

## **“Veil of Shame”: Derrida, Sarah Bartmann and Animality**

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### **Introduction**

Sarah Bartmann, famously known as the “Hottentot Venus,” was a South African Khoisan woman who was paraded around nineteenth-century England and France (sometimes in a cage) because of her striking appearance.<sup>2</sup> Significantly, descriptions of Bartmann abound with references to her similarity to animals. As racial theorist T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting notes, most people “did not view her as a person or even a human” (1999: 17). In 1839, Samuel Morton, the father of scientific racism, described Bartmann and the Khoisans as “the nearest approximation to the lower animals” (Washington 2006: 83).<sup>3</sup> In being connected to animality, Bartmann’s body was variously employed by the nineteenth-century scientific community in the service of human (read: white, male, European) self-conceptions.

Alongside a reading of Derrida’s “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” I maintain that the way Sarah Bartmann’s raced, sexed and colonial treatment was *animalized* concretely illustrates Derrida’s claim that the animal-human binary is perhaps the most central for theory.<sup>4</sup> In his text, Derrida argues that the animal-human binary we have constructed goes all the way back to a time before time, indeed to the “very genesis of time” (2008: 17, my emphasis). But despite the fact that

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2 The term “Hottentot apron,” the name ascribed to Bartmann’s supposedly “overdeveloped” labia stands for “sinus pudoris” in Latin, meaning “veil of shame” (Derrida, 2008: 83).

3 Harriet Washington explains that “Hottentot,” was a derogatory name for the Khoisan people, apparently meant to imitate the clicking sounds of their language (2006: 84).

4 See Calarco (2008: 103) on this.

the animal-human divide has been lurking in the background since time began, theorists of oppression have yet to appreciate its enduring centrality. I maintain that if the animal-human divide persists in the background of both our theory and practice, it remains the generative site for the deployment of ever new and mutating strategies of oppression. Accordingly, I propose that critical gender, sex and race theory *must* register the animal-human dichotomy as a *fundamental driving mechanism* inherent in raced, sexed and colonial oppression, and therefore one that must be rigorously challenged if we wish to combat varying modes of persecution.<sup>5</sup>

### **“The One-Woman Spectacle”<sup>6</sup>**

Sarah Bartmann was born in the Cape Colony of South Africa, which later came under Dutch colonial rule (Sharpley-Whiting 1999: 17). Before her departure for Europe, Bartmann worked as a servant for a colonist named Peter Cesar, although there is speculation that she was his slave (Washington 2006: 82). In 1810, Bartmann entered into a contract with a surgeon who promised to take her to England and pay her at the end of five years’ service for her exhibition (Sharpley-Whiting, 1999: 18). Most people came to see her for her unusually large buttocks and small frame. During the course of her observation, Bartmann’s body was soon compared to that of an animal. In a famous picture depicting Sarah Bartmann and four people gawking at her body, one of the captions reads “Oh goddamn, what roast beef!,” drawing an explicit parallel to the buttocks of an animal carcass taken for food (Sharpley-Whiting, 1999: 21). Such a picture captures both the visual and edible modes of consuming Bartmann’s body, as if she were an animal in a zoo as well as an animal on our plates. In one of his observations, the famous French naturalist Georges Cuvier describes Bartmann as having a “way of pouting her lips exactly like... we have observed in the Orang-Outang... her ear was like that of many apes... These are animal characters”

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<sup>5</sup> My argument is in line with feminist thinkers like Kelly Oliver and Cathryn Bailey who likewise recognize the centrality of the animal-human divide in all forms of oppression (see Bailey, 2004 and Oliver, 2009; 2010). As Oliver states, “The man-animal binary is not just any opposition; it is the one used most often to justify violence, not just to animals, but also man’s violence to other people deemed to be like animals” (2009: 304).

<sup>6</sup>Sharpley-Whiting (1999: 18).

(Washington, 2006: 85). Author Harriet Washington further explains that Bartmann was often “displayed nude or bedecked in animal skins” and that “she was made to stand naked at parties of the wealthy and to impersonate a chained animal in garish Piccadilly, where the mob paid a shilling a head to gape and shout vulgarities” (84-5). In sum, there was little distinction between Sarah’s exhibition as a “one-woman spectacle” and that of animals in a zoo, especially considering that her French guardian was an exhibitor of wild animals who displayed her in a cage and told her to act “like a wild beast” (1999: 19, 18; 2006: 85). Bartmann eventually turned to alcohol and succumbed to an early death in 1815, at the age of twenty-seven (2006: 85). To add final insult to Bartmann’s long life of injury, Cuvier “preserved her brain, vulva, and anus in glass jars, then stripped the flesh from her skeleton and hung it on display in Paris’s Musée de l’Homme,” not unlike one would do with an exotic animal one has conquered (2006: 85).

Given that Sarah’s body was associated with animality, a shift of interest in her from object of entertainment to object of scientific inquiry soon took place. At that time, very little distinction obtained between primates and blacks in the popular imagination (Washington, 2006: 24). It was thus that, “For the scientific community, she provided the missing link in the ‘great chain of being,’ the crucial step between humanity, that is Europeans, and animals” (Washington, 2006: 17). In 1815, Bartmann’s body was examined by a group of researchers (zoologists among them) for a three-day period in order to determine whether her body could help account for the evolutionary gap between humans and animals. The scientific community, troubled at the time by this “blind spot” in its vision, turned to Bartmann for their answer since she was a “highly developed animal” (Washington, 2006: 22). During the course of her three-day observation, Bartmann was asked to bare all for the observers. Cuvier explained,

Our drawings present each animal in a simple state and always in a profile because it is in this position that one can best seize the totality of the form and physiognomy; and we have taken care to provide a frontal drawing where necessary in order to better see and judge the animals (Washington, 2006: 23).

Here, we learn how Bartmann (and animal bodies more generally) were read as texts of scientific data. The researchers literally imposed their visual tools on the body to “see” the knowledge that lay there. Throughout his text, Derrida repeatedly invokes the phrase the “naked truth” to flag the commonly held belief that the truth must be laid *bare* in order to be seen. In line with this belief, it makes sense that the researchers felt they could ascertain the truth of bodies only if they too were revealed in *their* nakedness. So, in trying to figure out the “naked truth” of Sarah’s body, they requested that she be naked.<sup>7</sup> But what did the researchers think they were able to read on Sarah’s body? Derrida probes, “Why would it belong to the essence of truth to be due, and nude...that is to say, owed to veracity” (2008: 21)? And why did they think they could look at Sarah’s body and see *her* truth (only to be later compared to *their* bodies, for *their* benefit)? What do we see when we look at the Other’s body, aside from our own projections? Perhaps Sarah’s, as well as the animal’s, body functions more as a reflective device, what Derrida calls a *psyché*, rather than a neutral text. Derrida asks, “But cannot this cat also be, deep within her eyes, my primary mirror?” (2008: 51)<sup>8</sup>

At this point, we might be wondering why Bartmann’s body was linked to *animality* of all things. Was it not enough to label her a “freak,” or a “monster” to account for her unusual appearance? How did the animal become such a central figure of reference here, as it has been historically in the oppression of so many, including slaves and women? A turn to Derrida will be instructive.

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<sup>7</sup> Sarah did not strip everything, but kept her genitals covered while on display. It was only after her death that researchers analyzed this part of her body. I discuss this later in the paper.

<sup>8</sup> In his famous piece, “What is it like to be a bat?” Thomas Nagel further asks what it is even *possible* for us to know about the Other from our own vantage point. He criticizes the tendency to think we can know something about the experience of the animal Other outside of the human standards and tools we use to measure. Nagel states “I want to know what it is like for a *bat* to be a bat. Yet if I try to imagine this, I am restricted by the resources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate to the task” (1979: 169). Similarly, Montaigne asks of man, “How does he know, by the force of his intelligence, the secret internal stirrings of animals? By what comparison between them and us does he infer the stupidity he attributes to them?” (as cited in Derrida, 2008: 6)

## **The Animal That Therefore I Am**

Derrida begins by asking a question, “Since so long ago, can we say that the animal has been looking at us?” (2008: 3) This question has more than one sense for Derrida. First, he is speaking in the context of his writing, and how the question of the animal has always been of concern to him, both implicitly and explicitly. But his question also urges us to consider whether or not the animal has been just as important to human history as it has been to the history of Derrida’s writings. Has the animal been following us all along, just as it has followed Derrida (*est-ce que l’animal nous suit toujours*)? Has it been there not only explicitly, as our literal resource, but also implicitly, as our symbolic reference point? Do our conceptions of humanity *depend* on an originary invocation of the animal?

Stressing this question, Derrida famously describes his daily encounter with his little female cat, and the feeling of shame that arises in him at the moment he discovers himself naked in front of the animal’s gaze. Derrida elaborates on his experience with his cat by reference to the biblical story in Genesis. We can recall that before Eve eats from the tree of knowledge, it is an animal, a serpent to be exact, who provokes her to do so. The serpent encourages Eve to eat from the tree of knowledge by telling her that “in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5). Having eaten from the tree, Eve then encourages Adam to do the same. Immediately both their “eyes... were opened” (3:7). Significantly, the moment they attain knowledge (and therefore the knowledge that they *are* naked), they feel ashamed of their nudity and cover themselves up with fig leaves (3:7). Indeed, Adam is so ashamed of his nudity that he hides himself so that God will not discover him in his nudity (3:11). But God recognizes that in order for Adam to *know* he is naked, he must have eaten from the tree of knowledge. God then banishes both Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden, but not before making them “coats of skins” to clothe them (3:21).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The story of Cain and Abel is also instructive here. We can recall that Cain was a farmer and Abel was a shepherd. When the brothers came to God with sacrifices, God preferred Abel’s animal sacrifice to Cain’s crop sacrifice. Indeed, it was for this reason that Cain was jealous of Abel and thus ended up killing him. For God, the “appropriate” sacrifice was that of the animal body. Similarly, we can say that our “appropriate” sacrifice (required for us to relegate humanity to the heights of divine purity)

We can readily discern that Adam and Eve's knowledge, shame and nakedness coincide in the story of Genesis just as they do in Derrida's encounter with his cat. Derrida becomes aware of his nakedness in front of the gaze of an animal much like Adam and Eve become ashamed of their nudity in front of God. We can note that Derrida, like Adam, is "overseen, under surveillance, under the gaze of Jehovah," where God and the cat are paralleled (2008: 16). Adding to this what we have learned from the Genesis story, we might suppose that Derrida is really only *ever* ashamed of his nudity "in front" of the animal, because the animal presents the very conditions under which we conceive of ourselves as naked in the first place. In other words, since the serpent provided the very temptation that brought Eve to the knowledge of her nudity, the Biblical story can be taken to teach us that if it were not for the animal, humans would not experience shame about their nakedness at all. That is, it is the gaze of the animal that permits humans to see themselves as naked, and subsequently to feel ashamed. But "Ashamed of what and naked before whom?" (2008: 4) Derrida states,

I often ask myself, just to see, *who I am*-and who I am (following) at the moment when, caught naked, in silence, by the gaze of an animal, for example, the eyes of a cat, I have trouble, yes, a bad time overcoming my embarrassment.

Whence this malaise? (2008: 3-4).

Why *would* Derrida feel ashamed of his nakedness in front of an animal? As Derrida is well aware, "It is generally thought... that the property unique to animals... is their being naked without knowing it" (2008: 4-5). Animals should theoretically be the very beings in front of whom our naked selves should feel *least* ashamed, freeing us to run around shamelessly naked in front of our pets. As feminist philosopher Lisa Guenther puts the question, "What is there to be ashamed of before a cat who seems impervious to shame, oblivious to the distinction between naked and clothed?" (2009: 152). So "whence this malaise" indeed (2009: 4)? Derrida asks, "Before the cat that

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similarly depends upon and exploits the figure of the animal, who consequently absorbs all that we do not want to associate with ourselves (Genesis 4:2-5).

looks at me naked, would I be ashamed *like* a beast that no longer has the sense of its nudity? Or, on the contrary, *like* a man who retains the sense of his nudity? Who am I, therefore? Who is it that I am (following)?" (2008: 5-6)

Derrida seems to suggest that he is ashamed in at least one of two ways. First, Derrida's humanity is supposed to prove that he is more than "just" an animal, and the human ability to clothe oneself is taken to be evidence of this. As Derrida notes, "In principle, with the exception of man, no animal has ever thought to dress itself," or so the story goes (2008: 5). On this first version of shame, then, Derrida would feel embarrassed precisely because he is *not* an animal, and therefore should be clothed like a human, not "naked as a beast" (4). On the second version though, Derrida is "ashamed of being ashamed" (21). Here, Derrida realizes how much he resembles an animal in its pure nakedness, *despite* what he has been told about the stark differentiation between animals and humans. The animal then, in seeing Derrida naked, exposes his animality, and the realization that Derrida too is a body more animal than human. Under the animal's gaze, then, the veneer of humanity is troubled.

In wondering about the various reasons for which he might feel ashamed, we soon realize that Derrida's experience with his cat is the very thing meant to challenge the assumption that the animal has less knowledge than the human. This is because his experience reveals an ability to feel ashamed in front of the animal *despite* the judgments and arguments humanity has made regarding who can and cannot feel ashamed. If animals cannot have knowledge the way humans do, if they have not eaten from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, then presumably Derrida would not think the cat could *know* he is naked. Yet, he still feels ashamed and wants to cover up—and this assumes the animal *does* have knowledge about his nakedness. So, if Derrida feels ashamed, perhaps his classifications are mistaken. If an animal can know Derrida is naked, do animals really lack knowledge after all? The demarcation between human and animal intelligence is suddenly on shaky ground. In being surprised by his feeling of shame in front of the "unknowing" animal, then, Derrida has presented us with an event that shatters the strict categories we try to use to understand humans and animals. As Derrida explains, this experience takes place in a *contretemps*, a time before time that disrupts the normal course of events and that challenges the strict groupings according to which we understand humans and animals.

“This contretemps has only just begun giving us trouble or doing us harm in the area of the knowledge of good and evil” (2008: 5).

In rattling the concepts we have used to pigeon-hole so-called animals and humans into identity categories, Derrida’s experience with his cat raises a series of perplexing questions. Who has knowledge and who does not? Who knows about their nakedness? And what does it mean for humans to be naked if they are naked only at the moment they become ashamed of this nudity in front of an Other, and have a concomitant desire to cover themselves up? Perhaps we are talking about “two *nudities without nudity*” in both cases here (2008: 5). The first case is that in which the animal is not truly naked because it does not know it is naked. The second is that in which the *human* is not truly naked because it only becomes aware of its nakedness in relation to a feeling of shame, according to which it immediately desires to cover itself up. Either way, it is no longer clear who counts as naked in this scene. Human? Animal? Do these concepts make sense anymore? Guenther captures the point well,

Precisely because they are naked without knowing it, other animals are not naked in the same sense as human beings; their nakedness does not refer to a scandalous or improper lack of clothing, but rather to their proper way of being. ‘The animal, therefore, is not naked because it is naked’ (Derrida, 2002: 374), in other words, because it is merely naked, without an explicit awareness of this nakedness. ‘At least that is what is thought’. Human beings would seem to be distinctively aware of their nakedness; and yet, Derrida argues that this awareness turns on a feeling of shame which already covers the human body with cultural techniques that modify nakedness and mediate it in innumerable ways. ‘Man . . . would only be a man to the extent that he was able to be naked, that is to say to be ashamed, to know himself to be ashamed because he is no longer naked’ (Derrida, 2002: 374). Man only becomes aware of his nakedness at the moment when he feels the need for clothing that shame provokes, and so—like the other animals, if for different reasons—man is not naked even when he is naked (2009: 152-153).

In covering ourselves up with various “cultural techniques” the moment we become aware of our nakedness, we too cannot claim to be properly naked. So by “deconstructing the opposition between naked and clothed,” Derrida has effectively opened up a locus for the rupture of the categories human and animal (Guenther, 2009: 152). In challenging the idea that humans are clothed and animals are naked, he has pushed the limit of humanity, both conceptually and subjectively. The animal exposes this limit, undressing the category of the human to the point where it is destabilized. Derrida states, “the gaze called ‘animal’ offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man, that is to say, the bordercrossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself” (2008: 12).

Following Derrida in his meditation on the cat, then, we can restate the following question: Can I be naked all on my own? Or, relatedly, can I be human without the animal, the subjugated Other *par excellence*? Derrida explains that in relegating the human to a distinct, superior realm of difference from the animal, we have come to think that humans are the only animals that can be truly naked at all. This is because this feeling of shame reveals that we have knowledge of ourselves (as naked and otherwise), ostensibly unlike other animals. But we forget that this “knowledge” arose *only in connection to and by invocation of the animal*. And it is for this very reason that Derrida is able to deconstruct the opposition between naked animals and clothed humans and show how little essential truth lies therein. But, as Derrida puts it, almost all major philosophers have conveniently forgotten that the cat is always watching, “before me... behind me,” “I who am (following) after it” (2008: 11). As he states, “Descartes forgets the serpent... that is to say, the behind. The serpent... is the animal’s behind...” (46). A turn back to the title of Derrida’s piece, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)” (*L’animal que donc je suis*), will be illuminating. The French *je suis* denotes both the first-person constructions “I am” and “I follow,” stemming from the relevant verbs *être* and *suivre* (to be and to follow). In playing with the ambiguity of this verb formation, Derrida implicitly suggests that perhaps we cannot distinguish “I am” from “I follow” statements as readily as we might suppose. Indeed, he seems to suggest that *I am* only as *I follow* the animal, or that I exist only *after*, and thus in relation to, the animal. So Derrida, in playing on the equivocation between *suis* and *suis* (to be and to follow) seeks to challenge the dominant metaphysical tradition by suggesting that “to follow” cannot be understood without

“to be,” since it is not the case that we simply *are, simpliciter*, as if we do not *follow* (or literally come out of) and relate to relevant others.

The importance of the sense in which the animal is “behind” us cannot be overstated in this discussion. The animal has been there since the genesis of time, and has accordingly had a defining background presence. As the Bible makes clear, the animals were created *before* man. In having been there all along, they have thus been able to serve as a ready and fast point of differentiation from which man was able to invent his self-conception. This is why it is the *snake* in Genesis that brings Adam and Eve to knowledge of their nudity, because without the animal, the notion of human nakedness would never have gained its purchase. As Kelly Oliver puts it, “An animal, the snake ‘teaches’ man that he is distinct from other animals... This knowledge of his difference ushers in everything that we associate with humanity, from clothing and culture to time itself” (2009: 143).

### **“The Black Venus”**

A turn back to the time of Sarah Bartmann reveals that her sexed and raced treatment likewise exposes an implied reliance on the figure of the animal, the animal that has been behind us, following us, since the time of Genesis, “the very genesis of time” (Derrida: 2008, 17). Sharpley-Whiting explains, “by the nineteenth century, the ape, the monkey, and orangutan had become the interchangeable counterparts, the next of kin, to blacks in pseudoscientific and literary texts” (1999: 24). Accordingly, Cuvier and his researchers made a direct link between Bartmann’s “animal-like features” and her race. During this time, the “light of white maleness” was thought to be able to “illuminate the dark continent” (1999: 24). In her paper “States of Undress: Nakedness and the Colonial Imagination,” Philippa Levine notes that the features Cuvier discovers on Bartmann remind him of the monkey, thus fating black Africans to a “state of barbarity” (2008: 26). Feminist and animal theorist Carol Adams likewise explains how black bodies were considered more animal-like and primitive than whites in the nineteenth century. Ironically, Adams explains that because black bodies were considered more animal-like, it was argued that they could survive without animal bodies (because they already had enough “animal body” in them?)

(1990: 40). Why could “savages” survive on a diet without animal food in contrast to Europeans? Quoting nineteenth-century doctor George Beard, Adams explains it was because “savages” were considered,

...little removed from the common animal stock from which they are derived. They are much nearer to the forms of life from which they feed than are the highly civilized brain-workers, and can therefore subsist on forms of life which would be most poisonous to us. Secondly, savages who feed on poor food are poor savages, and intellectually far inferior to the beef-eaters of any race (1990: 41).

Because black bodies were considered more animal than human, the way in which they were considered naked was defined accordingly. Levine explains that colonized people who did not wear clothing were understood in terms of primitive savagery. She explains that Europeans expected them to be totally shameless, and that “their lack of shame was in large measure definitional of the primitive” (2008: 197). The logic was that since these colonized people seemed to have no desire to cover up, they must be just as shameless and “as naked as a beast” (Derrida, 2008: 4). “To be primitive was to be in a state of nature, unschooled, unselfconscious, lacking in shame and propriety—and nothing better signified the primitive than nakedness” (Levine, 2008: 192).

This assumption of shameless animal-like nakedness carried over to discussions about colonized people who *did* wear clothing (Levine, 2008: 189). Levine explains that when Europeans requested photographs of undressed colonial bodies, part of the reason they thought they could get such pictures so easily was because colonial people, in their proximity to animals, were assumed to lack shame for their nakedness (2008: 193). However this was *in spite* of the fact that many colonial people refused to undress for the camera and clearly *did* experience discomfort and shame about their nudity. Levine explains that this fact was virtually ignored in favour of the view that people like Bartmann were like animals, shamelessly naked, and with a mental capacity more “simian-like” than human (probably lacking a full knowledge or understanding of their nakedness). As in Genesis, colonial people did not eat from the tree of knowledge. And just like animals, then, they were not ashamed of their own

nakedness. How could they be, since they knew as little as a monkey knows about its “nakedness” (as the story would have it)? Furthermore, Levine explains that when colonized people were shown clothed in pictures, the fact that they did not properly *understand* how to dress themselves was also highlighted (194). This further emphasizes the connection between knowledge (or a lack thereof), nakedness and animality in our discussion.

But how did Europeans account for the fact that they too were naked at times? Levine explains that Westerners erected a dichotomy “based centrally (if not exclusively) around a distinction between nakedness and nudity” (2008: 190). When Europeans were naked in pictures, they were *nude*, connoting a dignified and tasteful form of *human* nakedness. When colonized people were naked, however, they were anything but regal, much closer to the ground like an animal than the sky like a god. The fact that nakedness in the case of the colonized meant savagery (*even* in the instance of those who wore clothing), but in the case of the Europeans, it meant dignity or “nudity,” reveals the arbitrary character and racist undertones of nineteenth-century “scientific” readings of the body. Quoting two nineteenth-century anthropologists, Levine notes that “the study of difference... was directed towards the creation of hierarchy” (208). Coming to their research with convictions about the primitiveness and savagery of native bodies, scientists were anything but objective, reading naked bodies in their own bedrooms in a manner completely different from naked bodies in the “wild.”

The interpretations of naked colonial bodies as *animal* bodies cannot be overstated in this discussion. As has been shown, the figure of the animal became a central device in European colonists’ attempts to objectify and denigrate the colonized people. We need only turn to the time of slavery to see how the links between colonial bodies and animals become even more acute. These comparisons have been well-documented. As intersectional theorist Cathryn Bailey explains, “The very *genesis* of race in the United States occurred, in part, because of arguments that certain groups of humans were closer to animals in some evolutionary sense” (my emphasis, 2007: 44). Importantly, Bailey explains that the animal did not simply serve a supplementary role in accounting for the oppression of Africans. Rather, the use of the animal helped *generate* the correlative traits that were then accorded to both Europeans and Africans.

“It is not simply that the ‘animalization’ of Africans and Native Americans justified their mistreatment, but that notions of whiteness and civility were created in contrast to it. This is especially evident in the racist anthropological pseudosciences that produced such images as the profiles of the chimpanzee, ‘negro,’ and ‘Greek’” (44). The figure of the animal, then, has not only been haunting the history of scientific racism since it began, but has been contributing to the very identity *formations* of both oppressed and oppressor.

Bartmann’s supposed “untamed wildness” was also connected to a state of rampant, bestial sexuality linked to native people more generally in the nineteenth century. Lacking dignity and dress, the associations between raced people’s “state of nature and a potent sexuality were both long-standing and deep. To be a native was to be monstrously and overly sexual,” as wild as a beast (Levine, 2008: 193). Washington elaborates,

Khoi women’s dramatically endowed figures and especially their large, fleshy buttocks (medically termed *steatopygia*) were seen as markers for their sexual prowess... Most scientists agreed that the hot, damp tropical climate created a licentiousness and sexual profligacy in African women that was unknown among European women (2006: 83).

Baartmann [sic] embodied not only the boundary between man and animal but also the lure of the bestial, the base, and grotesquely hypersexual (84).

Although some people reportedly viewed Bartmann as a beautiful anomaly, it was in the context of fascination and exoticism, often coupled with jest (Sharpley-Whiting, 1999: 35). Sharpley-Whiting argues that any appreciation of Bartmann’s body as an exotic beauty was undercut by the “comedic verbiage” that was paired with it, and the reduction of her body to the “‘enormous butt’ of a joke” (1999: 34). Any reference to Bartmann’s sexual attractiveness was likewise undermined by an admission that she was “ultimately sexually undesirable” to the male Europeans (39). If Bartmann’s sexed oppression was animalized, then presumably sexual attraction to her would be more akin to bestiality than anything else.

Aside from the savage-like sexuality invoked here, people like Bartmann were also *anatomically* dissected with a research eye oriented specifically towards race. Upon her death, Cuvier “immediately unveiled Bartmann” in the name of science to reveal the most exciting “truth” of all about her race (Sharpley-Whiting, 1999: 27). Sharpley-Whiting (1999) explains,

Bartmann’s “monstrous” steatopygia was quickly superseded by the treasure Cuvier discovered between her thighs (218): “We did not at all perceive the more remarkable particularity of her organization; she held her apron (‘tablier’) carefully hidden, it was between her thighs, and it was not until after her death that we knew she had it” (215-16). The famous “Hottentot apron” is a hypertrophy, or overdevelopment, of the labia minora or nymphae (27).

Upon Bartmann’s death in 1815, Cuvier and his medical team were able to pull open her legs, which she apparently kept closed while on display. What they discovered was a so-called abnormally large set of inner labia, which they named an “apron.” This too was connected to Sarah’s supposed animality. “Was Sara [sic] of ‘the last race of the human species, or the negro race and the first of the apes’ just above the orangutan?” (Crais and Skully, 2009: 135). According to authors Clifton Crais and Pamela Skully, “Cuvier thought a key part of the answer lay in Sara’s [sic] genitals” (135). In fact, it was on the basis of these supposedly “overdeveloped” genitals that the Khoisan people were imagined to be a “divergent branch of humanity” in the first place, labelled “*Homo monstrosus monorchidei*” by zoologist Carl Linnaeus (Washington, 2006: 83). It was thus that Cuvier was not interested in seeing the “Hottentot apron” in any manner other than as confirmation of Bartmann’s primitive animality.

The term ascribed to Bartmann’s genitals, the “Hottentot apron,” is ironically suitable. What truth did Cuvier think this apron revealed that Bartmann’s legs covered over? Are not the concepts that Cuvier and his researchers used to describe Bartmann’s “overdevelopment” just as much aprons themselves, coverings that supposedly reveal the truth, but really do more to obscure than anything? Do we learn about Bartmann’s

“animality” when looking at her genitals, her “monstrous” sexuality? Or is this not simply another historical moment in which, as Nietzsche would say, the powerful define the powerless in line with their own agendas, and employ the animal as that which “stands in for what we cannot think and what we cannot accept about ourselves” (as cited in Oliver, 2010: 279)?

In discussing Bartmann’s sex and sexuality, it looks like the serpent has again reared its ugly head. Not only was Bartmann’s “savage-like sexuality” connected to wild animal urges, but her genitals were also taken to be further “evidence” of her animal-like status. If the animal did not exist, would Sarah’s oppression have played itself out the way it did? Would she have been paraded around as a spectacle in a cage, considered bestial in her sexuality, and ape-like anatomically? The answer is clearly no. In fact, the animal played such a central role in Bartmann’s oppression that, without it, her story would be so different we could no longer characterize it. Animality shaped Bartmann’s racial body, her status as part of the “savage,” colonial world versus the “civilized” world, and her sexuality all at once. To undermine the centrality of the animal figure in her oppression would be, as Derrida states, “simply too asinine [*bête*]” (2008: 30).

### **Varied Oppressions**

One worry with Levine’s excellent piece on states of undress in colonial times concerns her lack of an interrogation of the strict (and, as I have been arguing, overriding) binary between animality and humanity that is invoked by Cuvier and his fellow researchers. In defense of the colonized, she states that “colonials were not always as shameless about nudity as Europeans seemed to expect them to be” and the “belief that lack of shame was in large measure definitional of the primitive was not always consonant with facts” (2008: 197). But although attempts to show that colonized people defied the stereotype of shamelessness raises the natives back up to the status of humanity, I worry that it does so only at the *expense* of the animal, and, ultimately, at the expense of all oppressed others whose identity and treatment have been so tightly linked to animality. As feminist and race theorists have variously argued, efforts to prove that oppressed persons can and do meet the norms of the

dominant (“rational”-white-male-human) class simply reasserts the power of the oppressor and, even more dangerously, validates the idea that these norms *should* be met in order for the oppressed to earn the treatment they seek. As legal theorist Catharine MacKinnon has noted, the “‘like-us’ model of sameness... misses animals on their own terms, just as it has missed women on theirs” (2004: 264). Attempts to bring animals or animal-like humans back up to the status of humanity only maintain the very binary that helped generate oppression in its myriad forms in the first place. Derrida’s discussion of the deeply entrenched animal-human divide should make us especially wary, then, of all attempts to rescue oppressed victims by saying they are unlike animals, since, as has been shown, the animal-human divide has been at work in the history of oppression since the beginning, with a presence both insidious and tenacious.

The question now becomes—how might we challenge this deep-seated animal-human binary that has been so central to the history of oppression? We can recall that Derrida’s discussion about his feeling of shame in front of the animal led to a series of questions, none of which could be definitively answered. Who is Derrida in this moment? Is his shame human, or animal? Why feel shame in front of the being who supposedly does not know? The questions dizzy the mind. “Who comes before and who is after whom? I no longer know which end my head is. Madness” (2008: 10). In this moment, in this *contretemps*, Derrida is calling our attention to his experience with the cat, “before” identity is named, “before” the concepts we have used to pigeon-hole so-called animals and humans. The notions encounter a slippage. Who is naked here, and who is not? The moment is thoroughly disruptive. My “humanity” and the cat’s “animality” are destabilized. He asks, “Who was born first, before the names?” (18) We are no longer sure. The concepts are not static; they are not reliable. In fact, the only thing on the horizon is pure possibility. “God’s exposure to surprise, to the event of what is going to occur between man and animal, this time before time has always made me dizzy. As if someone said, in the form of a promise or a threat: ‘You’ll see what you will see,’ without knowing what was going to end up happening” (17). It is interesting to note that, in this vertiginous moment, the one who is supposed to be subordinate is the one troubling (threatening) the concepts, and thus challenging our thoughts about who has the sovereign right to name. Adam strips the

power of naming the animal away from God, who will “see what [he] will see,” the same way Derrida’s cat strips the power of naming himself human away from Derrida.

However in calling our attention to the *contretemps*, this disruptive time “before” naming, Derrida is not trying to suggest that there is an experience we can *chronologically* access before names. This would be a rather anti-Derridean move, supporting a disjunction between the name and the thing. Rather, Derrida’s point is simply to note that there are experiences that *resist* conceptualization, that open up fields of possibility and that always challenge us to rework the identities and names we use. These are experiences that point us beyond names, to a time “before” that can no longer be reached. He is pointing us to the absolute *impossibility* of clean categorization. He is noting that our names and concepts *always* defy the complexity and singularity of the individuals and the experiences they attempt to capture:

If I say “it is a real cat” that sees me naked, this is in order to mark its unsubstitutable singularity. When it responds in its name... it doesn’t do so as the exemplar of a species called “cat,” even less so of an “animal” genus or kingdom. It is true that I identify it as a male or female cat. But even before this identification, it comes to me as *this* irreplaceable living being that one day enters my space, into this place where it can encounter me, see me, even see me naked. Nothing can ever rob me of the certainty that what we have here is an existence that refuses to be conceptualized [*rebelle à tout concept*] (2008: 9).<sup>10</sup>

If Derrida is calling our attention to experiences that resist conceptualization, what does he make of our use of the concepts “human” and “animal”? Ought we to redefine these groupings, or perhaps abandon the human-animal divide altogether? Derrida’s thoughts on this have been debated among several commentators. Matthew Calarco has stated that Derrida’s claim that “There is no interest to be found in debating something like a discontinuity, rupture, or even abyss between those who call themselves men and what [they] call the animal” is “one of the most dogmatic and

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<sup>10</sup> To my mind, the French “rebelle” connotes resistance or unwillingness more than refusal. A more appropriate translation would thus perhaps be “...here is an existence that resists conceptualization.”

puzzling moments in all of his writings” (Calarco, 2008: 145-6; Derrida 2008: 30). Indeed, why *would* Derrida insist on maintaining an abyss between humans and animals, when the very thing he seems to be doing is dismantling the supposed content of these categories?

However in his paper, “Life Beyond Biologism,” Ted Toadvine rightly explains that Derrida is more complicated than Calarco appreciates. Derrida does not simply want to maintain the animal-human abyss in order to deny any crossover. Rather, “At stake in Derrida’s approach is the very logic of the limits between the human and the animal, which must be confronted obliquely in order to destabilize the biologism-humanism alternative. This points us toward an abyssal logic that thickens and multiplies differences, eliminating any hierarchy between humans and animals” (2010: 247). In multiplying the abysses, we soon find that there is no obvious way in which we can cleanly maintain the human-animal dichotomy, since abysses now surround us to the point where we cannot see clearly. Derrida states,

The discussion becomes interesting once, instead of asking whether or not there is a limit that produces a discontinuity, one attempts to think what a limit becomes once it is abyss, once the frontier no longer forms a single indivisible line but more than one internally divided line; once, as a result, it can no longer be traced, objectified, or counted as single and indivisible (2008: 30-31).

A multiplication of abysses results in what Toadvine calls an “abyssal logic” that is more complex than a Darwinist continuism that challenges the human-animal binary in a different yet still problematic way (the latter of which Calarco seems to want to endorse) (2010: 251). As we have seen in the case of Sarah Bartmann, evolutionary logic does not necessarily imply the lack of a hierarchy. To the contrary, such a “breaking down” of the abyss between humans and animals in this regard has often resulted in even *more* oppression, and still vertical forms of exclusionary logic. Toadvine further acknowledges that subsuming the human within the category of “animality” does nothing to interrogate the idea of some unified group of “Animals” within which an infinite number of wholly different beings can be grouped (251). It is such that “Derrida’s own rejection of biologism seeks to avoid a correlative

humanism precisely by ‘thickening’ and ‘multiplying’ the differences, subjecting the logic of the abyss to an abyssal logic of limits” (251).

## **Conclusion**

Bartmann’s story has hopefully served to highlight the centrality of the animal-human divide in dominant forms of oppression like racism, colonialism and sexism. In so doing, I hope to have shown that we must rigorously attend to the animal-human divide in our theorizing if we wish to combat oppressions of all varieties. It is crucial to recognize that the ways male, white humanness were defined in the European colonists’ imaginary were inextricably wound up with the figure of the debased animal. Since Genesis, “proper” humanity has been defined in opposition to the animal body, the latter of which went on to be derogatorily applied to myriad inferiorized others. This practice is still very much at work today, as indicated by the language of dehumanization and animalization on the contemporary U.S. political landscape (especially as it is applied in wartime and regarding the treatment of prisoners) (see Guenther, forthcoming in *JCAS* on this).

In thinking about how to battle oppression, gender and race theorist Georgia Warnke suggests that we must “imagine a life beyond sex and beyond race...” (2001: 135). But, as we have seen, Sarah Bartmann’s story proves that the strict dividing lines between femaleness and maleness, blackness and whiteness, colonizer and colonized are all caught up within networks of power that exploit and rely on the animal-human divide. Correlatively, they all work together to form a general notion of the “proper human.” Given the centrality of the animal-human binary I have been discussing in both raced and sexed oppression then, it is going to be crucial for us to expand Warnke’s imaginative scheme by thinking beyond humanity as well. It should be noted that this proposal is not meant to simply name a neglected form of oppression and argue that it ought to be considered. Of course, it is impossible to attend to all forms of oppression all the time. But, as I have argued, disrupting the animal-human will cause a *foundational* element inherent in these other forms of oppression to crumble.<sup>11</sup> It is in this sense that proposals like that of Warnke, which purport to

combat raced and sexed oppression, are seriously short-sighted. If the liberatory goals we strive for *depend* on attending to the figure of the animal alongside other forms of oppression, then we must think within, beyond and between not only race, sex and gender binaries, but, crucially, the animal-human binary as well.<sup>12</sup> A Derridean approach that multiplies differences and limits wherever possible can help illuminate the fabricated nature of claims about these so-called essential facts of our identities. Derrida introduces a new term, “animot,” intended to summon the multiple differences of all living creatures, covered over by the singular, ostensibly inclusive category “Animal.” He states, “*Ecce Animot*. Neither a species nor a gender nor an individual, it is an irreducible living multiplicity of mortals... a sort of monstrous hybrid”; it is “a multiplicity of heterogeneous structures and limits” (41, 48). Perhaps thinking beyond, between and within the animal-human binary can begin here.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Of course, disrupting the animal-human binary will also have huge implications for the oppression of animals themselves. A full exploration of the importance of this implication is beyond the scope of this paper, but is nonetheless crucial to point out.

<sup>12</sup> Derrida makes a similar move with respect to sex difference. In his text, Derrida points to animal bodies that defy the male/female sexed body divide. He states that the silkworm, for instance, is an animal “welcomed on the threshold of sexual difference... beyond any sexual difference or rather any duality of the sexes” (2008: 36). Kelly Oliver (2010) makes this point in her book.

<sup>13</sup> Many thanks to Chris Wells for his indispensable help with this paper.

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