

→ 1 ←

BLACK LIVES, BLACK LIFE



Syl Ko

August 10, 2015

IN THIS CHAPTER, I WANT TO DISCUSS AND CONNECT TWO SEEMINGLY disparate conversations: one concerning diversity and the other concerning #blacklivesmatter. There's a troubling aspect present in both, and that is the interpretation of blackness or brownness as essentially *bodied*. In other words, the mainstream (read: white) tendency to find us visible insofar as we are regarded merely as bodies is a tendency that we have internalized and one that we now perpetuate in our own movements.

I'm not trying to pull any philosophical lingo on you by using the term *bodied*. I don't mean to say there is something problematic about our having bodies. Also, I don't think there is anything inferior about bodies or that they "drag down" our existence or any other such nonsense. Understanding beings as "bodied" becomes a problem when beings are viewed *primarily* in terms of their bodies. That is, reducing conscious, active beings with viewpoints, interests, and/or projects—*subjects*—into merely the biological frame that houses the source of this activity—*objects*—is destructive to those beings. Time after time, this type of reduction is used to justify horrendous treatment. The phenomena of slavery, human experimentation, sex camps, human exhibits in zoos, etc., were made possible by interpreting these beings as primarily *bodied*. And the phenomena of slaughtering nonhumans for meat, the gross manipulation of female nonhuman reproductive capacities for dairy and egg production, scientific

experimentation on nonhumans, the incarceration of nonhumans in zoos, etc., are also made possible by pretending these beings are best understood as merely bodied.

My task in this chapter isn't to beg white people to drop this interpretation of black people. My aim is to make us reflect on ways in which people of color may have internalized this interpretation of ourselves, especially in activist spaces, and how to move away from that interpretation.

The #blacklivesmatter movement is one obvious place to turn. Although the slogan demands that black *lives* matter, some of us are upset that black *deaths* don't seem to matter. If you don't believe me, take a look at our community's reaction to the way mainstream news outlets reported the death of Cecil the lion—whom a white Minnesotan killed on a trophy hunt in Zimbabwe. Of course, in saying that our deaths matter, we are in a roundabout way saying our lives matter. But what do we mean when we say our "lives" matter?

Given the context in which the slogan was born, there is overwhelming attention to and emphasis on the biological aspect of black life. Black people are violently targeted, tortured, and murdered left and right, many times in the light of day. But even though these unjust attacks on black bodies have helped to make this issue a mainstream one, the myopic focus on actual or biological black life and death is just reproducing the black-as-bodied narrative. The framing of the issue in this biological way puts at stake the way we believe we can move forward or "do something" about this problem.

For instance, obsessive and excessive attention has been devoted to the issue of police violence. Some may think I'm being harsh in calling what seems to be deserved focus "obsessive and excessive," but let's face it: we in the black community have always had a disastrous relationship with the police. Just because white people are beginning to trust our word on this doesn't merit hitching every solution to investigating the police or installing cameras or trying to make fair the inherently racist justice system. That's not to say these are all bad ideas. I'm merely saying these aren't necessarily ways to move forward. Some of us who are a little more seasoned might even agree with George Jackson when he wrote: "How

ridiculous we must seem to the rest of the black world when we beg the government to investigate their own protective agencies.”¹

The particular framework in which we cast these types of solutions is restrictive because the interpretation of the problem that underpins this framework is itself restrictive. Yes, black people’s actual, biological lives and bodies are under attack. But what if we go deeper to find what is giving rise to this phenomenon? This requires seeing the problem as more than just physical violation . . . and seeing ourselves as beyond primarily bodied.

One way I suggest construing the issue is as follows: symbolic or cultural elimination of black Life is a necessary condition for which literal elimination of black lives is made possible. We’ve been so focused on biological black “lives” that we have lost sight of what might be a cause of this problem: the routine dismissal of black Life. Life (capital L) is more than biological. Life includes those activities that make life worth living and valuable; it is what lends *weight* to our existence as human beings. To feel alive, to have a life that feels worthy of living, to experience one’s “weight” as a living subject is not merely to feel one’s pulse or possess a working brain. It’s something more.

The ways in which we as humans construct Life for ourselves usually demand an ongoing dialogue with the world in which we exist. These dialogues manifest themselves as contributions that attempt to engage with society; art, music, film, science, religion, theory, literature, and philosophy are some categories in which these conversations occur. Other times, Life can be constructed by ongoing dialogues with microworlds we have created for ourselves, such as our families or communities, and these are usually represented or treated in art, music, film, theory, etc.

The problem is that we live in a society (and world, for that matter) that either erases, or rejects, or diminishes the value of contributions offered by black people; which then entails the erasure, rejection, or inferiorization of family and community life represented and treated in many of those contributions. In other words, we live in a society that culturally or symbolically eliminates black Life. We might even call it a US tradition:

black Life does not matter. If it did, then we'd not still find ourselves drowning in whiteness and Eurocentricity to this day.

It is here that the discussion thus far links up well with the second conversation I mentioned at the beginning: diversity. We can find the black-as-bodied narrative in operation here as well; in many ways, it fuels the US tradition of erasing or rejecting black Life. In short, diversity (or rather "diversity") is the idea that black (and brown) people should function as vessels for white perspectives and white theory as opposed to contributing their own viewpoints and theories. The assumption here is that the considerations of black people are either inferior or negligible and so the value of black people in any space will be in their ability to reproduce whiteness. In simpler words, "diversity" is the *presence of black bodies*, as opposed to the presence of black ideas born from black perspectives, in predominantly white spaces.

Let's look at two examples that demonstrate how we fall into this way of thinking:

- (1) Many times, people—including black people—think they are "being diverse" when they choose to focus on some type of project that concentrates on an issue that affects non-white people or makes non-white people the prime subjects of the project. More often than not, the *framework* from which the study or research project is generated is Eurocentric. Just because the project is "about race," or concerns black and brown people, does not mean you are valuing diversity. Valuing diversity in such a context means recognizing that theoretical models devised by brown and black people, *especially those that directly challenge Eurocentricity*, are just as good, if not even more appropriate, to frame your research projects or studies in, whether or not they are about black or brown populations.
- (2) Now let's consider an example that touches on "strategies for inclusion" in spaces that find it difficult to recruit black people.

As a student in philosophy, I can speak to this example from experience: all across the US, faculties in philosophy programs are scrambling for ways to “get black people interested in philosophy” in order to do something about the abysmal number of non-whites, particularly black people, in the profession. I am depressed to say I know more than a handful of black philosophers who are enthusiastically invested in this “project” as well. Of course, the truth is black people have been philosophizing all along, but “top” programs refuse to acknowledge those works as “real” philosophy. So, the problem isn’t some mysterious malaise affecting black people that prevents them from appreciating the virtues of philosophy and applying to philosophy programs. The problem is that the white gatekeepers of philosophical inquiry maintain a particularly Eurocentric conception of “philosophy.”

What’s especially poignant with diversity rhetoric is that black people are being used to erase our *own* perspectives. You can see why Aph and I reject the idea that any of this is actual diversity. We call it “cosmetic diversity”: be black, think white. Others call it “imperial diversity.” Angela Davis describes it as “a corporate strategy.”²

It seems that cosmetic diversity is itself *adding* to the problem of disappearing black lives given that this flawed understanding of diversity seeks to reject genuine contributions from black people for the sake of upholding and glorifying white ones. If physical erasure of black people is made possible by our cultural or symbolic erasure, and “diversity” functions to include our black bodies in white spaces but rejects our unique perspectives, then “diversity” is not on our side.

This lack of interest in black Life and the activity of erasing our contributions, voices, and perspectives play a central role in making possible our physical, literal erasure. If the very thing that makes us “really alive”—the contributions that make our existence possible and worthwhile as social beings—is regarded as nonexistent, pointless, inferior, or not worth even acknowledging, then we have already been killed. If our artistic vision, our

theoretical endeavors, our constructs are completely without value and have no place in the world, mere flesh and blood will never persuade anyone that we have a rightful place here. What exactly are the grounds to prove that our lives matter when our Life doesn't matter to the world at large?

So, how do we move forward? Well, we have to take black Life seriously. But to do that, we first have to look backward to our brothers and sisters in the struggle who pointed out a long time ago that *black lives are not supposed to matter*. We were never *meant* to be on equal footing with white people. This is what Aimé Césaire means when he describes the "Negro" as "an invention of Europe."³ As black people, we are *supposed* to be inferior in precisely this way. People of any race can understand that surely black biological life matters: killing or beating black people is wrong. People of any race can understand that surely black bodies should be included in all spaces. Excluding black people from places is wrong. But this does not mean those people understand that black Life matters. And this does not mean that those people understand that black ideas and perspectives should be welcome in all spaces. You can be a diehard activist, shutting down highways with your protests against police killings, and still be a part of the problem if you fail to take seriously black art, black theory, black perspectives. You can be the president of the committee on diversity and still be an enemy to true diversity if your only concern is to recruit black and brown bodies instead of black and brown ideas.

We have to be careful in how we prod our allies (and ourselves) to action on these issues. If we maintain the current strategy, we might—at most—get mainstream society to care about us when we're dead. How about we try to get society to care about us, *really* care about us, while we're alive?

→ 2 ←

BRINGING OUR DIGITAL MOPS HOME

*A Call to Black Folks to Stop Cleaning up
White Folks' Intellectual Messes Online*



Aph Ko

August 12, 2015

AFTER POPULAR BLACK FEMINIST COMEDIAN AND VIDEO BLOGGER AKILAH Hughes released “On Intersectionality in Feminism and Pizza,” a video that went viral on YouTube, social justice websites and magazines enthusiastically promoted the video for weeks. Hughes created the video to explain to white women why white feminism¹ inherently excludes women of color, and she offers intersectional feminism as a more appropriate framework to help bring about the liberation of all women. In Hughes’ video, men are symbolized through burgers, and women are symbolized through pizza. Cheese pizza represents white women and deluxe pizza (with sausage and peppers) represents any combination of minoritized² identities (like being transgender, disabled, and/or of color). Hughes employs humor to demonstrate how difficult it is to navigate a “burger’s world” as *any* type of pizza; however, she specifically highlights how it’s particularly difficult for deluxe pizzas.³

Hughes educates the viewer about intersectionality and oppression, however, when she holds up the burgers and pizzas to the camera, it becomes evident that the animal products she uses as props will not be factored into her analysis on oppression.

Frankly, it was not surprising that Hughes did not problematize her use of animal products in the video (to be fair, animal products weren't the focus of her message), nor does she examine animal oppression in her regular advocacy. However, what I saw in Hughes' viral video was representative of what I regularly saw in the mainstream landscape of black anti-racist activism: a focus on publicly educating individual white people coupled with the routine dismissal of animal oppression.

The public celebration of Hughes' video reminded me of how I felt when I saw the mainstream black community's response to Cecil the lion. *Clutch*, an online magazine dedicated to progressive, hip, young black women, published an article called "Maybe People Should Dress Like Lions, or How Cecil the Lion Has Gotten More Sympathy than Dead Black People."⁴ The author writes about the ways the mainstream white public quickly organized around Cecil in hopes of bringing justice, yet remained silent when black people were killed at the hands of police. In the *New York Times*, well-known black feminist Roxane Gay wrote, "A late-night television host did not cry on camera this week for human lives that have been lost. He certainly doesn't have to. He did, however, cry for a lion and that's worth thinking about."⁵

This overt centering of white people's reactions to black death in the media has produced a type of "Dear White People"⁶ syndrome within black activism, where black folks spend their time and energy writing posts to white people, creating educational videos for white people about racism, and spending all of their energy debating white people online. This has actually given rise to a phenomenon called "Racial Discussion Fatigue Syndrome."⁷

Some of the most visible mainstream anti-racist activism manifests itself through teaching white people how they are racist, where their privileges are located, and what they can do to "be better." I'm reminded of a popular video that came out on *Huffington Post*, featuring Zeba Blay, a black writer. "Why We Need to Talk about White Feminism"⁸ essentially explains to white women the problems with their advocacy. The video also features a white woman alongside Blay who helps in educating the presumed white

viewer. The problem with this type of activism is that it positions black people as automatic racial experts who explain racism to white people, and it casts individual white people as the problem. This was most evident with our community's reaction to Cecil, where mainstream black activists intervened to publicly discipline white people for emotionally catering to a dead nonhuman animal. This was typified through a satirical tweet by Roxane Gay: "I'm personally going to start wearing a lion costume when I leave my house so if I get shot, people will care."⁹

Of course, I understand why some minoritized people respond this way. Black people are undergoing systemic violence; therefore, our physical experiences with racism can take precedence over other issues. Additionally, when the mainstream white public focuses on nonhuman animals, beings our Western society labels automatically *less than* and, thus, disposable, it's seen as the ultimate of disrespectful, racial acts.

However, I have always argued that we, as minoritized people, should include the violence that nonhuman animals receive in *our* theoretical anti-racist frameworks because it's a more complex way of understanding the systems that are impacting us as people of color. As black folks, we have been encouraged to create borders around our own racial oppression without realizing that white supremacy provides us with those border walls to ensure that we never fully see how complex our oppression really is.¹⁰ The walls have been so high that we haven't been able to see that our struggle involves the struggle of others; and since we can't see the massive landscape of white supremacy beyond this barrier, we don't realize just how expansive its territory is.

Rather than fighting the system of white supremacy, we spend time "calling out" individual white people and/or white news media. The little energy we have left after dealing with internalized racism and systemic oppression is spent on fighting and educating white people.

Normally, the conversation gets turned to the ways that white folks in the animal rights landscape have no regard for the racist violence inflicted on black people. Although that's a legitimate conversation that is currently being written and talked about extensively, as black folks we need to

realize that an important conversation lurks under all this mess that we need to be having among ourselves as well.

The mainstream black community's reaction to Cecil made me realize that, as black people, we have spent way too much time worrying about white people and educating them. When we privilege educating or fighting individual white people *as* anti-racist activism, we lose sight of the structure that is causing us violence and we subscribe to a simplistic version of how the system works. Our energy might be better spent on examining just how expansive the territory of white supremacy is, which may lead us to understand that white supremacy is much more complex than the actions of individual white people.

We need to stop serving as intellectual maids to white people, cleaning up their privileged white messes by writing articles and creating videos to help them get back on track. While we've been helping white people clean up their intellectual homes for free, ours have begun to collect dust.

Black folks are committed to having racial conversations with white people, a commitment that speaks to our resilience and strength during an era where some of us are just trying to survive. However, sometimes we forget that racial work as a community requires us to be critical of our own ways, too, including our conceptual frameworks. We have work to do *within* our own movements and this will require us to engage seriously and dialogue with the different and diverse black social justice movements. *Black folks aren't monolithic, and neither are our movements to overturn white supremacy.*

For example, I thought it was odd that during the Cecil debates, mainstream black news sites and well-trafficked black websites didn't appear (at least to my knowledge) to reach out to black vegans to get their viewpoints or to gain some new insight within the context of anti-racism and animality. Instead, they immediately focused on white people's reactions to the event. This is a problem. In fact, I have noticed that whenever it comes to veganism or animal oppression, the loudest voices on these topics in the black community are people who *aren't* vegan, and don't talk or write about animal oppression at all, which is problematic. Although some nonvegan black folks point to the ways that white folks animalize

them, this argument isn't necessarily the same as talking about nonhuman animal oppression. Some of these folks have not yet been exposed to the idea of animality as a racialized weapon of white supremacy. Rather than immediately engage with white people's reactions to events, which will inevitably lead to conversations about the racial insensitivity of individual white people, it might be beneficial for us to privilege diverse perspectives in our own communities.

In the black community, to speak of "the animal" is to highlight generations' worth of anxieties about our own identities, as well as the oppressive conditions of white supremacy. However, we can't afford to shy away from conversations with each other that could advance our own causes.

Unfortunately, the implicit assumption is that black vegans are the same as white ones, privileging animal experiences over black human experiences. Neither could be further from the truth. Most black vegans I have encountered place anti-racism at the center of their activism. I'm reminded of a time when black lawyers protested an event at which I was speaking on a panel with another black vegan activist and a white vegan lawyer. The black lawyers reportedly said the event shouldn't spotlight "self-hating blacks" (meaning black people who were advocating for black liberation alongside animal liberation). They assumed I was going to be playing into the tropes of white veganism by "comparing" oppressions to draw sympathy with animal oppression.

As it happened, the title of my talk was, "Beyond Victim Comparisons: Creating a New Vocabulary for White Human Terrorism." Ironically, my talk centered on the ways that we *shouldn't* compare black oppression to animal oppression because they aren't "like" each other; they just have a common source of oppression, which is systemic white human violence. Unfortunately, some of the critics didn't attend the event, which made me realize the power of white people's framing of these conversations, since they can control how minoritized people will even engage with the subject. As black folks, we must push past the ways individual white people have constructed the conversation to foreground our *own* experiences and perspectives. Currently, we, as black activists, are positioned as perpetual

racial experts with a fixed experience and manner of viewing our own conditions. This prevents us from examining the different means by which our oppression is sustained.

Liberatory social change will require us, as minorities, to change our thinking as well. If we know that racism and sexism are systemic issues that impact *everyone*, why would we think that white people are the only ones who need to reevaluate their behaviors and conceptual frameworks? The system has infected us all. It is illogical to talk about “structures” in one breath, and then have our advocacy structured around disciplining *individual* white people. Liberation will require *all of us* to act differently and to reevaluate how we’ve been trained to understand what the actual problems are, and their solutions. Change won’t just be an external event, but will happen internally as well. Liberation requires us to knock down the wall we’ve placed around our own oppression as black people so we can see the expansive territory of white supremacy and how it impacts many other marginalized groups.

So, I’m asking for us to return home with the digital mops we’ve been using online to clean up white people’s intellectual messes, and start placing some of that attention on one another. This is an extension of self-care. Frequently, self-care is interpreted as an individualized phenomenon; however, I see it as a way of putting energy into our collective black selves. This certainly doesn’t mean that we can’t or shouldn’t engage white people in conversations about their privilege. It simply means that that’s not the only route to dismantling white supremacy.

→ 3 ←

#ALLVEGANSROCK
The All Lives Matter Hashtag of Veganism

◆
Aph Ko
August 19, 2015

IN JUNE 2015, I WROTE THE FIRST ARTICLE LISTING 100 BLACK VEGANS.¹ I felt compelled to do this after I witnessed conversations from animal rights activists about the “whiteness” of the movement. There appeared to be a strong desire among activists to include representations of people of color in advocacy; however, I saw that people didn’t necessarily have the right tools to move forward with this plan outside of hosting conversations about inclusivity and diversity.

I started to notice that diversity rhetoric *itself* was eclipsing contributions from vegans of color. In 2015, Dr. Amie Breeze Harper launched “The Vegan Praxis of Black Lives Matter,”² an online conference where vegans from different racial backgrounds analyzed the intersections between racism and speciesism. (Syl talks more about speciesism in chapter 17.) Unfortunately, this conference didn’t get nearly as much attention as the nebulous conversations about “diversity.” (Although the presence of vegans of color certainly doesn’t negate the point that the racial grammar of the movement is white, the movement tends to highlight whiteness, rather than focus on the people of color already in the movement.)

I realized that with a simple paradigm shift, vegans could actualize our goals at making the mainstream animal rights movement racially diverse

since, technically, it already was. Vegans of color were doing the work, but there wasn't any serious infrastructure in place to ensure they were receiving the visibility and support in the animal advocacy movement they deserved. I wanted to write an article listing black game-changers who were vegan, alongside black vegans who didn't identify as activists, to demonstrate how normalized plant-based eating was in many of our communities.

This was my way of showing *how* black lives matter. Not only would I be deconstructing white-centric mainstream animal rights spaces, but I'd also be reconstructing—offering something new instead of just criticizing.

When my article was published, vegans of color all over the world contacted me, appreciative of the list, honored to be on it, and wanting to be included in the project. Although the article was well received, some called it “racist” and “speciesist” because it apparently detracted from the goals of the animal rights movement. Such attacks were alarming; but they weren't surprising, considering black folks are usually called “segregationists” and “racists” when we attempt to carve out spaces of empowerment for ourselves.³

The Vegan Society shared my article on their Facebook page (which had over 300,000 followers at the time) and I was overwhelmed by the torrent of post-racial, racist, and offensive comments that followed.⁴ I have included *some* (from the hundreds) of comments directed at my article, which merely sought to highlight black vegans who were working in the areas of food justice, animal rights, anti-racism, and feminism. (It must also be noted that vegans of color—particularly non-black minorities—also participated in writing racist comments under the article.)

I am not aiming to shock you, because these responses are somewhat predictable (especially if you've been in the movement for some time). However, I think it's necessary to document the anger directed at the 100 Black Vegans article as proof of black folks' claims that there is racism in the animal rights movement. These responses remind me of the misguided panic over Anita Sarkeesian's analysis of video games wherein people asked: *What does gender inequality have to do with video games?*⁵ Similarly, folks below ask: *What does race have to do with the animals?*

You created a racial discussion and you derailed the purpose of veganism to further your cause.

It's just as racially exclusive to have a 100 black vegans list as it would be to have a 100 white vegans. Why is this acceptable? 100 just . . . vegans would be fine. Pretty sure the animals don't care what colour face they're not being shoveled into, why is this still so important to us? It's 2015.

Well done The Vegan Society, you just successfully created a racial discussion out of a topic which should be about diet and health, regardless of skin color.

It's a sad world when we have to bring the race issues into one's dietary habits.

Isn't this racist?

Can you imagine a "White Vegans Rock" post? No, I thought not.

We'll never have equality so long as people are praised for simply being _____ race. There are no black vegans, or white vegans, or red vegans, etc. There are only vegans.

There are no black vegans, white vegans, red vegans. . . . We are ALL vegans in brotherhood and sisterhood for the good of the environment, our beloved animals, and our own health. It seems to be the minority's [*sic*] communities who continually like to segregate that condemn white segregation. I am vegan with all who are vegan.

Why does EVERYTHING always have to be about race? Why can't it just simply be all about being a vegan, not about being a black

vegan or a white vegan or an Asian vegan? Why label each other? This kind of thinking baffles me. It's exactly this kind of thinking that makes worldwide racism such a big issue.

I'M A NON-WHITE VEGAN, PAY ATTENTION TO ME INSTEAD OF THE BUTCHERED ANIMALS!!! Oh how lovely.

I completely do not understand why we have to have "lists." I am an Asian-American who happens to be vegan; I don't need to be acknowledged for my choice. I know I made it. There seems to be so much separation in unity. I am just happy to know there are vegans from many countries, many walks of life, and that we strive to make the world a better place—for animals and for humans.

If someone had made a list highlighting only white vegans, someone would have a tantrum over it. So why it's OK to make one of all black people is something many of us scratch our heads at.

I am going to unsub and unlike you, The Vegan Society—you are totally out to cause division. You are making vegans argue amongst themselves and the direction of their argument is miles away from being vegan. Donald [Watson, the cofounder of The Vegan Society] is rolling in his grave. I don't have time for people who cause division.

I get what you're saying yet I've never thought about vegans being black, white, or any other color. We are people. That's the bottom line.

I'm not following your site anymore. You are bringing sex, colour, whatever you can to promote veganism and all this is bullshit,

Aph and Syl Ko

it's about animals' death not art, colour, etc. Blimey, you guys certainly know how to complicate things. Thanks for nothing.

Why does it matter what color a vegan is? The fact remains that vegans of all colors are awesome.

My thought on this post as written: last I checked, vegans do not eat black people. That said, just because an organization does not make it a point to give the Black Lives Matter campaign a deliberate shout out does not mean there is no support.

I think it's ridiculous to just have one list. Do Caucasians, Asians, Hispanics, and mixed races not matter? Why not have lists of them? I think it best to have a list of vegans period. But if it helps a person of a specific race decide to become vegan because another person of the same race is vegan then it's good. I'm not going to bother reading your article because all lives matter.

Why?? Why put labels on people, black people, gay people, white people, short people, STOP PEOPLE. We are all the same!

Why does it always have to be about race? So sick of it all! Will you be featuring all people every month? White Vegans, Australian Vegans, Women Vegans, Handicap Vegans, Military Vegans?? See my point?

Veganism doesn't care what colour you are and no one should celebrate division unless you are racists anyway. No black, white, hetero, gay, transsexual, pink, fluffy or anything vegan. It's JUST VEGAN!

My dear fellow vegans, as The Vegan Society has chosen to use a noble cause to air his [*sic*] racist thoughts, I will now leave this

page. I think that we are not whites or blacks, we are humans, and it's as humans that we have to help the animals.

This is why racism is still so prevalent—because we continue to separate ourselves like this. Come on people.

Give us ONE example of black, white, green, yellow people being excluded from the vegan debate EVER since the world began, you numpties.

Why do we need black anything, how about just not mention race? Why do black people incessantly need their own everything?

This site should be about spreading word about animals and how it is morally unjust and wrong to abuse, profit, etc. off any animal, not about statistics about colour or race.

Why can't we just be vegans?

Why are we bringing race into this?

All vegans rock equally.

The discourse surrounding “All vegans rock” and “There are no white vegans, black vegans, red vegans . . . we are all vegans” is an extension of the “All Lives Matter” nonsense. Whenever black folks attempt to be specific about their own causes, we are called out for racism. Exclaiming “We are all vegans” is a way to employ post-racial rhetoric to violently silence activists of color who are trying to organize around their own experiences. Silencing vegans of color somehow translates to being “compassionate” for the animals. “All vegans rock” is a way to call activists of color “racist” for wanting to produce knowledge from their own standpoints, which is

ironic given that the mainstream animal rights movement is structured through the experiences of the white dominant class.

These reactions are also troubling in an era where the word *intersectional* is often used to describe most of our social justice movements. It is possible to discuss more than one oppression at a time and it's OK to reexamine how these "isms" relate to one another. Conceptual violence creates the conditions for physical violence. The conceptual chains that oppress animals have been forged by race and gender constructs, which is why it's important to create theoretical tools to help break these chains. Setting animals free *physically* requires us to *conceptually* reevaluate all systems that have sustained and normalized their oppression.

→ 4 ←

BY “HUMAN,” EVERYBODY JUST MEANS “WHITE”



Syl Ko

August 25, 2015

ANIMAL. WE, AS BLACK FOLKS, REACT VERY STRONGLY TO THIS WORD WHEN IT is used to draw any sort of relation or comparison to us. After all, the label *animal* was and continues to be one of the most destructive ever applied to us. One of the easiest ways to violate a person or group of people is to compare or reduce them to “animals.” In March 2015, the San Francisco Police Department was investigated for racist and homophobic text exchanges. *Think Progress* reported on the story, stating, “The texts made public Friday included jokes about Kwanzaa, calling African Americans monkeys, calling for the lynching of all African Americans, and even one that said, ‘Its [*sic*] not against the law to put an animal down.’”¹

In her 1994 open letter to her colleagues, cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter noted, “You may have heard a radio news report which aired briefly during the days after the jury’s acquittal of the policemen in the Rodney King beating case. The report stated that public officials of the judicial system of Los Angeles routinely used the acronym N.H.I. to refer to any case involving a breach of the rights of young Black males who belong to the jobless category of the inner city ghettos. N.H.I. means ‘no humans involved.’”²

One could even argue that words like *nigger* or *thug* operate a lot like replacement terms for *animal*. Think about the ways that police (as well as everyday folks) justify violence toward black people by referring to them as “thugs” who need to be “controlled.” It’s no wonder that one way we have historically sought and continue to seek social visibility is by asserting our “humanity.”

I used to be that kind of black activist. You know: “*We’re human, too!*” But now, I question this strategy and want to investigate it in this chapter. How I see it is that the strategy of asserting one’s humanity—humanization—is a lot like animalization.

With animalization, we are conceiving of a person or group as if they are animals. But with humanization, we’re not acknowledging that one is a “human.” We’re conceiving a person or group *like* they are humans. So, my aim here is to persuade you that to demand that we be seen like we are human is racially loaded. If animalizing people is problematic, humanizing them is even worse, or so I suggest.

Since the terms *human* and *animal* are up for debate here, I will refer to what we ordinarily call humans as “*homo sapiens*” and what we ordinarily call animals as members of species “other than *homo sapiens*.”

Of course, one major assumption behind both animalization and humanization is that those who are not members of *homo sapiens* just don’t belong in the domain of moral or political consideration. I won’t treat this issue directly but needless to say I think it’s a view fraught with major problems.

Another assumption at work in these processes is that being “like an animal” is supposed to strike us as immediately intelligible. But the term *animal* refers to a fairly broad concept. There is no such thing as the general “animal,” and I can’t think of one feature or unifying behavior common only to all members of species other than *homo sapiens*. The only thing they have in common is they are not members of our species.

And what is “being human” like? At least here we have only one species to consider—*ours*. Maybe what it is like to “be human” is the

wrong question to ask. After all, isn't being human just belonging to our species? So, why should humanization be a problem?

But *is* belonging to our species *really* what it is to "be human"? I don't think so. I think most people would distinguish "animal" from "human" behavior by appealing to something like "reason," "morality," our transcendence of the laws of nature, or something similar.

Or perhaps some of us might even say that human behavior is not to act "like an animal." For instance, the following passage from Douglas MacLean's article in *Philosophy & Public Policy Quarterly* (a reputable philosophy journal) would probably not be very controversial to most of us:

Just as we have naming ceremonies for newborns, involve food in our rituals, go in for weddings, and do not disturb or desecrate graves, so it is part of what it means to be a human being that we don't eat off of the ground, defecate in public, or in other ways "behave like animals." It is only when we separate ourselves from nature in these ways that we make it possible to gain a sense of dignity, become suitable objects of respect, and make sense of moral behavior that is anything other than a set of instrumental relationships.³

Let's be honest about a few things. First, whether or not certain behaviors are ways in which we "behave like animals" is a somewhat subjective judgment. Secondly, the prioritizing of our "rational capacities" or the belief that engaging in certain practices "separates" us or puts us "above" nature are notions held by and tendencies in which only *certain* groups of people participate. And thirdly, those who prioritized our rational capacities and believed that their practices made them break with "nature" just happened to be those who decided which behaviors are reminiscent of "animals" and which weren't.

In fact, these people possess the most privilege in the world, thereby giving them the power not only to define the terms at play (*reason, nature,*

and the terms in question—*human, animal*) but also to self-designate their group as behaving and looking distinctly *human*.

The domain of the “human” or “humanity” is not just about whether or not one belongs to the species *homo sapiens*. Rather, “human” means a certain way of being, especially exemplified by how one looks or behaves, what practices are associated with one’s community, and so on. So, the “human” or what “humanity” is just is a *conceptual way to mark the province of European whiteness as the ideal way of being homo sapiens*.

This means that the conceptions of “humanity/human” and “animality/animal” have been constructed along *racial* lines. What is now understood to be *biological* was really European whites’ self-conception and what they believed followed about the rest of the natural world in order to make this self-conception a *truth*.

Now, before I move on, I want to consider the following. Some of you might be thinking: members of *homo sapiens* divided themselves from all other species long before race entered the scene. At minimum, this divide was necessary so that other species could be used for food, clothing, labor, and a variety of other purposes. To see ourselves (*homo sapiens*) as different from all other species, however slight the *difference*, made it possible for us to exploit the latter, especially as food, and this played a major role in our evolutionary development from a physiological perspective. But it also played a major role in our development from a *cultural* perspective, given that many of our rituals and practices incorporate the use of animals in some way.

I certainly don’t dispute this fact, although the ways in which this distinction was drawn and the degree to which there was ever a *clear* distinction probably varied among different groups of people. But let’s bracket that information for the sake of getting to the point. I think it’s a mistake to assume that the *modern* use of and subsequent attitude toward other species is a mere continuation of this *homo sapiens* “tradition.” The introduction of race as a way of understanding geocultural, social, and individual identities completely changed our conceptual landscape. It

continues to impact, in a deep sense, how we understand ourselves, each other, and the world.

With the invention of race came the reinvention of “man” or the “human.” As the decolonial scholar Walter D. Mignolo describes it, “During the European renaissance, man [*sic*] was conceived at the intersection of his body and his mind, his body proportion and his intellect. Leonardo da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man translated into visual language what humanists were portraying in words.” As a result, “when the idea and the category of man came into the picture, it came already with a privilege” (p. 10).⁴

How so? Well, since European whites introduced the social construct of race for *their benefit*, they designated *themselves* and their point of reference as constitutive of “being human.” They had the power to *universalize* whiteness as human. So, this new language of race posited the “human” in terms of naturalized whiteness.

What do I mean when I say that racial logic changed our conceptual landscape? Looking to gender as an example might help make sense of this claim. Feminist philosopher María Lugones notes that the norms of what it is to be a man or a woman were “premised upon the experiences of middle-class men and women of European origin.”⁵ She notes just how profoundly and cataclysmically this notion impacted non-European populations in the form of colonialism. Lugones draws on feminist scholar Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí’s book *The Invention of Women*,⁶ in which Oyèwùmí argues that prior to colonization the Yoruba society of present-day Nigeria did not have a gender system in place. Although they had terms to designate anatomic male and female, these categories were not understood to be hierarchical or binarily opposed.

Colonialism foisted onto different societies Eurocentric-constructed gender norms such that, for instance, what it was to be a woman involved a certain degree of whiteness, whether that be manifested in the shade of one’s skin, the proportions of one’s body, the hair’s texture/length/style, the tone of voice, gait, and so on. Even to this day, conceptions of femininity and the ideal woman coincide with representations of whiteness.

Similarly, what it means to be “human” also underwent a drastic change after the introduction of racial logic, such that the term represented a particular population that had a certain way of being homo sapiens. But if this conception underwent such a drastic change after the introduction of race, it stands to reason that lots of other conceptions, especially those deeply connected to “human,” were either distorted, reinvented, or generated under this new logic. Even relations were reinterpreted.

Lugones quotes sociologist Anibal Quijano: “The invention of race is a pivotal turn as it replaces the relations of superiority and inferiority established through domination. It reconceives humanity and human relations fictionally, in biological terms.” This statement has interesting implications for how racial logic might affect our understanding of “animality/animal” and “humanity/human.”⁷ What is really the domination of one group by another is naturalized in terms of biological kinds.

With this in mind, we can go back to a question I raised earlier regarding what we mean when we hear something described as “animalistic” or “like an animal.”

I noted that these types of descriptions involve an assumption that they are intelligible despite the fact that I really can’t think of any obvious feature or behavior in which only members of species other than homo sapiens participate or that they possess. That is, how do these descriptions make sense when there just is no such thing as “*the animal*”? I think it is here wherein the *racial* construction of “the animal” can really be seen.

Although individual animal species may not in themselves be construed in terms of race, the conception of “the animal” or “the general animal” operates in conjunction with its racial analog, “the human” or “the general human.” If “the human” is really an expression of whiteness as the ideal way of being homo sapiens, then “the animal” is supposed to express a *deviation* from this way of being. “The general animal,” then, applies not only to members of other species, who clearly cannot participate in such a form of life by virtue of not having even the necessary features to “be human,” but it can also apply to those members of homo

sapiens who deviate from the way whites look and/or behave, and what values and commitments they hold, and so forth.

On this interpretation, humanization is not merely the act of asserting that one is homo sapiens. That would be futile. Rather, humanization is the act of asserting one's resemblance to "humans"—white people.

When we refer to a person or a group as "animalistic," we are not really saying they bear some generic strong resemblance to species other than homo sapiens. This would make no sense because, again, there is no such thing as a generic non-homo sapiens property. What we are saying is *they don't behave or look or believe properly*, where what is "proper" is defined by Eurocentric, white ideals. In other words, they *deviate from whiteness*.

"Appropriate" ways of looking and carrying oneself are standardized by whites; "respectable" religions and "proper" rituals of belief are standardized by whites; the most "useful" ways of thinking about and engaging with the world are standardized by whites, and so on. Anything that doesn't have an air of white familiarity to it is "exotic," "primitive," "irrational," "animalistic." You get the picture.

So, now what? Obviously, I strongly support moving away from the strategy of humanization, at least in the way it currently stands. First of all, from a practical viewpoint, it just won't work. If humanity is defined in terms of whiteness, then at best most of us will be living in the shadow of what Western whites deem is the way to live, look, behave, believe, know, celebrate, and so on. More importantly, when we attempt to "humanize" ourselves, and when we glamorize "the human," we uphold the superiority of whiteness.

Having said that, I also don't think the way to move forward is to try to disentangle whiteness from our conception of "human." For instance, some might think it would be a good idea to reconceive (*really* reconceive) humanity in terms of species. Namely, any member of homo sapiens qualifies as human regardless of one's features or practices or history. But this way of thinking seems to overlook completely the fact that "human" and "animal," especially understood in relation to one another, *are deeply embedded in the grammar of racial logic*. If we want to free ourselves and others who have

suffered from the racialization of the world, why play along with the game of defining “human”? Why not move away from this imperial project altogether and recast the terms of liberation, for ourselves and for others, in a completely new language and vision of the world?

I acknowledge that I’m painting an incomplete picture here. But I wanted to express these thoughts in order to inspire some reflection. In closing, I’d like to leave you with a few conclusions that follow from the thoughts presented here.

First, I think we as black people seriously need to reconsider our relationship with nonhuman animals. When we make use of the human–animal binary to justify our attitudes toward other species, we are in fact using the very same racial logic that posits the “human” as whiteness. There is already a movement underway in which people from our community call upon members to “decolonize” our bodies, our diets, and areas of activism. But we also need to decolonize the frameworks that govern our concepts. For those of us in the West who can afford to live otherwise, our comfort with using animals, especially as meat and dairy, only reveals our comfort with white-centric modes of thinking. Dismantling racism might require dismantling our patterns of consumption, including our food practices.

Secondly and closely related, I think those of us who *do* see a need to address the situation of nonhuman animals need to steer clear of the mainstream tendency to simplify issues having to do with animality in terms of speciesism alone. Right now, a lot of tension exists in mainstream animal rights spaces, with many questioning the relevance of racial issues beyond their use in drawing up productive analogies. Understanding the “human” and “animal” in this more nuanced sense should spark a commitment in our community to understand the white/black and human–animal binaries as not merely bearing upon one another but *deeply intertwined*, with all four terms functioning to uphold the superiority of whiteness.

Author’s note: Please see chapter 17 (“Revaluing the Human as a Way to Revalue the Animal”) for a follow-up to this discussion.

→ 5 ←

WHY CONFUSION IS NECESSARY FOR OUR ACTIVISM TO EVOLVE



Aph Ko
September 2, 2015

HAVE YOU EVER ENCOUNTERED SOMEONE WHO EATS MEAT AND BOMBARDS you with thousands of scenario-based questions when you confront them over his or her eating patterns? This person usually says, “Well, what would we do with all of the animals in factory farms if factory farms ended? Would you just release them all at once? Wouldn’t that be a problem?” Or, have you ever been in conversation with someone about ending the prison system and the person says, “Well, if we end prisons, what are we supposed to do with all of the prisoners? Just let them out?” Though these questions are frustrating and at times predictable, they demonstrate how people are colonized by the mainstream system to the extent they can’t even imagine new possibilities for themselves. They can’t imagine a different setup from the one that’s been imposed on them.

Part of activism is finding yourself in a new space of confusion, allowing yourself to step into new conceptual terrain. When you abandon commonly held oppressive beliefs, you might not exactly know what to do afterward, and that’s where more activists *need* to be. Confusion is usually a symptom of decolonizing yourself from the mainstream system. Answers aren’t easily laid out in front of you since you’re now forced to think critically. You have to create new blueprints and imagine new ways of

interacting with people and doing things. Often, people who are colonized by the contemporary system ask questions in a patronizing way because they don't want change to happen, because most people thrive on comfort. Change is a threat.

I remember I once told a sexist professor at my university that I was a feminist. We had a meeting that finished and we were heading out of the building. As we were walking to the exit, he asked me, "Well, I know you're a feminist and I don't want to offend you or anything, but can I open the door for you? Do you allow men to open your doors or are you going to be offended?"

Of course, he was asking me this in a patronizing way to mock my political beliefs. However, his questions made me realize how *he* was the one with the anxiety because he didn't want to confront his own confusion surrounding gendered interactions. It was *he* who was anxious about what to do when it came to opening the door, not me. In fact, I'm certain that as women gained more rights in the US, men who were conditioned to think we were silly playthings reacted by negatively pointing out how confused *they* were now. *Do I pay for the meal? Do I buy flowers? Do I open the door?*

I would argue that confusion is a *good* thing.

The resurgence in such talk, wherein people keep asking if "chivalry is dead" or if it should come back, isn't coincidental; it's a backlash at feminist advances. My generation of so-called millennials has a particular nostalgia for gallantry because it was evidently "so much easier back then"—to live during a time when such behaviors were advertised because you didn't have to question them: society told you what to do, how to dress, how to behave, and you were rewarded for following the scripts.

Many chauvinistic men who cling to gender norms of the past blame feminism for contributing to their confusion when they encounter women today. They assume that gendered interactions are much more stressful than before. However, being confused about how to talk and be with women is valuable. It means you no longer view all women through a single lens, where we're all easily impressed with faux attempts at respect (opening the door, but not taking my voice seriously). Confusion means you've stepped

into new terrain and you actually have to *think*. Not knowing what to do because your culture is changing is catalytic. It offers moments when your colonized self is confronting or colliding with your “decolonizing” self.

The only way we can build from the ground up is to allow ourselves to be confused. Our activist spaces are in turmoil precisely because people don’t want to accommodate this necessary confusion. *Intersectionality* may be a fun word to toss around, but people are scared to make connections in their movements because they will have to create new blueprints for their activism. This is difficult, especially if your particular style of activism has become an identity for you.

So many of the ways we conduct our activism operate on scripts and mantras but don’t foster critical thinking or questioning. In fact, I’m finding that areas where we engage with others in activism can be quite violent, because they often reproduce the very problems they’re fighting against. Even social justice movements that dogmatically cling to intersectionality are relatively uncritical spaces in which people are looking for a framework to *follow*, not a framework to critically *think* through. When you engage in critical thinking, you don’t necessarily cling to a model or one specific way of viewing the world; you are always shifting and changing perspectives.

As I wrote in chapter 3, white vegans attacked my 100 Black Vegans article because they felt that focusing on race and animality within the context of animal rights would distract from helping “the animals.” Although many people were angry, some actually seemed *afraid* that their movement was changing—even to the extent of claiming that people who talk about race and animality (like me) are in a “cult.” (I’m not kidding.) No, I’m not in a cult. In fact, if you can’t interpret my actions or theory as anything other than cultlike, then maybe *you* are actually a member of a group with a fixed view of the world.

Because there’s an already-established blueprint for engaging in animal rights work and activism, some folks get afraid when they see it being done differently. When they notice that some activists are attempting to show how speciesism connects with racism and sexism, they grow fearful

because it's not "usually" done like that. I see a similar anxiety in mainstream anti-racist movements. When I bring up animality and race, I'm usually confronted with *immediate* resistance from black folks who don't think speciesism has anything to do with racism. In fact, I tend to face humiliation in multiple online and physical locations that already have a specific way of conducting anti-racist activist work, because the frameworks they employ are not designed to interpret theory that politicizes animality and white supremacy.

I understand intimately how daunting it can be when you are exposed to a theory that turns your activism on its head. Recently, when I was preparing for a presentation, I'd *almost* completed my notes when I *happened* to read a few articles from Tommy Curry, an Africana philosopher, that challenge the ways in which people talk and theorize about black men and racial violence.¹ Dr. Curry posits that black men don't just experience *racism*, they simultaneously experience *sexual racism* considering that they are routinely harassed sexually and raped by police officers² (which the mainstream news media tend to exclude in their analyses of racism and police violence), and have undergone sexual trauma dating back to slavery.

Dr. Curry brilliantly points out that when we frame gender-based violence as solely a phenomenon that revolves around women (particularly white women), we erase the ways that white women have historically assaulted black men and continue to commit sexual violence on black men's bodies.³ These articles *shattered* the intersectional frameworks I had been using in my activism, and I remember panicking because I *agreed* with the author, and in agreeing with him I assumed my whole presentation was invalid because I saw so many gaps in my own theories and thoughts. However, I integrated his theories into my presentation because I was eager to introduce these provocative and life-changing ideas to my audience.

Unfortunately, a lot of activists don't allow their cherished theories and practices to be altered in such a manner. Some would much rather stay in an oppressive system as long as they have some semblance of power and control, rather than engage with new ideas that incorporate new voices, because they destabilize their feelings of control.

In March 2015, I attended a lecture by Angela Davis at a women's studies conference. The section of her dazzling talk that resonated with me most was her analysis of how activists often reproduce oppressive behaviors by not allowing themselves to change their viewpoints. In essence, she stated that we all use frameworks for our activism. When someone offers us new information that *should* disrupt our framework, many of us cling even harder to our viewpoints and frameworks because we're scared to change. There is seemingly nothing worse for an activist than being introduced to a new perspective or theory that challenges the way you've been doing things. Rather than acting as though that perspective doesn't exist, Professor Davis suggested we should immerse ourselves in it and allow ourselves to be confronted. Our reflex to turn the other way as activists is a product of being colonized.

We need to encourage people to question their behaviors so they're in a conceptual terrain of confusion, which is one of the most revolutionary areas to be in because we're not bound by oppressive behaviors and norms. In this space, we all have the power to be conceptual architects. Questions dismantle cultural scripts and confusion can produce new blueprints for change. Confusion is a necessary phase in activism, and if you find that you're rarely confused and rarely challenged, then you might be operating from a script yourself.