

## An Interspecies Internet? Thinking and Acting Feminist - Animal Rights Discourse Online

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### Abstract:

As contemporary feminist discourse continues to utilize online and digital media and technologies as platforms and tools for debate and information sharing, the reality of who - and *what* - has access and makes contributions to this discourse is changing. The perception of online and digital communication and debate as accessible, intersectional and democratizing forces has also meant that the conceived relationship between theoretical discourse and feminist praxis in a global forum has been made more mutable, and the distinctions between what is theory and what is praxis have become more blurred. Whether we regard digital media as trans or post-human, disembodied or decentralized, it does at least represent a form of conversation that blurs the boundaries of how we communicate, who (and what) is considered to have subjectivity, the impact of geographical location and embodiment and corporeality. These have also underpinned feminist animal rights and feminist vegetarian/vegan discourse, especially around our feminist understanding of what it means to be human. This paper references feminist-vegetarian, feminist-vegan and ecofeminist theory alongside theoretical work from animal studies across a range of disciplines to analyze feminist intersections with animal rights and veganism. In doing this I hope to offer an introduction to how online context influences feminist animal rights discourse. By considering this topic through a lens of ecofeminist and vegetarian/vegan feminist theory, what we think about when we think about 'the animal', and an examination of the role and function of digital media in feminist discourse, this paper offers some reflections on the online contribution being made to feminist animal rights and vegan discourse, and how digital media are shaping and influencing this discourse and its wider impact.

### Introduction

Feminist discourses of animal rights, vegetarianism and veganism, much like feminist discourse more broadly, have developed and mutated in an age of increasing use of the Internet and information technology. Digital media platforms have, in fact, become both locations *and* methods for the dissemination of information and channels of communication and debate. However, what remains less clear is how digital platforms as 'disembodied' locations for animal rights discourse intersecting with feminist theory and practice, impact the content and tone of the discourse itself. In particular, the question of how we as feminists understand our relationships to our own bodies and corporeality and

that of other animal species in an online context remains to be answered.

### **(Eco)feminist Theory – the ‘Animal Question’**

Slicer (1991) and Adams (1991) have discussed connections between the use of the non-human animal as a resource and the ‘use’ of women within mirrored frameworks of domination. Slicer examines animal testing and experimentation, while Adams focuses on the non-human animal as ‘meat’. Establishing the non-human animal as subject and the links between the language of patriarchy and patriarchal oppression of women and of the non-human animal, both Adams and Slicer emphasize the role of dualisms such as man/woman, emotion/rationalism, or nature/science, employed as constructs of the justification of oppressions – that one element of the polarity is mightier on some basis, and so has the right to oppress.

Both Slicer and Adams critique the received notion of non-human animal inferiority as tied to a lack of intellectualism or rationalism on the part of the animal. Both highlight the fact of the perception of humans as being inherently superior to (and, therefore, inherently entitled to oppress) non-human species. They expand on this phenomenon, linking it to the same value judgements which also place the masculine (supposedly rational and intellectual) ideologically above the feminine (supposedly irrational and emotional). In essence, the contention of theorists like Adams and Slicer is that a feminism which concedes that non-human animals are ‘less than’ humans simultaneously reifies the same false logic that justifies misogyny, racism, homophobia etc.

Gilligan (1982) discusses human responses to nature and the non-human animal, and specifically how the ‘default’ human ‘gaze’ is codified as male, providing insidious justification for the erasure of women’s experiences and standpoints. Collard and Contrucci (1988) offer a similar critique of patriarchal scientific epistemologies, and Leland (1983), Kheel (1995) and Jones (2011) have made significant contributions to discourse around feminism’s actual and potential role in recalibrating the excessively patriarchal language of both anti-woman and anti-animal practices, as well as of an animal rights movement which is dominated by patriarchal ideologies, perpetuating them and neglecting

intersectional approaches. The insistence upon patriarchal language and understanding obfuscates and elides our perception of the non-human animal. It is this elision that leads us to regard the non-human animal body as ‘meat’, devaluing empathy and normalizing and ‘naturalizing’ our view of animals as edible, killable or sellable.

This theoretical principle might invite us to consider what the online context means for feminist debate, research and publication. Braidotti (2013) discusses the post-human landscape as one where technology and internet-based ‘cyber’ contexts are increasingly a part of the reality of what it is to be human. Braidotti argues that this is an opportunity to move out of anthropocentrism, into a post-humanism where as humans we expand our horizons of understanding of what it is to be embodied and organic. If we consider that to be ‘meat’ is necessarily to be embodied, Braidotti’s analysis offers an interesting way into understanding the human domination of and relationship to the non-human, particularly in the future we are moving towards together.

Adams refers to “a correlation between plant-based economies and women’s power and animal-based economies and male power” (Adams, 2015:13), defining ‘the sexual politics of meat’ as “an attitude and action that animalizes women and feminizes animals” (Adams, 2015:xviii). This demonstrates the way in which the consumption of the non-human animal forms part of the same structure which enables the parallel consumption of women by men. It also highlights the broader structure of domination under which both consumptions are occurring – whoever is being consumed, it is the dominant male doing the consuming. In (cyber) worlds where boundaries of being and of embodiment are blurred, the emergence of a counter-culture which transgresses boundaries in this way will impact upon all the many meanings of what it is to be embodied, to be a subject and not simply an object, and what we understand as ‘meat’, in relation to the non-human animal *and* in relation to women. However, in order to understand fully the impact of a technological future, we need to consider who and what has or doesn’t have access to these means.

Gruen’s (2015) theory of ‘entangled empathy’ highlights both the intrinsic humanity of empathy and the oneness of humans with the rest of the natural world. Gruen focuses her discussion on how we understand ourselves as individuals, our role in collective existence, and how this impacts on our ability to empathize with other beings in accordance not

necessarily with their *similarity* to us, but as other individuals. Curtin (1991:72) discusses empathy and sympathy as part of a feminist 'ethic of care', and writes in particular in relation to abstinence from meat as a "way of politicizing an ethic of care". Donovan (1996:165) frames sympathy theory as evolving in response to a feminist care ethic which moves the ethical approach to non-human animals away from universalized, abstract rationalism to an experiential empathy which can be applied to feminist praxis and lived experience as well as theory.

Plumwood (1993) focuses on how 'mastery' over nature through patriarchal rationalism results in ethical frameworks which are incomplete and insufficient, and rendered excessively theoretical and impersonal in the search for 'universalizable' theory. More false dualisms laden with erroneous value judgements emerge when we critique patriarchal, rationalist theories – the false dualisms of the universal/contextual, the male/female, and the rational/emotional are all applied in devaluing women's feminist experiential approaches. These rationalist theories, of which Singer (1997) and Regan (1983) are perhaps the most well-known and referenced in subsequent feminist responses to their theories, frame the dominant patriarchal discourse as being separate from nature and the non-human animal, rejecting a holistic understanding of humans within the natural world, thus justifying domination. The role of (false) dualism is very pertinent, particularly in considering how we conjure with a 'real space'/digital media dualism, and what this real or perceived polarity does to our appreciation of the role of digital communication in understanding lived reality for species including, but not limited to, humans. A feminist approach to animal rights rejects dualism as a justification for oppression in the same way that it rejects dualism as the basis for masculine oppression of the feminine, heteronormative oppression of the queer, white oppression of people of color and so on.

Spiegel's (1988) work correctly insists that feminists of color have a unique (and historically erased) perspective, essential to the animal rights movement. In fact, Spiegel maintains that the animal rights movement persistently reflects the mainstream elements of white, wealthy and middle class normativity. Bahna-James, who has written specifically on veganism as an animal rights and social justice issue, (2010:168) concurs by arguing that "it's important that Black women be included in the vegan dialogue, not only because we are so frequently left out of it [...] the vegan cause will not be wholly effective until it

addresses the diverse spectrum of circumstances and psychologies that contribute to the practices it is trying to overcome”.

Breeze-Harper (2010:20) writes about her personal journey to veganism, pushing past the idea of animal rights and veganism as “the domain of the privileged” to an understanding that oppression of the non-human animal contributes to the structure of privilege in society. Mallory (2013) and Park (2011) show how animal rights theory and practice can be focused on a more diverse racial and cultural relevance, reclaimed from perceptions of white middle-class privilege which are a major obstacle to the mutual benefits of diverse theory, but crucially of ensuring that praxis reflects this theory on a real experiential level which resists superficial generalization and the temptations of abstract universalization. Whether or not mainstream animal rights movements (or, more specifically, *feminist* animal rights movements) are succeeding in engaging in truly intersectional theory and praxis is a question which draws irresistibly upon where and by what means discourse is occurring. While making reference to the established links between the oppressions of women and of non-human animals, Deckha (2013:48) states “the majority of animal advocates are women whose experience with animal advocacy is adversely inflected by gendering”. In considering how women’s experiences of animal rights discourse are gendered, we should also bear in mind that women’s use of online spaces is also profoundly gendered and that this will inevitably impact upon the context and content of feminist animal rights discourse online.

It is also useful to consider ecofeminist and vegetarian-feminist analyses of language when critiquing how language by and about the animal rights movement is used online. Joan Dunayer has written about the link between animal insults and the degradation of women, and it is my contention that this phenomenon takes on a new dimension when viewed through the lens of online discourse. Dunayer lists animal-based pejoratives like “bitch”, “dog”, “cow” etc, but points out that “without this disdainful view of dogs, *dog* would not offend” Dunayer (1995:12). Our willingness to engage with this implied offensiveness requires on our part the replication of an oppressive, anthropocentric dominance and oppression, but what does this mean for speech online? A feminist discussion of intersectionality in the animal rights movement often results in the movement being reduced to and dismissed as a ‘policing’ of women’s bodies, which is necessarily and

categorically 'unfeminist'. However, ecofeminist theory can interrogate this as a misappropriation or an expiation of guilt at a consumption which contributes to suffering within a logic of domination, reinforcing the oppression of all oppressed groups. Gaard (2002) and Warren (1990) contribute to the discourse around subjects such as queer readings of the role and function of ecofeminist ethical approaches to the non-human animal and nature and the intrinsic links between non-human animal oppression and the intersectional foci of 'traditional' feminism. Online feminist spaces offer arena for the interweaving of a variety of feminisms which challenge essentialist ideology and offer a place to understand differing experience. An analysis of the animal rights movement in this context will offer a deeper understanding of how ethical issues which contribute to 'animal rights' – diet, ethical purchasing, environmental degradation – are lived by feminist activists and commentators 'beyond the theory'.

### **Feminists and/in Digital Media**

Online platforms, and particularly social media and blog spaces, have made a revolutionary contribution to feminist discourses. Keller (2016) offers an in-depth assessment of blogging as a transformative form of discourse, particularly for young feminists – “online spaces such as blogs have been significant spaces to problematize the caricature of the feminist found within postfeminist popular culture” (Keller, 2016:19). Existing research on feminist blogging appears to have this countering of traditional, dominant (read 'masculine') discourse as its core focus. As such, much of the existing research on feminism in digital media is focused on the concept of the creation of a counter-culture or counter-public, which challenges the idea of what is socio-culturally 'normal' and what is considered 'transgressive'. Fraser (1990:59) discusses the notion of the public sphere and how this relates to what is public and private, and where the boundaries of these concepts sit, when discussion happens online – in suggesting that “discussants were to deliberate as peers” and “inequalities of status bracketed”, Fraser lays the foundation for a consideration of what happens when the 'public sphere' of online discourse is not open to all due to a lack of intersectionality and a failure to consider inequality. It is also clear that there is no sphere for species beyond the human in this

paradigm.

Gay (2014:265) comments on social media (in this case, Twitter) maintaining that “social networks [...] provide us with something of a flawed but necessary conscience”. This begs the question of what the presence in digital media of social justice movements and counter-cultures can actually do for discourse around the non-human animal. If we are to regard the digital media counter-public as something of a disembodied ‘conscience’, we must begin to try to reconcile that with feminist activism which rejects the policing of women’s bodies and behaviors. Moreover, there is an opportunity here to interrogate the function of digital media as a revolutionary conscience. We can ask whether (false) anonymity is in fact part of the power source of this conscience, which provides the user with the opportunity to engage in shaming practices which de-humanize (read, ‘make animal’) and elide the individual.

Some ecofeminist theory which asks questions about how the human co-exists with the non-human makes stark and bold forays into questions of bodily being and ‘cyber-existence’. As previously discussed, Braidotti (2013) has written on the impact of post-humanist and post-anthropocentric thought on our sense of subjectivity, and Donna Haraway in particular asks us to consider species and existence boundaries, the post-human and transgression of bodily definitions, offering an examination of species and subject boundaries. She describes her *Cyborg Manifesto* as being “an argument for *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction” Haraway (1991:150). Echoing the rejection of false dualism, Haraway consistently challenges what she regards as a false opposition of nature and culture – “nothing really convincingly settles the separation of human and animal [...] movements for animal rights are not irrational denials of human uniqueness; they are a clear-sighted recognition of connection across the discredited breach of nature and culture” Haraway (1991:52). A common method of discrediting animal rights discourse and activism, one can observe that irrationality, emotion, sensitivity, empathy etc are often feminized, where rationality, objectivity (even where objectivity in the absolute cannot possibly exist), detachment etc are to be found in a scientific verbal ‘silo’ which is masculine by default and in which the ‘feminine’ must be resisted (if women are to be admitted at all). In short, accusations of sentimentality are deployed as a method of silencing dissent over species-specific

discourse. Haraway's examination has enormous relevance to any study of how human experience and bodily being exists in digital worlds where to be bodied and corporeal takes on different meanings.

Star (1996) encourages her reader to consider what our move into the digital means for the concepts of home and homelessness. The discourse of animal 'rights' still struggles to find a home in feminist discourse online in much the same way as it has and does in the embodied praxis of feminism 'in real life'. Zickmund highlights the "sense of Being-in-the-world" which is often absent from cyber-community, which in turn informs our notions of 'cyberhate', particularly between subversive or counter-culture groups Zickmund (2000:237). This again invokes the dehumanizations entailed in digital discourse and 'being' in digital media, and asks whether 'cyberhate' is generated in part by the disconnection between the organic humanity and the abstracted cyber-presence. Plant remarks that "We found ourselves working as slave components of systems whose scales and complexities we could not comprehend. Were we their parasites? Were they ours?" Plant (1998:4).

Kaitlynn Mendes' *Slutwalk: Feminism, Activism and Media* references the 2011 worldwide feminist phenomenon of the same name. Mendes dedicates a chapter to the ways in which the global momentum of Slutwalk dovetailed with the ever-growing popularity of social media, for all of its benefits and setbacks. In conclusion, Mendes lauds the possibility for feminist networking offered by digital media, while also noting the lack of safety and potential risks to mental health presented by cyberspatial discourse Mendes (2015:185). Disagreement and debate on how 'real' feminism ought to respond to the discursive move into online counter-publics is pertinent to the topic of online animal rights and feminist activism, and in particular to our ability to grasp the heterogenous ways in which feminists use and respond to digital technologies and what is arguably a tendency to claim an equality in digital media which may not be as universal as some proponents would suggest. Spender (1995) discusses how online discourse goes beyond a vehicle for communication and is, in very real terms, a force for changing and shaping our experiences, opinions and the way we engage interpersonally – *if* we are alert to what is included, and what erased.



Ebeen and Kramarae (1993) advocate for “criteria that demonstrate the extent to which information technologies are deployed wisely” (1993:24). Digital media signal a (significant but only partial) democratization of information, activism and knowledge, assisting in proliferating feminist ethics, theory and philosophy out of academia. However, this democratized, to some extent unpoliced space, comes with its own attendant challenges, especially where, as is the case with non-human animal ‘rights’, the subject (the animal) is by necessity excluded from the space itself, and present only as an object in humorous YouTube videos, for example. It is vitally important to consider what digital media circumnavigates and erases, as well as what it helps to lend a platform to, and to expose to scrutiny the notion of digital media as an inherently safe and diverse space.

### **The Voice(less) Online**

Sandoval (2000: 374) discusses the role that cyber spaces and the increasing co-existence of “robotic conditions” and “human agency” play in “oppositional politics” and “resistance”, particularly for those humans who are hierarchically disadvantaged in society (including but not limited to women) and find themselves seeking to “renegotiate power” in new ways. We can compare with this Spender’s (1995: 45) commentary on what digital media means for our concept of the ‘reader’, and the fact that the advent of the printing press challenged the reality that “only a very few people were readers: the priests and the princes” and that “in modern times we expect everyone to be able to read”. If the availability of information online has further democratized who can read what, we must also consider this second point – that we assume (incorrectly) that this democratization is *complete* because access to the skills and materials required to realize it is universal. With this in mind, it is important to note that animal rights discourse happening online introduces another layer of technological, cyber ‘agency’ (or *lack* of agency) into the discussions that are taking place. As the developed world is a context in which human relationships with animals-as-product are increasingly mechanized and robotic, so we as humans are also using technologies to *discuss* the non-human animal ‘at a remove’. Sandoval (2000: 384) also touches upon where and how cyber communication as a “methodology of the oppressed” manifests as a “differential mode of consciousness, carrying it through to the

level of the ‘real’ where it can guide and impress dominant powers”. In an Internet where the non-human animal continues to be as voiceless as in ‘the real world’, the question of whether animal rights discourse online succeeds in ‘impressing dominant powers’ perhaps remains to be answered. The widening availability of digital media can, generally speaking, be observed as having had a democratizing affect on feminist discourse *in the developed or ‘first’ world*. Research, study and commentary from academic sources continues to command authority and, arguably, to dominate the narrative. Internet resources may be more readily accessible to more feminist activists and, crucially, individuals who may identify neither as feminists nor as animal rights activists *per se*.

Interestingly, Gromala (2000: 598) relates conversations with academics specializing in VR (virtual reality) technologies and how they “thrill in the sensation of ‘disembodiment’ and the ecstasy of ‘leaving the meat behind’”. ‘Meat’ in this case refers to their own physical reality, and as a choice of term it is very revealing, implying a sense that VR and, perhaps, broader information technologies (and, by extension, the Internet) have the effect of *elevating* the human to a divine state beyond the animal – beyond the ‘meat’. Gromala (2000: 607) goes on to conclude that VR in particular “serves to upset notions in our relationship to the symbolic realms, as well as binary mind/body, subject/object, and material/immaterial distinctions” and that “what is at stake is our human ability to make our world shareable with others”. What we must do here is to ask ourselves what we mean by ‘others’. If we mean simply the human ‘other’, this presumably means that our technological future will remain as anthropocentric as our present. Given that the very basis of the structure of oppression and the perceived right to dominate, both between human groups and of humans over non-humans, is predicated on sets of binaries, Gromala’s observation is pertinent. It asks us to consider what going ‘beyond the meat’ by means of cyber technologies does to the binaries upon which societies in the developed world are constructed, and also the form that the ‘voice’ takes in the context of that transience and immateriality.

Due in no small part to the power of online advertising (and, therefore, the influence of mainstream media and capitalist purchasing power), a growing number of online spaces are available to use for free provided an individual has Internet access - and this is a contentious proviso when one considers how many people/women/feminists/animal rights

activists lack easy or reliable Internet access. In summary, the democratization of information, debate and expression has not extended to everyone, and despite the major shift in the accessibility of ideas, there are large parts of the world and massive populations which do not have access to these digital media. As such, in accordance with feminist theory and practice, we need to consider the extent to which real life oppressive structures are replicated when certain voices do not find a 'home' online. One of these replicated structures is the oppression of the non-human. Star (2000) invokes the image of the Ancient Roman goddess Vesta (Hestia in Ancient Greece) to illustrate the way in which digital media problematizes concepts of home and homelessness. Crucially, Star (2000: 632-633) notes that the Vestal fire illustrates a non-anthropomorphized, perpetually present (female) 'entity'. In considering that the concept of 'hearth and home' is mutable and can, notionally, transcend principles of physical, geographic location, feminist theory could therefore assert that the 'world wide web' reifies feminist principles of inclusion and a 'home' for all women. While material inequalities such as socio-economic and geo-political barriers exist, truly inclusive online discourse is unlikely. Star (2000: 641) talks about her 'homepage' online as "a new addition to the way I think about myself and my sense of home", but also concedes that there are basic standards of financial security and accessibility – access to hardware and software, literacy, a network of contacts – which need to be met before the globally available, nebulous 'home' online can be set up and inhabited. In fact, Star (2000: 640) explicitly states that there are cases where modern technologies have served to elide the causes and impact of material, 'real world' homelessness – using as an example centers which provide voicemail boxes for homeless job applicants which may help them to conceal their homeless status from potential employers, but do little to interrogate or truly address the causes of their homelessness 'root and branch'. As such, it is important to consider the structures of privilege which may be being practiced online, and who and what is excluded from this form of discourse.

As regards the rights of the non-human animal, digital media, while symbolizing something like both the post and trans human, can also be seen to be entirely anthropocentric. It is a complete exclusion of the 'meat' of the animal body – while humans live with animals in 'real life', the nature of the relationship with the animal shifts in cases where the animal is completely absent (for example, when humans purchase and consume animals as 'meat', the relationship with that meat as animal is elided and invisible). We can consider, for

example, the comments of Haraway (1991, 2003) and Braidotti (2013) on the subjects of blurred distinctions between the co-existences of humans and other animal species which call into question the truth of the human/animal polarity, or how technologies of all kinds are mutating our notions of what it is to be and live as human. In digital media, the non-human animal is purely object and not subject (in basic terms, the non-human animal has no Internet access, and so is quite literally voiceless online), and is removed from the interpersonal in a way which, to some degree, mirrors the way the invisibility of the non-human animal is procured through the mechanisms Adams (2015) has discussed such as the mass term and the absent referent, and the way that slaughterhouses and the transformation of the animal into 'meat' is invisible and cloaked in euphemism. It is in this context that online discourse, whether about feminism or animal rights or the intersection of the two, takes place. There are ways in which feminist theories of animal rights and veganism find (or fail to find) their 'home' online. The (im)materiality of digital media influences both the content and context of the arguments being put forward, and frames the subjectivity/objectivity of the non-human animal both as a material in 'the real world' and as a topic of discourse and debate.

### **Case Studies – Feminism Blogs the Animal**

In her 2016 blog post *Confessions of a meat eating feminist*<sup>1</sup>, Marija Assereckova's position is that veganism and feminism are not, and nor should they be, mutually inclusive. On the question of the 'rights' of the non-human animal, Assereckova's initial focus is to challenge the equation of the reproductive rights of human women to the exploitation of reproductive functions in the production of products like cows' milk. Assereckova's argument seems to be that if as feminists we oppose the exploitation of a cow's reproductive system in a farming context, logically we must also oppose male animals' acts of sexual 'violence' against female animals in the wild. However, though Assereckova readily admits that "people do exploit animals", this argument does not unpack the distinction between farming (which is human-driven) and animal existences in the wild, where species exist within a broader ecology. This is an interesting way in which human

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1 (<http://www.europeanyoung.feminists.eu/2016/07/31/confessions-of-a-meat-eating-feminist>)

discourse online overlooks the way in which human agency is expressed through technology, which includes mechanized farming and information technologies. The conflation of animal suffering at human hands and inter-species predation in the ecological wild overlooks the role that dominant masculine narratives of capitalism and mechanization for maximum profit play in the mass production of meat and dairy, particularly in the developed world.

Further, Assereckova asserts that vegan-feminist arguments are too often predicated on the anthropomorphization of non-human species. However, as many vegetarian and vegan feminists and ecofeminist theorists have demonstrated, the ascribing of human characteristics to non-human animals, far from being a necessary facet of the extension of 'rights' to non-human animals, can be regarded as being besides the point, and the rights and utility based theoretical models including those of Singer (1997) and Regan (1983), while still of relevance, have been rigorously challenged by vegan and vegetarian feminist theory since their original publication.

Assereckova asserts that feminist campaigning for animal welfare can only ever have meaning inasmuch as it produces "moral satisfaction", because animals cannot speak for themselves and there cannot be a sense of "awareness that they are experiencing the same oppression" as humans who campaign for their welfare or rights. However, it is unclear how the fact that the non-human animal "has no voice" or is unable to verbalize a shared oppression obstructs the value of feminist animal welfare advocacy. It is difficult to reconcile the concept of voicelessness (which can be literal voicelessness as that experienced by the non-verbal animal, or the metaphorical voicelessness of socio-economic limitations, geo-political oppressions or a lack of social capital as experienced by a large part of the human population) with an elision of our moral and ethical responsibility to give voice to the voiceless where possible. As discussed earlier, to be voiced online requires a certain amount of capital and a certain amount of agency, and the Internet does not provide us with a mechanism by which *all* humans, much less all sentient animals, are homed and given voice. Presumably, too, the logical conclusion of this position is that as feminists we can only ever campaign from a position of shared experience, and while this certainly seems to be a position held by many feminists, it also begs the question of how we 'should' respond in the face of diverse experiences and difference.

In 2013 blog post *Meat Eating and Feminism*<sup>2</sup>, Nerdy Feminist, who similarly asserts that while animal rights and welfare as they pertain to veganism as a lifestyle choice are not incompatible with feminism, also openly states that “I will *a/ways* choose humans over animals . . . I value the bodily autonomy of people *over* animals”. This is unequivocal. It would be interesting to read an explanation of this position which Nerdy Feminist asserts ‘as read’. However, as a lot of feminist theory shows, the *ipso facto* superiority of human over non-human is not an ethical or philosophical ‘given’. This is interesting, too, when we consider Gromala’s (2000) account of virtual reality experts and academics (who, it could be argued, are the purveyors of the dominant narrative and culture) regarding VR technologies as a means of transcending the ‘meat’ – the animal within the human. That Nerdy Feminist is asserting the natural superiority of the human over the animal using a medium which reinforces and reifies that ‘superiority’ is an important observation.

In 2016 blog post *I don’t eat meat because I’m a feminist*,<sup>3</sup> Madison Griffiths draws comparisons between the objectification of women as the ‘property’ of men and the objectification of animals as the ‘property’ of the human species, and goes on to describe the concept of ‘othering’ which is at the root of these parallel oppressions – that difference (in physicality, gender, sexuality, race, species) is a valid basis for oppressive practices and that, in certain situations to be decided upon on an *ad hoc* basis, might *can* equal right. If we consider feminist theory and discourse online as a counter-narrative to the dominant, masculine, privileged narrative of the mainstream, we must also consider what the elevation of the human above the animal through (information) technology means for our oppressive relationships with the non-human animal. In short, we are faced with feminist animal rights discourse which is taking place in a location which makes the ‘othering’ of the non-human animal easier.

Alice Rebekah Fraser’s 2016 online article *Not eating meat makes you a Vegetarian, not a Feminist*<sup>4</sup>, is a response to Madison Griffiths, dismissing her position as a “desperate conflation of philosophical ideas”. Fraser’s focus seems to sit more around what is

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2 (<http://www.nerdyfeminist.com/2013/01/meat-eating-and-feminism.html>)

3 (<http://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/life-and-relationships/real-life/i-don't-eat-meat-because-im-a-feminist-20160830-gr4nmi.html>)

4 (<http://www.sbs.com.au/comedy/article/2016/09/02/not-eating-meat-makes-you-vegetarian-not-feminist>)

perceived as a tendency on the part of veganism to police women's bodies while projecting ideological purity in a way which allows activists to grade themselves comparatively, particularly in an online world. Fraser does not examine the question of animal welfare and rights, and so it is difficult to interrogate the extent to which this position allows that the consumption of the non-human animal by humans as a resource is oppressive, and Fraser's chief objection to Griffiths' position is the conflation of masculine *digestive* appetite with masculine *sexual* appetite.

In 2015 blog post *3 Reasons Black Folks Don't Join the Animal Rights Movement – And Why We Should*<sup>5</sup>, Aph Ko focuses on intersectionality in animal rights and vegan activism, and particularly on the prevalence in mainstream animal rights discourse of comparisons between non-human animal exploitation and both historical and contemporary racist ideologies and acts. Ko makes specific reference to ways in which that which is 'animal' is also 'other', used to codify a basis or justification for mistreatment and exploitation, and has been used as a structure for rationalizing the oppression of people of color. On the question of animal welfare and the 'rights' of the non-human animal, Ko states "As black people, if we fear being labeled an "animal" because it means that we can be used, abused, objectified, and killed, then perhaps we should question why animals are automatically deserving of abuse such that we're terrified to even be called one". Ko's reflections on this issue certainly echo feminist theorists including Joan Dunayer who have interrogated the link between animal-related pejoratives and human oppressions, with particular focus on the animalization of women. Moreover, Ko's comments on the location of non-human animal oppression within the broader structure of oppression are vital to a full understanding of the incomplete nature of mainstream animal rights discourse – "no-one's liberation will occur within a context of injustice for another group of sentient beings [...] the ease with which we look away from the suffering of sentient beings who are regarded as "less than" is the same ease that white people use to look away from our oppression".

## Conclusion

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5 (<http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/09/black-folks-animal-rights-mvmt/>)

In a world where the vast majority of animal life (both human and non-human) is not connected to the Internet, and has no voice or agency online, we are invited to think more carefully about who and what is included in online discourse and what is absent, and especially about how we understand corporeality, anthropological identity and materiality in a world where the mechanical, the technological and the trans/post human forms an increasingly central part of our co-existences. Comparison and contrast with increasingly mechanized, industrialized farming methods and the impact these have on human relationships with animals-as-subjects vs animals-as-food could help us to understand how ways of being with and discussing animals are affected by human technological advancement.

If we are to regard discourse and debate in digital media as an opportunity for democratizing and improving the inclusion and accessibility of feminist theory and practice, we must consider what this method of communication *doesn't* do as well as what it does, and who it excludes as well as who it empowers. This is not to suggest that online discourse is not a viable means of empowerment, for women, for feminism and also for animal rights discourse. In fact, increasing access to cheap or free publication platforms, audiences and information means that digital media can be a location in which non-mainstream media and counter-cultures can find a voice and also build networks. However, when we talk about animal rights online, we are speaking *for* rather than speaking *to* or *with*. This is also true when we speak about humans in the developing world who are 'homeless' or even entirely absent on the internet, and this has ramifications when the discourse invokes feminist theory or practice and discussion of privilege and choice – as feminist critiques of the animal rights and vegan movements often do.

The question of what digital media means for corporeality and physicality also provides a lens for considering how we talk and think about bodies in the context of feminist discourse and debate online. As a context for talking about what is meat, what is flesh, what is food and how we conjure with body shape and image, it is profoundly ironic in its ability not just to decentre the concept of 'home' but also of materiality and the fusion of the body and the consciousness.



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