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Tricky Ticks and Vegan Quips: The Lone Star Tick and Logics of Debility

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Abstract

In this article, we explore the discourse around the Lone Star tick, predominately through the platform of Twitter, in order to highlight the way the tick is imagined as a potential tool for increasing veganism, as the Lone Star tick's bite has been found to cause allergies to a carbohydrate found in red meat. In particular, the article questions why the notion of tick-as-vegan-technology is so widespread and easily called forward. In order to explain this pattern, we turn to Sunaura Taylor's monograph, *Beasts of Burden* and Jasbir Puar's notion of debility. Taylor's monograph provides a framework for analyzing the imbrications of power between ableism and speciesism. Puar's debility helps articulate how the imagination of widespread red meat allergies is an imagination of decapacitation. Puar's analysis of the invisibilizing of debility also helps reveal how both ticks and humans are debilitated and instrumentalized in this articulated fantasy. We argue that the governance impulse in these discourses reflect a continued alignment with biopolitical forces that always designate some lives as worthy of care and others as useable, which is fundamentally at odds with broader goals of animal liberation.

Keywords

Debility, ticks, veganism, capacity, activism

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Introduction

While ticks have long been the scourge of outdoor enthusiasts, they have typically been derided for the Deer tick, *Ixodes scapularis*, which carries *Borrelia burgdorferi*, the bacteria responsible for Lyme disease. However, the Lone Star tick, *Amblyomma americanum*, is quickly becoming one of the most well-known infectious hosts, but not predominately of bacteria or viruses, but because of its own medically anomalous effect; its bite has been found to cause people to become allergic to red meat—a terrifying prospect for people who enjoy steak. The Lone Star tick has seen a growth in prevalence, with headlines like “One type of tick can make people allergic to red meat — and it seems to be spreading” and “Meet the tick that’s forcing Americans to give up their meat” (Loria; Teirstein Grist).

It is perhaps unsurprising that people are quick to point out that a future where people don't eat meat is in fact a desirable one for one group of people—animal rights activists. As a result, light-hearted discussions of vegan activism turning to ticks to force people into vegetarianism or veganism is common enough for the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) to make such an idea the centre of an April Fool's joke:

We do get a little ticked off that some people are still eating animals, but we are not alone: Apparently, so does at least one breed of ticks. Scientists have discovered that the bite of the Lone Star tick causes people to develop an allergy to meat. Once a person has been bitten, if he or she eats meat, things can get a little uncomfortable and a hives-like rash can break out within hours. That gave PETA the germ of an idea, and we'd like your input.

Currently, the ticks are predominantly found in the southeastern United States. But PETA has hatched a plan to release Lone Star ticks in parks in the Northeast, hoping that warming weather and moist conditions will help the ticks thrive. PETA's Don Belev, a biologist who is investigating the feasibility of the project, explained how the resulting meat allergies will greatly benefit human beings who come into contact with the ticks (Kretzer).

Here, PETA declares this allergy to be a "great benefit" to humanity, employing ticks for human bidding (Ibid.). Yet the ease and frequency with which this joke is made is cause for concern and deserving of reflection. Why is it so easy to imagine using ticks to achieve a political goal? And what might that impulse reveal about biopolitical governance and the relationship between animality and disability?

While this expectedly was found humorous by vegan activists, discourse around the Lone Star tick was frequent even outside of those circles, as people even requested on social media to be exposed to Lone Star ticks, so that they could finally stick to a vegetarian diet. One Twitter user wrote, "Honestly I hope I get bitten by a Lone Star tick on my backpacking trip so I'm baseline allergic to meat" (theleafdude). We would like to trouble the impulse at the base of these tweets: desire in the creation, proliferation, and instrumentalization of these tick-human intimacies for the purpose of governance. More, we are specifically intrigued by the ease with which the acquiring of tick-allergy information leads to applying notions of "purpose," "control," and "value" to this ecological dynamic; why are people so quick to deploy this assemblage as an army to pursue the goals of ideological veganism?

This paper seeks to explore these questions by reading the PETA April Fool's press release alongside tweets about the Lone Star tick and veganism, against the works of Jasbir Puar and Sunaura Taylor. Utilizing Puar's recent framework of debility and capacity, alongside Taylor's monograph describing the imbrication of speciesism and ableism, this paper points to the complexities that arise when animal rights encounter a being that harms humans. Through

this analysis, we investigate the competing claims to notions of health and humanity and expose how thinking ticks within animal studies also avails theoretical gaps in Taylor's *Beasts of Burden*. As the case of the Lone Star tick sits at the intersection of critical animal studies and critical disability studies, it provides a space to explore the interstices of nonhuman animal intimacies and disabling rhetoric through the enfolding of the Lone Star tick into future imaginations.

Ableism in the Animal Rights Movement

Mainstream animal rights groups have long been critiqued for how they uphold and deploy oppressive logics through their advocacy and activism. It is common for organizations to rely upon imagery and evocations of the Holocaust and slavery to describe the experiences and realities of nonhuman animals in factory farms (Harris 18-21). Similarly, organizations, most notably PETA, also often mobilize sexist imagery of women for their campaigns (Pendergast 64). These consistent collusions with systems of social oppression in order to further animal rights points to the failings of activism that does not contend with the intersecting and interwoven nature of oppression; potential spaces of collaboration and solidarity are closed off in the face of problematic and harmful rhetoric.

There are also important issues with how animal rights groups rely upon ableism in their discourse and politics, and critical disability studies has been increasingly tending to those issues. Two recent books, *Earth, Animal, and Disability Liberation: the rise of the eco-ability movement*, edited by Anthony J. Nocella II, Judy K. C. Bentley, and Janet M. Duncan; and Taylor's recent monograph both highlight the issues of ableism within current animal rights discourse and point to potential reconfigurations of movement. There are two particularly

important dimensions to how animal rights groups engage in ableist rhetoric or practices: ascribing disability upon meat-eaters and erasing the realities of disabled people.

On the one hand, disability is used as a framing device for some animal rights groups. Animal rights blogs often frame animal exploitation and consumption as “sociopathic deviancy or idiocy” and use “pejoratives relating to intellectual ability and mental health” (Wrenn et al. 1310). Avoiding disability is presented as a reason to become vegan. Taylor points to the PETA “Got Autism” campaign, which sought to “suggest an unsubstantiated link between autism and drinking milk..., exploit[ing] people’s fears and misinformation about autism to boost a vegan agenda” (Taylor 60). Here, then, animal rights groups actively lean into ableism. They work to connect what they deem undesirable (the exploitation of nonhuman animals) with what is seen as undesirable within Western society (disability). Justice for nonhuman animal exploitation is justified through the proliferation of anxieties about disability, in the hopes that people will change their behaviours around animal consumption in order to avoid becoming disabled.

On the other hand, while disability is evoked as a symbolic tool to further groups’ political efforts, actual disabled people are made invisible within the movement (Wrenn et al. 1309). They are not seen as part of the movement, in part because veganism is positioned and promoted as “fixing” or preventing disability. Or, disabled people are excluded from imagined futures as they are “depicted as drains on resources” and thus their “existence should be prevented” (Withers 116). When those who are not vegan are consistently rendered as disabled by the mainstream animal rights movement, any space to consider and contend with the realities of disabled people, whether within the movement or not, is foreclosed.

Turning to the example of the Lone Star tick and vegan discourse around it, we see these dimensions of ableism continuing to be engaged. The ableist logics of the PETA press release

and their subsequent materials present a complex set of contradictory or problematic steps: the promotion of widespread infliction of a kind of disability or impairment, which is framed as relatively benign, actually causing health benefits and preventing disability, while simultaneously erasing all of the other associated harmful health effects of tick bites. The allergic reaction is both “a little uncomfortable” yet also severe enough to force people to stop eating meat. Throughout the rest of the paper, we untangle these deeper contradictory logics and the politics they are implicated within, beginning with a closer consideration of the material reality of the Lone Star tick and the effects it can cause.

The Lone Star Tick

The Lone Star tick lives in North America, and is spread across the East, Southeast, and Midwest United States, as well as much of Mexico (Springer et al. 883). It is visibly distinct for the white dot on the back of adult females, which inspired its name (Loira). Like other ticks, the Lone Star tick spreads geographically by attaching and feeding off of white-tailed deer and migratory birds (Springer et al. 886; Leighton et al. 458). However, the range of areas that the ticks can survive is growing and shifting northward as a result of climate change and the associated warmer weather; they are now expanding into Northeast and upper Midwest states as well as areas of Eastern and Central Canada (Springer et al. 887). As a result, there is a great deal of concern about the ticks becoming established in new regions and thus posing potential health threats in those areas.

The potential health threat of the Lone Star tick, in particular, is the development of an allergy to *galactose-alpha 1,3-galactose* (alpha-gal), a sugar compound found in non-primate mammalian meat (Saleh et al. 2). While the exact mechanisms of the allergy are not yet fully

known, much of the process has been pieced together at this point. When a tick feeds on a mammal such as a deer or a cow, some residual mammalian glycoproteins or glycolipids remain in the digestive system of the tick (Steinke et al. 592). In the feeding process, a tick first penetrates the skin and then secretes salivary cement to help keep the tick attached, as well as compounds to prevent hemostasis in the host (Karim and Ribeiro 2). As a result, if a tick feeds on a human sometime after feeding on a deer or cow, the tick can release some of the alpha-gal into the human's bloodstream through its saliva.

Several weeks following the tick bite, the person can then develop a unique allergy to alpha-gal. If the now-allergic person consumes red meat, which contains alpha-gal, they will experience an allergic reaction including hives, difficulty breathing, hypotension, swelling, and anaphylaxis (Saleh et al. 3). However, unlike virtually all other anaphylaxis-causing allergies, the alpha-gal reaction is not immediate but instead occurs 3-7 hours after the ingestion of the food (Ibid.). This means people can suddenly experience the reaction despite not eating anything at that moment, making it both terrifying and difficult to diagnose.

Alongside the alpha-gal allergy, Lone Star ticks are also vectors for a number of other viral and bacterial pathogens, including southern tick-associated rash illness (STARI), which is a "Lyme-like illness" (Masters et al. 371). Additionally, the Lone Star tick is a vector for the Heartland virus, which causes fever, fatigue, nausea, and joint aches (Savage et al. 445; CDC). Finally, *Ehrlichia chaffeensis* and *E. ewingii* are both largely transmitted by the Lone Star tick; they cause human ehrlichiosis, an illness marked fever, headache, muscle pains, nausea, fatigue, and others, as well as more severe complications including meningitis or even death if left untreated (Egizi et al. 940).

While the rest of the paper will be focused largely on the alpha-gal allergy, it is important to keep in mind that any Lone Star tick bite also carries with it the risk of transmitting these pathogens and others. As such, the experiences of those who are bitten by the Lone Star tick must be recognized as having a more complex experience than simply that of not being able to eat red meat anymore. While there are many people who have experienced long-term or chronic conditions because of tick-based diseases, the treatment of these diseases, or their immune system's responses to these diseases, there is no indication of this reality in the quoted PETA joke. The PETA press release downplays the severity of the allergic reaction itself—mentioning only the symptom of hives and not the more dangerous ones like anaphylaxis—as well as entirely ignoring the host of other tick-borne diseases and illnesses that can be transmitted alongside the allergen. It is likely that the author(s) determined that the joke would not be as funny if the fuller reality of health impacts were presented in detail.

Returning to the alpha-gal allergy itself, we encounter the challenge of how to theorize allergies within or in relation to disability. As Elaine Gerber notes in the introduction to the *Politics of Disability & Food* special issue of *Disability Studies Quarterly*, there is a need for greater critical disability studies engagement with the questions of food allergies and their implications, though some recent works have sought to develop such a framework for approaching allergies. Julia Bandini begins to flesh out the debate around whether food allergies should be considered a disability or not through her work on celiac disease and its associated requirement of a gluten-free diet. She turns to the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act in order to consider the social implications of including those severe food allergies (1578). She points to the need to balance the potential for stigmatization and the greater ability to access accommodations (1580). Michael Gill opts instead to consider allergies through a lens of

embodiment and relations in the context of kissing, fluid exchanges, and food allergens. He explores how allergies become a shared experience through the act of eating and sexual intercourse that incorporates the non-allergic partner (202-3). By drawing upon Mia Mingus' notion of "access intimacy," Gill demonstrates how we might place allergies within a broader web of relationality and exchanges (Ibid.). By re-conceptualizing these allergies outside of the individual, these scholars provide a foundation to recognize how the alpha-gal allergy requires the navigation of shifting intimacies, with ticks, cows, pigs, humans, and more.

Therefore, we are interested in how the allergy serves to reshape particular embodied experiences and relations, and most especially, how vegan activists and PETA *imagine* what that reshaping entails. Consequently, we turn to Jasbir Puar out of the comprehension that social and medical models of disability do not provide the space for this bite as both a socially constructed reality, a specific ontological event of imagined violence, and a constellation of networks that might recapitulate or subjectivize this self through the use of the Lone Star tick as what one Twitter user deems, a "Vegan bio weapon" (lowlevelninja).

Debility

Puar's theorizing on debility and capacity offers a framework to contend with how the alpha-gal allergy redirects bodies (both human and nonhuman) towards particular orientations, behaviours, and relations. It allows us to consider an assemblage of disability that cannot be untangled from the vast ecological and social environments which enable its occurrence. As Kelly Fritsch argues "taking debility and capacity seriously within a neoliberal biocapitalist context opens up space for analyzing the ways bodies are differentially produced," allowing us to question what changes would really occur if PETA released the ticks.

For Puar, capacity acts as the space of potential: having the capacity to do something might be a reflection upon the ability of a person, the possibility of an outcome, the power to act (“Hands Up Don’t Shoot”). Debility emphasizes the endemic, unexceptional forms of “injury and exclusion,” that effect one’s capacity, and conceptually might be considered the corrosion of a body (Puar, *The Right to Maim* xvii). Think of, for instance, Puar’s writing of debilitation “as a normal consequence of labouring, as an ‘expected impairment’” which “expose[s] the violence of what constitutes ‘a normal consequence’” (“Hands Up Don’t Shoot”). Debility here is the underlying ontological event of what many would call disability, but also functions outside of that identity, as impairments that would not be coded as disability, for they are expected, naturalized in the daily life of labourers; they are the “what do you expect?,” the “that’s what happens when you work like that.” Thus, the bite here appears if not as disability, then as a form of debility, especially for those whom would be more likely to be bitten by ticks: day labourers, farmers, and those with unstable housing.

Enhanced capacity can also result from debility itself, as a form of recapacitation, reorienting one’s capacities or diminishing capacity in one area, whilst strengthening it elsewhere. Puar hints at this, describing “disability rights as a capacitating frame that recognizes some disabilities at the expense of other disabilities that do not fit the respectability and empowerment models of disability progress” (Ibid.). Puar is thus concerned with providing space not only for recognizing what kinds of disability are recognized by the state, but how this state recognition, and the re-codification of debility as disability, presents a recapacitation through new access that may grant resources or health options, like wheelchairs or stair climbers for instance. In essence, technologies and government recognition can engender bodies to be recapacitated at the site of their debility.

One reason this framework is so illuminating is because as Fritsch notes, Puar's argument exposes how bodies are no longer being evaluated as merely able or disabled, but "in relation to their success or failure in terms of health, wealth, progressive productivity, upward mobility, [and] enhanced capacity" (qtd. in Fritsch 27). Puar's terminology then extends analyses beyond the identification of disability to think more broadly about how regimes of ability, enhancement, and power are measured, without exceptionalizing the difference of disability (Fritsch 36). While Puar is writing often with Palestine in mind, where war and military violence is an everyday reality, here debility and capacity provide an apt framework to consider how the ticks themselves are bound to different networks or ecologies of debilitation.

Here the imagined allergy takes the form of an imagined debilitation, with others exclaiming things like "Cmon vegan terrorist, this is your ultimate weapon!" or "If you're Vegan and a villain, start plotting", displaying the truth of the matter that the absolute humour of the initial PETA post is found in the privilege of a dearth in actual biological warfare (TakoyakiMura; DarriusRankin). While one Twitter user posted photos of a gun, loaded with an unknown substance, claiming "So you point a gun at us, we point this one right back at you. You fall asleep and wake up Vegan. Tranquilizer + Lone Star tick venom = 😂", this appears to be an outlier (AdamJoshDotCom).

PETA alongside these Twitter users enact the tick as a debilitating force, as an instrumentalization of the non-human animal in service of the human. Twitter user then_there_was tweets "@sentientist Would it be ethical to breed thousands of Lone Star Ticks and release them into cities to convert people into vegans?" with a followup, where the user clarifies that, "This sounds like I'm being facetious. I'm not. I really am curious. Would the net benefits outweigh the negatives?" Ticks are reduced here to vectors of conversion, imagined as a

team of PETA volunteers standing at street intersections and asking if people have considered going vegan. They are objectified, mirroring the same logic that Carol J. Adams describes as enabling non-vegans to enjoy eating meat (Taylor 201). Objectification of the tick occurs here as a manner through which to instrumentalize its body. For Puar, if debility is an explicit corrosion of the social body, then this call for the expansion of ticks onto the population discursively actualizes a debilitating impulse for social inscription. What becomes clear here is that debilitation is imagined here as the right to subjectivize, to recapacitate, imagined by some vegan activists as the way forward: a debilitating turn. One in which the everyday realities of the tick bite are obscured and instead, the allergy to meat is focused upon as a political solution through a methodological debilitation, like in this tweet, “I support militant vegans in harnessing the lone star tick to spread meat allergies” (Agabrielrose).

Beyond Debility

Yet, while we can easily conclude that these humans are subject to debilitation, the Lone Star tick’s bite also functions as both a form of decapacitization—as one can no longer eat meat without allergic reaction—and a re-capacitization and optimization through the subject’s new proximity to veganism. This violence is thus conceived of as putatively curative—to the aforementioned “disability” that some vegan activists describe as cured through eating vegan (Wrenn et al. 1311). Notions of cure continue throughout PETA’s press release, but function to reveal the slippery border between the impulse or desire for debility, cure, trans-ability, and eugenics. This sliding exhibits the necessity to think beyond the identity politics of disability/ability to contend with the multitude of different forms of (de/re)capacitizations that can occur within a single event.

In the press release announcing the April Fool's joke, PETA's fake biologist writes, "JUST AS LEECHES PURIFY THE BLOOD, THESE TINY INSECTS CAN HELP PEOPLE KICK A HABIT THAT SUCKS FOR ANIMALS, HUMAN HEALTH, AND THE ENVIRONMENT" (Kretzer, emphasis in original). By metaphorizing the tick through the leech, and the allergen as a process of purification, PETA constructs the meat-eating body somewhere along a spectrum of able-bodiedness, between already disabled and perhaps just in need of behavioural modification. Either way, however, PETA embraces the tick then as a form of curative violence, a pseudo-eugenics: sharing the same logic of destroying those without the correct capacities, which exhibits an interrelated logic between speciesism and ableism (Taylor 80). Cures are typically derided within disability studies for manifesting a very similar logic: attend to that which will rid you of your "defect" or "disease" (Kim 12-14). While debates have occurred about the differences between cures for disability and cures for chronic disease, the term ushers with it anxiety due to histories of violent "fixes" (Ibid.).

If the tick bite is more akin to cure, then veganism is figured as advancement or an enhancement, an extension of capacity. This is further evident from the press release's note that the organization will send the "bugs by mail for anyone itching to go vegetarian but lacking the willpower to do so" (Kretzer). Once again, animal welfare is not taken seriously, but more intriguingly, PETA deploys willpower. As Sara Ahmed explain in her text, *Willful Subjects*, willpower has historically been "something that a responsible and moral subject must develop or strengthen" (7). This moralistic tool also structures who is even considered to have the capacity to be human, which is often attached to "not being white, not being male, not being straight, not being able-bodied" (Ahmed 15). By invoking willpower, PETA positions non-meat eaters as more "human" or closer to the ideals of the human—more humane, further entrenching

humanness as the beacon of moralism, and therefore also ableist and speciesist idealizations of cognitive capacity and progressive advancement.

One Twitter user, MekailahP even wrote, “Well I personally wanted to go vegan for years but never pushed myself to actually do it, & then I stopped eating red meat because I got bitten by the lone star tick while pregnant & became allergic. And that was the push I needed, now I’m pescatarian on my way to vegan :).” Here the Lone Star tick’s bite is the movement toward a specific interpellation, a debilitation that capacitizes vegan ideological goals. Take for instance, another Twitter user, TheGirlGenius who wrote “I kinda wanna be bitten by that lone star tick to help me go vegan easier.” Humorously, this offer wasn’t just in jest, but another user replied proselytizing, “Get a free starter kit! <https://www.peta.org/living/food/free-vegan-starter-kit/> ... #KindIsSexy” (Ibid.). The Lone Star tick bite might be reconsidered as a self-help tool; it is a dissolving body-mod. Instrumentalized to debilitate, this form of debilitation therefore also re-capacitizes these subjects toward PETA’s gastronomical goals.

De-Animalized Animals

While those above appear excited about tick bites, this is dissimilar from how ticks are usually encountered. As Jacob Bull argues, the tick typically raises affects of “disgust, repulsion and violence,” because it stands at the limits of animality (“Between Ticks” 73). When encountered, ticks are figured then “only momentarily visible as animals before they are excluded again” through death (Ibid. 77). This border-zone conditions ticks to be uniquely capacitated for PETA’s labour.

In *Beasts of Burden*, Taylor clearly and convincingly exploring the imbrications and divergences between ableism and speciesism, and disability and animal justice. However, her text also lays out a second reason for which ticks could be easily harnessed: humans attend to nonhuman animals differently based upon their perceptions of those nonhuman animals' intelligence or sentience (Taylor 75). She explains that an animal's capacity for thought or feeling renders them less likely to be harmed, as perceptions of sentience or cognition justify greater responsibilities of care (Ibid.). Through such processes, capacity is synonymized with species, and species differences come to function as the means through which one's "killability" is recognized (Giraud 55). Thus, this hierarchy is dangerous for it is mobilized as the arbiter of a nonhuman animal's worth, constructing similar hierarchies along the lines of class, sexuality, race and ability within human populations (Taylor 74). As evident from the contemporary use of "parasite" to castigate those receiving social welfare—"synonymising...disability with 'parasites'" and racializing the parasite, as it is figured next the anti-Black archetype of the welfare queen—these conceptualizations do travel and maintain "racialized, gendered, classed, and ableist power structures" (Burch 401; Taylor 74). Cognitive capacity and agency act then as signifiers of personhood and thus, potential for ethical consideration.

This is perhaps most obvious in Taylor's own writing when she argues against any static idea of sentience and for a nuanced ethics for nonhuman interaction. Here, she reserves an ethical respect for "beings we already know experience and feel their lives"—like dogs or pigs—that she posits is just up for question for "microbial life, insects, plants, and of the environment" (Taylor 81). This division is a discursive separation of those granted ethical recognition from those one is unsure should receive such consideration, as their sentience is not yet confirmed (Ibid.). More, the nonhuman animals represented in her prose or used for exemplification

throughout the text exemplify this pattern. Drawing on animals like pigs, chickens, lobsters and dogs, Taylor falls into what Bull describes as animal studies' fascination with the "nearby," developing scholarship on "kinship bonds between humans and animals like us" ("Between Ticks" 74). Bull concludes that these accounts do not adequately reconsider human-nonhuman animal relations, perpetuating some creatures including ticks as "invisible animals," for they are "socially out-of-sight and absent from wider academic enquiry" (Ibid. 73).

For instance, Taylor recounts a particularly horrific story about disabled men who "were forced to live in squalor, at times padlocked into their bug-infested home, and at least one of them even repeatedly being chained to his bed" (106). Such a story is obviously harrowing and explicates the violence of ableism, but Taylor, quick to describe this violence, does not actually theorize further about these bugs; they merely serve as descriptive elements. In a text about the relationship between animals and disability, there is an oversight here that dismisses bugs, and thus, moves the bug-like—including ticks—outside of the animal. Taylor elucidates the hypocrisy of PETA's April fool's joke by repeating it herself.

By occluding those animals which are not seen as near to the human, and here specifically the tick or parasite, Taylor structures her analysis upon kinship models, recognizing relations with only those therefore that are believed to experience the sentience to form such bonds. Taylor notes at length how this form of ethics entrenches the systemic ableism which perpetuates intelligence and capacity as definitional to humanness (57-58). Unfortunately, as evident, her openness to harm justified upon sentience repeats the same ableist logics that PETA utilizes in their April Fool's Joke and "gives power to those who want to view animals as "mindless objects" (65). PETA, by employing this lack of "nearbyness" to instrumentalize the tick as a debilitating force, similarly occludes the tick from the animals they desire to save.

However, this occlusion might be thought differently as the manifestation of different regimes of recognition, where some animals are debilitated for what Puar terms, “objects of care.” An ‘object of care’ is a body recapacitated by the State following the acknowledgment or care for disability (Puar, *The Right to Maim* 78). Puar calls our attention to this to reorient our view toward those who care for these “objects of care” — the care-workers whose bodies are often subject to debilitating labour themselves (Ibid.). Bull evidences potential animal affinities, describing the historical “management” of ticks for black rhino conservation (“Toxic Skin” 91). He asserts that “practices of care therefore are practices of ordering,” so caring for one animal often requires the erosion of other nonhuman animal populations (Ibid.). If Puar describes how disability is then foreclosed for some people, Bull exposes how the category of the animal is similarly obstructed by notions of care.

Yet, this exclusion extends beyond the animal. While the alpha-gal allergy only restricts the eating of red-meat, there is a presumption that people who have the allergy will not only cease eating cows and pigs, but all nonhuman animals, implying a trickle-down care for a wider environment that still somehow excludes ticks. Or as one Twitter user describes it, “where my #vegetarian #vegan terrorists at? who wants to put a bunch of lone star ticks on folks & change planet” (sevenxenemies). Bred, disciplined and instrumentalized, ticks serve as the force of both human and nonhuman animal debilitation within this discourse, as the tool for both the optimization of vegan activism and the planet.

Ecologies of Intimacy/Ecologies of Debilitation

As PETA presents it, the promotion of the alpha-gal allergy as a pathway to veganism positions the end of animal exploitation as both individualized and based on simple behavioural

changes. This ignores the realities of how people actually navigate allergies and food choices, especially in the face of pharmaceutical options to alleviate the symptoms of a reaction. One might think here of those who are lactose-intolerant who take drugs like Lactaid, eat dairy products up to the point of serious reactions, or even consume lactose-free dairy. Or, in the extreme, we might recall an episode of the television series *Archer*, where a character Pam spends the entire episode eating foods she is deathly allergic to, only to use an epi-pen during the final scene to stop the anaphylaxis (Reed). Within a neoliberal capitalist context, a plot to disperse Lone Star ticks across the world would more likely than not simply result in a new market for “alpha-gal-free” meat and medications for the allergy and additional tick-borne illnesses—which will most likely be developed through animal testing, as is the case with the Lyme disease vaccine research (Bull, “Toxic Skin” 84). And, of course, it must also be re-affirmed that the very idea of mass breeding ticks to release as tools or weapons mirrors the language and logic of industrial agriculture, with cows, pigs, and chickens also being subjected to mass breeding for human use.

Instead, what is necessary is both a structural understanding of animal exploitation, as well as activist efforts to encourage political and ideological changes, rather than mere behaviour ones. Thinking ecologically, there is a great deal of potential to consider in the way ticks, cows, deer, pigs, sheep, and birds form relationships and intimacies. Through a complex web of interactions, we might first consider how these nonhuman beings form solidarity with each other and push back against anthropogenic climate change and ecological destruction.

A major contributing factor to climate change is industrial livestock agriculture, which produces a large proportion of worldwide greenhouse gas emissions (“Livestock's Long Shadow”). As discussed above, climate change is a driving component to the expansion of the

Lone Star tick's range across North America. These factory farms are also sites of incredible violence and harm both to humans and to nonhuman animals, who are bred, raised, and killed for consumption—which have been explored and critiqued greatly within critical animal studies scholarship. Taylor, for example, points to how “industrially farmed animals live in such cramped, filthy, and unnatural conditions that disabilities become common, even inevitable” (Taylor 31).

Considering the Lone Star tick's relationship to industrially farmed animals in the context of Taylor's argument that “animals can and do participate in their own liberation” (Taylor 62) points to an intriguing series of steps: humans harm cows, pigs, etc. and cause climate change through factory farming; ticks expand their range as a result of climate change; ticks bite humans and cause them to be allergic to red meat; humans consume fewer (of some) farm animals; factory farming declines (at least some kinds, as the allergy is not triggered by consuming birds or fish). As such, one could argue that Lone Star ticks and cows (amongst others) engage in a kind of solidarity work, with cows providing ticks with sustenance and ticks helping to resist the violence humans subject the farm animals, while deer and birds also help ticks travel and access new areas. Pushing against human society and its ecologically destructive practices becomes a group effort, each species playing a role in an attempt to slow further destruction and violence. As Agnieszka Kowalczyk argues, “acts of resisting exploitation performed by non-human bodies do not necessarily have to be thoughtful... to be recognized as significant” (194), so it is worth taking seriously that these relations and dynamics are a form of nonhuman resistance. Yet, doing so is dangerous, as it would anthropomorphize nonhuman animal actions, weighing only those significant which we can assign easy political value, and assumes those humans who would be harmed would have any control over these conditions.

Several years after the original April Fool's post, PETA posted a follow-up article that said, "so while PETA may not be releasing Lone Star ticks across the U.S., we're certainly happy to kick back and let them continue to do their beautiful thing" (Sullivan). Once again, this statement erases the realities of the tick bite, and makes invisible the experiences of those who have the allergy. In order to not repeat this harmful dynamic, acknowledging this ecological resistance requires also taking seriously the complications that arise when we address human experiences of debility and disability in this dynamic. On a first level, this requires resisting the separation between humans and nature, and subsequently humans from nonhuman animals. We need to recognize ourselves as part of a broader, complex ecological community. Taylor speaks to this shift in her call for a "feminist ethic of care regarding animals" which "views animals and humans as entangled in interdependent relations" (Taylor 206). However, the example of the Lone Star tick complicates an ecological or feminist ethic of care by demonstrating how mutual flourishing and interdependence becomes strained or even untenable. Bull, in exploring human-tick relations and the affects of Lyme disease, attempts to draw out the implications and nuances of such relations and asks, "how can this unsettling process also be a site for the negotiation of multi-species responsibility" ("Between Ticks" 80)?

Thus, given that so much of the tick-human interaction is marked by discomfort, pain, anxiety, and terror, models of care that solely highlight mutual support and the benefits of co-existence are not necessarily the most useful. Instead, we might find more value in developing frameworks that centre vulnerability in how we relate to and conceptualize nonhuman animals. Taylor argues that "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" (Taylor 171). We want to

push this further, in order to recognize that alongside the giving and receiving of care, there are also the processes of debilitating and disabling. To expand Taylor's disability perspective on interdependence requires us to contend with the complicated interweaving of care and debility that more fully encompass our shared material realities. This view is reflected in Bull's suggestion that "living together is a complex negotiation, often fatal, always dangerous and one in which... the human is not always in the position of power ("Between Ticks" 79). If we centre vulnerability in our frameworks of interdependence, then we must ask what it means to be accountable to the vulnerabilities of other beings, both human and nonhuman, while simultaneously experiencing vulnerability ourselves.

Exploring our relationships with the Lone Star tick requires a language that holds open a contested space for navigating unwanted encounters or unpleasant intimacies. We need a framework that pays heightened attention to embodiments across species and exploring how those embodiments are shaped through disparate relations. In some ways, the example of the Lone Star tick points us towards recognizing ecologies of debility. We can only truly understand these ecological assemblages through tracing the ways that different human and nonhuman bodies are debilitated and recapacitated. This is an area that critical disability studies is especially well-situated to intervene in and provide insights to critical animal studies and animal rights activism, by directing us towards the sociality of embodiments and vulnerabilities.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, we have wrestled with the question of why it is that when people learn of the Lone Star tick and alpha-gal allergies, they immediately and consistently suggest the ticks should/could be used to make people vegan. Through numerous tweets and PETA's joke

press release, some animal rights activists demonstrate a willingness to use certain nonhuman beings for the sake of protecting other nonhuman beings that they care about more; cows can be saved from factory farms if we replace them with ticks bred in laboratories. The impulse to make this switch, to replace one being with another, is indicative of an unquestioned biopolitics, where the instrumentalization of supposedly unworthy lives is logical and reasonable. In thinking the Lone Star tick through debility, we can see that this is a directing and controlling of the tick in order to recapitulate the body into allergy-enforced veganism.

Fundamentally, the problem with this imaginary exercise is that it leans into broader systemic structures of subjugation and domination, violence and governance, which must be challenged in order to actually achieve the goals of animal and disability liberation. Addressing factory farming as the problem itself, rather than merely an outcome of deeper oppressive logics, leaves open the door for new versions of speciesism, as evidenced by discussions of “breeding” and “harnessing” ticks. For animal rights activism to be successful in its goals, it must push against said logics.

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