

# Relations

BEYOND ANTHROPOCENTRISM

11.2

DECEMBER 2023

*Ethical Models for the Animal Question*

Edited by Francesco Allegri

## STUDIES AND RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS

The Affective Turn in Animal Ethics <i>Ralph R. Acampora</i>	9
Animal Ethics and the Problem of Direct Conflict: Why Current Theories Can't Offer Solutions <i>Carla Turner</i>	25
Advocating for a Political Vegan Feminism: A Rebuttal to Val Plumwood and Donna Haraway's Criticisms of Ethical Veganism <i>Andrea Natan Feltrin</i>	41
Il sublime delle stenelle. Riflessioni sull'estetica del <i>whalewatching</i> <i>Riccardo Cravero</i>	63

## COMMENTS, DEBATES, REPORTS AND INTERVIEWS

Better Descartes than Aristotle: Talking about Those Who Deny Moral Consideration to Animals <i>Francesco Allegri</i>	85
Author Guidelines	93



# Advocating for a Political Vegan Feminism

## A Rebuttal to Val Plumwood and Donna Haraway's Criticisms of Ethical Veganism

Andrea Natan Feltrin

*University of North Texas, Denton (TX)*

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7358/rela-2023-02-fela>

[natan.feltrin@live.it](mailto:natan.feltrin@live.it)

---

### ABSTRACT

*This paper highlights the vital connection between intersectional ecofeminism and veganism as profound ethical and political practices. It critically engages with the ideas of feminist philosophers Val Plumwood and Donna Haraway, revealing how their contributions, while significant in critical animal studies and ecological philosophies, inadvertently allow continued exploitation of non-human animals, especially for food. Drawing from neo-materialist feminism and recent developments in political veganism, this paper underscores the ethical and ecological imperatives for an intersectional and radical veganism. This approach seeks to deconstruct biopolitical structures upholding non-human oppression, envisioning liberation for sentient beings and ecological restoration. It argues that the boundaries between ecofeminism, veganism, and multispecies justice should blur to dismantle systems rooted in human exceptionalism and ensure non-human animals are not treated as mere tools. In conclusion, this paper advocates for a holistic approach to non-human liberation, emphasizing the urgent need to strengthen the bonds between ecofeminism and veganism. This union challenges prevailing biopolitical systems and paves the way for genuine liberation for all sentient beings, both human and non-human.*

*Keywords:* animal ethics; animal liberation; critical animal studies; ethical veganism; food politics; human supremacy; intersectional ecofeminism; multispecies justice; neo-materialist feminism; political veganism.

---

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, various philosophical movements have arisen to address the ecological crisis. However, only a few have effectively reevaluated the relationship between human communities and non-human beings from

a non-anthropocentric perspective. Ecofeminism stands out as a significant and intersectional movement, challenging the multiple forms of oppression that jointly constitute capitalist modernity. This philosophical movement has succeeded in incorporating marginalized communities, oppressed subjectivities, and biocultural differences into the ecological debate, thereby advancing the critical pursuit of environmental and multispecies justice.

In this paper, I contend that embracing veganism as an ecofeminist practice of intersectional ethics and politics is of paramount importance. Such an approach stands in direct opposition to the exploitation of sentient non-human animals and firmly rejects the oppressive system founded on human exceptionalism and supremacism. To substantiate this argument, I initiate my discussion by critically engaging with the philosophies of two influential figures in contemporary feminism, Val Plumwood and Donna Haraway. Although both have made substantial contributions to ecofeminist and feminist posthumanism discourses, their philosophies inadvertently offer theoretical tools that can be wielded by opponents of critical animal studies and animal liberation. Plumwood's critique of vegetarianism, for instance, falls short when confronted with the prevailing global system of oppression against non-human animals. Conversely, Haraway's concept of "companion species" (2007), while challenging anthropocentrism, also carries the potential to rationalize the instrumentalization of non-human beings.

Through a critical analysis of their philosophies, we can reclaim their subversive potential to challenge the tenets of biocapitalism. This, in turn, enables us to guide contemporary feminism down a political trajectory that advocates for a flourishing multispecies future, one where non-human animals are not relegated to the status of mere instruments. To achieve this, I draw upon the perspectives and concepts put forth by other feminist intellectuals, particularly those grounded in the new materialism movement.

## 2. PLUMWOOD AND THE BROKEN CIRCLE OF LIFE

The Australian philosopher Val Plumwood made a significant contribution to 20th-century ecofeminist philosophy by critiquing hierarchical dualisms present in Western philosophy. These dualisms included nature/culture, feminine/masculine, human/animal, and means/ends. Her work paved the way for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship

between humans and non-humans on this planet in the 21st century (Plumwood 1993). As a prominent figure in the ecofeminist philosophical movement, Plumwood's forceful critiques of other advocates for radical change concerning sentient animals, especially those who oppose the instrumental use of animal bodies, such as Carol J. Adams, cannot be overlooked (Plumwood 2000).

In this paper, I will draw from Plumwood's "Integrating Ethical Frameworks for Animals, Humans, and Nature: A Critical Feminist Eco-Socialist Analysis" (2000) to present her objections to Adams' ethical veganism, or "ontological veganism". Subsequently, I will examine the limitations of her criticisms, especially in the context of a world where predation and being preyed upon no longer hold the same ontological-existential significance that Plumwood portrayed with a certain romanticism (Plumwood 2013).

Plumwood's criticisms are based on her rejection of all forms of dualism. Instead, she advocates for recognizing non-human subjectivities or individualities as moral patients while emphasizing the importance of adopting a holistic and context-specific approach to the environment<sup>1</sup>. While her emphasis on situational knowledge serves as an antidote to totalizing thought and universal normativity, it can inadvertently lead to a form of anthropocentrism that aligns with what Timothy Morton (2019, 25) has termed "explosive holism". This perspective assumes that the whole always takes precedence over the parts, except for human subjectivities. In simpler terms, justifying the instrumentalization of non-human subjectivities, such as their use as food within an ecocentric perspective, becomes challenging without also accepting that humans should be considered "sacrificable" for the greater good of the environment. Nevertheless, many ecocentric viewpoints indeed uphold an implicit ontology that separates humans from non-humans when determining whose lives are considered "sacrificable" for the greater good of the environment (Horta 2014). In essence, transcending this human/non-human dualism proves to be a formidable challenge, even for the most radical ecocentric thinkers, unless it takes a turn towards eco-fascist positions, which inherently contradict our principles of human rights (Linkola 2011).

---

<sup>1</sup> Here, I am referring to how Plumwood's position moves, at least in principle, beyond the classic division in environmental ethics between an individualistic approach and a holistic approach.

Yet, Plumwood sees the approach of those who, like Adams, recognize ethical interests in non-human sentient subjectivities as more dualistic and neo-Cartesian:

Neo-Cartesian animalist theorists aver fervently and often that animals, and only animals, count ethically, signaling the repetition of the Cartesian gesture of moral dualism and the ethical exclusion of “non-conscious” life forms that marks the approach of minimal departure from the rationalist foundations of liberal-humanism. (Plumwood 2000, 286)

In her opinion, animal rights thinking is the harbinger of a new dualism that is as problematic as the strictly anthropocentric one. From this point of view, in the article under examination, Plumwood portrays the positions of Adams and those of Mary Zeiss Stange (1997), a supporter of hunting as harmonization with nature, as if these two authors were equidistant from a serious ecological and ecofeminist position:

Stange aims to reclaim Woman the Hunter as a disruptive figure who makes a feminist claim to powers of aggression and predation oppressively reserved in patriarchal society for men. She argues convincingly that much cultural ecofeminist discussion of hunting has involved gender dualism, ethnocentrism, mythical anthropology, and poor contextualization. (Plumwood 2000, 288)

While conflicts between the interests of human and non-human animal subjectivities and those of the broader multispecies community can indeed emerge, it is crucial to emphasize that achieving a systematic and nearly worldwide cessation of animal exploitation within human societies and cultures, commencing with Western consumerist carnism (Gilbert 2013), does not inherently hinder the thriving of the biocultural community. On the contrary, the most recent data demonstrate that the biocultural community would greatly benefit from forsaking the consumption of animal products in favor of a predominantly plant-based diet (Monbiot 2022). This lifestyle choice would create room for the partial recovery of ecosystems and biological communities, where active and passive rewilding could contribute to reestablishing a more harmonious relationship between humans and non-humans on our planet (Vettese 2022).

Conversely, it is notably more challenging to maintain a perspective on the use of non-human animals, which Plumwood appears to find valuable, that extends beyond indigenous communities. In her highly pertinent philosophical proposition, which remains pivotal in the field

of environmental ethics today, deeming something as “edible” does not entail adopting an instrumentalist viewpoint – an outlook Plumwood characterized as a form of egocentrism in her work *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (Plumwood 1993). However, a question arises: how can one delineate a clear boundary between those who serve as users and those who are used concerning edibility? Plumwood simplifies the answer: it involves integrating human subjectivities into the ontology of what can be objectified as nourishment for others, a robust theoretical standpoint that the philosopher shares with James Hatley (2004). According to the Plumwood perspective, the idea that humans are “inedible” needs to be questioned:

It is a curious and paradoxical feature of ontological vegetarianism that it basically shares this taboo on envisaging the human in edible terms, and that its strategy for greater equality is the extensionist one of attempting to extend it to a wider class of beings. The paradox is that it was precisely to give effect or expression to such a radical separation between humans and other animals that this taboo on conceiving humans as edible was developed in the first place. (Plumwood 2000, 294)

In the heart of Plumwood’s critique lies her objection to Adams and her colleagues’ concept of “ontological veganism” (*ibid.*, 294). This perspective perceives predation as a form of wrongdoing that should ideally be eliminated, even among non-human animals, as advocated by thinkers like Oscar Horta (2004) in their ultra-sentiocentric philosophies.

To challenge “ontological veganism” and its dualistic implications, Plumwood proposes an embodied ethics. This notion of an embodied encounter with non-human alterity, attained through a reevaluation of predator-prey dynamics, which are often romanticized by hunting’s more sophisticated proponents, directly stems from Plumwood’s harrowing experience with a crocodile during a canoe trip in Australia’s Kakadu National Park:

I leapt through the eye of the crocodile into what seemed also a parallel universe, one with completely different rules to the ‘normal universe’. This harsh, unfamiliar territory was the Heraclitean universe where everything flows, where we live the other’s death, die the other’s life: the universe represented in the food chain. I was suddenly transformed in the parallel universe into the form of a small, edible animal whose death was of no more significance than that of a mouse, and as I saw myself as meat I also saw with an incredible shock that I inhabited a grim, relentless and deplorable world that would make no exceptions for me, no matter how smart I was,

because like all living things, I was made of meat, was nutritious food for another being. (Plumwood 2013, 13-14)

Surviving three death-rolls, the philosopher came to grasp how individualistic ethics frequently clash with the most primal Heraclitean ethics of the circle of life, where everything is impermanent, and subjectivities exist in a constant state of transformation through phagocytosis. According to Plumwood, humans inhabit two worlds simultaneously: one governed by modern individualistic ethics and the other characterized by a holistic and Heraclitean ethics. To evade perilous dualisms, it becomes imperative to acknowledge the validity and worth of an ethics centered on “nature” in conjunction with the care for individuals.

Nonetheless, consuming non-human animals does not align with an act of care; predation, regardless of how it may be romanticized or rationalized, remains an act of violence. Hence, through the perspectives of Plumwood and Hatley, we can comprehend the value of predation within non-human animals and perhaps even accept human predation as a “non-absolute” evil. Like many others, Plumwood forgave the predator that had reduced her to mere sustenance in those horrific moments. Nevertheless, it would not be wise or even compassionate to willingly place ourselves in situations of potential predation, eschewing the technological safeguards that civilization/modernity affords, thus subjecting ourselves to the violent assimilation of our bodies by non-human alterities.

So, the question arises: why should hunting and killing sentient animals by humans be justified or desirable in order to feel a part of the circle of life? How can we avoid ethical and ontological chauvinism if we don’t embrace predation, but rather combat it while we thoughtlessly prey upon other animals?

The circle of life, often likened to the carbon cycle, encompasses us all, as no one can evade the recycling of matter in some form. However, when this inherent materiality is transformed into a prescription or justification, the dissolution of the nature/culture dualism simplifies both concepts, leading to the glorification of naturalness as if it were the harbinger of absolute values and mandates.

Moreover, even if hunting and being hunted were not justifiable but deemed desirable, the vast disparity in numbers and forces within the natural realm would render anthropophagy a mere epiphenomenon within the broader context of a systemic animal slaughter left unquestioned. The circle of life, as conventionally understood, is disrupted, necessitating the discovery of new strategies to navigate the ethical complexities of



a contemporary era marked by the Sixth Mass Extinction and the highest recorded rate of non-human body consumption by *Homo sapiens* in history (Animal Clock n.d.).

Viewed from this perspective, Plumwood's arguments may appear fragile and susceptible to criticism, particularly in relation to her concern about potentially reintroducing problematic dualisms between animal life and the broader spectrum of existence. However, it is worth noting that adopting a multispecies perspective can effectively challenge ontological anthropocentrism without rendering it impossible to differentiate between the varying needs of different living entities within the realm of ethics. In the words of Donaldson and Kymlicka:

We do not deny that humans have moral duties to plants and inanimate nature. Nor do we claim that humans and animals are higher in some cosmic hierarchy than trees or mountains. Rather, we claim that they are different – sentience generates distinctive vulnerabilities, and hence distinctive needs for protection of inviolable rights. (Donaldson and Kymlicka 2011, 36)

That said, it is necessary to reiterate how Plumwood's article confuses the possibility of being food with the social-ontological category of being structurally understood as edible bodies. On this point, Lori Gruen is very clear:

But Plumwood conflates the fact that we are all consumable with the fact that we categorize some bodies as “edible” and others as “non-edible”. The fact that Plumwood almost became a crocodile's supper and that all of us could be consumed as “prey” in certain contexts is an important recognition of our vulnerability. But this recognition is distinct from the social categorization of certain others as edible. To aspire to be vegan is not to deny ecological entanglement, but to suggest a reconceptualization of animals in their living bodies as fellow creatures with whom we can be in empathetic relationship and for whom we must have deeper respect. (Gruen 2015, 13)

In conclusion, a middle ground between “natural” ethics and individual ethics can be discovered by drawing upon Freya Mathews' contemplation of the differentiation between modern axiological ethics and the cosmic law deeply rooted in the indigenous communities of Australia (Mathews 2011). Axiological ethics, on one hand, necessitates more than just respect, a term often devoid of substance; it also calls for compassion and acknowledgment of the individuality of others. Conversely, cosmic, natural, Heraclitean ethics teaches us that we are all fundamentally consumable and a source of nourishment for the lives of others.

As Mathews (2011) posits, aspiring to uphold axiological ethics, even concerning non-human entities, does not imply a denial of the morality intrinsic to the cosmic law or the circle of life. Instead, it justifies and imparts meaning to the interconnectedness of non-human entities with one another and with us, transcending human-centric ethics. This distinction need not inevitably lead us toward dualism; rather, it endows us with a sense of agency and responsibility toward the other, restraining the inclination to instrumentalize the non-human indiscriminately and too readily.

In this perspective, in which it is possible to recognize the value of ecosystems and the community of living beings – with its beyond-human logics – without denying that non-human animals are capable of experiencing pain and pleasure as individual subjects, the choice not to consume animal bodies is the necessary consequence of a thought not based on human supremacism.

### 3. HARAWAY MAKING COMPASSIONATE KIN

Donna Haraway, though not strictly confined within the boundaries of ecofeminism and posthumanist feminism, undeniably stands as one of the most influential figures in contemporary feminist discourse. Through her extensive body of work, she has made an enduring impact on the intersection of feminism and critical animal studies, shaping the ongoing discourse for decades to come. Consequently, her perspectives on animal exploitation, spanning from the breeding of purebred dogs to meat consumption, demand critical examination.

As aptly pointed out by Zipporah Weisberg (2009), Haraway's post- or anti-humanist philosophy has opened up a realm of possibilities for reevaluating the relationship between humans and the multispecies community from an ethical and political standpoint. Nevertheless, certain aspects of her promising and expansive ideas have been challenged by the pitfalls of uncritical instrumentalism, lurking amidst the conceptual complexity of Donna Haraway's tentacular thoughts (2007, 2008).

Building upon Weisberg's insights, one can discern how Donna Haraway's concepts, as expounded in *Primate Visions* (1989), which delve into the intricate interplay of sadism, misogyny, anthropocentrism, and humanistic modernity, held the potential to unveil avenues of empathy towards animal alterities and non-human alterities more broadly. How-

ever, in subsequent years, Haraway did not fully explore this potential for nurturing compassionate kinship. Instead, her introduction of the concept of “companion species” introduced disquieting ethical ambiguities, as astutely highlighted by Weisberg:

Haraway’s disturbing writings on the animal question represent a serious threat both to the development of a truly critical Animal Studies and, more generally, to the cause of animal liberation. It is therefore important that we gain a better understanding of where her work goes wrong, and why. (Weisberg 2009, 23)

As Haraway (2016, 101) adeptly imparts, the manner in which stories are told carries significant weight. In her case, her storytelling prowess wields transformative power, capable of either reinforcing violent humanism towards the non-human, which she has masterfully decried in other contexts. The primary concern within Haraway’s philosophical framework lies in her overly conciliatory stance towards the instrumentalization of others. As aptly observed by Manuela Rossini, the concept of companion species can all too easily devolve into “companion speciesism” (Rossini 2006, 10). This instrumentalist perspective steers the philosopher away from denouncing and, in some instances, towards endorsing violent practices inflicted upon other animals. These practices encompass cruel experiments conducted out of sheer curiosity, condemnable dog training methods, genetic engineering abuses, and the consumption of animal products for sustenance, even within the Western world (Weisberg 2009).

This investigation will centralize Haraway’s rationale for endorsing the consumption of animal flesh for sustenance. This focus emerges from her own assertion that “the smallest unit of being and analysis” is the relationship itself (Haraway 2008, 26). Given that the majority of relationships with our companion species are underpinned by a violent asymmetry, for which the author seems to evade full responsibility, it becomes imperative to scrutinize her stance. Haraway ostensibly distances herself from instrumentalism, if only at a rhetorical level, only to reintegrate it into the human-animal equation after it has been cleansed of its negative connotations: “Work, use, and instrumentality are intrinsic to bodily webbed mortal earthly being and becoming” (*ibid.*, 71). However, this maneuver appears inelegant. Although she concedes that relationships between humans and other animals often exhibit asymmetry, even near-unilateralism, this acknowledgment falls short of propelling her towards a profound interrogation of what she takes for granted: an ontological bridge between

sexism, colonialism, and racism on one hand, and the manipulative and violent exploitation of non-human animals on the other.

In the Capitalo-Anthropocene era, when different species meet, it's not a harmonious (be)coming-together but rather a process of asserting mastery over nature. The ethical and political underpinnings of this domination cannot be concealed under the veil of neutrality or positivity (Crary and Gruen 2022). Not all forms of coexistence are innocent, a point that Haraway acknowledges. However, the majority of interactions between *Homo sapiens* and other vertebrates involve the former consuming the latter. Haraway attributes agency to non-human animals, a perspective often absent in the global system of exploitation, which is built upon the unspeakable suffering of these animals. When addressing the issue of livestock, the philosopher speaks of animals that essentially reject life in the context of excessive manipulation and human hubris (Haraway 2008, 73). Yet, in the face of the horror of intensive livestock farming, Haraway refrains from explicit condemnation, merely recognizing that these contexts make it challenging to contemplate animal freedom within instrumental relationships. To invoke one of the powerful refrains from *Staying with the Trouble*, she urges us to think, and indeed, we must think (2016, 30). However, when it comes to the animals we “innocently” use every day, we collectively struggle to think, much like “Eichmann the Thoughtless” (*ibid.*, 47)<sup>2</sup>.

As Haraway herself acknowledges (*ibid.*, 27), we are all heirs of Adolf Eichmann, and we all have the potential to avoid thinking, especially when it demands new ethical stances, altered habits, changed customs, and increased responsibilities. In the Capitalo-Anthropocene, blissful ignorance is a luxury we cannot afford, and Haraway imparts this crucial lesson. However, the suspicion that her posthumanist posthumanism, as described by Cary Wolf (2009), is also blind to the incomprehensible animal suffering in human societies is more than justified. While the philosopher recognizes, on one hand, the potential of vegetarianism/veganism as a practice of feminist resistance, she then dismisses it by appealing to an elegant cosmic justification. The theoretical value of this justification and its formal validity have already been shown to be shaky in the case of Plumwood:

---

<sup>2</sup> In the 2017 interview “Staying with the Manifesto”, Haraway openly acknowledges underestimating the harsh conditions of animals in farms and lacking sufficient reflection on the issue. Yet, even on this occasion, she fails to view veganism as a proactive choice, characterizing it merely as a “no” (Franklin 2017).

I do not disagree that vegetarianism, veganism, and opposition to sentient animal experimentation can be powerful feminist positions; I do disagree that they are Feminist Doxa. Further, I think feminism outside the logic of sacrifice has to figure out how to honor the entangled labor of humans and animals together in science and in many other domains, including animal husbandry right up to the table. (Haraway 2008, 80)

This passage highlights how Haraway's thinking, while critiquing ethical veganism as overly absolutist, falls short in proposing concrete alternatives. This ambiguity leaves readers grappling with both theoretical and practical dilemmas.

In conclusion, we must question the value of dissolving dichotomies between human and non-human, culture and nature, user and used, if it ultimately leads to condemning human exploitation while justifying that of animals through storytelling. The "Feminist Doxa" should compel us to confront all forms of oppression, so why should we make exceptions for animal oppression within the human world?

#### 4. FOR A MATERIALIST AND POLITICAL VEGAN FEMINISM

How can we break free from the deadlock of ontological veganism, which tends to universalize ethics, oversimplifying complex issues into individual choices, and without resorting to romanticizing violence to justify the consumption of non-human animal bodies? I believe that feminism, particularly ecofeminism, has illuminated the dimensions of the problem and shown us pathways to a more compassionate future, all without necessitating utopian veganism.

In essence, strands of feminist philosophy and activism have long taught us, echoing Haraway (2016), to "stay with the troubles" of coexisting with countless non-humans, participating in the dance of carbon-based (and perhaps even silicon-based) life without succumbing to nihilism.

In this paragraph, I humbly draw from the rich tradition of feminism, recognizing its transformative power. I call for its continued evolution in 21st-century politics and activism. Without relying solely on the narratives of Plumwood and Haraway, we urgently need to envision a veganism free from cultural relativism. It should serve as both anti-capitalist resistance against the Anthropo-Capitalocene and a liberation theory for the billions of non-human animals who remain overlooked in our current extractive dynamics.

So, where should we begin? Firstly, we must acknowledge that post-speciesism, as portrayed in numerous post-humanist narratives, is entangled in violence just like traditional speciesism. Our society isn't authentically post-speciesist or post-racist; it continues to perpetuate both forms of discrimination and abuse, alongside various oppressions camouflaged under the "post" prefix, as astutely highlighted by Corey Wrenn:

Food sovereignty and its reliance on the bodies of Nonhuman Animals facilitates a post-speciesist ideology, or what I would describe as a system-wide, false assumption that humanity's injustice to other animals is waning or has otherwise ceased altogether [...]. Post-speciesism, most critically, works to ideologically obscure the continued and robust existence of speciesism. The illusion of realized social change and social justice attached to the concept of post-speciesism becomes a powerful means of securing and normalizing oppression. Minor adjustments to the material conditions of other animals used by humans (such as stunning before slaughter or allowing animals outdoor access) supports this process. (Wrenn 2021, 163-164)

A possible response to the weak relativism of post-speciesism can be found in a philosophy rooted in the bodily, animal, and material dimensions advocated by neo-materialist feminism. This is a philosophy where non-human nature "punches back", demonstrating its non-passivity and agency even in a world structurally dominated by a single species, with all its internal contrasts.

In the perspective outlined here, this feminist materialism takes up the insights of Plumwood and Haraway but further explicates them in an attempt to go beyond the division of nature and culture, without allowing the latter to docilely absorb the former. The neo-materialist framework allows for resistance both to the speciesism which modernity, starting with Descartes and Bacon, has been a harbinger of, and to the post-speciesism which inhabits, as an unsettling guest, much of post-modern, post-structuralist, and even post-humanist thought. If we follow the interpretation of Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, this feminist philosophical current can give body and momentum to the vegan and anti-speciesist demands pioneered by ecofeminism, as in at least three ways.

First and foremost, by acknowledging that materiality matters and cannot be concealed behind rhetorical forms or wordplay. Bodies, for instance, bear witness to violence and discrimination, such as racism, sexism, classism, ableism, speciesism, and so on, and in this situated materiality, we find a call for an ethical response that is equally directed towards material action in the world. As Alaimo and Hekman write:

An emerging group of feminist theorists of the body are arguing, however, that we need a way to talk about the materiality of the body as itself an active, sometimes recalcitrant, force. Women have bodies; these bodies have pain as well as pleasure. They also have diseases that are subject to medical interventions that may or may not cure those bodies. We need a way to talk about these bodies and the materiality they inhabit. Focusing exclusively on representations, ideology, and discourse excludes lived experience, corporeal practice, and biological substance from consideration. It makes it nearly impossible for feminism to engage with medicine or science in innovative, productive, or affirmative ways – the only path available is the well-worn path of critique. (Alaimo and Hekman 2008, 3-4)

Bodies matter beyond the confinements of modernist positivism; they serve as the stage for the most pivotal political struggles of our era. Furthermore, bodies undergo experiences of pleasure and pain that transcend the utilitarian perspectives of Bentham and Singer. These experiences should serve as sufficient catalysts for compassionate actions aimed at countering the objectification and violence rooted in narratives, whether ancient or contemporary. When faced with the tangible reality of living and experiencing a body, such narratives reveal their transient nature.

In this context, materialist feminism bears the significant responsibility of rejecting discourse-centric ethics that attempt to resolve all issues primarily on a hermeneutical plane, where multiple discourses converge to enhance mutual understanding and mediation. Such an approach, practiced predominantly by the global West while masking its neocolonialist nature, is inherently violent. This is because dialogues don't occur in a political vacuum or within the neutrality of the ethereal realm; instead, they unfold in an embodied world where dynamics of oppression permeate conversations at their very core.

To extend this line of thought to the realm of animal exploitation, it becomes apparent that Cartesian justifications come into play whenever someone is asked to act as a ventriloquist for non-human entities. Non-human beings don't communicate in human languages; they express themselves through the semiotic realm of animality, conveyed via their bodies and their embodied needs. Therefore, it's imperative not only to heed Haraway's wisdom regarding how stories convey narratives but also to integrate an exploration of how other bodies communicate with our own.

Secondly, feminist materialism allows us to shift the conversation on ethics from principles and intentions to consequences:

Ethics must be centered not only on those discourses but on the material consequences as well. Material feminism suggests an approach to ethics that displaces the impasse of cultural relativism. Cultural relativism entails that all ethical positions are equal, that we cannot make any cross cultural judgment. (*Ibid.*, 7)

This realization doesn't advocate for a simplistic form of ethical imperialism. Instead, it enables us to see beyond the curtain of cultural disparities. It helps us recognize that there are no culturally or ontologically sealed identities; rather, there are perspectival differences influenced by various factors. However, all these perspectives must contend with the fundamental basis of human existence: its animal materiality.

By tracing the paths of this materiality, the seemingly enclosed boxes of cultural constructs become clearer as different systems of oppression. In other words, every culture often, following a Marxist lens, reflects the narrative power of those in authority. From this standpoint, materialist feminism can address the silencing of women and minorities even on a transcultural level. It can also shed light on those who have been ontologically excluded as passive objects of the creative power wielded by the *Homo sapiens* species – the non-human entities. Once again, delving into the materiality of bodies permits us to engage in a dialogue with active witnesses of injustice who would otherwise be excluded from intercultural discourse. Non-human bodies communicate with us beyond the narratives we project onto them.

To give a concrete example, I briefly return to Haraway and how she uses Derrida's concept of "eating well", aka killing well, to indicate how, in her multispecies post-speciesist horizon, what matters is a sort of emotional and cognitive openness towards "who" comes to nourish one's own body. In this regard, Haraway feels that the practice of veganism as an ethical approach is rejected because:

Histories are complex and dynamic in the human-nonhuman animal relations called hunting and do not lend themselves to typological reduction, except for purposes of hostile polemic, dogmatic purity, and hackneyed origin stories, usually of the Man-the-Hunter genre [...]. To repeat myself, outside Eden, eating means also killing, directly or indirectly, and killing well is an obligation akin to eating well. This applies to a vegan as much as to a human carnivore. The devil is, as usual, in the details. (Haraway 2008, 296)

It is precisely this relativism of Haraway that remains, to stay on topic, challenging to digest within her commendable and decades-long reflec-



tion on multispecies feminism. This criticism could be extended, though with due distinctions, to the concept of “sacred eating” discussed by Plumwood (2000, 300-301).

Unfortunately, concepts such as respect, sacredness, and informed action become tools that, when associated with the idea of violence against the sentient bodies of others, reflect the human onto the human like a mirror. They do so without adapting to the needs, desires, expectations, and embodied existence of the bodies upon which human violence operates. In other words, when we discuss respect in ethics, it implies that we have already forsaken any path towards a structural change in political reality and its patterns of use and abuse. Consequently, we “respectfully” kill, consume, and objectify the bodies of others. Respect remains when the *ethos* shifts from a matter involving the self and the other to becoming a self-referential action.

Recognizing that the animals we use and consume are sentient beings capable of suffering and experiencing pleasure should be sufficient, beyond any philosophical theory, to guide us as individuals and as a society towards the non-instrumental and non-violent treatment of these animals. However, the question remains whether a political, metacultural, feminist, and neo-materialist veganism can encounter objections worthy of consideration beyond exceptional cases and material impossibilities. In this perspective, two things are essential. Firstly, there needs to be a greater political awareness of veganism as a tool of resistance against bio-capitalism (Maurizi 2021). Secondly, there should be a more explicit assertion of its intersectional agenda (Bruek 2017; Crary and Gruen 2022). Transforming veganism from a simple matter of personal choice that may, perhaps, impact the market through supply and demand dynamics into a more explicitly political movement is not only possible but necessary.

Certainly, having a practice that reminds us daily of our ethical and political stance through the most elemental of actions, feeding, can be a form of self-empowerment in a context that often leads to resignation and despair (Caffo 2018). However, animal liberation is not only compatible with environmental and multispecies justice but also aligns with a long Marxist tradition of critiquing the economic system (Maurizi 2021; Vettese and Pendergrass 2022). This is crucial if we want veganism to transcend being a fashionable trend for conscience cleansing among a fringe of the global population that can afford a healthy and diverse plant-based diet, while many in the world suffer from hunger or lack the real possibility to choose ethically due to their circumstances.

In essence, contemporary society is riddled with countless dichotomies, chains, and systems of oppression (Lugones 2010). However, what matters is not necessarily agreeing on the common origin of these injustices but rather being aware that true liberation is either for all or for none. Therefore, veganism cannot remain merely a matter of personal choice to boast about, especially among the white and privileged populations of the most affluent nations (The Vegan Society n.d.). The intention is to demand the end of subsidies directed toward the production and reproduction of slaughter animals in favor of an economy that makes ethical choices affordable for everyone.

## 5. VEGAN FEMINISM AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Can this political objective maintain a transcultural scope without inadvertently becoming a new frontier of colonialism? To address this question effectively, it's crucial to emphasize that not only the objective but also the process, its timeline, and the locations where it unfolds are of paramount importance. Halting the slaughter of billions of animals annually for purposes entirely unnecessary for human survival is an urgent matter, just like the ecological crisis exacerbated by this speciesist economy (Monbiot 2022). Protecting this civilization from self-consumption-induced extinction is merely the beginning. We must delve into what needs to change for it to be worth preserving this violent society from vanishing into the annals of history.

Certainly, the proactive intention should be to secure a future that isn't merely a therapeutic obsession of the global extractive capitalist system. Consequently, the responsible stakeholders must encompass all nations possessing the material and economic capabilities to initiate a transition toward a non-speciesist economy. Simultaneously, this transition should aim to safeguard, if not enhance, the conditions of human workers and the communities affected by this transformation.

Furthermore, we must ponder whether local traditions and cultures, encompassing not just indigenous ones in the strict sense, should take precedence over the lives of non-human beings (Kopnina *et al.* 2018). Accepting that traditional values might supersede ethical calls for change, even when grounded in the empiricism of materially intersubjective facts, would imply that human rights and many other progressive demands could be opposed in the name of culture. While this is a precarious and contentious terrain, following the materialist feminism of Alaimo and

other philosophers, I propose turning to the tribunal of bodies before that of abstract ideas.

Thirdly, instead of confining our focus solely to cultural conflicts, once veganism has taken root in Western contexts, it's worth exploring how this ethical imperative can coexist with other value systems, all while respecting their unique identities and perspectives. It's vital to acknowledge that veganism is not a Western invention or a Western-exclusive concept; it holds cross-cultural relevance. Each culture can contemplate the incorporation of veganism in a manner that aligns with its own traditions and beliefs. Just as many indigenous peoples have embraced various modern products while striving to maintain fidelity to their core values, there may be opportunities for positive cross-pollination in the realm of ethics.

In essence, we should be asking ourselves: why the gun and not lab-grown meat? This thought-provoking question has also been raised by Margaret Robinson, an academic and member of the Mi'kmaq people:

The emergence of in vitro meat leads me to ask how the relationship of the Mi'kmaq people with the moose would change if we were to consume cultured meat instead of once-living animals. This same question can be asked in relation to many animals traditionally used for food, but I will focus on the moose, whose significance in Mi'kmaq culture places it in a special role. (Robinson 2016, 263)

The Mi'kmaq people have always regarded non-human animals as kin, forming a profound connection that extends far beyond mere coexistence. In their cosmology and traditions, animals are considered siblings, and their legends recount how these creatures would willingly offer themselves to support humans, provided that the principle of *Netukulink*, which emphasizes sustenance without excess in hunting, was upheld. Among the Mi'kmaq, the act of hunting moose, revered as the leader of animals, held a sacred significance and involved intricate rituals designed to guide the spirit of the animal upward, while also serving as a means to foster community bonds. However, these hunting practices and relationships with non-human companions are presently being challenged by colonial values.

The modern diet is gradually supplanting a centuries-old tradition of shared existence with animal siblings, jeopardizing the profound link the Mi'kmaq have with the natural world. Margaret Robinson, a Mi'kmaq scholar, acknowledges the potential tension between her ancestral traditions and the utilization of in vitro meat or other substitutes for animal

bodies. Nonetheless, she envisions an opportunity to bridge this gap by establishing a connection between these technologies and her people's values of kinship with non-human beings. Robinson emphasizes the significance of recognizing the shared history of blood and brotherhood that the Mi'kmaq share with animals and stresses the importance of continuing to uphold and honor this relationship. In Robinson's words:

In a future where in vitro meat technology requires only cells from a living animal then the moose enters a situation akin to Marten – available to eat, yet also alive as a friend and brother. The choice to eat in vitro meat could embody our own regret at animal death, and at our failure to live out the value of *Netukulimk* (avoiding not having enough). Thinking back to the story in which the moose makes a bargain with the starving Mi'kmaq family, we might reimagine a situation in which we renegotiate that agreement to one in which the moose provide stem cells rather than laying down their lives. The consumption of in vitro meat could be framed an expression of *Netukulimk*, and also as an expression of non-interference, since it reduces our impact on animal life. (*Ibid.*, 275)

In Margaret Robinson's perspective, the Mi'kmaq people can embrace in vitro meat and similar alternatives to honor their traditions while adapting to the changing world, thereby creating a sustainable and ethical future for all living beings. This case study offers an opportunity to interpret Plumwood and Haraway's call to view "eating well" as a bioculturally situated knowledge through an anti-speciesist lens and a neo-materialist ethical framework.

Importantly, it also prompts us to consider the possibility of conceiving an ethical-political, feminist veganism that is non-colonialist and not based on white privilege. In recent decades, there has been a surge in veganism primarily embraced by white, settler, and bourgeois populations in the Western world. While this shift in dietary choices is significant, it has not effectively brought about animal liberation. Instead, it has led to the emergence of a parallel market for vegan products alongside the global mainstream market for animal products.

Moreover, this movement intersects with environmentalism, critiquing meat and animal byproducts as ecologically unsustainable. However, it is unrealistic to expect that this trend alone will achieve animal liberation. This movement also carries biases and structural violence, as pointed out by various BIPOC activists and scholars (Adewale and Harper 2021). Therefore, a feminist, materialist, and intersectional political veganism, rooted in ecofeminism, queer theory, multiracial

perspectives, non-colonialism, and interdependence, can champion the cause for complete emancipation from the use and exploitation of other bodies, transcending the categories of human and non-human animals in the struggle against consumption and commodification.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Amidst what Deborah Bird Rose (2012) aptly described as “the great unmaking” of life diversity, an increasing body of research highlights the social and ecological advantages of an alternative food system that no longer relies on animal proteins (Monbiot 2022). This transformation is facilitated by cutting-edge technologies and the resurgence of indigenous knowledge (Vettese 2022). It is becoming both necessary and feasible to liberate the billions of non-human animals oppressed and objectified by the anthropocentric global system.

In the 21st century, feminism should adopt an ecofeminist stance that recognizes the imperative to actively resist all forms of oppression, including animal exploitation within the human world (Kemmerer 2011). This struggle must embrace an intersectional and non-identitarian veganism, conceived as a political aspiration (Gruen 2015). As suggested by Alaimo (1994) and other activists, ecofeminism should encompass a political dimension rather than being confined to the *oikos* by the phallocapitalistic logic that still largely dominates thought and action.

To make veganism as politically potent as intersectional feminism, governments must be urged to cease subsidizing industries that profit from animal bodies. Policies need to be implemented to ensure that every person, especially the most marginalized, can access an affordable, sustainable, and nutritious plant-based diet that doesn't result from the exploitation of humans and non-humans, who are too often concealed from view (Brueck 2017, 2019; Johnson 2018; Jones 2020; Adewale and Harper 2021). In this regard, the insights of Plumwood and Haraway remain significant in grounding our politics and ethics in embodied experience (Giraud 2013), while acknowledging the importance of dismantling the system of animal exploitation and contesting it on a more than private level for a transcorporeal political veganism.

## REFERENCES

- Adewale, Omowale, and Breeze Harper. 2021. *Brotha Vegan: Black Men Speak on Food, Identity, Health, and Society*. New York: Lantern Publishing & Media.
- Alaimo, Stacy. 1994. "Cyborg and Ecofeminist Interventions: Challenges for an Environmental Feminism". *Feminist Studies* 20 (1): 133-152.
- Alaimo, Stacy, and Susan Hekman. 2008. *Material Feminisms*. Bloomington (IN): Indiana University Press.
- Animal Clock. N.d. "2023 U.S. Animal Kill Clock".  
<https://animalclock.org/>
- Brueck, Feliz Julia, ed. 2017. *Veganism in an Oppressive World: A Vegans-of-Color Community Project*. Sanctuary Publishers.
- Brueck, Feliz Julia, ed. 2019. *Veganism of Color: Decentering Whiteness in Human and Nonhuman Liberation*. Sanctuary Publishers.
- Caffo, Leonardo. 2018. *Vegan*. Torino: Einaudi.
- Crary, Alice, and Lori Gruen. 2022. *Animal Crisis: A New Critical Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Donaldson, Sue, and Will Kymlicka. 2011. *Zoopolis: A Political Theory of Animal Rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Franklin, Sarah. 2017. "Staying with the Manifesto: An Interview with Donna Haraway". *Theory, Culture & Society* 34 (4): 49-63.
- Giraud, Eva. 2013. "'Beasts of Burden': Productive Tensions between Haraway and Radical Animal Rights Activism". *Culture, Theory and Critique* 54 (1): 102-120.
- Gruen, Lori, and Robert C. Jones. 2015. "Veganism as an Aspiration". In *The Moral Complexities of Eating Meat*, edited by Ben Bramble and Bob Fisher, 153-171. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Haraway, Donna. 2007. *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Haraway, Donna. 2008. *When Species Meet*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Haraway, Donna. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene (Experimental Futures)*. Durham (NC): Duke University Press.
- Hatley, James. 2004. "The Uncanny Goodness of Being Edible to Bears". In *Rethinking Nature: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, edited by Bruce V. Foltz and Robert Frodean, 13-31. Indianapolis (IN): Indiana University Press.
- Horta, Oscar, et al. 2014. *Una morale per tutti gli animali. Al di là dell'ecologia*. Milano: Mimesis.

- Johnson, April. 2018. "This Indigenous Scholar Says Veganism Is More than a Lifestyle for White People". *Vice*, March 27.  
<https://www.vice.com/en/article/7xd8ex/this-indigenous-scholar-says-veganism-is-more-than-a-lifestyle-for-white-people>
- Jones, Patrice, and Breeze Harper. 2020. *Sistah Vegan: Black Women Speak on Food, Identity, Health, and Society*. New York: Lantern Publishing & Media.
- Kemmerer, Lisa, et al. 2011. *Sister Species: Women, Animals and Social Justice*. Urbana (IL): University of Illinois Press.
- Kopnina, Helen, Haydin Whashington, Bron Raymond Taylor, and John J. Piccolo. 2018. "Anthropocentrism: More than Just a Misunderstood Problem". *Journal of Agricultural & Environmental Ethics* 31 (1): 109-127.
- Linkola, Pentti. 2011. *Can Life Prevail? A Revolutionary Approach to the Environmental Crisis*. London: Arktos.
- Lugones, María. 2010. "Toward a Decolonial Feminism". *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 25 (4): 742-759.
- Mathews, Freya. 2011. "The Anguish of Wildlife Ethics". *New Formations* 76: 114-131.
- Maurizi, Marco. 2021 *Beyond Nature: Animal Liberation, Marxism, and Critical Theory*. Leiden: Brill.
- Monbiot, George. 2022. *Regenesi*. London: Penguin.
- Morton, Timothy. 2019. *Humankind: Solidarity with Non-Human People*. London: Verso.
- Plumwood, Val. 1993. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature (Opening Out: Feminism for Today)*. London: Routledge.
- Plumwood, Val. 2000. "Integrating Ethical Frameworks for Animals, Humans, and Nature: A Critical Feminist Eco-Socialist Analysis". *Ethics and the Environment* 5 (2): 285-322.
- Plumwood, Val, and Lorraine Shannon. 2013. *The Eye of the Crocodile*. Canberra (Australia): ANU E Press.
- Rose, Deborah Bird. 2012. "Multispecies Knots of Ethical Time". *Environmental Philosophy* 9 (1): 127-140.
- Rossini, Manuela. 2006. "To the Dogs: Companion Speciesism and the New Feminist Materialism". *Kritikos. An International and Interdisciplinary Journal of Postmodern Cultural Sound, Text and Image*: 3: 1-25.  
<http://repository.uibn.ru.nl/bitstream/handle/2066/56881/56881.pdf>
- Stange, Mary Zeiss. 1997. *Woman the Hunter*. Boston (MA): Beacon Press.
- The Vegan Society. N.d. "Why Vegan Activism Needs to Be Intersectional and Trauma-Informed".  
<https://www.vegansociety.com/get-involved/research/research-news/why-vegan-activism-needs-be-intersectional-and-trauma-informed>

- Vettese, Troy, and Drew Pendergrass. 2022. *Half-Earth Socialism: A Plan to Save the Future from Extinction, Climate Change and Pandemics*. Amsterdam: Adfo Books.
- Weisberg, Zipporah. 2009. "The Broken Promises of Monsters: Haraway, Animals and the Humanist Legacy". *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* 7: 21-61.
- Wolfe, Cary. 2010. *What Is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis (MN): University of Minnesota Press.

Copyright (©) 2023 Andrea Natan Feltrin

Editorial format and graphical layout: copyright (©) LED Edizioni Universitarie



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons

Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives – 4.0 International License

*How to cite this paper:* Feltrin, Andrea Natan. 2023. "Advocating for a Political Vegan Feminism: A Rebuttal to Val Plumwood and Donna Haraway's Criticisms of Ethical Veganism". *Relations. Beyond Anthropocentrism* 11 (2): 41-62. doi: <https://doi.org/10.7358/rela-2023-02-fela>