

Beyond Other Animals:
Haraway's When Species Meet and Privilege within Feminism(s)

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While Donna J. Haraway can be reasonably seen to work from a perspective of materialist and postmodern feminism(s), in her book entitled *When Species Meet*,² Haraway goes far beyond relationships between humans to focus primarily on interactions between humans and other animals. Nonetheless, Haraway's work in *When Species Meet* is useful for feminists trying to work beyond and across various types of privilege for three reasons: she focuses on respect despite, rather than in the absence of, power differentials; she invokes the structural in a way that pays fierce attention to the mundane and to day-to-day interactions; and she embraces the concepts of inheritance and heritage. Along with a definition of the concept of privilege and a brief introduction to its relevance for feminist political theory, I explain how each of the three elements listed above can contribute to feminist attempts to consider questions of privilege. In so doing, I am explicit about the challenges and dangers involved in using theory about relationships between human and non-human animals to theorise about relationships between people that are characterised by oppression. I nonetheless conclude that this translation is warranted.

Feminists have been struggling with questions of privilege for decades, in response to serious and well-founded criticisms from those who have been excluded from the often middle-class, white, heterosexist strains of feminist activism and thought in the context of 20th century North America. Many feminists have identified privilege as an area that requires attention if feminists are serious about working together for inclusive and effective feminist action that does more than just focus on the needs of women with significant amounts of privilege. Nonetheless, the question of how to respond to privilege in feminist relationships has not been definitively answered.

Privilege can be defined and understood in many related but distinct ways. It is complex and multifaceted, and developing a comprehensive definition of privilege is decidedly beyond the scope of this paper. However, for my purposes here, a working definition of privilege can be roughly sketched from Haraway's book itself. It is a term that Haraway uses,³ and though it does not play a foundational role in her terminology, she takes privilege seriously. For example, in a story about a conference at which protesters suggested that she should be raped, Haraway notes that that incident served to remind her that she is a woman, which is "something class and colour privilege bonded to professional status can mute for long periods of time."⁴ Haraway, then, is conscientious of privilege in her own positioning, and makes it clear that privilege, for her, is connected with identity characteristics that are connected to real relationships and interactions. Beyond this, however, privilege for Haraway seems to be linked to "the Great Divides," as Bruno Latour calls them, in which "the principle Others to Man," such as "gods, machines, animals, monsters, creepy crawlies, women, servants and slaves, and noncitizens in general" may "have remarkable capacity to induce panic in the centres of power and self-certainty."⁵ These Others, Haraway says, lie "[o]utside the security checkpoint of bright reason" and "outside the apparatus of reproduction of the sacred image of the same."⁶ In this vein, privilege can be seen to have its roots in the binary hierarchies through which the Other is simultaneously an outsider and

² Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

³ See, for example, *ibid.*, 10, 263.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 9–10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

a threat. These features of Otherness are embedded in complex and situated histories and experiences that make some more vulnerable than others in particular situations and over the course of their lives. Privilege, then, may be understood for the purpose of this paper as a situated experience of relative security and centrality based on the sides of various Great Divides to which one falls.

There are three ways that Haraway's framework can help feminist theory and feminist actors address questions of privilege. First, Haraway focuses on respect and working together despite, rather than without, power imbalances. Encounter is a crucial and central concept in *When Species Meet*. Haraway believes that "those who are to be in the world are constituted in intra- and interaction. The partners do not precede the meeting; species of all kinds, living and not, are consequent on a subject- and object- shaping dance of encounters."⁷ Therefore subjects, in Haraway's framework, are not pre-constituted, but rather come into being through relationships and meetings. Encounter, for Haraway, involves an engagement which is mutual as well as constitutive. As she says,

To hold in regard, to respond, to look back reciprocally, to notice, to pay attention, to have courteous regard for, to esteem: all of that is tied to polite greeting, to constituting the polis, where and when species meet. To knot companion and species together in encounter, in regard and respect, is to enter the world of becoming with, where *who and what are* is precisely what is at stake.⁸

Encounter, for Haraway, calls for respect. "Respect," she says, "is *repecere* – looking back, holding in regard, understanding that meeting the look of the other is a condition of having face oneself."⁹ As such, figuring out how to respond becomes part of who we are.

Haraway assumes that encounter is constitutive, and that subjects are formed in encounters that are infused with power imbalances. She does not presume equal positioning among the parties to her encounters, and this is not surprising given her subject matter. For example, Haraway extensively discusses her relationship with her dog, Cayenne, and their mutual love of agility competitions. She freely admits that the sport, though relying on cooperation within a multispecies team, contains relationships of unequal authority: "I would be a liar to claim," she says, "that agility is a utopia of equality and spontaneous nature."¹⁰ She explains that "the human" necessarily dictates the "acceptable criteria of performance" despite the enjoyment that the dog experiences.¹¹ She nonetheless argues that humans owe certain things to dogs in the encounter within the sport of agility: the human must "respond to the authority of the dog's actual performance" and "learn to recognise when *trust* is what the human owes the dog."¹²

Thus, for Haraway, respect, regard, and response in encounter are challenging obligations that are maintained even within relationships that do not have equal or balanced forms of power. This assessment is crucial to her analysis of human and non-human relationships. Renouncing

⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁸ Ibid., 19.

⁹ Ibid., 88.

¹⁰ Ibid., 220.

¹¹ Ibid., 221–222.

¹² Ibid., 224.

one's power over non-human animals does not significantly reduce or eliminate it. Similarly, privilege is a particular type of power that cannot be simply escaped in our interactions with each other. We become who we are, as Haraway argues, in constant and always changing encounters. This is where privilege emerges, but perhaps it is also where privilege can be untangled.

This suggests that it is misguided to demand that feminists eliminate privilege from our interactions. While this might be desirable from an abstract utopian standpoint, humans are “worldly,”¹³ as Haraway argues. We do not exist outside of the relations that constantly create us, and while we can seek to make those relationships more equitable, and to see ourselves as obligated to conduct those relationships with respect and regard, we cannot simply disavow the relationships that have made us who we are and brought us into particular interactions with each other. This suggests we must grapple with our privilege, in full recognition of those imbalances, and with attentiveness to how to make our relationships more just. Haraway challenges us to take respect seriously in the presence of power imbalances, and so we should take respect seriously in contexts of privilege, which is certainly a type of power imbalance.

Second, Haraway's work can be useful to feminists dealing with privilege because she manages to invoke the structural while paying fierce attention to the mundane and relational; for her, these are embodied in encounter. Crucially, for Haraway, encounter is tenuous and may shift hierarchical binaries into matters of the everyday. “A great deal is at stake in such meetings,” she says, “and outcomes are not guaranteed.”¹⁴ She continues,

There is no teleological warrant here, no assured happy or unhappy ending, socially, ecologically, or scientifically. There is only the chance for getting on together with some grace. The Great Divides of animal/human, nature/culture, organic/technical, and wild/domestic flatten into mundane differences – the kinds that have consequences and demand respect and response – rather than rising to sublime and final ends.¹⁵

Haraway does not shy away from serious considerations of the structural, but she gives significant attention to the “mundane.”¹⁶ “I think we learn to be worldly,” says Haraway, “from grappling with, rather than generalizing from, the ordinary. I am a creature of the mud, not the sky.”¹⁷ This commitment is expressed, for example, through her focus on her own collaborations with Cayenne in agility training and competitions.

While Haraway considers both structural and mundane aspects, the strength in this work is that her analyses of the mundane and the structural cannot really be separated. For example, the chapter entitled “Value-Added Dogs and Lively Capital,”¹⁸ includes an analysis and extension of Marx's insights around issues of labour and exchange value in her analysis of the pet industry. In this context, she considers the “ethical obligation[s] of the human who lives with a companion animal in affluent, so-called first-world circumstances” today, which Haraway

¹³ Ibid., 3.

¹⁴ Ibid., 15.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 3.

¹⁸ Ibid., 45–67.

decides might involve even the provision of drugs like Prozac.¹⁹ She recognises the integration between structural issues, such as the commodification of pharmaceuticals and the ways that human organisation constrains opportunities for play for many dogs, with the more situated and day to day considerations, such as the obligations that a particular human might have toward a particular dog who is both his or her property and his or her companion.

This weaving together of structural and everyday considerations can provide significant insight into how feminists might deal with relationships marked by privilege. Privilege itself connects the mundane and the structural. Privilege is structural in that it is connected strongly, though not simplistically, to various material and discursive systems of power that serve to distribute both material and psychological resources in extensively unequal ways. Privilege is mundane in that it is not something distant that simply acts upon people, but rather it is continued and enacted in the ongoing daily relationships that shape most of human lives. How we speak to each other, how we respond to each other, and the conscious and subconscious assumptions that guide our interactions with each other are how privilege is enacted. It, too, connects the structural with the mundane.

Haraway's approach might serve as a model for feminists dealing with issues of privilege because she manages to engage both the structural and the mundane together. Dealing with privilege may have the most potential to be effective if we avoid seeing privilege as only situated in daily experience or as only structural. Treating privilege as strictly structural captures broad trends and systems that underscore privilege and keep people's life chances closely correlated with various categories of identity, but it does not address the responsibility that each person has in perpetuating privilege in daily interactions. Treating privilege as strictly interpersonal captures the ways in which privilege is enacted and perpetuated in daily interactions, and the ways in which privilege shapes who people are constantly in the processes of becoming, but does not address the structural elements that distribute those life chances in largely predictable ways, and the systems that enforce its re-creation. Most importantly, trading off between the two options is unlikely to capture the most important feature of privilege: the interaction between these two layers. Privilege resides most stubbornly where the structural and the mundane meet, and Haraway's work gives us an example of how to engage with those layers as they work, together, instead of one at a time.

Third, Haraway's attention to the concepts of inheritance and heritage may allow feminists to reframe privilege in a constructive way. Inheritance is significant for Haraway's work in *When Species Meet*. In discussing the death of her father, she says "I inherit in the flesh, in material troping, tripping, that joins text and body in what I call material semiosis and semiotic materiality."²⁰ Haraway clearly connects her notion of encounter with a significant element of heritage. She notes that becoming within encounter involves "actors" who are "full of the patterns of their sometimes-joined, sometimes-separate heritages both before and lateral to *this* encounter."²¹

¹⁹ Ibid., 61.

²⁰ Ibid., 163.

²¹ Ibid., 25.

Inheritance, for Haraway, invokes personal obligations that depend, in large part, on the histories that bring us into these encounters that shape our being. In discussing one dog breed's colonially embedded history in California, where she lives, Haraway states,

I don't want to inherit these violent histories, as Cayenne, Roland, and I run our agility courses and conduct our cross-species family affairs. But, like it or not, flesh-to-flesh and face-to-face, I have inherited these histories through touch with my dogs, and my obligations in the world are different because of that fact. That's why I have to tell these stories – to tease out the personal and collective response required now, not centuries ago.²²

Matters of inheritance, then, produce embodied obligations and requirements for response for Haraway. They cannot be ignored as matters of the past that did not involve her directly. These inherited obligations connect directly with questions that many feminists have considered for decades. "*Species* reeks of race and sex," she says, "and where and when species meet, that heritage must be untied and better knots of companion species attempted within and across differences."²³ Even in the context in which she focuses on encounter with other species, then, the heritage of sexism and racism must be unpacked.

Considering privilege as an aspect of our inheritance may be a step in the right direction for taking privilege seriously in feminist encounter, for three reasons. First, the concept of inheritance recognises the "material-semiotic"²⁴ web in which privilege comes to be and is maintained. It requires attention to histories of embodied space, resources, and language that are important for serious feminist considerations of privilege. Privilege cannot operate outside its histories of the material and the linguistic.

Second, Haraway's use of the concepts of inheritance and heritage suggest that we are required to take responsibility for privilege, but not to be paralysed by it. A good example is that of Haraway and her dogs, noted above. She is not naive about the history of oppression that has brought her and her dogs together in this way, and that undergirds the everyday interactions that continue to constitute who she and her dogs are. Haraway does not excuse herself from asking serious questions about what this inheritance means for her and her dogs, and what sorts of requirements arise from their touch and their encounter. Her recognition of and attempts to grapple with these oppressive histories does not keep her from having dogs and having serious, engaging, emotionally important relationships with them, and with other dogs and "their people."²⁵

This is weighty for feminist relationships. In feminist encounter, sometimes recognising privilege keeps us from engaging with each other. For example, recognising that white, middle-class women have been the centre of attention in much of the North American feminist movement might encourage white women to primarily cede space, voice, and leadership, and to make space for those who have been marginalised. While this can certainly be valuable, and potentially necessary as a historical stage of dealing with privilege in feminisms, it also has the potential to do three additional things. One is that it may keep those with privilege from

²² Ibid., 97.

²³ Ibid., 18.

²⁴ Ibid., 26.

²⁵ Ibid., 210.

recognising their own role in its creation, and excuse them from the responsibility to oppose it. Another is that it may eliminate opportunities for encounter and for building new relationships and new selves that are not as extensively constituted by the privilege in encounter. Ceding leadership and voice may mean withdrawal more generally, and the lost opportunity may stifle efforts to build productive feminist relationships across privilege. A third is that such withdrawal is, itself, an embodiment and continuation of privilege. Feminists of all genders who are marginalised do not have the option of simply stepping back and leaving issues of race, class, and heterosexism for others to address. Such distancing might make feminists with privilege feel less guilty about that privilege, but it should not. As Haraway says, “To claim not to be able to communicate with and to know one another and other critters, however imperfectly, is a denial of moral entanglements ... for which we are responsible and in which we respond.”²⁶ If privilege is indeed something that must be dealt with rather than simply eliminated, then we must take what we inherit seriously, and those with comparative privilege cannot leave privilege unaddressed while leaving the difficult work to others.

Third, inheritance and heritage link the past with the present. That which we inherit, along with heritage, is a significant part of how we see ourselves, who we are, and how we got to where we are. Histories of oppression are not something that happened hundreds of years ago without continuing through to us in the present day, “in the flesh.”²⁷ Likewise, the notion of heritage does not allow identity and its associated privilege to be considered solely as a current, contemporary situation that is disconnected from history and can be disrupted without acknowledgement of how it arose. Attempts to “get on together”²⁸ in the face of feminist privilege are unlikely to be successful unless they allow us to see histories of colonialism and oppression as part of who we are and how we engage in all of our actions and interactions.

In these ways, Haraway’s treatment of power imbalances, the structural and the mundane, and inheritance and heritage may open crucial space for thinking about and acting through privilege differently in feminist relationships. Nonetheless, there is an objection that results from the complex histories of language and categorisation within which I must work. In using Haraway’s terms as I feel I must, I am not suggesting that humans involved in feminist interactions are unknowable or exotic, or should be exoticized as the other. Dominant cultural constructions of the animal as inferior to and opposite of the human mean that it would be easy to assume differently. For example, Twine describes a disgust reaction that a colleague in an elevator had to a book he was carrying on ecofeminism, the title of which drew a parallel between women and animals.²⁹ He sees this sort of reaction as a barrier to taking seriously the role that animality and animals play in relationships of oppression, and to taking animals seriously in intersectional analyses.³⁰

One of Haraway’s strengths is that she manages to theorise radical difference and interactions across it, and across hierarchies, while working to de-exoticize the beings about whom she speaks. This move is tricky and tenuous, and serious attention needs to be paid.

²⁶ Ibid., 226.

²⁷ Ibid., 162.

²⁸ Ibid., 106.

²⁹ Richard Twine, “Intersectional Disgust? Animals and (eco)feminism,” *Feminism & Psychology* 20, no. 3 (August 1, 2010): 397–406.

³⁰ Ibid., 398–399.

However, Haraway works hard to move away from human exceptionalism, and so we should not assume that her analysis of interactions between human and non-human animals is an expression of moral hierarchy. It would be a disservice to the search for ethical and just relationships between people, and between people and other animals, if we were to discount the lessons that Haraway draws from different sorts of relationships solely on the basis of our ingrained discomfort. So given Haraway's significant attempt to move away from human exceptionalism, we should not ignore the lessons that she offers on the questions I have highlighted above.

A more serious objection relates to the conclusions I draw. I am suggesting that feminists should see themselves as in the mud of privilege, to use Haraway's imagery. I argue that we should acknowledge the existence of situated power imbalances, that we should link structural and mundane to understand embedded privilege in and beyond our relationships, and that we should see ourselves as part of and deal seriously with what we inherit as we become who we are in oppressive societies. This leaves little room for discrete distance from which to theorise our involvement and our culpability. We are culpable from within. Perhaps by acknowledging, and indeed embracing, our constant becoming in encounter shaped by privilege, we are in danger of letting ourselves off the hook for responding to the pain and oppression embedded in privilege and our active role in its existence. This exercise might simply become another excuse, not that dissimilar from leaving the fight against other axes of oppression for those who experience them directly. There is a danger of this move being largely rhetorical, and of replacing one way of protecting privilege with another.

However, perhaps Haraway can help with this, as well. The unavoidability of power imbalances does not, for Haraway, excuse the subjects in her encounters from their moral obligations in those encounters. For example, in the context of a discussion about guinea pigs in a lab setting, she argues that "[i]nstrumental intra-action itself is not the enemy," but rather that "[u]nidirectional relations of use, ruled by practices of calculation and self-sure of hierarchy, are quite another matter."³¹ Instead of relieving us of moral concerns, she instead refocuses them to a morality of "messmates at table, with indigestion and without the comfort of teleological purpose from above, below, in front, or behind."³²

By way of providing guidance, and in speaking about eating as always a matter of life and death, Haraway ends *When Species Meet* with a demand that "one must actively cast oneself with some ways of life and not others *without* making any of three tempting moves."³³ These are

- (1) being self-certain; (2) relegating those who eat differently to a subclass of vermin, the underprivileged, or the unenlightened; and (3) giving up on knowing more, including scientifically, and feeling more, including scientifically, about how to eat well – together.³⁴

Thus, Haraway's challenge requires us to be uncertain, to take seriously those who deal with their place in the world differently than we do, and to be "subject" to what she calls "curiosity"³⁵ in trying to know more. Taking her requirements seriously will leave feminists little room for

³¹ Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 71.

³² *Ibid.*, 74.

³³ *Ibid.*, 295.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

what Haraway calls “moral comfort,” in which we could be “sure of” our “righteousness.”³⁶ If there is room for feminists with various types of privilege to hold open their uncertainty, respect, and curiosity, Haraway’s approach may well open up new possibilities for responding to privilege in feminist relationships.

In conclusion, I have shown how Haraway’s work might help feminists who are working to deal with questions of privilege: it can help us to see how feminists might work together with respect in the presence of privilege, since it cannot be swiftly eliminated; it can help us to see ways to examine the structural and mundane elements of privilege together, instead of separately; and it can help us to consider what we inherit as we try to address issues of privilege. Haraway says that “cosmopolitical questions arise when people respond to seriously different, felt and known, finite truths and must cohabit well without a final peace.”³⁷ Perhaps final peace is unlikely for those of us who struggle with privilege in feminist traditions, and particularly within feminist communities. More importantly, my analysis here suggests that final peace is the wrong goal for feminists struggling with privilege in encounter. Uncertainty and lack of moral comfort is needed for us to hope to deal with privilege here in the mud. While there is “no assured happy or unhappy ending,”³⁸ Haraway shows us that there might still be possibility. Encounter suggests significant opportunity, if we can trade self-certainty for curiosity.

³⁶ Ibid., 75.

³⁷ Ibid., 299.

³⁸ Ibid., 15.

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