

“Happy” Goats

*or, Taking Embarrassment
Seriously*

Marco Reggio

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Abstract: This text was originally published in Italian as the first chapter (Dérive #1) of Marco Reggio's book *Cospirazione Animale. Tra azione diretta e intersezionalità* [*Animal Conspiracy: Between Direct Action and Intersectionality*]. Additional footnotes have been provided by the author for this English translation, with some information on the Italian context. The chapter deals with issues of species, gender, and coloniality that emerged in the praxis of the Italian anti-speciesist movement over the past fifteen years. In particular, Reggio gives an account of his experience as an activist and researcher facing the death of an Ethiopian woman, Agitu Ideo Gudeta, who fled her country under political persecution to open a goat farm in Italy, where she was assaulted and killed by a co-worker. Reggio interrogates the conflict between the privilege that entails being able to criticize and take distance from animal farming (which was hardly achievable from Gudeta's standpoint), and the impossibility of endorsing and celebrating the "happy meat" paradox from an animal liberation perspective (like all farmers, Gudeta sent baby goats to the slaughter in order to be able to milk their mothers). Reggio articulates his reflection along the lines of Frantz Fanon's notion of the "zone of non-being" and Judith Butler's aporetic "embarrassment" in the face of the inexhaustible plurality of identities that cloak the subject (potentially opening the doors to the more-than-human).

Keywords: *animal ethics, intersectionality, animal liberation, anti-speciesism, goats*

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In memory of Sarat Colling (1984–2025)

Agitu Ideo Gudeta was a refugee from Ethiopia who had fled to Italy after being subjected to political persecution in her home country. She became quite well known in the Trentino region after founding a goat farm that produced cheese—a farm which grew over the years and obtained a certain level of entrepreneurial success. After earning a degree in Sociology from the University of Trento, Agitu returned to Ethiopia to lead projects in sustainable agriculture. In 2010, faced with the Ethiopian government’s ongoing expropriation of land from farmers, she began participating in protest demonstrations, openly opposing the government’s disregard for the environmental consequences of handing land over to multinational corporations. Persecuted for her activism, she returned to Trentino in search of abandoned lands to reclaim. Despite having very limited resources, she succeeded in bringing her entrepreneurial vision to life, building a network of support and solidarity, while also facing frequent racist and sexist attacks. Hers was a story of emancipation—although, in many progressive narratives, she was reduced to a symbol of a paternalistic model of integration: the successfully “integrated” immigrant.

On 29 December 2020, Agitu was found dead in her home in the Valle dei Mocheni in Trentino. Yet another femicide. But the case also had some peculiarities that sparked heated debate and conflicting emotions. Her killer was quickly arrested; it emerged that she had also been raped. The patriarchal nature of the crime became even more evident: the usual message of extreme violence against an autonomous, independent woman who was managing to make a life worth living for herself, despite years of sexist and racist threats. The perpetrator was of African origin—a fact that inevitably triggered racializing narratives about “savage” rapists and “illegal” immigrants who, in contrast to the victim, represent the archetype of non-integration. In any case, Agitu’s story was both complex and “naturally” *intersectional*, articulated along the lines of gender, racialization, and ecological activism.

Goats and Bears

The name of this livestock farm was “La Capra Felice” (The Happy Goat). A name that was emblematic of the happy meat rhetoric that certain currents of antispeciesist¹ thought had, for some years, come to regard with deep suspicion. At the time, I was active in a group called Assemblea Antispecista, a nationwide network that had emerged only a few months earlier and had mostly dedicated itself to another campaign rooted in Trentino. Between September and October 2020, we launched a campaign for the liberation of the bears held captive at the Casteller facility² and against the

- 1 The term *antispeciesism*, less commonly used in the Anglophone world, is more prevalent in Italy, comparable to terms such as “animal rights”, “animal liberation”, and “*animalismo*” (animal advocacy). It derives from “speciesism”, a term coined by Richard Ryder and popularized by Peter Singer in his 1975 classic, *Animal Liberation*. Speciesism is analogous to racism and sexism, and refers to discrimination on the basis of species. Antispeciesism, then, is the theoretical and political movement opposing such discrimination and, by extension, human supremacy. It seeks to establish equality among members of all species. In the Italian context, this term is preferred to, or contrasted with, the more generic and widespread *animalismo*, to denote a more theoretically rigorous and politically conscious form of animal rights activism—one that is more intersectional and recognizes the importance of struggles against human oppression, highlighting their connections with the fight for animal liberation.
- 2 The STOPCasteller campaign was created to oppose the policies of the northern Italian province of Trento concerning the local bears population. In Italy, bears are found in only two regions: in Abruzzo (central Italy), where coexistence with humans has not posed significant problems thanks to the judicious administration of the Regional Park; and in Trentino, where bears were reintroduced in the late 1990s under the EU-funded LIFE Ursus repopulation project. According to this project, bears were meant to spread across the Alps in the years that followed, but poor management by both national and local authorities prevented this from happening. As one might expect, the bear population grew within Trento. This led to some minor conflicts between the bears and the human population—nothing serious—as well as some limited economic damage to local farmers, which prompted the local government to capture or kill bears, in violation of established bear management protocol. The most high-profile case was that of Daniza, a mother bear introduced from Slovenia through LIFE Ursus. Daniza had an encounter with a mushroom forager in Pinzolo, which resulted in the man sustaining multiple injuries, though the details of the event were never fully clarified. Daniza evaded a capture order for a long time, but when she was finally caught, she died of excessive sedation. In recent years, the right-wing provincial administration has used the Casteller wildlife centre, near Trento, to detain “problematic” individuals. The enclosure reserved for bears is so small that it can be reasonably described as a prison. Casteller was originally meant to house these individuals temporarily, pending reintroduction into the wild—but this never occurred. In the past two years, the campaign has faced increasingly repressive policies towards bears, especially following the death of Andrea Papi. Papi, a resident of Val di Sole (Trentino), was killed on 5 April 2023 when he encountered

persecution of other bears living freely in the mountains of Trentino and who were under attack by the right-wing provincial administration led by the Lega Nord.³ After years of stagnation,⁴ STOPCasteller was an energizing project, built in collaboration with local groups such as Fridays for Future Trento and, in particular, with the *centro sociale* Bruno and other *centri sociali*.⁵ A campaign with tangible, in many ways quite practical, objectives, but also with broader ambitions, at least potentially. Bears were reintroduced into Trentino

JJ4, a bear, while out jogging — the only fatal incident of its kind in the area. A cull order was issued for JJ4; she was tracked and captured, but thanks to widespread mobilization the cull was prevented, and she remains confined at the Casteller facility. In the months that followed, the Autonomous Province of Trento intensified its crackdown on bears deemed ungovernable. For an introduction to the campaign and its context, see: “STOPCasteller”, *Assemblea Antispecista*, <https://assembleantispecista.noblogs.org/stopcasteller/stopcasteller-eng/>.

- 3 Lega Nord (the “Northern League”) is a major right-wing political party in Italy, founded between 1989 and 1991 from a confederation of regional independence movements in the North. It initially gained attention for its racist propaganda — first directed at Southern Italians, and later at migrants from outside Europe. The party has enjoyed strong electoral support and participated in several centre-right governments, beginning with Silvio Berlusconi’s first term in 1994. Since 2013, its leader has been Matteo Salvini, who served as Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister from 2018 to 2019, and became known for his anti-immigration propaganda and migrant push-back policies in the Mediterranean. Internationally, Salvini is affiliated with xenophobic and neo-fascist groups such as Marine Le Pen’s National Front in France. Lega Nord continues to wield considerable power at the regional and municipal levels, especially in the North (as in the case of Trento), and, at times, in central Italy.
- 4 The movement for animal liberation in Italy experienced a particularly active period in the 2000s, when several radical campaigns emerged along the lines of SHAC (Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty). These included “Chiudere Morini” (Shut Down Morini), a campaign against a large dog-breeding facility for vivisection; the “AIP” campaign (Attack the Fur Industry); in the early 2010s, “Fermare Green Hill” (Stop Green Hill), aimed at shutting down a beagle-breeding facility for vivisection owned by a multinational corporation. Both Morini and Green Hill were permanently shut down as a result of these campaigns. Fur farming was banned in Italy in 2022 during the Covid-19 pandemic for public-health reasons — thanks in part to the longstanding efforts of organizations such as *Essere Animali* (many of whose members originally contributed to AIP, before funding a more institutional group) and Lega Anti Vivisezione, as well as years of anonymous direct action. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, pressure campaigns like AIP enjoyed strong support significantly from the anarchist movement, while the Animal Liberation Front became highly active. Their activities declined sharply in the years that followed. By the mid-to-late 2010s, grassroots animal liberation activism had diminished considerably.
- 5 In Italy, *centri sociali* [social centres] refers to spaces run by the extra-parliamentary left, intended for the organization of political, social, and cultural activities. They are typically squatted.

between 1999 and 2002 in order to secure EU funding. Later, they became a “problem”, were considered overly habituated to humans, too dangerous, too uncontrollable, or simply too numerous (bears, of course, reproduce). Eventually, they were persecuted and hunted; they rebelled. They were killed and imprisoned; they escaped — like M49 whose two extraordinary breakouts from Casteller had inspired us to act.⁶ They were recaptured and triumphantly returned to their cages, where they were doped up on psychotropic drugs. That alone would have been enough to mobilize us, but such institutional management called for a broader critique, intersecting as it did with a specific mode of viewing the territory as a resource to be exploited, parcelled out, like one giant ski resort, and it also again raised the question of non-conforming bodies — bodies that do not recognize borders and cross them — be they animal bodies who inhabit the Alpine forests, oblivious to national frontiers, human migrants seeking a better life, or indecorous, unsettling presences who dare to bring into public spaces some form of gender dissidence.

For this reason, it was a valuable experience to encounter other radical groups that were antagonistic⁷ to the local authorities. We all cherished this experience, as if this encounter, with all its contradictions, were something to be preserved and protected — protected, for instance, from identitarianism, since what was unfolding was a dialogue, and at times a mutual fascination, between very differ-

6 M49 (also known as Papillon) is a Trentino bear who, following the protests of farmers to whom he had caused much economic damage, was captured in July 2019. Within hours of being placed in the Casteller facility, he escaped. He remained at large until April 2020, when he was recaptured and placed under heightened surveillance with cameras and high electric fencing. He was chemically castrated and fitted with a radio collar. Nevertheless, he escaped a third time in late July 2020, generating widespread media attention and public solidarity throughout Italy. He was captured again in September 2020 and has not been released since. His escape brought public scrutiny to the conditions at Casteller, especially after a report by CITES (a government agency for wildlife conservation) with testimonies from veterinarians responsible for M49’s care: inadequate space, sensory deprivation, isolation, and the constant administration of psychotropic drugs. For more information on M49’s story, see: Reggio, “StopCasteller e gli orsi”. In English, see D’Amico, “Italian Governor Steps Up”; and, more recently, Giffrida, “Animal Rights Groups”.

7 The term *antagonista* has a specific political history in Italy, referring to groups on the extra-parliamentary left, often associated with *centri sociali*.

ent histories. Now, the *centri sociali* (that rather phantasmatic label encompassing many indefinable things, including the absence of a clearly defined antispeciesist consciousness) were beginning to take an interest in antispeciesism *tout court*. At the same time, those of us with a background in animal liberation were finally adopting an intersectional perspective capable of grappling with the complexity of positionalities beyond the tragedy of nonhuman exploitation. Members of Assemblea Antispecista, some very young, were coming to activism with considerable political awareness and attentiveness to issues traditionally seen as external to animal advocacy. They formed a group overtly opposed to sexist, homo-transphobic, colonial, and ableist politics. This came with many contradictions but also with the determination to challenge them. Nonetheless, there was always the risk that clinging to reassuring identities would hinder bridge-building. And yet we quickly found common ground with our comrades from the *centri sociali*, in both a slogan and an action: “Smontiamo la gabbia” [“Break the cage”]. This was the rallying cry of the national demonstration that launched the campaign, but it was above all a literal practice, as during the first protest several groups managed to dismantle a large section of the Casteller centre’s outer fence. We found each other in animal resistance, in the immediate solidarity with the rebellious bears, with M49 — a solidarity that seemed almost more real for “them” than for “us”, we who were by now all too accustomed to treating animal revolt as a topic of discussion, an area study with a rich bibliography.

News of Agitu’s murder reached us amid this heady but exhausting context, and it was immediately clear how hard it would be to speak about it. Agitu was not only a person but had, against her own will, become a symbol, especially in some activist circles: a symbol of liberation, of female autonomy, of antiracism, of resilience and “care”. A symbol of care because her small farm embodied the ideal of the “happy” farm: she loved her goats, took care of them, gave them ample space to graze. At the same time, her work had ecological significance, tied to the conservation of the land and the preservation of the rare and endangered Mòchena goat breed. For this reason, the outrage over her murder was also the outrage of a community who

had known her, supported her, and forged ties with her — a community that included many farmers (both male and female) and transcended the local sphere, as shown by the appeal from the Valsusa FilmFest (see page 102 below).

My first reaction, I remember, was rage. The same, I believe, that many other people (always too few) felt in the face of this femicide that had brought this journey of emancipation from colonialism to a sudden, violent end. But I already knew that something problematic would surface, because I knew that the path she had chosen, within a limited range of possibilities, clashed with my own sensibility — with “our” sensibility — in at least two respects. First, there was the very fact of animal exploitation, which, even if carried out with less violence, nevertheless meant the perpetuation of a mechanism that cannot escape some material realities. For example, no matter how attentive a farmer may be to the suffering and desires of the animals she farms, even if no goats are sent to slaughter, if you want a goat to produce milk, she must produce kids, and those kids will not live happily ever after. The second aspect was precisely the notion of “loving exploitation”.

When the news arrived, it had a destabilizing effect on me, in a certain sense. Alongside my rage, I felt a sense of closeness to Agitu’s community, which also includes people who farm animals — and this in itself disturbed me. At the same time, my awareness of the fictions behind “happy meat” resurfaced along with this sense of solidarity. We knew that the celebration of Agitu’s life — its spectacularization in some cases — would play out along the axes of not only gender and race, but also of species. The oppressed was, in this case, in a position of privilege, if only because she had control over the lives of others. I found myself “unable to speak”. Not only out of respect for mourning — a mourning which was *already* political in its expression and extended beyond her family and friends: it was the fruit of her connection with a community that was also symbolic — but also because of the sense of being unable to take a stance without betraying one’s own convictions, one’s own sensibility, was nothing new, especially for someone involved in antispeciesist politics. This paralysis

stemmed from a contradiction between the push to decolonialize⁸ antispeciesism and the feeling that our critique of “happy meat” was important — perhaps even essential — but at the same time tainted by as-yet undefined elements of coloniality. I remember how, during those long discussions within the group, some were adamant about rejecting the idea of “ethical” farming and insisting that Agitu was not antispeciesist. But one comrade said, more or less: “I don’t think that Agitu, in Ethiopia, had anything even close to the *privilege* of thinking about animal liberation, of incorporating it into her feminist and ecological struggle — certainly not as we conceive of it — and nor did she have the privilege of putting it into practice here in Italy.” Her words were very important in giving shape to our unease.

Judging Love from the “Zone of Being”

In a 2012 essay entitled “The Concept of ‘Racism’ in Michel Foucault and Frantz Fanon”, Ramón Grosfoguel elaborates on the distinction Fanon draws in *Black Skin, White Masks* between the “zone of being” and the “zone of non-being”: “those subjects located above the line marking the human live in what [Fanon] calls the ‘zone of being’, while those who live below this line live in the zone of ‘nonbeing.’”⁹ Around that time, I happened to be reading this essay, and I was struck by the fact that the racial apparatus was framed in terms of the category of the *human*: who counts as human and who does not. In the zone of being, subjects experience a particular form of racism, namely racial privilege; in the zone of non-being, they experience racial oppression. All forms of oppression — class, gender, sexuality — are experienced very differently in these two worlds. In the zone of being, there are relative conflicts between the “Self” and the “Other”, but they are not racialized, because the Other is still acknowledged as fundamentally human. Hence these conflicts depend on mechanisms of emancipation, inclusion, and negotiation. Since I am writing from this zone and from a position of relative priv-

8 In her book, *Decolonialità e privilegio*, Rachele Borghi introduces into the Italian context the Latin American feminist distinction between “*decolonizzare*” [decolonize], meaning liberation from military and political occupation, and “*decolonializzare*” [decolonialize], meaning liberation from the cultural and ideological legacies of colonialism.

9 Grosfoguel, “El concepto de ‘racismo’”, 94.

ilege, I am familiar with these dynamics—for example, as a worker able to negotiate certain aspects of my exploitation. I also know that recourse to direct violence by those in power is always a latent possibility—it is what Grosfoguel calls a “perpetual peace with exceptional moments of war”. In the zone of non-being, by contrast, negotiation is rare: “perpetual violence” and “open and blatant appropriation” are the norm—a state of “perpetual war with exceptional moments of peace”.¹⁰ These two zones, evidently, cannot be delineated in a strictly geographic sense, because the global distinction between zones of being and non-being is accompanied by the distinction between zones of internal colonialism. Thus, skin colour, facial features, and religious beliefs are indicators of conditions that vary greatly based on the context.

While reading the essay, I couldn’t help thinking of nonhuman animals, not only because, as I noticed, everything hinged on Man, measure of all things, but more concretely because I wondered what place animals occupied in this framework. They were always situated, in every circumstance, within the zone of non-being, regardless of latitude or geopolitical context, whether in colonies, post-colonies, protectorates, or the major Western metropolises. Always and everywhere, they were imprisoned, violated, slaughtered—and it makes no difference how sterile, sanitized, or “humane” the slaughterhouse is. “*They* always come from someplace worse.”¹¹ But perhaps this too was a form of white prejudice. After all, many non-Western cultures have never made such a clearcut distinction between humans and animals. Was it this prejudice, which I likely shared with many Western antispeciesists, that legitimized our judgment of the ambiguity of the word “care” in Agitu’s case? As if, faced with the animal tragedy, one could even question the good intentions of a refugee trying to rebuild her life?

Indeed, Grosfoguel goes on to argue that the issue is not so much racism as a line of separation between bodies, but “epistemological

10 Grosfoguel, “El concepto de ‘racismo’”, 96.

11 *Them*, season 1, episode 1, “Day 1”, written by Little Marvin, directed by Nelson Cragg, aired 9 April 2021 on Amazon Prime Video.

racism”. I discovered that “what we know today as critical theory or critical thought is the social theory produced by the historical and social experience of the ‘Other’ in the zone of being.”¹² He is referring to the very tools I use in my work. It’s not that they are not useful, of course. The concept of “epistemic violence” developed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, for instance — a closely related idea but one that emerges from the academic, complex, and often inaccessible tradition of postcolonial thought — first made an impression on me when I saw it used in a clear and accessible way by a Critical Animal Studies scholar, Dinesh Wadiwel, to talk about fish.

Wadiwel describes epistemic justice “as a way to understand the capacity of systems of truth to silence particular subjects, and render visible and invisible particular forms of truth and possibility.”¹³ While Spivak deployed this concept to deconstruct the narratives of *sati* (the Hindu ritual of widows burning) produced by colonizers and Indian fundamentalists, and how both narratives silenced the voices of colonized women, Wadiwel applies it to the debate around the suffering of fish and welfare-based actions to alleviate it. Exploited animals, he argues, are caught in a double bind produced by the dominant epistemic framework: on the one hand, the narrative claiming that animals do not suffer and indeed “want” to die (like Indian women did according to the patriarchal, fundamentalist version of *sati*); on the other hand, the saviour narrative of animal advocates who cannot imagine any alternative but to save animals from suffering or, at least, fight to reduce it.

Just as Spivak might suggest there is an epistemic violence in imagining that the solution — the only solution — that Indian women wanted to the ritual practice of *sati* was to be saved by British colonisers, we might similarly ask if the only solution available to the problem of large-scale human utilisation of animals is to reduce or avoid suffering (to ‘save’ animals who suffer).¹⁴

12 Grosfoguel, “El concepto de ‘racismo’”, 97.

13 Wadiwel, “Do Fish Resist?”, 205.

14 Wadiwel, “Do Fish Resist?”, 206.

There is, then, a possible approach from outside this suffocating framework: fish resist violence, and it is therefore evident that they do not “want to die”, and that their salvation does not come by way of the well-meaning, paternalistic animal advocate who argues for improving the conditions of their exploitation.

Going back to Grosfoguel and decolonial thought: leftist critical theory is an insufficient framework for “understanding either the problems experienced, or the way in which processes of violence and appropriation are articulated in the domination and exploitation of those subjects who belong to the zone of non-being.”¹⁵ Might it be the case, then, that antispeciesist activists were judging from within the zone of being a person who was trying to survive in the zone of non-being? And — to complicate matters further — might they have felt authorized to do so because they were defending someone who, like the goats, had always inhabited a zone even more invisible and obscure than non-being itself? A zone of “absolute non-being”?

Vandana Shiva and the Pig

And yet, we did not lack the necessary tools to deconstruct the rhetoric of “happy meat”, even within the leftist movement, where such rhetoric thrived and constituted a powerful barrier to the awareness of human privilege, thanks to *Genuino Clandestino* and similar organizations.¹⁶ For years, various activists, collectives, and groups had cautioned against his rhetoric. I was part of a working group, *BioViolenza*, whose name synthesized a particular discursive turn that had taken place in Italy, which led to the promotion of animal products as *bio* or *biologico* [organic]. *BioViolenza* began to mobilize precisely against those entities that promoted such products. We studied the issue, wrote and disseminated texts analysing the various facets of “happy meat” rhetoric. There were of course those

15 Grosfoguel, “El concepto de ‘racismo’”, 98.

16 *Genuino Clandestino* is a territorial network of “farmers, artisans, students, and rural workers” founded in Italy in 2010. They organize grassroots markets for local products with a focus on food sovereignty. There were public debates between antispeciesist activists and members of *Genuino Clandestino*, who support traditional practices of extensive farming. See <https://genuinoclandestino.it/>.

who didn’t understand why “radical” animal advocates would target small farmers, while industrial producers like Cremonini¹⁷ and McDonald’s were still out there running rampant. And indeed, our first protest was directed against Slow Food, at the *Salone del Gusto* in Turin.¹⁸ At the time, Slow Food was beginning to become a formidable force, and its founder, Carlo Petrini, had become a key figure for a certain strand of “left-wing” culture (though he was also courted “from the right”). In essence, their operation involved constructing an imaginary built on a mixture of appeals to traditional values, the land, community, consumer identity, and, above all, food: good, very good, populist—yet somehow also aristocratic—healthy, ecological, and fair. In all of this, one of the elements was the ideal of traditional, “sustainable” livestock farming, along with the usual corollaries of locavorism, resource conservation, and animal welfare.

With the idea of disrupting this narrative, in 2010 we staged a sit-in outside the festival venue. Our goal was to make visible the “silent guests” at this immense banquet attended by thousands, not least because the event was cosponsored by another initiative called

17 Cremonini is the largest private producer of beef and processed meat in Europe, comparable to Tyson in the US. It “supplies hamburger meat to McDonald’s and Burger King in Italy and other countries”. See “Luigi Cremonini & family”, *Forbes*, <https://www.forbes.com/profile/luigi-cremonini/>.

18 BioViolenza describes itself as follows: “The BioViolenza project was created by activists to expose an emerging strategy within the vast world of animal exploitation for food production (farming, fishing, and hunting): that of promoting supposedly ‘sustainable’, ‘ethical’, or ‘organic’ [in Italian, *bio*, from *biologico*] methods of farming and slaughter. These are marketed as respectful of the environment, workers’ rights, local communities, and even of ‘animal welfare’. We argue that this approach is anything but ethical, as it does not advance the abolition of animal slavery or radically question human–nonhuman relations. We believe this rhetoric must be challenged and its contradictions exposed: the façade of ‘sustainability’ of these farms, ostensibly opposed to factory farming, allows consumers to silence their consciences while continuing to support, commercially and politically, an unjustifiable and irredeemable massacre.” See <https://bioviolenza.blogspot.com/p/chi-siamo.html>. The BioViolenza project is conceived both as a critique of the ideology of “happy meat” and as an organizing tool for protests against public expressions of this ideology. One such case was the *Salone del Gusto*, a major food fair in Italy featuring producers from around the world, organized by Slow Food Italy. The latter is part of the international Slow Food association, which promotes “the right to pleasure and to good, clean, and fair food for all, as part of the quest for prosperity and happiness for current and future humanity and for the entire network of living beings”. Slow Food supports networks of local producers offering ecologically sustainable, high-quality gastronomic products. See <https://www.slowfood.it/>.

Terra Madre (Mother Earth), which had a vaguely more political, Third Worldist flavour to it. *Terra Madre* brought together farmers and indigenous activists from around the world in a shared struggle for food sovereignty, culminating in a sort of final gathering at the Palaiosaki arena, where thousands of delegates were to witness a debate featuring various high-profile speakers, including Carlo Petrini, Serge Latouche, and Vandana Shiva. Despite being paired with what was essentially a food expo masquerading as a political-cultural — with huge crowds of gourmards sampling delicacies at commercial stands, the festival gave the Slow Food the credentials to engage in institutional politics while also gaining support among the nonprofit sector. It opened up a series of discussions on the use of “resources”, food waste, agricultural models, and the practices of marginalized non-Western communities displaced by agribusiness giants — but it was also clear that it offered fertile ground for expanding the rhetoric of “sustainable” farming. So we showed up at the arena with the intent of forcing the public to listen to the issues we had been screaming into a megaphone about in the street earlier that day. We opted for a surprise action.¹⁹ One activist in a pig costume covered in fake blood stormed onto the stage and collapsed, physically and symbolically, at the feet of the speakers. Amidst the general embarrassment, a second comrade took the stage, leveraging Slow Food’s performative commitment to democracy and open dialogue. (It worked: Petrini prevented security from intervening before she finished speaking). Meanwhile, other activists in the crowd handed out flyers denouncing the rhetoric of “happy meat”.

The speech was improvised, passionate, tough — but also confident in the possibility of mutual understanding, of finding a common language, at least in part — not so much with the “big names”, but with the general public. I was particularly struck by the alternating booing and applause: the audience wasn’t split into two opposing sides. Instead, there were overlapping emotions and conflicting reactions that overlapped. In any case, intense feelings that couldn’t

19 See Francia, “Blitz animalista”.

be contained. By applauding, they were expressing solidarity with a message opposing slavery and exploitation, in defence of the most vulnerable. The boos, perhaps, were triggered by what felt like an attack on identities forged with great effort and acknowledged only rarely, on a few precious occasions like this one. That, at least, is how I interpreted crowd’s reactions as I lay at the speakers’ feet. Because I was the pig, and because I was rendered immobile, I was asking myself these questions for the duration of the whole speech, until the police took us away. I remember wondering what Vandana Shiva was thinking, a few inches away from me. (I may have splashed her shoes with fake blood.) In a situation where we were both protesters, she was more of a potential ally than a political enemy. Could she understand our protest? Or might she have misunderstood it completely? Perhaps she experienced the intrusion of the animal issue as a nuisance in this occasion — an annoying “deviation” from an environmentalist path of liberation, emancipation, of speaking out? *(Is this also how Agitu’s community instinctively reacts to those who raise the problem of the goats? The issues are the same: liberation, emancipation, speaking out, ecology).*

Predictably, in the debate that followed, the panellists avoided the topic altogether, aided by Petrini’s deft framing, which cast the activists’ message as mere sentimentality, to be met with paternalistic benevolence — a framing conveniently embodied in the figure of the activist who had spoken: young, very young, and female; the idealistic “little girl”, full of good intentions, emotional, a little impulsive. (It would be worth discussing, at some point, how political movements internalize this form of sexism and adultism, silencing “little girls” even before their opponents do. At the time, we chose not to give a fuck about whether she would be taken seriously for her age and gender.) Later, I thought again about how Vandana Shiva might have experienced those moments, and whether there truly was a short circuit between colonialism and antispeciesism. Perhaps she simply saw us as white vegans who want to teach Indigenous people about nonviolence, respect for other forms of life, even empathy. Would she have been wrong? But I also wondered if it wasn’t more important to underline that Slow Food itself represented the

true expression of colonialism, appropriating the language of marginalized global communities to gain legitimacy in the industrialized centre.

And so we return, ten years later, to Agitu’s goats. The ambiguity between care and exploitation was clearly at the heart of the matter. But even on this point, we did not lack critical tools. Agnese Pignataro, feminist and antispeciesist, activist and scholar, had written a detailed article deconstructing the discourse of “care” in animal farming.²⁰ This discourse had been gaining traction in France thanks to the work of Jocelyne Porcher, a farmer who adopted a feminist lens to frame her relationship with nonhuman animals as non-hierarchical. Drawing on standpoint theory and the ethics of care as elaborated by Joan Tronto,²¹ Pignataro dismantled several of Porcher’s arguments to show how livestock farming could not be considered as a practice of care. She specifically questioned the idea of reciprocity between farmer and animal.

In the same period, antispeciesist scholar Marco Maurizi had written a short essay following a series of discussions on veganism held in various *centri sociali*.²² In it, he clearly identified the key points of tension that made the debate between vegans and supporters of “grassroots” farming so fraught. I especially remember one evening at a *centro sociale* in Milan where one of the antispeciesist activists in attendance insisted on framing the issue in a moralizing way, focusing blame on individual consumers of animal products and hindering any real political debate. And on the opposing side, I remember the resistance of the advocates of self-production, who, in practice, did little more than defend the good old traditional practices. Unsurprisingly, Marxist thinkers like Pignataro and Maurizi were highly critical of appeals to tradition as a value in itself—but there was also no shortage of contributions by the anarchists. In the years that followed, a self-published book by the *Troglodita Tribe* collective began to circulate, entitled *La fattoria (in)felice: animali e contadini* [The (Un)

20 Pignataro, “Allevamento di animali”.

21 Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*.

22 Maurizi, “Antispecismo”.

Happy Farm: Animals and Peasants], which directly addressed this nostalgic rural imaginary.²³ Meanwhile, the North American scholar Matthew Cole had gone so far as to invoke “Saint Foucault” and his notion of pastoral power to frame the discourse around animal welfare.²⁴ Following the Slow Food protest, the trajectory of the *BioViolenza* collective intersected with the protests against Expo 2015 in Milan, where the hypocrisy of “good, clean, and fair” food was on full display. In the meantime, a wealth of critical material and activist experience had accumulated.²⁵

A decade on, the topic was well-established. Still, thanks to the intersectional currents within antispeciesism, new critical frameworks continued to emerge. Thus, in her book *Beasts of Burden*, the artist and animal and disability rights activist Sunaura Taylor framed the reality of “happy meat” from a situated perspective:

In many ways the thinking behind the humane meat movement is a philosophy built on the idea of interdependence. Domesticated animals and human beings have evolved together to be interdependent—animals help human beings, and we in turns help the animals—or so the argument goes. The interdependence theories of the new meat movement nonetheless still reward the independent at the expense of the dependent and the stronger at the expense of the more vulnerable. In contrast, disability communities have long recognized that interdependence is not a mutual-advantage calculation. Instead a disability perspective on interdependence recognizes that we are *all* vulnerable beings who will go in and out of dependency and who will give and receive care (more often than not doing both at once) over the course of our lives. What disability can bring to the humane meat conversation is a much-needed analysis of what it means to be accountable to being who are vulnerable.²⁶

23 Trogglodita Tribe, *La fattoria (in)felice*.

24 Cole, ““Animal Machines””.

25 See the recommended readings listed on the BioViolenza website: <http://bioviolenza.blogspot.com/p/materiali-e-letture-consigliate.html>. See also Collettivo BioViolenza, “La ‘carne felice’”; Gelli, “Alimenta il conflitto”; and Bertuzzi and Reggio, “No Expo”.

26 Taylor, *Beasts of Burden*, 171.

Herd Immunity

These tools were important. We wrote a statement about Agitu’s death, which generated some hostility, but it was, I believe, the most honest and constructive exercise of practical thinking we could offer in that moment.²⁷ However, we had to deal with a more concrete problem: the fate of the goats. Agitu left behind some eighty goats, some of them pregnant. The most obvious solution was for local farmers to take them in. This possibility was also framed as a way of respecting Agitu’s legacy and the spirit of care that had guided her work. What interested us, however, was how the goats could find a way out of exploitation. *But how can one develop an action against exploitation if one cannot even name it?*

Up until this point, the critique of the “happy meat” rhetoric within the movement could perhaps have been seen as a kind of peevishness — a matter of concern for antispeciesist purists only. But now the issue was becoming decidedly concrete, because it was this very rhetoric that was pushing for the goats to be placed with local farmers. In material terms, this would have meant the immediate slaughter of the newborns (many of the goats were pregnant). The symbolic investment was evident. The Valsusa FilmFest had amplified an appeal by Marzia Verona (writer, shepherd, and farmer) and Marta Fossati (goat farmer): “let’s post something on our social media [...] something that speaks to who we are. I am calling on women breeders, farmers, veterinarians, salaried shepherds, women involved in the agricultural/livestock world in any capacity.”²⁸ This was not just a call to reclaim mountain traditions. The authors of the appeal were leveraging the figure of the woman farmer — a strong, independent woman, connected with nature — who could bring to this traditionally male domain a particular aptitude for care, which could find expression in these photos on social media.²⁹ This struck me.

27 Assemblea Antispecista, “Agitu Ideo Gudeta e le ‘sue’ capre: tra patriarcato, razzismo e specismo”, 20 January 2021, <https://assembleantispecista.noblogs.org/post/2021/01/20/agitu-ideo-gudeta-e-le-sue-capre-tra-patriarcato-razzismo-e-specismo/>.

28 Marzia Verona, “La voce delle donne”, *Pascoli e stalle*, 31 Dec. 2020, <https://pascoliestalleblog.wordpress.com/2020/12/31/la-voce-delle-donne/>.

29 Marzia Verona, “Sensazioni agrodolci”, *Pascoli e stalle*, 8 Jan. 2021. <https://pascoliestalleblog.wordpress.com/2021/01/08/sensazioni-agrodolci/>.

Verona collected many of the photos under the hashtag #donneforti (#StrongWomen): they mostly featured women farmers tenderly holding baby lambs, sheep, and shepherd dogs. They seemed to express genuine care. Some images even recalled the images you see of antispeciesist sanctuaries for animals removed from the circuit of exploitation. Perhaps for this reason, they revealed the most profound — and the most subtle — contradiction at the heart of the “happy meat” paradigm. Some photos came from non-Western contexts, reinforcing an image of resistance to Eurocentrism. The messages of solidarity also spoke of abuse, intimidation, and the killing of animals carried out because they were women — but also referred to sexist comments, insults, and sexual innuendoes relating to the photos of women in close-up with nonhuman animals.

Mixed feelings, again. The aspects of resistance to the patriarchy and colonialism resonated with me precisely because of the resemblance to Agitu’s story. But it was precisely the symbolic power of these aspects that rendered the animals’ perspective invisible. A form of epistemic counter-violence, entirely legitimate in and of itself, which nevertheless turns against other oppressed subjects by reproducing, uncritically and knowingly, the epistemic violence of anthropocentrism. The fate of the goats hinged on a battle over the wishes of a dead person: “This is what Agitu would have wanted”, people said, usually in order to argue for the keeping the herd together, preserving the rare breed, and continuing “sustainable” cheese production. But another idea that was circulating was that Agitu’s empathetic approach might be better honoured by allowing the goats she had loved to live in peace. A network of animal sanctuaries, prompted by our collective, proposed that the goats be rehomed in places where they could live their lives without being expected to produce.³⁰ The principal argument against this proposal was the supposed need to keep the herd intact, either because it is what Agitu would have wanted, or because it was necessary for the preservation of the breed. This discourse on “the conservation of the race” [*conservazione della razza*], while never openly racist, clearly

[wordpress.com/2021/01/08/sensazioni-agrodolci-2/..](https://wordpress.com/2021/01/08/sensazioni-agrodolci-2/)

30 Bardi, “Portiamo le capre”.

reflected a logic of racial purity, whereby certain individuals must be sacrificed for the sake of the “bloodline”. Except that in this case, ironically, the victims are not members of some “inferior” race, but rather precisely of the one to be preserved. In the first weeks, the goats remained with a young shepherd who volunteered to care for them during this transitional period.

In the meantime, the words of the activist *feminoska*, who defined antispeciesism as “an emotionally exhausting experience”,³¹ seemed to describe the situation perfectly. Whereas Francesca Manzini, a comrade from the Centro Sociale Bruno di Trento,³² described it as *disturbing*:

Like transfeminism, antispeciesism is not a badge we can pin to our chests without fully embracing its radicality. It equips us with tools that permit us to view the episodes that infect us daily through entirely new and very powerful lenses: where others see neutrality, we see the many constraints and potentials that come with being oppressed — or an oppressor.³³

A *parrhesiastic* position³⁴ in which we are constantly forced, not to speak truth to power, but to “speak through” subjects who themselves hold hardly any power and who risk appearing as the object of indignation, as the *enemy*. Agitu herself seems to have been disturbed, if not by antispecism, then by the relationship she had built with “her” animals, since on at least one occasion she had said that she struggled with the prospect of having to separate herself from the kids and tried, whenever possible, to give some of them up for adoption to avoid slaughter.

In the conclusion to *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler observes, almost in passing, that:

The theories of feminist identity that elaborate predicates of color, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and able-bodiedness invar-

31 *feminoska*, “Perché essere antispecista”.

32 Francesca went on to cofound the intersectional antispeciesist collective Scobi.

33 Manzini, “Un punto di vista antispecista”.

34 See Foucault, *Parrësia*.

iably close with an embarrassed “etc.” at the end of the list. Through this horizontal trajectory of adjectives, these positions strive to encompass a situated subject, but invariably fail to be complete. This failure, however, is instructive: what political impetus is to be derived from the exasperated “etc.” that so often occurs at the end of such lines?³⁵

Regardless of the answer that an antispeciesist might give to this question, I believe that the disturbance caused by this “etc.” must be taken very seriously. The politics of animal liberation has often seemed to me like an attempt, an almost obligatory one, to take fully upon oneself the consequences that such embarrassment can generate, one of those consequences being an “instructive” failure. The nonhuman “etc.” of the species axis, or, more concretely, of the gaze that includes other animals, provokes a gestalt reorientation: you see everything under a different, rather unsettling, light. One of the first things you find is that animal exploitation is everywhere—in every object, every commodity; that human history is founded on it, literally on animal blood—and, perhaps even more disconcertingly, that domination over other animals is present in our ideas, in the ways we are taught to think from childhood. Going back to Agitu’s story, this is perhaps the discomfort, or the *embarrassment* of the “etc.”, a placeholder that, by definition, has no fixed content, and which may therefore allow unexpected elements to erupt into the space of political legibility. If I say “etc.”—a little word in which most people “see neutrality”—there is always the chance that someone will see nonhuman animals in it.

Conclusions

The story has an unhappy ending. In a certain sense, the worst possible ending. The herd was neither kept together nor did it escape the cycle of exploitation. After about twenty days, and due in part to freezing temperatures, the goats were distributed among various local farmers.³⁶ To indulge in the post-mortem overdetermination that

35 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 182.

36 “Fa troppo freddo in valle dei Mocheni”, *l’Adige.it*, 20 January 2021, <https://www.ladige.it/cronaca/2021/01/20/fa-troppo-freddo-in-valle-dei-mocheni-trasferite-e-smistate-le-capre->

was common at the time: Agitu would not have wanted it to end this way. But this outcome tells us little. It was, after all, the outcome of a series of contingencies, bureaucratic hurdles, and our limited ability to influence the situation — despite the debates, the appeals, or the political approaches to the status of non-humans. It does tell us something about the frame of reference. The institutions in Trentino seem to have distinguished themselves in their inability — or unwillingness — to resolve the situation: municipalities, provinces, and regions are often happy to delegate responsibility and management of animals to groups and businesses, like the shelters, which offer to help without asking anything in return. It does not escape our attention that these are the same institutions responsible for the mismanagement of the coexistence of humans and bears, a coexistence that in other regions (e.g. in Abruzzo) appears to be less problematic. But, above all, one must wonder what conception underlies the cul-de-sac in which Agitu’s goats found themselves, where the only conceivable condition seems to be that of bodies in production. The conflict between the need to keep the herd together to protect the breed and the demand to save the individuals by separating them (and sterilizing them), could have been resolved through simple, low-cost solution: let the herd live freely and autonomously in the Valle dei Mocheni. *Could have been* — but clearly this solution lies beyond the discursive regime, not only that of the farmers and the institutions, but even some animal advocates. To the farmers, free goats are unproductive. To the politicians, they are unmanageable (like the bears, even if not as dangerous). And to the animal advocates, they are in constant need of protection. To some extent, all parties involved share the same anthropocentric assumption: that the land is “ours” to exploit and to manage (more or less benevolently).

The dominant narrative is one of infantilization:³⁷ the goats are “happy” so long as a human cares for them. Without humans, they are assumed to be incapable of finding food, shelter, caring for their young, or escaping predators — and guess who the predators are in

[di-agitu-la-tristezza-di-beatrice-vi-auguro-il-meglio-1.2831893](#).

37 Manzini, “Un punto di vista antispecista”.

this area: the bears.³⁸ The relation with the breeder becomes a reciprocal exchange: food and refuge in return for milk and meat. This narrative, which dictates what is “best” for the subject without ever consulting them, obscures its own violence. The kids separated from their mothers and sent to slaughter represent an exercise of power that is inseparable from production. The moral burden for this was placed squarely on Agitu by the more vulgar animal advocates, as if she, not the broader system of production, were the killer. Broader not only because it determines the economic rules (I cannot think of an economic context in which it is possible to run a profitable livestock business while sparing newborns and “unproductive” animals), but because of its suffocating entanglement of colonialism and speciesism: the only “salvation” available to a migrant anti-land grabbing activist was to participate in the oppression of someone even more vulnerable. The irony is that land grabbing is deadly not only for colonized peoples, but also for the nonhuman animals who inhabit the forests. In such contexts, animals and animalized humans are natural allies with a common enemy. The racial and anthropocentric apparatuses of the “First World” aim to destroy this alliance by suggesting total compatibility between the resistance of people like Agitu and the “gentle” exploitation of other animals.

There is no simple recipe for escaping this cul-de-sac. Not for me, at least. Perhaps, however, one useful ingredient is to make anti-speciesism even more disturbing. Certainly, it should be more situated, more attentive to exploitation and to the intersectional logics of power—but also, perhaps for that very reason, also more uncomfortable. A continued resistance to the sensation of *aphonia*, of being unable to speak, unable to risk speaking. (Are we disturbing you? Don’t ask why we allow ourselves to speak—ask why *you* feel disturbed). But naturally, we must understand what precedes us. The terrible reputation of the “animal rights activists”, or of the “vegans”, for starters. The accusations levelled at Agitu remind us: murderer, farmer, exploiter. And then the allure of “happy meat” within the movements themselves.

38 *La Capra Felice* was also committed to protecting the Mòchena goat breed from bears—a further element that complicates any antispeciesist reading of this story.

And, again, the conflict between ecology and antispeciesism, between species and individuals, becomes a new essentialism: sending kids to slaughter to save the Mòchena goat breed. Then there are the complex hierarchies of value between wildness and domestication. While the province of Trento was under fire for killing bears, hunters and breeders rallied to its defence, complaining about how aggressive these specimens were, citing bear attacks and claiming damage to their livelihoods; someone pointed out that bear attacks are actually extremely rare, while those by cattle are infinitely more frequent, but the latter never become a public “issue”, presumably because it is accepted that livestock play an important economic role, which is worth a little collateral damage. Domesticated animals enjoy greater protection than wild ones — until the moment they are slaughtered, of course. Conversely, environmentalism, as ecofeminist Marti Kheel argued over thirty years ago, tends to give primacy to the wild. This inversion of perspectives is equally problematic, having as much to do with the prioritization of the species over sentient individuals as with a patriarchal worldview. Until recently, in radical animal advocacy, the “wild” was the domain of untamed, active, ferocious animals, while factory farms were the realm of passive, helpless, feminized creatures; and “pets” (“companion” animals) were seen as an abomination, an institution to be abolished. Wild animals follow their “nature”; the others are perverse, unnatural. This explains why it remains easier to rally around bears than goats. The real reason, of course, is obvious: we exploit goats. They are on our dinner plates. Their milk and cheese are in our supermarkets. We eat them. Not so with the bears.

For their part, many animal advocates/anti-speciesists struggle to imagine a herd that is simply left to roam free. During this time, a story was making the rounds on social media — a bizarre story, but certainly reason for hope and for solidarity for those who fight for the liberation of animals (and not only). In Spain, three parrots were reportedly opening the cages of captive birds to help them escape.³⁹ They had learned how to open the locks and had formed a group

39 “I pappagalli che aprono le gabbie”, *Resistenza Animale*, 21 January 2021, <https://resistenzanimale.noblogs.org/post/2021/01/27/i-pappagalli-che-aprono-le-gabbie/>.

of liberators. This news was thrilling— not only from an ethological or cognitive standpoint, but politically: animals resist, we’ve always known that, but they resist collectively, non-violently, and altruistically. Still, the first response to this news story on the average animal advocacy group’s page was concern that the freed birds, having lived in captivity, are not adapted to a life in freedom. A grotesque echo of the mainstream media’s reaction the Animal Liberation Front raids: “hundreds of mink freed — many will die,” they say, or “these terrorists are crazy; they are harming the very animals they want to help” (read: “they were better off in those tiny cages, awaiting electrocution”).

Therefore: dwell in contradiction, avoid moralism, be the killjoy. “Killjoy” in Sara Ahmed’s sense of disturbing the harmony of communities built on the exclusion of some other, even if, at times, it means ruining a moment of mourning, like wearing the wrong thing to a funeral. At the same time know that if you accept this game, the killjoys are many, and you might even realize that their own position is not outside of coloniality or other forms of privilege. It will be *embarrassing*, but it will allow us to really talk to each other.

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