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Masculinized Sovereignty: Understanding Violence Towards Mice and the Nonhuman

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My behavioral biology research on mice could potentially help the 130 million people living with diabetes. My experiments are motivated by a desire to secure my place in the medical industry. This desire, however, leads me to ignore the implications of exploiting mice as a model organism. There is no question that I, as an animal researcher, commit ethical crimes: I confine a mouse in a small cage, take it away from its family, anesthetize it, and physically take its body apart. Foucault’s realm of “biopower,” in which “metaphysical imperative instead of political or cultural rationality holds sway,” describes the field of animal research ethics that studies why we make animals suffer intensely in pursuit of a scientific agenda.¹⁰⁷ In the eyes of the biomedical academic research industrial complex, violence for the “public good” justifies the erasure of animals’ pain. Like the State, this complex dispossesses, takes, and displaces land and its habitants for the project of capital accumulation.

While conducting research, I view the lab as a site of social advancement where the differences between humans and nonhumans create a community of shared purpose. However, an interrogation of the lab as a site of violence can help us better understand how the State’s capitalist modes of advancement and production harm those of Indigenous people, Black women, and other minorities. I will be applying my lived experiences of working *on* mice and the relations between humans and nonhumans to explore the masculinization of sovereignty (over both land and people) and the State’s monopoly on violence. Using Black feminist standpoint theory, I will further examine the the “Black captive body” and the commodification other nonhumans.

Masculinized Human Sovereignty

What does it mean to be *human*, and who is given the authority to set the definition of human? By framing the human as a tool for violence, it can be used to categorize groups who do not fit into this definition and punish them for it. To

¹⁰⁷ Kimberly W Benston, “Experimenting at the Threshold: Sacrifice, Anthropomorphism, and the Aims of (Critical) Animal Studies,” *PMLA* 124, no. 2 (2009): 550.

animal researchers, a human is someone who has intellectual capabilities of reasoning, speaking, remembering, and intending, “making ‘human’ substance (rational, cultural, and moral capability) the measure of animal identity.”¹⁰⁸ In thinking about human and nonhuman relations, speciesism is the conviction that humans are more important than other species, which is used to justify the exploitation of animals. In the lab, ideas of intellectual capability and speciesism combine to, for example, rationalize euthanizing a mouse that fails the behavioral test of not licking the correct solution bottle. In connection with the murder of Indigenous women, whose bodies represent alternative political order against settler colonialism, we see how the subjects that go against the dominant ideal of human are prohibited from living a free life, if not altogether eliminated.

Applying this conceptualization of how the definition of *human* changes in order to benefit the oppressor helps us understand how White masculinity is upheld. In Audre Lorde’s “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” she explains how human means fitting in the “mythical norm”: “In America, (...) is usually defined as White, thin, male, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure.”¹⁰⁹ Lorde identifies the feeling of “that is not me,” where our identities fail to fit society’s belief of what is normal and are labeled as being “less than” others. In Sojourner Truth’s speech “Ain’t I a Woman?,” she considers the connection between the *human* and *who is granted rights*, wondering why “[t]hey talk about this thing in the head; what’s this they call it? [member of audience whispers, ‘intellect’] (...) What’s that got to do with women’s right or Negroes’ rights?”¹¹⁰ Here, *human* gets complicated by racist and sexist stereotypes, as it is not solely based on groups that fit into the biopower of racial, bodily, gender, religious, and class identity, but also whether or not they are associated with intellectual ability, a trait that is a discriminator between humans and nonhumans. With both mice and groups that do not fit into the “American human,” not belonging to the given definition of human legitimates the oppression of the inferior group. Society responds to those in Lorde’s “mythical norm” by dehumanizing these groups in the same way that I, as a participant in the biomedical industrial complex, do to mice.

The outlined definitions of human are difficult to conceptualize without linking them to power. How does the definition of human determine who has power over, or *monopolizes*, violence? European colonizers in the 1600s relegated minority subjects to positions of subordination through sovereign power, upholding their economic, political, and social domination. This violence, specifically through imperialist expansion, was supported by the colonial constructions of race. Similarly to social Darwinism in the late 19th century,

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*: 546.

¹⁰⁹ Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” in *Sister Outsider Essays and Speeches* (New York: Penguin Books, 2020): 2.

¹¹⁰ Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I a Woman?” in *Civil Rights and Conflict in the United States: Selected Speeches* (Lit2Go Edition, 1851).

“settlers suggested that the natives were inferior to the ‘master race’ and that ‘primitive races’ would inevitably (perhaps desirably) be wiped out by the more ‘civilized’ European ones.”¹¹¹ Here, the “civilized” human becomes included in the definition of human, signifying Whiteness, property ownership, and desire for production. In human and animal relations, the civilized human hopes to produce scientific knowledge to benefit their own species. Therefore, humans are inevitably more deserving of living because their desire for scientific advancement (i.e. capital production).

The “Black Captive Body”

Colonialism, in combination with racist ideologies, produces the idea of the “Black captive body” as *not human*. Thus, the White colonizer’s violence is justified, going so far as to convince “decent men and women to accept the notion that distant territories and their native people *should* be subjugated.”¹¹² Violence towards the Black body is specifically exercised through criminalization and captivity; these methods both produce and reproduce the masculinization of sovereignty over people. In relation to the lab, 55,475 out of 3,936,723 procedures using live animals are included in the category of behavioral research that causes “pain, suffering, distress or lasting harm.”¹¹³ By denying their pain, we continue to claim mice’s bodies, think of them as not human for the good of science, and reproduce our sovereignty over them. Moreover, lynch mobs served as an extra-legal means for reimposing racism, sexism, and other -isms that drive one farther from the category of human. By viewing African American male-White female relations as a crime and White male-African American relations as a right to property, White men claimed ownership over bodies. Accordingly, the White man’s violence is never seen as damaging but as restorative, rightful, and unpunishable (i.e. the masculinization of sovereignty over people).¹¹⁴

The Masculine State

*The State that I seek to name has a character, it has a male character, it is more than likely white, or aspiring to an unmarked center of whiteness, and definitely heteropatriarchal.*¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Mary Bosworth and Jeanne Flavin, eds., *Race, Gender, and Punishment: From Colonialism to the War on Terror* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007): 19.

¹¹² *Ibid*: 13.

¹¹³ Kimberley Jayne and Adam See, "Behavioral Research on Captive Animals: Scientific and Ethical Concerns" in *Animal Experimentation: Working Towards a Paradigm Change* (Leiden: Brill, 2019): 520.

¹¹⁴ Bosworth and Flavin, *Race, Gender, and Punishment*, 23.

¹¹⁵ Audra Simpson, "The State is a Man: Theresa Spence, Loretta Saunders and the Gender of Settler Sovereignty," *Theory & Event* 19, no. 4 (2016): 2.

Given the way that the White man comes to define himself by having a monopoly over violence, how do we understand how the masculinized State apprehends bodies? By viewing the State as “a Man,” institutionalized rejection of difference, or in other words, the State seeing others as not human, creates systems of punishment attached to the colonial construction of race. In Audra Simpson's “The State is a Man: Theresa Spence, Loretta Saunder and the Gender of Settler Sovereignty,” she shows how masculinized sovereignty is exerted not only over people but also land. The Canadian government’s “multicultural, liberal” settling of land is, in actuality, an ongoing dispossession of land, controlling who lives where and with what rights.¹¹⁶ In this case, land does not just represent the physical soil. It is also the home, identity, traditional governance forms and, most markedly, “a dead body to be extracted from.”¹¹⁷ Indigenous women’s bodies are less valuable and less human *because* of what they symbolize: “land, reproduction, [and] Indigenous kinship and governance”—a direct threat to settlement. Through the State’s gendered and racialized elimination techniques of Indigenous women’s bodies to “destroy what is not,” he secures the masculinized settler sovereignty.¹¹⁸

Now, I will make visible the key concepts in order to frame animal research’s application to the State’s sovereignty and resulting violence over land and people:

*The animal researcher dominated IACUCS [Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee] [= the masculine State] has determined a priori that experimental animals [= Indigenous people] are of so little ethical worth compared to the value they place on hypothetically increasing scientific knowledge [= capital production] that the ends always justify the means.*¹¹⁹

Analogously, mice in my lab are forced away from their natural habitats to captivity in order for their behavior to be observed and their bodies to be manipulated. This violent dislocation procedure forces mice to engage in social interaction that is distinct from what they would naturally experience. They are exposed to unnatural procedures, such as “being caught and handled, unfamiliar sounds, lighting and temperature, and cage cleaning.”¹²⁰ The State’s similar dispossession of land drives Indigenous people to live without clean water and proper housing in extreme temperatures. Their environment shifted but also their “traditional way of life.”¹²¹ The trauma that both the mice and Indigenous people face helps us comprehend the implications of colonialism.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*: 2.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*: 7.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*: 2.

¹¹⁹ Lawrence A. Hansen and Kori Ann Kosberg, “Ethics, Efficacy, and Decision-making in Animal Research” in *Animal Experimentation: Working Towards a Paradigm Change* (Leiden: Brill, 2019): 284.

¹²⁰ Jayne and See, “Behavioral Research on Captive Animals,” 521.

¹²¹ Simpson, “The State is a Man,” 5.

Securing sovereignty goes hand-in-hand with upholding capitalism. Colonial construction of race is not only based on racial inferiority and savagery, but it is also entangled with the economic necessity of labor for colonizers and their home countries. As Lorde comments, an “institutionalized rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders a surplus people.”¹²² In other words, those at the top (who most likely fit the mythical norm) benefit from using difference as a tool, creating a large supply of workers whose labor is so exploited that they are made less than human. Even after the abolition of slavery, economic motivation drove the Southern elite to explore creative ways to reintroduce race-based involuntary servitude and now drives the criminal justice system to enforce mass incarceration for prison labor. It is the continuing ethos of capitalism that overrides any questions about morality. Thus, the nonhuman black body was and is not only captive but also commodifiable. In a capitalist world, violence drives and is driven by capital production.

As a scientist, there are many times when ethical grounds are divorced from scientific advancement. To give some examples, the death of a mouse becomes overshadowed by a successful experimental result. When mice have pups, reproduction is tethered to making commodities and is in service of the marketplace, while no thought is given to the dispelling of the mouse’s experience of motherhood. As Claude Bernard, a famous physiologist puts it, a scientist “no longer perceives the cry of animal he (...) perceives only organisms concealing problems which he intends to solve.”¹²³ I have experienced their “cry” from the approved killing methods for rodents such as neck dislocation and carbon dioxide suffocation. Nevertheless, the possibility of new advances in human health that benefit the biomedical-industrial complex is what reassures my colleagues and I. This erasure of an animal’s pain provokes the question of how the same is done to Indigenous women. Their “cry” results from the trauma, homelessness, poverty, and ill-health Natives face as a consequence of colonization. Their cries are silenced by eliminating Indigenous women, a gendered mode of violence that upholds the State’s sovereignty.

It is important to highlight how structural systems prevent change and make resistance difficult. The biomedical-industrial complex delegates researchers to determine if animal experimentation should be allowed. For example, in my laboratory, it seems that we are reluctant to consider adopting non-animal based research methods, because doing so would interfere with our own personal objectives and employment. The same is true with the State, as “the disappearances keep things in place, the narratives, the politics, the distributions in power that allow for land to still be taken.”¹²⁴ The State, himself, determines laws about what land is taken and eliminates anything or anyone that goes against him. If both the

¹²² Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex,” 1.

¹²³ Benston, “Experimenting at the Threshold,” 549.

¹²⁴ Simpson, “The State is a Man,” 1.

biomedical-industrial complex and the State make up the rules, how else can we envision change?

Black Feminist Standpoint Theory: A Solution

The pain, suffering, and exploitation of nonhuman groups show us how society falters when difference is seen as deviance, and deviance is seen as not human. Patricia Hill Collins' "Black Feminist Thought in the Matrix of Domination" calls for us to shift the ways in which we think about oppression by using Black feminist standpoint theory. Her frameworks help us reflect on how we can reimagine human and nonhuman relations. In colonizer and slave, State and Native, and human and animal relations, the problem lies in that "all categories of humans labeled Others have been equated to one another, to animals, and to nature."¹²⁵ In human and nonhuman relations, epistemic violence has been used to erase animals' pain and view matters solely from the human standpoint. Collins highlights how Black feminist thought fosters new ways of assessing the "truth" by placing Black women's *experiences* as the center of analysis.¹²⁶ In the lab, the problem arises when the researcher "perceives only organisms concealing problems which he intends to solve."¹²⁷ However, a decolonial perspective functioning in the biomedical-industrial complex would mean formulating questions but not always trying to find the answers to them through violent experimentation in order to fit homogenous knowledge formations. Utilizing Black feminist standpoint theory in human and nonhuman relations would allow us to decolonize the dominant, scientific viewpoint, defeat speciesism, and see from the animal's point of view, helping us gain empathy and giving us a way to practice feminism.

¹²⁵ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000): 555.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*: 553.

¹²⁷ Benston, "Experimenting at the Threshold," 546.

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