

Towards an Animal Standpoint: Vegan Education and the Epistemology of Ignorance

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historia...II. an account of one's inquiries, a narrative, history....

— Liddell and Scott. *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (1889)

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

— Walter Benjamin (1970: 259-60)

Looking at the immediacies of the colonial context, it is clear that what divides this world is first and foremost what species, what race one belongs to.

— Frantz Fanon (2004: 5)

I became a member of the vegan movement¹ in 1998, after quitting my job in New York and having adventurously moved cross-country to Los Angeles, the City of Angels, in the search for love and some newfound direction. Up to that point, my whole life had been a sort of haphazard series of fragments in which my ethical commitment to nonhuman animals repeatedly attempted to articulate and realize itself in a manner akin to the way one tunes in a radio or satellite feed of relatively poor signal strength — there were pieces of a message I kept receiving, but always through a veil of immense feedback that muddied my comprehension and ultimately made me change the channel. In the years prior, I had committed to vegetarianism and even served as an unwitting diplomat of sorts for the philosophy, having introduced it to the small rural town of Szabadszállás, Hungary, when I lived there for a year in the mid-Nineties (“Ah, vegetáriánus,” people would say to me dolefully and half-perplexed when I tried to politely refuse the honor as visiting American to strike the first blow in a ritual pig slaughter or to eat the sheep intestines stew that had been painstakingly crafted for me as a sometimes dinner guest). I also became more political about my lifestyle as I grew steadily more responsive to the fact that my deployment of vegetarianism as a personal dietary choice, one often locked in the private confines of my lonely kitchen or occasional restaurant outings, was at best a meager remedy to a social and ethical atrocity of such huge proportions that I feared to seriously contemplate it in any sort of systematic fashion.²

In part, my increased sensitivity toward the need for a more radical form of vegetarianism was undoubtedly catalyzed by those friends and acquaintances in my everyday life who were invariably curious as to how I had arrived at the decision to stop eating meat and therefore commonly put questions to me such as “Is this for health reasons or your love of animals?” Now I can only chuckle at the supposed dichotomy of the query, but at the time these inquiries into

my beliefs seriously troubled me as I lacked a convincingly coherent answer for them. I remained lodged, at least partially, within an epistemology of ignorance (Tuana, 2004; McHugh, 2004; Mills, 2007) that served to occlude the full extent of my membership within a speciesist society and so I was without the critical literacy necessary to voice my dawning conscientization into the need for animal liberation as part of my own emancipatory journey. Yet, my initial succession from the hegemony of the standard American diet had granted me certain epistemological privileges as well such that I began to read my interrogators on another level. Hence, I learned to interpret their questions about my vegetarian lifestyle as implicit attempts to elicit my re-enculturation into mainstream values and the dominant culture. But, even more importantly, I also perceived others' suspicion of my motives as a continual opportunity to better grasp exactly why and how I came to stand in the particular social, cultural and historical position I in fact occupied.

In this way, I was led to follow an educational path that I remain upon today — the development of an “animal standpoint” (Donovan, 2006), a mode of “oppositional consciousness” (Collins, 1989) that I define variously as: 1) the “cognitive praxis” (Eyerman & Jamison, 1991) of the animal and earth liberation movements, which works to rupture and transform academic discourse in order to establish relevant knowledge interests that are held by movement members (Kahn, 2006); 2) the recognition of the socio-political and cultural agency of nonhuman animals that co-constructs our shared reality (Haraway, 2003; Latour, 2004); and 3) the attempt to radically shift our gestalt away from a Western cosmological legacy informed by the history of speciesist relations that has functioned ideologically to inscribe reified notions of “humanity” and “animality” throughout society (Kahn, 2007; Lewis & Kahn, Forthcoming).

The critical theorist Steven Best (Forthcoming) writes:

Whereas nearly all histories, even so-called “radical” narratives, have been written from the human standpoint, a growing number of theorists have broken free of the speciesist straightjacket to examine history and society from the standpoint of animals. This approach...considers the interaction between human and nonhuman animals — past, present, and future — and the need for profound changes in the way human beings define themselves and relate to other sentient species and to the natural world as a whole.

Accordingly, a primary concern of the animal standpoint is to provide counter-histories to what Ivan Illich called “modern certainties,” or the “epoch-specific apriorisms which generate not only our mental conceptions but also our sensual perceptions and feelings in our hearts about what constitutes social reality” (Cayley, 1992: 172-73). These counter-histories can help to illuminate profound silences on the animal standpoint in the socio-historical record as being often non-accidental, and institutionally perpetrated and organized, in order to legitimate hegemonic regimes of truth and ways of knowing that are foundational to our present moment's “dialectic of enlightenment” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002).

Of course, as we continue to live under the hegemony of speciesism in which animal liberation is not the norm — and in fact is considered an act of “ecoterrorism” — it is impossible to produce a definitive and unified chronicle of the animal standpoint at this time. Instead, the animal standpoint is very much anticipatory of a future possibility that is only realizable now to a certain extent. As the epigram by Benjamin alludes, those who would speak from the animal standpoint occupy something of a morally eschatological space in which they are left to piece

together clues out of the catastrophic rubble of the past in order to map the prospects of hope. In this way, the animal standpoint actually seeks to understand the world from multiple evolving locations, and so there are at present a multitude of heterogenous and contradictory animal standpoint situations, not a singular universal standpoint that can be utilized like a cryptographic key for a theory of everything. But as Sandra Harding (2004: 127-38) has argued, while this form of subjugated knowledge may be unable to escape being pluralist and partial in nature, it can thereby serve positively as a powerful resource to increase our objective understanding of society and provide for a more robustly democratic public sphere beyond majoritarian accounts.

Lately, I have become interested in the ways in which the counterstorytelling methodology of critical race theory can provide a compelling model for historical research from the animal standpoint. As Tara Yosso (2006) writes, by interpretatively blending social science data and critical theory with personal reflections, autobiography, and the experiences of colleagues and other acquaintances, counterstorytelling strengthens marginalized traditions of resistance, draws attention to the victims of systemic oppression, and documents the workings of this oppression from the epistemological standpoint of the victimized (10-11). This essay therefore attempts to employ a form of counterstorytelling to provide some summative exploration of my formal and nonformal educational experiences as a vegan academic working on animal standpoint theory.

On Becoming a Vegan

I remember the day I told my father I had made the decision to become a vegan. “Congratulations, Rich,” he said dryly over the phone, “you’ve officially found a way to get even weirder. Why do you have to be such a pain the ass?” His reaction continued: “A vay-gun, huh?” he muttered, sarcastically emphasizing his mispronunciation of the term (which is pronounced “vee-gun”). “Well, give my regards to planet Vega.” Over the years, my father’s stance has softened somewhat and, upon recent visits to him, he has shown real concern about how to provide proper hospitality and has even gone out of his way to cook special vegan desserts for the occasions. Further, to a small degree, he allows some discussion about social matters from a vegan perspective such as my own.

On the other hand, he is also clear about drawing a firm line in the sand where the discussion cannot entail his own self-critique or personal transformation. For instance, I can eat a vegan meal in relative peace next to him, he seems to have decided, but in order to do so I must silently tolerate his food choices and listen obediently to his stories about how he relates to nonhuman animals and the natural world, regardless of how far they might transgress my own ethical commitments. An analogy for this might be that an abolitionist could be considered welcome at a slave auction as long as he/she didn’t openly question the reason for being there in the first place.

When in my father’s company I am also consistently needled by his “jokes” that I send my vegan children to spend time under his care so that he can “teach them how to eat hamburgers, hotdogs, and all other sorts of yucky stuff.” Invariably, this line of half-comedy ends with his dramatic guffaws and an attempt to form the hand salute used by the Star Trek character, Mr. Spock the Vulcan. Only a few times has my father actually done the gesture correctly, spreading his fingers apart into a “V” at the middle and ring finger, while intoning, “Live long and prosper.” In any event, his point is clearly not to offer salutary blessings, but rather to remind me of my alien and outsider status as an invader of his normal cultural routine. I

relate this story not because I intend to paint my father as a uniquely unfeeling ogre who is deserving of public scrutiny, but rather because I have found that my relations with him on this matter are broadly representative of how vegans (who comprise approximately 1.4% of the general population³) are generally treated in their day-to-day lives by the great mass of other people. In fact, I think dealings with him are somewhat better even.

Microaggressions

The vegan in a speciesist society is ubiquitously on the receiving end of an unending volley of “microaggressions,” the “subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people...often automatically or unconsciously” (Solórzano, et. al., 2000) in situations when those who are the microaggressions’ target are members of a marginalized class. Part of what makes pedagogy against microaggressions so difficult is that these acts are often perpetrated by people who are unaware of the repressive nature of their behavior and who may not even consciously intend to be communicating hostile messages by it. In other words, such microaggressions are part of the transactional fabric of the conflictual encounter between standpoint epistemologies and the larger epistemology of ignorance that is manufactured to support the conservation of the social status quo.

Many times these microaggressions arise indirectly against vegans through people’s everyday use of speciesist language (Dunayer, 2001), in which nonhuman animals are spoken of as unthinking, unfeeling, and lesser objects instead of rational, sentient and equal beings. As part of common parlance which socially reproduces desensitization, vegans are required literally to stop conversation and challenge these assumptions if communication is to take place in good faith. However, to do so is often highly impractical as communication does not take place in a political vacuum and so vegans can easily be outnumbered or outranked by their interlocutors. Moreover, if they do in fact raise questions about the assumptions buried in people’s language, they run the risk of being tagged as strident, irrational, or otherwise extreme.

In other instances, vegans can be more directly singled out for microaggressions against them. A case in point took place in 2002, in a truck stop outside of San Bernardino, CA, when my wife (then an ovo-lacto vegetarian) and I stopped to investigate whether the Burger King located there was offering the new “BK Veggie” sandwich. The context for our decision was a raucous debate that was taking place within the animal advocacy community at the time about the food item. Liberal vegan ideologues like Erik Marcus and major animal rights groups like PETA openly celebrated its arrival and encouraged everyone to buy as many as possible, believing it to be a strategic opportunity to get vegetarianism solidly established within popular culture. On the other hand, a significant number of vegans (including myself) were highly skeptical that fast-food corporations like Burger King held liberatory potentials for anything beyond perhaps a highly contradictory and strategically useless form of vegetarianism as personal lifestyle addendum. Indeed, as with McDonalds’ fries that were revealed to be quietly slathered in meat juices, so too it was eventually found that Burger King’s veggie burger was not even vegetarian unless one asked to have its standard mayonnaise and bun removed — for these contained polysorbate-60, a fatty-acid emulsifier, derived from animals. Further, some vegans pointed out that, unless Burger King also microwaved the patty on a separate plate instead of flame-broiling it, the veggie burger would share grill fats and residue from the other meat products that are cooked there. With these points being actively discussed between us as we

drove down the I-10, upon seeing the Burger King sign listed for an upcoming truck stop, my wife and I decided to stop in and see for ourselves whether or not to believe all the hype.

A sprawling and somewhat unsanitary place for drivers to fill up on a wide-range of commodities in a hurry, it was at first difficult to even locate the Burger King within the travel center. Having eventually found it tucked in the back of the building, near the bathrooms and a small array of video game consoles, we stepped up cautiously toward the lone order-taker as we scanned the menu to see if the BK Veggie was an available item there. I had bet it wouldn't be. The place was deafeningly quiet and seemed almost to be staged for our experiment. "Can I help you?" the young woman behind the cash register asked. We didn't see the item on the menu. "Do you have the BK Veggie?" we inquired. "Uhm...the what?" she replied, our order-taker was baffled and so we quickly provided a run-down as to the national announcement of the new sandwich. "I'm not sure if we have that or not," she muttered confusedly, "I'd better check with the manager." With that she was off and disappeared into a back area behind the equipment. A minute later she returned with a smile, "Yes, we do have it!" Since it was available, my wife was determined to taste one and placed an order, careful to spell out that it should not have either the bun or mayonnaise and that it should be microwaved, as she was a vegetarian. "I don't think we can do that?" the cashier wondered out loud. In a friendly but direct manner, my wife insisted, "I thought the motto of this company is 'Have it your way'?" The young woman behind the counter disappeared again, this time to return with the manager himself.

"What seems to be the trouble here?" he drawled, "So you want one of those BK Veggies, but how do you want it?" I noticed that he had raised one of his eyebrows, as if doubtfully examining the strange customers before him, wondering if we were trouble-makers with our out of the ordinary request. My wife reiterated her desire, calmly providing the philosophical explanation for it along the way. "Oh. Hmmm. So you want just a microwaved veggie patty nothing on it? Alright we can do that," the manager concluded, as he directed to the order-taker that he'd take care of it and then headed off to find the frozen patty for microwaving. Two minutes later he returned with a grayish, wet-looking specimen on a small paper plate and handed it to my wife, "One BK Veggie for you." Thinking it looked pretty unappetizing we took it and were about to head back to the car to explore it further when the manager suddenly exclaimed excitedly, "Call me T-Rex!" "What?" we thought, and looked up to see him thumping his chest fiercely with one fist. "Call me T-Rex!" he said again, very pleased with himself and then began to stomp back and forth across the cashier aisle floor like the carnivorous dinosaur. Finally, returning from the cretaceous period, he turned back toward us, pointed to our order and began to shake his head from side to side. "I don't eat anything unless it's bled. I'd never eat one of those things," the manager resolved.

It was a fascinating reaction on the man's part, one that we had in no obvious way enlisted. Apparently, even the single order of a quasi-vegetarian item that was his to offer for profit had struck at his identity as a happy member of a speciesist society in such a profound manner that he felt compelled to provide a performative rejection of what he took to be our critical countercultural position. Quite literally, through a microaggressive burst, the Burger King manager had to underline for us all that what he knew to be true prior to his customers' order of the veggie burger (with all of its possible background context) had not been put in jeopardy by the encounter. In this way, he sealed any fissures that may have erupted in his epistemology of ignorance and eradicated any possible contextual messaging that might eventually lead him to overturn his cosmological certainties about the order of the universe or his own place in it.

Microinequities

Vegans not only encounter microaggressions across society, but also “microinequities,” which Sue, et. al. (2004: 273) define as “the pattern of being overlooked, underrespected, and devalued.” Whether it is at the supermarket or the average eatery, shoe store, clothier, or anywhere else that the living animal body is brutally reduced to an unliving article for trade, there is a widespread structural ignorance to vegan issues in most communities in the United States. While tiring and thankless work, an interesting form of vegan education can be to visit these establishments and to inquire of them what they have that is vegan, thereby making shopping a form of “public pedagogy” (Giroux, 2004). As in the Burger King example, this often sends frontline help scrambling for supervisors in a desperate attempt to figure out what a “vegan” is and whether or not one can then be serviced there (the answer typically being, “no”). While the tactic is unlikely to foment thorough-going social change from the animal standpoint, it can at least serve to generate critical dialogue with people and possibly raise some metacognitive reflection about multiculturalism, as well as put veganism on their cultural radar thereby.

Businesses are hardly the only purveyor of microinequities, though. Even friends and acquaintances routinely overlook the need to find some way to demonstrate the thought of inclusion to vegan guests at parties or other gatherings. This is frequently revealed when a vegan is offered and rejects the barbeque, cake, or any list of items that is then rapidly produced thereafter, as it becomes more and more apparent to host and guest alike that the vegan attendee had not been considered during the event’s preparation. At other times, friends will thoughtlessly engage in talk about the delightful qualities of the non-vegan meal they may recently have had or will display non-vegan merchandise to vegans in the search for their cordial approval, something that of course cannot come without involving the vegan in a fundamental self-contradiction.

Activists for other radical and progressive causes are themselves not above overlooking and devaluing advocates for the animal standpoint. For instance, I have been a part of many meetings where strong critiques of classism, racism, sexism, or other forms of structural oppression are delivered by people who then go on to consume commercial varieties of factory-farmed meat and dairy, entirely blind to the problematical aspects of doing so.⁴ Moreover, vegans have had a hard-time being heard in some activist communities, as they can be stereotypically characterized therein as white liberals who have adopted a political cause that works to divert them from the need to examine the other forms of prejudice suspected to be rooted within their lives. I myself have been the target of such criticism, and while I would be the first to admit both my own imperfections and that there are some vegans for whom this charge is undeniably apt, it is also overly broad and misleading. Thus, allies in other struggles are sometimes surprised to learn that important vegan figures in the fight for social justice include people like César Chávez, Coretta Scott King, Alice Walker, and Michael Franti. While not a reason to adopt vegan politics in itself, opening dialogue about why vocal leaders like these became vegan or why other activists assumed that they would not be can serve to sow the seeds for the kind of collective intersectional analyses that are ultimately necessary to understand the “matrix of domination” (Collins, 2000) that is used to divide and conquer counterhegemonic groups by those who would legislate our everyday lives.

Vegan Education in the Public Schools

Vegans can just as easily encounter microaggressions and microinequities in the school as they can in the larger society.⁵ While some schools have moved to try to incorporate a consistent vegetarian (and sometimes vegan) offering on the menu, the overall reality is that vegans are still treated like second-class citizens in most school cafeterias. Even when there is food provided for them to eat, the school experience is structured so as to reduce veganism to a personal “special dietary requirement” and not a collective political standpoint from which to mount a transformative critique of society. When exhaustive ingredient lists are not made openly available, or there is not clear transparency as to the manner in which the available food has been cooked, and staff are not properly educated so as to be able to easily answer questions about the food or its preparation, this constitutes a form of microaggression by school administrations against vegans (and by extension — all who eat at the school). It is crucial to remember, however, that behind these dietary microaggressions lies a macroaggressive institutional logic, not just the careless or uninformed aptitudes of individual administrators.

Consider the recent story of Dave Warwak, a 5th through 8th grade tenured art teacher in the Chicago-area Fox River Grove Middle School, who had previously exhibited at Northern Illinois University but who was suspended and then fired by his public school for teaching art from the animal standpoint.⁶ In 2006, Warwak became a vegan and decided to respond to evidence of animal cruelty by students at the school by developing (and gaining approval for) a collective art lesson in which a number of students and teachers created and cared for their own companion animal made out of commercially-available marshmallow “Peeps” chick-shaped candy. As with school exercises in which students care for “baby” eggs, people at the school personalized their Peeps, spoke to them, and treated them as if they were subjects of a life that were deserving of protection. At the end of the lesson, however, Warwak surprised everyone by collecting the marshmallow chicks for a diorama school art exhibit he then created in which the Peeps candies were represented as locked behind zoo cages, hung on the wall as trophy game heads, squashed as road kill, boiled and fried in pots and pans, and enclosed between slices of bread as sandwiches. According to a Sept. 12, 2007 Chicago Tribune editorial, this resulted in a rebuke from the school’s principal that Warwak was trying to “influence students against the school lunch program” and he was warned to stick to the curriculum. In response, Warwak replied that part of teaching art to students is to get them to think about life and to have them connect their creativity up to the social issues that they care very deeply about. He then turned his sights on asking for the removal of the National Dairy Council’s “Got Milk?” and other promotional posters which adorned the lunch room walls, and when the school’s cafeteria manager refused to take them down, Warwak and his students posted their own vegan posters satirizing the issue. He also began a more public campaign to raise consciousness about the quality of school lunches being fed at the school, which resulted in his dismissal.

While one might question Warwak’s collegiality, it also seems clear upon studying his case that his firing resulted not due to his pedagogical style, but rather because of his unwillingness to relent from using the art curriculum to explore his own school as a location in which to house the animal standpoint. By doing so, he quickly found himself immersed in a hot bed of political issues related to the existence of what could be termed the “school cafeteria-industrial complex” that lay just below the epistemological surface of the school’s day-to-day code of normalcy. For instance, we might ask (as he did): Why were the Dairy Council posters in the school? What was the school’s food quality? What’s wrong with influencing students against the school lunch program if there is a sound educational point to be made in doing so?

Not only at Fox River Grove Middle School but also in thousands of schools across the country, corporate agribusiness has run amok in the attempt to utilize public education as a place to establish the naturalization of commercial meat and dairy as lifelong eating habits, to generate increased sales, to subsidize the food industry against decreased producer prices, as well as to funnel below-health standards food not fit for public sale. Warwak was correct to demand the riddance of the Dairy Council's posters as they had in fact already been targeted for removal from approximately 105,000 public schools by the Federal Trade Commission. In May, 2007, the Commission ruled that the advertisements' message on behalf of the dairy industry's "Milk Your Diet" campaign — that claimed that the regular consumption of milk promotes healthy weight loss — was scientifically misleading and false.⁷ A story on the matter in *Alternet* captures the corporate duplicity behind this overt operation to infuse milk propaganda in schools:

The Milk Your Diet campaign (also called BodyByMilk; Think About Your Drink; Why Milk?; 24oz/24hours; 3-A-Day; and Got Milk? as in — one of these slogans has got to work!)...shipped truck-size posters of 'stache-wearing David Beckham, Carrie Underwood and New York Yankee Alex Rodriguez to 45,000 public middle and high schools and 60,000 public elementary schools last fall and conducted an online auction where students could use milk UPC codes as currency. ("It's an amazing experience," say the web promos, which were still up in May. "Did we mention you have a chance to win an iPod? And a Fender guitar? And cool clothes from Adidas and Baby Phat? All you have to do is drink milk to get it. Any size. Any flavor.")

The campaign offered \$1,000 America's Healthiest Student Bodies Awards to schools with the "most active" students and saluted them with what? Got Milk recognitions (Rosenberg, 2007).

Schools across the country have utilized dairy industry materials in this fashion because it is tacitly demanded by the USDA's National School Lunch Program, the primary governmental vehicle through which food that is in over-supply is promoted and national prices thereby subsidized. In this case, schools are only reimbursed for their food expenses by the program unless they promote items like milk, which it has deemed a nutritional good.

It should be pointed out that this is the same National School Lunch Program that was slammed by a March, 2008 exposé from the *Wall Street Journal*, which uncovered that:

In reports dating back to 2003, the USDA Office of Inspector General and the Government Accountability Office cited the USDA's lunch-program administrators and inspectors for weak food-safety standards, poor safeguards against bacterial contamination, and choosing lunch-program vendors with known food-safety violations. Auditors singled out problems with controls over E. coli and salmonella contamination (Williamson, 2008).

Worse still, the above phrase "known food-safety violations" is something of a euphemism. For a prime beef vendor for the National School Lunch Program has been the meat packing company Westland/Hallmark which, via undercover footage shot by the Humane Society of the United States, was revealed to be regularly slaughtering "downer" cows (i.e., mortally sick animals that

have also been linked to Mad Cow and other fatal diseases in humans) for popular consumption. Though having repeatedly denied any illegal wrongdoing for years, the ultimate revelation of Westland/Hallmark's practices in turn led to the nation's largest ever recall of beef (Associated Press, 2008). Unfortunately, it was suspected that the large majority of the meat from Westland/Hallmark had already been eaten — much of it by school children. Dave Warwak's art program therefore sought to provide a form of epistemological rupture of the educational status quo in order to call attention to the role being played by this sort of food in his own school. In so doing, however, he threatened to parade the fact that the dietary norms constructed on behalf of those attending public schools (as well as in the larger society) are generally set in place by an emperor without clothes.

“Ecoterrorists” in the Academy?

In closing, I would like to offer some cursory critical remarks about higher education from the animal standpoint. While many colleges and universities exert greater control over their food purchases than public schools, and have moved to respond to increasing student demand for vegetarian and vegan menu options, there has been far more interest in providing locally-produced foods as part of a potential cost-cutting program legitimated through the language of sustainability (Powers, 2007) than in engaging in campus-wide discussion about the ethical dimensions of dining hall food services. Furthermore, the forms of symptomatic microaggression that take place against vegans in elementary and secondary schools, and in the broader society, routinely occur on college campuses against students and faculty alike as well.

To my mind, the most ominous of these microaggressive themes is the tendency amongst academics to uncritically reproduce the sentiments of corporations and the state about the animal rights movement as being composed of irrational and increasingly criminal elements.⁸ This has resulted in a hostile campus climate for vegan scholars working from the animal standpoint, in which their colleagues maintain a psychological disposition that functions institutionally to delegitimize research normatively informed by the unprecedented plight faced by nonhuman animals. Crucially, this also feeds into an atmosphere of repressive tolerance within higher education that stifles meaningful protest and just debate of vivisection practices on campus.⁹

The philosopher Steven Best perhaps represents the bellwether case for what can happen professionally to animal standpoint theorists, as the repercussions for his written inquiries on this matter have involved Best's being branded an “ecoterrorist” in the halls of the United States Senate, his having a permanent ban placed upon his visitation rights by the United Kingdom, and his subsequently having his departmental Chair removed under spurious circumstances that also allegedly involved attempts to revoke his tenure status as a professor. In my own experience, I have been actively discouraged by mentors — “for my own good” — from doing animal standpoint work, and when I have chosen instead to continue with it, have been coached to remove relevant references from my curriculum vitae, and to otherwise de-emphasize the research interest publicly wherever possible. I should add that the advice was not without some strategic merit, as my professional references informed me after my being hired last year that prospective employers repeatedly asked for assurances that I was “just studying these things” and was without any correlative background of illegal behavior. In a connected instance, dating back to September, 2003, a professor in my Ph.D. program easily wondered out loud with me if I had anything to do with a then recent series of alleged Earth Liberation Front attacks on Humvee

vehicles in the San Gabriel Valley. “I figured it must have been you and some of your buddies,” he remarked. To this day, I am not sure whether or not he was kidding.

More than ever before we need students actively engaged in critical animal studies, yet it can be argued that the current academic trend is toward the penalization of animal standpoint research and vegan education. It may be argued back to me that we are now witnessing an almost faddish rise of scholarship on nonhuman animals through the development of interdisciplinary posthumanist discourse and the emergence of fields such as “Human-Animal Studies.” To be sure, these developments should be pursued as potential opportunities to shatter the long tradition of speciesist scholarship across the disciplines and to end the role that higher education plays in producing an epistemology of ignorance about nonhuman animals at this time. But as Frank Margonis (2007: 176) has written, “One of the key philosophical strategies for maintaining the epistemology of ignorance is...a tendency to abstract away from social realities.” In this sense, I am skeptical that posthumanism or other forms of academese that are detached from the concrete requirements for animal liberationist praxis provide much more than a means to undermine the animal standpoint by co-opting its language and tempering its aims on behalf of the quest for professional prestige and more conservative political visions.

My skepticism about the academy’s present desire to seriously confront the issues of the animal standpoint should not be considered cynicism about the larger possibility for positive change, however. On the contrary, if the previous century was marked by an assault on the lines of color, class, and gender, the 21st century will be defined in large part by the attempt to resolve issues of justice in relation to species. The critical educator Paulo Freire (2000: 43) wrote, “While the problem of humanization has always, from an axiological point of view, been humankind’s central problem, it now takes on the character of an inescapable concern.” As I have tried to relate, there are significant historical forces at work affecting a culture of silence throughout mainstream society on vegan issues. Yet in all sectors and levels of education, both formal and nonformal, the struggle for a new paradigm of non-anthropocentric understanding is taking place today. It is true that the end of speciesism cannot be guaranteed but, then again, neither can the conditions that would allow for its unquestioned continuance.

Notes

¹ The vegan movement began in 1944 when Donald Watson and Elsie Shrigley founded the UK Vegan Society in response to frustrations that vegetarians were increasingly normalizing the practice of consuming dairy products linked to highly exploitative and oppressive animal husbandry practices (Rodger, 2004). The society defines veganism as “a philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude — as far as is possible and practical — all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose; and by extension, promotes the development and use of animal-free alternatives for the benefit of humans, animals and the environment. In dietary terms it denotes the practice of dispensing with all products derived wholly or partly from animals” (Vegan Society, 1979). News media tend to characterize vegans as “avoiding” animal products of any kind, but do not emphasize that they do this as a form of political boycott.

² A summary of the many aspects and broad extent of the evolving catastrophe for animal-kind, both human and nonhuman, can be found in Kahn (2008). For a powerful filmic treatment of this horror, see the movie *Earthlings* (2003). Like most people I only became gradually familiar with the realities behind the conditions in industrial factory farms, slaughterhouses, and other

institutional practices responsible for the standard American diet such as the over-fishing of the oceans and the destruction of the Amazonian rain forests in order to grow endless acres of monocropped soybeans for cheap beef production. Interestingly, people's first response to consciousness of these problems is often to respond by saying something like, "If I had to know where my food came from, I don't think I could eat it." This is a profound articulation of the need for vegan education and the epistemological role that ignorance plays in allowing for grossly unsustainable cultural practices to continue without challenge.

³ This number is according to a 2006 poll conducted by Harris Interactive for the Vegetarian Resource Group, see: <http://www.vrg.org/journal/vj2006issue4/vj2006issue4poll.htm>.

⁴ One could easily (and ultimately should) advance critiques of members of the vegan community in this same way. For example, an entire line of vegan-friendly "green" consumer products — including gourmet ice creams, cookies, pizzas, "chicken" nuggets, and the like — have sprung up in the last decade as both vegan manufacturers and other companies have raced to fill the needs of what is demographically considered a niche market with significant buying power. However, exchanging relatively low consumer cost meat for high-priced vegan frozen and boxed food simply assists the capitalist system to effect transformation through a period of potential crisis. It is no surprise, then, that companies selling vegan wares such as Whole Foods, Inc. have been repeatedly tabbed as grossly exploitative of labor. In this way, veganism that is not also anti-capitalist fails to strike at the larger structural problem and so can itself be a source of continued epistemological ignorance. On Whole Foods, see for example, <http://www.wholeworkersunite.org> and http://www.ufcw.org/press_room/index.cfm?pressReleaseID=3, as well as <http://www.coopamerica.org/programs/responsibleshopper/company.cfm?id=309>.

⁵ Due to issue's of space, I will not cover the range of issues that might be covered under this idea, which besides issues of school food include in-class dissection, the use of pesticides and rodenticides by schools, in-class pets, as well as the manner in which the history of nonhuman animals (as with women, people of color, the disabled, etc.) has effectively been written out of the majority of the school curriculum.

⁶ The details of this story are formed out of personal correspondence I had with Warwak in September and October, 2007, as well as the composite evidence and article links archived on Dave Warwak's websites: <http://www.inslide.com> and <http://peepshowforchildrenonly.com>. The latter is dedicated to a self-published manuscript in which Warwak chronicles his pedagogical saga and archives transcripts from resultant legal proceedings that took place when Warwak sued the school district for being improperly fired and for not abiding by mandated state standards for character and humane education.

⁷ The Federal Trade Commission ruling, while a victory for democratic science, came on the heels of countless petitions filed against the Dairy Industry campaign by the animal rights organization, Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, dating back to 1999. The Commission denied a hearing for all of the previous petitions.

⁸ It should be noted that standpoint theory has been used historically to question the right of capitalist society to define criminality in ways that privilege social leaders and further marginalize the struggle-from-below; see Lukacs (1971).

⁹ I deal with this issue at length in Kahn (Forthcoming).

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