

Interview with author, anarchist and feminist Abbey Willis

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Abbey Willis is an author, anarchist and feminist militant. She and fellow anarchist Deric Shannon have the piece "*Theoretical Polyamory: Thoughts on Loving, Thinking and Queering Anarchism*" forthcoming in *Sexualities*.

Thank you, Abbey Willis, for agreeing to this interview with the Journal for Critical Animals Studies. 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 anarchist activist and feminist, we thought you would be able to comment on the recent “pieing” of author Lierre Keith. First, could you tell our readers a little about your background and worldview?

I've been organizing as an anarchist for 7 years. I am a member of the Workers Solidarity Alliance, the North Eastern Federation of Anarchist Communists, Queers Without Borders, Hartford Food Not Bombs and the Hartford Independent Media Collective, though I don't speak for any of those groups. Most of my organizing is done in central Connecticut. I believe we can live differently—vastly differently. Class society and other hierarchies are constructed and maintained, not natural and inevitable. I don't aim for a structureless and unorganized society—I aim for a differently organized and differently structured egalitarian society based on (real and universal) democracy and participation—a world free of domination, coercion and control. Not only do we need to smash the structures of our society like capitalism and the state, but we need to get rid of other hierarchies like white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, ableism, cissexism, etc. Although I recognize class as being a material relationship to the means of production and therefore a unique hierarchy, I ultimately believe all hierarchies work in unique and intersecting ways. To be rid of any hierarchy we need to be rid of them all. I actively fight to overthrow capitalism and the state, but I also organize to smash heterosexism, patriarchy, white supremacy, etc. I do not value one fight over the other or see one as “central” or as coming first.

That says what I'm against. What I'm for is a free, egalitarian and participatory society where folks have the freedom to fulfill their needs and desires in a way that doesn't destroy the self, others or the non-human world. Folks should make decisions in a society based on the degree to which they are affected by a given decision. I don't need politicians making decisions for me. We know what is best for ourselves, ultimately. I see my freedom as necessarily tied to the freedom of others. As the old saying goes, No One is Free Until Everyone is Free.

Do you believe this was a good choice of direct action? Please explain why

The pieing of Lierre Keith is not direct action—it is a direct attack. Direct action refers to people coming together and collectively taking action into their own hands rather than jumping through loopholes of bureaucracy. Direct action refers to folks acting on their own behalf instead of asking governments or centralized authorities to do it for them. A good example of direct action would be people taking what they need, whether that's food, shelter, schools, workplaces—not asking the state or capital for permission, but actively doing something to better their lives on their own behalf. The pieing of Lierre Keith has nothing to do with direct action.

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

Pieings, as we've seen it in the past, have been attempts to humiliate or embarrass public figures by tossing a pie plate filled with whipped cream at them. I believe this type of pieing is considered humorous and not particularly violent by most folks. The three pies tossed at Lierre Keith at the 2010 San Francisco Anarchist Book Fair were not simply filled with whipped cream. Although I realize the contents of the pies are perhaps contested, it has been reported by various sources including the Bay Area Anarchist Book Fair Organizers that the pies were filled with hot sauce and cayenne pepper—similar to ingredients in pepper spray that cops use to violently attack dissenters or folks who object to being caged. As to whether it is “immature”, I'm not sure what to say about that. I do know that if folks had objected to ideas in her book *The Vegetarian Myth*, another option would have been to challenge her at her talk. Granted, pieing vs. having a conversation have different meanings and attractiveness

to them. Earlier in the day at the book fair Ward Churchill gave a talk. There were many Native Americans in the audience who challenged him as to whether or not he was an actual “Elder” or if he was even connected to the concerns and organizing that the American Indian Movement is part of in that community. Some audience members took the floor away from him in the middle of his speech to challenge his authority on Native American struggles. They advised the audience to check out their table and to speak with them about their community, as they stated they had very different feelings and conclusions from Churchill. This was an effective way to take clout away from his arguments (and contested authority), but also a way to explain why they felt this way. I am not critiquing the supposed “direct action” of the pie-ers, mainly because I don’t see their actions as direct action—it is more accurately a direct attack.

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

I have a problem that this would even be a question, or even contested. I do, indeed, find the pieing to be a sexist and ableist attack on a woman—how could it be seen any differently? Three men violently attacked an older woman with disabilities. That is not, by any means, my only critique of the incident, but none of my other critiques change that.

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?

I think we can all learn from critiques of unsustainable agricultural practices, including Keith’s. But Keith uses junk science and sweeping claims to attack vegan diets. Vegan diets can be healthy, nutritious, and sustainable. We don’t need mass produced or processed crap. Because of that, her arguments (about veganism) are flawed and deserve to be ridiculed. Anthropocentrism is a part of our “power relations”. It’s difficult for me to understand how Keith could “examine” them and then trash, insult, and infantilize those of us who have consciously chosen to use our

diets as a cultural mechanism to demonstrate to the rest of the world that humanity needs to build new relationships with the non-human world. And animals pay every day that we go on refusing to consider this. Also, as a radical, I would like to see her critiques focus more on the ways capitalism, through factory farming practices (profit-driven, mass produced “farming”), has exacerbated the torture of animals and the degradation of the earth in ways unimaginable by early agriculturalists.

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.”?

I suppose it brings to mind two things for me:

The language is ageist and offensive. I think she mobilizes it to infantilize vegans. It's a rather common (and unfortunate) tactic in debate and is rooted in the belief that youth should be devalued and that our elders are wiser just by virtue of their age. Dick Cheney is old as fuck. I think that speaks for itself.

There is a grain of truth to death being “embedded in every creature's sustenance”. But to try to suggest similarities between eating vegetables and grains (without central nervous systems) with eating animals and their various forced excretions is nonsense. It is manifestly so.

Granted, many of her critiques are that “vegan” food is produced (and farming practices maintained) in ways that kill topsoil and various mollusks, as well as depend on animal products such as manure (this is farming-wide, whether for mass produced monocrops or small organic farms). I strongly feel like “giving up” veganism based on the notion that animals/insects/land will always be (necessarily) killed or altered “unfavorably” is an abstract point. My veganism isn't “Oh, well, non-human animals (and soil and all the creatures that live in it) will always be killed/exploited in order to grow vegetables and grains, so therefore I may as well eat meat, too.” The points she makes are valid in that we need to think about eating as locally as possible—and I think with new and developing technology that we can have healthy and sustainable vegan diets with the use of things like vertical farming. Of course, we have the ability

to invent and utilize things like vertical farms right now, but there is too much profit to be made off factory farming and monocrops as we know them. This is why the profit motive is something that needs more focus in animal/land advocacy/sustainability research. The profit motive is injury to all life. She is right that not eating animals and their “products” are not enough to stop their suffering, but Keith and I come to different conclusions based on that common understanding. Indeed, smashing capitalism to bits, along with the profit motive, must be parts of a consistent political practice that advocates for animals and the earth.

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

Well, we would agree that we need to adopt sustainable eating habits. But I think veganism can be sustainable, as I’ve noted previously. By utilizing technology, another (sustainable) diet is possible! I think that point is important to make both to people who eat animal products AND to vegans.

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

Her arguments as to the “health” (or lack thereof) of folks who maintain a vegan diet are so flimsy, it’s rather easy to just refute them. It’s unnecessary to physically assault someone to point this out. We should encourage dissent, dialogue, open discussion, debate, and even questioning shibboleths of animal advocates (even poorly reasoned ones like Keith’s). And we should enter into those discussions in good faith. Acting like smug, elitist contrarians with all of the answers is a terrible way to build a movement. And, ultimately, I think it is movements that will change society and smash the hierarchical structures that we live under—not diets.