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Sex, Violence and Transgression: Feminism and Necropolitics in the Commercial Egg Industry

Charlotte Lim

Difference is that raw and powerful connection
from which our personal power is forged
—Audre Lorde, 1979

Introduction: The vegan “extreme”

In February 2019, I became vegan. I vowed to commit to a diet and lifestyle excluding all animal flesh and animal products (including eggs, dairy, honey and gelatine). This decision led to a paradigm shift: I no longer saw meat as separate from the once sentient individual whose life was brutally taken to satisfy a human whim for mere taste. I saw eggs and dairy products as vestiges of animal suffering, cruelty that was legitimised through a speciesist lens devaluing animal life and autonomy and justifying the systemic exploitation of animal reproductive systems. How did I reach this “extreme” position?

The seed was planted in first-year Gender Studies, taught by Dr. Astrida Neimanis. It was during the lecture on intersectionality that I experienced my first moral epiphany: could I call myself a feminist if I ate animals? I had spent my childhood frolicking with chickens in my backyard, yet never made the connection between the pets I adored and the body on my dinner plate. Later, this developed into: could I label myself a feminist if I contributed to the abuse of certain bodies on the grounds of their species? And then: what kind of feminist would I be if I

continued to uphold structures of oppression and exploitation imposed on animal bodies – predominantly female ones – through my consumption of animals and animal products? To rephrase Audre Lorde, what does it mean when the tools of a *speciesist* patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? ‘It means that only the most narrow perimeters of change are possible and allowable’ (Lorde, 1984, pp. 110–111).

Sex and violence are inextricably intertwined with the animal agriculture industry. This paper aims to demonstrate how violence towards chickens, founded on the sex/gender of the animal, is utilised to procure eggs for human consumption. Part I argues that the egg industry wields a form of necropolitical power (Agamben, 1998; Mbembé & Meintjes, 2003) over animal lives, justified through ideologies of capitalism, anthropocentrism and carnism (Joy, 2010). Part II engages in dialogue with sanctuary founder Catherine Kelaheer and tells the story of Ariel, a member of Kelaheer’s “disabled flock,” as an example of how vegan animal activists can transgress necropolitical norms. I conclude by demonstrating how the violence of the animal agriculture industry can be both subverted and transgressed by committing to a vegan diet and lifestyle, engaging in vegan animal activism, and through telling Ariel’s story prove how the survival of those liberated is an act of protest against the violence of the industry.

Part I: Taxonomies of power and necropolitics in the poultry industry

Capitalism and anthropocentrism – the belief in human exceptionalism – are the intertwined “taxonomies of power” (Kim, 2015) that create and perpetuate necropolitical (death-inducing) power structures in poultry and egg industries. These ideological frameworks seek to legitimate an existing or desired social order, and reinforce the socially normative shared belief that it is morally permissible to use animal bodies for the sole purpose of human “needs” and privilege (Nibert, 2003, p. 8). In egg production, female poultry are oppressed, abused and exploited not only due to their species but also their biological sex. The industry uses their reproductive abilities, or in other words, the poultry equivalent of human ovulation (laying), as a means of production and, thus, profit. The exploitation of chickens as objectifiable “Others” is justified by anthropocentrism, validated by capitalism and in turn genders the nature of oppression in the egg industry – the “right” to

use animal bodies and (female) reproductive systems for profit. Capitalism is then reinforced through the oppressive dominant human/nonhuman binary operationalised in the egg industry (and animal agriculture more broadly) as animals are transformed conceptually from subjects to objects and treated accordingly (Canavan, 2017, p. 34).

Anthropocentrism enables the organisation of human society through a rigid “species hierarchy” in which humans are placed firmly at its apex so that the “needs, desires, interests and even whims of human beings shape the kinds of relationships we are likely to have with non-human species” (Cudworth, 2008, p. 34). The species hierarchy justifies the normative ideology of carnism, the belief system that conditions humans to eat certain animals but abstain from eating others (Joy, 2010). The violence of carnism is embedded in fragmented notions of tradition and modernity; notions of what constitutes a “normal,” “natural” and “healthy” diet. Carnism exists in strict opposition to veganism and is informed by the biopolitical belief that some (animal) lives are worth less (e.g., poultry) than others (e.g., canines) and therefore those lives should be “let go,” implying that such lives should be made to exist without the rights afforded to those species that humans deem worthwhile. Carnism exists as a means to prop up normative human society (and industries). Michel Foucault conceptualised this shift from sovereign power – “the right to kill”, or rather, “to take life or let live” (Foucault, 1976, pp. 240-241) – to biopower: a form of power that sought to “regularise life, the authority to *force* living not just to happen but to endure and appear in particular ways” (Berlant, 2007, p. 756). In relation to animal agricultural industries, I argue, however, that *necropolitical* power (Mbembé, J & Meintjes, L, 2003). reshapes both sovereignty and biopower: it is the right to *create* animal life, *force it* to endure in particular ways, and then *take* that life through slaughter when their productive (profitable) capacities slow.

Necropolitical power is rife throughout the egg industry. Animal life is systematically managed through the dispersion of implicit and explicit violence that seeks to control the outcome of life even before an egg hatches. Battery chickens have been systematically bred and genetically modified to lay 300-360 eggs per year (C. Kelaher, personal communication, February 9 2020). This number is in stark contrast to their ancestors, the red jungle fowl laying just 15-30 eggs per year (C. Kelaher, personal communication, February 9 2020).

Hens, however, only make up 50% of the chickens born. Their male counterparts are deemed “useless” – or unproductive – by the industry, and are either put through a machine that grounds them alive or are gassed to death just after hatching (Kelaher, 2020). Due to the abuse of female reproductive organs, male chickens are categorised as “waste” objects that need to be disposed of in the most efficient way, rather than individual, autonomous subjects with lives that matter to them. Female chicks that are “lucky” enough to be “allowed” to live are then debeaked: a horrific process involving the severing of a portion of the hen’s beak – the most sensitive part of the animal’s anatomy – with a hot blade and without the aid of anaesthetic or analgesics (Capps, 2013). Chicks often experience difficulties eating and drinking after this mutilation and suffer from hunger and dehydration (Kelaher, 2020). Debeaking occurs because seven to ten hens can be crammed into a single battery cage. Without the space to roam and engage their natural behaviour of dust-bathing, hunting and wing-flapping, hens often attack each other to defend their minimal territory and cause injury with their full beaks.

Rather than utilising ‘governmentality’ to regulate and maintain the hen population, that is, to operate “through politics and departments, through managerial and bureaucratic institutions, through the law” (Butler, 2004, p. 52) and changing the conditions of the structures in which these birds live (for example, introducing law reforms that effectively transition the animal agriculture industry to one that is plant-based), the egg industry has instead pinned fault on the animal’s natural attributes and mutilated their beaks. Forced to live in crammed conditions without the space to stretch their legs or wings, hens are made to lay, intensively, for 18 months, before their egg production slows and death at the slaughterhouse awaits (Kelaher, 2020). Once they reach the slaughterhouse, hens are treated with horrific violence: shackled by their legs and hung upside down as they are stunned before being run through blades designed to slit the animal’s throat (Kelaher, 2020). The short lives of these animals reflect Lauren Berlant’s definition of “slow death”: “the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of...that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence” (Berlant, 2007, p. 754).

I would like to take a moment to briefly refute the arguments put forth by welfarists or advocates of “free range” or “ethical” eggs, who argue that the aforementioned conditions are not reflective of the whole industry, despite being standard practice. Welfarism is an ideology that claims to abide by the “ethical” use of

animals involved in production. Its intended purpose is to enable consumers to resist challenging the normative status of animals implicated and often exploited in the participation of food industries (Canavan, 2017). Welfarism seeks to justify the consumption of eggs, dairy and other animal products as “ethical” as the consumption of these food groups does not directly result from the death/slaughter of an animal. However, while “free-range” eggs, for instance, claim to guarantee adequate room for chickens (less than two A4-sheets of paper per hen), “free range” only caters to the portion of the animal’s *laying* life. Male chicks are still ground alive, hens are still debeaked, and whether free range, barn or cage, no hen can escape the fate of slaughter once their egg production begins to wane after 18 months (Lim, 2020a). Ultimately, the systemic use and abuse of animal reproductive systems create and sustain the egg industry. “Better conditions” for laying hens do not subvert, nor will they transgress the structural make-up of the industry that relies on the exploitation of animal bodies.

Part II: Transgressing carnist cages

How can humans *and* animals overturn necropolitical power structures which govern carnist norms? Lorde (1984, p. 112) suggests that “Interdependency between women is the way to a freedom which allows the *I* to *be*, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative.” She also argues that it is the *difference* between women (Lorde, 1984, p. 112), and as I argue, the difference *between species* that forges a new kind of power: one which can “dismantle the master’s house” – through connectedness. Catherine Kelaher is a feminist, vegan and animal activist as well as the founder and CEO of NSW Hen Rescue, a charity dedicated to the liberation of all animals with a focus on caged hens. Kelaher also became vegan due to her intersectional-feminist ethos and was driven by the injustices inflicted upon animals because of their reproductive organs to run her own animal sanctuary (Lim, 2020b). The act of being vegan, according to Kelaher, *is* an act of transgression against the carnist norm. It openly defies the necropolitical and capitalist logic that has structured the multi-billion-dollar animal agriculture industry, which relies on the exploitation of animal bodies (Statistics, 2019).

Kelaher takes in several disabled hens who have been liberated from their cages. Like the ‘traditional hierarchy of relations’ in ableist human society, disabled hens are often considered “economic burdens” and either “abandoned and left to their

destiny” of a slow death via dehydration and starvation or simply killed at a slaughterhouse (Mitra, 2013, p. 1286). There exists a disturbing conviction in industries where animals are used – not just as a food source but as objects which generate profit, such as greyhound (Busby, 2019) and horse racing (Stayner, 2012) – that the death of the animal is actually preferable to disability (Puar, 2015, p. 219).

The relationship between Ariel, a member of Kelaher’s disabled flock and survivor of the egg industry, and Kelaher defies and transgresses such a neoliberal and necropolitical view of animal life. Rescued from a battery cage and suffering neurological damage due to past trauma, Ariel requires a higher provision of day-to-day care (Lim, 2020b). She is hand-fed brought water twice daily and sleeps in a pet carrier on a yoga mat and soft towel, as the usual straw irritates her face due to her disability. She sleeps inside the human house when it rains as the dampness triggers neurological episodes. Once she started laying again, post-rescue, her eggs were “sloppy” – meaning eggs without shells, or soft shells, which got stuck in her oviduct causing pain and distress. Thanks to a hormonal implant, she will never have to lay an egg again.

A month after her rescue, Ariel gained the strength to stand on the grass and walk in small, battery-cage sized circles. It was as though she did not believe she could walk any further than that – a vestige of the trauma of her caged days. Over time, Ariel’s circle got bigger and bigger, and now, five years on from her rescue, she zooms from one side of Kelaher’s garden to the other. Ariel would have died in that battery cage, alone, not knowing the sun, the feeling of grass beneath her feet and love, had Kelaher not transgressed the property borders of Ariel’s prison and pulled her out. Ariel’s story of survival against necropolitical, ableist, sexist and speciesist capitalism is a testament to her power to protest animal-based violence.

Conclusion

‘To lead an ethical life is to be feminist, and to be feminist is to be vegan’ is the conclusion I came to when I reckoned with horrific acts of violence inflicted upon farmed animals. To view all life, regardless of sex/gender, dis/ability and species, as equal, with rights worthy of protection, is the foundation of intersectional feminism. It is through the generous storytelling of feminists – bravely shared in books, poetry and speeches – that I learned to critically reflect on my practice of feminism and how this ethical framework could be extended to what I ate, wore

and how I lived. Feminist storytelling transformed the way I view and participate in the world, and in turn, allows humans to reimagine more just interspecies relationships. Whether that be through diet, lifestyle, activism, education initiatives and consciousness-raising activities, it is my hope that Ariel's story possesses the same transformative potency to those who encounter it. The vegan diet (and lifestyle more broadly) are acts that defy the necropolitical, carnist norm – and provide the foundational tools in which the master's house of sexist, speciesist and ableist patriarchy – can finally be dismantled.

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