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SEXISM IN ANIMAL ACTIVISM

The Foie Gras Campaigns

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Foie gras (which translates to “fat liver” in French) consists of liver taken from force-fed and force-fattened ducks and, to a lesser extent, geese¹ (geese being more expensive and time intensive to exploit). While foie gras has been in production for hundreds, if not thousands, of years, its industrialization in the 1960s dramatically increased the number of animals impacted.² Approximately 40 million individuals each year are currently used, abused, and killed for this specialty product, the majority of whom live and die in southwest France.³ Adams⁴ has argued that nonhuman animal agriculture is a deeply gendered industry, whereby nonhuman animals are routinely feminized in order to facilitate their objectification, butchering, and consumption. An analysis of foie gras production expands this observation by underscoring the gendered and institutional elements of nonhuman animal agriculture beyond biological sex, as the vast majority of foie gras victims are male.

This twist further proves itself particularly relevant to understanding efforts to *resist* foie gras. As of this writing, foie gras production (and, in some cases, its importation and sale) is banned in many European countries, parts of the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Argentina, India, and elsewhere. It remains one of the longest-pursued campaigns in the modern nonhuman animal rights movement. It also provides a revealing case study in the gender politics of anti-speciesism, notably the persistent inability of the movement to transgress sexist scripts in its effort to challenge speciesist cultural constructions. Foie gras comes from male ducks, yet nonhuman animal rights mobilization, specifically that associated with People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), maintains tactics that both villainize and victimize women.

Using vegan feminist theory, this chapter critically analyzes PETA’s anti-foie gras campaigning (predominantly that which transpires in the United States, United Kingdom, and Europe) and its cultural implications for understanding both gender and species relations in the wider public and within activist spaces. Foie gras production aligns with gendered roles of male domination and female subservience, and anti-speciesism activists have attempted to accentuate this relationship using female activists as foie gras victims. However, they are also known to target women as perpetrators. Anti-foie gras campaigns, furthermore, tend to rely on sexist (and often violent) imagery and ideas about women. This is a tendency, I argue, that is deeply problematic in a society that is as patriarchal as it is human

supremacist. Gender scripting in anti-speciesism campaigning must be carefully employed (if employed at all) to avoid intersectional failure when drawing comparisons between sexism and speciesism.

Sex and Gender in Foie Gras Production

The making of “meat”⁵ is a deeply patriarchal affair. Vegan feminist scholars have noted that speciesist agriculture tends to follow sexist scripts whereby “farmers” (culturally envisioned as male) own, control, physically manipulate, and financially exploit farmed animals.⁶ Male farmers may be outnumbered by their female counterparts in some areas, but nonhuman animal agriculture remains male dominated and largely male owned.⁷ Women, Black women in particular, have been disproportionately assigned to less prestigious, lower paying, more dangerous and psychologically damaging jobs in the American poultry industry,⁸ suggesting similar gender inequalities in foie gras production may be present. The United States, United Kingdom, and Western Europe, for that matter, also rely heavily on vulnerable immigrant laborers to undertake difficult and loathsome agricultural work. Migrant women in this industry are especially subject to sexual violence and slavery.⁹ These gender dynamics are obviously not outwardly promoted by nonhuman animal agricultural corporations, and how this transpires in foie gras production is not well documented. However, an idealized image of femininity has been key to its status as a wholesome delicacy. In France, women have been important to the branding and customer service elements of foie gras sales, a role some women farmers have celebrated as vital to the preservation and transmission of cultural heritage.¹⁰

Gender inequality is also found in the treatment of the nonhuman products themselves. While I will argue that all farmed animals exploited in the food system are feminized by way of their subservient position, it is also the case that female bodies are disproportionately exploited given their capacity to offer their own bodies for capitalist gain as well as their sexual productions (namely eggs, breastmilk, and children to repopulate the system).¹¹ Furthermore, male bodies, in industries such as that of dairy and egg production, are rendered low value or even worthless; they are frequently killed immediately or very soon after birth. Male chicks, for instance, are ground alive in an industrial grinder just minutes after hatching if not dumped in large trash receptacles where they will be suffocated or crushed under thousands of their brothers. In foie gras production, however, the product is the liver not the egg, and thus male bodies are prized, as they tend to grow larger than females. Female duck and goose hatchlings are killed immediately after birth, as are rooster chicks in the egg industry. Indeed, reproduction has a much more marginal role in foie gras production; the animals used are hybrid “mules” created from two different subspecies and are unable to reproduce themselves.

The sex of the victims in foie gras is key to production, but gender relations, vegan feminism emphasizes, are also highly relevant. Nonhuman animal agriculture, in general, tends to be male owned and male benefiting, but its very structure is patriarchal in design. Consider, for instance, that it is generally considered a masculine role in patriarchal cultures to provide food and shelter, but this “protection” and “provision” comes at the cost of entrapment in the domestic setting. Here, ducks have been literally caged and isolated, preventing movement and comradery with other victims. The “feeding” practice, in particular, is highly sexualized. “Farmers,” who may be male or female, take on a masculine role by restraining their victims and forcing a long pipe or funnel into their mouths and down their

throats to fill their stomachs close to (and sometimes beyond) bursting (Figure 39.1). In traditional methods, the bird's body will be fully restrained by the "farmer's" hands, legs, and feet while the violation occurs. In modern methods, birds remain encased in their cages and their faces and beaks are manipulated by an employee who is aided by a pneumatic pump rather than gravity. The technological shift seems to further masculinize the process, removing even the human touch involved in handling victims, replacing it with cold, rationalized machinery. The vulnerability of on-the-ground employees in many foie gras facilities (as is typical in the "meat" industry) adds another layer of domination.¹² Although these workers take on a masculine role in their manipulation of incarcerated ducks and geese, they themselves are, if to a lesser extent, also victims of patriarchal power relations given the exploitative conditions that frequently characterize their work.

Nonhuman animal rights campaigners have rightly detected the sexualized nature of foie gras production. A Humane League protest against the London Grill in Philadelphia, for instance, reportedly shamed management with the chant "How many ducks have you raped today?"¹³ (Caro 2009). United Poultry Concerns director Karen Davis¹⁴ has also argued that the exploitation of farmed animals is a form of rape:

The rape of farmed animals is an ancient practice, not only because these animals have always been readily available for sexual assault on the farm, but because farmed-animal production is based on physically manipulating and controlling animals' sex



Figure 39.1 Forced feeding of a restrained duck.

lives and reproductive organs. Sexually abusive in essence, animal farming invites crude conduct and attitudes toward the animals on the part of producers and consumers alike.

AuQ22 To the first point, we might typically think of this in the context of layer hens and dairy cows, but ducks killed for foie gras are sexually manipulated as well. Ducks must be “artificially inseminated” to reproduce, for instance. Furthermore, incubation temperature will be adjusted to encourage a genetic predisposition to increasing liver weight for the industry.¹⁵ Baby birds just one to three weeks old are then subjected to several weeks of “preparation” (i.e. grooming) for their future force-feeding. This preparation involves modified feeding practices that facilitate rapid growth, manipulate their throats to be able to withstand a lifetime of force-feeding, and acclimation to the psychical constraint of their bodies necessary for that feeding.¹⁶ The gag reflex proves to be a major difficulty in grooming young birds for the industry, for instance, and here the intersections with women’s sexual exploitation is perhaps at its clearest.

A number of injustices are imposed on foie gras victims that are unique to ducks and geese, however. In many cases, these victims are kept in darkness except for feeding periods in order to reduce panic and fear. Birds frequently exhibit psychological and physical signs of distress and injury, including feather-picking, pacing, panting, efforts to flee “farmers” at feeding times, difficulty standing and walking due to distended livers, fighting with other victims, bodily injuries gleaned from the feeding practices and cage designs, digestive difficulties, cannibalism, and so on.¹⁷ These violations of birds’ dignity and bodily integrity have become routinized because humans find their sick and disabled organs a delicacy (although it is important to acknowledge that it is predominantly men who control the food industry and influence the diets of all genders). Hundreds of thousands of ducks and geese each year do not survive long enough to reach their final destination at the slaughterhouse.

Although Davis does not explicitly acknowledge the sexual acts farmed animals must endure, as noted, it is not difficult to draw parallels. In the case of dairy, for instance, farmers (almost always male) are the ones who impregnate cows, not bulls. Men restrain cows, glove their arm in what amounts to an extended condom (designed as it is to ease penetration and protect the arm), and then insert their arm into each victim’s rectum. From here, he is able to manipulate her reproductive organs and use his other hand to penetrate her vulva with an instrument containing sperm. In foie gras production, sexual organs might not be immediately violated in the process of force-feeding, but the process is sexualized nonetheless as the throats of ducks and geese are penetrated with feeding tubes that ejaculate fatty meal. In all cases—the rape of women, the forced impregnation of dairy cows, and the forced feeding of ducks—a patriarchal industry violates the bodily autonomy of vulnerable groups for profit or pleasure. In all cases, it is an exaction of power.

Davis’s observation that the control of birds’ bodies in food production is inherently sexually abusive is also exemplified in the biosecurity practices of the foie gras industry. The intensive conditions most birds live under facilitate repeated zoonotic diseases, particularly for those who are living in “free range” facilities as they have greater contact with free-living animals and other environmental contagions.¹⁸ Indoor “farming” allows for the full control (Figure 39.2) not only of birds’ bodies but of nature itself. Although “free-range” alternatives do more to serve consumer-enticing myths about happy, healthy animals who willingly give up their lives to please humans than they do for *actually* increasing the welfare conditions for victims, the industry’s preference for indoor factory farming does speak



Figure 39.2 Confinement conditions that typify the experience of foie gras victims.

to the level of control sought in foie gras production. There can be no consent in the making of foie gras when eating, drinking, reproduction, movement, longevity, and ability to maintain bodily integrity (few animals eat themselves to the point of sickness outside of human institutions) are strictly controlled. No duck or goose willingly walks to slaughter, for that matter.

Sex and Gender in Foie Gras Protest

Beyond the mechanics of corporal oppression in “farming,” research has noted that body politics have been central to the foie gras debates as well.¹⁹ Advocates for foie gras sometimes insist that free-living ducks and geese overeat to prepare for winter months just as their force-fed domesticated relatives would; industrial force-feeding is akin to helping them along with natural behavior. Advocates for the ducks and geese, however, point to their capacity for physical and psychological suffering. As is often the case with producers and consumers of pornography, those who profit from the foie gras industry or indulge in its products as consumers ascribe to scripts of denial that frame the duck victims as happy, well-fed, and treated to the good life. Adams²⁰ has noted that, as in pornography, the inherent violence in the objectification of marginalized bodies for privileged consumption is made possible with sexualization, humor, fragmentation, and ultimately the disconnection of the final product from the person who was exploited to create it. In the case of foie gras, the trappings of fine cuisine (including exoticism, elaborate culinary displays, and upscale prices) ensure that the consumer focuses on the food as fare and sensual experience, not

as a decomposing internal organ of a person who lived and died in horrific conditions. Activists are understandably compelled to penetrate the fantasy and romance of foie gras consumption to accentuate the crass power dynamics that make the product possible. The engagement with gender politics, it seems, serves as a particularly relevant tactic, or at least one that stands out as most available in a deeply gendered culture.

Femininity as a gender role is consistently stereotyped as a performance of servility and a site of masculine control and violence. In this way, foie gras production displays the hallmarks of gender as a system of power relations. Foie gras, however, disrupts the conflation of sex and gender that is typical in Western cultures. *Male* ducks in the foie gras industry are feminized as they are dominated by “farmers,” and their bodies, from birth to death, are sites of extreme violence. This poses a bit of a conundrum for the nonhuman animal rights movement, whether this is consciously acknowledged or not, as, traditionally, campaigners have sought to challenge speciesism by drawing on sexism as a poignant analogy. This tactic could be criticized for conflating oppressions despite distinctive qualities of these oppression that women and other animals independently experience. For all the injustices women face, for instance, they are ultimately human and considerably more privileged than nonhuman animals. Nonhuman animals, meanwhile, lacking literacy in human gender politics, would not place relevance on many aspects of sexism. Analogy-making of this kind can also reinforce stereotypes about women and reify gender essentialism. Not all women are equally or inherently weak, vulnerable to violence, and attuned to nature and other animals; not all men are compelled to engage with that violence, eat other animals, use women, and so on.

I argue that this tendency to analogize speciesism with sexism may simply be a reflection of the larger number of female activists available and the prevalence of sexism in the male-ruled movement, sexism that condones the exploitation of female activists.²¹ Although foie gras does not align with conventionally understood gendered social relations in the nonhuman animal rights movement (male farmers oppressing female nonhumans), the movement attempts to wedge this conventional gender script into traditional campaigning styles which normally utilize women as proxies of other animals. Perhaps this awkward analogy reflects activist ignorance of the sexual politics of foie gras production (a distinct possibility, as few persons outside of the industry are aware of the particulars beyond the infamously gruesome practice of force-feeding). More likely, the strategy reflects sexist assumptions about female victimization in farming and female objectification in social movement campaigning. Campaigners may be unable to fathom the possibility of male activists serving as metaphorical recipients of male violence like that experienced by male ducks and geese used, abused, and killed for foie gras.

A similar theme seems to permeate modern foie gras campaigning. Although both women *and* men consume foie gras, women are also used in some PETA campaigns as representations of the guilty diner, while men in these campaigns are more likely to be represented as a sort of disembodied or indirect conduit. Female consumers, that is, are more likely to be vilified for participating in a patriarchal, male-benefiting industry than men. In several PETA foie gras (Figures 39.3 and 39.4), women are used to analogize the feminized, oppressed nonhuman *and* the evils of frivolous consumption. Street demonstrations replicate these images in real life with women bound and strapped to dining chairs or forced to their knees. Demonstrations of this kind feature women choking and gagging on a feeding tube manipulated by another, usually male, activist. Some protests include oozing blood

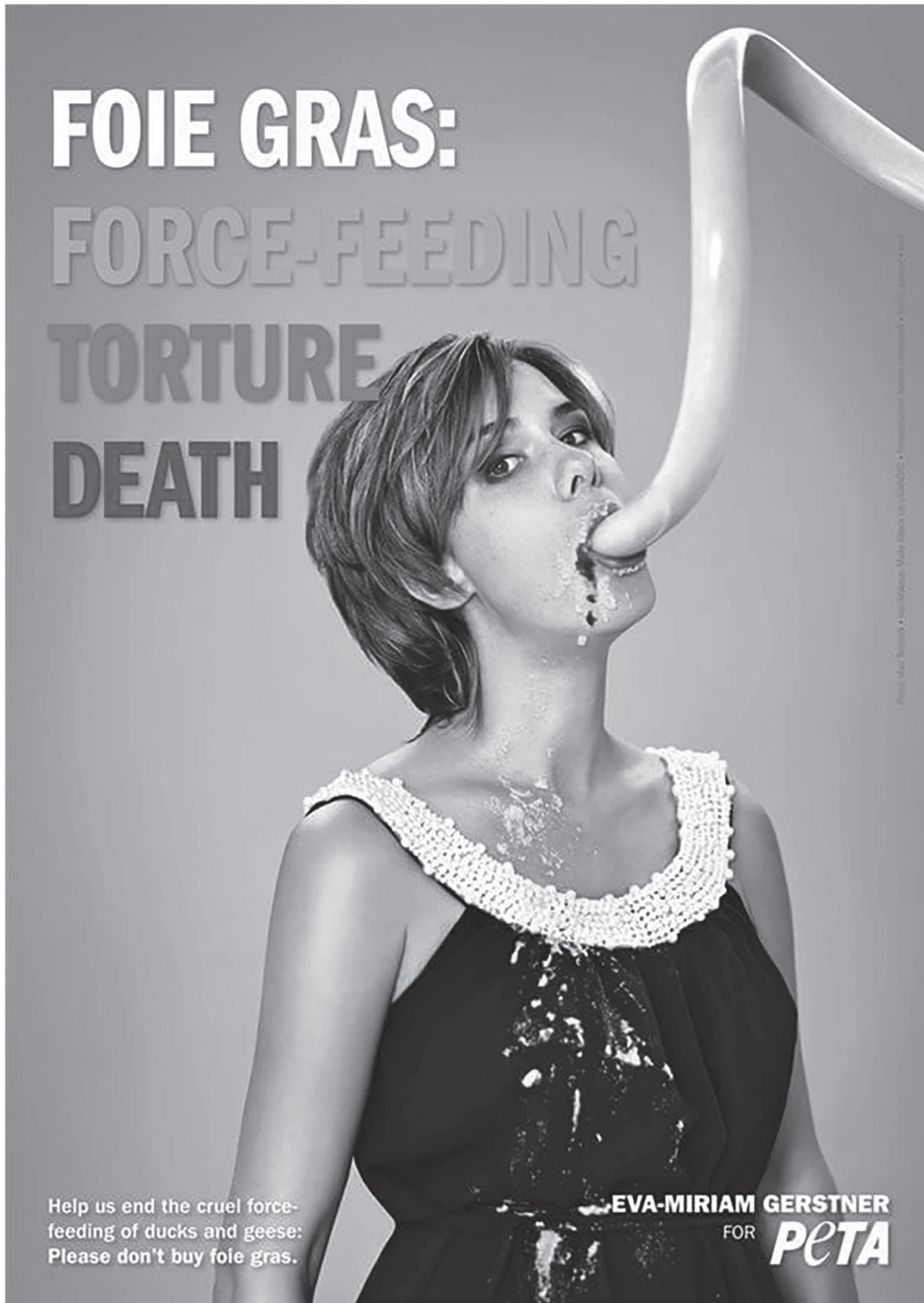


Figure 39.3 PETA foie gras campaign depicting the victim as female with pornographic undertones.



Figure 39.4 PETA foie gras campaign depicting both the victim and perpetrator as female with undertones of punishment and pornography.

painted on women's mouths and may even feature women passed out in their own bloody vomit. The regurgitation is sometimes riddled with grains used in force-feeding ducks and geese. In other protests, women cower on their knees below their male counterpart with expressions of pain and fear, wholly reminiscent of gonzo pornography and other misogynistic hardcore tropes reflecting the cultural legacy of the 1972 film *Deep Throat*.²²

As the foie gras industry took hold in the United States at the turn of the 20th century, protest gathered momentum with the efforts of organizations such as In Defense of Animals, Animal Protection and Rescue League,²³ the Humane League, Farm Sanctuary, Viva! USA,²⁴ and PETA.²⁵ Given the complexity, diffusiveness, and relative spontaneity of activist networks, it is not possible to know the extent to which PETA's aforementioned sexist strategy is utilized in foie gras protest and, to be fair, this is not the only tactic it deploys in opposition to the industry. However, images of street demonstrations involving men's simulated assault on women diners hosted by PETA US, PETA UK, and PETA France can be found with a simple internet search of news coverage and stock photo websites, suggesting its persistent use in an international repertoire. One stunt even features the founder Ingrid Newkirk playing the victim.²⁶

Foie Gras Protest Without the Sexism

Though I problematize the highly sexualized and misogynistic tactics commonly employed in PETA's foie gras campaigning, not all activists and organizations have taken this approach. Michelin-starred chef Alexis Gauthier, for instance, claims he was motivated to drop foie gras from his restaurant (which traded in 20 kilos each week) in favor of a veganized analog ("faux gras") following a protest outside his restaurant.²⁷ He collaborated with Animal Equality UK to deliver a quarter of a million signatures to the British government in support of a ban as part of an ongoing petition. The media utilized by Animal Equality UK to mobilize change relies on graphic footage taken from foie gras production sites. In these street protests, activists hold placards depicting duck and goose victims themselves rather than relying on female activists to impersonate them through the lens of human gender roles. PETA's 1991 undercover footage documentary *Victims of Indulgence* also had a sensational impact, encouraging significant legislative change in the United States.²⁸ The Animal Protection and Rescue League also utilized this tactic to rally support with *Delicacy of Despair* in 2003. This campaign included the open rescue of several ducks and the creation of an informative website, GourmetCruelty.com. A year later, Farm Sanctuary levied its website NoFoieGras.org and undercover footage for the successful removal of foie gras from Wolfgang Puck restaurants. This campaign also solicited pledges to keep foie gras off the menu in over 1,000 other restaurants. The Humane League personally met with restaurateurs in its home city of Philadelphia, providing information and images to good effect. By way of another example, PETA enlisted celebrities to describe the experiences of foie gras victims for the successful passing of California's ban in 2004.²⁹ Sexism, in other words, is not necessary to achieve anti-speciesist goals. Images of ducks and geese can be a powerful means of raising critical awareness about a system of violence largely hidden from society. For many consumers, the *magnitude* and *complexity* of violence inherent to animal-based food production is, for various sociological and psychological reasons, generally obscured from their awareness beyond the basic understanding that these animals must be manipulated and killed in some way.

Consumer awareness, however, is not enough to create institutional change. Morally shocking images have certain limitations in a sexist society saturated with objectifying, violent, and pornographic imagery. For consumers who *have* been reached by anti-speciesist outreach efforts, cognitive dissonance (and confirmation bias) can encourage them to fall back on industry propaganda that promises high welfare and a “good life” for its victims. Sometimes this humane-washing is not even necessary to secure foie gras as a delicacy. One study finds that about half of foie gras consumers are aware of how the product is created, but they continue to consume it and many would consume *more* if it were more affordable.³⁰ What this could suggest is that the normalcy of owning and oppressing others for personal pleasure is the core problem. Vegan feminism recognizes the interlocking nature of speciesism and sexism, asserting that patriarchal norms that make violence and control ubiquitous must be disrupted to achieve a vegan world. Successful campaigning against foie gras must therefore be contextualized within a larger feminist framework. At the time of this writing for instance, the British government has reneged on its plan to ban imports of foie gras. The reversal is championed as a matter of consumer choice and individual freedom.³¹ Such a narrative is not unlike that used in defense of pornography. In framing privilege and participation in inequality as a matter of personal consumer choice, the unjust system itself remains unexamined and the interests of the privileged consumer are protected as paramount.

The foie gras industry is horrific and must be abolished. To accomplish this, however, activists will need to think strategically about the efficacy of their tactics. The sexism that saturates society has created a problematic common sense that “sex sells.” Exceedingly little research is available to assist campaigners in effectively negotiating with sexual objectification and rape scripts. What empirical research *has* been conducted suggests that sexually imbued tactics trigger a critical feminist response from their audience, a response that is generally dismissive of anti-speciesism and uninterested in offering solidarity.³² One study of male Australian university students found that sexualized PETA campaigns generated less support than non-sexualized comparison campaigns.³³ The dehumanization of women in the sexualized campaign “was the only significant mediator” accounting for the participants’ disapproval. There is an immediate imperative, then, to perform additional research regarding the efficacy of sex, rape, and misogynistic scripts in anti-speciesist campaigning. At the very least, the Bongiorno et al. study does suggest that some men (specifically those enrolled in university who are more educated and liberal than the general public) will resist the nonhuman animal rights movement’s stoking of sexist culture.

Conclusion

The production of “foie gras” is highly gendered, reflecting patriarchal norms of institutionalized male dominance, control, and consumption of feminized, objectified beings. In this case, the foie gras industry is predominantly male owned and highly masculinized, particularly with its rationalized, emotion- and pain-denying, commodifying, throat-stuffing approach to speciesism. This is only amplified by its reliance on feminized immigrant and precarious labor, which entangles the domination of vulnerable humans and nonhumans alike. However, although their livers are sexualized as a decadent, sensual, and almost taboo treat for the privileged diner to lustfully consume, the ducks and geese who are victimized in this industry tend to be male. Anti-speciesist activists have typically relied on female activists to act as proxies for nonhuman victims in campaigning, presumably

because it is often female animals who are abused in speciesist systems (such as dairy and egg industries). In this case, choosing women's bodies does not align with the reality of the speciesist industry in question: the victims are usually male, and, for that matter, foie gras production in the West often employs women to conduct the force-feeding. This is particularly true of preindustrial France, where force-feeding ducks was assigned to women such that it has become an iconic image in the foie gras industry's nationalistic propaganda.³⁴ Activists are also unclear on the patriarchal source of oppression. For instance, while some campaigns depict men (sometimes disembodied with only their hands and arms visible) holding down or choking women who are supposed to represent ducks and geese, women are simultaneously depicted as the guilty diners responsible for supporting foie gras through their self-centered consumption.

Women's self-indulgence and a failure to practice selflessness for others has long been considered a violation of the feminine gender role. Consider, for instance, the state's history of force-feeding imprisoned suffragettes, which was not only a physical violation but also a symbolic act of sexual violence and political silencing. Although it has been suggested that the force-feeding of feminists at the turn of the 20th century was an instance of intersectional oppression between women and other animals (both groups were subjected to scientific torture in the name of medicine),³⁵ I think it is safe to say that the message to women in the audience of a foie gras protest is anything but a call to solidarity. Women, it seems, are simulated as being tortured and punished in the public sphere via street demonstrations or in print campaigns for consuming foie gras. The punishment depicted in this protest imagery is designed to fit the crime by sentencing the women to meet the same fate as the ducks and geese. Men's responsibility for creating, steering, and sustaining the industry goes largely unexamined.

Foie gras campaigning provides powerful insight into the sexist assumptions that permeate anti-speciesist repertoires and activist culture. Using women as proxies for other animals is not done to demonstrate to the public how things "really are." Rather, sexualized violence against women's bodies is a familiar script to activists and the public; the aim is to align protest frames with widespread cultural understandings. Blaming and shaming women for the ills of the world is a trope that activists seem to exploit with hopes of resonance in a sexist society (and this tactic likely reflects sexist beliefs within the movement as well). Furthermore, this sexist imagery is frequently sexualized, predictably so given the increasing pornification of modern society and the marketplace. This adoption of sexist scripts in anti-speciesism is a clear case of intersectional failure. If the sexualized objectification of nonhuman animals is to be challenged, this cannot be done successfully if the nonhuman animal rights movement uncritically persists in the vilification and sexualized objectification of women. Patriarchy and capitalism must be disrupted, not reinforced. Foie gras ducks and geese cannot be liberated so long as the same ideological mechanisms are bulwarked in advocacy spaces.

Notes

- 1 Mass terms such as "geese" are avoided so as to respect the personhood of individuals victimized in the system.
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- 5 Euphemistic terms that mask human violence against animals are denoted with quotation marks.
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