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Lions, Transers, and 'Borgs, Oh My!:

Transfeminism and Ecofeminism as Unlikely Allies in a Posthuman World

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Ecofeminism spawned out of a neoconservative, biologically reductionist, naturalized, heteronormative, and essentialized rhetoric that appealed to the argument that "women are better suited than men to cleaning up nature as an extension of their biology and their separate-but-equal household responsibilities" (Sandilands 4). As such, it would seem that ecofeminism would be the last ideology trans activists could turn to for support given their deconstruction of biocentrist philosophies. However, I argue that ecofeminism is trans in 'nature' due to its foundation in addressing the "discursive associations (and extra-discursive repercussions) between women and nature or, even more generally, the discursive life of the 'natural' outside of the primary subject of environmental ethics: the physical environment and its other-than-human inhabitants" (Azzarello 21). Despite ecofeminism's evolution from a neoconservative rhetoric, it still recognized the constructionism of nature and gender and, by extension, sex. The trans 'nature' of ecofeminism was also amplified through its later cultivation of a self-reflexivity through proliferating into interdisciplinary fields including "feminist spirituality, social ecology, transpersonal psychology, Foucauldian genealogical criticism, Heideggerian philosophy, antiracist pedagogy, postcolonial literary criticism, and gay and lesbian history (to name but a few)" (Azzarello 48). More importantly, the movement into a posthumanist framework of both trans studies as well as critical animal studies (within ecofeminism) unites these two categories and amplifies the intersections that exist between these interdisciplinary fields. Although ecofeminism, due to its biologizing roots, seems at odds with the claims of transfeminism, ecofeminism has also addresses the constructed-ness of

nature and, in doing so, helps deconstruct the same sort of naturalizing binaries that transfeminism does. Given their analogous approaches to addressing oppressions, seeking to emphasize the intersections between transfeminism and ecofeminism will help to activate transformative political progress that both acknowledges the individuals' subjectivity while recognizing the intersectional elements of systemic power relations as a whole at the same time. In particular, uniting these ideologies and 'transing' boundaries, both transfeminists and ecofeminists will be able to conceptualize differently of scientific and judiopolitical discourses that have, to this point, been limited by in laden anthropocentrism. In particular, I will focus this essay on how ecofeminism, transfeminism, and posthumanism can intersect to result in a radical reconceptualization of human rights.

Susan Stryker starts her criticism of naturalizing and reductionist discourses of scientific communities through the article "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix" (1994). The title of this text points to a section of the book in which the monster violates his maker's conception of 'humanity' through speaking to him, just as Stryker profanes the American Psychiatric Association's labeling of transsexuals as less-than-human (or, at the very least, less-than-rational) through her protests. She expresses her rage at not being able to be accepted into the category of 'human' simply because of her transsexuality:

Like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment; like the monster's as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist. (Stryker 238)

Through this Gothic metaphor, Stryker emphasizes the interconnections between herself and a misunderstood being; however, her use of Frankenstein's monster also opens up space for emphasizing the interconnections between the nonhuman and the monster, and thus the nonhuman and the transgendered person, as Frankenstein's monster is comprised of animal corpses taken from "the dissecting room and the slaughter-house" (Shelley n.p.). As a result, this metaphor not only operates for transstudies, but also ecofeminism through its inadvertent emphasis on the anthropocentric nature of science's definition of what it means to be a human, person, or at least a being worthy of the same rights as one of these categories. It is my assertion that this discussion of trans-monstrosity can pivot discussions of trans- issues into discussions of ecofeminism. In emphasizing the interrelations between two 'its' within Western humanist ontology — the transgendered and the animals — Stryker not only embodies a "jarring transitio[n] between genders" (Stryker 237) but also a therianthropic transition between animals and humans.

This posthumanist movement between genders as well as animals is important to both ecofeminism and transfeminsm; however, moving beyond the trans-ing of genders and species is essential to a deconstruction of the humanist paradigm that oppresses trans people, nonhuman animals, and so many others. Haraway also accomplishes this movement in her work "Cyborg Manifesto" through her suggestion that we are all cyborgs (Haraway n.p.). She puts forward,

a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals *and machines*, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints. The political struggle

is to see from both perspectives at once because each reveals both dominations and possibilities unimaginable from the other vantage point.

(Haraway n.p., emphasis mine)

These illegitimacies, partial identities, and contradictory standpoints incorporate transsexuals in not only a postgender world, but also a posthumanist world. This formulation of activism gives way to a form of ethics that breaks (or, at least, seeks to break) away from the exclusionary framework that categorizes the definition of not only the human, but also man, woman, and sentient being. Matthew Calarco asserts that moving away from binary oppositions and, thus, exclusionary discourses has a "transformative potential for struggles for justice involving animal life and human-animal relations, underscoring their respective promises and limits while at the same time suggesting the need for increased/ attention to those discourses and practices examined under the rubric of indistinction" (41-42). What Calarco and Haraway are hinting at here though their emphasis on the transformation of political discourse is the movement from a difference-based politics to an analogic politics — particularly in those that concern the ethical responsibilities we hold towards the disenfranchised, be them humans or nonhumans.

One of the most pervasive frameworks by which the exclusionary conception of the human has been mobilized has been "human rights" discourses. Skeptical of the rights based approach to ethics Kendall Thomas argues,

the concepts of the 'human' and of 'rights' have become the object of 'the most radical questioning possible.' The regime of 'hard' and 'soft' global human rights law (within and across states) has never been more comprehensive and complex.

For all its complexity, however, a clear consensus over the interpretation and application of contemporary human rights norms continues to elude us. Indeed, even the once taken-for-granted notions bequeathed to us by the liberal humanist tradition—that of a sovereign, rational human subject; a shared human condition; a common humanity; or the existence of inborn, inalienable human rights—are being challenged and criticized on theoretical as well as practical grounds.

(Taylor 311)

Taylor emphasizes here how individuals have started to look upon rights with increased cynicism due to its grounding within exclusivist, rationalist, and universalizing discourses. Arguably, it is because of these restraints that so many individuals find themselves oppressed by rights discourses. This conception of the rationalist, humanist subject as the benefactor of certain rights has, indeed, resulted in the exclusion of those who fail to enroll as rational or human in the narrow, Western conception of these categories.

As a result, although being included within an existing judiopolitical discourse may be viewed as a step forward for both trans activists and animal activists — most notably by organizations such as Egale Canada Human Rights Trust (ECHRT) and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) — many critics assert that the 'rights' system is inherently exclusionist and will, inevitably, end up oppressing others due to this orientation. Riki Wilchins contends that a "transgender rights movement . . . unable to interrogate the fact of its own existence, will merely end up cementing the idea of a binary sex which I am presumed to somehow transgress or merely transverse" (as

cited in Currah 5). In her article "Animal Rights and Feminist Theory," Josephine Donovan argues

[u]nfortunately, contemporary animal rights theorists, in their reliance on theory that derives from the mechanistic premises of Enlightenment epistemology (natural rights in the case of Regan and utilitarian calculation in the case of Singer) and in their suppression/denial of emotional knowledge, continue to employ Cartesian, or objectivist, modes even while they condemn the scientific practices enabled by them. (365)

Donovan and Wilchins both point to the inability of Western humanist deontological practices to adequately deconstruct their rationalist, anthropocentric, and inclusionist origins from animal activist and trans activist lenses. In bringing together these two approaches, trans activists and animal activists will be able to gain a better understanding of the ways in which humanism operates and oppresses others within our society. In emphasizing the lesser-emphasized intersection between nonhuman suffering and the suffering of those not considered human by Western civilization, the hope is to increase understanding of the ways that hegemonic culture works in order to unite minoritarian struggles.

Through uniting the various oppressions perpetuated by the rights discourse through using intersectional analysis, the "politics of exclusion" (Castricano 10) inherent to Western humanist discourses becomes illuminated. Emphasizing how uniting the trials of nonhumans within critical studies will help to address the more pernicious qualities of humanism, Jodey Castricano argues,

the absence of sustained attention to the nonhuman animal question in cultural studies and critical theory might serve to warn us that the *politics of exclusion* — which enabled older formations of the humanities to disregard questions of gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality and class— are still operative within new fields of inquiry that seek to critique the Western, humanist tradition upon which such exclusions have been naturalized and reproduced. (Castricano 10)

As a result, Castricano argues it is through this intersectional and analogic approach that critical scholars will be able to better understand and undermine Western hegemonic ideologies relating to our treatment of humans and nonhumans. In taking part in this intersectional analysis, it is my contention that critical scholars can work towards a more self-reflexive framework that actively questions the oppressions it is creating through its action — and, in doing so, limit the amount of suffering it causes to other beings.

Speaking to these same "politics of exclusion" (Castricano 10), Derrida claims that human rights have been couched within a finite discourse of hospitality (55). Derrida emphasizes that these sorts of discourses "can only be exercised by filtering, choosing, and thus by excluding and doing violence" (55). In other words, human rights are only 'universal' so far as the definition of 'human' is universal — something it has never truly been. Emphasizing the injustice that this exclusive categorization perpetuates, Derrida states that, when hospitality is inscribed within a discourse, there is a paradoxical delineation between self and other that turns hospitality into hostility (55). This phenomenon very much categorizes lived experiences by those who have not been conceived of as 'human.' In particular, this includes the experiences of women, people of different races, differently enabled people, and, who I will focus on in this essay, trans

people and nonhuman animals. As a result, the call that transfeminists and animal rights activists should be making is not to become included within a framework of rights that is entrenched within a gender dimorphic and anthropocentric apparatus, but to try to question the very nature of this system.

Derrida points out that "the limit upon which all the great questions are formed and determined, as well as all the concepts that attempt to delimit what is 'proper to man,' the essence and future of [. . .] '*human rights*,'" (63, my italics) is the delineation between the human and the animal. However, this categorization of the "human" is centered around not only a human, opposed to an animal, but also a white, Western, cis, male, property-owner. This development is a result of formative texts on the development of human rights in Western civilization: The *Magna Carta* (1215), The *United States' Declaration of Independence* (1776), and The *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* (1789). Each of these texts were central to demarcating between those who had rights and those who did not: women, 'slaves,' homosexuals, bisexuals, criminals, first nations peoples, disabled peoples, immigrants, the lower classes, racialized persons, and, particularly, who I will be discussing in this essay, transsexuals and nonhuman animals. As such, the inherent anthropocentrism of human rights discourse is tainted with racism, colonialism, ableism, sexism, and heterosexism. As such, although being defined as a human has allowed individuals to have specific rights and freedoms, these rights and freedoms have been historically denied to individuals that have not fit the hegemonic conception of 'the human,' 'the person,' 'the citizen,' 'the sovereign individual subject' and so on.

Calling for a re-visioning of this humanist subject to move from being inclusive,

Derrida argues,

It's the very concept of right that will have to be "rethought." In general, in the European philosophical tradition, there is no conception of a (finite) subject of law [*droit*] who is not a subject of duty (Kant sees only two exceptions to this law [*loi*]: God, whose rights are without duty, and slaves, who have duties but no rights). It is once again a matter of the inherited concepts of the subject, the political subject, the citizen, the sovereign self-determination of the subject of law.

(*On Hospitality* 73-74)

Derrida's call for re-visioning, here echoes calls from both ecofeminist as well as transfeminist movements on the issue of rights — in particular, the sort of call for self-reflexive ideologies that Wilchins and Donovan reference (Wilchins as cited in Currah 5; Donovan 365). This intersectional analysis, I argue, will result in a movement away from a finite discourse of hospitality.

Kendall Thomas in the afterword of *Transgender Rights "Are Transgender Rights Inhuman Rights?"* emphasizes how trans activism, through its critique of the gender binary, is positioned to deconstruct the nonhuman human binary, stating

The same spirit of self-critical questioning [that the transgender movement brings to the uses and limits of the idea of binary sex] should be brought to bear on the idea of humanity or, more precisely, on the presumption of a sharp and necessary distinction between *lives that are human* and *lives that are not*. This holds true as well for the moral categories and consequences that have historically turned on this distinction. The interrogatory imperative I am advancing here is this: a transgender rights movement that refuses to question the commonsense truths about human

existence (its nature, scope, meaning, etc.) runs the risk of entrenching the rigid, repressive ideas about humanity and inhumanity from which trans people are fighting to be free. (317)

The arbitrariness of this so-called "sharp and necessary distinction" (317) is also called into question in Marjorie Spiegel's address of the boundaries between the interconnections between racism and speciesism. She points out:

A line was arbitrarily drawn between white people and black people, a division that has since been rejected. But what of the line which has been drawn between human and non-human animals? We often behave as if there were a wide and bridgeless chasm, with humans on one side and all the rest of the animals on the other. Even our terminology reflects this attitude: we speak of 'humans' in one breath, and in the next, lump all other animals into one grab-bag of a category entitled 'non-human animals.' On what basis is this line drawn? [. . .] It is only an anthropocentric world view which makes qualities by humans those by which all other species are measured. (Spiegel 20, 23)

The difference between Spiegel and Thomas, however, becomes a willingness to voice the complete ulterior other: the animal. Thomas emphasizes, "the ethics of solidarity [should] oblige transgender human rights advocates to fashion forms of argument and activism that are consistent with those advanced by the domestic and international feminist, gay and lesbian, disability, religious freedom, antiracist, refugee, and other movements" (Thomas 313); however, what he fails to do include animal activism within his reconceptualization of inhuman rights despite his claim that

As a strictly factual matter, anyone familiar with contemporary transgender

communities cannot help but note how transgender existence may be said not only to 'cross over, cut across, move between, or otherwise queer socially constructed *sex/gender* boundaries,' but to do so in ways that test and contest the socially constructed boundaries of *human* ontology. (314)

This is an oversight that I see as severely limiting his discussion of "lives that are not" considered human (6) and, thus, his deconstruction of a western humanist paradigm that seeks to fracture and isolate minoritarian struggles from one another. In failing to address this interconnection, Thomas limits the ability of his argument to truly address the questions he so much wants to explore:

What might it mean for the transgender human rights movement to challenge the inhuman treatment of trans people by treating the notion of the inhuman not just as an obstacle but as an opportunity? What might it mean for trans activists and their allies to mobilize around a vision of transgender or, better, 'transhuman' rights that affirmatively aligns itself with, rather than against, the idea of the *inhuman*? What might it mean to view the human rights culture we seek to create as one in which the call to social justice for transgendered/people is voiced as a call to 'stand on the side' of the inhuman? What might it mean for the transgender movement to conceive the justice it seeks not as a matter of simple inclusion into the existing institutions and ideology of human rights but as a transformation of human rights discourse, and a transfiguration of the human rights imaginary? What if trans human rights advocates began to advance the idea of a human right to *inhumanity*?

(Thomas 313)

These questions deal explicitly with Derrida's emphasis that we must revision human rights (73-74) through addressing "the *question* of the animal" (Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 9), what Derrida argues "involve[s] thinking about what is meant by living, speaking, dying, being, and world as in being-in-the-world, or being-with, being-before, being-behind, being-after, being and following, being followed or being following, that where *I am*, in one way or another, but unimpeachably, *near* what they call the animal [. . .] and whatever we do about this thing" (11). Through failing to critically engage with how the definition of the human has been defined entirely in contrast to the animal, Thomas limits exactly how radical his re-questioning is and, indeed, fails at the radical reconceptualization of the human he set out to; you can not understand the 'human' and, thus, the 'inhuman' without first looking at 'the animal' — an idea that, I believe, better suits Agamben's axiom, "humans are human in so far as they bear witness to the inhuman" (as cited in Thomas 319).

In his book *Queer Environmentality*, Azzarello emphasizes the interconnections between queer politics, environmentalism, and animal advocacy, arguing, "the queer project and the environmental project are always already connected, that is to say, that the questions and politics of human sexuality are always entwined with the questions and politics of the other-than-human world" (Azzarello 127). He argues that queer studies needs to look into conceptualizing that queer studies scholars need to stop equating the body with that of the human body in the way that heterosexual people equate sex with male or femaleness. He illustrates how these intersections are mobilized in his discussion of one pinto tortoise, an endangered species of tortoise, named "Lonely George":

Lonely George [. . .] has proven an unwilling participant in [scientists']

conservation] endeavors. Uninterested in sex acts with the females of his species, with any members of his species for that matter, Lonesome George, in the words of *New York Times* writer John Tierney, “prefers a different lifestyle.” Undeterred by George’s disinterest, however, conservation biologists have begun to lube George up and rub him down in an attempt to extract semen that can then be used for artificial insemination. These attempts have also misfired. Although the tortoise does achieve an erection, he has yet to reach orgasm. The case of Lonesome George raises an important ethical question. Should the conservation biologists leave the animal alone, or extract semen to reproduce the species by any means necessary, including cloning? On the one hand, is an ethics of manipulation and control indicative of a larger human hubris, a larger and potentially-misplaced faith in science and technological innovation? And on the other, is an ethics of letting be indicative of a larger will towards death, a larger aesthetics of ephemerality? The jump between a critique of human sexual dimorphism to a discussion of tortoise sexual disinterest may seem fallacious, but I would maintain that both are different manifestations of the same central problem of reproductive heteronormativity.

(Azarello 206-207)

As a result, in the same way that “[t]he belief that the bodies and lives of transgendered people ‘cannot be humanized’ [because their gender identity and gender expression do not conform to their assigned birth sex] has rendered them vulnerable to the terrorisms of structural and physical violence” (Thomas 311) so too does the belief, that LGBTQ communities belief “that the bodies and lives of” nonhuman animals are not human “has rendered them vulnerable to the terrorisms of structural and physical violence” (Thomas

311) or, indeed, any definition of the human, be it founded upon rationality, heterosexuality, gender identification, appearance, ability, maleness, and so on. Through emphasizing the ways that the definition of the human is mobilized to oppress both transsexuals and nonhumans, I argue that transactivists and animal activists will be able to align themselves with the inhuman: the mutable and monstrous, cyborg that will be able to subvert "certain dualisms [that] have been persistent in Western traditions; [. . .] systemic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of color, nature, workers, animals—in short, domination of all constituted as *others*, whose task is to mirror the self" in order to "suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves" (Haraway 35, 39).

In conclusion, although there has been resistance from both trans movements as well as ecofeminist movements in regards to accepting the intersection of oppressions experienced by nonhumans and trans individuals, and what society stands to gain by proliferating and recognizing these intersections. While the fight to extend the designation of 'humanity' to more and more individuals may seem like a positive step for both trans activists and animal activists, it continues to reinscribe the central figure of 'the human' and, in doing so, results in the inevitable oppression of 'others' — whomever they may be. Through aligning ourselves, as Stryker, Haraway, and Thomas align themselves with the monstrous, the cyborg, and the inhuman (respectively) within an analogic approach to the oppressions faced by both trans persons and nonhumans, it is my contention that both ecofeminists and transfeminists can move towards deontological discourse of hospitality that moves away from being exclusive and, thus, hostile towards one that is absolute through its self-reflexivity and mutability.

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