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Marrissa S. Ballard  
*Salve Regina University*

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# The Upholding of Heteropatriarchy: An Ecofeminist Critique of PETA Advertisements

Marrissa Ballard

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## Abstract

Humans are continually connected and divided by labels, systems, and hierarchies that determine how much power and status is available to each individual person. These hierarchies often aid in upholding the heteropatriarchal structure of society, which holds male dominated heterosexuality as the default and most powerful position. Because our society is structured to pander to heterosexual men, the exploitation of woman is often used to advertise and sell products. The exploitation of women also mirrors the exploitation of the environment, and this parallel serves as the basis of Ecofeminism. This paper aims to utilize ecofeminism to critique the use and brutalization of women in PETA advertisements. A brief explanation of ecofeminism is provided, as is a survey of the current conversations happening about both ecofeminism and PETA itself. A review of the past criticism of advertisements is also given to explain the stakes of exploiting and brutalizing women. The paper culminates in a close-reading of several of PETA's video and print ads. PETA often focuses their message on heterosexual men by promising sexual benefits as a reward for a vegan lifestyle. The promise of sexual prowess is coupled with violence, and thus PETA deliberately panders not only to male heterosexuality but also to violent and dominant masculinity. This paper argues that in using women in this way, not only is PETA damaging its capability to inspire change, but the organization's message becomes one that calls for the end of animal cruelty at the expense of women.

## Introduction

When we consider what it means to be a human living on this planet, it is imperative to recognize how we are both connected and divided by labels, systems, and hierarchies. This understanding is particularly important for any discussion of ecology and environmental justice. Environmental justice is a movement, an ideology, and a discipline through which the injustices against the environment and humanity are connected. As scholar and eco-critic Timothy Morton states in his work *The Ecological Thought*, thinking ecologically “includes all the ways we imagine how we live together.”<sup>1</sup> Morton does not stop with merely connecting humans, but combines everything into the “mesh” – a network of connected beings, including non-living and living entities.<sup>2</sup> Another work that reflects on the radical connectedness of humanity is Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. Through a social, biological, and historical lens, Harari deconstructs what it means to be human and gives context to our development. His ideas of inter-subjectivity and the human capability of imagination are particularly relevant for any conversation about connectivity.<sup>3</sup> The notion of imagination means that we are able to create myths which exist only because we imagine them into existence. Inter-subjectivity means that these ideas exist in the consciousness of many people, which is what gives these imagined orders power. As humans have evolved, we have constructed many imaginary myths such as religions or corporations that connect us. Inter-subjective imagined

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Morton. *The Ecological Thought*. (First Harvard University Press, 2012), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 28.

<sup>3</sup> Yuval Noah Harari. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. (Harper Collins Publishers, 2015), 166-117.

orders, such as gender and race, have also succeeded in dividing us and creating social hierarchies.

Divisive social labels and systems have led to injustice for human beings, animals, and the environment. Hierarchies of class, race, gender, and sexuality often dictate how much influence and power a person has access to. Harari again joins this conversation in an important way as he posits how hierarchies developed and spends a chapter titled “There is No Justice in History” deconstructing the ideologies behind those hierarchies with a focus on gender and race.<sup>4</sup> Harari disproves the ideas that were and still are used to justify racial and gender distinctions. For example, he debunks the argument that men are physically stronger and therefore became the leaders of society and instead argues that, if evolution favors cooperation, it is women who should rule as they are stereotyped as more cooperative.<sup>5</sup> In his explanation of the Agricultural Revolution, Harari discusses how peasants often worked the hardest but received less than the elite. The expansion, creation, and development of agriculture in general led to exploitation of all kinds; of people, of animals, and of the environment. At the end of the section on the Agricultural Revolution, Harari ends with a chilling statement: “a dramatic increase in the collective power and ostensible success of our species went hand in hand with much individual suffering.”<sup>6</sup> There is a sense of injustice and inequality inherent in that statement, as it sets up the imbalances of work, power, and rewards that still plague our world today.

As Harari notes, our successes and easy lifestyles, in many cases, come at the expense of other beings and the environment. Through integrating social issues into their writing, Morton and Harari truly encompass the “ecological thought” and what it means to consider environmental justice. In any consideration of justice, it is often important to incorporate ideas of mercy and morality. The Sisters of Mercy, for example, include women, the environment, and non-violence as three of their five critical concerns, meaning that the Sisters believe these issues must be addressed. Similarly, Pope Francis’ encyclical *On Care for Our Common Home* makes the connection between ecology and justice clear when he states that “an ecological approach always becomes a social one; it must always integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment.”<sup>7</sup> Environmental justice always seeks to draw a link between environmental degradation and disadvantaged populations. It demands the consideration of the systems that control our society, such as social hierarchies and capitalism. Similarly, the theoretical discipline of ecofeminism demands the same critical thought and exploration, specifically with a focus on gender. At the center of many conversations about both ecofeminism and the ecological crisis is the question of power; who has it and how is it being used? As Morton and Francis explicitly point out, we must question how our methods of production and consumption are degrading not only our environment but also other beings. Ecofeminism is concerned with the power that lies in a patriarchal society that upholds and celebrates male domination. In a society where consumption is sexualized in the extreme, both women and nature are seen as objects to be used and brutalized in order to increase power and capital. In the discussion of things such as class, capitalism, gender, poverty, and race, scholars aid in drawing links between oppression and injustice of all kinds. Their texts pulse with an undercurrent of desire, a desire to understand why and how we live in a world so devoid of justice, and perhaps how we can begin to make progress.

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<sup>4</sup> Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens*, 133-159.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 154-157.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 97.

<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis. *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home*. (Our Sunday Visitor, 2015), 35.

## Surveying the Conversation: PETA, Controversy, and Ecofeminist Thought

In looking at issues of injustice, this project will connect ecofeminist research and the controversial advertising utilized by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). Looking at PETA's marketing tactics through an ecofeminist lens demonstrates that, while it ought to be working for the liberation of oppressed populations, PETA actually perpetuates heteropatriarchy primarily through the objectification of women. The term "heteropatriarchy" combines the ideas of patriarchy, meaning male-dominated society, and "hetero" meaning heterosexuality. In a heteropatriarchal society, media panders not only to heterosexuality but specifically to *male* heterosexuality, and thus this pandering happens usually through the sexualization of women. PETA connects the exploitation of animals and the exploitation of women in its campaigns by using women's bodies to advertise animal rights and veganism. However, ecofeminism is not a new term, study, or conversation. General ecofeminist research can be found in abundance, and one of the most important sources on the subject of ecofeminism is a book by scholars Maria Meis and Vandana Shiva, aptly titled *Ecofeminism*.<sup>8</sup> The book is the first source that shows up in a search through GoogleScholar, which yielded 19,500 results.<sup>9</sup> Searching the term "ecofeminism" in the EBSCOHost database revealed almost six hundred results, including historical accounts of the emergence of ecofeminism as well as more contemporary articles about the movement today.<sup>10</sup> One article, "Ecofeminism: Liberation for Women and Nature," was published in 2015 and explores the topic of ecofeminism through theology.<sup>11</sup> Online outlets such as *EverydayFeminism* and *The New York Times* also wrote about the intersection between the environment and feminist theory.<sup>12</sup> On Twitter, searching "#ecofeminism" reveals a lot of conversations and pictures from women and men all over the globe.<sup>13</sup> A search on Tumblr.com, a popular site for activist blogs, garners pages and pages of blogs dedicated to ecofeminism as well as users who post pictures, quotes, and discussions.<sup>14</sup> On Facebook, the top results are popular pages such as *Bitch Media* and *Ms. Magazine*.<sup>15</sup> Through searching through the web, it is apparent that both scholars and individuals are engaging in ecofeminist dialogue.

Similarly, many dissertations, studies, and articles have already discussed links between meat-eating and masculinity. One academic article, titled "Vegan sexuality: challenging heteronormative masculinity through meat-free sex," from the journal *Feminism & Psychology* seems to directly relate to PETA's practice of sexualizing veganism.<sup>16</sup> A dissertation from the University of Hawaii conducted research about situations in which men feel they must defend

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<sup>8</sup> Maria Mies, and Shiva, Vandana. *Critique Influence Change: Ecofeminism* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). (London, GBR: Zed Books, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> <http://tinyurl.com/zxnpx56>. 9 March 2016.

<sup>10</sup> <http://tinyurl.com/gleqrhk>. 9 March 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Caro Velez and Consuelo, Olga. "Ecofeminism: New Liberation Paths for Women and Nature." *Exchange*, Vol 44, Issue 1. 2015.

<sup>12</sup> <http://everydayfeminism.com>, <http://nytimes.com>

<sup>13</sup> <http://tinyurl.com/z7tt7f4>. 9 March 2016.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.tumblr.com/search/ecofeminism>. 9 March 2015.

<sup>15</sup> *Bitch Media*. <https://www.facebook.com/Bitch-Media-20954259668/?fref=nf>. *Ms. Magazine*. <https://www.facebook.com/msmagazine/?fref=nf>.

<sup>16</sup> A Potts and J Parry. "Vegan sexuality: challenging heteronormative masculinity through meat-free sex." *Feminism & Psychology* 20, no. 1 (February 2010): 53-72 20p. CINAHL with Full Text, EBSCOhost (accessed March 9, 2016).

their masculinity through eating meat.<sup>17</sup> As far as discussions specifically about PETA, social media, particularly Twitter, revealed the more angry reactions to PETA's use of gender and sexuality in their ads.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, many thought-pieces, blog posts, and articles on websites like *Business Insider* commented on PETA's controversial marketing.<sup>19</sup> In an analysis of PETA advertisements, it seems like the more visceral and critical reactions will come from smaller blogs and social media rather than large news corporations. The comment sections on the official PETA YouTube page might also be helpful for more emotional and individual responses. PETA's marketing and its use of gender has not received that much scholarship, as a search for "PETA" and "gender" yielded only one relevant result: an article titled "When Sex Doesn't Sell."<sup>20</sup> While the searches for information on PETA revealed less scholarly results, the individual discussions on smaller websites and social media demonstrate that PETA has sparked controversy and conversation.

### **Ecofeminist Interconnectivity: Facts as Feelings, Woman as Environment**

In the introduction to *The Ecological Thought*, Timothy Morton explains the concept and practice of thinking ecologically. According to Morton, the ecological thinking is a thought process which requires an open recognition of interconnectivity.<sup>21</sup> This sense of interconnectivity requires the consideration of every possible connection between individuals and the world at large. Similarly, thinking critically does not reveal simple answers, but rather leads to further connections and further questioning. Thinking critically means that the thinker must be open to these connections. As Morton points out, thinking ecologically involves every social issue, system, and discipline. It is impossible to understand environmental justice without understanding issues such as race, class, gender, sexuality, economics, production, and consumption.<sup>22</sup> Interdisciplinary research is also crucial for understanding the current ecological crisis. Though the evidence and claims about the degradation of the environment often come from the hard sciences, other disciplines such as cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and even literature can help explain the true scope of environmental issues, as well as how those issues were created. Morton demonstrates an interdisciplinary approach in his book by analyzing poetry from authors such as Wordsworth and Milton.<sup>23</sup> In his analysis of both the form and content of Milton's work, Morton supports the ideas of openness and interconnectivity as well as the impossibility of reaching "complete knowledge."<sup>24</sup> The emotion in a work such as *Paradise Lost* is necessary for emphasizing the human element of suffering and injustice. Through literature, Morton demonstrates how global concepts can be brought to the level of the individual, and how facts can be turned into feelings.

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<sup>17</sup> Attila Pohlmann. 2015. "Threatened at the table: Meat consumption, maleness and men's gender identities." US: ProQuest Information & Learning, 2015. PsycINFO, EBSCOhost (accessed March 9, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> Twitter. <http://tinyurl.com/h62kwfh>. 9 March 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Kim Bhasin. "13 Most Offensive PETA Advertisements." 12 Oct. 2011.

<http://www.businessinsider.com/peta-shocking-controversial-ads-2011-10>. Accessed 9 March 2016.

<sup>20</sup> Adam J. Newmark and Shannon K. Vaughan. 2014. "When Sex Doesn't Sell." *Public Integrity* 16, no. 2: 117-140. Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost (accessed March 9, 2016).

<sup>21</sup> Timothy Morton. *The Ecological Thought*, 1-2.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 21-41.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

Morton also notes that “interconnection implies separateness and difference.”<sup>25</sup> With their differences, interdisciplinary approaches such as ecofeminism can create connections between the various issues involved in environmental justice. The discipline of ecofeminism, as previously stated, works to demonstrate how environmental issues effect humanity on an individual level. At its core, ecofeminism seeks to point out how the exploitation of the environment parallels the exploitation of women.<sup>26</sup> This exploitation can be seen in American advertising, particularly in the marketing of both meat-eating as well as veganism. Countless Carl’s Jr. commercials feature a group of glowing women in bikinis stuffing gargantuan cheeseburgers into their mouths.<sup>27</sup> Conversely, in the advertising of veganism created primarily by PETA, the organization uses the female body to encourage men to consider a meat-less lifestyle. PETA is particularly devoted to marketing the idea that, in going vegan, men will become more masculine and powerful.<sup>28</sup> The masculinization and sexualization of both meat-eating and a meat-less lifestyles upholds the current social hierarchy, specifically heteropatriarchy, at the expense of both animals and women. As previously mentioned, heteropatriarchy panders to a heterosexual and patriarchal understanding of masculinity, in which women become a tool in serving the male ego. With the sexualization of both veganism and extreme meat consumption, it appears that women have no place in the conversation aside from the use of their images and bodies. Thus the exploitation of the environment, particularly in regards to animals and the meat industry, is tangled with the exploitation of women.

### Re-regarding the Idea of a Movement

Ecofeminism is often considered a discipline, but like environmental justice it can also be seen as a critical approach, a branch of research, and a political movement. However, several authors who write about ecofeminism cite a quote from Kirpatrick Sale, who “argues that it is ‘too early to speak of ecofeminism as a ‘movement’”<sup>29</sup> According to Leila Brammer, who presented a paper on ecofeminism at the National Communication Association in 1998, the main reason ecofeminism is not considered a social movement is because of a lack of “action,” meaning direct action tactics such as protest.<sup>30</sup> Even in 2007, scholars Aneel Salman and Nuzhat Iqbal, wrote that ecofeminism is a social movement still in its “embryonic” stage.<sup>31</sup> In general, ecofeminism is primarily focused on theory, consciousness, and awareness rather than protest. As a movement, ecofeminism seeks to make obvious the parallels between the devaluation of the environment and the devaluation of women. The amounting scholarship and textual analysis on the subject is often seen as the “statement” of ecofeminist “ideology.”<sup>32</sup> Ecofeminism, much like

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<sup>25</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 47.

<sup>26</sup> Maria Mies, and Shiva, Vandana. *Critique Influence Change: Ecofeminism* (2nd Edition), 5.

<sup>27</sup> Carls Jr. “Carl’s Jr. | Tex Mex Bacon Thickburger “Borderball” Commercial Extended Cut.” Youtube video, 0:52. Posted Sept. 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=45boXlqXFUQ>.

<sup>28</sup> PETA. “Boyfriend Went Vegan.” Youtube video, 0:31. Posted Feb. 2012.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m0vQOnHW0Kc>

<sup>29</sup> Leila R. Brammer. *ECOFEMINISM, THE ENVIRONMENT, AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS*. National Communication Association Conference, 1998. <http://homepages.gac.edu/~lbrammer/Ecofeminism.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Aneel Salman and Nuzhat Iqbal. 2007. “Ecofeminist Movements—from the North to the South [with Comments]”. *The Pakistan Development Review* 46 (4). Pakistan Institute of Development Economics, Islamabad: 853–64. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41261200>.

<sup>32</sup> Leila Brammar. *ECOFEMINISM, THE ENVIRONMENT, AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS*.

Morton's ecological thought, is a way of "re-regarding the world."<sup>33</sup> This re-regarding can inspire any number of movements and behaviors. Complicating the opportunity for social action is the fact that ecofeminism is a decentralized ideology; "there is no group of ecofeminists, no declared leader, and no vague form of organized activity (other than a few intellectual conferences and books)."<sup>34</sup> Any form of "organized activity" results in the publishing of articles and books, which aid the movement in "spreading the message."<sup>35</sup> Comparing ecofeminism to other philosophical and political movements, such as the Black Power movement, draws a sharp contrast in the level of collective action. Ecofeminism may not fit the traditional idea of a movement with the lack of physical or direct action, but perhaps it can aid in a reconsideration of movements in the Digital, and decentralized, Age. It is not the structure of the movement that is important in ecofeminism, but meaning and analysis. The spreading of this meaning could then be seen as a form of direct action, as the movement changes and reaches more minds.

That being said, however, perhaps ecofeminist action can be taken even if it is not labeled as ecofeminist. The constant protest, voiced especially by feminists, against the degradation of the environment, the slaughter of animals, and the objectification of women, could all fall under the umbrella of ecofeminism. In December 2014, Aph Ko wrote an article for *Everyday Feminism* that gave five reasons as to why animal rights issues are feminist issues.<sup>36</sup> More recently, and for the same site, in February 2016 Celia Eddell wrote an article and made a video about how feminism requires vegetarianism or veganism.<sup>37</sup> Pieces like these become a form of direct action in that the ecofeminist movement is concerned with spreading a message. Enacting these philosophies in reality could include becoming a vegan or vegetarian, if one has the privilege to do so, or petitioning for animal rights. Fighting for reproductive rights, cruelty-free products, equal representation, and gender equality could also be a form of direct action. These fights most frequently push for legislative change, but also proliferate in the form of discussions and posts on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. In the Digital Age, such online activism, often called "hashtag activism," has received a lot of criticism for not "achieving" anything.<sup>38</sup> However, hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter, #IStandWithPP, and #JusticeforTrayvon have succeeded in bringing about real change, even if that change is measured only in raising awareness. However, some critics might still say that awareness achieves nothing. Michael Flood, a writer for *Troy Media*, stated that "all this hashtag activism seems to be mere 'slacktivism' – the appearance and feeling of doing something without actual

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Aph Ko. "5 Reasons for Why Animal Rights are A Feminist Issue." 30 December 2014. *EverydayFeminism.com*. <http://everydayfeminism.com/2014/12/animal-rights-feminist-issue/>. Accessed 6 March 2016. These reasons included: 1. the objectification of animal bodies, similar to the objectification of women; 2. the use of animals to normalize rape culture; 3. domestic violence harms animals; 4. feminism must be intersectional in its consideration of *all* oppressed groups; and 5. society tells lies about animals, too.

<sup>37</sup> Celia Eddell. "Does Feminism Require Vegetarianism or Veganism?" 17 February 2016. *EverydayFeminism.com*. <http://everydayfeminism.com/2016/02/feminism-and-vegetarianism/>. Accessed 6 March 2016.

<sup>38</sup> Caitlin Dewey. "#Bringbackourgirls, #Kony2012, and the complete, divisive history of 'hashtag activism'." 8 May 2014. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/05/08/bringbackourgirls-kony2012-and-the-complete-divisive-history-of-hashtag-activism/>. Accessed 10 March 2016.

result.”<sup>39</sup> However, as *Washington Post* journalist Caitlin Dewey notes, awareness “almost always does something — something small, perhaps, but something measurable.”<sup>40</sup> In particular, hashtag activism is well-suited for amplifying marginalized voices that have not been privileged in society. If ecofeminism is concerned with awareness, then online and hashtag activism can both be seen as forms of direct action. Because ecofeminism contains the interconnected ideas of both environmental and gender justice, protesting for or discussing either environmental or gender issues leads back to the other. One cannot separate women from the environment, and thus to be a feminist is to be an environmentalist, and vice versa.

### Advertisements, Gender, and Sexuality: PETA’s Unethical Marketing Tactic

When considering the relationship between gender and any form of media, it is always important to note that gender is first and foremost a social construct. Whereas sex indicates the anatomical attributes that mark someone as either biologically female or male, gender is concerned with the characteristics and stereotypes that indicate whether someone is masculine or feminine. One’s gender is not tied to biology, because we all, in Judith Butler’s terms, “perform” our gender through our actions, words, and appearance.<sup>41</sup> In general, femininity is devalued while masculinity is presented as an ideal and norm. Because masculinity is so dominant in society, women have often been used and objectified in advertising in order to sell a product to a male buyer. One of the most famous studies on women in print images, written in 1976, is Erving Goffman’s groundbreaking work, *Gender Advertisements*.<sup>42</sup> In his analysis, Goffman created a language and coding system that allowed future scholars to analyze the way women are posed in images. One of the most important concepts from his analysis is called “The Ritualization of Subordination.”<sup>43</sup> Through this concept, Goffman characterized how often women and children are pictured lying in “recumbent positions” on beds or seats while men would be shown elevated or standing.<sup>44</sup> As Goffman notes, “elevation seems to be employed indicatively in our society, high physical place symbolizing high social place.”<sup>45</sup> Goffman’s analysis demonstrated the subtleties in advertising which contributed to gender norms on a seemingly unconscious symbolic level. His work was then updated in 2004 by Katharina Lindner, who pointed out that “advertisements contain messages about gender roles in terms of appropriate behavior and appearance for both men and women. They shape our ideas of what it means to be male or female.”<sup>46</sup> It has been suggested in research that stereotypes and gender roles in advertising influences attitudes about gender in every day life.<sup>47</sup> Jeane Kilbourne has made four documentaries about the effect of advertising on women, often through a lens of

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<sup>39</sup> Michael Flood. “Is ‘raising awareness’ through social media enough?” *Troy Media*. N.d. Troy Media Marketplace. <http://www.troymedia.com/2015/01/28/raising-awareness-social-media-enough/> Accessed 10 April 2016.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble*. (New York: Routledge Classics, 2006).

<sup>42</sup> Erving Goffman. *Gender Advertisements*. (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., 1976), 40.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 43.

<sup>46</sup> Katharina Lindner. “Images of Women in General Interest and Fashion Magazine Advertisements from 1955 to 2002.” *Sex Roles*, 51: October 2008. Springer Science+Business Media, Inc., 409-421.

<sup>47</sup> Nancy Signorelli. “Television and conceptions about sex roles: Maintaining conventionality and the status quo.” *Sex Roles*, 21: 1989. Plenum Publishing Corporation, 341-360.

<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2F978-1-4020-2895-9#page-1>

psychological and emotional damage. The most recent version, *Killing Us Softly 4*, was released in 2010.<sup>48</sup> Most scholars, feminist writers, and researchers have reached similar conclusions: the treatment of women in ads both influences societal attitudes towards females and also characterize relationships between men and women as based on power and dominance.

In PETA's advertisements, many of Goffman's codes are present, but the characterization and objectification of women does not happen subtly. In most of their ads, women are lying down or spread out on a floor, therefore they are "ritually subordinated."<sup>49</sup> In one of their famous ads featuring [Pamela Anderson](#), she is lying down and her body is segmented into sections with lines and text reading "breast" or "rump." The ad also features the caption "All Animals Have the Same Parts."<sup>50</sup> Though this rhetoric can be seen as an attempt to break down the human/non-human divide that often justifies the torture and consumption of animals, ads that segment the naked female body emphasize that certain parts are more important than the whole. Instead of labeling the woman's heart, brain, emotions, or capability for imagination – aspects which scholars like Timothy Morton say exist in animals – the ad focuses only on the body.<sup>51</sup> Rather than pointing out how humans and animals should be equals, these ads place women below animals. While PETA deems the exploitation of animals as unacceptable, they seem to delight in the use and exploitation of women. PETA also often creates ads featuring naked women who are boycotting the use of fur or goose feathers. These ads often feature taglines such as "I'd rather go naked than wear fur."<sup>52</sup> Another [recent ad](#) from PETA criticized the torture of animals at circus shows, which is a worthwhile cause in itself. However, the ad features a naked female holding a stuffed elephant over her behind with the headline: "Let *her* entertain you, not the elephants."<sup>53</sup> This ad promotes the message that, rather than objectifying and watching animals for entertainment, one should instead turn their gaze to a female whose only purpose is to "entertain them." Women are thus always presented as being in service to male viewers, and the effort to end the exploitation of animals becomes another facet of the exploitation of women.

Not only does PETA use objectified women in their print and online advertisements, but also in their videos and commercials. PETA advertisements have also progressed with a new focus in mind: upon going vegan, a man's stamina and sexual ability increases. One of their most viral videos was titled "[Boyfriend Went Vegan](#)" and told the story of Jessica, a girl whose boyfriend had gone vegan and now caused her physical pain during and after sex.<sup>54</sup> The commercial's central acronym, "BWVAKTBOOM" stands for "Boyfriend Went Vegan and Knocked the Bottom Out of Me." The commercial mimics a Public Service Announcement with a serious narrator, and Jessica is presented in the beginning as a victim of some kind of assault. The humor of the video is supposed come from the reveal that Jessica is simply suffering from "rough" sex rather than abuse. The commercial begins with Jessica, who is wearing a bulky white neck brace, walking back from a grocery store carrying vegetables as she repeatedly

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<sup>48</sup> Jean Kilbourne. *Killing us Softly 4*. Media Education Foundation: 2010. Video.

<sup>49</sup> Erving Goffman. *Gender Advertisements*, 40.

<sup>50</sup> PETA. Pamela Anderson for PETA. <https://secure.peta.org/images/content/pagebuilder/21617.jpg>

<sup>51</sup> Timothy Morton. *The Ecological Thought*, 88.

<sup>52</sup> PETA. Christy Turlington for PETA.

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/archive/2/2f/20100630134036!Christy\\_Turlington\\_I'd\\_rather\\_g  
o\\_naked\\_than\\_wear\\_fur.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/archive/2/2f/20100630134036!Christy_Turlington_I'd_rather_go_naked_than_wear_fur.jpg)

<sup>53</sup> PETA. Meggan Anderson for PETA.

[https://theworldislame.files.wordpress.com/2015/05/mv5bmtu4mdm1nduxn15bml5banbnxkftztcwmja4nti1  
oa-v1\\_sx640\\_sy720.jpg](https://theworldislame.files.wordpress.com/2015/05/mv5bmtu4mdm1nduxn15bml5banbnxkftztcwmja4nti1oa-v1_sx640_sy720.jpg)

<sup>54</sup> PETA. "Boyfriend Went Vegan." Youtube video.

grimaces in pain. The camera also focuses on her underwear twice, most obviously when it follows from behind as she climbs a set of stairs painfully. When Jessica returns to her boyfriend, she immediately strips off her coat and smiles suggestively, as if all of her pain and injuries have disappeared. The commercial presents the idea that true masculinity and sexuality include violence and dominance which is then rewarded by the woman's sexualized pain. The incentive to become vegan becomes the promise of more sexual power and masculine strength. The advertisement also conflates sexuality and violence and marks pain as the signifier of sexual ability. This message is especially problematic because it perpetuates a culture where male violence is celebrated or excused. The ultimate message is that to be masculine is to be violently sexual, and to be feminine is to receive that violence. In this kind of culture, often called "rape culture," female victims of assault are ignored or re-victimized by society, while the male perpetrators are excused. According to The Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), only 2 of every 100 rapists will spend time in prison for their crime.<sup>55</sup> Rape has become the punchline of a joke in our society rather than a punishable offense. It is also important to note that "rape culture" and male violence effect the environment as well, as humans and capitalist systems have been essentially raping the planet for decades. It is in this sense that PETA most directly upholds heteropatriarchy, as their commercials and advertisements are coupled with messages of violence. The message from ads like these is that the reward of veganism is not the liberation of animals or the conservation of food, but that it will increase masculine dominance, which is the ultimate goal of a heteropatriarchal society.

As previously stated, PETA's advertising has often caused conversation and controversy, but the organization has never responded with apologies or awareness. While searching through the web, no formal apology from PETA could be found in response to their use of women. However, there is a section in PETA's Frequently Asked Questions that responds to the question, "Why does PETA sometimes use nudity in its campaigns?"<sup>56</sup> The organization's official response is that "provocative, attention-grabbing actions are sometimes necessary to get people talking about issues that they would otherwise prefer not to think about."<sup>57</sup> In 2003, Michael Specter wrote an in-depth article on Ingrid Newkirk, the president of PETA, for *The New Yorker*. Newkirk defends the use of naked bodies by saying that "People enjoy sex" and that the company tries to appeal to sexual desires as often as possible to further their message.<sup>58</sup> According to Specter, Newkirk also considers herself a feminist. She is also aware that other feminists "hate the naked displays" but believes that the ads will make people "look twice" at animal rights issues.<sup>59</sup> Newkirk, as well as the organization in general, seems to believe that using shocking and controversial tactics is the only way to make people care about animal rights. Using and exploiting women then just is justified as the only way to encourage meat-less and cruelty free lifestyles. From these responses, it is apparent that neither PETA nor Newkirk seems to care about the harmful messages they are embedding in their advertising. Instead, the

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<sup>55</sup> "Reporting Rates." *RAINN.org*. 2012. RAINN. <https://rainn.org/get-information/statistics/reporting-rates>. Accessed 24 April 2016.

<sup>56</sup> "Why does PETA sometimes use nudity in its campaigns?" *PETA.org*. N.d. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. <http://www.peta.org/about-peta/faq/why-does-peta-sometimes-use-nudity-in-its-campaigns/>. Accessed 24 April 2016.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid

<sup>58</sup> Michael Specter. "The woman behind the most successful radical group in America." *MichaelSpecter.com* 4 April 2003. <http://www.michaelspecter.com/2003/04/the-extremist/>. Accessed 24 April 2016.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid

organization seems to delight in controversy with no awareness of how they are perpetuating harmful systems.

A study done by three scholars set out to test whether this controversial advertising did actually increase support for PETA and its goals. The scholars performed two studies on how viewers reacted to and interpreted the presence of sexualized women in the ads.<sup>60</sup> Their central question was: “is it effective to advertise an ethical cause using unethical means?”<sup>61</sup> Inherent in this questioning is a recognition that PETA’s current advertising methods “dehumanize” women.<sup>62</sup> The study found that when shown images of sexualized females, both men and women were less likely to support the organization.<sup>63</sup> Even if the males found the images arousing, they did not associate the arousal with support for PETA and instead focused negatively on the dehumanization. These results go against PETA and Newkirk’s aforementioned justifications for their advertising tactics, as the sexualization of women only deterred people from supporting their campaigns. The studies demonstrate that using women in advertisements in this way can actually backfire, especially for organizations who are supposedly arguing for ethical causes. If PETA wants to encourage ethical actions that can end animal and environmental cruelty, it appears that its current model is not succeeding aside from garnering negative attention. Instead, through the sexualization and brutalization of women in their advertising, PETA only perpetuates harmful gender stereotypes and does so at the expense of women.

## Conclusion

This paper began with the assertion that we must continually be aware of the hierarchies, labels, and systems that both connect and divide us. The boundaries surrounding sexuality and gender are particularly rigid in dictating who has power in our society. Writers such as Morton, Harari, Pope Francis, and Shiva have all provide frameworks for understanding how connected we are. Morton encourages us to think ecologically and with radical interconnectivity. Pope Francis, through a religious lens, thinks of the human race as a family of stewards. Harari, in his biological, sociological, and historical account of the advancement of humans, demonstrates that our society has been dominated by power struggles. He also proves that we, as humans, share the capability of imagination – that we can collectively imagine structures and ideas such as corporations, religion, gender, and race. Shiva and Meis, in their groundbreaking work, fleshed out the links between women and the environment, further proving the parallel between the two. As ecofeminist scholars have noted, women and the environment are also tied together often in the way that they are exploited by power structures such as heteropatriarchy and capitalism.

The parallel between the exploitation of women and the exploitation of the environment – particularly animals – becomes especially apparent in the advertisements created by PETA. As an organization, PETA’s goal is to end all kinds of animal cruelty by campaigning against eating meat, wearing fur, and testing products on animals. In order to market these campaigns, PETA’s main tactic is to use and brutalize the female body in videos and images. This has included segmenting the naked body with words and lines or using lewd captions to invoke sexuality. For

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<sup>60</sup> Renata, Bongiorno, Paul G. Bain, and Nick Haslam. "When Sex Doesn't Sell: Using Sexualized Images of Women Reduces Support for Ethical Campaigns." *Plos ONE* 8, no. 12 (December 2013): 1-6. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 5, 2016).

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 1.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 2-3.

further research, it would be interesting to look at the connections between PETA's advertising, their campaigns against animal testing, and the beauty industry in the United States. Makeup and skincare companies are easily the biggest proponents of animal testing, as most of their products are tested on rabbits or mice before they are sold in stores. PETA has long led a firm campaign against animal testing, but utilizes made up and sexualized women in their advertising. Do their models use only vegan and cruelty free makeup in their photo shoots? This is a line of questioning worth pursuing, especially since PETA's advertising only adds to the unrealistic body and beauty image portrayed by the media. These unrealistic standards then basically fund the makeup and beauty industries as women try to look more and more like the models they see. In this case, PETA may again be perpetuating harmful animal practices rather than fighting against them.

Aside from possible connections to the beauty and makeup testing industries, there are clearly many problematic elements in PETA's marketing tactics. First, PETA ads pander only to male sexuality as if women are not worth converting to veganism. Secondly, it presents the exploitation of women as preferable to the exploitation of animals, therefore placing women below animals. While the use of animals is presented as grotesque, offensive, and morally wrong, the use of women is deemed acceptable and even celebrated. Thirdly, the sexualization of women in these advertisements is paired with violence. These messages directly contribute to a "rape culture" where male violence against both women and the environment is excused and even celebrated. The promised rewards of dominance, power, and sexual prowess at the center of PETA's campaigns demonstrate how the organization's message is lost. Countless thought pieces written by women have repeated the same disgust and inability to support PETA, even if that woman feels strongly about animal rights. It is clear that PETA's unethical advertising not only serves as a clear example of the oppression and use of women, but also is harming the very ideas they hope to advertise. PETA calls for animals to be raised to the same position as humans while it continually degrades and dehumanizes women. Overall, PETA upholds and advertises the ideals of heteropatriarchy in that male dominance and aggression are celebrated and held up as both a reward and a sign of progress. Any environmentalism the organization could have represented is ruined in this framework, as PETA does nothing to upend the heteropatriarchal structure responsible for the degradation of both women and the environment. Instead, PETA only perpetuates this structure and therefore becomes a part of the problem rather than the solution.

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