

Critical Response

Thinking Animals: International Conference

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It only happened to me twice – that I left a debate, just standing up and leaving the room, not being able to bear the conversation any longer. It happened first during a political debate on an ecology and someone said – after hours of discussing non-human ethics – that we’re not going to talk about *food*.

It happened again at the international conference *Thinking Animals*, held by the Institute of Ethnomusicology, ZRC SAZU, under the organization of Marjetka Golež Kaučič.

What became clear during the aforementioned debate, the fact that more-than-human animals are beings with inherent value and that we should at least try to protect their right to not be killed, is not something that all participants of the conference hold as true.

There was, at the end, the very carnistic, speciesist debate that got us – metaphorically – out of our closed room (the ivory tower as it is sometimes called) and right into the middle of the carnistic, speciesist, anthropocentric society we live in anyway.

The conference was not unlike other similar international conferences in a sense that it did bring together researchers from different parts of the world to share their knowledge about more-than-human animals and human relations to them. We did learn a lot about different fields and how human interactions with more-than-humans are manifested in those areas and what that tells us – as a whole – about subtle ways that what Barbara Noske calls the animal-industrial complex could be understood in a more direct way as the practices, organizations, and overall industry that turns more-than-human animals into food and other commodities, or in a broader sense as all ways and practices in which more-than-human animals are exploited by (systemic) human activities.

The conference covered a broad spectrum of different fields such as

more-than-human animals in literature, ecology, pedagogy, history, local communities, different mythologies and as more-than-human creators in music. It was informative and showcased how much more-than-humans are involved in human societies and how speciesism and carnism are inherent parts of different systems of oppression and how they are expressed in different societal fields; how literature shapes our impressions of more-than-humans and how the school system is often the one that teaches us from a very young age that more-than-humans don't have inherent value or that they are just metaphors for something human, just tools that help us understand ourselves. It was important that the conference gave us the possibility to understand how different societies see nature, more-than-human animals and even plants, or how more-than-humans can be understood as creators of music or how they are political agents and have been for centuries, even though we, as humans, don't normally understand them in that way.

But on the other hand this was – for a person who is vegan, an activist and proponent of multispecies, more-than-human societies, that are based on total liberation, which is often the position of people attending similar international conferences – a very sobering experience. There we were, people who try to research human/more-than-human relationships as broad systems of oppression, still not able to agree that killing more-than-humans is ethically not acceptable.

This is, probably, the most obvious difference between animal studies and *critical* animal studies; the fact that animal studies can – and do – research human and non-human interactions, sometimes even in the light of systemic patterns, but only critical animal studies (by definition) demand any societal change and take more-than-humans seriously in a way that their perspectives matter – not only as information for humans about humans, but on their own. Only from the critical animal studies point of view does it become clear that more-than-humans are agents in a human dominated world, trying in their own ways to fight oppression – war, really, according to Dinesh Wadiwel – and are not just passive victims of wrongdoings of humanity.

What was most painful to watch at the *Thinking Animals* conference was the fact that faced with speciesist and carnistic ways in the argumentation of some of the contributors, a lot of those who do indeed engage in the critical animal studies field just fell silent. It was this awful feeling of being, once again, defeated, by the same ideologies we were supposed to question in those few days that the conference lasted. I, myself, and two

colleagues tried – we really did try – to question the same positions that are so prevalent in the society at large, but there were not enough of us (once again) and it was very apparent that more-than-humans don't really matter. What mattered was an academic gathering, humans, talking to each other about how much we care, when in reality, we don't – or do, but just about everything else but the rights and lives of other beings; the ongoing human-human wars can show us how little we care about each other too.

So this is why this is more of a call to empathy than praise for everyone who contributed something to this conference and it is more of a way to say 'sorry' to those that I believe we failed again.

One of the main points of critical animal studies is that we have to let activism be part of our academic work and that we all must sustain from exploiting more-than-humans as much as is possible. It was deeply saddening that it is apparently not possible, not even for people interested in those relations, to at least not eat corpses of the killed or consume their bodily fluids and/or other products of their bodies or, indeed, try not to justify the killing of more-than-humans. But if there is no autonomy over one's body, there is no autonomy over one's life. If one's perspectives and interests don't matter and it is always someone else who decides for a group of beings – be it human or more-than-human – than we can't really say that there is a liberation movement; the conference showed very clearly that we are not, in fact, trying to be allies to more-than-humans, that we only try to analyse in a very human – academic – context the existing relations.

The fact that even those who did previously fight for more-than-humans from a critical standpoint stayed mostly silent in this (un)safe academic environment, is something that can tell us about how strong the systems of oppressions are.