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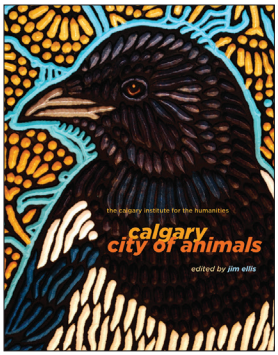


# CALGARY: City of Animals
## Edited by Jim Ellis

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# critical animal studies & the humanities

## a critical introduction

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**Acting as a project manager** for the Calgary Institute for the Humanities, I managed the research and coordination involved in organizing the 34th Community Seminar in 2016. Since one of my tasks was to conduct background research in humanities literature concerning animals and our relationship with them, I welcomed this opportunity to contribute to this volume: this chapter will introduce the field of Critical Animal Studies and its relation to the humanities.

Critical Animal Studies is an interdisciplinary field of scholarship on the frontiers of the humanities. It is a remarkably radical field of thought and action, focused on understanding how oppression and different oppressive systems intersect, to overcome practices of exploitation and move toward a trans-species social justice.

In this chapter, I will introduce the progressive epistemological stance of Critical Animal Studies activist-scholars and their avant-garde approach to finding the roots of some of these profound issues and proposing radical solutions. However, I will also identify conceptual gaps and practical limits of the approaches advocated by Critical Animal Studies. The next section will describe the background of Critical Animal Studies and its development as a field of academic scholarship. The following section will illuminate the key issues and practical approaches in the literature. On this basis, I will highlight some of the gaps in the radical ideas and some of the limits of the practical approaches and will conclude by advocating for moderate efforts within institutional frameworks and radical efforts on a personal level to overcome such limits and gaps and facilitate social change.

## *the development of critical animal studies: background, scholarship & institutions*

Critical Animal Studies departs from a fundamental assumption underlying Humanism, inherited in postmodern and post-humanist thought: Anthropocentrism, the assumption of human exceptionalism as a superior species. Anthropocentrism is rooted in dualist thinking and conceptual distinctions between Human/Animal and Civilization/Wilderness and, consequently, thinking of such things as species, races, and genders hierarchically. Critical Animal Studies scholars argue that this facilitates ideologies and practices of oppression and exploitation. Thus, Critical Animal Studies opposes dualist thinking and making distinctions between humans and animals as well as anthropocentric assumptions about the superiority of the human species.

Critical Animal Studies can be considered the scholarly manifestation of the confluence of animal liberation, advocacy, and rights movements, and the humanities. Although the

previous illustration:
**Fish & Game Association hunter training, Calgary, Alberta**. 1964, Glenbow Archives, PA-1599-258-8, Calgary, AB.

roots of Critical Animal Studies can be traced back to ancient Eastern religions and early Western philosophers such as Pythagoras (6th century BC), modern Critical Animal Studies criticizes the history of religious thought and philosophy as being dominated by anthropocentric views that legitimize hierarchization of living species and the domination of humans over animals; in particular, the idea of human "dominion," established by the "monotheistic powerhouse of Christianity" provides a "supernatural authorization for the exploitation" and provides the basis for certain mainstream ideologies in contemporary Western culture (Nocella II et al. xxi, xxii).

The philosophical cornerstone of the modern animal rights movement is Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation*, which is also the most acclaimed work of scholarship in Critical Animal Studies. Building upon the ideas of Jeremy Bentham—the founder of utilitarian philosophy who established principles such as happiness expectations and the capability for suffering as the basis for moral evaluations—Singer has particularly focused on the problem of animal suffering, arguing that actions become moral duties whenever collective benefits (happiness) outweigh costs (suffering). The most significant contribution of this work is the critical examination of the concept of speciesism: a hierarchical understanding of the value of species and the consequent morality that privileges a certain kind. He compares the underlying prejudice of speciesism to that of racism and sexism, similarly embedded and manifested in social institutions, practices, and relationships (Cudworth 25).

Contemporary Critical Animal Studies, however, is critical toward utilitarian assumptions: assuming that humans have moral superiority based on cognitive capabilities—particularly, the capability to contemplate and project their existence and desire into the future—is in line with the traditional moral hierarchy of humanist thought, which ultimately justifies exploitation (Steiner 82). Hence, modern Critical Animal Studies has a strong affinity with feminism, post-colonial theory, and particularly, with ecofeminist writings of the 1970s and 1980s (Taylor and Twine 5, 6; Sorenson xxi). It departs from Singer on practical solutions to the problem of animal suffering (such as offered by genetic engineering), since those solutions ignore the inherent value of an animal's "identity and beingness" (Davis 178–81). Rather, and in line with the critical tradition in the humanities and social sciences, "Critical Animal Studies rejects the humanist frame" (Taylor and Twine 7) in favour of a "total liberation frame": a theoretical objective of "activist-scholars"—"radical environmentalists"—to "holistically understand movements" that seek to eliminate all forms of oppression, prejudice, and discrimination and shift global consciousness toward "Social-Environmental-Species Justice" (Fitzgerald and Pellow 42–47). Particularly, the ecofeminist influence on Critical Animal Studies illuminates "how the material and symbolic exploitation of animals intersects with and helps maintain dominant categories of gender, race and class" (Taylor and Twine 4).

Current Critical Animal Studies scholars (Adams 21–26; Sorenson xxi) believe that since the agricultural revolution, the structural foundations of human society and the origins of human relations rest upon our oppressive and exploitative relationship with animals. In an effort to turn away from convictions that facilitate exploitation, they are committed to rethinking the "boundaries and continuities between humans and other animals and our duties towards other beings," and taking into account the "animal standpoint" (Sorenson xx).

Critical Animal Studies discourse takes a sharply oppositional stance toward the field of Animal Studies in sciences—particularly the practice of vivisection and animal experimentation (Peggs 36)—and even toward humanities scholars who refer to Animal Studies rather than Human-Animal Studies or Critical Animal Studies, criticizing them for having no interest in taking the animal standpoint and investigating their oppression, exploitation, and liberation as a moral end in and of itself (Nocella II et al. xxiv). While the focus of Animal Studies is on the "question of the animal," Critical Animal Studies shifts the focus toward questioning the "conditions of the animal," with "a direct focus on the circumstances and treatment of animals." Hence, Critical Animal Studies seeks to shift the focus of the humanities from humans toward ecology and animal life (Taylor and Twine 2). This shift of focus has given Critical Animal Studies a critical edge in addressing current debates and urgent questions of our time, particularly by challenging traditional perspectives in the social and natural sciences and in spanning the boundaries of the humanities.

## *practical issues: problems & solutions*

A central issue for Critical Animal Studies is how to engage theory directly and indirectly to achieve social change on both individual and institutional levels (Taylor and Twine 6). Faced with humanity's tremendous historic legacy of cruelty and exploitation—beginning with the original sin of animal oppression by humans—the approach of Critical Animal Studies calls for "a clear line of praxis"—"to professionalize, legitimize and prioritize an ethics theory in practice"—with a focus on avoiding harm to animals (Glaser and Roy 90–91). The "praxis" approach of Critical Animal Studies is based on the ethics of social and material veganism, directed against the central problem in the field: the Animal Industrial Complex (Stallwood 299).

A central premise of Critical Animal Studies scholarship is that "capitalist societies exist only in and through their exploitation of other animals" (Drew and Taylor 159). The notion of an Animal Industrial Complex is inspired by Eisenhower's Military-Industrial Complex and yet is construed to be the precedent of all capitalist systems (Fitzgerald and Pellow

**Calgary Zoo, Calgary, Alberta**. 1956, Glenbow Archives, NA-5600-6844c, Calgary, AB.

40) in the sense that "animal exploitation . . . [is] central to systems of oppression" (Nocella II et al. xxi). The global Animal Industrial Complex is rooted in a long history of violence toward animals and Indigenous people by slaughterhouse operators in a quest for "private wealth accumulation"—a fundamental ideology of European colonialism and contemporary neo-liberal capitalism. In this context, Critical Animal Studies argues that the oppression and exploitation of devalued humans and animals are deeply entangled (Nibert 15–17).

Hence, the greater problem of Critical Animal Studies relates to the ideological paradigms of our time, particularly when it comes to "carnism" (meat eating ideology) and commodification of animals for human consumption, with tremendous institutional legacy representation through the Animal Industrial Complex (Fitzgerald and Pellow 40), including universities in which animals are used as objects of research for vivisection and experimentation (Sorenson xvii). Critical Animal Studies is framed both as a social movement and a moral crusade against the Animal Industrial Complex (Stallwood). Therefore, the engaged theory approach of Critical Animal Studies is a political-intellectual project to "understand society from the perspective of those who are oppressed and victimized and to engage in political action to protect them" (Sorenson xx). This goal is pursued by seeking to influence lifestyle choices on a personal level as well as to bring change to the realm of material institutions through the praxis of veganism (Weitzenfeld and Joy 25).

The road to salvation in Critical Animal Studies is the social and ethical praxis of veganism. Veganism provides a moral baseline for an anarchist, non-violent social movement based on "true compassion" that uses various strategies of bottom-up resistance against systems of domination. These strategies range from "taking it to the streets" and "public civil disobedience" (White and Cudworth 215) to public education campaigns (Stallwood 312) and innovative educational strategies to create a space and language in academia that facilitates an understanding of the "animal standpoint" (Linne and Pedersen 282). Vegan praxis seeks to challenge all oppressive power structures through an "ever-changing way of understanding and relating to oneself and all other beings based on the principles of true freedom—empathy, authenticity, reciprocity, justice and integrity" (Weitzenfeld and Joy 25).

The quest of veganism is deeply personal; it's a quest to mobilize knowledge in order to change deeply ingrained personal habits: "breaking with your formal self" (Salih 61), not only when it comes to eating meat but rather in all consumption. It is suggested that vegans, unless brought up so, will most probably have undergone a sort of "breakdown" or "breakthrough" in their lives that has fundamentally changed their world view. Hence, being vegan means that as the first step toward ethical consumption, one must "refuse to accept what is presented to you," break down products to their constituent

parts and subject them to ethical scrutiny. On the downside, since we are living in a world of institutionalized capitalist markets, intensive and repeated breakdowns can lead to cognitive dissonance and dismay and, ultimately, to marginalization and social exclusion (Salih 62). But veganism is neither supposed to be a (counter-) ideology nor "a match for the Animal Industrial Complex" (Stallwood 298), but rather, the capacity of the self-disrupting mind to break down and open itself to new possibilities. Veganism has no rules, only some "perceived wrongs" (Salih 64–65).

## *limits & gaps*

Ultimately, the purpose of all forms of life is sustenance. On the other hand, living beings nourish themselves on the dead, both literally in biological terms and metaphorically in terms of inheriting the legacy of the dead's existence. If we are to take our subjective sense of compassion to its "true" end and want to wage a "moral crusade" on behalf of beings that our form of consciousness can empathize with, as some Critical Animal Studies scholars suggest (Stallwood 314), are we not assuming some sort of "exceptionalism" for our existence? Hence remains the question: What are the limits of our compassion? Where are we supposed to draw the lines for understanding biological life as our subject of compassion?

Veganism does not offer any rules or systematic ideology; it merely seeks to raise consciousness by encouraging the idea of overcoming one's self. Hence, there seems to be a considerable gap in terms of what shall count as the subject of our empathy, compassion, and ethics and where we can draw limits; at least a systematic debate about these fundamental questions seems to be missing from contemporary Critical Animal Studies literature. Especially when considering emerging developments in the food industries such as entomophagy and vitro meat, these conceptual gaps may also explain the lack of a response of Critical Animal Studies toward such developments and emerging issues.

Entomophagy is the human practice of eating insects. Despite its roots in various cultures around the world, it has emerged as a new trend in response to the major global problem of food insecurity. Most recently, a spin-off start-up formed at McGill University's management program won the Clinton Global Initiative's HULT prize competition for its business model on insect farming.[45] Insect farming produces significantly lower greenhouse gas emissions than the farming of animals by the Animal Industrial Complex and, in addition to food insecurity, responds to other problems such as water security and global warming as well. Whereas the most recent issue of the *Animal Studies Journal*[46] is dedicated to the subject of insects, Critical Animal Studies has yet to respond to this trend. In this case, taking the "animal standpoint" seems like a difficult riddle:

next illustration:
**Conservative women's club tea, Calgary, Alberta**. 1941, Glenbow Archives, PA-1599-192-29, Calgary, AB.

Shall we have compassion for mealworms, crickets, and cockroaches? For that end, can we empathize with such an existence and take its point of view? How? If one is going this far for "true" compassion, would it be worth going further and empathizing with the plant which is determined to grow further each and every day?

Speaking of everlasting growth, since the very concept of capitalism seems to be a central subject of criticism in Critical Animal Studies, an ethical debate about solutions which have somewhat overcome the animal question seems to be missing as well: for instance, vitro meat is emerging as a technology for producing muscular tissues cultured in the lab,[47] advanced plant-based meat imitations such as those produced by "Impossible Foods" (www.impossiblefoods.com) are introduced to global markets, and engineered food replacements such as "Soylent" offer a GMO-based vegan food to eradicate the human problem of nutrition altogether. How shall these products be considered ethically, given that they result from economic entrepreneurship and venture capitalism rather than a value-based community culture? Does the very act of market participation not empower capitalism as the umbrella ideology presiding over all current systems of oppression?

Finally, if the practice of eating meat is responsible for so much of our ideological and historic legacy and, to some accounts, for the biological possibility of our existence,[48] why are we obligated to repudiate and condemn it as the original sin that enabled our becoming? Why shall we, in exception to all other species, commission ourselves with preserving life from death? If so, does this not parallel the approach of Christianity and similar religious ideologies in terms of assuming human exceptionality while paradoxically denouncing the origins of its exceptional existence?

## *conclusions*

One of the key programs of the Calgary Institute for the Humanities is knowledge engagement.[49] With this goal in mind, I managed the 34th Annual Community Seminar and acted on behalf of the institute in bringing together humanities scholars and the local community to explore Calgary from the "animal standpoint." Whereas the subjects revolved around the history of human-animal relationship in the Canadian urban context and particularly the city of Calgary, this year's community seminar had an interesting side effect; after initial doubts about offering the right proportion of vegan food—ordered at a local "ethical vegetarian" restaurant—participants overwhelmingly went for the vegan option.[50]

On the other hand, the City of Calgary recently published its 10-year biodiversity strategic plan, which aims to "provide a comprehensive and systematic approach to protect-

**Calgary Zoo baby animals, Calgary, Alberta**. 1953, Glenbow Archives, NA-5600-6169f, Calgary, AB.

ing, developing and managing its natural and built environments for healthy ecological processes in support of biodiversity." To this end, this plan envisions the revival of Calgary's diversity and richness in wildlife, vegetation, and landscape. Negotiated by active citizens and enacted by Calgary's city council, this plan overwhelmingly resonated with seminar participants but also raised critical questions.

Hence, moderate efforts can prove to be an effective alternative to radical activism for bringing about change; especially when faced with persistent legacies, opportunities within institutional frameworks can be utilized to facilitate incremental change. A realistic hope for universal change from a strictly anarchist perspective would rely on catastrophes and, in the ideal situation, result in an immediate, tremendous destruction of all institutional frameworks. Hence, renceadicalism might be worth exploring on a personal level, but on a social and institutional level, radical approaches can come at a cost that is irresponsible to assume on behalf of others.

Personally, engaging with the Critical Animal Studies Scholarship did in fact "disrupt" me toward contemplating veganism. My reluctance toward eating meat increased drastically enough that I actively began seeking alternatives. Faced with problems such as breaking habits, having no access to affordable vegan food or a "space" that allows and promotes a vegan lifestyle on the University of Calgary campus, and while having to function in a competitive academic environment that leaves little "time" for a vegan lifestyle, I found a radical solution: "Soylent"—an open source, GMO-based vegan meal replacement, engineered to provide optimal nutrition, produced by a crowd-funded start-up.[51]

Experimenting with radical diet change such as "going Soylent" might be fraught with risk, particularly given the fact that any kind of research about the effects of this kind of food on the human body and psyche is missing at this point. However, I hope that exploring radicalism on a personal level can open up a new perspective for gaining and sharing an interesting experience of self-disruption. Perhaps such experiential accounts can open a critical perspective to the vegan discourse and disrupt its concepts, practices, and even its meaning. Perhaps it's now time for veganism to "break down" in order to "break through."

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