

## “Akbar Stole My Heart: Coming out as an Animalist”

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*For Fati*

In an email exchange about the boom in animality studies with Brazilian writer, Regina Rheda, she cautioned that “The value of all these activities will be in direct proportion to the reduction in exploitation of the objects of study.” *e-misférica*’s call for reflections on the relation of *bios* to *zoo* reminded me at once of Rheda’s admonition, and of the predicament of articulating moral concern for those barred from the privileged, historically contingent human domain. Concientization about the exploitation of nonhumans constitutes an unveiling or “coming out,” one that is thwarted both by the stigma of excessive caring and the equivocal association with white privilege. In my previous work on ethnography, I queried what Martinican theorist Aimé Césaire calls “thingification,” the debasement of sentient *bios* that facilitates the exercise of violence without legal or moral reproof. To be sure, I had long been aware that humans were not the only species suffering from animalization, but this consciousness was dissonant with the common sense disavowal of animal pain. I repressed what I knew about transspecies connectivity, and even as I write this, I am aware of my trepidation as I seek out historical parallels and call upon theoretical allies for leverage, as though animals were not enough.

Several years ago, a graduate student with whom I was closely politically and ethically aligned commended me for being quiet about my vegetarianism, for not trying to change

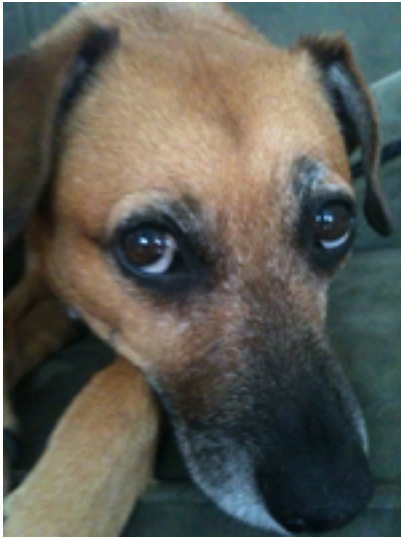
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people or make them feel badly about eating meat. Gazing disdainfully out the window of the Spanish and Portuguese T.A.'s office at an animal rights rally on U.C. Berkeley's Sproul Plaza, another member of my cohort concluded, "these students care more about animals than they do about people of color." Such moments were the catalysts for my perplexed meditation during years to come, out of which I began to tentatively articulate a rejoinder, beginning with "I learned to care about other species from my Iranian mother, who at age fourteen swallowed her last bit of animal flesh after witnessing one too many acts of slaughter. The quotidian public butchering of lambs, goats and chickens hadn't offered her the veil behind which the reality of slaughterhouses is hidden in the industrialized west. She had also learned a thing or two about intersecting forms of violence from her own mother, who wept to the cries of inmates being tortured in the Shah's nearby prison cells and fed home-made yoghurt to the neighborhood stray cats and dogs to induce vomiting and, hence, eliminate the poison routinely administered by animal control. My empathy has a much less predictable trajectory than you wish to allow." Together with the disclosure of my individual animalist trajectory (from the Shah's prisons to livestock butchering blocks), I came to understand not only the symbolic inversion constituted by ethical veganism's association with white privilege but, moreover, white privilege's *reliance upon* discourses of speciation. Colonialism and slavery are sedimented in biological taxonomies, from Linnaeus's mid-eighteenth-century hierarchy of flora and fauna to Madison Grant's early twentieth-century theorization of Nordic supremacy, informed by zoological scholarship and pivotal for the architecture of biopower not only in the settler colonies of Brazil and the United States but also in Hitler's Germany. My awareness of the profound interdependence of notions about race and species has been bolstered by ecocritics' dismantling of the northern European historicization of environmentalism and animal advocacy, situating figures including Mahatma Gandhi and Edward Said as pivotal theorists of a non-anthropocentric world.<sup>1</sup> The intersecting processes of speciation and racialization are provocatively probed in the testimonies of A. Breeze Harper's *Sistah Vegan* (2010), on the "Vegans of Color" website, and in theoretical interrogations including Neel Ahuja's and Dinesh Wadiwel's work on transspecies necropolitics in confined spaces ranging from veal crates to Guantanamo's prison cells.<sup>2</sup> In a word, the connections between colonialism and species violence have been effectively laid out.

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Akbar.

Photo: Alexandra Isfahani-Hammond

What persists is the embarrassing matter of feeling and, what is worse, the emotion evoked by the mixed-breed, medium-sized brown dog whom I rescued from a shelter seven years ago. The truth is that my experience of Akbar's complex sociability, self-awareness and will to self-preservation was the catalyst for my turn to species inquiry. I had until recently disavowed my relationship to my dog to evade the charge of sentimentality--a once-positive attribute that eventually came to connote lack of reason, excessive feeling, and femininity, and was also deployed to undermine nineteenth-century anti-slavery campaigns--reporting that I'd become vegan on the basis of two particular scenes of underground footage in Shaun Monson's documentary, "Earthlings" (2005). In the first, automobile safety crash testers strap a baboon to a platform and repeatedly propel her head-first at increasing velocity against a steel barrier until her brains are disembodied. In the second, a group of pigs huddle in a pen to evade a worker who clubs one after the other to death, muttering contemptuously as the others watch; the last, who won't succumb to clubbing, finally receives a bullet to the head as the worker intones, "you fucker." "Earthlings'" visual evidence constituted the final push for boycotting this macabre reality, discarding the justification offered by my mother, now herself vegan, for our prior consumption of reproductive products ("animals aren't killed to take their milk and eggs"). But the missing element was Akbar. Faced with the unavoidable fact that, by virtue of his species, this complex individual with whom I cohabit could be subjected to legally and ethically condoned torture and death, I could not remain complicit with the dangers to which his biotic, or zoological type, place him. Meeting Akbar's gaze meant that I could no longer dissimulate what Jacques Derrida qualifies as the "artificial, infernal, virtually interminable survival" of the animalized: "As if, for example, instead of throwing a people into ovens and gas chambers (let's say Nazi) doctors and geneticists had decided to organize the overproduction and exploitation of Jews,

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gypsies and homosexuals by means of artificial insemination, so that, being continually more numerous and better fed, they could be destined in always increasing ways for the same hell, that of the imposition of genetic experimentation, or extermination by gas or fire" ("The Animal that Therefore I Am," 26).

Derrida situates his cat's gaze as the source of his animal turn, though his comparison of concentration camps with factory farms does not guide him to abandon his complicity with agribusiness. In furtively disclosed Facebook updates, a series of academic friends go a step farther, confessing that they became vegan in the instant that they clutched a companion animal and wept violently while watching underground footage of factory farming and laboratory experimentation. Respect for sentient *bios*—across not only racial, ethnic, gender, class but also species lines—is only cautiously revealed in a world wherein humanity is the sole, ever-shifting gauge for protection against abjection. In the course of my research on what J.M. Coetzee terms the transspecies "sympathetic imagination," I have been energized by announcements like *e-misférica's* of the "turn to animals studies," and the abundance of journals, conferences, symposia and academic programs centered on the nonhuman. On the other hand, I have also encountered within this "turn" a great deal of scholarship wherein compassion is rigorously withheld; far from subjects for moral consideration, non-humans are objects of figurative curiosity. This disavowal of suffering constitutes a sinister new form of thingification at the avant-garde of literary debate. It calls to mind the reactionary, aestheticizing perspective of Afro-Brazilian studies to which I attended in *White Negritude* (2008), crystallized by sociologist L.A. Costa Pinto's response to the demand of black participants in the 1950 *Primeiro Congresso do Negro Brasileiro* to be published in the Congress's anthology: "I doubt that there is a biologist who, after studying, shall we say, a microbe, has seen that microbe come forth in public and write sottishly about the study in which he participated as laboratory material" (in Abdias do Nascimento, *O Negro Revoltado*, 1968, 17). I can imagine the guffaws and disdainful snorts of Costa Pinto's colleagues as they supported his condemnation of the bizarre proposal that black agency was anything but a misnomer; as matter, or microbe, black "objects of science" were not sociohistorical subjects whose lives mattered. In discussions with colleagues in the contemporary arena of species and posthuman studies, I've repeated versions of Regina's warning about the imperative for praxis and witnessed the constrained looks and silences that followed. Clearly, acknowledging a dog as the catalyst for one's political orientation continues to be far too risky an endeavor.

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## Notes

I would like to express gratitude to S.A. Bachman, and my Fall 2012 Memoir and Intercultural Writing Students at U.C. San Diego, for their invaluable feedback on this piece.

1 See Deloughrey, Elizabeth; George B. Handley. 2011. *Postcolonial Ecologies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

2 See Wadiwel. 2004. "Animal by Any Other Name? Patterson and Agamben Discuss Animal (and Human) Life" and Ahuja. 2011. "Abu Zubaydah and the Caterpillar"

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