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Rasmus R. Simonsen  
*University of Western Ontario*

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## **A Queer Vegan Manifesto**

**Rasmus Rahbek Simonsen<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

What does it mean for a person to declare her or his veganism to the world? How does the transition from one diet to another impact one's sense of self? Veganism challenges the foundational character of how we "act out" our selves—not least of all in the context of sexuality and gender. In my paper, I am thus interested in the potential of veganism to disrupt the "natural" bond between gender formations and the consumption of animal products, as this relates to social and cultural genealogies. Consequently, I will explore a queer form of veganism that affirms the radical impact of what Sara Ahmed calls "shared deviation."

**Keywords:** Veganism, Queer Theory, Gender, Sexuality, Ethics of Eating, Food and Normalization

### **A Queer Vegan Manifesto**

[Sexual object choice] is more like vegetarianism than homosexuality.  
—David Halperin

In his article "History of Male Homosexuality," David Halperin proposes that simple sexual object choice—what he sees as an "exercise in erotic connoisseurship" (2000: 98)—in late antiquity and medieval contexts did not correspond to an expression of sexuality as such, at least not in the way we understand it today; indeed, "it [was] more like vegetarianism than homosexuality" (98). In this circumstance, we can deduce that, by way of comparison,

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<sup>1</sup> Rasmus Rahbek Simonsen (rsimonse@uwo.ca) is a PhD Candidate in the English Department at the University of Western Ontario. His dissertation deals with the queer aspects of the American Renaissance. His publication record includes essays on queer zombies and the fiction of Paul Auster. Additionally, he has presented papers at several conferences on topics ranging from contemporary queer fiction to the intellectual kinship between Heidegger and Thoreau.

vegetarianism can have ethical or aesthetic provenance, but it does not “necessarily function...as a marker of difference” (98). Now, Halperin’s immediate focus is not vegetarianism, and I do not wish to enlist him as a straw man for my argument; rather, my aim is to promote vegetarianism as a viable topic of inquiry for Queer Studies. Since, historically, deviating from eating meat has carefully been tied to the discursive production of masculinity—and not simply in terms of aberration or one’s momentary preference for a certain food object—vegetarianism (and more apposite my essay, veganism) comes to constitute a set of gendered acts that are linked to the whole of what signifies as male (and female), which certainly includes sexuality. In other words, vegetarianism and veganism are much more complex than what Halperin’s casual simile would otherwise indicate.

In this essay, I will thus ask the following: What does it mean for a person to declare their veganism to the world? How does the transition from one diet to another impact one’s sense of self? While it is true that, as Lorna Piatti-Farnell writes, “[f]ood is dynamic, malleable and subject to interpretation” (2011: 1), there are certain, long-established traditions and conventions that govern how and what we eat. In this regard, veganism calls into question preconceived notions of what a “proper” diet consists of and, hence, how life is properly lived in contemporary Western liberal societies. Additionally, veganism challenges the foundational character of how we “act out” our selves—not least of all in the context of sexuality and gender—when we consider the performative aspect involved in eating different foods. It cannot be denied that, time and time again, the tenets of veganism are rendered suspect in relation to sexuality and reproduction.

Famously, in *The Sexual Politics of Meat* ([1990] 2010), Carol Adams traces how different ways of eating have been employed to maintain clear gender boundaries in the Western world and elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> Erika Cudworth affirms this fact in a recent article, “‘The Recipe for Love’? Continuities and Changes in the Sexual Politics of Meat,” where she

identifies a “food hierarchy in which red meats have been associated with masculinity and white meats, fish and dairy products associated with femininity” (2010: 81). As a consequence, meat consumption has become a powerful way of asserting or performing one’s masculinity. Even the mode by which meat is prepared is gendered. Cudworth highlights how “roasting,” for men, has become the favored way of cooking meat, as it leaves the meat with a raw, bloody appearance that draws on “mythologies of masculine strength and virility deriving from animal blood” (2010: 89); on the other hand, “boiling” meat is “associated with frugality,” and “stewing” is considered “mundane,” and therefore domestic, feminine (81). This appears to be in line with Adams’ conclusion that, in the main, “[r]efusing meat means a man is effeminate” (2010: 63); effeminacy, however, cannot unequivocally be grouped with homosexuality, as Halperin reminds us.<sup>ii</sup> Nevertheless, vegans—and most noticeably so, male vegans—are stigmatized by general society to the extent that, borrowing from Lee Edelman, they fail “to comply with heteronormative mandates” (2004: 17) of eating, which, in reality, as Carmen Dell’Aversano puts it in her radical assessment of the “normal” Western diet, is “[l]earning to eat [in a way that] implies being indoctrinated in an attitude of callousness towards physical and psychological torture, pain, fear and ultimately murder” of nonhuman animals (2010: 82). Despite this, from the position of dominant meat-eating society, veganism is considered odd, or indeed queer. Becoming vegan is a direct response to the discursive mechanisms of “anthronormative” society, and, in this way, veganism shares a bond with recent developments (or reconfigurations) in queer theory.

The queering of veganism entails, in Noreen Giffney and Myra Hird’s words, “the continual unhinging of certainties and the systematic disturbing of the familiar” (2008: 4). Etymologically speaking, “queer,” as Eve Sedgwick has pointed out, “means *across*,” and the term itself has spun “outward along dimensions that can’t be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all” (1993: xii, 9). In line with this, we can say that veganism’s “affective

involvement” (Parisi, 2008: 290) with species other than the human directly expresses a desire to transverse not to say disrupt the boundaries that uphold and police the categories that separate the human from the nonhuman. In my treatment of veganism I will thus appropriate Dell’Aversano’s view that “queer” is a “subversive enterprise,” aimed at “denaturalization” (2010: 74)<sup>iii</sup> *in general*, and not merely, strictly speaking, in relation to questions of sexuality. In this way, veganism, due to the connotations that attach to different dietary habits, involves a critical consideration of the gendering of food and how identities are shaped around what we eat. As a result, my concern in this text is not so much “the queering of the human-animal barrier” (Dell’Aversano, 2010: 100), but rather I aim to examine the socio-cultural aspect of veganism as a marker of identity and the discursive tug-of-war that follows. For this reason, I will neither linger with the question of animal exploitation nor that of inter-species affect long; I defer instead to other more proficient studies on this point.<sup>iv</sup>

I am interested in the potential of veganism to disrupt the firmly ensconced view that meat-eating and masculinity are naturally linked—even in a genealogical sense. As Adams states, “meat represents [one’s male] ancestors’ food and provides a sense of continuity” (2010: 200), and, further, since taste is connected to memory and positive or negative affect we generally have a tendency to seek out that which, according to Elsebeth Probyn, “tastes of memories, and activates aspiration, gratitude, desire or recognition” (2000: 147); following this, it becomes apparent that food consumption is inscribed with a certain sense of teleology: “The sensorial perception of food,” Piatti-Farnell writes, serves as “a starting point for future perceptions, in which past and present become embodied through consumption”(Piatti-Farnell, 2011: 8-9). We might say, then, that eating attaches to a certain wish or expectation for the future—the furthering of familial bonds, for example. But the kind of meat consumed today does not belong to the same category as that of yesteryear, and neither have the animals

of the modern agricultural system been treated in a similar manner. Meat-eating culture merely presumes “the normativeness and centrality of their activity” (Adams, 2010: 201). We can expect, therefore, that as a minority, (especially male) vegans will be rendered deviant by normative society. In response to the ordering of society according to a male perspective, Adams, in her historical survey, suggests that vegetarianism became a way for marginalized women to silently oppose their oppression (2010: 213). However, refusing meat, I will argue, does not only involve taking a stance against patriarchal culture, as Adams suggests; it is also, specifically, a way of resisting heteronormativity, since meat-eating for men and, perhaps to a lesser degree, women is tied to the rhetorical as well as the actual reproduction of heterosexual norms and practices. We might then appropriate Sara Ahmed’s central question in her discussion of “the affective potential of queer” as a category of anti-normative being: “Do queer moments happen when this failure to reproduce norms as forms of life is embraced or affirmed as a political and ethical alternative?” (2004: 146).

As is well known, according to Judith Butler, different “acts, gestures, enactments,” specific to each gender, combine to produce “a false stabilization of gender in the interests of the heterosexual construction and regulation of sexuality within the reproductive domain” ([1990] 1999: 173, 172). As a man, in this manner, refusing to partake in the proscribed consumption of meat disrupts the discourse on male sexuality and gender. In the way that different food items carry specifically gendered connotations (i.e. meat: masculine), we see how male vegans become a problem within heterosexual discourse. We are not far here from viewing the “vegan” as a sub-species of the “pervert” (read: homosexual) in Michel Foucault’s analysis from the first volume of his *History of Sexuality* ([1976] 1998; see especially 42-3 on this point). In this manner, declaring one’s veganism to the world can almost be compared to the act of coming out for queer-identified individuals. For example, when I told my parents that I was adopting the vegan diet my mother broke into tears with the

words, “how will I ever be able to cook for you again?!” The unintended disruption that my veganism caused in my childhood home felt very queer to say the least: my mother’s role as nurturer was put in jeopardy—in her own view—and each meal that I would henceforth share with my family had the potential to serve as a challenge to anthropocentric dietary habits; more to the point, I would become a “killjoy” at the family table—as the one “who gets in the way of [the] organic solidarity” centered around eating (Ahmed, 2010: 213)—by implicitly disavowing not only animal-based foods but, more importantly, the form of togetherness that the traditional family dinner represents. The function of the dinner table as what Ahmed refers to as a “kinship object” (46)—the locus of familial coherence—came in danger of being undermined by my decision to go vegan; fellow-feeling as an affective force could no longer pass unhindered between me and the other members of my family. In this manner, by disaffirming the killing of other species, vegans might actually, and ironically, come to “kill” “the joy of the family” (49). No more “happy” meals. And not only that, the heterocentrist ordering of the family space was called into question, as, the implication ran, my mother might not in future be able to continue the same level of feminine “service work” (Cudworth, 2010: 82) that she had been used to performing for me and the rest of my family in the past. All things considered, we should be careful not to equate the stigma of veganism with homosexuality, since we all know who figure more frequently as victims of hate-crimes (although, to be fair, to my knowledge, no statistics on violence against vegans exist—certainly not queer-identified vegans). Nevertheless, sharing concerns raised by queer theorists, it is precisely by insisting on its disruptive qualities and—although not my immediate focus here—“improper” concern for other species that I read veganism as queer.

I do not wish to hide the fact that the view on veganism I will present in the following is anything but polemical. This is why I have opted to include “manifesto” in the title of my essay. As most other authors writing in the tradition of the manifesto style, I wish to make

“manifest” a certain grievance in relation to society at large. However, my contribution to this particular genre is decidedly not steeped in the language of progress, which seems to have been the core ingredient of previous manifestos (see Latour, 2010: 3); nor do I rush to support José Esteban Muñoz’ assertion that a manifesto must necessarily be “a call to a doing in and for the future” (2009: 26).<sup>v</sup> And my text ought perhaps not be called a manifesto proper at all. Rather than defining a program for future action, my manifesto (in implied quotation marks) seeks to call attention to the problematic act of framing the future according to present discontents, however radical it might appear on the page. The veganism that I present in the following is not concerned with imagining a utopic future without meat—where veganism itself would become a moot concept. Instead, I am interested in thinking about veganism as a form of what Ahmed calls “shared deviation” (2010: 196). What is so radically uncomfortable about queer veganism is the willingness to “cause unhappiness by revealing the causes of unhappiness” (196). By saying no to animal products we make it harder for other people to disregard what their culinary contentment is predicated on: the brutality of the animal product industry and their own complicity in the death of millions. Certainly, happiness is difficult to sustain in the face of overwhelming suffering. Becoming vegan is learning—everywhere and always—to challenge and negate the inherited norm of anthropocentrism. Queer veganism affirms deviation; queer veganism institutes a gap in the communal bond inherent to sharing and feasting on the flesh of nonhuman animals. The motto of queer veganism might then read: share negativity! Share in becoming the deviant cause of unhappiness in a system of animal exploitation. Deviance, in other words, is the *manifest* linchpin of my text—that which ensures the *interlocking* of “queer” and “vegan.”

Veganism is still considered a rogue topic for many scholars in the humanities and social sciences,<sup>vi</sup> and I don’t presume that the queer bent of my approach will change this. By drawing on a number of examples from both mass media and from within the ranks of

veganism/animal rights, I will show how veganism invariably is filtered through a normative lens. What follows is my queer intervention in the debate on veganism. At the same time, for reasons that will become apparent, I don't advocate for what would amount to a paradigm shift in the discourse on Western food consumption. While on a fundamental level I agree with Marc Bekoff that the status quo of "what we buy, where we live, who we eat, who we wear, and even family planning"—the latter being of particular interest to me—"has wreaked havoc on animals and Earth" (2010: 2), I will refrain from couching my argument in the language of revolution.<sup>vii</sup> History has shown us that the romantic ideal of revolution is poorly equipped to accept or adequately deal with the surprises and unexpected occurrences of what postcolonial scholar David Scott has referred to as "worldly life," which namely acknowledges "that we cannot make ourselves entirely immune to the vagaries of misfortune, to calamities, say, or loss or bodily desire" (2004: 182). This specifically "tragic" view of history fits well with queer veganism, as it is here recognized that the emphasis on liberation and revolution in establishing the vegan identity puts us on a slippery slope towards totalitarianism—even as this is rarely accepted by the "movement." Employing Edelmanian phraseology, queer veganism should be thought of not in terms of identity, then, but rather as a radically unassimilable force, which will always oppose the oppositional insistence of the social order; rather than disavowing the "meat-eater" as constituting a certain identity—although I recognize the importance of doing so to an extent—it appears much more crucial, and dare I say *productive*, to critique the very structuring and mobilization of subjectivities *as such*, since it is the same binarizing—or "othering"—impetus behind this operation that is ultimately responsible for the construction of the human/animal divide. Dell'Aversano sums up well the primary focus of the queer critique of identity:

Queer does not aim at consolidating or stabilizing any identity, least of all its own, but has as its ultimate purpose a critique of identity, which should not lead to the hegemony of a new or alternative identity, but to the demise of the category of

identity as such, by making conscious and calling into question the performance that makes us and others what we “are.” (2010: 103)

The queer polemics of Lee Edelman’s book *No Future* will thus be adopted as a way of reading veganism as the figural and literal resistance to the dominant social order, which is predicated on a discursive formation that stresses the superiority of human life and legitimizes the means by which we make use of other species to sustain ourselves. At the same time, sexual norms and expectations of gender roles blend with the anthropocentric drive of the Western discourse on life; in other words, certain subject positions must be produced over and over, in order to maintain the image of the body politic as a coherent whole. This affects not only male sexuality, of course. We should not be surprised to learn that female subjectivity, for example, has been inflected by the consumption of specific animal products, such as eggs and dairy, which, according to Cudworth, are considered “‘feminized foods’, not only because they are associated with female consumption, but because they are by-products of the reproductive systems of female animals” (2010: 79). Consequently, in the following section I will examine a number of different ways in which male and female vegan bodies come into contact with heterocentrist, normalizing processes.

### **Veganism, Pathology, and “Normification”**

[V]egetarianism is best seen as a method for complicating the normalization of eating.

—Simon M. Gilbody, et al.

The shape that “life” takes in Western societies is the controversial issue that I will contend with here. That a certain way of life has become the norm in the West is, according to Michel Foucault, “the historical outcome of a technology of power centered on life” ([1976] 1998:

144). In his by now famous phrasing, Foucault traces the formation of “*a biopolitics of the population*,” a series of “*regulatory controls*” that frame the body according to “the mechanics of life,” in order to have it serve “as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity” (139). In normalizing society the body is at the centre of attention, and, as we saw with Butler, the “right” body must conform to very specific performances that are intimately linked to gender.<sup>viii</sup> In regard to veganism, a news story will pop up every so often that tells about “bad” vegans, who—from lack of sufficient dietary knowledge—have caused the death of their infants by not feeding them properly.<sup>ix</sup> It would therefore seem that the very premise of veganism becomes flawed by association, in that—as a generalized marker of a certain way of living—the habits and behaviors of *all* vegans can be explained by making reference to their particular choice of food. Essentially, the vegan comes to figure as nothing less than the antithesis to society: vegans subvert the possibility of a future by literally killing “our” children, as any child born into society becomes part of the collective potential to reproduce the foundation of that communality, however imaginary. Nina Planck’s 2007 op-ed piece for the *New York Times* with the ominous title “Death by Veganism” makes clear how veganism is not only nutritionally inadequate but fails on the level of community as well. She states: “There are no vegan societies for a simple reason: a vegan diet is not adequate in the long run.” As a consequence, veganism is viewed as a “dangerous” diet in dire need of supplementation. A recent counter-response to this attitude is “vegansexuality,” and I will show later how “disgust” figures as an important means by which a specifically vegan scheme of community and reproduction is produced in opposition to the omnivorous identity according to the same “expulsion-repulsion” dynamic that frames the vegan as “other” in anthronormative discourse.

Vegan bodies regularly come to comprise socially and culturally contested sites of nourishment. The vegan diet is thought to be inherently inferior, and, no matter the degree to which it is supplemented, will never completely live up to the nutritional value of animal-based products. This notion is primarily due to consistent misinformation by the mainstream news media. For example, in a news story from *The Sunday Times* detailing the hospitalization of a twelve-year-old Scottish girl with a severe form of rickets, veganism is quickly identified as the culprit (Macaskill, 2008). Rickets—which can lead to permanent bone deformity—primarily affects the spine, and is brought about by vitamin D deficiency. So much is clear. The reporter then continues to list the main sources of vitamin D: “liver, oily fish and diary produce.” However, the article fails to specify that the main source of vitamin D is direct sunlight.<sup>x</sup> Actually, this essential vitamin is produced, photochemically, in the skin. If, in this case, veganism is considered to provoke a certain nutritional deficiency, once identified, the young vegan girl is made susceptible to stigmatization on the basis of her lacking, “harmful” diet. With reference to Erving Goffman’s classic study *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, we can then say that veganism becomes a “trait that can obtrude itself upon attention” ([1963] 1986: 5); it has the potential to discredit the individual vegan, depending on the specific social setting. The stigma of veganism, therefore, goes beyond mere dietary deficiencies: one’s diet can actually break social bonds (5).

The potential dangers of vegetarian or vegan diets are further emphasized in an article released by *ABC News* in 2009 titled “Vegetarian Teens May Face Higher Eating Disorder Risk.” The journalist paraphrases Dr. Neal Barnard from the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine as saying that “it [is] likely that some teens simply use[] vegetarianism as a cover for their unhealthy eating habits.” The title itself insures that the reader is instilled with a bias against vegetarian diets on the very threshold of the article. Towards the end of the article, parents of vegetarian teens are encouraged to exert greater control over their

children. We are led to believe that the decision to abstain from eating animal products is, in some cases, likely to be derived from the teen's own personal pathology; and, thus, the reasoning goes, young vegetarians would benefit from a higher level of parental surveillance. As Dr. Barnard further warns, "parents should make an effort to spend time with their teens at mealtime to ensure that they are eating a healthy diet." In this light, vegetarianism can be viewed as a symptom of the "sick" child's obsessive compulsion to lose weight.

Eating disorders are typically—if mistakenly—associated with young women, and, as such, vegetarianism is once more linked to the specificities of gender. Indeed, the issue of gender always seems to linger in close proximity to any discussion of vegetarianism or veganism. Anorexia is one example of this, and some studies suggest that vegetarianism might function as a veil to hide a person's underlying disorder, thus adding to the "mystique" of the female constitution.<sup>xi</sup> Ritualism is seen to be the connecting link between vegetarianism and so-called disordered eating, but what constitutes ritualistic behavior in this instance, and why does meat-eating usually not qualify? Is it perhaps because the consumption of meat is a foundational element in the teleology of society and the ideology of reproduction? According to Probyn, anorexia produces an "aesthetic and controlled" body (2000: 7), the image of which, we should remind ourselves, has strong ties to the tradition of the "hysterization of women's bodies" (Foucault, [1976] 1998: 104). As Foucault has pointed out, the pathologizing of women's bodies, of course, has traditionally served a very specific social function. The female anorexic, in the tradition of the bourgeoisie that Foucault outlines, becomes classified under the rubric of "the 'idle' woman" (121), and, hence, the young woman who refuses "normal" nourishment radically swerves from the path leading to the proper emergence of adulthood. Her "destiny charged with conjugal and parental obligations" (121) is violently jeopardized by her inadequate way of eating. Additionally, as Adams has demonstrated, in the nineteenth century female vegetarianism was associated with "chlorosis,"

which was a medical condition closely related to anemia (2010: 210). Since anemia disrupts the menstrual flow, not eating meat, medical professionals and laypeople alike believed, thus impacted female sexuality in a negative way.

Concerns over female consumption have a substantial history in the West. Even today, female children's vegetarianism should therefore, we are told, be carefully scrutinized—if not outright condemned—by the responsible parent, in order to guarantee the proper growth of the child, who in turn will come to fulfill her filial duty as a productive, fertile, and thus “happy” citizen. Consequently, *ABC News* implicitly propagates the view that vegetarianism can somehow be coupled with a phobic relation to food, if not a psychological disorder. This corresponds to Adams' assertion that dominant society “distort[s] the radical cultural critique of vegetarianism” (2010: 197) by obscuring the harm that the animal agriculture industry inflicts on the natural world. Moreover, this distortion spreads to and influences the vegan's self-understanding, which is further harmed by how omnivores have reacted to the question of veganism and sexuality. As Annie Potts and Jovian Parry demonstrate in their survey of online responses to the phenomenon of so-called vegansexuality: “Vegans...are [often] 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” (2010: 60). The connection to Ahmed's notion of the queer “killjoy” is here obvious. The charge of austerity or prudishness has the effect that vegans themselves often attempt to normalize or simplify the requirements of a vegan lifestyle, thus circumventing the accusation of asceticism or self-abnegation that is so prevalent in the popular discourse on veganism.

As sociologists Petra Sneijder and Hedwig te Molder show in their analysis of an online discussion forum devoted to the topic of veganism, vegans use certain discursive devices “to build vegan eating practices as simple and ordinary, thereby rebutting the rhetorical alternative of veganism as a complicated lifestyle” (2009: 626). The members of

the particular forum that Sneijder and Molder examine tend to draw upon a number of performative speech-acts regarding their diet that the authors label “doing being ordinary” (627). “‘Ordinariness’ is normatively invoked here as the rhetorical alternative for ‘complicatedness’, such that someone who is ‘a vegan but still an ordinary person’ cannot be reproached” (627). This corresponds to Erving Goffman’s (awkward) term “normification,” which, “namely [is] the effort on the part of a stigmatized individual to present himself [sic] as an ordinary person, although not necessarily making a secret of his [so-called] failing” ([1963] 1986: 31). In this manner, vegans (at least so far as we can generalize the findings of Sneijder and Molder) will endeavor, to a marked degree, to present their mode of living as being in line with the expectations of social norms.<sup>xiii</sup>

Such normalizing tendencies are not restricted to the fairly “localized” narratives of vegan Internet fora. Despite their ostensibly radical framework and devotion to reducing the level of distortion that veganism is filtered through, popular vegan/animal rights organizations are not isolated from the impetus that drives the production of the norm in general society. The *Cruelty Doesn’t Fly* video with Pamela Anderson produced by PETA will serve as a case in point here. In this video the TV-star/model turned animal rights spokes-person plays a customs officer in an airport. Instead of the usual regulations on liquids, sharp objects, etc., this particular airport does not allow passengers to wear any kind of clothing derived from animals such as leather and fur on their flights. The first person to approach the security check is a shirt-less, young male, who Anderson manhandles and then proceeds to crouch in front of suggestively in her skimpy outfit, ripping the leather belt from his pants. Only a naked heterosexual couple is allowed to pass security without arousing Anderson’s vigilant suspicions. In other words, they are able to “pass” for “good” vegans; naked as they came, this proto-Adam/Eve couple is welcomed into PETA’s normative paradise. With no critical attention to the values they reproduce, PETA presents the viewer

with a clear image of the desirable vegan body today: physically fit, very carefully gendered, and, perhaps most problematic of all, white; thus optimized for propagation, there is no doubt as to who will populate PETA's utopian vegan nation. Veganism has been made as sexy as any other product that corporate America wants us to buy (An entire archive of "sexy" print ads populate PETA's website). From its position of "otherness," the vegan body is brought into the limelight of spectacular heterosexuality; PETA has succeeded in normalizing veganism. Of course, in the process they *have* managed to get rid of the historically constructed assumption that veganism for males spells effeminacy or gender "inversion." We must ask ourselves nonetheless: at what cost? Is PETA's program desirable in the end? How will we be able to oppose the oppressive mechanisms of society if we blindly reproduce the very logic we, as vegans, supposedly fight against?

Rather than insisting on a "norm" of veganism, I want to emphasize the queerness of veganism, as that which, to employ a phrase from Edelman, "chafes against 'normalization'" (2004: 6). This is done in order to problematize the "privilege of heteronormativity"—which at the same time is the privilege of anthronormativity—as the "organizing principle of communal relations" (2). Becoming vegan is therefore also becoming queer in all its "abjectified difference" (26), to quote from Edelman once more. If we wish to effectively and forcefully challenge the system behind animal exploitation it becomes crucial to examine and expose all the various discourses that make up that system. At the same time, this means abandoning the idea that veganism can exist in the mainstream without being "hailed" by the project of normalization. We should not refer to veganism as a lifestyle. Veganism shares the "hopeless" queer ethics of Edelman, as both positions subscribe to a refusal to carry on, or reproduce, the social order of anthro/heteronormativity. Assimilation is not an option.

By drawing on a number of examples, my focus in this text so far has been to provide a basis for how we can begin to approach the subject of a vegan queer ethics, predicated on

the potential involved in embracing deviation. It is by negating the idea of identity as teleology that we might learn how to share our “selves” across species boundaries. Effectively, the only way of thinking communion with nonhumans is simply to recognize that we, as a species, are not separated from “them” as such: to invoke Luciana Parisi, our lived “experience extends outside the living towards the entire nature—including the smallest parts, atoms, electrons, and so on” (2008: 302). The relation is the becoming. To be sure, as Cary Wolfe puts it, “the only way to the ‘there’ in which the animals reside is to find them ‘here,’ in us and of us” (2003: 207). In other words, the abject is localizable within the human body-self. Largely, however, in the Western world the vegan body is viewed as deficient, and its very presence disturbs the social order. But the human body is always in a state of lack—it is never stable, nor ever perfectly healthy or “at rest.” Nonetheless, by embracing the queer position of radical otherness—which translates to the “refusal to be optimistic about ‘the right things’ in the right kind of way” (Ahmed, 2010: 162)—we are at the same time able to think relations that are not marked by a human specificity. The human condition itself is constantly exposed to “contamination” from the outside, veganism merely foregrounds this fact. We might like to pretend that biological life is under the domain of the human—indeed most of us continue to eat as if it were—and, yet, this is unequivocally not so. In the end, it is not contradictory—in the anthronormative view—to take the meaning of life to include the death of other animals. It is life such as this that the vegan—blatantly queer or not—must refuse.

### **A Question of Life and/or Death?**

Perhaps the reason that veganism is despised or at the very least rendered suspicious by dominant meat-eating culture is namely because it does not shy away from the fact of death. Be it in the shape of actual images of violence in the animal agriculture industry or textual

and oral evidence, veganism as a discourse is suffused with the tenets of death and suffering; some may even call the language of animal activism morbid. This is ironic when we consider that veganism, as I have shown, is often considered an irresponsible diet, or even a source of mortal harm. I bring up this issue because I think it is important to think about how we invoke the life/death binary when we theorize veganism or advocate for animal rights.

As a way of approaching my conclusion, I would thus like to return to Adams' analysis of the sexual politics of meat. Adams of course aims to reverse the various negative stereotypes of vegetarians and vegans, and she proceeds by pointing to a slew of statistics which indicate that adhering to a vegetable-based diet is significantly healthier than eating meat. There is nothing wrong with making this claim (the different health benefits of a vegan diet seem difficult to deny)—given the context it is even admirable. However, I am apprehensive of the fact that she continues by saying that, “[t]hey [vegetarians as a collective whole] see meat as causing death because of the effects of high-fat diets on one’s susceptibility to cancer and heart disease,” and that, therefore, meat eating is “not consonant with the *human* body” ([1990] 2010: 196, 204). By drawing on different anthropological and medical sources, Adams further asserts that the human body is essentially vegetarian (194-95). This view seems untenable (humans are widely considered to be omnivorous, which is why we can *choose* not to consume other animals), and, in my opinion, it hardly helps matters to simply reverse the life/death binary (meat consumption/veganism → veganism/meat consumption). Similarly, the fact that humans prepare meat in ways that are radically distinct from other animals (“the use of implements to kill and butcher the animal, the cooking and seasoning of meat” [197-98]) is not a good objection to eating meat in the first place, since human beings vary from other animals in myriad ways: no other animal participates in wage labor or religious and political practices and structures either, to name but a few examples. Furthermore, simply because humans use tools to process and prepare

the dead animal for consumption does not prove that eating meat is basically unnatural in a human context (many different species surely eat in many different ways, and, yet, we do not consider any of these unnatural). Adams' text, in effect, suffers greatly from her choice of logic on this point: if A (human) does X differently from B (nonhuman animal) she takes it to mean that the practice of X absolutely separates A from C (nature), the domain of B. Actually, by posing the question, "*If meat eating is natural, why do we not do it naturally, like the animals?* [my emphasis]" (198). Adams, quite inadvertently, I am sure, comes to reiterate one of the central philosophical justifications for the exploitation of animals. I am here referring to the so-called "tool argument"—the ability of humans to utilize that which is "present-at-hand," in Heideggerian parlance. She is suggesting that by using tools to prepare meat or other animal ingredients for consumption, we will have demonstrated an "unnatural" relation to our surroundings. This argument appears obviously problematic and inherently flawed when we consider that, as Peter H. Steeves points out, "[s]ome monkeys use stones to smash open nuts and seeds" (2002: 234), and species other than humans have thus clearly demonstrated a propensity for using tools.

The above might read as a petty critique of a body of work that has unquestionably been widely influential and important for scholars and activists alike (myself included); Adams clearly wants to show that eating meat, to a large extent, is a social and cultural construction, and that the origins of vegetarianism have been subverted by a recent tradition of meat-eating. I am with her so far—and I respect her overall contribution to the field (it would, in fact, not be untoward to argue that she has more or less invented the area of study that I find myself working within)—but some elements of her argument trouble me. She suggests that the inherent essence of human nature has been silenced by the "carnophallogocentric" (a term she borrows from Jacques Derrida) impetus of modern, Western society, since, in fact, "the word the human body speaks is vegetarian" (197). This is an

obviously hyperbolic claim to make, but, aside from the audacity of her statement, I find the essentializing thrust of her language the more striking still. To all intents and purposes, veganism, for Adams, is no longer simply an ethical choice; it corresponds to a biological fact of the human body. In Adams' discourse, the human consumption of meat is thus rendered not only immoral but also unnatural, while the vegan body comes to resemble something like the spirit of proper, primordial humanity incarnate. But when is the vegan body vegan enough? Is it ever possible to cleanse oneself of the spiritual pollutants that would have formed in the modern "soul" prior to one's going vegan? In fact, as Adams herself gestures towards, the problem is not that the essence of the human is separated from its actual, current reality by a field of distortion produced by dominant culture, it is virtually physically impossible to become 100% vegan. Moreover, not only is animal exploitation firmly embedded within Western culture, simply being in the world is intertwined with violence: nonhuman life must necessarily be sacrificed in order for human existence to emerge and thrive. No matter how ethical we may endeavor to be or become, we cannot help the fact that plant and insect life, as a bare minimum, will perish in the wake of every single human birth. Contrary to popular vegan belief, none of us are "deathless," and regardless of how many evocative t-shirt designs we choose to purchase we should never delude ourselves into thinking otherwise.<sup>xiii</sup>

Deathlessness as a trope indeed seems to be crucial to veganism as a formation of identity. Following a 2006 New Zealand study on the experiences of vegetarians and vegans conducted by the Centre for Human-Animal Studies, two new terms entered the vocabulary: vegansexuality and vegansexuals—the pervasiveness and dissemination of both words mostly came about not surprisingly due to the responses of sensationalist news media, but, in turn, it was quickly picked up by online vegan communities around the world (Potts and Parry, 2010: 56). Vegansexuality refers to the preference of some vegans to only enter into sexual and/or

romantic relationships with other vegans—they are vegansexuals. In Annie Potts and Jovian Parry’s article, “Vegan Sexuality: Challenging Heteronormative Masculinity through Meat-free Sex,” they quote a number of vegans who participated in the study, and the consensus seems to be that bodies sustained on meat and other animal products are at best considered unappetizing to the vegansexual, if not downright disgusting. As a 49-year old woman puts it: “I couldn’t think of kissing lips that allow dead animal pieces to pass between them,” and yet another: “I believe we are what we consume so I really struggle with bodily fluids, especially sexually” (Potts and Parry, 2010: 54). This organically motivated attitude is not new to the vegan world, of course, as Potts and Parry also make clear (56). I believe that this form of reaction is caused by two things: the nostalgic belief that—similar to what Adams outlines in her text—through a vegan diet, it is possible to reverse the (damaging) impact that the advent of industrialized food production has had on the human body; and, secondly, the operation of what the father of affect theory, Silvan Tomkins, has called “counter-contempt” (1995: 138).

In effect, the New Zealand study reports on a crisis in communal relations between vegans and omnivores. Indeed, the notion of community will necessarily be brought to a point of crisis if we react with disgust towards what the other habitually consumes. Not only is a specific food object rejected—as in Tomkins’ description of how one’s response to disgust, or contempt (he conflates the two), “intends to maximize the distance between the face and the object which disgusts the self” (1995: 135)—but the other actually becomes identical to the initial object of disgust, meat in this case. Evidently, any display of disgust/contempt will more than likely function as an “impediment[] to intimacy and communion,” as Tomkins makes clear (139). Vegansexuality may very well then be the deferred or even displaced response to the contempt that meat-eating culture has been directing against vegans. Certainly, as Tomkins notes, “[i]t is not difficult for one who is treated with contempt to respond with anger” (158), or, in this instance, counter-contempt,

which would be the vegan's way of challenging or rejecting the socializing impetus to internalize claims of inferiority directed at one's person. Vegansexuality, however, comes to perpetuate the same processes of "othering" that "vegan" as a discursively founded category has been suffused with: the rejection of "meat-bodies"—sexually and ideologically—only strengthens and further solidifies the binary vegan/meat-eater. Furthermore, as any good Foucauldian would have been able to predict, as a classificatory term, vegansexuality inevitably and almost immediately became yet another means of categorizing those others who fail to reproduce the heterosexual norm, and, subsequently, the vegansexual developed as a site of etiological inscription (Potts and Parry, 2010: 55-56).

In addition to this, there is a major irony at work here. Dead animal bodies daily pass by vegan "lips"—understood as a figure for the threshold of the self—as it is by internalizing the loss of animal lives that a crucial component of vegan ethics and identity is established. Vegans habitually devour and, in turn, regurgitate the spectral remainder of animal carcasses, as it were, since the daily and constant loss of nonhuman lives that the meat industry is responsible for must continually be remembered and re-articulated in order to sustain one's motivation for being and remaining vegan; the loss cannot (or must not) adequately be worked through. And perhaps it is even this "morbid" and "stubborn" preoccupation with the death of nonhuman others that renders veganism so markedly queer. The anxious disavowal of death itself by some vegans appears, to my mind, namely to prove this point. Do we, then, fundamentally and continually run the risk of fetishizing the loss of the nonhuman? Veganism itself relies on the sacrifice of animals in order to sustain itself as an identity-defining project, since the goal of veganism—dismantling the animal agriculture industry—would make veganism redundant as a consequence.<sup>xiv</sup>

## **A Hope for the Future? Or, Towards an Ethics of Unforeseeability**

That's what makes queerness intolerable, even to those who call themselves queer: a nonteleological negativity that refuses the leavening of piety and with it the dollop of sweetness afforded by messianic hope.  
—Lee Edelman in Dinshaw et al. (2007)

There can be no vegan future without meat consumption, and, hence, veganism, paradoxically, implies the very suffering that it opposes. In other words, the concept of veganism supports and preserves meat-eating in a discursive system of difference. As difficult or counterintuitive as it may appear, for veganism to be effective—and this returns us to the queer impetus of my argument—at the very point of its articulation it must turn back on the oppositional position of its social and linguistic structuring. In so far as veganism anticipates a future without meat and other animal products, it carries with it the promise of an impossible “realization of meaning that [would nonetheless] suture” (Edelman, 2004: 24) the vegan identity by closing the gap between what we *know* to be the “truth” of “our anatomical makeup” (Adams, [1990] 2010: 195) and the flawed—not to say harmful—representation of veganism as engendered by society. In Adams’ view, this would mean filtering out the disruptive waves of discursive distortion that normative culture projects at the vegan self. Notwithstanding the important cultural analysis of her work, Adams’ vegan-feminism finally offers dominant culture nothing but a “reassuringly symmetrical, if inverted depiction of its own ostensibly coherent identity” (Edelman, 2004: 24). Once more I unashamedly appropriate Edelman’s rhetoric to make the point that veganism in its current formation (and I am of course speaking very generally here), by insisting that abstaining from nonhuman animal consumption of any kind, can connect us to a more “authentic” relation with our presumably vegetarian past is aggressively nostalgic. Pining for a lost bond with ourselves—as well as nature and other animals—produces a desire for community, which, in

Jean-Luc Nancy's phrasing, merely corresponds to a "belated invention that trie[s] to respond to the harsh reality of modern experience" (1991: 10). But, not only that, no matter how dynamic or inclusive we may believe a certain theory of vegan community to be, it will always have to define itself against an outside (meat-eating society, in this instance), which will then be internalized, or devoured rather. And, as such, veganism might very well end up becoming as static and reactionary as the normative structures of society that we oppose.

In response to this, I strongly propose 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. Veganism is not an umbrella term for ethical behavior in general; it does not correspond to an all-encompassing morality (*the Moral position par excellence*—that which all other moralities can be measured against). It appears to me invaluable to bear in mind that coming to veganism, or becoming vegan, happens as a response to universalism in general, and it is therefore fitting that veganism as a *pure* concept is always impossible to sustain or even arrive at. On the one hand, I can articulate the wish to become a more compassionate vegan in general, but, on the other, I will never be able to live up to any ideal concept of compassion thus expressed, for, following Derrida: "I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another, without sacrificing the other other, the other others" (1995: 68). Even so, responsibility in the Derridean sense denotes "a respect for otherness," and as Derek Attridge comments in his introduction to Derrida's *Acts of Literature*: "This responsibility toward the other is also a responsibility toward the *future*, since it involves the struggle to create openings within which the other can appear beyond any of our programs and predictions" (1993: 5).

We must here distinguish sharply between futurity as it appears in the Derridean optic and that which Edelman refers to as "reproductive futurity"—the furthering of the body politic through the re-articulation of conservative values pertaining to a heterocentrist

ordering of social relations. The responsibility towards the to-come—which Derrida describes as “the experience of a promise engaged, that is always an endless promise” (1993: 38)—disengages from the naïveté of liberal politics. Consequently, if veganism can be said to have or allude to a future promise at all it might best be described in terms of what, in reference to Derrida, Marius Timmann Mjaaland calls the structure of “unforeseeability,” which “contains the possibility of a *confirmation*, an opening in the direction of a confirmation which surpasses all one’s expectations, goals, and calculations” (2008: 77); in our present circumstance, this would entail the confirmation of a veganism that—by queering its own sense of a future—we can depend on to “always contain[] something *other* than one had expected” (77). We should here hear an echo of Scott’s “tragic historicism” and his openness to the vagaries of life that we encountered earlier. Such an ethic surely involves risk and a level of audaciousness. And what would veganism be without deviance—the unforeseeable relations and outcomes that might come from refusing to participate in the oppression and consumption of nonhuman others? Rather than shying away from the radical potential of veganism through norm-seeking behavior, as according to the tenets of “doing-being-ordinary,” we should acknowledge that daring to be deviant is exhilarating because of the unexpected elements involved—even if this might cause a degree of “unhappiness” around us. This is why unforeseeability thus denotes affirmation rather than anxiety—and that without the stifling clause of reproductive futurity; this is also why—far from being joyless or dully ascetic—veganism is a quite titillating approach to life.

Liberalism views the future as the realization of a hope that is nevertheless firmly rooted in a structure of hopeless nostalgia. Veganism is clearly (queerly) disconcerting to liberal futurism—“intolerable” even, in Edelmanian parlance (2007: 195)—as it disaffirms the structure that the latter is predicated upon: the survival of the social order, which is—metaphorically and physically—nourished on the death of nonhuman others. While it is not

unlikely that Edelman off-hand might want to group veganism with “pious” and naïve utopianism, I believe that I have managed to present it in terms that could be agreeable to even the most “negatively” inclined of queer theorists. Indeed, the promise of becoming vegan—which has not yet been realized in quite the manner that I imagine it in this text—is to challenge, or queer, always and everywhere, the normative demands that are placed upon our genders, sexualities, and diets; from the persistent assumptions about masculinity and meat-eating to the hetero-graphic images of PETA’s activist campaigns, veganism must appear as the fundamental “*troublant*” of dominant society (Sedgwick, 1993: xii). Troubling, yes, because of its unforeseeable impact.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Looking at Britain in the nineteenth century, for example, Adams cites “the first national food survey of...dietary habits [conducted] in 1863, which revealed that the major difference in the diet of men and women in the same family was the amount of meat consumed” (2010: 51). Moreover, by drawing on the work of Peggy Sanday, Adams is lead to state that there is “a correlation between plant-based economies and women’s power and animal-based economies and male power” (59).

<sup>ii</sup> According to Halperin, effeminacy should be treated as a category unto itself, since the designation “soft” or “unmasculine,” in a number of different European cultural traditions, could mean either “*womanly*, or transgendered,” or, on the other hand, that one was a womanizer (2000: 93).

<sup>iii</sup> It is unfortunate that Dell’Aversano’s otherwise “radical,” queer endeavor— seeing as it is so heavily influenced by Lee Edelman’s work—is marred by her insistence on “rights” as a viable term in relation to the “animal question.” Were we to extend the right of bodily integrity to nonhuman animals, we would have to construct a set of legal rights to administer this moral right. Already we subject other animals to disciplinary practices (in the modern-day factory farm, through pet training, in circuses, etc.), and it is my concern that we in our efforts to treat animals fairly instead wind up perpetrating new acts of “violence” against them by insisting that they be incorporated into yet more human structures. Since nonhumans cannot properly engage in human discourse, her/his inclusion in a system of rights would always have to be decided by us. Put simply, it will never be possible for an animal to take a stance on the issue of rights, and the rights approach is for this reason insufficient when it comes to determining how to guide our interactions with other animals. Dell’Aversano does implicitly acknowledge this when she emphasizes the “radical unknowability of animals” (2010: 102), and thus affirms how animals are barred from becoming subjects in any “real” sense (both in structural and psychoanalytic terms).

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<sup>iv</sup> On the issue of affect see the aforementioned article, “The Love Whose Name Cannot be Spoken: Queering the Human-Animal Bond” by Carmen Dell’Aversano, as well as Alice A. Kuzniar, *Melancholia’s Dog: Reflections on our Animal Kinship*, Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson, *When Elephants Weep: The Emotional Lives of Animals*, and Marc Bekoff, *Animal Manifesto*. For the exploitation of nonhuman animals refer to, e.g., Nicole Shukin, *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times*, and, of course, the work of Peter Singer and Tom Regan.

<sup>v</sup> As will become clear, I *am* sympathetic to Muñoz’ placing emphasis on that which is “not-yet-conscious” and the future potential for “being” and “doing” things opposite “reproductive majoritarian heterosexuality” (2009: 22), but I don’t see how or why a “romance” of hope and optimism rather than one of negativity (1) would be better equipped to show us the way to a future that would finally be queer enough for Muñoz and the rest of us (22); further, if we do not yet know it, how will we finally recognize true queerness when we see it?

<sup>vi</sup> I have many times in conversation with other academics had to contend with the accusation that veganism is just another “lifestyle” that has been elevated to a scholarly topic, the implication being, I take it, that vegan scholars are similar to those “others” who have made their own minority status an object of study. This is of course an extremely offensive argument, as the tenets of veganism and various other “deviant” identifications cannot comfortably be subsumed under the “lifestyle” heading, since doing so would ignore the political consequences of one’s position.

<sup>vii</sup> In this context, I find it invaluable to keep in mind David Scott’s cautioning words from his book *Conscripts of Modernity*: “In a moral-political world in which all other values exist only to be overcome or subordinated to a single overarching principle, while we may gain much from the vision and certainty, we also impoverish our readiness for accommodation, for reception, for openness, for yielding” (2004: 206).

<sup>viii</sup> The basic biopolitical processes outlined here are also found in the farm industry. As Cudworth points out, “Animals’ sexuality and reproductive capacity is appropriated in order to ensure continuity, efficiency and consistency in the production of milk and meat” (2008: 42).

<sup>ix</sup> Recall, for example, how an Atlanta couple was convicted of murder for having failed to meet their infant’s dietary needs, by feeding him mainly juice and soymilk. On the basis of this and a few similar cases, an article by Nina Planck (2007) in the *New York Times* argues that, “a vegan diet is not adequate in the long run.”

<sup>x</sup> Naturally, for one reason or another (for example during those months of the year when sunlight is scarce) it can become necessary to supplement one’s diet with other sources of vitamin D, which never have to be derived from animals, we should add.

<sup>xi</sup> For example, see Sheree A. Klopp and Heather S. Smith “Self-reported Vegetarianism May Be a Marker for College Women at Risk for Disordered Eating” (in which only 33% of the “vegetarians” studied did not eat any form of meat!), and Simon M. Gilbody, et al., “Vegetarianism in Young Women: Another Means of Weight Control?”, the latter of which states that “[a]dopting a vegetarian diet may...offer the individual with an eating disorder a legitimate means of restricting their intake and an apparently perfect *weapon* for resisting nutritional rehabilitation [my emphasis]” (88).

<sup>xii</sup> If we are to believe a recent “lifestyle” article in the *Boston Globe*, “hegans” are the newest species of vegans to crop up in our culture (Pierce, 2010). This group encompasses middle-aged males who seem to have turned to veganism as a means of combating obesity or other health-related issues. Not incidentally, the term shares a prefix with “he-man,” signifying quintessential, brawny masculinity. Hegan, then, mainly refers to the tautologically inflected phrase, “a real man’s man;” and yet we find

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included on the list of hegans Thom Yorke of Radiohead fame and actor Tobey Maguire, who—it is fair to say—are not usually linked to images of rugged masculinity. It is thus not quite clear just how masculine one is required to be in order to qualify as a proper hegan; the term is fundamentally ill-defined. However, veteran firefighter and triathlete Rip Esseltyn obviously represents the type of hegan the reporter has in mind. Esseltyn anxiously seeks to counter the stereotype that veganism is for “tree-hugging, emaciated weaklings,” and he goes on to ardently insist that “real men eat plants.”

<sup>xiii</sup> See <http://store.veganessentials.com/deathless-unisex-v-neck-t-shirt-by-herbivore-clothing-p3131.aspx>.

<sup>xiv</sup> The otherwise intentionally silly novel *The Vegan Revolution...With Zombies* (in an obvious homage to George Romero’s classic horror film, *Dawn of the Dead*, the tagline of the book reads: “When there’s no more meat in hell, the vegans will walk the earth...”) by David Agranoff ends on a poignant note as the author considers what the world would look like after the vegan revolution has run its course. In Agranoff’s book, the revolution only happens as a result of a regular zombie apocalypse, induced by the human consumption of a new drug used in the meat industry that would make animals immune to suffering—thereby creating what in the novel becomes known as Stress Free Food; vegans are the only ones not affected by this, and they are left to fend off the hordes of undead who are now looking to consume more than animal flesh. At the end of the book, the aged protagonist, Dani—being the last person alive to have lived through what effectively became the dismantling of civilization as we know it—asks a group of school children if they “‘know the word vegan?’” (2010: 153). As they have never lived in a world of animal exploitation or factory farming, consequently, veganism is an obscure term to them: “They [the children] looked at each other confused. Dani smiled. ‘I suppose you wouldn’t know that word, would you.’ Dani closed her eyes and took in a deep breath. ‘Good for you.’” (154).

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