



BRILL

SOCIETY & ANIMALS 28 (2020) 327-330

Animals  
& Society  
Institute  
brill.com/soan

## *Book Review*



# Breaking the Spell: A Critique of Intersectionality and Veganism in Anti-Racist Activism

Aph Ko, *Racism as Zoological Witchcraft: A Guide to Getting Out*. Lantern Books, 2019. 168 pp.

Can we realize a liberatory world for humans and other animals without veganism as a baseline? In her second monograph, *Racism as Zoological Witchcraft*, Ko (2019) imagines we might. There is, sadly, a considerable lack of communication between anti-racism and anti-speciesism movements, and Ko posits that this disconnect reflects the limitations of theoretical frameworks. For one, veganism is frequently depoliticized into a dietary lifestyle, largely due to corporate interests and the (perhaps intentional) mischaracterization from nonvegans. Anti-racism activists, Ko conjectures, are not likely to find as much value in veganism as a tactic as such: “When we treat veganism as only a matter of what food one eats, it can feel as if we’re holding the key to racial liberation in our hands but only conceive of it as a spoon” (p. 8). More than this, however, she also suggests that veganism, *even in its unadulterated political form*, has its limitations. Veganism is not necessarily useful for conceptualizing all intersections between oppressed humans and other animals, and, furthermore, it may not speak equally to all audiences. Ko explains:

Rather than trying to smuggle all of these complex conversations about animals under the vegan label, we should get to a point in our activism where we recognize that conversations about race and animality often exceed the boundaries of vegan discourse, and that this should be celebrated rather than appropriated. (p. 30)

Veganism, in other words, may be a logic of anti-oppression, but its core emphasis relates to the rendering of nonhuman animals into products of consumption, and this framework does not always function for other oppression narratives.

Woodcock (2016), Asian American founder of the now defunct Abolitionist Vegan Society, anti-racism activist, and intersectional feminist, has argued a similar position, albeit with the interests of nonhuman animals in mind. For Woodcock, veganism is a logic specifically catered to resist speciesism and was formulated to explicitly center nonhuman animals (arguably the most vulnerable group in human society). Woodcock's critique responds to the observation also made by Ko that, as intersectional feminism has begun to permeate the discourse of anti-speciesism activism, veganism has become a catchall term for anything and everything related to social justice. This variation of intersectionality is often superficial or forced.

Yet Woodcock's insistence that veganism should relate only to nonhuman animals and Ko's concern that veganism is often inappropriate for addressing racism do, to some extent, reinforce boundaries and social movement segregation. Thus, readers must deliberate between the desire to acknowledge how mechanisms of oppression simultaneously impact various minoritized groups while *also* resisting the tendency to erase distinctive experiences under the banner of some grand narrative. Ko furthers this debate by criticizing the very categories themselves. Explains Ko: "Although activists are accustomed to taking 'race,' 'gender,' and 'class' and making them intersect, most people don't question how they have been trained to understand what 'race,' 'gender,' and 'class' are to begin with" (p. 13). True liberation, she argues, requires "un-disciplinary thinking" which transcends categorical and categorizing disciplines.

As a sociologist, I am not sure I am fully convinced by this critique, as there are various interpretations of intersectionality theory which might prove more useful than the distilled version utilized in most activist spaces. Collins, for instance, explicitly engages Ko's critique in *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), arguing that various oppressions should not be layered but instead understood as existing in a matrix. Doing so avoids the tendency for activists to pile on various experiences without necessarily examining how they inform one another simultaneously and resist categorical thinking. Ko's point that intersectionality continues to rely conceptually on colonial categories, however, is an important advance. Ko's is an immersive intersectionality which seeks to incorporate various interpretations and experiences, some of which may gel while others may only loosely complement one another. This "un-disciplinary" approach offers

both solidarity and flexibility while also leaving space for future innovations in discourse and tactical repertoires.

*Racism as Zoological Witchcraft* tackles these various theoretical challenges in a book that is generously illustrated to assist readers with complex arguments. Ko also makes heavy use of popular media references, notably Peele's 2017 film *Get Out*. This second book, which follows *Aphro-ism* (Ko & Ko, 2017), is much more effective in justifying media analysis as a useful tool for communicating and unpacking social justice theory. Although television and film easily date, particularly resonant contributions such as Peele's *Get Out*, are likely to have a lasting cultural imprint and, thus, a lasting theoretical relevance and explanatory power.

As Ko explores, *Get Out* provides an interesting spin on contemporary afro-futurist thought with regard to the internalization of oppression and the role of consumption in sustaining inequality, thus illustrating often dense academic theories by a more approachable means. Ko, for instance, draws on examples from the film to elaborate on the work of Perkinson (2005), a scholar who frames white supremacy as a sort of sorcery that subdues and infiltrates minoritized bodies. Ko cleverly extends this analysis to emphasize how this process is also inherently tied to the animalization process. People of color, like nonhuman animals, are subject to a sort of taxidermy by which they are: "physically and conceptually consumed and 'stuffed' with definitions from the dominant class. The dominant class has the ability and the means to 'get inside' and tamper with the essence of the Other, reducing them to epidermal shells and props" (p. 54). Both nonhuman animals and persons of color are subject to this white supremacist witchcraft which is "on par with tribalistic, superstitious justifications for killing, eating raping, and sacrificing humans" (p. 56) and reinforced by biased narratives from Western science (and pseudo-science).

Although Ko's interrogation of intersectionality and veganism may challenge many readers and activists, most, I would wager, could get on board with Ko's exciting application of Perkinson's thesis of white supremacist shamanism to human supremacy practices, whereby she identifies the category of "animal" as one in which all minoritized groups, both human and nonhuman, are subjected. To break the spell of white supremacist zoological witchcraft and "get out," Ko advocates an abandonment of status quo activism as well as the ever-segregating divides between various social justice movements and theories. We must "move our bodies closer together" instead (p. 105).

*Corey Lee Wrenn*

University of Kent, United Kingdom

*corey.wrenn@gmail.com*

## References

- Collins, P. (1990). *Black feminist thought*. New York: Routledge.
- Ko, A., & Ko, S. (2017). *Aphro-ism*. New York: Lantern.
- McKittrick, S., Blum, J., Hamm, Jr, E. H. (Producers), & Peele, J. (Producer/Director). (2017). *Get out* [Motion Picture]. USA: Universal Pictures.
- Perkinson, J. (2005). *Shamanism, racism, and hip hop culture*. New York: Palgrave.
- Woodcock, S. (2016). Intersectionality Interview 1. *ARZone*. Retrieved from <https://www.vegfest.co.uk/>.