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Unnamed Others: How Can Thinking about “Animals” Matter to Feminist Theorizing?

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TAKING TURNS

NORA has made a habit of inviting Nordic as well as non-Nordic scholars—with important and timely contributions of relevance to Nordic feminist and gender research—for our series of short position papers, entitled “Taking Turns”. The “Taking Turns” series provides scholars with the opportunity to take turns in expressing positions and perspectives on the contemporary changes and challenges of our heterogeneous field of research. Moreover, the short position paper series presents urgent matters of concern in an accessible mode, and it has proven to be of great use in the feminist or critical academic classrooms at many European universities!

In this issue, and in line with our aim of promoting feminist research that engages critically and creatively with more-than-human centred issues, we are very proud to present Professor Lynda Birke, a pioneer of feminist science studies. She stands as a key figure of feminist biology and of materialist feminist theory and practice. A Visiting Professor at the Department of Biological Sciences, University of Chester (UK), she has also been a trail-blazer in the emerging field of human-animal studies. Due to her commitment to ethical human-animal relations (as witnessed in her own horsemanship) and her accessible feminist writing style, Lynda Birke has had and continues to have a major influence in and on both feminist science studies and human animal studies. This is evidenced in her extensive list of publications, including *Women, Feminism and Biology: The Feminist Challenge* (Hemel Hempstead, 1986), *Feminism, Animals and Science: The Naming of the Shrew* (Open University Press, 1994), *Feminism and the Biological Body* (Edinburgh University Press, 1999), and *The Sacrifice: How Scientific Experiments Transform Animals and People* (Purdue University Press, 2007) with Arnold Arluke and Mike Michael. In this short think piece, she asks us to consider the importance of thinking with animals for feminist theorizing.

Unnamed Others: How Can Thinking about “Animals” Matter to Feminist Theorizing?

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I am old enough to remember calls to “bring women in” to various academic disciplines. That was the foundation of feminist inquiry—to uncover the multiple

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ways in which women were excluded by the practices and philosophies of academia. This challenge was rooted in feminist activism and began to develop into specific areas of inquiry—such as women’s or gender studies. Much more recently, there has been a similar call to “bring animals in”—a response to the realization that not only are non-human animals excluded from most disciplinary purviews, but that we humans are not alone in producing society or culture. Here, too, academic questions had roots in activism, and new interdisciplinary conjunctions—“human-animal studies”—emerged.

Is this new field of any relevance to feminist inquiry? Can it throw up some challenges to future directions? My answer is yes, and I have suggested before that there are, indeed, potential paths of cross-fertilization (Birke 2002, 2009). These earlier explorations centred more on what feminist ideas might contribute to human-animal studies (henceforth, HAS). Here, however, my concern is to turn that around and focus more on the question: Can HAS contribute anything to feminism? I want to address that in three parts: problems, politics, and promises.

Problems

To begin first with the problems—in what ways has it been problematic for feminism to think about other species? Despite the proliferation of “animals” within academic scholarship, animality has too often been linked to the idea of the “sub-human” other (see Deckha 2010; Kemmerer 2011), used to associate categories of people with the bestial, with being closer to an unchanging nature. That, indeed, has been a significant reason why feminism historically tended to distance itself from animals; we did not want that implied association with essentialism. But what were the implications of making this move?

For a long time, theorists in gender studies avoided thinking much about species difference—even while there was growing focus on the politics of difference and how structures of power are produced and intersect. The politics of non-humans did not seem important to those endeavours. But that exclusion had implications, particularly in the way it removed us from biology, which left us inarticulate not only about other species in our worlds, but also about how to think about the biological body.

Our theorizing has too often rested implicitly on assumptions of animals as generic others to our humanity, or as irrelevant; non-human animals have simply not mattered much to feminist thought (Birke 1994). The demarcation of “us” from “them” is deeply rooted in humanism, to which Western feminism is also heir. Such opposition is one reason why “... even western critical theories, including feminist theories, have not labored to unpack species difference, distinctions and demarcations in our cultural order” (Deckha 2010: 30). The category of the sub-human, Deckha notes, serves both to erase specificities and to justify violence. Whether these are groups of people or the generic “animal”, they are discursively and materially relegated to status of an inferior other.

In some ways, a concern to think about “the animal” is growing, in gender studies as elsewhere (Birke et al. 2004; Haraway 2008). We are, perhaps, more sensitive now to the significance of non-humans in our social worlds. As Haraway emphasizes, we and our companion species are jointly implicated in the production of what she terms

“naturecultures”: it makes no sense to think about politics and social life while denying the deep interconnections with other species. That said, however, there remain problems—we cannot so easily throw away entrenched ways of thinking about our relationship to non-human others. Perhaps the greatest difficulty is the very term “animal”, generically opposed to “the human”. This is, of course, manifest in the very discussion of “humans and animals” which is the remit of this article and drives recent work in “human-animal studies”. Animal is a slippery word, conflating enormous diversity. Whatever its meaning in biology (as species classified within the kingdom Animalia, including humans), its most common colloquial use is as counterpoint to the human. In this usage, there is little acknowledgement of human embeddedness in a vast array of different species.

However much “animals” begin to creep into our theories, they usually remain in that oppositional place, which in turn reinforces understandings of “them” as the inferior other. If the word “animal” creeps into social theory, it is all too often as an opposition, to indicate that which we humans are not. To give one example in feminist writing, Rosi Braidotti, writing about the materiality of life and processes of “becoming”, suggests that: “The strength of animals is that they are immanent in their territories and environmentally bound: insects and animals mark their territory acoustically, olfactorily, by their own sign system” (Braidotti 2006: 111). While Braidotti views “animals” and humans as both enmeshed environmentally and explores these interconnections in this work, this passage still posits “animals” as somehow unable to transcend their immediate environments. As such, they seem to be synonymous with an inability to change.¹

For me, any separation of us from “other” animals remains deeply problematic. These inferior, bounded others lurk in the shadows of our thinking. And that is the irony in Braidotti’s reference, for in this work she is explicitly trying to move beyond the division of human and animal, emphasizing shared materialities. It troubles me that doing so, while at the same time writing about “animals” as bound into territories or fixed patterns of behaviour, returns “animals” to the very separation addressed. It is not only materialities, fleshy similarities, which we share with other species, but also how we/they engage with the world behaviourally. Perhaps some “animals” are more bounded than other kinds—but not all. We are not the only species with complex socio-cultural lives, and not the only species capable of materially transcending our environments.

Indeed, divisions of species are all too seldom addressed. If non-humans are perceived collectively as inferior, environmentally bound, and territorially immanent, then it is hardly surprising that we (humans in the industrialized West) want to distance ourselves. But if, on the other hand, we recognize that social lives are constructed by and out of many meetings with others, whoever they are, then seeing some of those others through a lens of inferiority is rather less inevitable.²

The primary problem, then, in thinking about “animals” is the enormous difficulty of escaping from a word which does enormous cultural work in maintaining human exceptionalism. There are increasingly moves to challenge anthropocentrism (the supposition that humans are the centre of the world)—from, for example, post-humanism (see Wolfe 2003). Philosophically, these are necessary moves—we do indeed need to think beyond human centrality. But we have yet to figure out how to

translate the theory into methodologies for research or to work out the implications for practical politics (Taylor 2011).

To begin with, we have to recognize that non-human others—of myriad forms and features—have always been part and parcel of who we are and how we live in the world. From the bacteria in our guts, to the dogs in some of our homes, to the cattle supplying bodily parts, human social worlds, our naturecultures, are not imaginable without animal others. These beings are part and parcel of the social structures that concern any politics, including feminism. Our theories must recognize that.

While HAS is a relatively new field of inquiry, it can fruitfully inform other social theory, including feminist ideas. But what is more important, I think, is that a perspective that is critical of pejorative notions of animality needs to be informed by an understanding of politics and power; indeed, I am wary of merely noting that we live alongside animals, or that some companion species are deeply tied up with our histories and social structures—our relations with non-human others are profoundly structured by differentials of power.

Acknowledging our deep connections with other species does not, moreover, undermine justice for humans; on the contrary, I would argue that it complements feminist concerns with, and challenges to, human oppression in all its forms. Thinking across species enriches our understanding of structural forms of oppression (also see Plumwood 1993), and of how power and politics intersect.

Politics and power

In her short story, “She Unnames Them”, Ursula LeGuin’s protagonist takes human names away from the animals, who one by one walk away with as much indifference as they bore toward the original naming (LeGuin 1987). Our naming, or unnameing, of non-humans rarely takes into account their perspectives; and how we think about them too seldom acknowledges the way that our worlds are built upon oppression of these unnameable others.

A key insight of feminist theory has been an oppositional consciousness, centred upon concepts of situated perspectives (Braidotti 2009). Trying to think about situated perspectives with regard to non-humans is tricky, however, for we cannot easily speak with them, nor readily understand their points of view; indeed, as LeGuin implies, they may at times be indifferent to how we think or talk about them. They cannot, within our political structures, readily articulate their own situatedness for themselves—and even if they could, we would be singularly bad at understanding what they might have to say. Political structures are, furthermore, human, set up in ways that simply deny animal existence, except as possessions of individuals or groups of people (see Francione 1996).

We may find it difficult to see the situated perspectives of non-human others,³ but it is arguably less difficult to think about accountability. One of the key elements of developing a specifically feminist research methodology was to insist on making the research (and the researcher) accountable to the subjects of study. To do so means listening to the people whose lives you are investigating, and to (try to) understand their situation, where they are coming from, and what the implications are to them of the research. That may be (partly) feasible, in principle, if the research involves humans

(or at least those humans who can speak back and be made obviously accountable)—but can this be done if the subjects of research are not human? Can we be accountable to animal subjects if we “stand in for them” and act on their behalf? Can we ever ask questions about non-human animals without the edifice of human domination of other species? And can feminism afford to ignore or play down these concerns, in the wake of humanity’s massive destruction of other species’ habitats—as well as our own?

Being accountable in research is not easy, and there is, as feminist researchers have long argued, invariably an imbalance of power—whether those studied are human or not. Still, I would argue that thinking about how to be accountable is an important lesson that feminist inquiry can bring to animal studies. For all that HAS is primarily concerned with non-humans and their relationships with us, too seldom does it seek to identify how the animals themselves might view (or be impacted by) the studies we do and the conclusions we draw.⁴ Radically differently, I suspect.

It is, moreover, that question of accountability to others, *including non-human others*, that provides a significant challenge to feminist scholarship, I would argue. If we emphasize intersectionality in research and theorizing, and seek to understand the multiple and complex ways that power structures cut across or complement each other, then we must recognize where other species are situated in those power structures. This is where insights from HAS scholarship can help to inform feminist inquiry; not only does HAS work to trace the complex ways in which non-human lives are entwined with human ones, but its activist connections remind us of the politics. Non-human animals in our techno-industrial world are increasingly commodified and disempowered. Indeed, it is precisely for this reason that I am wary of some academic writing on post-humanism; whatever the philosophical promises, post-humanist thinkers seem sometimes preoccupied with transgressing bodily boundaries through biotechnology—and you can guess which individuals will have their bodily boundaries transgressed without their consent (see Twine 2010).

As Erika Cudworth has noted (Cudworth 2010), it is not enough to uncover how entwined our lives are with (some) other species, if such uncovering remains oblivious to the politics of our relationships with non-humans—essentially, one of exploitation. This would remain an academic exercise, leaving the theorizing as unaccountable to those whose lives are analysed. Even while there is growing concern with creating better lives for animals, we find ways to make their lives worse. Thus, international institutions (such as the European Union, for example) increasingly stipulate that animals in our care must have certain freedoms, such as freedom to express a range of behaviour; yet they simultaneously support the rights of institutions (member states, corporations) to take away those freedoms (through genetic manipulation to produce animals that cannot express normal behaviour, for instance, or because incarcerating the animal is “in human interests”).⁵ Non-human animals do not have political power, they do not generally have the opportunity to bargain and negotiate (in human terms), and they are increasingly denied even individual expression as a result of our practices—factory farming is the classic example.

Lacking obvious political power, however, does not mean that non-humans are outside political power structures and how these are reproduced. On the contrary, many animal kinds are crucially implicated, and the more that humans find ways to oppress them, the more we shore up cross-cutting power imbalances. If people

intensify exploitation of animals through, say, biotechnology or changes in farming practices, then there will be implications for how other systems of exploitation play out—and it is important that feminist theorists pay attention to such connections. Processes of meat production, for example, are not only highly abusive of the animals involved, but are also profoundly threaded through with gendered, racist, and heterosexist assumptions (Adams 2003).

What HAS, and its focus on the interconnections of humans and animal others, brings to this analysis of power is a recognition of the *sentience* and *cultures* of non-human animals. Ability to feel and to suffer matters—as do abilities to play and work together (Haraway 2008). And this is why any analysis of the intersections of structures of power must take into account all those who can *feel*, or *engage with others*, whatever their species, gender, or race. In turn, it is sentient, knowing, creatures who produce sociality and culture—within their own species or in co-production with us (Bekoff 2002). It is vital that this mutuality is properly recognized in our politics. To that end, it is equally important that feminist theorists engage explicitly with scholarship on animal behaviour, particularly emerging debates about cognition and sentience. Seeing all other species as fixed into “nature”, as acultural or even asocial, is a political move, and one which reinforces human domination. It is not a compassionate move.

We need to understand how different species—and different peoples—are locked into and experience these systems of domination; we also need to know how they are socially and culturally altered through those experiences—their own situatedness. A politics which does not attempt to consider the perspectives of *all* those who might be oppressed by existing social institutions is not a feminist politics.

Promises

One aspect that HAS can bring to feminist theorizing, then, is a more nuanced consideration of the politics of power. Cudworth (2010) discusses human exploitation of, and power over, non-human animals in some detail. While she agrees with Haraway that there are indeed multiple connections between us and “companion species”, she takes issue with the way that “... the wider context of human species domination is left untheorized” in Haraway’s work, such that “[d]omesticated animals exist in a context of dependency and social structures of human domination that Haraway significantly underplays both at the macro and micro level—co-constituted relations may also be those of inequality and oppression” (Cudworth 2010: 148). We must, Cudworth urges, examine all the complex ways in which systems of domination intersect and mutually reinforce each other. She notes, too, that although our relations with other species are primarily exploitative, embedded in myriad layers of domination, there may also be affection and love within specific relations—as many of us who share our lives with companion species would attest.

Theories of intersectionality have been influential in recent feminist scholarship, offering ways to understand complex relations of gender, race, class, and sexuality; but they are not unproblematic, as several commentators have noted (Lykke 2005; Davis 2008; Nash 2008). In particular, discussions of intersectionality have tended to disregard non-humans, rarely considering how human power is materially constituted

(including being constituted through the bodies of non-humans). It is precisely these considerations that human-animal studies can usefully bring to feminist inquiry. What would it mean to consider “the interaction of multiple identities and experiences of exclusion and subordination” (Davis 2008: 67) if we take species into account? How good are our theories, intersectional or otherwise, at recognizing our situation and experiences as one species among many? This is a considerable challenge, as feminist theorizing has not yet done enough to problematize species diversity or to explore how the exploitation of non-humans cross-cuts and co-constitutes other systems of oppression. But such questions do, I believe, promise to enrich feminist thinking greatly.

A second promising theme concerns embodiment and relationality. There has been enormous interest in “the body” in feminist work, generating many scholarly articles. One criticism of this discussion on “the body” has been, however, that too often this is a body as shell or surface; there is rather less acknowledgement of either the biological processes in embodiment (Birke 1999), or of how these processes interact with the world—or other bodies.

More recently, however, some feminist authors have examined embodiment more explicitly in relation to how biological processes work—our guts, nerves, and so on—as part of our lived experience (Fausto-Sterling 2000; Wilson 2004). Wilson, for example, explores how our experience and environments shape, and are shaped by, functions of the nervous system. What she emphasizes is that how we engage in our worlds shapes biological processes, as much as it is shaped by them. And in our worlds are other species with whom we engage, whether we live particularly closely with them as companions or we do not.

Part of our experiencing embodiment is thus in engagement with others, whoever they are (and that includes the plethora of micro-organisms living as co-travellers within our bodies). Understanding mutual embodiment between species offers particular promise; as Wilson suggests, feminist thinking about the body needs to be more actively engaged with biological functions (such as how nerves or endocrine systems work). What bringing (some) animals into this discussion does, it seems to me, is precisely to emphasize *intercorporeality*, the sharing *across* boundaries of bodily responses, and the bringing into being of mutually affected physiologies.

One clear example of how embodied experience can work across boundaries of self and (animal) other comes from the act of riding horses. I acknowledge here that riding can also be seen in part as an act of domination, in that we might presume that the horse would probably rather be doing something else, like eating grass. I must admit, too, that my own thinking about other animals stems not only from my training in biology, but also from a lifetime of living with various animals—including horses. But while I recognize that such acts as riding are embedded in imbalances of social and political power, I also, like Cudworth (2010) and Haraway (2008), believe that there are some (albeit limited) possibilities for relationship within that. Besides, at an individual level (and tongue in cheek) I seriously doubt that I (a mere 1.55 m high, and in my 60s) could truly dominate a large horse.

Sociologist Ann Game (2001) writes about how riding comes to be a *process*, in which both horse and human bodies express and anticipate the other. This mutuality was reinforced for her when the horse she lived with became seriously ill and was unable to

move properly even after recuperation. It was only when she was ridden again that the mare’s muscles were finally able to move properly—a recovery made possible, Game suggests, because the muscles, nerves, and sinews carried the “memory” of movement in relation to the movement of the rider. The horse is, in her discussion, a subject, a being with a mind of her or his own—someone who can resist, or become part of a social contract. Indeed, as Thompson (2011) points out, there is a profound intercorporeality in riding, a co-production of meaning and movement, in which the rider must become part-horse, and the horse part-human. Thinking about such intercorporeality has much to offer feminist theorizing about the body, I would suggest.

In interacting through the body with the body of an other—exemplified by riding—embodiment *becomes* relational (see also Despret 2004); the shaping of biological processes is co-produced, by my understanding of shared experiences with the horse, but also through a profound enmeshing of nerves, muscles, minds. In short, who I am is always in the process of being produced in mutuality with others, many of whom have four legs, or are furred or feathered.

Such “relatings” impact our lives and how we experience embodiment in ways that need much more detailed analysis. Relationality produces a kind of emergent order; exploring the implications of what this might mean is, to me, where a synergy between feminist inquiry and human-animal studies could be most fruitful, precisely because it is in engagement with those most unlike us that our ways of thinking will be most troubled. And these others may be quite different from us: Hayward (2011) discusses, for example, her own observations of jelly-fish—animals who are very unlike us indeed. She uses this to focus on the material relationality of various actors (jelly-fish, human observers, other marine species) and emphasizes that species are not “in” relationships, rather they *are* relationships.

How relationalities are constituted, and how such relationalities become (inter)corporeal are questions that matter to feminism—and are questions much enriched when we acknowledge differences of species. The blossoming of scholarship in human-animal studies, with its focus on species, has much to offer, not only to feminist theory and politics but to our interspecies, and intercorporeal, social lives. Other non-human beings, with whom we share our lives in various and complex ways, may indeed be indifferent to our naming or unnamings; they may not really care too much about our philosophizing. But these often unnamed others are very likely to care *how* we share the world. They may not always have obvious routes of resistance, but they have points of view. It is time that those of us who care about politics and change, including feminists, began seriously to take them into account. To do that, we need to start listening.

Notes

¹ The “boundedness” of animals here is deeply troubling to me, but so too is the surprising separation of insects and animals—a biologically meaningless opposition.

² For further discussion of this point in relation to feminist thought, see Birke, Bryld, and Lykke (2004).

³ Or, indeed, many human others, especially those who cannot easily make their voice heard, because of age, physical disability, or many other reasons.

⁴ This is inevitably a generalization, drawn from my work in different fields in human-animal studies. Some are critical of the very term HAS precisely because it remains anthropomorphic, without challenging the

power structures maintaining human domination. Perhaps the most critical articles appear in the Journal of Critical Animal Studies.

⁵ I am troubled that so much feminist analysis of technoscience, and notably in relation to biotechnology and genetic manipulation, has paid insufficient attention to the plight of the animals whose bodies are altered.

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