



Women/chickens vs. men/cattle: Insights on gender–species intersectionality

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ABSTRACT

This paper is conceptually grounded in feminist–posthumanist intersectionality, offering an empirical case study that is geographic in scope, balances discursive and material elements, focuses on gender–species relations, and details dynamics of othering and privileging. It is empirically situated in a case study featuring women and chickens, men and cattle in the southern African nation of Botswana. It considers their symbolic associations with certain social realms, their spatial placements into and within particular locales, and the resulting context-specific dynamics that occur and shape their daily lives and interrelations with one another. Such socio-spatial practices are the means through which men, women, chickens and cattle become privileged and/or othered within dominant gender–species hierarchical arrangements. The paper also explores emerging urban and commercial agriculture spaces in contemporary Botswana, which empower women and chickens through increased access to land and productive activities, and increased visibility, status and value. Such empowerment remains bounded, however, given significant material, discursive and ethical implications of re-positioning within dominant structures.

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1. Introduction

This paper features a case study of women and chickens, men and cattle in the southern African nation of Botswana, revealing the intricate connections between interspecies ‘othering’ and ‘privileging’, as well as mutual daily interdependence that occur through socio-spatial practice. Broadly speaking, men and women in Botswana are positioned within social, economic and political realms on different and unequal terms. Botswana culture is patrilineal and powerful conventions restrict women’s domain to the household and women’s autonomy under male guardianship; women are disadvantaged in terms of access to education, employment, resource allocation, and decision-making. Cattle and chickens similarly occupy different and unequal positionality in Botswana. Cattle are admired and respected, reflecting high social status and economic wealth of individuals and the nation; they drive the economy, feature in government development programs, reside in reserved, privileged physical spaces of cattle posts and ranches, and mark important social occasions through their exchange. Chickens garner much less attention, wield little status and power, and feature in low-valued domestic subsistence or impersonal industrial agriculture realms.

That women’s lives and circumstances are necessarily intertwined with chickens, and likewise men with cattle, is not coincidental but rather a result of shared species positionality within

dominant hierarchies that shape the subjectivities, material realities, relationships, and daily existence of both humans and animals. Traditionally, this interspecies positionality meant consistent reification of men and cattle and marginalization of women and chickens. Contemporary agrarian restructuring and urbanization trends, however, have generated opportunities for women and chickens to renegotiate their shared status through increased access to land and productive activities within the commercial urban agriculture sector, leading to their increased visibility, status and value. This socio-spatial re-positioning, however, is discursively and materially bounded, generating problematic ethical implications, which ultimately reproduce dominant gender–species hierarchical arrangements.

Through a conceptual frame of feminist–posthumanist intersectionality, this paper relates the story of women/chickens vs. men/cattle to illustrate human and nonhuman animal othering as necessarily wrapped up with gender–species relations of power. It investigates how positionalities, those of men, cattle, women, chicken, and relationships between them, are produced and reproduced through dynamic socio-spatial practices in particular contexts. The paper, by doing so, examines issues central to critical scholars interested in multiple axes of difference, and establishes linkages between feminist and posthumanist thought to further highlight oppressive power relations, invisible and marginalized ‘others’, and shared locations in social hierarchies. It also contributes to recent discussions regarding relational thought in human–environment geography, offering an avenue to explore networks embedded with hierarchies of position and connectivity, as well as as those infused with both human and nonhuman animal agency.

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The paper is organized as follows: first it outlines feminist–posthumanist intersectionality as a conceptual frame; second it provides methodological details; third it examines othering of women and chickens and privileging of men and cattle in Botswana; fourth it examines empowered re-positioning of women and chickens emerging in the context of urbanization and agrarian change; fifth it summarizes insights gained from this case study demonstrating intersectional socio-spatial practices that work in particular contexts to continually produce and reproduce power relations premised upon both gender and species positionalities.

2. Feminist–posthumanist intersectionality

I engage intersectionality as a conceptual frame to explore, understand and explain gender–species positionality and relations in Botswana. Intersectionality is a theory and methodology of studying the relationships amongst numerous dimensions and modalities of social relationships and subject formations (McCall, 2005, p. 1771) and outlining interdependencies between social categories of power. Over the past thirty years, critical race and feminist theorists (e.g. Burman, 2004; Butler, 1997; Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1993; Essed, 1990; hooks, 1984; Mohanty et al., 1991; Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1988) have rejected narrow, separate, essentialist categories of gender, race, ethnicity, class, orientation, age, ability, etc. and have advocated for analyses acknowledging and engaging how such categories intersect and emerge in relation to one another symbolically and in practice. Intersectional analysis names and describes hidden acts of multiple discrimination and how they conceal damaging power relations; it brings to the fore how they construct, while paradoxically obviating, identities of self (Fernandes, 2003, p. 309). Here identities are emergent properties not reducible to naturally given biological essences or socially constructed role expectations. Emphasis lies on how identities or relations occur in intersections rather than on stable or given understandings of social difference (West and Fenstermaker, 1995, p. 9).

Geographical contributions to intersectionality scholarship, recently summarized and extended by Nightingale (2011, p. 153), focus on the relational production of space and subjectivity, as well as on the role of nature in producing particular identities and bodies. Feminist geographers especially have been instrumental in such theorizing, articulating the ways in which inequalities emerge through socio-spatial dynamics rooted in both discursive imaginings and material placements (e.g. Bondi and Davidson, 2003; Longhurst, 2003; Massey, 1994; Pratt and Hanson, 1994; Rose, 1994). Spaces are not socially neutral but rather enrolled in processes of creating difference and can become potent arenas for (re)producing or contesting oppressive forms of exclusion (Nightingale, 2011, p. 155; Valentine, 2007). Feminist political ecologists extend engagement with intersectionality into human–environment relations, emphasizing the ways in which social difference emerges from the convergence of political economic structures and everyday practices in specific ecological contexts (Nightingale, 2011, p. 155; Seager, 2003, p. 172). Here nature, as well as space, plays a fundamental role in the simultaneous constitution of gender, race, ethnicity, and class in light of broader processes of uneven development and distribution of, access to and control over resources (e.g. Hovorka, 2005; Gururani, 2002; Nightingale, 2006; Rocheleau et al., 1996). Animal geographers further extend understandings of intersectionality through their engagement with human–animal relations and co-constructions of identity. They detail how uses of animal bodies constitute and reinforce imperial notions of cultural and racial differences of humans, and in turn how this impacts nonhuman animals (e.g. Elder et al., 1998) or how constructions of masculinity and femininity shape treatment of both humans and nonhumans (e.g. Emel,

1995). They also illuminate how speciesism closely reflects other Western-based hierarchies; debates about animals unmistakably echo familiar racist, classist, and sexist ideologies about ‘natural affinities’, destinies inscribed in biology and ‘scientific proofs’ of the limited capacities of the ‘other’ used to justify slavery, mistreatment of the poor, and oppression of women (Seager, 2003, p. 169).

While richly insightful, geographical contributions to intersectionality scholarship are limited (Nightingale, 2011, p. 155; Valentine, 2007, p. 10) and thus the significance of space or nature (including animals) in processes of subject formation are underplayed. Further, work on intersectionality within the social sciences is largely theoretical in scope (Deckha, 2009; McCall, 2005). Empirical research demonstrating the way that categories intersect in the lived experiences of subjects is lacking (Valentine, 2007, p. 14); discursive constructions of intersectionality overshadow the materiality of such processes (Nightingale, 2011, p. 155). Challenges persist of exactly *how* to study intersectionality in practice (Deckha, 2009, p. 249; McCall, 2005, p. 1771). Finally, existing scholarship tends to limit analysis to relationships between particular identities, often gender and class or race, and highlights experiences of nonprivileged groups rather than on how privileged identities are similarly (un)done (Valentine, 2007, p. 14). Through conceptual engagement of intersectionality, I wish to extend its application, as well as address some of these limitations. Specifically, my case study of women/chickens and men/cattle in Botswana provides an empirical illustration that is geographic in scope, balances discursive and material elements, focuses on gender–species relations, and details dynamics of both othering and privileging.

To move forward in these directions, I draw upon posthumanist approaches to intersectionality and feminist animal studies exploring gender–species relations. A pivotal idea stemming from the former is that experiences of gender, race, ethnicity, class, orientation, age, ability etc. are often based on and take shape through speciesist ideas of humanness vis-à-vis animality (Deckha, 2009, p. 249–250). While only marginally discussed in critical social theory, species is a foundational identifier of difference. The gender–race–class triad in particular operates and is inflected with discourses of animality and ‘nature’ generally and these categories contribute symbolic associations to intra-human constructions of hierarchy and separation (Seager, 2003, p. 169; Twine, 2010, p. 397). Further, certain groups of humans become symbolically associated and materially related to certain other (nonhuman) species (and vice versa) – this process, together with hierarchical privileging and othering, (re)produces the positionality and life chances of both humans and nonhumans within society. Here we come to a conceptual ‘boundary breakdown’ whereby the line between human and nonhuman animals is more a broad smudgy band than sharp demarcation (Haraway, 1985). The lives of all beings are necessarily intertwined. Thus intersectionality “needs to resist the comfort of the humanist paradigm and reach across the species divide to consider species as a force of social construction, experience formation, and source of difference” (Deckha, 2009, p. 267).

Intersections of specifically gender and species have been theorized and investigated, for example, by ecofeminists who explore shared oppressions and simultaneous debasement of women and animals (e.g. Adams, 1990; Adams and Donovan, 1995; Donovan, 1990, 2006; Emel, 1995; Gaard, 1993; Griffin, 1978; Kheel, 2003; Plumwood, 1997, 2000). Recent innovative moves to understand and illustrate posthumanist intersectionality have brought feminist conceptions of performativity into the study of human–animal relations such that the focus shifts from ‘human’ to ‘animal’ as relationally performed, reproduced and co-produced (Twine, 2010, p. 401). Haraway’s (2003, 2008) work on companion species is an oft-cited example focused on the doing and becoming of identity across species boundaries; Birke et al.’s (2004) exploration of

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