

Their Bodies, Our Selves

by *patrice jones*

In the lounge of a fancy hotel, participants in an animal rights conference gather to socialize and blow off steam after a hard day of education and debate. A dog called “Babe” by her human companions sits in the midst of it all. Like most of us, Babe doesn’t much like being touched by strangers. Like many of us, Babe has had some life experiences that led her to be shy and a little bit nervous among people she doesn’t know.

Babe becomes visibly uncomfortable as person after person touches, grabs, and strokes her without first getting her permission or even considering her wishes. Babe’s body language expresses her preferences quite clearly. She pulls away, ducks her head, and moves closer to her human companion for protection. Again and again, her human companion says things like, “Babe is nervous around strangers” and “Babe doesn’t seem to want to be touched right now.” Certain that they are somehow special or simply so wrapped up in their own desires that they don’t notice hers, the people continue to touch Babe anyhow. Eventually, Babe and her human companion have to leave the area so that she can have some peace.

Fast forward a year. Same conference, different hotel, same need for solace after a long day of confronting unspeakable sorrow. Drunk to the point where you say what you really mean because all of your inhibitions are gone, an activist who has been chastised for grabbing women’s asses explains that he has the right to touch any woman he wants to touch. He laughs at the idea that he ought to obtain permission first, seeming to find that idea as absurd as many people find the idea of animal self-determination to be. Rebuffed by one group of women, he staggers over to Babe’s human companion and asks her if she has any lesbian proclivities.

Why are people eating more meat than ever, despite decades of vegetarian activism? Why do so many men beat their girlfriends and wives, despite decades of feminist activism? Why do so many parents feel insulted when their children announce themselves to be vegetarian or homosexual? Why do so many women choose to become wives, when doing so often means giving up the legal right to say whether and when your body will be penetrated? Why does anyone choose to eat meat, anyway?

Believe it or not, these questions all have the same answer. Unfortunately, we just don’t have a word for it.

Big Brother Versus Mother Earth

While we don’t have a word for the problem, we know it when we see it. It’s the fault line running underneath all of the social and environmental disruptions that plague us and the planet. You can read all about it in Genesis or the platform of the Republican Party: Men have the right and the duty to subdue the earth, the animals, their own families, and the men of other faiths.

We tend to think about speciesism and sexism as separate albeit overlapping problems. In truth, they are just different aspects of our nameless violation. Women and animals, along with land and children, have historically been seen as the property of male heads of households, who then compete with other men for more power and property. Patriarchy (male control of political and family life) and pastoralism (animal herding as a way of life) appeared on the historical stage together and cannot be separated, because they are justified and perpetuated by the same ideologies and practices. Those ways of thinking and acting are evident everywhere from the detention camps at Guantanamo Bay to the dead zone in the Chesapeake Bay.

At the heart of the problem is alienation, separation, and dissociation. Estrangement is both cause and consequence of the problem. We are cut off from the earth, other animals, each other, and ourselves. Those disconnections allow us to do terrible things to the earth, other animals, each other, and ourselves. Doing those terrible things increases the estrangement. And the cycle of violation and separation continues.

In the process, we are cut off from our bodies in two ways. First, many of us embrace philosophies or religious faiths that urge us to view our bodies, our very selves, as profane objects to be transcended. We come to see our bodies as something other

than ourselves. From that division flows the subdivision of the body into a collection of body parts. Experiencing ourselves in such a fragmented manner, is it any wonder that men reduce women to their body parts in pornography or that the everyday butchery of animals into their body parts seems so natural?

Whose Bodies? Whose Selves?

Once bodies are seen as objects to be controlled, the question becomes: Who will control them? In many U.S. states and a number of other countries, husbands may not be prosecuted for raping their wives. The “right” of a man to have sex with his wife whether or not she consents is conceivable only in the context of a worldview in which bodies are things rather than selves. Once the daughter has been sold or “given away” by her father, the right to control her body passes to the husband.

“Social construction” is the term sociologists use to describe the process by which people collectively create categories, like gender or species, and then come to perceive those categories as natural. The idea that animals are objects and thus need not be consulted before breaking their bodies is a social construct that dates back to the days when all daughters were the property of their fathers. Because our ideas about daughters and dairy cows evolved when both were property of husbands, the characteristics we ascribe to female humans and domesticated animals refer to and reinforce one another.

Understanding this, we can begin to understand why so



Babe

many fathers are outraged when their daughters choose vegetarianism. Men who have never before paid any attention to food shopping, meal planning, or cooking become instant experts on nutrition when their daughters give up meat. While they may pretend that their concern is purely nutritional, the escalating emotion of the mealtime conversations tells anyone willing to listen that these angry fathers are motivated by something other than dispassionate concern for their daughters' health.

This is evidence that we all understand, at some deep unspoken level, the link between subjugation of animals and subjugation of women. The girl who gives up meat is also, to some degree, giving up her deference to patriarchal authority. And at some level, both she and her father know it. The mother is generally ambivalent, siding with the daughter as a fellow female but with the father as a fellow parent. The arguments can go on and on for years, ruining every holiday meal, because the real roots of the conflict are never brought to light. This is the sexism-speciesism problem in microcosm: neither can be truly understood or resolved until their tangled roots are unearthed.

In the U.S., at least one out of every hundred girls is raped by her biological father and the percentages are much higher for step-fathers and mothers' boyfriends. One out of every four girls is sexually assaulted before the age of 18, with the perpetrators most often being family members or friends of the family. Meat and the male organ are very closely related in the popular mindset. Some even call masturbation "beating the meat." Furthermore, meat is the result of a process of violation. At every stage of the process, from impregnation to slaughter, animals' bodies are manipulated without their consent. So, when a daughter refuses the meat, she's saying "no" to more than a menu.

Ecofeminism in Action

A young woman finds a chicken by the side of the road and delivers the bird to our sanctuary. She looks like the girl next door but has a subversive secret. Squinting into the morning sun, she recalls the exact moment she became a vegan: "Seventh grade. At the dinner table. My father was waving a forkful of steak and saying 'moo.' And that was it."

I'm at the University of New Orleans, talking to a women's studies class about the links between feminism and animal liberation. A number of faculty members are sitting in and apparently enjoying my theories about the social construction of gender and species. Suddenly setting aside theoretical speculations, I start to talk about milk. "Can you imagine," I ask, "having a baby and then having someone take it away from you...just so that someone else can have your milk?" Sev-

eral women unconsciously mimic my own instinctive reaction to that thought, reflexively crossing their arms protectively across their breasts. Since we're in Dixie, I remind us that enslaved women were, in fact, forced to suckle someone else's children. We are quiet for a moment, protecting our breasts, thinking about that. "That's it," says one of the faculty members as she walks past me after the class, "I'm giving up dairy."



Seagull

An alliance between feminists and animal liberation activists is long overdue. Animal advocates must make explicit and purposeful coalitions with individuals and organizations working for the liberation of women.

Milk is the most promising potential joint project. Cows are forcibly and repeatedly impregnated so that their bodies will produce milk for their calves. People then steal both the milk and the calves in order to produce

profits for the dairy and veal industries. The cows suffer painful physical ailments, such as mastitis, as well as the emotional distress of having their children and their own freedom torn away from them. Meanwhile, milk products are responsible for an unhealthy acceleration in the onset of menses in girls and are also correlated with breast cancer in women. Thus the mammary glands of cows are exploited in order to produce a product that harms the mammary glands of women.

Eggs are another option. Here again, female animals suffer unspeakable torments so that elements of their reproductive systems can be exploited for profit. And, again, the products end up hurting the equivalent part of women's bodies. Recent research links egg consumption to ovarian cancer.

Whatever topic we choose, we must make sure that our efforts are real rather than hypothetical. Theoretical ecofeminism is a contradiction in terms. If we want to heal the ruptures that separate us from the earth, other animals, and ourselves, then we've got to do it with our whole selves.

Earlier this year, here at the Eastern Shore Sanctuary, a young female Muscovy duck called "Seagull" waded into the fray when a newly arrived rooster, who had been trained by people to be aggressive, started picking on one of the elderly roosters in the front yard. Marching into the middle of the altercation, Seagull said something to each of the roosters in turn and then used her body to walk the aggressor away from the victim, talking to him in a scolding tone the whole time. Our challenge is to be at least as courageous and compassionate in our efforts to repair the damage that our own species has done. If little Seagull is willing to put her body on the line, the least we can do is to follow her lead.

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