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# Vegans, Freaks, and Animals: Toward a New Table Fellowship

*Sunaura Taylor*

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In September 2010 I agreed to take part in an art event at the Headlands Center for the Arts in Marin County, California. The Feral Share,<sup>1</sup> as the event was named, was one part local and organic feast, one part art fund-raising, and one part philosophical exercise. I was invited to be part of the philosophical entertainment for the evening: I was to be the vegan representative in a debate over the ethics of eating meat. I was debating Nicolette Hahn Niman, an environmental lawyer, cattle rancher, and author of *Righteous Porkchop: Finding a Life and Good Food beyond Factory Farms*.

My partner, David, and I got to the event on time, but spent the first forty minutes or so sitting by ourselves downstairs while everyone else participated in the art event, which took place on an inaccessible floor of the building. Our only company was a few chefs busily putting the finishing touches on the evening's meal—a choice of either grass-fed beef or cheese ravioli.

David and I had been warned prior to the event about the lack of access, but as we sat there waiting, we began to feel increasingly uncomfortable. The disability activist in me felt guilty that I had agreed to partake in an event that I could not participate in fully. My innocuous presence, as I quietly sat downstairs in my wheelchair waiting, somehow made me feel as if I were condoning the discrimination that was built into the event and the art center itself. As if my presence were saying, “It’s OK, I don’t need to be accommodated—after all, being disabled is my own personal struggle.”

David’s and my alienation was heightened soon after when we were given our meal—as the only two vegans in the room we were made a special dish by the chefs (some of whom were from Alice Waters’s famous Berkeley restaurant Chez Panisse).<sup>2</sup> The dish was largely roasted vegetables. As I was about to expound to a room full of omnivores on the reasons for choosing veganism, I felt keenly aware of how this food would be read—as isolating and different,

as creating more work for the chefs, and as unfilling in comparison with the other dishes. I entered into the debate with a keen sense of being alone in that room, not only because I was the only visibly disabled individual, but because, besides David, I knew I was the only one with no animal products on my plate.

Michael Pollan writes in *The Omnivore's Dilemma* that the thing that troubled him the most about being a vegetarian was “the subtle way it alienate(d) me from other people.”<sup>3</sup> People who write about food often spend a surprising amount of energy deciphering how much feeling of social alienation they are willing to face for their ethical beliefs. Countless articles in popular magazines and newspapers on the “challenges” of becoming a vegetarian or vegan focus on the social stigma one will face if they “go veg”—the eye rolling, the teasing comments, the weird looks. Jonathan Safran Foer writes that we “have a strong impulse to do what others around us are doing, especially when it comes to food.”<sup>4</sup>

It is difficult to ascertain what role these articles themselves play in marginalizing the vegetarian experience. There are many pressing issues that face individuals who would perhaps otherwise choose to try to become vegetarian or vegan, such as the reality of food deserts in low-income, often largely people of color neighborhoods and a government that subsidizes and promotes animal- and fat-heavy diets versus ones with vegetables and fruits.<sup>5</sup> However, rather than focus on these serious structural barriers, many articles often present the challenge of avoiding meat and animal products as a challenge to one's very own normalcy and acceptability.

Those who care about animals are often represented as abnormal in contemporary American culture. Animal activists are represented as overly zealous, as human haters, even as terrorists, while vegetarians and vegans are often presented as spacey, hysterical, sentimental, and neurotic about food. Even vegetarian foods become “freaked,” and alternatives to meats are often described as lab or science experiments. Since many animal protein alternatives are not traditionally American, the marginalization of these foods as somehow weird or unnatural works both to solidify an American identity (what “real” Americans eat: real meat) and to exoticize the other. However, the abnormality of those who do not eat animals is perhaps best exemplified by the name of a popular vegan podcast and book: *Vegan Freaks*. The title refers to how many vegans feel that they are perceived by mainstream culture.<sup>6</sup>

My point is not to say that there is no challenge to becoming a vegetarian or vegan, but rather to point out that the media, including various authors, contribute to the “enfreakment” of what is so often patronizingly referred to as the vegan or vegetarian “lifestyle.” Of course the marginalization of those

who care about animals is nothing new. Diane Beers writes in her book *For the Prevention of Cruelty: The History and Legacy of Animal Rights Activism in the United States* “that several late nineteenth-century physicians concocted a diagnosable form of mental illness to explain such bizarre behavior. Sadly, they pronounced, these misguided souls suffered from ‘zoophilpsychosis.’”<sup>7</sup> As Beers describes, zoophilpsychosis (an overconcern for animals), was more likely to be used to diagnose women who were understood as “particularly susceptible to the malady.”<sup>8</sup> As the early animal advocacy movement in the UK and the United States was largely made up of women, such charges worked to uphold the subjugation both of women and of nonhuman animals.

As this history suggests, not so very long ago Niman and I would not have been invited to speak with any sort of authority on these topics because we are women. However, Niman and I are also both white, a fact that reflects the reality that racism is largely still an underaddressed issue within animal-ethics conversations. Although, historically, middle- and upper-class white women have made up the bulk of the animal advocacy movement, it was not until the mid-1940s that they began to achieve positions of leadership. People of color have been even less likely to be included in these conversations, let alone be represented as leaders within mainstream animal advocacy movements. It unfortunately comes as no surprise that this legacy of patriarchy and racism still deeply affects conversations around animal ethics, sustainability, and food justice. Just last year, the scholars Carol J. Adams, Lori Gruen, and A. Breeze Harper were driven to write a letter of complaint to the *New York Times* for inviting a panel that consisted solely of five white men to judge a contest seeking the best arguments for defending meat eating. Repeatedly those who are given space at conferences, publication opportunities, and media attention on these topics are white and male. Adams, Gruen, and Harper write, “The fact is that ethical discussions about eating animals are permeated with sexist and racist perspectives that have operated as normative.”<sup>9</sup>

Disability and disabled people have also largely been left out of these conversations, and ableism has similarly been rendered as normative and naturalized. The disability community has had a challenging relationship to the animal rights community, as epitomized by continued debates involving philosophers like Peter Singer, whose works has denied personhood to certain groups of intellectually disabled individuals.<sup>10</sup> But even in less extreme ways, disabled individuals and the various issues that affect us have largely been left out of the animal welfare and sustainability movements, whether because of the movements’ obsession with health and physical fitness or a lack of attention to who has access to different kinds of educational and activist events.

As I sat in that inaccessible space at the Headlands, waiting downstairs for the debate to begin, feeling like a freak in both my body and my food choices, I thought about Michael Pollan and the numerous other writers who speak of “table fellowship,” or the connection and bonds that can be made over food. Pollan argues that this sense of fellowship is threatened if you are a vegetarian. Would I have felt more like I belonged if I had eaten a part of the steer who was fed to the guests that night? On his attempt at being a vegetarian, Pollan writes: “Other people now have to accommodate me, and I find this uncomfortable: My new dietary restrictions throw a big wrench into the basic host-guest relationship.”<sup>11</sup>

Pollan feels “uncomfortable” that he now has to be “accommodated.” It is a telling privilege that this is a new experience for him. Disrupting social comfort and requesting accommodation are things disabled people confront all the time. Do we go to the restaurant our friends want to visit even though it has steps and we will have to be carried? Do we eat with a fork in our hands, versus the fork in our mouth, or no fork at all, to make ourselves more acceptable at the table—to avoid eating “like an animal”? Do we draw attention to the fact that the space we have been invited to debate in is one of unacknowledged privilege and ableism? For many disabled individuals, the importance of upholding a certain politeness at the dinner table is far overshadowed by something else—upholding our right to *be* at the dinner table, even if we make others uncomfortable.

Pollan assumes you can make it to the table in the first place. I looked around at the audience I was about to speak to and thought about those who were not at the table: people whose disabilities, race, gender, or income too often render them invisible in conversations around animal ethics and sustainability.

Safran Foer asks a simple question in his book *Eating Animals*: “How much do I value creating a socially comfortable situation, and how much do I value acting socially responsible?”<sup>12</sup>

In many ways my debate with Niman was like many other conversations between vegans and those who support humane meat: we debated the environmental consequences of both veganism and sustainable omnivorism, discussed whether veganism was a “healthy” diet, and spent a long time parsing out why animals may or may not have a right to live out their lives free from slaughter by humans. Niman and I passionately agreed about the atrocities of factory farms, and we both understood animals to be sentient, thinking, feeling beings, often with complex emotions, abilities, and relationships. However, where Niman argued that it is possible to kill and eat animals compassionately, I argued that in almost all cases it is not, and that the justifications for such positions are not only speciesist but ableist.

As the debate was only an hour, I had previously decided that trying to talk about disability as it relates to animal issues would not be possible. But after being in that inaccessible space, I felt compelled to discuss it. I felt a responsibility to represent disability and animal issues to the best of my ability—to represent a model of disability I politically agreed with in hopes that some of the marginalization I had experienced would be considered.

Throughout the debate I tried to explain how my perspective as a disabled person and as a disability scholar influenced my views on animals. I spoke about how the field of disability studies raises questions that are important to the animal-ethics discussion. Questions about normalcy and nature, value and efficiency, interdependence and vulnerability, as well as more specific concerns about rights and autonomy, are central to the field. What is the best way to protect the rights of those who may not be physically autonomous but are vulnerable and interdependent? How can the rights of those who cannot protect their own, or those who cannot understand the concept of a right, be protected?

I described how limited interpretations of what is natural and normal leads to the continued oppression of both disabled people and animals. Of the tens of billions of animals killed every year for human use, many are literally manufactured to be disabled. Industrialized farm animals not only live in such cramped, filthy, and unnatural conditions that disabilities become common but also are literally bred and violently altered to physically damaging extremes, where udders produce too much milk for a cow's body to hold, where turkeys cannot bear the weight of their own giant breasts, and where chickens are left with amputated beaks that make it difficult for them to eat. Even my own disability, arthrogryposis, is found often enough on factory farms to have been the subject of *Beef Magazine's* December 2008 issue.<sup>13</sup>

I also spoke about how animals are continually judged by ableist human traits and abilities. How we understand animals as inferior and not valuable for many of the same reasons disabled people are viewed these ways—they are seen as incapable, as lacking, and as different. Animals are clearly affected by the privileging of the able-bodied human ideal, which is constantly put up as the standard against which they are judged, justifying the cruelty we so often inflict on them. The abled body that ableism perpetuates and privileges is always not only nondisabled but also nonanimal.

In the end I tried to share what I could about disability studies, how it offers new ways of valuing human life that are not limited by specific physical or mental capabilities. Disability studies scholars argue that it is not specifically our intelligence, our rationality, our agility, our physical independence, or

our bipedal posture that gives us dignity and value. We argue that life is, and should be presumed to be, worth living, whether you are a person with Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, quadriplegia, autism, or like me, arthrogryposis. But, I asked, if disability advocates argue for the protection of the rights of those of us who are disabled, those of us who are lacking certain highly valued abilities like rationality and physical independence, then what are the consequences of these arguments in regard to nonhuman animals?

As the debate ended, I felt a sense of defeat creep over me—not over animal issues but over disability issues. I had a strong feeling that the disability politics I had represented would be misunderstood: instead of people considering their own privilege as human and nondisabled, I would be seen as using my disability to boost animal issues.

The very first person who came up to speak to me introduced herself as the mother of an intellectually disabled child. She was both impressed with me (in a sort of supercrip way) and worried for me—like someone trying to save my soul.

“This doesn’t help your cause.” She kept saying, “You don’t have to compare yourself to an animal.”

In some ways I understood where the woman was coming from. Individuals with intellectual disabilities have not been treated well by the branch of animal rights discourse promoted by people like Singer. As the philosopher Licia Carlson writes, “If we take seriously the potential for conceptual exploitation and the current marginalization of intellectual disability in philosophy, we must critically consider the roles that the “intellectually disabled” have been assigned to play in this discourse.”<sup>14</sup> I tried to explain that I was not really meaning to compare myself to an animal, but was rather comparing our shared oppressions. Disabled people and nonhuman animals, I told her, are often oppressed by similar forces. I told her, though, that to me being compared to an animal does not have to be negative—after all, we are all animals.

She told me she did not want to compare her disabled child’s situation to an animal’s situation, that they were not related. Her child was not an animal. I was doing a disservice to myself and others by making these connections.

The woman never got mad at me, as I assume she would have at an able-bodied person saying what I was saying. Instead she seemed sad for me, as if I lacked the disability pride and confidence to think of myself as anything more than animal.

If I had demanded accommodation, instead of politely following social etiquette and making others feel comfortable, would my confidence as a disabled human being have come through differently? I wonder whether, if I had

arrived at the event insisting on my body's right to access, would the confidence I have in my embodiment have been so unmistakable that even discussing my relationship to animals would have been recognized as a gesture of my love for disability? Perhaps my behavior would have been seen as disruptive, perhaps it would have made others uncomfortable, but by demanding accommodation I would have insisted on a different kind of table fellowship.

The inaccessibility of the space framed my words that night and led me to focus on the ways in which animal oppression and disability oppression are made invisible by being rendered as simply natural: steers are served for dinner and disabled people wait downstairs.



**Figure 1.**

*Animals With Arthrogryposis*, oil on canvas, 2009, 72" x 108". Painting by Sunaura Taylor. Photo courtesy of David Wallace.

### Notes

1. The Feral Share was an art event organized by Joseph del Pesco and Jerome Waag. The event was hosted at the Headlands Center for the Arts on September 19, 2010.
2. Chez Panisse is a restaurant in Berkeley, California. It was cofounded in 1971 by the food writer and activist Alice Waters and the film producer Paul Aratow. It is known for serving local and organic foods.
3. Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 313.



4. Jonathan Safran Foer, *Eating Animals* (New York: Little, Brown, 2010), 32.
5. A study done by Tufts University showed that “between 1997 and 2005 subsidies saved chicken, pork, beef and HFCS producers roughly \$26.5 billion.” These subsidies support a meat industry that itself is worth \$160 billion (which does not even include the \$70 billion fishing industry).
6. Bob Torres and Jenna Torres, *Vegan Freak: Being Vegan in a Non-Vegan World* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2010).
7. Diane L. Beers, *For the Prevention of Cruelty: The History and Legacy of Animal Rights Activism in the United States* (Athens, Ohio: Swallow Press, 2006), 16.
8. Ibid.
9. Carol J. Adams, Lori Gruen, and A. Breeze Harper, “What’s Wrong with Only White Men Judging a Contest Defending Meat-Eating?,” CarolJAdams.blogspot.com, March 24, 2012, <http://caroljadams.blogspot.com/2012/03/whats-wrong-with-only-white-men-judging.html>.
10. Licia Carlson and Eva Feder Kittay, eds., *Cognitive Disability and Its Challenge to Moral Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).
11. Pollan, *Omnivore’s Dilemma*, 314.
12. Safran Foer, *Eating Animals*, 55.
13. W. Ishmael, “Dealing with Curly Calf,” *Beef Magazine*, 2008, <http://beefmagazine.com/genetics/1201-curlly-calf-issue>.
14. Licia Carlson, “Philosophers of Intellectual Disability: A Taxonomy,” in Carlson and Kittay, *Cognitive Disability*, 318.