

Interview with animal liberation activist and former political prisoner Peter Young

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Peter Young is a veteran animal liberation activist and former political prisoner convicted for his role in liberating thousands of animals from fur farms across the country. Emerging from a grand jury indictment, seven years of being wanted by the FBI, a federal prison sentence, and nearly fifteen years in the animal liberation movement; today Peter is an activist, lecturer at universities and events, writer on liberation movements, and unapologetic supporter of those who work outside the law to achieve human, earth, and animal liberation. Please visit his website voiceofthevoiceless.org for more information.

Thank you, Peter Young, for agreeing to this interview with the Journal for Critical Animal Studies. It is a privilege to speak with you. One of the purposes of the Institute for Critical Animal Studies is to articulate and examine the reasoning behind direct action tactics that are often left unexplained. As an animal activist that has adopted controversial and radical tactics, we thought you would be able to comment on the recent “pieing” of author Lierre Keith. First, could you tell our readers why you became a vegan?

I became vegan when I learned this culture’s pretense of “civility” was a façade, and behind the walls of buildings all around me were the billions of tortured beings we called “food” and “research subjects”. I became vegan because there is no amount of suffering as great and severe as that which non-human animals are subjected to. As the most extreme of injustices, it deserves the most extreme of responses. The first and most basic of which is veganism.

In your blog post, “Animal-Holocaust Denier Pied at Anarchist Book Fair,” you write that the pieing of author Lierre Keith “will undoubtedly give Keith some (vegan) ‘food for thought’ while she travels the country, promoting the consumption of animals.” Do you believe this was a good choice of direct action? Please explain.

One would have to wonder how debatable this would be if Keith were promoting her book “The Holocaust Myth”, or “The Sexism Myth”. She would be as marginalized as any Nazi. Yet she can promote an agenda that claims more lives every day than the entire Holocaust, and somehow we find this open to friendly debate.

She got pied. That’s all. It was classic guerilla theater. Those who condemn this action would certainly be in full support if the target was a CEO or Klan leader. This is not a debate over tactics – there is no tactic more benign than a pie in the face. This is a debate over speciesism. This is a debate over people who live selfishly being confronted with their disregard for other’s lives. The role of an activist is to agitate oppressors. And the piers have done a fantastically effective job.

While many have supported the pieing action, others call it immature. How do you understand the event?

I don’t ask if a tactic is “mature”, I only ask if it is effective. And this was highly effective. The activists were successful at generating a tremendous amount of attention, stirring up a much needed public debate on the trend towards “humane meat” and “conscious carnivorism”. It took only three people giving a few minutes of their time to shine the spotlight on this farce, and put every one of Keith’s followers on the defensive. You can call something immature without ever having to defeat its efficacy or necessity. The animals don’t care if it is “immature”.

It was a pie. It is comical for Keith to life herself to victim status over being attacked with a pie. She even called the police. The animals she kills don’t have the luxury of police protection. She might elicit more sympathy when she displays some of her own towards other species.

Do you think the pieing was a sexist and ableist attack on a woman with disabilities? Why or why not?

This is a typical application of “anarchist fallacy”, whereby you win the argument by labeling the other side one of several guilty of one or all of the worst “isms” – sexism, racism, classism, etc. Most who rely on this schoolyard-bully strategy are too

regressive to use, or give weight to, another ism: “specisism”, the ism which claims more victims than all the rest combined. The power of this rhetorical device comes from the implication that if you disagree with them, you are a sexist, racist, classism, heterosexist, or fill-in-the-blank flavor-of-the-week category of oppressor.

She was no more of a target because of her gender or disability. She was not targeted because she was in a position of weakness. She was targeted because she promotes the exploitation of the weak. Because she promotes falsehoods, and the death of every species but the one she belongs to. How incredibly disingenuous to pull the “oppressed” card, when oppression is inherent in the lifestyle she promotes. I am certain the animals who die to satisfy her taste for flesh feel “oppressed”. She is in no position to be arguing against the strong exploiting the weak. Exploiting the weak is the foundation of the lifestyle she promotes.

Described as a radical, feminist environmentalist, Keith explains in her book that she is questioning agriculture. She argues that by examining “the power relations behind the foundational myth of our culture,” we can work toward a sustainable world. How would you respond to this claim?

Labeling yourself a radical-anything doesn’t give you a free pass to promote speciesism and oppression. Among the “foundational myths of our culture:” is anthropocentrism, and “might makes right”. Animal agriculture is still agriculture.

What is your take on her claim that moving away from a vegetarian/vegan lifestyle is a turn to “adult knowledge,” in which humans acknowledge that “death is embedded in every creature's sustenance”?

This is predicated on the apathetic and self-serving belief that if you can’t do everything, you shouldn’t do anything. That if a grasshopper is injured in grain harvesting, we should just throw up our hands and stuff our mouths with the bloodied corpses of tortured animals. And this is not to mention the largest consumers of grain are animals raised for food.

The tone of Lierre's book is one of condescension. It is laden with lines like "what vegetarians don't understand is..." and "If this is hard to grasp, let me explain". Calling her speciesist position "adult knowledge" is consistent with the insulting tone that runs through the rest of her book. It is written in a bizarrely emotional way, reading at times like a temper tantrum and others like a flustered schoolteacher. Those that have a strong and defensible point, make it. Those who don't, condescend.

The people who disingenuously call flesh eating a regrettable but necessary evil, and shed fake tears while using lines like "nature is cruel" and "violence is a part of life", are never themselves the victims of the violence they excuse. It is a very easy thing to sit at the privileged throne of a podium in a university lecture hall and bemoan the cruel realities of "the circle of life", when she is not herself on death row. Were Keith to be hung up by a chain and find a knife at their throat like the animals those who pied her stood up for, she may find herself less dismissive of the "death" she fetishizes.

Do you agree with any claims or arguments in Keith's book about the need to adopt large-scale sustainable eating habits?

Of course. By what measure, one has to wonder, are animals more "efficient" or "sustainable" food sources than plants? It takes 16 pounds of grain to make one pound of flesh. Keith would say we shouldn't feed animals grain. But there is not enough free range land for the animals needed to feed 300 million people. And the animals she eats are not native species. She might argue for eating native species and the scaling back the human population. But that does nothing for our current situation, and in no way justifies her selfish regression from veganism. It is not surprising she begins her talks by stating she will not take questions.

It is a strange ruler to use, making the sole measure of whether a thing is good or bad its "sustainability", and placing a behavior's impact on the "biotic community" as the only factor worth consideration while disregarding its impact on sentient individuals. By this formula, the promoters of "conscious carnivorism" would have championed solar powered gas chambers at Dachau.

What recommendations do you have for the critical animal studies movement to respond to Keith's book?

You can argue it on her terms. If “isms” are the language she speaks, you can give her isms. Drive home that speciesism is analogous to sexism, racism, homophobia, and other social inequities. But, unlike Keith, few of the aforementioned varieties of oppressors openly advocate the killing of those weaker populations who they place below them. Remove her façade of “anti-oppression” and highlight the oppression that is inherent in what she promotes. Expose her lies of “radical feminism” and highlight the rape of animals forced to produce dairy and eggs, and that only female animals are imprisoned for these “foods”. Expose her as promoting an oppressive, violent agenda that is based on lies and moral schizophrenia.