

TOTAL WOMAN VICTORY Animal Husbandry and the Female Condition

"To the extent that we accept such abuse, in conformity with the husbands' master mentality, we can see how we ourselves have been domesticated, how thoroughly male rule has molded us."

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By [*aurora linnea*](#)

The word "husband" derives from the Old Norse *húsbóndi*, meaning "Master of the House." This Master's work is husbandry: the art and science of domestic domination. When practiced on animals, his noble trade begins with rape—the female animal is forced into intercourse with a chosen "stud," or she is penetrated by the Husband himself, wielder of the Insemination Gun—and ends in murder. Quaintly, this is known as the "care and keeping" of animals. In the (typically brief) interval between rape and slaughter, husbands hobble and pinion and cage the animals under their care; they whip them and chain them and strike them with electric prods; they blind them and mutilate their toes, tails, beaks, ears; they burn their insignia into young animals' skin with hot irons as proof of ownership, and twist thorned branches around infants' muzzles to thwart their attempts to nurse; they starve them in lightless warehouses and ram metal tubes down their throats to gorge them overstuffed and sick with gruel (Cranstone, 1969; Patterson, 2002; Kemmerer, 2011).

The husbands have been perfecting their tactics for the last ten or twelve thousand years, since mankind first began cultivating control over other animals through the process of domestication, whereby free beings are pressed into thralldom for use as instruments of production, enslaved laborers, consumable bodies, and profitable commodities.¹ This conversion is gradual, achieved over successive generations through isolation from wild kin, selective breeding, and steady habituation to subjection. Under the regime of husbandry, animals are bred to be productive and tractable. Defined by and valued solely for its productive capacities, the animal body is reconceived as property: "In order to be domesticated animals are incorporated into the social structure of a human community and become objects of ownership, inheritance, purchase, and exchange" (Clutton-Brock, 1999, p. 31). Zooarchaeologist Juliet Clutton-Brock writes that, as creatures came to be perceived as possessions, the relationship between humans and animals shifted "from one of mutual trust in which the environment and its resources are shared to total human control and domination" (p. 31). Now the animal belongs to the Husband; she is his thing to use according to his purposes—so her life is no longer her own.

Her body, too, is taken from her: domestication turns the animal body against itself, shaped by a vision within which the suffering of living as such a body means nothing. Cows and chickens have been bred to yield milk and eggs, respectively, in such exorbitant surfeit that their exhausted bodies begin to break down while they are still young. A cow can live twenty years, but under the care of the dairyman, kept in a state of near-constant pregnancy, she might make it to four before she's "spent" and dispatched to the slaughterhouse (Cusack, 2013). Birds bred for rapid, prodigal growth are prone to heart attacks and broken bones, as their skeletons and viscera succumb to the onrush of massing flesh (Davis, 2009). Many of these creatures can barely stand. At the furthest extreme is a breed of mice genetically engineered for a predisposition to cancer, christened the OncoMouse. Created only to sicken, these animals are used in medical research.

To bind them to the husbands who abuse them, domesticates are coerced into a state of engrained dependency. Kris Forkasiewicz (2015) writes that "[a]nimal domestication was not unlike the making of a junkie. In this case, the victims had to be hooked on the oppressive agent and gradually stripped of their opportunities to obtain food by themselves, to give birth and raise progeny on their own terms, and to die as free beings" (p. 135). Captive feeding and violent enforcement are pivotal in the making of animal dependents, but here, too, unnatural selection plays its part. In his study of inheritance, *The Variation of Plants and Animals Under Domestication* (1868), Charles Darwin

identified a constellation of traits consistently present in domesticated but not wild animal populations. The cornerstone of this “domestication syndrome” is docility: “the fact or quality of being easily handled, managed, or led; meek and unquestioning obedience” (“Docility Definition & Meaning,” 2023). Physiologically, the docility of domesticates is associated with stress hormone down-regulation in combination with a “dramatic reduction” in the size of specific brain structures that, as Melinda A. Zeder (2012) of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History explains, “can be directly linked to an increase in the thresholds for the display of behaviors such as aggression, fear, and flight that result in the overall reduction of reactivity” (p. 169). It is of obvious advantage to the predator to divest the prey of her instinctual fear of predation. Docile animals, who serve their function with minimal friction, accepting captive dependency as safety, are “much more attractive to their human keepers” than animals who realize the danger they’re in and strive to free themselves. Thus the inbred docility of the domesticate is what Marilyn Frye (1983) calls *mayhem*: “a maiming which impairs a person’s ability to defend herself” (p. 70).

Another key symptom of domestication syndrome is pedomorphism, characterized by the retention of a juvenile appearance and demeanor among adults (Wildins et al., 2014). Compared with their wild kin, domesticates are babyfaced, their muzzles shorter, eyes bigger and rounder, ears floppier. Behaviorally, they are more submissive, fawning over their masters like pups currying favor with a parent. To the masters, domesticates’ stunted development is “cute”; their babyishness codes to defenselessness—an attractive quality in a subordinate. Incompatible though the social position of eternal child may be with dignity or self-determination, it is not without its privileges: as long as she stays adorably wide-eyed and acquiescent—in the Husband’s house if not his factory farm—the domesticate can expect to be coddled, she will earn caresses, treats will be doled out to her, since she poses no threat to the Husband’s power. As a rule, aging domesticates, like noncompliant ones, are summarily culled.

As far as the domesticators are concerned, mankind’s domination of other animals is an act of love. The Husband is the ever-benevolent paternal Good Shepherd ministering devotedly to his flock, tending to their needs, protecting them from harm. Domesticates, for their part, repay their guardians’ love through loyal subservience. Marilyn Frye (1983) observes that “Under the name of Love, a willing and unconditional servitude has been promoted as something ecstatic, noble, fulfilling, and even redemptive” (p. 72). The mythos of domestication teaches that the animal is consummated, existentially, spiritually, by the Husband’s use of her. In India’s Guashalas, or cow sanctuaries, dairymen “worship” cows by using them for milk, on the grounds that it is the animals’ dharma—their sacred duty—to nourish mankind with their bodily fluids (Narayanan, 2019).

Domestication has been variously exalted as a loving relationship, a partnership, a mutualism, and a social contract (Zeder, 2012; Palmer, 1997). It is said that animals consented to captivity, subjugation, the total instrumentalization and commodification of their bodies, even to being killed and consumed, because they recognized they’d be better off under the yoke than fending for themselves in the perilous wilds. Animals gladly forfeited their freedom in exchange for the luxury of birth-to-death dependency. In any case, they’re so much happier in bondage: animals have a deep instinct for submission; they need the whip and the chain, the firm hand of the Husband, to steady them. It is clear, at the very least, that they are more productive when properly mastered—and could there be a surer sign of flourishing? Proponents of the theory that domestication has been just as good for animals as for mankind point to the superabundance of domesticates now covering the earth, proliferating at a rate far outpacing their wild relations, who have not benefited from husbandly kindness. They remind us that there are more chickens alive today than any other species of bird, enough that a million can be killed every hour and their numbers suffer not at all (Kemmerer, 2011).



In *Woman's Creation: Sexual Evolution and the Shaping of Society* (1979), Elizabeth Fisher theorized that “the sexual subjugation of women, as it is practiced in all the known civilizations of the world, was modeled after the domestication of animals” (p. 190). Her argument is that it was only after “the initiation of animal keeping ... that men began to control women’s reproductive capacity, enforcing chastity and sexual repression,” in effect “domesticating” women themselves, for exploitation as reproductive and sexual chattel (p. 194). She writes that it was also through animal breeding that men came to understand the male role in reproduction, whereas earlier it had been regarded as a more or less mystical, strictly female affair. This domestication-mediated discovery of paternity was a precondition for the development of patriarchal society. Confident now in their contribution to creation, men claimed fathers’ rights to children; the patriline was in the ascendant, and out of patrilineal descent emerged patrilocal, with women—often sold by their families in exchange for domesticated animals—isolated from anyone who might see them as other than servants or protect them from the husbands’ abuse (French, 2008). Gerda Lerner (1986) disputes the line Fisher draws between domestication and male domination, writing that no causal connection can be made because “relatively egalitarian societies” existed 2000 to 4000 years after the introduction of husbandry (p. 46). Yet whether or not the connection is causal, it is consistent: as Peggy Reeves Sanday observes in *Female Power and Male Dominance* (1981), animal husbandry has historically been a male occupation, and herding societies have tended to be patriarchally organized, endowed with male-supremacist cultures and religions for the reinforcement of male rule.

Where ancient history is concerned, there is only so much we can know for sure. Nonetheless, there seems reasonable cause to take men’s subjugation of other animals and of women as conjoined developments. And from there, domestication would become “the model and training ground for all other forms of oppression” and the “archetypal pattern for ... social subordination” (Cantor, 1983, as cited in Patterson, 2002, p. 12; Thomas, 1983, p. 46). In ancient Sumer, the same methods were implemented in the management of enslaved humans and “livestock,” while a single word described both castrated oxen and castrated male slaves (Patterson, 2002). Women prisoners seized during military raids were regularly impounded as breeders to replenish the slave labor force. Militarism itself seems to have thundered onto the historical scene as a consequence of domestication. David Nibert writes in *Animal Oppression and Human Violence: Domesecration, Capitalism, and Global Conflict* (2013) that the maintenance of large groups of cows and sheep by early Eurasian pastoralists “compelled the expropriation of land and water used by other humans, driving large-scale invasions and warfare” (p. 30). By the incursions of these roving bands of

militarized husbands, more egalitarian, woman-centered societies across Europe were one after another routed.

Centuries later, European men weaponized domesticates in the genocidal sieges they perpetrated around the world. Wherever the invaders drove their herds across stolen land, catastrophic violence and displacement of the land's native inhabitants followed. In the so-called United States, colonizers paired the logic of domestication with white nationalism to justify the dispossession and massacre of Indigenous "savages," comparing them to wild animals who needed either to be tamed—redeemed through capitulation to white male authority—or else eradicated, like rabid wolves to be hunted down for the safekeeping of the husbands' flock (Kim, 2015).

Domestication, then, has been foundational to the advent of totalitarian manhood—with womanhood as its servile antipode—the burgeoning of patriarchal empire, and the entangled oppression of every body classed as less than fully "human" and sacrificed on the altar of patriarchal power.² By institutionalizing human dominion over animals, the husbands set themselves on a course to becoming warlords and tyrants. Meanwhile, they left women to the beasts, as breeders and housepets, sexual commodities and sacrificial lambs.

Likened to other animals, our membership in the human species denied and debated by male religious/political/cultural authorities, women have been corralled as detainees, subsumed into the Husband's estate no less than his sheep, cows, pigs, fowl, and horses. Not uncommonly, men trade girls and women for these other animals (Nibert, 2013; Dixon, 2016). Long confined to the "domestic" sphere—the patriarchal home and family—women have labored in men's service, our lives lived on their behalf, our lifework to sustain and succor them; while our wombs have been harnessed to men's desire for heirs—sons to immortalize them—and to the manmade society's desire for cheap plentiful workers. Poor women have peddled their commodified femaleness as wet nurses, sometimes alongside goats, their competitors in the breastmilk business; Muslim women in medieval Europe and African-American women in the United States were enslaved to do the same. (Today, bovine mothers have an involuntary monopoly on this woman's work.) A line from Shakespeare's shrew-taming Petruchio, as a man asserting his claim to a woman, is instructive here: "She is my goods, my chattels; she is my house, my household stuff, my field, my barn, my horse, my ox, my ass, my anything."

The billions of creatures currently enduring husbandry in the purgatorial death camps of the animal industrial complex are disproportionately female—nearly every individual among the 30 billion chickens on earth today is a hen—and it is female animals who are most intensively used. The female animal, whether she is a dairy cow, a laying hen, or a breeding sow, suffers unimaginable torments so that her specifically female biology can be expropriated for the husband's gain, and it is only after she has been exploited to her bodily limit that she is released from her ordeal, when she is trucked to the slaughterhouse and killed. Thus we see that sexualized violence against domesticated females is the central enterprise of animal agriculture.

Marketing campaigns portray female domesticates as burlesque analogs to human women, dolled up in anthropomorphic drag, with lipstick and earrings and anatomically incorrect curves. "Happy Cows" spend their days chewing the cud, gossiping with The Girls on the greenest possible pastures of plenty, blissfully content fenced inside the bucolic idyll of well-fed passivity and comfy cozy servitude the husbands have imposed on them. Chickens, too, are happy with their lot; otherwise, how could they pump out all those eggs? That the female animal manages to function—to produce—in conditions of confinement and abuse is taken as evidence that those conditions suit her nature. When not cast as homey foster mamas to mankind, with all its myriad mommy issues, female domesticates are eroticized, depicted as seductresses enticing consumers to taste of their milk and meat. A mascaraed cow croons about the creamy delights whipped up from her own extracted bodily fluids, a pig in cut-off shorts stabs at her shiny pink haunches with cutlery: "Put a

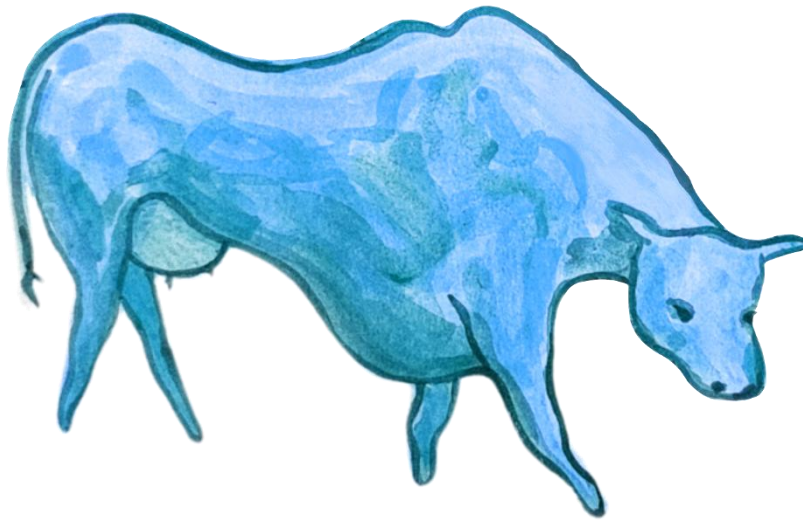
fork in me, I'm done!"³ This coyly masochistic creature occupies a quintessential feminine role in patriarchal culture: she is the willing victim, in her element and at her winsomest when roughly used.

Yet it is not only females but domesticated animals of both sexes who become targets for misogynistic contempt. As United Poultry Concerns founder Karen Davis (1995) writes, there is "a culturally conditioned indifference toward, and prejudice against, creatures whose lives appear too slavishly, too boringly, too stupidly female, too 'cowlike'" (p. 196). Davis highlights the contemptuous disregard for domesticates voiced by environmentalists like J. Baird Callicot (1980): "[Domesticated] animals have been bred to docility, tractability, stupidity, and dependency. It is literally meaningless to suggest that they be liberated" (cited in Davis, p. 196). The diminishment of the oppressed animal accomplished over millennia of intergenerational oppression conveniently supplies the excuse for that oppression's perpetuation, as the domesticate is disdained for existing in so lowly a state as the one the husbands trapped her in. "The next step," Davis writes, "is to assert that these animals wanted, even chose, to resign their metaphysical autonomy to humans on the darkling plain of evolution" (p. 201). Domestication is domination inscribed so deeply into the being of the dominated that she is transformed into an icon of unfreedom, stymied by the wound of a debility her masters affirm to be the expression of her true and changeless nature.

The earth, too, has been feminized, fantasized as a massive She: "Mother Nature." And "she," too, has been a victim of husbandry, the affront of domestication. It is patriarchal doctrine that the earth belongs to Man, his to forcibly master. So rivers are dammed and rerouted, forests are razed, the earth is pierced for oil, mountains are decapitated with explosives so men can mine them, and everywhere the land is fragmented in real estate and paved over, countless tons of concrete a deathly carapace over the living soil; and land unused by Man, the husbands say, is wasted—so build a new shopping center, new subdivision, fill the swamp and mow the field to make a golf course and keep it mowed, and kill the geese who try to settle there.

Jim Mason, in *An Unnatural Order: The Roots of Our Destruction of Nature* (1993), writes that domestication "broke up the old ideas of kinship and continuity with the living world. This, more than any other factor, accelerated and accentuated human alienation from nature" (p. 146). Over the centuries, this alienation culminated in the paradigm shift Carolyn Merchant (1980) has deemed "the death of nature." For the male geniuses of the Scientific Revolution, the earth and its creatures were no more than mechanical contrivances—animals were "natural automata," as the philosopher René Descartes famously declared—destitute of inner life. The devitalizing turn to mechanism sanctioned intensifying exploitation and hastened the dying away of whatever sympathies remained latent in the hearts of the husbands for "their" land, "their" animals.

Domestication has also been more straightforwardly ecocidal. The global proliferation of "livestock" has replaced forests and fields with feedlots and free-living creatures with brutalized animal machines. Around the world, indigenous subsistence agricultural practices, more often based in an ethic of cooperation rather than conquest and plunder, have been replaced by corporate-colonial monocultures for export as animal fodder, to disastrous effect for humans, animals, and the earth (Shiva, 1989, 1993). In defense of their animal property, men have hunted, trapped, and poisoned wild animals nearly to extinction. Deforestation, dwindling biodiversity, the rancid blooming of the ocean's dead zones, the disappearance of global water supplies, the upward arc of greenhouse gas emissions, the toxification of the biosphere by pesticides and herbicides, soil erosion and desertification: all can be traced back to the violence of husbandry.⁴ For this manmade civilization built on the backs of oppressed creatures, dominion has come at the cost of despoliation. But it cannot last: the earth, no self-sacrificing mommy after all, will not sustain such an aberration for long.



The exploitative abuse of nonhuman animals is a long-spun thread in the bloodstained tangle of patriarchal tyranny, militarism, enslavement, conquest, capitalist-imperialism, social stratification, white/male/human supremacy and normalized sadism that writhes into view with any clear-eyed examination of the manmade world. To the extent that we accept such abuse, in conformity with the husbands' master mentality, we can see how we ourselves have been domesticated, how thoroughly male rule has molded us. Should we not be disturbed by this? The captivity, rape, torture, and killing of billions of females, confined in absolute subjection and reduced to consumable commodified bodies-without-selves in the context of a male capitalist enterprise in a male imperialist society would seem an atrocity difficult for feminists to overlook. So how is it we keep overlooking it?

Historians of domestication write of the defense mechanisms that husbands have devised to distance themselves from the animals they harm, including rationalization, denial (of suffering, of subjectivity, of sentience), desensitization, euphemism, and compensatory cruelty (Serpell, 1986; Adams & Donovan, 1995; Patterson, 2002). But more than any of these, the trick has been detachment. For animal activist and scholar patrice jones (2005), this detachment, or estrangement, is the crux, both cause and consequence of patriarchal murderousness. She writes: "We are cut off from the earth, other animals, each other, and ourselves. These disconnections allow us to do terrible things to the earth, other animals, each other, and ourselves. Doing these terrible things increases the estrangement. And the cycle of violation and separation continues." The husbands have inoculated manmade culture with detachment, estrangement, and dissociation as prophylactics against compassion. The heart hardens, cavities forming as the stiffening tissue thins and pales. Atrophies, frays. How can we be witnesses to this and not ask ourselves if a system that depends on our unfeelingness, which renders us merciless by design, deserves to survive?

Oppressed as human females under male dominion, we sabotage and demean ourselves when we allow men to drag us through the carnage as their accomplices in the oppression of numberless others. If we as feminists discover ourselves on the side of the Husband instead of with the raped and maimed creature wrenched in the machinery of he who says he is her master, then, as feminists, we have been led astray.

In contrast to the numbness and ever-narrowing focus manmade culture prescribes, interspecies sisterhood takes seriously the shared subjugation of every creature driven by domesticating violence into captive dependency on abusive men, and advances in response a radical destabilization of the patriarchal system, through whole-hearted rejection of the husbands' creed of biological supremacy and non-participation in their daily rituals of domination. Opposition to male dominion at every level, whoever its victim may be, in defense of life and the living, incites a resensitization, restoring us to our native potential for compassionate relations with our earthly kin. To shed the self-deception and detachment into which we've been indoctrinated is not easily done; it hurts, but let it: it is essential. For releasing ourselves from patriarchal doctrine is the first revolt in the slow practice of feralization, domestication's counterprocess. To go feral is to renounce compliance, complicity, the living death of transfixed dependency on the oppressor, lurching along animated by his ruinous delusions and stale, squalid desires. The feral creature is the former captive-turned-absconder, no one's beast of burden and no one's master; she is bound to no husband. Her life is her own to live and no one else's.

Feralization is possible: in this world, maimed as it is, there are islands roamed by free-living cows, and forests where pigs dwell in the matriarchal clans natural to their kind. The husbands vilify feral animals—they say they are fugitives, rogue fracturers of the rightful order, and hunt them down, hem them in, poison them—yet the animals live on (Rowan & Timmins, 2016). Unlike the buzzier concept of “rewilding,” intrinsic to feralization is an understanding that there will be no return to true wildness at this late stage of the patriarchal political-ecological-cultural polycrisis. It is of no use to idle in daydreams of some pristine, untouched and untouchable prehistoric past. Domesticated animals do not revert to a truly wild state when they go feral—physical alterations wrought by breeding persist even after many generations—but their instincts return, and their self-reliance; they remember in their bodies who to fear and how to defend themselves, learning again what survival requires.⁵ Likewise, as women born and raised under male dominion, we cannot expect ourselves or our sisters, by dint of the decision to try leaping the fence, to be spontaneously cleansed of our histories of victimization, dependency, and strategic identification with the master class. In going feral, then, we are urged to gentleness, to be softer with one another, human and nonhuman alike, as together we grow fierce. We are none of us the creatures we once were, so many thousands of years ago, but we are not lost to ourselves, nor to each other.



postscript: years ago my friend got married to a man at an estate somewhere in the middle of the Irish countryside. i traveled there, in the name of friendship, but i was miserable because i hate weddings, i hate the chattel institution of marriage, sworn never to be anyone's wife, never to give my love up to the patriarchal state like that; and i hate, too, the bleary drizzle of party chatter, the alcohol, the dead animals on plates flanked by more forks than any eating could possibly require. among the humans gathered to celebrate the sacrament of marriage i was a stranger, but outside the estate there were cows and each morning i rose early to visit them, to sit on the wall of their enclosure and share in their quietness, watch the dewy freshborn sunlight ripple over their dark fur and breathe the warm velvet steam haloing them. one morning the cows were grazing the far hill when i slipped out, but as i climbed onto the wall they began to rush down the field, a gleaming tumble of blackness cascading towards me, as if i'd called for them. not caring that the big animals could crush me, i dropped from the wall into the pasture. inside the house the wedding party was hungover shambling dazed but i was swept extravagantly alive into the luster of a dove-colored hour ringed by cows jostling and licking at me, pressing their dense bodies against mine; we drew close so curious about each other, so eager to know one another, by the taste of our hair and the smell of our skin. where will we run to, i asked them, and imagined the quaking in the earth as we abandoned the sleeping estate—and the troubled dreaming of those shut up inside it, and the unseen husbands, wherever they were lurking—to the desolation nature wreaks in time on all senseless things.

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Notes

1

For the purposes of this essay, my focus is on the domestication of animals, rather than plants; and more specifically on animals domesticated for agricultural purposes instead of those brought into human homes as "pets." There is no question that animals like dogs and cats are dominated by humans, but to the extent that they serve as companions and not consumable commodities, they are spared the worst of the violence perpetrated against animals used for food and labor.

2

I strongly recommend Syl Ko's contributions to *Aphro-Ism: Essays on Pop Culture, Feminism, and Black Veganism from Two Sisters* (2017) for a thorough analysis of the concept of the "human" as a figment (and weapon) of the white patriarchal imagination. It is only because of this supremacist notion of

“humanity,” and the concomitant devaluation of animality, that we understand the meaning of “dehumanization.”

3

For further examples, see posts tagged “Sexy” on the brilliant Suicide Food blog (Suicidefood.blogspot.com), as well as Carol Adams’ *The Pornography of Meat* (2003).

4

See, for example, Nibert, 2013, especially Chapter 8; Ritchie, 2017; and Ritchie et al., 2022.

5

I should clarify that, for many domesticated animals imprisoned in the industrial animal complex, even the liberation of feralization is out of reach, having been systematically abused and genetically maimed into a state of severe disability. Since it is our kind that has warped them, we have an ethical imperative to support these creatures for the rest of their natural lives. Providing this essential care is the work of farmed animal sanctuaries.

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