

Notes on Vegan Camp

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IN 2014 INTERNATIONAL NEWS MEDIA DISCLOSED THAT PRINCE WILLIAM had called for the destruction of all items in the Buckingham Palace Royal Collection that contained ivory. This declaration came several years after the Prince of Wales had reportedly begun calling for ivory products, from thrones to fans, to be placed out of sight. The call for total destruction, praised by conservationist groups for promoting a zero-tolerance attitude toward the exploitation of endangered animal species, was interpreted as more than a merely symbolic act. Simon Pope of the World Society for the Protection of Animals (WSPA), for instance, was quoted in *The Independent* as saying, “In taking this strong stand, potentially thousands more people will follow [the Royal Family’s] lead, making the appealing notion of owning ivory a thing of the past in modern Britain” (qtd. in Morrison). The explosion of media coverage attending to the fate of historic ivory artifacts was accompanied by a pledge from forty-six nations, at the 2014 London Conference on the Illegal Wildlife Trade, to renounce the use of products derived from species threatened with extinction (Morrison).

Ivory, along with a smorgasbord of animal-derived products, from fur to leather to pearls, is an overdetermined marker of gender, class, and race, offering a wealth of symbolic connotations beyond its material presence.¹ However, these commodities also possess meaning beyond such symbolism, formed as they are from the dismembered remains of distinctly nonmetaphoric animal bodies. The question of how to recover these bodies from the patterns of human consumption, definition, and metaphor that render the animal an “absent referent” is the focus of Carol J. Adams’s seminal 1990 text *The Sexual Politics of Meat*. Adams’s work laid the foundations for a now dominant trend in vegan theoretical approaches to animal

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exploitation, typified by the popular maxim “If slaughterhouses had glass walls, everyone would be a vegetarian.” In this formulation, veganism is an awakening to, and recovery of, hidden knowledge. Eating meat is posited, by contrast, as an acquiescence to a speciesist culture reliant on the concealment and obfuscation of reality to sustain itself.²

The term *vegan* was coined in 1944 by Donald Watson, founder of the first Vegan Society, and his wife, Dorothy Watson (“Ripened by Human Determination” 1). In the years since, the prevalence of vegans and the intelligibility of veganism, as a commitment to living without the exploitation of animals, have increased rapidly across the developed world. Numerous studies detailing the impact on the environment of animal agriculture, mass meat consumption, and an unprecedented rise in global population have contributed to a significant shift in veganism’s cultural currency: from ineffectual fad to an urgent and essential response to a wide range of ethical, environmental, and social issues. Assertions of vegan identity have emerged under a shadow of death; over 150 billion farmed animals are now killed by human beings each year. Among those whose veganism is motivated primarily by ethical concern for animals, the scale of this mass slaughter often incites a traumatic encounter with structural violence that is intensified by the rhetoric of exposure and visibility in both mainstream and academic vegan discourses. For J. M. Coetzee’s iconic fictional vegetarian Elizabeth Costello, for example, knowledge of the suffering of nonhuman animals is a contaminating form of knowing that results in a sense of paralyzing alienation. In a much-quoted scene she laments to her son, “I no longer know where I am. I seem to move around perfectly easily among people, to have perfectly normal relations with them. Is it possible, I ask myself, that all of them are participants in a crime of stupefying proportions? Am I fantasizing it all? I must be mad!” (114).

By refusing to treat the all-too-real gravity of the global animal-industrial complex with the sobriety it seems to call for, this paper defines vegan camp as a survival strategy for individual vegans that offers an alternative mode of looking and witnessing, one that does not exclusively focus on revelations of violence.³ Vegan camp is an effort to avoid the paralyzing alienation experienced by Costello, a reorienting of perspective that reveals the utopian longings, community identification, and humor that can productively exist alongside ethical awareness. Such an approach is not applicable to all sites of violence or trauma, nor is it exempt from the perpetuation of structural inequalities. Certainly, vegan camp might be seen as appealing to a predominantly white, Western, and economically privileged viewer, an impression that aligns with a frequent critique of veganism more broadly: its failure to recognize the inequalities that often make vegan dietary practices unachievable for the disenfranchised.⁴ However, vegan camp nonetheless offers a productive means of recognizing the ways in which humor and parody can diffuse the seeming triumph of an anthropocentric culture over the nonhuman animal. Products of exploitation that appear to lionize human exceptionalism gain agency through a camp lens, mocking and destabilizing the security of the conceptual category of the human, a category that has long perpetuated damaging delineations between those who are considered eligible for full human status and those who are not, based on their race, gender, or class.

Vegan camp can be defined as an aesthetic lens and sensibility that, while acknowledging the extremity of animal suffering, seeks to draw sustenance from what has previously only caused pain. It emerges out of modernity and urban living, which are characterized by an ever-increasing distance from animals, and offers a riposte to the unprecedented scale of animal death and the lived experience of late capitalism in which

political resistance feels futile. In drawing pleasure from a state of mass violence, vegan camp provides sustenance for individual vegans while refusing a damaging sense of the vegan as a morally righteous “beautiful soul.” Indeed, with a camp enjoyment comes an acknowledgment of a seemingly inevitable individual complicity in global capitalist structures that support animal exploitation. A camp sensibility performs the inescapable complicity of vegan lives in mass suffering. This performance of complicity, put into practice below, provides a way of working through horror and continuing to fight for change in the face of the seeming impossibility of living an ethical life. In this sense, complicity affords a temporary mode of ethical affiliation, a way of occupying the present that acknowledges rather than castigates feelings of failure and insufficiency.⁵

While the royal renunciation of ivory is a far cry from a royal promotion of veganism, Pope’s comments on behalf of the WSPA exemplify the relation posited between renunciation and an eradication of desire: if out of sight, he suggests, ivory will no longer be “appealing” to the British public. This essay questions whether simply removing such products from view engages adequately with how and why they have historically provided pleasure.⁶ Instead of choosing to stand outside a culture responsible for our current decimation of animal life, vegan camp allows for simultaneous critique and enjoyment, reveling in the superficiality of the performance of normative humanity. Akin to the distinction Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick draws between paranoid and reparative reading practices, vegan camp turns away from a focus on exposing systemic violence and offers a way of accounting for the vegan pleasures and desires that often intersect in uncomfortable ways with mass violence. For Sedgwick, paranoid practices reinforce a narrative of exposure that resists and undermines reparative motives of pleasure and amelioration by assuming

that the one thing lacking for global revolution, explosion of gender roles, or whatever, is people’s (that is, other people’s) having the painful effects of their oppression, poverty, or deludedness sufficiently exacerbated to make the pain conscious (as if otherwise it wouldn’t have been) and intolerable (as if intolerable situations were famous for generating excellent solutions). (“Paranoid Reading” 144)

The equivalent paranoid revelation of violence in the field of animal studies is typified by Adams’s work on the absent referent (*Sexual Politics*) and Josephine Donovan’s monograph *The Aesthetics of Care* (2016).

Donovan builds on Adams’s work by theorizing the relation between aesthetics and an ethical vegan perspective through a focus on modes of looking and making visible. She calls for an “attentive love directed toward animals as moral beings—as subjects—in literature and art” and is critical of representational strategies that fail to attend to non-human animals and “require the sacrifice of the animal as an independent being to human aesthetic interests” (10, 48). Donovan’s “attentive love” draws on her interpretation of Simone Weil’s concept of “attention,” which she posits as central to an ethics and aesthetics of care. This kind of love “pay[s] attention to what is overlooked when the subject is framed according to prescribed value and aesthetic ideals, relegating the overlooked material to insignificance or indeed to nonbeing” (Donovan 7). For Donovan, such attention provides a way to extricate nonhuman animal subjects from the imaginative frameworks of anthropocentric culture, promising an awakening to their value as moral beings. An aesthetics of care “means *being with* the subjects, seeing through their eyes, feeling through their bodies . . . , not standing apart as an outside observer but [being] integrated into the same world as the ‘observed’” (92–93).

However, when it comes to the aesthetic experiences of ethical vegans, “seeing through [an animal’s] eyes” and “feeling through their

bodies” risk bringing about a relentless confrontation with horror and a sense of despair at the scale of human brutality. Ethical veganism often results in an inability to ignore the absent referent animal behind practices of animal exploitation. It is a peculiar way of seeing the world in its radical misalignment with cultural norms. However, this does not necessitate a renunciation of desire. Vegan camp is offered as an invitation to recognize motives of pleasure implicit in paranoid reading as a reparative practice that foregrounds alternative forms of knowing beyond an often debilitating focus on the immensity of global animal suffering. Sedgwick challenges the assumption of paranoid criticism that the violence it seeks to expose is invisible, an assumption that relies on a seemingly “infinite reservoir of naivete in those who make up the audience for these unveilings,” and she argues that, while often politically necessary, paranoid reading is only one way “among other ways, of seeking, finding, and organizing knowledge” (“Paranoid Reading” 141, 130). Reparative forms of criticism risk, by contrast, implication in a pretense of such infinite naivete. However, while paranoid criticism often masquerades as truth, it is revealed as ultimately no different from or more realistic than the reparative readings that “infuse self-avowedly paranoid critical projects” (129). Vegan camp is a reparative practice that can teach us, like queer camp, “the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them” (150–51).

Susan Sontag’s 1964 “Notes on Camp” is perhaps the most famous attempt to articulate what we mean by *camp*. For Sontag, camp is a sensibility that manifests itself as a “love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration” (275). It converts the serious into the frivolous, seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon and reveling in stylization and extravagance: “To perceive Camp in objects and persons is

to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role” (280). Pure camp objects are described as expressing a seriousness that has failed, containing a “mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naïve.” Put another way, “Camp is art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is ‘too much’” (283).

From Ernest B. Schoedsack’s *King Kong* (277) to feather boas (278) and “a woman walking around in a dress made of three million feathers” (283), spectral animal presences inform many of Sontag’s examples of camp. Adams and Donovan, as we have seen, highlight the need to recover and re-member the animals absent from such discourses: the birds, for instance, from whom the three million feathers would be derived. However, to do so would be to contradict what Sontag sees as the essence of camp: a disengaged refusal to see content beyond surface, expressive of a love “of things-being-what-they-are-not” (279). Instead of therefore seeing camp as antithetical to an ethical vegan aesthetics, we might interrogate the centrality of the overdetermined significations of dead animal bodies to much queer camp. If queer camp exposes the artificial and exaggerated stylization of what has traditionally been seen as the immutability of gender, vegan camp seeks to further disrupt ideas about what it means to be human. As Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen argue, challenging the boundaries of what constitutes the human is at the heart of the foundational texts of queer theory, “both in their attention to how sexual norms themselves constitute and regulate hierarchies of humanness, and as they work to unsettle those norms and the default forms of humanness they uphold” (186). Vegan camp offers a recognition and alternative means of knowing that what we see is not the animal, nor its suffering, but the artifice and spectacle of human exceptionalism.

The prominence of fake fur, PVC, and plastic feather boas in queer camp performances already gestures toward its engagement

with the artifice of the binary division between the human and nonhuman animal. The reproduction of products of exploitation in kitsch plastic substitutes destabilizes their seemingly fixed referential value as markers of gender, class, or race. Vegan camp involves a refiguring of our modes of looking, a way of seeing the world as a satirical spectacle designed to reinforce and encourage a commitment to cruelty-free living rather than retreating into a paralyzing sense of horror because of the impervious nature of violence. Vegan camp is also an important extension of queer camp, recognizing that heterosexual masculinity relies on the assumption of compulsory carnivorousness.⁷ Veganism is engaged in critiquing many of the same institutions as queer theory, challenging heteronormative ideas about what it means to be a sexed, gendered, and “speciesed” subject. It also offers alternative modes of affiliation and kinship, extending its remit to animals.

If queer camp is predominantly associated with an embrace of stereotypes of gay male femininity, I align vegan camp with the derogatory figure of the sexless vegan (often woman) who secretly desires meat. This is a trope pervasive across mainstream depictions of vegans, in which vegetarianism and veganism repeatedly rub up against lesbianism, frigidity, and hysteria and is linked to the negation and repression of both sexual and alimentary desires: from the “Beast People” of H. G. Wells’s *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) to disordered female eating in Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman* (1969) and the “vegetarian vampires” of Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* (2005).⁸ The several thousand violent and vitriolic online responses to the media sensationalization of “vegansexuality” in 2007 crystallize the gender politics behind this stereotyping and demonstrate the ready availability of the sexless vegan trope for mainstream derogation. *Vegansexuality*, a term used to describe vegans primarily sexually attracted to other vegans, emerged as a minor aspect of a report on the

dietary practices of New Zealanders published in 2007 (Potts and White) and became the subject of widespread international media coverage. Annie Potts and Jovian Parry summarize the responses to the public “coming out” of vegansexuals. Veganism, and the preference of a vegan partner, was castigated, primarily by meat-eating heterosexual men, as little more than “a superficial cultural veneer of misguided abstinence, beneath which powerful, ‘natural’ carnal urges roil unabated” (60). In this conception of female desire as a tempest of carnal longing for men and meat, veganism is positioned as a denial of supposedly natural and beneficial appetites—carnivorous and heterosexual—in favor of a misguided asceticism. However, the subsequent embrace of the vegansexuality label by many vegans attests that for individual practitioners there is often a converse relation between veganism and desire, in which their veganism enacts an active reclamation, and refiguring, of the latter.

Richard Twine’s conception of the “vegan killjoy” provides a useful framework for understanding such cultural marginalization of vegan desire. Using Sara Ahmed’s concept of the “feminist killjoy,” Twine explains that the figure of the vegan killjoy exposes a normative order of happiness as anthropocentric and “[i]n willfully speaking up . . . may engender anxiety, discomfort, guilt, and risks exclusion for doing so” (625). If the undermining of normative happiness figures as an important performative refusal, vegan camp reflects Twine’s optimism for the potential of the killjoy figure: “In performing a practice that attempts to *re-construct* happiness, pleasure and politics the vegan killjoy does what all politically wilful killjoys attempt to do: create new meanings and practices that underline the shared joy in living outside and beyond social norms once thought fixed” (638). Like identifying oneself as vegansexual, vegan camp involves a reorienting of desire away from the dictates of what Jacques Derrida calls carno-phallogocentric” culture (280).

What Twine terms a “politically wilful killjoy” contrasts with Sontag’s apolitical rendering of camp. For Sontag, “It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical” (277). However, while camp is not necessarily inherently political, its real-world application, as a means of belonging and community, pleasure and resistance, allows for the conversion of damaging stereotypes into witty commentary on social realities. As scholars such as Ann Pellegrini note, it can function as a reimagining of the world and creation of queer social agency, expressive of resilience and imagination in the face of vulnerability. It offers, in Pellegrini’s formulation, an invitation to “laugh at situations that do not seem all that funny” (179). Similarly, while vegan camp may seem to simply counter stereotypes of the vegan killjoy to placate meat-eating culture, it in fact actively challenges the dominant political order. For example, the performance of stereotypes of the sexless, repressed vegan parodies and plays with normative structures of desire.⁹ Insisting that of course vegans secretly desire and enjoy products of exploitation,¹⁰ vegan camp is a joke shared with carnivorous culture. However, vegans are laughing for different reasons. A camp enjoyment exposes to ridicule the obsessive desire to relentlessly enforce the supposed necessity of animal exploitation.

The moral condemnation and critique that might accompany an analogous attempt to formulate camp as a response to human rights violations risk implying that the incorporation of camp into the realm of animal rights diminishes the moral status of animals and fails to take seriously the scale of the violence we are confronting. In response, I suggest that the ironic detachment required for a camp aesthetics is possible because of an unavoidable mediation of affect attached to animal products. Those whose oppression we are witnessing are not the subjects of aesthetic or political discourse since we can only ever

speak for and on behalf of animals. Therefore, rather than strive toward Donovan’s notion of “*being with*,” we might use our detachment from the animal to critically evaluate our relations. This involves pleasure and enjoyment derived from satirizing human exceptionalism as much as an acknowledgment of our implication in its structures.

Without minimizing the significant relation between disgust and vegan transitions, or the importance of renunciation as a strategy of resistance, this essay suggests an alternative approach that embraces parody and performativity: a mode of asserting agency, and fun, in the face of relentless violence. Turning to three disparate sites of vegan camping—a piece of scrimshaw, Lady Gaga’s “meat dress,” and mock meats—I embrace miscellaneity over coherence, performing a camp act of salvage. The anomalous placing of nineteenth-century folk art alongside modern celebrity culture and vegan food products provides evidence of a range of possible vegan camp engagements, incorporating distinctions that Fabio Cleto draws between high and low camp, naive and deliberate camp, and apolitical and progressive camp. The juvenile scrimshander’s folk art provides an example of an unconsciously campy aesthetics, and my reading of it establishes a transformative camp mode of looking. Gaga’s meat dress, by contrast, is consciously invested in queer camp aesthetics, enabling an explication of the intersections between its conscious queer and unconscious vegan camping. Mock meats allow for an active embrace of the symbolic meanings of meat and an overinvestment in its surface appearance and taste. I conclude by addressing the variant political and ethical stakes involved in an enjoyment of artifacts of the historic British whaling industry, the freshly slaughtered cows composing Gaga’s dress, and vegan alternatives to meat.

Questioning whether a vegan camp is possible, or worth having, I ask if the enjoyment of camp objects might offer a productive move away from the sincerity and despair that often

characterizes vegan responses to violence. If, as Sontag argues, one is drawn to camp when one realizes that “sincerity” is not enough (288), might camp offer a means of enjoying art, fashion, and food in a way that speaks to the inconsistency of our moral attachments?

The Jolly Sailor

This essay began as a response to an invitation to speak about an image or object from the exhibition *Turner and the Whale*, on display at the Hull Maritime Museum.¹¹ The symposium sought to critically engage with the legacy of whaling, and it juxtaposed the visual pleasure generated by the images and objects in the gallery space with contemporary perspectives on an industry now largely condemned globally. For me as a vegan and scholar working on veganism, the task provoked questions about how one could or should look at these images and talk about them without simply decrying their status as legacies of atrocity.¹² If vegans are to learn from Ahmed and Twine, should

we embrace our killjoy status and characterize the exhibition as a mortuary, at worst, or a space of public memorial to violence, at best?

These questions came to the fore upon the discovery, in the collection, of an object that resisted straightforward condemnation: a delightfully kitsch piece of scrimshaw on permanent display at the Hull Maritime Museum (fig. 1).¹³ The museum’s online collection describes the figure, engraved on a sperm-whale tooth, as a “jolly sailor.” He stands legs akimbo in a pose of triumph, waving his straw hat in the air on board the fifth-rate warship the *Cornelia*, the name of which is proudly emblazoned on his shirt. With his posture both invoking and flaunting his resistance to a self-sacrificial crucifixion pose, he is surrounded by an excessive display of imperial ambition: the Royal Navy’s White Ensign, which he is planting on the deck of the ship, and a cannon prominently visible between his legs, a display of military strength as much as one of male virility.

Scrimshandering was a popular pastime on board ships in the nineteenth century, a period in which the whaling industry was crucial to the global economy. Jason Edwards suggests that the production of whale oil was part of an Enlightenment humanist tradition, “in which animals were not only categorically subordinate to human needs and wishes, but contributed to the Enlightenment’s actual visual technologies,” including candles and streetlights (“Vegan Viewer” 89). Scrimshaw thus constitutes a part of the material legacy of the human and animal labor that went into maintaining and developing human progress on land.

Patriotic portraits were a common subject for scrimshaw. However, among the wealth on display in Hull, this piece stands out for its incongruously gaudy aesthetics as much as for its potential for being read as a parody of male imperial ambition in the early nineteenth century. Whaling, along with Arctic exploration by sea, created national heroes out of the sto-



FIG. 1

Anonymous nineteenth-century portrait of a British sailor engraved on a sperm-whale tooth. Hull Maritime Museum, KINCM: 2005.2340.

ries of hardship, triumph, and disaster that came back with its male adventurers. As Jen Hill argues, “Exploring and mapping the Arctic was a self-conscious exercise in national masculine identity building” (3).

The gesture of engraving an image of male chauvinistic triumph onto the tooth of a slaughtered sperm whale suggests a performative excess, implying that the death of the whale was not itself enough of a souvenir of human exceptionalism. The tooth does not immediately appear as a grotesque relic of slaughter. Instead, the comic figure cut by the jolly sailor and his cannon generates pleasure, refusing the seriousness that often accompanies discussions of whaling today. Appropriating the jolly sailor as vegan camp is a way of refusing to experience horror or disgust at the canvas, of enjoying it for its surface performance of human exceptionalism, an enjoyment that parodies the object’s seeming earnestness and exposes the desperate drive to assert human dominance over the nonhuman animal to farce.

However, reading the jolly sailor as adulterated and earnest male bravado, revealed as performative by the discerning eye of the vegan viewer, risks overlooking the implicit queerness of such works. The unmistakably phallic tooth might also be read as a memorial to the homoerotics of the all-male whaling ship. The novels of Herman Melville are often noted for their transmission of the queer resonances implicit in the homosocial environment of nineteenth-century whaling.¹⁴ In a now famous scene in *Moby-Dick*, Ishmael describes the process of breaking down spermaceti:

Squeeze! squeeze! squeeze! all the morning long; I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me; and I found myself unwittingly squeezing my co-laborers’ hands in it, mistaking their hands for the gentle globules. Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly, loving feeling did this

avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking up into their eyes sentimentally; as much as to say, . . . Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us all squeeze ourselves into each other. (414–15)

Peter Coviello describes this merging of spermaceti and male body parts as “an unwriting of the body and of territorializations of the self,” a freedom offered in Melville’s novel, in which one can inhabit “a body less forcefully coded by race and sex, or the imperatives of alliance or sexuality both, and so . . . discover a body capable of new and thrilling alignments” (135).

Redressing the fact that “[s]cholars have not encouraged viewers to consider scrimshaw in Melville’s homoerotic terms,” an article online at the University of York’s *History of Art Research Portal* advances a queer mode of handling scrimshaw. Scrimshandering is seen as presenting a “perhaps equally erotic scene” in which “whalers would likely have been sat on the deck at a quiet moment . . . scrimshandering together, with the sperm whale tooth between their legs” (“Squeeze”). Incorporating the homoerotics of scrimshandering into a vegan camp reading acknowledges the ways in which the anxieties of sexual identity are embedded in the reproduction of a rigid hierarchical binary between human and nonhuman animals. Whether consciously or unconsciously campy, the jolly sailor offers a pleasurable parody of imperial masculinity and its association with compulsory heterosexuality.

A camp enjoyment of scrimshaw thus detaches us from the earnestness with which we might otherwise want to approach the remains of a slaughtered mammal and raises key ethical questions. Principally, are we obliged to exclusively bear witness to violence and condemn exploitation, or might we also foster an aesthetic enjoyment that cultivates pleasure instead of intolerable pain? What might it mean to enjoy such scrimshaw by refusing to take it seriously, or at least not *only* seriously?

Rather than an inherently problematic means of aestheticizing exploitation, vegan camp might be a way of detaching ourselves from earnestness in order to appreciate the spectacle and frivolity of human exceptionalism. Recoiling from the scrimshaw would demonstrate a paranoid reading practice that places the knowing vegan subject above the uncritical speciesist viewer. The laughter provoked by a vegan camp position acknowledges this condescension at the same time that it draws attention to an inescapable complicity in exploitation. An ironic detachment that accommodates aesthetic delight thus provides a reparative mode of reading that allows the ostensibly horrific to also offer something else: a strategy for destabilizing the solemnity of our attachment to human exceptionalism.

If the kitsch aesthetics of the jolly sailor cries out for a camp reading, the cultivation of a vegan camp lens that looks at an anthropocentric culture with ironic disdain facilitates an aesthetics of care radically distinct from that proposed by Donovan. It might then allow us to rethink our enjoyment of other works, such as the distinctly unexceptional whaling paintings of the Hull whaling school exhibited alongside the scrimshaw in the Hull exhibit. For Edwards, the violence of both the content and the materiality of the Hull paintings¹⁵ risks causing emotional breakdown and misanthropic seclusion (“Vegan Viewer”). I propose vegan camp as a means of harnessing the satiric potential of an otherwise exhausting misanthropy by turning the historic enjoyment derived from the whaling industry and its memorialization in painting against itself, by seeing in them a farcical display of the absurd lengths to which we, as human beings, have gone to in asserting a supposedly natural and divinely ordained human beneficence.

Lady Gaga’s Meat Dress

The 2010 MTV Video Music Awards saw the unveiling of Lady Gaga’s now infamous “meat

dress.” Designed by the Argentinian artist and fashion designer Franc Fernandez, the dress and matching shoes, hat, and bag were made from cuts of raw beef. The controversial and provocative move was designed, like many of Gaga’s fashion choices, with maximum publicity in mind. However, it also challenged and confused the consumer desires behind such publicity, undermining ideals of feminine sexual appeal by explicitly comparing the female body to a slab of rotting meat and undercutting ideas of sexually attractive pop icons as complicit in their visual consumption.¹⁶

Coupled with her flesh garments was Gaga’s appropriation of camp aesthetics and performance borrowed from drag queen culture. Accepting an award from the gay icon Cher, Gaga quipped euphemistically, “I never thought I’d be asking Cher to hold my meat purse” (“Lady Gaga Teases”). In an interview with Ellen DeGeneres on the same night, she responded to DeGeneres’s evident discomfort and admission that “I’m a vegan” with the comic retort “Well, that’s just my luck!” (“Lady Gaga on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*”). In this moment, the notion of Gaga’s desirability as a piece of meat is comically inverted, rejected by a lesbian and vegan icon. And yet Gaga’s meat-purse comment is an exaggerated performance of sexual availability to all genders. Two years later, in an interview with Oprah Winfrey, Gaga discussed the stench emitted by the dress as it began to decompose over the course of the night (“Truth”). Drawing attention to the putrid qualities of meat, her dress here comes to render both meat and women simultaneously disgusting *and* desirable to all.¹⁷

In addition to this somewhat crude nod to the attraction of repulsion and performance of a *too* available female sexuality, Gaga drew her outfit into a discussion of gay rights. In her interview with DeGeneres, Gaga stated that she was wearing the meat “for my fans, who are gay, who feel like bad kids. Who feel like they have . . . governmental oppres-

sion on them.” Gaga’s explanation makes her wearing of the mutilated remains of non-human animals into a metaphor, which she later elaborates by suggesting that her outfit represents the idea that if we don’t fight for our rights as queer people, “pretty soon we’re gonna have as much rights as the meat on the skin of our bones” (“Lady Gaga on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*”). Insisting that the dress was a direct protest against the United States military’s Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy, Gaga’s performance is as troubling in its invocation of the presumed willingness of animals to submit to their death as it is in its utilization of their remains to advocate for the right of queers to risk death through military service.

Recalling the ambiguity of the jolly sailor’s contextual campness, Gaga’s display of dead animal bodies, as a metaphoric statement on the respectively symbolic and literal consumption of female and military bodies, is juxtaposed to her identification as a meat eater and Fernandez’s disregard for the real live animals behind his materials.¹⁸ However, that Gaga was not choosing to make a conscious vegan statement is not what matters here. The comic irony of her assertion to DeGeneres that “it’s certainly no disrespect to anyone that’s vegan or vegetarian” rings true (“Lady Gaga on *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*”), regardless of intentionality, by parodying and destabilizing ideas about heteronormative male desires for both meat and women. The meat dress exposes the paradox of misogyny: the view that women are both desirable and disgusting. At the same time, the dress parodies the association between meat and masculinity by emphasizing the former’s simultaneous desirable and putrid nature.

J. Jack Halberstam has invested, at least theoretically, in the political potential of Gaga’s performances and fashion choices as a radical queer mode of feminist politics. Halberstam defines “gaga feminism” as “a form of political expression that masquerades as naive nonsense but that actually participates

in big and meaningful forms of critique. It finds inspiration in the silly and the marginal, the childish and the outlandish” (*Gaga Feminism* xxv). Arguing that Gaga functions as a locus for the coming together of childishness, alternative forms of family, and resistance to marriage, Halberstam expresses a sensibility that speaks to a feminist camp positionality. Gaga feminism is “a scavenger feminism that borrows promiscuously, steals from everywhere, and inhabits the ground of stereotype and cliché all at the same time” (5). Halberstam suggests that by wearing the meat dress, Gaga, albeit indirectly, “call[s] attention to the whimsy of personhood, the ways in which we all need to see each other anew, find new surfaces, name those surfaces differently, and confuse the relation between surface and depth” (26). The focus on surfaces refuses the symbolic values that assign personhood as a humanist Cartesian subjectivity. The surface of flesh does not return to a prediscursive site, in the recognition and return of the absent referent animal, but becomes visible as a surface-level depiction of the discursively constructed nature of our desires and identities. Acknowledging the fun and whimsy of this revelation is one of several possible vegan strategies for confronting the world. If, for Halberstam, Gaga offers a mode of radical feminist salvage, despite her ostensibly problematic public statements, I argue that vegan camp might also be able to salvage something from the reality of the dead animal body draped over her body. Camp provides a radical vegan aesthetic sensibility that focuses only on the surface of such materiality, a surface that reveals a precariously held together discourse of desire that extols the virtues of meat and masculinity

Gaga’s outfit was reincarnated in early 2018 as an edible meat dress for a plastic Barbie doll at Niu Pot, a Cantonese restaurant in New York. Appropriating Gaga’s meat dress and using the iconic symbol of oppressive female beauty standards, Barbie dolls are

wrapped in rib eye meat and presented to diners to dunk in a melon hot pot. As a viral image of the latest edible couture, the Barbie meat dress flaunts and emphasizes the campiness of Gaga's performance. Nowhere is Adams's theory of the sexual politics of meat more overt. However, to critique this merging of consumable female and animal bodies is to risk simply stating the obvious, ignoring its conscious evocation of the controversy surrounding Gaga's dress and assuming that other diners are unaware of its problematic nature. In refusing seriousness, in laughing at the absurdity of the edible dress, vegan camp might productively dwell in a space that consumes it differently, as image or object rather than food. As I note above, instead of desperately trying to counter stereotypes of the joyless vegan, vegan camp laughs at carnivorous culture's jokes, but for different reasons.

Anxieties about what it means to be in on the joke run throughout opinion pieces on Gaga's meat dress. As the blogger Laurie Penny comments, "It is a sly wink at that aspect of society and the joke is on us. . . . She is the one laughing." Similarly, a BBC article ruminating on the various ways of interpreting the dress concludes, "It could all add up to the most disturbing theory of all—that the joke is on us; her meat ensemble means nothing at all" (Winterman and Kelly). Within the anxiety that the joke is not *for* "us"—here the normative subject of heterosexual, Western capitalism—lies an anxiety about the inability to attach clear meaning to slaughtered animal remains, particularly in the face of Gaga's parodic performance of all that they *are* thought to mean. For the vegan viewer, such public anxiety becomes part of its camp spectacle.

Mock Meats

Mock duck is a tinned meat substitute that mimics the taste and texture of duck meat. Sold as an imported product in many East Asian supermarkets in the United Kingdom

and North America, this wheat gluten product is also replicated by Western vegetarian food brands and is distinctive for its mock-plucked appearance. The apparent desirability of this mock gooseflesh revels in, and parodies, the desirability of the fleshiness that is so often obscured in modern meat production. The lexical choice of *mock* plays on the product's status as both an imitation and an object of derision. Here, in its imitated state, meat becomes the absent object of scorn or mockery. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *mock-duck* as "a dish of pork, lamb, etc., prepared so as to resemble duck" and dates its first use to 1907 ("Mock-Duck"). By mimicking an existing, meat-based product that itself mimics duck, vegan mock duck, with its gooseflesh, comes to represent the indecipherable nature of animal remains. Thus, the desirability of a tinned vegan product with the texture of plucked skin challenges omnivores to confront the limits of their own desires and the instability of carnivorous appetites.

Similarly, the American vegetarian-food brand Vegetarian Plus offers a true-to-life "Vegan Whole Turkey," which uses textured soybean protein to fashion an imitation trussed turkey. The description on their Web site runs, "Healthy eating shouldn't mean sacrificing taste or visual appeal. A pleasing presentation is a big part of holiday celebrations, and our 'bird' has a beautiful table appearance, as well as a delicately subtle flavor and texture so close to real turkey, you'll look twice to make sure it's really vegan" ("Vegan Whole Turkey"). What is the "visual appeal" of a stuffed dead bird? As this marketing spiel elucidates, such aesthetics are bound to ideas of the family dinner table. A vegan camp aesthetics acknowledges these pleasures while inscribing an alternative vegan history onto traditional markers of gendered, ethnic, and national identity.

Just as animal bodies pervade Sontag's definition of camp, so too do gustatory metaphors. Camp, Sontag writes, "makes the man

of good taste cheerful, where before he ran the risk of being chronically frustrated. It is good for the digestion.” Furthermore, camp is “a *tender feeling*” (291), a phrase that describes both an affectionate attachment and something that is easily digestible. *Tender* also denominates a cut of meat from the weaker muscles of an animal. Taking the digestible to be a form of literal, rather than visual or metaphorical, consumption, a camp revelry in mock meats becomes a means of good digestion, a solvent of disgust that provides a way of eating well. The faculty of taste on which camp relies becomes a literal sensorial taste that embraces the undetectable distinctions in flavor between real and artificial animal bodies.

The enjoyment to be derived from the consumption of such mock products comes as much from their taste as from the fact that they promise consumption without guilt. Mock meat products allow for a nostalgic enjoyment of food items renounced as part of vegan transitions. Furthermore, the ambiguous space between the real and the fake makes it possible to deceive meat eaters, a performance of bad hospitality demonstrating that their attachment to meat is based on ideological constructs rather than any inherent property of the dead animal bodies. Vegans’ enjoyment of mock turkey, with mock meat and mock cheese, provides a carnivalesque performance of the fluidity of such culinary terms. This invites a spectacle of camp excess, of food that is not quite what it seems. It also highlights the absurdity of industrial food production in an age of consumer capitalism, in which every product is expected to possess a distinctly recognizable surface aesthetics in a production line of identical replicas. Vegan camp is a performative relishing of such desires, a way to feast and enjoy their replicability without harming other living beings.

A further manifestation of anxieties around the challenge posed by vegan mock products is found in the virulent responses to the increasing popularity of plant-based

milks, testifying to the anxieties that cluster around camp destabilizations of the linguistic referents of animal products. For example, the Wisconsin senator Tammy Baldwin’s 2017 bid for reelection saw her sponsor the Dairy Pride Act, a bill that appropriated the language of gay rights and promised to “protect the integrity of milk” (“Dairy Pride Act”). Similarly, a 2017 European Union ruling declared *cheese* a protected term. Alexander Anton, secretary general of the European Dairy Association, described the ruling as “a good day for dairy, a good day for European citizens and a good day for Europe,” stating that “the makers of such plant-based products are not allowed to misuse our dairy terms for marketing their products” (McClean). In the world of vegan camp, the “misuse” of the linguistic signifiers *meat* and *dairy* is crucial. As is the need to question whom Anton’s “our” refers to.

Mock meat and plant-based dairy products reduce animal products to their surface aesthetics. They offer too a specific instance of vegan community building, providing foods that “belong” to vegans, of which vegans share the joke about their own complex relation to mass culture and normative dietary habits. However, the potential camp spectacle of mock meats also more commonly finds itself contained and commodified within the global capitalist marketplace. For example, the advent of the Impossible Burger, made by the American food company Impossible Foods, sees the marketing of a vegan substitute burger aimed at meat eaters. Describing their product as a “carnivore’s dream” (qtd. in Stephenson-Laws), Impossible Foods offers a burger that, through genetic modification of plant molecules in a lab, not only looks and tastes like beef but “bleeds” like it too (Stephenson-Laws). Here, mock meats are claimed by and for carnivores, not challenging the necessity of meat but finding the closest possible alternative in an environmentally threatened world. The North American fast-food giants White Castle and Burger King, hardly famed for

their animal-rights records, now serve the Impossible Burger, offering the environmentally conscious meat eater a consumer alternative that does not threaten to disrupt or overturn an investment in carnivorousness.

Nonetheless, the development of a bleeding veggie burger promotes the idea that expectations of taste and visuality are more important than the origins of meat. While the radicalism of a camp revelry in mock meats is muted by such developments, I suggest that a vegan camp perspective derives pleasure from an appreciation of the spectacle of artifice and parody that lingers in such products. Therefore, neither intrinsically camp nor free from implication in the horrors of industrial animal agriculture and its key profiteers, bleeding mock meat burgers and plant-based milk might be claimed by a vegan camp viewer as a signal of the riotous excess of meat-eating cultures. While at risk of conforming to narratives that promote the desirability and necessity of consuming animal products, mock meats also, when viewed through a vegan camp lens, posit that meat, as the main constituent of meals, a primary source of protein and strength, and an emblem of masculine virility, is prosthetic.

The scrimshaw, meat dress, and mock meat products represent a range of different camp modes. The scrimshaw, featuring an anonymous sailor's engraving, camps male heroic desire. Lady Gaga offers a self-conscious performance of her own readily available, consumable, and (un)desirable female sexuality. Mock meat provides a form of vegan camp that seems the least ethically problematic in its refusal to partake in the exchange of real animal corpses. The excessive replication of true-to-life faux meat comes to mirror the very excess of flesh eating, an earnest vegan attempt to reproduce what is repudiated that empties the term *meat* of its meaning. These differences make it unclear whom exactly vegan camp is taking aim at.

A vegan camp reading, as defined thus far, emphasizes the performative nature of human identity as it pertains to the assertion of human exceptionalism. However, whereas queer camping is often invested in a reclamation and survival strategy of gay men and for gay men, there is a distinction between camp as a performance of a stigmatized vegan self and camp as a performance of the stigmatized selfhood of nonhuman animals.

Potts's essay "The Mark of the Beast: Inscribing 'Animality' through Extreme Body Modification" might offer an alternative camp strategy for performing human exceptionalism to excess. Potts looks to individuals who have used extreme body modification to appear more animal: "This new 'brute fashion' inscribes the animal on the human at the same time as it 'freaks out' the establishment, disrupting our ideas about humanity." The late Stalking Cat is a well-known example, famous for his world-record-breaking use of body modification to resemble a tigress, including facial tattooing, subdermal implants, silicone injections, and bifurcation of the upper lips. The result might indeed, as Potts argues, "dra[w] attention to the plasticity of the human body and the beauty of the other" (152). However, it does little to confuse or distort the boundary between human and animal. Stalking Cat remains, through his continued posthumous presence online, a human being, and the extensive and invasive surgical procedures function only as striking visual evidence of the gulf that separates him from the animal. We might thus view Stalking Cat as parodying the excess of human desires to embody and incorporate the other. This reading suggests a form of vegan camp that laughs at the rigid binary maintained between human and nonhuman animals as much as at the futile attempts to dissolve such species distinctions.

At the same time that it refuses to take seriously human exceptionalism, vegan camp fails to take species equality seriously, particularly within the social politics of camp style.

Vegan camp is resolutely invested in the human, and in vegan identity politics, in ways that risk ignoring the animals that veganism seeks to protect. However, such a focus on the vegan over the animal is perhaps a necessary way of avoiding the symbolic consumption of the nonhuman. As Tim Dean argues, in relation to the queer subculture of barebacking, we might theorize an alternative mode of queer ethics based on the impersonal, “in which one cares about others even when one *cannot* see anything of oneself in them” (25). In the ironic detachment of vegan camp we see only the absurdity of a human speciesism whose obsession with killing, consuming, and displaying the slaughtered bodies of animals thwarts attempts at mutual understanding.

How might we access vegan camp or occupy a vegan camp position? When it comes to scrimshaw and the bovine bodies adorning Gaga, do we have to sacrifice our moral intuition and the disgust that so often plays a part in regulating and reinforcing vegan lives? When camp is not a response to violence against fellow human beings, as queer camp is, but rather a response to violence against non-human animals, can we take on the agency to mock and enjoy? Similar questions have been raised during contentious debates about camp in queer theory: is camp a progressive challenge to rigid gender norms or, as Andrew Britton contends, is it a “solvent of context, . . . a means by which . . . analysis is perpetually postponed” (140)? Britton argues that camp fetishizes objects within a reassuring vacuum and that, in the case of its challenge to patriarchal oppression and misogyny, “‘camping around’ is . . . often little more than being ‘one of the boys’ by pink limelight” (142).

There is of course a certain elitism or stereotypical vegan smugness embedded in vegan camping. This sense of superiority can be seen in the suggestion that vegan viewers are more awakened than Gaga or the working-class juvenile scrimshanderer. This is a risk that must be acknowledged. However, vegan-

ism involves seeing the world differently and envisaging a future that is often antithetical to the futurism and normative happiness of culture at large. Vegan camp, by laughing in the face of horror, forces an acknowledgement of the complicity of vegans in systems of global exploitation. Like queer camp, which laughs at gender norms while performing a certain complicity in misogyny, vegan camp is not just about a high-horse superiority. Instead of disavowing complicity or self-righteous critique, vegan camp uses the structures in which it is implicated to reimagine a relation to the material world, offering a possible survival strategy for vegans: the ability to revel in the instability of human attachments to meat, in the paradoxical nature of the desire to consume and understand nonhuman animals, and to accept the impossibility of a pure or complete veganism. In refusing to look beyond the surface, vegan camp laughs at the suggestion that dead animal bodies could constitute a position so central to notions of human identity.

To conclude, camp aesthetics, akin to their origins in the queer closet, function as a strategy that allows for pleasure within the pain of acknowledging a violence we are powerless to stop. In keeping with Sontag’s conclusion that camp sees something as “good *because* it’s awful” (274), vegan camp reclaims the humor within an otherwise relentless horror. It emerges from the realization and knowledge of systemic injustice and revels in destabilizing the human as we know it.

Adams suggests that the inevitable grief experienced by vegans in an animal-destroying culture is a “gift of awareness” that should be neither privatized nor made a source of shame (“Feminized Protein” 40). While laughter, or a feigned indifference, in the face of horror is often an unavoidable privatization of grief that vegans must choose in order to live among nonvegans, vegan camp incorporates a complicity in the enjoyment of violence, acknowledging the insufficiencies of a vegan position. Indeed, vegan pleasures and

vegan desires do exist and are often implicated in complex ways in the practices of institutions and systems we abhor. The resultant laughter is necessary if we are to commit to the possibility of a better future. It is a utopian vision rather than the expression of the beautiful soul in the now, and as such it must embrace its own denigration in order to survive the present.

However, it remains to be seen whether any distinct subcultural vegan camp or drag scene will emerge. Disgust, horror, and emotional trauma are far more characteristic of my own personal responses to both literal and symbolic violence against the nonhuman than is the playfulness suggested here. Often such responses are difficult, if not impossible, to overcome.¹⁹ However, following Sedgwick, I suggest that implicit to a vegan confrontation with traumatic violence is a motive of pleasure and the desire for survival in a culture that sustains neither ethical vegans nor the animals to whom their ethical concern extends. Vegan camp might therefore be seen as an aspirational gesture that looks to a future in which products of exploitation will no longer have the power to wound.

Whatever the case, we undoubtedly need vegan camp. We need it as a vegan survival strategy in a world that confronts us daily with what Gary Steiner describes as “a gnawing horror born of a recognition of what is being done to billions of animals *right now* and of the seeming futility of one’s decision” (63). We need it as a way of maintaining a queer vision for an alternative future world without descending into despair. And we need it as an aesthetic strategy that enables the revelation of the inconsistencies and complexities of human desire.

NOTES

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1. For a critical animal studies perspective on ivory, see Edwards, “*Ex Omnia Conchis?*”

2. Increasingly restrictive “ag-gag” laws in the United States forbid activists from taking video recordings of, or otherwise documenting, what happens in slaughterhouses and demonstrate how the logic of concealment is also deeply embedded in the meat industry itself.

3. Simon Amstell’s 2017 film *Carnage* makes clear that humor can be an appropriate and powerful strategy for conveying pro-vegan messages. His mockumentary, following a group of young vegans in 2067 confronting a past carnist culture, embraces a multitude of vegan stereotypes. For instance, his fictional future vegans respond with a hyperbolic display of emotion when confronting a past love of cheese, and one particularly comic scene sees them vomit at the sight of Nigella Lawson.

4. Veganism’s association with whiteness comes despite important work on veganism’s intersections with critical race studies and the decolonization of diet. See, e.g., Harper; Ko and Ko.

5. Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* elaborates the significance of a rethinking of failure for queer lives.

6. Carrie Hamilton’s “Mourning Leather” raises a related point, asking how vegans in the sexually marginalized Leatherfolk community might mourn the loss of both the nonhuman animals killed for leather and the human pleasure derived from the products of their exploitation.

7. See Adams, *Sexual Politics*, and Derrida’s explication of “carno-phallogocentrism” (280).

8. Similarly, Westwood outlines the trope of the “disappearing vegan,” in which vegans are associated with a rhetoric of restriction, privation, and refusal. For more on vegan vampires, see Stanescu.

9. In *Celibacies: American Modernism and Sexual Life*, Kahan draws attention to the ways in which celibacy has functioned across history as a “site of radical politics, of feminist organizing, of black activism, queer citizenship, and other leftist interventions” (153).

10. We might also consider a possible comparison between representations of vegan desire and the representation of sexuality in animal agriculture. Rosenberg demonstrates the legal and linguistic negation of bestial practices in agricultural contexts, dividing sexual contact with animals into two distinct camps: “bestial sexual abuse against companion animals and aseptic, desireless animal husbandry in agricultural contexts” (486).

11. *Turner and the Whale* was on display at the Hull Maritime Museum from October 2017 to January 2018.

12. Lignou-Tsmanantani analyzes the ways in which we might approach scrimshaw as an image of nonhuman atrocity.

13. *Scrimshaw* refers here to engravings on whale bones or teeth, primarily carried out on board ships by sailors.

14. See, e.g., Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, and Coviello.

15. Edwards notes that J. M. W. Turner used spermaceti oil in his canvases (“Vegan Viewer” 89). He argues that we must “look for animal traces not only in the form of their representations, but of their material presence as the so-called raw materials of paint, and in the hog-, badger-, and horse-hair brushes, with which nineteenth-century pictures were painted, as well as in the spermaceti candles which enabled painters and their audiences to see” (89–90).

16. This is akin to what Rosenberg notes as the transformation of animals, in the meat-industrial complex, into “flesh that can be touched but cannot be violated” (498–99).

17. This is not the first example of meat’s being used for fashion and art. See, e.g., Jana Sterbak’s 1987 sculpture *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic* and Carolee Schneemann’s iconic performance-art piece *Meat Joy*, first staged in 1964.

18. In an interview with *Meatpaper*, Fernandez responds to the question of whether making the dress changed the way he felt about meat by saying, “I’m Argentinean. Even when I told my family, they said, ‘That’s great.’ It was never weird for me or odd” (qtd. in Smith).

19. Salih describes the difficulty she has bearing ethical witness when it comes to meat; she finds herself unable to respond with anything but tears to the presence of animal remains.

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