



Farmed nonhuman animals in newspapers and *Aphro-ism*



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Abstract

Critical discourse analysis of farmed nonhuman animals in newspapers has so far relied on a common problem understanding. This understanding is framed as speciesism, as a human-animal issue, “similar” to racism or sexism. Additionally, scientific evidence of sentience or suffering aids to argue against speciesism. In their recent book *Aphro-ism*, Aph and Syl Ko (2017a) describe their framework of black veganism. *Aphro-ism* challenges the conventional definition of speciesism and instead formulates animal oppression as more than a mere human-animal issue. Instead, Ko and Ko identify the common source of oppressions in white, human supremacy which harms all who are considered “not-quite-human”. *Aphro-ism* also questions the reliance on scientific evidence as an argument against oppression. As oppression is not based on observable differences, scientific evidence does not get to its ideological roots. Overall, Ko and Ko (2017a) urge for a closer investigation into the ideological and conceptual roots of oppression, and for an exploration of alternative frameworks rooted in anti-racist and decolonial traditions. Thus, the *Aphro-ism* perspective provides an extra layer for analyzing how commodifying or objectifying language and animal oppression are interlinked. This article discusses how Ko and Ko’s perspective can enrich the newspaper research on farmed nonhuman animal’s representation in both its conceptual approaches and findings.



Keywords:

Aphro-ism, animal oppression, anti-racism, farmed nonhuman animals, newspaper representation, critical discourse analysis, critical animal and media studies.

1. Introduction

Farmed nonhuman animals constitute a massive group of individuals exploited at the hands of humans. Through the way newspapers report the news, they can reflect and reinforce, but also challenge dominant discourses legitimizing exploitation. Thus, newspaper articles provide an interesting medium for critical analysis. With the rising concern for nonhuman animals in the last decades, the scholarly attention to the subject has increased. One of the strands of research concerns itself with nonhuman animals’ representation and discourses in the media. The field of critical animal and media studies, with its roots in critical animal studies and critical media studies, has pioneered this research from an intersectional, antispeciesist perspective (Almiron, Cole, and Freeman 2016). Several studies have analyzed the representation of farmed nonhuman animals in newspapers through critical discourse analysis and textual analysis, which are the focus of this paper.

In 2017, Aph and Syl Ko (2017a) released their essays into a crucial book for critical animal and media studies, *Aphro-ism: Essays on Pop Culture, Feminism and Black Veganism*. *Aphro-ism* contains a rich analysis based on the Ko sisters' experiences in both the anti-racist and vegan movements while drawing from different decolonial and anti-racist perspectives. As such, they outline their conceptual framework of black veganism. This paper does not provide a full summary of all their arguments, but rather explores which parts can enrich the analysis on farmed nonhuman animals' representation in newspapers.

As is clear throughout the book, one's position in the social hierarchies and associated personal experiences are crucial in creating theories and frameworks. This is one of the central premises of *Aphro-ism* and black veganism. Therefore, positioning myself as what the dominant view considers a fully human, white, European, able-bodied cis male crucially shapes my experiences. Certainly, this stops me from representing black veganism, and I must take extra care not to misrepresent the perspectives laid out in *Aphro-ism*. However, not engaging with this invaluable literature due to my privileges would do nothing to decolonize my perspectives. After all, being privileged by white, human supremacy does not mean I'm absolved of the urgency to dismantle it.

2. Theoretical frameworks

Analyzing farmed nonhuman animal's representation first requires an analysis of the problem to frame the research. The way the problem is understood significantly influences how the newspapers are analyzed. While not all mentioned studies below deal exactly with farmed nonhuman animals' representation in newspapers, their similar problem definitions are relevant to provide a broader picture. This section will first summarize the most prevalent theories and frameworks in the literature before exploring the ways *Aphro-ism* challenges them.

2.1. Speciesism

Most of the reviewed research for this paper bases its analysis on an understanding of and opposition to speciesism. While the authors describe speciesism in different ways, there are some common themes and definitions. The most common definition comes from Peter Singer's (1975) influential book *Animal Liberation*. Based on Singer's work, Carrie P. Freeman (2009, 82) describes speciesism as the "discrimination of a living being based on his/her species". Natalie Khazaal and Núria Almiron (2016) also cite Singer's influence in spreading the term. The root of the term comes from Richard Ryder, who is also cited in the definitions (Cole and Morgan 2011, Khazaal and Almiron 2016, Freeman and Merskin 2016). Here, speciesism is defined as a "prejudice against nonhuman animals" (Cole and Morgan 2011, 135). Thus, the initial understanding of speciesism amounts to a discrimination, prejudice, or bias of humans towards nonhumans.

A crucial detail in the common definitions of speciesism is the comparison to racism and sexism. These comparisons originate in the Singer's and Ryder's definitions, which "relate speciesism to better-known bias-based ideologies such as racism and sexism" (Khazaal and Almiron 2016, 3). Speciesism, as a form of discrimination, operates "like racism or sexism" (Freeman 2009, 82). Another way to phrase this is to see speciesism as "analogous to sexism and racism" (Cole and Morgan 2011, 135). The most common definitions thus see speciesism as a different, yet similar phenomenon to racism and sexism.

While many studies define speciesism as discrimination or prejudice, similar to racism and sexism, several others expand this view to provide more systemic definitions as well. For example, Matthew Cole and Karen Morgan (2011, 135) draw from David Nibert's sociological perspective to analyze speciesism's "manifestation in social institutions and relationships". Similarly, Khazaal and Almiron (2016) describe the institutionalization of speciesism for human profit. These views provide a more systemic perspective going beyond the narrow definitions of discrimination and prejudice, which are still rather prevalent.

Aphro-ism provokes several challenges to this view of speciesism as the problem. Firstly, they reject universalizing problem definitions and emphasize how our specific experiences shape our problem definitions (Ko and Ko 2017b). A frequent objection here is that speciesism concerns nonhuman animals, not the experiences of humans. However, relating the issue to personal human experiences enriches the understanding of the problem. Only allowing one "right" way to define the problem limits the explanations and ways to fight the problem. An analysis considering this has to pay close attention to the way the problem is framed. Incorporating more diverse voices in the problem definition is a first step, however, *Aphro-ism* emphasizes the importance of using different frameworks and ways of thinking, not merely diverse people following the dominant frameworks.

This relates to a broader theme of *Aphro-ism*, that of using new or alternative frameworks, rather than merely expanding or adapting the dominant ones. This is of course in line with the decolonial argument against universalizing, dominant frameworks. The argument goes beyond pluralism for the sake of diversity, but aims to highlight the problematic roots of many dominant theories. Much of Western philosophy, and by extension also the most dominant animal rights philosophy, comes from Enlightenment thinkers, specifically white, privileged men. In its entanglement with racism and colonialism, Enlightenment thinking has a violent history of exclusion. Instead of trying to extend these views with their obsession with personhood and individuality, Syl Ko (2017a) proposes to use different ideas from anti-racist traditions or create new ones. Uprooting the dominant frameworks of the animal rights literature is a big task for a research analyzing newspaper articles. Nevertheless, focusing on alternative theories from anti-racist and decolonial perspectives can enhance the depth of such analysis.

One of these alternative frameworks is black veganism, as developed by Aph and Syl Ko. While developing their framework based on their experiences in

both vegan and anti-racist circles, they emphasize the need to listen to a range of other experiences as well. Instead of the dominant view of speciesism as different, but similar to racism and sexism, black veganism sees these issues as part of the same problem. Rather than comparing the oppressions and the outcomes, *Aphro-ism* focuses on the common source of these oppressions (Ko 2017d). In all of these oppressions, some are considered “not-quite-human” as they do not match up to the colonial invention of the ideal “human” (being white, male, *Homo sapiens*, straight, able-bodied, etc.). By centering this idea of “humanity” as the basis of white supremacy, sexism and animal oppression, there is no need to “connect” these issues superficially in their outcomes, as they already stem from the same root (Ko 2017d).

Incorporating these perspectives into the analysis requires rethinking at several levels. While the reviewed studies aim to identify and analyze how newspaper articles reinforce or challenge speciesism, the insights of *Aphro-ism* challenge the idea of speciesism as a stand-alone issue. Thus, a more holistic lens would have to identify how the discourses represent not just nonhuman animals, but all “not-quite-humans”, as well as how the discourses reinforce the colonial, “ideal” form of “human”. As the studies aim to reveal the common-sense assumptions in underlying discourses, searching for traces of the colonial invention of the “ideal” human, as described in *Aphro-ism*, would be a good starting point. These traces may be found in whose experiences are reported, and in how they are reported.

2.2. Scientific evidence

One interesting argument for this discussion that often appears in the reviewed research is the use of scientific evidence. By drawing from different natural science disciplines, studies proving animals’ sentience, capacity for suffering and emotional lives, amongst other features, should garner support for their moral consideration. These arguments show the similarity, or at least continuity, between human and nonhuman lives, which in turn should challenge speciesism. The fact that the struggle against speciesism is not as common in academia as other struggles may explain the necessity to justify that focus. Nevertheless, the use of scientific arguments to combat animal oppression opens some fruitful points of analysis. This section will first describe how the reviewed studies have incorporated scientific arguments before discussing the *Aphro-ism* perspective.

The first systematic study on farmed nonhuman animals in newspapers presents several scientific arguments before discussing the different philosophical positions (Freeman 2009). Specifically, it cites the Sentience Report from Farm Sanctuary (which is no longer available) to prove that farmed nonhuman animals “endure both physical and emotional pain during their lives and their slaughter” (Freeman 2009, 80). A more recent report is the Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness, which draws from different branches of neuroscience to prove that all mammals and birds, amongst many other animals, are conscious (Low et al. 2012). For example, a book chapter on the representation of nonhuman animals cites this declaration and thereby follows a

similar pattern of justifying the issue with scientific evidence first (Freeman and Merskin 2016). Again, the scientific evidence for their capacity to feel positive and negative emotions should support the case against speciesism and for respectful representation.

The second main study analyzed here also presents a range of scientific evidence, and directly connects it to speciesism. Citing scientists from Charles Darwin to Mark Bekoff, the article describes the evidence for the intellectual, emotional and moral lives of animals (Khazaal and Almiron 2016). Following from this growing evidence, “the assumptions that hold the symbolic core of speciesism in place are no longer deemed scientific” (Khazaal and Almiron 2016, 3). Thus, while the authors do not consider scientific evidence the main argument against speciesism, they give it significant prominence in the explanation of speciesism.

Syl Ko (2017b) explored the role of scientific evidence and the wider effort to emphasize similarities in anti-racist and anti-speciesist activism. She acknowledges the role of emphasizing the differences along racial lines as part of the racist project. On the flip side, many of the scientists working to prove the similarities want to fight the racist project. Generally speaking, this is a similar phenomenon in the racism and speciesism debate. One side emphasizes the differences, while the other side emphasizes the similarities or continuities between racial and species lines.

However, Ko argues that countering the focus on differences by focusing on similarities does not get to the root of the problems. Despite clear scientific evidence proving the similarities and continuity along racial and species lines, “racism and speciesism remain fully entrenched in our society” (Ko 2017b, loc. 866). This challenges the underlying assumption that actual, measurable differences in capabilities cause or explain racism and speciesism (Ko 2017b). Accordingly, these phenomena have deeper roots than their mere observable differences.

To explain these roots, Syl Ko draws from Cora Diamond’s (1978) concept of “the difference”. While the differences, like the ones described above, can be addressed by the sciences, “the difference” cannot be explained by the sciences. We “create the concept of the difference, knowing perfectly well the overwhelmingly obvious similarities” (Diamond 1978, 470). Instead of observable, measurable traits and differences, “the difference” stems from what we mean by the concept of “animal”. As such, for terms like “animal” or “nonhuman”, the justification of violence toward that individual “is *in the choice of that term itself* [emphasis in original]” (Ko 2017b, loc. 922). Similarly, the racist idea of inferiority is found within the racial label “black”, not in actually observed individuals (Ko 2017b). Thus, the emphasis on the observable similarities and continuities with oppressed groups does not capture the full extent of the problem.

Instead, Syl Ko advocates a different strategy. Firstly, she defends exposing the source of this created, fictional “difference”, namely white

supremacy (Ko 2017b). The second step is to “uproot the source by changing the terms of the conversation”, by “*refusing to center whiteness* in our lives and work [emphasis in original]” (Ko 2017b, loc. 937).

These points are immediately relevant to the analysis of newspaper articles, as they are essentially discursive features. The emphasis on scientific evidence for sentience and capabilities of pain and emotions could also be identified in discourses attempting to challenge the status quo. Thus, awareness of the underlying assumptions in this strategy can be information for future research. Additionally, “the difference” is another concept that can help understand the meaning packed into terms describing nonhuman animals. As Cora Diamond (1978) argued, the term “animal” already includes that this is something to be eaten, as opposed to a “human” or “person”. This perspective can inform the discursive functions of the terms beyond the externally observable features such as species membership. Further, understanding this “difference” as a creation of white supremacy can enhance a critical perspective.

3. Review of research

Going beyond the theory used in the reviewed studies, this section discusses some of the results to see how the *Aphro-ism* perspective can enrich further research. To do so, two main findings, the objectification/commodification and the suppression of suffering/emotional lives of nonhuman animals, are analyzed.

One of the main features of speciesist discourses identified in the literature is the use of objectifying or commodifying language to describe nonhuman animals. Instead of living, sentient beings, nonhuman animals are described as passive objects or as mere commodities for economic profit through several discursive strategies. Freeman (2009, 89), for example, showed US news using terms like “*livestock, beef cattle, pork, dairy cows, veal calves, poultry, or seafood* [emphasis in original]”. The other main study found a similar use of language in a Spanish newspaper (Khazaal and Almiron 2016). Following Dunayer’s (2001) analysis of speciesist language, other terms such as “nonhuman animals” are promoted as anti-speciesist alternatives.

Indeed, terms like “livestock” or “seafood” objectify nonhuman animals, yet the *Aphro-ism* perspective can still enrich this analysis. While these are the cruder terms, Syl Ko tracks the roots of our conception of “animal” that underlies them. Instead of the mere phenomena of speciesism, “the notions of ‘human’ and ‘animal’ are racially constituted” (Ko 2017e, loc. 1311). Thus, not only the crude, objectifying terms, but even the categorization as “animal” designates their place in the hierarchy. While the white, male human occupies the top of this hierarchy, the more one deviates from this “ideal”, the less one “matters” (Ko 2017e). Hence, this notion of “animality” not only denigrates nonhumans but also racialized people (Ko 2017e). As a result, Syl Ko (2017e) justifies reclaiming “the animal” to dislodge the hierarchy for the benefit of all victims of “animality”. Understanding how white supremacy underlies the human-animal binary helps

contextualize the objectification and goes beyond describing it as merely a speciesist phenomenon.

Another interesting note is the promotion of “nonhuman animals” as an alternative. Of course, this is technically the more appropriate term, since biologically, humans are animals. However, asserting that humans are animals reveals some underlying assumptions over how to challenge speciesism. Syl Ko (2017c) discusses the slogan “we are all animals” that makes a similar claim of pulling nonhuman and humans into the same space. Again, this runs into the assumption already described above that promoting objective facts (such as humans being biologically animals or emphasizing our similarities) automatically transfers into our moral behavior. This similarity can just as much be used to justify experimentation. Therefore, these facts need “to be filtered through something else, some sort of rule, that instructs us to interpret said similarity as a reason to protect and care” (Ko 2017c, loc. 2013). While this perspective does not disregard the strategy entirely, it reveals some of the underlying assumptions.

Another finding in both of the main studies is the lack or suppression of nonhuman animals’ emotions and suffering in newspaper articles (Freeman 2009, Khazaal and Almiron 2016). On the flip side, examples of such emotions and suffering are discussed as challenges to the speciesist status quo. Here, as before, Cora Diamond’s concept of “the difference” provides valuable insight. Hence, “appealing to anything external, such as their capacity to suffer, misses the force of concepts and *how* they function [emphasis in original]” (Ko 2017b, loc. 915). As described above, the justification for mistreatment is already in the concept of “the animal”. This challenges further research to go beyond the focus on suffering when exploring the discourses surrounding farmed nonhuman animals.

4. Conclusion

These are some of the many ways in which Aph and Syl Ko challenge us to rethink our assumptions when advocating against animal oppression and racism. I argue that these insights can enrich the perspective of research on farmed nonhuman animals’ representation by rethinking the frame of speciesism as an issue that only concerns nonhuman animals. Specifically, they show the shortcomings of focusing only on external, biological aspects such as sentience and suffering. Instead, they center the focus on our dominant concepts and how they function, such as the human-animal binary. Showing and problematizing the entanglements of white supremacy, coloniality and animality can help decolonize and enrich the research on farmed nonhuman animals’ representation and our understanding of animal oppression more generally.



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