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Taming Southern California Wilderness

Animality, Capitalist Pioneers, and Christian Socialism in Upton Sinclair's *Oil!*

Enrico Mariani
Ca' Foscari University of Venice
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7006-8834
Email: enrico.mariani@unive.it

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Abstract

Despite David Fine's consideration of Upton Sinclair's novel *Oil!* (1926) as the most ambitious novel about Los Angeles in the 1920s (2004), the novel received limited critical attention, except for an early reading of the novel as a debunking of Los Angeles' crooked capitalist monopoly, and a recent renewed interest in ecocritical perspectives related to the oil industry and oil trade. Venturing beyond these two main threads, the essay offers a reading of the novel that focuses on human interaction with the Southern California flora and fauna and explores how human/animal relationships influence the social dynamics between the protagonists and oil workers. The analysis is thus structured in two main parts. First, it briefly situates the novel within literary transitions: as a "new frontier" novel and as one of the earliest examples of *extractive fiction* (M. S. Henry 2019). Second, drawing on "animality studies" (M. Lundblad 2013), it analyzes several instances of humans' animalization and animality – the construction of the human/animal categories based on Darwinist-Freudian terms – and interrogates the application of the "survival of the fittest" discourse to the conflict of capital (oilmen) versus labor (socialist workers). Ultimately, it demonstrates that the conflict is instead resolved on the grounds of Christian piety and morality, due to the religious component with which the narrative imbues Socialism.

"You're going to include Los Angeles, then?"

"The whole Southern California, the new land of 'black gold.'"

(Mary Craig Sinclair, *Southern Belle*)

1. Introduction

In the cinematic first chapter of Upton Sinclair's novel *Oil!* (1927), the two protagonists, the independent oil operator J. Arnold Ross and his son, nicknamed Bunny, are taking a long car ride through the desertic highways of Southern California, heading to Beach City (a fictional counterpart of Long Beach) to sign an oil lease. They stop to eat in the "Western town" of Santa Ynez, where J. A. Ross, also called Dad, takes fried rabbit, while Bunny "thought he wouldn't – not because of the cannibalistic suggestion, but because of one he had seen mashed on the road that morning. He chose roast pork – not having seen any dead pigs" (Sinclair 2007, 19). If

Bunny's attitude could apparently be dismissed as childish behavior, it is also indicative of a way in which progressive intellectuals in the US, and precisely in a Southern California transitioning towards modernity, constructed human-animal relationships at the beginning of the 20th century. In this essay it will be shown that Bunny's attitude towards animals relates to his fondness for Socialist ideals, and that some practices of oil extraction can be conceived as 'animalistic,' as the oil-business jargon seems to suggest.

At the turn of the 19th to 20th century, Charles Darwin's evolutionism, Sigmund Freud's studies about human 'animal instincts' and Herbert Spencer's social Darwinism, along with new discoveries on animal behaviors, led to new ways of thinking about humans, such as the application of the 'survival of the fittest' theory to modern capitalist societies. In the US, this scientific and ideological turmoil produced what Michael Lundblad calls "the discourse of the jungle," which "revolves around questions related to the figure of 'the animal': constructing the nature of 'the beast' in terms of both 'real' animals and the human being as a Darwinist-Freudian animal" (2013, 2). The kind of 'animality studies' proposed by Lundblad must not be confused with the field of Animal Studies – theorized, among others, by Kenneth Shapiro, Jacques Derrida, Donna Haraway, and Cary Wolfe – that "emphasize[s] treating nonhuman animals better, or that prioritize identifying whether texts and practices succeed or fail in modeling ethical treatment of animals" (2013, 12). Animality studies do not focus on

> advocacy for nonhuman animals, even though [they] share an interest in how we think about "real" animals. Animality studies can prioritize questions of human cultural politics, then, in relation to how we have thought about human and nonhuman animality at various historical and cultural moments. (Lundblad 2013, 12)

In his study, Lundblad examines US texts published between 1894 and 1914 (2013, 3), which both resist and contribute to the discourse of the jungle, featuring authors such as Rudyard Kipling, Henry James, Jack London, Frank Norris, and Upton Sinclair, whose classic *The Jungle* (1906) is taken as a case study. This article tries to extend the analysis of "new constructions of what it means to be human, as well as animal" (Lundblad 2013, 6) also to *Oil!*, focusing on the relationship between oil tycoons, oil workers and the Southern California environment, particularly with animals – "the bestiary of California writers," in fact, "is quite extensive and animal imagery abounds" (Lagayette 2016, 82). Specific attention is also given to the regional dimension of the novel, which is read here both as a Southern Californian *extractive fiction* (Henry 2019, 403; Bordin 2024, 17-18), and as a peculiar 'frontier' novel.[1] Instances of

[1] The term refers to the Western frontier literary tradition, from J. Fenimore Cooper, Catherine M. Sedgwick, and Francis Parkman to the Southern Californian context in Bret Harte, Helen Hunt Jackson, and Mary Austin.

animality, in fact, can be found in the encounter of the new pioneers – businessmen and magnates – with the Southern California wilderness, on the background of a booming Los Angeles at the peak of its class struggle, from WWI until the first half of the 1920s. In this sense, Lundblad's approach on animality is here combined with Mike Davis' history of wildlife in Southern California, according to which "the social construction of nature is typically mirrored by the naturalization of social contradictions" (2020, 208). In Sinclair's novel, J. A. Ross' building of an oil empire in a still rural Los Angeles forces him and his son to confront the region's ecology and to participate in the politics of wildlife. The latter, claims Davis, "presents a double aspect. On the one hand, it concerns the formation of human attitudes toward animals; on the other, it concerns class or ethnic conflict refracted through the symbolic role of wildlife in distinguishing the ethical universes of competing social groups" (2020, 208). First, however, it is necessary to provide an overview of the novel's multilayered plot, its critical legacy, and its tradition in the US national and regional literary production.

2. (Un)fortunate legacies of *Oil!*

The kernel of *Oil!* is the story of Bunny's political and sentimental education, centered on the relationship with his sympathetic father J. A. Ross, who becomes the most important independent oil tycoon in the Los Angeles basin around 1913-1923. Destined to become the heir of Ross' oil empire, Bunny gets caught between the privileged environment of his family and the Socialist ideals of his proletarian friend and mentor Paul Watkins, ideals to which Bunny feels much more attracted and for which he becomes an advocate. The novel follows Bunny's journey through his oil business education, his college years, his gatherings with both the Southern Californian rich (the Hollywood milieu), the I.W.W., and the Socialists, up to his ongoing research for a more just treatment of workers in the oil industry and his utopian quest to resolve the conflict of "capital versus labor" (Sinclair 2007, 316-317). J. A. Ross, eventually, gets involved in an oil scandal with the US government, while Paul Watkins falls victim of the Red Scare and anti-communist propaganda, and Bunny finds his compromise in founding a socialist utopian community, a "Labor college."

As many of Sinclair's works, *Oil!* is partially inspired by real events and real people. Sinclair's interest for the oil business started after he moved to Los Angeles, when an oilman purchased two lots that he and his wife owned at Signal Hill and drove them all around the area while Sinclair interrogated him about the business – a car ride that inspired the first chapter mentioned above (Sinclair 2005, 302; Wyatt 2010, 35). The oil scandal is a clear adaptation of the 1920s Teapot Dome Scandal, when W. G. Harding's Secretary of Interiors Albert Fall assured, under bribery, the exclusive rights of the Navy's oil reserve to two tycoons: Harry F. Sinclair (not related to the writer) and Edward L. Doheny. The latter and C. C. Julian are the

two Southern Californian oil tycoons upon which J. A. Ross is modeled (Fine 2004, 54-55; Starr 1990, 87-88); while Paul Watkins' brother, the evangelist priest Eli, is a key character explicitly modeled on the famous controversial evangelist preacher Aimee Semple McPherson, who became the protagonist of fictional accounts and a target of the media in the 1920s and 1930s (Fine 2004, 54-58).

Within Sinclair's extremely prolific literary production, *Oil!* – first serialized between 1926 and 1927 – was the second commercial success after *The Jungle*; it was translated into twenty-nine languages and became a sensation across the country, partly due to its ban for 'obscenity' by the Boston authorities. In response, Sinclair sold a self-published 'fig-leaf' edition on the streets of that same city, which led to his temporary arrest (Sinclair 2005, 309-310; Coodley 2013, 98-99). The 'obscenities' were to be found in chapter 8, for example, where a young-adult Bunny discusses contraceptives with his first girlfriend, while in chapter 16 Bunny's sister, Bertie, has an abortion. As David Fine notes, in fact, apart from the oil-centered plot, the novel's "documentary scope is immense," and "takes us through the tumultuous period from World War I to the Coolidge years," passing through several sub-plots about the US perception of the Russian Revolution, Red Scare, Hollywood star system, college life, and Prohibition drinking (2004, 60).

Despite *Oil!*'s scarce critical reception, two threads can be identified. The older one emphasizes its importance as a debunking document of Southern California's society at its first capitalist edge (Ulin 2002, 67), and starts with the Southern Californian historian Carey McWilliams, also a friend and supporter of Sinclair, who praised the novel as "very good: a fine panoramic picture of southern California, and woefully true" (1926, qtd. in Richardson 2005, 29). Likewise, echoing McWilliams, Mike Davis considered the novel as "historically interesting" because it "debunked the oil boom and evoked the oppression of labor in Los Angeles" (2018, 28-29). A more positive reception comes from Fine, who defines it "the most wide-reaching, most ambitious novel about Los Angeles in the 1920s by the most prominent American novelist to settle in the region at the time" (2004, 58). Similarly, David Wyatt places *Oil!* among the "big California novels," between Frank Norris' *The Octopus* (1901) and John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), which "depict the state as uniquely hospitable to concentrations of power" (2010, 35). The second and most recent thread follows the novel's renewed attention after its loose cinematic adaptation by Paul Thomas Anderson, the acclaimed *There Will Be Blood* (2007), and is more focused on aesthetics and global-politics issues. Anderson's movie is, in fact, based on a small part of the novel's plot and its scholarship is more focused either on Anderson's own aesthetics (Di Vilio 2023) or in the process of film adaptation (Phipps 2015), but some of the latest studies provide also innovative perspectives on the novel by analyzing it within the

framework of *petrofiction*, or oil literature (LeMenager 2014; Hitchcock 2010), as it will be discussed further on.

Despite these sporadic readings, the general poor reception of the novel can be attributed to its lack of formal innovation, especially for a period, the US Modernist 1920s, that saw the publication of experimental and refined works by John Dos Passos, Francis Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner. Mike Davis' notion that the novel is "vapidly written" (2018, 28) can be traced back again to McWilliams' opinion, who thought the novel had "one defect: a chatty, overly explicit, awfully obvious, prose style. Perhaps this comes from [Sinclair's] long years as a hack writer, and [from] his years as a pamphleteer. Yet it is a serious blemish: he writes as poorly as Dreiser" (1926, qtd. in Richardson 2005, 29).[2] While Sinclair's unstable legacy and questionable literary consideration can sometimes tempt to dismiss his novels as mere fictional extensions of his pamphlets, I find it more stimulating to connect *Oil!* to broader literary traditions and to move beyond its reading as "a long piece of documentary realism, a muckraking exposé of industrial corruption, municipal graft, and political chicanery" (Fine 2004, 58).

3. In search of a tradition: a new frontier novel, an old extractive fiction

Given the periodic renewed interest in the novel, especially for its resonance with many current issues such as Southern California ecocriticism, oil aesthetics, and social politics, it might be useful to find new critical frameworks both inside and outside the US literary tradition. An overlooked characteristic of the novel is its peculiar echo to the frontier image, which was taking a new shape in the first decades of the 20th century. As it will be shown, the novel refers to the pioneer image within a post-frontier cultural framework (Docherty 2024, 6), as envisioned by Frederick Jackson Turner in his 1893 well-known essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," where he claims that in the absence of a physical frontier, its spirit remains

[2] The debates around Sinclair's literary quality started right after the success of *The Jungle*: the general impression was that his background as a 'muckraker' journalist made him privilege the documental, sociological, and propagandist features of the literary means over a lyrical and innovative prose style. His friend and rival Henry Louis Mencken, in a review of Sinclair's novel *The Moneychangers* (1908), made clear that "Sinclair has hopelessly confused the functions of the novelist with those of the crusader. […] His characters are at once too familiar and too elusive" (1908, 156). Sinclair himself, however, was not eager to become a formal innovator, but was a conscious advocate for the moral use of literature as a political means, as he peremptorily claims in the pamphlet he wrote right before *Oil!*, titled *Mammonart* (1925): "all art is propaganda. It is universally and inescapably propaganda; sometimes unconsciously, but often deliberately, propaganda" (1925, 9). More recently, Mario Maffi claimed that from Sinclair's enormous production, only a few things can be saved from a strictly literary point of view, not entire novels but fragments, such as the descriptions (2013, 144). Some of them, says Maffi, reach almost a cinematic quality, as for example the Lithuanian feast in the opening of *The Jungle*, or the first chapter from *Oil!*, which "anticipates the road movies," whereas some others, as in the first chapter from *King Coal* (1917), expressed his fine qualities as social historian (2013, 144-145).

in the American character (1928, 38). The most precise definition of the frontier that can be found in Sinclair's novel, however, is given in a post-Turnerian essay by Frank Norris (Docherty 2024, 6-7), "The Frontier Gone at Last" (1902). Here, Norris satirizes the closing of the frontier, claiming that a new phase was ahead of the US under two new conditions: a new direction, "conquer we must, and checked in the Westward course of empire we turned Eastward"; and a new purpose, "the great word of our century is no longer War but Trade" (Norris 1986, 1185). According to Norris, after the westward colonial expansion, which stopped with the Philippines occupation, the US have turned eastward with the aim of trading all the natural and cultural resources they could extract and profit on, thus giving a new ironic rendition to Berkeley's saying: "Eastward the course of commerce takes its way" (Norris 1986, 1187).[3] J. A. Ross, as his non-fictional counterparts, went westward to extract oil and sell it eastward to Europe and the Middle East, turning the romantic Turnerian ideology of the frontier to a more straight settler *habitus* dependent from the market laws. Sinclair's novel is one of the few from that period to mark exactly this transition in the South-Western setting: the pioneers of the West are no longer the men of the people, the Daniel Boones, the Davy Crocketts, the Natty Bumppos, guided by a rural-based Jeffersonian democratic ideal; they are instead the businessmen, the robber barons, and the entrepreneurs ready to exploit the remaining corners of the West and its labor force as long as their profits grow.

A 'new frontier' novel would be, nonetheless, a rather incomplete definition for *Oil!* since it leaves out the title referent, oil extraction, which takes up a great descriptive part for the first quarter of the novel and remains undercurrent for the rest of the plot. In a 1992 article, Amitav Ghosh coined the word "petrofiction" referring to Jordanian writer Abdelrahman Munif's novel, *Cities of Salt* (1987), lamenting that there was not enough fiction which raised concerns about the consequences of oil extraction and of the global oil trade (1992, 29-30). Ghosh claimed that especially US writers should oversee the writing of petrofiction, but because of cultural, institutional, and political reasons, "there isn't a Great American Oil Novel" (1992, 30). Ghosh's overlooking of Sinclair's novel is evidenced by Peter Hitchcock's comparative analysis of *Oil!* and *Cities of Salt*, when the latter claims: "the Great American Oil Novel is contemporaneous with the emergence of oil in American history. Sinclair's oil encounter […] confronts the transformation any discovery of oil produces in the modern period, this time within the very infrastructure of the American state" (2010, 90). Hitchcock himself is aware, however, that *Oil!*

[3] The last stanza of the poem "Verses On the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America" (1728) by Irish philosopher George Berkeley (1685-1753) begins with the verse: "Westward the course of empire takes its way." This line became a motto for the doctrine of US Manifest Destiny of westward expansion and inspired the title of Emanuel G. Leutze's 1861 painting in the US Capitol.

can hardly be included in Ghosh's category (2010, 89-94), because in Ghosh's idea, the form of petrofiction is postmodern, thus impossible to be conceived in the 1920s:

> The territory of oil is bafflingly multilingual, […] while the novel, with its conventions of naturalistic dialogue, is most at home within monolingual speech communities (within nation-states, in other words). […] The experiences associated with oil are lived out within a space that is no place at all, a world that is intrinsically displaced, heterogeneous, and international. (1992, 30-31)

Sinclair's novel, on the contrary, is monolingual, it is conceived in a time where the distinctions among nation-states are very clear (its WWI and international chapters are imbued with nation-state geopolitics), and its perspective is extremely local – namely, American and Southern Californian.

For these reasons, I argue that a more suitable descriptive category for *Oil!* would be Matthew S. Henry's term, "extractive fiction," which refers to "literature and other cultural forms that render visible the socioecological impacts of extractive capitalism and problematize extraction as a cultural practice" (2019, 403). In contrast to Ghosh's petrofiction, the concept of extractive fiction regains the local dimension – in the case of Sinclair that of the Southern California microcosm made of oilmen, farmers, and workers, because extractive fiction "give[s] a voice to those residing in 'sacrifice zones,' landscapes considered expendable in pursuit of what government and industry stakeholders perceive as a 'greater good'" (Henry 2019, 405). The environmental engagement of the novel, however, is challenged by Stephanie LeMenager, who claims that "this 'committed' book also generates a series of aesthetic images and environmental emotions that valorize driving and even the process of oil extraction" (2014, 69). The aesthetic of petroleum generated by *Oil!*, though, is intrinsic both in the novel medium itself and in the Progressive Era dialectic between the wonder for new industrial innovations and the costs of the means of production. Going back to Sinclair's *The Jungle*, a similar aesthetic dialectic is represented by the protagonist Jurgis, when he finds himself "open-mouthed, lost in wonder" (1906, 43) in front of the Taylorized disassembly line of the meat-packing factories at the Chicago stockyards: he cannot help but feel a fascination towards the same machine that progressively debases him. Or, to put it with Hitchcock's words about *Oil!*: "true, the novel embraces industrial prowess as central to a vibrant modernity […] but its critique of capitalism […] permits a creative ambivalence in class tension that cannot be resolved by oil encounters alone" (2010, 89-90). According to Henry, in fact, extractive fiction does not systematically guarantee transformative politics but articulates alternative "visions for a future free from the dictates of extractive capitalism" (2019, 407). In *Oil!*, this alternative vision haunts Bunny's

political consciousness and, as we will see, is a constant thread that will lead him to build a tentatively Christian Socialist solution.

It can be said, furthermore, that *Oil!* is one of the pioneers of a regionalist extractive fiction tradition which exposed the damages caused to the Southern California region by the extraction of its three main natural and cultural resources: oil, water, and entertainment. Ten years before the publication of Sinclair's novel, Mary Austin published *The Ford* (1917), an "expansive, panoramic novel" where the protagonists, ranchers from a fictionalized Southern California valley called Tierra Longa, rebel against oil speculators and entrepreneurs who try to steal the rancher's water rights to build an aqueduct which diverts water to San Francisco (Fine 2004, 38-39). As Sinclair would do ten years later, Austin rendered a fictionalized representation of the so-called "water grab," or "water steal," or "rape" of the Owens Valley, that Mary and her husband Stafford Wallace Austin were the first to acknowledge and to try to publicly oppose to (Hoffman 2011, 305-315; Fine 2004, 37).[4] The Owens Valley 'rape' was the subject of yet another novel, published in 1938, *The Promised Land: Notes for a History*, by the English newspaperman Cedric Belfrage, a representative for Hollywood producer Samuel Goldwyn. In Austin's and Sinclair's fashion, this dramatic and ambitious extractive fiction follows the unfortunate events of two members from the same family. One of them, a Hollywood producer, loses his house property after a bank failure, while the other, a rancher, loses his land in the Owens Valley water grab (Fine 2004, 75-76). Similarly to Wyatt's category of "big California novel," *Oil!* can be included along with these two less studied novels in the category of 'California regional extractive fictions.' A common trait of the three novels by Austin, Sinclair, and Belfrage, is the Socialist stance in their critique of the disproportionate, capitalist-driven, building of Los Angeles at the expanses of the region's population and environment.

4. Animality, the frontier oilman, and oil extraction

It is difficult not to detect Sinclair's irony when, in the novel, Bunny chose to eat "roast pork – not having seen any dead pigs." This is especially notable considering that one of the most quoted passages from Sinclair's major novel, *The Jungle*, is the compassionate description of the journey of the unharmed, squealing hog from the stockyard to the various factory lines where its pieces will be canned. Even though we can be tempted to read the latter passage as an example of the 'survival of the fittest' discourse where the pig succumbs to the 'natural laws' of

[4] The conspiracies behind the Los Angeles aqueduct construction inspired an exceeding number of fictional and non-fictional accounts by authors such as Morrow Mayo, Louis Adamic, Carey McWilliams, and movies such as *Chinatown* (R. Polanski, 1974), or documentaries such as *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (T. Andersen, 2003) (Mariani 2024, 43-46). The most complete study on the subject is Steven P. Erie's *Beyond Chinatown: The Metropolitan Water District and the Environment in Southern California* (2006).

modern corporate capitalism, it should be noted that the Taylorized disassembly line through which the hog gets scientifically butchered strikes Jurgis as unnatural – the hog cannot really fight back (Lundblad 2013, 111). According to Lundblad, in fact, what he calls the Darwinist-Freudian "jungle discourse," in the first decades of the 20th century, did not involve corporations as much as it involved the working class (2013, 92). In *The Jungle*, Lundblad argues, the "discourse of the jungle" is constructed on the animalization of Jurgis himself, represented "as a beast with sexual appetites, a working-class animal who cannot control his sexual instincts" (2013, 113), who eventually becomes he himself a hog, butchered by the industrial corporate system (2013, 111). And even though socialism represented an inspiration for Jurgis' struggle and a possible liberation from his condition, his final incarceration, claims Lundblad, assures the middle-class socialists that his animal instincts are contained and that they can conduct the struggle for him (2013, 117-118). Sinclair's subtle hinting at the middle-class readers about their distinction from the animalized workers is made even more clear in *Oil!*, where the animality discourse is further complicated by the characters' relationship with the natural environment in which they operate.

As opposed to his idealistic son, J. A. Ross is presented as a man without romance, whose consciousness was a "complicated machine […]. An engine might break down, but Dad's mind had the efficiency of an eclipse of the sun" (Sinclair 2007, 7). He is a man of action with a modest background and little education, but secularized and smart enough to always think human and natural events in terms of money. He is a new kind of pioneer, a hard worker who has always been deeply connected with the natural elements, especially minerals. Driven by the search for crude oil underground, Ross embodies a blend of the old pragmatic pioneer spirit and the turn-of-the-century business mentality, which constantly seeks profit. Sinclair illustrates this new hybrid pioneer by comparing Ross' oil-driven nomadism to that of the Indigenous people he encountered in Canada (Sinclair 2021):

> all his life that he could remember, home had been a place which you rented, or bought with the idea of holding it as a real estate speculation. As the Indians in the Hudson Bay country kill the moose in the winter-time, and move to the moose, so Dad started an oil-well, and moved to the well. (Sinclair 2007, 62)

The animalistic similitude with the moose-driven Indigenous nomadism seems even more apt if we think that the Southern California in which Ross operates was still largely based on ranch economy, and most of the people who signed land leases for Ross' oilfields were ranchers, such as the Watkins family: in this sense, Ross still followed animals. In that period, Southern California's fauna was not entirely native due to the introduction of cattle by the Spanish in the 16th century, with another boom during the gold rush of the 1850s (Davis 2020, 213-217), and

cattle raising remained a stable economy until the urban expansion of Los Angeles in the 1920s and 1930s. Ross was aware that the economy of the region was changing and was searching for what was under the cattle's feet, as he ironically claims to Bunny: "'there's one thing sure, son […], either you and me move up to front row seats in the oil game, or else, by golly, we'll be the goat and sheep kings of California!" (Sinclair 2007, 107).

Economic changes notwithstanding, the vocabulary of oil extraction employed animal references: the verb "wildcatting" derives from the older financial adjective "wildcat," used to define something that is financially irresponsible, and it means to drill experimental oil wells in territories not known for being productive – or, to put it with the novel's narrator: "wildcatting was nothing but gambling anyhow" (Sinclair 2007, 24).[5] The drilling equipment assumes animal traits as well: in chapter 3, titled "The Drilling," which resembles *The Jungle*'s chapter 3 for its thorough technical description, when the trucks loaded with machineries arrive on site, they honk resembling "some huge flock of prehistoric birds – did the pterodactyls make noises?" (Sinclair 2007, 51). Moreover, one of the machineries is called the "mud-hog," which "snorts" and "puffs" while pumping out the mud from the well: "drilling was always a dirty business; you swam in pale grey mud until the well came in, and after that you slid in oil" (Sinclair 2007, 65).

Sinclair's intentional use of ambiguous phrases and metaphors that go back and forth between 'innocent' nature and profit schemes, sparks multiple meanings: the entire novel demonstrates that drilling is a "dirty business" in both a literal sense – because it physically dirties you with the soil's viscera – and an abstract sense – because ruthless business competition involves moral corruption. The constant match between nature and business, in fact, serves Sinclair's purpose to expose moral corruption, as when Ross' partner, Vernon Roscoe, buys the presidential elections: "I can buy any officials, just the same as I can buy any politicians, or anybody else […]. Money ain't power till it's used, and the reason I can buy power is because men know I can use it" (Sinclair 2007, 384). But if for Ross it is more important to connect with the environment, Roscoe is more interested in the financial and political implications of the oil business. He is described as unsuitable to endure physical work especially when, during a heatwave, he visited the Ross' mansion, where he "kicked off his shoes and his trousers, and sat himself under an electric fan" (Sinclair 2007, 294). Ross, instead, educates Bunny to camp, hunt, and live in the open air, as they do in the Watkins ranch, in the fictional San Elido Valley (probably inspired by Kern County), where "the land was haunted by the souls of old-time pioneers who had crossed it in covered wagons or with pack-mules, and had left their

[5] "Wildcat" on Merriam-Webster Dictionary: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/wildcat. Last visited 16/07/2024. According to a local story written on a historical marker, one of the first productive oilfields was found by chance in Pennsylvania in Venango County around the 1860s and 1870s, where the oil speculator shot a wildcat, stuffed it, and put it on top of his derrick, thus calling the field Wildcat Hollow, which spread the use of the term "wildcatting" for drilling unproven territories (Stoessel 2019).

bones beside many a trail" (Sinclair 2007, 85). The old-time pioneers of Southern California were followed in the 1880s by British and Eastern US wealthy people who introduced hunting "as a genteel Anglo-Saxon pastime" (Davis 2020, 221), and indeed quail hunting was Ross' favorite pastime, quail being the most widespread bird species in Southern California (Davis 2020, 212). Quail hunting "was the only way you could get [Ross] away from his work, […] out into the open" (Sinclair 2007, 95). As Davis explains, "this vigorous 'life in the open' […] inevitably produced social friction as it rubbed against the sedentary culture of the majority" (2020, 225), but in the novel Ross and Bunny were allowed to hunt quail by the Watkins themselves, and it was during their hunt, after an earthquake, that they accidentally discovered oil under the Watkins ranch. Then, Bunny's conscience is shaken by the "moral problem" raised by his father's willingness to buy the Watkins' ranch without mentioning the oil discovery: "just what rights did the Watkinses have to the oil that lay underneath this ranch?" (Sinclair 2007, 98).

5. Roadkill, working class beavers, and socialist seals

If the inquiry on animality from Ross' perspective does not yet produce nor resist a 'discourse of the jungle' in Lundblad's sense, it usefully shows the deep connection between the animalistic features of oil extraction as a legacy of the old Western pioneers and the scientific calculations of turn-of-the-century corporative capitalism. It is Bunny, then, whose worldview gradually grows in the opposite direction from Ross', that interrogates the 'discourse of the jungle.' From the very first chapter, Bunny animalizes the working class by unconsciously projecting his sympathy towards Southern Californian fauna to the lower classes. During the car ride, Bunny enjoys the spectacle of grass-hoppers, jackrabbits, butcher-birds, and roadrunners, until he sees a "mangled corpse – a ground squirrel […] mashed […] flat," and cannot stop thinking about "how cruel life was," until a loaded ranch wagon with two kids riding in the back passes ahead of their car, "and that was another thing to wonder about, why people should be poor and nobody to help them" (Sinclair 2007, 15). Even though the narrator separates Bunny's thoughts, the narrative consequentiality of the events suggests Bunny's deterministic connection between the poors on the ranch wagon and the mashed squirrel. An attentive reading, however, shows that the animalization of the poor is framed inside Christian piety rather than in Marxist terms, since both are seen as victims of unknown evil forces which kill them or keep them poor.

As LeMenager puts it, "roadkill speaks of the animal, in the broad sense of […] mortality;" then she offers an interpretation by quoting Brian Ladd's metaphor of roadkill as modern capital, which "moves rapidly to new sites of cheap and efficient production, leaving a trail of defunct manufacturing sites and regional laborers in its wake" (2014, 82). In this sense, it might be useful to briefly confront roadkill, 'railway-kill,' and animal road encounters that are present

in two of the three "big California novels" Wyatt matched with *Oil!* – Norris' *The Octopus* and Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* – in order to grasp *Oil!*'s different connotation of the unknown evil forces vis-à-vis the natural environment. *The Octopus* opens with the slaughter of a herd of sheep that was crossing the railroad tracks. Here, Lundblad notes, we are tempted to read the scene as "the conflict between 'the People' and the elite class of railroad magnates," with the sheep symbolizing the workers squeezed by the tentacles of the railroad monopoly (2013, 79). Nonetheless, Lundblad argues that it is difficult to interpret the novel within the framework of 'the survival of the fittest.' The slaughter caused by the Railroad monopoly cannot easily be attributed to any individual magnate, thus, the Railroad is not driven by animal survival instincts but by a non-human, "unstoppable machinery" of "supply and demand forces," which are "natural" only in their inevitability and inscrutability (2013, 85-86). A more positive animalistic metaphor involves a land turtle crossing a highway without getting killed in chapter 3 from Steinbeck's *The Grapes Wrath*. According to Pierre Lagayette, the turtle's perilous crossing can be interpreted in two ways: first, the turtle's bravery serves as a metaphor for the Okies' "audacious migration;" second, it signifies that "Nature is on command, not humans" (2016, 83). The turtle, oblivious to settlers, roads, and social injustices, responds solely to natural survival forces, here connotated positively; similarly, the Okies' migration and their pursuit of the California dream follow an inherent positive principle of survival (Lagayette 2016, 83). Differently from Steinbeck's turtle, Sinclair's animals get killed on the street and do not stand as good omens or hopeful symbols, and similarly to Norris' sheep, they do not fight for survival but reveal the challenging relationship between capitalist monopolies and the Californian environment. Unlike *The Octopus*, however, *Oil!* tentatively provides salvation for animals and workers from the 'unstoppable machinery' through Bunny.

Ross, for his part, does not feel compassion for the mashed squirrel, since "squirrels carried plague […]; every now and then there would be cases of this disease and the newspapers would have to hush it up, because it was bad for real estate" (2007, 15). Ross' business approach towards ecology is historically grounded, because when epidemics of rat and ground squirrel-borne plague hit Los Angeles in the early 20th century – killing around 40 people and forcing some sections to quarantine – local boosters denounced the quarantine as a "plot to ruin Los Angeles," and blamed the Mexican quarters for the plague (Davis 2020, 254-257). Quite ironically, the Mexicans are also blamed in the novel by Ross during the initial ride, because they rode "in tumble-down buggies," and "failed to keep out on the dirt where they belong;" yet, they were the same that, with "Indians, bronze of skin, armed with pick and shovel," built the freeway the Rosses were riding on (Sinclair 2007, 3-5). Even though Ross shows compassion at times towards his workers, especially in relation to Bunny's commitment to their conditions, he eventually views them as the "mashed squirrel" because some of them, like Paul Watkins, carry

the "plague" of socialism and unionism in California, particularly after the War and the 1917 Russian Revolution. "The shiftlessness of the working class" was Dad's "favorite theme" (Sinclair 2007, 68), even though the workers are essential to the personal excitement he derives from his job:

> What could be more fun to watch than a job like this? To know what was going on under the ground; to see the ingenuity by which men overcame Nature's obstacles; to see a crew of workers, rushing here and there, busy as beavers or ants, yet at the same time serene and sure, knowing their job, and just how it was going! (Sinclair 2007, 76-77)

Contrary to Steinbeck's turtle synecdoche, then, Nature in *Oil!* is not in command but is threatened, along with its working-class "squirrels, beavers, and ants," by oil extraction. In chapter 6, the workers are drilling an oil well in the Watkins' ranch, when one of them, a man named Joe Gundha, falls into the hole and they had to "fish" his body out for several hours (Sinclair 2007, 152-154). It was Thanksgiving, and the Ross family dinner was spoiled by the death of Joe Gundha, which led the thought to the "hundreds of men […] hurt in other wells all over the country," but also to the US soldiers fighting the Great War in Europe (Sinclair 2007, 155). Bunny's concerns in this chapter can be considered the breaking point where he matures his epistemological distance from Dad and decides not to follow in his footsteps:

> Dad said they might jist [sic] as well go quail shooting, and forget what they couldn't help. And Bunny said all right; but in truth he didn't enjoy the sport, because in his mind somehow the quail had got themselves mixed up with Joe Gundha and the soldiers in France, and he couldn't get any fun out of mangled bodies. (Sinclair 2007, 156)

Bunny did not like shooting quail because "sometimes they were still alive, and you had to wring their necks" (Sinclair 2007, 96). His protective instinct towards quail again extends to the working class – they are all "mixed up" – and from then on, he grew his admiration for Paul Watkins and gets more involved in socialism. Sinclair binds Bunny's socialism to his empathy towards animals, which, however, never becomes animalist advocacy: non-human animals seem to be, for Bunny, an intellectual pastime, a baffling signifier to measure and interrogate human activities.

At the beginning of chapter 13, Bunny is in his second year at Southern Pacific University and is more involved in Socialist propaganda, trying "to make up his mind about the problem of capital versus labor […]. Labor was to organize, and take over industry, and rebuild it upon a basis of service. The formula was simple, and worthy of all trust" (Sinclair 2007, 316). Later in the chapter, he and his fiancée, the Hollywood starlet Vee Tracy, are invited over the weekend in Vernon Roscoe's country mansion, called the Monastery, a typical Southern California villa

far from the city, by the sea, a venue for the city elite – "mountains on every side, and the oil magnate owned everything in sight, both the land and the landscape" (Sinclair 2007, 321). Early in the morning, Bunny walks alone at the beach contemplating the Californian coastline, then takes a swim among a colony of "strangely human" seals laying on rocks, and wonders:

> What must it be like to be a seal? What did they think concerning this arrogant being who commandeered their resting places? […] And how did they understand so clearly that they must not eat a man? Embarrassing if one of them should be a "red," and rebel against the genial customs of the phocidae! (Sinclair 2007, 337)

Bunny's considerations open to several controversial interpretations. If, based on Bunny's experience, extractive capitalism is seen as 'overcoming Nature's obstacles' by exploiting the land and killing animals – thus being against nature – the metaphor suggests that the only response to capitalism is through unnatural acts. By anthropomorphizing the 'red' seals and suggesting they should act against their nature by consuming the humans who took their place, Bunny seems to imply that humans should 'go red' and act against their nature to challenge capitalism. This in turn creates a twofold conclusion: it either suggests a paradox where socialism is portrayed as against nature, or alternatively, it suggests that humans should oppose the 'naturalized' capitalist practices prevalent in US culture. The latter conclusion seems to be the novel's only instance of constructing the Darwinist-Freudian 'discourse of the jungle,' by implying that the 'red' seals (socialist workers) are struggling for survival against capitalist humans – even though the capitalist animal counterpart is lacking.

It is worth noting that the anthropomorphizing of animals is typical of what Davis calls the Southern California "wild-urban ecotone," the place where suburban and wildness meet, a "dynamic, nonlinear, and unstable" zone: "the ideal suburb is adjacent to nature but never directly implicated in it" (2020, 207-208). In these zones, claims Davis, animals such as coyotes and cougars are deemed as "symbols of urban disorder," as "trespassers" and thus "discursively assimilated to 'serial killers'" (2020, 207-208). A major characteristic of these wild-urban ecotones is the "bizarre reshaping of food chain and predator-prey relationships," referring to coyotes eating junk foods or ravens eating roadkill (Davis 2020, 207). In *Oil!*'s wild-urban ecotone, instead, Bunny fantasizes about a new food chain with man-eating seals. However, the 'survival of the fittest' discourse is never taken too far in the novel, and the narrator reminds us that this is "just the same [Bunny] at the age of twenty-one as when first we met him, […] speculating about the feelings of ground-squirrels and butcher-birds" (Sinclair 2007, 337), a Bunny still moved by Christian piety.

6. Evil power and Christian morality: a conclusion

Even during Bunny's animal encounters, the novel does not depict capital and labor as animals fighting for survival but, rather, leaves the conflict open to interpretations rooted in Christian morality. According to the narrator, capitalism is symbolized by oil and presented as a corrupting evil:

> the black and cruel demon […]: an evil Power which roams the earth, crippling the bodies of men and women, and luring the nations to destruction by visions of unearned wealth, and the opportunity to enslave and exploit labor. (Sinclair 2007, 548)

As in *The Jungle*, the only way to challenge this evil power is through socialism, which paradoxically Sinclair interprets as closely aligned with Christianity. The Watkins brothers are often depicted as preachers from two different churches, Eli as an evangelist, Paul as a communist "apostle": "Bunny […] mocked at Eli's god, but believed in Paul's" (Sinclair 2007, 485). After Ross' death, Bunny decides to use his oil money to establish a "Labor college," called at one point "Labor Temple," where Paul should inform the workers of what he has seen in Russia (Sinclair 2007, 524). Sinclair's adherence to Christian Socialism stemmed from his interest in Jesus as a historical figure, a topic that he also addressed in his novel *They Call Me Carpenter* (1922), written a few years before *Oil!* (Coodley 2013, 82-83). In this novel set in the early 1920s, the carpenter who professes himself as Christ is accused of being a "Bolsheviki," and in his sermons we can read both Sinclair's socialist and Christian beliefs (Coodley 2013, 83).

The socialism professed by Bunny, however, is less radical and more Christian than the secular-Russian socialism embodied by Paul, who – one could speculate Christ-like – is killed at the end of the novel in a raid of a hired mob during a labor meeting, inspired by the raids Sinclair witnessed during I.W.W. gatherings in the docks of San Pedro (Sinclair 2005, 280-281). Differently from the immigrant Jurgis in *The Jungle*, who is jailed to contain his animal instincts, Paul Watkins is a white, self-educated working-class hero, who emancipates himself from the Christian fundamentalism of his family by reading Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* and advocating the Russian cause (Sinclair 2007, 117).[6] Therefore, Paul is a martyr, victim of the capitalist criminalization of labor unions in Los Angeles, whose sin was trying to import a

[6] In contrast to Jurigs Rudkus, Paul Watkins has a strong intellectual education that spanned from French theorists and explorers such as Francis Galton and Ernest Renan to zoologists, biologists and eugenicists such as Oliver Lodge, Edwin Lankester, August Weissmann, Ernst Haekel, Thomas Huxley, and Herbert Spencer (Sinclair 2007, 127, 132). All popular readings among US Socialists at the turn of the 20th century, which contributed to the construction of the "discourse of the jungle" described by Lundblad.

secularized form of socialism: "Bread, peace, freedom […] Long live Revolution!" (2007, 541, 544) are the Bolshevik slogans Paul shouts in a long delirium before his death.

In conclusion, animality as theorized by Lundblad provides a useful framework for reading *Oil!*'s many instances of the interaction between the humans and non-human animals in Southern California. Bunny's Christian sympathy for roadkill and the local fauna reflects his sympathy for the poor and the working class and builds up a discourse of Christian piety in which the conflict of capital versus labor is ultimately encapsulated. In this sense, the novel's plot resists the 'discourse of the jungle' in Darwinist-Freudian terms in favor of a broad Christian moral and ethical issues, as it is also confirmed in chapter 17 by the narrator and, possibly, by Sinclair: "the Freudian theories, not being consistent with Methodist theology, had not yet penetrated into Southern California" (2007, 451).

Bionote

Enrico Mariani currently teaches Anglo-American literature at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, where he previously was a Postdoctoral Research Fellow. He taught Anglo-American Literature at University of Naples Federico II and at Roma Tre University, where he earned his Ph.D. He has been a visiting scholar at John D. Calandra Italian American Institute (CUNY). In 2024, his Ph.D. dissertation was awarded the Agostino Lombardo Prize. He contributed to the field of American Studies in journals such as *Ácoma*, *From the European South*, and *Campi Immaginabili*, and has recently published the book *Americani di seconda classe. La dialettica del* melting pot *in Louis Adamic, Carlos Bulosan e John Fante* (Agorà, 2025).

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