. In the next section, however, I demonstrate The Pit’s exploration of what happens when the mind of the world and the capitalist marketplace intersect in the figure of Curtis Jadwin, a speculator with “sixth sense.”

Unconscious Relations in The Pit

Norris’s second (and, as it turned out, final) novel in his projected Epic of the Wheat trilogy maintains many of its predecessor’s dominant themes and images. However, whereas Norris consciously structured The Octopus as an epic, offering readers a sprawling narrative of the American West, The Pit (1903), Norris’s “novel of Chicago,” is a more contained drama, and arguably an inferior one: a “half-hearted or failed business novel” (Eby, “Domesticating”162). This difference between the two books is
accentuated by the dissimilar scope of their suggested social networks; in *The Pit*, as one early reviewer noted, “the characters who count may be numbered on your fingers…” (*New York Herald* 192). Still, through the story of the speculator Curtis Jadwin’s financial rise and fall, Norris’s second Wheat novel continues the project he began in *The Octopus* of exploring in fiction the possible existence (and ramifications) of intermental networks. In the analysis that follows, I consider how *The Pit* extends this exploration by locating its speculator-protagonist Curtis Jadwin at the intersection of local and global networks. *The Octopus* emphasized the influence of “imaginative contact” and of the individual who can harness preternaturally expansive forms of intersubjectivity: Vanamee not only affects others via cognition at a distance, but also, by taking the “larger view” when it comes to social processes, understands the world’s interdependence in a way that other characters in the novel cannot. However, *The Pit* is finally more ambivalent when it comes to the individual who would deploy his “sixth sense.” In Norris’s “story of Chicago,” becoming too absorbed with the mind of the world entails risking one’s relationships with personal acquaintances.

Norris populates *The Pit* with characters who, if not explicitly telepathic in the vein of Vanamee, are at least marked by what Norris refers to as a similar kind of “sixth sense.” The novel characterizes these individuals as particularly receptive to external impressions and, like *The Octopus*’s mystic shepherd, mysteriously in touch with the Mind of the World. Perhaps not surprisingly, in *The Pit* these characters tend also to be the most successful speculators on the floor of the Chicago Board of Trade (also called “the pit”). For instance, Landry Court, a young trader and a friend of Curtis Jadwin, the novel’s protagonist, becomes a “very different Landry Court” when he is on
the trading floor. The narrator goes so far as to remark that when Landry is at work in the pit “a whole new set of nerves came into being” and “a whole new system of brain machinery began to move…” (83) Significantly, Norris suggests that Landry’s amplified intuition—and therefore also his success as a speculator—relies on his being absorbed by the “mass” in the Pit, as he readily admits to his female admirer Page Dearborn: “A crowd is a real inspiration…. When everyone is talking and shouting around me, or to me, even, my mind works at its best” (193).

Landry’s remarks in this scene recall Gustave Le Bon’s *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1896), another fin de siècle work that demonstrates the period’s burgeoning interest in forms of social cognition. Le Bon’s landmark study explores how a crowd of individuals forms a “collective mind,” becoming a “single being” obedient to what Le Bon calls “the law of the mental unity of crowds” (2). The convergence between *The Pit* and *The Crowd* is striking: Norris, according to my argument, wrote his Epic of the Wheat with an eye toward expanding his readers’ notion of what constitutes a network (beyond forms of social acquaintanceship), while Le Bon, at work in the same decade, emphasized that the formation of a crowd has little to do with social proximity or face-to-face interaction. Indeed, while Le Bon’s major conclusions regarding the “herd” mentality of crowds have become more or less familiar since *The Crowd*’s publication, it remains less recognized that Le Bon favored a very flexible and capacious notion of what constitutes a “crowd” in the first place (212). In fact, Le Bon proposes that “an entire nation, though there may be no visible agglomeration, may become a crowd under the action of certain influences” (3, emphasis added). Hence the collective consciousness or “popular mind” achieved by Le Bon’s crowds closely resembles the
unmediated transference of telepathic communication represented in Norris’s Wheat novels: neither of these modes of interconnection require any “visible agglomeration” of subjects. “Taken to the extreme,” one scholar argues, Le Bon’s model for understanding the crowd presumes something like “thought transmission, telepathy” (Borch-Jakobsen 140).

Landry Court is part of a visible agglomeration in the Chicago pit; but the novel also underscores that he is part of a much more extensive “crowd,” one that comprises the whole of the wheat market and its various players. Beyond demonstrating how Landry’s mind is responsive to other minds in the Pit, Norris characterizes Landry as having a particular talent to “feel—almost at his very finger tips” the fluctuations of the market (90). At such moments, Norris emphasizes Landry’s ability to intuit—or even forecast—the mood on the trading floor, which the narrator describes as a kind of atmospheric pressure: “It was in the very air around him. He could almost physically feel the pressure of renewed avalanches of wheat crowding down the price” (93). The phrase “It was in the very air around him” is not merely a figurative gesture on the narrator’s part; rather, as I’ve suggested above, Norris tends to literalize the way that the products of other minds—emotions, thoughts, etc.—exist outside the body.55 The dominant idea here—one that, as I’ve already shown, held some currency at the turn of the century—is that consciousness is capable of occupying and traversing the spaces between persons, and, moreover, of continuing to function outside of and apart from the

55 In The Octopus, the narrator at one point describes Hilma Tree, Anniexter’s saintly love interest, as being “surrounded by an invisible atmosphere of Love,” which radiates “in a faint luster from her dark, thick hair.” The blazon even goes on to invoke the same kind of “electric” metaphors cited earlier in this chapter; Norris describes the “Love” which “disengaged itself” from Hilma as a “an invisible electric fluid… subtle, alluring…” (497). Hilma’s angelic disposition becomes so tangible that even Osterman, a perpetual “joker” for whom nothing seems serious, receives the following impression: “Something was passing there in the air about him that he did not understand, something, however, that imposed reverence and profound respect” (504).
Yet even more than he does Landry, Norris distinguishes Curtis Jadwin, the novel’s ostensible “hero,” by his preternatural cognitive receptivity to the products of other minds, even at a distance. While Landry is more than capable of intuiting the mood of his counterparts on the trading floor, Norris implies that Jadwin’s “sixth sense” extends much further, enabling him to take stock of the national disposition and even “the mind” of a global marketplace. Unlike other speculators—“men of little minds, of narrow imaginations”—Jadwin’s capacity for “imaginative contact” is shown to be directly responsible for his success in the market, allowing him to get “large…vast results” (228). Accordingly, the narrative discourse attends closely to Jadwin’s mental functioning, tracking, for instance, how his “nerves braced taut” when some impression excited “the tiny machinery of the brain” (283). Here, too, Norris registers economic pressures principally as cognitive phenomena, dramatizing how market fluctuations readily translate into “nervous” fluctuations in Jadwin’s mind. Indeed, the speculator’s mind becomes a primary site for *The Pit*’s melodramatic *esprit* when Jadwin’s corner in wheat is finally busted during the novel’s climactic scene, the force of his financial collapse “deafened the ears, blinded the eyes, dulled and numbed the mind…” and came “crashing… through his very brain…” (339).

Tellingly, Norris uses the same language to describe Vanamee’s telepathic power in *The Octopus* that he does to explain Jadwin’s prowess as a speculator in *The Pit*. Although the thematic connection between these two characters has not been discussed
in the commentary on the novels, Norris clearly configures their modes of cognition in similar terms. Both Vanamee and Jadwin are said to have a “sixth sense,” and for Jadwin, the narrator of *The Pit* tells us, it is precisely this power that “had made him the successful speculator he was” (169). Like Vanamee, whose mind is capable of feeling the “far off” ripple, the vague “vibration” only “appreciable by some sublimated faculty of the mind as yet unnamed” (*The Octopus* 389), Jadwin, too, is often seized on the trading floor by “an intangible, vague premonition” (*The Pit* 79). *The Pit* can thus be read as reinscribing the figure of the Romantic mystic onto the archetypal man of business: reinforcing his view that literary naturalism should synthesize the romantic and the realistic, Norris constructs a “captain of finance” who, so far as he demonstrates a “sixth sense,” is not all that different from an inspired shepherd.

However, though Vanamee and Jadwin share a capacity for intermental contact with large-scale minds, Norris thematizes the two men’s “sixth sense” in very different registers. I have already shown how Vanamee, the embodiment of a kind of pre-capitalist agrarianism, connects with the mind of the world in a way that usefully increases his (and our) understanding of the mechanics of modernity’s global interconnectedness. In the fall of Curtis Jadwin, by contrast, Norris depicts what happens when an individual preternaturally attuned to the “larger mind” puts his power to use *within* the capitalist marketplace, thus exploiting imaginative contact for selfish financial gain. Whereas *The Octopus* seems to endorse Vanamee’s telepathic exchanges because these function thoroughly apart from the world of business, *The Pit* illustrates how Curtis Jadwin’s sixth sense is inextricable from the workings of the capitalist market, and thus of special concern.
To this end, one of *The Pit*’s major conflicts hinges on how Jadwin puts his superior cognition or “sixth sense” to use. Extremely sensitive to what the narrator calls public “sentiment,” “that peculiar, indefinite thing,” Jadwin demonstrates a remarkable aptitude for “feeling” the prevailing public mood, which bears directly on market fluctuations (168). Indeed, what makes Jadwin a great speculator is his ability to tap into the “mind” of the global market. Economists of Norris’s period were turning to the context of psychic research to understand market dynamics, such that the market itself came to be seen as “an aggregation of minds” that acted—especially during panics—“like a single mind” (Zimmerman 62). The idea that the market had a mind of its own functioned ideologically (and arguably still functions) to naturalize sometimes highly damaging market fluctuations. By demonstrating that Jadwin is a “Great Man” to the degree that his sixth sense allows him access to the mind of the Pit itself, Norris’s novel seems to ascribe to exactly this view. Yet the novel also shows that in attuning himself so completely with this kind of “larger” mind—whether it be public sentiment, the mind of the market, or the mind of the world—Jadwin alienates himself from the people ostensibly closest to him. *The Pit* implies that Jadwin feels the market even more intensely than the young Landry Court because, unlike Landry, who is a different person at home than he is at work, Jadwin is preoccupied with the fluctuations of the market wherever he goes. Indeed, one of the novel’s central concerns is to demonstrate how Jadwin’s failure to uphold boundaries between his speculation on the market and

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56 See also Edward David Jones’s *Economic Crises* (1900). Published one year before *The Octopus*, Jones’s work blames the recurrence of economic crises in part on the susceptibility of the social mind: “If the individual mind works imperfectly and is prone to certain chronic errors, the social mind is yet more unsatisfactory in many ways” (199). Market panics spread rapidly, Jones claims, due to the same kind of “sympathetic force” (204) which allows “states of mind, hopes and beliefs… [to be] communicated from one to another” (203).
his domestic life creates trouble in his marriage. In effect, Jadwin’s intense focus on the most distant nodes in his imaginative network—the ranchers in California, consumers in Europe, etc.—prevents him from accurately seeing those closest to him: his macrosociological imaginings alienate him from his wife.

Hence attending to this tension between immediate, personal contacts, on one hand, and what Cooley called the “imaginative” or otherwise mediated links in one’s network, on the other, also helps to clarify one of the thornier critical issues surrounding The Pit: the role of Laura Dearborn. Laura, who becomes Jadwin’s wife early in the novel, has in fact been something of a lightning rod for critical debate. For example, even though “Norris himself considered Laura’s character to be the structural and thematic center of The Pit,” Barbara Hochman has noted that Laura “sometimes seems a peculiarly blank, even lifeless, creation” (101). Norris’s intention, stated in a personal letter, was to keep Laura “the center of the stage all of the time” and to “interest the reader more in the problems of her character and career than in any other human element in the book.”57 However, if focusing the narrative discourse on Laura remained Norris’s target throughout the writing process, something seems to have gone awry, since Laura is absent from the novel for long stretches. Because Jadwin occupies much more of the narrative’s discursive attention, it is difficult to find fault with the critical consensus that holds him as “unquestionably the hero of The Pit” (Marchand 169).

As a result of Laura’s fluctuating position in the narrative—and in a manner reminiscent of critical reaction to the Vanamee subplot in The Octopus—The Pit’s love

57 See Norris’s November 1901 letter to Isaac Frederick Marcosson, included in Frank Norris Collected Letters.
plot has been “singled out as the novel’s central flaw” (Pizer 165). Indeed, the domestic plot’s controversial role in the book arises mainly from the way Laura Jadwin is one step removed from any direct connection with the wheat itself. Viewing this as a significant weakness of the novel, Donald Pizer asserts that “in The Octopus… all the major participants in the love stories are in direct contact with the wheat,” while in The Pit, by contrast, “Laura has nothing to do with [the wheat]” (175). One of Norris’s contemporaries likewise argued that the narrative should have kept its attention on “the wheat gambler—not the wheat gambler’s wife” (McElrath and Knight 289), and literary scholars continue to echo this critique, suggesting that Norris must have been stymied by “the problem created by a heroine with no personal interest in wheat speculation” (McElrath and Crisler 397). Finding fault with the gap between Jadwin’s and Laura’s separate subplots, which seem “minimally connected until the last pages,” these commentators point out that husband and wife are so alienated from one another that “Norris had to split… chapters into discrete, alternating Laura and Curtis sections” (McElrath and Crisler 398).

Despite this consensus, a network-oriented analysis of The Pit raises the possibility that Laura’s once-removed relation to the wheat industry, far from constituting a flaw, is an essential part of the novel’s broader thematic structure. Norris takes care to show how Laura suffers for her husband’s obsession with wheat, even as she herself has no direct contact with that commodity; moreover, the novel clearly connects the breakdown in their marriage with the fact that Curtis Jadwin has become “so absorbed” in the business of speculation (230): “By now his mind was upon this one great fact—May Wheat—continually” (247). In the latter half of The Pit, Laura
justifiably accuses Jadwin: “Your mind seems to be away from me” (203). She continues: “I can see just what’s in your mind. It’s wheat—wheat—wheat, wheat—wheat, all the time” (204). Ironically, for all of Jadwin’s “sixth sense,” his ability preternaturally to “feel” the minutest fluctuations of the wheat market, he is strikingly out of touch with the mind of his own wife: “what Laura thought [Jadwin] could only guess” (248). In Jadwin, then, Norris constructs a protagonist who displays a far-reaching intermental potency yet constantly fails to recognize the mind of his own spouse.

Indeed, The Pit suggests that although Jadwin is something of a savant when it comes to being in touch with mind of the market, or the mind of the public at large—an agglomerate he has never met and cannot see—his preoccupation with such imaginative contact comes at a cost, threatening his most intimate, personal relations: he is simply not on his wife’s “wavelength.” The novel’s disciplining of Jadwin thus highlights the potential negative consequences of privileging “imaginative” contacts, as Cooley conceptualizes them, over immediate, personal ones. Despite one critic’s claim that Jadwin has not “learned to think in broad terms, to see the complex relations of wheat trading to the economic life of the nation” (Marchand 163–4), the nature of Jadwin’s marital breakdown actually suggests that Jadwin thinks in terms that are too broad. Though tapped into public sentiment, or the large-scale collective mind I’ve been calling “the mind of the world,” Jadwin fails to connect with the constituent individuals that make up that whole.

Thus, whereas The Octopus demonstrates how Vanamee effectively deploys his “larger view” to understand the far-reaching effects of market capitalism, The Pit dramatizes what happens when the capitalist system appropriates this “larger view” for
its own ends. Through the story of a speculator who sees the whole of the economy but not the persons who comprise it, Norris second Wheat novel functions in part as a cautionary tale. Marked by a kind of intermental far-sightedness, Jadwin is punished in the novel to the extent that he forsakes his most local connections—his wife, his friends—in favor of being attuned to the mind of the global market. An uncontroversial tenet of social network theory holds that “people’s knowledge is mostly about their direct contacts, and they are progressively less aware of what is going on further way from them in the global network” (Bruggeman 28). However, The Pit’s protagonist represents a reversal of this dynamic: Jadwin can read large-scale minds (public “sentiment”) with ease, but is “progressively less aware” of what those individuals closest to him are thinking. To be sure, engaging with proximate, immediate contacts, on one hand, and distant, “imaginative” ones, on the other, needn’t be an either/or choice—but Jadwin, to his own detriment, makes it one. While he is almost mystically in touch with the agglomeration of distant peoples and events affecting the price of wheat, he can’t—or won’t—see the mental functioning that immediately surrounds him.

Hence unlike The Octopus—which suggested that although telepathy reduces individual autonomy, it also carries the promise of far-reaching human interconnection—The Pit is decidedly more pessimistic about the role of intermental networks and the interdependent social world they presume. In “From Field to Storehouse: How a Wheat Crop is Handled in California” (1897), a journalistic account of the wheat industry, Frank Norris had begun his report by emphasizing the world’s ever-increasing interdependence. “One man’s loss is another man’s gain,” Norris asserts in that report, “and the same is true of wheat-producing countries the world round”
By the end of *The Octopus*, Presley, having been tutored by Vanamee, is finally able to see how the whole of the society in which he moves is interconnected in just such ways: “Because Magnus had been beggared, Gerard had become Railroad King; because the farmers of the valley were poor, these men were rich…” (608). Through the story of Vanamee’s mentorship of Presley, *The Octopus* suggests that this view of the world itself provides reason for optimism. *The Pit*, by contrast, underscores that Jadwin’s macrosociological imagination—his “sixth sense” or imaginative contact with the mind of the market—essentially gets in the way of more proximate relationships. The narrator points out that Laura “knew very little of her husband’s affairs,” and mostly learns about his business transactions through the “daily papers” (168). Laura’s relationship to her husband has become, quite literally, a mediated one: rather than engaging directly with her husband, Laura attempts to get inside his head by reading the newspapers, by taking stock of something that approaches a public mind.

As with Jadwin’s marriage to Laura, his friendship with Charles Cressler is tragically undercut by Jadwin’s own “larger view”: in both of these relationships, Jadwin’s wholesale focus on making imaginative contact with distant strangers obstructs communication between individuals who purport to be intimates. Yet while the Jadwin marriage ultimately recovers from this mediation, Cressler never does, committing suicide in the closing chapters of the book. Despite the narrator’s assurance in the novel’s final pages that “the Wheat… had killed Cressler,” the thrust of *The Pit* is actually to demonstrate how Jadwin’s economic gain is directly responsible for Cressler’s death (368, emphasis added). Believing that it is the speculator’s duty to help

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58. “From Field to Storehouse” was originally published in *The Wave* 16 (August 7, 1897) and is included in *The Apprenticeship Writings of Frank Norris, 1896-1898*.  

130
“keep wheat at an average legitimate value,” Cressler clearly represents the voice of social responsibility—a voice that is all too often ignored by other characters in the novel (115). Although all along Cressler and Jadwin profess themselves to be “good friends,” by the latter half of The Pit the two compatriots are unwittingly working at cross-purposes (243). In the scenes leading up to Cressler’s death, the novel emphasizes that Jadwin has deliberately kept the nature of his speculations a secret; only his closest business partners recognize that he is the “Unknown Bull” whose risky endeavor to corner the wheat market has captured the public’s attention. Moreover, while it’s clear to many characters that the Unknown Bull is engaged in a battle with Calvin Crookes, the pit’s “Great Bear,” very few characters know exactly who is working alongside Crookes. When Jadwin asks Sam Gretry (his most trusted partner) to tell him who makes up Crookes’s gang, Gretry tells him: “I don’t know; nobody does” (276). But by this point, of course, Norris’s readers do know at least one person who has become entangled in Crookes’s scheme: Charles Cressler.

To be clear, Jadwin is speculating as a Bull (buying stock in wheat) and Cressler as a Bear (“selling short”), yet neither of the friends realize they have entered into a condition of inverse relations wherein (to repeat Norris’s words from above) “one man’s loss is another man’s gain.” Though Jadwin doesn’t know it, his success will ensure Cressler’s ruin, and as if to underscore the source of this tragedy Norris constructs a scene in which Jadwin actively deceives Cressler by claiming that he (Jadwin) is “just as well out of” the speculation game “for good and all.” When Cressler presses Jadwin on the identity of the Unknown Bull—who readers have known for some time is Jadwin himself—Jadwin assures Cressler that “there isn’t any Big Bull” (244). Not many pages
later, after Jadwin has cornered the market, Cressler commits suicide—a direct result of the fact that Jadwin’s covert speculations have prevented both men from recognizing the real state of their connection to each other, their relationship within the financial network. The revelation that his own market “victory” has ruined Cressler is devastating for Jadwin, coming as it does after Cressler has killed himself. In Jadwin’s most expressive moment in the novel, he acknowledges the role he has played in his friend’s suicide:

“My God, my God,” groaned Jadwin, as if in the throes of a deadly sickness. “He was in the Crookes ring, and we never knew it—I’ve killed him, Sam. I might as well have held that pistol myself.” [Jadwin] stamped his foot, striking his fist across his forehead, “Great God—my best friend—Charlie—Charlie Cressler!”

(321)

Describing turn-of-the-century America’s “distended society,” the cultural historian Robert Wiebe has suggested that the “inhibitions that restrained a man in his own community scarcely applied when his decisions involved distant, invisible people” (37). The Cressler subplot in *The Pit* represents something like a return of the repressed, dramatizing the tragic consequences when these “distant, invisible people” reveal themselves not to have been so distant or invisible after all. Before Cressler’s death, the narrator tells us that Jadwin “could ignore” the distant effects of his questionable trading practices, because any consequence was inevitably “far from him, he could not see it” (293). When Jadwin does hear about the social consequences of his actions, it is only “indirectly, passed on by a dozen mouths before it reached his ears” (293). Cressler’s suicide, however, brings what was once “far” into Jadwin’s immediate proximity, forcing him to confront personally the repercussions of his speculation.
The Pit thus uses the Cressler subplot to illustrate how in a modern world marked by elusive interconnections, even people of otherwise close acquaintanceship are capable of affecting each other in unrecognizable—yet profoundly determinative—ways. While Jadwin considers Cressler “about as old a friend as I have,” noting that the two “used to be together about every hour of the day,” the pressures of speculation have intruded on this intimate relationship (318). The mediation of the Wheat market—specifically, the market’s effacement of lucid relations so as to enable a complex and anonymous but still deeply interconnected system—precipitates Cressler’s suicide: neither Jadwin nor Cressler realize just how their fates are conjoined. In this sense, Cressler’s death speaks to the personal devastation wrought by an intricately networked society, one dominated by what Charles Horton Cooley termed “unconscious relations”: “those [relations] of which we are not aware, which for some reason escape our notice” (SO 4). In Social Organization: A Study of the Larger Mind, Cooley argues that “a great part of the influences at work upon us are of this character,” such that we are constantly being affected by “people to whom we are but indirectly and unconsciously related” (4).

In contrast to The Octopus, in which Norris’s explores how even minds are capable of influencing each other across social and/or geographical distances (and thus how even non-acquaintances are bound up in one another’s fortunes), The Pit cleverly takes a different tack. The tragic nature of the Cressler subplot demonstrates how the modern market translates immediate, “conscious” relations (Cressler and Jadwin as “friends”) into alienated, “unconscious” ones (Cressler and Jadwin as unwitting financial rivals). Hence, whereas The Octopus explores how distant relations or even strangers are actually more connected with one another than might initially be imagined, The Pit
illustrates just how quickly “close” acquaintances can become strangers to one another within the dizzyingly intricate world of the global market.

James, Norris, and Divergent Branches in the Genealogy of Network Studies

In “A Plea for Romantic Fiction” (1901), Norris famously disparages literary realism by arguing that it “notes only the surface of things.” He goes on:

For [Realism], Beauty is not even skin deep, but only a geometrical plane, without dimensions and depth, a mere outside. Realism is very excellent so far as it goes, but it goes no further than the Realist himself can actually see, or actually hear. Realism is minute; it is the drama of a broken teacup, the tragedy of a walk down the block, the excitement of an afternoon call, the adventure of an invitation to dinner. It is the visit to my neighbor’s house, a formal visit, from which I may draw no conclusions. I see my neighbour and his friends—very, oh such very! probable people—and that is all. Realism bows upon the doormat and goes away and says to me, as we link arms on the sidewalk: “That is life.” And I say it is not. It is not, as you would very well see if you took Romance with you to call upon your neighbour. (215-6)

In this passage Norris offers an intriguing series of metaphors for realism and its attendant failures (as he sees them). Perhaps the most familiar of these to 21st-century readers is “the drama of a broken teacup,” this phrase having come to stand for the general line of critique that faults American literary realism for its alleged mundanity. Even more illuminating, though, are the phrases that follow Norris’s “teacup” barb, as Norris proceeds to map the differences between realism and what he calls “Romance” onto concomitant distinctions he finds among diverse forms of social interaction. In Norris’s account, realism might be compared to an “afternoon call,” or an “invitation to dinner,” or a “visit to my neighbour’s house, a formal visit”: each of these constitutes a mode of social encounter that is highly ritualized, inherently local, and dependent on face-to-face contact. Of course, in making this point Norris also strategically pulls from

59 “A Plea for Romantic Fiction” is one of several essays included in Norris’s The Responsibilities of the Novelist, and Other Literary Essays (1903).
the content of realist novels themselves, since the prototypical plots of James, or of
Howells and his circle, are often built upon scenes of afternoon calls, invitations to
dinner, and other such formal visits. As I observed in chapter 1, it is exactly this kind of
ritualized social interaction—the meeting or introductory “interview”—that, when
multiplied, provides the foundation for the complex social networks encountered in
James’s fiction.

By conflating literary realism with formalized, face-to-face social encounters,
Norris suggests that the difference between realist fiction and his own work might be
apprehended by turning to their different modes for imagining interpersonal contact. In
the Wheat novels Norris aims to break through realism’s “surface of things” by focusing
on deeper connections among characters—connections that, grounded in intersubjective
contact, shift conceptions of social networks away from notions of social
acquaintanceship toward something more mystical, more abstract, and—from a
contemporary perspective—less scientifically valid: a mind of the world. What is more,
whereas James rigorously documents the process whereby parts (individual persons)
accrue to make a whole (the social network, or “society” in its entirety), Norris’s
naturalist Wheat novels instead explore how the social whole cannot be understood
merely by examining it as an amalgamation of individuals. Characters are
interconnected in James’s narratives because of the ubiquity of social contact; in the
modern world as James imagines it, individuals are continually making each other’s
acquaintance, in large part because they share mutual friends or associates. Norris, by
contrast, does not emphasize paths of personal acquaintanceship so much as forms of
imaginative contact, even literalized intermental exchanges such as telepathic communications.

In this sense, Norris’s desire to get below realism’s “surface of things”—to explore how individuals might be connected to one another apart from, or prior to, face-to-face social contact—approaches the notion of “cosmic consciousness” as articulated by the American psychologist William James, Henry’s brother. In his essay “The Confidences of a ‘Psychical Researcher’” (1909), William James elucidates what he had elsewhere referred to as the “panpsychic view of the universe”:

We with our lives are like islands in the sea, or like trees in the forest. The maple and the pine may whisper to each other with their leaves, and Conanicut and Newport hear each other’s foghorns. But the trees also commingle their roots in the darkness underground, and the islands also hang together through the ocean’s bottom. Just so there is a continuum of cosmic consciousness, against which our individuality builds but accidental fences, and into which our several minds plunge as into a mother sea or reservoir. (1263-4)

Subscribing to a similar logic, Norris imagines the most powerful forms of human interconnectedness to function within the context of an invisible, worldwide intermental network, or—to use William James’s word—a kind of “panpsychism.”

Thus, rather than neglecting his characters’ minds, as some critics have suggested, Norris actually frames cognition as socially functional and even literally

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60 William James’s views on the phenomenon now called intersubjectivity were complicated, to say the least. Ross Posnock notes that “at least two rhetorics coexist uneasily” in the psychologist’s work. “On the one hand,” Posnock observes, “James’s belief in radical autonomy posits the individual keeping his own thoughts to himself; on the other, he preferred to believe in overlap and continuity among individual streams of consciousness and insisted on the reality of relations” (30). Posnock points out, for instance, that William James endorsed such intersubjective possibilities as “thought transference, mesmeric influence, and spirit control” (35). In fact, James helped to found the American branch of the Society for Psychical Research in 1884; he later became its president. Originally published in The American Magazine in October 1909, “The Confidences of a ‘Psychical Researcher’” can be found in the Library of America’s edition William James: Writings, 1902-1910.

61 Cooley relies on a similar metaphor to explain the “deep” interconnectedness he thought to be underlying the modern world’s superficial complexity: “There is much talk of the chaotic character of human life. It is, in fact, a tangled growth, but always sequent, always proceeding from roots, like the vines and brambles in the swamp…” (Life and the Student 245).
transferable, providing a valuable means of contact in an increasingly distended world. Indeed, by representing large-scale intersubjectivity as the basis for a kind of spiritual communion among otherwise unacquainted or remote individuals, Norris purports to illustrate in *The Octopus* and *The Pit* how people are connected to one another based on their relative positions within a global mental whole—that is, via forms of imaginative contact. While Henry James configured social networks in such a way as to demonstrate the wide-reaching effects of interpersonal contact—documenting, that is, how reverberations are felt up and down the length of a grand social chain in which each individual forms a single link—in Frank Norris’s naturalist Wheat novels minds are making contact even when “persons” are not. Positing a deep level of cognitive interaction, Norris depicts human minds as perpetually “comming[ing],” but only sometimes in readily observable ways.

Though his fiction does not feature the psychological nuance or formidable prose style of “the Master,” Norris, no less than James, experimented with illuminating how the fates of seemingly unconnected individuals are actually intertwined—or, to cite Charles Horton Cooley, how in the modern world “separateness is an illusion of the eye and community the inner truth” (*SO* 9). Yet there are also substantial differences in how these two authors imagined the forms and functions of social networks. For James, networks are built from the ground up; hence the progression of his narratives tends to track this assembly as it occurs through time, node by node. When in *The Princess Casamassima* Hyacinth Robinson makes the personal acquaintance of Diedrich Hofendahl—the leader of the socialist conspirators—their meeting has the important consequence of situating the bookbinder and the socialist in networked relations with
each other, such that Hyacinth will later suffer for his being linked to Hoffendahl. In *The Octopus*, by contrast, the famous scene in which Presley comes “face to face” with Shelgrim (the President and owner of the Pacific and Southwestern Railroad) only comes *after* the railroad-rancher conflict has already reached its climactic moment, the gunfight in which several important characters are killed (570). Moreover, the meeting itself is a let-down: Shelgrim insists that “conditions, not men” are responsible for the ranchers’ defeat, and Presley leaves knowing that his interview with Shelgrim will have no material effect on the plight of California’s laboring classes (570). The contrast between how these two scenes of meeting function in the progression of each narrative is telling: in James’s fiction, networks tend to be built person-by-person, through systematic social processes, whereas in Norris’s Epic of the Wheat networks are always already existent, even independent of personal acquaintanceship or other forms social interaction. According to these narratives’ distinct logics, Hyacinth and Hoffendahl are components of the same network because they meet (that is, their face-to-face contact yields a relationship marked by network “constraints”), whereas Presley and Shelgrim meet because they are already components of the same network (pre-existing constraints have precipitated their face-to-face contact).

In this sense, the fiction of Henry James and that of Frank Norris illuminate distinct branches of early network research: James focuses readers’ attention on the microsociological, “bottom-up” interactions of the kind being theorized by Georg Simmel; Norris stresses the psychical and intersubjective contact being explored by scholars associated with the SPR and the sociologist Charles Horton Cooley,

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62 See chapter 1 for a more comprehensive analysis of this scene.
respectively. Thus, even as emergent network discourses help to elucidate some of the recalcitrant issues surrounding the Wheat novels, Norris's treatment of telepathic communications and large-scale intermental networks models what was then a burgeoning direction for network research—a direction focused less on person-to-person interactions than on the forms of imaginative contact undergirding more visible social processes. Though engaged with separate strains of network analysis, both James and Norris used narrative fiction to explore—and likewise urge their readers to consider—what it means to live in an interconnected world.
Chapter 3

Who’s Who in Dos Passos: Sociometry and the U.S.A. Trilogy

“The world is full of partial stories that run parallel to one another, beginning and ending at odd times. They mutually interlace and interfere at points, but we cannot unify them completely in our minds.”

—William James, Pragmatism (64)

An Introduction to this Chapter

In 1925, the same year that John Dos Passos published his montage-novel Manhattan Transfer, a young psychiatrist named Jacob Moreno emigrated from Romania to the United States. Over the course of the next two decades, Moreno would revolutionize the still nascent science of social networks. A quarter-century earlier, Georg Simmel, the German sociologist generally regarded as social network theory’s leading pioneer, had set forth the discipline’s foundational principles. But it was not until Moreno, social scientists today agree, that anyone had attempted to enact a “total network approach”—that is, to put theory into practice (Degenne and Forsé 23). Moreno’s preferred term for this practice was “sociometry,” and in this chapter I examine the three novels of John Dos Passos’s U.S.A. trilogy—called by one contemporary reviewer the “most ambitious [enterprise] that American fiction has embarked on since Frank Norris’s unfinished trilogy of the wheat”—in the context of Moreno’s groundbreaking sociometric framework (De Voto 122). Arguing that sociometric methodologies targeted problems of networked life on which Dos Passos’s fiction likewise converged, my aim in this chapter is to demonstrate the parallel
techniques and themes connecting Moreno’s network scholarship with Dos Passos’s \textit{U.S.A.}, even across their different discursive registers.

If for some readers \textit{U.S.A.} feels “grimly geometrical,” it is not so difficult to see why (Weeks 145). The trilogy was originally published as three separate novels: \textit{The 42nd Parallel} (1930), \textit{Nineteen Nineteen} (1932) and \textit{The Big Money} (1936). Each of these novels is itself broken into segmented sections taking the form of one of four principal modalities. These are most often referred to as (1) “Biographies,” (2) “Newsreels,” (3) “the Camera Eye,” and (4) “Narratives.” Dos Passos’s combination of these four modes—each with its own structure and subject matter—surely contributes to \textit{U.S.A.’s} unique aesthetic, and remains one of the trilogy’s most commented-upon features.

While I acknowledge that the novels’ exhaustive segmentation holds a central place in any discussion of Dos Passos’s modernist experimentation, and while much of the complexity and power of Dos Passos’s work arises from the manner in which these modes complement and collide with one another, in this chapter I will for the most part bracket the Biography, Newsreel, and Camera Eye modalities in order to focus my attention on \textit{U.S.A.’s} Narrative sections.\textsuperscript{63}

If we follow Lubomír Doležel in his claim that “the world that looks chaotic to the acting person is the most fertile narrative world” (97), then the worlds of \textit{U.S.A.’s}...

\textsuperscript{63} To be sure, “spill-overs” from the Newsreels, Biographies, and Camera Eye sections into the Narratives add another layer of complexity to the networked structure of the trilogy as a whole. For instance, appearances of Biographical subjects like President Wilson in the Narratives raises the question of how Dos Passos might ask readers to create networks containing both fictional and historical figures. I largely bracket analysis of how networks extend across the trilogy's four modes because this broader investigation has already been performed, and performed well, by Wesley Beal. In “Network Narration in John Dos Passos’s \textit{U.S.A.} Trilogy,” Beal argues that the formal of structure of \textit{U.S.A.} is modeled on the “Fordist paradigm,” which “emphasizes central management at the same time that its actual production strategy relies on networked simultaneity”—that is, a subsegmented division of labor. For Beal, to the extent that \textit{U.S.A.} invokes “Fordist interdependence,” the “structure of the trilogy is that of a network comprised of four anchoring nodes” (no pagination).
Narratives are fertile ones indeed. In Dos Passos's own description, the Narratives deal "with the more or less entangled lives of a number of Americans during the first three decades" of the 20th century (qtd. in Nanney 178). Over the course of the trilogy, these segments contain dozens upon dozens of characters, but arguably twelve primary figures: those whose names Dos Passos uses to title the various sections. In The 42nd Parallel, these characters are: Mac (a drifter, printer, and sometime Wobbly), J. Ward Moorehouse (a powerful figure in the public relations industry), Janey Williams (Moorehouse's personal assistant), Eleanor Stoddard (an interior designer drawn into the Moorehouse orbit), and Charley Anderson (a mechanic and WWI ambulance driver). In Nineteen Nineteen, five more major characters emerge: Joe Williams (Janey's brother, a sailor), Richard Ellsworth Savage (Moorehouse's public relations protégé), Eveline Hutchins (Eleanor's friend), Anne Elizabeth Trent or “Daughter” (a Texan belle) and Ben Compton (a young revolutionary). Finally, The Big Money revisits Charley Anderson and Dick Savage, while also attending to the stories of Mary French (a Communist), and Margo Dowling (an aspiring actress).

As I analyze these characters’ networked relations with one another—as well as their connections with the trilogy’s other, less central figures—I will be honing in on the technique that Donald Pizer, in his study of Dos Passos, has called “interlacing” (110). I first explore how interlacing functions in the context of an emergent sociometry, arguing that Dos Passos’s application of this technique points to his investment in network thinking and even to what I will call his “sociometric aesthetic,” that is, his propensity to view the social world of fiction as a mappable or quasi-mappable network of interpersonal relations. Examining parallels between Dos
Passos’s text and an emergent sociometric analysis helps us to understand *U.S.A.*’s configuration of its characters’ densely networked relations as well as the unique challenges its radical form has posed to readers, from Dos Passos’s era through today. I then turn to an investigation of how more recent network models that are critical descendents of Moreno’s sociometry—including Robin Dunbar’s cognitive anthropology and Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory—might productively be enlisted to bring clarity to these same challenges, in addition to elucidating related debates about the trilogy’s aesthetic and political merits. Like Moreno’s sociometry, which depicts social-scientific procedures as having the potential to advance freedom for the individual, Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* explores whether the empirical analysis of networks—even beyond any one political program—might be a viable starting point for reform.

As Pizer defines it, “interlacing” refers to any contact among characters in *U.S.A.*’s fictional narrative sections, but especially to the way that major characters “frequently appear in narratives other than their own” (406). For Pizer examples of this structure range “from a casual reappearance of a figure,” as when J. Ward Moorehouse shows up in Mac’s narrative in Mexico, to more substantial relations, such as “the love affairs of Daughter and Richard Savage and of Charley Anderson and Margo” (110). Pizer notes that Dos Passos’s use of the interlacing technique generally “increases as the trilogy goes forward” and that “by the close of the trilogy only Mary French has not

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64 Pizer differentiates between interlacing and a separate device he calls “cross-stitching,” with the latter term referring to those moments when “a new major character and thus a new area of experience is introduced” to the narrative (406). Pizer’s primary example of cross-stitching is the introduction of Margo Dowling, and her Hollywood milieu, into *The Big Money*. Since my focus in this chapter is on the development of *U.S.A.*’s networks generally, I do not distinguish between “interlacing” and “cross-stitching,” but instead will treat each as basically the same kind of network process: the addition of new persons, or new relations, to an already established structure.
appeared in the narrative of another figure” (110). While in Pizer’s view there is occasionally “a sense of forcing when two characters are interlaced under unlikely circumstances,” he concludes that “in general the effect is curiously appropriate,” as well as thematically significant. Dos Passos, Pizer writes, “appears to be saying that though we seem to be a nation of separate strands, we are in fact intertwined in a fabric of relatedness” (406–407).

Of the several works of narrative fiction that I analyze in this dissertation, from the realist and naturalist novels of James and Norris to the noir stories of Hammett and Chandler, Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* is the text which has so far received the most attention from scholars interested in the convergence of social networks and fictional storytelling. It is not difficult to see why: of all these authors, it is Dos Passos who most spectacularly invokes what has come to be called a “six-degrees-of-separation” logic, following characters who appear and reappear in the context of an ever-evolving network of relations. Dos Passos’s United States becomes, in effect, what social network theorists refer to as a “small world”: a network that is both large-scale and highly

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65 Evidence from Dos Passos’s drafts and notes suggests that these interlacings were central to how he intended to structure the trilogy from the very beginning (148). For instance, Pizer singles out one specific example from Dos Passos’s notebook, in which the author seems to remind himself while writing a “Charley Anderson” section that “Dick Savage and Moorehouse come in here somewhere” (164n.7).

66 Dos Passos’s contemporary reviewers often noted this very feature of his work. Indeed, those critics who looked on it favorably tended to emphasize its mimetic quality. So Sinclair Lewis, reviewing *Manhattan Transfer* for the *Saturday Review*, wrote that Dos Passos combines his characters “only naturally”—as opposed to configuring interrelations that were “rigged.” Lewis continues: “Each thread of story is distinct yet all of them proceed together. Aunt Tessie McCabe of Benner’s Falls may seem far from Croce of Naples, but Aunt Tessie’s nephew Winthrop, who is a lawyer in Omaha, has for client a spaghetti importer whose best friend is the nephew of Croce. And to just that natural degree does Dos Passos intertwine his stories” (70). Although the term “six degrees of separation” was not used in social-scientific circles until 1967, when the network researcher Stanley Milgram concluded that persons in the U.S. could be connected by an average of five intervening persons, the “six degrees” concept can actually be traced back to “Chain-Links”—a 1929 short story by the Hungarian author Frigyes Karinthy. See Newman, Barabási, and Watts’s *The Structure and Dynamics of Networks* for more on this fascinating history. For more on “small-world” theory, see my discussion of Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* in chapter 4.
clustered, giving individuals the sense that they are living with a
“single giant component within which virtually anyone can be connected to anyone else”
(Watts 82). So, for example, Mary French is in love with Ben Compton, whose sister
Gladys works with Janey Williams, who serves as secretary for J. Ward Moorehouse,
who hires Dick Savage, who (at a party thrown by Eveline) meets Charley Anderson,
who…. one gets the point. We could go on and on.

Wesley Beal’s 2011 article on “network narration” in the U.S.A. trilogy has to this point provided the most comprehensive and compelling analysis on this subject. Calling Dos Passos “a pioneer in conceptualizing the network as the twentieth century’s defining organization for the social,” Beal argues that the structure of U.S.A. proves that “in the moment of modernism, the network was becoming a powerful ideational and organizational figure.” Even more, Beal raises the possibility that “network theory [was] already present in the intellectual and literary production of Dos Passos’s milieu.” Ultimately, however, Beal does not seem all that interested in the particulars of an historically embedded network theory, nor in the specifics of network analysis itself. While making a convincing case that “U.S.A. insists on the interconnectivity of its networked characters,” Beal’s essay is finally content to treat networks, and the history of network theory, in a fairly generalized way. For example, he never mentions Jacob Moreno. Yet it is exactly the convergence between Dos Passos and Moreno—a scholar whose work has been largely forgotten—that most bears exploration. Before turning to an analysis of U.S.A., I outline in my next section Moreno’s framework for analyzing social networks.

Sociometry and the “Problem” of Human Interrelations
The discipline that Moreno termed “sociometry” began with the premise that new methodologies needed to be developed in order to study a modern, and increasingly globalized, social world. When one considers the sheer “number of interrelations” in the world, Moreno reasoned, and when, moreover, one acknowledges that each of these relations “influences” the total world situation in some manner, however slight,” then it follows that the quantity of interpersonal exchanges “must amount to a figure of astronomical magnitude” (21). In 1934, Moreno published *Who Shall Survive? A New Approach to the Problem of Human Interrelations*, which would come to be called the “Bible” of sociometry. The monograph received mainly positive reviews, and even garnered Moreno some mainstream attention in the form of coverage by *The New York Times* (in an article that I will discuss below). By 1937, with the founding of the academic journal *Sociometry: A Journal of Interpersonal Relations*, Moreno had further cemented the study of “interpersonal relations” as an important new direction for sociological research.

But what is “sociometry,” exactly? While Moreno’s scholarship clearly owes a significant debt to the work of Simmel and other scholars who had, since the beginning of the twentieth century, emphasized the determinative force of interpersonal relations over and above the characteristics of individuals themselves, Moreno managed to frame his work as contributing to a wholly new discipline. Sociometry, he held, was an original scientific method, uniquely suited “to determine objectively the basic structure of human societies” (20). Following Simmel’s lead, he maintained that interpersonal dynamics were “not lawless,” but rather “related to more or less permanent structures which bind individuals together into large networks” (256, emphasis in the original).
Where Moreno most clearly departed from earlier thinkers was in his effort to standardize a methodology for visualizing networks. Flip open *Who Shall Survive?* to any page, and one is likely to find an image of network, a chart representing an interconnected structure of multi-colored lines, arrows, and triangles or circles (these last standing in for individual persons). Moreno called these charts “sociograms” (see Figure 1), and while many of Moreno’s particular visual markers (his use of specific colors, shapes, etc.) have since been abandoned, today the sociogram remains a standard tool used by network researchers “to build a record of relations among members of a group” (Degenne and Forsé 23).

Figure 1: A Moreno Sociogram
Moreno describes the purpose of his sociograms in *Who Shall Survive*:

As the pattern of the social universe is not visible to us, it is made visible through charting. Therefore the sociometric chart is the more useful the more accurately and realistically it portrays the relations discovered… The mapping of networks indicates that we may devise on the basis of primary sociograms forms of charting which enable us to explore large geographical areas. (25)

Moreno’s visual orientation toward the social is a quality he shared with Dos Passos, who was also inclined to describe interpersonal dynamics by way of spatial, imagistic language. In *The Big Money*, for instance, Dos Passos devotes one Biography segment to Thorsten Veblen, whom he praises for establishing “a new diagram of a society dominated by monopoly capital” (*BM* 81). In his non-fiction writings, too, Dos Passos often reflects on the “shape” of society; his essay titled “The Changing Shape of Institutions” provides just one ready example (1958). Even beyond using this kind of language, however, Dos Passos’s aesthetic experimentation have long been regarded as representative of what the literary critic Joseph Frank termed “spatial form.” Associated with literary modernism, spatial form is an umbrella term “designating the techniques with which writers disrupt the linear, chronological sequence intrinsic to narrative”; it emphasizes simultaneity over sequentiality, transcribes time into space,

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67 Further indicating the convergence of literary narrative and social science, Moreno claimed in *Who Shall Survive*? that his sociograms had been inspired by Greek mythology and poetry. When he introduces the coding system for his sociograms, which consists of red and black lines and arrows, Moreno writes: In Greek mythology Eros is the god of love and Eris is the god of discord. Less well known is the interesting brother of Eros, Anteros, the god of mutual love. That is how the Greeks accounted for the forces of attraction and repulsion among men. It is most beautiful Greek poetry that when love begins an arrow flies to the chosen. The symbol of the arrow has its counterpart in our symbol for attraction, the ‘red line.’ The Greeks held that all the red lines are projected by Eros, all the blank lines by Eris, and all the mutual red ones by Anteros, and that men had nothing to say about them. Instead of searching with a torch into the labyrinth of love and hatred, they had a mythical formula. We have tried to analyze this network. (103)
and translates “story” into a structural field (See 343). Yet while spatial form has proven to be a valuable concept since Frank introduced it in 1945, it has also, as Sam See observes, “been assimilated so readily into critical discourse that few scholars have asked why spatial narratives pervade modernist literature” (343). One of my aims in this chapter, then, is to demonstrate how, for Dos Passos at least, spatial form is connected to what I refer to as his sociometric aesthetic. In a way that harmonizes with Moreno’s sociometric approach, Dos Passos tended to view social and even geographical “spaces” as inextricable from the interpersonal relations that constitute and connect them.

More than this, Moreno and Dos Passos shared an interest in exploring how social networks might be harnessed for the public good, or how social organization contributes to (or detracts from) personal fulfillment. A psychiatrist by training, Moreno developed a version of network science that is fundamentally informed by his interest in human psychology. For Moreno, that is, “problems of social organization” and problems of “mental health” could not, and should not, be separated from one another (Fox xiii). Hence achieving a “free and independent life for the single individual” meant attending closely to the structure of interpersonal networks. Since “the whole of mankind is a unity,” Moreno suggests in *Who Shall Survive?, “then tendencies must emerge between the different parts of this unity drawing them at one time apart and drawing them at another time together” (3). Moreover, this series of

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68 This is an important issue in *U.S.A.* insofar that the fragmentation of the narrative sections—the trilogy’s studied segmentation—also extends to the domain of time, which is “discontinuous” among the narratives (Clark 132). That is, the reader might jump wildly in time, both “forward” and “reverse,” as she moves from one narrative section to the next. There is also “no uniform time within the Narratives,” as the pacing shifts wildly across Genette’s four durational categories. The cumulative effect is to disrupt the reader’s sense of stable temporal progression, as well as the cause-effect linearity of traditional plot.
“attractions and repulsions”—the interpersonal exchanges that occur across the social field—“may have a near or distant effect not only upon the immediate participants in the relation but also upon all other parts of that unity which we call mankind” (3). In other words, an individual’s mental well-being was always, for Moreno, inextricable from that figure’s particular position in wider social networks. Social organization is in this sense profoundly determinative, since even one’s non-immediate relations contribute to the shaping of one’s psychology.

As if to underscore the way that social networks affect mental health, Moreno sometimes referred to sociometry as “psychological geography” (26). In fact, it is this term that Moreno uses in a fascinating interview with *The New York Times*, published in an April 1933 article. The headline in the *Times* reads “EMOTIONS MAPPED BY NEW GEOGRAPHY,” which is immediately followed by the sub-header: “Charts Seek to Portray the Psychological Currents of Human Relationships.” The article proper opens by emphasizing sociometry’s original contributions to its field: “A new science, named psychological geography, which aims to chart the emotional currents, cross-currents, and under-currents of human relationships in a community was introduced here yesterday at the scientific exhibit of the State of New York…”

The article’s main point of focus, however, is personal isolation. In much of his writing, Moreno showed special concern for isolated individuals, believing that a key indicator of one’s mental well-being was the establishment of mutually-affirmative

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69 Interestingly, whereas the early twentieth-century network researchers from which Frank Norris took his cues often compared social networks to emergent communication technologies (see Chapter 2), Moreno was adamant that such a comparison should be resisted. Instead, Moreno preferred to conceptualize networks using models that were organic rather than based on technological modes of exchange. He claimed that the “psychogeographical network is analogous to the nervous system, whose network is also molded by the currents that run through it and which is so organized also as to produce the greatest effect with the least effort” (261). Yet a social network, Moreno adds, “cannot be compared… with a telephone system, as the latter… is not molded by these currents” (261).
contacts with others. For instance, in *Who Shall Survive?* Moreno expends much space considering the situation of the isolated person, even providing a sociogram to demonstrate the specific social dynamics that lead to isolation (53). This chart, which relies on Moreno’s examination of students’ interrelations at a school, visualizes the position of a boy who “has formed only one satisfactory contact in the whole school” (53). For Moreno, in effect, isolation occurs when the persons one would choose to spend time with do not reciprocate those feelings (or vice versa).

The *Times* picks up on this concern with isolation; the article’s sub-headlines include “MANY MISFITS REVEALED” and “Dr. J.L. Moreno Calculates There Are 10 to 15 Million Isolated Individuals in Nation.” In slightly melodramatic fashion, the *Times* frames social isolation as a pressing national problem: according to Moreno, the articles states, there are anywhere “from 10,000,000 to 15,000,000 isolated individuals in the United States,” and these persons are (here quoting Moreno) “always getting the short end of everything. In consequence, they suffer, are discontented, and reflect their unhappiness into the lives of others.” Significantly, however, neither the *Times* nor Moreno himself frame isolation as a political problem. Rather, the problem—as well as potential solutions it—gets discussed in purely social-scientific (and, more specifically, psychological) terms. By charting social relations and identifying isolated persons, the *Times* writes, the hope is that these individuals can then “be transplanted to other environments where they become happy human beings.” The line reads like a kind of social botany: if an individual isn’t doing so well in a given network, so the logic goes, it might be time to graft that person to a new one.
Moreno, that is, regarded himself not just as a scientist, or as a sociologist, or even as a psychiatrist, but also as a reformer, promising that sociometry would bring positive change to the modern world. And he clearly believed that the primary force driving this change would come from the realm of science, not politics. The Moreno scholar Jonathan Fox puts it this way:

The essence of sociometry lies in the idea that groups have an internal life of their own and that this life can best be understood by examining the choices members make at any given moment with regard to each other. Such knowledge—who is rejected, who is the ‘star,’ where are the cliques—can then be used to institute a program for positive change. Every group, Moreno insisted, has underneath its visible structure an internal, invisible structure that is ‘real, alive, and dynamic’…. [He] believed that all groups have the capacity for a transcendent interconnectedness. (xiii)

In this chapter I want to suggest that Dos Passos shared Moreno’s conviction that “the close study of social structure” was a significant means through which “we may treat the ills of society” (Fox 20). As I have already shown, in his nonfiction writing Dos Passos was often deeply concerned with analyzing the “shape” of modern society. But this “shape,” he believed, was stubbornly elusive; indeed, people “have always found it hard to keep up with the changes in the shape of society which their own inventions bring about” (“Changing Shape”). In “A Question of Elbow Room,” he claims that social life “has become so hard to understand and to see as a whole that most people won’t even try” (62). Articulating the modernist refrain, Dos Passos suggests that the world has fragmented, making what were once navigable communities and comprehensible institutions now “enormously complicated” (62). And yet, despite its difficulty, this project was for Dos Passos absolutely crucial in bringing about change: calling the twentieth century a period of “moral chaos,” Dos Passos wrote that the “first
step” out of such torpor must be “to try to form for ourselves an accurate picture of the society we live in” (202).

While criticism of Dos Passos’s fiction has long been dominated by discussion of his evolving political and artistic identity—from aesthete to modernist to political radical to right-wing ideologue—not enough critical attention has yet been paid to the manner in which Dos Passos’s desire to form an “accurate picture” of society converges with contemporaneous practices in the field of social science, especially Moreno’s development of sociometry. Yet Dos Passos pursued some of the same values and goals that were being pursued by Moreno and other social scientists. Through my discussion of U.S.A. in the remainder of this chapter, I hope to make the case that Dos Passos looked (beyond politics) to emergent scientific methodologies as a significant means by which the place of the individual in society might potentially be understood and improved. In writing the U.S.A. trilogy, in fact, Dos Passos approached a sociometric aesthetic that paralleled Moreno’s own attempts to imagine how a better understanding of the forms and functions of interpersonal networks might lead to positive social change.

“Making Contact”: Dos Passos’s Sociological Imaginary

On multiple occasions in his nonfiction writing, Dos Passos indicated that one of his chief intentions in Manhattan Transfer and U.S.A. was to achieve what he called an “objective description” of social life (75). In investigating the various models that might have informed Dos Passos’s attempts to achieve “objectivity,” critics have typically looked to two principal sources. The first of these is film. Interested in cinematic devices, Dos Passos was familiar with the work of Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein,
two Russian filmmakers who pioneered the art of cinema, and especially, in Eisenstein’s case, the montage. On a visit to Russia in 1928 Dos Passos met Eisenstein, and, as many scholars have noted, montage effects were clearly much on Dos Passos’s mind in configuring the segmented form of *U.S.A.* With good reason, critics have linked Dos Passos’s montage aesthetic to his pursuit of “objective” description. For instance, in a positive review of *Manhattan Transfer*, D.H. Lawrence connects the novel’s mimetic effects with its cinematic flourishes, observing that “if you set a… film-camera going to photograph all the motions of a scattered group of individuals, at the points where they meet and touch… you would more or less get Mr. Dos Passos’s method” (75).

The second model to which critics have often turned—one not unconnected to the workings of a film camera—is that provided by machines or mechanical technologies. One contemporary review of *Manhattan Transfer* praised Dos Passos for his wide-ranging inclusiveness, connecting this to the novel’s machine aesthetic: Dos Passos, the reviewer notes, “discard[s] no episode, however trivial,” but rather “records them all with a mechanical impartiality” (65). More recently, Cecilia Tichi has argued that Dos Passos’s “numerous characters are presented as human components integrated in a large-scale, dynamic system conceived on the model of machine and structural technology” (202). In Tichi’s reading, attending to machine structure helps us to understand Dos Passos’s concurrent interest in representing the social world as an integrated system—one that might be objectively and comprehensively described.

To be sure, cinematic devices and machine technologies provide valuable models for understanding how Dos Passos structured *U.S.A.*, but I suggest that these

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70 For a small sampling of the extensive critical work on Dos Passos’s connection to film technique and/or the history of cinema, see Edwards, Foster, Kadlec, and North.
interpretive lenses should be supplemented with emergent social-scientific research in
general, and more specifically the logic of sociometry. Indeed, in a manner that
converges with Moreno’s research in the 1920s and 1930s, Dos Passos seems to have
imagined the social worlds of his own work in sociometric terms. In his account of his
own artistic process, Dos Passos compared his methods with scientific modes of inquiry:
“To report objectively some scene, some situation, the movement of some animal, the
shape of some organism under the microscope, a man has to fall into a state of
unpreoccupied alertness…” (74) Dos Passos’s comparison between writing and
scientifically examining “some organism under the microscope” suggests that other
cultural discourses besides those of the cinema and the machine were informing his
fiction. If anything, Dos Passos faulted himself for not being scientific *enough*. A “man
of letters” or journalist, he wrote, “is hampered by his lack of rigorous training in the
still rudimentary sciences of sociology and anthropology” (qtd. in Layman 195-6). This
comment suggests the relevance of contemporaneous social-scientific discourses in
general, and sociometric research in particular, for understanding Dos Passos’s fictional
practice, including his use of “interlacing.”

Dos Passos found particular inspiration, and another analogue for his own
writing, in the English scientist William Harvey’s 17th-century work on the circulation
of blood in living organisms. Reflecting on a passage from *The Circulation of the Blood* in
which Harvey examines circulation in a shrimp, Dos Passos suggests that “the aim, the
never quite attainable aim of the novelist or historian, is to see men’s private emotions
and their movements in masses as clearly as William Harvey saw the heart of the
shrimp” (qtd. in Crunden 98). I find two items of considerable interest in Dos Passos’s
enthusiasm for Harvey. First, once again it is clear that Dos Passos envisioned his own fiction as embodying, at least at some level, a scientific approach to experience. Second, and more specifically, Dos Passos seems (like Moreno) to have been interested in the way that physiological systems might serve as models for how the whole of a society could be understood by closely examining its various parts. If “readjustments” to social organization were actually to be made, Dos Passos wrote, we must first “manage to see the shape of our society as clearly as Harvey saw the heart of the shrimp” (76). Harvey was able to understand the heart of the shrimp by analyzing the way that blood flowed through its extremities; just so, Dos Passos reasoned, must the writer and scientist attend to matters of social circulation. To understand the “heart” of the social world, in other words, one must take stock of the behavior of persons situated at the margins of that world. After all, Dos Passos argued, the “only gauge we have of [the organization of society] is how it affects each separate individual citizen” (210).71

Judging from the fates of each of the “separate individual” characters in the U.S.A. trilogy, Dos Passos obviously felt that the present organization of society was an abject failure. By observing how Dos Passos’s representation of “who is rejected, who is the ‘star,’ where are the cliques,” and the like contributes to U.S.A.’s overarching interest in the ramifications of social organization, we begin to see how the trilogy converges with a sociometric paradigm. Those who wield power in U.S.A., who “succeed” (at least in a material sense), are those who cultivate the most contacts, and who are able to position themselves closer toward the “center” of the network.

71 Here again D.H. Lawrence proves to have been one of Dos Passos’s savvier contemporary readers. As if particularly attuned to this physiological dimension of Dos Passos’s work, Lawrence wrote that Dos Passos’s fiction “has no obvious rhythm” except for the “systole-diastole of success and failure” (75).
J. Ward Moorehouse is clearly the most visible of these figures in the novel. Not coincidentally, his trajectory from a middle-class Delaware boy called Johnny Moorehouse to the powerful propagandist J. Ward begins with a meeting: an encounter with Annabelle Strang, on a train to Maryland. Here Dos Passos’s mordant irony comes to the fore, as Moorehouse’s rise to power is only made possible by his happening to meet the daughter of “the best known nose and throat specialist in Philadelphia” (FP 150). Indeed, to Moorehouse, who at this point has no real standing in “society,” the Strang family’s connections are impressive, even intimidating. When, during their first meeting, Annabelle asks Moorehouse if he knows a certain well-connected family in Delaware, he awkwardly avoids answering the question (FP 143). While he might not have “contacts” yet himself, Moorehouse’s recognition that social connectedness equates to social power will change his life, and the lives of those connected to him, soon enough.

When Annabelle introduces Moorehouse to her father, she erroneously calls him “Mr. Morris,” a mistake that emphasizes not only Moorehouse’s current status as a social “nobody” but also the way that his contact with the Strangs will result in a thoroughly changed identity (FP 144). Indeed, in the world of The 42nd Parallel, the Strang-Moorehouse wedding ultimately seems less about Annabelle’s and Moorehouse’s marriage than it signifies Moorehouse’s coming into a position to inherit Dr. Strang’s bounteous contacts. The ceremony itself is huge “because Dr. Strang had so many social obligations,” and, as if Dos Passos means to suggest that he is supplanting the traditional place of the bride, Moorehouse finds himself “the center of all eyes” at the wedding (FP 153). Of course, the notion of reaching the “center” is a recurring motif in
Dos Passos’s fiction, and here, for the first time in his life, Moorehouse finds himself at the center. This is also the moment that John Moorehouse becomes J. Ward Moorehouse, since “Annabelle decided” that the latter name was more distinguished. Moorehouse’s initiation into the center is thus simultaneously an emasculation. And perhaps an infantilization, as well: while on their honeymoon, a steward mistakes the older Annabelle for Moorehouse’s mother. Hence the discourse ultimately treats Annabelle less as Moorehouse’s first wife than as his first contact, and this slippage from “wife” to “contact” reinforces the way in which in the world of Dos Passos relationships become events, structures emptied of content. For Moorehouse and those like him, the making and retaining of contacts becomes the predominant method of climbing the social ladder.72

Dos Passos makes clear that Moorehouse’s genius—if he can be said to have any genius at all—lies in making contacts; he is the trilogy’s networker par excellence. Thus The 42nd Parallel tracks his rise from nobody to “big name” by telling the story of his accumulating acquaintances. Moorehouse spends his honeymoon getting to know an elderly banker named Jarvis Oppenheimer, who “knew everyone” (FP 155). He subsequently uses Oppenheimer’s connections to get a job working for the Paris branch of the New York Herald. This job, the narration relates in deadpan, “enabled him to make many valuable contacts” (FP 156). Still, Moorehouse feels dissatisfied with his situation at the paper, and, in an example of his casual elitism and xenophobia, laments

72 While I have said that I will mainly be bracketing U.S.A.’s other three modalities, it is important to note that this concern with the making of contacts—i.e., networking—breaks over into the world of the Camera Eye. In Camera Eye 25, the narration seems to describe advice that Dos Passos received while in college: “all the pleasant contacts will be useful in Later Life say hello pleasantly to everybody crossing the yard…” In his evident resistance to the practice of cultivating contacts, Dos Passos here situates himself as an anti-Moorehouse.
that he is consigned not “to know any really nice people, never to get an assignment that wasn’t connected with working people or foreigners or criminals; he hated it” (FP 195). By the midpoint of The 42nd Parallel, Moorehouse is newly married for a second time and “had the capital and the connections” necessary to become a recognizable name in the big business of public relations. Like one of Moreno’s sociometric “stars,” he has “picked up” countless new acquaintances as if by gravitational force (FP 209). His work consists mainly of going to “Pittsburgh and Chicago and Bethlehem and Philadelphia to reestablish contacts” (FP 209-10).

On the other end of the social spectrum, the character of Mac (another of the trilogy’s “major” figures) never achieves “centeredness”—and never seems to want to. While living in Mexico at the end The 42nd Parallel, Mac hears from his IWW compatriot Ben Stowell that “a guy named G.H. Barrow” (FP 243) as well as “a big contact man from New York… this guy Moorehouse” would both be visiting on business. Later, when Barrow and Moorehouse show up at a party at Ben’s, Moorehouse explains “that he had come down in a purely unofficial capacity you understand to make contacts…” (FP 249). Their encounter is brief (and, significantly, this is Mac’s only contact with any of the trilogy’s other major figures), but it is long enough for Mac to surmise that Moorehouse is a “smooth bastard” (FP 250). Where Mac responds to Moorehouse’s quest for contacts with condescension, however, Ben expresses a desire to emulate Moorehouse: “That baby’s got a slick cream of millions all over him. By gum, I’d like to make some of those contacts he talks about… By gory, I may do it yet… You just watch your Uncle Dudley, Mac. I’m goin’ to associate with the big hombres after this” (FP 250). Unlike Mac, who opts out of the culture of
networking, Ben believes that his contact with Moorehouse (however brief) will lead to other contacts, and thus to social capital. But plainly we are meant to read Ben’s sentiment as delusional: in the world of Dos Passos’s trilogy, we recognize, Ben Stowell will never be anything more than a marginal player.

What I am calling Dos Passos’s “sociometric aesthetic” becomes visible here precisely because Dos Passos focuses readers’ attention on the determinative effect of what Moreno called “acquaintance volume.” For Moreno, acquaintance volume begins with the idea of the “social atom,” which Moreno defined as the “nucleus of relations around every individual which is ‘thicker’ around some, ‘thinner’ around others.” One’s acquaintance volume, subsequently, points to the relative “thickness” or “thinness” of his relations: according to Moreno, a “crude indicator of the expansiveness of an individual in making and retaining contacts in a given community” (145).

Moreno also found that tracking an individual’s acquaintance volume led to insights about the evolution of social networks:

Through the acquaintance test we learned if a social atom has rhythmic growth, reaches a high point, and then sinks to more or less an average level; if it is in a phase of expansion or of shrinking… and finally which groups of the community the individual becomes acquainted and whom he can recall when the test is given. (145)

He could well be describing the world of the U.S.A. trilogy when he makes his case that sociometric processes have vast and dramatic implications:

The classification of the social atom illustrates in a dramatic fashion that we live in an ambiguous world, half real and half fiction; that we do not live with persons with whom frequently we would like to live; that we work with persons who are not chosen by us; and that we make love to persons whom we do not love; that we isolate and reject persons whom we need most, and that we throw our lives away for people and principles which are not worthy…. Perhaps because we are enmeshed ourselves in this network, it has been so hard to break the door to the actual world beneath, to recognize the human universe in all its
forms as a summation, interpenetration and dynamic multiplication of social atoms. (146)

Some characters are destined to be at “the center of things” in Dos Passos’s fiction; others try to get there only to fail. One excellent example of this second type is Bud Kornpenning who arrives in New York at the start of Manhattan Transfer because he wants “to get to the center of things” (4), only to die unceremoniously not even halfway through the novel. As one critic observes, in the case of Bud, “devoting that much attention to a character, yet never creating any connection between him and another characters” models a conception of character that “departs in disturbing ways from fictional conventions that implied order, relationship, and the intrinsic meaningfulness of existence…” (Nanney 168) For Bud, a lack of interpersonal contact becomes synonymous with death: in Dos Passos’s social imaginary, his isolation is a sign, and perhaps cause, of his demise.

In U.S.A., an even starker juxtaposition than that between J. Ward and Mac occurs in Dos Passos’s pairing of Moorehouse, who succeeds in making himself into something of a household name, with Charley Anderson, whose name people never seem to remember. If Dos Passos draws readers’ attention to the positional inequality between Moorehouse and Mac, even more extensively does he direct readers’ attention to the divergence between Moorehouse and Charley, whose upward economic trajectory in The Big Money only serves to heighten his lack of standing in “society,” and ultimately his erasure from the social world altogether. In the terms provided by Moreno, we might say that his “acquaintanceship volume” is limited—and that Dos Passos calls our attention to this fact.
Here again we find that names function as an important motif, allowing Dos Passos to add commentary about one’s social connectedness or lack thereof. Moorehouse has made himself into a name—a brand, essentially—and in this sense has dehumanized himself. When Eveline Hutchins first encounters Moorehouse in Nineteen Nineteen, the narration conveys to us that “everybody was talking about him before he came because he’d been one of the best known publicity experts in New York before the war. There was no one who hadn’t heard of J. Ward Moorehouse” (NN 173). In a similar fashion, Janey Williams also first meets Moorehouse-the-name before she meets Moorehouse-the-man: when the self-interested labor representative G.H. Barrow, for whom Janey has been taking dictation, tells her that he wants to introduce her to J. Ward Moorehouse, he assumes that “she must know the name.” To her embarrassment, however, Janey has never heard of Moorehouse (FP 226). When she meets Moorehouse in person, her reaction, in a convoluted logic that points to the unnaturalness of their social organization, is to think that this “must be J. Ward Moorehouse whose name she ought to know” (FP 228).

By contrast, Charley Anderson, a more recognizably human and sympathetic figure, is constantly being misrecognized or forgotten altogether. No one seems to know his name for long.\(^73\) For example, at a party, Al Johnson—a newspaperman who claims “never [to] forget faces… or names”—mistakenly introduces Charley to the other guests as “Charles Edward Holden” (the name of an eminent writer within the

\(^73\) As with Annabelle’s christening of John Moorehouse into “J. Ward Moorehouse,” Charlie is also re-named at the hands of a female paramour. Margo Dowling prefers to call him “Mr. A” (261). Unlike Moorehouse’s re-naming of Moorehouse, however, where the new name serves to bolster his name-recognition, Charley’s re-naming serves to underscore the way his identity is being actively reduced rather than re-packaged for public consumption; “Mr. A” deliberately precludes the possibility of recognition.
storyworld). Charley initially attempts to correct Johnson’s error, but, being cut off by his excited interlocutors (most of whom, he notes, are attractive women), decides to play the role he’s errantly been given. When the party-goers continue to call him Charles Edward Holden, he offers a purposefully ambiguous rejoinder: “Better call me Charley” \( (BM \ 54-5) \). Later, Dos Passos returns to this moment of mis-recognition by putting Charley into direct contact with the actual Charles Edward Holden. The scene of their meeting, which occurs at one of Eveline’s parties, functions as clever counterpoint to Charley’s earlier role-playing. Although Charley has by this point become “filthy rich” in the airplane business, he is immediately marginalized by the presence of the real Holden. The narrative registers this marginalization spatially, as “Charley found himself pushed away from Eveline by people trying to listen to what Charles Edward Holden was saying” \( (BM \ 165) \). Like the isolated figure in a Moreno sociogram, Charley Anderson finds here that he has not been chosen; Holden has superseded him. Even more, this change of social dynamics is particularly injurious to Charley, we realize, since Holden is having an “all so public” affair with Eveline—to whom Charley is also attracted. Despite his financial success, Charley will never achieve the social centrality of a man like Moorehouse, or even Holden.

But perhaps the saddest instance of Charley’s marginalized position in the social world of \( U.S.A. \) occurs after his death. In the “Margo Dowling” section immediately following the narrative segment that related the story of Charley’s automobile accident and subsequent death, the Hollywood director Sam Margolies, now Margo’s husband, recalls Charley (or, rather, doesn’t): “You remember, Margo dearest, I told you that day that pictures had a great future… you and… you know, the great automobile magnate, I
have forgotten his name…” (BM 32). What emerges is a tension between Charlie’s legacy within the diegesis, on the one hand, and how his character is recalled by readers—extra-diegetically—on the other. As readers, we still remember Charley. He has only been gone, after all, for the span of a few pages. Within the storyworld, however, Charley has already been long forgotten; Margolies doesn’t remember his name, nor can he correctly recall the industry that made Charley rich. (Margolies’s forgetfulness appears even colder when we recall that Margo herself benefited substantially from Charley’s largesse.) Hence the pathos of Charley’s erasure from the social world of U.S.A. is heightened by the fact that he had been, for readers, one of the trilogy’s “major figures.”

Yet if in figures like Charley Dos Passos registers the tragedy of an individual’s being forgotten, in characters like Moorehouse he also demonstrates the tragedy inherent in becoming a celebrity—that is, in becoming a “name” instead of a person. This tension between names and persons is central to the thematic thrust of U.S.A., as even the more “rounded” characters are always on the precipice of becoming mere names (both to each other and to the reader). Near the end of the trilogy, after suffering a heart attack, Moorehouse suggests to his protégé Dick Savage that the title of his public relations firm be changed to include the name “Savage.” Dick contests the wisdom of this change, telling his mentor that “it would a mistake to change the name, J.W. After all J. Ward Moorehouse is a national institution” (BM 408). Already, Dick’s words imply that Moorehouse has lost some of his humanity in becoming a brand. Yet when his colleague Reggie responds to Moorehouse’s declining state by saying (in words echoing Dick’s) that “after all J. Ward Moorehouse isn’t a man… it’s a name…. 
You can’t feel sorry when a name gets sick,” Dick is indignant (BM +10). He rebukes Reggie, but the point has been made: Moorehouse has sacrificed his personhood for centeredness.

Dos Passos showed a remarkable sensitivity, then, to what social network theorists refer to as “positional inequality,” or the idea that “stratification and hierarchy… occurs not because of who we are but because of who are connected to” (Christakis and Fowler 200). In other words, U.S.A. goes out of its way to demonstrate how one’s position within a structural network matters to one’s social standing and capital. As Christakis and Fowler observe, “Some of us have more connections, and some fewer. Some of us are more centrally located, and some of us find ourselves at the periphery” (200). Dos Passos seems to have set out precisely to explore these positional variations and how they impinge on his characters' status, relationships, and experiences.

U.S.A. and the Difficult Business of Networking

Even more than being merely good at networking (i.e., “making contacts”), Moorehouse and his ilk have mastered the art of using networks to their advantage by controlling how—and what kind of—information flows through them. In the figure of the propagandist Moorehouse, Dos Passos articulates his concern—one he shared with Moreno—that expansive networks might be manipulated in the modern age to shore up power for the few at the top. Moreno believed that networks needed to be studied not only because individual mental health depended on them, but also because “networks have the function of shaping social tradition and public opinion” (26). In the passage I
cite immediately below, for example, Moreno expresses his concern about the rapidity by which misinformation can be spread across modern networks:

Our knowledge of the networks by which a large population in a given geographical area is inter-connected suggests to how far an extent a group in power may be able to degenerate the development of psychological currents through the use of the modern technological methods for the dissemination of propaganda…. A group in power may even attempt to produce psychological currents at will, synthetically. Such management of the networks and currents in a population is a most dangerous play and may produce greater disturbances in the depths than the momentary effects upon the surface at first may indicate (350).

Where Moreno articulates his fear that the “management” of networks is a “most dangerous play,” Dos Passos creates in Moorehouse the very person who actively seeks to manage networks. Both war profiteer and public relations pioneer, Moorehouse is the incarnation of what Moreno fears, and, indeed, Dos Passos implies via U.S.A.'s highly interconnected world that Moorehouse’s exploitation of his web of contacts produces “disturbances” across the whole of the network.

74 Also add to this that Dos Passos partly modeled Moorehouse on two pioneers of the public relations industry, Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays. The nephew of Sigmund Freud, Bernays, in particular, was known to have leaned on research from the social sciences in developing foundational PR strategies. (For instance, he was a student of “Group Dynamics,” a field which can be said to have included Moreno.) In his book Propaganda (1928), Bernays writes of social organization: “The groupings and affiliations of society today are no longer subject to ‘local and sectional’ limitations…. Today, because ideas can be instantaneously transmitted to any distance and to any number of people… persons having the same ideas and interests may be associated and regimented for common action though they live thousands of miles apart” (40-1).

75 In a fascinating article published in The Washington Post (1947), on the subject of increasing reports of flying saucers, Moreno attempts to explain the rumors by invoking networks: “The beliefs that people take spread like wildfire because human society is highly structured. Experiences, real or rumored, spread according to specific social laws. They spread just as surely as a stone falls in accord with the law of gravitation. There is a law of social gravitation based on emotional infectiousness of individuals for one another. Mankind is not just a number of individuals. Mankind consists of millions of networks through which ideas travel. It is because of these networks that reports, true or false, spread with such velocity. The natural networks are enhanced by the press, radio, movies, magazines and other publications…. Man has yet to learn to control these networks, which are for human society what the nervous system is for the individual.”
Of course it is no coincidence that the trilogy’s most accomplished networker is also its embodiment of capitalist oppression. Moorehouse talks expansively about “cooperation,” which he claims is the “great motto upon which I have built my business” (FP 213). Citing the example of modern technology, he argues that the new American industrialist must transform the “old individualistic methods” (FP 210). “What does a steamengine require?” he asks, then answers his own question: “Cooperation, coordination of the inventor’s brain the promoter’s brain that made the development of these highpower products possible… Coordination of capital…” (FP 210). By “cooperation” Moorehouse really means exploitation: his specialty is undermining labor’s cause by networking with them—in effect, by bringing them onto his side. For instance, he tells G.H. Barrow, the ostensible labor organizer, that in order to undo the increasing distance between capital and workers “the first step is to establish contact… Right as this moment under our very eyes we see friendly contact being established” (FP 213). “I must admit,” says G.H. Barrow with an uneasy laugh, “I never expected to be drinking a highball with a member of the firm of Planet and Wilson…” (FP 213). Moorehouse’s modus operandi, then, is not just to establish contact with the “key men,”

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76 For another example of this type in early twentieth-century American literature, see Frank Cowperwood in Theodore Dreiser’s *The Financier*: “Like a spider in a spangled net, every thread of which he knew, had laid, had tested, he had surrounded and entangled himself in a splendid, glittering network of connections, and he was watching all the details” (156).

77 Barrow, like Burnham, Stevens, and Bingham, is a minor character who reappears so often that he serves to provide links among all other characters. Mentions of Barrow recur so frequently in part because his network is multiplex—that is, he is central to different kinds of networks, both business-related and sexual. At various times over the course of the trilogy he pursues Janey, Daughter, and Mary French, who meets him in *The Big Money*, pre-war, at his lecture on “The Promise of Peace” (chronologically, just after he has returned from Mexico) (BM 94). Highlighting the failure of his previous ideas about “how it was the workingclass… would keep the country out of war,” his new lecture is ironically titled “Problems of Post-war Reconstruction” (BM 101). Barrow seeks Mary’s company, he says, because she is “in daily contact with the actual people,” and Mary, as if affected by the reader’s own extra-diegetic sensibility—“felt somehow that she’d known Mr. Barrow for years” (BM 101).
but also to increase the density of his social network so as better to manipulate the anti-
capitalist movement (NN 242).

Here it is also useful to consider the roles of Eveline Hutchins and Eleanor
Stoddard as they function in the trilogy. Especially Eveline, I want to argue, serves as
an embodiment of Dos Passos’s concern with the modern world’s networked relations.
Like Moorehouse’s upward trajectory, each of these women’s narratives in the trilogy
largely revolves around their making of contacts, i.e., the gradual development of what
Moreno would call their “acquaintanceship volumes.” Indeed, the first meaningful
contact each woman makes is with the other; they encounter each other by chance,
midway through The 42nd Parallel, at the Art Institute of Chicago. Moving quickly
through time, the narration indicates that “Eleanor made several friends through
Eveline Hutchins” (FP 171). This emerges as a recurring dynamic: Dos Passos
demonstrates over the course of U.S.A. that Eveline cultivates contacts as deliberately
as Moorehouse, if (as discussed below) for an altogether different purpose. Moving to
New York with aspirations to start an interior decorating business, Eveline and Eleanor
find that must rely on their actor friend Freddy Seargent to introduce them to the
society of their new city. Fortunately, Freddy “seemed to know so many people and
introduced them to everybody as if he was very proud of them” (FP 217). When they
are introduced to Freddy’s friends, Eveline and Eleanor recognize in their new
acquaintances many of the names they’d read of in The Daily News (FP 217). Once
again, Dos Passos attends to the way that names precede persons in the modern world;

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78 Characters recognizing each other from the media is a recurring dynamic in U.S.A. Mary French first
meets Don Stevens after recognizing him “from his picture in the Daily” (BM 365). It is easy to see why
the society pages might interest Dos Passos, since [like U.S.A. itself] they tend to vacate any explicit
psychological motives in favor of recording behavior and events.
that is, individuals are often first known as discursive objects rather than personal subjects.

As their relationship evolves, and the two women grow further apart, Eveline actually begins to enter this social world, while Eleanor continues only to consume it from the outside: Eveline, we are told, “has many beaux… and Eleanor used to read about her on the society page Sunday mornings” (FP 179). Both women eventually begin a sexual relationship with Moorehouse. On Armistice Day, Eveline, who has been drawn into Moorehouse’s orbit through Eleanor, “found herself kissing Major Moorehouse right on the mouth” (NN 233). The tension of the love triangle escalates in Nineteen Nineteen: when Moorehouse asks Eveline for the first dance at a dance hall, we are told that “Eleanor looked a little sour” (NN 242). In fact, recalling the triadic dynamics of James’s “The Friends of the Friends” (see Chapter 1), Eveline and Moorehouse bond over their mutual relationship with Eleanor. Moorehouse even waxes poetic to Eveline about his beautiful friendship with her friend, observing “how much she’d meant to him during the trying years with his second wife Gertrude in New York, and how people had misunderstood their beautiful friendship that had been always free from the sensual and the degrading” (NN 247).

Largely due to their association with Moorehouse, Eveline and Eleanor find themselves at “the center of everything” (FP 219). Yet for each woman what this “everything” entails, exactly, looks somewhat different. This divergence replicates itself

79 Characters’ attempts to differentiate between the material and spiritual dimensions of human relationships, or between the sexual and the “pure,” is a recurring theme in Dos Passos’s work. In Manhattan Transfer, for instance, Ellen attempts to assure Cassie that her boyfriend Morris will “come back all right,” only for Cassie to lament in response: “No but you’re so material…. I mean spiritually our union is broken forever. Can you see there was this beautiful divine spiritual thing between us and it’s boken…” (140). In U.S.A., Moorehouse’s rhetoric of a “beautiful friendship” is clearly undercut by Dos Passos’s portrayal of the character’s lack of scruples, while in this passage from Manhattan Transfer Cassie’s lisp undercuts the seriousness of her message, making her sentiment the subject of comedy.
in the different kinds of relationships each woman forms with Moorehouse. Eleanor meets Moorehouse when she gets the job to decorate the home he shares with his wife, and she finds herself attracted to his talk of “the stock exchange and how the Steel Corporation was founded and the difficulties of the oil companies in Mexico, and Hearst and great fortunes” (FP 221). When she asks his thoughts about a small investment she is making, he responds in a manner that Dos Passos surely intended to be read ironically, as a kind of sadly askew proposal: “Miss Stoddard, may I have the honor of being your financial adviser?” (FP 221). Where a more traditional narrative might insert a marriage, Dos Passos gives us the consummation of a business relationship. In fact, for some time, Eveline only knows Moorehouse as Eleanor’s financial adviser, since Eleanor “spoke about ‘my financial adviser’ this and that, until Eveline didn’t know what to think” (NN 100).

Eveline, like Moorehouse, is principally characterized by her effort to manipulate social networks. And, again like Moorehouse, she achieves a level of superficial success in this endeavor: her parties become something of a legend within the world of the trilogy. In The Big Money, gossiping partygoers exchange stories about meeting various celebrities, including Harry Houdini, at her gatherings (BM 165). What makes her parties special, one attendee says, is that “you never can tell who you’ll meet…” (BM 165). Eveline imagines herself as a kind of master of ceremonies, connecting persons who might not otherwise meet. In Nineteen Nineteen, she sets herself the task of “sorting our ranks and getting hold of people who mixed properly” (NN 179). Yet while, like Moorehouse, she is a capable networker, Eveline makes contacts for social rather than financial reasons. Eveline is in basic agreement with Eleanor about the importance of
making contacts: in New York, she finds that “Eleanor was rather trying on the whole; but they met such interesting people…” (NN 94). However, the two women seem to differ when it comes to the purpose of these contacts, with Eleanor seeing these more as potential business associates than dalliances; indeed, in Eleanor’s opinion the “young men Eveline collected were all so poor and certainly more of a liability than an asset to the business” (NN 94–5). Thus, whereas we can read Eleanor as a female version of Moorehouse—as a woman who learns to “make contacts” in order to further her business prospects—Eveline is more insistently a feminized Moorehouse, someone who makes contacts but for her own (traditionally feminized) reasons.

To the extent that Eveline achieves some success in her endeavor, it is ultimately success that leaves her feeling hollow. In a moment with some metanarrative resonance, capturing as it does the difficulty readers are likely to experience in tracking U.S.A.’s sprawling cast of characters, Eveline is haunted by multiplicity—by the possibility that, like the Charley Andersons of the world, she might be reduced to confusion or dependency in the face of a complex social network. Lying alone in bed in a “halfdream,” Eveline hallucinates faces that blur into one another: “Sometime it was Jerry Burnham’s face that would bud out of the mists changing slowly into Mr. Rasmussen’s or Edgar Robbins’ or Paul Johnson’s or Freddy Sergeant’s” (NN 250). The experience is an especially traumatic one for Eveline because she constantly seeks to exert control over the network of which she’s a part. Yet the reality of multiplicity—of a social world that can hardly be comprehended, let alone controlled or contained—haunts her. Dos Passos delineates the difference between Eveline’s desire to exert control over the network, on one hand, and a character like Charley’s submission to it,
on the other, early in *The Big Money*. When, after flirting with the married Eveline, Charley observes fatalistically that “we won’t ever see each other again,” Eveline surprises him by scoffing: “Why not?” (*BM* 4). Dos Passos shows that her bravado cannot last, however. Indeed, the *U.S.A.* trilogy closes with Eveline’s suicide, an act that immediately follows one of her most “successful” parties. Other characters will only hear about her death from (where else?) the tabloids. Her final words in the narrative capture her sense that she has wasted time trying to control the relations around her: “You know it does seem too silly to spend your life filling up rooms with ill-assorted people who really hate each other” (*BM* 444).

For critics hoping to understand *U.S.A.*, Eveline’s parties have come to signify more than just parties; rather, they have come to serve as metaphors for the trilogy’s logic of interaction in a broader sense. Indeed, the figurative language that critics and reviewers reach for in their attempt to describe the interaction, of lack of interaction, among Dos Passos’s characters is telling in itself. Jun-young Lee has suggested that the trilogy’s characters are more noteworthy for “their isolations than… their interactions.” He compares them to “a bunch of party-goers in a cocktail party,” who “bump into one another in a very superficial and coincidental way” (241). Dos Passos’s contemporary reviewers often took his novels to task for exactly this reason. A reviewer for the *Nation* suggested that Dos Passos’s most glaring aesthetic “deficiency shows itself most plainly in the personal relations of his characters—they are hardly persons enough to sustain real relations with one another, any more than billiard balls do” (Whipple 150). More recently, Matthew Packer has attempted to add some nuance to this conversation by noting that critics’ use of the “collide’… metaphor is misleading” since actually “the
characters are vortices, ‘strangely attracting’ individuals rather than bumping them into 
one another” (221). One could see this debate quickly descending into absurd territory: 
is the characters’ interaction more of a “bump” or a “crash”? Would one do better to say 
they “mingle with” or “brush past” one another?

I raise this issue not to be nitpicking about diction for its own sake, but rather to 
demonstrate that such critical metaphors, when applied to the whole of U.S.A., are 
inhertently limited. In approaching his characters’ various interactions with one another 
with what amounts to a sociometric lens, Dos Passos allows us to see that all of these 
interactions are part of the process by which social networks are formed, expand, and 
link up with other such networks. The social world of U.S.A. resists generalizations; 
rather than having to decide whether his characters “collide” or “intersect” or “combine 
with” one another, we can simply acknowledge that Dos Passos’s characters do all of the 
above. In this sense, Dos Passos imagines the social less in synecdochal terms—i.e., two 
characters mingling at a party exemplifies an entire society—than material ones.

Anticipating Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory, U.S.A. is ultimately more interested 
in exposing how society gets “assembled” rather than trying to say anything absolute 
about its “essence.” Correspondingly, it is best to avoid making generalizations about 
whether Dos Passos intends to emphasize his characters’ isolation from one another or 
their interaction with one another, since his project seems instead to be one of 
ascertaining what Moreno would call the “acquaintance volume” of each figure.80 Dos 
Passos thus focuses our attention on the fact that world is made up both of very

80 To see how far critics have diverged on this fragmentation vs. unity issue, simply contrast Granville 
Hicks’s argument that Dos Passos intended to show “the fundamental unity beneath the seemingly 
chaotic complexity of American life” (qtd. in Foley 436) with Henry Hazlitt’s review of The 42nd Parallel, 
which claims that “it would be difficult to point to any unity in the book except that supplied by the 
binding” (315).
connected persons and very disconnected persons—and that, depending on one’s position within the network, these individuals subsequently live very different lives.

Indeed, Dos Passos’s characters can be generally divided into two major camps: those that understand and to various degrees manipulate networks, and those that are overwhelmed by them. The first group—Moorehouse, Savage, Eveline, Eleanor—get closer to the “center of things,” but lose a part of their humanity in the process. The second group—Mac, Charley, and also the prototypical Bud Kornpenning, from Manhattan Transfer—are more or less flummoxed by their place in a networked world, and come to represent the very forms of social isolation that Moreno (and the New York Times) seemed so concerned about. These latter figures are more sympathetic, perhaps, than their counterparts in the first group, but they are also victims.

As Dos Passos’s characters attempt, with more (J. Ward Moorehouse) or less (Charley Anderson) success, to understand and control their social world, so too is the reader of U.S.A. challenged to follow the complex web of interrelations binding characters together. This is no easy task, as the many figures in the trilogy, both major and minor, recur in different contexts and display constantly evolving feelings and intentions toward one another. J.J. Butts has recently claimed that members of this second group (those who have trouble understanding the social world) function as a “metanarrative reference to the difficulty of making sense of a complex environment beyond the reach of the individual consciousness.” In other words, characters like Mac, Charley, and Bud are like confused readers trying to keep up with the intricate social world of U.S.A. Ultimately, none of these characters prove to be skilled at what
Jameson has called the process of “cognitive mapping”; they can’t distinguish the whole from its parts, and thus they are doomed to be dominated by it.\footnote{Jameson’s notion of cognitive mapping, which I also discuss in chapter 4 in the context of hard-boiled fiction, entails studying social phenomena “not in isolation but as part of a world-spanning network of relations” (Ryan 215). For more narrative-oriented summaries of the “cognitive mapping” phenomenon, see Ryan’s “Cognitive Maps and the Construction of Narrative Space” and Herman’s “Narratology as a Cognitive Science.”}

Like readers of U.S.A., all of these characters must try to piece together the multivalent feelings circulating through the complex network. Those in the first group are able to read these feeling better than those in the second. Contrast, for instance, the network comprehension of Dick Savage with that of Charley Anderson. Upon being ushered into the Moorehouse circle, and meeting many of the Moorehouse cohorts for the very first time, Dick “noticed at once from the way Miss Stoddard walked into the room and the way Mr. Moorehouse came forward a little to meet her, that she was used to running the show in that room” (NN 305-6). Moreover, like a detective surveying the room, he is intentional when it comes to understanding the network: “He was introduced to various people and stood around for a while with his mouth shut and his ears open” (NN 306). Not coincidentally, the characters who are good at navigating the network are those that maintain contacts, remembering and being remembered by others. In Nineteen Nineteen, having only met Moorehouse once, and briefly at that, Dick Savage is struck by the fact that Moorehouse “remembered his name” (NN 306).

Once again, poor Charley Anderson provides a useful juxtaposition. Dos Passos establishes at the beginning of The Big Money that Charley, despite his escalating material fortunes, has few acquaintances. He is a friend of Ollie Taylor, one of those Dos Passos creations whom “everybody seemed to know” (BM 9); but when Ollie is gone Charley, out of loneliness, contacts Paul and Eveline Johnson; “they were the only
people left he knew” (*BM* 48). When he first meets several of the trilogy’s recurring characters at a party thrown by Eveline, he does manage to notice certain social exchanges: for instance, that “Stevens and the young man who had just come in [Dick Savage] stared at each other without speaking.” Yet the prevailing sentiment for Charley during encounters is to succumb to the feeling that “it was all getting very confusing” (*BM* 53).

I have called Charley more recognizably human and sympathetic than someone like Moorehouse, and perhaps what helps to make him so is that he finds navigating the social world of *U.S.A.* to be a challenging task—just as, at another level, so many readers do. Criticism surrounding the trilogy has long been dominated by the question of whether Dos Passos finally emphasizes social fragmentation or social totalization, and within this discussion—indeed, articulated by critics on either side of the debate—is the prevailing idea that Dos Passos places an extraordinary onus on the reader, requiring him or her to make a comprehensible social totality out of what seems at first a swirling chaos of fragmentation. For example, Lee claims that the reader of *U.S.A.* “serves as dialectical mediator between [the trilogy’s] montages of fragmentation and totality. In other words, the reader participates in a dialectical process of reintegrating the reified and fragmented world into a dialectical whole” (230). Similarly, Marc Brosseau, examining what he calls the “network fabric” of *Manhattan Transfer*, suggests that Dos Passos “requires the reader to reconstitute the social networks mentally in order to make sense of this apparently scattered urban scene” (101). And Wesley Beal, whose work most closely tracks with my own analysis of Dos Passos’s representations
of networks, argues that “making sense of… disaggregation on its own terms is precisely the demand placed on readers” by Dos Passos’s novels.

Does *U.S.A.* ultimately emphasize fragmentation, or totalization? And what is the role of the reader, exactly, in this dialectic? In answer to the first question, my argument is that, by viewing *U.S.A.* through the lens of sociometry, we avoid having to choose. In fact, it’s a question doomed to lack an answer, since Dos Passos actually uses *U.S.A.* to explore the divergence between those who are socially well-connected and those who are not—i.e., individuals with a large “acquaintance volume” and those who are truly isolated. Hence the dichotomy between fragmentation and totalization is finally a false one in *U.S.A.*, precisely because Dos Passos is primarily interested in showing how *both* of these impulses characterize the same social network depending on one’s perspective. In other words, Dos Passos provides us with characters who see the world as more or less fragmented (or totalized) depending on their specific vantage point, personality, and position within the network. For Moorehouse—a character obsessed with the making, retaining, and documenting of contacts—the totalizing impulse trumps any sense of social fragmentation. In fact, Moorehouse engages in the very process that the critics I have cited above have been describing: he takes what seems a fragmented social world and makes it whole (in a way that benefits him personally). He even collects names and mini-bios of his contacts on filing cards—his personal *Who’s Who*—and reviews these before meetings. For instance, his card on G.H. Barrow reads: “Barrow, G.H., labor connections, reformer type. Once sec. Bro. locomotive engineers; unreliable” (*FP* 212). Later, Moorehouse’s secretary Janey, uncertain about whether or not she should accept Barrow’s marriage proposal, does the
only thing she can think of: she looks Barrow up in *Who’s Who*. “And there he was,” the narration tells us, “Barrow, George Henry, publicist…but she didn’t think she could ever love him” (*FP* 271). Janey must turn to *Who’s Who* in her duress; other characters in *U.S.A.* have even less to work with. On the opposite end of the spectrum from Moorehouse, characters like Mac and Charley Anderson have little success turning their fragmented realities into anything totalizing—either because they have no desire to, or because they don’t have the (financial, cultural, or intellectual) resources. Ultimately, Dos Passos registers both interaction and isolation in *U.S.A.*: the Moorehouses of the world are well connected, and suffer for it; the Macs and Charleys of the world are disconnected, and suffer for it.

Thus, despite all of the debates surrounding the reader’s role in processing the complex of social world of *U.S.A.*, what critics have not yet captured is that for Dos Passos this is always already a loaded ideological project. Dos Passos has already embedded readers’ potential responses to the novel’s complex web of social interconnection within the storyworld itself. For instance, when Wesley Beal argues that *U.S.A.* emphasizes totalization by explaining that the trilogy produces meaning “not by violent juxtaposition but by the cooperation of separate functions that are simultaneously… nodal and networked,” he seems not to hesitate in using the same word that is a Moorehouse favorite (emphasis added). Yet “cooperation,” is of course a loaded term within the world Dos Passos has created; as used by the propagandist Moorehouse, it always has nefarious connotations. My point here is not to fault Beal for a single word choice, but rather to point out that Dos Passos’s fiction anticipates, and
assigns an ideological position to, potential readerly responses to his novels’ intricate interlacings.

In fact, Dos Passos frames readers as having two starkly different options—neither of them very pleasant. On the one hand, to confidently and successfully navigate _U.S.A._’s social system is to become perhaps too much like Moorehouse for one’s liking: as I’ve shown, Dos Passos associates effective cognitive mapping skills and strategies with capitalist oppression. In part, Moorehouse is successful at understanding complex networks because he is willing to view people structurally, as placeholders to be collected and manipulated. On the other hand, Dos Passos connects a lack of cognitive mapping skills with those characters who are in some way oppressed by this system. The choice in Dos Passos’s storyworld is either to comprehend the network but lose a part of one’s humanity in the process; or, alternately, to retain some degree of human empathy but become vulnerable to social confusion. Disturbingly, the two responses that Dos Passos assigns to his characters are also those he leaves open to us as readers. In making his audience engage in this same process as his characters must, Dos Passos puts us in a position where we gravitate either toward the Moorehouse side of the spectrum or the Charley side—each with its own set of consequences. Perhaps not surprisingly, most of Dos Passos’s contemporary reviewers landed with the latter group. So, for instance, Upton Sinclair, sounding not unlike Charley Anderson, lamented the form of Dos Passos’s fiction, which gave “little glimpses of one character after another—and so many characters, and switching the back and forth, so fast, that I lost track of the stories, and half the time couldn’t be sure which was which” (87).
In considering how *U.S.A.* challenges readers to keep track of an interconnected storyworld populated by dozens upon dozens of characters, the concept that social anthropologists refer to as “Dunbar’s number” proves valuable. Named for the anthropologist and evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar, Dunbar’s number refers to the maximum number of persons with whom one can maintain active social relationships, based on the cognitive capacity of human beings. In other words, Dunbar’s number speaks to the fact that “human cognitive abilities may… set a limit on the maximum size of human groups” (Roberts 118). Moreno’s early twentieth century scholarship on the idea of “acquaintance volume” clearly anticipates Dunbar’s number, and Dos Passos’s exploration of these sorts of issues raises the possibility that Dunbar’s model will help to elucidate the form of *U.S.A.* According to Dunbar’s framework, four layers or circles of acquaintanceship can be said surround the individual. Each of these layers tends to contain a different number of persons depending on their function in the life of the individual at the center. The first and smallest circle is generally called “the support clique,” and averages five members. The support clique is made up of those persons “from who one would seek advice, support or help in time of severe emotional or financial distress” (Roberts 117). The second circle, averaging twelve to fifteen members, has been termed the “sympathy group,” and this layer includes not only the members of the support clique, but also additional persons whom the individual contacts on a regular basis (117). The third circle, called the “band,” contains roughly fifty acquaintances (including members of both the support clique and the sympathy group); the band remains the least well understood of the circles. Finally, the largest circle is called the “active network,” and it consists of “all those individuals that [the central
individual] feels that they have a personal relationship with, and makes a conscious effort to keep in contact with” (117). For the modern human, the number of persons in this group averages to approximately 150.

Evolutionary psychologists have drawn on Dunbar’s work in hypothesizing that as “the number of [persons] in each layer of the network increases, the level of emotional intimacy and the level or interaction between [persons] decreases.” In other words: the bigger the group, the less intimate the relationships. This suggests, in effect, “that there are constraints on the number of relationships” an individual can maintain at any given level; it is simply too “cognitively demanding to keep track of a large number of relationships simultaneously” (Roberts 117–118). Notably, these cognitive constraints pose a problem that Dos Passos both dramatizes within the storyworld of *U.S.A.* (by giving us characters who are more or less confused by their position in the social domain) and enacts via form (by including so many characters, and combining them so intricately, that we, as readers, are challenged to keep track of them).

Hence we can think about *U.S.A.*’s characters in terms of Dunbar’s levels: Moorehouse has the largest active network but few (if any) close friends; while Charley, on the other end of the spectrum, is characterized by his strong feelings toward a few people, but no sense of the wider network of which he’s one small part. But beyond this, considering Dos Passos’s fiction in the context of Dunbar’s number also raises the provocative possibility that his trilogy’s configuration of characters essentially replicates these concentric circles of acquaintanceship for each reader. Put differently, it may not be a coincidence that Dunbar’s concentric circles closely match Dos Passos’s character field. For example, in *U.S.A.*’s narratives, Charles Marz (who has apparently
counted) points out that “some 120 characters are introduced, interrupted, terminated, or forgotten” (412). And, if we correlate the titled narrative segments with the trilogy’s “major figures,” we might also say that there are twelve principal characters in *U.S.A.* This structure is very much like that of *Manhattan Transfer*, where “twelve characters each appear in at least seven scenes,” while these primary figures are themselves surrounded by a much wider network of characters (Dennis 95).

Thus we might say that our experience of Dos Passos’s character configuration in these novels basically corresponds to the “sympathy group” and “active network” circles provided by Dunbar’s framework. As readers engaging with Dos Passos’s novels, that is, we are in one sense experiencing the tension between simultaneously attending to a “sympathy group” (the trilogy’s twelve major figures) and an “active network” (the 120 or characters that appear at one point or another in the novels). In this way, Dunbar’s model allows to understand what is unique about *U.S.A.*—and perhaps also unique about other modernist narratives that break from traditional forms in a similar way. Whereas earlier forms of the novel may have leaned toward an emphasis on one or two major protagonists (in effect, a “support clique”), Dos Passos’s novels focus our attention most decidedly on the play between sympathy group and active network. The *U.S.A* trilogy is so challenging, then, because it puts tension on our cognitive constraints, raising the “acquaintance volume” of the storyworld to such a level that it becomes difficult for us to keep up.82

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82 In *Emergence of Mind: Representations of Consciousness in Narrative Discourse in English* (2011; ed., David Herman), Lisa Zunshine considers Dunbar’s ideas about cognitive constraints in the context of Theory of Mind. While my own point of focus is different, my reading of *U.S.A.*’s sprawling networks causes me to agree with Zunshine’s overarching assessment that “fictional narratives endlessly *experiment with* rather than *automatically execute* [readers’] evolved cognitive adaptations” (167, emphasis in the original).
Sociometric thinking and its critical descendents, including Dunbar’s number, helps us to make sense of Dos Passos’s still uneasy place in the canon and what has long been a mixed reception to his work. When his contemporary reviewers faulted Dos Passos’s work in the *U.S.A.* trilogy, it was often because of their antipathy toward his configuration of characters. While admitting that the trilogy offered “a scintillating exposition of human behavior and its intricate inter-relationships,” one critic felt that the work lacked “cumulative power” since characters are treated “in the most perfunctory fashion. They are mentioned, they appear for a brief moment and then disappear…. Once Dos Passos has brought his people to their various conclusions, generally within the framework of a single book, he seems to have done with them, and, engrossed in the panorama of a new character’s unfolding life, the earlier protagonists are readily forgotten” (Bessie 141-2). Conversely, those who praised *U.S.A.* tended to emphasize its mimetic achievements. The *New York Times Book Review* called *Nineteen Nineteen* a novel “more true to life on a tightly meshed planet than most of us like to admit” (Chamberlain 103). These readers often acknowledged that keeping track of *U.S.A.*’s intricate character networks was a frustrating endeavor, but, rather than faulting Dos Passos for this fact, praised him for capturing how modern life “really” felt.

In a similar fashion, critics who fault *U.S.A.* for the fact that its characters’ relations with one another seem empty of feeling tend to miss Dos Passos’s dramatization of how monopoly capitalism dehumanizes individuals by reducing persons to roles and making relationships more about form than content—that is, about “making contact” rather than any exchange of human feelings. Dos Passos’s social

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my analysis of Frank Norris’s Wheat novels in chapter 2 for an extended discussion of cognitive networks in fiction.
world is a gloomy one, in which “links are created and undone continuously; marriage and divorce follow each other; friendships are ephemeral; trades and professions change; success and failure never cease to alternate”… all without the feeling that there is any meaning to it (Brosseau 103). Characters like Moorehouse and Savage “network” for its own sake, because accumulating contacts entails amassing social power. This metamorphosis of human relations into something mechanical is of course an important thematic issue for Dos Passos. For instance, when Charley becomes distraught over the fact that his “last friend,” Bill Cermack, has died in a tragic accident, a colleague attempts to console him by pointing out that “After all… he was only a mechanic” (BM 256). Dick Savage, meanwhile, is, by the end of the trilogy, prone to making pronouncements such as: “We certainly can’t let drinking acquaintance stand in the way the efficiency of the office” (BM 415)—a rationale he uses to absolve himself of guilt when he must fire one of his friends. Even Janey Williams, who had once seemed to have a spark of authentic soul in her relations with others, comes to see interpersonal relations through Moorehouse’s structural-economic framework. Conflating the personal with the financial, Janey welcomes Dick Savage to employment at the public relations firm by telling him, “I’m sure it’ll be an enjoyable and profitable experience for all parties” (NN 313).

This shift—from authentic human relationship to the economic onus to “make contact”—reflects Dos Passos’s conviction that the corporation “with its board of directors, its chain of command, its hierarchy of power” had replaced the family unit as the “dominant social pattern” of modern life (202). The reduction of interpersonal relationships to the formal, hollow contacts of business acquaintanceship come most
prominently and tragically to the fore when “Daughter” meets Moorehouse and Eleanor in Paris. The narration registers Daughter’s perspective as she takes in the scene, which includes the presence of Dick Savage, who is accompanying Moorehouse and Eleanor: “Dick came in looking very handsome in his uniform with a pale older woman in grey and a tall stoutish lighthaired man, whom Mr. Barrow pointed out as J. Ward Moorehouse” (NN 328). Although she is pregnant with Dick’s child, Daughter is precluded from acknowledging their actual relationship: “Everybody was introduced and she and Dick shook hands very formally, as if they were the merest acquaintances. Miss Stoddard, whom she’d been so friendly with in Rome, gave her a quick inquisitive cold stare that made her feel terrible” (NN 329). Here the intensely emotional relationship between Daughter and Dick is vacated to make room for a ruse: pretending to merely “make contact” with Dick when in reality they’ve already made much more. That Daughter seems more pained about this ruse than Dick tells us all we need to know about the difference between the two characters. Indeed, Daughter belongs, unlike Dick, to the species of Mac, Charley, and Bud Korpenning; she is generally confused by the social dynamics at work, finding here that she “couldn’t image what it was that had made everybody so stiff and constrained, maybe she was imagining it on account of her and Dick” (NN 329).

Attending Dos Passos’s sociometric aesthetic allows us also to intervene in one of messier debates concerning U.S.A.: what is it, exactly? Should the trilogy be considered a “collective novel”?83 Is it a work of “proletarian fiction”? Or does U.S.A. stubbornly do its own thing, a work not beholden to any of these categories? In the

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83 In a recent article, J.J. Butts has convincingly argued that “the urban collective novel serves as an important modernist precursor” to the contemporary “network narrative,” since collective novels tend “to generate cognitive maps, making both connection and… disconnection visible” to audiences.
remaining pages of this chapter, my aim lies less in arguing that *U.S.A.* fits any specific generic mould than it lies in attempting to explain—using the network approach as a lens—what is at stake in this critical discussion as it so far exists.

Moreno, Marx, and Dos Passos’s Literary Collectivism

In her foundational study of proletarian fiction, Barbara Foley has argued that “certainly in the United States, and possibly in the entire international sphere of literary proletarianism outside the USSR, Dos Passos is the single most important pioneer in the form of the collective novel” (425). Following other critics who assert that “the text’s collective protagonist is the nation itself”—hence the novel’s title—Foley believes that Dos Passos’s literary collectivism is fundamentally “shaped by a Marxist notion of class struggle” (425). There are a few weaknesses to Foley’s argument. She herself concedes, for instance, that *U.S.A.* neither “holds up proletarian heroes” nor “groups its characters in clearly opposed camps of bosses and workers” (426). She also admits that, especially in *The Big Money* (generally regarded as the most cynical of the three novels), Dos Passos’s “political doctrine was, from a Marxist standpoint, open to critique” (426).

The novel’s ambiguous positioning of itself in reference to proletarian fiction has long been a source of critical controversy, especially because Dos Passos’s politics had already begun to move rightward prior to the completion of *The Big Money*. A reviewer for the *Nation* went so far as to write that “Dos Passos does not call himself a Marxist; if he were more of one, he might have written a better novel” (151). The *Southern Review* sounded a similar note but from a different direction: “The binding together of lives (and thus of the reader’s interest and gaze) into the progress of a plot—an element
present even in a work of the scope of *War and Peace*—is wholly lacking” (183). This lack of emphasis on progress entailed for some that Dos Passos was not only a bad storyteller, but a bad Marxist. By the 21st century, however, “though the degree to which [*U.S.A.*] can be considered Marxist has been endlessly debated, it is routinely associated with the proletarian tradition” (Casey 133).

I contend that the form of Dos Passos’s novels conforms less with Marx than it does with Moreno, though the latter thinker has been all but lost to intellectual history. Indeed, it is clear from his essays that Dos Passos saw himself as attempting a kind of anthropology or social science in fiction. He laments that

> there has been too little exploration of industrial society in the terms of human behavior. One reason is that obsession with socialist capitalist antithesis (with socialism equals good, capitalism equals bad or vice versa) has kept investigators from seeing clearly the prospects that were opening out under their noses…. If you are going to study an ant’s nest you have to start out with a mind blank of preconceptions about the behavior of social insects. Difficult as it is to be unprejudiced about ants it’s a whole lot more difficult to be unprejudiced about people. (208)

Ironically, this “obsession with socialist capitalist antithesis” that Dos Passos protests could also be said to mark the scholarship surrounding *U.S.A.*: critics have debated Dos Passos's politics at the expense of more fully investigating his interest in social science.

Yet the development of sociometry in the 1930s provides a significant context in which to consider Dos Passos’s characterological configurations in *U.S.A.*. Turning to the figural power of the network, Dos Passos replaces Marxist progression with sociometric recursiveness, combining his characters in ways that make room simultaneously for interaction and isolation, unity and fragmentation. The concept of the social network provided American modernist writers such as John Dos Passos with the means to think about collectivity without mystical unity, contiguity without
centeredness, change without progress. Moreno’s sociometric framework rejected both “the materialistic concept of the individual organism, with its unity, and… its microcosmic independence” and the notion of a “romantic” or “mystical” “collectivistic unity of a people” (27). Social networks would need to be explained, Moreno believed, not by any easy recourse to a Marxist notion of “the masses,” nor by looking to the kind of parapsychology invoked by Frank Norris, but only rigorously through “scientific evidence” (27). Like Latour’s more recent conceptualization of actor-network-theory, Moreno, as well as Dos Passos, seems to approach social phenomena primarily as material processes instead of manifestations of ideology. Rather than offering “grand theories of arrogated social unities such as ‘classes’ or ‘races’ or ‘nations’,” one commentator explains, Latour’s actor-network theory “urges researchers to observe particular actors and situations” (Jagoda 194). This distinction perhaps helps to clarify the polarized reception of Dos Passos’s fiction, especially the U.S.A. trilogy. While critics have most often sought to determine the essential “causes” or “forces” driving his characters’ (mainly abject) social behavior, Dos Passos, by contrast, urges his audience to read “society” primarily as a surface—not a symptom. Replacing an ideologically oriented view of the social with a more insistently technical one, Dos Passos sets out to demonstrate how “U.S.A.” is assembled—not necessarily diagnose why.

Our readerly processing of U.S.A.’s complex networks is a task further complicated by the manner in which Dos Passos stages introductions over the course of the trilogy, underscoring our sense that we are “meeting” characters again and again, even after we’ve already met them. (Here we are in very different territory than we were with, say, Henry James. While, as I demonstrated in chapter 1, James’s plots tend
to revolve around scenes of meeting, his technique of grounding narrative discourse in a single, sustained perspective does not compel readers to “meet” any character for a second or third time). At the level of form, this device constitutes one of the ways in which *U.S.A* resists any sense of Marxist progression—a drive toward *telos*—in favor of a more decidedly sociometric recursiveness. Pizer usefully describes this technique: “The reappearance of a major character in the narrative… does not elicit a sign of recognition from the narrative voice. It is as if the narrator is encountering the figure, whom we as readers are fully acquainted with, for the first time” (111). The effect is such that, as readers, we are perpetually encountering characters through the fresh eyes of some individual who is making contact with them for the first time.

Certain figures are especially functional in this dynamic. One is Dick Savage, who finds himself ushered into the Moorehouse circle late in *Nineteen Nineteen*. The novel proceeds to re-present to the reader Moorehouse, Eveline, Eleanor, and Janey, each from Dick’s outsider perspective. For example, note how the narration describes Dick’s initial contact with Moorehouse and Eleanor: “Mr. Moorehouse turned out to be a large quietspoken blueeyed jowly man with occasionally a touch of the southern senator in his way of talking. With him were a man named Robbins and a Miss Stoddard, a fraillooking woman with very transparent alabaster skin and a sharp chirpy voice; Dick noticed that she was stunningly welldressed” (*NN* 285). Sometimes the effect evokes pathos, as when Mary French, on the night before Eveline’s suicide, finds herself “shaking hands with a tall slender woman in a pearlgrey dress” (*BM* 439). By giving us Mary’s perspective on Eveline just before Eveline kills herself, Dos Passos emphasizes the outsider’s view of the characters—that Eveline will always be a stranger
to us. The thrust of the technique is to emphasize the basic unknowability of these characters; we see them again and again as if they were strangers to us.

Thus, by making readers engage with a multitude of perspectives, Dos Passos’s adds yet further complications to our readerly processing of U.S.A.’s social network. Each character in U.S.A. potentially has a different sense of the broader network of which he or she is a part, since each character’s knowledge of the overarching constellation is incomplete and unique to his or position in that constellation. As readers, we are tasked with projecting the network in its entirety by identifying, assessing, and combining various perceptions of the network as these are focalized through the different characters who comprise its nodes. Even more than this, the trilogy encourages readers to take seriously the experience of characters not currently being focalized by the narrative—i.e., to acknowledge a plurality of possible, though non-actualized, nodal vantage points. (Here I am especially thinking of such recurring characters as G.H. Barrow and Jerry Burnham). All of this adds up to make the task of following how each of these persons connects with and feels about the others—what Moreno called their spontaneous “attractions and repulsions”—an extremely challenging one. For instance, we learn in blink-or-you’ll-miss-it fashion that Janey does not care much for Eleanor (despite Eleanor’s apparent respect for Janey’s

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84 Alan Palmer and other narrative theorists have elsewhere referred to this notion of “possible” vantage points as “aspectuality,” which can be defined as the idea that storyworlds might be “experienced differently, under other aspects, by all of the other characters who are not being focalized in the text” (40).
competence) \( (FP 263) \); that Gladys Compton does not care for Mary French \( (BM 357) \); that Barrow is attracted to just about anyone of the opposite sex, and on and on.\(^{85}\)

Dos Passos also uses what Gérard Genette refers to as “repetitive” constructions in order to represent a single event from multiple perspectives. The moment when Joe Williams steps off an elevator and sees his sister, Janey, gets rendered in both \( \textit{The 42\textsuperscript{nd} Parallel} \) (from Janey’s perspective) and \( \textit{Nineteen Nineteen} \) (from Joe’s). Another description of a meeting occurs from both sides when G.H. Barrow introduces Anne Elizabeth (“Daughter”) to Dick Savage while the three are on a train to Rome. (Using Moorehouse-esque language, Barrow tells Dick that he is “anxious to establish contacts with people who really knew what it was all about.”) \( (NN 292) \) Dick seems amused by Daughter’s middle-American innocence and naiveté, marking her as a “pinkcheeked girl” with a “drawling Texas voice” \( (NN 290) \). Their meeting is much more intense from Daughter’s perspective, which we get some pages later: “There was an American officer on the train, Captain Savage, so good looking and such a funny talker…. When Captain Savage looked at her it made her all melt up inside” \( (NN 323) \).

Perhaps the quintessential repetitive moment in the trilogy, and certainly the most significant one in terms of plot, occurs in the meeting between Eveline and Eleanor, which also gets rendered from each’s perspective. In \( \textit{The 42\textsuperscript{nd} Parallel} \), Dos Passos presents the meeting from Eleanor’s point of view. In \( \textit{Nineteen Nineteen} \), he provides the meeting from Eveline’s vantage point. Once again, readers witness the two women meet at the Art Institute, here finding that what had been rendered in \( \textit{The 42\textsuperscript{nd} Parallel} \) as Eleanor’s self-conscious posing about matters of art goes unnoticed by

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\(^{85}\) Interestingly, Moreno also used multi-perspectivism in his sociometric writings. The idea here is that potential gaps between attraction and repulsion can only be understood by getting each individual’s account of the other; the arrows he charts between persons are a two-way street (see figure 2, page 174).
Eveline. Immediately after meeting Eleanor, Eveline writes to her brother, relaying that she has met a girl “who really seemed to feel painting” and whom she “could really talk about things with” (NN 89). The two women see their budding relationship in very different terms: Eleanor desperately wants to be accepted by Eveline, while Eveline immediately begins to imagine how she might “build her life on a beautiful friendship” (NN 89).

Each of these episodes urges us as readers to attend to the gap between how two characters see their shared bond. That two individuals can see the same society so differently raises the question of just how much can be learned about social organization from the subjective perceptions of the persons within it. This is an idea Dos Passos raises also in his nonfiction writing: “If you want to find out what is happening to a society,” he argues, “the thing to study is the behavior of the people in it and not what they say about their behavior. But most of the writing and arguing about social systems is about ideologies and not about behavior” (204). Hence when Dos Passos explores how Eleanor feels about Eveline and how Eveline feels about Eleanor, he examines this dynamic more as sociologist studying human behavior than as Marxist expounding an ideology. Even when Dos Passos’s prototypically modern characters seem to have “no familial or spatial rationale for their lives,” social science, and especially sociometry, provides a way to think about relations in human behavioral—rather than overtly political—terms (200). The “antithesis between capitalism and socialism is beside the point,” Dos Passos would go on to write, because this antithesis “doesn’t affect the way in which the people who work the machines and sit at the directors’ tables and run the teletypes and sweep out the offices actually behave” (204).
“If we ever get to the point of charting a whole city or a whole nation,” Moreno states toward the end of the 1933 *New York Times* article, “we would have an intricate maze of psychological reactions which would present a picture of a vast solar system of intangible structures, powerfully influencing conduct, as gravitation does bodies in space.” In its own way, through the vehicle of narrative fiction, Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* exemplifies a sociometric aesthetic by charting large swaths of the “psychological geography” of the whole nation. While engaging problems of social organization in different discursive registers, Moreno and Dos Passos articulate a shared assumption that modern society’s networked structure was a profoundly determinative force in the lives of individuals. In 1956, Dos Passos would write in “The Changing Shape of Institutions”:

> The intellectual tools with which to examine societies in the spirit of the search for knowledge rather than for party purposes are already in the language…. In America at least the study of behavior, in the good old empirical tradition, has not run its course nor reached its highest fruition. We’ve just begun to take up the problem. An entire science lies ahead. In that science we may find the tools with which to build out of our runaway institutions a society which will offer participation to each individual man. (208)

Converging on an approach to social organization that emphasized interpersonal connectedness, and that each man believed might, if properly utilized, be a viable instrument for reform, Dos Passos and Moreno both imagined the geographic space of the nation in terms the sometimes fleeting yet always quantifiable “contacts” of modern life. With its many tales of squandered potential and individual tragedy, the *U.S.A.* trilogy is a decidedly pessimistic work of fiction, and it does not offer easy solutions to the difficult “problem” of human interrelations. Yet in *U.S.A.*’s embrace of sociometry
there is also a kind of chimeric optimism at work, a hopefulness that has so far been unremarked: Dos Passos (like Moreno) suggests that positive interventions will surely follow if we can first just accurately diagnose the problem. Indeed, Dos Passos’s formal techniques—in particular, his thorough use of “interlacing”—encourage readers to visualize the nation as a massive sociogram, one featuring dynamic, and sometimes chaotic, networks of interaction. In this sense, *U.S.A.* can be said to have helped lay the groundwork—by modeling via the affordances of narrative fiction—the very forms of “psychological geography” that Moreno and his intellectual descendants would continue to explore into the following decades. Even more than James’s and Norris’s convergence with foundational social-network theories (see chapters 1 and 2), the multiple points of intersection between Moreno’s and Dos Passos’s sociological imaginaries suggest that we have yet to explore the full extent of the connection between American modernist fiction and emergent practices of empirical network research. Although Dos Passos never claimed to be a social scientist, *U.S.A.* models a sociometric aesthetic, drawing readers’ attention toward, and perhaps even focusing their hope, on that “entire science [which] lies ahead.”
Chapter 4

Network Noir: Multi-Character Configuration in the American Hard-Boiled Detective Novel

“Look here, Marlowe, I think I can understand your detective instinct to tie everything that happens into one compact knot, but don’t let it run away with you.”

— from Raymond Chandler’s The Lady in the Lake (1943)

An Introduction to this Chapter

As representative examples of American hard-boiled detective fiction, Dashiell Hammett’s Red Harvest (1929) and Raymond Chandler’s The Big Sleep (1939), each of these being their author’s debut novel, afford important insights into the configuration of social networks in narrative fiction. At its most basic level, detective fiction tends to involve “the transformation of a fragmented and incomplete set of events into a more and ordered and complete understanding” (Hutter 231). The self-reflexive quality of this textual phenomenon has helped to ensure that the detective genre occupies an important place in the field of narrative theory. Indeed, since the detective in mystery fiction often functions as “textually embedded model reader” (Pyrhönen, Mayhem 5)—in that he or she attempts to shape fragments into a story—the detective genre has come to be seen as a “semi-allegorical and thematic exploration of narrative poetics” itself (Pyrhönen, Mayhem 7).

Part of my aim in the present chapter is to explore the methods by which Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler encourage their readers to participate in this kind of reconstructive effort: in Red Harvest and The Big Sleep alike, both detectives and
readers are impelled to think about the other characters in network-analytic terms, to view the suggested social world as an interconnected whole. However, I will also demonstrate how Hammett and Chandler simultaneously frustrate their readers’ ability to map the narrative’s “meaningful totality” precisely or completely. More so than previous chapters, this chapter also considers how examining areas of overlap between social network analysis and modernist American fiction sheds new light on established models for understanding literary character. I contend that existing models offer productive but incomplete frameworks for studying multi-character configurations in American hard-boiled fiction. Additionally, focusing on what’s distinct about the hard-boiled novel’s dominant social imaginary, I show how social-network formations offered American writers a crucial narrative device with which to distinguish themselves from their British mystery-writing counterparts.

Since as early as 1960, when Leslie Fiedler famously branded the American hard-boiled detective “a cowboy adapted to life on the city streets,” critics have maintained that the hard-boiled genre tends to reflect, if not definitively endorse, the United States’ archetypal individualist ethos (499). Equating hard-boiled detective narratives with the American westerns that genealogically preceded them, critical consensus holds that hard-boiled fiction, be it celebratory or conflicted in its assessment, is thematically “about” the status of the individual. The world of the hard-boiled narrative, this story goes, favors representations of individual volition over those of collective activity, proffering worlds in which “the only meaningful social forces stem from the pursuit of individual interest” (McCann 70). This is certainly the case for Dashiell Hammett’s Continental Operative (or “Op,” for short). Although he maintains
tenuous ties to the detective agency that provides his moniker, ultimately, like Chandler’s detective Philip Marlowe, Hammett’s Op trusts his own instincts and keeps others at arm’s length. He has “no wife, no children, no home to speak of, no fraternal organizations, no emotional attachments to anyone” (Smith 80). Moreover, not only is the prototypical hard-boiled detective a “lone wolf,” but the other characters in these narratives—those that in their minor roles surround the Philip Marlowes, Sam Spades, and Continental Ops—also act perpetually out of extreme, and often shockingly violent, self-interest.

Yet if for most critics “individualism,” broadly conceived, constitutes a baseline thematic concern of the hard-boiled detective novel, critics have also been quick to note that, in terms of form, the genre often hardly registers characters as individuals at all. Compared to literary genres more inclined to mimetic representation, the hard-boiled novel seems to contain “not so much persons as representations of persons” (McGurl 165). Indeed, the hard-boiled narrative can be compared to other American popular genres, in which the heroic protagonist achieves individuation at the “expense” of some other (minor) characters’ anonymity and/or expendability. In his analysis of the “minimal conditions” of fictional characters, the narrative theorist Uri Margolin proposes a sliding scale between “uniqueness” and “deindividuation” that allows readers to determine how—and to what degree—characters in a fictional world may be differentiated from one another.86 According to Margolin, the more “unique” a character in a given fictional world, the more completely he or she may be distinguished

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86 Margolin organizes his minimal conditions for literary characters as five pairs of binary oppositions: (1) “existence vs. semiotic possibility,” (2) “identity vs. indeterminacy,” (3) “uniqueness vs. deindividuation,” (4) “paradigmatic unity vs. random assemblage,” and (5) “continuity vs. temporal dispersal.” See Margolin’s “Introducing and Sustaining Characters in Literary Narrative: A Set of Conditions” for further information.
from the other characters contained in that world. On the other hand, the more “deindividuated” the characters involved, the more difficult it becomes for the reader to make distinctions among individuals. As an example of figures on this lower end of the scale, Margolin points to Lewis Carroll’s Tweedledee and Tweedledum, two characters scarcely differentiated from one another, distinguished as two separate individuals only by the their distinct (though, even here, nearly identical) proper names.

Applying this framework to the hard-boiled novel, we can say that narratives such as those by Hammett and Chandler tend to exhibit a low degree of individuation when it comes to minor characters. Indeed, many of the minor (= non-protagonist) characters contained in hard-boiled fiction are differentiated from one another by relatively minimal distinctions: a single physical trait, an association with another character, a proper name. In general, these are by no means the “round” characters Forster identified as being familiar to the nineteenth-century realist novel: by minimizing the mimetic particularities of their minor characters, hard-boiled authors construct fictional individuals whose degrees of individuation are at times more reminiscent of Tweedledee and Tweedledum than, say, David Copperfield or Isabel Archer.

Minor characters’ relative deindividuation in the hard-boiled novel can be explained, in part, by the genre’s thematic focus on the world as a place of ubiquitous corruption. Hammett’s Red Harvest, for instance, suggests that at the end of the day people are all pretty much the same. According to Sean McCann, the novel aims to

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87 Chandler openly acknowledged this tendency in his own writing, remarking in a personal letter: “It has been clear to me for some time that what is largely boring about mystery stories, at least on a literate plane, is that characters get lost about a third of the way through…. The plot thickens and the people become mere names. Well, what can you do to avoid this?” (Raymond Chandler Papers 181).
produce a leveling effect wherein “all distinctions of identity and even the most relative political and moral differences have evaporated,” as the narrative’s fictional participants become “indistinguishable reflections of each other—a single, violent Hobbesian person” (81-2). When in Red Harvest a character named Noonan, the corrupt chief of police, remarks that “everybody’s killing everybody,” we find a perfect example of this dynamic. Such a formulation (“everybody’s killing everybody”) leaves room for neither individual particularity nor localized criminal accountability (143).

Attending to multi-character configuration in Red Harvest and The Big Sleep—more specifically, to the point-by-point construction of social networks in these works—promises to clarify the tension between the hard-boiled novel’s thematic emphasis on individualism, on one hand, and its tendency toward the deindividuation of minor characters, on the other. In the pages that follow, I argue that focusing on the distinctive features and functions of social-network configurations in the hard-boiled novel illuminates the genre’s dominant formal conventions and ideological concerns, even as exploring Hammett’s and Chandler’s treatments of character networks elucidate the genealogy of social network studies as it neared mid-century. By situating basic network-analytic procedures—especially the tracing of the network formation that researchers have more recently called a “small world”—at the heart of readers’ experience with these stories, hard-boiled fiction anticipates (and contributes to) network theory’s twentieth-century transmutation into popular discourse.

One of the core concepts of contemporary network studies, “small-world” theory speaks to the relatively high degree of connectedness within a given network. Simultaneously expansive and densely clustered, a “small world” can be defined as a
social network “within which virtually anyone can be connected to anyone else” via a relatively short number of intermediary persons (Watts 82). First theorized by the social psychologist Stanley Milgram in the charter edition of *Psychology Today* (1967), the concept of the small-world network has had an undeniable impact on contemporary popular consciousness. In the twenty-first century, for instance, small-world theory contributes to such “pop” sociological phenomena as the widely recognized notion of “six degrees of separation” as well as the “Kevin Bacon game.”

This chapter is divided roughly in halves, each of which considers a different aspect of multi-character configuration in the American hard-boiled detective novel. In the first half, I explore the status of fictional individuals in hard-boiled storyworlds, by considering how minor characters are (minimally) distinguished from one another in Hammett’s *Red Harvest*. Investigating the social network configured in Hammett’s novel allows us to see that, paradoxically, interpersonal connectedness becomes a significant vehicle for individual characterization. In *Red Harvest*, that is, the hard-boiled genre’s frequently cited metonymical logic extends to metonymic connections among fictional individuals. Additionally, Hammett’s emphasis on proxy relationships makes his audience’s task an especially daunting one, as the convoluted nature of the storyworld’s social network complicates any attempt to localize criminal guilt. Hence this first section aims to delineate some of the distinguishing properties of hard-boiled

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88 In the “Kevin Bacon game,” players attempt to link any person connected to Hollywood back to Kevin Bacon via an unbroken chain of colleagues; the goal is to use the fewest possible intermediary links. (Obviously, the Kevin Bacon game can also be played using individuals not named Kevin Bacon.) As discussed in chapter 3, the term “six degrees of separation” was not used by network theorists until 1967, when Milgram concluded that persons in the U.S. could be connected by an average of five intervening persons, but the basic idea can be traced at least as far back to “Chain-Links” (1929), a short story by the Hungarian author Frigyes Karinthy. See Newman, Barabási, and Watts’s *The Structure and Dynamics of Networks* for more on the history of the “six-degrees” idea.
character networks, illustrating how their excessiveness, intricacy, and at times even incoherence lead to a particularly demanding reading experience.

In the chapter’s second half, I continue to explore social-network configurations in the hard-boiled detective novel through a close reading of Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*. Shifting my focus from the hard-boiled narrative’s configuration of metonymical relations to its construction of asymmetrical relations, I demonstrate that the social networks encountered in American hard-boiled detective fiction are fundamentally different than those of the conventional British “whodunit,” or puzzle mystery. In addition, I show how Chandler’s novel destabilizes its various characters’ degrees of “minorness,” illustrating how narrative prominence for even marginal characters is capable of fluctuating over the course of a given narrative. Finally, I suggest that the “small-world” configurations characteristic of American hard-boiled detective fiction requires that we reconsider critical assumptions about the genre’s emphasis on social fragmentation. To demonstrate how hard-boiled fiction often impels readers to accept the unsolvable complexities of social interconnection, I now turn to an analysis of *Red Harvest*’s metonymic character relations.

**Guilty By Association: Metonymic Relations in *Red Harvest***

Given that Dashiell Hammett “more than any other person, invented the hard-boiled detective” (Cawelti 163), his debut novel *Red Harvest* (1929) holds a privileged position within the mystery canon, regarded as alternatively “a watershed in the history of the American noir novel” (Marling 106) and “the most radical instance of the genre which it virtually founds” (Priestman 170).89 The novel takes place in the fictional

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89 Hammett cobbled *Red Harvest* together from four shorter narratives originally published in *Black Mask*, the 1920s’ premiere magazine for hard-boiled fiction and other pulp narratives. These four shorter
Western outpost of Personville, “an ugly city of forty thousand people” (Hammett 7).

Although the locals have effectively renamed the town “Poisonville”—and for good reason, considering the two dozen or so murders that will occur there before the novel’s end—the city’s official name, “Personville,” is also a fitting one, since from its opening pages the novel conflates the city itself with a single person. That person is Elihu Willsson, who “for forty years,” the Op tells us,

had owned Personville, heart, soul, skin, and guts. He was president and majority stockholder of the Personville Mining Corporation, ditto of the First National Bank, owner of the Morning Herald and Evening Herald, the city’s only newspapers, and at least part owner of nearly every other enterprise of any importance. Along with these pieces of property he owned a United States senator, a couple of representatives, the governor, the mayor, and most of the state legislature. Elihu Willsson was Personville, and he was almost the whole state. (8)

Willsson’s immense wealth has allowed him to dominate the city: his pockets run deep, and many of the novel’s characters—including, finally, the Op himself—find themselves deep within them.

When Willsson’s son Donald, a reform-minded newspaperman, is murdered after summoning the Continental Op to Personville (but, alas, before he can tell the Op why he has summoned him), the Op sets out to find “whodunit.” At this point in the narrative Hammett seizes the opportunity to twist the conventions of the classic mystery story, allowing the Op to discover almost immediately (in fact, within the span of a few chapters) the culprit: one Robert Albury, an unassuming assistant cashier at the

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narratives are: “The Cleansing of Personville”; “Crime Wanted—Male or Female”; “Dynamite”; and “The 19th Murder” (Panek 121). Hammett’s habit of combining shorter narratives to create his novels has implications for my study of social networks in hard-boiled fiction, since Hammett’s authorial process would have entailed his constructing connections among characters where previously there had been none. For the most comprehensive account of Hammett’s process of narrative construction, see LeRoy Lad Panek’s Reading Early Hammett: A Critical Study of the Fiction Prior to The Maltese Falcon. Chandler, likewise, crafted his novels by combining shorter narratives: The Big Sleep makes use of both “Killer in the Rain” (1935) and “The Curtain” (1936).
Personville First National Bank. Albury’s crime had been motivated by his jealousy over the relationship between young Donald Willsson and Dinah Brand, Red Harvest’s resident femme fatale.\textsuperscript{90} This mystery solved early on, as if Hammett was intent on demonstrating the relative clarity of the classic whodunit, the Op moves on to murkier territory. Indeed, he is now free to get on with the real business that Elihu Willsson wants him to perform: the “cleansing” Personville of its robust criminal element.

As the Op soon learns, Personville has been suffering in the aftermath of a violent confrontation between capital and labor, and competitive individualism now dominates the city in the form of gangster capitalism. When Personville’s miners organized a strike (prior to the novel’s opening), Elihu Willsson had hired a band of roughs to take care of the problem. The Op relates the rest of this back-story to us with his signature lack of affect: “The wobblies had to do their own bleeding.”\textsuperscript{91} Old Elihu hired gunmen, strike-breakers, national guardsmen and even parts of the regular army, to do his. When the last skull had been cracked, the last rib kicked in, organized labor in Personville was a used fire-cracker” (9). Once the dust settled, the strikers were gone but Elihu’s thugs remained, and they no longer considered themselves under Elihu’s employ. Assuming \textit{de facto} control of Personville, the criminals divided themselves into four rival gangs, each under its own leader: Pete the Finn, Lew Yard, Noonan (also the city’s corrupt Chief of Police), and Max “Whisper” Thaler. And so goes the rest of the

\textsuperscript{90} Though I will not be examining gender relations extensively in this chapter, I think it is likely that the social-network configurations to which I argue we should attend in hard-boiled fiction can also illuminate the genre’s treatment of gender. Critics have noted that part of what makes the femme fatale so dangerous is her spectacular connectivity. Pointing to Red Harvest in particular, Sean McCann contends that Dinah Brand is the “center of Poisonville’s criminal kingdom” (110). See McCann’s Gumshoe America for more information on this topic.

\textsuperscript{91} “Wobblies” refers here to members of the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.), a labor organization that reached the height of its influence in the early twentieth century.
novel: operating as Elihu’s proxy, the Op sets out to rid Personville of its gangster problem, the narrative following in his wake, from one episode of violence to another.

This brief plot summary, albeit important to our understanding of the Continental Op’s trajectory in *Red Harvest*, does little to communicate the truly chaotic nature of Hammett’s novel. As I suggested at the beginning of this section, minor characters in hard-boiled novels are not typically marked by high degrees of individuation. *Red Harvest*, in particular, provides a template for examining how at least a minimal degree of individuation takes hold over the course of a hard-boiled novel. Hammett’s novel constructs individuation as a self-contradictory process, dramatizing simultaneously the irresistible impulse to particularize and the attendant problems of particularizing within a densely interconnected world. In a kind of paradox, the characters in *Red Harvest* are primarily individuated through their association(s) with other characters. To be clear, I do not mean by this that *Red Harvest* follows a comparative or a superlative logic (for instance, “Character X is taller than Character Y” or “Character X is the most generous of Characters X, Y, and Z,” respectively), but rather that *Red Harvest*’s mode of characterization requires each character’s structural positioning in the narrative discourse—as well as his or her social positioning in the diegesis—to inform almost absolutely his or her unique and individual “identity.” In *Red Harvest*, that is, interpersonal situatedness—the place of the fictional person within his or her broader social network—constitutes the very means by which individual characters come to be recognized as individuals by the reading audience.

The character who provides the best example of this dynamic is Jerry Hooper, one of *Red Harvest*’s many unfortunate minor figures. Jerry serves in the novel as Max
“Whisper” Thaler’s “man-Friday” (this term is used in the novel) and apart from the reader’s being told of a single physical detail (Jerry is repeatedly described as “chinless”) and of his ultimate fate (he’s shot to death), the audience knows almost nothing about Jerry aside from his organizational position as Whisper’s right-hand man (119). Within the narrative discourse, Jerry Hooper exists primarily as a name that emerges continually in the context of Whisper’s name: outside of his allegiance to Whisper—an attachment rigorously established in both the narrative’s story (fabula) and its discourse (syuzhet)—the individual we call “Jerry” ceases to exist in any meaningful way. If for Roland Barthes character occurs when semes “traverse the same proper name several times and appear to settle on it” (67), then Jerry’s character, semically speaking, is a remarkably simple one: “Jerry” equals “chinless” plus the illusion of a supplement provided by his proper name. It is only when we look to Jerry’s positioning in the narrative, placing Jerry within the network of social interrelations surrounding him (and particularly his close bond with Whisper), that we begin to recognize his character as a distinct entity, an individual that “figures” in this narrative world.

I have more to say about Jerry Hooper’s function in Red Harvest, but allow me to get there by a slightly circuitous route. Scholars have observed that the American hard-boiled novel locates itself within a “metonymic aesthetic,” following a synecdochal logic of characterization by which one seemingly insignificant detail—often a caricatured body part—stands in for the whole individual (Marling 117). Yet Hammett takes this logic even further than critics have acknowledged: by emphasizing how the semes ostensibly meant to signify character come to supersede it, Hammett self-reflexively

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92 See Barthes’s S/Z for a description of his five textual “codes”: hermeneutic, semic, symbolic, proairetic, and cultural.
explores his own authorial tendency toward metonymic characterization. *Red Harvest*'s most striking examples of this dynamic occur in the description of the minor characters O’Marra and MacSwain. The character repeatedly called “long-legged O’Marra” (192) makes his final appearance in the novel when, after a dramatic shootout, the Continental Op notes in passing: “We bumped over dead Hank O’ Marra’s legs and headed for home” (198). The transformation from “long-legged O’Marra” to “dead Hank O’Marra’s legs” is a telling one, encompassing in two brief phrases the self-negating process by which the very parts meant to individuate O’Marra (his distinctive long legs) come to usurp the place of the individual to whom these parts purportedly belong. Composed of little more than a single descriptor even while alive, in death O’Marra’s depersonalization is complete, as he is wholly replaced by the long legs which had previously helped to distinguish him, if ever so vaguely. Hammett signals this troubling shift with a concurrent change in syntax; whereas “long-legged O’Marra” preserves “O’Marra” as the subject of its sentence, “dead Hank O’Marra’s legs” switches subjects, forcing “O’Marra” himself into the adjectival position and allowing his legs to assume preeminence. Even in death, however, the sheer length of O’Marra’s legs is made implicit in the fact that the Op and his colleagues have “bumped over them.” Thus, if the length of O’Marra’s legs once served as a base indicator of O’Marra’s potential individuality, performing an indexical or what Barthes would call a semic function, they have now become mere objects obstructing the protagonist’s path, a minor line in Barthes’s proairetic code. The length of O’Marra’s legs causes them, put simply, to get in the way.
A similar example can be found in the Op’s search for a bow-legged criminal named MacSwain. The Op narrates:

I went out to hunt for MacSwain. Neither city directory nor telephone book told me anything. I did the pool rooms, cigars stores, speakeasies, looking around first, then asking cautious questions. That got me nothing. I walked the streets, looking for bowed legs. That got me nothing. I decided to go back to my hotel, grab a nap, and resume the hunting at night. In a far corner of the lobby a man stopped hiding behind a newspaper and came out to meet me. He had bowed legs, a hog jaw, and was MacSwain. (94)

Once again, the unusual syntax of the last sentence alerts us to Hammett’s self-aware experimentation with individuating techniques in general and with the proper-name function in particular. The momentarily delayed shift from constituent parts to whole person—“was MacSwain” is only the third of three consecutive terms—syntactically equates “being” MacSwain with “having” bowed legs and a hog jaw. As we find with both O’Marra and MacSwain, then, it is not just that Red Harvest follows a metonymic logic. Even more than this, the novel demonstrates Hammett’s self-reflexive examination of how metonyms are capable of displacing the very individuals these metonyms are ostensibly meant to characterize.

This dynamic is especially important in Red Harvest because the narrative frequently constructs metonymical relationships among characters, most often among characters involved in asymmetrical power relationships. As such, Red Harvest offers a vivid illustration of how complex network configurations in fiction perpetuate metonymical understandings of character itself. For instance, in Hammett’s novel workers function regularly as metonymical representations of their employers, and vice versa. The Op, as his lack of any other name suggests, stands in for the Continental Detective Agency; Elihu Willsson, who owns so much of Personville, subsequently “is”
Personville. In a move characteristic of the hard-boiled genre, Hammett envisions Willsson undergoing individuation even as he becomes fused with a broader collective institution—in this particular case, the town itself. Just as the Op contentedly describes himself as the Continental Detective Agency embodied, Willsson’s individuality, if it can be called that, paradoxically depends on his conflation with the city in which he exerts his power.

The storyworlds typical of hard-boiled fiction contain a surfeit of proxy relationships, and *Red Harvest* is no exception: in Hammett’s novel each character in a position of power has at least one representative through whom he (or, in fewer cases, she) works. In *Red Harvest*, these proxy relationships accumulate and overlap in a manner that complicates the audience’s reconfiguration of the suggested social network. As LeRoy Lad Panek has observed, in Hammett’s novel the “minor” gangster figures exist as “clots of hangers-on attached” to each of the more powerful gangsters (136). (Panek’s description of these character assemblages as “clots” nicely captures the way that the novel underscores the density of networked relations, such that they seem almost material in nature.) Whereas the minor figures in *Red Harvest* are more often characterized by the type of metonymy already familiar to critical accounts of the genre, in which one part of the human body stands in for the whole individual—“chinless” Jerry, “long-legged O’Marra, “bow-legged MacSwain, etc.—the novel’s most prominent figures are at key points characterized by a metonymic logic that appropriates one part of a corporate body for its vehicle. In short, Hammett’s metonymical technique extends here to encapsulate hierarchical character relations; whereas “chinless” stands for Jerry, Jerry himself stands for Whisper Thaler.
One of *Red Harvest*’s best set pieces, the bank heist scene, effectively captures how Hammett uses metonymical relations among characters both to encourage and to frustrate readers’ attempts to assign individual guilt within the narrative. In a chapter ominously titled “Exit Jerry,” the Continental Op learns that Personville’s First National Bank has just been robbed. As the burglars were making their escape, they had become engaged in a confrontation with police. The two sides exchanged fire, and the robbers eventually fled, but not before leaving behind what seems a key piece of evidence: Jerry Hooper’s body has been found, with a bullet in it, at the site of the heist. Hence once again *Red Harvest* reverts to something like the classic whodunit. No one knows for sure which of the city’s four gangs is responsible for the robbery, but because Jerry has been a prominent member of Whisper’s gang since his first appearance in the narrative, the presence of his body at the scene of the crime immediately indicates Whisper’s involvement in the heist. Indeed, the presence of Jerry’s corpse at the scene serves as a physical marker of Whisper’s culpability. It is enough evidence, at least, for the policeman McGraw to reach his own conclusion: “Nobody can identify anybody. But with Jerry on it, it’s a cinch it was Whisper’s caper” (125-6).

This provocative scene demonstrates in miniature how individuation occurs in the narrative world of *Red Harvest*, as Whisper is only identified as the guilty party through Jerry’s presence at the scene. That is, Whisper only emerges from an unidentifiable mass of potential culprits (“Nobody can identify anybody”) through his known association with another character—specifically, his “man-Friday” Jerry. Hence McGraw’s assessment of Whisper’s culpability relies on his knowledge of the particular
social connection between Jerry and Whisper, a logic that in this instance also traces labor (Jerry) back to its originating capital (Whisper).

Yet if as readers we find ourselves agreeing with McGraw’s conclusion about Whisper’s role in the bank heist—and, from the way he configures this “whodunit” episode, it seems likely that Hammett intends us to—then it turns out that the surprise is on us. For in fact, as the Op only later discovers, Whisper is innocent of this particular crime. Rather, in a neat trick, a rival gang leader has killed Jerry and left his body at the bank in order to frame Whisper. Only after realizing this does the Op explain to Whisper what really happened: “[Jerry] was dropped and left in front of the bank because he was your right bower, and his being killed there would pin the trick to you” (150). The Op’s characterization of Jerry as Whisper’s “right bower”—the second-most powerful card in the game of euchre—emphasizes Jerry’s functional status. Framed in this way, Jerry is little more than a card to be “played” by Whisper—indeed, for most of the novel he is the most prominent card in Whisper’s hand. The paradox re-asserts itself: Jerry’s individuation (there is only one “right bower” per game) occurs simultaneously with his reduction to a nonhuman, purely functional role. The card metaphor is an apt one precisely because Jerry doubles as Whisper’s identification (or “calling”) card, in that the presence of his corpse at the scene of the crime seems to signify Whisper’s presence.

In this manner, the scene offers a powerful critique of the reliability of proxy logic. The Jerry-Whisper link is revealed to be a red herring: Whisper had not been present at the crime scene; it was not his gang that perpetrated the heist.⑨3 Thus, even

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⑨3 Pyrhönen defines red herrings as “false fragments… which seem to fit one or more of the existing narrative patterns, but which temporarily invalidate correct hypotheses” (“Criticism” 50). (From another
as *Red Harvest* demonstrates the way that Thaler gets individuated, emerging from the unidentifiable mass through his association with Jerry, the novel also reveals how this particular mode of individuation, because it takes its cue from the figure’s structural position rather than semic “essence,” is prone to error and manipulation. If initially “Exit Jerry” demonstrates how individuation occurs in the novel via a triangulating process—that is, through a precise accounting for one’s various associations (Jerry is “Whisper’s man” and Whisper is “Jerry’s boss”)—the chapter then complicates this very procedure, showing that individuation through association offers questionable results. Accordingly, if *Red Harvest* has challenged the reader all along to keep track as best he or she can of the intricate network of social relations in the novel, in Jerry’s death that very activity—the mapping of character associations—gets revealed not as a means of enlightenment, nor as a way to distinguish individuals from one another, localize guilt, or discover “whodunit,” but rather as an opportunity for deliberate obfuscation: the assigning of responsibility to Whisper is simply incorrect. The scene dramatizes in quick succession (1) the impulse, endemic to mystery fiction generally, to assign individual responsibility; (2) an attempt to designate responsibility based on each figure’s assumed position within the social web; and (3) the failure of the social web to offer stable grounds for accurate determination of responsibility.

Hence, even while the reader of hard-boiled detective fiction is led to engage with the complicated process of piecing together a social network, he or she must simultaneously treat all interconnections as contingent, potentially undone by the angle, we might say that red herrings actually temporarily validate incorrect hypotheses.) The quintessential red herring is the planted murder weapon, the clue that points away from the actual culprit toward an innocent suspect. The planting of Jerry’s body at the scene of the heist constitutes a red herring because it suggests, inaccurately, that Whisper is involved in the heist.
narrative progression at any moment. On one hand, *Red Harvest* makes the audience’s engagement with its convoluted social network a central part of the reading experience; on the other, the novel’s bank heist scene seems intent on undermining the audience’s confidence in using networks as a tool for narrative interpretation. Indeed, readers’ potential misreading of the presence of Jerry’s body has a chastening effect: by seeing characters as necessarily attached to other characters, this scene implies, readers risk assuming too much about the mechanics of *Red Harvest*’s social world. In this sense, for as much as hard-boiled novels ask readers to reconstruct convoluted networks, they also require their audience to tread carefully, acknowledging the highly contingent nature of interpersonal association: play the “game” of social network analysis, yes—but tread carefully.

If Hammett’s readers are precluded from using *Red Harvest*’s character constellations to determine individual culpability with any sort of confidence, how exactly are readers asked to relate to the elaborate and constantly shifting networks configured in the novel? To what degree does *Red Harvest* encourage readers to keep track of the interrelations among its many characters? We can begin to answer these questions by attending to the gangsters’ configuration in the narrative, since these criminals—indeed, the sheer number of criminal figures in *Red Harvest*—have proved especially problematic for critics. Since the novel’s publication, negative reviews of the book often emphasize *Red Harvest*’s “excessive number of characters,” which make the narrative “almost too chaotic to comprehend” (McGurl 169). The notion of *Red Harvest*’s being too “crowded” was echoed even by Hammett’s own editor Harry Block, who remarked that the novel contained an “immense number of characters, which is so
great as to create confusion” (qtd. in McGurl 169-70). For LeRoy Lad Panek, Hammett betrays his “inexperience” in his debut novel when he “introduces too many characters and then doesn’t know what to do with them.” Panek elaborates: “During most of the novel Hammett pays so much attention to police corruption and Chief Noonan that it seems as if he doesn’t know what to do with the other three bad men [Pete the Finn, Lew Yard, and Whisper Thaler] identified as the centers of corruption in the town” (147).

Panek’s argument usefully underscores the incongruity between the characters who are principal to the criminal plots within the novel and those who are principal to Hammett’s plot, the novel Red Harvest itself. Certainly, it does seem strange that Pete the Finn, “probably the strongest” of Personville’s prominent gangsters, is also the gangster who comes in for the least amount of narrative attention. But Panek’s dismissal of this phenomenon as a sign of Hammett’s inexperience seems misguided, as such a critique ultimately relies on his (Panek’s) assumption that Pete the Finn’s power within the diegesis must necessarily correspond to his degree of prominence within the discourse. Although it may be too much to say that in the case of Pete the Finn this incongruity represents a deliberate strategy on Hammett’s part—a purposeful upending of readerly expectations—I do believe we can grant Hammett some credit that Panek withholds. At the very least, Hammett seems fully aware of the incongruity he’s established: Pete the Finn’s marginalization on the level of discourse speaks to the Op’s dominant strategy in his quest to “cleanse” Personville. Rather than taking on “probably the strongest” of the gangsters directly, the Op avoids any such confrontation. Hence, far from undermining Pete’s power within the storyworld, Pete’s
peripheral place in the narrative discourse reflects the Op’s very consciousness of that power. The Op—and thus *Red Harvest* itself—only approach Pete indirectly, through the mediation of other, less potent figures who constitute Pete’s social web.

Hence I want to argue that far from constituting a formal “error” on Hammett’s part, the asymmetry of the four gangsters’ degrees of narrative prominence formally replicates the newly asymmetrical power relations between the four men in the storyworld—an asymmetry that the Op has encouraged and on which his endgame relies. As we have already begun to see, in *Red Harvest* the four principal gang leaders battle each other for dominance of Personville within the diegesis at the same time Hammett selectively balances their relative prominence in the novel itself. Hammett clearly intends these two spaces of “conflict” to be mutually informative: the fact that Pete the Finn and Lew Yard cannot be said to monopolize narrative discourse reflects their failure to consolidate power in the storyworld. In this sense, critical anxiety that *Red Harvest*’s sustained attention to some characters (Chief Noonan) comes at the expense of its other major antagonists (Pete the Finn and Lew Yard) fails to register the functionality of the asymmetrical character fields that are endemic to hard-boiled detective fiction. For much of the first part of *Red Harvest*, each of the principal gang leaders typically gets mentioned in reference to the others, and moreover the four gangs seem to be operating among themselves with a relative degree of stability. However, as the novel progresses and the Op’s strategy for cleansing Poisonville becomes ever more clear, the gangsters grow more competitive with each other in the story and—equally significant—become increasingly unbalanced in the discourse, as well.
In fact, as the gangsters continually form and break alliances with each other, the social network suggested by the novel grows more and more intricate, until at times it becomes difficult both for figures within the diegesis and for Hammett’s readers to comprehend just who is working with whom, who against whom. And this is just how the Op likes it, stating at one point:

I’ve got to have a wedge that can be put between Pete and Yard, Yard and Noonan, Pete and Noonan, Pete and Thaler, or Yard and Thaler. If we can smash things up enough—break the combination—they’ll have their knives in each other’s backs, doing our work for us. The break between Thaler and Noonan is a starter. But it’ll sag on us if we don’t help it along. (118)

The Op demands that the four criminals be divided from one another, but his own speech, which comes off as a series of names thrown together in seemingly arbitrary combinations, betrays the novel’s discursive resistance to such singling out. The implicit tension at this point in the narrative is between the Op’s desire to “break the combination” between the gangster-characters, on the one hand, and the fact that the nature of the narrative discourse seems to preclude the possibility of any such individuation, on the other.94 This dynamic becomes even more apparent in a later passage, when the Op explains to Dinah Brand:

They were evenly divided—Pete and Whisper against Noonan and Reno. But not one of them could count on his partner backing him up if he made a play, and by the time the meeting was over the pairs had been split. Noonan was out of the count, and Reno and Whisper, against each other, had Pete against them…. The chief was shot down. If Pete the Finn meant what he said—and he has the look of a man who would—he’ll be out after Whisper. Reno was as much to blame for Jerry’s death as Noonan, so Whisper ought to be gunning for him.

94 Many critics have noted that the Op’s mission to “break the combination” among the gangsters can be said to resemble the capitalist’s project to disrupt resistant collectivity. In other words, the Op’s activity throughout much of the novel functions as a replication of the kind of strike-busting that precipitated the town’s downfall in the first place. In this reading, the novel proper retells the strike story gestured to early in the novel in the form of a gangster story, with the gangsters taking the place of the strikers. That it is a combination of capitalists that needs “busted” points to the complexity of the novel’s labor politics.
Knowing it, Reno will be out to get Whisper first, and that will set Pete on his trail. Besides that, Reno will likely have his hands full standing off those of the late Lew Yard’s underlings who don’t fancy Reno as a boss. All in all it’s one swell dish. (156)

One swell dish, indeed: the passage’s onslaught of names approaches incompressibility. The Op had promised to manipulate Personville’s criminals “like you’d play trout,” and at this point in the narrative we begin to get a full sense of what that manipulation entails (157).

As the lengthy passage quoted above attests, at pivotal moments in the narrative Hammett’s aim seems less to lie in challenging his readers to map the convoluted interconnections among various characters than in forcing readers into a position where they must, put simply, give up. If, as I’ve argued, individuation in *Red Harvest* relies to large extent on each character’s structural position in the novel and on his or her social (often hierarchical) associations with other characters, then the Op’s ability to keep such associations fluid, to keep allies and enemies forever changing places, promotes deep confusion: in *Red Harvest*, to not know who goes with whom is to not know who *is* who. As Hammett’s characters’ relations to one another continually shift, their respective processes of individuation stall, and the result is that the novel’s principal figures subsequently come to seem mere names constantly interchanging with other names. The Op comes to regard the individuals populating Personville as interchangeable pawns; and the narrative discourse, propelled by the Op’s own voice, perhaps tempts the reader to do likewise. Such sociographical flux is a hallmark of *Red Harvest*, which tends dramatically—frustratingly—to illustrate the way that individual identity depends for its coherence on the stability of the overarching network.
The narrative chaos induced by these shifting relations is not without purpose, however. Though critics have long criticized the asymmetry, excessiveness, and general incoherence of *Red Harvest*'s social network, we should note that Hammett takes care to show how within the diegesis these phenomena are highly effective, constituting the very means by which the Op goes about his bloody business. Ultimately the Op’s complicated plan succeeds, and in fact it succeeds for the very reason that it’s so complicated. By playing the gangsters off one another such that no one knows any more who is allied with whom, the Op generates a situation where “everybody’s killing everybody” (143). After the number of murders reaches “a dozen and a half” (154), Dinah Brand suggests to the Op that he skip town until the violence has died down. The Op’s response is telling:

> Can’t, sister. Somebody’s got to stay here to count the dead. Besides, the whole program is based on the present combination of people and events. Our going out of town would change that, and the chances are the whole thing would have to be gone over again. (158)

The Op refuses to leave Personville because he understands that the cutting of single social tie threatens to alter the entire network, and at present he likes the network the way it is: bloody. By the end of the novel, all four of the original gang leaders are deceased, although it remains somewhat confusing as to who killed whom.

In *Red Harvest*, we are met with a novel that seems to assume—in fact, to flaunt—the reader’s failure adequately to map its intricate, ever-shifting network of criminals. Yet we should not ignore that this mode of failure is a productive one within the storyworld. For the Op, inducing social chaos is a deliberate strategy. His mission is not to see through the interconnected world of Personville in order to ascertain individual guilt (the goal of the classic “whodunit”). Rather, the Op uses the densely
interconnected nature of Personville against the whole of Personville itself. *Red Harvest* finally asks its readers to accept—even more, to adopt—the Op’s strategy for what it is: not the mapping of character relations so much as a strategic muddling of them. Instead of treating the social network as a puzzle to be “solved,” the Continental Op—indeed, *Red Harvest* itself—multiplies, mischaracterizes, and perpetually reconfigures the novel’s manifold interconnections, in this way embracing a notion of networks as *productively* unmanageable. To the extent that the Op himself is capable of “mastering” the suggested social network, he does so chiefly by manipulating the network’s complexity for his own purposes; he leverages his knowledge of the gangster’s knotted interrelations so as to deliberately induce more chaos.

**Against “Whodunit”: The Small World of *The Big Sleep***

In the same manner that critics have often described *Red Harvest* as over-populated and overly elaborate, Raymond Chandler’s debut novel *The Big Sleep* (1939) has also long maintained its reputation as an “immensely tangled text” (McCann 166). Depending on one’s perspective, *The Big Sleep* either creates “rich digressive effects” (Porter 63) or, less charitably, “drift[es] up one picaresque side-alley after another, like a dog looking for a lamp-post” (Partridge 36).95 Whatever one’s evaluation of its aesthetic merits, the novel’s famously convoluted plot cannot be separated from Chandler’s positioning of his characters within an intricately interconnected, yet also quite sprawling, network of relations.

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95 Chandler was well aware of his own digressions, describing them as inevitable if not altogether intentional. “As a constructionist, I have dreadful fault,” he confessed in a May 1949 letter to his friend James Sandoe. “I let characters run away with the scenes and then refuse to discard the scenes that don’t fit” (qtd. in Wolfe 57).
In the remainder of this chapter, I argue that a vital but so far neglected feature of Chandler’s hard-boiled aesthetic is his pointed concern with the forms and functions of modern networks. In a manner that anticipates the phenomenon of the “small world”—a phenomenon that would not be theorized by network researchers for another three decades—Chandler crafts the plot of *The Big Sleep* as if strategically to consider the wide-ranging consequences of social interconnectedness. In fact, the social networks readers encounter in *The Big Sleep* are fundamentally different than those of the conventional British “whodunit,” or “puzzle mystery.” This difference speaks to Chandler’s emphatic resistance to what he lambasted in his essay “The Simple Art of Murder” (1944) as the overly “careful grouping” of suspects in the whodunit novel (393). *The Big Sleep* rejects any sense of a “careful grouping” in favor of an ever-evolving, asymmetrical, and essentially chaotic web of relations among characters. Ultimately I want to argue that *The Big Sleep*'s configuration of a small-world social network is indicative of Chandler’s broader ideological commitments. In this connection, I will conclude the chapter by considering how the complex network central to *The Big Sleep*'s social imaginary complicates critical assumptions about the hard-boiled genre’s insistence on fragmentation as a formal and thematic touchstone.

*The Big Sleep*'s plot resists easy synopsis, but it is worth taking a moment to consider its chief points. When private detective Philip Marlowe agrees to help the wealthy invalid General Sternwood protect Sternwood’s youngest daughter Carmen from a mysterious blackmailer, our world-weary protagonist quickly finds himself drawn into an intricate web of gangsters, pornographers, hit men, small-time grifters, and corrupt cops. Haunting the margins of this web—or is it the center?—is the long-
since disappeared Rusty Regan, husband to Carmen Sternwood’s sister Vivian. Murder follows murder: the first to get gunned down is Arthur Geiger, Carmen’s presumed blackmailer; then the police find the body of Owen Taylor, the Sternwood chauffeur, who is also (it turns out) Geiger’s killer. Meanwhile, the gangster Eddie Mars, knowing that Carmen Sternwood killed Regan, manipulates the situation to make it look like Regan has run away with his own wife, Mona—the better to keep the police off the trail while he’s blackmailing the Sternwood daughters under the threat of exposing their involvement in the crime. (After discovering Carmen’s crime, Vivian had helped Carmen conceal the murder; Eddie Mars knows this, too, since he also aided in the cover-up—for a hefty fee.) We have not yet even mentioned Joe Brody, Harry Jones, Carol Lundgren, Agnes Lozelle, or Lash Canino: other schemers who each make their mark on Chandler’s plot. If this all sounds a bit difficult to follow, well, it is.

Not surprisingly, Chandler’s configuration of an intricately networked social world occasions a particularly demanding reading experience. Over the course of the novel, Marlowe’s mission—as well as the audience’s—consists largely of extricating the mysterious associations between and among these minor characters. In effect, the quest narrative at work in The Big Sleep is Marlowe’s attempt to discover “who the Sternwood women know and why” (Cassuto 82). The episodic nature of Marlowe’s quest in The Big Sleep—all forward motion from one set piece to the next—is typical of the American hard-boiled genre, which, as Dennis Porter has argued, “more obviously than other narrative genres… promotes the myth of the necessary chain” (40). The plot of The Big Sleep, in particular, “follows the trail of clues in an unbroken chain from person to person and from place to place…” (Porter 40)
As with *Red Harvest*, *The Big Sleep* takes as its originating link in this “necessary chain” a proxy relationship between the detective (Marlowe) and an older, wealthier man (General Sternwood). Yet if the phrase “unbroken chain from person to person” suggests that each of the links between characters in this novel will be so easily discerned by the reader as that between Marlowe and Sternwood, such is decidedly not the case. Rather, the criminal network encountered in *The Big Sleep* is, like that in Hammett’s novel, so convoluted that at key moments it approaches incoherence. In a frequently cited anecdote, Chandler himself admitted that he was not quite sure how all the pieces fit together. When director Howard Hawks, preparing a script for his filmic adaptation of the novel, sent Chandler a telegram asking the author who killed Owen Taylor, Chandler famously cabled back: “No idea” (85).  

American writers’ turn toward the hard-boiled aesthetic can be read as an attempt to establish “an anti-British countertradition” within the broader crime or mystery genre (Porter 128). Raymond Chandler explicitly repudiated the “Golden Age” British whodunit, the genteel “puzzle” narratives of the type authored by Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers. In his essay “The Simple Art of Murder” (1944), for example, Chandler accused the British whodunit of sacrificing mimesis in favor of contrived plot twists. The British writers, he argued, fail to capture “the authentic flavor of life as it is lived” (394). Though it is unnecessary to point out that Chandler’s notion of what constitutes “the authentic” is ultimately as artificial as Christie’s or Sayers’s, it is significant that Chandler connects his understanding of “reality” to particular forms of multi-character configuration. In a letter to his agent Bernice

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96 This is a story that often gets retold by critics, illuminating as it does something of Chandler’s aesthetic priorities as well as his colorful personality. For just one example, see Leonard Cassuto’s *Hard-Boiled Sentimentality: The Secret History of American Crime Stories*. 

221
Baumgarten, Chandler called the realism of writers like Dickens “superficial,” arguing that “although such things happen, they do not happen so fast and in such a tight frame of logic to so closely knit a group of people” (Papers 103). In a similar vein, Chandler criticized the British whodunit’s “careful grouping of suspects” (“Simple” 393).

Such proclamations suggest that The Big Sleep's complex social network should not be regarded as an inadvertent phenomenon—a by-product of ulterior narrative concerns—but rather part and parcel of Chandler’s broader mimetic strategy. For Chandler, that is, getting “real life” right meant getting the structure of social networks right. Distinguishing his own aesthetic from the British tradition, Chandler deliberately sought to eschew any sense that his suspects had been “careful[ly] group[ed].” Complex social networks function in this sense as a vehicle by which Chandler could position his fiction as technically innovative and generically distinct: although the characters in Chandler’s novel are interconnected in complex and sometimes surprising ways, they are by no means “closely knit.”

Rather, engaging with the logic of what would subsequently be termed small-world theory, Chandler emphasizes that the novel’s characters are all connected to one another, but sometimes only at several degrees remove. Whereas the traditional British whodunit most often takes place in an exactingly contained universe—the archetypal example being the aristocratic manor or country house in which only a dozen or so guests are lodged—Chandler’s fictional worlds defy all attempts at containment, tending rather toward social sprawl. In The Big Sleep, Carmen Sternwood’s initial act of killing Rusty Regan spirals outward, with far-reaching consequences for the broader social environment. To take just one example of these consequences, when Lash Canino
kills Harry Jones (who had been working for Joe Brody) near the end of the novel, 
Jones’s death is framed as the logical outcome of the succession of events that began 
with Carmen’s murder of Regan, even though Carmen and Jones have presumably never 
met. Hence, whereas the British whodunit typically prefers a “quarantined site”—the 
better to demonstrate the “isolation of the crime”—social networks in American hard-
boiled fiction tend to expand over the course of a given narrative, encompassing more 
and more fictional individuals, such that writers like Hammett and Chandler can show 
how crime is never really isolated (Cawelti 145).

The formal phenomenon of *The Big Sleep*'s elaborate social network thus speaks 
to a significant ideological underpinning of Chandler’s work: the notion that modern 
society’s interconnectedness undermines attempts to localize criminal culpability. 
Carmen’s original crime against Regan reverberates, and Chandler uses the narrative to 
track these reverberations across the breadth of the social network, establishing that 
crime begets more crime. The novel’s manifold interpersonal connections, most of them 
grounded in illicit exchanges, quickly multiply: after her sister Carmen murders Rusty, 
Vivian turns to Eddie Mars to help conceal the crime; following the cover-up, Mars uses 
the pornographer Arthur Geiger—who has himself begun blackmailing the 
Sternwoods—as a “cat’s-paw” to see if General Sternwood knows about the murder and 
is willing to pay to keep it covered up. Owen Taylor, the chauffeur intent on protecting 
Carmen, kills Geiger. Meanwhile, a small-timer named Joe Brody moves in on Geiger’s 
business, and is subsequently killed by Geiger’s male lover Carol, who wrongly believes 
that Brody killed Geiger. How is Carol connected to Carmen? He isn’t—at least, not 
directly. But because they are shown to be part of the same network, we can (and
Chandler’s novel encourages us to retrace the paths of connection between them, thus viewing Geiger, Eddie Mars, and Vivian as intermediary links in a single social chain.

Chandler’s predilection to diffuse criminal responsibility (rather than localize it) manifests itself not only as a formal phenomenon in his hard-boiled detective narratives, but also in a particular kind of reading experience evoked by those narratives. That writers of hard-boiled detective fiction tend to distribute criminal guilt is by no means a new idea. Critics have shown, for instance, that evil in The Big Sleep, unlike evil in the classic puzzle mystery, “comes less from the quirks of deviant individuals… than from society itself” (Rabinowitz, “Rats” 129), and that, moreover, “for Chandler, the perpetrator of evil is not the cause of evil” (“Rats” 131). Building on such accounts, David Richter reminds us that The Big Sleep contains at least five murders, each perpetrated by a different killer.97 When Philip Marlowe expresses his disinclination to believe any story that displays “the austere simplicity of fiction rather than the tangled woof of fact,” Chandler would seem openly to acknowledge his suspicion of narratives that resolve too tidily, or that simplify crime by ignoring its social embeddedness (203).

The Big Sleep’s sprawling web of relations thus reinforces the impossibility of quarantining criminal responsibility. Like Hammett’s in Red Harvest, Chandler’s strategy in The Big Sleeps lies in making the novel’s network of characters so dense that the readerly impulse to identify individual guilt becomes marginalized, if not altogether irrelevant. In this sense, the novel actually discourages its audience from participating in the hunt for individual criminality. As in the case of Owen Taylor’s unsolved death, the

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97 In his article “Background Action and Ideology: Grey Men and Dope Doctors in Raymond Chandler,” Richter usefully walks us through these murders, which are, in the order they occur in the story (fabula); (1) Rusty Regan by Carmen Sternwood, (2) Arthur Geiger by Owen Taylor, (3) Joe Brody by Carol Lundgren, (4) Harry Jones by Lash Canino, and (5) Lash Canino by Philip Marlowe.
thrust of *The Big Sleep* is finally to regard crime as an obligatory consequence of a particular set of networked relations, the result of pervasive social evil.

The effects of such sprawl on the experience of reading hard-boiled detective fiction, as opposed to the reading experienced evoked by mystery narratives of the classical whodunit variety, should not be underestimated. If in the conventional whodunit novel readers tend to know from the beginning who—and how many—the principal players in the narrative will be, and thus become familiar with the identities of potential suspects at an early stage, *The Big Sleep* instead retains the possibility that at any given moment in the narrative prime culprits have not yet even been introduced. To be sure, particular British mysteries experimented with the use of asymmetrical character relations, and with destabilizing major and minor characters, but it was the American hard-boiled detective story that made these narrative phenomena key features of the genre. By allowing figures that turn out to be “major” characters to exit the narrative surprisingly early and to enter it surprisingly late, hard-boiled narratives like *The Big Sleep* forces their readers to remain uncertain regarding how many characters will finally comprise the overarching network. What results is a narrative puzzle of a distinct kind: attempting to assign guilt as they progress through the narrative, readers

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98 In some editions of Christie’s novels, publishers emphasize this aspect of the whodunit reading experience by including a paratextual “Cast of Characters.” This list of characters allows readers to encounter the complete range potential suspects (as a rule, the criminal’s name is always included on this list) even before the narrative proper begins. Conversely, it is a remarkable aspect of American hard-boiled detective fiction that characters often appear for the first time relatively “late” in the narrative. One significant example in *The Big Sleep* is Lash Canino, Eddie Mars’s most dangerous henchman, who squares off with Marlowe in what is arguably the climactic moment of the narrative. (The scene ends with Marlowe fatally shooting Canino.) Despite functioning as the most lethal of Marlowe’s adversaries, Canino is not mentioned until approximately four-fifths of the way through the novel. His delayed entrance into discourse thus breaks an implicit rule of the classic British mystery story: namely, that the whole cast of characters, and especially criminals or potential criminals, should be identified for the reader early in the narrative.
of hard-boiled fiction are forced to allow that, regarding suspects’ culpability, “none of the above” remains an ever-present option.

The distinctly configured character networks of these two mystery subgenres—the British whodunit, on the one hand, and the American hard-boiled detective, on the other—further come into focus in the context of Agatha Christie’s well-known whodunit *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934). With its surprising revelation that all twelve of the chief suspects have conspired together to commit the “perfect murder,” Christie’s novel seems at first to undercut my argument that an emphasis on networked relations is a distinguishing characteristic of American hard-boiled detective fiction. Upon closer inspection, however, we will find that *The Murder on the Orient Express* actually helps make my case that the character networks in hard-boiled fiction are fundamentally different than those of their British counterparts. In brief, the conceit of Christie’s novel goes as follows: A few years after the kidnapping and murder of Daisy Armstrong, the three year-old child of a wealthy American couple, a man named Ratchett is murdered while traveling on the Orient Express. It turns out that Ratchett’s real name is Cassetti, and that he had been traveling under an assumed name because he was the person responsible for Daisy Armstrong’s death. By the end of the novel, the detective Hercule Poirot has determined that Ratchett/Cassetti was murdered by twelve riders on the train, these dozen individuals working collectively to get their revenge on Daisy’s killer. Although these twelve characters had not seemed to have anything significant in common, representing amongst them a wide range of national, vocational, and socioeconomic identities, ultimately each of these “supposed
strangers… turns out to have been connected in some way with… the Daisy Armstrong case” (Smith 85).

Like so many hard-boiled stories, then, *The Murder on the Orient Express* is essentially a conspiracy narrative; as in *The Big Sleep*, hidden connections among characters are a prominent concern in Christie’s novel. Tellingly, though, the social network in Christie’s novel takes a very different shape than that in *The Big Sleep*. When Tzvetan Todorov points to the “purely geometric architecture” of certain detective stories, it is no surprise that he takes as his primary example *The Murder on the Orient Express*, since Christie’s novel “offers twelve suspects… consists of twelve chapters, and again twelve interrogations…” (45) In *The Murder on the Orient Express*, the corpse functions as the central node in the social network, exerting a kind of centripetal pull on the characters contained therein. As one critic has said of detective narratives of this sort, “the ties of the characters to the corpse reveal themselves… to be the same ones that make the characters recognizable among themselves as a group… [in] a pattern of sociological bonding” (Heissenbuttel 88). What binds the characters in the typical Christie or Sayers novel is precisely their shared relation to the victim whose death occupies the center of the mystery. (This is doubly true of *Murder on the Orient Express*, in which each of the principal suspects is connected to Daisy Armstrong, thus also to the man who took her life and subsequently becomes a victim himself: Cassetti.) In fact, it is their common connection to this central node that allows these otherwise diverse men and women to overcome their differences in the service of their conspiracy.

By contrast, in American hard-boiled fiction the victim almost as a rule does not lie at the center of the network—such that it is difficult in *The Big Sleep* to ascertain any
“center” at all. Rusty Regan is perhaps the most important victim in *The Big Sleep*’s progression, yet Chandler underscores that several of the plot’s major players are only connected to him at several degrees remove. In fact, Marlowe’s insistence that Regan’s vanishing act plays a marginal role in his investigation serves for much of the novel as a kind of running joke: to Marlowe’s increasing irritation, Vivian, Eddie Mars, Harry Jones, Captain Gregory (of the Missing Persons Unit), and the policeman Bernie Ohls each inquire as to whether Marlowe is on the hunt for Regan. Yet it is not clear until the novel’s resolution what has actually happened to Regan: whether he is alive or dead, criminal or victim, center or periphery. Thus, rather than positioning his characters within the orbit of a central victim, Chandler’s novel foregrounds how networks sprawl centrifugally; in this sense, *The Big Sleep* represents less a “pure geometry” than an experiment in the socio-spatial limits of detective narratives *per se*.

The plot of *The Big Sleep* progresses outwardly toward the furthest reaches of the character network, shifting in episodic fashion from character to character. One result of this centrifugal movement is that readers of (not to mention detectives in) Chandler’s novel eventually come into contact with figures they might never have expected to meet—indeed, with characters whose very existence they could not have foreseen. An exemplary figure in this regard is Harry Jones, who Marlowe first meets approximately two-thirds of the way through *The Big Sleep*, after Marlowe decides to confront the man (Jones) he has lately seen tailing him. Marlowe’s deadpan reaction to Jones’s spectacularly late arrival onto the scene almost makes a joke out of the narrative’s tendency toward sprawl:

“Maybe you know me,” [Jones] said. “I’m Harry Jones.”
I said I didn’t know him. (194)
Despite not knowing Jones, however, our detective Marlowe—like an ersatz network analyst—quickly identifies Jones’s place in the social constellation: “Maybe you knew a fellow called Joe Brody,” Marlowe tells Jones, to which Jones can only reply incredulously: “How’d you tie me to Joe?” Jones proceeds to tell Marlowe about how Joe Brody originally became involved in the Sternwood business, a tale that challenges Chandler’s detective (and audience) to play a game of “who-knows-who”:

Joe tails Canino out to the Sternwood place and Canino parks outside the estate and a car come up beside him with a girl in it…. It’s Regan’s wife. Okey, she knows Canino and Canino knows Mars. So Joe figures Canino knows something about Regan and is trying to squeeze a little on the side for himself. Canino blows and Joe loses him. End of Act One. (200)

This passage recalls *Red Harvest*’s “swell dish”; it seems to delight in its own intricacy, challenging readers to “keep up.” When Marlowe later encounters Canino (after Canino has killed Jones), Chandler once more foregrounds networked relations by situating Jones as an intermediary link that has allowed Marlowe successfully to reconstruct the network. Marlowe narrates: “The brown man [Canino] and I were two strangers chance-met, looking at each other across a little dead man named Harry Jones. Only the brown man didn’t know that yet” (225). Marlowe’s ability to “know” the network thus affords him power within the storyworld; Chandler may not depict Marlowe as a genius of human psychology à la Hercule Poirot, but as an investigator capable of tracing links and nodes—that is, as a social network analyst—Marlowe does just fine.

The trajectory of *The Big Sleep* is designed to reveal an ever-expanding web of (more or less covert) criminal interconnections. This is a narrative phenomenon that Steven Johnson has elsewhere referred to as the hunt for “phantom relationships” among characters—“phantom relationships” being, in Johnson’s definition,
interpersonal links deliberately withheld from the audience, as part of the conspiracy-narrative “game” (114). In this connection, the reader’s effort to map *The Big Sleep*’s social network is complicated by the fact that Marlowe typically interacts with characters one-on-one, not in groups. For example, when the swindler Joe Brody initially resists admitting that he knows “anybody named Geiger,” the burden is on Marlowe to prove otherwise (92). (In this instance, Marlowe’s ability to connect Geiger with Brody is aided by his discovery of Agnes Lozelle, the “ash blonde” clerk he’d met at Geiger’s store, at Brody’s side; hence Agnes becomes the intermediary link that allows Marlowe to connect this particular chain. 

Throughout the novel, characters attempt to conceal from Marlowe their various connections with one another. When Marlowe initially meets the gangster Eddie Mars, Mars lies about two of his associates in the space of one page. First he pretends not to know Carmen Sternwood—“Who’s the girl?”—even though by this time his blackmail scheme involving Carmen is already well under way. Then Mars mischaracterizes his relationship with Geiger, claiming that the pornographer had merely been his “tenant.” “You know such lovely people,” Marlowe acidly replies (85). In addition to such instances of intentional deception, Chandler’s characters also add to the confusion by routinely misidentifying the relations among the narrative’s other players. For example, in one of the plot’s costlier mistakes, Carol Lundgren, Geiger’s male lover, kills Joe Brody out of the erroneous belief that Brody had murdered Geiger.

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99 In *Everything Bad is Good For You: How Today’s Popular Culture is Actually Making Us Smarter*, Johnson discusses the device of “phantom relationships” in the context of conspiracy narratives, particularly the twenty-first century television series *24*. See the coda for further discussion of Johnson’s argument and its connection to my study.
Chandler thus demonstrates how this expansive (and perpetually expanding) network of interrelations poses problems for the detective-protagonist within the world of the story as well as for the reader outside of it, each presumably striving to identify the narrative’s criminal perpetrators. When the pornographer Geiger is murdered early in the novel, Marlowe confiscates his “blue indexed notebook,” hoping that it will contain a list of names, since (Marlowe conjectures) one of Geiger’s business associates is likely to have been his killer. In fact, the notebook does contain a list of names; the problem is that it contains too many of them. Marlowe narrates this scene of discovery:

“All I could be sure of was that it was a list of names and addresses, probably of the customers. There were over four hundred of them. That made it a nice racket, not to mention any blackmail angles, and there were plenty of those. Any name on the list might be a prospect as the killer” (50-1).

Here Chandler ingeniously uses Geiger’s notebook, a document overflowing with potential culprits, to draw a contrast once again between his own detective fiction and the classic British tradition. As an instance of narrative *mise-en-abyme*, the notebook effectively represents within the fictional world of the story a challenge posed by *The Big Sleep* itself. Rather than provide readers with a manageable list of potential criminals `a la Christie, Chandler confronts his audience with the problem of social multiplicity by radically proliferating the number of persons who arouse the detective’s suspicion. In fact, the list of potential suspects in Geiger’s notebook is so lengthy that it must by sheer logistical necessity remain anonymous; the novel does not even pause to provide any of these names to the reader. Thus, in contrast to the delimited character relations engendered by many classic whodunits, Geiger simply has too many
connections; his network is so vast as to overwhelm any possibility of particularization. In the hard-boiled world of *The Big Sleep*, Geiger’s notebook suggests, there are simply too many people capable of murder.

**Majorness, Minorness, and the Strange Case of Owen Taylor**

I’ve argued so far that readers of American hard-boiled detective fiction are often prevented, as in *The Big Sleep*, from knowing with certainty how many characters will finally be ushered into the narrative as result of their association with existing narrative participants, and moreover that this phenomenon makes for a very different reading experience from that evoked by the conventional British whodunit. I now turn to a close analysis of Owen Taylor’s role in *The Big Sleep* in order to explore how Chandler’s convoluted social networks result, in part, from the strategic destabilizing of his characters’ relative degrees of “majorness” and “minorness.” Such instability introduces yet a further complication to the reader’s efforts to reconstruct the hard-boiled novel’s social network, or to assign criminal responsibility, with anything close to precision.

Whereas in the British puzzle mystery the suspects’ degrees of minorness tend to be relatively static and symmetrical with one another—i.e., each suspect is as prominent in the discourse as any other—*The Big Sleep* offers no such narrative stability.  

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100 In most Christie novels, for example, the standard practice is for each suspect to be granted approximately an equal amount of “face time” with the detective (and with the reader): “twelve characters, twelve chapters.” I would argue, in fact, that it is precisely this conventional symmetry of whodunit mysteries that readers of such narratives strive to overcome in determining which one of the suspects is guilty—i.e., which one of the characters is fundamentally different from the others, despite their relatively equal apportionments of space in the narrative discourse. To put this same point another way, the basically symmetrical multi-character configuration of the whodunit exists in tension with what is revealed at the narrative’s end to be an asymmetrical delineation of criminal culpability: although each potential suspect receives roughly the same amount of the detective’s (and the narrative’s) attention, only one of them (the real criminal) is finally shown to have deserved this attention. (*The Murder on the Orient Express*, in which each of the suspects is revealed to have played an equal part in the murder, here constitutes the exception that proves the rule.)
We need only examine Owen Taylor’s dramatically fluctuating degree of prominence in *The Big Sleep* to observe how Chandler eschews the relatively more stable character field of the conventional whodunit narrative. To follow Taylor’s trajectory in the novel is to witness a character’s progression from background figure to pivotal participant in the narrative’s plot. Taylor’s first appearance in *The Big Sleep* occurs when Marlowe, summoned to the Sternwood home, notices Taylor as a “slim dark young chauffeur in shiny black leggings” (4). Marlowe off-handedly mentions the chauffeur a second time during this initial encounter with the Sternwoods, but Chandler gives readers no indication that this as-yet-unnamed character will play any significant role in the novel. On the contrary, Marlowe’s observation of the chauffeur during this early scene seems to be merely a passing aside. Hence Taylor’s sudden rise to narrative prominence (he murders Geiger and then mysteriously winds up dead himself) comes as something of a surprise. Still, this startling development adheres to a discernible logic: Taylor’s shift from background to foreground is licensed within the narrative by his relationship to Carmen Sternwood. According to the rules established by *The Big Sleep*, even an ostensibly background figure like Owen Taylor might emerge as an essential participant in the plot simply because he is part of the network—no matter how initially marginal a node.¹⁰¹

Yet if Chandler illustrates how a relatively minor character can suddenly rise to prominence, he also dramatizes how a relatively major character can suddenly fall from prominence, he also dramatizes how a relatively major character can suddenly fall from prominence.

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¹⁰¹ Hence what licenses Taylor’s shift from background to foreground in *The Big Sleep* is precisely the logic of the “small world,” or, alternately, the “chain” of relations that critics have identified as central to the hard-boiled aesthetic. Not just anyone may come to the fore “late” in the narrative discourse of a hard-boiled detective novel; rather, the late arrival generally gets ushered into discourse based on his or her established points of contact with a character (or characters) already situated in the storyworld’s social network.
it. Indeed, Owen Taylor’s newly central position in the plot remains as tenuous as was his former position at the margins. The chauffeur’s time in the narrative limelight is notably short-lived: though his actions encroach on the events of the plot more than readers might initially have been led to expect, the nature of his death dramatically recalls him to background status, reducing him once again to a servant’s anonymity. When, after finding Taylor’s corpse, the policeman Bernie Ohls asks Marlowe whether Marlowe’s work for General Sternwood has “anything to do with him [Taylor],” Marlowe dispassionately responds: “No. I don’t even know his name” (59).

Taylor’s trajectory in The Big Sleep is thus particularly tragic in that it charts his rise from background to foreground, and from functionality to autonomy, only to return him to the place where he began. Although Taylor transcends his role as “mere” chauffeur when he throws himself into the novel’s central criminal plot, he dies in the very car Marlowe had seen him polishing during his initial appearance in the novel. A jaded Ohls informs Marlowe of Taylor’s death: “A nice new Buick sedan all messed up with sand and sea water…. Oh, I almost forgot. There’s a guy inside it” (52). Ohls’s darkly humorous positioning of Taylor as an afterthought—first Marlowe is told that a “nice new” sedan has been “messed up,” only then that “there’s a guy inside it”—recalls what had been Taylor’s functional position in the Sternwood household. Viewed as an extension of the car itself, the chauffeur functions, after all, as an absent presence, the figure one is meant to “forget” is inside the car. In death, Taylor gets represented as finally interchangeable with, even of lesser value than, the Sternwood vehicle for which he was responsible. The manner in which Ohls frames his remarks only reinforces the point that Taylor’s rise to narrative prominence—a fluctuation motivated by his
connection to Carmen Sternwood—has ended with a spectacular return to bare functionality.

Beyond elucidating *The Big Sleep*’s thematic concerns, attending to how minor characters’ various degrees of minorness fluctuate over the course of Chandler’s novel also pays theoretical dividends. In particular, the dynamic character field in Chandler’s novel adds a new layer to Alex Woloch’s notion of characterological “minorness” as Woloch conceptualizes it in *The One vs. the Many*. Defining “character-space” as “that particular and charged encounter between individual human personality and a determined space and position within the narrative as a whole,” Woloch’s framework is able to take into account both a fictional individual’s representation within the story (*fabula*) and his or her particular presence in discourse (*syuzhet*). For Woloch, attending to “character-space” entails considering, among other details, where, when, and how often characters appear within narrative discourse. Woloch’s central argument is that “the hero’s manifest history (the represented life of a central character as derived out of a novel’s story) is intertwined with the implicit history of the protagonist’s very centrality, a history that can be worked out only on the level of the narrative discourse” (319). In other words, Woloch’s book focuses on the way a protagonist dynamically becomes a protagonist over the course of a novel by siphoning narrative attention from a mass of minor characters. Reading this phenomenon through a neo-Marxist lens, Woloch refers to this mass of minor characters as “the proletariat of the novel.”

While Woloch’s theory goes some distance in explaining the dynamics of the character systems conventionally found in hard-boiled detective novels, I want to argue that the particular case studies I’ve taken up in this chapter point to the need for further
exploration of character “minorness” *per se.* Since Woloch sometimes seems to claim that the framework he outlines in *The One vs. the Many* speaks to the dynamics of narrative in general (not just to the canonical realist novel), it is important that we consider his argument in relation to *The Big Sleep.* By stressing minor characters’ networked relations, Chandler’s novel complicates Woloch’s model in interesting and productive ways. To begin, *The Big Sleep* opens with a clear protagonist already emergent. Marlowe’s distinct role (he is, after all, the detective in this detective novel), bolstered by his status as the character-narrator, is transparent from the book’s opening pages. Rather, as with *Red Harvest,* what’s initially unclear in Chandler’s novel is the identity of a central *antagonist*—or whether there’s a *central* antagonist at all.\(^2\) Like Hammett’s novel, *The Big Sleep* confronts readers with a plurality of potential arch-villains, and sorting out the hierarchy of antagonists, mapping their networked relations, is, as any reader of Chandler knows, no easy task. *The Big Sleep* challenges its readers to play the game of determining connections among criminals—of figuring out who is working with whom, who is “behind” who—while at the same time frustrating readers’ ability to reconstruct a precise and stable hierarchy of the narrative’s manifold minor characters. The convoluted nature of *The Big Sleep*’s social network, along with the fluctuating narrative prominence of figures like Owen Taylor, prevents readers from knowing with certainty which of the novel’s minor characters will turn out to be the most significant to the unfolding plot. (As we will see, although Eddie Mars is perhaps the character closest to the “center” of *The Big Sleep*’s criminal network, this is a

\(^{102}\) More generally, it is striking that Woloch’s study, which focuses almost exclusively on the “space of the protagonist in the novel,” does not consider in any way the space of the antagonist in narrative fiction. Yet popular genres such as the hard-boiled detective story might prompt us to consider exactly that.
conclusion to which Chandler’s readers are brought only gradually, over the course of
the narrative as a whole.)

My reading of *The Big Sleep*’s complex social network thus points to the need for
a more sustained analysis of how even minor characters’ degrees of narrative
prominence can exist in significant flux. As it stands, current models for the study of
multi-character configurations in fictional narratives would not seem to allow much
room for this kind of variation in minor characters’ relative degrees of minorness.103
Although Woloch’s model does imply that minor characters’ “character-spaces” exist in
a variety of shapes and sizes, distinctions among minor characters’ degrees of narrative
prominence do not, for Woloch, ultimately signify. Indeed, his analog for minor
characters—“the proletariat of the novel”—suggests that for Woloch a novel’s “mass” of
minor characters is essentially monolithic, not allowing for the possibility that some
novels, like *The Big Sleep*, achieve their unique effects by delineating meaningful
gradations between the relative “majorness” of minor characters. If we are invested in
keeping Woloch’s analogy, we might say that *The Big Sleep*, having solidified its
protagonist from the first page and turned instead to the selective distribution of
discourse among minor characters, represents a kind of proletarian infighting: not “the
one versus the many” in a “competition” for narrative attention, but rather “the many”
versus themselves.

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103 For more on how hard-boiled narratives construct “majorness” and “minorness,” see Peter
Rabinowitz’s fascinating discussion of the critical notion of “path” in “They Shoot Tigers, Don’t They:
Path and Counterpoint in *The Long Goodbye*” in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*. Rabinowitz suggests
that “path”—which pertains to the order in which characters’ experience narrative events—might help
reveal how in certain narratives our understanding “of center and periphery may be skewed” (189). The
dynamic nature of Owen Taylor’s relative “majorness” in *The Big Sleep* points to this same kind of
distorting effect on the relation between center and periphery.
So far we have seen how *The Big Sleep* introduces readers to a convoluted constellation of characters, a network that is all the more difficult to reconstruct due to its increasingly expansive nature and the constantly fluctuating degrees of narrative prominence among its members. Although Marlowe insists at the end of *The Big Sleep* that “it all ties together” (in a passage that I will consider in greater detail below), actually mapping the intricately networked relations among the narrative’s various fictional individuals makes for challenging readerly work. In the remainder of this chapter, I consider how attending to networked sociality in *The Big Sleep* allows us to reconsider critical assumptions about the hard-boiled novel’s representation of social fragmentation. My argument in what follows is not that fragmented experience is wholly immaterial to *The Big Sleep*, but rather that instances of fragmentation in Chandler’s novel exist only through and against a significant counter-discourse of social interconnectedness—a counter-discourse of which we must take stock if we are to understand Chandler’s prevailing ideological concerns in the narrative.

**Social Fragmentation, and Other Red Herrings**

It is something of a critical commonplace that American hard-boiled detective stories feature isolated characters and a pervasive sense of loneliness. The urban alienation represented in a novel like *The Big Sleep*, this story goes, reflects the increasingly de-centered, profit-driven cultures of modernity from which these narratives emerged. Nearly always in such accounts the critic’s emphasis falls on how disconnected the characters in hard-boiled fiction are from one another, how fragmented their social milieu has become. From this perspective, Chandler’s mean streets, “in contrast to Christie’s close-knit and chatty” locales, offer readers “a world of solitary,
disconnected individuals” (Rabinowitz, *Before Reading* 130). Consequently, the atomistic storyworlds of hard-boiled detective fiction have been said to cohere only in the figure of the detective/protagonist himself. This detective (who is also, in many instances, the narrator) effectively connects the narrative’s diverse, disconnected personages by incorporating them into a common story: his own quest for justice. In *The Big Sleep*, according to this account, only Marlowe’s narration, functioning as a “trustworthy and efficient connector,” ensures novelistic unity (Fontana 159). In other words, if we accept the premise that Chandler’s novel consists of “independent episodes linked by an investigative purpose and point of view,” then it follows that “Philip Marlowe is the necessary principle which joins all the intermediary links of the chain” (Porter 40-1).

Frederic Jameson has been perhaps the most influential proponent of this view. In his pivotal essay “On Raymond Chandler,” Jameson identifies fragmentation as the essential feature of hard-boiled mysteries generally and of *The Big Sleep* in particular, asserting that in Chandler’s fiction “the detective’s journey is episodic because of the fragmentary, atomistic nature of the society he moves through” (72). In Jameson’s reading, the detective constitutes the crucial, compensatory link in *The Big Sleep*’s social chain: Marlowe’s experience provides the “external force” that connects the novel’s

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104 To take just one other representative example of this kind of claim, Leonard Cassuto calls the world of Dashiell Hammett’s *Red Harvest* “a place of unitary sordidness, populated by criminals with no human linkages” (58).

105 In *Hard-boiled: Working-Class Readers and Pulp Magazines*, Erin Smith offers a different view of the hard-boiled novel’s “linked episodes,” suggesting that the episodic quality of these narratives speaks to the hard-boiled novel’s predominantly working-class audience. For Smith, such plots invite readers “to make contact with the story at odd, isolated moments without concerning themselves with an overarching narrative” (36). My own view is that readerly concern with the “overarching narrative” cannot (and should not) be so readily jettisoned as Smith implies.
isolated individuals, allowing a fragmentary series of episodes to cohere as narrative. He contends: “The form of Chandler’s books reflects an initial American separation of people from each other, their need to be linked by some external force (in this case the detective) if they are ever to be fitted together as parts of the same picture puzzle” (72-3).

In this sense, Jameson locates in Marlowe a manifestation of the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky’s notion that characters can be used as “threading” devices—a narrative technique that allows literary authors to connect non-congruent episodes through their common experience with a central figure. Jameson writes:

Since there is no longer any privileged experience in which the whole of the social structure can be grasped, a figure must be invented who can be superimposed on the society as a whole, whose routine and life-pattern serve somehow to tie its separate and isolated parts together. Its equivalent is the picaresque novel, where a single character moves from one background to another, links picturesque but not intrinsically related episodes together. (69)

Situating Marlowe’s role in The Big Sleep as a vehicle for stringing the various plots and persons together into the “same picture puzzle,” Jameson maintains that the resulting threaded structure also performs ideological work: it provides for readers what Jameson identifies as a mystificatory social unity, or pseudo-totality.106

I want to suggest, however, that Chandler uses the technique of narrative “threading” toward a different end than that emphasized by Jameson; for in fact Marlowe’s experience in The Big Sleep does not, pace Jameson, constitute the only link between otherwise isolated personages. Rather, unlike the hero of the picaresque novel,

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106 Jameson’s reading of Chandler builds on the work of György Lukács, who asserts in Theory of the Novel that in a modern world marked by fragmentation and multiplicity, “the novel overcomes its ‘bad’ infinity by recourse to the biographical form.” The phenomenon of “biographical form”—closely related to the notion of narrative “threading”—signifies for Lukács an ideological mystification in which “discreetly heterogeneous mass of isolated persons, non-sensuous structures and meaningless events receives a unified articulation by the relating of each separate element to the central character…” (81)
Marlowe merely reveals to the reader the hidden connections among characters (distinct “threads” in their own right) that had preceded his arrival on the scene. Although this distinction may at first seem slight, it actually has the potential to reorient our understanding of The Big Sleep’s ideological commitments. While Jameson regards the novel as being built upon a series of “not intrinsically related episodes” that only cohere because each comprises one part of Marlowe’s singular experience, recognizing the importance of networked sociality to The Big Sleep raises the question of whether the critical emphasis on fragmentation finally coincides with Chandler’s dominant narrative strategy.

Indeed, by configuring the novel’s characters within what contemporary network researchers call a “small-world” network, Chandler seems intent on demonstrating that the various episodes and minor characters contained in its complex plot are intrinsically connected to one another, and not merely through their common relation to the figure of the detective—nor, for that matter, to any one figure. I say “nor to any one figure” because critical accounts of The Big Sleep have recently looked to the gangster Eddie Mars as another character who, perhaps more subtly than Marlowe, functions as a “primary thread linking the disparate plots” (Rabinowitz, “Rats” 235). For instance, Peter Rabinowitz has suggested that although The Big Sleep’s “number of criminals seems endless,” one individual does still “stand out above the rest” (“Rats” 232-3). For Rabinowitz, that individual is Eddie Mars, who despite having his hand in most of the novel’s crimes—the cover-up of Regan’s murder, Geiger’s blackmailing of...
the General, his own (Mars’s) blackmailing of Vivian Sternwood, and more—manages to exit the narrative unscathed.\textsuperscript{107}

Taking stock of Mars’s place in the criminal network, Rabinowitz makes a strong argument that Mars, and not Carmen Sternwood—who actually pulled the trigger on Rusty Regan—is “the closest thing to a central villain” in \textit{The Big Sleep} (“Rats” 233). Marlowe first makes Mars acquaintance when the two men encounter each other at Geiger’s home (and the site of his murder). “Excuse the casual entrance,” Mars tells Marlowe as he enters the residence—not coincidentally, these are also his first words in the book. As the plot progresses, determining the nature of the connection between Vivian and Eddie Mars becomes a key point of interest for Marlowe. The detective considers: “Mrs. Regan knew Eddie Mars well enough to borrow money from him…. Apart from this they had an added bond of interest in Regan. He was her husband and he had gone off with Eddie Mars’ wife…” (155) Of course, the “bond of interest” connecting Eddie Mars and Vivian Regan will prove to be much more significant than Marlowe has yet realized at this point in the novel: Mars has helped conceal Carmen’s crime, and is blackmailing Vivian in return. Noting Mars’s many criminal dealings, Rabinowitz argues that “there is one link, other than Marlowe, holding it all together: Mars is involved, although often behind the scenes, in all of the action of the book” (\textit{Before Reading} 199).

I do not quarrel with Rabinowitz’s broader point that critics of \textit{The Big Sleep} have tended to overlook Eddie Mars’s wide-reaching culpability in favor of

\textsuperscript{107} Such is emphatically not the case in Hawks’s film adaptation, the final moments of which dramatize Mars getting gunned down by his own men. A useful contrast might be drawn between the social network in the novel and the filmic adaptation, the latter of which alters the social landscape—for instance, by making Vivian and Marlowe romantic partners.
“scapegoating” Carmen Sternwood, whose sex-motivated killing of Rusty Regan is a more overt act of criminality than Mars’s underworld dealings—and thus easier for audiences to condemn. Yet by claiming that Mars is “involved… in all of the action of the book,” that he “hold[s] it all together,” Rabinowitz overstates his case. In their readings of The Big Sleep, Jameson and Rabinowitz each put too much pressure on locating a “single character”—the “one link”—responsible for the novel’s cohesion. However, this impulse to locate “one link” perhaps tells us more about critics’ own readerly investments and expectations than it tells us about the dynamics of Chandler’s novel.

As I’ve already argued in contrasting The Big Sleep with The Murder on the Orient Express, however, Chandler’s novel deliberately resists providing a “central node”: no one individual can be said to occupy the center of the narrative’s social network, because that network’s asymmetrical centrifugality is exactly the point. Although some figures (e.g., Eddie Mars) might be closer to the center of the network than others, to imply that Mars or any other character is visible in “all of the action of the book” is to miss Chandler’s overarching strategy of destabilizing the relationship between central and peripheral events in the narrative. In a similar way, Jameson’s argument that Chandler’s novels contain disconnected characters who must be “linked by some external force”—i.e., Marlowe’s experience or point-of-view—does not exactly correspond with the decentralized but still densely interconnected (= small-world) social networks evoked by The Big Sleep. On the contrary, Chandler’s novel gradually reveals over the course of the narrative that the various minor characters are, in fact, deeply interconnected with one another even apart from (and preceding) their common
experience with the detective Philip Marlowe. Remove Marlowe altogether, and one still faces a remarkably dense and interconnected network: Harry Jones worked for Joe Brody, who was murdered by Carol Lundgren, who was the lover of Arthur Geiger, who’d been blackmailing Carmen Sternwood, who’d killed Rusty Regan… we could go on. Clearly, Marlowe does not constitute the only connection between the novel’s seemingly disparate figures, but instead serves to make visible the connections between characters and events that actually pre-existed his arrival on the scene.

We can say, then, that although the social world Chandler constructs is superficially chaotic, it is also essentially a “small world” as this phenomenon has been defined by network theorists: every one of its figures can be shown to be connected to everyone else via a path of relatively few intermediary persons or “steps.” In this sense, *The Big Sleep* does not configure a single, centralized criminal conspiracy so much as a series of interconnected criminals and a series of interconnected conspiracies. When Marlowe remarks at the end of the novel that “it all ties together,” his words point to the fact that he has uncovered a criminal network, not that he has caused a network to cohere (268).

The critical distinction for which I’m arguing becomes clearer when we consider Marlowe’s function in *The Big Sleep* in relation to the story/discourse (alternately, *fabula/syuzhet*) divide that is foundational to the field of narrative theory. Chandler’s hard-boiled novel configures its characters in such a way that they are intricately

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108 The critic R.W. Lid comes closest to make this kind of distinction, as he also frames Marlowe’s function as revealing (not constituting in himself) the connections between characters that, for much of the narrative, exist beyond the reader’s purview. Lid asserts that Chandler’s fiction involves “people who seemingly have no relation to each other until Marlowe, digging into the past and beneath the surface of events, demonstrates those relations…. [Marlowe’s] function was to search out and make visible the links between people and events and reveal the developing pattern of significance” (47, emphasis added). However, Lid does not elaborate on this distinction, if he does see it as a salient distinction.
interconnected on the level of story (fabula), while these same connections remain invisible to the reader—and to the detective—through much of the narrative discourse (syuzhet). Considered from this angle, social fragmentation is shown to be more of a discursive gesture in *The Big Sleep* than it is a “real” phenomenon within the world of the story. Whereas Jameson pays admirable attention to the novel’s fragmented form—noting, for instance, how Chandler’s minor figures are almost always represented as “separate and isolated parts,” resulting in a lengthy series of scenes in which Marlowe interacts with individual characters one by one—he does not sufficiently attend to how characters are intricately networked on the story-level of the narrative, how within the diegesis it really does all “tie together.”

One of the principal activities required of Chandler’s audience, then, is to overcome this discrepancy between story and discourse by piecing together the networks of characters who are seemingly isolated from one another. In his discussion of narrative gaps, Meir Sternberg has used the phrase “temporary gap” to refer to discourse-level instances of indeterminacy.\(^{109}\) The readerly activity I have been describing above constitutes an attempt to fill in a series of temporary gaps that are particularly central to Chandler’s novel. Reconstructing the story level of *The Big Sleep* demands that the reader identify networked relations (in the story) within what appears (from the discourse) to be a highly atomistic society. By configuring characterological interconnectedness as a system of gaps, Chandler puts his audience in the position of striving to assemble the novel’s (temporarily) indeterminate web of relations. Like Marlowe, the reader of *The Big Sleep* is tasked with performing a kind of network

\(^{109}\) See Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* for a useful synopsis of Sternberg’s framework for examining narrative gaps.
analysis on a partially veiled social world; if the case is to be solved, a whole network
must be built from fragments, piece by piece.

The atomistic distribution of characters, then, contributes to the form of
Chandler’s novel; but we should not automatically assume that such fragmentation finds
its equivalent in the social world his novel imagines. In another fascinating instance of
mise-en-abyme in *The Big Sleep*, Chandler manages to embed a representation of this
same kind of tension—between “actual” interconnectedness, on the one hand, and
represented fragmentation, on the other—within the world of the novel. After Geiger’s
murder and Taylor’s death, Marlowe turns to newspapers to see how the press has been
covering some of the novel’s major events. Though he seems unsurprised by the
newspapers’ blatant inaccuracies and cover-ups, Marlowe does single out for criticism
the press’s inability to connect the plot’s various characters with one another. He
narrates: “Their accounts of the affair came as close to the truth as newspaper stories
usually come—as close as Mars is to Saturn. None of the three connected Owen Taylor,
driver of the Lido Pier Suicide Car, with the Laurel Canyon Exotic Bungalow Slaying.
None of them mentioned the Sternwoods, Bernie Ohls or me” (142). (Here the signifier
“Mars” functions as an additional cue that this passage should be read as having meta-
narrative significance.)

Marlowe’s reaction to the newspapers’ various distortions suggests that there is
much at stake in determining how the tension between fragmentation and
interconnectedness functions in *The Big Sleep*. Marlowe takes particular note of the fact
that Owen Taylor’s death has been reported in a completely different section of the
newspaper (“Section II”) from the rest of these events, suggesting that Taylor’s demise
is an isolated incident rather than one component of a broader plot. By separating these events and their attendant participants into discrete segments of text, the newspapers correspond to *The Big Sleep* itself, which (at least until the novel’s closing pages) uses discursive fragmentation to obfuscate the storyworlds genuinely interconnected nature. What results is a particularly rich meta-narrative moment: as with the newspapers, more is connected in *The Big Sleep* than its discourse allows. Just as Marlowe sees connections in the news despite the paper’s atomized structure, reconstructing the *fabula* of *The Big Sleep* demands that Chandler’s audience identify the networked relations underlying what appears (from the discourse) to be a highly fragmented society.

Subsequent developments in the novel further illuminate how what readers often apprehend as instances of fragmentation actually reveal themselves to be veiled expressions of interconnectivity. Critics have often made the point that hard-boiled novels depict not only the breakdown of society at-large, but also the fragmentation of traditional family structures. For instance, Charles Rzepka observes that “Chandler takes pains not to let us encounter more than one member of the Sternwood family at a time…. They don’t even share the same chapters.” “As a result,” Rzepka goes on to say, “the very structure of the novel reinforces our sense of the Sternwoods’ reciprocal isolation, the fragmentation of a family…” (709) To be sure, the Sternwoods fail to represent a pretty picture of the conventional family unit, and this failure, as Rzepka rightly implies, constitutes one object of Chandler’s critique. Yet by emphasizing the Sternwood family’s manifest fragmentation on the level of discourse—“they don’t even share the same chapters”—Rzepka neglects to mention that the Sternwood daughters,
Carmen and Vivian, are in fact more closely connected than they appear, since all along they have been operating in tandem, with the additional help of Eddie Mars and his underworld resources, to cover up Carmen’s murder of Rusty Regan, Vivian’s husband. Carmen’s crime is a secret that the Sternwood sisters share, even as they seem to share so little.

And this is exactly the point: the sisters’ apparent isolation from each other represents, in part, their need within the world of the story to keep the full extent of their actual relations concealed. When Marlowe had asked General Sternwood early in the novel whether his two daughters “run around together,” Sternwood replied: “I think not. I think they go their separate and slightly divergent roads to perdition” (15). As it turns out, Carmen’s and Vivian’s roads to perdition are not nearly so separate as the General, and perhaps also Chandler’s readers, had assumed. In this manner familial alienation—the suggested “fragmentation of a family”—itself functions as a kind of red herring, one that even many critics can’t resist following. However, the Sternwood sisters’ mutual involvement in concealing Carmen’s crime—their “phantom relationship”—suggests that Chandler is finally more concerned with the transfiguration of traditional social relations than he is the total dissolution of them. In this reading, what is ultimately at issue for Chandler is not his characters’ essential disconnectedness—Jameson’s “atomistic” society—but rather the fact that these characters’ (often criminal) connections with each other so capably masquerade as disconnection, remaining invisible to the detective, and thus also to the reader, for much of the narrative.
The Big Sleep's configuration of a small-world network thus challenges the conventional view that Chandler’s hard-boiled stories are fundamentally “about” modernity’s fragmented social worlds. By insufficiently attending to how characters are intricately networked on the fabula-level of these narratives, critics have so far told only half the story, emphasizing social atomization at the expense of (veiled, but actual) interconnectedness. It is only when we note the tension between how minor characters interact—often covertly—in the fabula and yet remain isolated from one another in the syuzhet that we are able to see The Big Sleep’s ideological mystification for what it truly is. Indeed, attending to the gap between story and discourse in Chandler’s novel allows us to consider the possibility that Jameson’s account of The Big Sleep needs to be flipped on its head: although Chandler’s characters may seem disconnected from each other, their apparent isolation is deceptive, obfuscating nefarious modes of organization that are only capable of being recognized—and thus disarmed—by the detective himself.

Allow me to restate this final point in a different way. For Jameson, the unifying “thread” provided by Marlowe’s perspective functions as an ideological compensation, offsetting the anxiety wrought by the actual fragmentation of modern experience. Jameson’s analysis would seem to regard social interconnectedness and fragmentation not as coterminous pressures within the novel but rather as two phenomena arranged in sequence, such that interconnected or networked relations ultimately serve as an imaginary substitute for social fragmentation (which can then be expelled from the world of the novel, albeit in a mystificatory way). However, when we acknowledge the concomitant tension between these phenomena, we find that the logic of networked sociality, far from functioning as an ideological compensation in The Big Sleep, reveals
itself to be a crucial source of the anxiety voiced by the text. Social interconnectedness is in this sense at least as much an ideological problem for *The Big Sleep* as it is part of any compensatory solution. Hence what seems most concerning for Marlowe, and for Chandler, is not fragmentation *per se*, but rather the fact that a nefarious and complex network of interrelations so capably masquerades as fragmentation, and that this network therefore operates outside of public purview.

In the final pages of *The Big Sleep*, Philip Marlowe attempts to articulate how narrative discourse and, indeed, language more generally, are complicit in this masquerading effect. He tells Vivian Sternwood: “If I seem to talk in circles, it just seems that way. It all ties together—everything. Geiger and his cute little blackmail tricks, Brody and his pictures, Eddie Mars and his roulette tables, Canino and the girl Rusty Regan didn’t run away with. It all ties together” (268). Marlowe’s summation of the novel’s defining social network recalls not only the Op’s “swell dish,” but also Mr. Vetch’s concluding remarks in *The Princess Casamassima* (see chapter 1), in which Vetch describes the long chain of acquaintanceship that had brought Hyacinth into contact with the Princess. But Vivian Sternwood is no Henry James character, and her response to Marlowe is pure Chandler: “You tire me… God how you tire me!” (269) Confronted with such a complex network—one that comes into focus only through Marlowe’s dogged tracing of nodes and links—Chandler’s audience may be tempted to respond in kind.

Certainly, the hard-boiled novel’s social networks tend to resist simple reconstruction. In *Red Harvest* and *The Big Sleep*, respectively, Hammett and Chandler proffer social networks that approach—and even at some points embrace—incoherence,
deliberately frustrating the reader’s capacity to map character interrelations with anything close to precision. Both novels impel their readers to reconstruct networks in an attempt to localize criminal guilt, only to demonstrate that this very process—the challenging (and at times impossible) readerly work of tracing complex networks—undermines the notion of localized guilt in the first place. Hence social networks in the hard-boiled novel cannot simply be mapped by the reader in good faith; rather, these networks become objects of scrutiny for their own part.

Yet Marlowe’s view that “it all ties together” cannot be merely cast aside if we are to understand the hard-boiled novel’s profound commitment to representing—and exploring the ramifications of—social interconnectedness. By making the audience’s engagement with their far-reaching, intricately constructed character networks a central part of the reading experience, Red Harvest and The Big Sleep together constitute a stark divergence from the tradition of the classic whodunit, marking American hard-boiled detective fiction as generically distinct. Moreover, attending to the labyrinthine networks in The Big Sleep—in particular, to the gap between how Chandler’s minor characters interact with one another on the level of story and yet remain isolated from each other in discourse—alerts us to the possibility that hard-boiled fiction’s concern lies less in modernity’s isolation of people than it does in the modern world’s capacity to tie so many people together, so densely, in a virtually unnarratable network of exchange.

In chapters 1, 2, and 3, I aimed to emphasize points of convergence between modern American fiction writers and social network theorists; in this chapter, I am suggesting that the popularization of network-analytical procedures—that is, network
theory’s shift from being primarily an academic discourse to its becoming part of the popular consciousness at-large—can be traced back, in part, to the domain of literature, as hard-boiled novelists like Hammett and Chandler began to depict detection itself as a form of social network analysis. Indeed, by making their audience’s engagement with convoluted networks a central part of the reading experience, *Red Harvest* and *The Big Sleep* not only model small-world configurations but, even more, anticipate and *contribute to* the ascendance of small-world theory as a model for understanding social organization in the twentieth century. As in earlier chapters, by studying the convergence between authors’ experiments with multi-character configurations in narrative fiction, on one hand, and phenomena being theorized by social scientists, on the other, we can see the range of ways that literary history bears relevantly on the genealogy of social network studies—and not just vice versa.
Coda: Basic Cables

In *Ties That Bind* I have aimed to explore areas of intersection between the emergence of social network analysis and the development of American literary modernism. Henry James, Frank Norris, John Dos Passos, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler: each of these writers engaged imaginatively with some of the very phenomena concurrently being theorized by the pioneers of social network research, such that we can observe significant parallels between fictional works and social-scientific accounts of this period. In proposing a bidirectional model to study this convergence, I have tried to show that social network theory and modern American fiction prove mutually illuminating. Thus, not only can the concepts and methodologies of network analysis help elucidate the literary works, but the formal and thematic features of modernist American fiction also bear relevantly on then-contemporary accounts of social networks.

The purpose of this coda is to consider how the mode of inquiry outlined in this study might contribute to future research into the convergence of network analysis and narrative fiction, across a broader range of socio-historical contexts as well as storytelling media. More specifically, how might the framework I delineate in this dissertation illuminate fictional narratives produced within a twenty-first century environment that is arguably as social-media-saturated as it is preoccupied with digital “connections” of all kinds? If the first decades of the twentieth century witnessed the convergence of nascent network-analytic methodologies and modern American fiction,
what might we find by looking to fictional works of the present day—works that have emerged from a culture in which Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg is *Time*’s “Person of the Year” (2010), and in which the discourse of social network analysis, no longer the exclusive domain of social-scientific specialists, is more pervasive than ever?

I want to suggest that in the broad realm of contemporary narrative fiction, nowhere is this cultural preoccupation with the procedures of social network analysis more conspicuously present than in American television serials. In point of fact, by spoofing the subject of television “network narratives” the satirical newspaper *The Onion* has already made this argument implicitly. In a *TV Guide*-like synopsis for one episode of the invented television show *Seven Stories*, *The Onion* parodies the present-day network fad: “Seven people go about their lives without ever crossing one another’s paths. In this episode, Ken has a layover in the state where James lives.” While *The Onion*’s mockery suggests that the television “network narrative” is now so commonplace that it has become essentially meaningless, it would seem from current programming that television storytellers (and audiences) remain enraptured by the possibilities of the network format. Building on tendencies already emergent in the works of modern American fiction I examined in chapters 1–4, twenty-first-century television narratives are uniquely suited, through the affordances of visual media, to provide viewers with graphic, on-screen representations of social networks. These network visualizations, which can be compared with the diagrammatic representations that foundational network theorist Jacob Moreno called sociograms, have in fact become a recurring feature of contemporary serialized television dramas, including *Homeland*, *Rubicon*, *The Wire*, *Mad Men*, and more. In his 1934 study *Who Shall Survive?: A New*
Approach to the Problem of Human Interrelations, Moreno introduced the sociogram as a way to visualize group interactions and determine the relative centrality of networked individuals. While Moreno created his diagrams by hand, social network researchers have since drawn on Moreno’s innovation of the sociogram to develop a wide array of computational procedures—many of them remarkably sophisticated—for mapping large-scale or otherwise complex social networks.110

As I demonstrate in this coda, contemporary television storytellers recruit sociograms for a variety of effects, including the creation of conflict or instabilities between characters, tension between characters’ and audiences’ experience of the fictional world, and meta-narrative comment on the very procedure of approaching characters through the lens of network analysis. What remains most remarkable to me about this trope, however, is the way it links early twenty-first narrative productions to the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century fictions discussed in my previous chapters, suggesting how routinely today's television narratives integrate the tools and procedures of network analysis into their diverse storyworlds.

Meta-Narrative Sociograms in The Wire and Mad Men

Scholars of television and popular culture have suggested that “something profound has happened to the social complexity of the TV drama in the past thirty years” (Johnson 111). For Jason Mittell, the turn toward “narrative complexity” in television describes a wide array of formal innovations, but especially the blurring of the traditional boundary between episodic (e.g., the mid-century sitcom) and serial (e.g., the soap opera) storytelling. By contrast, “complex” television, in Mittell’s definition, draws

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110 See chapter 3 for further discussion of Moreno’s innovation of the sociogram, as well as its place in the genealogy of network analysis and its connection to American literary history.
on the structural features of both of these more conventional formats, embracing neither episodic closure nor serial open-endedness but instead creating something amorphously in-between. Other critics, noting that contemporary television stories often “feature dense webs of relationships that require focus and scrutiny on the part of the viewer,” cite these intricate configurations of social networks as the driving force behind television narrative’s increased complexity (Johnson 109). For example, amidst his discussion of cinematic network narratives (see the introduction to this study), David Bordwell points out that, in fact, television has always been the visual-medium pioneer when it comes to configuring complex webs of characters. Revolutionary series like *Hill Street Blues* (1981-1987), Bordwell contends, “made audiences adept at keeping track of many characters and their interactions,” and, in this sense, set the stage for the scores of filmic network narratives that would follow (195).

Steven Johnson’s best-selling *Everything Bad is Good For: How Popular Culture is Actually Making Us Smarter* (2005) has likewise broached this issue, even utilizing sociograms to show how television’s social networks have become increasingly complex over the course of the past few decades. Juxtaposing the hit series *24* (2001-2010) with the popular drama *Dallas* (1978-1991), Johnson suggests that the stark difference between these two shows’ social networks represents a broader trend in television narrative, which has shifted from focusing on networks roughly the size of an “extended family” (*Dallas*) to more often tracing networks “closer to the scale of a small village” (*24*). Like the twenty-first century television dramas *The Wire* and *Mad Men*, which I will discuss below, *24* necessitates that its audience watch multiple episodes in order to achieve any solid sense of the unfolding network; conversely, the entire social world of
Dallas is “perfectly readable within the frame of the episode itself” (Johnson 113). Thus, viewed collectively, recent popular-culture studies are suggestive of the possibility that narrative seriality, on one hand, and social-network configurations in fiction, on the other, come together to form something of a combustible admixture—one that helps to explain the increased complexity of contemporary television storytelling.

The Wire (2002–2008, HBO) deserves special attention in this connection. Described by Walter Benn Michaels as the “most serious and ambitious fictional narrative of the twenty-first century so far,” The Wire follows an expansive cast of characters—between thirty-five and seventy principals, depending on how you count them—as their lives intersect in a vérité-inspired rendering of Baltimore, Maryland (qtd. in Williams 208-9). Across five seasons, the series shows how the projects of law-enforcement officers, drug lords and their soldiers, dock-workers, lawyers, politicians, teachers and students, newspaper reporters, and many others can be connected into a single, networked whole. The Wire’s creator, David Simon, has called the show a “visual novel,” saying he took inspiration from the likes of Dickens, Balzac, and Tolstoy. These antecedents are particularly salient since, in the same vein as the prototypical realist novel, The Wire obviously strives to represent a kind of “social totality,” and, in so doing, explores the fraught relationship between political or economic institutions and the individuals within them. Indeed, with its pessimistic take on the status of the individual in contemporary American society, The Wire powerfully “dramatizes the

111 Linda Williams puts the number at “some thirty-five crucially important characters” (219), while Caroline Levine observes that the total number of characters falls somewhere between fifty and seventy. To extend the discussion of cognitive constraints that I began in chapter 3 (in the context of Dos Passos’s U.S.A.), we can say that the size of The Wire’s social network approximates what anthropologists building on the work of Robin Dunbar have called a “band”: that group of acquaintances falling somewhere between the categories of “sympathy group” (averaging 12 members) and “active network” (averaging 150).
precariousness of escaping one’s structural position within an American capitalist
network” (Jagoda 199).

As a point of convergence between narrative fiction and social network studies,
*The Wire* is difficult to match. The literary scholar Patrick Jagoda has argued that the
show’s “formal features… repeatedly draw from and complicate social network analysis”
(192); in agreement, the sociologists Anmol Chaddha and William Julius Wilson claim
that the show manages to capture “the complexity of urban life in ways that have eluded
many social scientists” (166). By showing how diverse (and sometimes only indirectly
connected) social actors affect one another in multifarious ways, across the boundaries
of race or class or institutional membership, *The Wire* enacts network complexity on the
level of form, presenting viewers with a world “so densely tangled, so tortuously
convoluted, that it is impossible to know and isolate clear causes for events” (Levine).

But many characters in *The Wire* try to do just that—i.e., trace effects back to
their attendant causes. And by urging viewers to piece together its storyworld’s
convoluted social networks, the show likewise recruits its audience to this same
exercise. In this connection, the figure of the sociogram plays a crucial role in viewers’
experience of the series. One of *The Wire’s* most prominent visual motifs is a large
corkboard that displays a sociogram onto which the show’s “Major Crimes Unit” maps,
person by person, the storyworld’s sprawling web of criminal interconnections (166).

Jagoda has provided us with a vivid description of this board:

> The Major Crimes Unit… represents the changing Barksdale drug organization
> visually, on a bulletin board filled with surveillance photos, suspect names, and
crisscrossing lines of relationships among the known players. This cartography
of social and financial relations, which grows in complexity throughout the
seasons, takes the shape of a web. The changing Barksdale network emphasizes
that police work is a prolonged process of connecting the dots and not, as is the
case in television police dramas like the CBS show *CSI*, of merely solving episodic cases. (193)

Invoking Frederic Jameson’s notion of “cognitive mapping,” Jagoda suggests that the board functions as a kind of “mental map.”112 We can extend this point further by saying that *The Wire*’s sociogram constitutes a meta-narrative device—that is, a self-reflexive reference to narrative production itself. *The Wire* thus uses the corkboard to *themmatize* network approaches to story-making: offering an embedded image of the audience’s own cognitive activity, the corkboard sociogram evolves throughout the series, as the detectives continually edit the visualized network based on new criminal assemblages, or at least new information about them. In this sense, *The Wire*’s characters and its viewers alike enact the kind of social “assembly” theorized by Bruno Latour, in his discussion of actor-network-theory.113 “We’re building something here…” the detective Lester Freamon says of the corkboard-sociogram—and, as the audience, we could say the same.

*The Wire* also uses the corkboard-sociogram to create several tensions that shape significantly the audience’s experience of the show. First, the presence of the sociogram

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112 For further discussion of Jameson’s cognitive mapping, see chapter 3. Notably, Jameson himself has written about *The Wire*. Observing that the show “challenges and problematizes the distinction between protagonists and ‘secondary characters’” (359), Jameson in fact strikes many of the same notes as did his analysis of *The Big Sleep* (see chapter 4). *The Wire*, he suggests, should ultimately be conceived as a mystery-procedural that stresses collectivities instead of individuals:

> Here it is not an individual criminal responsible for an enigmatic crime, but rather a whole society that must be opened up to representation and tracked down, identified, explored, mapped like a new dimension or a foreign culture…. [The] whole social complex… now demands new instruments of detection and registration… (362)

What makes *The Wire* somewhat unique, in Jameson’s view, is that “not only is the criminal a collective or network, the ‘detective’ is also a group and a conspiratorial one at that” (363).

113 In *Reassembling the Social* (2005), Latour aims to circumvent the distinction between individual agency and macro-sociological forces by conceptualizing the social as existing in a constant process of “assembly.” Instead of attempting to uncover the “essence” of the social, Latour recommends attending to the surface-level behaviors and activities that build it node by node. See the introduction for further discussion of Latour’s actor-network-theory.
challenges viewers to consider how the character constellation envisaged on the corkboard corresponds, or fails to correspond, with viewers’ own conceptualization of the criminal network encountered in the narrative. Thus the series underscores the tension between, on one hand, embedded networks—i.e., networks as they are imagined or visualized by characters within the diegesis—and, on the other, the audience’s understanding of those networks. These two are often quite dissimilar. At the beginning of season 2, a close-up of the corkboard shows us that the dock-worker Frank Sobotka is a marginal player on the detectives’ sociogram; however, as viewers we know that his role in the network is more important than the police realize.

In a slightly different vein, the audience grapples with another phenomenon that the detectives do not: that the police are themselves component nodes of multiple networks—networks that overlap and connect with those of the criminals. In fact, The Wire perpetually draws parallels between the world of the police and the world of the criminals, such that viewers come to see that actually these are not two separate worlds, but rather a single connected one. Thus, The Wire also encourages its audience to recognize that where the material corkboard stops, the network being visualized actually continues—even into the very domain of the police themselves. To put this same point differently, The Wire stresses that the characters who are on the board and the characters who have produced the board are ultimately contiguous: the detectives piecing together the network are also component nodes of (that same) one. Here again the corkboard-sociogram performs a meta-narrative function, drawing attention to potential sites of overlap and disjunction between how its characters and its viewers assemble the show’s networked relationships. By staging network-analytic procedures
within its storyworld, *The Wire* suggests the relevance of those same procedures for interpreting the program itself.

*Mad Men* (2007–present, AMC) is, on the face of it, a very different kind of show than *The Wire*. A workplace drama set in (or rather, through) the 1960s, *Mad Men* places significantly less emphasis on networked relations than does David Simon’s expansive procedural. Whereas *The Wire* represents the construction of its sociogram as an ongoing narrative process, *Mad Men* employs a sociogram as a dramatic narrative “event” contained within a single episode. And whereas *The Wire* navigates social networks as they transcend the boundaries of institutions—across multiple episodes and even seasons—*Mad Men* attends more locally to the interpersonal dynamics of the advertising agency Sterling Cooper. *Mad Men*, in other words, limits itself to the exploration of a single corporate hierarchy rather than a sprawling social web, and this characterization perhaps helps to explain why the series’ engagement with network logics has so far been ignored.

Despite their differences, however, each series contains embedded sociograms functioning in the manner of a *mise en abyme*; each show uses this device to comment on (characters’ and viewers’) processes of story-making. Indeed, both series situate the figure of the sociogram as a tele-visual metaphor for the very process of engaging with serial narrative itself. While *The Wire* focuses viewers’ attention on the gap between characters’ embedded networks and their (the audience’s) own re-configurations of the networks under consideration, *Mad Men* explores more thoroughly the phenomenon that network theorists call “multiplexity.” First theorized in the 1970s, and a central object of inquiry in today’s social network studies, the concept of multiplexity refers to
“the possibility that two nodes occupy more than one position that ties them together.” Multiplexity, then, makes visible the phenomenon of multiple linked individuals being simultaneously part of different kinds of networks. The quintessential example of multiplexity—also called network “layering” or “stacking”—is found in corporate organization and management systems. Within a single company, two individuals may have “an organization relationship, say ‘supervisor’ and ‘assistant’ (to the supervisor), but are also friends” (Kadushin 36). In this particular example, the link between the two persons is “multiplex” because it as actually two links: one “formal” and the other “informal.”

This distinction between “formal positions” and “informal relationships” lies at the core of social-network-based theories of corporate management (Kadushin 36). Social scientists define formal networks as those that exist primarily within or are created by institutions. The formal network is a given company’s “official” structure, that is, the “‘ideal’ patterns [of interaction] best described on organization charts that few within the organization actually pay attention to” (46). If formal networks can be described as de jure roles, informal networks, by contrast, consist of the de facto relationships that actually exist among individuals within the institution—often cutting against the grain of that institution’s dictates. These two systems (i.e., formal and informal networks) are not just co-existent but essentially interwoven with one another, since informal configurations signify chiefly “in reference to, or even in opposition to, the formal relationships” (Kadushin 39). Thus, even in the case of informal networks,

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114 As the network scholar Charles Kadushin observes, “when members of an organization are queried about the formal organization chart,” their most frequent response is to ask “What chart?” (46).
the “instituted or prescribed relations are always in some way, even negatively, ‘taken into account’” (39).

Since multiplexity highlights the relationship between formal and informal networks, perhaps we should not be surprised that a focus on this phenomenon is typical of workplace-oriented narratives, which regularly wring drama (and comedy) from characters’ overlapping, and often competing, roles. *Mad Men*, in particular, draws on the sustained tension between formal and informal networks. First there is Sterling Cooper’s “formal” corporate hierarchy. Grafted onto this is the “informal” network of friendships, antagonisms, alliances, affairs, and flirtations that inform the everyday life of the agency. Pete Campbell is Peggy Olson’s superior, but they are also—for a brief period—lovers. In early seasons, Joan, the firm’s head secretary, may not have much official power, but her dalliance with Roger Sterling gives her access to the very top of the Sterling Cooper food-chain. Again, it is important to note that these formal and informal relations emerge from and influence each other: Roger’s powerful “formal” position may have contributed to Joan’s attraction to him in the first place, while the consummation of their “informal” relationship potentially undermines his ability to maintain that very role.\(^\text{115}\)

\(^{115}\) Although the series’ formal and informal networks are mutually influential, real-world viewers can interact with either of these networks to varying degrees. For instance, the sociogram produced by *Wired* magazine (Figure 2) represents *Mad Men*’s field of characters as less as a corporate hierarchy than a social web. Stressing the show’s soap-operatic quality by focusing exclusively on romantic relationships, *Wired*’s sociogram color-codes interpersonal links including “Consummated affair,” “Married couple/both single,” “Attempted/hit on,” and the ontologically distinct “Affairs we’d like to see.” For a sociogram that gestures toward both the show’s formal and informal networks, see “*Mad Men*: Seasons 1–4 Explained,” produced by the blog “I Love Charts” (Figure 3). Here the links include such diverse categories as “Business Partner,” “Romance,” “Offspring,” and “Rival.” In fact, the number of sociograms created by persons (fans and media-makers) not officially associated with a given show’s production was one of the more striking phenomena I uncovered in my research for this coda. For instance, the series *Lost*, which follows a large cast of interconnected characters, has inspired many such charts.
Figure 2: Wired's Mad Men Sociogram

Figure 3: Mad Men Seasons 1–4 Explained ("I Love Charts")
*Mad Men’s* focus on issues pertinent to network multiplexity comes to a head in one highly dramatic scene from the notorious episode “Guy Walks Into an Advertising Agency” (3.6). A brief summary of the episode highlights its affiliation with concepts of multiplexity. The episode begins with the announcement that several representatives from Puttnam, Powell, & Lowe (PPL)—Sterling Cooper’s new ownership—will be arriving from England in order to offer their personal assessments of the agency’s performance. Predictably, this news sends shockwaves through the Sterling Cooper offices, as characters conjecture, often fretfully, about what the visit means for them and for the future of the agency. Even Roger Sterling seems on edge, asking rhetorically: “It’s my company; why should I be nervous?” PPL’s visit seems particularly menacing due to its timing: the representatives from the corporate office will arrive just in time to interrupt what the Sterling Cooper employees had thought was going to be their Fourth of July holiday. Characterizing their visit as something of a hostile invasion, Sterling deadpans that “the British are coming.”

In its first half, the episode raises the possibility that Don Draper, the series’ protagonist and Sterling Cooper’s Creative Director, will be promoted, and that the show’s center of gravity, until now rooted in New York City, might subsequently shift to London. Amidst all of the gossiping and guesswork about what PPL’s arrival implies, Bert Cooper, former owner of Sterling Cooper and still an acting partner, suggests to Don that Puttnam, Powell, & Lowe think highly of his work—and thus that purpose of their visit is likely to offer Don a new job as joint Director for both the London and New York branches of the company. Not one to glow, Don is obviously
more than a little pleased with this possibility, even asking his wife later in the episode what she would think of moving to London.

Cleverly, though, *Mad Men* raises such possibilities only to undercut them. In a sudden reversal, it turns out that Don is not gaining power, but losing it. In fact, Don is not going to London because Guy MacKendrick, PPL’s resident *wunderkind*, is coming to New York to assume joint control of the two branches. MacKendrick is a fresh introduction to the world of *Mad Men*. Prior to “Guy Walks Into an Advertising Agency,” viewers have not seen this individual before, nor heard his name, but the episode does an efficient job of characterizing him as a man of competence and confidence and what Saint John Powell, founding owner of PPL, calls “inestimable charm.” Guy’s resume includes degrees from Cambridge and the London School of Economics, not to mention that, as one secretary remarks, he is a “very handsome man.” Indeed, Guy MacKendrick functions as Don Draper’s British doppelganger: a Don Draper without the existential baggage or American ennui.

It is as this point in the episode that *Mad Men* enlists the device of the sociogram for maximum effect. The episode hinges on a crucial scene, situated at the mid-point of its runtime, in which MacKendrick gathers the Sterling Cooper employees into a crowded conference room for what promises to be an important presentation. MacKendrick has brought with him a single visual aid: an organizational chart that presents Sterling Cooper’s new corporate structure, as determined by PPL (see Figure 4). This sociogram, which includes the names of many of *Mad Men*’s major characters, threatens to overhaul the agency—and thus also the show—to which viewers have by
this point in the series become accustomed. Indeed, although MacKendrick attempts to minimize the new scheme by calling it a “slight reorganization,” his “streamlined” organization chart promises huge changes both for Sterling Cooper and for *Mad Men*.

![Figure 4: MacKendrick's Organization Chart (AMC)](image)

The impending changes announced by MacKendrick’s sociogram are many. On the chart, which is projected so that it is visible to characters within the scene as well as to the show’s viewers, Don Draper has been marginalized: he no longer has any “official” access to any of his superiors aside from MacKendrick. MacKendrick, whose name sits closest to the center of the chart (just as MacKendrick himself occupies the center of the conference room—and the frame) has become a new middleman between

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116 Interestingly, following the episode’s premiere AMC posted a download-able image of this sociogram on the channel’s website. This fact seems to bolster my claim that thinking about television dramas in social-network terms has become a dominant mode of audience engagement.
the Sterling Cooper employees and the PPL higher-ups. The organization chart promises other adjustments, as well. For instance, the former PPL-man Lane Pryce’s name is not on it. In a scene immediately prior, Lane had been told that the company would be sending him to Bombay. The PPL representatives claim that this new position is Lane’s “reward” for his productivity at Sterling Cooper, but the Bombay assignment is clearly devastating to Lane, who has come to consider the U.S. his home. It will be “hard to lose Lane,” Guy tells the Sterling Cooper employees, “but our loss is India’s gain.” An even more important name has been left off the chart, this one inadvertently. Bert Cooper notices that “Mr. Sterling’s not on that chart at all.” “It’s true,” Sterling says, dumbfounded. Guy apologizes for the error, and a PPL representative, in an absurdist touch, stands to write Sterling’s name onto the chart with a marker. Of course, the late addition only reinforces the tension between the proposed hierarchy and the current one. I “wasn’t even on the chart,” Sterling complains once the meeting has been disbanded, adding: “My name’s on the wall out there.”

*Mad Men* thus confronts its audience with the possibility of sudden and far-reaching narrative re-arrangement. The hypothetical network, or “network-to-be,” represented by MacKendrick’s sociogram constitutes yet another network that viewers must integrate into their understanding the *Mad Men* storyworld. The scene’s tension works partly on a “meta” level, since the intrusion of the sociogram calls attention to—and threatens to alter—the formal and informal networks already established in the storyworld. What is more, the show encourages viewers to consider how this hypothetical network, even if not yet actualized, comments on the current (formal and
informal) ones. That is, by “updating” the agency’s formal network, Guy’s sociogram perhaps communicates something about the agency’s present structure: in this sense, Sterling’s absence on the chart functions as a commentary on the tenuous nature of his present position, and reaffirms that he often seems a “boss” in name only.

The way the scene is shot and framed underscores these tensions. Following a close-up on the projector as it clicks on, the camera (like the sociogram itself) mostly centers on Guy, who stands in the light of the projector in the otherwise darkened conference room. Meanwhile, the Sterling Cooper employees sit in the shadows, watching mostly in silence as Guy basks in the limelight, determining their futures. As viewers, we look at them looking at their own names on the sociogram—or, in some cases, looking at the absence of their names, at their own effacement. After a close-up of his name on the sociogram, the camera lingers on a reaction shot of Don as he feigns composure—this also in close-up, as a sort of mirror image of the close-up on his name. In contrast to *The Wire*, in which one set of characters (the police) maps the network of another set (the criminals), in this episode of *Mad Men* the Sterling Cooper employees are forced to look at themselves as networked persons, through the lens provided by an embedded sociogram. Indeed, the organizational chart itself dominates the frame, reinforcing its intrusion into this world and its marginalization of the “actual” characters. A sociogram has been brought to bear on the world of Sterling Cooper, and the characters don’t like what they see with it. When the meeting is over, this sense of shock is pervasive. Harry Crane asks, “What the hell just happened?”; Bert Cooper, for his part, apologizes to Don for his “wild imagination.”
Ultimately *Mad Men* uses its sociogram in the service of dark comedy—because, in fact, MacKendrick’s proposed reorganization never gets implemented. Later that same day, during an alcohol-infused goodbye-party for head secretary Joan Harris, another Sterling Cooper secretary inadvertently runs over Guy’s foot with a riding lawnmower. (The lawnmower was in the office because Sterling Cooper had just won an important marketing account with the agricultural manufacturer John Deere—not by coincidence, a quintessentially American company). “We will have to reevaluate our entire strategy,” one of the PPL men admits—in effect scrapping the sociogram to which the episode had devoted so much of its plot and runtime. He adds, moreover, that “Lane will remain here indefinitely.” However, despite the fact that it will never be actualized, the sociogram’s impact still resonates, affecting *Mad Men*’s characters in a variety of ways. Referencing Mark Twain’s (here again, quintessentially American) *Tom Sawyer*, Lane Pryce remarks: “I feel like I just went to my own funeral. I didn’t like the eulogy.” Meanwhile, Guy MacKendrick becomes little more than—forgive me, but this is the kind of pun the episode itself encourages—a footnote in *Mad Men*’s social network. The full extent of this joke is visible in the divergence between the organization chart presented within the show’s storyworld—a sociogram on which Guy had positioned himself at the center—and the network visualization produced retrospectively by the website “I Love Charts,” where he is so marginalized that you might miss him on first glance (Figure 3; find Guy at the bottom-right corner of the chart, where, in further humiliation, he is only linked to the rest of the *Mad Men* network via Lois Sadler, the secretary who mauled his foot). The episode raises expectations that Sterling Cooper, and *Mad Men*, will undergo substantial network re-
configurations—“Before I raise a glass to Sterling Cooper’s future, I’d like to recognize its past,” Guy announces to open Joan’s party. But then the plot suddenly pivots, such that Guy and his sociogram, violently cut off from seriality, instead become doomed to the episodic.

Hence “Guy Walks Into an Advertising Agency,” as its title implies, finally functions as a kind of meta-joke on the audience. Confronting viewers with a potentially drastic reorganization of *Mad Men’s* ensemble, the episode actually ends neither with Don in London nor with Guy in New York, but rather with the status quo, at least in terms of the show’s configuration of its “formal” network. In this sense, *Mad Men* cleverly uses the form of the sociogram to project an alternate version of itself, inviting the audience to consider how the “hypothetical” network comments on the “actual” one, and vice versa. In *Mad Men*, as in *The Wire* before it, a sociogram functions simultaneously as a visual motif, a consequential plot point, and a meta-narrative device. Hence beyond merely thematizing social networks, beyond even staging them on the level of form, these shows implant the instruments and procedures of social network analysis itself into the social worlds of their stories. In so doing, contemporary television serials represent a new chapter in the evolving story of social networks in the narrative imagination.

In this coda, I have only started to lay groundwork for exploring the nexus of social networks and serial-television storytelling. Yet the way contemporary television narratives such as *The Wire* and *Mad Men* have begun regularly embedding sociograms into their storyworlds—such that the very apparatuses of social network analysis have noticeable effects on characters and plots—seems to affirm the ascendency of social
network studies in our digital age. Indeed, the proliferation of sociograms in twenty-first century television serials suggests the extent to which concepts related to social network theory have come to structure audiences’ engagement with narratives of this kind. The related proliferation of what Gerard Genette would call *epitextual* sociograms—those produced by fans or media outlets—further underscores this point, raising the possibility that embedded sociograms such as that found in *Mad Men* function meta-narratively because they insert an (increasingly familiar) epitext formation into the storyworld. Finally, my investigation of *The Wire* and *Mad Men* indicates that the convergence between innovative treatments of fictional characters and theories of social networks, which the individual chapters of this study aimed to demonstrate in the context of modern American fiction, continues unabated in the present day.
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