
Feminist Animal Studies in the U.S.: Bodies Matter

by

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Abstract: Raising the question, “Has Animal Studies been good for actual animals?” this essay addresses over twenty years of feminist animal studies that developed between the more visible years of the Singer/Regan era of the 1970s and the renewed interest in animals subsequent to Derrida’s (2002) celebrated discovery of animal subjectivity. Feminist communication theory may explain the reasons that, although feminists have been speaking on this topic for decades, masculinist-elite academics have not been listening. Since the reinvigorated version of academic animal studies recognizes no obligation to act on behalf of actual animals, the lack of “uptake” for feminist animal studies has been particularly devastating for the well-being of nonhuman animals.

The emergence and academic acclaim for Animal Studies over the past decade is visible in the presence of new book series at university presses, new journals, new courses in Human-Animal Studies across the curriculum at prestigious universities, special themed issues of *PMLA* (2009) and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2009), numerous conferences, professional societies, and caucuses of professional societies (Wolfe 2009). In short, Animal Studies has been good for academe. The question is, has it been good for animals?

The capacity to ask this question – indeed, to make it central to one’s intellectual, scholarly, and pedagogical work – is the hallmark of feminism. Not merely an academic endeavour or a “way of seeing”, feminism emerged from the lived experiences of women who recognized their own experiences of marginalization, oppression, and inequality (whether via race, gender, class, sexuality, age, ability – and usually some nexus thereof) not as personal deficits or biological necessities to be accepted and endured, but rather as socially-produced

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political problems to be challenged. As political and material circumstances allowed (and often when they didn't), these women stepped forward to work with other women and feminist men to challenge social hierarchies and create social change. From the start, feminism has been a movement for justice: at its heart is the centrality of praxis, the necessary linkage of intellectual, political, and activist work. Feminist methodology-articulated through such foundational texts as *Breaking Out: Feminist Consciousness and Feminist Research* (Stanley & Wise 1983), *Feminism and Methodology* (Harding 1987), and *Feminist Praxis* (Stanley 1990) – requires that feminist research puts the lives of the oppressed at the center of the research question, and undertakes studies, gathers data, and interrogates material contexts with the primary aim of improving the lives and the material conditions of the oppressed.

When feminists attend to “the question of the animal,” they do so from a standpoint that centers other animal species, makes connections among diverse forms of oppression, and seeks to put an end to animal suffering – in other words, to benefit the subject of the research. Nineteenth-century women’s advocacy for animals challenged vivisection, “plumage” (the practice of wearing birds feathers or even body parts in women’s hats), fur-wearing and meat-eating alike (Donovan 1990). Using standard feminist methodology (i.e., asking questions such as “where are the women?” and “is there an association between ontologizing a being as feminine and that subject’s access to social and material goods?”), twentieth-century vegan feminists and animal ecofeminists sought to end animal suffering in its many manifestations (in scientific research, and specifically in the feminized beauty and cleaning products industries; in dairy, egg, and animal food production [“factory farming”]; in “pet” keeping and breeding, zoos, rodeos, hunting, fur and clothing) by developing a feminist theoretical perspective on the intersections of species, gender, race, class, sexuality, and nature. Motivated by an intellectual and experiential understanding of the mutually-reinforcing interconnections among diverse forms of oppression, as well as by many women’s interconnected sense of self-identity, a self-in-relationship to other animals (including humans) and environments (specific trees, rivers, plants, as well as places), twentieth and twenty-first century animal ecofeminists and vegan feminists see their own liberation and well-being as fundamentally connected to the well-being of other animal species; in short, we insist on moving forward together (Harper 2010; Kemmerer 2011). This commitment to an intersectional approach permeates the *praxis* (theory-practice) of animal ecofeminists and vegan feminists because, in the words of Martin Luther King, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”. For example, when Feminists for Animal Rights (FAR) activists learned that many battered women refused to leave situations of domestic violence, aware that there was no place that would shelter both their children and their companion animals, and fearful that leaving the animals behind would almost ensure the animals’ torture, abuse, and death at the hands of the batterer, FAR activists began building coalitions between animal rescue groups and battered women’s shelters (Adams 1995). When animal ecofeminists criticized the harms produced by injecting rBGH into cows, they stressed the suffering this growth hormone caused to lactating cows already grieving the separation from their own

offspring, who would have drank the mother cow's milk, not allowing it to be fed to humans; but ecofeminists also framed the issue as an opportunity to build coalitions among animal advocates, feminists, small farmers, consumer advocates, and environmentalists alike (Gaard 1994). Such praxis exemplifies feminist animal studies.

But the *feminist* empathy for animal suffering, articulated as an ethic of care (Adams & Donovan 1996; Donovan & Adams 2007), was soon *feminized* and women's activism for animal rights was mocked as a movement of "little old ladies in tennis shoes": in male-supremacist (patriarchal) cultures, the association of women and animals reinforces their subordinate status. Indeed, the animal rights movement itself was catapulted to respectability only when white male philosophers distanced themselves from kindness, empathy, or care, and theorized about the motives for animal liberation as legitimated either by recourse to animal rights (Regan 1983) or to an attention to animal suffering (Singer 1975). Nearly thirty years later, Cary Wolfe (2009) echoes the Singer/Regan era in his claim that "taking animal studies seriously thus has nothing to do, strictly speaking, with whether or not you like animals" (p. 567). Between these two eras of animal rights/posthumanist studies prominence, feminist animal scholarship flourished.

Building on three decades of praxis by second-wave feminist animal advocates such as Connie Salamone, Aviva Cantor, Marti Kheel, Gena Corea, Andrée Collard and Joyce Contrucci, feminists theorizing about species, gender, nature, and race offered more nuanced and sophisticated corrections to the theories of Singer and Regan (Gaard 2002). Beginning with Donovan (1990) and Adams (1990), vegan feminists and animal ecofeminists developed an ethic of care and responsibility (Adams & Donovan 1995, 1996), a contextual moral vegetarianism (Curtin 1991) that was later used to develop contextual ethics around indigenous whaling practices (Gaard 2001), an analysis of hunting as a site for constructing and performing the dominance of heteromascularity (Kheel 1995; Luke 1997, 1998), a feminist interspecies ecopsychology (Jones 2010a, 2010b), and a reconception of human self-identity as "political *animal*" (Gaard 1998; Sandilands 1999) that challenged the gendered dualisms at the foundation of western culture, strategically situating humans within realms of both culture and nature – a location supporting feminist activism for ecology, democracy, inter-species and environmental justice¹. More recent animal ecofeminist critiques have made connections among the oppression of women farmers in the global south, climate change and industrialized animal food production (Gaard 2011b).

Yet, despite the theoretical scholarship and political activism of animal ecofeminists and vegan feminists alike, the visibility of species within the academy

¹ Animal Studies, or posthumanism, also reconceives human identity, adopting the strategy of interrogating the norm (used productively in queer theory to interrogate heteronormativity, for example, and in antiracist studies to interrogate whiteness) – but its theory seems to stop after reconceiving what it means to be human, requiring no particular action after linguistic deconstruction. As Kari Weil (2010) concludes, "In the wake of poststructuralist and postmodern decenterings that have displaced the human as a standard for knowledge, [posthumanist] theory finds itself in a similar predicament. It cannot avoid seeing the animal suffering around us, but has contradictory foundations on which to judge the good or the right thing to do about it" (p. 20).

quickly receded after Singer and Regan. Perhaps attending to anthro(andro)centrism, sexism, and speciesism was just too burdensome for animal ecofeminism's potential allies. Mainstream feminists of the 1990s seemed adamantly anthropocentric (Birke 2002; Gaard 2011a), with even ecological feminists misrepresenting animal ecofeminists as issuing universalizing mandates for veganism, and thereby evading their own responsibility for attending to species for at least another decade (see, for example, Plumwood 2000; Seager 2003). A second group of potential allies, radical environmentalists resisted analysis of both gender and species; race and class gained attention within environmental circles after the 1991 First National People of Color Environmental Conference, but familiar patterns persisted there as well, with women doing the bulk of the grassroots activism, and men doing the majority of speaking and theorizing, excluding the question of species from most definitions of "environment". A third group of potential allies outside the academy, animal rights activists (both women and men) were also resistant to feminist insights, arguing that "at least women *have* rights; animals have none". No one should have been surprised, then, when the confluence of Derrida's discovery of himself as an animal (2002), Wolfe's coinage of the term "posthumanism" (2003), and Haraway's exploration of dog training (2003) together catapulted the field of Animal Studies into academic respectability.

Such surprise could only be possible if one forgot the foundational scholarship of feminist communication studies. Work by Robin Lakoff (1975), Dale Spender (1980) and Cheris Kramarae (1981) exposed the gendered patterns of communication, and the ways that women's talk is subordinated through the use of tag questions ("it seems women are being excluded, doesn't it?"), hedges ("sort of" or "kind of unscholarly to do that"), apologies ("I'm sorry, but it seems vegan feminist scholarship isn't being read"), and frequent interruptions. Women's gendered role in conversation requires linguistic support for and stylistic accommodation to dominant speakers, rather than conversational innovation. The norm dictates that women and men continue topics introduced by men, but when women introduce new topics, these topics are rarely taken up (conversational "uptake" in mixed-power groups is less likely for topics introduced by women and other non-dominant groups). Consider the well-known phenomenon of the department or staff meeting, where a woman introduces a new idea that receives no response; later, a man introduces substantially the same idea, which is welcomed with acclaim! Perhaps something similar has occurred in this field of knowledge about animals, where feminists have been developing theory around species, identity, society and ecology for at least three decades, but the topic itself only punctures the glass ceiling and surfaces as an academically respectable field when articulated by the dominant group of scholars – Singer and Regan in the 1970s and 1980s, and now Derrida, Wolfe, and Haraway² by 2010.

² Haraway's inclusion in the elite of Animal Studies can be explained not just by her shared membership in an academic, racialized, gendered, and classed elite but also by her style-shifting accommodation to a dominant and prestige discursive style that shapes not only diction and syntax but also topics. As Haraway has admitted, her interests in dog training do not lead her to refrain from eating other animals (Potts & Haraway 2010). If Haraway chose to advocate veganism and to stop

Feminist communication scholarship has looked not only at whose speech merits attention, but also at who listens; speaking is associated with power, knowledge, and dominance, while listening is associated with subordination. If animal ecofeminists and vegan feminists have been speaking and acting in ways that articulate a feminist animal studies approach, the absence of their scholarship from the foundation and development of Animal Studies indicates that the academic elite have not been listening. Not surprisingly, feminist methodology emphasizes listening as a hallmark of good scholarship – listening to one’s research subjects, to the oppressed, to one’s activist and scholarly community – and creating structures for collaboration whereby the research subjects can themselves set the agenda, express needs, and benefit from the scholarly endeavor. These “listening failures” in animal studies scholarship are not merely a bibliographic matter of failing to cite feminists, but signify a more profound conceptual failure to grapple with the issues being raised by feminist scholarship, a failure made more egregious when similar ideas are later celebrated if presented via nonfeminist sources. For example, consider how Carol Adams (2010) helpfully augments Cary Wolfe’s (2003) complication of the human/animal binary with categories not just of Wolfe’s humanized human, animalized human, humanized animal, and animalized animal, but also animalized *woman* and *feminized* animal, terms that foreground the gender/species/ecology connections that are so relevant to ecological feminism – and, one might hope, to Animal Studies as well.

Reproduction and consumption are explored within Animal Studies, but these topics are feminist issues as well: across animal species, female bodies do the majority of labor in reproduction, and in most human cultures female bodies both serve and are served as the food. Feminist concerns about reproductive freedom apply not only to elite white women but to poor women, indigenous women, women of the global south, and females in factory farming operations as well; from an animal ecofeminist standpoint, the reproductive and sexual enslavement of female animal bodies *anywhere* is deeply unethical (Gaard 2010). This practice benefits the few, at the expense and suffering of the many: the female animals, their mates and offspring, the workers paid to slaughter them, the subsistence farmers driven out of work by industrial agribusiness, the land clearcut or polluted with excrement, the water contaminated with antibiotics and growth hormones, the air polluted with excesses of flatulence and carbon dioxide, and the consumers who contract heart disease, obesity, and a variety of cancers and infectious diseases.

What are the benefits of making connections between the insights produced through animal studies and those of a larger eco-cultural critique such as a postcolonial, ecological animal feminism? Clearly, such connections extend theory from the realm of the purely intellectual to that of the political. They expose the broader implications and deeper roots of animal studies insights, making the theory more relevant. In many cases, such connections expose our own role in oppressive structures – as consumers of suffering, as contributors to climate change, as sponsors of global food scarcity – and such exposure is not flattering. Moreover,

dog training or horseback riding as manifestations of species dominance, one wonders whether her scholarship would fall from favor within academe and Animal Studies alike.

these connections uncover the historical role human-animal relations have played in perpetuating colonization (Huggan & Tiffin 2010) – making it paradoxical for postcolonial scholars and animal studies scholars alike to continue patronizing institutions of species imprisonment, enslavement, and slaughter. In sum, making these broader connections requires restoring what Adams (1990) calls “the absent referent,” the fragmented bodies of animals, and in the face of such suffering, it requires action. In the words of Josephine Donovan (1990), “We should not kill, eat, torture, and exploit animals because they do not want to be so treated, and we know that. If we listen, we can hear them”.

Let’s start listening.

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