

Feminism, animal studies and the intersection between gender and human-animal relations



Patricia Piccinini 'The Young Family' (2002)

Abstract

Ecofeminist understandings of human relations with non-human animals collectively constitute a prolific and important body of work. Early writing of the 1970s and 1980s argued that women's social practices of care mean they are more likely than men to oppose practices of harm against animals. Others made the rather different case that women may empathize with the sufferings of animals as they have some common experiences; for example, female domestic animals are most likely to be 'oppressed' via control of their sexuality and reproductive powers. Work in the 1990s and beyond, focused on a number of issues: the speciesism of linguistic practices and the links between this and our gendered and racialized use of language, the interrelations between gender and the environmental and species impact of colonial practices, the ways in which social practices such as meat eating are gendered and sexualised, and popular culture is saturated with interpolations of gendered nature, and natured gender. Other perspectives have problematized the human-animal binary and sought to destabilise the certainties around both these socially constituted categories. There has not been a singular ecofeminist position on 'the animal question' as disputes have revolved around the assumptions underpinning women's caring (or reproductive) labour, questions of animal liberation and the use of animals as food, clothing and companions.

This paper maps some of the main issues and debates in ecofeminist work on non-human animals. It will argue that whatever the differences between different positions and perspectives, this work taken as a whole has been influential in problematising 'the human', 'the animal' and human relations with non-human animals. It has had a significant impact in alerting us to the intersectionalised qualities of oppression. These approaches provide a powerful analysis of the ways the social system of gender relations is co-constituted through ideas and practices around 'nature' and species relations. The paper will also advocate a particular theorisation of human

relations with non-human animals, which argues that the non-human lifeworld is marginalised, exploited and oppressed through a system of social relations of the domination of 'nature' – anthroparchy – which intersects with other relational systems of oppression (based on class, gender, race and more). The paper will use examples of violent practices that illustrate the nexus between the constitution of gender and of the animal, and suggest trajectories for future work in feminist animal studies.