

COW, CUNT, CRIP: TOWARD A TRANSSPECIES, ANTI-ABLEIST FEMINISM

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In July of 2010 Pamela Anderson was set to debut a billboard in Montreal, which she had made in collaboration with People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). It read ALL ANIMALS HAVE THE SAME PARTS and HAVE A HEART, GO VEGETARIAN (Fig. 1). A photograph of Anderson's bikini-clad body was outlined and sectioned as if in preparation for the butcher, labeled "rump," "ribs," "breast," etc. But while Anderson was in town for the ad's premiere, the Canadian government announced that it would not grant PETA a permit to display the billboard. They claimed the work to be degrading to women: it equated us with animals and commodities. Josée Rochefort of the Montreal Film and TV Commission justified her refusal by stating that the ad "goes against all principles public organizations are fighting for in the everlasting battle of equality between men and women ... we, as public officials representing a municipal government, cannot endorse this image of Ms. Anderson."¹ PETA's Senior Vice President Dan Mathews retorted that "city officials are ... confusing 'sexy' with 'sexist,'" echoing decades-old debates about the feminist ethics of pornographic images, and whether their existence reinforces women's status as objects to be consumed or its regulation figures as yet another restriction on women's sexuality.² What makes the censorship of the Anderson-PETA image so perplexing, however, is that such restrictions are never placed on advertisements depicting scantily-clad women used to sell products by arousing consumers, or to shame them for not conforming to unrealistic beauty standards. The ubiquity of such advertisements suggests that it is fine for women to sell their bodies when doing so does not threaten the status quo: ironically, the ad was to be shown in a city known for its strip clubs. The campaign was meant to remind omnivores that humans are animals, too: a simple and obvious fact, yet one we tend to ignore. The logic of the censorship frames "animal" as a more offensive slur than "object."

Being called an animal is indeed often intended as an insult. Animals are frequently encountered

1 Josée Rochefort quoted in "Pamela Anderson PETA Plan Denied," *Hollywood Reporter*, July 15, 2010, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/pamela-anderson-peta-plan-denied-25521>.

2 Dan Mathews quoted in "Pamela Anderson's Nearly Naked PETA Ad Banned in Canada," *US Magazine*, July 15, 2010, <https://www.usmagazine.com/celebrity-body/news/pamela-anderson-blocked-from-montreal-event-for-sexist-ad-2010157/>.

3 See Dana Rosati, "Mapping Milk: The Paradigm of Objectification of the Female Body, from Bovine to Human," *Animal Instances*, Spring 2018, <https://animalinstances.com/mapping-milk-the-paradigm-of-objectification-of-the-female-body-from-bovine-to-human/>.

4 See Taylor, *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation* (New York: The New Press, 2017), 110.

5 See Carol Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (London: Bloomsbury, 1990). Anderson's ad resembles the cover of the 2015 edition of the book.

6 Taylor, *Beasts of Burden*, 110.

7 *Ibid.*

as commodities, their bodies turned into food and goods. In the ad, Anderson presents herself as livestock: cows or pigs for consumption. As an insult, "cow" is typically wielded against women, used to describe them as fat and taking up space.³ To be a pig is also to be greedy or overindulgent. More and worse animal insults are lodged against people of color.⁴ Of course, Anderson is *not* a cow in any sense of the word: she has come to represent the pinnacle of normative beauty standards as a tan, thin, white, blonde woman with large breasts who starred in *Baywatch* and worked as a Playboy Playmate. Feminists have analogized their own objectification to that of meat, refusing to be considered mere flesh for consumption and domination, rather than sentient subjects.⁵ But why should animals, who are also sentient subjects, be treated like "meat"?

Anderson's gesture asserts that she *is* an animal, and that's not a bad thing. "What if instead of demeaning us," asks disability and animal rights activist Sunaura Taylor, "claiming animality could be a way of challenging the violence of animalization and of speciesism—of recognizing that animal liberation is entangled with our own?"⁶ Of seeing how, under capitalism, many different bodies are abused, commodified, and consumed? Taylor eloquently asks, "How do those of us who have been negatively compared to nonhuman animals assert our value as beings without either implying human superiority or denying our very own animality?" which, I argue, Anderson achieved—yet it was misread by Canadian officials under the rhetoric of a speciesist feminism.⁷

Anderson sells the image of her female body in order to claim solidarity with animals whose bodies, like hers, are commodities. Her decision could be framed as one of empowerment in part because she is regarded as capable of consent, whereas animals in factory farms are not. But this conception ignores the ways in which nonhuman animals often actively express that they do not consent: to posit them as voiceless is to overlook the ways in which they cry, express sadness, and protest their abuse and slaughtering. They don't use the English language to do so, but they communicate clearly nonetheless—at least to those who care to listen. Rochefort's decision to censor the ad because she considers the equation of women and animals offensive also robs Anderson of her agency by overriding her consent, effectively suggesting that she has internalized misogyny and cannot decide for herself. Legal scholar Maneesha Deckha takes a similar position in her analysis of PETA ads that use women's bodies: she argues that "reducing women to their bodies in a context of animality, whether by presenting them as sexualized 'bunnies'

Fig. 1 Pamela Anderson in a PETA ad made in 2010. Courtesy of PETA.



or ‘foxes’ or simply connecting their sexualized bodies to the idea of animals, solidifies the trajectory of their thinghood.” But this logic reinforces the notion that animals are indeed “things,” which is exactly what Anderson is critiquing. I argue that Anderson, like Taylor, reveals instead that concepts of liberation, consent, or autonomous action are flawed: she insists that if animals are not free, then neither are we—or as Martin Luther King Jr. famously put it, “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”⁸

Questions as to if and how women can consent and act freely while unlearning all the ways we’ve been taught to see ourselves have long been at the heart of feminist thought. PETA’s advertisement could have easily been made with a man, as men, of course, are animals too. Typically, when we call men “animals,” we refer to the ways they give into their natural impulses, or sexually aggressive instincts, or more generally, their consumption with reckless abandon.

The ad’s message has more impact with a woman’s body. Not only does it touch on notions of consent, it also equates the commodification of women’s bodies in advertisements and porn alike. It elicits society’s impulses either to protect and defend women, or to use and objectify us: twinned impulses that draw from the same conception of women as passive and thus either defenseless or domitable, or both. In performing passivity, or availability, knowingly—indeed confrontationally—this image of Anderson asks that we reconsider who we type as passive and rob agency from. “There has been an urgent need to challenge animalization and claim humanity,” writes Taylor. “As urgent and understandable as these challenges are, it is important to ask how we can reconcile the brutal reality of human animalization with the concurrent need to challenge the devaluing of animals, and even acknowledge our own animality.”⁹ Claiming “humanity” is often equated with claiming subjectivity, as if animals are not subjects, too: those seen as having the capacity to consent, or to have agency.

It is no wonder that women, who have also been denied subjectivity under capitalist patriarchy, and who have long been negatively compared to animals, are often also serving as leaders of animal rights movements. I’ve been to countless dinners where the vegetarian/not divide conforms perfectly to the gender binary. Artist Lin May Saeed once remarked to me, while making a body of work about historical animal activists, that she had inadvertently focused only on women—Saeed hadn’t been thinking about any women’s issues or feminist methodology; there were just so many prominent women figures in that history (unlike many histories) that it proved inevitable.¹⁰ Care

8 Martin Luther King, Jr., *Gospel of Freedom: Letters from Birmingham Jail and the Struggle that Changed a Nation*, ed. Jonathan Rieder (New York: Bloomsbury, 2003), 170.

9 Taylor, *Beasts of Burden*, 20.
10 Lin May Saeed, studio visit with the artist, November 26, 2018. This visit occurred while she was in the early stages of preparing for her show that would later be called “Girl with Cat” at Jacky Strenz gallery in Frankfurt. I reviewed the show for *Artforum* online. See Emily Watlington, “Critic’s Picks: Lin May Saeed,” *Artforum.com*, <https://www.artforum.com/picks/lin-may-saeed-79890>.

11 Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1963), 6. Originally published in 1938.

12 Josephine Donovan, “Animal Rights and Feminist Theory,” in *The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics: A Reader*, eds. Josephine Donovan and Carol Adams (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 65. Article originally published in 1990.

13 Andrea Dworkin, *Last Days at Hot Slit: The Radical Ethics of Andrea Dworkin* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019), 56.

14 Aristotle quoted in Donovan and Adams, *The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics*, 61.

15 Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics* (Wikisource, originally published 1677) [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Ethics_\(Spinoza\)/Part_4.](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Ethics_(Spinoza)/Part_4.)

16 Jeffrey Kluger, “Got Credibility? Then You’re Not PETA,” *Time*, May 30, 2015. <https://time.com/2798480/peta-autism-got-milk/>.

17 “Vaccines Do Not Cause Autism,” Center for Disease Control, October 27, 2015 <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccinesafety/concerns/autism.html>.

18 “Autism Risk Linked to Particulate Air Pollution,” *Scientific American*, n.d., <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/autism-risk-linked-to-particulate-air-pollution/>.

19 Taylor, *Beasts of Burden*, 58.

20 Nathan J. Robinson, “Now Peter Singer Argues That It Might Be Okay to Rape Disabled People,” *Current Affairs*, April 4, 2017, <https://www.currentaffairs.org/2017/04/now-peter-singer-argues-that-it-might-be-okay-to-rape-disabled-people>.

21 Taylor, *Beasts of Burden*, 50.

labor for animals has been disproportionately taken on by women, my evidence of this being more cultural than statistical. Virginia Woolf noticed this disparity, writing that “The vast majority of birds and beasts have been killed by you [men]; not us.”¹¹ Josephine Donovan compiled a list of first-wave feminist vegetarians or animal advocates, including Mary Wollstonecraft, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lydia Maria Child, Elizabeth Blackwell, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps Ward, Victoria Woodhull, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the Grimke sisters, Lucy Stone, Frances Willard, Frances Power Cobbe, Anna Kingsford, Caroline Earle White, and Agnes Ryan.¹² Some feminist thinkers have drawn analogies between women and animals without intending to advocate for animal liberation: Andrea Dworkin, for example, began to claim solidarity between cunts and cows in 1974, writing that “judging women according to their conformity to a standard of beauty serves to make them into products, chattels, differing from the farmer’s favorite cow only in terms of literal form.”¹³ And, as I’ve shown, women and nonhuman animals have been likened to prove their twinned inferiority: Aristotle compared women to animals in order to illustrate that both lack capacity for moral thought.¹⁴ Spinoza remarked that advocacy against animal slaughter was based on “superstition and womanish pity” rather than on reason.¹⁵ Our conceptions of agency and self-determination are often speciesist and misogynistic, and, accordingly, the liberation of animals and women are deeply entangled. We can’t liberate one without the other.

This is true not only for women and animals. It warrants a broader cultural reckoning with the question of to whom agency is granted. Consider another illuminating PETA ad, made in 2014, which read “GOT AUTISM?” and showed a bowl full of milk with Cheerios arranged to form a frowny-face. The advertisement reinforced the stigmatization of autism by invoking fear: it framed the diagnosis as tragic and blamed the disability on a moral failure, suggesting autism is proper punishment for consuming animal products. Most of the backlash this advertisement faced was on the grounds that any link between dairy consumption and autism is simply not scientifically-founded, rather than its ableist assertion of autism as a tragedy.¹⁶

The use of fear-mongering with regard to autism is growing and is most visibly wielded by anti-vaxxers, who claim that vaccines cause autism, even though this has been disproven.¹⁷ This perplexing logic posits that the threat of polio or measles is less tragic than autism, as if many autistic people don’t live happy and successful lives according to both normative and nonnormative definitions. More recently, some climate change activists have tried to claim, yet again without scientific evidence, that

Fig. 2 Pamela Anderson representing PETA at Sea World’s annual meeting. PETA holds stock in the Sea World company in order to propose changes to shareholders. Courtesy of PETA.



certain pollutants not only harm the earth but may also lead to autism—as if this were a consequence on par with the obliteration of the human race.¹⁸

Factory farming does indeed produce disability—in nonhuman animals. Taylor's *Beasts of Burden: Animals and Disability Liberation* comprehensively explores the relationship between the twinned oppression of animals and disabled people, arguing that “speciesism uses ableist logic to function” and citing the ableist views of Peter Singer, who popularized the term “speciesism.”¹⁹ Singer's controversial utilitarian philosophy supports both bestiality and the rape of cognitively disabled people, on the premise that neither is capable of consent.²⁰ As Taylor points out, we consider consuming nonhuman animals the natural order of things because we perceive humans to be able to do things that animals cannot. We also genetically engineer them to be easier to control, giving us, for instance, bulls without horns. So many of our conceptions of what animals are able to do are based on how they conform to ableist and patriarchal understandings of agency. I already mentioned that animals *do* express sadness at their mistreatment and that the labor of care and empathy seems to have fallen largely upon women. There is more: chimpanzees and dolphins have successfully been able to learn American Sign Language (ASL), which, as Taylor notes, has been twisted to support ableist rhetoric that ASL must be a simplistic language, when in fact the language is rich and complex, and these animals are also quite intelligent.²¹ Since animals, women, and disabled people do not always express their subjectivity in the terms set out by an ableist and patriarchal society, they are often robbed of their subjectivity by dominant culture.

In reading these two ads I have aimed to describe our cultural sensibility regarding the intersections of gender, species, and ability. My perspective stems from conversations about intersectional feminism but focuses on the categories of species and ability, which have been given less attention than other pressing matters, such as race, class, and sexuality. These two advertisements and their reception are revealing, as they pit women and disabled people against animals, as if all were not oppressed in related ways under capitalist patriarchy, and as if we could free one from oppression at the expense of the other. This essay serves to remind activists that there can be no liberation for some without liberation for all; that ableist, speciesist, and misogynistic logics are deeply intertwined; that chastising one population to lift up another does not end oppression. Women, animals, and disabled people are often oppressed due to societal beliefs about what others think they can and cannot do, owing to their perceived abilities. Turning to these

advertisements and to media in general is imperative for thinking about our relationship to animals in a time when we rarely encounter living animals in our daily lives but rather receive them packaged and consumed as objects, images, and food.

The “GOT AUTISM?” ad makes the mistake of pitting the disabled against nonhuman animals, even though much of what veganism purports to contest is the disabling conditions in which dairy cows and other animals are kept. The backlash against Pamela Anderson's PETA ad likewise privileges women—in this case, a cisgender, white woman—over nonhuman animals. If we were to extend the logic of both cases together, we would be presented with a food chain of subjectivity that grants agency to women over animals, and animals over disabled people, but a chain is only as strong as its weakest link.



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