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Annie POTTS and Jovian PARRY

Vegan Sexuality: Challenging Heteronormative Masculinity through Meat-free Sex

The terms 'vegansexuality' and 'vegansexuals' entered popular discourse following substantial media interest in a New Zealand-based academic study on ethical consumption that noted that some vegans engaged in sexual relationships and intimate partnerships only with other vegans. At this time it was suggested that a spectrum existed in relation to cruelty-free consumption and sexual relationships: at one end of this spectrum, a form of sexual preference influenced by veganism entailed an increased likelihood of sexual attraction towards those who shared similar beliefs regarding the exploitation of non-human animals; at the other end of the spectrum such a propensity might manifest as a strong sexual aversion to the bodies of those who consume meat and other animal products. The extensive media hype about (and public response to) vegansexuality was predominantly negative and derogatory towards 'vegansexuals' and vegans/vegetarians. A particular aggression was evident in online comments by those positioned as heterosexual meat-eating men. In this article we examine the hostile responses to vegansexuality and veganism posted by such men on internet news and journalism sites, personal blogs and chatrooms. We argue that the rhetoric associated with this backlash constructs vegansexuals – and vegans more generally – as (sexual) losers, cowards, deviants, failures and bigots. Furthermore, we suggest that the vigorous reactions of self-identified omnivorous men demonstrate how the notion of alternative sexual practices predicated on the refusal of meat culture radically challenges the powerful links between meat-eating, masculinity and virility in western societies.

Key Words: *embodiment, masculinity, meat, sexuality, vegan*

INTRODUCTION: THE 'VEGANSEXUALITY' PHENOMENON

In 2007, a new word, a new 'sexual preference' and a new controversy appeared in the global media-scape and on the internet: 'vegansexuality'. This article describes how this phenomenon occurred and attempts to analyse its implications

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for the cultural politics of gender, sexuality and human–animal relations. We begin by describing the background study that identified the preference of some vegans to engage in sexual relations only with other vegans. This is followed by a discussion of how the recognition of such a preference resulted in the creation and sensationalizing of 'vegansexuality' and 'vegansexuals' via global media. Our central examination in this article, however, concerns the forceful – and sometimes violent – responses 'vegansexuality' evoked from those positioned as heterosexual omnivorous men in particular. We analyse this backlash with recourse to comments posted by such men on several public internet sites.

Background

In late 2006, the New Zealand Centre for Human–Animal Studies (NZCHAS) administered a nationwide open-ended survey exploring the perspectives and experiences of cruelty-free consumers in this country. Volunteers were invited to express in writing their viewpoints on a list of topics relating to the exploitation of non-human animals for food and clothing, and in recreation, sports and entertainment. While this project attracted a few omnivore informants (specifically those concerned about intensive farming practices and vivisection in New Zealand), the overwhelming majority of respondents were vegetarian or vegan (141 veg*ns[1] versus 16 omnivores). When a report on this research was released (Potts and White, 2007), one relatively minor aspect of the overall study generated significant media interest, both nationally and internationally. This related to the statements of several women that they preferred sexual intimacy, or primary relationships, *only* with others who did not consume meat or other animal products. They explained their preference in these ways (see Potts and White, 2007: 98):

> I could not be in an intimate relationship with anyone who was eating animals. Our worlds would just be too far apart and the likelihood of the relationship succeeding would be very low. I couldn't think of kissing lips that allow dead animal pieces to pass between them. (49-year-old vegan woman)

> I believe we are what we consume so I really struggle with bodily fluids, especially sexually. (34-year-old vegan woman)

> I would not want to be intimate with someone whose body is literally made up from the bodies of others who have died for their sustenance. Non-vegetarian bodies smell different to me . . . Even though I might find someone really attractive, I wouldn't want to get close to them in a physical sense if their body was derived from meat. For me, this constitutes my very personal form of ethical sexuality. (41-year-old vegan woman)

This preference for physical intimacy with non-meat-eaters only was referred to as vegan sexuality by the first author of the study. Specifically, vegan sexuality pertained to those who refused primarily on ethical grounds to have intimate

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relations with non-vegans. Potts (2008) argued that a spectrum existed in relation to ethical consumption and sexual relationships: at one end of the spectrum, veg*ns might experience an increased likelihood of sexual attraction towards those who do not consume animals or other animal products. At the other end, vegan sexuality may manifest as an actual physical aversion to the bodies of those who consume animals and animal products. For the people in this latter group, avoidance of sexual intimacy with omnivorous (and even some herbivorous) bodies would be felt at a much more visceral or embodied level. Importantly, vegan sexuality was not proposed as an innate or predetermined form of sexuality or desire; instead it was suggested that vegan sexuality was discernable as a disposition (or an inclination or preference) towards those who also practice an ethical (as in cruelty-free) lifestyle. It was also suggested that vegan sexuality be understood as an *embodied ethical form of sexuality* (Potts, 2008;[2] see also Scott-Dixon, 2009).

Media Hype: The Creation of 'Vegansexuals'

Following an initial story by *The Christchurch Press* (Todd, 2007), the global media coverage of 'vegansexuality' (the two words were joined in subsequent reporting) was, predictably, highly sensationalized. *The Press*'s website generated over 110,000 hits (and Google over 21,000 new references to 'vegansexuals') within two days of the original news release (King, 2007). Print and internet-based publications around the globe seized upon the idea and disseminated it through their websites and news blogs. Articles about 'vegansexuality' became the top stories on Australasian news sites www.yahoo.com.au and www.stuff.co.nz, while British and North American publications quickly picked up on the excitement, publishing their own versions of Todd's article (Janko, 2007; Jeffers, 2007; Middleton, 2007; Piazza, 2007; Price, 2007; Salber, 2007; Steiner, 2007; Stryker, 2007). The number of people in the NZCHAS study who strongly associated their sexualities, and their choices in relationships, with their dedication to cruelty-free lifestyles was embellished ('a few' – actually six – quickly morphed into 'many'), and for the most part 'vegansexuality' was presented by the media as a fixed, easily compartmentalized category of sexual identity, with the UK newspaper *The Independent* even stating 'there are heterosexuals, homosexuals, bisexuals and metrosexuals. And now there are vegansexuals' (Marks, 2007). The publicity elicited vigorous and heated debate on internet discussion boards and comments pages, and by the end of 2007 the buzz had been substantial enough that *The Sydney Morning Herald* listed vegansexuality as one of 'the year's biggest health stories' (Reuters, cited in *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2007), and *The New York Times* magazine included vegansexuality in its '7th Annual Year in Ideas' edition as one of the top 70 ideas of 2007 (*New York Times Magazine*, 2007).

The vegansexuality phenomenon lends itself quite well to a Foucauldian analysis of the invention of new sexualities (and/or sexual identities) through various machinations of power and resistance, discourse and confession (Foucault,

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1978). For example, not only was a staunch backlash immediately noticeable globally against the idea of vegans controlling their own sexual choices, but self-identified 'vegansexuals' began 'coming out', declaring themselves on the internet, radio and television. A series of 'Vegansexual' t-shirts was launched for purchase online via an American site www.cowpiecreek.com, 'vegansexuals' posted videos about themselves on YouTube, and users of the popular friendship and networking site Facebook created a 'Vegansexuals' group, consisting of 287 'out' vegansexuals (this site was used primarily as a way to find nearby vegans for potential romantic liaisons). The terms 'vegansexuality' and 'vegansexual' also rapidly entered online urban and popular culture dictionaries, as well as *Wikipedia* (here, vegansexuality appears as a variation of 'eco-sexuality').[3]

Veganism as 'Sexy'

As vegans, the two authors of this article consider it understandable that some veg*ns might experience sexuality on a (more or less) 'ethical-embodied' level; someone dedicated to cruelty-free living may well extend this ethical commitment beyond the consumption of food into other aspects of his or her life, and especially into such an important arena as intimate relationships (see also Fessler et al, 2003; Fox and Ward, 2008; Kalof et al, 1999; McDonald, 2000; ; Middleton, 2007; Rozin et al, 1997). Moreover, historically, unorthodox sexualities have often arisen in response to mainstream culture that is perceived as restrictive or repressive (Foucault, 1978); we argue it is therefore possible that 'vegansexuals' are expressing an intimate bodily resistance to the oppression of dominant meat-eating culture. We are of the view that such a form of sexual preference is not surprising, nor is it extreme (as has been suggested) when considered according to such a rationale. Indeed, the propensity towards vegan sexual exclusivity was already documented by Canadian transgendered rights, sex workers' rights, and animal rights activist Mirha Soleil-Ross fully seven years before 'vegansexuality' hit the headlines. *G-SPrOuT*, a Toronto Gay and Lesbian film festival favourite produced by Ross and her partner, featured interviews with sexually diverse vegans talking about their preferences for vegans as romantic and sexual partners (Karbusicky and Ross, 2000). And 2003 saw the launch of a pornographic site populated by and dedicated solely to veg*ns: although www.VegPorn.com features only veg*n volunteers as models, the site embraces an ethos of inclusivity when it comes to gender, sexual orientation, and physical appearance (Furry Girl, 2006; Tortorici, 2008).

Over recent years, moreover, the portrayal of veganism has shifted substantially in popular culture: from its previous stereotypical representation as hippyish and boring, veganism has been revamped (in fact, remarketed and rewritten) as an appealing and chic 'lifestyle choice'. A flurry of new-look vegan cookery books published over the past ten of so years depict vegan food as colourful, hip, healthy, compassionate and ethical: in a word, 'sexy' (Inness, 2006: 157). Celebrities such as the Vegan Vixens – 'four talented women ecotainers [whose

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goal] is to alleviate the suffering of animals, to help people get fit/healthy and to stop global warming' – have also helped to popularize and 'sex up' veganism through their musical CDs, cookery book, 'green' reality TV show, and other appearances on television and radio (see Vegan Vixens, 2009). The new image of veganism (and vegetarianism) is also attracting more and more young people, who are 'becoming vegans in growing numbers' (Inness, 2006: 157).[4]

Popular media's contemporary flirtation with veg*nism owes much to the widespread cultural anxiety surrounding meat in recent years, as well-publicized contamination threats, an increasing awareness of the health risks of red meat consumption, and the growing cultural authority of activist discourses stressing the cruel and environmentally hazardous excesses of modern factory farming all combined to take their toll on the traditional prestige that meat has been afforded in western society (Fiddes, 1991). Building upon popular discourses emphasizing the 'nature'-alienated condition of the modern urbanite (Parry, under review) and perhaps fostered by a postmodern tendency to experience consumption as a means of identity construction (Ashley et al., 2004: 68), 'conscious eating' has become a fashionable topic of popular discussion, and the higher cultural profile of veg*nism is but one facet of this trend (see Parry, under review). However, while veganism has made some ground towards increased mainstream acceptance (less thorough forms of vegetarianism having accomplished this same leverage earlier in the 1970s (Inness, 2006)), it still has a long way to go – media engagement with veganism remains ambivalent and frequently hostile. This is evident from the way in which conventional and some alternative media across the world picked up on the identification of vegan sexuality; and also from the ferociousness of the public backlash against those vegans who stated they preferred intimate relationships with non-meat eaters (this backlash was both produced and reinforced by the extensive media coverage).

Analysing Public Responses to 'Vegansexuality'

The majority of responses (and there were thousands) posted overnight on news and other media sites, blogs and elsewhere, were immensely negative and/or derogatory towards 'vegansexuals'. The overwhelming bulk of this verbalized contempt for vegansexuality came from omnivorous heterosexual men.[5] In this article, we describe and analyse the negative online comments posted by individuals self-identifying as meat-eating men which appeared on twelve cyberspace sources receiving the heaviest traffic pertaining to vegansexuality from August 2007 to date. These sources are: *The Sydney Morning Herald's* 'The Daily Truth' blogsite, *Washington Post*'s *OFF/beat* blogsite, independent global journalism site www.salon.com, New Zealand news site www.stuff.co.nz, the website of the British academic and current affairs journal *New Scientist* www.newscientist.com, internet community site www.plime.com, American radio personalities Ron and Fez's fan-site www.RonFez.com, gay lifestyle site www.gaire.com, media publicity site *The Steel Deal* (www.steelturman.typepad.com), Australian 'geek

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community' website www.Zgeek.com, celebrity chef Michael Ruhlman's *Notes from the Food World* blog (http://blog.ruhlman.com), and personal blogsite http://tetherballs.blogspot.com (linked to a website called *The Triumvirate of Bland*).

When organizing and analysing the negative comments posted on the internet by self-identifying men who eat meat we were particularly interested in locating and examining which aspects of veganism or vegansexuality were producing such profound anxiety, disapproval and aggression.[6] Our analytic practice was informed by cultural studies approaches to textual examination (Barker and Galasinksi, 2003), and also influenced by Braun and Clarke's (2007) views on thematic analysis.

THE ONLINE RESPONSES TO VEGAN SEXUALITY

Meat-free Sexuality: A Rejection of Heteronormative Masculinity

> Animal flesh is a consummate male food, and a man eating meat is an exemplar of maleness. (Sobal, 2005: 137)

An entrenched connection exists between meat-eating and masculinity in western culture. The consumption of meat is central to the enactment of normative masculinities, and meat is widely considered to be essential sustenance for healthy male bodies. So powerful is the union of meat-eating and masculinity that the cultural 'meanings' of meat are routinely conflated with ideas about power, strength and virility (Adams, 1990, 2003; Armstrong and Potts, 2004; Sobal, 2005). Red meat is particularly constructed as important for men. Consisting of muscle (and understood as energy) from herbivorous animals, red meat may be prepared for food in a more or less raw state, still displaying signs of blood from the body of the animal (blood itself being symbolic of vitality and strength in many human cultures) (Levi-Strauss, 1970). This enables the relationship between the slaughtered animal and the consumption of his or her body to be more visible and pronounced. Acknowledging this connection (between the killing of animals and the consumption of their flesh) assists to render more 'natural' the link between meat eating and masculine power, especially masculine domination over nature (Fiddes, 1991).[7]

A refusal to consume meat thereby signals the opposite of red-blooded masculinity:

> Not eating meat is considered feminine, offering a culinary counterpoint between genders . . . Vegetarianism, the ultimate representation of not eating meat, provides an important negative case in support of the masculinity of meat consumption. Vegetarians do not eat various animal products and tend to be women with only a minority (about 30%) being men. (Sobal, 2005: 140)

Not surprisingly, given this construction, the 'real' manliness (and sexuality) of vegetarian and vegan men typically comes under scrutiny by men who eat meat.

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However, interestingly, it appears vegansexuality may have been viewed as such a transgressive concept in *itself*, particularly since it stood to impact negatively on the sexual possibilities for omnivorous heterosexual men, that their quarrel with this notion side-stepped the more predictable target of vegan men (and their questionable masculinity and sexuality) in order to assail those who posed a challenge to their ideas about, and their potential practice of, heterosexuality: that is, vegan women. For although male vegans were interviewed for many media articles, vegansexuality was represented in the main – in both news stories and online discussions – as a phenomenon instigated and enacted by (heterosexual) women (and hence a bizarre new skirmish in the familiar battle of the sexes). As one academic linguistics blog noted, news coverage paints a picture of a mass of vegan and vegetarian women who are 'fighting the dark side of their sexuality' in resisting their attraction to men who eat meat. The assumption underlying this assertion, and indeed underpinning much social research on the subject of veg*nism (see Cole, 2008), is that veg*ns are in some way abstaining from something natural and carnal in rejecting meat. For many omnivorous internet posters, meat and meat-eaters were assumed to forever prove a temptation to veg*n women.

The idea that veg*n women might reject sex with meat-eaters seemed to engender considerable anxiety among omnivorous heterosexual men. Here, meat's close association with sex in the minds of many male internet users became especially apparent, and the distinctions between veganism (the rejection of meat and animal products), vegansexuality (the rejection of sexual partners who eat meat) and celibacy (the rejection of sex altogether) were thoroughly blurred. The language of abstinence was invoked to describe a vegan or vegetarian's decision to avoid animal flesh, echoing the news coverage's portrayal of vegansexual women as 'abstaining' from sex with men who eat meat. Some respondents drew on essentialist assumptions about humans' biological need to eat meat (and to have sex) in their disparagement of 'vegansexuals':

> Vegans are like Catholic priests. Everyone KNOWS priests get horny . . . it is biology. Everyone KNOWS vegans find themselves salivating despite themselves at the distant smell of hamburgers on the grill . . . it is once again . . . BIOLOGY.[8]

Other posts highlighting a connection between meat and sexuality drew attention to how vegans and vegansexuals were 'missing out' on vital carnal pleasures. An anonymous user on independent journalism site www.salon.com posted a list of common meaty colloquialisms for male genitalia (including 'tube steak', 'sausage', 'roast beef', and 'baloney') and the act of sexual penetration ('makin' bacon', 'slipping someone the hot beef injection'), ending this inventory with the exclamation: 'Think of all the delicacies [vegansexuals] are missing out on!'[9]

Meat consumption seemed so closely linked to sexual appetite that on many (omnivore) message boards, serious discussions were aired as to whether sex (especially oral sex) was even permissible to vegans.[10] One respondent on author/

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chef Michael Ruhlman's 'Notes from the Food World' blog asked: 'Is it okay for a vegan to have sex with a human at all? After all, humans are animals and sex involves the consumption of bodily fluids'.[11] In a similar vein, a poster on the blog of Ron and Fez (www.ronfez.net), two popular American radio personalities, proclaimed: 'I can't date a girl who won't put sausage in her mouth'.[12] Another poster on the independent news site www.salon.com went further, contending vegans were 'bitter, unhappy and morbid people [who] possess a paralyzing inability to give or receive love'.[13]

In the above-mentioned responses, the rejection of or abstinence from meat (understood as 'real food') comes to be equated with the rejection of or abstinence from sex (that is, 'real sex', meaning heterosex with a meat-eating man). Vegans and vegansexuals alike are portrayed as joyless pleasure-deniers, many of whom secretly long to sate their carnal appetites by indulging in both meat-eating and sex with meat-eaters. In this way, the vegan's rejection of meat and the vegansexual's rejection of a sexual partner who eats meat are simultaneously undermined: they are only a superficial cultural veneer of misguided abstinence, beneath which powerful, 'natural' carnal urges roil unabated. The fact that vegans and vegansexuals vocally denied they were in fact 'abstaining' from anything worth having only fuelled the flames of many omnivores' ire: as one post on www.plime.com put it: 'Denying yourself temptation is fine, even noble . . . so long as you don't go around saying you aren't tempted.'[14] Thus, the refusal of 'vegansexual' women to engage sexually with men who eat meat is framed in less threatening terms: instead of rejection (of these men), it becomes a form of self-inflicted sexual sobriety on the part of vegan women.

Cannibalizing Vegans: Punishing Dietary/Sexual 'Deviance'

Further intermingling the concepts of meat-eating and sex, some internet users even indulged in violent fantasies of cannibalizing vegan sexual partners. Building upon a recurring theme of animalizing vegans into herbivorous 'livestock', one blogger on www.stuff.co.nz stated:

> I hope [vegans] keep up [vegansexuality]. In a few generations we'll have a new species of herbivore. Little pegged teeth, eyes on the sides of the head and a muzzle for grazing. Maybe they can be domesticated and some use found for them then.[15]

The regular writer of *The Sydney Morning Herald*'s 'The Daily Truth' blog (Jack Marx) went so far as to describe himself seducing a vegan lover and consuming her both sexually and gastronomically:

> All this talk of veganism, meat eating and sex is making my mouth water. Like those corn-fed pigs that you can order at some fancy restaurants, vegans are sort of primed with the luscious fruits and vegetables on which they've stuffed themselves. Picking up a vegan, then, is the perfect recipe for a hot and tasty evening

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> for two, and a delicious memory for one . . . a table set only for one; a 'bed' of roast vegetables in which a space has been cleared just for my 'guest'; a reach around to gently plant an apple in the mouth.[16]

Here, the vegan is animalized into an herbivorous 'food' animal,[17] seduced onto the plate and consumed as a meal, in a passage laden with sexual overtones and allusions. The violence towards non-human animals inherent in the production of meat transfers to the vegan victim who is to be dispatched and consumed much like a farmed animal. The cannibalism fantasy is continued in other responses posted to this blog: 'I reckon they'd taste like a mix of moth balls and body odour. Maybe a strong marinade might help.' Men even suggested ways to kill vegans: 'I recommend the Halal method to slaughter your vegan'; 'They should all be lined up and shot and then put through a vegan sluicing machine.'[18]

Carol Adams, leading scholar of feminist vegetarian studies, asserts there is a connection between meat consumption and the oppression of women in western cultures. Adams's (1990, 2003) work foregrounds the ways in which the marketing of meat relies on images of domination over and violence towards animals and women. Historically an image of an animal (or a cut of animal meat) is superimposed over an image of a (highly feminized or sexualized) woman. Adams (2003) argues that such representations in advertising campaigns for meat incite consumers to objectify and commodify both animals and women (see also Fiteni, 2003). Although the above comment by Jack Marx ('The Daily Truth') does not overtly disclose the gender of the vegan, a similar narrative prevails: the consumption of an herbivorous being is sexualized. Moreover, given that veganism is generally feminized within western culture, and the majority of herbivorous animals eaten by humans are female (Cudworth, 2008), it is reasonably safe to assume the vegan on this journalist's menu is a woman.

While Marx employed the rhetoric of seduction in his derogation of vegans, other omnivorous men's responses to the threat of rejection by vegan lovers were considerably blunter (such as the following one appearing on a personal blog called www.tetherballs.blogspot.com):

> That just gives me more of a reason to donkey punch them once I've got them in the doghouse. This includes every young, nubile PETA skank who decides that getting naked is an effective means of protesting anything.[19]

Here Carol Adams's contention that there is a connection between violence towards non-human animals and violence towards women is clearly demonstrated in the use of the slang term 'donkey punch'. This saying (derived from the boxing term 'rabbit punch', after a method of killing rabbits) refers to the thumping by a man of the back of his sexual partner's head during anal penetration. This violent action is said to produce contraction of the partner's anal sphincter and, ostensibly, a 'superior' orgasm for the man (see Urban Dictionary, n.d.). Such expressions of brutality against vegan women were abundant on blogs catering for 'red-blooded' heterosexual men. One respondent on the Ron and Fez radio

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talk-show fan-site, for example, urged the moderators of the discussion board to 'stop showing stories that make me want to go into wild punching sprees', while another confessed that accounts of vegansexuality made him 'want to do her on a bed of rare steaks' (precisely who 'she' is remains unclear).[20]

What stands out in these hostile responses is a sense of outrage that vegans and vegetarians might actually prefer to pursue sexual relationships with one another than with the 'normal' omnivorous population, accompanied by a deep-seated desire to forcibly discipline such deviants back into line. Vegansexuality therefore challenges more than the cultural link between meat-eating and heteronormative masculinity, it endangers 'the male sex drive discourse' that assumes heterosexual men have the need – and the right – to have sex with any woman they want, and all women must be available to meet this desire (Gavey, 1992; Hollway, 1984; Potts, 2002). Non-compliant women are warned of the consequences of vegansexuality: at the very least, they will be submitted to verbal abuse for their unconventionality, including threats of exploitation, domination and violence. In short, they can expect to be treated like the very animals they personally refuse to harm.

Vegans as Deficient Lovers

While the virility that meat consumption has long been thought to bestow particularly upon men (Fiddes, 1991; Sobal, 2005; Twigg, 1983) seems to make it doubly difficult for many meat-eating blog commentators to accept that vegans and vegetarians might choose to reject meat-eaters as sexual partners (while not rejecting sex at the same time), numerous posts sought to redress the imbalance by asserting that such rejection was in fact mutual. Vegans and vegetarians were derided as being both physically and mentally deficient and ultimately undesirable. 'Most vegan chicks are pale and crazy', a respondent on www.zgeek.com asserted.[21] On www.salon.com, a self-professed 'reformed vegetarian' stated 'vegans are not very sexual and they are notoriously bad lays', adding that in being rejected by vegan lovers, 'meat-eaters are catching a lucky break'.[22] A commentator on 'The Daily Truth' recounted an anecdote about a (male) vegan workmate, whom he derided as lethargic, pale and non-virile, and described this man's miserable sexless relationship with his vegan girlfriend.[23] Although most posts of this nature appear to have been from heterosexuals, gay men were not exempt from this perception that meat is central to masculine virility: a writer on the gay dating site www.gaire.com cautioned: 'if these gay men don't get their fill of lots of steak and chicken they will produce little protein . . . doesn't make for a very good "money shot" now does it?' Another post on the same site commented: 'Fancy that. A gay who doesn't swallow meat. He'll go far.'[24]

In their arguments against veganism and vegetarianism, the most common appeals made by omnivores to the naturalness of meat-eating drew on evolutionary theory or religious doctrine. The ethos underlying the two was almost interchangeable: God and Evolution/Biology/Science alike, according to many posters, decreed that humans should eat meat. 'Animals were put on this earth

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for human USE!' one poster on www.stuff.co.nz declared, while another summarized his position even more succinctly: 'If God did not want us to eat animals he would not have made them out of MEAT!' (capitals in original postings).[25] The reference to evolutionary reasons for meat-eating extended to ideas about the long-term 'survival' of vegans (and vegansexuals). A prevalent response of male users on omnivore blogs and news sites was that vegansexuality would drastically limit the number of potential partners for vegans, hence restricting their gene pool and leading to their eventual extinction (in this scenario, vegans tended to be conceptualized as a separate species):

> That should tighten up the gene pool nicely. If these vegans refuse to breed outside themselves, their progeny will most assuredly suffer the consequences.[26]

> Hemophilia, insanity, birth defects of all kinds and a general diminishing of the genetic lines . . . in other words, these loons will eat themselves right out of existence. They will become extinct. And that's the best news I've heard all week.[27]

In these ways, vegans were constructed as sexually deficient, as well as failures in an evolutionary sense.

Furthermore, building upon a long tradition of deriding compassion for animals as 'sentimental' (Armstrong, 2007, 2008), a poster on *The Chicago Tribune* website asserted that vegans were merely misguided people who grew up 'watching too many Disney movies'.[28] Here, compassion for non-human animals becomes a synonym of immaturity and naivety, a youthful foible that meat-refusers were never able to successfully outgrow.

Vegans as Bigots

Even though vegansexuals were depicted as overly sensitive, weak, undesirable, deficient and deviant, it appears that their refusal to consider intimate sexual relationships with non-vegans was too close to the bone for many meat-eaters. Numerous comments were posted on blogs and news sites from irate omnivores who viewed vegansexuality as a form of bigotry (compared by some to racism). Vegans were accused of 'creating a caste system based upon the evils of the flesh', and their 'refusal to mate with [meat eaters] would suggest that they may even regard them as sub-human'.[29] A user on the *Sydney Morning Herald*'s 'Daily Truth' blog suggested 'the attitudes of most vegans and, (to a lesser extent), vegetarians, have a similar ring to another group of people and organizations who object to other people doing something that comes naturally to them'.[30] A respondent on www.salon.com stated: 'There isn't nearly enough hatred or intolerance in the world. Thank God we have the vegans to show us how to create more!' Another poster on the same site stated: 'When you judge someone, it's a way of dominating them. Honestly, stories like this make me think of vegans as people with a certain love for domination simmering between the supposedly

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peace-loving exteriors.'[31] These comments construct vegansexuals as domineering and intolerant of others, while vegansexuality is viewed as something harmful to meat eaters because it discriminates against them (one news article even used the title 'Victimized by Vegansexuality' (Janko, 2007)).

MEAT CULTURE/MACHO CULTURE

Our analysis of responses posted on news site and personal blogs demonstrates how vegansexuality is variously constructed by self-identified men who eat meat as: a form of sexual control or abstinence exercised by women who ultimately prefer meat-eaters (and meat) but deny their 'true' desires; a mode of dietary deviance coupled with sexual dysfunction; a deficiency in desire and taste;[32] and a form of discrimination (likened to racism) against meat-eaters. Ergo, vegansexuals (and more broadly vegans per se) are represented as (sexual) losers, cowards, deviants, failures and bigots.

The negative reactions of men positioned as meat-eaters to the existence of an exclusive sexual preference for herbivores are entirely consistent with the role meat plays in constructions of masculine sexuality in western culture. The consumption of meat (along with the domination of non-human animals implicit in this practice) is central to the enactment of normative masculinities (Luke, 2007), and meat is widely considered to be essential sustenance for healthy and vigorous male bodies (Fiddes, 1991; Robinson, 2005). So powerful is the union of meat-eating and masculinity that the cultural 'meanings' of meat are routinely conflated with ideas about potency, strength and authority (Adams, 1990, 2003; Armstrong and Potts, 2004; Cudworth, 2008; Potts and White, 2008; Sobal, 2005). Our analysis of these men's protestations against vegansexuality indicates this concept and its mode of sexual practice fundamentally challenges the very muscular links between meat-eating, masculinity and virility in western culture.

The particularly brutal remarks directed at women 'vegansexuals' may also be understood as an effect of masculinist meat-eating culture's relationship to certain forms of male violence perpetrated against both nonhuman animals (e.g. hunting and rodeo) and other humans (e.g. via misogyny, homophobia and racism) (Adams, 2003; Luke, 2007). Of course, the connection between violence towards humans and violence towards animals (referred to as 'the link' by scholars in this field) is becoming clearer all the time (Ascione, 2005, Taylor and Signal, 2004, 2005). Some forms of violence towards animals, including specific farming practices and the act of slaughter itself, remain more or less sanctioned within mainstream culture (assumed to be 'how things are done' to get meat on the table). However, even these common and seemingly intractable traditions are now also being assessed by specialists on 'the link' in terms of how they influence notions of 'power', 'violence', 'cruelty' and 'empathy' (as these connect to abuse of both humans and animals), beliefs about animals and human–animal relations, and assumptions about dominance over other humans and/or animals (Taylor and

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Signal, 2008). One way of understanding the violence of the reaction against 'vegansexuality' would be to see it as a particular manifestation of this link.

Importantly, vegansexuality's brief but widespread exposure in the mainstream media spotlight also needs to be analysed in the context of a society in which food, and eating, are increasingly becoming a site of anxiety, and the topic of popular discussion (Gaard, 2002; Kheel, 2008; Kjaernes et al., 2007; Watson and Caldwell, 2005; Willard, 2002). The mainstream media's brief fling with vegansexuality owed much to the term's seemingly irresistible conflation of food (the hot topic *du jour*) and sex (a perennial favourite). Food has become increasingly fashionable in journalistic investigation, from food scares and contamination, 'meet your meat' exposés and commodity chain analyses, glowing reports of so-called humane farms and the virtues of locally produced food (see Lovenheim, 2002; French, 1999; Pollan, 2006; Young, 2005), to the very public flaunting of offal consumption by the 'New Carnivore' movement (Spartos, 2008, Soller, 2009). *The Sydney Morning Herald*'s 'top eight' health stories of 2007 included no less than five food-related issues; the comment accompanying the newspaper's listing of 'vegansexuality' highlighted 'how much attention we pay to what we're eating – and what everyone else is eating – and how that obsession affects other aspects of our lives'. The vegansexuality phenomenon strongly suggests that the politics of sexuality, gender, ethical consumption and human–animal relations will continue to be increasingly intimately related in the future.

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NOTES

1. The term 'veg*n' is used in vegetarian studies, and popularly, to connote either vegetarian or vegan.
2. As a scholar of gender, sexuality and vegetarianism, personally critical of sexual and other 'imperatives', Potts had no intention to suggest that the existence of this ethical form of sexuality should be viewed as, or become, a new demand on vegans. Highlighting the existence of ethical intimacy of this nature involved allowing those participants in the New Zealand study who felt strongly about their own relationships to express their preferences for practicing cruelty-free sex *as well as* cruelty-free consumption.
3. For 'Ecosexuality', see Wikipedia (n.d.).
4. In fact, we would argue the increasing 'sexiness' of veganism among young people is partly motivated by its non-acceptance by the mainstream.
5. Elsewhere we discuss the responses of vegans themselves, as well as prominent vegan political organizations, to the notion of 'vegansexuality' (Potts and Parry, in progress). In short, while there was little acceptance of the concept of vegansexuality evident on

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omnivore-related blogs and news sites, vegetarian and vegan sites tended to be much more accepting of the idea that one's choices about sexual relationships and intimacy could be connected to beliefs about ethical consumption. Analogizing vegetarians' avoidance of meat-eating partners to non-smokers' avoidance of smoking partners was common, and there seemed to be broad general support for the idea that 'like . . . gravitate[s] towards like', with posters pointing out that people are more likely to form romantic relationships with those of similar religious and political views. Many vegetarians and vegans themselves reported that they preferred sexual relationships with fellow non-meat eaters, and although this trend does not appear to have been recognized academically until Potts and White's (2007) report, to those within the vegan/vegetarian community the existence of such a trend is hardly a revelation. As one poster on LiveJournal's online vegan community put it: 'I only date vegans and most vegans I know only date vegans. It's always been normal to me' (LiveJournal, 1999–2009).

In contrast to the omnivore websites emphasizing the virility and sex appeal of meat-eating (and particularly how this relates to masculine prowess), vegan and vegetarian commentators (particularly those posting their comments on vegetarian or animal advocacy websites) tended to highlight the positive physical and sexual benefits of a meat-free diet. For example, while the heading for *The Washington Post*'s on-line article read 'No Sex Please, We're Vegans' (Steiner, 2007), the header for www.animalrighter.com's posting proudly proclaimed: 'Too Sexy for Your Meat' (Thomas, 2008). In an email statement to the Australian press a representative from the prominent American-based animal advocacy organization People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) spoke of 'the energy and stamina of a vegan lover, which continues way past the age when meat-eating men are seeking drugs so they can stop being duds', overtly comparing the benefits of a vegan diet to those of popular 'erectile dysfunction' drug Viagra. Vegan and vegetarian organizations, it would appear, are directly challenging well-entrenched stereotypes of the central role meat consumption plays in male virility, asserting that meat does not help but rather hinders sexual performance.

6. Although the words vegan and sexuality were not conjoined in the original formulation of this idea, we now take up the term 'vegansexuality' as this is the version that has become popular with both those endorsing and opposing this concept.
7. So-called white meats such as fish and chicken are feminized in western culture; they are viewed as 'lighter' (paler), more appropriate foods for women and children (Fiddes, 1991).
8. Posted on www.plime.com (online wiki community) August 2007. Retrieved 10 January 2009 from http://www.plime.com/l/29668/1/; capitals in original.
9. Posted on www.salon.com (independent journalism website), August 2007. Retrieved on 15 April 2009 from http://letters.salon.com/mwt/broadsheet/2007/07/31/vegansexual/permalink/fa1c66e04f59828a93637383cb85de49.html.
10. Comments posted on www.salon.com (independent journalism website), August 2007. Retrieved 15 April 2009 from http://letters.salon.com/mwt/broadsheet/2007/07/31/vegansexual/permalink/39f06c652b87733ab81f3f42341aa690.html, http://www.chow.com/stories/10852; also comments posted on *Washington Post* (newspaper) website, August 2007. Retrieved 16 August 2007 from http://blog.washingtonpost.com/offbeat/2007/08/no_sex_please_we're_vegans.htm.
11. Posted on www.ruhlman.com (Michael Ruhlman's 'Notes from the Food World'

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website), July 2007. Retrieved 15 April 2009 from http://blog.ruhlman.com/ruhlman-com/2007/08/vegansexual.html.

12. Posted on www.RonFez.net (American radio personalities Ron and Fez's website), August 2007. Retrieved 15 April 2009 from http://www.ronfez.net/forums/archive/index.php/t-62204.html.
13. Posted on www.salon.com (independent journalism website), August 2007. Retrieved 10 April 2009 from http://letters.salon.com/mwt/broadsheet/2007/07/31/vegansexual/permalink/a18d12cafa4b7ec2ce091059ece1d73d.html.
14. Posted on www.plime.com (online wiki community), August 2007. Retrieved 1 April 2009 from www.plime.com/science/sex/1/29668/1/.
15. Posted on www.stuff.co.nz (New Zealand local news site), July 2007. Retrieved 11 April 2009 from http://www.stuff.co.nz/print/4148907a4261.html.
16. Posted on http://blogs.smh/com.au/thedailytruth (*Sydney Morning Herald* daily blog), August 2007. Retrieved 1 April 2009 from http://blogs.smh.com.au/thedailytruth/archives/2007/08/pork.html.
17. In fact almost all animals eaten by humans are herbivores (Amey, 2008).
18. Posted on http://blogs.smh/com.au/thedailytruth (*Sydney Morning Herald* daily blog), August 2007. Retrieved 1 April 2009 from http://blogs.smh.com.au/thedailytruth/archives/2007/08/pork.html.
19. Posted on http://tetherballs.blogspot.com/ (personal blog), August 2007. Retrieved on 12 April 2009 from http://tetherballs.blogspot.com/2007_08_01_archive.html. Note: The American animal rights organization PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals), referred to in this blog, is known for its anti-fur campaigns in which celebrities often pose naked accompanied by the slogan: 'I would rather go naked than wear fur.'
20. Posted on www.RonFez.net (American radio personalities Ron and Fez's website), August 2007. Retrieved 15 April 2009 from http://www.ronfez.net/forums/archive/index.php/t-62204.html.
21. Posted on www.zGeek.com (Australian 'geek' community website), August 2007. Retrieved 9 April 2009 from http://www.zgeek.com/forum/showthread.php?t=69642.
22. Posted on www.salon.com (independent journalism site), August 2007. Retrieved 9 April 2009 from http://letters.salon.com/mwt/broadsheet/2007/07/31/vegansexual/view/index.html.
23. Posted on http://blogs.smh/com.au/thedailytruth (*Sydney Morning Herald* daily blog), August 2007. Retrieved 1 April 2009 from http://blogs.smh.com.au/thedailytruth/archives/2007/08/pork.html.
24. Posted on www.gaire.com (online gay dating site), August 2007. Retrieved 13 March 2009 from http://www.gaire.com/e/f/view.asp?parent=803637&nav=1.
25. Posted on www.stuff.co.nz (New Zealand local news site), July 2007. Retrieved 11 April 2009 from http://www.stuff.co.nz/print/4148907a4261.html.
26. Posted on www.zGeek.com (Australian 'geek' community website), August 2007. Retrieved 9 April 2009 from http://www.zgeek.com/forum/showthread.php?t=69642.
27. Posted on http://steelturman.typepad.com (media publicity site), August 2007. Retrieved on 15 April 2009 from http://steelturman.typepad.com/thesteeldeal/2007/07/vegan-vegetaria.html.
28. Posted on *Chicago Tribune* website (newspaper), August 2007. Retrieved on 15 April from 2009 http://leisureblogs.chicagotribune.com/thestew/2007/08/think-soys-sexy.html.

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29. Posted on http://www.stuff.co.nz (New Zealand local news site), July 2007. Retrieved 11 April 2009 from http://www.stuff.co.nz/print/4148907a4261.html.
30. Posted on http://blogs.smh/com.au/thedailytruth (*Sydney Morning Herald* daily blog), August 2007. Retrieved 1 April 2009 from http://blogs.smh.com.au/thedailytruth/archives/2007/08/pork.html.
31. Posted on www.salon.com (independent journalism website), August 2007. Retrieved 10 April 2009 from http://letters.salon.com/mwt/broadsheet/2007/07/31/vegansexual/permalink/a18d12cafa4b7ec2ce091059ece1d73d.html.
32. Interestingly, while vegetarians have long claimed omnivorous bodies smell (or taste) less appealing than meat-free bodies, a recent study on the effect of red meat consumption on the attractiveness of male axillary body odour now offers support that such an olfactory distinction exists. In this study, omnivorous women repeatedly assessed the odours of men on meat and non-meat diets (in terms of 'pleasantness', attractiveness', masculinity' and 'intensity' of smell). They judged the body odours of men on non-meat diets to be more attractive, more pleasant and less intense (Havlicek and Lenochova, 2006).

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