

Susan Askew

The Museum of Human Violence

Book Three: Theory
Critical Animal Studies,
Post-humanism
Ecofeminism



In 'The Museum of Human Violence', I was lucky to have a balcony outside the window to the room where the work was installed. I made a 100 x 200m banner to advertise opening of the new gallery. nb. South London Art Gallery - entrance right below the banner - asked me to remove (I had flagged with them previously my decision to hang). I then hung it on the scaffolding outside the entrance to college and it was stolen overnight. I take this as a message that I should not have made a plastic banner! If I want a banner in future - make it as a fabric collage). Below: a corner of the work with 'Introduction to Biology' - the same book I used years ago in Biology. Second hand on ebay. The scalpel has a metal handle but the blade is made from cardboard painted silver. One of 13 ceramic frogs is just visible in the bottom left of the image. The word 'cuts' can be seen on the blackboard.

Thinking with Theory

Over the year of this project I have found the following theoretical areas helpful in clarifying the underpinning premises of my work:

1. critical animal studies
2. ecofeminism
3. posthumanism

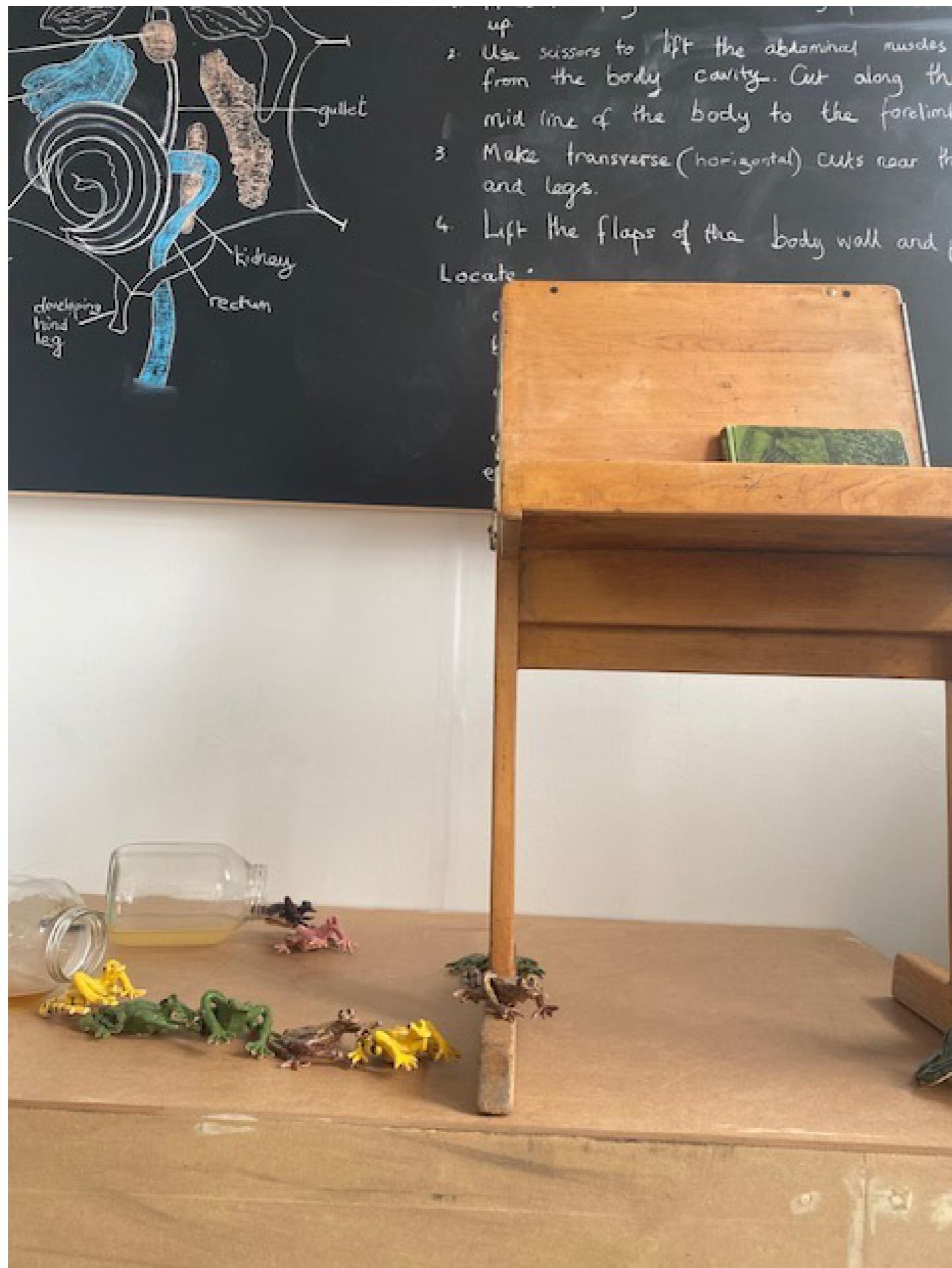
Here I summarise key ideas from all three of these areas. I want to gain more clarity on how they relate to one another: what are the similarities and differences between these positions, particularly with regard to ethics, action and intersectionality. And how might my new understanding change my focus for making work?

1. Critical Animal Studies

Best et al (2007:5) explain they have renamed the Center on Animal Liberation Affairs as 'Institute for Critical Animal Studies (ICAS)'. They write that their aim is to provide a space for the development of a critical approach to animal studies that views the relations between human and non-human animals as at a point of crisis which implicates the whole planet. They evidence this with reference to the billions of other animals slaughtered each year, the unfolding of the sixth great extinction crisis and monumental environmental ecological effects including the threat of global warming, rainforest destruction, desertification, air and water pollution and resource scarcity, to which animal agriculture is a prime contributor (p. 5).

Best describes Critical Animal Studies as follows (Best et al, 2007, Introduction: 2)

Critical animal studies has a broad and holistic understanding of hierarchical power systems (e.g., racism, sexism, classism, and speciesism) and their intricate interrelationships. CAS explores the systemic destructive effects of capitalism on all life and the earth, and views animal liberation and human liberation as inseparably interrelated projects. Most generally, Critical Animal Studies uses theory as a means to the end of illuminating and eliminating domination.

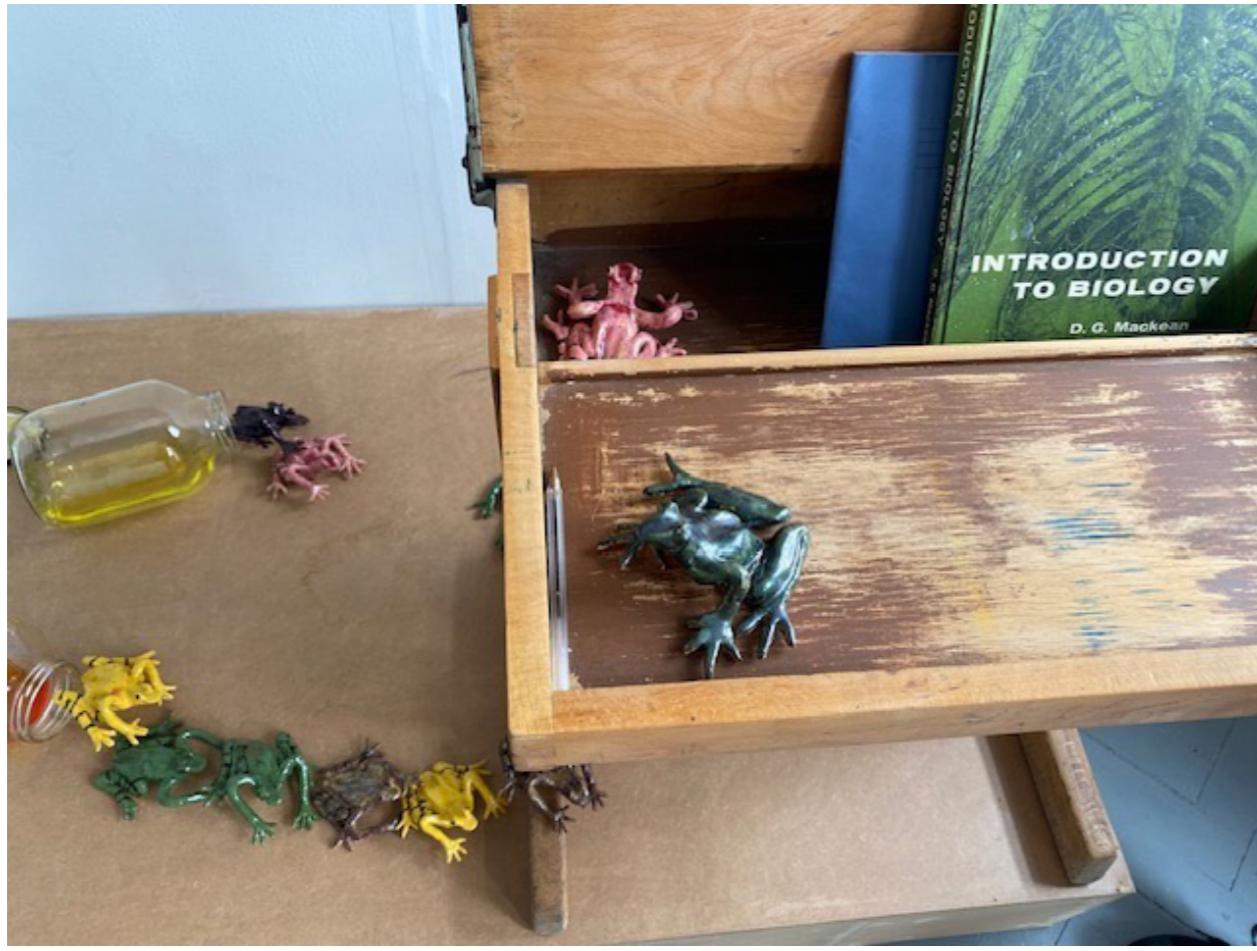


CAS theorises our abuse and relationship to other animals with regard to intersectionality and other forms of social injustice, particularly those injustices resulting from late global capitalism. While recognising that the ending of violence to other animals is most important to the other animals themselves, CAS argues animal agriculture is the primary violent system underpinning all other violent systems.

CAS is critical of much of the animal studies that can be found in university departments. They describe this as 'abstract, esoteric, jargon-laden, insular, non-normative, and apolitical discipline, one where scholars can achieve recognition while nevertheless remaining wedded to speciesist values, carnivore lifestyles, and at least tacit – sometimes overt – support of numerous forms of animal exploitation such as vivisection (Best et al. 2007: 5).

Importantly CAS is most concerned with linking theory to practice and the academy to the community. For example, CAS, supports activism for animal liberation. It advances a holistic understanding of the commonality of oppressions, such as speciesism, sexism, racism, ableism, classism and other hierarchical ideologies, all of which are viewed as parts of a larger, interlocking global system of domination. It argues for an anti-capitalist, and radically anti-hierarchical politics that dismantles all structures of exploitation, domination, oppression, torture, killing and power in favour of decentralising and democratising society at all levels on a global basis.

I was interested in the argument by Perlo (2007), for intrinsic over extrinsic reasons for promoting animal liberation. She argues that extrinsic reasons for plant based diets, for example – focus on better health or on environmental issues – lead to inconsistency, ethical ambiguity and speciesist biases.



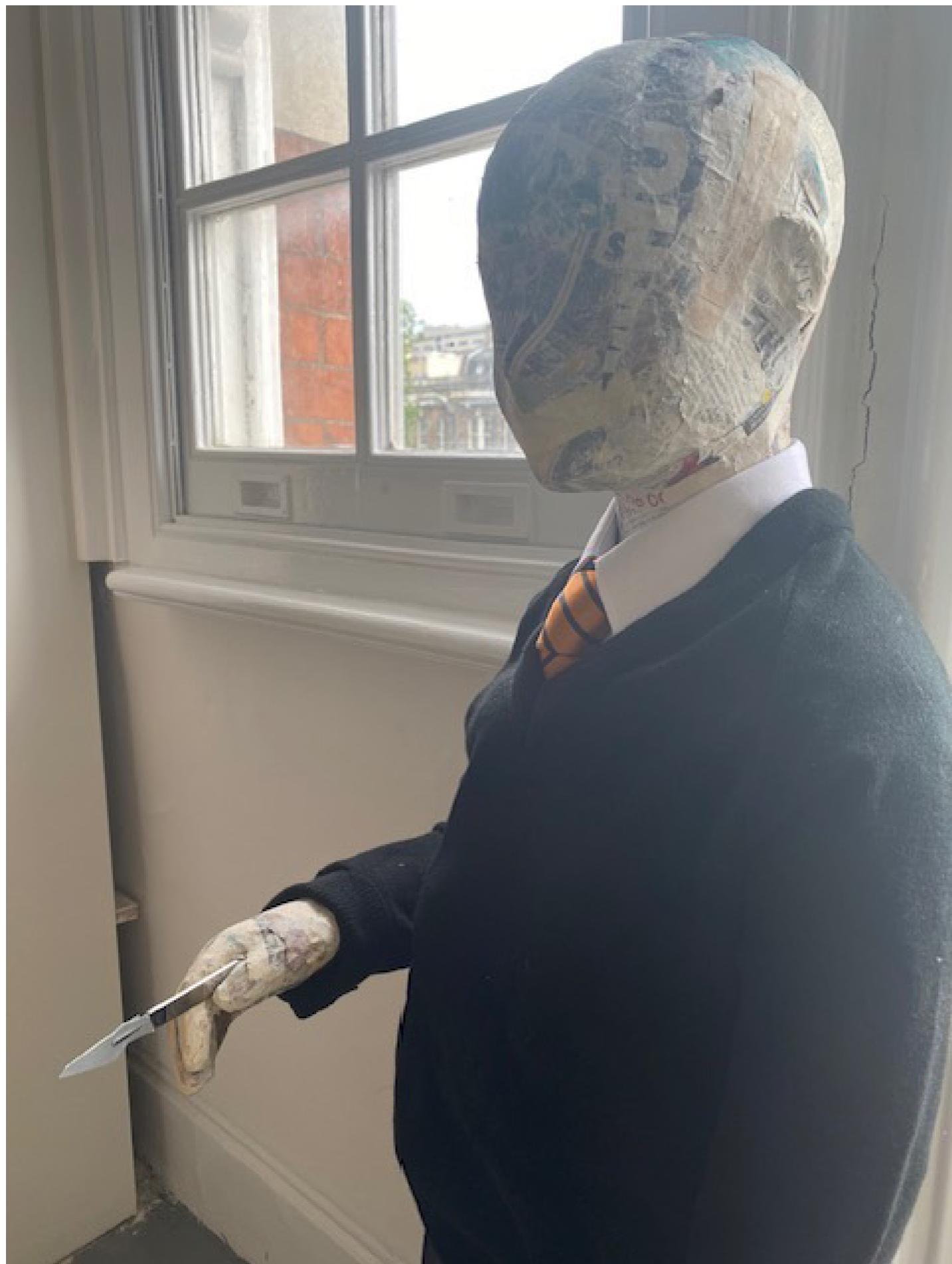
I agree with this argument, and that intrinsic reasons – animal liberation for the animals, not for human health or the environment, is in itself the first and most important reason because based on what is ‘good, just and right’: ‘health’ reasons for not eating animal flesh or excretions are very persuasive, but do not shift the notion that humans are superior to other animals (see post humanism below), nor do health or environmental arguments, shift the conversation away from an anthropocentric view that only considers what is ethical or ‘good’ in relation to whether it is good for humans. Crucially, extrinsic arguments focus on food systems.

While the food system is at the bottom of much of the violence, environmental destruction, starvation, ill-health and other issues, focus on plant based diets still shifts attention from the main problem vis a vis our relationship with other animals – whom we consider as objects for our own use and abuse and entertainment. A plant based diet alone, while essential, does not challenge all the other ways that humans exploit other animals – vivisection, zoos, entertainment, ‘work horses’ and so on.

2. Ecofeminism

Broadly, ecofeminism has been concerned with the interrelationship of environmental degradation and women’s subordination (Foster, 2021). Since its inception in the 1970s and 1980s it generally fell out of fashion with postmodern feminists who accused it of essentialism i.e. the belief that all women have a natural affinity with nature, and a proclivity for caring.

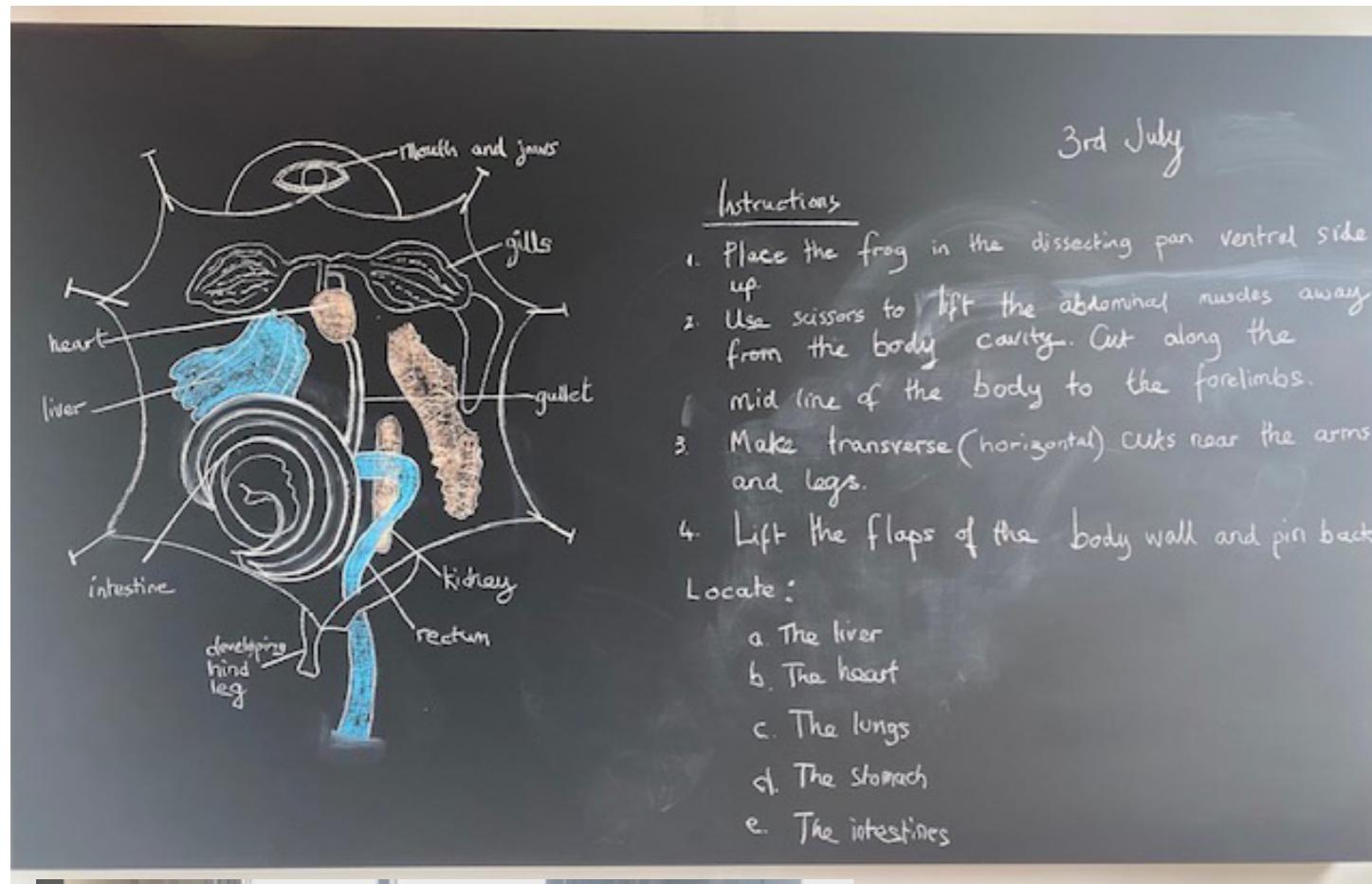
Ecofeminism takes different forms, including affinity or spiritual ecofeminism and socialist ecofeminism. Although their analysis of the problems are different, both kinds of ecofeminism recognise that the values linked to masculinity are foundational to environmental damage (while recognising ‘masculinity’ as being socially constructed). Social ecofeminists focus on economic and other inequalities and highlight that global capitalism and patriarchy are made possible through the exploitation and oppression of women and other nature.



Ecofeminism is also critical of the way that technology is used to control, degrade and destroy the environment as well as the impacts this has on women's lives and livelihoods (Shiva, 1989). Some technologies critiqued are nuclear power, weaponry and new reproductive technologies. Criticism of socialist ecofeminists included the high regard they held for mothering and nurturing, as well as their occasional use of e.g. poetry and reference to female deities, which does not stand well in academic circles! Socialist feminists were also accused of universalism - i.e. they were accused of suggesting that all women care about the planet.

Today, ecofeminism is being reappraised. Its anxieties about technology are being revisited; its use of magic, the arts and poetry as a counter to scientific and cognitive 'rational' way of thinking; and its blurring of the nature-culture binary, are being reassessed, especially in the light of the scientific and technological solutions being put forward as solutions to environmental degradation and climate change. These solutions do nothing to change our beliefs, or dominating relationship/way of being with the Earth and other animals and do not challenge the humanist and modernist assumptions that have caused the problems in the first place. (Note the words of the former governor of the Bank of England governor, Mark Carney, 'Climate change is the greatest commercial opportunity of our time.')

One of the core foci of both critique and debate today is the nature-culture binary. Ecofeminists appeared to suggest that women were closer to nature and men to culture - thus reinforcing this binary. This binary has traditionally operated in a hierarchical way with culture (rationality, cognitive, human) being perceived as 'better than' nature (non-human, corporeal, instinctual). More recently, however, ecofeminism is interpreted rather differently - not only women but humans are seen as part of nature, not separate from it. This idea of interconnectedness is in fact a central tenet of posthumanism.



..ecofeminists embraced not only women and men of different races, but all forms of life - other animals, plants and the living earth itself. The diverse strands of this retelling and reframing led to a new, more complicated experiential ethic of ecological interconnectedness (Diamond and Orenstein, 1990: xi)

Today as climate change is viewed as a scientific problem with technological and scientific solutions without transforming ideologies and economies of domination, exploitation and colonialism, intersectional ecofeminism is seen as a lens through which to tackle antifeminist 'threads companioning the scientific response to climate change: the linked rhetoric of population control, erotophobia, and ecophobia, anti-immigration sentiment, and increased militarism (Gaard, 2015)

Posthumanism

Posthumanism adds weight to the critique of how human animals have abused other animals for their own gain. Posthumanism is of course, a critique of Humanism. Humanism provided a justification and rationale for abuse of other animals, as well as ways of thinking that support the objectification and hierarchical systems that are normalised in our societies. Mellamphy (2021: 1) describes Humanism as follows:

A hallmark of humanism is that it established humanity's separate and exceptional character and, purposely or not, led to the subjection of everything else to this alleged special status. Strongly anthropocentric, humanism posits a theory of "human nature" that is used as a basis for making various normative, moral, cultural, and legal claims that elevate humans to the status of moral and political agents while relegating nonhumans to a lesser more instrumental status. Humanism grounds its ethical claims in the human capacities for reason, autonomy, impartiality, and universality, which are then used as justifications for mastery and management of nonhumans who are considered to lack these capabilities. In the intellectual histories of Western thought, the view that humans possess unique capacities that make them exceptional and/or superior to others is often found. For instance, ancient Greek virtue-ethics, medieval humanism, early modern mechanism, and even contemporary philosophy of mind are grounded in anthropocentric terms that privilege the achievement of human ends by way of human rationality at the expense of nonhuman lives. (Mellamphy. 2021: 1)



Braidotti (2022) writes that humanism placed its faith in scientific reason and technology while supporting Western projects of modernity, industrialisation, imperialism and war. Wolfe (2008) suggests that post-humanism is a critique of humanisms' inability to meet its own criteria of value pluralism, tolerance and equality for all. Posthumanism points out the fallacy of the autonomous, self-determinint, rationale human, and suggests this is an ideal, and an ideology.

Braidotti (2022) claims we are living in the time of the 'posthuman convergence' characterised by change occuring in late global capitalism including speeding up in all areas - climate change, technological advancement, and structural inequalities. For Braidotti, 'the posthuman turn is about the becoming-other-human' (p6) . She writes that other traditions have failed to tackle the specific features of contemporary cognitive, and technologically-driven capitalism, 'The opportunistic boundary-breaking nature of capitalism....the neo-colonial order of migration, innovative technologies and biopolitics of life as capital' (2022:p44).

Biocapital is one of the new forms of capitalism that reconstructs what it means to be human in the 21st century (Sunder Rajan, 2006). New biological knowledge is being rapidly commercialised as 'life' itself is commodified and living systems are de/re-constructed. We are accustomed to the lives of other animals being exploited and used for profit. In Bio-capital, the lives of humans are also for profit. As You Sow As you Reap. This major new and rapidly growing industry now has sales of over £500 billion a year (Martin, undated). It is largely focused on human health care but also involved in agriculture and environmental services. Activities include: genomic sequencing, data storage and analysis, and genome editing; synthetic biology including synthetic molecules, metabolic pathways and ultimately whole organisms; Cell and tissue engineering, The rapidly expanding and increasingly cheaper technologies have major implicatons for how life, living systems and the human are understood, including blurring the boundaries between life forms, as it reveals the shared evolutionary heritage of all living organisms. (Martin, undated)



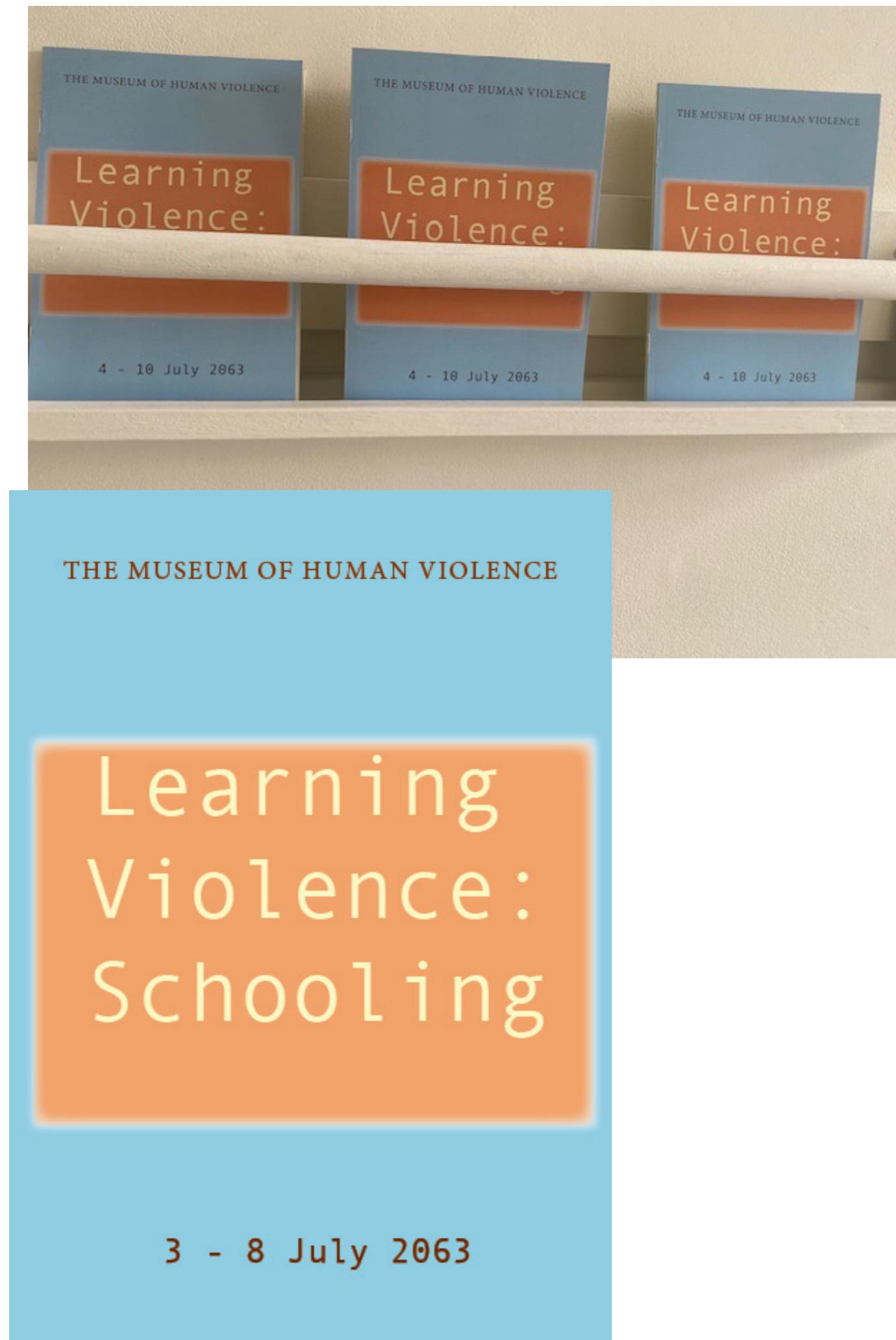
‘Posthum Studies have paid far too little detailed empirical attention to major changes in the production of new biological knowledge and its commercialization by powerful industrial actors. Instead, broad shifts in the relationship between humans and non humans are outlined from an ecological perspective and new digital platforms are attributed with redefining collective and individual identities’ (Martin, undated).

Pendersen (2011) explores some ways that Critical Animal Studies and Posthumanism are similar and different. She describes CAS as ‘activist scholarship’. Posthumanism addresses fundamental ontological and epistemological questions about how we can define ‘essential’ human nature and how humans are ‘becoming-other-human’.

Biotechnology is one such area for divergence between posthumanism and CAS (Pendersen 2011). While Martin points out that this area has been given insufficient attention in posthumanist writing, in some instances posthumanist thinking is not critical (and even supports) biotechnical assemblages. In contrast CAS points out that research and development into these technologies by agribusiness and pharmaceutical industries means increasingly sophisticated forms of hyper-exploitation, deprivation and complete physical and mental domination of other animals, for example of chickens in the poultry industry (Boyd, 2001).

Another issue of contention relates to posthumanists focus on permeability of boundary identity and subject boundary dissolution. CAS emphasises that presumably other animals, who have experiences extreme violence from humans, have no desire to co-merge with them. ‘Theorising boundary dissolution is relatively unproblematic for those who never need to experience oppression’ (Pendersen, 2011: 72).

Crist (2004) point out that posthumanists focus on boundary dissolution bears an uncomfortable resemblance to ecological colonialism. (see an example of permeability of boundary identity/biotechnical assemblage in Donna Haraway's fictional story of Camille - outlined in book 2 in the section on fictioning as a method, which in my view raises many problematic ethical and other questions).



What do I take from each of these positions for my own work?

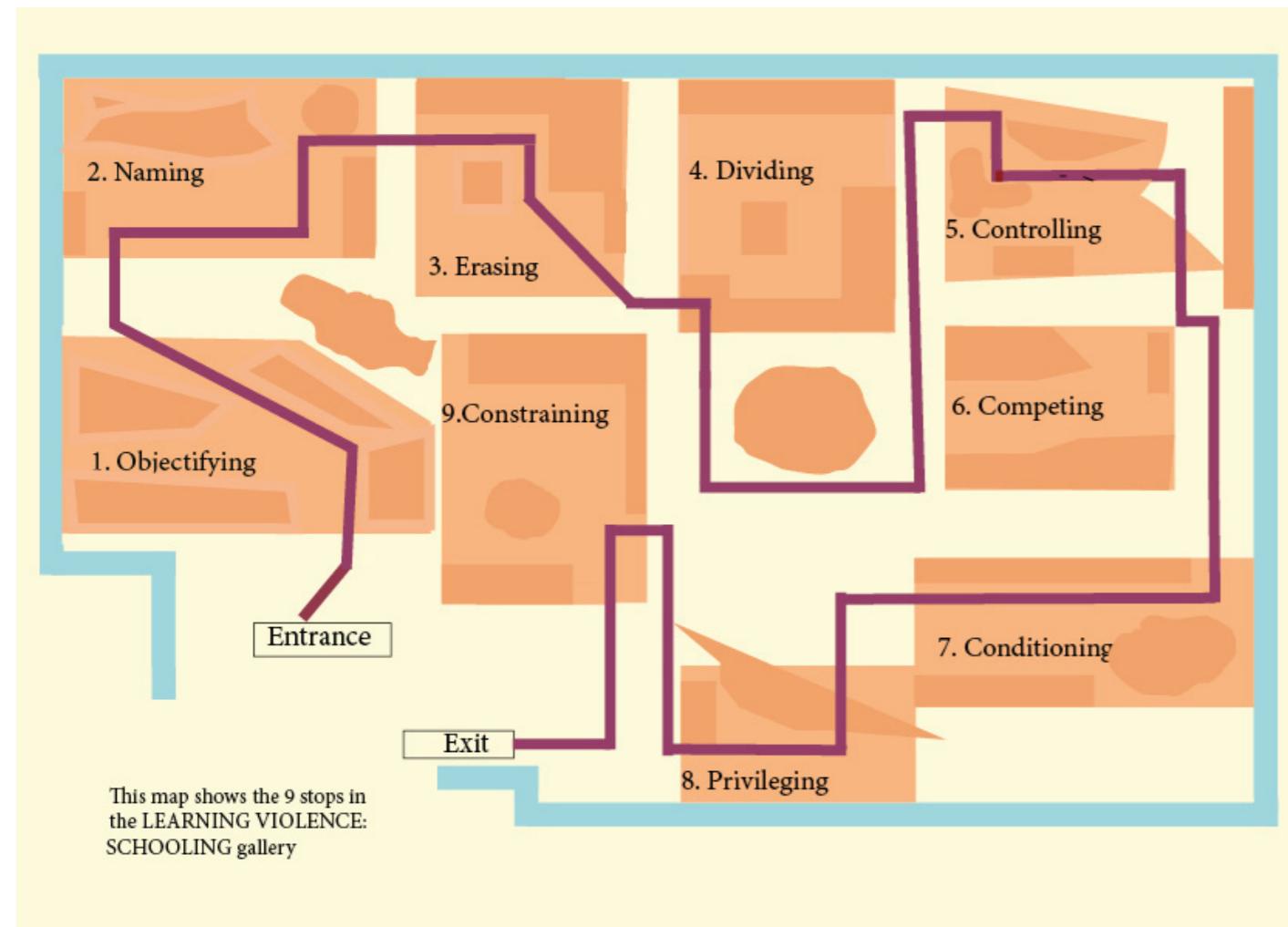
One way of perceiving how these theories relate to one another is to see critical animal studies and ecofeminism as aspects of posthumanist thinking, which is a broad collection of works focusing on decentering the human, including exploring human-non-human relations, as well as the 'becoming-other-human in the (cognitive, bio)capitalocene.

- From Critical Animal Studies I take the importance of action, and change to my own behaviour. I take the central message that if I care about non human animals I need to not eat them, wear them, use them for entertainment or testing - I need to act. I also take the understanding that the agricultural system is the fundamental violent system.
- From post humanism I take the importance of futuristic thinking for hope and change. I take vital materialist ethics of relational immanence/becoming and the idea that we are all interdependent and 'in this together'. I also take the idea of decentering the Anthropos/man, and critiquing ideas of superiority, rationality and intelligence.
- From ecofeminism I take the critique of the dualism of culture-nature, with its emphasis on the superiority of culture over nature. I also take its ethics of care, as well as critique of the scientific response to ecocrisis.
- From all of these positions I take intersectionality - the idea that non human and human injustice, and environmental damage stem from the same set of belief systems - the anthropocentric view that the human, or more specifically the white, male heterosexual human is the standard to which all other life is compared, and has dominance over the earth..

I understand that an ethics of care is problematic if it reinforces the idea that humans have power over all life. I also understand the idea that legal animal rights are problematic when they emphasise equality with the 'human', since again this means the human is the standard to which others measure up. However both an ethics of care and animal legal rights involve action, whereas vital materialsit ethics seem to let us off the hook of doing anything, other than waiting and fictioning a different future. Given both ecofeminism and post humanism disavow dualism, I see no reason why the ethics of vital materialism and the ethics of care cannot go together - while I learn to live with, and become other, I can practice care.

Map of the new Gallery within the Museum of Human Violence, opened in July 2063 : Learning Violence: Schooling. The map guides us around the nine different 'stops' within this gallery.

The installation itself focuses on 'Stop' 3: Erasing.



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