

“WE FIGHT FOR ALL LIVING THINGS”: COUNTERING MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT THE RADICAL ANIMAL LIBERATION MOVEMENT

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Abstract

This qualitative content analysis of online documents compiled from the North American Animal Liberation Front (ALF), Earth Liberation Kollektive (ELK), and Grassroots Ontario Animal Liberation (GOAL) network websites and Facebook pages explores how activism within the Radical Animal Liberation Movement (RALM) intersects with other social movements. While most literature to date traces the RALM’s (dis)junctures with other forms of social justice activism through analyses of their broad ideological assumptions, or the views of renowned RALM scholars, this research provides authentic insights into the voices of Canadian, American, and Mexican activists as they are represented in documents they author themselves. Like activists in anarchistic, anti-capitalist, immigrant rights, Indigenous, prison abolition, prisoner support, and radical feminist movements, those in the RALM critique capitalism, colonialism, hierarchy, racism, sexism, state power, and the prison industrial complex. Our research calls into question the existing narratives that depict the RALM as an extremist, single-issue movement oblivious to all other forms of social inequality, injustice, marginalization, and oppression. Rather, RALM activists are building alliances with other radical social movements to achieve the common goal of ending both human and animal suffering and exploitation.

Keywords

animal liberation, intersectionality, radical social movements, solidarity, qualitative content analysis, online research

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Introduction

Relegated to the fringes of social movement activism, the Radical¹ Animal Liberation Movement (RALM) is frequently assumed by fellow activists (ADL, 2011; Francione, 2009; Staudenmaier, 2004), scholars (Posluszna, 2015), government agencies (Berthiaume, 2011) and mainstream media (Maqueen, 2013) to be a single-issue cause peopled by misanthropic, extremist animal fanatics who care little about other forms of social justice, or simply seek some moral justification for their penchant for property destruction and social rebellion. The FBI and CSIS have both referred to the RALM as a high-level terrorist threat (Berthiamume, 2011; Best, 2006), while Liddick (2006, p. 3) speculates, “might not a motivated animal rights or environmental extremist, believing the safety of the planet demands it, use an infectious biological agent to kill thousands, perhaps millions of people?” This unfounded characterization disregards the reality of contemporary RALM activism, which we argue is broadly intersectional in its critiques of power, capitalism, and inequality as well as animal *and* human suffering.

Drawing on a qualitative content analysis of 354 documents gathered from RALM activist websites and the public Facebook pages of three North American organizations, this study reveals the ways in which activists understand anguish, captivity, and injustice as entrenched in the ubiquitous inequalities that beget other social harms such as colonialism, classism, criminalization, imprisonment, police violence, racism, and sexism. We found that the RALM’s mission is to bring into being a world free from all forms of coercive power, social hierarchy, repression, commodification, and confinement. RALM activists reject the mainstream animal rights framework, and instead understand consumer boycotts and legislative reforms as techniques of cooptation that perpetuate capitalism and lend legitimacy to unjust power structures. (While some RALM activists use the phrase ‘animal rights’, it is understood to refer to inherent moral rights to autonomy and freedom from harm, rather than legal rights, since most

RALM activists are critical of state power, as we discuss later). They emphasize the alliances they have formed with other social movements such as anarchistic, anti-capitalist, Indigenous, immigrant rights, prison abolition, prisoner support, and radical feminist groups, with an understanding that such affinity with like-minded advocates can co-create a world in which all beings are treated with compassion and respect. While it can be said that we ought to be critical of the rhetoric of the movement and appreciate concerns that some activists may only “talk the talk” (Lamb-Books, 2016), the purpose of this article is not to analyze the results of RALM activism so much as it is to understand how the networked and rhizomatic perspectives of actors within the RALM shape how issues and goals are addressed and framed by the social movement – for to do the former would mean advancing a “capitalist logic” that evaluates the movement’s success by its material and productive capacity to meet programmatic goals (Castells, 2012, p. 143). In doing the latter, we counter the stigma attached to members of the movement and contribute to a more accurate and contemporary depiction of the RALM.

Background to the Animal Rights and Liberation Movements

Confusion about the ideological differences between the RALM and mainstream animal rights groups are quite common in media, public perception, and academic literature (Gaarder, 2011; Groves, 2001; Liddick, 2006, 2013). The conflation of mainstream and radical discourses is extremely problematic because it obscures significant differences in the ideological and strategic approaches of both movements, and ignores the similarities between the RALM and other progressive social justice struggles (Best, 2014; Grubbs & Loadenthal, 2014; Sanbonmatsu, 2011). Mainstream animal rights groups generally follow some version of the utilitarian and rights approaches championed by influential philosophers Singer (1975) and Regan (1983), who advocated for modified and restricted forms of animal use, and legal rights to be granted to animals. Even the animal rights theorists who call for the total abolition of animal use (Francione

& Garner, 2010) envision this happening through a widespread public conversion to veganism, rather than through any radical change to existing social, cultural, and economic systems of oppression. These groups heavily rely on lobbying, petitions, traditional protests, and letter-writing campaigns to persuade legislators and companies to change their ways (Munro, 2005), which shoulders most of the responsibility for animal suffering on the average consumer's buying habits.

Radical animal liberationists, on the other hand, press for drastic changes to current political, economic, and social structures that oppress animals, and view grassroots social movements, rather than state institutions, as the most important actors in creating more equitable relationships with animals (Luke, 2007). For liberationists, no amount of 'cruelty free' consumerism or animal welfare reform will ever emancipate animals from human exploitation, and therefore direct action must be taken to free animals and damage animal industries. Many animal liberationists construct the mainstream animal rights movement as a moral crusade that defends consumerism (Best, 2014). Animal rights philosophers, in turn, tend to condemn the RALM as harmful to the animal advocacy movement because of the negative media response their actions generate, and claim that real change manifests by appealing to consumers, rather than by attacking producers (Cochrane, 2012; Regan, 2004; Singer, 1975). For example, Gary Francione (2009: para. 10), a law professor and author of several tomes on animal rights and veganism, says of the ALF: "[t]he actions of a small number of people have allowed a reactionary press...to create the impression that those who oppose animal exploitation generally are violent misanthropes who value animal life but do not care about human life".

The political dispositions, identities, and moralities of activists contribute to the tactics they draw on to address the social problem of animal exploitation and slaughter. Related to the notion of confrontational forms of contentious politics (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007), direct action is

any act in defiance of the state that directly creates social change without negotiation or intermediaries (Sparrow, 1997). The use of direct action by the RALM is a reaction to the dire and immediate problem of animal suffering that cannot be solved through conventional forms of protest, sluggish legislative change, or a general change of heart by animal exploiters (Best, 2014; Cooke, 2013). Some RALM activists take part in property destruction and so-called ‘monkey wrenching’ (sabotaging industry tools to prevent their use), or liberate caged animals in order to thwart animal suffering and impede the economic activities and profits of animal enterprises (Jones, 2004; Liddick, 2006, 2013). Recent scholarship finds that those who engage in direct action feel that it is their only moral recourse in the face of the horrendous injustices of animal confinement, abuse, and exploitation (Cooke, 2013; Nocella et al., 2014; Upton, 2012). Yet radical activists like those within the RALM are often wrongly associated with violence in ways that obfuscate movement strategies and goals, and exacerbate the problematic media and state conflation of nonviolent RALM activists with those who defend the use of violence (Scarce, 1990; Walby & Monaghan, 2011).

Despite RALM activists focusing much of their attention on animal issues, they do not view the suffering of animals as isolated or distinct from the oppression of marginalized humans. Ideological and strategic comparisons have been made between the RALM and other liberation struggles, including the U.S. abolition movement (Best, 2014; Webb, 2004), women’s emancipation (Gaarder, 2011), and Jewish resistance against Nazism in Europe (Schnurer, 2004). Some scholars recognize that the horrific and systematic systems of confinement, incarceration, abuse, and killing enacted upon oppressed humans throughout history are often modelled directly on systems of animal exploitation (Adams, 2010, 2011; Patterson, 2002; Pachirat, 2011; Torres, 2007). Members of anarchistic social movements highlight the many atrocities perpetrated by the state and capitalist enterprises that oppress humans, animals, and the earth like mass

imprisonment, the widespread slaying of innocent civilians in resource wars, and the relentless destruction of ecosystems (Khasnabish, 2005, 2008b; Saunders, 2008; Shantz & Williams, 2014). Others illuminate the ways in which processes of white colonization that have sought to confine, exploit, and destroy Indigenous peoples have also, through industrialization and widespread settlement, damaged the environment, domesticated and dominated so-called ‘farm’ animals, and destroyed the wildlife that once existed (Deckha, 2012; Gaard, 2001; Sampson, 2004). While in some ways it may be helpful to emphasize the connections between the exploitation of animals and people (for example, see Adams, 2010), feminist writers acknowledge that there is a need for great sensitivity when doing so, as we must recognize that many marginalized groups still suffer from discriminatory attitudes that may be intensified by drawing such comparisons (Harper, 2009, 2011; Peggs, 2013).

While most literature to date maps intersections between the RALM and other social movements through analyses of similarities and disjuncture in tactics, broad ideological assumptions, or the views of well-known RALM scholars, this research provides authentic insights into the voices of North American activists as they are portrayed in documents they author themselves. The ALF and other leaderless, non-hierarchical movements are characterized by what Joosse (2007) refers to as ‘ideological inclusion’, whereby a wide diversity of activists from many different political and moral standpoints may engage in activism without the socio-political, moral, and ethical dictates inherent to a structured organizational body. Since research on the RALM cannot hope to make claims on behalf of all of its activists, it is most helpful to compile and analyse the words of many individual cells and activists in order to unveil the commonalities, intersections, and tensions that inform their perspectives.

Methodology

For ethical reasons as well as pragmatic circumstances common to graduate level research, the problem of how to determine the perspectives of activists with whom we did not actually meet or speak was circumvented by analyzing 354 documents garnered from North American RALM activist websites and public Facebook pages dating from 2005-2015.² These documents consisted of communiqués,³ essays, Facebook posts, published interviews, mission statements, and pamphlets. The activist websites of three RALM collectives were selected for our analysis: two grassroots groups from Canada, the Earthling Liberation Kollektive (ELK) and the Grassroots Ontario Animal Liberation (GOAL) network, as well as Canadian, Mexican, and American branches of the North American Animal Liberation Front (ALF), which is the name used by the global network of autonomous cells of clandestine animal liberation activists who use direct action campaigns against animal enterprises. Online environments are increasingly important in building politicized social networks, activity and solidarity, communicating ideology, and mobilizing activism (Castells, 2012; Stoddart, Ramos, & Tindall, 2015).

The ALF, ELK, and GOAL websites and Facebook pages were selected because they are among a very small number of publically available online spaces for RALM activists. To date, there is little research that explores the experiences and perspectives of Canadian activists in the RALM, yet Canada presents a unique case for two reasons. First, it has come under criticism from animal rights advocates who argue that Canada has a shameful record in the treatment of animals with respect to its antiquated animal cruelty laws, mediocre regulation on the treatment of laboratory and livestock research specimens, policing, surveillance, and ideological attacks against activists, and its internationally condemned commercial seal hunt (Ingram, 2013; Sorenson, 2009, 2010, 2011; Walby & Monaghan, 2011). Second, Canada's geographical proximity to the United States (where RALM activism is more widespread) offers, at least for the moment, a less repressive environment for activists who are deterred or threatened by the harsh

sentences that may be meted out under the AETA (Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act), although this may cease to be true with the recent passing of Bill C-51, which criminalizes many forms of activism and political association.⁴

The ALF is the oldest and most notorious radical animal liberation movement worldwide (Best & Nocella, 2004; Flükiger, 2009), on which its sister organization, the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), is modelled. The North American ALF Press Office website represents the largest body of current information on RALM activism that is publically available. It provides information and communiqués from animal liberations and other direct actions which are otherwise difficult to obtain, and offers insight into the beliefs and ideologies of RALM activists. Since the ALF presence in Canadian RALM activism has been slow to develop, additional groups were needed for our analysis in order to gain more rigorous and in-depth insights into Canada-based RALM activism. ELK is a Canadian grassroots animal liberation movement based in British Columbia and Ontario that supports and defends the use of direct action in animal liberation activism, and draws a connection between the root causes of many forms of human and animal oppression. ELK engages in radical anti-oppressive community organizing around animal liberation-related issues. Their transformative justice approach challenges all forms of hierarchy, domination, and inequality (Evans, 2015), which makes the group a useful resource for examining how RALM activism transcends the reformist discourses of animal rights and welfare. GOAL is a network of Ontario-based grassroots animal liberation groups including the Hamilton Animal Liberation Team (HALT) and Marineland Animal Defense (MAD) that takes part in public and mainstream forms of activism (i.e., marches and pamphleteering), as well as some modes of direct action (i.e., lockdowns and disruptive protest). Unlike most animal rights groups, GOAL and ELK adhere to non-hierarchical organization and consensus-based decision-making in their operations. The GOAL network also participates in solidarity work with other

social justice movements, including Indigenous rights support, and LGBTTTQIA+ and critical feminist advocacy. Unlike the clandestine cells of ALF activists, ELK and GOAL groups largely operate aboveground and members are known to one another.

We adopted a qualitative approach to content analysis that is rooted in critical scholarship and feminist approaches to methodology (Finfgeld-Connett, 2014; Krippendorf, 2004). We focused on the interpretations and nuances of the activists' words in ways that allowed us to understand their dynamic and complex perspectives and lived experiences (Strega, 2005). Following Creswell (2014) and Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) systematic coding guidelines, all documents were initially read line by line to get a broad sense of the epistemological and theoretical connections and departures activists shared in relation to each other. Possible themes and concepts were then noted in the margins, and later expanded and refined after sections of the data were compared with others (Morse, 1995). Key thoughts and concepts that appeared repeatedly throughout the coding process produced a coding scheme whereby comments and observations were added in a word processor that answered the questions: What are the activists saying? How do they talk about, characterize, and understand what is going on? What are they trying to accomplish? By what strategies and means do they do this? What assumptions are they making? The theoretical categories that emerged in response to these questions, concepts, and themes guided how the analytical section of this article is structured (Joosse, 2012). Quantitative elements in the form of percentages were used in the coding process and articulated in the analysis to bolster the largely qualitative findings of this research. Wherever possible, codes that reflected the language expressed by activists were used. Yet despite the best intentions to let the data speak for itself and not impose value-laden judgments on the text (Black, 2013), we acknowledge that coding is largely an interpretive process that may be filtered to some degree through personal empathies felt towards the goals of animal liberation (Saldana, 2013).

Our analysis is intersectional in that it coalesces the “co-constitutive forces of race, class, sex, gender, and nation” (Puar, 2012, p. 49) instead of problematically imposing mutually exclusive identity paradigms (Crenshaw, 1991). How dispositions unfold and take form within social movements is nuanced, unanticipated, unpredictable, unstructured, and fluid to such a degree that we cannot mistake subject positioning as a stable and fixed experience (Khasnabish, 2008a; Puar, 2007). We found friction and assemblage between how activists represent themselves as subjects of political suppression and as relational figures who, in solidarity, pursue the eradication of a vast array of unjust social forces and structures. There is no simple method available that exhaustively categorizes, defines, and describes the activists’ conflicting social struggles and lives, or “litany of disjunctions” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2009, p. 12). In this research, the theoretical concepts that emerged in practice surfaced in messy ways, which supported Guattari’s (1996a, p. 52) assertion that “nothing can unravel, by the sole magic of the transference, the real micropolitical conflicts in which the subject is imprisoned; no mystery, no hidden universe”. With a focus on how social relations and organizational forms demystify and unpack widespread networks of inequality (Phillips, 2006), the goal of our integrative approach is to shed meaning on the profound and multifaceted voices of activists that demonstrate how the RALM opposes the discursive ideological, gendered, racist, colonial, and classist social powers ultimately responsible for the systematic exploitation, imprisonment, and suffering of humans and animals.

Anti-Capitalist Discourses

Several connections unfolded between the experiences and analyses made by other radical movements and those revealed in this study of RALM activism. Reminiscent of some anarchistic and radical feminist affinity groups (Day, 2005; Dixon, 2014; Graeber, 2009; Khasnabish, 2005, 2008a/b; Shantz & Williams, 2014), the RALM speaks and writes about their

activism in ways that challenge, expose, and undermine the institutional, economic, and social structures that work to confine and harm animals and humans. The activists studied demonstrate a keen awareness of the broader threats concurrent to the problems of capitalism, consumerism and state-corporate corruption, the destruction of ecosystems, and monopoly of state power primarily controlled by elite white male persons. Our findings generally transgress the media-driven interpretations of typical public protests and petitioning that have become the hallmarks of mainstream animal rights and welfare activism (Best, 2014; Francione, 1996; Francione & Garner, 2010; Munro, 2005), and provide a glimpse into the confluence of ideologies underlying direct actions taken by RALM activists.

To combat racism, sexism, animal abuse and more, we must adequately confront global capitalism. For it is this behemoth which allows the militarization of law enforcement, the continued use of police violence against targeted communities, the perpetual pillage of this continent and all others at the hands of amerikan imperialism and ecocidal conquest.

– ALF/EF! activist essay,⁵ 2013

RALM activists share with other anti-capitalist movements the perspective that capitalism must, by its very nature, continuously grow and expand its area of influence, and that human relations under capitalism are inherently exploitative and dispossess animals and people of their means of existence (Dixon, 2014). Capitalism produces not only animal exploitation but also a host of other social problems, including excessive state and military power, patriarchal domination, ecological devastation, the marginalization of poor and racialized communities, and the destruction of traditional ways of living (Webb, 2004; Gaarder, 2011; Schnurer, 2004). Activists perceive western society to be held in the death grip of capitalism, where the pursuit of wealth is valued above all else, leading those who control capital to treat animals and less powerful people as objects (Adams, 2010, 2011; Boggs, 2011; Torres, 2007). While still highly critical of the apathy and cruelty of individuals who exploit animals, activists clearly express

understandings of capitalism as the ‘root of all evil’. 90% of the data analyzed contained some criticism of capitalism, the animal-industrial complex, or consumerism.

Capitalism is cancerous and deadly to every life it comes into contact with. We're not interested in...the continuance of a culture that views lives as an economic resource.

– Oregon ALF communiqué, 2011

Life should be able to develop in freedom and not be converted into a commodity. We oppose all forms of limitations imposed on us by this system which encourage submission and an artificial life maintaining the desire for money and power. We believe that like humans, animals are not merchandise and we fight to destroy all cages.

– FLA/Frente Liberación de la Tierra communiqué, Mexico, 2012

Such conceptions of the struggle of the movement contrast the common conflation that animal liberation (like animal rights) is a moral crusade and lacks a critique of capitalist structures (Best, 2014; Grubbs & Loadenthal, 2014; Nocella et al., 2014; Sanbonmatsu, 2011). Here the RALM activists’ goal is to strike capitalism at its roots by draining the exploitative enterprises of their profits and resources, as opposed to simply rescuing animal bodies from suffering. Combatting the many forms of oppression that confront animals, humans, and the earth involves disrupting the “cancerous” spread of inequality and unjust social structures, and envisioning non-hierarchical relations that allow all beings to live freely.

Other activists acknowledged that animal exploitation is but one form of the elaborate, corrupt schematic that works to distribute bodies as commodities in order to enhance the discursive flows of capital and power (Deleuze & Guattari, 2009). Removing one cog, so to speak, from vast and overarching networks and clusters of parts does not stop the problematic machines of control, coercion, domination, and power from functioning, nor halt their discursive production and distribution. As one Canadian ALF activist describes in a 2005 interview,

The oppression and abuse of animals does not happen in a vacuum, outside of the oppression and abuse of women, minorities, and other targeted humans...Fighting for the rights of animals must be done in the context of fighting against all abuse and killing.

This activist makes reference to the intrinsic connection that some scholars and other activists have drawn between patriarchal power, racial inequality, and human domination over animals (Adams, 2011; Pellow, 2014), and the need to engage in intersectional forms of analyses and resistance. By trying to lend aid to various marginalized groups in the stranglehold of inequality, activists challenge the suppressive ontological structures that generate rampant alienation and disparity amongst many living beings.

Of course, because of the wide-ranging ideological background of RALM activists, our data did reveal some contrasting viewpoints to the collective perception that animal liberation is an anticapitalist movement. One activist encouraged supporters of MAD to purchase coffee from Starbucks, a giant multinational corporation:

An organizer from Marineland Animal Defense has arrived on site at Marineland...and will live in this bathtub for the next 3 days...please drop by and show some support! We hear they would really appreciate a warm drink...if you live in niagara falls, hook my friends up with the starbucks. fucking superheros.

– GOAL website post, 2014

This encouragement of the consumption of branded commodities demonstrates a lack of concern for the proliferation of capitalist enterprises and the many harmful economic and environmental impacts they have on communities and ecosystems both locally and in countries where their products are sourced. However, this was the sole pro-consumerism statement found in our data set.

Total Liberation, Not 'Rights'

While the term ‘animal rights’ is commonly used as shorthand to describe any movement that advocates for animals, and is indeed used by many within the RALM (particularly Press Officers and other activists who are in the public eye), a distinction is often made between movements that advocate for the increased legal rights of animals and the RALM. For many

activists, the promotion of state-created laws, rules, and regulations serves to reproduce the very power that yields demands for institutional intervention.

I don't give a fuck about rights. I'm not interested in portraying myself as a victim because I view the State as my enemy. I seek no sort of resolution between myself and domination; I want it to be completely destroyed. The courts, the prisons, hetero-supremacy, white supremacy—I want to work on consistently attacking the manifestations of these forms of domination.

– U.S. ALF website post, 2014

The entire concept of “rights” itself is fairly problematic, given that what mainstream societies perceive as a “right” for a human or animal is largely defined by the dominant power structures that are white supremacist, ableist, cis, hetero-patriarchal, colonial, capitalist, and of course, speciesist.

– ELK activist essay, 2015

RALM activists seek to dismantle power-over relationships that involve control and domination such as those between humans and captive animals, men over women, or between police and the poor (Nocella et al., 2014). Legal rights, to some activists, coopt resistance and struggle, and represent a set of corrupted ideologies that only in the past progressively questioned existing social structures and “claimed to serve as guides for reconstructing society on a more just and egalitarian bases” (Guattari, 1996b, p. 109). Activists who engage in direct actions refuse to submit to the countless apparatuses of power such as laws that protect corporate property or allow humans to harm and slay animals at their corporate-sponsored and government-sanctioned disposal. One Canadian activist emphasizes how it is imperative to “remember that what’s legal and what’s illegal is defined by the state, and people with power” (ELK activist interview, 2014). This activist does not believe laws are designed to ensure the wellbeing and protection of the masses, but their purpose, rather, is to serve the interests of elites.

RALM activists who oppose the authority and legitimacy of the state often suffer from the suppression, policing, and surveillance of their cause (Walby & Monaghan, 2011; Sorenson, 2011). While comparisons of animal liberation efforts to human liberatory struggles raise the

hackles of some who work on behalf of oppressed humans (Gaarder, 2011; Harper, 2011; Peggs, 2013; Schurner, 2004), RALM activists see all forms of oppressive power as being heavily reinforced by the state. Repeated references to unjust laws and the corruption of state decision-makers by corporate influences provide a vital imperative to transgress any rules set out about what forms of activism are permitted (Sampson, 2004; Graeber, 2009). 62% of activist documents made some critique of state power. For example, one Mexican communiqué justifies the RALM's anti-establishment actions by framing state power as fascist, racist, speciesist, and corrupt:

With this action we completely repudiate the anti-immigrant laws that were implemented by the fascist state of Arizona, and not only reject this law but all those who prevent us from being free and wild, which we will break when it is necessary, always. Let's keep striking the state, blow by blow, that the flame is not extinguished and that it extends to the most remote places where there is domestication and domination.

– FLA/Frente Liberación de la Tierra communiqué, Mexico, 2010

While this passage does not advocate for the use of violence to resist the widespread networks and circulations of state power, the activist positions their struggle with the government's racialized techniques of suppression as part of an ongoing and collective war against all agents and forms of social control.

Solidarity with Indigenous Movements

In recent years intersectional liberation movements have increasingly critiqued the enduring legacy of colonialist takeover and, in particular, the ongoing displacement and marginalization of Indigenous peoples in North America. This is especially true as Indigenous communities continue to rise up to defend their independence, and become perhaps the strongest voice in movements against environmental destruction and capitalist political and social systems (Saunders, 2008). 27% of all documents analysed supported Indigenous struggles or advocated

for traditional Indigenous ways of living with the earth and its inhabitants as a model for a better world.

[J]ust like Indigenous peoples' inherent rights, animals' inherent rights were really eroded and even lost as a result of colonization...animals have independent life, their own purpose, their own relationships with the Great Spirit...they are not made for food, they are not a resource...overfishing, overhunting, captivity, industrial farming, wholesale destruction of habitat...these conditions do not fulfill our responsibilities as people of the Earth to protect the land and ecological relations.

– Métis organizer/ELK activist essay, 2015

This quote is an example of how many RALM activists find similarities in the exploitation and colonization of Indigenous people and animals, and contrast abusive forms of animal use with the respectful, traditional, and sustainable practices of many Indigenous peoples who take part in symbiotic, spiritual relations with other animals. Organizations such as Sea Shepherd, the anti-whaling group led by Greenpeace co-founder Paul Watson, are criticized by human rights advocates for their campaigns against Indigenous hunting and fishing practices, including the battle to prevent the Makah tribe from participating in the traditional whale hunts protected by their treaty rights (Gaard, 2001; Tanner, 2005). While many animal rights groups disregard the immeasurable difference between the treatment of animals in traditional Indigenous culture and the exploitative decimation of species by white settlers (Sampson, 2004), RALM activists tend to express more nuanced understandings of the relationship between animal suffering and capitalist and settler domination (Deckha, 2012). For example, in response to mainstream animal rights groups' protests against traditional Haudenosaunee deer hunts, members from the GOAL group Hamilton Animal Liberation Team (HALT) expressed unity with the Haudenosaunee and condemned the actions of white protesters as racist and patriarchal.

As a movement fighting for total animal liberation, we need to understand that this cause is set within a much grander scheme of things that encompasses land use, resource extraction and exploitation, colonialism, capitalism and systemic oppression...the settler community, which the [deer hunt] protesters are part of, has no right to intervene in the

traditional practices of the Onkwehon:we. You cannot claim to be fighting against oppression while simultaneously perpetuating a brutal legacy of violence.

– HALT Facebook post, 2014

These statements not only reveal how some RALM activists consider there to be overlap between various forms of social injustice, but they also acknowledge that such intersections have a compounding effect on certain people and animals who embody several markers of oppressed status, like impoverished Indigenous people, Black women, and female domesticated animals (Peggs, 2013).

We found that a handful of RALM activists do not make these critical connections. Former activist and ALF Press Officer, Gary Yourofsky, made this comment in 2013: “Hunters hunt for the thrill of the kill. They receive a heroine-like rush to the senses. Hunting is blood lust and dominance. Hunting is hatred and violence. Hunting is murder. And it’s obscene”. One 2012 U.S. ALF communiqué referred to hunters as “gun-wielding sadists”. These activists make no distinction between those who engage in respectful, traditional hunting practices as a means of subsistence and those who hunt for sport. However, in 80% of the activist documents that referred to hunting, a clear line was drawn between those engaging in commercial, canned, and sport hunting and those who rely on hunting to survive.

Critical Feminist Struggles

Some RALM activists see the multitudes of their own suffering mirrored in the plight of captive animals, as this essay from a Muslim RALM activist explains:

I was turned off by meat because I saw it as a symbol of my own powerlessness that animals were to humans the way women were to men. From a very young age I was taught the bodies of animals were not their own, just as my female body that I was expected to preserve as purity for my future husband was not really my own.

– ELK activist essay, 2014

In the dominant North American culture, women and animals' bodies are objectified and fragmented through pornography and meat advertisements that portray them as objects for (male) consumption (Adams, 2010). Activist women express feelings of displacement and a lack of control over their bodies, which becomes reinforced by societal expectations that women ought to display a femininity that emphasizes weakness and powerlessness in relation to the always-already dominant man (Korobov, 2011). Feminist activism challenges the male ownership of female and animal bodies, and demonstrates how spoken forms of resistance and direct action confront the patriarchal powers moulded in misogynist western cultures. 23% of the data analyzed expressed some feminist sentiment.

In contemporary western cultures, masculinity helps define what it means to be human. War propaganda, competitive sports industry, and advertisements are constantly reaffirming our identity as connected to power and gender/species domination. At the same time, women and non-human animals are portrayed as objects of consumption and conquest. Through a culture of violence and predation, masculinity ideas subjugate “otherness” in order to affirm Self. Violence against women and animals are not different kinds of oppression, but different expressions of the same oppression.

– ELK activist interview, 2014

This activist draws attention to how the subordination of gendered others through violence and domination is closely linked to the ways in which profiteering animal industries demarcate human identities and relations as having gained meaning from our conquests over animals and other figures labelled as less powerful (namely women). An anonymous US ALF activist essay in 2015 discusses how sexism is inherent in certain animal products: “the consumption of milk from cows or eggs from chickens enables the coercive and sexual exploitation of vagina-bearing individuals”. Adams (2010, p. 4) refers to these products as “feminized protein” and has explored similar connections between the sexual exploitation of women and animals. She specifically draws attention to what the animal industry disturbingly

refers to as “rape racks” (Adams, 2010, p. 160), which are devices used in animal breeding practices to restrain female animals for artificial insemination.

Not all individuals within the ALF espouse the critical feminist perspectives found within ELK and GOAL. Two ALF communiqués made misogynistic threats towards women in animal industries, calling them “fur bitch” (Canada, 2009) and “a psychotic bastard child of cruella deville and barbie” (U.S., 2013). Another notorious example of hatred from outside of our data set stems, once again, from Gary Yourofsky, who often makes violent, racist, and sexist statements and threats against those who harm animals. In a 2006 interview he remarked: “Every woman ensconced in fur should endure a rape so vicious that it scars them forever. While every man entrenched in fur should suffer an anal raping so horrific that they become disembowelled” (Care2, 2006; para. 14). Further, 3% of the data studied contained some reference to animal ‘slavery’, while 2% likened animal exploitation to the Holocaust. These comparisons are criticized by feminist scholars such as Harper (2009, 2011) and Adams (2010) who point out that these types of statements are most often made by white, privileged (male) activists who lack an appreciation of how such conflation continue to oppress and silence the voices of persons of colour, women, and other marginalized people.

Examples of blatant misogyny and racism in the RALM are not common and some groups, such as ELK and GOAL, have a strict mandate to fight against all oppression and refuse to tolerate such dissonance. Yet there is clearly contention within the movement. It is notable that Yourofsky is still one of the public faces of the ALF, and indeed in leaderless and autonomous networks it remains unclear how such a person might be removed and who would have the authority to do so, or even how Press Officers are appointed in the first place. One 2013 U.S. ALF communiqué says this of the Press Office:

When a press office claiming to represent the ALF directly scoffs at the requests of the ALF, this should be a scandal... Those of us underground risk our freedom and sometimes lives rescuing animals; the least we can expect is a press office that is responsive to us... We hope that NAALPO will respect our wishes in the future - it seems to us that its very legitimacy would hinge on this.

Evidently there is conflict and tension emerging between direct-action activists and the aboveground movement of the ALF, which speaks to the need for future research to explore and analyze how discourses are produced, included, contested, and excluded within the RALM.⁶

Radical Activism Versus the Nonprofit Industrial Complex

One third of RALM activists in the documents sampled criticize the mainstream animal rights movement, especially the well-known group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) for focussing on indirect methods such as vegan outreach and education (Best, 2014; Cochrane, 2012; Francione, 1996; Torres, 2007). These campaigns often promote consumerism by advocating for a reformist vegan lifestyle that is still highly problematic because of its perpetuation of industries that contribute to environmental destruction, like fuel consumption and emissions from food transportation, and the migrant and child labour utilized in produce farming (Harper, 2009; Sorenson, 2012; Torres, 2007). ELK specifically addresses the shortcomings of such mainstream approaches to animal activism with their #DearPeta campaign, which collects and posts reader photos alongside statements about what they find offensive in PETA's media stunts and advertising.

Veganism is not going to 'fix' capitalism, or 'fix' consumerism. Capitalism is *designed* around exploitation of something (labour, animals or the Earth), and consumerism is the means by which we acquire and make use of this exploitation. Sadly, "going vegan" doesn't change any of that...you can't fucking 'buy' a revolution.

– ELK activist essay, 2014

[there are] many problems with the culture of animal rights (primarily because it thrives within terribly privileged communities), and similarly with the tactics & priorities of PETA as an organization (essentially for promoting short-term "go vegan" campaigns that tokenize different peoples or issues for their elitist version of "rights" for animals).

– ELK website post, 2014

In addition to criticizing the tactics and single-issue focus of mainstream campaigns (which like those of other large nonprofits are often designed to appease donors and funding sources [Incite!, 2007] rather than address the deep underlying sources of animal exploitation), ELK activists criticize PETA's tactics for their sexism, racism, ableism, and heteronormativity, which are rampant in their advertising and public relations campaigns. They argue that such campaigns are not only offensive but also ineffective in garnering support from target groups (Fraiman, 2012; Francione, 1996). In fact, the sexual objectification of women in the animal rights movement can contribute to the sexual harassment and assault of women activists by their male counterparts (Adams, 2011). Feminists heavily criticize the protection of sexual predators in the animal rights movement at the expense of victims (Gaarder, 2011; Groves, 2001). Assaulted women tend to leave the animal advocacy movement or stay silent because they believe that it is more important to have male activists represent the cause than to seek justice for themselves (Adams, 2011). Following an incident in 2015 where a male organizer from the animal rights group Direct Action Everywhere admitted to several sex crimes against fellow activists, HALT attempted to counter this unspoken code of silence by emphasizing:

This is why we need safe spaces in our organizations and communities. Misogynists have NO place in the fight. It doesn't matter if the person is a "good" activist. It certainly doesn't matter if they're vegan. We don't just fight for the liberation of animals, but all living things.

– HALT Facebook post, 2015

Operating in the public sphere, as some mainstream animal rights movements do, grassroots groups such as ELK and those within the GOAL network are particularly sensitive to the shortcomings of gendered approaches to activism. Marineland Animal Defense (MAD), another GOAL group, posted a response in 2014 to the homophobic pro-vegan Facebook page *Vegans of Eden*: "Everyone go and report this group immediately! There is explicit hate speech

in this group which is promoted as ‘heterosexual-only’. Let these people know that veganism is about standing in solidarity with all living things”.

While this open-minded attitude resonated in most of the data from all sources, one well-known U.S. ALF prisoner expressed intolerant sentiments in a 2014 interview where he endorsed the ‘hardline’ subculture that he had attempted to revive earlier in his life as being “militantly pro-life...as well as against all sex outside of that between a man and a woman, specifically for pro-creative purposes”. While this view is not typical of the majority of activists, it demonstrates that the RALM is not a movement that uniformly accepts of all forms of diversity. This same activist quoted above critiqued the intersectional agenda of the RALM in general, and argued that the focus of the movement must be on animals and the earth, rather than cater to what he referred to as a “political checklist”. For a small minority of RALM activists, concern for animals does not translate into broader social justice awareness. We acknowledge there are differing views between those within the RALM who disparage mainstream animal rights activism for what one U.S. ALF communiqué referred to as “armchair activ[ism] and passive politics”, and those who understand the need for solidarity building between movements. Speaking from the first author’s experience of activism within many different animal rights and welfare organizations, there are certainly many activists within mainstream movements who support radical activism and direct action, and engage in a broad range of social justice activities that support the well-being of humans, animals, and the earth. The decision not to engage in direct action is not always based on fear or discomfort with law-breaking. Some people seriously consider the potential impact of obtaining a criminal record or prison sentence that would impede their ability to care for their family and children. It is our understanding that divisiveness within any social movement is counterproductive, and that resistance of any kind must be enacted

through collective efforts if the goal is to overcome the array of social forces that unrelentingly propagandize fear and pit activists against one another.

Despite the existence of such tensions, the ALF, ELK, and GOAL most often seek to create more inclusive alternatives to mainstream animal rights activism by incorporating radical critiques of systemic power injustices within a framework of anti-oppression, community activism, and solidarity (Dixon, 2014), while ideologically supporting other radical and clandestine activists.

[We] will prioritize organizing that is free of speciesism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, queerphobia, ableism, xenophobia, and classism. The Network operates on an intersectional understanding of oppression and aims toward the goal of actively organizing for total liberation that recognizes the inherent worth and interconnectedness of all beings.

– GOAL Facebook post, 2015

[A] similar fabric runs throughout society, connecting us not solely to other predominately white social movements but also to many people who survive without compromise in this world on fire...what matters is that we utilize our time and privileges toward fighting effectively against the many forces seeking to destroy us.

– ALF website post, 2013

As referenced in the GOAL quote above, the RALM may be considered to embody a mandate of what some recent scholarship has termed ‘total liberation’, which values freedom and justice for humans, animals, and ecosystems alike by means of an anti-capitalistic, anarchistic, and direct action-oriented strategy (Best, 2014; Pellow, 2014). Many RALM activists believe that to achieve total liberation, multitudes of social movements must continue to form alliances and networks as they challenge the myriad assortment of social inequalities that operate in tandem to oppress, devalue, and dehumanize a countless number of cultures and human and animal lives. They understand the need to unite as many people as possible to resist discursive power structures, organizations, and regulatory schemes that suppress marginalized populations from all angles and facets of life in order to tame potentially unruly populations.

Empty Cells and Empty Cages

One way in which the RALM expresses this solidarity with other activists is through prisoner support. As a social movement that often engages in actions that states deem subversive and illegal, the RALM is devoted to providing support and solidarity with prisoners, particularly anti-authoritarian prisoners such as anarchists, earth liberation activists, and social revolutionaries. 77% of the data (and almost all of the ALF communiqués) expressed this critical framing of prison issues and solidarity, which counters the pro-prison stance taken by some mainstream animal rights groups that press for harsher sentences for those convicted of animal abuse.

Prisons perpetuate systems of domination whereby perpetrators are taken out of communities, put into prison and then later re-integrated back into the same unjust, politicized and wholly unequal society. The systemic relations of power and oppression are left untouched, and actually reinforced as poverty and marginalization fuel a cycle of incarceration. It is a system used for capitalist gain...to criminalize and displace our communities...it targets: queer and trans folks; communities of colour; Indigenous peoples; immigrants; people with disabilities and mental health issues; poor and low-income communities; drug users; and more recently, environmental and animal rights “terrorists”.

– ELK activist essay, 2014

The protection of private property by the state at the expense of the liberty of others results in the criminalization of those who suffer most under the inequalities of capitalism; specifically racialized, gender ‘othered’, and poor communities (Christie, 2000; Davis, 2003). In the above quote, as among others in our data set, the prison is constructed as a space where power is circulated, reinvented, and recycled in order to preserve the dominant social and economic structures that keep the marginalized oppressed, vulnerable, bound in chains, and locked in cages. The RALM contests the police and state’s deployment of the label “terrorist” to persuade the public into thinking that they are always-already dangerous (Joosse, 2012) for standing in opposition to capitalism, transphobia, ableism, sexism, racism, speciesism, and psychiatric power

(Walby & Monaghan 2011). In a posting that commemorated the anniversary of a prison strike conducted by immigration detainees in an Ontario prison, HALT called upon activists to recognize and support those, who like animals, are imprisoned without reason:

We talk a lot about cages in animal liberation. A cage is a prison cell is a cage. Organizations like No One Is Illegal have been working tirelessly to bring attention to our government's draconian immigration detention policy, to deliver justice to migrants in this country who are locked up in our country without trial or indefinite sentences, and to question the criminalization of migrants entering this so-called free nation.

– HALT Facebook post, 2014

HALT recognizes the victories that have been won by other organizations that are not as concerned with animal suffering as they are with ameliorating hostile immigration policies that indefinitely incarcerate newcomers to Canada for reasons that are often beyond their control. They and other RALM activists perceive that any victory against systematic inequalities and institutions is part of the broader dismantling of an unjust and domineering society that oppresses both humans and other animals.

In spite of the overwhelming majority of the data that championed a prisoner ally or prison abolitionist perspective, some ALF communiqués referred to animal exploiters as ‘murderers’ and ‘criminals’, and condemned those involved in animal industries. Variations on the word ‘criminal’ were found in four communiqués while ‘murder’ occurred twelve times. In one interview from the ALF website, a prominent animal liberation activist and author compared animal abuse to child molestation, implying that those who ‘torture’ animals are deeply disturbed and should be punished. Two activists noted that part of their mandate was in fact to mete out punishment to those who exploit animals, as this 2011 Vermont ALF communiqué expresses: “(w)e will use whatever means necessary to liberate animals, prevent cruelty and punish those who commit acts of cruelty”. In this case, the punishment enacted was the destruction of a fence, the theft of surveillance cameras, and the disabling of other farm equipment.

Prefiguring liberation

Despite the grim prospect that animals may continue to suffer untold horrors at the hands of human beings for decades to come, RALM activists are nevertheless encouraged by the passion and dedication that fellow activists express, and hold a belief that by living in line with their values and encouraging others to do the same, the world will slowly get better. Radical activists engage in prefiguration, that is to say, a collective conception of a utopic future which blossoms from the daily work and interactions of their activism (Boggs, 1977; Khasnabish & Haiven, 2014).

Social transformation needs no martyrs... Revolutionary action must include a conscious effort to subvert the roles that define our exclusion and powerlessness. Revolution begins with each one of us. We are the executioners of fate. We must decide our own future so that no one else will be able to.

– ELK Facebook post, 2013

This passage speaks to the commitment of RALM activists in modelling positive relationships and communities based on equality and mutual respect. While mobilizing anti-oppressive and non-hierarchical forms of organization is an ongoing work in progress, as it is for most radical groups (Graeber, 2009), this continuous effort to confront privilege and power within a social movement as well as outside of it further distinguishes the RALM from its counterparts in the hierarchically organized animal rights movement. Sharing anarchistic struggles against all forms of coercive power, their politicized modes of resistance provide another intersection between animal liberation and movements pursuing social justice.

Compassion, justice, equity are all important values we can incorporate into our lives on a daily basis and on broad terms. Refusing to see wild animals as commodities, as assets and profits, should be part of a larger project to revise a society that made such things possible in the first place. At our best moments, together, our energy pointed to this – another world is possible.

– MAD Facebook post, 2015

Through calls to action, and by placing themselves in a position of vulnerability for the sake of

others, RALM activists hope to mobilize a social awakening, and, together with the support and solidarity of movements and activists, build a new world from the ground up.

Conclusion

The North American RALM is not bound by a single-issue platform. On the contrary, this research demonstrates that most animal liberationists care deeply about the world's problems in their entirety. It is easy to assume that people who struggle to save the lives of animals are narrow-minded, overly idealistic in their vision, or detached from the nightmares of human suffering. Yet if we listen to their voices and turn our attention away from the popular conceptions of these activists depicted in the propagandizing discourses of media and neo-liberal governments, we hear a different tale. Many RALM activists seek to upheave the roots of social chaos that are entrenched in manifestations of classism, racism, sexism, colonialism, ableism, power, and all other unjust social forces that leave people and animals vulnerable, marginalized, stigmatized, oppressed, and forgotten. Although a small number of activists express isolationist, misogynist, and racist views that may hinder the movement from being perceived as inclusive and intersectional, this research finds that the RALM has the potential to overcome these barriers and join with other movements to achieve common goals.

As movement coalitions, particularly transnational ones, become increasingly important in a globalized world (Tarrow, 2011; Vicari, 2014), the RALM may find it more vital than ever to build solidarity and partner with other movements. Further studies are warranted to determine if other activists, such as those found within feminist or Indigenous movements, are beginning to view the RALM as allies in their struggles against patriarchy, colonialism, and environmental destruction. Future research might also continue to explore the extent to which misconceptions about the RALM's perspectives and goals perpetuate their distance from other social movements. What is clear from this research is that for many RALM activists, animal liberation

is just the beginning; it is one key amongst many that will eventually lead to the desertion of all cages that thwart us from reaching our true potential – to coexist in a world where human and animal relations are peaceful, equitable, and non-exploitative.

Notes

1. The word “radical” is loosely attached to many social movements, however in this case we use radical in reference to etymology of the word, which is “root”, to imply that the RALM is interested in addressing the root causes of animal suffering and the meat industrial complex, as opposed to narrowly advocating against meat-eating practices. Secondly, we use “radical” because this is how activists who engage in the analyses and activities described in this paper are popularly referred to in the scholarly literature and media.
2. We did not, in any form, communicate with activists throughout this research.
3. Communiqués made up the bulk of the ALF activist data, which are the anonymous statements issued by activists to ‘press officers’ who publish them on the activist website. Communiqués inform readers of the direct actions claimed by autonomous cells of the ALF, offer a way of seeing how activists conceptualize their activism as it occurs in the present moment rather than in retrospect (Liddick, 2006), and provide the most instructive method of determining paradigmatic impacts in clandestine movements where activists cannot be identified and studied directly because of the potential illegality or covert nature of their actions (Joosse, 2014).
4. Bill C-51 makes it a criminal offense to express support for ‘terrorist’ organizations, labels many forms of radical activism such as blockades and the destruction of state property as terrorist acts, and allows for the preventative detainment of those suspected of intending to break the law (Parliament of Canada, 2015).
With the recent federal election of a new Liberal government in Canada, it remains to be seen if aspects of the Bill will be repealed or amended.
5. Some of the activists researched identified with both the ALF and EF! (Earth First!), so we have made this distinction throughout the article. Some Mexican activists took part in actions under the name of FLA (Frente Liberación de la Tierra), and their communiqués were posted on ALF websites.
6. ALF Guidelines:
 - i) To liberate animals from places of abuse...and place them in good homes where they may live out their natural lives, free from suffering.

- ii) To inflict economic damage on those who profit from the misery and exploitation of animals.
- iii) To reveal the horror and atrocities committed against animals behind locked doors, by performing direct actions and liberations.
- iv) To take all necessary precautions against harming any animal, human and non-human.
- v) Any group of people who are vegetarians or vegan and who carry out actions according to these guidelines have the right to regard themselves as part of the Animal Liberation Front.

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