

# INVITED SYMPOSIUM: FEMINISTS ENCOUNTERING ANIMALS

## Introduction

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In response to the growth of animal studies in the academy, an increasing number of conferences and panels have focused on “the question of the animal” whether from a disciplinary or interdisciplinary perspective. Participating in these conferences over the course of many years we have heard probing comments and contentious murmurs that we thought deserved to be more formally articulated and aired. When we began to read similar comments in some of the referee reports on submissions for this special issue, we were convinced we wanted to encourage these rumblings to be written up so that discussion and debate surrounding the history and reception of feminist animal studies could become more focused and more public. The comments, in some ways, reminded us of old battlegrounds among feminists—debates about just how personal the political should be, conflicts over erotic desire and political commitment, as well as those over strategies for alliance. So we thought it would be informative and productive to invite a number of feminist scholars working in animal studies—those who have been in the field for quite a while and those who have only recently begun to work in it—to voice their thoughts, concerns, and hopes. We prompted them with a set of questions:

- Is animal studies gendered, and if so, to what effect?
- Is so-called animal “theory” at odds with affective and/or feminist political engagement? Do you see a gap between the personal and the political (or theoretical) in animal studies and, if so, how is it manifesting?
- Have the insights of feminists/ecofeminists been overlooked/unacknowledged in animal studies, and if so, what is lost and what should be done to acknowledge and reclaim their insights?

We told those who agreed to have their musings included here that we were not necessarily looking for direct responses to these questions, but rather were

hoping they might use these questions to provoke written reflection. As you will see in the essays that follow, the authors may not have needed much prompting.

Not surprisingly, there is contention among the views expressed in this symposium, but there are also common themes. One clear commonality is the need to maintain feminist, ethical, and political commitments within animal studies—commitments to reflexivity, responsibility, engagement with the experiences of other animals, and sensitivity to the intersectional contexts in which we encounter them. Such commitments are at the core of a second, related area of common concern, that of the relationship between theory and practice. Animal bodies, we can all agree, must not be “absent referents” in animal studies (Adams 1990/2010). But what is the role of theory produced by those whose personal practices might be challenged on ethical or political grounds, even as it helps us to articulate important ideas? Throughout this symposium, as in this special issue as a whole, the importance of affect in feminist animal studies is noted. We know that we touch the lives of other animals and that they touch ours in a myriad of ways, but there remains disagreement about the positive and negative effects of these encounters.

Of course, the conclusions drawn in the musings that follow are by no means the last words on these complex topics. Our hope is that constructive discussion and debate will follow from them.

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## Ambivalence toward Animals and the Moral Community

KELLY OLIVER

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I recently attended an excellent session on Animality and Race at which two young feminist philosophers, Erin Tarver and Alison Suen, presented their research. Tarver presented an insightful analysis of football fans' reactions to Michael Vick's criminal sentence for fighting pit bulls (Tarver 2011). She argued that in the media, pit bulls are associated with gangs and ghettos, rounded up without due process, and killed because they are seen as dangerous and spreading danger like contagion. Suen presented a fascinating account of the film *The Cove*, in which Japanese fishermen are figured as cruel because of their treatment

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## Disciplinary Becomings: Horizons of Knowledge in Animal Studies

CARRIE ROHMAN

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Recent work in animal studies and animal theory has sometimes coalesced around a kind of “primal scene” in which subjectivities that we call human and animal confront each other, retreat, respond, or otherwise intermingle. Perhaps the most well-known of these is Derrida’s naked-in-front-of-cat scene and, subsequently, Donna Haraway’s insightful reading of its limitations. I have been reminded of both my own scholarly “primal scene”—as a young scholar en route to a career in feminist theory who then turned to the animal—and of the disciplinary “primal scenes” of animal studies itself.<sup>1</sup>

The present moment in animal studies brings to mind the quite similar disciplinary “disputes” that went on within feminist theoretical circles in the late 1990s. Anyone interested in the way that high theory is regularly coming under suspicion in animal studies right now would do well to revisit the exchange between Susan Gubar and Robyn Wiegman in *Critical Inquiry*, for example, around the question, “What Ails Feminist Criticism?” (Gubar 1998; Wiegman 1999).

I was a graduate student at Indiana University when Gubar, Wiegman, and Cary Wolfe were all teaching there. Like many of my colleagues in animal studies, I had an ongoing interest in the ethical question of our relationship to non-human animals that preceded my scholarly career. That interest emerged roughly alongside my interest in feminist theory and gender studies when I was an undergraduate. As a graduate student, I set out with the intention of working in feminist criticism (and feminist literary criticism), but once I began to see the prominence of animals and animality in modernist literature, my scholarly energies migrated in that direction. At all points, however, I was keenly aware of the way that the feminist critique of the subject, to give one example, allowed for an opening onto similar troublings of the species barrier. Nevertheless, what remains a kind of fascinating and “primal” moment in my own turn from feminist work to species work was Gubar’s deeply suspicious response to my scholarly interest in animals. In one especially striking exchange over my use of Lyotard’s concept of the *differend* to discuss the animal as paradigmatic of the “victim” (the one who does not have the ability to register its injuries in the language of those in control), she asked me point blank if I was suggesting that animals were “more” victimized than women. Instead of seeing the interlocking structures of oppression that writers like Carol Adams, Marjorie Spiegel, and others had already pointed out at that time—and the productive theoretical analogies that might proliferate—Gubar experienced my discussion of animals as a threat: a threat, I can only surmise, to the political position she felt her own work had staked out for women, for a particular set of feminist claims, and perhaps for a semi-institutionalized prerogative that was roughly correlated to the suffering or affliction of women.

I find this anecdote instructive here because it not only demonstrates just how unpredictable a “feminist” response to animal issues can be,<sup>2</sup> but also because it resonates with the way in which some scholars today view developments in “high” animal theory as threatening. As Wiegman pointed out in her own discussion, Gubar’s anxieties about various poststructuralist genealogies rested in part on the association between that body of work and certain European, masculinist “complicities” (Wiegman 1999, 368). We sometimes still hear protests against the “boys’ club” of high theory in work on animals because thinkers such as Derrida, Wolfe, and Agamben are seen as overshadowing the work of female scholars and of critics who are less theoretically entrenched. As a scholar of the modernist period, I am perhaps too keenly aware of how women have historically been excluded from “critical” practice. Despite some of the limitations that high theory might entail, however, I do not want to countenance a feminist or animalist disavowal of critical theory.

In terms of disciplinary primal scenes, there have been prominent disavowals of this kind at the heart of animal studies in its contemporary staging. It is worth mentioning one of the “founding” moments for animal studies here. The confer-

ence *Millennial Animals: Theorising and Understanding the Importance of Animals*, organized by Robert McKay and Sue Vice in 2000, took place in England. Carol Adams and Cary Wolfe were the two keynote speakers. Adams gave a presentation based on her 1990 book that was very interesting, but essentially ten years old. Wolfe, who was my graduate advisor at the time, gave a presentation that engaged a wide range of recent continental theory on the philosophical question of the species barrier. Throughout the conference, Adams made it clear that she was willfully opposed to almost any “theoretical” discussion of animality. Her resistance was extremely disappointing to those of us in attendance who considered ourselves “feminist” and who also felt that new theoretical work was opening up the field in a way that had profound consequences for “animal rights” or “pro-animal” intellectuals, and the real animals who motivated them.

It became quite clear in that crucible for the discipline that Adams was self-styling as specifically and adamantly anti-theory. Such stylings tend to reinforce the misperception that thinkers with a strong “theoretical” commitment in animal studies are not ethically engaged. But the reality is that almost all of the theoretically sophisticated scholars who have been at the forefront of this discipline, in my experience, have a serious eye on the ethical relationship humans have with real animals. And I don’t mean Derrida. I mean the ranks of folks in cultural studies, philosophy, literary studies, and many other fields who were not famous or even well-known at that time, and who saw theory as a meaningful way to understand and describe serious questions about animals and animality. These scholars were using theory in their work on animals long before the discipline got its name a few years ago. Put in theoretical terms, they always recognized the ethical link between the discursive animal and the material animal. To be clear, I don’t mean to suggest that every scholar using animal theory has an “activist” predisposition. But I do mean that many, many important theoreticians in this field are ethically engaged. In fact, some of the best early scholarship in the field has shown how the work of iconic figures like Derrida and Levinas is essentially *more* pro-animal than either Derrida or Levinas would have us believe.

I make these claims recognizing that an “enforced” sense of activism in animal studies would be extremely problematic. But as Wolfe has pointed out in such detail in *What is Posthumanism?* (Wolfe 2010), we can also make distinctions between what work goes about its business without troubling humanist presumptions, and what work unsettles them. We should never be so naïve as to completely collapse scholarship with activism. On the other hand, trying to keep them utterly separate creates a false distinction. Scholarly work and activism in the classic sense operate along a continuum of knowledge-making and knowledge-challenging.<sup>3</sup>

But coming back to Adams’s work, I believe there are ways to acknowledge the (ongoing) role of such contributions, but also to recognize how certain

theoretical developments have opened up broader aspects of animal theory. This is not to devalue or marginalize the work of “earlier” feminists/ecofeminists, but to be frank about the manner in which a discipline must inevitably expand and become complex. One way of putting this is that a discipline, like an event, is always in excess of its causes. Animal studies will (and should) inevitably be in excess of its “causes.” Although this may result in some generational anxiety, we should ultimately embrace the proliferation of knowledges that this excessiveness signals. Deleuze and Guattari’s work on the concept seems apt here, even though we are talking about disciplines: “a concept also has a *becoming* that involves its relationship with concepts situated on the same plane. Here concepts link up with each other, support one another, coordinate their contours, articulate their respective problems, and belong to the same philosophy, even if they have different histories” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 18).

What we could use at this juncture in the development of animal studies is a theoretically sophisticated inquiry into the role of affect in the feminist care tradition and in “high” theoretical discourses such as Derrida’s. This might help us clarify what these different methodological approaches can and cannot offer us in the way of intellectual openings, trajectories, and future work in affective engagement. Such a discussion might provide us a sense of where they overlap and where they diverge. For instance, how do we parse the following excerpts from Adams and from Derrida in a way that constructs future work for the discipline? Adams claims, “My own evolution toward animal defense was because of the sudden loss of a Welsh pony, and the feelings that I experienced when I tried to eat a hamburger the night of that pony’s death” (Adams 2007, 199). Derrida writes, “We all know about the episode in Turin . . . where [Nietzsche’s] compassion for a horse led him to take its head into his hands, sobbing . . . Now if tears *come to the eyes*, if they *well up in them*, and if they can also veil sight, perhaps they reveal, in the very course of this experience . . . an essence of the eye” (quoted in Wolfe 2010, 142). There would be a good deal to discuss here, along the lines of individual responsibility, mortality and finitude, sympathetic recognition of animal subjectivity, embodiment, the upending of visual domination, and we could go on. There are both striking similarities in these excerpts and significant divergences. And although theory can sometimes have what I consider a “sanitizing” role, here is nonetheless a moment in which the force of Derrida’s questioning is more than a bit affective. So how do these approaches open up or allow intellectual and ethical work to be done? That is the question we want to pursue.

It has also occurred to me that when women in animal studies decry the male-dominated “boys’ club” of high theory, this protest might be understood to function, at least partially, as an unconscious lament for a highly theoretically sophisticated female intellectual who *has not fully emerged* in animal studies at this time. We can think of the way that a Butler or Spivak have functioned as

—perhaps not a girls' club entirely—but as ultra-theoretical female scholars who are *critically dominant* in their respective fields. It remains to be seen whether or when such a female critic will come to occupy that kind of placeholder in animal studies.

It is also important to ask why theory might be an especially vital site for knowledge-formation in animal studies. There would be any number of responses to this question, but given the space limitations here, I'll refer to my earlier discussions of the conundrum that the "animal" presents to the "human."<sup>4</sup> The animal is uniquely unsettling in its *organic* as well as *subjective* liminality. Where does it figure amid humans and stones? This is a question upon which Heidegger's discourse so famously foundered. How do we understand this "fellow" creature who is both extraordinarily like us and yet the "strangest stranger"? We need theoretical tools to help us reckon with these questions. Moreover, although many animals most certainly have forms of language, respond to us, and communicate in various ways, they do not have a formal or even loosely associative representative voice. In other words, the animal cannot symmetrically "talk back" to our objectifying codes. Therefore, questions of language, the politics and dangers of representation, and even the seemingly benign postures of advocacy and the humane all require our philosophical caution.

I want to move toward a conclusion by suggesting that feminist critics in animal studies embrace theoretical work as an important component of the discipline. Why? In part because there is an evolutionary logic to the development of any academic field. It's simply not possible to become less complex or to remain in some imagined "originary" position. Does this mean we embrace complexity just for its own sake? No. Rather, it means that we remain interested in the movement or becoming of the field—of the way in which it invites ruminations from various critical perspectives—and that we move with that field, assimilating, questioning, yes, but, more important, engaging in an enlivened ethics of *new working* in the field. We need to say yes to new forms of knowledge, to the becoming-other and becoming-different of knowledges that open up future philosophical frameworks for the consideration of animal ethics, animality, and the human–animal or creaturely axis.

I am certainly interested in the ways that earlier work can be reclaimed if it has been overlooked or "lost" in more recent discussions. But I believe that recuperation should be incorporated into new work that energizes the field and creates horizons of knowledge. We also ought to be cautious about a desire for recognition as it tends to produce states of resentment, rivalry, or disaffection. As Rosi Braidotti suggests, "hope rests with an affirmative ethics of sustainable futures, a deep and careless generosity, the ethics of nonprofit at an ontological level" (Braidotti 2010, 217). Let's not invest in the repetition of what we assume we know, but rather, let's work with the claims and discourses we find productive

as we strive for philosophical plenitude and ethical vigilance in our scholarly work.

## NOTES

1. I am grateful to my colleague, Mary Armstrong, for our conversations about the “histories of disciplines.”
2. For a related discussion of the range of feminist responses to ethical vegetarianism, which includes a valuable overview, see Gruen 2007.
3. Erica Fudge is quite good on this point in the recent forum on speciesism, identity politics, and ecocriticism. See her contribution in Cole et al. 2011.
4. See my fuller discussion of these questions in the introduction to Rohman 2009.

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