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Christopher Gair

**‘The Beautiful and True and Good’: Culture, Race, and Nation  
in *The People of the Abyss***

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Christopher Gair

## **‘The Beautiful and True and Good’: Culture, Race, and Nation in *The People of the Abyss***

Jack London’s copy of *The Battle with the Slum* (1902), Jacob Riis’s socio-journalistic study of tenement life in New York, contains only one mark by London. On the rear flyleaf, he indexes page 27, noting ‘English slum (dead) compared with American slum (yeast)’.<sup>1</sup> Such a comment may initially appear strange to readers familiar with London’s regular condemnations of the effects of *American* corporate capitalism on the living conditions of the *American* working classes. We might think, for instance, of the horrors represented in ‘The Apostate’ (1906), *The Road* (1907), or, much later, in *The Valley of the Moon* (1913). Likewise, another book in London’s library, Frank Norris’s *The Octopus* (1901), contains lengthy and melodramatic accounts of desperate searches for any kind of food or shelter in San Francisco, and suggests that release is impossible. Although the protagonists of London’s works *do* manage to escape, either to hoboing or to farming, they are marked (even by London) as being the exceptions (and the exceptional), rather than the rule. More typical are the bleakly deterministic universes of Stephen Crane (*Maggie*), Theodore Dreiser (*Sister Carrie*, at least in the Hurstwood sections), and Upton Sinclair (*The Jungle*). And even where London’s fictions do project release from the dehumanising world of the slum, the ‘yeast’ of rising aspirations is rapidly flattened by the deadening effects of bourgeois culture, as with Martin Eden’s transformation from literary idealist to suicidal depressive, ‘empty of any desire for anything.’<sup>2</sup>

Recently, however, various critics have begun to offer explanations for London’s need to differentiate between American and English slums. In order to do so, they

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<sup>1</sup> David Mike Hamilton, *‘The Tools of My Trade’: The Annotated Books in Jack London’s Library* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1986), 237.

<sup>2</sup> Jack London, *Martin Eden* (1909; reprint, New York and London: Penguin, 1985), 465.