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PETA in Havana:
Meat, Globalisms, and the Practices and Politics of Consumption

The normalization of U.S.-Cuba relations under the Obama administration has loosened restrictions on both trade and tourism between the two countries. For many in the United States, decades of an official state policy of political and economic isolation have crafted a particular place for Cuba within the national imagination, as one of the last holdouts against the processes of global capitalism.¹ While this isolation may not be quite as pristine as often imagined, this easing of restrictions, for many, represents both an opening of potential markets and the possibility of travel to a place until very recently beyond access. Among these many travelers are representatives of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, or PETA, an American animal-rights and pro-veganism organization known for its use of provocative and sexualized advertising. Under the travel category of “humanitarian support,” two of these “lettuce ladies,” dressed in “lettuce bikinis,” arrived by plane in Havana, Cuba on February 28th, 2017, for a three-day trip. PETA’s stated intention was to deliver veterinary supplies and promote veganism as a lifestyle choice among Cubans (PETA 2017d, Whitefield 2017a).

This paper attempts to analyze PETA’s three-day visit to Cuba and PETA’s own coverage of the event in order to unveil and examine the disjunctures present when PETA’s methods encounter Cuban relations to food. PETA’s methods, as well as their own stated aims and views concerning animal rights, assume an imagined audience composed of subjects

¹ See Cave 2016 or Brown 2015 for examples of this view.

making “lifestyle” choices about consumption, who are in possession of a gaze within which the use of the image of the female body in advertising is a familiar gesture. These assumptions, situated within the context of a history of Cuban relationships with food, raise questions about legibility and translatability that are only cursorily addressed by PETA’s proclamation that “Compassion is the same in any language” (PETA 2017d). Drawing on Anna Tsing’s analysis of the centrality of spectacle to the search for financial capital, I will be arguing that the particular methods used by PETA, in fact, function as a “scale-making” project: a claim to global presence made to an audience located within the United States. Rather than take PETA’s stated aims at face value, and without making assumptions about the intentions of any actors involved, an analysis of PETA’s media coverage of its own efforts allows us to examine media as not only a record of an event that has occurred, but as a product being produced, and a means by which to construct the appearance of a global “brand”. Finally, I will be turning to a discussion of the work of Emily Yates-Doerr, who provides an alternative framework through which to approach the very issues of translatability that PETA leaves out of consideration. By examining practices and discourses surrounding meat in Guatemala, Yates-Doerr argues for an understanding of meat as something “enacted” within situated practice, offering a means of understanding and categorization alternative to the static, meat-as-animal flesh definition used by PETA.

Some Context: Food in Cuba

Cuban attitudes towards food are deeply intertwined with a long and fraught history of U.S.-Cuba relations that in the 20th century saw each state aligned on opposite sides of the

Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba's primary trading partner, and subsequent breakdown of Cold War political alignments from 1989 to 1991 resulted in a 75% decrease in foreign trade (Henken 2008). Cuba has historically imported much of its food, lacking the "climatic conditions or technical development which allow production of valuable cereal crops and protein sources" (Dominguez 1997). A robust Cuban cattle industry, for instance, relied on Soviet grain imports to provide feed (Gollner 2014). During the first five years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, consequently, Cubans experienced a decrease of daily energy intake from 2899 kcal to 1863 kcal (Franco et. al 2008). Cuban President Fidel Castro, in an effort to mitigate the effects of this collapse of transnational trade, declared a "Special Period" (período especial) beginning in 1990, in which minor economic reforms expanded international tourism and foreign investment, and legalized self-employment, foreign remittances, and the use of the U.S. dollar (Henken 2008).

Even prior to the Obama administration's official loosening of trade restrictions with Cuba, the United States was participating in the export of food to Cuba, approving agricultural exports to Cuba in 2000, and exporting 1.3 billion dollars in food products between 2001 and 2005 (Caribbean Media Corp 2005).² More recently, the Obama administration's move towards the normalization of relations with Cuba marks the end of official state policies of economic and political isolation. These changes have included the easing of restrictions on travel, remittances, and banking (Davis 2016, Baker 2014, U.S. Department of the Treasury 2015). The normalization of relations has also presented commercial possibilities for U.S. food industries looking for easier access into a difficult-to-

²See also U.S. International Trade Commission 2007 for a more detailed discussion.

access market, as shown in news coverage by both the U.S. Meat Export Federation Staff and the U.S. Grains Council (U.S. Meat Export Federation Staff 2015, U.S. Grains Council 2015). As of 2012, the United States already made up 50 percent of the Cuban grain market, despite a prohibition preventing Cuba from purchasing on credit (Shultz 2012), while Cuban imports of chicken between 2009 and 2014 are valued at \$762 million (Gollner 2014).

Cuban attitudes towards meat are inevitably shaped by this complex history of food. Veronica Vega, a writer for the Havana Times, argues that “traditional Cuban cuisine does not conceive of the absence of meat. The economic uncertainty itself has turned the presence of animal fiber into the goal and symbol of social status” (Vega 2017). In his investigation of the consumption of beef in contemporary Cuba, Adam Gollner reports that “Cubans describe themselves as ‘carnivorous’ people; they want beef more than any other food”, despite state attempts to encourage the consumption of *moringa*, a root vegetable, as a meat alternative (Gollner 2014). Fidel Castro’s praise of *moringa* and mulberry likewise drew criticism from the Cuban scholar Haroldo Dilla Alfonso for “telling Cubans to become herbivores without bothering to ask them if they want to” (Alfonso 2012). While the Cuban state has made previous attempts to decenter the cultural status of meat, encouraging the consumption of fruits and vegetables via state television (Grogg 2002), alternatives such as “soy mincemeat fattened with ears and tripe” remain undesirable alternatives that “mak[e] your stomach turn” (Alvarez 2016). More recently, the very opening of relations that has enabled an increase in tourism has led to an increase in competition for basic food staples, as private restaurants compete with Cubans for access to limited goods outside of state-run markets (Ahmed 2016). It is within this fraught and complex history of food dependency and shortage that PETA enters Cuba.

PETA

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, or PETA, is an American NGO headquartered in Norfolk, Virginia. Claiming to be the “largest animal rights organization in the world”, with “more than 6.5 million members and supporters” (PETA a), they aim to “stop animal suffering” (PETA b) “in the food industry, in the clothing trade, in laboratories, and in the entertainment industry (PETA a). Known for controversial ad campaigns,³ PETA has regularly used female nudity in its advertisements, claiming that “in this tabloid era, the media usually do not consider the facts alone interesting enough to cover. Colorful and controversial gimmicks, however... consistently grab headlines, bringing the animal rights message to audiences around the country and often the world” (PETA b). Among these marketing tools is PETA’s use of “lettuce ladies”, female volunteers wearing “strategically placed greens” who travel to “cities around the globe” in order to promote veganism (PETA j).

PETA’s arguments in favor of non-human animal rights feature elements of both utilitarian and rights-based ethical discourses. PETA’s webpage, “Why Animal Rights?”, cites both Jeremy Bentham and contemporary utilitarian Peter Singer to argue that “the capacity for suffering... [is] the vital characteristic that gives a being the right to equal consideration... [Animals] feel pain, pleasure, fear, frustration, loneliness, and motherly love. ” (PETA i). This form of utilitarian moral reasoning can also be seen in PETA’s use of and advocacy for

³ Bhasin 2011 goes over several.

euthanization as “often the most compassionate option” for unwanted companion animals (PETA f) and support for sterilization as a means of controlling companion animal overpopulation (PETA c).

Alongside these utilitarian appeals, PETA also utilizes rights-based arguments that center on the capacity non-human animals have for valuing their own lives, and thus their right to be seen as ends in themselves, rather than as instrumental means toward human ends. PETA’s arguments position non-human animals as subjects similar to human beings in essential ways: “Animals do not belong to us, and their lives are just as precious to them as yours or mine is to you or me” (PETA e). PETA’s website says that “Supporters of animal rights believe that animals have an inherent worth—a value completely separate from their usefulness to humans” (PETA i). This recognition of the subjectivities and capacities for suffering present in non-human animals also plays an essential role in PETA’s arguments for their right to interfere with the lives of others and promote the spread of veganism. In response to the argument that diet ought to be a matter of individual choice, PETA’s official reply is that: “From a moral standpoint, actions that harm others are not matters of personal choice... history teaches that society also once encouraged slavery, child labor, and many other practices now universally recognized as wrong” (PETA g). In other words, the recognition of non-human animals as subjects with rights, and the claim that such a recognition ought to be held universally across cultures and contexts, are what legitimate PETA’s interference with what others might perceive as matters of personal, local, or cultural choice.

PETA’s opposition to the consumption of animal foods relies on the assumption that the animals being eaten are being raised instrumentally for the purpose of being eaten, and

suffer in the process. Indeed, PETA seems to display no opposition to companion animals, and even says that “we would not oppose eating eggs from chickens treated as companions if the birds receive excellent care and are not purchased from hatcheries” (PETA k). However, given the fact outlined above that much of the meat eaten in Cuba is industrially produced in the United States (while industrial pig farming is a major domestic industry, see Traba and Galvez 2016), it seems that Cuban meat consumption would indeed meet with opposition from PETA’s animal-rights views. We now turn to one of PETA’s recent efforts to promote veganism: the visit of two “lettuce ladies” to Havana.

“Lettuce Diplomacy”: PETA in Havana

On February 28th, two “lettuce ladies” departed for a three-day trip to Havana, Cuba, under the category of “humanitarian support”, one of the twelve categories of permitted U.S. travelers, along with PETA representatives and media crew. PETA’s coverage of the three-day trip presents the stated aim of the trip as the delivery of \$1000 worth of veterinary supplies, as well as the encouragement of veganism as a dietary choice among Cubans (PETA 2017d, Whitefield 2017b). In the image below, the “lettuce ladies,” wearing lettuce bikinis are holding signs saying “Turn Over a New Leaf: Go Vegan” and “Come tus verduras, no a tus amigos” (eat your vegetables, not your friends), these women also handed out “vegan starter

kits,” visited private language schools, and posed for photos with people on the streets of Havana⁴.

Seen in the context of Cuba’s complex history of food shortage and dependency, PETA’s efforts seem both insensitive and inefficacious. PETA’s presentation of veganism addresses the Cuban citizen as a consumer exercising personal dietary choices, eliding any concern with what Vega circumspectly describes as the “disadvantages of distributing recipes whose ingredients are not available to most” (2017), while drawing on a repertory of images familiar from American corporate advertising: the use of the female body to sell consumer goods. While the trip cursorily addresses the need for cultural and linguistic translatability through the provisioning of Spanish-language kits and the presence of lettuce ladies who speak Spanish, the methods utilized by PETA appear to proclaim a fair degree of confidence in the translatability of PETA’s views on the rights of non-human animals across geographic and cultural distance, as well as the universal appeal and legibility of the use of the female body as a marketing tool. Tellingly, PETA’s coverage of the event proclaims that “compassion is the same in any language” (PETA 2017d), a universalizing claim about what constitutes a subject, and how these subjects ought to be relating to each other. Moreover, an examination of coverage of the event would appear to show that a fair portion of the viewers on the streets of Havana, in fact, appear to be tourists, not Cubans, people perhaps as detached from the concerns of Cubans as the arguments and methods utilized by PETA.

One way to begin to make sense of PETA’s methods and their own coverage of their visit to Cuba is through Anna Tsing’s notion of ‘globalisms’: claims to global scales that are

⁴ See also Whitefield 2017a for further description of the lettuce ladies’ activities

themselves “a kind of conjuring, a dramatic performance”, that “mak[e] us imagine globality” (2005: 57-58). In her analysis of the workings of global capitalism, Tsing proposes “the economy of appearances” as a framework for understanding the centrality of spectacle-making in the routine search for financial capital (56-57): “In speculative enterprises, profit must be imagined before it can be extracted; the possibility of economic performance must be conjured like a spirit to draw an audience of potential investors” (57). Claims of global reach and presence are themselves a kind of conjuring and spectacle that announce the possibility of “a more total and hegemonic world-making than we have ever known” (57). While Tsing focuses on the conjuring of the possibility of financial profit, the terms she provides suit themselves just as well to PETA’s conjuring of the possibility of a different kind of accumulation: not of capital, but of converts to its cause.

PETA’s coverage of the trip can thus be read as a way of proposing and constructing its own presence and capacities. PETA’s first blog post covering the trip begins: “As PETA’s official vegan ambassadors, the “Lettuce Ladies” are all about going the distance. They’ve been spotted on Capitol Hill, the icy streets of Kazakhstan, and just about every point in between” (PETA 2017d). The phrase “and just about every point in between” alerts us to the ways in which PETA’s coverage works to collapse and flatten distances, whether geographic, spatial, or cultural. To accomplish this, we are presented with the familiar and close — Capitol Hill — and the distant and foreign: Kazakhstan, or for that matter, Cuba. All other places and nations are homogenized and reduced to “points in between”, allowing us to recognize PETA’s effort as a “scale-making project”: the creation of a certain presentation of the world which must be “proposed, practiced, and evaded, as well as taken for granted” (Tsing 2005: 57-58).

In fact, PETA's trips call to mind Karen Ho's discussion of "Empty Office Syndrome", the corporate use of the "minimalist strateg[y]" of maintaining an empty office in a foreign country in order to create a claim to global reach and presence, while obscuring the "partial, incomplete, high-pressured, and ephemeral work of how and what constitutes "global presence" (2005: 84-86). In the case of PETA's visit to Havana, likewise, relatively small investments of money and resources are being used in an attempt to conjure an image of global reach and influence. The trip to Cuba itself lasted only two or three days, and featured two lettuce ladies, ostensibly volunteers, delivering about \$1000 worth of medical supplies, as well as vegan "starter-kits". The media coverage of the trip, both on PETA's own website and through other media outlets, serves not only as a record of the event, but also as the product being produced. The product is made all the more legible for an American audience through the familiar use of sexualized female bodies in advertising and the carrying of signs in English reading "Turn Over a New Leaf: Go Vegan," alongside the ones in Spanish. Accusations of sexism, misogyny, or cultural insensitivity can be seen to feed into this production of notoriety and media presence, rather than being liabilities to PETA's aims.

Meat in and as Practice

The trip to Havana and coverage of the event are expressive of a disjuncture between PETA's representation of the relationship between rights, non-human animals, and consumption, and situated Cuban attitudes, practices, and histories surrounding meat. In the process, issues of translatability are obscured rather than addressed. Emily Yates-Doerr, through her work on understandings of 'meat' in Guatemala, offers a different framework for understanding these very issues of translation. Yates-Doerr argues for an understanding of

categories as arising from “the fluid organization of everyday realities” (311) — an approach to meat as something “enacted” through situated practice, rather than as emerging from a universal taxonomy in which it derives its definition from its origin as animal. By examining the preparation of a holiday meal by Dulce María, the woman with whom she is staying in Guatemala, Yates-Doerr notes that the meat bought in market and prepared for dinner is made from soy, and yet is referred to, treated as, and considered to be meat, without any element of substitution or deception (2015: 312). Yates-Doerr argues that what meat is, for instance, in a local Catholic service (as something that in essence might be considered bread in other contexts), might be different from what meat is within an international trade agreement (as foods with a high content of iron and protein), which might be different from what meat is in a family dinner in which the meat is made from soy. However, the origin of the meat remains relevant for certain purposes and practices, such as when Dulce María needs to serve fish instead of beef on Fridays, keeping with Catholic tradition (318-319). Meat’s status as phylogeny, then — meat as animal flesh — is relevant within certain practices and enactments of meat, but not in others, in which priority, or purpose and use takes precedence as the basis of classification (312, 319).

PETA’s conceptualization of meat as animal flesh is certainly relevant to their aims of decreasing suffering and promoting the rights of non-human animals. But an attention to understanding what meat means — as well as what meat *is* and might be — to people in situated practices and contexts, is likely to provide a better sense of the roles that animal flesh is serving. Thus, it might unveil a place in which a discourse of non-human animal-rights might be inserted into particular contexts. Such an attentiveness necessarily requires a recognition of the ways in which socioeconomic inequities find themselves reflected in, and

connected with the space often delimited as cultural difference and aspiration.⁵ In other words, globalisms and distance — geographic or cultural, substantive and conjured — may be useful for the purposes of marketing and the creation of certain presentations of reach and presence, but obscure genuine issues of translation if taken at face value. However, an analysis that takes situated practice as the basis for shared understanding⁶ offers a way of approaching such issues while avoiding the opposite extreme: a view that asserts the impossibility of shared understanding altogether.

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⁶Or productive misunderstanding, c.f. Tsing 2005: 1-18.

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