

“The Ethics of Consumption: Advocacy, Activism, Academia”

Date: Friday 10 May 2024

Venue: University of Geneva, Espace Colladon

Organizers: Deborah Madsen (UNIGE), Aïcha Bouchelaghem (UNIGE)



This day-long workshop was organized as part of the **FNS project** “[Vegan Literary Studies: An American Textual History, 1776-1900](#)” tracing the literary history of ethical veganism in the United States and probing its intersections with other social justice movements such as Abolition, women’s rights, Temperance, dress reform, etc. The workshop focused on the shared discursive processes that sustain different-yet-interrelated systems of domination by highlighting the connection between Othering, objectification, and consumption in the reproduction of systemic violence.

The workshop started at 10am with a warm welcome laid out for the participants in the form of tea, coffee, fresh fruit and other tasty snacks. After a round of introductions, during which we got to know one another and our respective areas of research, interest, and activism, we sat down for the first lecture of the day.

The first keynote speaker, **Alexa Weik Von Mossner** (University of Klagenfurt, Austria), gave a lively and fascinating presentation titled “Food for Thought: Decolonizing Bodies and Diets in Narratives of Vegan Food Justice,” which centered on the intersection between veganism and Black activism in the United States. She started by defining and problematizing some of the key notions of her talk (esp. “food justice” and “food deserts”) and listed a number of arresting facts about the interconnection between socio-economic disparity and food insecurity in the contemporary US.



Alexa then talked about the benefits and challenges of urban community gardening as a form of organized resistance amongst low-income communities and/or communities of color and then presented a number of individual projects, ranging from academic monographs, documentaries, cookbooks, podcasts, pedagogical workshops, etc., that exploit the liberatory and empowering potential of veganism for disenfranchised groups. By reconnecting with ancestral food habits, she

concluded, these activists are changing the narrative that frames veganism as a white, middle-class, neoliberal phenomenon, and truly putting into practice its revolutionary dimension.

The midday break provided an opportunity to continue the lively exchanges of the Q&A in a more informal setting, around a delicious lunch (vegan, of course) at the Café du Marché.

The afternoon session comprised three parts: a series of presentations from graduate students, the second keynote of the day, Samantha Pergadia (Southern Methodist University, Texas), and a final roundtable, inviting all participants to reflect on the relationship between Advocacy, Activism and Academia.

Rachael Franke (UNIFR) initiated the session with a presentation titled “They’re Just Animals: Sacrificing the Non-Human for the ‘Greater Good,’” which introduced us to Argentinian writer Agustina Bazterrica and her 2017 dystopian novel *Tender is the Flesh*. The novel exposes the dehumanizing/inhumane logic at work in the exploitation of non-human, and sometimes human, animals, by imagining a future where humanity has replaced its consumption of animal beings to fellow human beings.



Second, **Robert Green's** (UNIL) paper, “Dreaming of a Sustainable Knowledge Framework: Digital Consumption and the Intersectionality of Socio-Economic Forces, Human Behavior, and Ecological Crises,” approached the notion of consumption from a cyber angle and discussed the many dangers, as well as potentialities, that digital technologies entail for their users.



Aïcha Bouchelaghem (UNIGE) concluded the student presentations with a talk on “Animalization for Consumption and Nineteenth-Century U.S. Discourses on Slavery.” She closely examined different abolitionists’ engagement with the human-animal binary and the rhetorical function of animality in nineteenth-century efforts to abolish American domestic slavery.

After a brief coffee break, the day resumed with a second keynote lecture, by **Samantha Pergadia** of the Southern Methodist University in Texas, who could not join the workshop in person due to unexpected circumstances but kindly offered to participate remotely via Zoom. Her presentation, “Slavery’s Slaughterhouse,” explored the many ways in which contemporary Black artists articulate racial and animal liberation in their critique of the capitalist exploitation of the living world.



The final session of the day, a **roundtable discussion** on “Advocacy, Activism, Academia,” brought together speakers and participants in a thought-provoking exchange picking up some of the many elements raised during the day. The two keynotes, Alexa Weik von Mossner and Samantha Pergadia, were joined by Deborah Madsen (UNIGE), Meg Duell (UNIL), Elodie Rogliardo (UNIL), and Caroline Martin (UNIGE) to lead the discussion, each sharing a couple of thoughts about their own position and activity in and outside academia.



The participant’s insights, informed by their own experience of activism or advocacy, made for an enriching conversation about the place of the Humanities in society at large, and the need to rethink the ways in which knowledge is produced and transmitted in a fast-changing world. Beyond its intellectual appeal, the conversation offered a much-needed opportunity to reflect jointly on our responsibility (as well as frustration) as academics in the face of global crises, especially as representatives of disciplines that are under constant threat of being made “redundant” according to neoliberal principles of management. The day closed on a slightly more optimistic note, as we collectively reflected on the impact of our teaching on students, and the visible manifestation of their own commitment to social justice, as evidenced by the worldwide student protests against the war on Gaza going on as we were talking.