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Posthuman Languages and Animal Rights in Jack London's Dog Fiction

Posthuman readings of literature tend to stress future transformations of subjectivity. Yet the idea of a posthuman past is too often overlooked. My paper today will use Jack London's The Call of the Wild (1903) and White Fang (1906) to address this subject, demonstrating how London's depiction of co-evolution between dogs and humans de-centers the liberal humanist subject and anticipates Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan's argument that "we are only a single theme of the orchestrated lifeform. With its glorious nonhuman past and its uncertain but provocative future, this life, our life, is embedded now, as it always has been, in the rest of Earth's sentient symphony" (199). This paper will cover three areas of concern. First, I will examine how the subjectivity of dogs is an evolutionary process of becoming rather than a fixed biological type. Second, I will read the ending of White Fang through Jacques Derrida's posthuman possibilities for language. Third, I will connect Cary Wolfe's critique of models for animal rights with London's vision of biological kinship.

I. Non-Human Subjects and the Reconstruction of Gender

In The Call of the Wild, Buck's dreaming about his wolf ancestors invokes an atavistic campfire scene, where he sees a "man [who] was shorter of leg and longer of arm, with muscles that were stringy and knotty rather than rounded and swelling He

uttered strange sounds, and seemed very much afraid of the darkness” (41). In White Fang, the wolf’s domestication follows a historical pattern that supports an evolutionary process of becoming rather than a fixed biological type:

His heredity was a life-stuff that may be likened to clay. It possessed many possibilities, was capable of being moulded into many different forms. Environment served to model the clay, to give it a particular form. Thus, had White Fang never come in to the fires of man, the Wild would have moulded him into a true wolf. But the gods had given him a different environment, and he was moulded into a dog that was rather wolfish, but that was a dog and not a wolf. (194-95)

London thus anticipates Donna Haraway’s proposal that

Those wolves with lower rates of thyroxine production, and so lower titers of the fright/flight adrenaline cocktail regulated by thyroid secretions, could get a good meal near human habitations. If they were really calm, they might den nearby A few generations of this could produce a being remarkably like current dogs, complete with curled tails a range of jaw types, considerable size variation, dogish coat patterns, floppy ears, and—above all—the capacity to stick around people and forgive almost anything. (119)

The co-evolutionary processes that join human and animal are guided by autopoiesis, defined by Margulis and Sagan as “life’s continuous production of

itself” (23). Derived from the second-order systems theory of Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, autopoietic systems complicate vision. Maturana and Varela explain that because an autopoietic system is “operationally closed” off from its environment, it “does not ‘pick up information’ from the environment, as we often hear. On the contrary, it brings forth a world by specifying what patterns of the environment are perturbations and what changes trigger them in the organism” (169). The perception of dogs is as subjective as that of humans, constituted through a field of vision that “brings forth a world” and incorporates them in the act of constructing meaning. Preceding Buck, London writes,

were the shades of all manners of dogs, half-wolves and wild wolves . . . scenting the wind with him, listening with him and telling him the sounds made by the wild life in the forest, dictating his moods, directing his actions, lying down to sleep with him when he lay down, and dreaming with him and beyond him and becoming themselves the stuff of his dreams. (62)

In *White Fang*, London connects subjective vision to received experiences, “Not alone out of his own eyes, but out of the eyes of all his ancestors was the cub now looking upon man – out of eyes that had circled in the darkness of countless winter campfires” (155). Rather than an absolute perspective from which to observe animal thinking, London gives us partial glimpses of evolution in action and identities in formation. As Haraway comments, gender “[d]ifference is theorized biologically as situational, not intrinsic, at every level from gene to foraging pattern, thereby fundamentally changing the biological

politics of the body” (199-200). What appears as London’s most imaginative and, yet paradoxical, deconstruction of evolutionary being is, at the same time, a reconstruction of gender. That is, the aforementioned image of dogs “dreaming with [Buck] and beyond him and becoming themselves the stuff of his dreams” dissipates an essential gendered self for Buck. London’s paradoxical way of questioning a static model of gender, moreover, fits with the paradoxical constitution of autopoietic systems. Wolfe elaborates,

What makes such systems paradoxical . . . is the identity of the difference between the two sides of the distinction that anchors its code. . . . [T]he tautological *unity* of this distinction may be disclosed only by a *second-order* observer, operating within *another* system and *another* code, which must remain blind to *its* paradoxical distinction if it is to use that distinction to process events for the system’s autopoiesis, and so on and forth.

(“Meaning”)¹

London mirrors this process by the generations of dogs, half-wolves, and wolves that constitute Buck and yet act apart and “beyond him.” In the words of Niklas Luhmann, “[T]he paradox does not prevent the operations of the system. On the contrary, it is the condition of their possibility” (in “Meaning”). London’s self-reflexive depiction of the evolutionary process presents the set of possibilities for subjectivity, without foreclosing any future transformations. And to return to Maturana and Varela, these possibilities demonstrate how posthuman languages are “a continuous becoming that we bring forth with others” (234-35).

II. Animal Equity, Human Justice, and Companion Species

In White Fang, London looks further at the ethical implications of regarding dogs as companion species. Although White Fang “had no abstract ideas about justice and fair play,” he retains “a sense of equity” (269). This “sense of equity” is shaped by his decision to sit by the fire of Gray Beaver, his first master: “At last he lay at the master’s feet, into whose possession he now surrendered himself, voluntarily, body and soul. Of his own choice he came in to sit by man’s fire and to be ruled by him” (182). But how London, through White Fang, perceives racial differences determines the ranking of those men who rule; as compared with Native Americans, white men are “a race of superior gods.” Of course, White Fang “does not reason it out”; it is a “feeling” (204). There is a related difference in his feelings of affection; for White Fang’s strongest emotional attachment is to his last owner, the white, upper-class mining engineer, Weedon Scott, “the love-master.”² The narrative intends to depict love as a natural trait; Charles Darwin writes that the “lower animals” exhibit the “same principle of pleasure” as humans do (Expression of Emotions 215).³ But at the same time it is an unnatural trait, for Mark Seltzer states, “Learning to love pain and the god-like hand of his master, White Fang learns to love at once the pleasure of unnatural acts (acts contrary to every ‘mandate of his instinct’) and the pain of turning from ‘the natural’ to the ‘cultural’” (169).

The civilizing of White Fang blurs the distinctions between reaction and response in two crucial scenes. When Weedon Scott is thrown from his horse and breaks his leg, White Fang runs to the house and is able to communicate, through barking, what has happened.⁴ In the final scene, a brutal convict, Jim Hall, escapes prison and seeks

revenge against Judge Scott who presided at his trial. While London expresses some sympathy for Hall, “ill-made in the making” and “innocent of the crime for which he was sentenced,” London implies that Hall, “a human beast,” is a threat to civilized society that must be violently controlled (277, 79). When Hall breaks into the Scott household, the wolf-dog waits until Hall starts up the stairs that “led to the love-master and his dearest possessions” before attacking (280). In London’s description of White Fang here, we see that he acts equally out of instinctual reaction and as a response for his love for Weedon Scott. The sense of animal “equity” (and the subsequent endorsement of upper-class values of property) is maintained over that of “justice” for the wrongly convicted Hall.

Biological kinship is thus reinforced through White Fang’s perception of equity, an instinctual feeling that is freighted with cultural codes. In an interview, Jacques Derrida states that “if one reinscribes language in a network of possibilities that do not merely encompass it but mark it irreducibly from the inside” then “[t]hese possibilities or necessities, without which there would be no language are themselves not only human” (“Eating Well” 116-17).⁵ As a result, Derrida posits, we are able to better read “the complexity of ‘animal languages,’ genetic coding, all forms of marking.” If we interpret White Fang’s barking as communication through animal languages and the final scene of the book as London’s elevation of animal “equity” over human “justice,” then London is really arguing that animals have an equal presence on the biological stage with humans. London’s blurring of the boundaries between response and reaction would, as Derrida affirms, erode the differences between animal and human. As Derrida comments, “It is less of a matter of asking whether one has the right to refuse the animal such and such a power (speech, reason, experience of death . . . and so on . . .) than of asking whether

what calls itself human has the right to rigorously attribute to man, which means therefore to attribute to himself, what he refuses the animal” (“Animal” 137).

London’s vision of biological kinship destabilizes human subjectivity, something that human reason, always and already guided by evolution, cannot refute. As London says in his conclusion to “The Other Animals” (1908), his powerful refutation of Teddy Roosevelt’s claim that he was a “nature faker,” the refusal of biological kinship is “a pretty spectacle, truly, of an exalted animal striving to disown the stuff of life out of which it is made, striving by use of the very reason that was developed by evolution to deny the process of evolution that developed it” (120). The posthuman rupture in subjectivity caused by biological kinship, however, can only be resolved in the closing violent fantasies in both novels that act out desires for the restoration of a stable social order. In the Call of the Wild, Buck’s return from the wild to attack the Native Americans, the Yeehats, who murdered his master is supported by Richard Slotkin’s frontier thesis. He writes that the frontier, as an ideological construct, “represented the redemption of American spirit or fortune as something to be achieved by playing through a scenario of separation, temporary regression to a more primitive or ‘natural’ state, and regeneration through violence (12). Buck’s evolutionary regression, signified by his identification with the untamed wolf rather than domesticated dog, recaptures a masculine vitality expressed through his attack on the Yeehats. His vengeance, in a historical context, not only legitimates U.S. dominance within its borders but rationalizes national expansion into new frontiers. And as I have just discussed, *White Fang*’s assault on Jim Hall maintains patriarchal control.

III. Biological Kinship, Species Discourses, and Animal Rights

We now arrive at the question of animal rights, a logical endpoint of London's biological kinship. Wolfe, in Animal Rites, critically examines two ethical formulations of animal rights, the "noncontingent natural ground," embodied by Peter Singer's concept of "suffering," and "the contingency of the social contract" (39, 48-49), forwarded by Vicki Hearne. Although Singer goes beyond a species-based discrimination (specieism), the reduction of animal rights to a primary right to avoid suffering, as Deborah Slicer contends, "is an 'essentialist' view of the moral worth of both human beings and animals" for it advocates "a single capacity—the possession of interests for being owed moral consideration" (in Wolfe 35). Conversely, Hearne's proposal for reciprocal relations between animals and humans is, as Elizabeth Anderson observes, supported by her case study of the ways "riders and horses come to communicate in a language expressed in a medium of touch" (286). But the promise of Hearne's posthuman languaging is dashed by her insistence of wording these relations in the terms of a social contract, creating what Wolfe calls "tortured formulations" that reintroduce humanist legal values as the deciding factor (49).

Finding both Singer and Hearne's models inadequate, Wolfe advocates a policy that "declares out of bounds any representationalist account of how we might 'ground' the ethical standing of being X in some more empirically 'true' understanding of its actual nature" (39). Despite the problematic treatment of race and gender which I have examined earlier, London's vision of biological kinship as an evolutionary "becoming" rather than "being" refutes an essentialist grounding for a "natural" subject—that is, as I have said before, contingencies remain unforeclosed. And as Wolfe promotes the self-

referential systems paradoxes of Luhmann as a way to extend and expand species discourses, we better grasp the significance of Luhmann's idea that "a system can only see what it can see. It cannot see what it cannot. Moreover, it cannot see that it cannot see this" (in Wolfe 204-05). Such an idea short-circuits the very assumptions for the universality of human reason that London assails. Taken further, we can even perhaps begin to undo the race and gender-based discriminations that underpin the motives for specieism, those discriminations that limit London's argument for animal rights.

I want to conclude with a brief remark about John Howard Moore's Universal Kinship, published the same year as White Fang. London, in his personal copy (housed in the Huntington Library, Rare Book Collection, San Marino, CA) marked a passage that resonates with his thinking, "All beings are ends; no creatures are means. All beings have not equal rights, neither have all men; but all have rights" (324). It is a promise that remains deferred in London's work. Yet London's failed attempts to realize this promise challenge us to respond, in the present, to the ethical dictates of biological kinship.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Cary Wolfe for allowing me to quote from an earlier draft of “Meaning as Event-Machine, or Systems Theory and ‘The Reconstruction of Deconstruction.’”
2. Tellingly, London writes that Gray Beaver did not “sound” the “deeps in [White Fang’s] nature” (187), which distinguishes Gray Beaver from Weedon Scott. The implication here is that White Fang can learn love only from a white, upper-class American.
3. To determine what London had read on Darwin, I consulted David Mike Hamilton’s “The Tools of My Trade”: The Annotated Books in Jack London’s Library and The Letters of Jack London Volume One: 1896-1905, edited by Earle Labor, Robert C. Leitz, III, and I. Milo Shepard. Discussions with Bert Bender and Sara S. Hodson and the research staff at the Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California, which houses London’s personal library, also were helpful.
4. Even domesticated, as a wolf White Fang has difficulty barking. As London states, “For the second and last time in his life he had barked and made himself understood” (275-76).
5. My reading of Derrida here is influenced by Wolfe, Animal Rites.

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