

Book Review

Thinking Veganism in Literature and Culture: Towards a Vegan Theory

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Citation: Todd, M. (2020). Thinking Veganism in Literature and Culture: Towards a Vegan Theory, *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 5(1), 07. <https://doi.org/10.20897/jcasc/8410>

Published: July 21, 2020

Keywords: veganism, critical animal studies, sociology, cultural studies

Emelia Quinn and Benjamin Westwood (eds) (2018). *Thinking Veganism in Literature and Culture: Towards a Vegan Theory*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, Palgrave Studies in Animals and Literature, 286 pages.

At the time of writing, the five-month focus on the Covid-19 pandemic has prompted many to reflect on our relationship with the planet and the other animals we share it with. Many are of the opinion that we are in the midst of the Anthropocene, or Sixth, Mass Extinction. Jem Bendell (2020) highlights how the destruction of natural habitats and resultant loss of biodiversity, heightens our risk of catching diseases like Covid-19, with zoonotic pathogens and viruses increasingly crossing from a rapidly dwindling number of wild animal species to humans. We are also witnessing a global rise in violent far-right extremism, and pervasive underlying structural racism, prompting peaceful Black Lives Matter protests in response to the killing of George Floyd and, let us not forget, Breonna Taylor. Bazterrica's (2017) *Tender is the Flesh*, then, was remarkably prescient. It highlighted both our abject horror at the thought of cannibalism, and the need for intersectional thinking on issues of social stratification, animal rights and the environment. It also presented a striking metaphorical commentary on how neoliberal capitalism's powerful few exploit/consume the less powerful many.

Quinn and Westwood's collection builds on such connections made in fiction, by looking at these issues through a critical lens. Veganism, they posit, as both an object of analysis and a method of social critique, offers a way to think *through* a range of questions about, for instance, culture, sexuality and law. It begins with an introduction to three key concerns: the first two concern vegan identity, acknowledging the many tensions and inconsistencies within both defining it and practising it. They moot the notion of veganism as an orientation, rather than simply a goal-orientated activist practice. Drawing on Derrida's (1997) carnophallagocentrism, and Bentham's concern with the capacity to suffer as a fundamental criterion for ethical consideration, they note the centrality of the human/animal binary in Western philosophy and the role of animal bodies in constructions of gender and 'race'. The final aim or concern is to explore the impact of the current vegan 'moment' across a range of disciplines.

The collection then unfolds in ten further chapters, situated within four parts: 'Politics', 'Visual Culture', 'Literature' and 'Definitions'. The first chapter is by Laura Wright, author of another volume in this series, *The Vegan Studies Project*. Using the 2016 presidential campaigns, she argues that animal consumption is aligned with patriotism. Using Agamben and Coetzee, Sara Salih explores the experience of bearing witness to suffering – is this a form of complicity or an important moment of acknowledgment for the victim? A few chapters in the collection consider what it means to occupy the position of 'vegan viewer' when responding to cultural representations of animal suffering or regarding the more-than-human world more generally in fine art, video games and film. Subsequent chapters consider whether legal definitions of veganism to counter discrimination, aid outreach, or, using queer theory, reflect on the possibilities of veganism as a 'form of life'.

In addressing the three broad aims outlined in the introduction, the collection also reveals three further central issues. One is that veganism exposes individuals to disturbing, painful knowledge. The horror of the slaughterhouse or factory farm, for instance, is behind most of the chapters in the collection. Several chapters also point to the performative nature of a vegan identity. Finally, this text asks difficult questions about the nature of the relationship between vegan subjectivity and academic research, though not providing easy answers. Whilst commendable in its scope, given early discussions about the role of understandings of 'the animal' in constructions of 'race' and gender, it is a pity this text doesn't adopt a more sustained intersectional approach.

Nevertheless, *Thinking Veganism* is a timely and necessary text for scholars of critical animal studies, cultural studies, sociology and anyone concerned with environmental or animal welfare matters. In a moment where we must reflect on the post-pandemic opportunities for a more equal and just society, we have already seen how quickly behavioural change can be effected. It is clear that if the Climate Emergency is not addressed swiftly, we will be facing a global crisis far more serious than the current pandemic. Matthew Arnold rightly recognised the potential for literature to change us for the better; if not a call to arms, *Thinking Veganism* is a beacon of hope, hope which lies in the transformative power of reading such texts. Positioning veganism as an orientation, with the potential to both engage with and create culture, rather than viewing it as simply a restrictive diet or political doctrine, is enlightened. At a time when veganism is gradually becoming normalised, literature, culture and collections such as this, will play an important part in changing social attitudes to our long-term lifestyle choices. An early chapter referenced Gramsci's interregnum; the old may well be dying, hopefully the new can be born.

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