Vegan Intersections: Literature, History, Theory

Wednesday 2nd - Friday 4th April 2025
Hosted by the University of Geneva

ABSTRACTS

Yagmur Su Kolsal, University of Münster, Germany

"The Vegan Politics of the Carnivorous Feminist in Fiction"

Thirty-four years after the publication of *The Sexual Politics of Meat* by Carol J. Adams and the translation of Jacques Derrida's "Eating Well" into English, the predominance of a form of carno-phallogecentrism that associates meat-eating with manliness, and draws cultural parallels between the objectification of women and various forms of animal exploitation, remains mostly unchallenged in popular imagination. However, in the recent years, feminist portrayals of meat consumption as a means of reclaiming lost agency and suppressed desires have been gracing our screens and book pages. While *Ginger Snaps* (2000), *Jennifer's Body* (2009), *The Lure* (2015), and *Raw* (2016) are earlier 21st century examples of the portrayal of carnivorous and cannibalistic consumption as feminist tools in film, in the first half of the 2020s, literary works that utilize similar consumption habits as central metaphors have gained relative popularity.

This article interprets this recourse to "animal flesh" as an attempt at establishing female subjecthood in an era of increasing individualism. Through an analysis of the employment of the carnivorous feral woman in Chelsea G. Summer's *A Certain Hunger* (2019), Rachel Yoder's *Nightbitch* (2021), and Lottie Hazell's *Piglet* (2024), this article argues that rather than offering an alternative to contemporary carnist and patriarchal ideologies, these works remain positioned within the dominant carnist discourse that can imagine feminist resistance only in terms of a reversal of roles without the dismantling of the sexual politics of meat that has necessitated the emergence of this trope in the first place.

Keywords: the female cannibal, carnophallogocentrism, carnism, contemporary fiction, food

Yagmur Su Kolsal (she/her) is a PhD student in the discipline of American Studies at the Graduate School Practices of Literature at the University of Münster, Germany. In her dissertation project, Su studies the dark academia fiction as a literary phenomenon in dialogue with the neoliberal corporate university and the role aesthetics play in the construction and the appeal of it. Su holds an M.A. in English Literature with a thesis titled "Hauntological Engagements With the Haunting House Motif in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* and Helen Oyeyemi's *White Is for Witching*" from the Middle East Technical University, Turkey. Her research interests include contemporary literature, 21st century American fiction, popular culture, horror and the Gothic, and the campus novel.

Roundtable, “Veganism, is it a fad?”

Deborah Madsen (moderator), Aïcha Bouchelaghem, Kimberly Frohreich, Bryn Skibo
Organized with the Geneva Festival Histoire et Cité

The increasingly dominant trend towards a vegan diet promotes the idea that veganism is a contemporary phenomenon. In fact, the philosophy of veganism can be traced from classical Greek and Rome to the European Enlightenment and to the emergence of the United States as a republic founded on the principles of justice and equality. The FNS project entitled “Vegan Literary Studies: An American Textual History, 1776-1900,” hosted by the English Department at UNIGE documents the development of ethical vegan theory and practice throughout the long nineteenth-century. One of the aims of the project is to sensitize the public to this long tradition that stands behind so many of today's practices of consumption.

The participants are all past or present members of the FNS project research team. They will present three contemporary points of controversy for discussion – “fake meat,” vivisection and animal experimentation, and alternatives to animal-based materials for clothing and ornamentation – highlighting the historical antecedents that have been identified by the project research. Two of the interventions will be presented in French; two in English; the Q&A will be bilingual.

Ljubica Matek, University of Osijek, Croatia

“Irony and Ethics: Veganism in T. C. Boyle’s 'Carnal Knowledge' ”

The paper aims to show that Thomas Coraghessan Boyle’s short story “Carnal Knowledge” (*Without a Hero and Other Stories*, 1994) relies on irony and humorous tone to facilitate a form of ideological deconstruction. In the story, veganism is represented as a contentious concept, vegan characters as “monstrous” (as per Quinn 2021), and the non-vegan autodiegetic narrator as irreparably influenced by carnophallogocentric thinking. The meaning of the story’s archaic central term (and title), carnal knowledge, which euphemistically denotes sexual intercourse, pervades the story due to the narrator’s male gaze directed at the female protagonist, but it also connotes the ingestion of meat. The narrator’s decisions are motivated by hunger both for a meaty meal and for sex with Alena. Equating human body with flesh, and coitus with the act of eating echoes Margaret St Clair’s humorous assertion that “[i]ncorporation [being] the ultimate intimacy . . . [t]here is no form of carnal knowledge so complete as that of knowing how someone tastes” (1). Despite the lack of the protagonists’ spiritual growth or ideological change, the story’s representation of events fosters reparative criticism of both vegan practices and attitudes to veganism, as well as of the general notion of unchecked consumption. Stereotypes of men who deal with existential doubts by giving in to casual sex or overeating, and of radically violent activists whose actions frequently backfire highlight the performative nature of our desires as well as the futility of both exploitation (for sex or food) and exclusionary perspectives, since neither hedonism nor puritanism can offer a fully ethical mode of being. In that sense, by ironizing the characters’ motivation and behaviour, the story “draws metafictional attention to the role of texts in constructing our ethical lives” (Quinn 26), inviting both scrutiny and acceptance.

Keywords: T. C. Boyle, “Carnal Knowledge,” irony, vegan activism, ethics

Dr. Ljubica Matek is Associate Professor in the Department of English and the Director of the Centre for Popular Culture at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Osijek, Croatia. She teaches courses in literature at undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate levels. She was a Fulbright Fellow at the Study of the U.S. Institute in Contemporary American Literature at the University of Louisville, Kentucky in 2008, an Erasmus+ teaching fellow at Lancaster University in 2019, and an Erasmus+ research fellow at the Complutense University of Madrid also in 2019. Her research interests are broad and include Gothic literature, eco-fiction, film, and popular culture. She is the author of *English Literature in Context. From Romanticism until the Twentieth Century* (Filozofski fakultet Osijek, 2020).

Dan Abitz, Emory University, USA

"Women's Utopian Literature and the Vegan Politics of the Future"

In this project, I explore different vegan futures in women's utopian literature from the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In particular, I examine the meat-less diets in Annie Denton Cridge's *Man's Rights* (1870), Mary E. Bradley Lane's *Mizora* (1880), Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett's *New Amazonia* (1889), Rokeya Hossain's "Sultana's Dream" (1905), and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915). Rather than treat veganism as a mere aspect of each author's utopian plan, I argue that veganism is the central facet of each author's feminist utopian politics. As Maureen O'Connor (2013) notes, "Vegetarianism was often asserted in the nineteenth century beginning with the Romantic period, as a form of rebellion against the dominant culture, a critique masculinity [and] the sequestering logic of imperialism" (29). However, I want to complicate this view by reading each text's veganism against a glaring omission from its ecological model: animals.

My project begins with an overview of the intertwined histories of women's rights and animal rights movements in the nineteenth century. In this introduction, I also review the concomitant connection between veganism and utopianism. From there, I consider the particular vegetarian diets, mechanical inventions, and food innovations in each of these novels in the context of worlds with either no animals or a very few (mistreated) ones. While these authors explicitly understood veganism as an anti-masculinist and anti-colonialist political practice, they could not imagine a cruelty-free world that also included non-human animals. While we would be right to question the "utopianism" of such futures, I ultimately argue that these novels proffer a foreboding look into a future vegan politics in our world of rapidly accelerating climate catastrophe. That is, what difficult questions about our own twenty-first-century veganism are reflected by these failed futures?

Keywords: Veganism, feminist utopianism, Victorian literature, vivisection, animals

Dan Abitz is a Postdoctoral Teaching Fellow in Emory's Writing Program. Before coming to Emory, he served as the Associate Director of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association for seven years, and he was fortunate enough to teach first-year writing at institutions such as Georgia State University, University of Central Arkansas, and Susquehanna University. His scholarly work can be found in Nineteenth Century Gender Studies, *The Comparatist, Victorians*, *Henry James Review*, *Women's Studies*, the *Palgrave Encyclopedia of Victorian Women Writers*, as well as edited collections such as *Utopia and Dystopia in the Age of Trump* and *Animated Mischief: Essays on Subversiveness in Cartoons Since 1987.* He is the treasurer of the Victorians Institute.

Burak Sezer, Technical University Dortmund, Germany

“Veganism and Solidarity”

This essay argues that solidarity takes centerstage in vegan modes of being in the world. Taking the cue from Timothy Morton’s notion of solidarity in *Humankind* (2017), I argue that veganism operates against what Morton calls “agrilogistics,” an exploitative form of modern-industrial agriculture whose logic bleeds into well-known ontological binaries, such as human/animal or nature/culture. Whereas agrilogistics is prone to foster parasitism – the “one” side living at the expense of the “other” – solidarity translates these relations of domination into those of symbiotic coexistence. Furthermore, this notion of solidarity will be extended into one that encompasses relations of hierarchy among humans as well, especially across class divisions in urban areas. This is necessary insofar as many discussions revolve around making animal products more expensive (via pricing) or more difficult to obtain (via faraway free-range farmers, fishers, or hunters with high standards of “animal welfare”) in order to curb consumption. However, that would allow affluent or otherwise privileged classes to maintain their diet while others are compelled to change theirs.

Against this background, vegan solidarity argues that it is an ethical obligation, especially for the upper-middle class, to outright refuse to eat non-vegan food, regardless of pricing, accessibility or “animal welfare.” Adding to Benjamin Westwood’s considerations of vegan refusal (2018), these theoretical considerations are then used to critique Donna Haraway and Martha Nussbaum’s recent contributions to human-animal studies. Haraway argues that it is ethically defensible to eat the meat obtained by trained hunters who “practice[] love for the animals they kill” (299), while Nussbaum claims that “[v]egans, like abolitionists, deny the possibility of mutually beneficial symbiosis” (221), instead aiming for merely a “mostly vegetarian diet” (169). I argue that both apologies for non-veganism falter in the face of the notion of vegan solidarity. Being in a privileged position to know a well-trained hunter, or being able to afford to buy ecologically sustainable fish, cannot constitute the ethical basis for a behavior that ought to translate into broader societal imperatives.

Keywords: veganism, solidarity, intersectionality, agrilogistics, classism

Burak Sezer is assistant professor of the chair of American Literature and Culture at the Technical University Dortmund, Germany. In 2015, he graduated from the University of Rochester, New York, with an MA in Comparative Literature. In 2017, he obtained a *Staatsexamen* in English, Mathematics, and Educational Sciences at the University of Cologne. As a scholarship holder of the a.r.t.e.s. Graduate School for the Humanities in Cologne, he then finished his PhD in American Literature with a dissertation on the role of mathematics in the work of Thomas Pynchon in 2022, forthcoming with Camden House. Currently, he pursues a habilitation project on the literary depiction of animals in pre-19th century American literature.

Aïcha Bouchelaghem, University of Geneva, Switzerland

“Dick Gregory’s Healthist Anti-Racist Vegan Thought”

Central to recent intersectional vegan theorizing has been to the challenge to “humanity” as the desirable existential standard. More generally, animal ethics and Black studies have called for post-anthropocentric methodologies. Yet tracing a genealogy of intersectional veganism(s) also requires analyzing how the “human,” while a questionable construct, has contributed to Black vegan thought. Specifically, “human” individual perfectibility – especially through health – significantly informs African American vegan discourse in the 1970s, as illustrated by the comedian and Civil Rights activist Dick Gregory’s *Dick Gregory’s Natural Diet for Folks Who Eat* (1973). Gregory’s work reconciles early American veganisms with the anti-vegan sentiments of some nineteenth-century African Americans.

While anti-slavery veganism dates to eighteenth-century Quakers Benjamin Lay and Joshua Evans, these early theorizations overlooked (enslaved) African Americans. In the autobiographies of Charles Ball (1836) and Harriet Jacobs (1861), denial of access to meat is even said to imperil health and human status (i.e., recognition as a full legal subject). In contrast, the discourse of nineteenth-century African American activist David Ruggles concurs with another strand of early American vegan theorists – alternative health professionals – through their shared interest in the medical treatment hydrotherapy or the water-cure. Historically, then, health achieved through self-reliance is an empowering rhetoric, as African Americans’ lives were neglected by enslavers. In the 1970s, Gregory echoes this observation, arguing that optimal nutrition still correlates with race (and class). His advocacy reiterates a belief in self-help in the face of untrustworthy systems. Through the trope of individual health improvement, then, Gregory constructs a racially inclusive implied readership. Dick Gregory’s *Natural Diet* combines a humanist rhetoric of physiological self-perfectibility with the vegan principle of non-violence, already preached by the earliest North American intersectional vegans and which Gregory first adopted through his Civil Rights work with Martin Luther King, Jr. The case of Gregory thus suggests that a rhetoric that discursively elevates the “human” can coalesce with a radical vegan anti-racist politics.

Keywords: veganism, intersectionality, anti-racism, health, humanism

Aïcha Bouchelaghem is a Teaching and Research Assistant, and doctoral candidate in American Literature at the University of Geneva (Switzerland). Her research focuses on the rhetorical functions of human-animal relations and of animality more abstractly in Antebellum African American slave narratives. Her doctoral project contends that, beyond expressing the Abolitionist idiom according to which enslaved African Americans are treated “like animals,” autobiographical slave narratives acquire credibility by representing other-than human animals as more-than-human, i.e., as operating beyond “human” strength, cognition, and morality. In addition to her doctoral project, from 2022 to 2024 Aïcha researched U.S. veg*n and animal welfare discourses of the long nineteenth century, as part of the research project *Vegan Literary Studies: An American Textual History, 1776-1900* (PI Deborah Madsen). Her academic interests extend to the intersection of Black Studies with Human-Animal Studies or Critical Animal Studies, African American literary theory, Fat Studies, and Literary Addiction Studies.

Irati Jiménez-Pérez, University of the Basque Country, Spain

“The Usefulness of the Figure of Talking Nonhuman Animal Characters in the Current US Animal Rights Context”

The representation of nonhuman animals in literature has always been characterised by a process of anthropomorphisation. On the one hand, this may be due to the traditional human exceptionalism present in Western cultures in most historical periods; and, on the other, to the difficulty that humans face in imagining other ways of being. Although fiction was seen during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as key to raise awareness about animal welfare, many interpreted these works from a human point of view, pointing out that “the animal is overlaid with metaphors of human characteristics or becomes the bearer of purely human concerns” (Burt 2007, 332). These fictional nonhuman animal stories ended up being understood as depictions of other human cases of discrimination, such as sexism or racism. In this paper, I will explore the attempt to overcome anthropomorphisation constituting a key action in the battle against human exceptionalism. In order to do so, due to its poor performance in the last Animal Protection Index, I will take the United States as a case study.

Keywords: anthropomorphisation, nonhuman animal characters, talking animals, US animal literature, human-animal relationships

Irati Jiménez-Pérez has a degree in Translation and Interpreting from the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU) and a master's degree in English Literary and Cultural Studies and its Social Impact from the National University of Distance Education (UNED). During the final project for her Masters degree, she conducted research on the representation of the bear in North American literature. Currently, under the supervision of Dr. Ángel Chaparro Sáinz, she is working on her doctoral thesis at the University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU). Her project is framed by Critical Animal Studies and focuses on literary critical analysis of nonhuman animals and the development of new narrative forms of nonhuman representation.

Anna James, Franklin College, Indiana, USA

“Notes Towards the Vegan Elegy”

Transfixed by what animal grief researcher Barbara J. King called her “unprecedented vigil,” the world watched as Tahlequah – a Southern Resident orca also known as J35 – carried with her the body of her recently deceased calf for seventeen days, across nearly 1000 miles. This elegiac spectacle inspired a range of human responses, from skeptical to sentimental, as viewers grappled with how to understand what they witnessed. The widespread and passionate interest provoked by Tahlequah’s grief thus suggests mourning may be an important site for thinking about interspecies relations.

This paper proposes that a natural affinity exists between veganism and elegy, and through close-readings of poems by Elizabeth Bishop, Lucille Clifton, and Rosa Alice Branco, posits the vegan elegy as a distinct poetic genre defined by unique forms of aesthetic and ethical attention. Paradoxical as it might seem, elegy’s characteristic sensitivity to alterity makes it a mode peculiarly suited to recognizing and sustaining the aliveness of non-human animals; the vegan elegy thus serves as an important

counterbalance to the fatalistic necropolitics of much vegan literature.

Building on Jessica Holmes's theorization of "vegan poetics," and on the foundational work of Carol J. Adams and Laura Wright, I illustrate how poetics (especially the elegy) provides tools for nuancing and expanding vegan literary studies. At the same time, however, I argue that literary studies stands to benefit from a greater engagement with veganism. Elegy is perhaps the form in which poetics most clearly defines its place in the human social world, yet it's precisely in the elegiac encounter with animals that (as John Vickery observes) the genre's boundaries are formed. I seek, consequently, to complement the genre studies of Jahan Ramazani, Diana Fuss, and others by demonstrating that veganism is a key locus from which poetics constructs – and fulfills – its ethical demands.

Keywords: elegy, ethics, poetry, vegan literature, vegan poetics

Anna James is an Assistant Professor of English at Franklin College who researches and teaches contemporary poetics, trans studies, and American literary history. Her most recent work is forthcoming in *Annulet: A Journal of Poetics*.

Martina Martausová, Pavol Jozef Šafárik University, Slovakia

"The Animal We Are/Eat"

The recent film *Society of the Snow* (Bayona 2023) revisits the well-known story of the Uruguayan rugby team whose plane crashed in the Andes in 1972, addressing the sensitive subject of real-life cannibalism and reinterpreting it through the lens of this tragic event. This study examines the film's portrayal of cannibalism, contextualizing it within the broader discourse on animal liberation and the ethical and environmental implications of a meat-centered diet. The perspective adopted in this research is grounded in the disciplines of animal studies and environmental studies that emphasize the ecological impact of dietary choices. By contrasting the film's depiction of human flesh consumption with discussions of animal liberation, the study seeks to scrutinize the ethical concerns surrounding characters who resort to cannibalism to survive. Drawing on Derrida's concept of the gaze and the collapse of established hierarchies, it suggests that the film's portrayal of cannibalism destabilizes the perceived distinction between human and non-human, allowing for broader reflections on the ethics of meat consumption. In *Society of the Snow*, cannibalism is depicted not as a cultural practice or personal choice, but as an act of sheer necessity in response to catastrophic circumstances. By presenting human flesh consumption as a survival option, the film challenges the anthropocentric view that determines what is considered meat and what is not, raising questions about the moral aspect of meat consumption, whether the flesh is human or non-human. In doing so, the film encourages fundamental reflections on the necessity of consuming non-human animals in an era marked by environmental crises, potential food system collapse, and the unpredictable effects of climate change.

Keywords: film, cannibalism, Animal Liberation, anthropocentrism, non-human animals

Martina Martausová is an Assistant Professor in the Department of British and American Studies at the Faculty of Arts, Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice, Slovakia. She has written primarily on masculinity and the narrative of the American Dream in American

cinema and co-edited, with Astrid Felner and Marta Fernández-Morales, the book *Re-Thinking Gender in Popular Culture in the 21st Century: Marlboro Men and California Gurls* (2017). Her academic interests include cultural studies, American film, and gender studies.

Arvind Thomas, University of California, Los Angeles, USA

“Critical Animal Pedagogies”

Whether as pet or as pest; whether as model dissected in the lab or as meat carved at the table; whether as symbol or referent, the non-human animal looms large though often invisible to us but still shaping what many of us in the West categorize as “human.” How do texts key to the so-called Western canon create the category of the “human” in apposition or, as is often the case, in opposition to that of the “animal”? To what extent, if any, do the same texts fail in policing the boundaries separating the “human” from the “animal”? What are the implications of attending to moments when such boundaries are blurred or even transgressed? Put differently, what are the conceptual and ethical gains of reading texts from the perspectives of the non-human animals that are frequently invoked only to be silenced?

This paper will illustrate pedagogical approaches to uncovering and critiquing the “human-animal binary” that underlies much of the Western canon in history, literature and the sciences. The approaches I offer are informed by an ethical veganism that eschews any consumption or exploitation of non-human animals. Drawing upon my teaching of a seminar on the construction of the “human” by texts ranging from Aristotle’s *The History of Animals* and Linneaus’s *Systema Naturae* to Darwin’s *Descent of Man* and Aph and Syl Ko’s *Aphro-ism*, the paper will highlight the questions I use to motivate omnivore students to read such texts from animal-friendly perspectives, and thereby reflect on issues central to veganism. Such questions touch on matters of logic (similarities and differences, and taxonomies), rhetoric (definitions, descriptions, identifications and figures of speech) and grammar (passive/active voices, and subjunctive moods).

Keywords: human-animal binary, pedagogy, composition, rhetoric, the Western canon

Arvind Thomas is Associate Professor in the Department of English at UCLA. A medievalist interested in the rich linguistic (and cultural) diversity of the so-called "middle ages," he works with texts written in Middle English, Latin, and German. On a related note, he is interested in more recent work in the area of critical animal studies and, more personally, have for long been an advocate for animal ethics.