

# We Are What We Eat: Feminist Vegetarianism and the Reproduction of Racial Identity

CATHRYN BAILEY

*In this article, Bailey analyzes the relationship between ethical vegetarianism (or the claim that ethical vegetarianism is morally right for all people) and white racism (the claim that white solipsistic and possibly white privileged ethical claims are imperialistically or insensitively universalized over less privileged human lives). This plays out in the dreaded comparison of animals with people of color and Jews as exemplified in the PETA campaign and the need for human identification (or solidarity) with animals in ethical vegetarianism. To support the viability of ethical vegetarianism, Bailey resolves the dread of this comparison by locating ethical vegetarianism as a strategy of resistance to classist, racist, heterosexist, and colonialist systems of power that often rely on the assumptions of speciesism to ground these axes of oppression. The author carries out this argument to contextualize African American responses to animal welfarism and ethical vegetarianism.*

---

On a rare trip home last year for Thanksgiving to the white, working-class town where I grew up, I arrived early enough to help with meal preparations. I watched as my sister patiently opened one can after another: green beans, cream of mushroom soup, crunchy fried onions. Having long since fled the processed, prepackaged fast-food world of my childhood (and the overweight I associate with it), I was shocked that this continued to be my sister's idea of cooking. Clearly, my reaction reflected more than an aversion to sodium and preservatives. Like most people, my sense of who I am is connected both to the foodways I have left behind and to those I have embraced. Gone are the slabs of processed cheese, white bread, and heaps of tuna casserole from my childhood.

In their place are organic yogurt, fresh greens, tofu, and a passion for Indian food, usually eaten in measured quantities. I am sensitive enough to classism to hate to admit it, but my experience confirms that “contemporary American whiteness, when it does not descend to the abject state of ‘white trash,’ relies crucially on regimes of bodily discipline and the suppression of appetite” and an “investment in fetishizing ethnic food” (Negra 2002, 69, 63).

Understanding how the deconstruction and reproduction of racial, gender, and class identity depends upon eating practices is critical for developing viable theories related to vegetarianism. Certainly, there is an intricate history of associations between race, sex, class, and meat that sheds light on both the hostility toward and attraction to vegetarianism. While some have argued that vegetarianism is an ethical requirement for being feminist, other feminists have been openly hostile to it. While some have argued that the plight of oppressed peoples is inextricably bound with that of animals, others have been outraged by such claims. In this essay, I explore some of the links between race, sex, and class identity and highlight the challenges such connections raise for feminist vegetarianism, especially in terms of how we think about the reproduction of whiteness through foodways.

The racist and sexist comparisons made between people of color and animals, and the conceptual overlaps imagined between them, have been well documented and analyzed. What has been less theorized is how foodways have constructed racial and ethnic identity and the lingering implication this might have for animal welfarism and ethical vegetarianism. Feminist vegetarianism broadly conceived—part political critique and part ethical theory—is premised on the idea that the oppression of women and animals is somehow connected. Early proponents sketched out the general similarities between the condition of animals and women under patriarchy (Griffin 1979/2000) while later theorists offered explicitly feminist rationales for why one ought not to mistreat animals—for example, that a patriarchal “logic of domination” lay at the heart of such mistreatment (Warren 2000). Most proponents of feminist vegetarianism acknowledge that we need to take into account the particularities of culture and history when analyzing human-animal relationships. However, most theories related to vegetarianism would be strengthened by an explicit consideration of the deep connections between race, ethnic and class identities and foodways. As I argue, a closer look at identity and foodways sheds light on why some may be resistant to vegetarianism even as it brings the intimate relationship between vegetarianism and feminism into sharper focus.

## UNPACKING THE ANIMAL-HUMAN COMPARISON

Recently, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) toured an exhibit that juxtaposed images of the brutal exploitation of blacks with those of animals. Humans being sold, tortured, and killed were presented alongside images of animals being sold, tortured, and killed. Although animals and people of color have long been compared, by both racists and antiracists, PETA's exhibit violated a taboo. The president of the Connecticut chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) complained that "black people are being pimped" and a passerby reportedly shouted, "You can't compare me to a freaking cow!" (quoted in Christie 2005). PETA president Ingrid Newkirk recognizes that the exhibit was controversial, but said, "The truth hurts." She added an apology "for the hurt and upset that this exhibit has caused in some of its viewers" (Newkirk 2005).

Comparisons between the suffering of animals and that of Holocaust victims have been similarly polemical. In J. M. Coetzee's novel *The Lives of Animals*, the main character, Elizabeth Costello, claims that "bringing rabbits, rats, poultry, livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them . . . rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of" (1999, 21). Not surprisingly, another character protests that the analogy "insults the memory of the dead." He means, of course, the human dead, a point that underscores the fact that the comparison functions as an insult largely because of the anthropocentric assumption that humans are better than nonhuman animals. As Marjorie Spiegel has put it, "Comparing the suffering of animals to that of blacks (or any other oppressed group) is offensive only to the speciesist" (1996, 30). However, if one pays attention to the historical associations, resistance to human-animal comparisons clearly has deep roots.

With some notable exceptions, the Western philosophical tradition is rife with what Elizabeth Spelman called "somatophobia," a kind of fear and loathing of the body (1982, 120). While Plato referred to the body as a cage, or a tomb, Descartes' hyperrationalist approach widened the rift between mind and body enough that Descartes could entertain, at least briefly, the idea that he might not have a body at all. Many subsequent Western philosophers have echoed this somatophobia. Not incidentally, this loathing of the body carries a host of other value judgments, significantly, the suggestion that it is better to be rational, intellectual, and spiritual than emotional, bodily, and physical.

Similarly, racist stereotypes about the especially physical nature of people of color (for example, the special physical abilities, sexual and otherwise, of blacks), were part of the rationalization for their enslavement and are still casually used to help justify their mistreatment. Like animals, racists have suggested, African Americans are impervious to the sort of physical suffering that is intolerable to whites. This racist somatophobia also appears in the desire to

control the fertility of women of color and in assumptions of black criminality. In short, almost wherever racial stereotypes appear, one can find the assumption that people of color are more bodily and emotional and thus further away from the reason that is said to distinguish “man” from animal.

Racist, somatophobic arguments have rested upon the view that animals were different in kind and subordinate to human beings, a view articulated and popularized by the Judeo-Christian tradition, Western philosophers, and social Darwinists. The logical next step, then, was to offer arguments and evidence that various other groups were either closer to animals or within the category itself. This “ethic of domination removed animals from the sphere of human concern. But it also legitimized the ill-treatment of humans who were in a supposedly animal condition” (Spiegel 1996, 30). If animals belong to man to do with as he wishes, if, further, they deserve this treatment because of their lowly place on the hierarchy of being, and if certain groups of people are in the animal category, too, then the justification for their exploitation is complete.

In the history of Western philosophy, rarely have we been permitted to forget that what separates “us” from the beasts is reason. With rationality identified as the measure of one’s humanity, the order of being has been clear: as the epitome of Spirit/Reason, God is on top, white men next, and women (white or otherwise) and men of color still lower. It hardly bears mentioning that nonhuman animals are at the very bottom. This makes it even clearer why discussions about the rights of people of color, white women, and animals have often centered on how rational such beings are.

In light of this history, it may be surprising that human-animal comparisons have also been used to *challenge* the oppression of blacks. Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem “Sympathy” capitalizes on such a comparison with the famous line, “I know why the caged bird sings” (1899/1993, 33).<sup>1</sup> The liberatory comparison became popularized in the 1970s, when Peter Singer appropriated the notion of speciesism, which he defined as “a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species” (1975, 6). Not incidentally, Peter Singer prepared the reader for his discussion of speciesism with the following quote from Sojourner Truth: “They talk about this thing in the head; what do they call it? [‘Intellect,’ whispered someone nearby.] That’s it. What’s that got to do with women’s rights or Negroes’ rights? If my cup won’t hold but a pint and yours holds a quart, wouldn’t you be mean not to let me have my little half-measure full?” (6). The point, as Singer extended it, is that even if there are factual differences between human beings and animals, even if humans could be said to be “better” in some sense, this would not justify treating humans better than animals. Both Truth and Singer challenged what Karen Warren calls a “logic of domination,” a “structure of argumentation” that “assumes that superiority justifies subordination” (2000, 47).

So far, I have written as if the liberatory use of animal-human comparisons were benign. What is probably clear, however, is that all comparisons between racism and anthropocentrism are risky. For example, part of what is objectionable about protesting the enslavement of blacks because it is like the caging of animals is that it naturalizes the condition for animals. As part of a larger argument to expose the connections between the suffering of women and that of animals, Carol Adams explained that when feminists protest that women are treated like animals, or like pieces of meat, they are implicitly reinscribing the appropriateness of treating animals that way (1991, 42). Adams's argument emphasizes that the analogies between women and animals, far from being harmless wordplay, reflect and reinscribe the lowly status of both. Spiegel's point is similar: "With the exception of those who still cling . . . to racist thought, most members of our society have reached the conclusion that it is wrong to treat blacks 'like animals.' But with regard to the animals themselves, most still feel that it is acceptable to treat them . . . as we say, 'like animals'" (1996, 19).

Catherine MacKinnon explores the woman-animal connection in pornography and exposes the logic in very clear terms: "The more denigrated the woman among women, prominently on racial grounds, the more and lower animal names she is called. This dynamic insults women, reinforces the notion that being like animals is a denigration, and denigrates animals" (2004, 266). Sometimes, then, when used to call attention to and protest the oppression of people, the comparison with animals can be bad for animals precisely because it is being used to reestablish human superiority. Part of how we continue to reproduce ourselves as the master species is through such comparisons with animals.

Drawing similarities between animals and people, even if it is well intentioned, can be dangerous to animals. Our relatively modern projection of animals as cute and cuddly (as the opposite of "beastly") suggests that "the value of the animal consists in its docility, playfulness, and charm as a human companion. Animals that fail to meet such standards may be written off as of no account" (Benson 1983, 82). Indeed, part of the function of such stereotypes is that they serve to justify further the large-scale abuse of farm animals, those smelly herds that are so far removed from the stuffed animals of our childhoods. Animals should not have to meet anthropocentric aesthetics or intellectual standards to deserve protection. As MacKinnon succinctly puts it, "Animals don't exist for humans any more than women exist for men. Why should animals have to measure up to humans' standards for humanity before their existence counts?" (2004, 267).

Given the complex conceptual and historical connections among sexism, racism, and anthropocentrism, it is not hard to appreciate how difficult it may be to resist particular kinds of human-animal comparisons. The hierarchical

comparisons among groups of people and animals do not perform a merely ornamental function in our language, but actually seem to define and identify beings in deep ways. Thus, for example, there is the entrenched notion that to be human is, precisely, to be distinguished from a beast. It is, in fact, difficult to imagine how many lines of Western philosophy would be lost if we were to eliminate the implicit and explicit comparisons and contrasts that define humanity and human superiority with animals serving as the foil. Even profeminist John Stuart Mill could not resist premising human superiority on the back of the animal. “Better to be a human dissatisfied than a pig satisfied,” he memorably asserted; “Better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied” (1861/2002, 10). The elevated, refined human being is thus born against a backdrop of proclaimed animal inferiority.

More specifically, in the history of the United States, to be born as a *white* human being has been facilitated by contrast to animals with racialized others as the medium. The very genesis of race in the United States occurred, in part, because of arguments that certain groups of humans were closer to animals in some evolutionary sense. As Ronald Takaki argued, in New England a distinctive “racialization of Indian ‘savagery’ developed” whereby native peoples were regarded “as incapable of becoming civilized because of their race, or ‘descent’” (1993, 38, 36). It is not simply that the “animalization” of Africans and Native Americans justified their mistreatment, but that notions of whiteness and civility were created in contrast to it. This is especially evident in the racist anthropological pseudosciences that produced such images as the profiles of the chimpanzee, “negro,” and “Greek.” The distorted drawings emphasized the morphological distance of the “Greek,” the supposedly cultured Caucasian forebear, from the chimpanzee (Tuana 1993, 45).

Such examples show that the definition of “civilized,” code for being white, male, and economically privileged, has required a separation of the white male body from those thought to be closer to nonhuman animals. I argue that that the reproduction of this privileged body comes about partly through the regulation of human eating practices. That these foodways are both raced and gendered is made especially clear by the tactics used to keep vegetarians in line.

#### REGULATING THE VEGETARIAN

It is in part because women and men of color, white women, and animals, have been so closely tied that it has been possible to use sexist and racist tactics to try to keep the vegetarian in line. For example, “men who decide to eschew meat eating are deemed effeminate; failure of men to eat meat announces they are not masculine” (Adams 1991, 34). Although this is not a point I wish to pursue in depth here, in a sexist society that symbolizes woman as meat, as a sexually consumable object, the man who declines to eat [her] is effectively

announcing his failure as a heterosexual. Vegetarianism, then, is implicated in heterosexism as well as sexism and racism. Perhaps not incidentally, MacKinnon notes that with respect to sodomy laws, "gay men are *sub silentio* lumped in with beasts" (2004, 267).

If eating meat itself has been regarded as a masculine activity, then the animal lover is a sissy, contemptibly weak, feminine, with all of the qualities that entails, including being overly emotional. Even some philosophers who are on the side of animals have unwittingly perpetuated this tendency. As Josephine Donovan has argued, "[Tom] Regan's and Singer's rejection of emotion and their concern about being branded sentimentalist are not accidental; rather, they expose the inherent bias in contemporary animal rights theory toward rationalism, which, paradoxically, in the form of Cartesian objectivism, established a major theoretical justification for animal abuse" (1995, 35). Not incidentally, meat eating also has associations with ableism. As one scholar has pointed out, both children and "invalids," as he unfortunately phrased it, were thought not to require "real meat" (Fiddes 1991, 159). The extent to which one was to be regarded as fully human was correlated with one's perceived need for meat.

It is hardly surprising, then, that while meat eating has long been considered a sort of brain food, necessary for intellectual beings, people of color were thought to be able to get along with very little. One late nineteenth-century medical doctor concluded that "savages" could live without much animal protein because they are "little removed from the common animal stock from which they are derived. They are much nearer to the forms of life from which they feed than are they highly civilized brain-workers, and can therefore subsist on forms of life which would be most poisonous to us" (quoted in Adams 1991, 31). Another medical doctor, Edgar Wherry, took this view seriously enough to rebut it thoughtfully in a 1913 issue of *Science*. Wherry patiently argued against the view that a vegetarian diet was responsible for "the evident inferiority of the races inhabiting India, which enables a mere handful of British soldiers to keep them under control," as was commonly believed at the time (1913, 909).

Clearly, the traditional conceptual connections drawn between race, sex, and vegetarianism complicate the issue of feminist vegetarianism. My experience has been, for example, that while feminists might be expected to be vegetarian in some sense (indeed, some have suggested that it is an ethical requirement for feminists, see Adams 1995; Donovan 1995), there can be a tendency for women (even feminists) to react to that expectation. Modern women are also supposed to be "equal to men," after all, and one way of showing the sort of strength valued by patriarchal society is to deny a connection or sympathy with animals. The reproduction of masculinity seems to require a denial of the cute and cuddly, a distancing from sympathizing with the suffering of others. Consider, too, the tacit understanding that a "feminine" woman must order a salad rather than a steak. It makes sense that women who wish to challenge

sexist stereotypes might be wary of aligning themselves with vegetarian animal lovers.

Perhaps most important, though, is the fact that whenever there is some food scarcity, women are almost universally the worst fed, with animal protein often reserved for men. In this context, it makes sense that some women might want to reclaim their right to food—meat in particular—even when other food sources are available. Access to food is not merely something one may do once one has achieved a higher standing. Rather, such access to food is part of what defines one as having such a standing. All of this may help explain the kind of apparently perverse pride I've heard from some feminists who proclaim their carnivore status. If one is sensitive to the patriarchal associations among gender, meat, and vegetables, then the existence of such loud and proud feminist carnivores is perhaps less jarring.

We should not minimize the attachment of working-class people of all races to meat eating either. If the steak dinner is reserved for the master or regarded as the upper-class person's mark of distinction, then a claim to class privilege can reasonably be thought to require a claim to meat. After all, foodways are themselves a significant part of culture; part of how one takes on or claims a cultural identity is through the adoption of foodways. This helps explain why vegetarianism has sometimes been dismissed as a bourgeois lifestyle choice, one deeply reflective of a privileged identity. Certainly, to be able to turn away nourishment of any kind often says something about one's level of privilege. Paradoxically, this can also help explain the reclamation of black "soul food," which was traditionally made with the parts of animals that white masters did not want to eat. It becomes a show of ethnic pride to reclaim what was previously despised. In response to the charge that Blacks had no cuisine, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) provided this paean to soul food:

Hoppin' John (black-eyed peas and rice); hushpuppies (crusty corn meal bread cooked in fish grease and best with fried fish, especially fried salt fish, which ought to soak overnight unless you're over 50 and can't take all that salt); hoecake (pan cake); buttermilk biscuits and pancakes; fatback, i.e., streak'alean-streak'afat; dumplings; neck bones; knuckles, both good for seasoning lima or string beans; okra; pork chops; grits, eggs and sausage; pancakes with Alaga syrup; a chicken wing on a piece of greasy bread; a piece of barbecue hot enough to make you whistle; and small sweet potato pies. (1966, 103)

Rafia Zafar explains, "Although Black American cuisine is certainly more than 'grits and greens,' those lowly dishes signify mightily. The eating of collards has meaning in ways analogous to the eating of parsley from a modern-day Seder plate: for Jews and Blacks alike, the ingestion of bitter greens serves as



a near-literal taste of slavery” (1999, 2–3). It is critical to reiterate that ethnic foodways are not merely ornamental; rather, the reproduction of ethnic identity is, in part, dependent upon their maintenance. Here, as in other contexts, one creates one’s own identity and those of one’s children, through foodways.

#### FOODWAYS AND “SPECIAL” WHITENESS

In societies structured to privilege whites, it is part of the point that whiteness itself, including the whiteness reflected in and reproduced through foodways, can become invisible. To many white Westerners, the fare described in Betty Crocker cookbooks or the fried chicken and sandwiches offered by the ubiquitous fast food chains, whatever their ethnic origins, can become experienced as blandly normal. Making a related point, North American philosopher and self-described “food adventurer” Lisa Heldke self-critically observes, “My culture is a plain white plate—perfect for setting off features of a cuisine without imparting any flavors of its own” (2003, 2). Not surprisingly, a notion of “special” whiteness has arisen in conjunction with this unmarked foil of whiteness, as evidenced in the rapid rise of ethnic-food cruising and new multicultural food palates.

Contemporary North American whiteness is now actually being reconstructed through the consumption of so-called ethnic foods. One scholar explains the popular fascination with “food films,” such as *Like Water for Chocolate*, set in Mexico, and *The Big Night*, which centers on an Italian-American restaurant. “The films proffer spectators the pleasures of rediscovering ethnic heritage as ‘new ethnics,’ those who come to redefine themselves as having an identity beyond whiteness,” argues Diane Negra (2002, 62–63). The earlier push for assimilation in the United States, the one that dismissed ethnic culinary distinctiveness by asking, “What can you expect of the Americanism of the man whose breath always reeks of garlic?” has been transformed into a veritable obsession among whites with ethnic dining. Whiteness, at least whiteness associated with middle- and upper-class membership, can be seen as being constructed in part by a fetishism of ethnic foods, usually those associated with people of color. This is perhaps not so different from how suburban teen-age male whiteness has been defined by a consumption of black rap music.

Heldke worries that the white fascination for ethnic foods is a kind of “cultural food colonialism” (2001, 176–77) one that, although apparently innocent, threatens to become another form of offensive tourism. A passionate and adventurous cook, Heldke writes, “When I began to examine my tendency to go culture hopping in the kitchen, I found that the attitude with which I approached such activities bore an uncomfortable resemblance to the attitude of various nineteenth- and twentieth-century European painters, anthropologists, and explorers who set out in search of ever ‘newer,’ ever more ‘remote’

cultures they could co-opt, borrow from freely and out of context, and use as raw material for their own efforts at creation and discovery.” Heldke acknowledges that these were not her only motives for pursuing ethnic food, but offers the honest insight that at least part of the attraction was that it might be “a way of making myself more interesting” (177).

Certainly, my own experiences confirm this tendency. One of the most common complaints made by new and old professors in the small town where I work is the dearth of “interesting” restaurants here. We regularly bemoan the fact that there are three KFCs, but no Italian restaurant. I confess, too, that we are currently amused by the local excitement that, at long last, an Olive Garden Restaurant will be opening. “As if that were a *real* Italian restaurant,” we think, but don’t need to say aloud. In fact, several of my white friends and I make regular eighty-mile sojourns to savor Thai, Indian, Ethiopian, and other foods in nearby Minneapolis. My point isn’t that there is anything wrong with enjoying such foods, but that part of how my friends and I continue to distinguish ourselves from the locals, as special somehow, despite the fact some of us have lived here for decades, is by our attitude to such foods.

So pervasive is the attraction of whites to ethnic dining, that numerous magazines and television shows focus on it and even restaurants as nondescript as Bennigan’s and Outback Steakhouse have scrambled to get on board. Bennigan’s has become Bennigan’s Irish-American Restaurant and Bar, symbolized by an eagle with a shamrock crest, and both are offering dishes with explicitly, often ridiculously, ethnic-inspired names, as well as large, “comfort”-sized portions of meat. According to Negra, “A semiotics of white ethnicity is deployed to promote pleasurable food-oriented consumption in tandem with the symbolic acquisition of the relationship to food that our popular culture associates with heritage ethnicities” (2002, 68).

Although Negra argues that this is an attempt to define “an identity beyond whiteness,” I think it is consistent with her point that a rejection of one kind of whiteness (thought to be blandly suburban) is precisely what is thought to be required to acquire another kind of whiteness. So, for example, even as my white students are rarely able to see themselves as raced, they are often eager to claim an Irish, Norwegian, or German family lineage. The death of the reviled suburban whiteness makes way for the birth of a whiteness that is more exotic. This reclamation of ethnicity is a clear reclamation of a kind of “special” whiteness.

This need to define a “special” whiteness could also be used to critique the growing trend of white vegetarianism, as can be seen in my own rejection of many of the eating practices of my childhood. For example, I have become more aware of how I gave birth to, and continue to, reproduce myself as an “enlightened” white professor, partly through my feminist-inspired vegetarian eating practices. Kathryn Paxton George has suggested that the ideals of feminist vegetarianism,

particularly when expressed by white feminists, are necessarily elitist. I will explore this critique as a way of opening up possibilities for productive self-criticism and further reflection on feminist ethical vegetarianism.

#### THE PERILS AND PROMISE OF FEMINIST VEGETARIANISM

Ethical vegetarianism has an ancient philosophical history in both the Western and Eastern context. Most notably, Hinduism has regarded certain animals as sacred and, usually, as nonedible because of this. In the ancient Western philosophical treatment, Pythagoras was an early proponent of ethical vegetarianism (Walters 1999). However, philosophical views, which demand regard for animals for their own sake, are rare. In their call for universal compassion for living beings, even Eastern accounts often become anthropocentric, suggesting that, in light of reincarnation, animal souls and human souls are not different in kind. Not surprisingly, the tradition of anthropocentric philosophical defenses in the West is even more entrenched. In discussions about animal welfare, for example, philosophers often cite Kant for his claim that we ought not to mistreat animals, not out of concern for them, but because it makes us callous toward other human beings.

When I use the term “ethical vegetarianism” here, I mean the view that we ought not to eat animals not merely because it is in the interests of human beings to refrain from doing so, for example, for nutritional reasons, but, at least partly, for the sake of the animals. Discussions about rights (Regan 1985) or utilitarian considerations weighing the amount and quality of suffering to be produced (Singer 1975) often theoretically buttress this view. While these approaches have some promise, they are not without problems. In particular, they continue to implicitly evaluate animals according to such anthropocentric standards as rationality (Bailey 2005, Donovan 1995). As MacKinnon puts it, “The primary model of animal rights to date—one that makes animals objects of rights in standard liberal moral terms—misses animals on their own terms, just as the same tradition has missed women on theirs” (2004, 264).

It is interesting that the PETA exhibit described above prompted William Saletan, a writer for on-line magazine *Slate*, to defend this anthropocentric trend in animal-welfare discussions. Apparently outraged by comparisons between animals and people, he insists that human standards be used to determine how animals should be treated: “Our increasing awareness of animal intelligence will prod us to give up the worst offenses, starting with butchery of higher mammals. We won’t do this because we pity them for being locked up. We’ll do it because we respect them for picking locks. And we’ll still use chimps to test our drugs, because the faculties worth respecting in them are that much more powerful in us. ‘We Are All Animals,’ PETA pleads in the title of its exhibit. Yes, we are. But some animals are more equal than others” (Saletan 2005, 1).

It is the shamelessness of this that interests me; Saletan defiantly replicates the anthropocentric, masculinist obsession with rationality, human purposes, and denigration of emotion, “pity,” that I’ve been discussing.

Feminist arguments for vegetarianism generally do assume the inherent worth of animals and argue, as Karen Warren has explained, “that the analysis of oppression of nonhuman animals is based on a variety of women-animal connections: for example, sexist-naturist language, images of women and animals as consumable objects, pornographic representations of women as meat.” They insist that “the unjustified dominations, objectifications, and commodifications of women and nonhuman animals occur in mutually reinforcing and conceptually inseparable ways” (Warren 2000, 126), and that “no one creature will be free until all are free” (Donovan and Adams 1996, 3). Feminist vegetarianism in general, then, is motivated not only from a concern for the welfare of animals (for their own sake), but also for the welfare of the beings whose oppression is conceptually and practically tied to that of animals. As I have already pointed out, meat eating materializes these concerns in the death of an animal, the consumption of its body, and the construction of gender in the carnivorous human being. Also, as I have suggested, in many cultures the ideologies connecting meat to masculinity help to create and reinscribe an ideal of manhood.

Some proponents of feminist vegetarianism emphasize that the ethical implications of the theory require an appreciation for the context in which human and animal relations take place, what is sometimes referred to as “feminist contextual vegetarianism.” They acknowledge, for example, that eating animals may not have the same meaning in all circumstances. Notably, “circumstances” is meant to highlight that eating animals can have a different meaning for individuals and cultures; the hunting, killing, and eating of a wild boar need not be thought of as morally equivalent to selecting and eating a segment of a hog’s leg from the supermarket by a privileged Westerner.

While it is both the scope and depth of its analysis that is the source of feminist vegetarianism’s promise, this is also the source of some of its difficulties. In trying to tie concerns about racism, sexism, and classism together, it can risk appearing to oversimplify in ways that can be damaging. For example, as I have suggested above, in their zeal to extend sympathy for animals, white privileged women have at times been insensitive to the different meanings that both animals and food have for women of color and for women globally. This absolutist position, that it is morally wrong for feminists to eat meat, has met particularly harsh criticism for its insensitivity to women’s real lives. I will now examine one such argument and then further develop my understanding of feminist contextual vegetarianism, not as a construction of white privilege or “special” whiteness, but as a means for exploring the construction of identity through food pathways.

## FEMINIST VEGETARIANISM AS ELITIST

In *Animal, Vegetable or Woman?* Kathryn Paxton George criticizes feminist vegetarianism for being elitist and ethnocentric. Many who advance feminist vegetarianism, she argues, assume an ideal that is itself “discriminatory.” There is “a hidden assumption that having an adult male body and living in cultures where adequate food and supplementation are available are the norm” (2000, 3). Due to health concerns and poverty, she argues, vegetarianism and veganism will be a much greater burden for many women. Her critique deserves closer attention, even though I think it is ultimately wrongheaded partly because it helps highlight why discussions about vegetarianism ought to include discussions about identity.

George attempts to be more sensitive than those she critiques by claiming that living up to the “vegetarian idea” may create added challenges for women and children already struggling to survive. She claims, for example, that for poor women with children, fresh vegetables or the means to prepare them may not be available. Feminist contextual vegetarianism doesn’t resolve the problem, she claims, for we should not merely make “exceptions” for such people, to “contextualize them.” Rather, “their ‘context’ involves being female, being mothers, and . . . we need to rethink the ideal assumed in ethical vegetarianism” (2000, 6).

One of the problems with George’s argument in *Animal, Vegetable, or Woman?* and in a 1994 article that received much criticism, is that many, if not all, of the reasons she cites for why vegetarianism may be out of reach for many poor women is precisely a result of the patriarchal system that devalues women and animals in the first place. It is not a randomly produced feature of the world that women and children make up the greatest poverty class or that the health of women and children is especially precarious. Nor is it an accident that “animal protein” in the form of cheap lunchmeat or fast food is often more readily available than vegetables in the United States. From the point of view of feminist ethical vegetarianism, these conditions result from the very racism, sexism, classism, and anthropocentrism that is being challenged. As Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen have pointed out, “What she [George] ignores is the well-known fact that, around the world, it is the men and boys who eat the first and most foods, while the girls and women eat last and least” (1996, 236).

Moreover, moral ideals need not themselves be thought of as discriminatory or elitist in the ways George has suggested, despite the fact that, in some sense, exemplifying moral virtue may often be tied to some kind of privilege. Consider, for example, the poor mother who is paid to be complicit with fascist torturers. Certainly, resisting participating in such a moral atrocity is more difficult for her than for many others, but we do not thereby abandon the moral ideal of avoiding aiding and abetting torturers. We might be more understanding of

her participation, but we should not use it as a basis for abandoning the moral ideal. George's suggestion that nearly all ethical vegetarians are moral elitists, however, threatens to slide into moral condescension, as if there ought to be a multiple-tier, separate-but-equal system of moral ideals.

Not incidentally, George's suggestion that feminist vegetarianism is classist and ethnocentric ignores the fact that "most non-Western diets are largely vegetarian (perhaps by virtue of necessity): consider Chinese, Indian, and African traditional cuisines. If anything, it is meat-eating that is a Western norm that 'development' has imposed upon non-Western nations" (Donovan 1995, 227). Ironically, George's position erases the number of poor women who are vegetarians by ethical choice, revealing the hidden privileged perspective that serves the edifice of her argument.

Often vegetarianism has been caricatured as epitomizing petty moral privilege, with the self-appointed morally empowered vegetarian depicted as lording it over others. As one character criticizes the vegetarian in Coetzee's novel, "It's nothing but a power-game. Her great hero Franz Kafka played the same game with his family. He refused to eat this, he refused to eat that, he would rather starve, he said. Soon everyone was feeling guilty about eating in front of him, and he could sit back feeling virtuous" (1999, 68). Similarly, George objects, ethical vegetarianism assumes that "a single definable class of persons is designated as better than—more *morally virtuous* than—all others simply because of its physiology and power" (2000, 2).

What I suspect lurks below the surface of George's critique is the worry that ethical vegetarianism is somehow antihumanism (antiwomanism), that one must choose between animals and humans. As Donovan argues in the introduction to her co-edited book, it is a familiar strategy: "Just as feminists were charged with man-hating when we began to channel our energies and our theorizing to women's needs and experiences, animal activists now stand accused of people hating" (Donovan and Adams 1996, 4). Here, too, there is the suggestion that one cannot be both *for* poor women and children and *for* animal welfare.

The response of the *New Haven Register* to the PETA exhibit described above further illustrates the point: "If you care about animals more than people, the comparison [in the PETA exhibit described above] may seem apt. . . . There is little common ground for agreement if PETA sees the slaughter of livestock for food as the same as the lynching of blacks or the extermination of millions of people in Europe" (quoted in Christie 2005). Not only is this analysis a speciesist objection to the comparison but it also implies that one who takes animals seriously is ipso facto demonstrating a failure to take humanity seriously; by George's parallel account, a feminist who takes animals seriously is failing to take women seriously.

With respect to ethical vegetarianism, I think it is clear that such a divide-and-conquer strategy only works if one accepts the racist, sexist, classist terms of the discussion. Part of what is required to understand some of the resistance to vegetarianism is to appreciate the logic that undergirds it. We should not, of course, automatically dismiss those who resist vegetarianism as insensitive dupes. To that end, it helps to appreciate that whether one is a meat eater or a vegetarian would not carry such visceral moral and emotional impact if it were not experienced as deeply entwined with the production and reproduction of identity. That our identities are so constituted is not a neutral or inalterable fact, however. The perpetuation of the patriarchy depends, in part, on the fact that we understand our racial, gendered, and sexual selves as contingent upon eating practices in the ways described above. Only then can vegetarianism be used as a wedge to divide people along racial, sexual, or class lines.

George is explicitly critical of feminist vegetarianism and offers an alternative designed to avoid the pitfalls of vegetarian accounts that do not sufficiently address concerns about context. Her “feminist aesthetic semivegetarianism *permits* everyone to eat a certain small amount of meat, dairy products and other animal products so long as animals are well treated and killed as painlessly as possible . . . *that* one consumes the meat and animal products is itself aesthetic because it is permitted as a matter of taste, health and context” (2000, 165). So, from George’s point of view, her account avoids the discriminatory character of vegetarian positions that fail to consider the reality of the lives of women for whom vegetarianism may involve great sacrifice and eliminates the moralizing tone of the position by talking about it as aesthetic rather than moral.

However, the theory of contextual vegetarianism is not about privileged white theorists condescending to “permit” disadvantaged women and people of color to eat meat. Imagining that theory necessarily functions this way is itself elitist and colonialist. Rather, we can understand contextual vegetarianism as recognizing that killing animals for food may not always have the same *meaning*. Killing animals under some circumstances (or human beings, for that matter, the exigencies of survival being what they are) may not be regarded as morally ideal, but I do not see that making judgments about other women is what the theory is really about. Its primary aims, rather, are to critique the patriarchal undergirding that is at least partly responsible for the conditions that so often pit humans against one another or against animals.

We can also understand contextual vegetarianism as decentering the healthy male subject that George has critiqued. Accepting George’s call to make the discussion more “aesthetic” than “moral,” then, has little to recommend it but carries risks. In particular, as I suggested above, it threatens to condescend to poor women by suggesting that the standards should be lower for them, that they can’t be expected to reach as high a level of aesthetic expression in their

lives as privileged people. Eliminating the word “moral” doesn’t eliminate the possibility of condescension; it merely disguises it.

The deeper problem with George’s argument is that it fails to account for how deeply foodways may be tied with other aspects of identity. Her position rests on the misconception that we can meaningfully conceptualize people as social beings apart from their eating practices. That is, there is a kind of assumption that one can conceive of a generic subject that is richly enough conceived to be able to imagine engaging in specific behaviors, such as eating. However, if the behaviors themselves are part of what constitutes identity, then this is misguided. The difference between identifying oneself as a “vegetarian” instead of as “a person who refrains from eating meat” illustrates this weakness. “Vegetarian” suggests a deeply held identity, one shaped by the practice.

George’s critique deserves attention because it is an especially systematic expression of many feminists’ worries about vegetarianism, that it fails to take seriously enough the lived realities of peoples’ lives. But yet another problem with George’s work is that in claiming to take women and children seriously, it somehow manages to do the opposite. Paradoxically, George argues against the universalizing tendency of such animal rights theorists as Singer and Regan, but performs a similar reduction of women; she abstracts their identity from their lived practices. As Carol Adams has explained, “like a good Cartesian, [George] reduces vegetarianism to some quantifiable nutritional resource that can be measured scientifically. The value-laden nature of nutritional studies cited for a feminist audience may or may not include the normativeness of eating animals” (1995, 221–22). George, too, then, fails to appreciate how central eating practices are to identity, that it matters what we eat because of who we are in the identities we claim for ourselves and the communities that define us. Rather, she treats the privilege of having food and the rituals of eating as if these were garments one may take on or remove without having an impact on one’s deeper self. George regards what one does or does not eat as merely a dietary or nutritional issue within a context merely informed by (rather than constructed and reproduced in conjunction with) such factors as cultural or personal attitudes toward animals and economic access.

My argument with George’s critique highlights her simplistic characterization of feminist vegetarianism as an elite, white phenomenon as well as her own privileged perspective in suggesting that poor women may not be capable of being vegetarians for morally compelling reasons. I believe George’s account is limited partly because of her inability to see that foodways are intimately and constitutively part of who we are individually and communally. What I am calling for is not merely a broader notion of “context” than the one George provides, one that includes the influence of foodways, but also one that acknowledges the deep ontological entanglements between the various aspects of who we are. As I argue, feminist contextual vegetarianism is more promising



in its ability to acknowledge our lived realities than George realizes, precisely because it leaves room for considerations of the deeply ontological aspects of identity as they intersect with foodways.

#### RECONSIDERING CONTEXTUAL FEMINIST ETHICAL VEGETARIANISM

Karen Warren, Val Plumwood, and Deane Curtin have recently moved toward appreciating the complexities of “context” for vegetarianism. Especially successful have been their challenges to the ethnocentrism implicit in calls for vegetarianism that do not take into account cultural specificity. Warren argues, for example, that what is needed is a context-sensitive vegetarianism, the cornerstone of which is that “reasons for moral vegetarianism as a practice in a given circumstance will be affected by contexts of personal relations, gender, ethnicity, class, geographic location, and culture” (2000, 133). Warren rightly points out that calls for universal vegetarianism are overly simplistic. I would note that such is usually the case with ideals that arise from broad-based political critiques of the sort feminist vegetarianism usually provides.

As heirs to a philosophical tradition that tends to interpret ethical theories primarily in terms of normative rules, we might be tempted to read feminist contextual vegetarianism solely as a list of isolated dos and don'ts. On this reading, the expansive political critique that underlies the moral ideals recedes into the background (as, for example, it often does during simplistic discussions of utilitarianism) and the critic feels compelled to seek superficial counterexamples to the moral “rules” this theory apparently advocates. Of course, sometimes the advocates of ethical theories make this same mistake. For example, some feminist vegetarians primarily speak the language of proscription and prescription and abandon discussions about the social, historical, and cultural conditions that make moral ideals meaningful in the first place. This can open the door to critiques such as George's. However, it is a distorted way of analyzing moral theories, whether done by the advocate or the critic, with the result that no moral theory of any substance could escape charges of being dogmatically judgmental, elitist, or worse. The truth, though, is that contextual feminist vegetarianism is much more than a set of rules, and some versions of the theory make room for the sort of ontological discussions about identity that I have been advocating.

Plumwood offers a metaphysical foundation for contextual vegetarianism, objecting to “ontological vegetarianism,” the idea that “nothing morally considerable should ever be ontologized as edible” (quoted in Warren 2000, 137). Drawing on an experience in which she herself became prey to a crocodile (and nearly died), Plumwood makes the interesting move of suggesting that humans, too, be conceived as part of the food chain. On this view, we can sometimes consider a being, human or nonhuman, as food without reducing it to mere

“meat” (Warren 2000, 137). Plumwood’s argument is significant because she places animals and humans on the same moral plane; she recognizes the continuity of being that topples the hierarchy in which (some) humans are on top and animals are below. I would emphasize, though, that this does not necessarily imply that it is ideal to eat an animal or to permit oneself to be consumed by a crocodile. Rather, we can interpret this account as accepting that life consists of tough choices and that we do not automatically have to decide in favor of certain human beings. Moral ideals are flexible precisely because they arise from an acceptance of reality as it is actually lived.

I am not suggesting that this sort of feminist vegetarianism is perfect. For example, one cannot simply decide to place oneself on a plane with animals and Plumwood does not suggest that it is this easy. Part of how one comes to think precisely of another as equal is by the relationships one establishes. Our relationship of superiority to animals is established, in part, by the fact that we eat and wear them and this congeals our identity as beings that are in charge. In “civilized society,” we decide their fate, and there is no greater marker of one’s power over another than to decide that they will die and for trivial purposes. And we should be clear; most Westerners who eat animals do not do so as a thoughtful expression of some deeply held aspect of our identity, but out of habit, convenience, or apathy.

Certainly, the disingenuous who read feminist contextual vegetarianism looking for excuses to continue ignoring the interests of animals can find them by distorting the spirit of the theory. In fact, it seems that many people want to defend eating animals by some appeal to “context.” “Context,” itself can become stretched to include even the most trivial considerations. However, this is not a particular weakness of the theory. Any theory that refuses to lay out a ten commandments of dos and don’ts because it acknowledges the complexities of life is similarly vulnerable. Any theory that appeals to the judgment and compassion of individual agents (as most interesting ethical theories do) rather than providing a paternalistic laundry list of norms can be similarly hijacked or evaded.

As I suggested above, it is a virtue of Plumwood’s theory that she begins to work out the ontological issues associated with feminist vegetarianism and the relationship of such issues to ethical concerns. If, as I am arguing here, eating practices should be thought of as deeply entwined with selfhood, as constitutive of it, then ontological concerns should be more prominent in discussions about vegetarianism. This can help us figure out, for ourselves at least, which sorts of contextual concerns are superficial and which are more profound. In particular, we need to work out the ethical implications for the sorts of identities various eating practices implicate. “You are what you eat” raises questions not only about how we establish and reproduce our identities through eating practices, but also about how we might, and perhaps should, go about changing them.

While it is unclear how much freedom we have to reinvent ourselves, surely, we ought not to conclude that the mere fact that one feels a practice to be central to one's identity entails that one is licensed to continue to engage in it. A murderer may feel essentially defined by killing, but, of course, that does not excuse the behavior. The point, then, is not to excuse pernicious behaviors by labeling them as essential to one's identity. In fact, part of what recognizing eating practices as identity helps us do is to notice something new about ourselves.

What it means to be an African American vegetarian likely differs from what it means to be an Iranian vegetarian or a white American vegetarian. The point is that these identities are shaped by the sort of ideological forces described above: the association of oppressed groups with animality; the various connections between the oppression of human and nonhuman animals; the construction of gender, race, class, nation, and imperialism (and resistance to it as well) through the raising, butcher, transport, and eating of animals; the political economies of food access and food security; and the everyday reinscription of white supremacy and gender inequities through the ingestion of meat and what it means. An authentically contextual feminist vegetarianism must recognize these structures and associations as a central piece of identity construction and transformation.

Western societies tend to construct us as meat eaters. Meat eating helps shape and is shaped by our racial, sexual, and class identities. Acknowledging this fact can lead us to appreciate the strength of our own and others' attachment to meat eating and help provide the impetus for a social critique to break or weaken those ties. Feminist contextual vegetarianism is not a call for a "special" whiteness so much as a call for complex reconsiderations on how we become and sustain who we are. For the white feminist, this can lead to a deconstruction of earlier ways of eating and being, if not a deconstruction of whiteness and its way of eating the world. The goal must be, then, to balance an appreciation for how eating practices are tied to identity with a critique of it. As we have seen, the connection between foodways and identity functions as a double-edged sword, both facilitating the rich expression of racial, ethnic, and class identities and limiting us in ways of which we may not be aware.

A context-sensitive feminist vegetarianism with a deep critique of the knotted relationship between racism, sexism, and anthropocentrism offers great promise. Certainly, no viable feminist vegetarianism can proceed without attempting to understand and dismantle such connections. As I have argued, this is so not only because of the complex ways that the philosophical ideas have been twisted and bound together, but also for practical reasons. As it stands now, many people still do not wish to be associated with the animal welfare and vegetarian movements. If white Western feminist vegetarians, even well-meaning ones, overlook or trivialize the historical and conceptual ties between racism

and anthropocentrism by failing to appreciate the connections between eating practices and racial identity, feminist ethical vegetarianism will be stalled at the class and color lines. However, we should not concede that ethical vegetarianism is an intrinsically racist, classist, or colonialist endeavor because doing so effectively allows the continued masking of the ways in which racism, classism, and imperialism have created foodways privileging the global elite. It also serves to divide and isolate the most oppressed, limiting human animals with respect to their ethical agency and access to quality food and leaving nonhuman animals where, for most of us, they have been all along—on our plates.

#### NOTE

1. Dunbar penned two poems named "Sympathy." The first appeared in Dunbar's first book, *Oak and Ivy*, which he distributed at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The other is the one that I refer to here, which was published in 1899 and which inspired the title of Maya Angelou's autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

#### REFERENCES

- Adams, Carol J. 1991. *The sexual politics of meat: A feminist-vegetarian critical theory*. New York: Continuum.
- . 1995. Comment on George's "Should feminists be vegetarians?" *Signs* 21 (1): 221–25.
- Bailey, Cathryn. 2005. On the backs of animals: The valorization of reason in contemporary animal ethics. *Ethics and the Environment* 10 (1): 1–17.
- Benson, Thomas L. 1983. "The clouded mirror: Animal stereotypes and human cruelty." In *Ethics and animals*, ed. Harlan B. Miller and William H. Williams. Clifton, N.J.: The Humana Press.
- Black Vegetarians. 2005. An interview with Kristin Candour and Tashee Meadows. *Black Vegetarians*. <http://www.blackvegetarians.org/features/newfeature.htm> (accessed September 23, 2005).
- Christie, Andrew. 2005. Shall I compare thee to a freaking cow? PETA throws bombs in New Haven. *Common Dreams*, August 19. <http://www.commondreams.org/views05/0819-25.htm> (accessed October 12, 2005).
- Coetzee, J. M. 1999. *The lives of animals*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Donovan, Josephine. 1995. Comment on George's "Should feminists be vegetarians?" *Signs* 21 (1): 226–29.
- , and Carol J. Adams, eds. 1996. *Beyond animal rights: A feminist caring ethic for the treatment of animals*. New York: Continuum.
- Dunbar, Paul Laurence. 1899/1993. *Sympathy*. In *The collected poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar*, ed. Joanne M. Braxton. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

- Fiddes, Nick. 1991. *Meat: A natural symbol*. London: Routledge.
- Gaard, Greta, and Lori Gruen. 1995. Comments on George's "Should feminists be vegetarians?" *Signs* 21 (1): 230–41.
- George, Kathryn Paxton. 1994. "Should feminists be vegetarians?" *Signs* 19: 405–34.
- . 2000. *Animal, vegetable, or woman? A feminist critique of ethical vegetarianism*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Griffin, Susan. 1979/2000. *Woman and nature: The roaring inside her*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.
- Heldke, Lisa. 2001. Let's cook Thai. In *Pilaf, pozole, and pad thai: American women and ethnic food*, ed. Sherrie A. Inness. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- . 2003. *Exotic appetites: Ruminations of a food adventurer*. New York: Routledge.
- Jones, LeRoi [Amiri Baraka]. 1966. Soul food. In *Home: Social essays*. New York: Morrow.
- MacKinnon, Catharine A. 2004. Of mice and men: A feminist fragment on animal rights. In *Animal rights: Current debates and new directions*, ed. Cass R. Sunstein and Martha C. Nussbaum. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mill, John Stuart. 1861/2002. *Utilitarianism*. 2nd ed. New York: Hackett Publishing Co.
- Negra, Diane. 2002. Ethnic food fetishism, whiteness, and nostalgia in recent film and television. *Velvet Light Trap* (50): 62–76.
- Newkirk, Ingrid E. 2005. PETA addresses anger over exhibit. [www.peta.org](http://www.peta.org) (accessed October 29, 2005).
- People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. Animal Liberation. PETA Online Exhibit <http://www.peta.org/AnimalLiberation/display.asp> (accessed October 29, 2005).
- Regan, Tom. 1985. *The case for animal rights*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Saletan, William. 2005. KKK vs. KFC: The difference between blacks and animals. *Slate*, August 18. <http://img.slate.com/id/2124601> (accessed October 26, 2005).
- Singer, Peter. 1975. *Animal liberation*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Spelman, Elizabeth. 1982. Woman as body: Ancient and contemporary views. *Feminist Studies* 8 (1): 108–31.
- Spiegel, Marjorie. 1996. *The dreaded comparison: Human and animal slavery*. New York: Mirror Books.
- Takaki, Ronald. 1993. *A different mirror: A history of multicultural America*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
- Tuana, Nancy. 1993. *The less noble sex: Scientific, religious, and philosophical conceptions of woman's nature*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Walters, Kerry S., and Lisa Portmess. 1999. *Ethical vegetarianism: From Pythagoras to Peter Singer*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Warren, Karen. 2000. *Ecofeminist philosophy: A Western perspective on what it is and why it matters*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Wherry, Edgar T. 1913. Does a low-protein diet produce racial inferiority? *Science* 37 (963): 908–9.
- Zafar, Rafia. 1999. The signifying dish: Autobiography and history in two black women's cookbooks. *Feminist Studies* 25 (2): 449–69.

Copyright of Hypatia is the property of Indiana University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.