

Queering Veganism: Prospects for a New Utopia

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Abstract

Undertaking the examination of the relationship between queerness and veganism, this article finds its importance in its configuration of veganism as a space of queer imagination. In resistance to the norms of anthropocentric culture, veganism is understood as an empowered practice of queer resistance and radical potential. Most notably, veganism disrupts dominant understandings of temporality and promises alternative constructions of time beyond the confinements of the present and the multispecies oppressions embedded within the current social order. Exploring this disruption to structures of time, alongside an examination of José Muñoz's (2009) work, veganism is identified as a queer utopia. Specifically, the article explores the processes and practices of veganism—in particular, total liberation veganism—that make possible its position as a queer utopia. In so doing, it focuses upon veganism's ability to queer the present moment, as exemplified through the position of the vegan at the dinner table. Further, it examines veganism's conceptualisation of a future beyond all oppressions, including but not limited to nonhuman animal exploitation and queer oppression. Here it draws out the multiple existences, subjectivities and cross-species relationships, such a configuration poses. Thus, this article demands veganism be configured as a queer utopia in order to further enhance its radical potential and open up new spaces of resistance against speciesism in the fight for a liberation beyond all oppressions.

Keywords: queer resistance; queer utopia; temporal disruption; total liberation; veganism

At its core veganism is much more than a dietary choice, rather it is a powerful act of agency and a quotidian form of resistance to dominant societal ideals and demands that normalise both nonhuman animal and human oppressions. Veganism disturbs several seemingly hegemonic narratives, including but not limited to anthropocentrism and speciesism, two discourses upholding practices of a believed, human superiority. This article engages with queer theory to draw out the political and social resistance embedded within veganism and the radical possibilities it offers in response to our current social order and its harmful and exploitative systems. Through bringing it into conversation with queerness, veganism is reconfigured as a deviant and queer act. Here queerness is interpreted as a practice stretching beyond personhood and sexual identity. Through the rejection of strict categorisation, queerness is understood as a mass of shifting, unstable and “deviant” everyday acts reaching beyond fixed notions of subjectivity, and structures of time and existence. It is within such a configuration of queerness, that I argue veganism lies.

This article examines veganism, in particular total liberation veganism, as a space of queer imagination, promise and ultimately, utopia. It works with José Esteban Muñoz’s (2009) conceptualisation of queerness to posit veganism itself as a queer utopia, in particular disrupting dominant structures of time and our relationship to the future. As the not-yet-conscious, the conceptualisation of a vegan future breaks from the limitations of the here and now and promises a turn to revolutionary forms of multispecies subjectivities and collectivities. I argue that in realising veganism as such a potential space, multiple possibilities of agency are encouraged to flourish beyond what appears to be all-pervasive and dominant temporal structures of existence, and a new future is glimpsed. Thus, I call for the wider recognition of veganism as a queer utopia in so that its radical potential can be fully explored.

To begin, I briefly examine the construction of time as a form of social control, intersecting with ideas of identity, sexuality and the social order. Such understandings pave the way to an exploration of the processes that create veganism’s powerful destabilisation of dominant temporal discourses and the queer potential it therefore promises.

VEGANISM, QUEER UTOPIAS, AND ALTERNATIVE TEMPORALITIES

Society’s relationship with, and understanding of, time determines the interpretation of the past, construction of the present and development of models of progress for the future (Halberstam 2005). Notably, societal narratives constructing heterosexuality operate in conjunction with constructions of temporality, thus the positioning of heterosexuality as both the norm and superior to queerness runs throughout society’s relationship with time (Halberstam 2005). As such, Halberstam (2005:5-6) labels dominant temporalities as straight time. Here straight time refers to the confinement of the subject to the narrative structure of heterocentric markers, such as, adolescence, marriage, reproduction, and family (Dinshaw et al. 2007). Furthermore, Muñoz (2009:29) speaks of the “tyranny of the now” as a heterocentric form of control that attempts to centre society around the present moment and construct the current social order as the only possible form of being. Muñoz

(2009:22) writes "straight time tells us there is no future but the here and now of our everyday life", suggesting that current constructions of society are infinitely stable and alternative futures inconceivable. It is important to note, however, that heterosexual temporalities can only ever attempt to silence queer constructions of time and space. Indeed, straight time can never assert itself as a totalising and all-encompassing power and there will always be spaces of queer resistance. Such queer resistance to straight time comes within the narratives of queer utopias and its temporal potential. It is within these spaces that I, too, position veganism. In order to explore veganism as an alternative temporality, I first turn to the broader discussion of queer utopias and their disruption to straight time.

It is within its destabilisation of straight time that queerness generates alternative modes of existence, society, identity, subjectivity, and desire, and most importantly finds its position as a utopia (Muñoz 2009). Muñoz (2009) argues that an engagement with queerness, be it through sexual acts or a broader sense of queerness as an antinormative practice (again it is here that I come to refer to veganism), enacts utopian ideals. Muñoz (2009:25) argues the "deviance" inherent in practices of queerness results in its "ecstatic and horizontal temporality" that acts as "a path and a movement to a greater openness to the world". By this Muñoz (2009) speaks of the multiple possibilities that arise when our relationship with time is no longer defined by the limitations of the present and is instead focussed on future promises of unfamiliarity and opportunities for new modes of existence. Through utopian ideologies and everyday utopian practices, the break from straight time enables a reconfiguration of the past, present and future. Certainly, the disturbance of heterocentric temporality is achieved through what Bell (2017:80) describes as the "utopian affirmative function", meaning the ability of a utopia to facilitate the imagination of an alternative future. Importantly, Bell's (2017) work begs us to refuse the conceptualisation of utopias as fully formed and tangible spaces, but rather to think of them as a tool through which possibilities of new temporalities are opened.

It is in this sense that I align with Muñoz (2009) in describing queerness and veganism respectively as utopias, for the two share the ability to produce new potentialities. Although queerness and veganism exist in the everyday present, these are merely glimpses of their broader potential to suggest a future beyond the doctrines of our present, for example a future beyond both queer and nonhuman animal oppression (Muñoz 2009). Put alternatively, both veganism and queerness have not yet truly arrived. Indeed, Muñoz (2009:21) writes of queerness, "[t]he not-quite-conscious is the realm of potentiality that must be called on, and insisted on, if we are ever to look beyond the pragmatic sphere of the here and now, the hollow nature of the present." Similarly, to queerness, veganism is called upon for its disruption to the present and envisioning of a future beyond dominant norms, most significantly the dismantling of anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism is the belief in the superiority of human life above all other life forms and the doctrine of humanity as the central existence within the universe (Boddice 2011). Veganism works away from such speciesist concepts and towards the development of new relationships, both between humans and other animals, and also between humans themselves.

Drawing on Simonsen's (2012) understanding of veganism as a multifaceted practice, rather than an act focussed on a singular objective, I stress the powerful destabilisation of multiple dominant narratives that veganism poses. Thus, alongside Simonsen (2012:73), I argue that "we approach veganism as something that can always only be 'to-come,' in the sense that it does not represent a telos but rather one ethical position among many." To think of veganism as a utopian force holding multiple alternative endings to the limitations of the now, is to recognise the radical queer potential that veganism holds. Here I point specifically to total liberation veganism. Total liberation veganism refers to a sort of veganism focussed upon dismantling the intersecting oppressions of all lives (Best 2014). It moves away from mainstream single-issue veganism and instead examines the connections between the oppression of nature, nonhuman animals and marginalised humans, such as how structures of heterocentrism work to oppress both queer people and nonhuman animals. For example, the erasure of sexual diversity and queerness within the nonhuman animal world upholds the idea that heterosexuality and reproduction are a "natural" norm, harming both nonhuman animals and queer individuals. Brueck (2018) identifies the total liberation approach as a movement of "consistent anti-oppression", arguing that there is no singular liberation without liberation from all oppressions. Situating nonhuman animals at the heart of an intersectional enquiry into multiple oppressions removes the divide between humans and nonhuman animals, targeting multispecies exploitations at their roots. It is through total liberation approaches, therefore, that veganism finds its position as a queer utopia, for it promises multiple endings of freedom and justice for all whilst simultaneously weakening the grip of current oppressions upheld in the "tyranny of the now" (Muñoz 2009:29).

Indeed, total liberation veganism works similarly to queerness to promise alternative constructions of society and temporalities through a queering of the present moment. Arguably, veganism achieves its disturbance of the here and now through what Bell (2017:80) describes as the ability of a queer utopian act to "historicize our present." Here Bell (2017) references the ability of a utopian force to make the present strange and uncanny to itself, also understood here as the process of queering. Put alternatively, the queer utopia, in its presentation of an alternative future, negates the present moment. Consequently, through the lens of queer utopias the present moment is recognised to be a contingent product of history and its position as an authoritative temporality is destabilised, emphasising the shifting and conditional nature of the present and the social order, in which it is embedded. As it is within the construction of the present that heterosexual values are reinforced, queerness reveals, in the perceived pervasiveness of straight time, the fragility of sexuality norms as ever shifting and unstable social constructions. Muñoz (2009) argues queerness's embrace of the instability of both temporality and sexuality allows for the configuration of a future beyond oppressions. Ultimately, queerness promises an alternative temporality through its disruption to the present and its simultaneous occupation of the horizon and the process of "becoming" (Muñoz 2009:26-7).

Similarly, veganism unveils the contingency of the anthropocentric values embedded within the present and promises a future beyond its supposed authority. Notably, through the power of individual acts, the practice of veganism provides evidence of the subject's ability to step outside of dominant animal eating culture and create not only a new diet, but new practices and relationships with food and nonhuman animals. The existence of a practice beyond the confinements of nonhuman animal marginalisation, highlights to those who exist within dominant spaces, that alternative practices and ways of being are possible. Moreover, veganism recognises the norms of eating animals, such as the necessity of animal protein for health purposes, as social constructions rather than natural and inherent aspects of human existence. Consequently, the present moment and its materialisation in anthropocentric culture, is exposed as a social and historical contingency. Importantly then, the contingency of the present, facilitates possibilities of new models of existence and alternative futures, such as veganism.

To illustrate veganism's process of queering the present, it is helpful to step away from temporality and ideological concepts and instead focus on a tangible example of this process. Therefore, I now turn to a discussion of the ways in which heteronormative and anthropocentric structures of family mealtimes are challenged by the presence of a vegan (Simonsen 2012). The act of family dinner is one bound up within heterosexual politics relating both to structures of time, as a heterocentric time marker of the day or week, as well as constructions of gender and family, such that the female figure cooks the animal flesh for the family. As such, any disruption to its tradition, is an inherently queer act. For example, in refusing to eat animals, the vegan refuses the supposed community embedded in the consumption of animals as food, disrupting the family mealtime, around eating animals, as an image of heterosexual joy.

Ahmed's (2012) concept of the "killjoy" further exemplifies the deviant and queer position of the vegan at the dinner table. Whilst Ahmed (2012) bases this theory on the feminist subject's challenge to gender norms, Twine (2014) labels the vegan as a "killjoy", simultaneously challenging heterosexuality, anthropocentrism and speciesism. Here, Twine (2014) refers to the ability of veganism to contest the order of happiness entrenched in the act of family dinner time tradition. In refusing to eat animals as food, as well as nonhuman animal by-products, the pleasure both in the act of eating animals and the "togetherness" surrounding it, is denied. As Twine (2014:628) explains "[v]eganism constitutes a direct challenge to the dominant affective community that celebrates the pleasure of consuming animals". The vegan challenge thus disrupts the social order of the present as it is embedded in an animal eating culture, and its materialisation in repetitive acts, such as, the dinner table tradition.

Furthermore, in relation to the vegan's queering of the present, it is helpful to examine the space of the dinner table in relation to Carol Adams' work. Adams (2015:20-22) explores the processes through which harm towards nonhuman animals is made invisible, focussing specifically on the animal's position as the absent referent. The absent referent describes the detachment of the nonhuman animal from the food on one's plate and the consequent

erasure of an animal's subjectivity from its consumption altogether. It is at the dinner table that the absent referent is so strongly deployed, yet the presence of a vegan, their demands and refusal to engage in this animal eating culture, challenges such discourse. In refusing to conform to the normative culture of the dinner table, the vegan makes visible multiple species' subjectivities and lives through simply calling into question hegemonic norms of nonhuman animal exploitation and consumption.

It is within this process that veganism makes the present strange to itself. Drawing attention to the consumption of a nonhuman animal and their wider exploitation, simply via the vegan presence, largely reverses the process of the absent referent. As such, what has previously been concealed is made visible, and the present moment and its anthropocentric structure is ultimately queered; in other words, it is made uncanny to itself. It is within this disruption to the act of consuming nonhuman animal products at the dinner table, that veganism reveals an animal eating culture as a fragile and contingent construction. Consequently, veganism functions as an alternative present and holds glimpses of a utopian future beyond the inherent violence of an animal eating culture.

Indeed, total liberation veganism operates as a practice of everyday resistance working towards an alternative future beyond the heterocentric present. Drawing again on Bell (2017), a utopia is not necessarily a perfectly formed society already in existence, but rather a force, practice or ideology that raises the potential of such a society, and the ability to imagine an alternative future. Through practising veganism, one is opened to the possibility of a future beyond nonhuman animal exploitation, and the wider oppressions entangled in such anthropocentric hierarchies. Although a vegan future is not a necessary goal for all vegans, for many, working towards a future beyond the exploitation of nonhuman animals for food products, labour, domestication and so on, is a substantial element of their veganism (Rodriguez 2015). Indeed, championing a vegan future can be an ethical and moral position, evidencing multiple demands, such as rights for nonhuman animals, environmental sustainability and a rejection of the multiple human oppressions upheld in an animals eating culture (Rodriguez 2015). For example, Adams (2015) recognises the disruption of veganism to anthropocentrism, as not only the development of an alternative future, but also the destruction of the harmful gendered doctrines embedded within the consumption of animals as food. She (2015:79) writes of vegans and vegetarians alike, "[they] see themselves as providing an alternative ending, veggie burgers instead of hamburgers, but they are actually eviscerating the entire narrative." The use of the term "eviscerating" is significant, for it points to a future in which society is completely reconstituted, as though to practice veganism is a step towards the de- and thereafter re-construction of society, thus echoing the goals and values of an abolitionist approach to social problems.

Furthering such arguments and championing total liberation veganism, Best (2014) calls for a movement that works towards a future beyond capitalism and consumerism, arguing that it is within these systems that anthropocentrism is engrained. Rather than incorporating veganism into the current social order, and thus weakening its utopian potential, Best (2014)

demands a radical abolition of global capitalism. Best (2014:103-104) writes “[t]he vegan and animal standpoints bear the seeds of a profound paradigm shift, turning away from dominatory cultures, [...] toward a new ethic and culture of complementarity, interconnectedness, and reverence for all life.” Ultimately, therefore, Best (2014) proposes a vegan future that demands the dismantling of several dominant discourses and ultimately a reconfiguration of societal structures and hierarchies as a whole. To practise veganism is thus to envision a time where all of nature, human and nonhuman animals, exist in harmony. It is within such an approach to veganism that Muñoz’s (2009) idea of a queer utopia comes into play. The ability of veganism to create visions of a future beyond the confinements of today’s social order fundamentally disturbs the present and what Muñoz (2009:29) calls the “tyranny of the now.” The suggestion of a new social order founded upon equality and new understandings of progress, rather than exploitation, promises new subjectivities and relationships between both humans themselves and our relationship with nonhuman animals and nature. Thus, veganism looks beyond the limitations of a straight time, re-envisioning a future by reconstructing our understandings of progress as we dismantle harmful narratives of exploitation and oppression. Importantly, veganism thus weakens the grip of the status quo, and in offering a hopeful future, reveals the fragility of dominant norms, and becomes the “not-quite-conscious” (Muñoz 2009:21) utopian promise. It is here that veganism, more specifically total liberation and consistent anti-oppression veganism, finds its place as a queer utopia.

Evidently, the utopian vision of a vegan future doubles as a queer space in regard to its promise of new social orders and simultaneous queering of the present moment and its norms. In other equally significant ways, veganism further maps neatly onto Muñoz’s (2009) conceptualisation of queerness itself as a utopia and a horizon. In advocating for a future of species equality, veganism anticipates a space of “multiple forms of belonging” (Muñoz 2009:20). For Muñoz (2009), queer utopias are founded upon an idea of a broad collectivity within which subjects exist and thrive through their difference, and it is this understanding and acceptance of difference that is considered so utopian. Veganism adds multiple species, and thus new forms of subjectivities and understandings of agency, to Muñoz’s (2009) image of a utopian future. It is through veganism’s celebration of various models of existence, for example the subjectivities of cows, fishes, and chickens, that its vision of the future is queered. Veganism queers the very meaning of belonging, creating new models of collectivity and community to include nonhuman animals. Through refusing the exploitation of nonhuman animals, vegans abandon an anthropocentric hierarchy and work to value and respect the differences in nonhuman animals. In this way, veganism offers a future of radical queer potential and finds its position as a utopian force.

As such, veganism champions an anti-speciesist, harmonious and peaceful society, beyond exploitation and marginalisation, and towards the acceptance and flourishing of multiple subjectivities and identities. Indeed, there are several existing vegan and queer spaces that arguably already act as utopia. Worldwide there are many sanctuaries run by queer individuals (and couples) for nonhuman animals rescued from exploitation, such as

farming and vivisection (Vegan Rainbow Project 2020). One specific sanctuary that practises total liberation veganism is VINE (Veganism is the Next Evolution) Sanctuary, that rescues and cares for nonhuman animals whilst working to dismantle intersecting oppressions through education, events and publications on the queering of animal liberation. VINE's approach is noticeably queer and utopian in its actions, encouraging the nonhuman animals to cultivate autonomy, friendships, relationships and a sexual agency beyond what their exploited selves would have previously been confined to. In her talk "Queering Animal Liberation" (2018), co-founder Pattrice Jones speaks of the multiple relationships and sexual experiences of the nonhuman animals that are made possible through the sanctuary and the lack of human authority and control regarding the spaces, routines and activities of the nonhuman animals. Consequently, VINE welcomes queerness within nature, embracing a queer eros beyond limited constructions of heterosexuality and reprocentrism as they are predominantly enforced onto nonhuman animals. Thus, this vegan utopian space fights both for nonhuman animals and also for the queer community, whose sexuality is deemed "unnatural" due to the erasure of queerness from within nature. As summarised by the Manifesto of Insectionals (n.d), a total liberation vegan collective, "sanctuaries [...] are the only political places where they [nonhuman animals] can gain their individuality back." VINE demonstrates the importance of queerness and sexual agency for the individuality and subjectivity of nonhuman animals. Vegan sanctuaries thus demonstrate both an existing queer utopia and a step beyond anthropocentrism and heteronormativity towards a total liberation future.

CONCLUSIONS

By examining queerness and veganism side by side, this article has foregrounded their relationship as a vehicle for change and progress beyond the current confinements of society. Indeed, through the configuration of veganism—more specifically, total liberation veganism—as a queer utopia, its disruption to limiting constructions of heterocentric temporality has come to the fore, such as its negation of the present and vision of alternative futures. Veganism creates new and empowering relationships with, and understandings of, time, as evidenced through the complex forces at play within its ideological promises and their materialisation in its everyday acts and already existing utopian spaces, such as the vegan "killjoy" and vegan sanctuaries.

To conclude, the queering of veganism makes visible the multiple pockets of resistance that exist throughout society and shatters the image of dominant discourses of control, such as anthropocentrism and heterocentrism, as totalising and inescapable powers. It is through such destruction that veganism occupies the position of the queer, developing new forms of being, new subjectivities and multiple forms of belonging, collectivity, and agency external to current societal confinements and heterocentric temporality. Therefore, I end by demanding the recognition of total liberation veganism, as a queer force building an alternative future beyond the multispecies oppressions of today. Such recognition is necessary to the integral intermingling of both vegan sociology and queer theory, both of

which can work more powerfully together in the deconstruction of harmful anthropocentric and heterocentric discourses. Indeed, veganism, as a queer potential, promises a utopian space in which non-human and human animals, as well as the rest of nature, can exist in harmony, putting into play radical practices of both vegan and queer resistance. The configuration of veganism as a queer utopia celebrates the potentialities of a movement that abandons the dominant structures of the human/nonhuman animal divide upheld by anthropocentric and heterocentric discourses, and instead, reconfigures the future as a space of opportunity and possibility. It is in this space of queer potential, that total liberation veganism can be read as both a foundational and developing utopian force, making a future beyond the current social order into a tangible reality.

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