

P/A Forum

Interview

Bird's-Eye Views

An interview with Patrice Jones

Introduction: *Bird's-Eye Views* is a collection of articles, essays and columns written over the span of thirty years. The topics range widely, from queering animal liberation to direct action and life in an animal sanctuary, but there are several red threads that connect the pieces. The essays are deeply personal and emphasize the importance of taking into account the perspective of other animals when thinking and writing about them. They also challenge anthropocentric-rationalist interpretations of thinking, as well as capitalist ways of being, and explore the connections between different forms of oppression. These themes are interconnected, which makes the book more than simply a collection of essays: Jones describes a multispecies philosophical model for living and thinking differently, which can be seen as a counterweight for capitalist and neoliberal ways of existing, developed together with other animals.

The Interviews / Symposia format acts as a platform for conversations, where participants discuss the original work of an author, practitioner, policy maker, or activist. As such, these entries do not offer an outlet for original research, but instead reflect the personal views of the participants

P/A **patrice, I am very glad you found the time to answer my questions in writing, in between co-running VINE Sanctuary, your writing projects, and all the other activist and political work that you do. Could you tell us a bit about how your typical day looks?**

PJ Here at the sanctuary, every day starts at sunrise as one person handles morning chores at the part of the sanctuary we call “the valley” (several coops for chickens, ducks, and geese amid dense foliage) and another person does the same “up the hill,” which includes both “the commons” (a cluster of coops and a big barn housing more chickens, ducks, and geese along with goats, sheep, turkeys, alpacas, guinea-fowl, and emus as well as elder, juvenile, or ailing cows) and “the back pasture” (a large expanse of wooded hills within which is another ban for the hardy herd of semi-feral cows who manage their own affairs with little interference from us). Morning chores start with opening coop doors, which are closed overnight to protect the birds. The barns are open 24/7 so that the mammals can come and go as they please within the safety of our fenced property. Next comes filling all water bowls, tubs, and troughs. Next comes breakfast for everybody along with medications and supplements for anyone who needs them. Finally, for the person handling the hill chores, comes the morning cow count, which can include extensive hiking to make sure everybody is present and seems well.

I live in “the valley.” If it’s one of the mornings I am scheduled to cover morning chores, that’s what I do first. Otherwise or next comes some quiet moments of reflection and preparation for the day. Next comes creative writing — I have to do that first, before looking at any computers and while I am still not fully awake. Next comes some hours of VINE tasks. Since that includes most of our administrative and fundraising work, that might include meeting with staff, writing newsletters, bookkeeping, event planning, website maintenance, or any of another hundred-and-one mundane chores.

At some point in the early afternoon, an alarm will go off, reminding me to “stop and sketch.” I will then spend anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour away from words — drawing, painting, or art-making in some other way. If all is on schedule (which it usually is not), the rest of the afternoon is reserved for long-form work requiring concentrated attention, such as writing chapters. I write outside when possible, by an open window if not.

Next comes a wooded walk with my canine companion Trickster, unless it’s hot, in which case we walk in the early evening. Three times each week, I have dinner with VINE cofounder Miriam Jones. Otherwise, I usually go back to writing after the walk. Evening might bring a VINE virtual event or a meeting in town — I serve on our public library’s Board of Trustees as well as our town’s official “Inclusion Committee.” Otherwise, I read.

Meanwhile, other VINE staff and volunteers have been doing the hands-on work of caring for hundreds of animals and maintaining sanctuary infrastructure. That includes cleaning every barn and coop every day, keeping water troughs refreshed throughout the day, and using tractors to put out 500lb bales of hay and haul loads of manure to the compost piles. Weekly, monthly, and seasonal chores such as repairing fences, painting buildings, and maintaining vehicles have to be squeezed in between those daily chores. Sunset brings evening chores, for which I am sometimes scheduled.

So, everybody is too busy all the time. And, of course, most of this happens outdoors in all weather, which can be taxing, especially in the winter. But, we all have the deep satisfaction that comes from meaningful work as well as the deep joy that comes from abiding relationships within the larger-than-human world. Only today, I saw two wild turkey hens with a clutch of recently-hatched chicks walking in a line between them. Moments later, I noticed that a goat who moved in only a few days ago, after years of lonely life apart from any other animals, is already fully integrated into a roving band of rambunctious goats and sheep.

P/A My second question concerns taking the animal perspective. In one of my favorite essays, *Angry Emus*, you write about the personal histories of the emus who came to live in VINE Sanctuary, and the history of their species. You constantly invite the reader to see human acts from the perspective of emus. The essay left me with a feeling of deep sadness, for the emus that suffered, but also awe for their ways of life, having been on this planet much longer than humans. In many of the other essays you also describe the lives of animals that played a part in your life, and use their experiences as a starting point for reflection. Why do you find it important to emphasize their perspectives in this way?

PJ I'm so glad to know that you liked that essay and felt as you did after reading it. It was initially a talk at an in-person conference, during which I was more adequately able — due to the additional communicative channels of voice, movement, gesture, eye contact, facial expressions, and shared energy — to express what I was trying to convey. I really struggled with condensing it down to only words. I'm so glad to know, at least for you, that the feeling came through the sentences.

But, to your question, there are several reasons why I strive so hard to imagine and express animal viewpoints and encourage others to do the same. Let me list them in the order they occurred to me:

First, within months of co-founding what was then the Eastern Shore Chicken Sanctuary and is now VINE Sanctuary, I found myself compelled to write about the birds who had flocked to our refuge. It wasn't just that I felt obliged to honor birds who died by making sure that other people knew their stories, although that was a deeply felt impulse. I sensed that, by being in relation to these birds, I had become privy to information not available to most humans. I felt a responsibility to share that information, even though my own grasp of it was tenuous.

Next, as I became more deeply involved in the animal advocacy movement, I noticed that all of the human foibles I had encountered in social justice movements were present, but worse. Why worse? Because the subjects of this liberation movement were not present to speak for themselves, leaving their self-appointed advocates free to indulge in virtue signaling, wars about words, and other frivolities without any push-back. That deepened my determination too.

Years passed, during which I became increasingly aware of human error in general and my own limitations in particular. At the same time, the wealth of perspectives of other animals became ever more apparent to me. That led me to understand something that I discuss in the opening chapter of this book, "Property, Profit, and (Re)Pro-

duction: A Bird's-Eye View" — the necessity of expanding the important feminist concept of standpoint to include the standpoints of other animals. In brief, standpoint theory reminds us that all viewpoints are limited by circumstance and suggests that marginal viewpoints may be especially important to consult when trying to solve difficult social problems. I came to understand that nonhuman standpoints may help us to better understand not only the dynamics of animal exploitation but also persistent social problems among humans.

Finally, perspective-taking is an essential element of both empathy and strategic thinking. So, of course, I want everybody to become better able to imagine the perspectives of others, including nonhuman others!

P/A This question is related to this. In which ways has living with nonhuman animals and caring for them shaped your own perspective on life, and specifically your philosophical outlook?

PJ Oh, now you are coming to something I almost tried to say in reply to the previous question and which I have struggled to articulate for some time.

Even before the sanctuary, some experiences with animals and other elements of the larger-than-human world had begun to wobble my felt experience of humanness. Living among and working alongside other animals in a sanctuary setting escalated and deepened that process.

It's not that I experience myself as some other species. It's more an awareness of being a particular kind of organism among other kinds of organisms alongside a simultaneous awareness that the kind of organism I am is not the same as the "human being" I was socialized to experience myself as. So, *homo sapiens*, but not "human."

Let me give an example. Once, in the barn, among a variety of human and nonhuman animals, I felt angry at another human who reacted less than optimally to a goat who had scared her. Then, from somewhere — maybe the cows? — came the thought, "oh, that's just an ape who is so flooded with feeling that she doesn't know what to do." As soon as I quit expecting her to be the vaunted "Human" of myth and acknowledged her as fellow fumbling primate, it was much easier to forgive her misstep and figure out how to make sure it never happened again.

Many times since, I have experienced this slippage of "human" identity in ways that have helped me to see myself and other people without looking through the stereotype-colored spectacles of speciesism. How does this feel? Mostly fabulous, as it dissolves that barrier between us and the larger-than-human world in a way that brings me into felt communion with lichens and wild turkeys and beech trees. It can be a little bit terrifying, but also thrilling.

But, alas, it is fleeting. Such is the strength of years of accumulated socialization into "human" identity, which is not so easy to shuck off as declaring yourself an opponent of human supremacy. This reminds me of what Simone De Beauvoir wrote, in her *Ethics of Ambiguity*, about the ways that layer upon layer of situational circumstances can constrain choice.

As for my philosophy, I guess you could call me an ecofeminist existentialist. I see problems as situations, by which I mean complex confluences of social and material

circumstances that cannot be solved without accurate analyses. While I share the concerns of other animal advocates concerning how speciesism leads humans to

think about and behave toward other animals, I am most closely focused on how speciesism confuses us about ourselves. Without a more accurate understanding of the primates who are the cause of most of the problems, we cannot hope to solve them.

P/A In the essay *Birds beyond Words* you further elaborate on your ideas about thinking in relation to what you call the ‘Plumwood Problem’. Ecofeminist thinker Val Plumwood called for rethinking rationalism and similar modes of thinking that underlie anthropocentric, androcentric, Eurocentric and similar modes of oppression. You point out that using thinking to think otherwise is difficult and perhaps impossible. What alternatives do you see? And how do animal forms of wisdom relate to this?

PJ Human beings are extraordinarily plastic, in the sense of flexible, organisms. While we do come into the world hard-wired with certain tendencies, many of our ways of being-in-the-world are molded by circumstance, with social factors such as parental attitudes and early childhood education—not to mention language itself—playing particularly strong roles in shaping how we experience and conceptualize ourselves, each other, and the larger-than-human world. These factors encourage us to develop some of our capabilities, such as verbal expression and rational thought, but also may discourage us from tapping into other ways of thinking and feeling.

So, while I do believe it to be highly unlikely that we can think our way out of rationalism, I know—because I have done it myself—that we can use our conscious, rational minds to identify this as a problem and then set about circumventing it by mindfully developing ways of perceiving, thinking, feeling, and expressing that may have been atrophied by our upbringings.

We don’t have to start from zero! As I elaborate in that essay, there is a rich body of work by artists and writers, particularly but not exclusively from the Caribbean, who long-ago identified the dangers of rationalism and devised ways of working around it. They can inspire and guide us as we figure out how to become the animals that other animals need us to be.

P/A In your writing style you also challenge overly rationalist modes of thinking and center embodied ways of being, by taking a first-person perspective and describing not only what you think but also what you feel. How would you describe your method, and (how) is it part of challenging oppression?

PJ I write using my own version of eco-composition. Eco-composition recognizes that no writer writes alone. Each is writing *to* or *for* some imagined readers. All of the ideas to be conveyed came to the writer from within relationships with other humans and other animals within the larger-than-human world. All writing takes place at some *place*, and this also may influence the words.

It feels dishonest to me to pretend otherwise. Similarly, I know that I am not a thinking machine, and so I will not pretend dispassion. My readers are organisms like me, and so what I want to do, insofar as possible, is share the pathway through thoughts and feelings that led me to whatever I am trying to say. If these gestures toward honest and effective communication have the knock-on effect of encouraging readers to be more whole-bodied in their own thinking and writing, all the better!

P/A **One could also position your writings in a tradition of anarchist thinking, both in content and method. In the essay *Free as a Bird* you describe a form of anarchism that is rooted in the more-than-human world, which you call ‘natural anarchism’. What is natural anarchism and why do we need it?**

PJ That is probably the most important essay in the book for readers of *Politics & Animals*. Going back to Kropotkin’s 1902 *Mutual Aid*, numerous anarchist theorists have incorporated lessons from the larger-than-human world into their thinking, but modern-day philosophers, political scientists, and activists interested in multispecies democracy seem almost entirely unaware of this vital stream of thought about how humans might better address the problems in collective living that governments try and fail to solve.

As I explain in the introduction to that essay, my own thinking is deeply rooted in anarchist theory and praxis. This essay began as a talk for an anarchist book fair in 2007 and has been workshoped at several anarchist events since. An earlier version was published in *Contemporary Anarchist Studies* (Routledge, 2009). The version of the essay that appears in this volume is substantially revised and expanded to reflect not only the evolution of my thinking but also my awareness of what animal advocates might need to know about anarchism.

In short, just as there are numerous feminisms, there are numerous anarchisms. All share a fundamental understanding that governments as they are currently constituted are inherently violent, creating more problems than they solve. Differences arise with the questions of how to disestablish the state and what to organize in its place.

My theory of Natural Anarchism draws upon the insights of Social Anarchism, which suggests that states can be made irrelevant by the establishment of wider and wider circles of mutual aid, but is much less human-centric and much more realistic about human frailties. I won’t say more, because I want your readers to read the essay itself. I look forward to their reactions, which I hope will be so provocative as to prompt yet another revision!

P/A **Another red thread in the essays is seeing the world through a queer lens. Not just in terms of looking at questions of sexuality, gender and related issues, but also queering our thinking, relations with nonhuman fellow beings – who have their own queer practices –, and activism. Could you elaborate a bit on this concept-practice, ‘queer’, and how it can inform practices and inspire social and political change?**

PJ I do use “queer” in the queerest possible sense. Of course, I want animal advocacy to become more queer-friendly in the more narrow sense. I know that animal activism has much to learn, both tactically and strategically, from both AIDS activism and the remarkably successful struggles for LGBTQ+ rights world wide. But I am trying to do something even more queer, which is to help humans collectively resituate ourselves within a larger-than-human world that confounds all of our categories.

Queer Theory is another intellectual stream of thought with which animal studies scholars would do well to acquaint themselves, although watch out for the usual academic tendency to become so enamored of clever language games that the real-world liberatory possibilities are obscured by the multisyllabic mumbblings. Early in the days of that scholarly trend, I was once politely encouraged to leave a reading group

because of my annoying tendency to arrive with simple one-sentence translations of high-flown paragraphs that weren't saying much at all that would be useful to activists on the street.

Oh! So I guess that obliges me to be simple and clear here. OK: Queer Theory questions binaries, categories, and the very idea of "normal." When I use "queer" as a verb, I mean to approach a problem from a radically different perspective. Since most

humans—including many animal advocates!—are unused to consulting animal points of view, virtually all of my recent work is queer, whether or not that word appears. Similarly, all of my efforts to wobble human supremacy are ways of queering the category of "human."

P/A In the introduction of the book you situate your essays explicitly in a time of climate change and ecological despair. For me these essays are hopeful, because they offer another mode of living, beyond the capitalist-neoliberal narrative, and also because the animals in your stories show resilience. Many of them are capable of embracing change after a life of suffering and starting anew. At the same time, you witness much of their suffering; grief is an important part of the life of those who care for other animals. Do you see caring for animals as a counter practice in the face of the large-scale violence that all of us experience? How are the micro- and macrolevel of politics related for you? How do you stay hopeful enough to keep going, and what advice do you have for the activists and academics working towards change for animals?

PJ As I explain in the essay "Beyond Despair," the most important thing I ever learned from birds is that hope is an action, not a feeling. I first learned that from egg factory survivors, and then the lesson was deepened when I met emus, as described in the essay "Derangement and Resistance." Do I *feel* hope? No, not at all. But that doesn't matter. I can still create hope by my actions. Did emus *feel* hope when dodging the bullets of Australian settlers, and thereby surviving their second brush with extinction? Probably not. But they made their paths by walking, and we can too. We will do so more ably if we can learn from them and from other animals whose histories stretch back further than that of our own species.

I do see care as an essential counter-practice as well as a form of direct action. Care work also can sustain morale. Will our efforts to fundamentally reshape human societies have their intended effects? We can't know! But rescuing one rooster means the whole world to that bird, and that is not nothing.

Of course, care also exposes you to grief. After more than 20 years of sanctuary work, I cannot count the number of birds who have died in my arms, the number of euthanasias I have attended, nor the number of times I have turned a corner to encounter a dead friend. Here are a few our tips for coping with grief: (1) Feel and express rather than deny and repress your feelings; (2) Deliberately draw closer to those who remain; (3) Turn to the larger-than-human world, which has been cradling you since before you were born, for solace; and (4) Respect your own animal rights — make sure your body gets all of the food, water, and rest it needs, so that it will be able to bear up to the emotional load.

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- P/A **And a final question, for those who want to read more from you: can you tell us something about new projects that you are working on, what can be expect?**
- PJ I've just finished a surrealist novella, for which I am currently seeking a publisher. I'm working on a book-length exposition of the ideas summarized in my recent contribution to the *Routledge Companion to Gender and Animals* entitled "Queering Animal Liberation: 20 Thoughts Toward Interspecies Solidarity." I'm also working on a book-length comic entitled *Who Is You?* that is intended to wobble human supremacy for a wider readership. The problem, as always, is time. Unfortunately, VINE Sanctuary still struggles for funding, and so that means that I spend too much time fundraising and doing administrative tasks that we can't afford to pay someone else to do. If anybody knows any rich people who can give the sanctuary money so that I can write, send them our way!
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About Patrice Jones

Patrice Jones is a co-founder of VINE Sanctuary, an LGBTQ-led refuge for farmed animals. A former tenant organizer and anti-racist educator, Jones has accumulated more than 40 years of activist experience in peace and justice movements. An internationally recognized ecofeminist theorist, Jones has taught college and university courses on the theory and praxis of social change activism as well as on linkages among different forms of injustice. Trained as a clinical psychologist, Jones brings heart, mind, rigor, and candor to the challenging questions facing 21st century social movements.