

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Review of
*Sister Species:
Women, Animals and Social Justice*

ed. L. Kemmerer

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MARINE LERCIER

What do we have in common with animals, and what do these women have in common? We are *Sister Species*, if not sisters at all. Lisa Kemmerer invites us to realize that we are more alike than different and to become aware of what our animal brothers and especially *sisters* experience: the suffering they endure because of our absurd inconsistencies and oppositions - even within the animal rights movement, often unbeknownst to us. The goal: more effective discourse and action, educating us to the *other* in the face of a norm imposed by a power, a discourse of normalization in a white, patriarchal society. Ten years after its publication, this book is still as topical as ever. The issues raised have not been resolved and the fundamental problems outlined regarding the interconnection of oppressions are still very much present. It contains powerful narratives of life and *humanity* - in the broad and compassionate sense of the word. *Sister Species*, edited by Lisa Kemmerer, focuses on *women, animals, and social justice*.

The book begins with a foreword by Carol J. Adams, known for her major works such as *The Pornography of Meat* and *The Sexual Politics of Meat*. She reminds us that the struggle for social justice cannot be reduced to a division between *humans* on the one hand and *nonhumans* on the other. She theorized the idea of animals as *absent referents* and identifies *human exceptionalism* as a major problem of the 21st century on which, despite their diversity, the women's accounts presented in this anthology will agree. Lisa Kemmerer then introduces this anthology in line with the work of Carol J. Adams and many other authors in the vein of *ecofeminism* and *feminist ethic of care*, thanks to whom she was able to reach this understanding after an experience marked by the domination of Western, patriarchal, male and white philosophy. Before moving on to the heart of the book, she offers a worthwhile overview of the evolu-

MARINE LERCIER

tion of intersectional analysis of social justice, the history of feminism, patriarchy, and ecofeminism. Most importantly, she reminds us that “historically, women, animals, and children have legally been defined as the property of males” (p.16) and that “speciesism is systematic, institutionalized oppression” on account of which animals are slaughtered “simply because of their species” and in which “institutional power and authority are used to support and perpetuate the oppression of nonhuman individuals” (p.17). The objectification of the other plays a central role in the prevailing web of oppressions and we need to be aware of these interconnections. This is certainly a reflection that needs to be further explored in critical animal studies.

The book is divided into 14 essays, corresponding to as many personal stories. Patrice Jones, in *Fighting Cocks: Ecofeminisms versus Sexualized Violence* tells us about her experience in a sanctuary rehabilitating cocks rescued from cock-fighting, which is still rampant in the United States and many other parts of the world. Despite the action of the authorities against this plague, the real victims - the roosters - are often left behind and euthanized when confiscated (p. 45-46). She relates how she became vegan and encourages us to remember who we were before we became vegan, too, in order to remain empathetic to those who have not yet taken this path, and to our *former selves*, so that we can succeed in bringing about change as “efforts to force people to confront their complicity in cruelty rarely lead to behavior changes” (p.53). She wonders “what took (her) so long to include animals in (her) activism?” (pp. 46-47), “a question worth answering”, noting our “tendency to distance our *new selves* from our *previous selves*” (p. 47, emphasis added). The question of asserting her sexuality and the rejection of meat seem intimately linked as they are “full-bodied decisions” (p.47). She also tells us about

MARINE LERCIER

the experience of these roosters in order to find peace again and to relearn to be *themselves* after the trauma (pp. 54-55). Then, in her essay *From Rural Roots to Angels' Wings*, Twyla François recounts what led her to change her eating habits and testifies to animal suffering at the farm, during transport and at the time of slaughter. We are reminded of the brutality and cruelty of the treatment of farmed animals deprived of everything and driven mad, the majority of which are, *like her and like me*, females. She urges us to refuse the exploitation of the reproductive potential of females, which is at the root of this misery (p. 63). Ingrid E. Newkirk rightly argues in her essay *Are you waving at me?* that compartmentalization contributes to discrimination (p.65). She undoubtedly shares Twyla François' analysis regarding the objectification and exploitation of females' bodies, both human and nonhuman. For her, we must reject classifications as much as possible. She also reflects on the culture that led her to find it "normal" to order the death of an animal in order to consume it, and then on the strange feeling that overwhelms us when we become aware of it, when in fact we would never hurt a fly (p.68). She wonders what is the worst case of cruelty she has ever seen, only to realize that they accumulate without ever seeing the end of it (p.69). However, in her opinion, women have the power to decide what is consumed in their homes (p.70), they are mothers who can bring about change if only they would understand what these *other mothers* feel.

The essay by A. Breeze Harper is perhaps my favorite, as it is a powerful testimony to the insidious and connected nature of *Speciesism, Racism, and Whiteness as the Norm*. She explains how she and her brother have been victims of racism since school, and that while some people are deliberately racist, many do not even realize it (p.72). There she analyzes

MARINE LERCIER

how racism is learned and perpetuated, and how privileges are maintained parallel to the ideological constructs that justify violence against, and the absence of compassion for, animals. She points out the inconsistencies in the way cruelty to animals is perceived, depending on whether it is validated by the white, speciesist and sexist norm, or is perpetrated by racialized communities. It is therefore “crucial that all of us involved with animal rights and critical animal studies notice these inconsistencies and ask these questions, that we all critique how racism, racialization, ethnocentrism, and whiteness-as-norm affect our consciousness and relationships with nonhuman animals (as well as with human animals)” (p.75). We must educate ourselves, because it is all connected. These are difficult but necessary questions. In *Fighting “Other”*, Miyun Park also deals with “one of the greatest sins of our species” (p.79), the desire to alienate and subjugate the *other* who would be different from *us*. Differences that should not weigh on the way we treat others - especially in order to inflict suffering on them - whether we are human or nonhuman, “hoofed” or “feathered”. The narrative of her experience of being relegated to the status of other is powerful, especially when this questioning arose in her early childhood. She confesses that either way, she was “other” (p.80). Very early on, too, she was aware of flagrant injustices and the good fortune she had had, determined to fight them (p.81). This has taken her from fighting for civil rights to realizing the pain inflicted on other animals to satisfy our appetites. Once this awareness grew, it was no longer possible to continue to treat animals as *others*, without being guilty of the same sin as those who were prejudiced against her (p.82). She wonders where the connection is failing to be made so that the situation of the animals is as it is today. Her diagnosis is that most of the time people do not know, just as there was a time when she did not know either (p.84). She also shares the story

MARINE LERCIER

of Jane, the hen she rescued in a miserable condition from a battery-cage egg factory farm - where she could never have been *herself*, a *hen* (pp.84-85).

Sangamithra Iyer's *Small Small Redemption* is a great great essay. Her experience at the Sanaga-Yong Chimpanzee Rescue Centre in the Mbarague forest of Cameroon alongside Emma, Gwen and Nieta, three chimpanzees orphaned by the illegal bushmeat trade, is incredibly enlightening. The spread of the HIV/AIDS virus is also attributable to this traffic, leading to the global pandemic that we know, and leaves *human children orphans, too* (p.93). She also recounts the resolution of her relationship with dairy products years before arriving at the Centre, once she was awakened to the fact that not only was *milk* taken from the cow, she was harmed by taking *her child* away from her (p.91). She also reflects on the fact that being white is perhaps not just a skin colour, but a position of privilege (p.94), particularly in the face of local disparities. Even more so when, a few kilometres from the centre, a pipeline construction company was completely isolated from the torments of local poverty, and further exacerbated the plight of the wildlife (pp. 95-96). Hope Ferdowsian authored *Compassion without Borders* in which she tells us about another encounter with a chimpanzee, Negra, who was exhibited and experimented upon before living in a sanctuary. From her experience of treating humans with post-traumatic stress disorder, she became aware that humans were not the only ones who could suffer from it. She describes this condition in many animals, and Negra is one of them (pp.98-99). She mentions that before being concerned about human rights violations, she was sensitive to the suffering of animals, of which we have an intuition: this is *empathy*, which we too often put aside (p.100). According to her, we need

MARINE LERCIER

to reclaim this empathy to re-examine our eating, clothing, science and other habits.

In *Theology and Animals*, Elizabeth Jane Farians looks back on how she was able to impose a “theology and animals” curriculum at the theology department of Xavier University in Cincinnati. She begins by examining the different religious traditions and how the majority of them have led to nothing but outrageous treatment of other animals. Yet nothing predestined this to be the case, as the majority claim compassion as a virtue, which should apply to all of *creation* (pp.102-103). For her, *dominion* does not mean *domination* (p.103), and the issue of nonhuman animals and morality must be dealt with in a religious context (p.104). This logically led her to push the doors of the theology department’s chair, as she recounts her many meetings until, finally, the idea of teaching a “Theology and Animals” course was accepted. Then, Linda Fisher deals with her Native American roots in *Freeing Feathered Spirits*. Like many other women in this book, she relates an encounter with an animal (in her case, a bird) that changed her perception and understanding about their own experiences. She also expresses her mixed feelings about the legacy of her traditions and the animal artifacts this entails. She nevertheless finds comfort in the conservationist and ecological teachings of her ancestors. The case of whale hunting, however, remains inconsistent in her eyes, as is the slaughter of any animal for the sake of tradition (p.112). She draws a legitimate parallel with traditions that harmed humans as well, and which have fortunately vanished. Let us hope that wisdom will eventually put an end to cruelty to animals in the name of tradition, too. She recalls the words of Chief Seattle, that still resonate and should continue to provide some guidance (p.115):

MARINE LERCIER

The beasts are our brothers, and we kill only to stay alive. If all the beasts were gone, men would die from great loneliness of spirit, for whatever happens to the beasts happens to man, for we are all of one breath. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the Earth, befalls the sons and daughters of Earth. Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.

Tara Sophia Bahna-James, in *The Art of Truth-Telling*, offers valuable insights into ways to raise people's awareness: theater is an excellent setting to gently reveal the incongruities of our treatment of animals (p.117), and to deal with our denial and fears that can lead to inaction or resistance to change. She tells us that "theater can present a nonviolent forum in which we might come to understand those with whom we disagree. It is a place where we suspend our judgment in order to witness and understand the experience of *others*." (p. 124, emphasis added) Hence, like other arts, theater can become "a very powerful tool" (p.124). She outlines the misery of the animal condition, largely due to humans, who need their stories to be told: "not only of how they are dying, but also of how they live" (p.125). She reflects a lot on compassion and the unity ("oneness", p.127) of beings and on the "unique position" of women to aid the process of nonhuman animal liberation and human healing, "inseparable" in her opinion (pp. 124-125). Karen Davis then takes us on a journey *From Hunting Grounds to Chicken Rights*. She remembers how learning about the horrors of concentration camps haunted her until her concerns expanded to include the immense suffering inflicted on animals by humans, "the largest class of innocent victims on earth" (p.128). Here we find a reflection about questions of identity, racial prejudice and civil rights, about feeding on sentient beings, and how women remain silent in the face of cruelty. It is clear to her that animals need legal protection because relying on human compas-

MARINE LERCIER

sion is simply not enough (p. 133). In particular, she refers to the examples of seal hunt and the cruelty of the turkey and chicken industries. She tells the story of Viva, a hen she took in (pp. 137-138), “a chicken, a member of Earth’s community, a dignified being with a claim to justice, compassion, and a life equal to anyone else’s”. There is a recurring sense of putting oneself in the place of the *other* - how would we feel in their situation? The suffering inflicted on all these others is intolerable. She asks: “How is it for a sheep to float sea-sickeningly across the Persian Gulf on the way to slaughter?” (p.139).

Arguing that “all living beings should be free of pain and torture” (p. 141), Christine L. Garcia wonders *Isn’t justice supposed to be blind?*, as “the plight of nonhuman animals, imposed by humans, is unjust and unnecessary” (p. 142). This is certainly the most interesting essay from a legal point of view, as its author instructs us on how she defends the interests of animals as an attorney (notably, “dangerous dogs” and animal advocates protesting against animal testing) which are desperately lacking representation in the face of the over-represented interests of humans (pp. 141-142), and how she drafts legislation and lobbies for its adoption. She notes that “there are not enough humans fighting those who routinely exploit nonhuman animals” (p. 141) and proposes a new vision in the form of a “spiral”, leaving no room for discrimination, against what she calls “the Hierarchy of Human Mis-Valuations” (pp. 148-149). She wonders what we are waiting for to change collectively, and asserts that it starts with our individual choices: she trusts that we are capable of it (pp. 150-151). In *An Appetite for Justice*, Lauren Ornelas wonders, like many of the other authors, how farmed animals feel. At a very young age, she decided that she “didn’t want to eat anyone” (p. 153). She narrates her journey as an activist engaged on many social justice issues, and her need to be proactive, as well as her investigations which have left their mark on her. She tells us about a time when “leaving those calves behind, (she) felt like a speciesist” (p. 155). We

MARINE LERCIER

are only able to share her chilling analysis concerning the animals left behind, in dreadful conditions, as “if they had been human beings, I would not have left until every last one was freed, and/or I would have released them myself” (p.155). Because “they were calves”, she did not. This directly challenges our morals. How can we let it happen? In addition, she provides an intersectional analysis, with the consequence that she no longer leaves behind abused human workers, either. Everything is connected: “oppression is oppression” (p.157), “from labor and immigration issues to water, nonhuman animals, and the environment”. The discussion of environmental racism and of the necessity for animal advocates to connect all forms of injustice is especially instructive. She reminds us that we each have the power, every day, to save lives (p. 160), as she did with Taylor, a “survivor” turkey. Finally, *A Magical Talisman* by Allison Lance concludes this anthology. There we learn about her formidable journey, from her disgust for the tortures inflicted by vivisection and hunting (and the sabotage in which she bravely took part!), to her involvement with *Sea Shepherd*, including the many times she was arrested. She discusses in detail the persecution of marine animals, mainly for their trade. She leaves us with this dilemma: to do what is right, or what is legal?

In her foreword, Carol J. Adams was right: throughout this book, as I read these stories, I wondered: “In relationship to the other animals, what is my own story of awareness and engagement?” “What does this awareness ask of me?” (p.xi) and I close it knowing that I am not alone. The answer I found, simple as it is, is that my efforts, beyond my research and advocacy work, need to be redoubled to make it clear that the fact that I am so much involved in animal rights does not mean that I am any less concerned or involved in human rights, quite the contrary. That when I address an issue related to the animal condition, I am nonetheless aware of its implications for the human condition, and that this must be seen and heard in the way I interact with my fellow

MARINE LERCIER

human beings. Together, we shall be all the stronger for we aspire to the same thing: *justice*, with that extra dimension that it should neither be limited to humans nor ignore them in order to be limited to non-humans, but rather, for the 21st century, be *interspecies*. To conclude, this is an inspiring and eye-opening book I recommend to those who wish to start an intersectional journey towards global interspecies justice. This is a good place to get started with questioning our prejudices and the *status quo* of the white patriarchal society that have led to a dominant culture of multi-faceted oppression. Reading this book, we unveil the layers of oppression one by one and end up with a comprehensive picture of the interconnectedness of human-animal abuse. We may not share every analysis proposed by every author, but we have no choice but to listen to what they report - to learn, and to educate ourselves. Even the cover of the book challenges and inspires us, putting us in front of the evidence of our sorority, positioning side by side the skin of a woman's thigh and the skin of a hen's thigh. From beginning to end, we come to terms with our inner roots as humans and as animals.