

ex•po•nent¹

1 a person who believes in and promotes the truth or benefits of an idea or theory.

What's Cooking With Academics?

The Vassar Student Association's Academics Committee welcomes you to the first issue of Exponent!

We are excited to share with you this new space for the discussion and showcasing of what drives academics at Vassar. After realizing the lack of an academic newsletter on campus, Exponent was created in order to let students know about the different academic resources and opportunities available at Vassar as well as to foster a hub for interdepartmental dialogue.

Packed into our pages are student and professor research and student spotlights, all focused on this issue's conversation topic, Food. Exponent truly embodies the idea of multi-disciplinary education that Vassar aspires to offer students. Our goal is to give you the chance to explore the extraordinarily diverse, yet surprisingly inter-related conversations that are taking place around campus, whether they are in Rocky, Blodgett or the library. We give you a chance to get a taste of all the diverse research that Professors are involved in and how different disciplines look at the same topic through very different perspectives. We hope that you will enjoy the opportunity to examine all the possibilities that Vassar as an academic institution has to offer.

We are extremely thankful to the Professors and students who contributed to Exponent and look forward to continue this newsletter in the semesters to come.

You can also find this issue of the Exponent online at www.vsa.vassar.edu/academics.

Thanks for reading!

The VSA Committee on Academics

ex•po•nent Staff: 2014

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Wokking the Suburbs

by Hua Hsu
English Department

The following is excerpted from “Wokking the Suburbs” by Hua Hsu. The essay first appeared in the Winter 2012 issue of *Lucky Peach*. It was nominated for a 2013 James Beard Foundation Award for Food Writing.

The first my mother ever heard of Chinatown was in *Life* magazine. Back in Taiwan, her father had invested in a subscription and given my mom and her siblings “American” names in the 1950s, out of some faint desire to show them a world beyond the dreariness of postwar Taipei. But “Chinatown” was a strange thing for her to wrap her mind around.

“I knew there was a place called Chinatown in America,” she tells me, “but it was a foreign place.” And yet, my father says, “Chinatown could connect you back to Taiwan. It was mostly Cantonese, so it wasn’t exactly like where you came from; they didn’t even speak the same dialect. But it came the closest. You could buy newspapers, magazines. There was food.” He pauses and tries to find the right phrasing. “Spiritual food.”

I never asked my father what he meant by this—“spiritual food.” I liked the sound of it. It was probably just a provisional way of translating his thoughts into English; something a little too metaphysical sounding that he would no doubt have retracted if pressed for clarification. “There was a place on Broadway around Seventy-Second,” he suddenly recalls, “that had youtiao”—long, deep-fried strips of dough usually dipped in warm soymilk. It was one of those things that connected him to Taiwan, even if the restaurant only served it once a week. The wayward students could follow a trail of youtiao flakes back to where they came from.

I grew up in Cupertino, a suburb one is contractually obliged to describe as “the heart of Silicon Valley,” or at least one of its major arteries. Suburbs are about the leisurely conquest of space, an alternative to the uncomfortable density of the city. But the illusion of tranquility frays at the edges: the neurosis required to maintain so neatly manicured a lawn, the pristine sidewalks that nobody walks on, the holy wars fought to keep one mu-

nicipality from oozing into the next. It’s a cliché to say that life in the suburbs struck me as staid and uneventful; perhaps I just didn’t yet appreciate what was special about it.

A sort of reprieve from Cupertino’s tedium would come on the weekends, when my parents would toss me in the backseat with my Walkman and drive for long stretches, often to other suburbs, in search of Chinese food, provisions, a bowl of fresh soymilk. There had been Chinese people where we had lived in Texas, but not quite like there were in California, where the 1980s tech industry was creating a new set of desires. We would drive to Campbell, Santa Clara, Sunnyvale, Palo Alto, obscure tracts of San Jose, sometimes as far as Milpitas. I would stare out the window at all that flatness and wonder why everything wasn’t just closer together like in San Francisco—those were the trips I liked, whenever we would sync some kind of big-city errand with morning dim sum. Driving all that way just to get to another strip mall felt self-defeating, despite the novelty of seeing what exotic mascot adorned someone else’s high school or whether they had a vintage Taco Bell.

I didn’t understand my parents’ excitement; it was all Chinese food to me. You could get “Chinese” food at home, so what was the point of a long pilgrimage to somewhere else? I was baffled when I treated my grandmother to a feast at a newly opened Panda Express, only to see her stare down at the table in disappointment. The levees of her Styrofoam plate had been breached; her sauces were pooling into one. I had never seen that look on her face before.

To my parents, these treks from one suburb to another were worthwhile, even meditative. As they got further away from their origins, their sense of identity grew hazy. Food was their mooring. Once we reached the restaurants, my mother and father, usually given to superhuman selflessness, would forget about me altogether as they studied their menus carefully, reading all the names aloud to each other, astounded that you could get that here. Between dishes, they would study the Chinese-language newspapers as though there would be a quiz on the way home. I would take in the loud glee of all the adults in the room, which shattered the prevailing stereotypes of Chinese as a serious, reticent people. It all seemed so improbable: the transcendent strip-mall meal, the noisy flock of Chinese folks who’d driven God knows what distances to convene in this room. To people who had come from other places, this wasn’t about authenticity. It was an experience that was at once familiar and completely novel.

Personal Anecdote

by Randy Cornelius
Psychology Department

Five year's ago on the day before Thanksgiving I had spinal fusion surgery to free up a nerve that was being pinched because the vertebral disc between my L5 and S1 vertebrae was severely herniated and essentially had collapsed. My surgeon did a laminectomy to free the nerve, took out what was left of my disc, replaced it with a cage filled with my own and some bovine bone marrow and then put the whole thing back together with some screws and rods (see photo). It was major surgery and so I was completely sedated and given large doses of morphine. The next morning I was able to wake up and eat breakfast but felt awful from both the surgery and the morphine. Breakfast consisted of some completely tasteless eggs, toast, and a cup of coffee. About a half hour after breakfast someone from the physical therapy department came bounding into my room and said, "All right, Randy, it's time to get out of bed and take your first steps!" Still feeling awful, I struggled to the side of the bed with Kathy's help. All the while the physical therapy guy is congratulating me on my progress, such as it was. I somehow got myself sitting on the edge of the bed in front of a walker that the therapy guy had brought in at which point he said, "C'mon, Randy, you can do it, let's stand up!" As I stood up I felt a tidal wave of nausea wash over me and I said to Kathy, "I'm going to be sick," and at that moment threw up all over physical therapy guy. He seemed to not take that very well and high-tailed it out of the room as I lay back down, never to be seen again. From that moment on I have not been able to stand the taste let alone the smell of coffee. In psychology this is called "one-trial aversion learning" or "the Garcia effect" after the psychologist who first described it. Note that the coffee was the only thing I'd eaten with any smell or taste and so my brain associated my nausea with it (rather than, say, therapy guy). This is why people receiving chemotherapy or who are taking any medication that makes them experience nausea are told never to eat their favorite food. They run the risk of never being able to eat it again. By the way, before my surgery I was a four or five cups a day kind of coffee drinker. I loved double shot lattes (made with soy milk), but no more. This aversion will be with me the rest of my life. (It's evolution's way of making sure we don't eat the same rancid and poisonous food twice.)band's death.



Image courtesy of Randy Cornelius
X-Ray image of the screws and rods that replaced the herniated vertebral disc.

Consuming and Feeding an Esteemed Game Animal in Princely India

by Julie E. Hughes
History Department

As far as the Rajput princes of north western India were concerned, wild boar were an endangered species by the early twentieth century.[1] Inter-breeding with domestic pig, inadequate or substandard forage, and compromised śikārgāh or royal game reserves all threatened to reduce the quality of these notoriously prolific animals, even if their actual numbers seemingly remained steady. The kinds of food that “good” boar required to make them bigger, better, and faster rendered these animals ideal quarry, and made them good to eat, too. Hunting and feasting on properly fed boar helped produce the physical prowess, noble character, and preeminent status that elite Rajputs claimed as their birth right. The ruler of Mewar State, Maharana Fateh Singh (r. 1884-1921, d. 1930) fed his state’s boar on makkī or corn and kept tabs on the population of his herds inside the exclusive Nahar Magra reserve. During the hunting seasons from 1907 through 1909, the prince’s men recorded the number of adult males, sows, sub-adults, and piglets visiting the Diwan Odi, Kesar Bag, Bari Odi, and Rang Burj shooting towers, along with the amount of corn they consumed.[2] This information helped Fateh Singh judge the efficacy of his feeding program, as measured in the hoped for multiplication and improvement of wild boar.

In Mewar, boar had been fed from royal shooting boxes as early as the eighteenth century. By 1900, they were receiving hand outs at the Nahar Magra shooting towers, at Khas Odi and numerous other sites near the capital, and elsewhere besides.[3] They received larger portions in the winter to compensate for decreased natural forage and to fix them to known locations during the hunting season. When the goal was not to kill but to catch a wild boar for use in a staged animal fight, state huntsmen would set up a trap in the jungle, outfitted with a steady supply of “corn, pieces of *sāṅṭhā*, [and] dried corn and jaggery *laḍḍus*” in the trough. As a finishing touch, “a little opium...mixed into the *laḍḍus*” ensured the availability of a new pig whenever needed, as boar quickly became addicted and would keep coming back for more.[4]

Wild boar in Jodhpur—a neighboring state with which Mewaris maintained a friendly rivalry—received

official rations as well. Unlike Mewar’s corn-fed animals, Jodhpuri boar in the early 1940s feasted on a more drought-tolerant crop: lentils. The results failed to impress when the Mewari State huntsman Dhaibhai Tulsinath Singh Tanwar visited the state. In his opinion, Jodhpur’s boar looked “fat in body, but upon being weighed, it didn’t come out.... Upon investigation, it turned out that their bodies were bloated on account of living in the desert and eating lentils.”[5]

“ Hunting and feasting on properly fed boar helped produce the physical prowess, noble character, and preeminent status that elite Rajputs claimed as their birth right.”

While legumes such as lentils are a protein-rich feed, in monogastric animals like domestic pig and their wild cousins, legumes can cause excessive gas production during digestion.[6] Over-indulgence can lead to abdominal pain and, in severe cases, death as the result of stomach distension and rupture. Another drawback is that pigs are less efficient at metabolizing the energy stored in lentils, a problem related to their difficulties digesting them in the first place. Their stomachs are better adapted to grains, including corn. Pigs also seem to find corn more palatable than lentils, which further explains why feed intake and growth both suffer in domestic pigs fed on legumes. While dehulling, cooking, or soaking can eliminate most of these problems, if Jodhpuri boar were eating a diet rich in inadequately processed or untreated lentils, then it is possible they actually were bloated, stunted, and lethargic in comparison with their Mewari counterparts.[7]

Rajputs found even more meaning in eating wild boar than they did in feeding the animals. Boar were worthy prey and appropriate food because they were brave, full of vitality, and challenging to obtain.[8] Relying on

his Mewari informants, the political agent James Tod accused one branch of the Kachhwaha clan of neglecting Rajput tradition, alleging that “the wild hog...should be eaten [at least] once a year by every Rajpoot, [yet it] is rarely even hunted by a Shekhawut.”[9] During Fateh Singh’s reign, the prince and his nobles frequently gave and received gifts of meat culled from the boar they killed.[10] It was even better to share a repast of wild pork when out hunting. Commensal feasting allowed rulers and their nobles to reinforce fraternal bonds and to reaffirm or renegotiate hierarchies, while the *al fresco* setting refreshed their connections to the land as they sat on the ground and ate off plates made from leaves.[11] In Mewar, the practice echoed the camp experiences and rugged lifestyles that the ruling Sisodia Rajputs associated with their ancestors, who had preserved their independence against hostile onslaughts by taking refuge in the state’s hilly tracts.

Whether they were hunting wild boar in the Aravalli hills or watching them fight inside the Khas Odi arena, Mewaris judged the quality of individual animals on the basis of gender, maturity, and size—full-grown adult males being best—and “type”—either *teliyā* or *machiyā*. [12] *Teliyā* or “oily” pigs were grey or black in color, long and tall in body, quick to anger, and named for their indigestible, fatty flesh. *Machiyā* boar had brown coats and sloped backs. They grew as large as *teliyā* pigs, but their tusks were shorter and their nature less fiery. They also tasted better, and were nicknamed “butter” pigs. Because *teliyās* and *machiyās* alike gave pigstickers good runs and hard fights, any full-grown adult male had the potential of being worthy prey. Although a *teliyā*’s longer tusks and nastier temperament presumably made it more formidable, while a *machiyā*’s flesh rendered it more palatable, this broad typology seems to have mattered more in theory than in practice. When Mewaris wrote about boar hunts, they rarely specified if the animals they pursued were *teliyās* or *machiyās*. Rather, they commented on their prey’s temperament and noted down gender, maturity, and size. The goal of the hunt and of the subsequent hunting feast was to nourish the body and to elevate the spirit by pursuing and then consuming a formidable, swift, eminently courageous animal. Pleasing the palate was a lesser concern.

[1] Content adapted from Julie Hughes, “Environmental Status and Wild Boar in Princely India,” in *Shifting Ground: People, Mobility and Animals in India’s Environmental Histories*, eds. Mahesh Rangarajan and K. Sivaramakrishnan (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, forthcoming), and Julie Hughes, “Royal Tigers and Ruling Princes: Wilderness and Wildlife Management in the Indian Princely States,” *Modern Asian Studies* (forthcoming).

[2] Order no. 7524 of *kātī vid 11 samvat 1964*, Mewar Mahakma Khas, Revenue Department, 269 of VS 1962, Rajasthan State Archives, Udaipur.

[3] Kamdar of Nahar Magra, to Hakim of Girwa, *samvat 1962 kātī sud 10*, Mewar Mahakma Khas, Revenue Department, 269 of VS 1962, Rajasthan State Archives-Udaipur; Padam Singh, to Kesri Singh, report, 5 March 1907, Mewar Mahakma Khas, Revenue Department, 269 of VS 1962, Rajasthan State Archives, Udaipur.

[4] Dhaibai Tulsinath Singh Tanwar, *Śikārī aur Śikār* (Udaipur: privately printed, 1956), 32. All translations are by the author.

[5] *Ibid.*, 296.

[6] D. Jezierny, R. Mosenthin, and E. Bauer, “The Use of Grain Legumes as a Protein Source in Pig Nutrition: A Review,” *Animal Feed Science and Technology* 157 (2010), 111 and 116.

[7] Apichai Mekbungwan, “Application of Tropical Legumes for Pig Feed,” *Animal Science Journal*, 78 (2007), 347-8. Some portion of their lentils were sprouted, suggestive of soaking, Tanwar, *Śikārī aur Śikār*, 296.

[8] *Ibid.*, 54.

[9] James Tod, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan, or the Central and Western Rajput States of India*, ed. William Crooke (New York: Humphrey Milford, 1920), 3:1381.

[10] G. N. Sharma, ed., *Haqiqat Bahida: H. H. Maharana Fateh Singhji 24 Dec., 1884 to 24 May, 1930* (Udaipur: Maharana Mewar Research Institute, 1992-97), 2:171, 172-3, and 191.

[11] Tanwar, *Śikārī aur Śikār*, 187, and Dhaibhai Tulsinath Singh Tanwar, *Samsmaran: Mahārānā Fateh Singhji, Mahārānā Bhupal Singhji, Mahārānā Bhagvat Singhji Mewār* (Udaipur: privately printed, 1982), 64-5.

[12] A. E. Wardrop, *Modern Pig-sticking* (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1914), 21.

Poetry from *Fried Fish and Flour Biscuits*

by Molly McGlennen
Assistant Professor of English
American Studies Department

Each poem below is taken from the collection of poems *Fried Fish and Flour Biscuits*, published in 2010 by Salt's award-winning "Earthworks Series: Writing from Indigenous Peoples."

Living the Language

She tells us the Ojibwe word for blueberry pie
is the recipe to make it:
miiniibashkimiinasigunbatagiingwesijiiganbiitooin-
gwesijiiganibakwezhigan

as we pick the delicate fruit from each calyx
indigo bulb hanging from a perfect five-pointed star
a gift to relieve our hunger
selecting each one, each star-berry staining our fingers
purple-red.

We can't help but pop some in our mouths.

She had said the juice could cure a cough
and the leaves could be tea — would be good for our
blood.

In the summers they'd dry them and store for long
winters.

We trod through marshy ground searching for the next
lowbush

can taste the pie already, baking slowly in her stove
can see her careful thumbs creating the wave that edges
the crust

sliding the fork through the top in four directions
holes for breath

as we punch ours out now — blueberry hunting.

We are this language of progression, this recipe
renewed each time our pails are filled and
our fingers drip hard blood in gratitude at the end of
days.

Fried Fish and Flour Biscuits

My body remembers
the time we rolled out dough
for two days.

Flour hands
salted heat
a kitchen like fire.
Careful not to pat it
too thin,
biscuits should fill
empty stomachs
you tell me.

No more school
after fourth grade —
what's a little girl to do
but listen

and follow the mark
of a hand,

hear a history
punctuated by story,
when your mother
would whisper hers
in between scaling

and gutting
the walleye,
ashamed to admit

how lakes

had always fed her family
how she had married
a pale Frenchman
moved away from the water.

So you

a daughter once removed
now stands next to me —

says history doesn't have to mean
coming over in a boat,
says this is how

you feed a family:

until your hands and arms ache
until your body remembers
the blood in its lines
like fried fish
and flour biscuits.

Vinegar and Olive Oil

by Miriam Rossi
Chemistry Department

Both Mr. Jemiolo and I are fairly passionate about food and cooking. For years, we used to talk about how food related issues can be used to illustrate many simple scientific concepts. Studying the science behind food and cooking is immensely worthwhile and relates to several fields, including nutrition and healthy lifestyles. As an outgrowth of these conversations, we developed and teach the Culture and Chemistry of Cuisine. It has a lecture and laboratory component that involves mostly cooking laboratories, where unlike most science labs, we get to eat our results! This course has been a wonderful teaching and faculty development experience for both of us!

Both of us also are doing some research related to “food” with many Vassar students and other faculty collaborators. Scientific research is a collective endeavor, with different persons contributing their expertise to answer a complex and frequently interdisciplinary question. Mostly, my research interests have to do with understanding how and why certain compounds that are beneficial for humans and that occur naturally in our diet through consumption of plants, fruits and vegetables, behave. A basic question we seek to answer is: what part of the 3-D structural shape (“the molecular architecture”) is key to explaining a chemical or biological property? My expertise is in identifying the structural component(s) that relate to a molecule’s biological activity at the molecular level using a combination of experimental X-ray diffraction and computer calculation methods. Collaborators help in answering other important questions, e.g., testing the biological activity on cell lines or model organisms or quantifying the antioxidant activity.

Some interesting and recent examples of how food compounds have played a key role in my research include: (1) incorporating the very common curry spice, curcumin, into a potential anti-tumor compound that we made, characterized and tested. This work was published in 2012. (2) Marissa Davis’13 studied the molecular structure of the ingredient found in grapefruit and certain other citrus fruits that can interfere with the breakdown of several kinds of prescription medications. (3) We have studied the relationship between the chemical structure of some antioxidants found in foods and their biological activity. Last semester, when I was on sabbatical, I

finally had time to write and publish an article with nine student co-authors on the antioxidant effects of a class of plant compounds! This work was amazing in that it contained aspects of chemistry, biochemistry and physiology. (4) We studied the interaction of these antioxidant compounds with harmful “free-radicals” using an effective and quick method that was completely developed in the Vassar chemistry department (thanks to Mr. Belli’s exceptional proficiency). This was the subject of Charlie Caldwell’s 2013 Biochemistry senior thesis and included work done by Casey Bartow-McKenney ‘14. (5) We tested the activity of these plant antioxidants on several model organisms with several of Vassar’s talented Biology department (Ms. Crespi – currently at Univ of Washington, Pullman, Ms. Susman and Ms. Schwarz).

Right now, there are three Vassar seniors doing theses with me related to food: Philip Kay (Chemistry’14) is studying how the antioxidant activity of whole strawberries varies with time after picking; he is growing his own strawberries in the Biology greenhouse! Grace Lee (Biochemistry’14) will analyze the antioxidant effectiveness of several extra virgin olive oils obtained from different harvesting methods (from California and Italy) and correlate it to the particular composition of an olive oil cultivar. From earlier work in our laboratory, Sharon Lee (Biology’14) has identified two potential strong antioxidants, found in fruits and vegetables, and she will test the rescuing effect of these compounds on oxidatively stressed model organisms, *C. elegans*, using the expertise of Prof. Susman.

Grace and Sharon spent URSI2013 with me in the university laboratories of collaborators in Rome, Italy, where we studied the effect on the cell growth of two different cell cultures, L-6 rat muscle cells and THP1 human leukemia cells, upon adding the extra virgin olive oils and the antioxidant chalcones. Although we are still analyzing the data, our summer results were really exciting – that normal muscle cell growth was enhanced by extra virgin olive oils while slowing down the leukemic cell growth. Grace and Sharon presented these results at the Fall 2013 URSI symposium.

In the meantime, Mr. Jemiolo is studying some biological properties of organic vinegars that are produced in the Hudson Valley by a French monk, Brother Victor Antoine LaTourette, at his Lagrangeville monastery near Vassar College. The stimulus for this project came from one of the field trips that our cooking class took.

Two Figs

by Sophie Asakura

2016 Art History major

Docent, Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center

Georgia O'Keeffe's *Two Figs* is a small oil painting done in 1930 of two plump and slightly irregular figs set against a white cloth background. Although the canvas is small, the fruit has a monumental presence. The figs fill the composition and dominate the angular cuts of the sheet with their sweeping curves. O'Keeffe gives the simple geometry of the figs fullness through subtle but complex color modeling. The greens give way to browns and then to purples, filling the fruit with life and drawing out its shape. Against the smooth, flowing roundness of the fruit, the sheet appears starkly white and its creases and folds take on a comparatively cubist texture. The composition and fruits in particular embody O'Keeffe's characteristically sinuous line. Throughout the design, the eye flows smoothly in and around the pictorial elements. Like many other works in her oeuvre, the rich colors and fluid lines of naturalistic elements capture and monumentalize the small wonders of nature. These forms, however, are often interpreted as embodiments of female sensuality or a celebration of sexuality. From early in her career, O'Keeffe was heralded for her expression of femininity and her ability to portray a feminine line, ripe with sensuality. As Alfred Steiglitz, owner of Gallery 291 in New York and her future husband said, "Finally, a woman on paper." Although these interpretations were first expressed during her early, mostly abstract period, they continued through her explorations of natural subjects, most notably her flowers. Many of her flower works visually call to mind female anatomy. In this image, *Two Figs*, we are reminded of the story of Adam and Eve, who, when enlightened to their nakedness, cover themselves in fig leaves. More abstractly, the organic forms themselves seem to speak to the body. In those works, like this one, the small wonders of nature are examined closely on a macro-scale. O'Keeffe observes, brings out, and glorifies tiny details. The idea of the still life is no longer simply about observation, but exploring the minute complexities of nature. In reference to her critics associating her work wholly with female sexuality, O'Keeffe retorted with "Well — I made you take time to look at what I saw and when you took time to really notice my flowers you hung all your own associations with flowers on my flower and you write about my flower as if I think and see what you think and see of the flower — and I don't." (In Ernest W. Watson, "Georgia O'Keeffe,"

American Artist [June 1943]:10.) Her work sought a new understanding of natural forms, divorced from their preconceived sexual connotations.

Born on a farm, O'Keeffe never let go of her relationship to nature. In 1917, O'Keeffe traveled to New Mexico and felt an immediate affinity, and, beginning in 1929 returned every summer to paint. O'Keeffe made Taos, New Mexico her permanent home in 1949, three years after her husband's death. It was in Taos that O'Keeffe fully explored her tendency toward representational forms and discovered her love for the animal bones and stark landscapes of the desert. Margaret Wood, O'Keeffe's caretaker late in her life, reveals a tender relationship between the artist and the land. She ate from her garden and was committed to organic, local, and slow foods in a time before those movements were popularized. Knowledge of her relationship to food sheds a not entirely surprising loving light on her still life subjects. O'Keeffe's respect for nature shines through not only in her commitment to a healthy and natural diet but the wonder and respect with which she encountered the



Image courtesy of Sophie Asakura

Georgia O'Keeffe (American, 1887-1986) *Two Figs*, 1923. Oil on Canvas. Bequest of Mrs. Arthur Schwab (Edna Bryner, class of 1907) 1967.31.12

fruits, vegetable, flowers, and bones themselves. Her reverence for her subjects and cultivation of her garden were byproducts of the artist's close, almost spiritual relationship to the land.

Veg*nism: an Embodied Feminism?

by Benedict Nguyen

2015 International Studies major

Reflection: WMST277 Gender and Nature

Is eating a vegetarian or vegan diet a feminist act? In Gender and Nature, a Women's Studies course taught by Earth Science Professor Jill Schneiderman, we explored the intersections between feminism and veg*nism, an abbreviation used to emblemize the multiplicity of ways that a human can reduce harm towards non-human animals in their daily interactions with food. Though we also explored topics such as the gendering of nature in the moniker "Mother Earth" and the advent of the Anthropocene, a geological shift recognizing the extent of human impact on the environment, the progression of students' relationships towards food and more specifically, a plant-based has been an unexpected learning experience in and of itself.

Our first assignment for Gender and Nature asked us to develop a position paper addressing whether Vassar's Campus Dining should offer solely vegetarian food to the college community. In addition to works written by male philosophers Peter Singer and Tom Regan, foundational scholars in the western animal rights movement, we explored through feminist Greta Gaard the history of ecofeminism as an academic discourse and its often uneasy relationship with vegetarianism.

We also read excerpts from *The Sexual Politics of Meat* by feminist scholar Carol Adams, who came to campus to give a talk sponsored by VARC, the Vassar Animal Rights Coalition. Adams has shown how the patriarchy's treatment of animals and meat disturbingly parallels its subjugation of women. Animal agricultural expert Marjorie Spiegel's *The Dreaded Comparison* and Breeze Harper's anthology *Sistah Vegan* explored in particular the racial dynamics of a plant-based diet; the former connected animal agriculture and human enslavement and the latter gave space to women of color to reflect on their journeys adopting a vegan diet and lifestyle.

Given a longstanding cultural association between women and nature as objects needing to be tamed and consumed by a white patriarchy, is it the feminist's responsibility to link these oppressions and stand in solidarity with non-human animals and not consume them? Recognizing the genetic differences between humans and non-human animals, we explored the question of speciesism, a system of oppression that places greater value in certain species over others, and anthropomorphism, the personification of the nonhuman world to help explain and understand it in human terms. In a

feminist practice, anthropomorphism can help us find greater connection with non-human animals in dismantling speciesism, sexism, racism, etc.

As the course transitioned to other units, we would often return to the question of veg*nism in class discussions. While a fair amount people of the class have long been vegan or vegetarian, a fair amount began confronting these questions for the first time. Many omnivores spoke to reducing the amount of animal-based products in their diet but also, the difficulty in doing so. Carnism, the ideology that conditions people to eat meat, has deep roots in our society and some have found it hard to separate from certain meals that, for example, evoke strong senses of home and comfort but contain meat. Adopting a plant-based diet represents a compelling challenge for feminists to translate theory to praxis because what easier way is there to truly embody our principles than to transform what we eat?

And yet, I hesitate to become a fully-fledged vegan. I've been a vegetarian for nearly a year but I still have certain reservations regarding the ideology behind the practice. In spite of well-intentioned efforts to make the movement as inclusive as possible, I've been wondering whether being a veg*n in America is inherently classist and racist.

While the costs of a buying food for a vegan diet are cheaper than an omnivore one, making this adjustment can prove contradictory with the culture of marginalized social groups. One of my favorite dishes coming home used to be phở, a Vietnamese noodle soup that contains meat. I've since adapted to a vegetarian version featuring tofu but the separation I'm making from my family is felt at the dinner table. Here, the embodiment of a new ideology originally founded by white men provokes a visceral unease. I can't help but feel as if I'm participating in the erasure of my own heritage that is already underrepresented in society.

Though I believe in a lot of the truth that vegan ideology communicates, the problematic dynamics of its dissemination need to be acknowledged. As I wander closer and closer to removing what little animal by-products remain in my diet, I wonder where I'm going to draw the line. A lot of the mass-produced food we consume derives from problematic systems of production. I hope that I and the other students of Gender and Nature will continue to explore ways we can dismantle these systems of oppression and create a more just way of living and eating.

Academic Resources at Vassar

Learning, Teaching, and Resource Center

<http://ltrc.vassar.edu>

Writing Center

Generally, the culture that drives the Writing Center is this: anyone who writes can find someone to talk to here. Our goal isn't necessarily to get you a better grade (though of course we aren't opposed to it, either) so much as it is to talk about your writing and you as a writer. We spend a consultation thinking with you about how your writing communicates the ideas and emotions you're trying to get across, and what techniques might help you present them more effectively. A consultation can come at any step in the writing process, from any discipline - crucial to the Writing Center's approach is a commitment to thinking about writing dynamically, in all shapes and sizes. Check out our website for more information on particulars like ThinkTank Tuesdays, the Oak Door, our blog, and a variety of other great services offered by the Learning, Teaching, and Research Center! <http://ltrc.vassar.edu/writing-center/index.html>

Q Center

The Q Center is Vassar's premiere resource for any doubts, questions, or concerns you may have about the quantitative components of classes. There are students who tutor specific classes: economics, math, chemistry and physics. Feel free to bring in any difficult homework problems or test prep.

Library

Student Guide To Library Services

<http://libguides.vassar.edu/studentguide>

General guide to lots of library stuff

<http://library.vassar.edu/research/assistance.html>

Research assistance

Includes Ask a Librarian and Research Guides, a discipline-specific look at available resources

<http://vassarcollege.worldcat.org> - Easy way to search for books, articles, etc. in Vassar, in ConnectNY, and beyond (much easier than manual ILL)

On Campus

<http://pages.vassar.edu>

Includes research projects, course and faculty blogs, campus initiatives and more!

Casperkill Watershed Oral History Project

<http://pages.vassar.edu/casperkill/>

Vassar History

Vassar's Historian Site

Elizabeth Daniels '41 compiled <http://historian.vassar.edu/>. It includes an encyclopedia, an extensive and searchable timeline, and more!

Archives & Special Collections

Provides categorical listings & background information on its website, <http://specialcollections.vassar.edu/>

Internal research

Includes links to relevant Vassar planning websites.

<http://institutionalresearch.vassar.edu/> -

<http://150.vassar.edu/>

Governance

<http://vsa.vassar.edu/archives> - Includes meeting minutes, governing documents, and reports like the CIE's audit, "What Would It Take For You to Thrive at Vassar?"

<http://committees.vassar.edu> - A guide to Vassar's extensive bureaucracy, complete with websites and reports on a variety of niche topics that might directly affect you!

Tools

<http://vapps.vassar.edu> - includes Mathematica, STATA, SPSS, etc.

<http://vspace.vassar.edu> - permits 650 MB storage for easy moving between computers