

Ashby Dialogue 2018-2019 Report
Crossroads: Animality, Disability, Activism and the Arts

by Etsuko Kinefuchi

Participating Faculty:

Etsuko Kinefuchi, Communication Studies
Gwen Hunnicutt, Sociology/Women and Gender Studies
Pete Kellett, Communication Studies
Larry Lavender, College of Visual and Performing Arts

We met three times during Spring 2019. The students from the participating faculty's classes were encouraged to join the dialogue either as part of a class assignment (CST460-3: Communicating Rights: Humans and Nature; WGS374: Ecofeminism) or for extra credit (HSS205: Animals and ourselves in art and performance). The February and March meetings were intimate dialogues among the faculty and students (each about 20-25 participants) that took place during Gwen's class. The April event was a public talk by Sunaura Taylor, the author of *Beast of Burden: Animal and disability liberation* (2017).

February 18, 2019: The Species Boundary: intersections of human and non-human animals, SOEB206, 4:00-5:30p.m.

Using Chapter 3 (animal crips) of Sunaura Taylor's book as an introduction to the crossroads of animality and disability, we considered the notions of "disability" and "abnormality" and how speciesism and ableism affect the ways in which we respond to other humans and non-human animals who are "disabled." Larry took the lead to prepare a set of questions. In small groups, we explored these questions and reported back to the whole group. This meeting set the conceptual stage for the March meeting and Taylor's presentation in April.

March 18, 2019: Constructing "dis/ability," SOEB206, 4:00-5:30p.m.

This meeting focused on disability – what it means to those who are labeled as "disabled," to those who care for them and what the ethics of care may mean. To prepare for the meeting, we all read chapter 17 (Caring across species and ability) of Taylor's book. Pete, who teaches disability communication, took the lead during this meeting. We watched *Torso Man*, a documentary about a young man who was born without limbs. Using this film in connection to chapter 17, we discussed in small groups different perspectives about fulfilling life, agency/voice, independence-dependence, and ethics of care in the context of disability both in humans and non-human animals.

April 11, 2019: *Solidarity across species: Animal and disability liberation* (lecture by Sunaura Taylor), SOEB114, 4:00-5:30p.m.

We concluded the dialogue with a visit by painter and writer Sunaura Taylor. Taylor was born with arthrogryposis, a condition that was caused by living in a low-income neighborhood near a toxic waste dumping site (now a superfund site) of Hugh Aircraft, Co., a missiles manufacturer, in Tucson, Arizona. Her disability has given her rare insights into the ways in which disabled humans are compared to animals, the ways in which ableism creates disables animals and affect

the ways we construct and interact with those – humans and non-human animals – who are disabled. She gave a public presentation based on her book, *Beasts of Burden* (2017), as well as on her paintings that articulate the entanglement between non-human animals and human disability. Gwen introduced Taylor. Taylor's presentation was about 45 minutes, followed by a lively 30-40 minutes of Q&A. The event was attended by about 80-90 people, including students, staff, and community members. The lecture was followed by a reception (funded by Green Fund) where the audience had a chance to further talk to Taylor and with each other.

Overall, the dialogue was a great success. As a group of interdisciplinary faculty, we were able to have intimate discussions with our students and with each other about the issues that we care about (e.g., disability, human-animal relationship, ableism, environmental pollutions, factory farming) but are not discussed enough in the academia. Using Taylor's book as the focal point, the Ashby Dialogue allowed us to explore the intersections we neglected before but is deeply important if we are to create an inclusive, just culture and future.