

Meat Culture

Edited by

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BRILL

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Critical Ecofeminism: Interrogating ‘Meat,’ ‘Species,’ and ‘Plant’

Greta Gaard

Do we need a ‘plant ethics’ that responds to vegetal instrumentalization in an allied manner to the ways animal ethics has responded to the animal-industrial complex?

—JONI ADAMSON AND CATE SANDILANDS, *Vegetal Ecocriticism* (2013)



The above question might alert animal studies scholars to a pending omnivore backlash against the decade-long success of animal studies, launched by Jacques Derrida’s “The Animal That Therefore I Am” (2002) which catapulted vegan perspectives into academic credibility. Like animal studies, plant studies scholarship has been ongoing for some time, but only recently has emerged as a cutting-edge academic field. One could compare Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation* (1975) with Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird’s *The Secret Life of Plants* (1973) as foundational works for two movements that would later become recognized as companion branches of posthumanist thought, though in thankless academic fashion, the founders of each branch have been strongly critiqued, Singer for his human rights-based moral extensionism, and Tompkins and Bird for their ‘new age’ unscientific speculations. Invoking the field of “critical plant studies” and author of *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* (2006), the carnivorous locavore Michael Pollan, Adamson and Sandilands anticipate my comparison in their description of a “Vegetal Ecocriticism” pre-conference seminar for the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) 2013 biannual conference:

As critical animal studies and animal rights scholars/activists have effectively worried constitutive boundaries between human beings and other animals, plant studies scholars have questioned the similarly political line between plants and animals: plants communicate, move, decide,

transform, and transgress in ways that are sometimes uncomfortably 'like' animals (including humans), and sometimes so completely Other to animality that conventional metaphysical principles are radically denaturalized.

The phrase "similarly political line between plants and animals" might raise eyebrows among animal studies scholars, and understandably so. Vegan and vegetarian feminist ecocriticism has a substantial history, starting with Carol Adams' discussion of Frankenstein's vegetarian monster in *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990), and continuing through the work of many vegan and vegetarian feminist ecocritics (i.e. Armbruster 1998; Chang 2009; Donovan 1991, 2009; Gaard 2000, 2001, 2013). But Simon Estok's (2009) essay in the flagship journal of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) finally threw down the gauntlet. Defining 'ecophobia' as an "irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world," Estok argued that "ecophobia is rooted in and dependent on anthropocentric arrogance and speciesism"; thus, it is "difficult to take seriously... the ecocritic who theorizes brilliantly on a stomach full of roast beef on rye" (2009, 208, 216–17). Four years after placing carnivorous ecocritics under such scrutiny, the emergence of Randy Laist's *Plants and Literature: Essays in Critical Plant Studies* (2013) confirms that vegan/vegetarian ecocritics will soon need a response to 'vegetal ecocriticism,' just as animal studies scholars will have to consider the findings and claims of plant studies. So, what is 'plant studies,' and do its claims of animal/plant similarity seek to delegitimize the very real suffering of other animal species, and place human food choices on a terrain of moral relativism suitable to a carnist¹ culture?

Central to these questions are the key terms *meat* and *species*.

Plant Studies: A New Field Emerges

Although articles formulating the emergence of plant studies had already begun to appear in journals such as *Quanta* (McGowan 2013), *Mother Earth News* (Angier 2013), *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* (Miller 2012), *Societies*

1 Melanie Joy (2010) uses *carnism* to describe cultures that make meat-eating seem "normal, natural, and necessary"—effectively, hegemonic—through a conceptual schema that uses "objectification, deindividualization, and dichotomization" (96, 117). Joy's work popularizes concepts from more sophisticated philosophical arguments such as Val Plumwood's (1993) Master Model and the wealth of groundwork provided by vegan and vegetarian scholar-activists.

(Gagliano 2013; Ryan 2012), and even the *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* (Houle 2011), plant studies emerged into popular culture through the publication of Michael Pollan's (2013) "The Intelligent Plant" in *The New Yorker*. There, Pollan reports the findings of biologists—molecular, cell, plant—confirming capacities that new materialists call *agency* (Coole and Frost 2010) and suggesting paradigm-shifting parallels to animal capacities as well (see Table 1).

TABLE 1 Behaviors confirming agency in plants and animals*

Species / Behaviors confirming agency	Plants	Animals
Senses: apparatus and ability to sense and optimally respond to environmental variables	15–20 distinct senses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sense and respond to chemicals in the air or on their bodies • react differently to various wavelengths of light and shadow • a vine or root 'knows' when it encounters a solid object, and vines grow toward supports • plant behavior suggests plants hear the sound of flowing water, and respond to potential threats by generating defense chemicals 	5 senses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smell • Taste • Sight • Touch • Sound
Communication	Plant 'signaling' occurs through the release of volatile chemicals, or the production of predator-repelling toxins	Vocalizations, body movements, postures, scents
'Intelligence'	Plants know their environment, location, and other plants nearby Root tips gather and assess data from their environment and respond in ways that benefit the plant community, kin and beyond Store information biologically, through molecular wrapping around chromosomes (epigenetics)	Brain, neurons, nervous system, consciousness Ability to reason, judge Memory & learning: laying down new connections in a network of neurons

Species / Behaviors confirming agency	Plants	Animals
Self-identity	'Distributed intelligence' through root networks; know their environment; may use fungal networks to nourish seedlings and even trade nutrients across subspecies	Self-awareness as individuals, family and species members
Arguments for uniqueness (and hence, moral standing, moral consideration, and possibly 'rights')	Can lose up to 90% of their bodies without being killed Plant signaling: molecular 'vocabulary' releases to signal distress, deter or poison enemies, recruit animals to perform services (i.e. pollination)	Ability to feel emotions, i.e., love, anger, loyalty, joy, playfulness, grief, depression, appreciation of beauty, loneliness, compassion, jealousy, regret, sociality

* Data sources from Angier 2013; Bekoff & Goodall 2007; Bekoff & Pearce 2009; Chamovitz 2012; Gagliano 2013; Pollan 2013; Ryan 2012.

Not surprisingly, there are at least two dissenting branches of the field. Anxious to safeguard their work as legitimate science by avoiding anthropocentrism and animism, conservative (read 'hard science') plant scientists interpret their data in very humanist ways that preserve the animal/plant species hierarchy, rejecting the terms 'plant communication' and 'plant neurobiology' for 'plant signaling,' and 'learning' for 'adaptation' (Pollan 2013). More progressive plant studies scholars (read 'humanities'), however, suggest not only that we should "stop anthropomorphizing plants" but actually "try instead to think like them, to phytomorphize ourselves" (McGowan 2013). Challenging evolutionary biology's misuse of the concept, 'survival of the fittest,' Monica Gagliano concludes that even "the very competitive evolutionary process of natural selection involves cooperation," and "cooperation and competition can coexist" because among plants, more cooperative, "collective associations are indeed an ecologically common state of affairs" (2013, 153). "Thinking plant-thought shoves us in a better way than thinking animal-thoughts does," argues Karen Houle in the *Journal of Critical Animal Studies*, since the ecologically "correct unit" of analysis is not the individual, nor the dyad, but "the assemblage" (2011, 111).

Though not explicitly drawing on queer studies, Houle's argument uses a posthumanist methodology that compares favorably with queer methodology (i.e., Browne and Nash 2010). As Cary Wolfe (2009) explains, posthumanism involves both content and method:

... one can engage in a humanist or a posthumanist practice of a discipline. ... Just because a historian or literary critic devotes attention to the topic or theme of nonhuman animals doesn't mean that a familiar form of humanism isn't being maintained through internal disciplinary practices that rely on a specific schema of the knowing subject and the kind of knowledge he or she can have. So even though your external disciplinarity is posthumanist in taking seriously the existence and ethical stakes of nonhuman beings (in that sense, it questions anthropocentrism) your internal disciplinarity may remain humanist to the core. (572)

Both posthumanist and queer methodologies reject the essentialist, unified Cartesian human for a socially constructed plurality of continually shifting identities and selves;² both methodologies can be seen in Houle's approach to plant studies. For example, Houle provocatively rejects the humanist and heteronormative hegemony of mutualism as a framework in plant studies, challenging the conceptual gesture that defines plant behaviors as 'communication' only in mutualist dyads: "if the benefits to the emitter and receiver [of plant signals] are not equal and not mutual, the description of the plant behavior is downgraded from 'communication' to 'eavesdropping'" and the "third party is called a 'cheater'" (109). Instead, Houle suggests framing these communications not as 'illicit' but as "actions of generosity and gift . . . spontaneous, non-meritocratic . . . uncontainable excess" (109). Pointing to the "permanent and varied role of organic and inorganic thirds and fourths in every communication mechanism" (110), Houle invokes Deleuze and Guattari's

2 As queer studies scholars have argued, queer perspectives may endorse but are more likely to differ from the liberal assimilationist goals of the lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered (LGBT) movement for inclusion in heteronormative institutions (i.e., equal marriage, equal inclusion in the military, LGBT human rights legislation, corporate sponsorships for Pride). Present in groups such as the Radical Faeries of the 1960s and queer activist groups of the 1990s, ACT UP and QUEER NATION, some queers have expressed resistance to heteronormative assimilation, choosing instead to celebrate queer culture, eschew essentialist dualisms of gender and sexuality, and affirm queer diversities across race, gender, and class (Jagose 1996; Gleig 2012). These perspectives form the base for queer methodology (Browne and Nash 2010).

concept of 'unholy alliances' to describe plant relations as "a radical collectivity" that transforms sociality and kinship "beyond any simple sense of between" to a broader "among" (111). Houle advocates 'becoming-plant' for the ways it "opens up thinking about relations as transient alliances rather than strategies," and "credits the accomplishment of identity and intimacy as a *radically collective achievement*" (112). These arguments fit well with new materialism's concept of *transcorporeality* (Alaimo 2010) as well as queer theory's fluidity of identity, sexuality, and community.

Leading ecocriticism's vegetal branch of 'critical plant studies,' Catriona Sandilands (2014) conceives of plant studies as emerging from and companioning critical animal studies. Her work on *Queer Ecology* (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010) has explored the ubiquitous presence of queer animals that usefully complicates heteronormative assumptions about sexuality, embodiment, and authenticity. Following models of queering animal studies, Sandilands (2014) proposes the concept of 'botanical queers' that illuminates how plant lives offer the potential to complicate heteronormative (and humanist) conceptions of identity, kinship, and time. Though Sandilands' version of critical plant studies seems to propose a sibling relation with animal studies, other approaches may be less benign.

For example, Canadian science writer Elaine Dewar (2013) seems almost gleeful in speculating that the proposal that 'plants think' will be "anathema to vegans," and since chemistry professor Susan Murch has called the volatile chemical signals from wounded plants "screams," Dewar warns, humans should "remember that, the next time you rip a carrot out of the garden." It appears that "a specter is haunting animal studies," writes T. S. Miller, "the specter of cellulose" (2012, 460). Miller rightly criticizes the humanist methodology of animal studies, arguing that "it is zoocentrism and not simply anthropocentrism, the bugbear of animal studies," that defines human identity (463). Miller agrees with Matthew Hall's view that "zoocentrism helps to maintain human notions of superiority over the plant kingdom in order that plants may be dominated. It is a crucial dualising force, responsible for depicting plants as inferior beings and as the natural base of a human-dominated hierarchy" (Hall 2011, 6). Rejecting what earlier plant studies scholars (Wandersee and Schussler 1999) rightly term 'plant-blindness' in Western culture, Gagliano condemns our current state of 'vegetal disregard' for "plants, whose fundamental role is to ensure continuity of life on Earth" (2013, 149). When we "contemplate and confront the vegetal in the human," Miller believes, we will advance the post-humanist project of overturning hierarchies, "strike at the root of humanity's instrumentalist domination of plants . . . [and] recognize kinship with plants [which] will inevitably alter how we think about our use of them" (462).

As with animal studies articulations of posthumanities, plant studies perspectives can be understood through their genealogies. The science studies perspectives in plant studies trace their field from ‘electrifying discovery’ in 1983, through ‘decisive debunking’ in 1984, and on to ‘resurrection’ by 1990 (McGowan 2013). Companioned by more popular science texts such as Michael Pollan’s *The Botany of Desire* (2001) and Daniel Chamovitz’ *What A Plant Knows: A Field Guide to the Senses* (2012), this science studies branch has gained academic attention through professional organizations such as the International Society of Plant Signaling and Behavior, whose annual conference in summer 2013 drew scholars from over 40 countries, and was discussed in the popular debut of plant studies (Pollan 2013). Prominent scholars such as Susan Murch (Canada Research Chair in Natural Products Chemistry), Catriona Sandilands (Canada Research Chair in Sustainability and Culture), science writer Elaine Dewar, and Basque philosopher Michael Marder each have plant studies research in press, with Dewar’s *Smarts* expected in 2015, and Marder’s new Rodopi Press series on “Critical Plant Studies: Philosophy, Literature, Culture” already producing its first volume on *Plants and Literature* (Laist 2013). Philosopher Michael Marder’s *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (2013) brings new materialism’s concepts of agency and the post-humanities’ decentering of the human to develop critical plant studies’ redefinition of species as existing on a continuum that is more alike than different, with shared ancestry.

In articles introducing the new field of plant studies, both the purposes for plant studies research and the dominant standpoints seem overwhelmingly humanist and masculinist, instrumentalizing plants for new technologies, or theorizing about plants in ways that benefit humans. For example, Pollan (2013) cites a disproportionate number of male scientists (women number only seven out of 27 researchers cited), and gives ‘poet-philosopher’ Stefano Mancuso of the University of Florence’s International Laboratory of Plant Neurobiology greatest prominence in philosophical discussions about how to interpret the science of plant studies. According to Mancuso, the reason to study plant behavior is because “we stand to learn valuable things and develop new technologies,” perhaps “design better computers, or robots, or networks,” harness plants for computational tasks or send them to other planets for exploration. Masculinist perspectives in plant science lead to questions that are limited and ultimately humanist: for example, observing ‘interplant communication’ through the release of volatile chemicals, ecologists Richard Karban and Martin Heil wonder “why should one plant waste energy clueing in its competitors about a danger?” and conclude that “plant communication is a misnomer” and should be called “plant eavesdropping” or even a “soliloquy” (McGowan 2013).

From a critical ecofeminist perspective, the plant studies genealogy as currently presented is a Euro-patrilineage that parallels the developments and omissions of animal studies (Gaard 2012). Presented as if the field emerged only recently, it erases not only the methodology and findings of Nobel prize-winner Barbara McClintock (Keller 1983) and marine biologist Rachel Carson (1951, 1962), along with two centuries of work on human-plant relations explored by women gardeners, scientific illustrators, animal writers, and ecological artists (Norwood 1993; Norwood & Monk 1987; Anderson 1991; Anderson & Edwards 2002; Gates 1998). Even more significantly, plant studies genealogies largely omit indigenous non-Western perspectives—contemporary eco-activists and writers such as Winona LaDuke, Tom Goldtooth, Gloria Anzaldúa, Chico Mendez, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Wangari Maathai, and many others—whose cultures never made the Aristotelian divisions of humans from the rest of life, and thus whose writing about plants, animals, and ecology has never needed material feminism’s recuperative concepts of ‘transcorporeality’ (Alaimo 2010) or ‘naturecultures’ (Haraway 2003) to illuminate *All Our Relations* (LaDuke 1999). Those plant studies scholars who do attend to indigenous perspectives currently work in the humanities wing of plant studies—anthropology (Kohn 2013; Viveiros de Castro 2004), philosophy (Hall 2011; Marder 2013), gender and cultural studies (Plumwood 2000, 2003, 2012; Sandilands 2014).

As usual in environmental studies, the findings of the environmental sciences wing are crucial yet insufficient, and may in fact be operating on distorted premises, purposes, or hypotheses; they lack the contextual, philosophical, and political reflectiveness of the environmental humanities. Bringing forward feminist animal studies in dialogue with Val Plumwood’s critical ecofeminist work on indigeneity and vegetarianism, Hall’s philosophical botany, and the queer/posthumanist/feminist approaches of Hall, Gagliano, and Sandilands is needed in cultivating a critical ecofeminist perspective on human, animal, plant, and ecological relations. Rethinking these relations augments our understanding of ‘species’ and ‘meat.’

Defining ‘Species’ and ‘Meat’

In animal studies, the key terms ‘species’ and ‘meat’ reference a wealth of field-defining and movement-building conceptual groundwork. Peter Singer’s (1975) key concept of *speciesism* defined as “a prejudice or attitude of bias toward the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species” (7) has been used to build analogies to other humanist structures of oppression—racism, sexism, classism, ethnocentrism, anthropocentrism—and to persuade progressive communities of feminists,

civil libertarians, labor activists, antiracist allies and environmentalists alike to recognize and reject mutually-reinforcing forms of hierarchical and dominative thinking, or what ecofeminist philosopher Karen Warren first called the *logic of domination* (1990).³ The year 1990 was equally significant for feminist animal studies: the leading journal of feminist scholarship, *Signs*, published Josephine Donovan's essay describing more than a century of vegetarian women's activism and theory connecting a feminist ethics of care with animal defense, and Carol Adams' *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* explored the ways gender dualisms linking men, meat-eating, and virility in opposition to women, vegetables, and passivity reinforce the subordination of women and non-human animals through processes of objectification, fragmentation, and consumption. Adams' concept of animals as the *absent referent* of meat eating, and female animals as the *absent referent* in not only meat eating but also dairy and egg production gave vegan feminist language to what it means to become 'a piece of meat.' Shortly afterwards, *Ecofeminism: Women, Animals, Nature* (Gaard 1993) became the first volume to link feminist animal studies with ecofeminism by placing species at the center of ecofeminist praxis, and launching a decade of debate among feminists and ecofeminists about the place of animals in an antiracist, non-essentialist and postcolonial ecofeminism (Gaard 2003, 2011).

In 2014, feminist animal studies still differs from the newer, yet mainstream branch of animal studies, and is more closely allied with critical animal studies. Whereas animal studies has tended to investigate human-animal relations from an academic perspective, both feminism and critical animal studies are movements for justice; many critical animal studies scholar-activists are also feminists. Unlike animal studies, at the heart of feminism is the centrality of praxis, the necessary linkage of intellectual, political, and activist work. Feminist methodology has challenged the male bias masquerading as objectivity in science, and worked to undermine the fit of science with dominant modes of exploitation and oppression that use science to benefit elite humans, often at the expense of disenfranchised humans and experimented-upon animals (Harding 1987, 1991; Keller & Longino 1996; Stanley 1990). In stark contrast, feminist methodology requires that feminist research puts the lives of the oppressed at the center of the research question, and undertakes studies, gathers data, and interrogates material contexts with the primary aim of improving the lives and the material conditions of the oppressed. When feminists attend to 'the question of the animal,' we do so from a standpoint that centers other

3 Warren did not include speciesism in that logic for another decade; see Warren 2000.

animal species, makes connections among diverse forms of oppression, and seeks to put an end to animal suffering—in other words, to benefit the subject of the research (Birke & Hubbard 1995).

On the surface, contemporary plant studies may share a commitment to plant well-being as well. Its scholarship challenges the definitions of ‘species’ and ‘meat,’ charging that animal studies scholarship (across the branches of animal studies) has only ‘moved the line’ of moral considerability, performing a humanist moral extensionism that includes other animal species but places plants outside the bounds of moral consideration—effectively, *treating plants like meat*. In animal studies, plants are “backgrounded,” writes Houle (91–92), and Matthew Hall (2011) agrees, invoking Val Plumwood’s (1993) theory of the Master Model construction of both the Master identity and a logic of domination (Warren 1990) that operates through Plumwood’s five linking postulates of the Other’s homogenization, hyperseparation, backgrounding, instrumentalism, and denied dependency. In short, animal studies may be liberating for animals, but oppressive for plants, thus perpetuating humanism. Not only are plants ‘kin’ to animals, but the presence of carnivorous plants, herbivorous animals, sea anemones, algae and fungi (Tsing 2012) which ambiguously display attributes of both plants and animals have all begun to blur the demarcation of ‘species’ dividing plants from animals, first asserted by Charles Darwin’s theory of common descent in his *On the Origin of the Species* (1859). This radical continuity, transcorporeality and kinship across plant and animal species gives rise to several questions: first, as feminist methodology suggests, we can ask, do plants benefit from plant studies? And second, inspired by a queer feminist and posthumanist animal studies, we must ask, without creating a moral underclass, how do we make ethical food choices in light of the fact that all potential ‘foods’ are sentient beings? And finally, in what ways can a feminist methodology be used to study and improve conditions and interspecies relations among plants, humans, and animals, augmenting critical animal studies by responding to the findings and implications of plant studies scholarship?

In considering these questions, there are arguments critical animal studies and ecofeminist scholars would want to endorse, and others to avoid. For example, plant neurobiologist Stefano Mancuso believes that “because plants are sensitive and intelligent beings, we are obliged to treat them with some degree of respect,” which means “protecting their habitats” and “avoiding practices such as genetic manipulation, growing plants in monocultures, and training them in bonsai” (Pollan 2013). This standpoint seems consonant with feminist animal studies arguments and feminist methodology. But this

standpoint does not prevent humans from eating plants since “*plants evolved to be eaten*,” Mancuso asserts, given plants’ lack of irreplaceable organs and modular structure. This argument is reminiscent of parallel justifications of human predation on other species (animals) and their *telos* (i.e., they are ‘meant to be eaten’), whether based on biology (theirs or ours), culture, or need.

Reviewing the arguments for veganism, we find some of these apply also to plants.

1. *They do not want to be eaten.* Countless texts in animal studies confirm that animals do not want to be eaten: their behavior speaks their desire as they run away from hunters, fight against other predators, and struggle to free themselves from zoos, leg-hold traps, science experiments, and other forms of confinement (Hribal 2011). But it appears plants do not want to be eaten either: they give off chemical signals when attacked by insects, alerting other plants, and sometimes invoking predatory insects to feed on the attackers; plants also produce toxins altering a leaf’s flavor or texture, making it less palatable and less digestible to herbivores (Angier 2013; Pollan 2013). In queer theory and in feminist theory alike, a primary consideration is *consent*: that is, if all parties do not consent to a specific behavior or relationship, this lack of consent signals potential exploitation, oppression, or otherwise ethically dubious relations at work.

2. *They feel pain.* Animals suffer and feel pain, and thus deserve not to suffer: Singer’s utilitarian argument has powered animal rights for decades. Animals are also clearly subjects-of-a-life, as Tom Regan has argued: animals feel pain, emotions, and have a sense of selfhood that affirms their intrinsic value and gives them moral rights; they are not to be used as means to an end for others (Regan 1983). Plant studies confirms that plants give off volatile chemical signals when attacked, suggesting plants experience vegetal versions of fear and pain. Although plants lack a brain and nervous system, their documented behaviors suggest a level of plant intelligence and plant communications that is presently beyond our knowledge. Lack of information does not ethically justify behavior (though it may explain behavior) and does not provide foundation for causing fear and pain without consent.

3. *They have consciousness.* While the consciousness of most animal species involves a sense of selfhood that is simultaneously individual, familial, species-based and relational, plant studies research suggests that plants have consciousness too in that they make decisions based on environmental information, communicate (or ‘signal’) to other plants and insects, share nutrients, nurture their offspring.

Adapting to plant studies and the questions of human diet the four frequently-invoked bases for veganism—environmental, human health, world hunger, animal suffering—and placing these in conjunction with Deane Curtin's (1991) contextual moral vegetarianism⁴ offers some clarity. As Curtin succinctly argues, “the reasons for moral vegetarianism may differ by locale, by gender, as well as by class”; as a “contextual moral vegetarian,” Curtin “cannot refer to an absolute moral rule that prohibits meat-eating under all circumstances” (69). For “the point of a contextualist ethic is that one need not treat all interests equally as if one had no relationship to any of the parties” (70), so Curtin can envision extreme situations of starvation or danger where killing another animal (of any species, including human) would be ethical. Curtin also cites environments that do not support a vegan or vegetarian diet as contexts where food ethics will be based on other considerations of relationships, both animal and ecological; he discusses cultures that pay respect to animals unavoidably killed during human agricultural practices (Japanese Shintoism), and cultures that give human bodies back to other animals as food, recognizing our place in the food chain (Tibetans). Instead of using other cultures' food practices as an excuse for Western predation, Curtin emphasizes, “if there is any context . . . in which moral vegetarianism is completely compelling as an expression of an ecological ethic of care, it is for economically well-off persons in technologically advanced countries” (70). To support this view, he cites the impact of first-world agriculture and consumption practices on first-world and global environments, the role animal agriculture plays in exacerbating human hunger, the exploitation of female animals in the egg and dairy industries, and the fact that first-world consumers have a variety of food options that do not perpetuate suffering. It is a moral and political injunction to “eliminate needless suffering wherever possible,” Curtin argues (70). His argument has been further supported by the United Nations' Food and Agricultural Organization's Report, *Livestock's Long Shadow* (2006), documenting the deleterious ecological effects of industrial animal agriculture, and its link to climate change;

4 In distinguishing uses of ‘vegetarian’ and ‘vegan’ in the 1990s, I quote Richard Twine's (2014, 206n4) excellent explanation: “During the 1990s . . . the term ‘vegetarianism’ was mostly used instead of ‘veganism.’ I would contend three reasons for this. First, I expect some North American writers used vegetarianism but meant veganism. Secondly, since the 1990s . . . vegetarianism has lost a lot of credibility as a consistent ethical position within the animal advocacy movement but at *that* time it was still deemed credible. Thirdly, and relatedly, during the first decade of the twenty-first century, notably in Western countries, there has been an ethical shift toward, and cultural normalization of, veganism as the preferred and more consistent practice of animal advocates. So much so, that an ecofeminist arguing today for ovo-lacto vegetarianism would suffer from a credibility problem.”

these findings have been popularized and presented in documentaries such as “Meat the Truth” (2008), “Beef Finland” (2012) and “Cowspiracy” (2014). Ample evidence documents the fact that eating such animals involves eating the planet, since the production of animals for food requires vast amounts of water, plants, soil, and other animals (Pimentel & Pimentel 2003); it requires the exploitation of low-waged workers in horrific working conditions (Schlosser 2001) and has devastating impact on human health (Robbins 1987; Campbell and Campbell 2006). Ethical eating is not merely a question of eater and eaten, but a question of eater-eaten-environment—and environments are simultaneously ecological, sociocultural, and economic.

Curtin kindly affirms that there may be no moral *destination*, but rather a moral *direction* we can move in making decisions around what counts as food; I call this insight ‘kind’ because it resists the judgmental attitude omnivores ascribe to vegans, and makes visible the fact that all food production involves some death. As Lori Gruen (2014) elaborates,

We can’t live and avoid killing; this is something I think has been under-explored in vegan literature. . . . We harm others (humans and nonhumans) in all aspects of food production. Many are displaced when land is converted for agricultural purposes, including highly endangered animals like orangutans who are coming close to extinction as a result of the destructive practices used to produce palm oil, a ubiquitous ingredient found in a large number of prepared ‘vegan’ food products. (132–133)⁵

Contextual moral veganism moves first-world consumers in a moral direction but does not eliminate the deaths and consumption of some sentient others, both animal and plant, who are more kin to humans than Westerners have recognized. An important component of critical ecofeminism, contextual moral veganism is capable of acknowledging the sentience of plants and other ecological beings, and in diverse contexts, placing humans in the food chain as both eater and eaten, pointing to context-specific moral directions that strive to produce the least suffering and greatest care for all involved: humans (industrial, rural, agricultural, indigenous), animals, plants, ecological entities.

Though ecofeminism has conceived of humans as always embedded within specific and diverse environments, developing theory in consideration of

5 Unsustainable palm oil requires deforestation and the deaths of orangutans alike, and a strong resistance is organized through The Orangutan Project (<http://www.orangutan.org.au/index.htm>). Thanks to Kate Rigby for alerting me to this important intersectional activism.

both social justice and environmental concerns, contemporary plant studies and new materialism's concepts of agency and transcorporeality raise more specific questions about the place of plants in environmental and dietary ethics alike. A paradigm-fracturing shift is needed here, one that acknowledges human inter-identity, inextricable from and supported by a web of relations with sentient, intelligent kin across species. Val Plumwood argued for such a shift in her theory of 'ecological animalism' (2012) or 'animist materialism' (2009) or what she variously calls a "critical feminist-socialist ecology" (2000, 285) and "critical ecological feminism" (2000, 289). I choose the term 'critical ecofeminism' both to acknowledge and to advance upon the foundational work bridging animal and plant studies, feminism and ecology, first world and indigenous perspectives that is the prescient hallmark of Plumwood's thinking. It is unfortunate her work rejecting 'ontological veganism' (Plumwood 2000, 2003) misunderstands, misrepresents, and omits significant arguments for contextual moral veganism initially advanced by Curtin (1991), and mounts a 'straw woman' argument against the work of vegan ecofeminists Carol Adams (1990, 2010) and Marti Kheel (2008) as ethnocentric 'universalism' that places humans outside of nature and separate from the food chain (Twine 2014). A strong antiracist ally committed to challenging white privilege, Plumwood misread the vegan feminism of Adams and Kheel as devaluing the ethics and worldview of indigenous Australians, whose diet (like all indigenous groups) has developed in relationship to their immediate environments, and includes a range of plants and animals, all of whom they regard as kin. In her theory of 'ecological animalism,' Plumwood (2003) advocated a "context-sensitive semi-vegetarian position" and opposed factory farming but not a subsistence, need-based killing of other animals; the goal of her theory was "situating human life in ecological terms, and situating non-human life in ethical terms." Because her unfounded attack on Adams and Kheel has been soundly critiqued by Richard Twine (2014), here, I will salvage those aspects of Plumwood's theory that are helpful in developing a critical ecofeminism that is responsive to agency and transcorporeality across plant and animal species.

As if anticipating critiques of the humanism in Ursula Heise's (2008) 'ecocosmopolitanism,' Plumwood (2003) argues against the "biosphere person' [whether vegan or omnivore] who draws on the whole planet for nutritional needs defined in the context of consumer choices in the global market" and whose lifestyle is "destructive and ecologically unaccountable." Instead, Plumwood develops a 'critical bioregionalism' (2008) that makes visible "the shadow places of the consumer self," those "places that take our pollution and dangerous waste, exhaust their fertility or destroy their indigenous or nonhuman populations in producing our food." In delightful anticipation of queering

ecofeminism and plant studies, Plumwood proposes “envisioning a less monogamous ideal and a more multiple relationship to place” which she phrases as an “accountability requirement” involving “an injunction to cherish and care for your places, but without in the process destroying or degrading any other places, where ‘other places’ includes other human places, but also other species’ places.” Urging that we “try to see creativity and agency in the other-than-human world around us” (2003), Plumwood simultaneously maintains that “all embodied beings are food and more than food” and yet “no being, human or nonhuman, should be ontologised reductively as meat” (2009). In these statements, Plumwood develops a contextualized ethic of human inter-identity as embedded with ecological others, accepting our place in the food chain as both eater and eaten.⁶ Considering ourselves as potential prey for other animals, but in the midst of our lives and after our death, is wholly consonant with Plumwood’s critical ecofeminism (1995, 2012).

Westerners are troubled by indigenous views of non-human animals, plants, and ecological beings such as rocks, water, and soil as not only sentient, but kin to humans; seen as animism, these views suggest a perspective belonging to the disciplines of anthropology and comparative religions rather than environmental science. Yet, new developments in plant studies and elemental ecocriticism (Cohen 2010) recognize a similar animacy and agency in ecological others. In eco-anthropology, scholars such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2004) and Eduardo Kohn (2013) describe the ecological worldview and linked self-identity of indigenous Amazonian cultures, which emphasize nondifferentiation between humans and animals, intercommunicability, and a state of being wherein self and other interpenetrate. As Viveiros de Castro explains, “cultivated plants may be conceived as blood relatives of the women who tend them, game animals may be approached by hunters as affines, shamans may relate to animal and plant spirits as associates or enemies” (466). In such worldviews, humans and animals are interchangeable, becoming one another as a result of death and consumption. For Westerners, such eating of one’s kin seems like cannibalism, and indeed some vegan and vegetarian activists

6 The new materialisms have uncovered the various ways that our own bodies are colonized by microbial life, and how illnesses soon to be exacerbated by climate change are a manifestation of other microbial species feeding on humans. The hegemony of humanism prevents non-indigenous humans from conceiving of ourselves as prey, as food, for the duration of our lives, and only after death do some cultures (i.e. Tibetan) offer human bodies as food for other animals. The ‘eater and eaten’ phrase in the text is thus still unequal: over the course of a lifetime, humans do far more eating than being eaten.

consider eating other animal species a form of cannibalism.⁷ But if plants are also sentient and kin, then all eating becomes the eating of relatives, a significant ethical conundrum for Westerners.

Horror movies “reflect a deep-seated dread of becoming food for other forms of life,” Plumwood argues, but “as eaters of others who can never ourselves be eaten in turn by them or even conceive ourselves in edible terms, we take, but do not give” (2003). Rejecting this anti-ecological human supremacy, Plumwood argues that “in a good human life we must gain our food in such a way as to acknowledge our kinship with those whom we make our food, which does not forget the more than food that every one of us is, and which positions us reciprocally as food for others” (2003). But this reciprocity to the ecological network or system does not reciprocate to the individual being consumed, as Ralph Acampora (2014) argues. Taking Analía Villagra’s work on “Cannibalism, Consumption, and Kinship in Animal Studies” (2011) seriously, Acampora explores her proposition that indigenous worldviews “allow for the consumption of fellow animals not in the absence of or in spite of bonds of kinship, but rather because of them” and thus Villagra argues for “becoming cannibal” (50, 52). But as Acampora observes, Villagra’s indigenous cannibalism applies to the extended kinship of other species, and does not commend anthropophagy (cannibalism of humans by humans). Whereas Villagra’s use of indigenous worldviews leads her to a moral relativism in her concluding discussion of “my delicious pet,” Acampora emphasizes the fact that the indigenous worldviews Villagra discusses have clear understanding of kinship distances. It appears there is both a moral direction and moral destination in these contextual and relational practices of eating, living together, and sharing souls. We can honor all our relations and still move in a moral direction that reduces suffering across species and bioregions, though our lives will never reach a moral destination of universal non-harming.

Beyond Meat, Beyond Species

What shall we eat? Eating plants ensures humans *consume less*—less plants, and less animals—and ensures we cause less suffering for plants, animals, ecosystems, and other humans as well. It ensures we free up more land for all of

7 These are private conversations; to my knowledge, no one has yet theorized this connection besides Ralph Acampora (2014). I first noticed this association when indexing my first book (Gaard 1993), and discovering the term ‘cannibalism’ cropped up enough to be indexed; at the time, the prospect seemed too far-fetched to mention.

life—for plants, for animals, for humans to eat and thrive. And, it monkey-wrenches climate change. Bringing into dialogue the critical animal studies and plant studies branches of posthumanism through a lens that recuperates the feminist lineage of these branches, critical ecofeminism has much to offer.

It argues that undoing the grasp and hegemony of a carnist culture requires shifting from denial to attentive listening, from alienation to empathy, from capitalist production time to seasonal time, from a heteronormative universalism to a queer multiversalism. It involves a refiguration of selfhood from rationalist individualism to material transcorporeality, releasing the internalized capitalism of a self-worth based on ceaseless production, and replacing it with a selfhood attuned and intra-active with the cycles of seasonal growth and decay; it offers an acceptance of our death as part of these cycles, and locates our place in the food chain as both eaters and eaten, invoking a contextual moral veganism that values individual lives as well as ecosystem relations, and makes food choices that move in directions promoting sustainability and reducing suffering for eater-eaten-ecosystem.

Philosophers, eco-anthropologists, ecocritics and other scholars of Western culture are using the tools we have inherited as ways to theorize our understanding of other beings, of non-human animals, plants, minerals, and other planetary entities. But as Audre Lorde has written, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (1984). What’s needed is a conceptual shift, a ‘re-think’ as Plumwood proposed (2009), re-situating our perspectives so that they companion the standpoints of non-Western cultures, other animals and plants. This shift involves the practice of attentive listening advocated by feminist animal studies scholars (Donovan 1990, 1998) and plant studies scholars as well: it involves learning a different language of embodiment, behavior, scent, and intra-activity. As strategies for seeing “creativity and agency in the other-than-human world around us” (Plumwood 2009), Westerners can stand with the struggles and lives of animals, plants, and indigenous peoples; we can utilize tools from the Buddhist practice of mindfulness and the non-theistic principles of the dharma, originating in India but freely offered across cultures.

From Plato and Descartes, Westerners have learned to “treat consciousness rather than embodiment as the basis of human identity” (Plumwood 2004, 46). But these elements of being are inseparable, intra-active elements of agency, interconnected with other flows of planetary life. Just as animal studies loosened the grip of humanism for Westerners, now plant studies—along with vegetal and elemental ecocriticism—offer additional tools. For example, Michael Marder’s *Plant-Thinking* (2013) proposes that we examine the world of plants from their own perspective, a practice of attentiveness that uncovers

the meaning of plant life, made evident through the seasonal changes, growth, and cyclical character of being. To cultivate this attentive stance, Plumwood (2005) proposes a practice of decolonizing gardening, “a healthful pursuit that brings gardeners into contact and collaboration with nature and sensitizes them to the earth, the rhythms of the seasons, growth processes and the life and death cycles of living things.” When Marder discusses the freedom of plants, he argues that plants’ indifference, lack of selfhood, and lack of concern for their own self-preservation make them capable of the freedom of play; thus, attentiveness to plants leads not only to plant emancipation, but our own alongside, enabling us to recognize the rich diversity of perspectives possible when consciousness and thought are understood as a creative and inventive “thinking before thinking” (154). Plants’ lack of selfhood echoes the Buddhist no-self (*anatta*), a concept linked to awareness of impermanence (*anicca*) and dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), the understanding that all beings and events co-arise and pass away. Plants’ alleged lack of concern for self-preservation (not entirely accurate if we consider the volatile scents released when plants perceive an attack) shows up in the Buddhist concept of non-clinging, since clinging (*tanha*) is the basis of suffering (*dukkha*).

From a Buddhist perspective, the alleged indifference of plants, like the imputed indifference of rocks and other minerals, might be better understood as *equanimity*, the ability to be present to life without placing conditions on how life shows up. In ecofeminist theory, Karen Warren’s (1990) work demonstrates how the logic of domination has been used to rationalize human dominance over plants and rocks (128–129), a dominance she refutes through a rock-climbing narrative that offers a Westerner’s practice of attentiveness to mineral life (cf. Cohen 2010; Gaard 2007), leading to a recognition that ethical practice depends not on the quality or attitude of the other, but rather on the quality of relationship and attention humans bring to regard the other:

I closed my eyes and began to feel the rock with my hands—the cracks and crannies, the raised lichen and mosses, the almost imperceptible nubs that might provide a resting place for my fingers and toes when I began to climb. At that moment I was bathed in serenity. . . . I felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude for what [the rock] offered me—a chance to know myself and the rock differently, to appreciate unforeseen miracles like the tiny flowers growing in the even tinier cracks in the rock’s surface, and to come to know a sense of being in relationship with the natural environment. It felt as if the rock and I were silent conversational partners in a longstanding friendship. (Warren 1990, 134)

Attending to animals, plants, minerals and other planetary life depends not only on the inclusion of others but on the quality of attention to the relations.

The emergence of plant studies illuminates the vegetal considerations already present in indigenous cultures, in Buddhism, and in critical ecofeminism, a Western perspective that brings together social and environmental justice, climate justice, and interspecies justice. Ecofeminism's contextual moral veganism offers a useful strategy for making decisions about ethical eating for humans, plants and animals; its contextual aspect is not a form of moral relativism, nor is it a universal rule. A critical ecofeminism encourages a shift in our thinking and in our being, from a humanist perspective of dominance to an awareness and participation in relations of mutuality and reciprocity that resituate humans in the cycles of planetary life.

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