

Seeing Ecophobia on a Vegan Plate

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Abstract

There has been a sudden growth in the vegan industry, with meatless burgers garnering a profoundly positive consumer response and even people such as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jackie Chan supportively entering the conversation. In some ways, companies such as Beyond Meat™ and Impossible Foods™ and films such as *The Game Changers* are succeeding in doing what many political vegetarians and vegans, academics, and activists have long failed to do: to have a real effect on the animal agriculture business. Perhaps this is something to celebrate, especially since (despite the arguments, protests, and even veg-friendly businesses having steadily increased) the numbers of animals involved in the industry have consistently swollen. To rest much hope in the current vegan trends would be to fall victim to a deceptively sexist and ecophobic guiding narrative. While taking big steps toward shutting down the animal agriculture business, the great strides of the vegan industry follow a well-worn path. Putting veggie patties in the meat aisle and shunning words such as “vegetarian” and “vegan” engages in a disavowal of vegetal realities, and the fact that the meat aisle itself is so heavily gendered effectively re-genders the food itself. It may all seem harmless enough—even productive—until understood within the larger context of patriarchal “attempts,” to cite Laura Wright, “to reconceptualize veganism as an alternative untramasculine choice.” *The Game Changers* drips with such attempts, and, like the “meatless” products now enjoying such popularity, reeks of male self-delusionalism about having discovered a healthful, new diet. There is a lot more than veggies being served up with what we might call the new veganism, and there is not much chance of really effecting change unless we look at what’s really on the plate.

Keywords: Vegan studies, ecophobia, food and gender, *The Game Changers*, meatless burgers.

Resumen

Ha habido un repentino crecimiento en la industria vegana, con las hamburguesas sin carne consiguiendo una aceptación profundamente tentadora, e incluso gente como Arnold Schwarzenegger y Jackie Chan han ofrecido su apoyo al tema. De alguna manera, compañías como Beyond Meat™ e Impossible Foods™ y películas como *The Game Changers* están teniendo éxito en lo que muchos vegetarianos y veganos políticos, académicos, y activistas han fracasado durante mucho tiempo: tener un efecto real en el negocio de la agricultura animal. Quizá esto es algo a celebrar, especialmente ya que, a pesar del aumento constante de argumentos, protestas, e incluso de los negocios respetuosos con lo vegetariano, las cifras de animales implicadas en la industria han crecido continuamente. Poner muchas esperanzas en las tendencias veganas actuales sería caer víctima de una narrativa influyente que es engañosamente sexista y ecofóbica. Mientras se dan grandes pasos hacia el cierre del negocio de la agricultura animal, las mayores zancadas de la industria vegana siguen un camino muy trillado. Poner hamburguesas veganas en el pasillo de la carne y evitar palabras como “vegetariano” o “vegano” conlleva la negación de la realidad vegetal, y el hecho de que el pasillo de la carne esté tan orientado al género hace que la comida se asocie a un género a su vez. Parece algo bastante inofensivo—incluso productivo—hasta que se entiende dentro del contexto más amplio de “intentos” patriarcales, citando a Laura Wright: “reconceptualizar el veganismo como una elección alternativa ultramasculina”. *The Game Changers* lo intenta a cuenta gotas y, como los productos “sin carne” gozan de tanta popularidad, apesta a autoengaño masculino sobre el hecho de haber descubierto una nueva dieta saludable. Se están sirviendo mucho más que *veggies* en lo que podemos llamar el nuevo veganismo, y no hay mucha oportunidad de realmente cambiar algo a menos que miremos lo que realmente está en el plato.

Palabras clave: Estudios veganos, ecofobia, alimento y género, *The Game Changers*, hamburguesas sin carne.

Greta Gaard argued almost a decade ago that “In the near future, ecofeminism and feminist ecocriticisms will need to articulate an interspecies focus within ecocriticism, bringing forward the vegetarian and vegan feminist threads that have been a developing part of feminist and ecological feminist theories since the nineteenth century” (651). That near future has come, as Laura Wright and others are demonstrating. With the phenomenal recent growth of veganism in the US and Canada, understanding what actually gets served up on the vegan plate has perhaps never been more important or timely. However, it is no secret that the remarkable recent success of veggie burgers (such as the Impossible Whopper and Beyond Meat products) is owing in large part to the facts that “the packaging for these products don’t include veggie or vegan anywhere on them” (Valinsky), and that the products are in the meat aisle rather than in the vegetable section. The distancing from vegetal realities is a clear marketing bonus, as the documentary film *The Game Changers* makes plain: CNN’s Daniel Gallan explains that “terms like veganism and vegetarianism are deliberately avoided” (Gallan).¹ What is fascinating about this film and the men who produced and star in it (as with the people who make and market the new meatless burgers that are currently in vogue) is that they all come across as having discovered (or re-discovered) something no one else knew about; moreover, films such as *The Game Changers* do something more disturbing: in actively asserting a muscular veganism dripping in machismo and testosterone, the film seems to re-write vegan histories as some sort of specifically *male* discovery dating back to the time of the gladiators (referenced at the outset of the film).² The combined disavowal of women in vegan and vegetarian histories, the disavowal of vegetal realities, and the notion that veganism is a new (or re-discovered) thing are deeply problematical for the ecophobia and sexism that they serve up.

The increasing popularity of what mainstream media identifies as veganism often tacitly relies on an ecophobic mindset. Ecophobia is a complex condition that in many ways defies definition. In *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*, I wrote about it as follows:

The ecophobic condition exists on a spectrum³ and can embody fear, contempt,

¹ James Wilks, one of the film’s producers (himself a former UFC fighter) explains that there is a stigma attached to being vegan and that he, like many other people, see the vegan as (in his words), a “skinny, long-haired hippie—tree hugging, [and a person who] lives in a commune.” The executive producers include Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jackie Chan.

² In the film, Schwarzenegger even states outrageously that “fifty years ago, no one talked about hey maybe you should just get your protein from vegetables.” But this is not true on any level. Fifty years ago, and many years before (as the film itself states in reference to the gladiators), there were such people saying that vegetables provide all that we need.

³ Biophilia is also on this spectrum. There is no evidence that ecophobia is anything but a human trait. Biophilia, on the other hand, does seem to be something that we share with other animals. There are many viral examples of species saving other species. One of my personal favorites is of a bear saving a crow in the Budapest Zoo (see Medveš). Fictional animals are a different story. King Kong, in at least three of his manifestations, combines sexist assumptions and behaviours (he is the precious male ego we follow and

indifference, or lack of mindfulness (or some combination of these) toward the natural environment. While its genetic origins have functioned, in part, to preserve our species (for instance, the fight or flight response), the ecophobic condition has also greatly serviced growth economies and ideological interests. Often a product of behaviours serviceable in the past but destructive in the present, it is also sometimes a product of the perceived requirements of our seemingly exponential growth. [...] Ecophobia exists globally on both macro and micro levels, and its manifestation is at times directly apparent and obvious but is also often deeply obscured by the clutter of habit and ignorance. (1)

Ecophobia is an alienation from nature that has roots in both biological and socio-cultural evolution. Like any other human behaviour, it is written into our genes, since, as I have argued, “there is no magical ventriloquism here, no enchanted space outside of our genes from which human behaviour can reasonably be thought to originate” (12). Ecophobia is a kind of “vestigial genetics gone to seed, things in evolutionary biology that have preserved us but are no longer necessary and yet form the basis of a very destructive set of behaviours” (“Theorising the EcoGothic” 44). At the same time, however, those things that have become unnecessary can easily switch back. When I penned *The Ecophobia Hypothesis* in 2018, for instance, I wrote about “compulsive hand sanitizing” (2) and about how it is a part of what Michael Pollan calls “germophobia” (297), also known as “microbiophobia,” “Mysophobia,” “verminophobia,” “bacillophobia,” and “bacteriophobia”—all clearly falling under the rubric of ecophobia. Yet, while obsessive hand sanitizing may, as I suggested, be harmful in the long run in that it kills organisms beneficial to our survival (including intestinal flora vital for digestion and microorganisms that regulate our immune system and reduce inflammation), times change, and Covid-19 has realigned things. It is important also to remember that ecophobia is culturally and sociologically nuanced, and what is ecophobia in one society is perhaps a matter of survival in another. Broadly speaking, ecophobia manifests in action toward nature that causes harms that can be avoided, it finds expression in nature-denying behaviours, and it revels in indifference.

At the banquet for the 1999 ASLE (the first I attended), I was directed to lettuce when I inquired about food for vegetarians. I was surprised by this and by the plenitude of meat on offer. Odd, I thought, for people who claim to be concerned about the environment. Years later in an interview with Kip Anderson for the film *Cowspiracy*, Howard Lyman would articulate perfectly the position I also held and had held since becoming vegetarian in 1983: “You can’t be an environmentalist and eat animal products. Period. Kid yourself if you want, if you want to feed your addiction, so be it, but don’t call yourself an environmentalist.” It is a point that Jonathan Safran Foer also makes in *Eating Animals*: “most simply put, someone who regularly eats factory-farmed animal products cannot call him [or her]self an environmentalist without divorcing that word from its meaning” (59). But I didn’t have these authoritative voices with me in 1999, and I felt a bit out of my depth; moreover, I was still five years out from being vegan and was already feeling the heat. Even so, I decided to begin each conference talk with an off-hand question about how many vegetarians might be in the audience—and my talks always included something about meat. The opening question and the challenging of meat did not go

that makes the leading female protagonists virtually mesmerized in obeisance and deference) and at the same time seems both chivalrously sexist and biophilic in his defense of a different species.

unnoticed. Often people responded *only* to the “vegetarian question” in my talks, riled and apparently unable to focus on anything else. Within a decade, Scott Slovic was explaining in the Editor’s Note to the Fall 2009 *ISLE* that “Ecocritics who’ve been treated to one of Simon Estok’s provocative conference presentations know very well that he tends to fish for audience responses, looking at listeners as he asks, ‘How many of you are vegetarians? Let me see a show of hands’” (“Editor’s Note” 681). As I have pointed out elsewhere (and I certainly don’t intend this as a personal attack on my friend and colleague),⁴ I’ve never fished (and it is an ugly image to be associated with me). Not only are vegetarian options two decades later now available at these conferences but meat isn’t!⁵ Perhaps my calling out what was either hypocrisy or a simple failure to connect dots was a performative enactment on my part of what Richard Twine positions as a “vegan killjoy”.⁶

Being mocked in print, I stopped asking; but the resistance to people who offer such challenges keeps up. The intense response of Harold Fromm—one of the editors of the field-initiating *The Ecocriticism Reader*—to vegan ethical practice and theorizing is one example. Fromm argues vigorously in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* against vegans. Laura Wright explains in this *Ecozon@* special ten-year anniversary issue that Fromm wrote to her about how he “stumbled” upon a reference she had made to his article. He claimed that the editors of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* over-edited and misrepresented his original intentions. The article, however, is still available, and the damage it does continues. In it, Fromm claims that “Veganism, while perhaps harmless enough, especially if you don’t care about being part of society or alienating potential friends who may find you more trouble than you’re worth, fails on both counts [theory and practice]” (Fromm). In a compelling book about post-truth, Lee McIntyre argues that one of the things pushing us away from saying the things that need to be said is “a desire not to offend our friends” (60) and that this leads to the kind of post-truth world in which we currently live. Saying things about meat at an eco-conference with a majority of meat-eaters is offensive. For Fromm, fear of alienating potential friends trumps ethical eating. Some might view this as cowardice. Moreover, the “abandonment of evidential standards” (1) about which McIntyre speaks is present in Fromm’s assertion, which offers a clear example of how, “when we are emotionally invested in a subject... our ability to reason well will probably be affected” (McIntyre 55).

Post-publication regrets notwithstanding, one must wonder what Fromm’s original intentions were in his anti-vegan rant. All of his comments against ethical veganism are easily countered. In the main, there have been three reasons to go vegan in the past (health, ethics, and environment), and arguments *against* any of these are similarly easily countered. However, the new marketing strategies (which are very successful in producing results) are much more dangerous than ranting and mockery. In addition to health, ethics, and environment, there is a new reason alleged for veganism:

⁴ See *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*, p. 19, note 25.

⁵ Of course, veganism and vegetarianism are *lifestyles*, not simply meatless or animal-free diets. For people who enjoy economic privilege, these lifestyles are much more accessible than for people in poorer communities, communities that face very real barriers in having healthful and ethically-sourced foods.

⁶ Much of the inspiration (and wording) for this sentence comes from the responses of an Anonymous Reader.

manliness and machismo.

The Game Changers is a 2018 film with manliness and meatlessness as the focal points. Purportedly about one man's journey, as described on the IMDb website, "on a quest for the truth about meat, protein, and strength" (IMDb), *The Game Changers* pivots away from the meat-is-manliness script to a meatlessness-is-power mantra. At no point is machismo under scrutiny. The film extols the virtues of a vegan diet in order to promote muscular elitism, military machismo, and tightly controlled bodies. Everything about this film reeks of the kinds of domination fantasies that plague patriarchies.⁷

Laura Wright begins an important exploration of "the discourse surrounding perceptions of male veganism—particularly the ultramasculine category of 'heganism'—and the cultural backlash against a perceived crisis in masculinity that such an identity category has engendered" (108).⁸ Wright contextualizes the various cultural resistances to narratives linking meat with masculinity—representations of "women who aspired to enter the hallowed all-male realm" (115) where meat consumption reigns supreme, the men who reject meat and maintain their strength, the growth of a classed vegan industry, and so on. It is important to note, in addition to these observations, that Western patriarchies have moved beyond the notion that masculinity requires meat to the position that such a masculine identity is, in fact, better fostered by an entirely plant-based diet. But this is where the problems begin.

Meat and vegetables have long been gendered. By placing veggie patties in the meat section of supermarkets, there is an implicit denial of their vegetality and a re-gendering of them as comestibles. If this seems a stretch, then perhaps we need to look more closely at the target audience of *The Game Changers* along with the target consumers of the new veggie burgers (and I for one am not entirely comfortable with calling them meatless burgers, since, as I will show, this seems to play into a misogynist and ecophobic narrative). So while the CEO of Beyond Meat has said repeatedly that vegetarians are not the target (which makes sense, since we all—we vegans and vegetarians—want to see meat-eaters become vegetarians), putting the product into an aisle which is in effect loaded with misogyny seems to taint the food. Ethical vegans don't go down meat aisles. Meatless burgers implicitly aim at men who get their food from the meat aisle. Similarly, the *The Game Changers* plays unmistakably to a defensive machismo.

The Game Changers falls into the category of what Wright presciently describes in her breath-takingly insightful *The Vegan Studies Project* as "attempts to reconceptualize veganism as an alternative ultramasculine choice" (124). The film is all about high performance athletes and the importance of a vegan diet. To be fair to the film, so far, so good. It uses (or at least gestures toward some) science. Good. It undoes some misinformation about how to get proteins. Good. It refutes claims that vegetarians and vegans are weak. Good. But it is a documentary dripping muscular veganism, replete with a lot of sham science, as we see in the penis measuring scene. Three men consent to measuring their penises after eating meat and again after eating only vegetables, all under

⁷ It is interesting that "dominate" was the key word of Donald Trump's response to street demonstrations and protests against racism in the United States in June 2020.

⁸ On the origins and definition of the term "hegan," see Wright (126).

the supervision of Dr. Aaron Spitz of the American Urological Association. Result? Eating veggies will cause a man's penis to grow bigger and harder for longer periods of time. My eleven year old daughter (who is vegetarian) watched the film with me (I had no idea that there was such a scene), and her response ("what if you don't have a penis?") suggested to me that even an eleven-year-old child will sense something very wrong about the film.⁹

Like the veggie burgers in the meat section, a film such as *The Game Changers* can only leave a person with very mixed feelings. On the one hand, it is doing what so many of us have been failing to do for so many years: it is reaching those men who eat meat, and it is making them think long enough about the subject to change their behaviours. On the other hand, it is making them do it for all of the wrong reasons—reasons that are based in objectifying, sexist, and violent behaviours that ethical veganism seeks to change. It seems doubtful to me that men obsessing about their genitals has ever done much good, and I suspect that it will not do much good for the environment in the long run. Changing male meat-eaters into vegans through arguments and visions that focus on male genitalia will not, I suspect, change the structures that have caused the problems. If, as Wright has claimed, "veganism has gained a foothold as a means to masculine physical strength and prowess" (144), then it has done so with a vengeance in *The Game Changers*—a vengeance with implications.

I choose my words carefully here, since what is going on with the mainstreaming of veganism very often *does* seem to involve a kind of vengeance against the very things that so many vegans have also been fighting against. The reformulation of "vegetarian" and "vegan" as "meatless" and "plant-based" and the implied backlash against feminism, against environmentalism, and, indeed, against veganism itself here is clear. Nature is the absent referent here, and the hegan stands alone. Moreover, as Wright poignantly observes, "male veganism only seems acceptable if it is *not* linked to animal welfare," and "we are left without many positive representations of male veganism as predicated upon an animal-liberation or animal-rights ethic" (129). Rather than confronting the misogyny implied in the equations between meat and masculinity, current trends reiterate it; rather than challenging the patriarchal nature of the meat industry, current trends transfer it to veganism (and veggies become the resource to enhance erectile function); rather than addressing the core issues, current mainstream trends are addressing the symptoms. The "profound denunciation of vegetarian and vegan diets as indicators of weakness, ethnicity, and femininity" that Wright describes (114) in 2015 has by 2018 morphed into a *celebration* of vegetarian and vegan diets as indicators of *triumph* over weakness, ethnicity, and femininity; the frameworks and ultimate victims of the hegan are the same as they were with the old flesh-chomping he-men. Meet the new. Same as the old.¹⁰ *The*

⁹ Vegan sexuality has been the topic of study before. Annie Potts and Jovian Parry note that there are "powerful links between meat-eating, masculinity, and virility in western societies" (53) but that "the 'real' manliness (and sexuality) of vegetarian and vegan men typically comes under scrutiny by men who eat meat" (58). It seems that in *The Game Changers*, there is a shift in who is analyzing what, and it is purportedly vegan men (or supporters of vegan men) who scrutinize vegan male sexuality—but in the most crudely unnuanced of terms. For Spitz, it all boils down to erections, it seems. Not very delicate reasoning or discussion here.

¹⁰ My reference here with the old and the new is *The Who* song "Won't Get Fooled Again."

Game Changers, like the “Manthem” commercial that Wright skillfully unpacks, “implies that women have actually oppressed men and that men need to be liberated” (119).

The heroic male works alone when not working *against* others, and the notion of inter-dependence and cooperation is the very antithesis of this model. In this sense, muscular veganism (of the sort embodied in films such as *The Game Changers* and in its co-executive producers Jackie Chan and Arnold Schwarzenegger, or vegans such as convicted rapist and former boxer Mike Tyson) is more part of the problem than solution, more part of a fight against anything that it is not than an attempt to work together toward solutions. It is a position that at core does not embrace but rejects ecological thinking. We call such a rejection ecophobia. Muscular veganism, moreover, at core rejects women¹¹ and feminist thinking. We call such a position sexism.

It is bizarre, surreal, and uncanny to hear Arnold Schwarzenegger, of all people, making some of the same arguments that Carol J. Adams pioneeringly made, and later that a long list of other people (including Deane Curtin, Laura Wright, Greta Gaard, Josephine Donovan, Lori Gruen, Marti Kheel, Deborah Slicer, myself, and others) have also made in reference to the work of Adams, work on which we have sometimes built and always benefited—arguments about “the sexual politics of meat” (the phrase comes from Adams) “selling the idea that real men eat meat.” The second quote is—startlingly—from Schwarzenegger, and of course he does not reference Adams or the many other feminists who have made such observations. It is almost as if he (and the rest of the narrators in the film) think that this idea is new, a discovery of clearly nonfeminist men. The notions that veganism is new, that the health benefits of it are an original insight (and a clearly muscular male discovery), and that meatlessness is great (with the absent referent being vegetables and all of the nature that they imply)—these are not game changers. To have meat-eating men all over America (and maybe the world) stop eating meat and start going vegan is something that many ethical vegetarians and vegans have long wanted, but the reasons for the sudden trend toward bringing into reality such a desire are all wrong. While much of the discourse of veganism confirms Wright’s claim that “these power males became vegan *after* establishing their prowess and power while they were eating meat” (126), *The Game Changers* is directly resisting this and arguing that men can only really be strong alpha males *if* they are vegan. It is the very point of the film.

The recent success of veggie burgers and the sudden growing acceptance of vegetable diets for men *may* have very good effects; however, it seems that to have such hope in the current trends—in what we might call the new veganism—is to fall victim to a deceptively sexist and ecophobic guiding narrative. As environmental issues exponentially worsen, it is increasingly difficult to believe our self-consolations that we are achieving very much in terms of actually slowing, halting, or reversing the global devastation we are causing, and it is more urgent than ever to understand that ecophobia and sexism may very well be at the core of what seems so good and right, so promising and progressive, so long overdue and so necessary. After all, the most immediate thing we

¹¹ I do not mean to suggest that top ranking athletes are only men, but I am unaware of experiments correlating female sexuality with vegetables: the penis measuring of *The Game Changers* has no clitoral parallel to my knowledge.

can do (in addition to writing and talking to each other about the issues) is to stop participating in animal agriculture: if everyone became vegan today, the world would be better tomorrow—except that the core problems of sexism and ecophobia would remain. Among the lessons we must learn in the Trump era, Lee McIntyre explains, “is that one must always fight back against lies” (155). My worry is about how the absent referents, the omissions, the conceptual occlusions, the motives, and the ethics of the new veganism reiterate dangerous lies; and, like *The Who*,

I'll tip my hat to the new constitution
Take a bow for the new revolution
Smile and grin at the change all around
Pick up my guitar and play
Just like yesterday
Then I'll get on my knees and pray
We don't get fooled again.

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