

# Relations

BEYOND ANTHROPOCENTRISM

10.2

DECEMBER 2022

*Human Beings' Moral Relations with Other Animals  
and the Natural Environment*

Edited by Francesco Allegri

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# The “Cruel Absurdity” of Human Violence and Its Consequences

## A Vegan Studies Analysis of a Pandemic Novel

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.7358/rela-2022-02-murj>

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### ABSTRACT

*This article teases out what a Vegan Studies theoretical framework can offer a literary analysis of a selected pandemic novel, “The Fell” (2021), by Sarah Moss. Pandemic fiction accommodates texts from a wide range of genres, and these types of literary texts have seen a resurgence in the wake of the spread of the corona virus. While literary engagements with pandemics have often been relegated to the realms of dystopian science fiction, our current realities have shifted to such an extent that they can now comfortably be read alongside more realistic fictional representations of contemporary societies. The causal relationships between anthropocentric abuse of the environment in general and of animals in particular, and pandemics have been energetically contested in the media and in scholarly disciplinary fields ranging from Virology to Critical Animal Studies. The argument that I will develop is that Vegan Studies is a theoretical rubric with unique and salient generative capacity and that it allows for the emergence of fresh and necessary insights when we start unpacking how to make sense of pandemics through fiction. I will use Moss’s novel to anchor and illustrate my argument in favour of the value of Vegan Studies in these discussions.*

*Keywords:* animals; factory farming; food politics; literary studies; more-than-human; pandemic fiction; Sarah Moss; veganism; Vegan Studies; violence.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

While veganism has been much maligned and misunderstood as an eccentric lifestyle choice, I will focus on Vegan Studies as a framework rather than on veganism as either an identity or a dietary practice. In other words, this article offers an argument in favour of Vegan Studies

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as a theory and a reading strategy rather than a defence of veganism as an identity category. Even this statement comes with the acknowledgment that there will necessarily be some overlaps and points of alignment between the two positions and rationales, and these will be addressed as the argument progresses. Vegan Studies owes its existence to multiple and layered iterations of veganism, and it is thus necessary to offer some preliminary comments on veganism before moving on to an articulation of the theoretical framework. The term “vegan” was coined by Donald Watson from the UK Vegan Society in 1944 by using the first and last few letters of the term “vegetarian” because he regarded the former as the logical outcome of meaningful engagement with the latter. Annie Potts and Philip Armstrong (2018, 395) offer a useful explanation of the term by noting that, in “the broadest sense, veganism extends concern for animals beyond a meat-free diet to a purposeful way of life that opposes and avoids the exploitation of animals in any form”. While not eating animals has come to signify veganism, it is merely the most basic element of a much more expansive concept. The influence of Watson and the UK Vegan Society in popularizing veganism in Western societies should not, however, obscure the much longer history of veganism in various cultures in the Global South and the East. Suffice at this stage to recognize A. Breeze Harper’s (2011, 158) salutary reminder that “the culture of veganism is not a monolith and is composed of many different subcultures and philosophies throughout the world”.

Any attempt to grapple with the nature and potentialities of Vegan Studies must depart from a space that takes seriously the multiplicities and histories of global cultures of veganism. In a useful overview of the origins of Vegan Studies as a unique disciplinary stance, Laura Wright (2021, 7) explains that is it necessary “to situate it as at once informed by and divergent from the field of animal studies, which is in itself multifaceted, consisting of critical animal studies, human-animal studies, and posthumanism”. Without devoting too much space to definitions of these fields, some brief conceptual clarifications will be useful because they will both help to situate the relatively new theoretical intervention of Vegan Studies and they will serve the analysis that will follow, when the mobilization of work from these other fields will clearly become relevant. In terms of relevance to the rest of my analysis, Critical Animal Studies (CAS) will be of particular use.

Peter Singer’s 1975 text, *Animal Liberation*, is widely credited with solidifying the central tenets of the field. Nik Taylor and Richard Twine (2014, 2) note that CAS “takes a normative stance against animal exploitation and so ‘critical’ also denotes a stance against an anthropocentric

status quo in human-animal relations, as demonstrated in current mainstream practices and social norms”. This emphasis on a critical, normative commitment to challenging anthropocentric and oppressive assumptions about animals is also the point where CAS diverges most insistently from Human-Animal Studies. While sharing a strong interdisciplinary approach, Margo DeMello (2012, 4) describes the latter as a field that explores “the spaces that animals occupy in human social and cultural worlds and the intersections humans have with them”. Posthumanism turns its focus to attempts at “understanding of species in a space that challenges our conceptions of what it means to be human” (Wright 2021, 9). Two of the most important theorists in this field are Donna Haraway and Cary Wolfe who both, albeit in different ways, explore the extent to which the very concept of the human must necessarily be destabilized once we understand how “species exist in a knot of interactions that co-shape one another” (Wright 2021, 9). Wolfe (2010, xv) regards posthumanism as the field best able to articulate the “embodiment and embeddedness of the human being in not just its biological but also its technological world, the coevolution of the human animal with the technicity of tools and external archival mechanisms”. These are very rudimentary explanations of complex and multi-faceted fields and various scholars offer important critiques of blind spots and marginalized voices within them (as these critiques relate to gender, for instance, see Wright 2021 and Fraiman 2012; for critical interventions related to race and postcolonialism, see Deckha 2018 and Kim 2015). Wright transparently draws on all these existing scholarly contributions when she offers her own articulation of Vegan Studies as follows:

[I] posit this field as a product of the discourse of vegan representation as it is situated within and outside of extant conceptions of animal studies, animal welfare/rights/liberation, and ecofeminism – the best theoretical model that I know for addressing enmeshed oppressions that include the oppression of nonhuman animals and the environment. (Wright 2017, 3)

She offers this additional explanation that resonates powerfully with my own academic forays into the emerging field of Vegan Studies:

Vegan studies constitute a lived and embodied ethic that impacts one’s scholarly trajectory; for vegans in the academy, veganism finds its way, via our theoretical musings, into the scholarship that we produce. Being vegan is a bodily action, dependent upon what one chooses to put in and on one’s body, and coming to this realization as a scholarly endeavor – for myself and the other vegan scholars that I have met – has been a life-long journey. (Wright 2017, 8)

Jessica Holmes (2021) draws on Wright's contributions when she articulates her own explanation of the need to distinguish between veganism and Vegan Studies while, as I have done above, noting the practical and intellectual entanglements between the two. She describes this as follows:

While veganism as an aspirational paradigm seeks to end animal exploitation (and while vegan studies as a discipline contributes to that pursuit), the intentions and objectives of vegan studies differ from those of the vegan movement itself. As Wright's work exhibits, vegan studies seeks to explore and deconstruct vegan *identity*. (Holmes 2021, 175; emphasis in original)

In this section, I have sketched out the considerations of distinct, yet overlapping, scholarly fields, conceptualizations of vegan identity, vegan practice, the vegan movement, a vegan reading and Vegan Studies. I have also signaled some of the contestations that come into play when one attempts to engage with these fields, theoretical frameworks and concepts. In the next section, I will draw on these considerations and contestations to expand the critical gaze in an example of a literary analysis that takes veganism and animals seriously, rather than glossing over them or instrumentalizing them as literary props.

## 2. A VEGAN STUDIES READING OF A PANDEMIC NOVEL

### 2.1. *Novel overview*

In the analysis that follows, I will take my analytical cue from Emelia Quinn's (2016, 507) insistence on "the potential of developing a distinct vegan mode of reading". The text in which I will ground my argument is Sarah Moss's *The Fell*. This is very explicitly a Covid pandemic novel that is set in late 2020 and was published in 2021. The plot mainly revolves around the ways in which three central characters navigate a two-week period of quarantine in England's Peak District. Kate lives with her teenage son, Matt, and their neighbor is the elderly Alice, who lives alone. Although they all struggle with the confinement of quarantine, Kate is the one who finds it most difficult to cope. Much of the novel deals with attempts to rescue her after she breaks quarantine to go for a hike and falls. This brief overview is intended merely as background for the vegan reading that, I argue, allows fresh meanings and insights to emerge from a text that will likely be read primarily as one that deals with the nature of human connection and the implications of a loss of that connection. While

the text explores how human relationships shift and shape characters, a reading approach that utilizes Vegan Studies (and, to a lesser extent, Critical Animal Studies) will demonstrate that the interactions with animals and the rest of the more-than-human world are no less salient and open to scholarly interrogation.

## 2.2. *Vegan Studies and the politics of food*

By the fourth page of the novel, in a section that is narrated from Matt’s perspective, the reader is alerted to Kate’s awareness of the politics of food. Food Studies is another emerging disciplinary field that might also be mobilized usefully to enrich an analytical engagement with representations of food in this novel as it entails sustained investigations of the politics of food. While Holmes (2021) provides a helpful overview of the central tenets of Food Studies as a scholarly discipline, it is her distinction between Food Studies and Vegan Studies that is most significant for the purposes of this article. She notes that, for Vegan Studies, “its fundamental organizing principle opposes the exploitation of animals” (Holmes 2021, 174). While scholars in both disciplines may well explore and even challenge the ethical implications related to animal consumption, “vegan studies scholars categorically cease to presume animal subjects (or their bodies) as constituting food commodities” (Holmes 2021, 174). The discursive and epistemological commitment to refusing to construct animals as killable and consumable is crucial and, as I unpack the literary representations below, I will demonstrate that Vegan Studies is uniquely suited to serving the analysis. In *The Fell*, the few brief lines in which Matt reflects on how much he misses being alone in their home offer a great deal of information for a Vegan Studies scholar. I quote the relevant lines in full below, before I move on to teasing out the implications for a vegan reading: Matt has

the place to himself to play his music and fry eggs and cheese sandwiches and sometimes boxes of frozen burgers from the village shop without her [his mother, Kate] on at him to open the windows and wash up before he’s even eaten and she doesn’t understand how he cannot think about the cows and the workers in the abattoir who all get PTSD because you would, wouldn’t you, killing animals all day, not to mention if people didn’t eat meat we wouldn’t be in this mess in the first place [...]. (Moss 2021, 4)

At the start of the novel, Matt does not yet realize that the coveted “stillness in the house” (4) foreshadows the realization that Kate is missing, which will dawn later that same evening. He is recounting his annoyance with his mother who prevents him from enjoying his animal products in

peace. Kate is represented as the quintessential “vegan killjoy” (Twine 2014, 623). Alice shares the understanding of veganism as deprivation when she considers sending Matt some cookies because “Kate keeps him on rabbit food” (14). Richard Twine (2014) uses Sara Ahmed’s work on the figure of the feminist killjoy and convincingly argues that there are sufficient resonances with veganism to warrant coining and critiquing the construction of the “vegan killjoy”. He explains that, within a “normatively omnivorous meat culture” (628), the concept of the vegan killjoy encapsulates how “[v]eganism constitutes a direct challenge to the dominant affective community that celebrates the pleasure of consuming animals” (Twine 2014, 628). The pleasure and happiness emanating from the shared consumption of food that the vegan killjoy “spoils” can only function if animals have already firmly been relegated to killable commodities whose lives and suffering do not matter. It is thus a fundamentally anthropocentric understanding of pleasure and happiness and, according to Twine (2014), the vegan killjoy, by her very presence (or, in the case of Kate, the memory or anticipation of her presence), exposes and disrupts this anthropocentrism. Twine (2014, 638) rehabilitates the figure of the vegan killjoy and claims the “decentering of joy and happiness [as] critical deconstructive work”. For Twine, this disruption, decentering and deconstruction serve important generative work:

In performing a practice that attempts to *re-construct* happiness, pleasure and politics the vegan killjoy does what all politically wilful killjoys attempt to do: create new meanings and practices that underline the shared joy in living outside and beyond social norms once thought fixed. (Twine 2014, 638)

The anthropocentric dimensions that lie at the heart of the construction of the vegan killjoy require more sustained focus and I will return to the concept later in the analysis. As a brief definition, Fiona Probyn-Rapsey (2018, 47) offers the following: “Anthropocentrism refers to a form of human centredness that places humans not only at the center of everything but makes ‘us’ the most important measure of all things”. Anthropocentric assumptions need to be solidly in place for a way of life that prioritizes “our” pleasure in eating over “their” suffering. Anthropocentric understandings about the place of the “human” become vulnerable when we start reading veganism more seriously and this might, at least in part, help explain the overt hostility towards and backlash against veganism. Decentering the “human” can feel like existential exposure. When Matt and Alice dismiss Kate’s vegan impulses, they are thus protecting a much larger ontological framework and their place within it. While I do not seek to diminish the dietary aspect of veganism, it is fairly easy for food



choices to become a smokescreen and preoccupation with those choices can hide what Vegan Studies is really challenging. In her important work on vegan politics, practice and theory, Eva Haifa Giraud (2021, 40) notes that her analyses “pose questions about markets, consumption, and the politics of anthropocentrism more broadly. These topics might emanate from discussions of food, but ultimately go well beyond it”.

Matt’s reflections above implicate markets and the effect of food production practices on workers in his annoyance with Kate’s beliefs about food. This is an important point, not only because it illustrates the broader reach of Vegan Studies, but also because of its potential for enriching the base of vegan advocacy. Neither the eating of animals nor the practical processes through which animals are turned into food products are politically neutral. Haifa Giraud (2021) traces clear linkages between inequalities between people and the suffering of animals in factory farming. The abattoir workers getting PTSD is a very real phenomenon and, crucially, these workers are themselves marginalized through the intersections of various markers of “inferior” identities. This is dangerous, dehumanizing and poorly paid work that is typically relegated to employees who are from lower socio-economical classes, who have less formal education, who are black or brown and, often, those who do not have secure citizenship statuses. Haifa Giraud (2021, 5) insists that neoliberal capitalist systems need to be drawn into these discussions as “the institutions that violently transform animals into capital are also reliant on the transformation of particular groups of people into expendable resources”. C. Lou Hamilton engages with the work of Val Plumwood to advocate in favour of

the inseparability of the struggle against anthropocentrism and campaigns to end the exploitation of people, calling upon animal rights advocates to form political alliances with workers’ movements, radical health movements, environmental organisations, small farmers and movements against neoliberalism. (Hamilton 2019, 53)

Hamilton and Plumwood are not alone in terms of positing the end of animal slaughter as a social justice issue that involves much more than the animals who are relegated to the realm of animals who are factory farmed (following conventions in Vegan Studies and Critical Animal Studies scholarship, I use the phrase “animals who are factory farmed” instead of “factory farmed animals” to signal my recognition that these are animals with their own identities and social worlds whose objectification in factory farming is a situation that is imposed by human beings, rather than some essential part of their natures; “factory farmed animals” is a strategic terminological choice that furthers their epistemic erasure and this a

conceptual manoeuvre that I refuse to perpetuate in my own writing; similarly, my use of the relative pronoun “who” instead of “that” is a linguistic manoeuvre that attempts to move animals beyond the category of objects). The PTSD that Kate mentions in relation to workers at abattoirs is a well-documented phenomenon and it disproportionately affects people who are already vulnerable in various ways (see, for instance, Cantrell 2016). Finally, the “mess” to which Kate refers, is about the much-contested origins of the corona virus. While I do not wish to enter into this discussion in this article, the risks to human health that result from the consumption of animal products have been extensively researched.

### 2.3. *Vegan Studies, violence and the larger environment*

Through Matt’s thoughts, Kate is represented as a character whose eschewal of animal products for food extends to a much wider concern for the environment. For her, recycling is something that she at least tries to take seriously rather than making it an exercise in performative greenwashing. She encourages Matt to rinse containers and to separate plastic from cardboard while also using a compost bin (Moss 2021). In Kate, Moss creates a character that allows for a nuanced engagement with veganism while also challenging a number of stereotypes of vegan practice and identity. Haifa Giraud (2021, 10) exposes the “sense of moral judgment that it [veganism] is seen to carry” as well as “stereotypes of the ‘preachy’ or ‘angry’ vegan” as significant “sources of tension”. While she argues that these stereotypes are much more complexly constructed tropes, the reader can explore the complexity with which these dynamics operate via other characters’ perceptions of Kate. Alice is a very revealing source in this regard as she seems to pre-emptively assume being judged by Kate while simultaneously judging Kate herself. In addition to the dismissive (and, the text reveals, inaccurate) assumptions about what Kate offers to Matt as food, Alice feels too uncomfortable to ask them to buy her the “food” (these include Hula Hoops and Bittermints) she really wants, “not with Kate working at Shoots and Leaves and growing her own lentils or whatever, probably hasn’t eaten a Hula Hoop in decades” (Moss 2021, 14). In contrast to Alice’s assumptions about Kate, the small family has demonstrated nothing but kindness and compassion to Alice by, for instance, doing her shopping while she, as an elderly and more at-risk neighbor, shelters in place during the lockdown.

While Kate’s efforts to engage ethically with the environment and the other animals within it are represented as a nuanced work in progress,

Alice is the character who seems to struggle with contradictory senses of what constitutes ethical interaction with the more-than-human world. For instance, she is worried about the tendency of people to acquire dogs during lockdown, mostly with little consideration of these animals' needs and how they will be fulfilled when work schedules may return to normal. She is represented as annoyed because of the dogs "worrying the sheep all summer and leaving a mess everywhere" (17). She notes that the issue of the dogs has left the "farmers fuming" and she regards this as understandable because "it'll be worse come lambing time, doesn't bear thinking about, what a dog will do to a field of pregnant ewes and panicky lambs" (17). When reading these lines through a Vegan Studies lens, it makes little sense to be concerned about the violence and fear that a dog can inflict on ewes and lambs when they are destined for the much greater violence of slaughterhouses. In Alice's reflections, the dog is the aggressor, and the image of the lambs is meant to conjure empathy for the "victims". The only way that one could possibly interpret these lines from a Vegan Studies perspective, is to either read Alice's concern as being for the financial losses that the farmers will incur, or as being symptomatic of the cognitive dissonance that allows people to simultaneously hold on to an identity that constructs themselves as being kind and caring while also consuming animals. When Kate thinks about animals and their vulnerability to human violence, she is much more careful to consider just how casually cruel that violence is, and how it will have a reverberating impact on the humans who insist on denying our interdependence with the more-than-human world. In a very short novel, it is significant that Moss devotes numerous pages to Kate's thoughts about the causes and impacts of pandemics on animals. While I will not enter into debates about the causes of pandemics, I do recognise that Kate oversimplifies some very complex scientific processes. From a Vegan Studies vantage point, it is worth noting that she draws direct links between what people eat, the casual violence with which we treat other animals and diseases that affect us. She thinks about "the Black Death washing around Europe for centuries and still occasionally popping up when people eat, is it marmots in Mongolia?" (30). She then moves on to "the cruel absurdity of farming mink for their fur and turning them into disease reservoirs and slaughtering them because they're contagious" (31). She recognises that these human actions cannot be without consequences for us, and she notes that "those mink are going to haunt us forever and so they damn well should, they should be leaving small blood footprints on the street corners in Copenhagen and Dublin" (32).

### 3. USING VEGAN STUDIES TO CRITIQUE STEREOTYPICAL REPRESENTATIONS OF VEGANISM

Kate demonstrates a fairly sophisticated understanding of how inter-species violence will always come back to haunt humans, but she also manages to continue raising a number of stereotypes about vegans. In addition to the angry, judgemental vegan killjoy discussed above, Moss raises and challenges how assumptions about socio-economic status shape contemporary understandings of veganism. According to Catherine Oliver (2022, 38), “[c]lass politics have also haunted the animal advocacy movement, where critique of the representation of the animal movement and veganism has long been as a wealthy middle-class lifestyle”. In the case of *The Fell*, however, Alice is represented as upper-middle class while Kate and Matt struggle to make ends meet. Moss also challenges some of the common stereotypes about vegans and against veganism by allowing for nuance and complexity in Kate’s identity and choices. Kate finds herself worrying about the environmental impact of having out-of-season fruit available to consumers throughout the year when she thinks about how people “have mangoes flown around the world” (33). She then quickly checks herself by noting that “she’s even boring herself, it’s going to be avocados she’s complaining about next” (33). Moss is humorously critiquing the notion that vegans are always eager to advocate their beliefs to anyone, regardless of their audience’s level of interest. This assumption is so widespread that it has become a common and dismissive joke: “How do you know someone’s vegan? Don’t worry, they’ll tell you” (for an insightful account that challenges the accuracy of this assumption, as well as the implications, Jan Bolderdijk and Gert Cornelissen use an amended version of the joke in the title of their 2022 article, “‘How Do You Know Someone’s Vegan?’ They Won’t Always Tell You: An Empirical Test of the Do-Goode’s Dilemma”). The reference to avocados is also noteworthy because it signals a popular way of criticizing veganism that has gained a great deal of traction in recent years and avocados have become something of an unlikely lightning rod for these attacks on veganism. In these accounts, which tend to be popular in conservative media and online spaces, veganism is actually posited as a choice that harms the environment by, amongst other things, encouraging unsustainable food choices, such as avocados (see Silva Sousa, Atkinson, and Montague 2020). While I do not dispute the fact that there are unsustainable elements in the food production chains of many items, including vegan ones, or the reality that the consistent availability of certain food items is only possible through practices that do indeed harm the environment, the furore over avocados

has been little more than a bad faith attempt to malign veganism because it is perceived as a threat to the status quo.

Shortly after raising and subtly critiquing these common anti-vegan tropes, Moss introduces another response to veganism that is perhaps even more prevalent when Kate says that “there is no real excuse not to be vegan” but that she “hasn’t tried all that hard, because of cheese, mostly” (35). There is no shortage of people proclaiming that their fondness for specific foods (most commonly cheese and bacon) is what is preventing them from embracing veganism. This type of response continues to prioritize the human’s right to perceived pleasure that is gained from eating certain foods over the animal suffering that is needed to produce that food. It is thus a fundamentally anthropocentric approach to dietary choices. More importantly, it falls into the trap of narrowing veganism down to dietary choices, and specifically to a plant-based diet. Here it is useful to keep in mind the following reminder from Jessica Holmes (2021, 175): “Because veganism functions as a lived ideology, it should not be categorized as a solely food-based topic like vegetarianism and plant-based diets”. Haifa Giraud also insists that,

in order to grasp veganism’s distinctiveness as a form of food culture, it is, paradoxically, necessary to understand it as *more than a diet*: not just due to veganism’s concern with animal ethics beyond food, but because of the broader ethical implications of its criticism of many existing human-animal relations. (Haifa Giraud 2021, 2; emphasis in original)

When Kate notes that cheese is an “excuse” for not becoming vegan, she is thus failing to engage with veganism in its real sense and she is glossing over “the theoretically, politically, and ethically complex issues that veganism poses” (Haifa Giraud 2021, 2). This superficial engagement with complexity and our relationship with the more-than-human world in her reference to cheese is, however, a departure from how she is represented in most of the novel.

Kate embodies the complexity and messiness that characterize attempts to live ethically in a contemporary, anthropocentric, neoliberal capitalist society. I would argue that, when considered together with her concern for the “cruel absurdity” (31) of human violence perpetrated against animals, her care for the environment and sustainability and her concern for workers’ rights, her failure to challenge her family’s cheese consumption constitutes a very small part of her larger vegan identity. Haifa Giraud (2021) draws on the work of Cudworth (2011, 67), who defines “anthroparchy” as “a complex and relatively stable set of hierarchical relationships in which ‘nature’ is dominated through formations of social organization which privilege the human”. In her conceptualiza-

tion of veganism, she posits it as a “way of living [which] has historically sought to unsettle the inevitability of these formations and the institutions that support them” (Haifa Giraud 2021, 4). Kate’s ways of thinking and being in the world should be read as meaningfully vegan in ways that often remain elusive to vegans who focus on the dietary aspect of this identity.

#### 4. THE DISRUPTIVE AND TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF A VEGAN STUDIES READING OF VIOLENCE AGAINST ANIMALS

Cruelty and its salience in our interactions with the majority of the other animals in the world are never far from Kate’s thoughts. She links this cruelty directly to the incessant demands of capitalism and she regards the treatment of animals as part of the much larger project of multispecies justice. The concept of multispecies justice can be traced to Donna Haraway’s *When Species Meet*. Numerous scholars have built on Haraway’s foundational text, and most conceptualizations of multispecies justice now start from its recognition of “the numerous, wide-ranging, cross-scalar, and everyday interactions that bind individuals and societies to networks of close and distant others, including other people and more-than-human beings: animals, plants, rivers, seas, and more” (Tschakert *et al.* 2021, 2). In their exploration of the benefits of multispecies justice, Eben Kirksey and Sophie Chao (2022, 15) identify “opportunities to deconstruct and reconstruct political positions, technical systems, ecological assemblages, and figures of hope”. Like the vegan killjoy, the champion of multispecies justice embraces opportunities to expose, disrupt, and re-imagine ways of being with each other in service of more hopeful and just potentialities. Crucially, these others extend beyond the human, and this appears to be something that Kate understands with some level of sophistication. In the pursuit of multi-species justice, we cannot disentangle completely the fates of, for instance, animals who are subjected to factory farming, the workers in those factories, the consumers of the products emanating from those factories and the larger political and economic structures within which we are all located. While we are all implicated in the larger neoliberal capitalist global economy, our levels of implication and the privileges we extract from our implication diverge widely, both amongst humans and between humans and other beings in the world. When Kate starts thinking about violence in human communities, her first instinct is to interrogate gender violence, but she quickly

moves beyond this as she understands that violence amongst people and violence against animals cannot be flattened out or conflated with one another in any simplistic way. She starts by comparing the lockdown of people during the pandemic to the treatment of animals, and she checks herself and her species privilege in an anthropocentric society as follows:

We're a living experiment, she thinks, in the intensive farming of humans, which is another silly overstatement, no-one's force-feeding us antibiotics or cutting bits off us so we can't run away and it's all in the name of safety, not profit. (Moss 2021, 57)

After her fall when she is not sure whether she will survive, Kate's thoughts return repeatedly to the animals and to the reverberating effects of violence against them: "The sheep, the mink, foot and mouth, animals burnt and ploughed into the ground, contaminated, poisoned blood and poisoned soil" (111). Her line of thought leads her to the conclusion that "the strange thing about the current pandemic isn't that it's happening now but that it didn't happen for so long" (126). As her thoughts become increasingly incoherent as her body temperature keeps dropping, she imagines that she is having a conversation with a raven and the bird asks her the following question: "Would you say you've been – well, sanctimonious, really, in the past, about the easy stuff, the masks and the sanitiser and all that"? (144). The raven comes to symbolize a more general animal voice that holds Kate accountable for her choices and, even in her compromised mental state, Kate considers the implications of ravens "watching us, keeping tabs" (144). She is then compelled to admit that she has been somewhat sanctimonious about the "easy stuff".

While the raven specifically categorizes the masks and sanitiser as being easy to advocate for, the more difficult task to which a Vegan Studies reading nudges us, is the necessary interrogation of all human treatment of animals and the role that our violence has played in setting the stage for this particular pandemic. This interrogation needs to include a thorough critique of all anthropocentric prioritizations of the category of the human and, indeed, a deconstruction of the entire category as such. Kate's environmentally conscious actions and ethical dietary concerns will never move us beyond the "easy stuff" if she fails to consider the very foundations of what it means to be human and animal and the privileges and responsibilities that come with these categories. Kate wonders "[s]ince when [...] has it been up to ravens to decide who deserves what" (144) but she admits "that it makes a kind of sense" or, at least, "as much sense as plenty of other stuff". Vegan Studies offers a mode of engagement that allows us to extend our efforts to the more

challenging aspects of being in the world with other beings and it enables us to critique anthropocentric assumptions about who deserves to make decisions about the lives and deaths of the other animals with whom we share space.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This article has used a selected pandemic novel to illustrate what a Vegan Studies framework and mode of reading can offer to literary studies with a particular emphasis on the ways in which these scholarly interventions can invigorate readings of a fictionalized representation of pandemics. Animals and human violence against them can easily slip through the cracks of academic attempts to make sense of the cultural products that have been emanating from the pandemic over the past year and will likely continue emerging in the coming decades. We cannot afford to keep glossing over animals and their voices. Vegan Studies and Critical Animal Studies insist that animals matter and any reading will necessarily be incomplete and compromised if we do not centre them in our analytical frameworks and value them with same commitment that we value other parts of our worlds. If animals are vulnerable and treated as expendable, we all are, and Vegan Studies scholarship offers an invaluable tool for critiquing the status quo and for imagining alternatives for a more just future. Our contemporary reality demonstrates very clearly that human decision making has served only a very small part of our world's most privileged human inhabitants at enormous cost to the vast majority of the rest of earth's human and more-than-human inhabitants. It has long been time to listen more attentively to animal voices, as represented by the raven in Moss's novel, and to engage meaningfully with what emerges from such a different mode of attunement.

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*How to cite this paper:* Murray, Jessica. 2022. "The 'Cruel Absurdity' of Human Violence and Its Consequences: A Vegan Studies Analysis of a Pandemic Novel". *Relations. Beyond Anthropocentrism* 10 (2): 23-38. doi: <https://dx.doi.org/10.7358/rela-2022-02-murj>