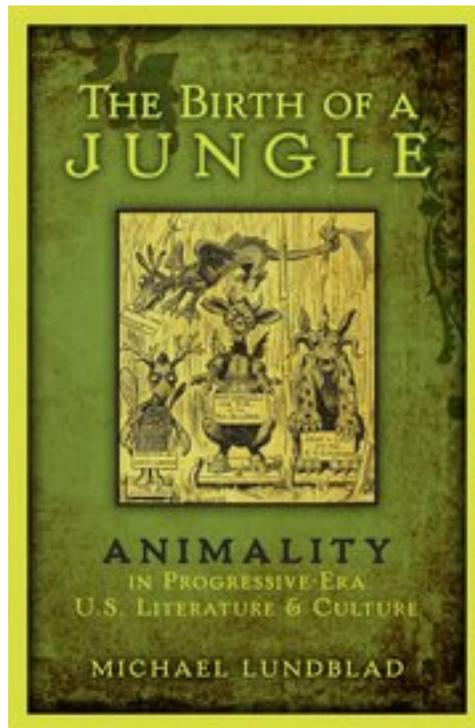


Ana Koncul

Beasts, Savages, and Beyond

Michael Lundblad, *The Birth of a Jungle: Animality in Progressive-Era U.S. Literature and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013. 240 pp. \$65.00.



The beast, the wolf, the savage, the octopus: all of these well-known tropes have marked *fin de siècle* literature in the United States. In his book *The Birth of a Jungle: Animality in Progressive-Era U.S. Literature and Culture* Michael Lundblad does more than trace the historical emergence of the discourse of the jungle in American literary and cultural texts between 1894 and 1914, the period known as the Progressive Era: he examines the texts that resist it.

*The Birth of a Jungle* is an invaluable contribution to the fields of animality and advocacy, the archaeology of humane society, as well as the study of human-animal relations in the US literature. The body of texts Lundblad uses to illustrate his hypothesis renders the discourse of the jungle comprehensible to readers unfamiliar with it. The book is therefore accessible to a wider audience than the community of scholars focused on

American literature and culture of the Progressive Era period, posthumanism, gender and sexuality studies, or Freudian psychoanalysis.

To support his argument that the period also produced texts that defy the Darwinist-Freudian jungle and dwell on alternative formulations of human violence and sexuality, Lundblad brings together works by Henry James, Jack London, Frank Norris, Herbert Spencer, Andrew Carnegie, E. R. Burroughs and Upton Sinclair. These texts, Lundblad argues, reflect a major shift within the discourse of the jungle — impulses that had been seen within a Protestant framework as a devilish, lustful, and evil came to be viewed as natural instincts of the human animal. In the discourse of the jungle the behavior of actual animals represents natural human instincts for violence in the name of survival, on the one hand, and heterosexuality in the name of reproduction, on the other. The alternatives open up possibilities for other characteristics that might be signified by animality.

The texts that have contributed to the construction of the discourse of the jungle commonly employ the aforementioned tropes in order to identify wild animal behavior with *natural* human instincts for competition, reproduction, violence, exploitation, and heterosexuality, as well as with national drives to be the fittest individual or the most civilized nation. As such, the discourse of the jungle heavily draws upon a Darwinist-Freudian heritage. Through the attentive reading of the texts from the period that resist the discourse of jungle, Lundblad emphasizes both their significance and the complexity of their positions, often neglected by current scholarship.

Understanding the historical and cultural circumstances in the US throughout the Progressive Era is of paramount importance for understanding why the discourse of the jungle became hegemonic, as well as how the construction of animality was associated with unrelated contexts such as US race relations. Through the description of the details of Theodore Roosevelt's governance (and particularly the Nature Fakers controversy) and of how Social Darwinism was rejected, Lundblad emphasizes that racial hierarchies had the potential to construct and to be constructed by representations of animality within the discourse of the jungle. During the period in question, Darwinian thinking achieved hegemony in the US. "Unnatural" (homosexual) desire was seen as a threat to Darwinian thought, rather than to God's will. Together with Freudian psychoanalysis,

particularly its naturalization of animal instincts and of heterosexuality, Lundblad sees Darwinism as the foundation of the laws of the jungle.

By examining the epistemology of the jungle, Lundblad invites readers to consider another shift in attention, from sexual acts to sexual identities, reminiscent of Foucault's famous claim that the *species* of the homosexual had not been born before the end of the 19th century. Lundblad initially does so through a close reading of Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle" and by relying on Eve K. Sedgwick's "Epistemology of the Closet." The author sees the figure of the beast as a signifier of queer desire in general, and goes on to argue that the internalized beast becomes the law of the jungle.

Lundblad examines the trope of *the wolf species* through a close reading of Jack London's "The Sea Wolf," which is significant because it represents a movement from James's beast toward an embodied individual character. For Lundblad the novel represents an alternative reading of class-constructed sexuality and questions the submission to middle class constructions of heteronormativity. Even so, the author insists, the narrative constructs "masculinity as embracing *the primitive* in an overcivilized world" (61).

Within the discourse of the jungle, animality is linked to heteronormativity first by following a Freudian line of thought, but also through the assumption that heterosexual intercourse in animals is necessarily a model of *natural* heterosexuality in humans. Representations of animals then become legible signifiers of human sexuality. London's work is particularly interesting, since it questions how the homoerotic content of interaction between men in a novel constructs (or challenges) the epistemology of a *different kind of jungle* (51). The author draws upon the depiction of the wolf on the ship and the potential homoeroticism he is involved in, and yet his narrative structure affirms normative heterosexuality by introducing Maud, another character whose identity transcends conventional conceptions of gender roles. Thus, Lundblad invokes Judith Butler's opposition between gender performativity and gender essence to conclude that transvestism's potential to reveal cultural anxieties should not be neglected. Besides highlighting the naturalization of heterosexuality within the discourse of the jungle, Lundblad questions the assumption that animal representations can only construct intra-*human* sexualities. He contrasts a Freudian psychoanalytical reading to Deleuze and Guattari's critique of the Oedipus complex, as well as to Derrida's *l'animot*.

Lundblad draws upon the posthumanities scholarship of Wolfe, Haraway, and Derrida to claim that the term *bestiality* is just as limiting as the umbrella term *animal*. Readers' attention is drawn to the problematic histories of *animalizing animals* by representing them as driven by instincts, and Lundblad calls for a history of animality that would focus on its cultural link with human oppression and violence. By effectively scanning the entire body of posthumanist scholarship that deals with what Marchesini refers to as *alterita non-humane*, Lundblad proposes animality studies as a discipline that will be more faithful to its research object than animal studies are. Animality studies for Lundblad would not only widen the scope of inquiry through the usage of a less limited term, but would also deal with actual animals and serve as advocacy for nonhuman animals' priorities.

Another aspect of the Darwinist-Freudian framework, the survival of the fittest, is the theme of the third chapter, "The Octopus and the Corporation," in which Lundblad analyzes *monstrous animality* in Spencer, Carnegie and Norris, particularly those representations of corporations that resist the discourse of the jungle. The metaphors are well-known: the corporation's far-reaching tentacles are prepared to attack and abolish their prey in pursuit of profit, and the *bull market* has to be tamed. Spencer's and Carnegie's writings are early examples of this discourse, and their narratives have yet to be animalized, even though the monstrosity has already been condemned. A detailed description of Frank Norris's *The Octopus* illustrates the idea that corporations can be both monstrous and indifferent, but never subject to controllable behaviors nor explicable motivations, which would be the case in the discourse of jungle. The animalization of the market in Spencer and Carnegie is heavily influenced by Christian discourse and social Darwinist economic terms. In addition to justifying competition as "the survival of the fittest instinct" (87), Spencer and Carnegie use the tropes of a bear and a bull to signify the behavior of the market as a whole, rather than that of individual participants. Lundblad invites readers to consider the taming of an increasingly animalized market. Spencer's view of society as an organism and the translation of individualism into the economic rhetoric of the "rising tide that lifts all boats" (89) used the Social Darwinist motto of survival of the fittest to justify exploitation, and caused the fading of Christian morality. Thus, violence became another expression of *natural* instinct, and the ability to control it the marker of class identity. Textual representations of violence caused by instinct functioned to delineate

class boundaries. The relationship between animals and economic ferociousness indicates how capitalism in the Progressive Era exploited the logic of *the jungle*.

The third chapter frames the construction of corporations as resisting the discourse of the jungle, in which wolfish predators exploit economic niches and international companies are driven by the instinct for survival in the market just like beasts in the jungle. The next chapter problematizes representations of *real* animals in the working class figures of Frank Norris's *The Octopus* and Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. Lundblad proposes that these representations were more likely to be animalized in a Darwinist-Freudian sense than that of the corporation. A significant problem in these texts is emphasized by the author: of all economic classes, the working class is constructed as the most animalized, and the different construction of the nature of the beast in more privileged characters bears traces of residual Christian discourse. According to Lundblad Norris's novel represents "the crisis of faith in the explanatory power of the Christian world view and displays a resistance to the growing hegemony of Darwinist-Freudian animality" (98). The privileged are able to resist being driven by animal instinct thanks to Christian morality. Working class characters, by contrast, are essentialized as beings capable of acting only according to the violent drive for survival. The scenes of violence in *The Octopus* Lundblad sees as illustrations of how animality defines both the nature of class identity and the nature of violence during the Progressive Era.

Another aspect of the threat of class violence is seen in the reading of the public spectacle of the electrocution of elephant Topsy at Coney Island, "a moral holiday" (94) in which "hierarchies overturned and penalties were suspended" (94). Lundblad sees the elephant's body as a representation of the working class, and as another example of the addition of aggressive impulses to Freudian *natural* sexual drives. He also notes that the discourse of jungle is not necessarily limited to society's lower strata. It evolves into a hegemonic discourse due to its ability to describe the behavior of all classes and of every attempt of social reform.

*The other race* is also seen as driven by violent impulses in the literature of the Progressive Era. Lundblad closely analyzes the representations of debauched African-American workers in *The Jungle* and *The Octopus*. The next chapter, titled "The Evolution of Race: Archaeology of a Humane Society. Animality, Savagery, Blackness," explores why the discourse of the jungle makes it easier to imagine white men as descendants of animals than of "contemporary barbarians." In this chapter Lundblad

examines the discourse of humane reform, which was constructed simultaneously with the justification of lynching through the myth of the black rapist. The birth of a humane society has its roots in Christian notions of duty towards helpless creatures. The 19th century is marked by the emergence of numerous foundations, organizations, and laws against animal abuse, cruelty, and negligence, alongside the notion that to be human means having the ability to restrain one's primal instincts. *Heat of passion* – the inability to resist animal instincts – was introduced into juridical discourse as a mean of defense. This flexible discourse was employed for the purpose of claiming superiority over non-white human races, and reinforcing the logic that claims that the higher evolutionary stage of the more civilized groups grants them the privilege to treat other races humanely. The white race was therefore seen as the only one capable of limiting and avoiding the inhumane treatment of black savages and animals. Interestingly, in contrast with white men's interest in *getting in touch* with their primal instincts, black men attempted to distance themselves from the trope of the black rapist and from the general construction of their animality. As a result, Lundblad writes, whiteness has been seen as associated with animality rather than with savagery. Lundblad thus concludes that within Darwinist-Freudian discourse, savages have remained stuck in the totem and taboo stage and are in need of external prohibition, instead of internalization.

Finally, the author examines what is probably the most popular fictional figure of the jungle discourse of the 20th century, E. R. Burroughs' Tarzan, in order to discuss the displaced representation of both US domestic and foreign race relations. Lundblad emphasizes the novel's disruption of evolutionary logic, and argues that not only can savagery and animality be distinguished, but also that animality has the potential to be elevated above savagery "in a disavowal of the evolutionary link between (black) savagery and (white) humanity" (139). In addition to examining the imperialist and racist implications of the famous work, Lundblad pays special attention to possibilities of reading the animals as actual animals, not only as constructions of them. Thus, Tarzan's supposedly inherent class and racial superiority distinguishes him both from animals and from the animalized white, the working class sailor, and so his cruelty is constructed as *natural*. Tarzan, finally, seems to resist the common hierarchies of gender, colonial status, and race, which are embedded in the Freudian primitive.

Lundblad concludes with several examples that emphasize the inconsistencies and complexity of the constructions of animality and of the discourse of the jungle at the turn of the century. He invites the reader to reconsider the relevance of Haraway's, Bekoff's, and Derrida's work, as well as of the potential of animality studies to reveal additional grounds for resisting hegemonic associations of the animal with instincts for heterosexuality and violence. The necessity of resistance to hegemonic associations is of inevitable importance, as the dominant discourse justifies and normalizes unchecked capitalist expansion and the repression of radical otherness. The Darwinist-Freudian framework has reoccurred persistently in innumerable cultural texts during the entire twentieth century. The discourse of the jungle has also flourished, widely permeating contemporary culture. Alerting us to the importance of recognizing subtle deflections from the discourse of the jungle is perhaps the greatest value of Lundblad's book, as it issues a call for a more thorough reading that can provide displaced perspectives that subvert the dominant Darwinist-Freudian appropriations of sexuality and violence, as well as providing a model for further analyses of other, especially contemporary, incarnations of the discourse of the jungle.

### Works Cited

Marchesini, Roberto. "[Alterity and the Non-Human.](#)" *Humanimalia*, Volume 1, Number 2 – Spring 2010.