

Companion Species under Fire: A Defense of Donna Haraway's *The Companion Species Manifesto*.

By Chris Vanderwees

According to Marianne Dekoven, Donna Haraway's "A Manifesto for Cyborgs," published in 1985, "signals the end of utopian feminist theory....and the inception of postmodern feminist theory" (1694). Haraway argues that technology constantly challenges gender binaries and in a world of continuous technological advancement, "we become unable to think of ourselves according to these categories or even as merely biological beings" (Richter 1966). She states, "[c]yborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves" (Haraway, "Manifesto for Cyborgs" 601). Haraway does not argue that all organisms possess fixed or containable identities, but rather that all organisms are always in a process of identification. She not only challenges and destabilizes dualistic arguments pertaining to gender, but also "offers the opportunity of dismantling hierarchies of class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and location" (Dekoven 1694). More recently, however, Haraway has left the cyborg behind, stating that she "ha[s] come to see cyborgs as junior siblings in the much bigger, queer family of companion species" (*Companion Species Manifesto* 11). Despite this shift in direction, Haraway's understanding of companion species shares some intimate connections with cyborgs. She argues that companion species function, like cyborgs, to bridge gaps between binary categories:

Cyborgs and companion species each bring together the human and non-human, the organic and technological, carbon and silicon, freedom and structure, history and myth, the rich and the poor, the state and the subject, diversity and depletion, modernity and postmodernity, and nature and culture in unexpected ways.
(Haraway, *Companion Species Manifesto* 4)

Although cyborgs and companion species function similarly, Haraway writes, "by the end of the millennium, cyborgs could no longer do the work of a proper herding dog to gather up the threads needed for critical inquiry" (*Companion Species Manifesto* 4). And so, she has set aside arguments pertaining to hybrids of organic and mechanical matter and has turned to dogs instead.

In *The Companion Species Manifesto*, Haraway explores how "an ethics and politics committed to the flourishing of significant otherness [might] be learned from taking dog-human

relationships seriously; and...how...stories about dog-human worlds [might] finally convince...people...that history matters in naturecultures” (3). While Haraway’s focus is on dogs, “companion species” also refers to a range of human and non-human animal relationships where humans and non-human animals have co-constitutively evolved alongside one another. Joseph Schneider interprets from Haraway’s argument that “any history of dogs needs to be told as inextricably entwined with the history of *Homo sapiens*” (Schneider 82). Similar to the cyborg, the significance of companion species is neither fixed nor containable, but instead, is always shifting, changing, and incomplete. Haraway explicitly states that the history and understanding of companion species is “permanently in progress, in principle” (*Companion Species Manifesto* 3). While companion species are always contingent upon one another, they are as much compatible as they are irreconcilable. The complex relationship between human and non-human animal companionship leads Haraway to draw from the work of Marilyn Strathern, which emphasizes a theory of “partial connections.” In Haraway’s words, “[p]arts don’t add up to wholes in this manifesto – or in life in naturecultures. I am looking for...the counter-intuitive geometries and incongruent translations necessary in getting on together” (*Companion Species Manifesto* 25). Haraway wants to tell stories about the interconnections between dogs and people and does so, through the concept of “metaplastm,” which is, in her words, “the remodeling of dog and human flesh, remolding the codes of life, in the history of companion-species relating” (*Companion Species Manifesto* 20). Eva Hayward sees metaplastm as “a kind of enactment with relationship as part of the relationship, a practice of enfolding relationships in their ongoing materializations” (78). In other words, companion species relationships are continuously in a state of becoming. Ultimately, through the concept of “metaplastm,” Haraway advocates an ethics of communication and understanding between humans and non-human animals and exemplifies this in practice by acknowledging the histories of her canine companions and through the interspecies sport of agility. She argues that the relationship between both dog and handler demonstrate the inadequacy of binary distinctions between nature and culture and communicate the need for an understanding of naturecultures.

Additionally, weaved throughout this manifesto are roots of feminism as Haraway writes, “I want my readers to know why I consider dog writing to be a branch of feminist theory, or the other way around” (*Companion Species Manifesto* 3). Consequently, since its publication, *The Companion Species Manifesto* has received attention from animal studies and feminist scholars

alike. This attention often arrives in forms of harsh criticism or disagreement. It is important to note that these scholars often critique and refer to Haraway and her ideas in contexts of posthumanism and ecofeminism. Voicing her dissatisfaction for posthumanism in an interview with Nicholas Gane, Haraway states, “[t]he reason I go to companion species is to get away from posthumanism. Companion species is my effort to be in alliance and in tension with posthumanist projects” (140). The practice of citing Haraway as an ecofeminist is also questionable. Stacy Alaimo argues, “[w]hereas ecofeminism seeks to strengthen the bonds between women and nature by critiquing their parallel oppressions...Haraway seeks to destabilize the nature/culture dualism that grounds the oppression of both women and nature” (133). For these reasons and for the purposes of this paper, I will avoid discussing Haraway and her ideas in posthumanist and ecofeminist contexts. This paper will, instead, defend Haraway’s arguments and concepts in light of both animal studies and feminist reactions to *The Companion Species Manifesto*, arguing that the criticisms Haraway receives are often misconstrued or misdirected. Finally, I will briefly explore and question Haraway’s conviction that the concept of dog writing is a branch of feminist theory.

Haraway’s latest manifesto perhaps receives the most disparaging criticism from animal rights and vegan-feminist activist, Carol J. Adams. In an interview with Tom Tyler, Adams states: “I found the final product, her small pamphlet...uneven, as though it were cobbled together. And her voice is not so much ambiguous as inconsistent. Sometimes it feels downright petulant. It’s the lacunae in Haraway that disturb” (125). While these may be legitimate criticisms, Adams does not provide any specific examples of these inconsistencies or ambiguities and hardly develops a concrete argument against the ideas at the core of Haraway’s manifesto. Adams is apparently disturbed by Haraway’s lacunae, or gaps in writing, but these gaps are inevitable when distinctions between nature and culture are unclear in terms of companion species. Haraway is working indirectly within what Jacques Derrida calls dissemination, “a continual flickering, spilling, and diffusing of meaning...which cannot be easily contained...within the categories of a conventional critical approach” (Eagleton 116). Haraway deals with elusive meanings and definitions and perhaps any concrete, unambiguous framework that would better comfort Adams in a discussion of companion species does not exist. Haraway repeatedly defines and redefines companion species throughout her work, emphasizing its fluidity and mutability as a category. For her to apply stable or fixed parameters to companion

species would undermine the premise that these relationships hold shifting, multiple, and evolving significances.

Adams also argues that Haraway ignores and dismisses animal rights issues, based solely on Haraway's use of the phrase, "rights besotted" (*Companion Species Manifesto* 48). She targets Haraway's ethical beliefs concerning veganism and argues that Haraway ignores and supports atrocities surrounding the production of meat:

[Haraway] seems so hesitant to address herself to the species with whom humans have the least ethical relation – the animals whom people eat – indeed, referring to a stop at *Burger King* to get 'burgers, coke, and fries'. Her book was published after *Burger King* started selling veggie burgers, but she fails to tell us what sort of burger she bought. Haraway protects the dominance that ontologizes animals as edible....She renders unto the renderers the bodies of animals....She cannot or will not acknowledge the possibility that livestock might also be companion species. (Adams 126)

Whether Haraway ate or did not eat meat at a fast food restaurant certainly does not, as a point alone, contradict the entirety of her text. While Haraway does not discuss the animals that people eat at any length, she does endorse "radical reform of the meat-industrial complex" (*Companion Species Manifesto* 97), and so it seems unfair to claim that she explicitly justifies or advocates meat consumption. Perhaps Haraway does not thoroughly discuss meat production because this is simply not a manifesto about the production of meat. Here, she is writing about dogs and argues that "dog people need to learn how to inherit difficult histories in order to shape more vital multi-species futures" (Haraway, *Companion Species Manifesto* 63). She wishes to fully acknowledge the complex histories and context surrounding dogs and presents them as an example to further human connection with other species. Haraway does not deny any possibility that humans and livestock might potentially exist in a companion species relationship, rather she explicitly writes, "[g]enerally speaking, one does not eat one's companion animals (nor get eaten by them); and one has a hard time shaking colonialist, ethnocentric, ahistorical attitudes toward those who do (eat or get eaten)" (*Companion Species Manifesto* 14). With this in mind, it appears unlikely that we could presently discuss livestock as existing in mutually constitutive relationships with human beings. Nevertheless, Haraway writes, "[c]ompanion species...is my awkward term for a not-humanism in which species of all sorts are in question....Companion species is a permanently undecidable category, a category-in-question" (*When Species Meet* 164-165). All species then, livestock included, are in question as possible companions in the process

of “becoming with” (Haraway, “Encounters” 99). Again, more simply put, her focus is on dogs and dog-human relations serve as one example for a much wider range of potentialities.

Animal studies scholars also tend to target Haraway’s perception of interspecies agility sports as mutually rewarding for both human and non-human animal participants. Haraway advocates for an ethics of reciprocal communication and understanding between humans and companions animals. Agility sports are Haraway’s exemplification of the potential for cross species mutuality:

Both dog and handler have to be able to take the initiative and to respond obediently to the other. The task is to become coherent enough in an incoherent world to engage in a joint dance of being that breeds respect and response in the flesh, in the run, on the course. And then to remember how to live like that at every scale, with all partners. (*Companion Species Manifesto* 62)

This is where Boria Sax disagrees. In “Human and Post-Animal,” Sax argues, “[t]he routines that dogs are trained to do are a symbolic affirmation of human dominance over the natural world” (1). Dog training, for Sax, is always a demonstration of human mastery over animals. He argues, “[w]hen a trainer gives commands and the dog is expected to follow them exactly, this can certainly appear to be the ultimate extreme of dominance” (*H-Net Discussion*). Raising a similar concern, Rebecca Cassidy writes, “[t]he idea that training relationships can be mutually gratifying, and even ethical, is opposed by many who would argue that the training relationship is always hierarchical and patriarchal” (327). These concerns are both valid ones, but Haraway is clear that companion species relationships should be cooperative, existing with premises of reciprocal communication. She argues, “in training, dogs obtain ‘rights’ in specific humans. In relationship, dogs and humans construct ‘rights’ in each other.... Possession – property – is about reciprocity and rights of access. If I have a dog, my dog has a human; what this means is concretely at stake” (Haraway, *Companion Species Manifesto* 53-54). Further, Haraway is explicit in her disdain for dog people that establish relationships with their canine companions based in hierarchy. Haraway writes that those who believe that dogs are capable of unconditional love and treat their dogs as children base their beliefs “on mistakes, if not lies [and]...are in themselves abusive – to dogs and to humans” (*Companion Species Manifesto* 33). She argues and demonstrates that patriarchal and hierarchical ethics of domination can be minimized in agility training and in companion species relationships, if not eliminated altogether. While dog training may or may not symbolize human dominance over nature, Sax ignores the

significant implication that both human and canine existences are inextricable. Jon T. Coleman writes, “[t]he subjects of genetic, behavioral, and cosmetic manipulation for centuries, dogs are unimaginable outside of their relationships with people. Dogs mongrelize species categories, and their impurity threatens to collapse other boundaries” (491). Dogs and human lives are therefore inseparable and certainly, training is part of this inseparability. Haraway argues that through ethics of reciprocal communication, humans not only train their dogs, but dogs also train their humans. In “Between Species: Science and Subjectivity,” Barbara Smuts similarly advocates for mutual communication between humans and non-human animals as a method to protect and preserve endangered species (125); while in “Feminism and the Treatment of Animals: From Care to Dialogue,” Josephine Donovan argues that humans “must recognize that the [non-human animal] ‘other’ has a ‘nature’ of her own that needs to be respected and with which one must enter into conversation” (324). Like Haraway, both Donovan and Smuts argue that in the best interests of both humans and non-human animals, humans must transform their perceptions of human and non-human animal relationships while striving for communicative mutuality. It is not enough to argue that companion species relationships are concretely patriarchal, hierarchical, or dominating as this argument alone is stagnant and ignores that these relationships are always in motion, changing, adapting, and transforming through, in Haraway’s words, ontological choreography. Companion species do not reinforce hierarchies, but rather, like cyborgs, work to destabilize them.

In “Critical Pet Studies?,” Heidi J. Nast also critiques Haraway in a context of hierarchies. Here, hierarchies between humans and canines do not concern Nast, rather she argues that Haraway “curiously sets self-critical capacities aside to argue that working dogs are so superior in intelligence (‘other’ dogs are mere pets) that they constitute a special category of ‘subject’; humans who successfully interact with such dogs...engage in a heightened form of intersubjectivity” (894). It is difficult to place Nast’s criticism especially since Haraway is frequently self-critical, acknowledging her subject position as a “US middle-aged white woman” and is fully aware that “[i]n the US, middle-aged, middle-class, white women dominate...[agility] sport[s] numerically” (*Companion Species Manifesto* 11, 60). Haraway is also careful to not construct hierarchies between pure breeds and mutts or working dogs and pets. She writes, “institutionalized breeds...as well as dogs with no fixed breed or kind, can help shape a potent worldly consciousness in solidarity with my feminist, anti-racist, queer, and

socialist comrades” (Haraway, *Companion Species Manifesto* 64). Further, Haraway states, “[a]nyone who has done historical research knows that the undocumented often have more to say about how the world is put together than do the well pedigreed” (*Companion Species Manifesto* 88). She balances any discussion and history of pure breeds with “A Category of One’s Own,” a chapter devoted strictly to Mexican strays that are adopted and shipped to the United States. While I do not believe Haraway supports or creates hierarchies between dogs, perhaps if she does focus more on working dogs or pure breeds, it is because she is writing from a personal perspective and Great Pyrenees and Australian Shepherds are the dogs she lives and interacts with on a daily basis. Dekoven writes, “[Haraway’s] new manifesto is not about ‘the dog’ at all but about real dogs, her dogs, the particular dogs with whom she has become intimately involved” (1695). Haraway does not exclude dogs outside of pure breed status; put simply, these are the dogs she writes about because these are the dogs she knows.

While I have tried to defend *The Companion Species Manifesto* from what I believe are often misdirected and confusing criticisms, one question still remains: How might we consider dog writing as a branch of feminist theory or feminist theory as a branch of dog writing? Alternatively, what relations do dog writing and feminism share? Haraway writes that she “consider[s] dog writing to be a branch of feminist theory, or the other way around” (*Companion Species Manifesto* 3), but she hardly explores or justifies this statement. Throughout *The Companion Species Manifesto*, Haraway fleetingly refers to feminist theory and concepts (both Judith Butler and Virginia Woolf are mentioned), yet she never sufficiently outlines any connection between dog writing and feminism. Haraway’s perception of an intimacy between dog writing and feminism inevitably raises questions. Would Haraway consider John Grogan’s *Marley & Me*, with Grogan’s clear disdain for his partner’s “feminist screeds” (11), to be a feminist text? Additionally, Dekoven writes, “[i]t is not clear...that *The Companion Species Manifesto* advances feminist theory beyond the insights already articulated by Haraway in her earlier work” (1695). This appears accurate, as Haraway seems to rely only upon the connections she envisions between companion species and cyborgs to justify connections between feminism and dog writing. Although Haraway ultimately leaves the relationship between dog writing and feminism relatively ambiguous and fails to explore the complexities of this implication, perhaps it is not her responsibility to provide every answer. Handelman argues that Haraway has “prick[ed] the thinking of scholars and intellectuals by pushing beyond

disciplinary boundaries, thinking laterally...and raising critical issues that academic common-sense...does not recognize" (254). Haraway has opened the door to a work that is "permanently in progress, in principle" (*Companion Species Manifesto* 3) and admits, in her own words, that "other people are doing a better job on a whole lot of this work than I am, and it's a collective project" (Haraway qtd. in Gane 144). Therefore, as a collective project in progress, perhaps it is now the job of animal studies and feminist scholars to discuss, critique, and discover useful applications for a mutually constitutive relationship between dog writing and feminism, feminism and dog writing, as a potential advancement toward understanding continuously evolving naturecultures.

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