

## The Radical In/Visibility of Speciesism and Non-human Animals Intrinsic Rights

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### Abstract

Non-human animals seem to be almost invisible within Political science and Sociology. Primarily, they are represented as part of the natural environment, deprived of sentience, agency, and mostly of intrinsic rights to life. Luckily, there are a few authors who address this epistemological gap in the field, and offer a very much needed conceptual re-elaboration of the relationship between the Human and the Animal.

In their provocative collection *Aphro-ism* authors Aph and Syl Ko offer new theoretical frameworks on race, activism regarding non-human animals, and feminism. They engage in the analysis of the interconnected forms of oppressions between species and, by using a feminist approach, they provide a very much needed deconstruction of Eurocentric narratives of race and species.

This paper explores whether the notion of interconnectedness of oppression between ‘sub-humanized’ groups and non-human animals, as elaborated by Aph and Syl Ko, can offer effective theoretical and political instruments for advocating for animal liberation and the enforcement of their moral and legal rights. It questions the extent to which any comparison, analogy and eventually coalescence of the notion of human and animal oppression supports a theory and a practice of shared justice or conversely reiterates narratives of anthropocentrism, without leading to a paradigm shift that proposes non-human animals as intrinsic rights-holders and veganism as an obligation towards them.

Keywords: animal rights, speciesism, racism, veganism.

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## 1. Introduction

In *The Prison Notebooks* (1991), published for the first time in Italian in 1929, the Marxist philosopher and journalist Antonio Gramsci elaborated the concept of *cultural hegemony*.

In Gramsci's understanding, hegemony is a subtle and pervasive form of domination that succeeds by concealing or denying any recognition of the violence, the abuse and the suffering that it causes. It presents exploitation as a natural, pseudo-biological event and any challenge to it not just implausible but inconceivable. In the same vein, a few decades later the anticolonial thinker Franz Fanon acutely argued that colonialism always thrives to the extent that its relations of power remain invisible as long as their presumed naturalism goes unchallenged (Fanon, 1970).

When in 1970, Richard Ryder coined the term *speciesism*, he presented it as an ideology and a socially engrained and institutionalized set of practices that legitimates a particular social order: it operates to justify sheer abuse and domination over non-human animals and the economic exploitation and commodification of them. Public intellectuals in general, and academics more specifically, have played a significant part in endorsing such a *speciesist* (and colonialist) *cultural hegemony*, by developing a system of knowledge about non-human animals and theories to justify human domination.

Political science and Sociology are two disciplines that traditionally and historically appear to be unaware of, or uninterested in, the moral, political and social status of non-human animals, a situation that seems paradoxical, given the fact that virtually all human activities are related to non-human animals in multiple ways and that these relations are socially constructed and indeed political. Surveying those disciplines, there are very few scholars who have even considered the moral and socio-political questions posed by the recognition of non-human animals as sentient beings, denying even the existence of a human-animal relation that is inherently a relationship of power and domination.

Critical Animal Studies (CAS) is a field that analyses the practices of speciesism in society and contests them. It is trans-disciplinary, and it reveals how speciesism does not refer simply to human relationships with other animals, but means socially, politically, economically and culturally constructed everyday practices and a body of knowledge that support such relationships. One of the most salient tasks of CAS is to oppose the socially and politically accepted assumptions that build a system of violence against non-human animals and make the most unspeakable atrocities against them seem an acceptable part of everyday life.

On one hand, the attempt of CAS is to challenge the anthropocentrism of various academic disciplines. On the other hand, CAS shares the commitments

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of critical theory as it was developed by the Frankfurt School in 1923, as an engaged theory that understands that bodies are at risk and which strives to emancipate them from conditions of domination. It is informed by activism, and it is, partly, written to inform activism. CAS is explicitly committed to animal rights, broadly speaking, calling for engaged scholarship in order to transform the structures of oppressive systems that dominate and commodify all non-human animals.

Aph and Syl Ko's spirited collection of essays *Aphro-ism. Essays on Pop Culture, Feminism and Black Veganism* (2020) offers a new conceptual architecture within CAS. In a way, it is deconstructive and reconstructive as the two writers shift the focus from who the oppressed to the commonalities of the oppressor, by stressing the importance of building bridges between theory and practice, animal sociology and animal advocacy, and by proposing the need for a socio-political movement that rearticulates human oppression (primarily black oppression) through the lens not only of race but also of animality.

It is important to highlight, quite early in this essay, that the Ko sisters' elaboration of oppression and relatedly of societal injustice, in relation to human and non-human animals, is not interpreted as the violation or the abuse of one's fundamental rights (morally and legally) but rather it is construed as an imbalance of Power<sup>1</sup>, within society, that generates the oppression of marginalized groups by hegemonic forces. Aphroism characterizes the hegemonic forces as white and Europeans, while the oppressed are represented along racial and animality lines.

In this article, I will explore the main arguments of *Aphroism*, some of which I argue are very problematic. I will also attempt to single out their contribution to the academic disciplines of Sociology and Politics, broadly speaking, with specific reference to the interdisciplinary fields of Critical Race theory and Gender Studies, which are hugely determined by theories and practices of Speciesism.

I will finally reflect on the writers' own interpretation of the cause of animal liberation, from both a theoretical and an activist perspective, trying to assess whether non-human animals' intrinsic rights (in the version of proto-rights) are enhanced by their arguments or are alternatively traded as instrumental to the human benefit, to the extent that the expression *animals rights* becomes an empty token.

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<sup>1</sup> In this regard, see for example Foucault, M. (2008) *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the Collège de France. 1978-1979* (trans G.Burchell), Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; Agamben, G. (2005) *Homo Sacer. Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita*. Torino: Einaudi.

## 2. The importance of an engaged theory, socio-political activism and rights

*Aphro-ism* could be placed within the larger, established discipline of post-modernism and post-humanism, but the two authors have decided not to engage with this literature and its convoluted and sometimes Eurocentric theories and to instead “build on a very long tradition of black and brown thinkers, activists, scholars, citizen-intellectuals and artists who have, from the beginning seen the human-animal binary in effect in racial oppression” (2020, p. 118), by analysing the animal aspect of the binary within the frameworks of critical race scholarship, decolonial studies and decolonial feminism.

Just as Franz Fanon argued that the *Negro* was a creation of whiteness, expected to gravitate towards it (Fanon, 1967), so the category of *animal*, according to the Ko sisters, was a colonial invention imposed on humans and animals, alongside the binary construction of identity that characterizes European whiteness as the model of humanity; in a nutshell, the conceptions of humanity/human vis-a-vis animality-animals have been constructed along *racial lines*. As a result, Syl Ko claims that animals did not inform our notion of *animality*. Animality instead informed our notions of animals. In this way, she re-elaborates in a problematic fashion (as it will be argued later in this essay) what decolonial sociologists, like Anibal Quijano (2000) and Maria Lugones (2010), have argued previously, referring to the invention of *race* as a pivotal turn to replace hierarchical relations of superiority and inferiority through domination. What is inherently a dynamic of oppression of one group over another is naturalized in terms of a biological (pseudo-biological) power structure, that regiments the lives of human and non-human animals alike, despite the wealth of studies by ethologists and cognitive ethologists (Bekoff, De Wall, Fouts, Griffin) who have variously shown how there is unity in the evolution of all animals (including the human ones) as well as difference in the unity.

This line of argument also suggests a crucial reflection on the representational practices (and significance) of animal and animality in our societies. “Animal” is not exclusively a category meant to refer to non-human species, but to the various marginalized and minoritized groups against which violence and abuse are allegedly justified and naturalized along biological lines and indeed speciesist ones.

Such an analysis of the interconnectedness of oppressions among the animalised of the world potentially offers some broad ideas for a collective strategy of opposition against oppression and ultimately injustice (elaborated as an uneven distribution of Power and forces rather than the violation of one’s fundamental rights); however, it seems to be less able to provide the oppressed

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with an actual plan of liberation that is based on the more ethical, and somehow pragmatic, stand that each case of domination and denial of freedom (and rights) should be taken singularly, as intolerable and unjust in its own right.

The Ko sisters argue that antiracists, feminists and vegans should all be involved in challenging the binary divide between human and animal, and above all the category of animal that constitutes the “ideological bedrock” of systems of oppression and abuse (2020, p. 45). If activists fail to confront these basic dynamics of oppression, they are bound to fail in their efforts for liberation. Here it is easy to recall a version of what so presciently Martin Luther King expressed in his *Letter from Birmingham jail* (1963) when he claimed that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. It is relevant for the present analysis to highlight that the fight against injustice that Martin Luther King so tenaciously (and successfully) conducted, was firmly rooted in the idea (which we could say stemmed from a rights-based approach) that the imbalance of forces within society and the ensuing oppression of certain groups were the result of the denial of those groups’ fundamental human and civil rights. In a nutshell, Martin Luther King did not think that any actual civil and political progress would have been achieved for the African American community in the USA, unless their moral and legal status was recognized as equal with the white majority<sup>2</sup>.

This is not the theoretical premise of *Aphroism*; rather the Ko sisters’ arguments are built on the notion of the practical insignificance of rights and their ensuing claim. The imbalance of Power within society makes (according to their reasoning) certain subjects (the racialized and animalized ones) ontologically inferior and doomed to be oppressed; they also implicitly express the idea (2020, p.94) that governments, institutions, legal treaties and convention of rights are colonial instruments of subjugation used by the powerful (the white, European majority) to control the powerless. If an examination of those approaches and theoretical frameworks goes well beyond the scope of this short article and probably this author’s skill set, it is sufficient to question those approaches in terms of the actual possibilities for change and

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<sup>2</sup> This author is aware of the fact that equality within legal systems is not automatically translated into an equitable society. The pervasive and structural racism that plagues North American society nowadays, 60 years after the abolition of segregation, is a case in point. Having said that, what MLK and the civil-rights movement achieved was extraordinary and it meant a huge progress for the black minority. Without the recognition of African Americans equal status, legally and morally, any analysis and critique of persisting racism within that society would be inconceivable and null, as racism and the systematic oppression of African Americans would be plainly legal and sanctioned by the law.

progress that they suggest to the oppressed (the human and non-human ones) whom putatively they speak for. If the oppressed within society are deprived of both the possibility of defending their interests and of attaching a claim to them, morally and legally, that is the basic definition of a right, in which way they could fight oppression and achieve freedom from it. Arguably they could fight oppression by using the same tools as the oppressors (force and abuse) that in best-case scenario would lead to new imbalances of injustice and power. I suspect that such a strategy would never dismantle the actual operations of Power as a constant threat against one's fundamental interests (and rights); it would simply perpetuate violence without offering actual tools for contrasting it. More importantly, in relation to non-human animals and their lack of rights, the adoption of a similar strategy would imply that their condition of oppression will never come to an end.

*Aphroism* also claims that by ignoring or neglecting the paradigm of the interconnectedness of oppressions, activists embrace and support the same form of oppression they are fighting against, contributing to an endless cycle of violence within the social fabric. As Aph Ko highlights, “this model of compartmentalizing oppressions tracks the problematic Eurocentric compartmentalization of the world and its members in general” (2020, p. 71).

The writers elaborate that the practices of Eurocentric (or racialized) veganism often employ comparisons, analogies and discussions of similarities in abuses that elide differences in oppressive practices and structures. According to their reasoning, racist oppression is not an example to be *exploited* for the liberation of other animals. They argue that the specific practice of Eurocentric veganism of conjuring up the experience of people who have been animalized (and thus oppressed and abused) as a mere metaphor for another's oppression (the non-human animals), denies the relevance of the experience of people who have been oppressed. They then become the “empty signifier”, as French philosopher Jacques Lacan might put it, or the “absent referent” as Carol Adams elaborated it (1990).

In this context, Aph Ko argues that the inner racial grammar of the vegan movement is white: by using the experience of racialized groups as a metaphor for animal oppression they make invisible those groups' experiences of injustice and racism.

According to this reasoning, Eurocentric veganism falls short of correcting systemic racism, but it seems that the majority of Eurocentric vegans never perceived the need of dismantling racism in our societies. One of Aph Ko's purposes, as she writes, was to “de-centre the white centric campaigns” (2020, p. 93). In her view, vegans who do not incorporate a critical racial lens fail to understand how speciesism operates: the legitimation of racial hierarchies through pseudo-biological orders are presented as natural and ineluctable.

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Racism and speciesism are deeply entangled. In her essay, Syl Ko supports this line of reasoning by claiming that “the organizing principle for racial logic lies in the human-animal divide” (2020, p. 66), understood to be moral opposites.

The Ko sisters also warn against the universalistic perspective of the quite popular claim “we are all animals”, as this model, they argue, contributes to the erasure of differences rather than their celebration. In a way – they claim – the push for sameness usually maintains the dominant group as the standard to which others and the *Others* should aspire.

It pays to notice, following the very insightful analysis by feminist philosopher Drucilla Cornell (1995), that the extension of the equal protection of certain minimum conditions of individuation in relation to a person and a subject of rights (being the human animal or the non-human animal), are the necessary (but by no means sufficient) elements that support the chance to transform any living being into an individuated being who can participate in political and public life. Cornell rightly highlights that only the equal protection of certain minimum and common standards are able to safeguard the necessary conditions of a person. If the universalistic principle is refused, personal individuation becomes subjected to the capricious, contingent workings of Power, broadly understood, and its unbalanced, unequal relationships. Ultimately the divide between justice and injustice, in relation to one’s condition (human and non-human animal ones), runs the risk of being determined relationally, within the uneven relations of Power, or essentialistically, as constitutive elements of certain identities as opposed to others.

In this imaginary context, instead of being a way to protect one’s fundamental interest and a claim to it, a right is taken apart and ends up being, in a very arbitrary way, an act of *concession* bestowed upon the powerless by the powerful. The anti-universalistic model, as advocated by the Ko sisters, would hardly result in an anti-oppressive and liberated society for human and non-human animals alike; at its best, it would result in an endless alternation of systems of domination, intrinsically violent towards some groups. Specifically, in relation to non-human animals, whose enslavement to humans is total and whose moral and legal status is that of property (Francione, 2020), the condition of their subjugation would only be reinforced by this model, without the possibility of any substantial progress.

In concluding their book, like many vegans of color campaigning for non-human animal and human rights, Aph and Syl Ko critically reflect on their challenges in being antiracist and black feminists among antiracists and black feminists who happen to be speciesists. They report how some black non-vegans have misunderstood their commitment to animal liberation as equating non-human animals as the *same* as black people that echoes the practice of animalising black people. They respond to this accusation by unpacking and

analysing the working of *animality* within our societies and maintaining that there is an urgent need for controversial conversations if more progress towards social justice is to be achieved.

### 3. The audiences for *Aphro-ism*

Aph and Syl Ko started their blogging careers in 2013 as digital activists, with the purpose of bridging the gap between vegan feminist theory and the fast-paced and rich conversations occurring across social media, placing their debate within the so called Pop culture. *Aphro-ism* constitutes a collection of essays from these projects, mostly composed between 2015 and 2016. This editorial choice has several advantages as the topics addressed are timely and also appealing to a non-academic audience. However, this specific approach could weaken the endurance of their arguments as the case studies presented to build their theoretical arguments quickly fade given the rapidity and fluidity of online trending. The YouTube videos and blog references that are crucial to most essays, for instance, have already become dated and partly forgotten. From this point of view, *Aphro-ism*'s consistent reliance on social media and, generally speaking, cultural references could date the analysis and in part puzzle readers in the years to come.

Having said that, present and future readers will be rewarded by the Ko sisters intense and urgent prose.

Their arguments, some of which I find counter-productive in connection with the advocacy for animal rights and personhood, can surely appeal to multiple and interdisciplinary audiences. I thus attempt to single out some of them.

Mainstream political theorists and sociologists, generally speaking, could benefit from *Aphro-ism* to create a theoretical framework and an analysis of the social fabric that includes animals, animality and their uneven and exploitative relation with humans. In both disciplines, animals are constantly compared with humans and found deficient in some sense. Other times, theorists use animals to build a theory, but none of them actually include the treatment of animals within those accounts. Relying lazily on outdated characterizations of animals and ignorant of the most recent biological and ethological findings, political scientists and sociologists have found few reasons to contemplate and study the omnipresence of animal life that is subjected to the human oppressive rule. In the last decade, however, a minority of political theorists and sociologists have started to look at the animal presence and conditions of oppression, both at the institutional and societal levels. Those lines of inquiry can definitely be supported by the Ko sisters' work and their analysis of the dynamics of



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oppression, employed by humans to dominate non-human animals and the *animalized* of our societies.

The Ko sisters' work is a critical study that demonstrates how there is no progressive antiracist and feminist praxis without a deep understanding of the interactions of race, gender and animality. As Syl argues, "the open acceptance of the negative status of the animal is a tacit acceptance of the hierarchical racial system and white supremacy in general" (2020, p. 74). Critical race scholars have acutely argued that *race* marked the *other* and objectified them as they were racialized. But blackness as a projection of the white imaginary is a condition of invisibility, a mode of being unseen because un-seeable. As Lewis Gordon (1995) writes "the black body – as unseen – is reduced to anonymity. They are all alike in their blackness, it is impossible to tell them apart" (1995, p. 34). It is disconcerting to realize the extent to which the majority of Critical race scholars have been able to analyse so clinically the operations of race and coloniality, while ignoring or neglecting *tout court* the machinery of speciesism and animality, whose dynamics of oppression are inherently hegemonic. Although the effects of speciesism are different and experienced in a unique way by its victims, the mechanisms of oppression consistently work – as critical race theorists would argue – to make the dominated *invisible* and naturally bound to be dominated. Animal agriculture and all the other forms of exploitation and cruelty against non-human animals precisely achieve the following: the invisibility of the animals and the legitimation of their oppression, along pseudo-biological lines. Aph and Syl Ko's book constitutes an interesting theoretical improvement of the widespread speciesism of critical race theorists.

Feminist scholarship is another field that generally, with few exceptions, is affected by strong practices of speciesism. While with the advent of decolonial studies and the rich theorization elaborated by critical race theorists, the paradigms of colonial and Eurocentric feminism have been enormously challenged, nevertheless the *invisibility* of speciesism has allowed a wealth of analytical frameworks, conceptualizations and praxis of liberation, from global systems of patriarchy that have neglected or made invisible the forms of oppressions and abuses against non-human animals. Hence, those feminist studies lacking an anti-speciesist focus have re-enacted and left unchallenged the very same practices of colonial and racial domination, along patriarchal lines or, as Matthew Cole and Kate Stewart (2018) acutely defined it, by introducing an anti-speciesist neologism, along *anthro-parchal* lines.

*Aphro-ism* also addresses the field of animal ethics. Aph and Syl Ko shift the debate from animal rights, animal *epistemology* presented as our knowledge of their capacities (that is inherently limited and strictly dependent on scientific progress) to their social ontology. They ask us to consider what compels us to advocate for or against rights and obligations in relation to living beings who

are already “doomed” to an inferior status by social codification. With their notion of animality, they draw together the human-animal biological divide and the human-animal social divide and argue that the latter actually subsumes and exceeds the former. Here, it is worth mentioning that the writers re-propose the arguments elaborated many years before by a group of eco-feminist scholars, who wrote the book *Beyond Animal Rights* (Adams & Donovan, 1997). The authors of the book claim that *rights*, generally speaking, are patriarchal and hegemonic elaborations; they should be replaced by a practice and an ethics of care towards non-human animals.

It goes beyond the scope of the present article to conduct a thorough critique of their work. In this context, I find it important to highlight that the idea that one’s rights, as the protection of one’s fundamental interests, should be replaced by one’s relations of care with others, potentially paves the way to widespread practices of abuse and abusive relationships. It is crucial to highlight that rape is a fundamental violation of rights, namely that of bodily integrity, regardless of the claimed intentions of (sexual) care that might have moved the rapist in the first place. If rape was not sanctioned as a gross violation of one’s rights but as a matter of relational practices, women would still be raped with impunity. The moral and legal definition of rape<sup>3</sup> as a fundamental violation of one’s rights is an enormous achievement for the social progress of our society above all in terms of women’s rights. If the notion of the importance of rights is extolled for human beings, but undermined for non-human animals, the arguments proposed by *Beyond Animal Rights* are not only problematic and somehow non-progressive but also intrinsically speciesist and they should not find any favourable reception among people who attempt to liberate non-human animals from the shackles of human domination.

In many ways, the Ko sisters’ book constitutes an analysis of how veganism is somehow connected with practices and struggles for the liberation of *hegemonized* living beings. If their elaboration of oppression and discrimination in society appears to be commendably liberated from Eurocentric and racialized

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<sup>3</sup> The legal definition of rape has enormously progressed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century the international community commenced to recognize rape as a weapon and strategy of war. In the 1993 the UN Commission on Human Rights (replaced in 2006 by the UN Human Rights Council) declared rape and military sexual slavery to be crimes against Humanity punishable as violation of women’s human rights. In a resolution adopted in 2008, the UN Security Council affirmed that rape and other forms of sexual violence constitute war crimes, crimes against humanity or a constitutive act with respect to genocide. In 2011, the Istanbul Convention on violence against women clearly defined violence against women, including sexual violence and rape as a gross violation of human rights and a form of discrimination.

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approaches, nevertheless their veganism fails to be dislodged from a very anthropocentric approach; veganism -as the title indicates- is mostly elaborated as a sort of cosmetic feature of political and social movements, rather than a moral obligation towards animals.

In this regard, in the next section of this paper I will analyse whether the notion of interconnectedness of oppression between 'sub-humanized' groups and non-human animals, as elaborated by Aph and Syl Ko, can offer effective theoretical and political instruments for advocating for animal liberation and the enforcement of their moral and legal rights. I am interested in exploring the extent to which any comparison, analogy and eventually coalescence of the notion of human and animal oppression supports a theory and a practice of shared justice or, conversely, reiterates narratives of anthropocentrism by contributing to a secondary form of objectification and instrumentalization of non-human animals, their agency and their fundamental rights to life.

In addition I will also question whether the approach that analyses non-human animals' uneven and exploitative relations with humans, as a matter of imbalances of Power in society, represents a valid approach to advance their position as intrinsic rights-holders or alternatively it results in a practice of compiling novel cartographies of oppression, where the oppressed (the non-human animals) are constantly reproduced as inadequate and in need of some human control and supervision

#### 4. A politics of animality without the Animals?

*Aphro-ism*, as a collection of essays, stands as an interesting set of arguments that demonstrate the intrinsic political nature of animality; it also encourages readers, activists, citizens and public intellectuals to strive for a relentless deconstruction of Eurocentric understandings of race and species, in order to innovate the debate about both.

I have read the book several times together with several of Aph and Syl Ko's blog entries and articles on Vegan Feminist Network (VFN)<sup>4</sup>. It is unfortunate and counterproductive for the relentless fight for animal liberation that the Ko 's analysis is empowering in advancing the importance of animality and in deconstructing it, but it makes non-human animals duly invisible, as speciesism does, although within a different paradigm and for a different purpose. Readers are introduced to non-human animals primarily as a metaphor and an instrument for black liberation. Non- human animals' agencies,

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<sup>4</sup>The blog was initiated and founded by the American sociologist, dr. Corey Lee Wrenn, specializing in human-animal studies.

subjectivities as living, breathing beings and suffering ones, as victims of a totalitarian human rule, are paradoxically objectified, reduced to a *cosmetic* status. They are rendered *visible* and *invisible* at the same time: visible as a token of the interconnectedness of oppressions and invisible as victims of that oppression.

The authors clearly declare that there is an intentionality to this omission: “veganism just can’t be all about the animals. We are the ones who talk about and act on this problem. So it will always have to be a little bit about us too” (2020, p. 55), where the use, in the last sentence, of the future tense suggests the projection of a well distinguished vision for the future (along racial/speciesist lines), and “us” refers specifically to black minorities. In so doing, Aph and Syl Ko neglect the fact that there are many minoritized and oppressed groups in society whose skin colour differs from black; they also implicitly sabotage their own elaboration of the interconnectedness of oppression, by assigning a specific skin colour to the oppressed.

In addition, a focus on the epidermis of the racialized could be – generally speaking – historically accurate and it could amount to the signifier of the oppression as experienced by the oppressed, but rarely to its signified and its phenomenology. Such a confusing operation of collapsing the signifier with the signified contributes to a weakening of the analysis of the anatomies of oppression; it undermines the multiple experiences of the victims of oppression and eventually it prevents the elaboration of a consistent agenda of anti-coloniality for a society free from oppression and abuses of power. Above all, in relation to animal rights and veganism, it contributes to reinforcing a very human-centric view of the world that has produced the speciesist hegemony over non-human animals, the instrumentalization of their rights and the objectification of their agencies.

In the following section, I will attempt to explain the reasons that lead me to consider Aphroism’s approach to non-human animals, their rights and veganism, in general, as very anthropocentric and over-*identitarian*, in relation to issues that should be inherently related to the liberation of non-human animals from human domination, ontologically and epistemologically. In a subtle, radically invisible way, Aphroism’s arguments endorse the primacy of humans over non-human animals, who end up being trapped by the faulty, racist and misogynist arrangements of human societies for which they bear no responsibility and from which they should be, rightfully, freed.

It is undeniable that race and other identities shape the vegan theory and praxis, of the “Eurocentric whites” as, relatedly, of the “Black vegans”. It pays to question whether a movement of transspecies justice – as the Kos envision black veganism – can be truly liberating, if it sets its course and its goals toward a future social fabric, where the categories of *race*, *black*, *white*, *species* and *animality* still work at full speed. Those categories are in fact children of the practices of

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racism and speciesism that they perpetuate endlessly anytime a vision of the future is still organized along racial and speciesist lines. Will such a movement be able to change the course of history towards “justice for all”, or rather will it stand as a *radical* celebration of the status quo, that will benefit none apart from the forces and agents of oppression and violations of rights? My argument does not negate at all the existence of racism and inequality in every aspect of the social fabric; quite the opposite, it tries to push forward an antiracist practice for a vision of a non-racial society where the categories of race and species have eventually stopped to function and to have relevance. This will not be achieved by reemploying constantly the categories of race and species in every praxis, agenda and vision for the future. It is not ‘All about Race’ as the English Prime Minister Disraeli liked to claim at the beginning of the 20th century advancing a very racist vision of society: conversely, every aspect of our social and political life has a racial dimension that we should strive to overcome, regardless of one’s background.

In relation to non-human animals, whose vulnerability, suffering and abuses of rights at the hands of human animals (Linzey, 2009, p.35) are historically longer and amplified when compared inter-sectionally with the suffering and abuses experienced by human minorities, in which way could they benefit from a theory and a praxis that oppose the hijacking of racism against minoritized group by a group of Eurocentric vegans, with the hijacking of animality, (animals) and speciesism by a group of black vegans? A deeper and more nuanced reflection on the ancillary and self-serving value of the concept of *animality* and, relatedly, the invisibility of *Animals* in *Aphro-ism* has been formulated when I reflected on the claim, variously re-elaborated through the book, that “the category of animal was also a colonial invention that has been imposed on human and animals” (2020, p. 144).

Leaving aside the quite preposterous claim that represents living, sentient beings as an historical invention, it is relevant to reflect on the Ko sisters’ historical re-collection of categories of discrimination, to support the critique of their problematic arguments that end up fostering radically invisible practices of speciesism that do not advance animals’ liberation; quite the opposite, they support their subjugation.

From an epistemological point of view, the word *race* is sometimes used in translation of classical and medieval texts, (Goldberg, 1993) but the term translated is invariably species and what is intended is not race but people and above all *foreign people*, and in particular barbarians and slaves, deprived of culture, democracy, ruled by Nature, similar to animals, and bound to be dominated and oppressed, as the Greek society elaborated it. The discrimination against those deemed uncultivated, close to nature was performed at a *speciesist* (animal) level. In Medieval thought, the exotic people,

the *species* subjected to exclusions, were represented as monstrous figures, falling between the Human and the Animal. These included Albanians, Ethiopians, Pygmies, speechless men and women, many types of hairy men and women and defective births (Friedman, 1981). If Greeks conceived the *species* in derogatory terms from a political and intellectual point of view, medieval thought was concentrated on theological categories and the species were those lacking morality, purveyors of the Natural Law: in a nutshell, non-human animals. If premodernity lacked any conception of the differences between human beings as racial, modernity comes increasingly to be defined by and through race. In many ways, it could be said that the shift from premodernity to modernity is in part a shift from speciesist (and relatedly politically and religiously) definitions to a racially defined discourse on human identity and personhood.

What this concise archaeology of discrimination through history is meant to suggest is that it is not too unreasonable to argue that speciesism has actually informed racism, rather than the opposite, as *Aphro-ism* tries to argue. In addition, human oppression and cruelty against non-human animals, deemed as inferior and naturally bound to be dominated, have been a constant practice characterizing the history of the human-animal relation, well before the definition of this oppression could be categorised along political, religious and racial lines. These brief considerations should suggest that the fight for animal liberation and their rights should constitute the primary goal of vegan movements, while opposing consistently injustice, violations of human rights and the forms of racial and gender oppression that as an invisible veil shrouds the social fabric and impedes any substantial progress towards social and political justice.

It is wise to argue – as *Aphro-ism* does – that the analysis should scrutinise the forces of oppression. Likewise, it is crucial to highlight that the designs and the effects of those oppressive forms vary in relation to the victims: those against non-human animals appear as most atrocious and relentless as perpetrated inter-sectionally by a variety of identities that – as Gramsci so poignantly would say – constitutes a dominant hegemony, of *Speciesism*. The lack of equality and above all of equity in our societies, the limitless number of cases of abuse and injustice against human beings through history worldwide, which needs no recounting here, does not seem substantially or inherently related to the horrors animals have suffered at the hands of humans. The operation of linking hypothetically the sufferings and atrocities experienced by animals with those of marginalized human groups is fruitless, if not a manipulation and exploitation of atrocities experienced by victims of abuses. Aphroism's analytical framework also endorses, in a non-progressive way, an approach that gives prominence to the abusers rather than to the victims, whose experience

of suffering and abuses needs to be taken as utterly unacceptable in its own right.

In addition, while the decolonial framework of analysis employed by *Aphro-ism* is useful and empowering for sketching the identity of the oppressors, the multifaceted forms of oppression and the machinery of animality, it appears inadequate to offer advice and eventually possible solutions for a future of justice for the victims of that oppression. In short, the deconstruction of a colonial present doesn't prevent a colonial future from occurring unless there is a concentrated effort towards the setting of a moral and legal framework of anti-coloniality. In relation to animals and their moral and legal rights, this effort should advance towards the definition of a list of fundamental animal rights that are not *encroachable* upon by states, political entities, civil societies, generally by humans, and they are morally and legally protected by the law. Non-human animals should gain the ethical and legal status of *personhood*. Currently they are chattel properties (Francione, 2020, p. 28) and any suggestion that an ethics of care and a non-oppressive relationship (among the oppressed) could be the solution to liberate them from subjugation seem implausible. The ethics of care approach deprives non-human animals of the right to have rights<sup>5</sup>, as *subjects* of rights, and keeps them instead as *objects* of human piety.

If the magnanimous role of history is acknowledged as a beacon of light for social and political progress, it is imperative to remember that the ashes and embers of a dictatorial regime in Italy were not accidentally pulverized by the end of a disastrous war and relatedly the end of the brutal fascist rule, but predominantly were removed with the elaboration of a progressive, forward thinking Constitution (1948) that defined and protected Italian citizens' fundamental rights to life and to a free and democratic way of living together, liberated from the oppression and the necro-politics of Fascism. Likewise, few decades later, in 1964, the Civil Rights movement in the United States achieved a great victory with the milestone Civil Rights Act that outlawed segregation and extended civil, political and legal rights and protection to African Americans.

## 5. Conclusions

The making of non-human animals' liberation as a token of other forms of liberation, as Aphrosim so consistently does, contributes to the endless

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<sup>5</sup> This author borrows such an enlightened expression from Hannah Arendt. She elaborated this concept in an essay in 1949 that then became part of chapter 8 of *the Origins of Totalitarianism*.

perpetuation of a radically speciesist society that deprives non-human animals of agency, intrinsic rights and both a present and a future of freedom from the anthropocentric society we have consolidated through our unequal, racist and misogynist history.

As an activist, who has been fighting for animal rights and liberation since a very young age, and who has always opposed practically and academically any form of racialization against certain groups in society, this author argues that the notion of the interconnectedness of oppressions in society could be interpreted as some sort of threshold for only imagining global liberation. She also largely disagree with Hugh Roberts' accusation (2007) that intersectionality identity politics represents minorities' narcissism, since practices of self-representation along cultural, religious, gender and ethnic lines are essentially social acts and tools of choices for marginalized groups to counter hegemonic forms of domination, the last barrier between themselves and those who have dominated them<sup>6</sup>. Nonetheless, the definition of one's identity(ies) and their self-representation should not imply the abuse, the denial, the erosion, the manipulation and the instrumentalization of another living being's rights, as it is Aphroism's elaboration of non-human animal rights in relation to the general cause of liberation of race and gender.

Even if a rights-based approach is refused or eschewed – which would be an unsound position if real progress is sought after – it will be sufficient (but not exhaustive) to concentrate on the specific effects of those forces of oppression on the oppressed and eventually their lack of means (mostly enforceable moral and legal rights) to counter those violations. In a nutshell, while the notion of the interconnectedness of oppression could be initially useful in order to elaborate new political views, it appears theoretically and politically hollow when the dynamics of oppression (as performed by the oppressors) are analysed closely in relation to their specific effects on the

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<sup>6</sup> A separate article should be written on the analysis of identity politics, an highly debated topic among sociologists and political scientists. Generally, the examination is focused on identity politics as elaborated by minorities and marginalised groups in society. It is worth noticing that nationalism, as well, is a well distinct form of identity politics. Its elaboration and its implementation can be highly problematic, within the social fabric. My position is that everyone should be free to elaborate and express their own identity(-ies) in society and none should act as the gatekeeper of someone else's identities. On the other hand, the problematic and pernicious developments of certain forms of identity politics should be always exposed by academics, public commentators and members of the civil society. The elaboration of one's identity should not imply the erosion or denial of other groups rights' in society. Historically, up to today, nationalism has been one of the lethal ideological justifications for tragic practices of genocide against certain members of society, whose *rights to exist* are fundamentally denied.



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oppressed (i.e non- human animals) and above all, if a future of justice for non-human animals is concretely elaborated. The application of the notion in itself could amount more to a tokenism, than a real epistemological and practical effort to support non- human animals moral and legal recognition of their fundamental rights to life. Besides, a potentially negative consequence of the employment of the concept of interconnectedness of oppression, in relation to animal rights theories and praxis, is that non- human animals and their subjectivities are exposed to the risk of being endlessly objectivised and rendered invisible (as it is the case for *Aphroism*): the substantial and most prominent double- bind dynamic of speciesism.

Animals are – without any possible doubt – positioned at the lowest echelon of oppression, made massively vulnerable to the forces and domination of an anthropocentric world that, if it is unequally and dramatically divided along racial and gender lines, conjointly works to commodify, objectivize, use, abuse, and kill non-human animals, as a group. As argued in this paper, this author is against the notion that the fight for animal liberation should be collapsed with other fights of human liberation: if those fights all share a common dynamic of oppression to rally against, there is a relevant difference in the dramatic effects of victimization on the oppressed and, above all, there is a radical disparity in the possibility of obtaining reparative justice for the victims themselves. Members of oppressed minorities<sup>7</sup> are *de jure* normative subjects of rights. Practices of racism and gender-based discrimination, inside society, together with the lethal intersection of those forms of racialization, thwart and restrict minorities members' implementation and enjoyment of rights for a flourishing life. The dynamic of oppression happens predominantly at social level (together with economic and political ones), not at a moral and legal one. Non-human animals have never been normative subjects of rights; they are instead chattel properties, and as such they are bound to be used and exploited, regardless of the anatomies of oppression inside society and the various degrees of exploitation. That is to say that any comparison or merging of oppressions between non- human animals and sub-humanized humans and the notion of interconnectedness of their oppression stand as a quite unsophisticated analysis and eventually it is non-progressive in relation to the fight for animal rights.

We should all practice antiracism and feminism, inside vegan movements as elsewhere in society, by maintaining a clear vision of liberation for non-human animals and by pushing for several much-needed ethical and legal

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<sup>7</sup> In my view, the only human group whose moral and legal status could be compared (if comparisons ever make any actual sense) with that of animals are refugees and stateless people.

milestones that recognise them as *persons* with enforceable moral and legal rights. In this context this author finds extremely important what Gary Francione (2020) so clearly stated that the fact that a living being is sentient is enough for their acquisition of moral and legal rights to life. This revolutionary idea also stands as an important counterargument against the more popularized approaches in animal rights theories that categorize animals and their (presumed) rights according to their skills, their cognitive apparatus and their ability to feel pain. Building on the extraordinary arguments proposed by the feminist novelist and social theorist Brigid Brophy, we should acknowledge that every living being, from the inception of their life, works as a system towards staying alive. This defines and ascribes non-human animals' right to life, without the need to limit, balance or even deny such a right according to some farcical and unfounded vetting, operated by humans. Brophy also clearly states, as an important counterclaim to any utilitarian philosophical view, that living beings claim their rights to life independently from their rights to shun pain (Brophy, 1971, p. 127).

In concluding this paper, the present author finds it important to stress the need for a total paradigm shift in the field of (loosely defined) animal rights theories: a total shift that parts ways with the current widespread approaches – namely utilitarianism, neo-welfarism, by which *Aphroism* generally abides, or complicated theories that trade animals' moral rights with anthropocentric and fictional political membership<sup>8</sup> – that have achieved historically very little for animals, who are still used, abused and killed daily in atrocious numbers, and that reproduce them as inadequate to be intrinsic subjects of rights. At their best, the guidelines that are derived from those theories regiment the degrees of non-human animal exploitation, rather than their total liberation from human domination.

Our common mission, as animal advocates, regardless of our identities within the fractured, discriminating human societies that have vilified our ethical bonds of humanity, should be to strive for recognizing animals as persons, morally and legally, free from our dominion. This also necessarily entails embracing veganism as a moral obligation towards animals. That is the acknowledgment of non-human animals' intrinsic right not to be used as food, entertainment, fashion sources, laboratories cavies, 'things', 'arguments', or even 'theories of liberation', relentlessly at human disposal.

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<sup>8</sup> The discussion of those approaches in 'animal rights' theory goes beyond the scope of the present article. For a very thorough examination of those theories and their deeply anthropocentric and speciesist stands, I suggest to check Francione, G. (2020) *Why Veganism matters. The Moral Value of Animals*. New York: Columbia University Press.

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