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Atavistic Tendencies: The Culture of Science in American Modernity by Dana Seitler. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008. Pp. 320, 22 black-and-white photos. $67.50 cloth, $22.50 paper.

Superbly researched and indispensable, accessible without any sacrifice of scholarship, *Atavistic Tendencies* is engaging and stunningly persuasive.

Awash in blue nocturnal light, one could imagine, the Wolf Man sees his "primal scene" (father and mother in *coitus a tergo,* as if they were beasts), which then spawns an arresting dream of six white wolves in a walnut tree. There is also—no dream here—the figure of "Unzie, the Hirsute Wonder," designated as an "albino aborigine," fascinating circusgoers with his hairy form. And, in the confabulations of fiction, there is *Nightwood*'s Robin Vote down in the dirt with her lover's dog, barking and crawling at the novel's close. In fact, keeping company with "backwards" feet, "degenerate" teeth, and "aberrant" skulls in medical photography, there are story titles that tell a tale of animal: "The Atavism of John Tom Little Bear" (O. Henry's short story) and *The Hairy Ape* (Eugene O'Neill's play).

To read this treatise is to be convinced of atavism's twentieth-century tendency to be pervasive and sharply paradoxical: it is everywhere; and everywhere it is, it is the sign of *modern* sensibilities—given shape through backward glance. That is to say, as Seitler states in many ways, the modern subject is an atavistic subject whose psychical workings are an "expression of animalism" (32). (*Atavistic,*

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according to Webster's: "displaying characteristics of a previous cultural era or of a previous ancestral form.") Freud's case studies—the Wolf Man, the Rat Man, horse-phobic Little Hans, and Frau Emmy Von N. (diagnosed with zoophilia)—are only the most obvious examples of how the forms of animals (and human prehistory, as a consequence) surface in the psyche, tying the sexual drives, in Freud's view, to animal urges and making instinct itself, as Seitler clearly conveys, quoting Freud, an "urge to restore an earlier state of things" (45). In this sense, the Oedipus complex is Freud's reassurance that what is *primal* about human beings can be sublimated—though, and this is critical, only incompletely. The past of individuals—and, indeed, for Freud, of "the race"—appears in the present as trauma that *is* the past alive in the current moment.

Modern subjectivity is this polytemporal, layered existence that can't shake a past it defines itself against. Hence, in O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape,* the brawny, coal-stoking workers on a steamer are at once Neanderthal throwbacks in their labor—subject to the insult of "filthy beast"—and an extension of their machines, making them the very engines of modernity through their atavism. Even photography, used to striking effect by criminologist César Lombroso (in his famous shots of criminals, prostitutes, and sexual perverts that presume to locate animal qualities in these groups), is a technology that preserves the past. For though it divides the past from the present—this was you, a photograph says—it presents the body, in the present moment, as frozen in time. The photograph, like atavism, is an incarnation, a "living embodiment" (66) of a person's pastness, making a body caught by the camera modern and unnatural (temporally backward) at the same time.

Seitler's thesis is thus ineluctable. Atavism is indeed a "privileged lens" (1) through which to catch modernity thinking it is new. And (to switch metaphors) Seitler puts meat on these deconstructive bones. As you can tell, the Derridean locked opposites of new-versus-obsolete don't just simply imply each other at every turn. They do so according to precise and intriguing cultural logics, which require careful moves if one would follow them. Seitler performs these moves with remarkable certainty and deftness. She deploys historical, theoretical, political, and, quite decidedly literary questions as she shows the specific contours of her central paradox. For instance, she situates early-twentieth-century subectivity in its setting of a focus on the visible, due to cinema and photography. Then she highlights a literary concept—*ekphrasis,* of all things (a literary commentary on or description of visual art, such as Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn")—that, quite surprisingly,

connects photography and psychoanalysis.

What she is after with this move is how Freud's emphasis on visual crisis—the Wolf Man's sight of parental sodomy, translated into his dream of wolves—is not a purely visual event, as modern science, stressing visibility and visible evidence, would prefer to render it. Rather, akin to Lombroso's photographs and other examples of medical photography that rely heavily on the use of captions to make their points, the Wolf Man's dream must be told in language and analyzed linguistically, even if Freud makes him draw how the wolves were sitting in the tree. The "process by which modernity constitutes itself as modern" (51), then, is neither direct nor directly visual, but rather recursive, discursive, and belated. In fact, as Seitler tells us, Freud himself compared belated psychic trauma to the likes of "a photographic exposure which can be developed after any interval of time and transformed into a picture" (54). And though this comparison makes the modern subject resemble technology, it also indicates how modern "selves" cannot evade the past.

Lurking, shadowing, haunting pasts; animal relays; and polytemporalities (*atavism* also means "resemblance to grandparents" and so disrupts, in Seitler's view, "an immediate reproductive connection" between a child and parent [2]): it's no wonder this study speaks to me as a queer theorist with modernist interests, as it will to others. Time is a massive queering force, as queer studies is dramatically discussing in terms of plastic kinship, gay and queer children, the notion of the future, and the denaturalizing motions of desire.[1] Moreover, the matter and meaning of History—in its historiographical guise as sequence and consequence, and its reliance (or not) on generation—are at the forefront of queer work.[2] Seitler centrally tackles the conceptual convolutions of temporality and history as she ruminates on Benjamin throughout, especially on his treatise "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (but also on Derrida, Deleuze, and Jameson, among other theorists). Her book's design, however, is meant to offer range and to cover interests in feminist studies, critical race theory, modernist studies, and the history of sexuality. Thus, her fairly detailed setup of her focus, in her introduction, is followed by chapters on Freud (his animal-titled cases), medical and criminological photography (Lombroso and company), two famous novels, one naturalist, one modernist (by Frank Norris and Djuna Barnes, respectively), dime-store serials (Tarzan, Fu Manchu), the feminist eugenic fictions of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and a set of texts that involve an ape's embrace, particularly in the setting of labor relations.

The chapters on Freud and Gilman are especially strong—the

first because Seitler makes us see dramatic points right under our noses; the second because readers will be shocked to learn or chagrined to recall that Gilman was a eugenicist of the first rank and wrote an essay in the *American Journal of Sociology* entitled "A Suggestion on the Negro Problem." Seitler illuminates these "suggestions"—the bald ones and the nuanced ones—as she shows us Gilman's feminist, racist logic across a range of texts: namely, Seitler summarizes, that "without sexual equality, the woman's body (and therefore her reproductive function) degenerates, thus disabling her role as a healthy reproducer of the social world" (185). In other words, if not equal to (white) men, (white) women will become atavistic and therefore unable to protect society from the atavism of bad reproducers. Domesticity, in particular, makes women backward, according to Gilman. So does sexual feeling, furthermore; so women should cultivate desire to reproduce, but in the absence of sexual drive.

Other strengths of the book include Seitler's counterintuitive findings on the supposed naturalist/modernist fiction divide (here undone in surprising ways by the persistence of atavistic focus across this gap—witness her pairing of Norris and Barnes); her unusually textured and telling contextualization of Lombroso's photographs via her grasp of *photography's* atavisms; and her engagement with serial form and what it means for generational logics, such as we encounter in the Tarzan series. Given the strong through line of this book, with its limpid thesis, there will be readers who find the book less surprising as it goes, since the major arguments are established early and remain similar in each chapter. And some readers may deem this book too synthetic in its theorizing, given its clear deconstructive bent wed to historical materialist leanings. For me, such demurs would be shortsighted.

The beauty of this book is its diamond clarity, the sharpness of its thesis that has such force. Seitler has given its facets quite a setting.

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NOTES

1. See, for example, Judith Butler, "Gender Is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion," in *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 121–42; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay: The War on Effeminate Boys," in *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 154–64; Michael Moon, *A Small Boy and Others: Imitation and Initiation in American Culture from Henry James to Andy Warhol,* Series Q (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley, eds., *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century,* Series Q (Durham, NC: Duke

University Press, 2009); Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive,* Series Q (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); and Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism,* ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 197–222.

2. For a sample of these debates, see Elizabeth Freeman, ed., "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, nos. 2–3 (2007): 177–95.