

Vegan Studies as Ecofeminist Intervention

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Abstract

On November 5, 2019, 11,000 scientists from 153 countries declared a climate emergency, and their report presents in stark terms the nature and certainty of the crisis, providing six paths forward, one of which focuses on agriculture: “eating mostly plant-based foods while reducing the global consumption of animal products . . . can improve human health and significantly lower GHG emissions” (Ripple et al. 4). We have been given a plan to help us mediate this crisis, but what will it take for us to act on it, or, for that matter, to discuss the “animal question” in ways that are not predicated on vitriolic fear and willful disdain of plant-based consumption? In this essay, I offer a vegan studies approach as a theoretical and lived ecofeminist intervention in a political moment characterized by environmental uncertainty, overt racism, misogyny, and anti-immigrant policies that have become conflated with the presumed threat veganism poses to an increasingly authoritarian present.

Keywords: Veganism, Green New Deal, climate crisis, United States politics.

Resumen

El 5 de noviembre de 2019, 11.000 científicos de 153 países declararon una emergencia climática, y su informe presenta con términos severos la naturaleza y certeza de la crisis, proporcionando seis vías, una de las cuales se centra en la agricultura: “comer principalmente comidas de origen vegetal a la vez que reducir el consumo de productos animales...puede mejorar la salud humana y reducir de forma significativa las emisiones de gases de efecto invernadero” (Ripple et al. 4). Se nos ha ofrecido un plan para ayudarnos a mediar en esta crisis, pero ¿qué necesitaremos para reaccionar o, lo que es más, para debatir el “tema animal” de maneras que no se basen en el miedo corrosivo y el desdén premeditado hacia el consumo de origen vegetal? En este ensayo ofrezco un enfoque desde los estudios veganos como intervención ecofeminista teórica y vivida en un momento político que se caracteriza por la incertidumbre medioambiental, el racismo evidente, misoginia, y las políticas antinmigración que se han fusionado con la supuesta amenaza que el veganismo plantea a un presente cada vez más autoritario.

Palabras clave: : Veganismo, Green New Deal, crisis climática, política estadounidense.

In 2018, Simon C. Estok addressed the often troubling absence of the “animal question” in discussions of climate change and in terms of the myriad challenges we face in the Anthropocene. The result is a kind of “hollow ecology” in which “critical discussions of ‘the animal question’ and vegetarianism are often simply dismissed or ignored, thus foreclosing on the possibility of generating an ethical scale appropriate for the enormity of the problems we face” (Estok 37-38). On November 5, 2019, 11,000 scientists from 153 countries declared a climate emergency, and their report presents in stark terms the

nature and certainty of the crisis,¹ providing six paths forward, one of which focuses on agriculture: “eating mostly plant-based foods while reducing the global consumption of animal products . . . can improve human health and significantly lower GHG emissions” (Ripple et al. 4). We have been given a plan to help us mediate this crisis, but what will it take for us to act on it, or, for that matter, to discuss the “animal question” in ways that are not predicated on vitriolic fear and willful disdain of plant-based consumption? I write from the U.S. at a time when a refusal to acknowledge and critique the environmental impact of animal agriculture is apparent in discussions of the Green New Deal (GND), a climate change non-binding resolution so general yet so polarizing that it has been “trumpeted by its supporters as the way to avoid planetary destruction, and vilified by opponents as a socialist plot to take away your ice cream” (Friedman). In this essay, I offer a vegan studies approach as a theoretical and lived ecofeminist intervention in a U.S. political moment characterized by environmental uncertainty, overt racism, misogyny, and anti-immigrant policies that have become conflated with the presumed threat veganism poses to an increasingly authoritarian present.

Ecocriticism, Animal Studies, and the Vegan Turn

Within the context of the mainstream hegemonic environmental movement and the academic frameworks of ecocriticism and animal studies, agricultural practices, factory farming, animal welfare, and meat consumption have been subjects of debate and concern. That said, the term “vegan” appears nowhere in Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm’s foundational 1996 collection *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. In fact, in 2010, Fromm penned the vitriolic “Vegans and the Quest for Purity” in which he decries and denounces vegans for “grandstanding” and holding positions that do not “produce much besides a sense of their own virtue.”² In 2011, veganism still did not warrant a single mention in Greg Garrard’s *Ecocriticism*, the text that defined the parameters of ecocritical study. Within the field of animal studies, veganism has been a consideration, but it is also an ethical delineator that for many scholars constitutes an impenetrable boundary between theoretical pursuit and lived experience. Within animal studies approaches, scholars often theorize about animals, even as they continue to ingest and exploit them.³ In Lori Gruen’s 2018 *Critical Terms for Animal Studies*, “Vegan” finally

¹ Unlike much news coverage—particularly in the U.S.—of climate change that has tended to couch the issue in terms of possible or potential outcomes.

² In his defense, I received the following email from Fromm on November 4, 2015: “I stumbled upon an article about your recent book about veganism while browsing online and I see that your reference is to the Chronicle’s version of my article. That version was horribly botched by an ongoing process of editing the [manuscript] that went on between me and one of the editors. When it actually appeared, I realized that bit by bit my acceptance of their suggested changes had resulted in a very changed essay indeed. I wrote a letter that appeared in a subsequent print edition to retract it as misrepresenting my original intentions. Even the title was not mine.”

³ Consider, for example, Cary Wolfe’s claim that it is not necessary to “like” animals in order to engage in Animal Studies and confront one’s own speciesism (7) and Donna Haraway’s avowed status as a committed meat eater, inherent her claims that “I . . . have a profound respect for veganism as a kind of witness, as a kind of No, a kind of loud No! as well as an affirmative politics. I am not a vegan, and I remain committed to sustainable animal agriculture for many reasons” (qtd in Franklin 8).

warrants a chapter in which Annie Potts and Philip Armstrong claim that “with the emergence of Animal Studies, the word vegan has begun to function . . . as a critical term” constituting, in discussions about whether the field should be vegan, “one of the major ethical and political debates of Animal Studies as a discipline” (396). In this ongoing debate, Stephanie Jenkins recognizes that even in the face of atrocities done to animals, “many animal studies scholars remain ambivalent about or even hostile to applying their arguments to practical implications” (505). Given these circumstances, for many ethical vegan scholars, animal studies has fallen short of offering a fully satisfactory space for scholarly and activist engagement.

That said, vegan ecofeminists have long recognized the potential importance of a fully vegan theoretical and lived practice. In a 2012 special issue of *Hypatia* titled “Feminists Encountering Animals,” scholars unpacked this history and examined how feminist/ecofeminist perspectives productively trouble the ways that animal studies *should* consider *actual* animals. In the issue, Traci Warkentin addresses the animal studies vegan debate, recognizing “connections between problematically uncritical promotion of veganism and a seeming lack of presence of environmental/eco/feminist praxis in animal studies generally” (499). Ecofeminists have made veganism a central aspect of their discourse—even as their contributions have often been erased, ignored, or rebranded within animal studies. Greta Gaard has called out this revisionism, asking for a recuperation of the “history of feminist ecocriticism, and the contributions of ecofeminist literary criticism within ecocritical thinking” (644) that includes foundational work by scholars such as Carol J. Adams, Deane Curtin, Josephine Donovan, and others. According to Gaard, the erasure of vegan ecofeminist perspectives constitutes a

failure to grapple with the issues being raised by that scholarship as feminist, a failure made more egregious when the same ideas are later celebrated when presented via nonfeminist sources... The animal studies groundwork of vegan feminists and ecofeminists is barely mentioned in the currently celebrated field of posthumanism, yet feminist scholarship both predates and helpfully complicates that work. (645)

I write as a social ecofeminist, recognizing that the oppressions of animals, women, colonized subjects, and nature are linked and reinforcing, prefaced upon the elevation of those things that are culturally associated with—and not essentially characteristic of⁴—masculinity, humanity, culture, and reason over those things deemed “feminine,” animal, natural, and emotional.

At occasional odds with animal studies and informed by and frustrated with the omission and denunciation of ecofeminism from a more holistic ecocritical animal studies praxis, those of us practicing ethical veganism and theorizing from a vegan position have offered vegan studies⁵ as an ecofeminist methodology that is fully vegan in its animal and

⁴ A criticism of cultural ecofeminism is that it is an essentializing framework that considers women as being *innately* more closely aligned with nature. Social ecofeminism recognizes the social construction of this trope while arguing for an elevation of those things *considered* feminine. The project is one of recognition of the ways that the social construction of binary oppositions—like masculine/feminine, culture/nature, human/animal—always favors one side of the binary while devaluing the other, and it is a project aimed at redressing that imbalance.

⁵ I coined “Vegan Studies” in my 2015 monograph *The Vegan Studies Project: Food, Animals, and Gender in the Age of Terror*. Since that time, there has been increasing interest in the field, as evidenced by Jodey

environmental advocacy. Believing that our veganism functions as an identity category and ethical position that shapes the way we read texts—and the world more broadly—a vegan studies perspective, among other things, offers textual analyses from a vegan point of view. In 2015, I wrote *The Vegan Studies Project: Food, Animals, and Gender in the Age of Terror* to propose vegan studies as a field that is a product of the discourse of vegan representation situated both within and outside of animal studies, animal welfare/rights/liberation, and ecofeminism. I worked “to unpack the tension between the dietary practice of veganism and the manifestation, construction, and representation of vegan identity... [in order] to show how vegan studies... provide[s] a new lens for ecocritical textual analysis” (“Introducing” 729-30). In her review of *The Vegan Studies Project*, Susan Zieger characterizes two divergent paths with regard to the ways that veganism has been perceived and packaged over the past few decades. First, “motivated both by ethical concerns for animals and by the promise of better health, veganism has... achieved mainstream popularity as a lifestyle geared toward weight loss, athletic achievement, and all around self-improvement.” The second path constitutes a continuation of veganism as political animal activism. But she notes a third possibility: “veganism could be a motivating force for left-wing populism.” In the face of the GND, a resolution drafted by Senator Ed Markey and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in February of 2019, veganism, which appears nowhere in the resolution, has nonetheless achieved status as a populist buzzword, if not a mode of championed resistance.

The Green New Deal and the Politicization of Veganism

In 2018, at the age of 29, Ocasio-Cortez became the youngest person and the first female member of the Democratic Socialists of America ever elected to Congress. According to Charlotte Alter, AOC is a politically polarizing individual, a kind of “human Rorschach test. Wonder Woman of the left, Wicked Witch of the right.” She is a Hispanic New Yorker who ran on a platform that included environmental sustainability, the abolition of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agency (ICE), and Medicare for all. She coined “the Squad” to denote four Democratic freshman congresswomen of color made up of herself, Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts, and Rashida Tlaib of Michigan who embody the progressive political ideology, multiethnic diversity, and feminist empowerment that characterize the far-left of the Democratic party—and they have faced vitriolic, sexist, anti-immigrant, and anti-Muslim attacks as a result. With regard to the GND, a consistent drum beat from critics on the right has focused on the imaginary danger it poses to hamburgers: among various critiques of the GND, “few capture the alarmism of the American right quite like Sebastian Gorka’s now viral claim that the deal’s proponents ‘want to take away your hamburgers... this is what Stalin dreamt about but never achieved’” (Dutkiewicz). Aside from the utter

Castricano and Rasmus R. Simonsen’s edited collection *Critical Perspectives on Veganism* (2016), Emelia Quinn and Benjamin Woodward’s edited collection *Thinking Veganism in Literature and Culture: Towards a Vegan Theory* (2018) and my edited collection *Through a Vegan Studies Lens: Textual Ethics and Lived Activism* (2019).

ridiculousness of this assertion, the GND does not call for a ban on hamburgers—nor does it mention beef or cows—even as it asks that farmers and lawmakers work together to remove greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture whenever “technologically feasible” (Pierre-Louis). AOC has gone so far as to say that the GND is not about forcing “everybody to go vegan or anything *crazy like that*” (Pierre-Louis, my emphasis). PETA has criticized her for not being vegan, asserting that the GND “should include vegan food policies” (Toliver). Regardless of the fact that veganism is not a part of the GND and that AOC is not vegan, coerced veganism has become an imaginary threat posed by the Squad, and in this way, in the U.S., veganism functions as an implicit dog whistle to signify the rising influence of women, immigrants and people of color, non-Christian religious ideologies, and policies that might actually address climate change.



In August of 2019, Cherokee Guns in rural Murphy, North Carolina, near where I live and teach, advertised via a billboard that read “The 4 Horsemen Cometh are Idiots,” above photos of the Congresswomen of the Squad, “signed, the Deplorables,” a reference to Hillary Clinton’s 2016 assertion that some of Trump’s supporters were a “basket of deplorables.” Due to public outcry against it, the billboard was subsequently removed by Allison Outdoor Advertising. The Biblical nod to the harbingers of the apocalypse is an appeal to evangelical Christians, a reassurance that these women—however evil—are too stupid to bring about the end times, but the reference also shows the fear that these women inspire in store owner Doc Wacholz (and men like him), who has stated that he believes that the two Muslim Congresswomen, Omar and Tlaib, have ties to terrorists groups (“Gun Store”). The removal of the billboard did not stop Wacholz from selling

bumper stickers with the same image of women whose opinions so offended President Trump’s sensibilities that he suggested that they “go back” to the countries they came from, even though all but Omar were born in the U.S. (Rogers and Fandos). In targeting the Squad, Wacholz channels Trump’s directive, missing the fact that Cherokee Guns is in Cherokee County, so named after the Native Americans who still live there and whose ancestors were violently displaced during the 1800s by people like Wacholz’s ancestors—who, of course, came from somewhere else.

In an ad posted on Cherokee Guns’ Facebook page, the directions to potential buyers note that in order to get a sticker, “eat a piece of bacon... tell us you’re voting for Trump in 2020”; “liberals” and “snowflakes” are “not eligible.” The admonition to eat bacon and say that one is voting for Trump in 2020 is linked to Trump’s anti-Muslim rhetoric and travel ban; it’s also about masculinity (Brissette), a confrontation to diets that are perceived as feminine—or ethnic, for that matter—those that eschew meat, those that are vegan, those that are associated, without cause, with the Squad, with AOC in particular, and with the GND. The mere act of eating bacon constitutes a symbolic re-ordering of the world: the eater is not Muslim, is manly and American, and animals, women, immigrants, Native Americans, and the environment cannot assert primacy. In the discussion of bacon, the animal, the pig, is absent, but Trump regularly refers to women he does not like as animals (Shear and Sullivan), particularly dogs and pigs, so the consumption of bacon can be read as literal and rhetorical violence against a variety of beings: actual pigs, Muslims, women, non-Christians, and immigrants—all of which is predicated on an unironic appropriation of “Cherokee,” the native peoples erased in the legacy of Manifest Destiny and capitalist expansion that led to the establishment of Wacholz’s gun store—a monument to the Second Amendment’s guarantee of the right to bear arms, even, as the U.S.’s epidemic of gun violence has shown,⁶ at the expense of all else.

Finally, in North Carolina, “bacon” evokes the hog farms that function as a staple industry rife with cruelty, environmental devastation (Moon), and labor practices that disenfranchise minority communities (Sturgis). In 2016, “ag-gag” legislation was passed prohibiting whistleblowers from taking video of conditions in factory farms in the state, protecting potential wrongdoers and enabling cruelty (“N.C.’s Boneheaded”). And in September of 2018, Hurricane Florence dumped millions of gallons of water on North Carolina, flooding hog farms and drowning countless animals. Aerial photos reveal the devastation in the form of overflowing waste lagoons and the bloated bodies of animals left to suffer and drown. And as the climate crisis intensifies, such devastating storms become more and more prevalent. From a vegan studies perspective an analysis of this billboard is layered, offering an ecofeminist intervention that exposes the implicit linkages between climate change, the historical violence enacted upon native peoples, and the contemporary violence enacted against livestock animals, women, people of color,

⁶ For data on gun violence in the U.S., see the Gun Violence Archive, which notes that as of December 28, 2019, there have been 414 mass shootings as well as 39,036 gun related deaths in 2019. <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org>

Muslims, and immigrants in the U.S.—and the ways that such violence has become increasingly permissible and weaponized in the age of Trump. It restores the absent referent,⁷ the pig, to a narrative about the consumption of bacon, and perhaps more importantly, it demonstrates the ways that the pervasive toxic politics of corporate animal agriculture infuse political and social discourse in ways that are often invisible, unrecognized, yet incredibly damaging.

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⁷ Carol J. Adams’s term for the ways that animals become absent when they become meat, their status as cows and pigs, for example, removed in their construction as objects – steaks and bacon, for example (20).

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