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Animal Prostheses as a Site of Transspecies Intimacy: Que(e)rying Time

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As the small brown goat ran to greet us, she hobbled upon a metallic leg that began just above her left knee. The Farm Sanctuary coordinator began to speak: “Zoop is unique. We found her earlier this year just a few miles from a slaughterhouse and she was walking on her knees due to a nasty case of frostbite. We tried to save Zoop’s front legs, but we weren’t able to keep them both. But she’s got a prosthetic leg now and she’s happier than ever. She loves jumping up and giving farm visitors ‘high fives’ with her forehead.” Almost on cue, the little goat reared up on her hind legs, waving her prosthetic leg up in the air and twisting her head toward me, eagerly awaiting a pat on the head.

As I responded to her ‘high five’ request with an equally eager pat, I reflected on how unusual this situation was. How few farm animals are given a second chance to live out their lives in a sanctuary? How few animals are deemed important enough to merit care for their so-called

disabilities. Like other instruments of care, animal prostheses delineate intelligible bodies from those that are unintelligible, to borrow Judith Butler's language. Attending to human-animal relations in the U.S. reveals that we extend subjectivity to specific animals (usually domesticated pets such as cats and dogs) by naming them, caring for them and recognizing them as individuals. There are cats and dogs with prostheses but there is no discussion of commodified farm animals with disabilities being cared for, largely because farm animals are seen as not just incapable of suffering but as disposable. These beings are rendered into what Jacques Derrida calls *animots*, a play on the French words "animal" and "word," implying that animals have merely become abstract representations of animality rather than seen as unique individual lives (2002). This is akin to what Giorgio Agamben calls "bare life:" life that is no longer grievable (1995).

Though numerous activists, scholars, and non-profits have drawn attention to the ubiquity of physical trauma in the U.S. agriculture industry for non-human animals and veterinarians have started discussions of proper pet prosthesis care, there is a dearth of literature on the specific ways that prostheses for farm animals change human-animal relations. Sunaura Taylor's work bridges her own experience with arthrogryposis with that of the suffering of farm animals to emphasize the interconnectedness of animal and human precarity (2011). The recent "eco-ability" literature emerging from the Institute for Critical Animal Studies has opened important avenues for discussion, but has since focused on the role disability plays in human subjects in environmental and animal justice work (2012). Despite the growing field of interest at the intersection of animality and ability in the U.S., there remains little work addressing the unique role that care for non-normative farm animal bodies plays in reframing the conversation about animals.

I would like to argue that the implementation of prosthetic limbs for animals constitutes a unique language of transspecies intimacy that recognizes the shared precarity of animals, both human and non-human. Applying time as an analytic to this relationship, we can see that this language subverts normative understandings of time for otherwise commodified animals (in other words, animals used for food or entertainment) by interrupting commodified time. Following Elizabeth Grosz, prostheses do not just constitute inanimate objects that we apply to the body (though I focus primarily on these in this paper), but animals and humans can become prostheses for one another (2005). By focusing on the moment of initial implementation of a literal prosthesis, we can see how humans and animals develop a transspecies prosthetic relationship. I close this paper with a reminder that critically engaging transspecies intimacy means an ongoing commitment to decolonize our minds of normative time. I maintain that understanding how we relate to animals with disabilities helps us to think about how we discuss disabilities in humans. It is for this reason that this work is pertinent to thinking about feminist and queer iterations of animal justice. When thinking about intimacy with animals, I refer not only to close bonds and connections. Like David Eng, I redefine it away from the sexual and romantic relations that mark the so-called liberal individual, which reinforce a clear divide between the bourgeois home from the world of culture, work and society (2010). Intimacy is polyvalent and often simultaneously rife with violence and affection. Furthermore, when I write about transspecies intimacy, I am referring not just to intimacy between different species, which would more aptly be called "interspecies intimacy." Instead, transspecies intimacy redefines the very boundaries of what each species

contains, troubling, in this case, the already leaky borders of what constitutes human versus animal.

At the core, implementing prostheses demonstrates a radical shift of focusing on what is important for *the animal as a grievable subject*. Unlike animal biotechnologies such as bovine growth hormones that improve the long-term investment of livestock or the development of fluorescent proteins inserted into zebrafish (dubbed “GloFish”) to make them more aesthetically pleasing, prostheses signify a commitment to reducing suffering for the animal. Articulating animals’ ability to suffer is to link their precarity with that of humans, articulating a shared ability to suffer. As Butler writes in *Precarious Life*, “[t]he body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency... In a way, we all live with this particular vulnerability, a vulnerability to the other that is part of bodily life, a vulnerability to a sudden address from elsewhere that we cannot preempt” (2004, p. 26, 29). The fact that farm animals are prescribed prostheses based off of human prostheses (and often manufactured by the same prosthetists) signifies the vulnerability and “shared embodied finitude” which is not species-specific (Stanescu 2012, p. 568). Following Robert McRuer’s *Crip Theory*, we are all simultaneously approaching and embodying disability (2006). Able-bodiedness is always in the process of trying to approximate an unattainable ideal and always failing (2006, p. 9). It is this inevitable failure of able-bodiedness that bonds all creatures, not just humans and animals deemed “disabled.”

Prostheses as signifiers of the recognition of animal sentience, as intelligible subjects, interrupt normative time in order to honor the animal’s grievability. This is significant because farm animals’ lives in the U.S. are typically measured in discrete time increments. Five years is the maximum lifespan of a dairy cow in industrial farming according to the EPA (2012), 42 days makes a broiler chicken mature enough for slaughter (Dozier et al. 2010), 14 hours is the number of artificial daylight hours necessary for layer hens to maintain maximum egg production (LSU Ag Center), and the list goes on. Many commodified animals are measured in this way in terms of the normative value they can produce when alive (milk, eggs, etc.), and when this drops below a certain amount per unit of time, their productivity is converted to meat.

When commodified animals slow down production, they are quickly killed and disposed of. For instance, federal regulations about slaughter methods proscribe that non-ambulatory cows should not be consumed given the association of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (known as “Mad Cow Disease”) with mobility issues. Instead the non-ambulatory cow or steer should be stunned on the transport vehicle and “disposed of” (American Meat Institute 2010, p. 28). Not surprisingly then, because the end product is compromised in the event of physical exhaustion or trauma, most discussion of livestock disability is articulated in terms of prevention. Given the way that farm animals are fed, treated and housed, however, developing a mobility problem is quite common. It is for this reason that addressing disability in commodified animals is a truly radical act that works against the grain of capitalism. After all, there is no room for a long-term care model in a system that has specific time expectations for its laboring subjects.

There are eerie parallels to the discussion of disability in humans as something to be prevented rather than cared for in the present. Geographers such as Michael Dorn and Carla C. Keirns assert that modern public health is seemingly irrelevant to people with disabilities since its

services such as campaigns for injury prevention are intended to prevent disability rather than actually address the physical and emotional needs to those already living with disability (2009, p. 107). If we consider that everyone will face changes in their bodies and abilities, as Robert McRuer (2006) writes, why is the focus on othering if not ignoring the subjects who are already disabled? Dorn et. al elaborate that the United States National Health Interview's door-to-door surveys starting from the late 1950's were largely focused on assessing the total number of days of work lost to sickness and the amount of use of medical services rather than the specific lived experiences of the individuals in particular (2009). This is a trend that can be traced through the present day. The presumption here is that all bodies, both normatively abled and not, should aim to accomplish the same amount of work in a given day. But recognizing the violence of this expectation and offering commodified animals and laboring humans disability care permits the slowing down of time and the re-examining of what sort of labor these bodies *should* do.

In this way, the institution of prostheses troubles the equation of non-human animals with laboring subjects in order to create new iterations and understandings of time. Elizabeth Freeman asserts that time can encourage new ways of relating to each other and even new forms of justice that subvert the "chrononormative" and "chronobiopolitical" (2010, p.10). These moments of transspecies intimacy afford non-human animals what José Esteban Muñoz calls a *futurity*, and what Alain Badiou refers to as the "thing-that-is-not-yet-imagined" (2009, p. 21). After all, the present is not enough, according to Muñoz: "It is impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging, normative tastes, and 'rational' expectations" (2009, p. 27). Similarly, animals with disabilities are denied a present in the contemporary agriculture structures. To render these animals as having potential and a future is to radically rethink the way that disability has been understood as a kind of "mishap" to be prevented in future generations.

Moreover, implementing prostheses in animals can be a queer site of transspecies intimacy because it is often a process that requires constant maintenance. In other words, implementation of a prosthetic device for Zoop requires ongoing veterinary visits to assess the life of the prosthesis, as well as the more basic care process of putting on and taking off the prosthesis for her. On a more frequent basis, caring for an animal with a limb prosthesis means regularly assessing the animal's skin for signs of bruising or bleeding at the site of the prosthesis. Limb prostheses are sometimes embedded with pressure-sensitive foam to assess if the prosthesis is putting high levels of pressure on the animal's body and, consequently, must be examined periodically for discoloration. Because the care for many animals with disabilities is not just ephemeral but continuous, prosthesis care acts as a kind of fermata, extending the time of connection between animals and their caretakers and signifying a commitment on the part of humans to the animals' wellbeing and recognition of their grievability.

Although there is radical potentiality in building the kind of transspecies intimacy that I have just discussed, it is important to note that there is no *pure* space of intimacy, both in humans and animals, and thus there is no *pure* instance of queering time for animals. Both in humans and non-humans, infantilizing discourses often surround disability in ways that reinstitute normative time despite their best efforts to avoid doing so. This can emerge in seemingly innocuous things such as having the reflex to coo at cute videos of animals successfully walking with a prosthesis or describing Zoop as "inspirational," as a number of fans did. The moment we infantilize

animals with disabilities by virtue of comparing them to normative members of the same species, we demonstrate that we are deeply entrenched in straight time, work time, normative time. The Squeaky Wheelchair blogger calls this “inspiration porn,” which constitutes:

allow[ing] disabled people to become a commodity, shared, tweeted, emailed, and cooed about for the sake of a public that wants to be “inspired” by them, to see their everyday accomplishments and participation in life as an uplifting exception and not a rule. Using people with disabilities as “heartwarming” stories when they accomplish the same feats as their non-disabled peers implies a glaring lack of expectations for them (2013, October 27).

Although she writes about humans, fetishizing non-normative animal bodies is a slippery slope to fetishizing and infantilizing non-normative human bodies. Both Zoop and many other animals with prostheses are portrayed as strong and heroic for the moments they are able to pass as able-bodied or to accomplish tasks that able-bodied subjects can accomplish.

To queer transspecies intimacy is to recognize that fetishizing animals and normalizing them despite their non-normative bodies, as well-intentioned as it may be, runs the risk of reproducing a hierarchical relationship between humans and animals and reinstating normative time. At the core, building transspecies intimacy with animals with disabilities is an important issue for feminists. In a society where commodified animals are worked to the bone, often literally, pausing and recognizing the different abilities of animals is crucial if we are to think more broadly about what justice might look like. To truly foster transspecies intimacy we must recognize that animal and human oppressions are synergistically interconnected or, to follow Clare Kim and Carla Freccero, are “crossings and entanglements [that] profoundly shape our ways of being in the world” (2013, p. 461). The way we treat animals often has so much to say about the way we treat other humans. We are, after all, animals, too.

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