theories and methodologies

Unruly Rhetorics: Disability, Animality, and New Kinship Compositions

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"I WAS SURE IT WOULD MAKE A GREAT STORY, FIRST FOR TELLING AND THEN FOR WRITING DOWN," WRITES HARRIET MCBRYDE JOHNSON, explaining why she accepts an invitation from Peter Singer to a debate at Princeton University (2003).[1] Initially, Johnson, a disability-rights activist and lawyer who has a neuromuscular disease, is unsure how to interact with Singer, whose philosophy of preferential utilitarianism argues that it is ethical to kill babies born with severe disabilities. Johnson first encounters Singer at an event at the College of Charleston, and she looks to the rules of decorum to help her decide how to handle the situation. When she sees Singer talking to friends, she considers leaving before even being introduced to him. "Hereabouts," however, "the rule is that if you're not prepared to shoot on sight, you have to be prepared to shake hands. I give Singer the three fingers on my right hand that still work. 'Good afternoon, Mr. Singer. I'm here for Not Dead Yet.' I want to think he flinches just a little" (204 [2005]).

Johnson wants Singer to flinch. Simply by introducing herself to him she mounts a powerful argument against the assumptions undergirding his views on utilitarianism and selective infanticide. According to Johnson, Singer believes that "disability makes a person 'worse off'" (207 [2005]), a belief Johnson challenges at their meeting in Charleston, where she maintains that "the presence or absence of a disability doesn't predict quality of life" (205). She sees her own well-lived life as evidence for this argument, explaining in the face of skepticism that she enjoys her life, "that it's a great sensual pleasure to zoom by power chair" around town, even though all this explaining gets "tedious" (2003).

Johnson also powerfully resists a long tradition in which disabled people have been excluded from rhetoric and public speaking. As Brenda Jo Brueggemann and James Fredal note, "Throughout its 2500 year history, rhetoric has never been particularly friendly to the disabled, the deformed, the deaf or mute, the less-than-perfect in voice, expression or stance." Rhetoric demands a well-functioning

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body and mind, and "anyone who hoped to control the will of an audience had first to control their own voice and body" (251). When Johnson counters Singer's views on selective infanticide and physician-assisted suicide in two university debates and discussions, she not only protests his views but also resists the long-held assumption that disabled people cannot and should not be rhetors. As Jay Dolmage shows in *Disability Rhetoric*, there is a tradition of valuing the efforts of disabled rhetors that disabled people like Johnson can tap into.

Johnson likes to think that she makes Singer flinch, but she also flinches at crucial moments during her interactions with him. The "great story" that she initially expects from her visit does not materialize, and instead an unruly narrative emerges. Despite having been told multiple times in conversation, in e-mail messages, and even in a few speeches, the story "just won't settle down. After all these tellings, it still lacks a coherent structure; I'm miles away from a rational argument. I keep getting interrupted by questions" (2003). One particularly difficult question that interrupts Johnson is this: how can Singer, the author of *Animal Liberation*, "put so much value on animal life and so little value on human life" (203 [2005])? This question is an echo of a question a student poses to Johnson at Princeton, asking her if she eats meat, to which she responds, "I haven't made any study of animal rights, so anything I could say on the subject wouldn't be worth everyone's time" (215). The question of animal rights is one that Johnson avoids, saying at first that it doesn't even make sense, but after having read some of Singer's writing on the issue, she is less sure. Yet she still resists—"I don't want to go there, or at least not for long. It's only a place to visit" (203).

Johnson struggles with her story for good reason—she is grappling with some of the most intractable questions involving the limits of personhood and subjectivity. As the posthumanist theorist Cary Wolfe writes, "Of the various contemporary fields of interdisciplinary cultural studies that emerged over the past decade, two of the most philosophically ambitious and ethically challenging are animal studies and disability studies" (127). Wolfe notes that who or what "comes after" the subject—when that subject is modeled on liberal humanism, with its focus on rationality, autonomy, and agency as the hallmarks of subjectivity—is a question that disability studies and animal studies can help answer. Rhetorical studies of disability can also help, and, as I show, they already address key issues and complicate concerns at the intersection of disability studies, animal studies, and language use. This intersection yields new perspectives that challenge predictable assumptions. Extensions of rhetorical studies of disability can create opportunities for valuing kinship connections among human rhetors and nonhuman animals without dehumanizing disabled people or assuming an implicitly negative connection between animality and disability.

Disabled people are all too familiar with the rhetorical moves necessary to counter negative assumptions about disability. Over the past several decades, people with disabilities have argued for civil rights, made inroads into public spheres from which they had been excluded, and begun recovering and rewriting a history for themselves. When Johnson debates Singer at the College of Charleston and at Princeton University, she is part of this larger effort, positioning herself as a nontraditionally "able" and effective rhetor, building a credible *ēthos*, deploying a logical argument, and connecting emotionally to her audience. At Princeton, she relates,

> I've decided to pound them with heart, hammer them with narrative. . . . I play with the emotional tone, giving them little peaks and valleys, modulating three times in one 45-second patch. I talk about justice. Even beauty and love. . . . Of course, I give them some argument, too. . . . And woven throughout the talk is the

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> presentation of myself as a representative of a minority group that has been rendered invisible by prejudice and oppression. (2003)

At first Johnson feels triumphant. Her arguments and overall rhetorical expertise reflect the efforts and accomplishments of the first wave of the disability-rights movement and the rise of disability studies. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson relates, this first wave "reflected the self-consciously political turn in criticism toward exposing the violence of representation, uncovering oppression and discrimination, appraising resistance and subversion, and hailing antinormativity" (916). In rhetorical studies of disability, this effort has often extended to include a focus on exposing normative foundations and revising rhetoric for disabled rhetors. In *Lend Me Your Ear*, for example, Brueggemann revises for deaf rhetors the ancient rhetorical construct of the "good man speaking well." James C. Wilson and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson, in "Disability, Rhetoric, and the Body," explore how "disability has had a political definition—of exclusion—for well over two thousand years" that is "tied to the dominant views of language and the body" (2). For most of rhetorical history, the dominant view has been that strong and able bodies are most qualified for rhetorical success. Johnson, who writes, "I'm twenty-eight inches wide. . . . I have trouble controlling my wheelchair if my hand gets cold. . . . I can swallow purees, soft bread, and grapes. I use a bedpan, not a toilet" (209–10 [2005]), is a stark contrast to the ideal rhetor, who, according to Cicero, possesses "the ready tongue, the ringing tones, strong lungs, vigour, suitable build and shape of the face and body as a whole" (81; bk. 1, ch. 25, secs. 114–15). Johnson, in body and argument, resists the assumption that able bodies make the best rhetors.

Johnson's desire to forestall the question of the animal is understandable. People with disabilities have frequently had their humanity questioned through comparisons to animals. As Lennard Davis writes, exploring the concept of normalcy in relation to disability, "To have a disability is to be an animal, to be part of the Other" (40). This association informs Johnson's response to animal rights: "As a disability pariah, I must struggle for a place, for kinship, for community, for connection. Because I am still seeking acceptance of my humanity, Singer's call to get past species seems a luxury way beyond my reach" (2003). Johnson does not identify herself as intellectually disabled, but for people who are intellectually disabled the call to "get past species" can be even more threatening. People with intellectual disabilities, as well as people with mental disabilities, are particularly prone to being cast from the status of human if their disabilities trouble traditional notions of autonomy, agency, and rationality or if their disabilities affect how they use language. In fact, throughout the rhetorical tradition, questioning people's language use has been a way to question their abilities and, by extension, their humanity.

The ancient Greek rhetorician Isocrates, who studied with Gorgias, exemplifies this chain of reasoning, while also embodying its contradictions. Although Isocrates is one of the ten Attic orators, Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg note that "tradition has it that he was a poor speaker—supposedly, his voice was weak and he suffered from stage fright" (67). As Kathleen Welch has suggested, Isocrates, perhaps realizing the potential of the developing technology of written literacy, might have circulated the rumors of his challenges as a speaker to allow him the time and energy necessary for crafting written texts privately. If so, then disability was more an opportunity than an obstacle for Isocrates, perhaps providing him with a cover story to validate his chosen work. His teachings, however, treat disability more traditionally, as a limit, and devalue it through a relation to animality.

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Isocrates defines and validates the art of discourse by identifying it as the most advantageous human trait—we should not "show ourselves intolerant toward that power which, of all the faculties which belong to the nature of man, is the source of most of our blessings" (327; sec. 253). He continues, adding measures of ability into his reasoning,

> For in the other powers which we possess, as I have already said on a former occasion, we are in no respect superior to other living creatures; nay, we are inferior to many in swiftness and in strength and in other resources; but, because there has been implanted in us the power to persuade each other and to make clear to each other whatever we desire, not only have we escaped the life of wild beasts, but we have come together and founded cities and made laws and invented arts; and, generally speaking, there is no institution devised by man which the power of speech has not helped us to establish. (327; secs. 253–55)

Isocrates concedes that many animals are physically superior to human beings, but he identifies the power of language as the true measure of ability. According to this logic, rhetoric, in addition to distinguishing human from nonhuman animals, clearly indicates who among its users is the most able. Reinforcing this equation, Isocrates explicitly adds disability into his logic regarding the attributes of rhetoric: "Through this we educate the ignorant and appraise the wise; for the power to speak well is taken as the surest index of a sound understanding, and discourse which is true and lawful and just is the outward image of a good and faithful soul" (327; secs. 255–56). In short, being an able rhetor is the "surest index" not only of sound understanding but also of humanity. Being "ignorant" or exhibiting poor performance in the arts of discourse—being a disabled rhetor—puts one's status as human into question. Although Johnson demonstrates rhetorical expertise, her reluctance to "get past species" can be seen as an indication that the implicitly negative associations between disability and animality persist.

In rhetorical studies of disability, theorists have discussed the relation between rhetoric and disability, often in an ongoing effort to revise rhetoric and its exclusions for disabled rhetors. Recent attention, building on explorations of physical, sensory, and visible disability, has been paid particularly to mental, cognitive, and psychological disability. Catherine Prendergast, examining the "rhetoricability" of people with schizophrenia (56), wonders how the speech and writing of people with mental illness can be understood as more than a "rhetorical black hole" and asks, "How or maybe when does one honor schizophrenics as rhetorically enabled subjects" (54)? Margaret Price asserts that revisions of rhetoric have yet to fully account for the needs of rhetors with mental disability: "Despite many attempts to refigure rhetoric through multiracial, feminist, poststructural, sophistic, and other theories, the underlying presumption of reason-as-normality has remained largely unchanged" (32). Also unchanged is the related presumption that reason and rationality are preconditions of one's humanity.

Theorists working at the intersection of rhetorical and disability studies have proposed alternative models to better include the wide range of rhetorical efforts by people with disabilities. These models do not all explicitly attend to nonhuman animals, but they are often flexible in addressing the needs of a variety of bodies, including human and nonhuman bodies that compose in collaboration. Lewiecki-Wilson argues that "we need an expanded understanding of rhetoricity as a potential, and a broadened concept of rhetoric to include collaborative and mediated rhetorics that work with the performative rhetoric of bodies that 'speak' with/out language" ("Rethinking" 157). Using the ancient rhetorical practice of *mētis*, or cunning

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intelligence, and the rhetorical body of Hephaestus, the god associated with *mētis*, Dolmage has modeled a way of understanding how "bodily difference and cunning thought can be reclaimed as a means of challenging physical and intellectual norms" ("Breathe" 125). As I have explored elsewhere, *mētis* is a rhetorical practice that also often involves the partnership of human and nonhuman animal bodies and minds, working together. The *mētis* of the fox and the octopus, for example, serves as a model for people to follow in cultivating approaches to the rhetorical appeals of *ēthos* and *logos* in ancient Greek culture. This model can resist legacies of ancient rhetoric that assume an implicitly negative association between disability and animality.

In ancient Greek culture, the rhetorical skills of the sophist were often compared to those of the fox and the octopus. The sophist was thought to combine the *mētis* of the octopus, as a "master at bending and interweaving *logoi* [in] a thousand ways of twisting and turning," with the *mētis* of the fox, as a rhetor who knows "how to turn an argument against the adversary who used it in the first place" (Detienne and Vernant 41–42). Johnson implicitly draws on models of the fox's and octopus's *mētis* when she attempts to puzzle out her responses to Singer. She channels the fox when she shares a vegetarian meal with Singer and other academics over a discussion of assisted suicide at Princeton. She relates how, during the dinner,

> my right elbow slips out from under me. This is awkward. Normally I get whoever is on my right to do this sort of thing. Why not now? I gesture to Singer. He leans over, and I whisper, 'Grab this wrist and pull forward one inch, without lifting.' He follows my instructions to the letter. He sees now I can again reach my food with my fork. And he may now understand what I was saying a minute ago, that most of the assistance disabled people need does not demand medical training. (2003)

With an embodied rhetorical argument, Johnson turns Singer's claim that disabled people are worse off against him by enlisting his aid in a simple action. She enacts a rhetorical touch in this instance—using her body in relation to Singer's to make him understand disability differently.

In another embodied rhetorical argument, Johnson channels the octopus to probe her conflicted feelings about Singer's call to get past species. When working with her personal-assistance aide, Carmen, to dress for the debate with Singer, Johnson asks Carmen why she is fussing with a part of her clothing. Carmen responds, "I thought I could hide this furry thing you sit on." Johnson directs, "Leave it. . . . Singer knows a lot of people eat meat. Now he'll know some crips sit on sheepskin" (213 [2005]). Johnson, who writes that "at 15, I threw away the back brace and let my spine reshape itself to a deep twisty S-curve," proudly declares that "since my backbone found its own natural shape, I've been entirely comfortable in my skin" (2003). She describes keeping herself propped up by resting her rib cage on her lap and placing her elbows beside her knees; her sheepskin cushion is likely crucial to this stance. By not censoring for Singer how she moves through the world, Johnson bends and interweaves the bodily and rhetorical messages that express her discomfort with Singer's high esteem for animals and lower esteem for disabled people.

These two powerful embodied rhetorical arguments respond to Singer's arguments, but they are not the extent of Johnson's response to Singer. Johnson's observation that her story about her visit won't "settle down" becomes productive for her as she closes her reflection. She writes, "As a shield from the terrible purity of Singer's vision, I'll look to the corruption that comes from interconnectedness" and "the muck and mess and undeniable reality of disabled lives well lived. That's the best I can do right now" (228 [2005]). As Lewiecki-Wilson points out, this muck and

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mess that Johnson invokes "could stand as figures for the origin and evolution of life, calling forth scenes of a primordial ooze and the twisting branches and shoots of relationship trees, some leading nowhere, some to present day animal-human evolutionary charts" ("Ableist Rhetorics" 75). The fruit of this interconnectedness is not something that Johnson can give up, even with Singer. Ultimately, Johnson finds hope in the fact that she cannot dehumanize Singer, even as he dehumanizes disabled people. Despite many urgings from others, including friends and comrades, she cannot make him a monster:

> If I define Singer's kind of disability prejudice as an ultimate evil, and him as a monster, then I must so define all who believe disabled lives are inherently worse off or that a life without a certain kind of consciousness lacks value. That definition would make monsters of many of the people with whom I move on the sidewalks, do business, break bread, swap stories and share the grunt work of local politics. (2003)

So, while Johnson holds that Singer's call to get past species is a luxury beyond her reach, she also maintains that she can't make a monster out of Singer or determine that a "life without a certain kind of consciousness lacks value." Significantly, she does not distinguish between human or animal life in this assertion. Ultimately, she holds the discomfort she feels with revaluing animals in tension with the potential that revaluation may lead to. Furthermore, by highlighting this tension and amplifying the unruliness of her argument rather than smoothing it over and editing it out, Johnson models a way of thinking beyond binaries and either-or positions and invites her readers to go places that she cannot. In this way, she practices a form of what Robert McRuer has termed "decomposition"—resisting "the simplistic formulation of that which is proper, orderly, and harmonious" and working with the richness of writing as a "disorderly" and "unruly" practice (48). Johnson tells a great story, despite her doubts, because she works with its unruliness. As Donna Haraway explains in *The Companion Species Manifesto*, "Stories are much bigger than ideologies. In that is our hope" (17). Johnson's unruly story and her evidence of a life well lived are her best defenses against Singer—in them is her hope that everyone who has a stake in this continuing story will "be engaged in the tribal fury that rages when opposing perspectives are let loose" (228 [2005]).

By writing unruliness into her reflection on her interactions with Singer, Johnson practices what Mel Chen calls the "animacy" of language, injecting it with liveliness and resistance, an appropriate approach to her life-and-death subject matter. The unruliness, liveliness, and resistance of Johnson's writing also characterize the recent surge of writing by disabled people who consider questions about relations among species. Temple Grandin, Dawn Prince-Hughes, Rod Michalko, Stephen Kuusisto, Eli Clare, Sunaura Taylor, and Nancy Mairs are all writers with disabilities who describe kinship connections with animals and their environments in ways that influence and shape their rhetorics. From Grandin's "cow's eye view" of the world (142) and Michalko's "two-in-one" relationship with his guide dog, Smokie, to Taylor's paintings blending animal activism and disability-rights discourse, these kinship compositions chart new territory. Extending Johnson's position, they suggest ways of considering connections between disability and animality that rest not on dehumanization and devaluation but on liveliness and messiness. They begin their stories by engaging with the unruliness of rhetorics forged in human-animal kinship. Like Johnson, many of them tell a great story because they tackle the unruliness, the muck, the mess, and the complicated kinships that animate their writing and experiences as disabled people. As intersections among rhetoric and composition, disability studies, and animal studies evolve, it will be necessary

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to develop ways of valuing the unruliness of interspecies-kinship compositions and to foster theories and practices for exploring them.

Note

1. Johnson writes about her meetings with Singer in a *New York Times Magazine* article, in 2003, and offers a slightly revised version in *Too Late to Die Young*, in 2005. I quote from both because some differences in wording are worth preserving. I cite only the year of publication when referring to the first version and the page number followed by the year of publication when referring to the revised version.

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