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This is a Prison Break

Individualism Beyond the Confines of Speciesism and
Civilized Identity

Vegan(A)tomic

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The socially constructed identities that had been assigned to me at birth play a role in how people view and treat me today. As a bi-racial (“black” and “white”) “man”, I have also been assigned roles to reinforce those assigned identities. The societal expectation to fulfill these roles comes armed with social pressures, emotional coercion, and often times physical violence. For many of us, this is our life – carefully pre-calculated and measured to reinforce the framework of capitalist, industrial society. Individuality, defined by capitalism, is the agency of one who makes choices while guided by - and participating in the reinforcement of - the capitalist empire. From this point of view, individuality is the personification of capitalism: the walking and talking manifestations of a monolithic nightmare. But what about an individuality which refuses to fulfill the roles that define its assigned identity? How does capitalism chain and govern an individuality that refuses the participatory reinforcement of capitalism, and instead declares war on the apparatus of social control? Is it really possible for individuals to

discover themselves beyond the confines of racial or gendered identity, setting fire to the mental prison of subservience?

Non-human animals have been regarded as mere objects for dietary consumption for as long as anthropocentric history has narrated. I feel it is important to point out that anthropocentrism – human supremacy – has a tendency to summarize history the same way white supremacy and patriarchy do: within a narrow vision of its self-production. What is common with these forms of hierarchical domination is a view of the world in terms of binaries; human/animal, male/female, white/black. But anyone who has socially interacted with those of these categorical dichotomies often comes to realize these binaries only reflect the perspective of those who create them, not necessarily reality. For example, “male” and “female” are part of a socially constructed apparatus called “gender”. Gender is assigned to us by a social establishment that reinforces itself through individual assimilation. But within gender, people are only allowed so much variation within its confinement. The extent of our liberation is through the creation of more terms and labels within gender, without a critical look at gender itself. The same can be said of race. Growing up, I was emotionally pressured to fulfill stereotypes that defined me as “black” while struggling to fulfill the “productive member of society” role of a successful “white man”. It wasn’t so much that this pressure to fulfill categorical expectations was confusing; I struggled against the expectations to be somebody that society said I should be. I wanted to be a self that was not already pre-constructed and pre-determined. I did not successfully fit the stereotypes and failed assimilation. After re-examining that failure I realized something explosive: what if race and gender weren’t representative enough? What if, in fact, racial and gendered identity had failed *me*?

I began to understand myself and others in terms of unique histories and experiences - not identity. The same way that after interacting with cows, pigs, and chickens, I began to un-

derstand them as complex beings beyond the identity of “food product”. My veganism is not inspired by “white” ethical consumerism, nor is it a “black” oriented form of dietary empowerment. Like my own social assignments which led people to see and treat me according to the stereotypes of these social constructs, I refuse to participate in and reinforce the commodity status of non-human animals. I do not view them as food objects defined by their assigned identity. They are complex individuals who deserve the same bodily autonomy as I expect for myself and respect for others. Society will call me “black” “man” and assign me roles to fulfill those identities, which will ultimately serve to socially reinforce those same confines assigned to others. But I am more than a racial construct. I am more than a gendered orientation or pronoun. I refuse to surrender myself to these confines which limit my potential toward discovering myself beyond capitalist categorization. My veganism is solidarity with every animal who struggles to break free from their socially assigned identity as “food” or “products”. Their identity is linked to the violence that materializes in the form of slaughterhouses and institutions. My racial identity is linked to the material violence of poverty and oppressive ideological thinking. My gender identity is linked to a web of violence that materializes war against bodies and beyond. As an individual, I refuse to reinforce the web of society's categorical control – including reinforcing the normalization of non-human animal consumption.

My individuality is a weapon of war against an establishment that reduces the complexity of our variation to categorical identities, which ultimately hold the mind, body and imagination captive. Non-human animals are not here to serve any superior group of beings. Animal agriculture is the industrial and institutional manifestation of human supremacy. Any individuals who take aim at gendered or racial violence and subservience without taking aim at the speciesist violence of human supremacy allows compromise to undermine the legiti-

macy of anti-oppression praxis. Colonial, capitalist, industrial civilization declares war by subjugating and re-defining the individual. Individual emancipation means war upon the apparatus of social control which attempts to dominate through assimilation. When an individual refuses to surrender mind, body, and imagination to the social programming of converting life to units of measurement and identity, they realize the potential of rebellion that can't be pacified or controlled. Being vegan is more than just a dietary choice; it is individual rebellion against the common enemy of social control. It is the personal refusal to participate in the program which requires us to define one another in terms of assigned identities rather than complex, unique individuals. "The system" is constructed by individual subservience and participation. The establishment maintains power through our collective disempowerment. The police can encircle and control a mass protest in the streets, but has difficulty controlling individuals who disperse and attack spontaneously. Just as the state can mass arrest protesters at an animal rights march, it has difficulty tracking down ALF cells and "lone wolf" rebels.

To those of every socially constructed assigned identity, are you merely an identity or are you more than what society wants you to be? To non-vegans of all types, in order to fulfill the role of the human supremacist, are you the "meat-eater" society expects you to be? Are your decisions to view non-human animals as food based on a pre-configured role assigned to you, or an individual choice to take their lives from them? The capitalist- industrial machine works best when it re-produces itself in others. Are we the mass re-producers of this nightmare, or the individualist rebels of its demise?