

Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the potential of developing a distinct vegan mode of reading. It uses the increasing incidence of anthropomorphic canine companion animals in the contemporary Hollywood romcom as a starting point, focusing on close-readings of the films *Marley and Me* and *Legally Blonde 2: Red White and Blonde*. An analysis of the increasing incidence of domestic dogs in the romcom is shown to have significance for examining social and cultural anxieties around how veganism, as the rejection of animal exploitation of any kind, might challenge the rigid human-animal divide that defines contemporary society. Building an analysis that seeks to explore the latent speciesism of popular cinema and note how this relates specifically to the representation of vegan identity, within a genre noted for its muting and denigration of queer identity, this paper seeks to situate veganism as a radical queer mode of being.

Keywords

Hollywood cinema; romantic comedy; companion animals; dogs; veganism.

Manuscript Text

The process of reading nonhuman animals within the contemporary Hollywood romcom offers a way of establishing the potential intersectional, radical queerness of veganism. To date, the field of critical animal studies has appeared reluctant to critically engage with the term “vegan”, particularly in relation to the process of reading animals within cultural texts. Building on Derrida’s (1991) notion of “carnophallogocentrism”, I posit veganism not simply as a dietary fad, or an identity category within which one can claim membership, but as a radical queer mode of being that rejects the speciesist foundations of human identity. This paper explores how the increasing incidence of anthropomorphic canine companion animals

in the contemporary Hollywood romcom genre provides fertile ground for beginning to explore the potential of developing a distinct vegan mode of reading.

By diagnosing the human exceptionalism characteristic of the genre I highlight the basic premise that discourses of human identity are built on a foundation of speciesism. This paper thus seeks to contribute a close analysis of the speciesism of the genre to a body of film criticism in which human-animal relations have been left noticeably neglected. This involves, principally, exposing the absent referent animal as far as possible, defined by Adams (1990) as the way in which animals “in name and body” are made absent through meat eating, language and metaphors (40-42). However, I also recognise that it is to be assumed that many readers, particularly those drawn to this journal, would not necessarily see the latent speciesist of a famously heteronormative, conservative genre as a particularly surprising turn within a global context of institutionalised abuse against nonhuman animals. Thus, it is important to note that this analysis is used to establish how an examination of speciesism, in relation to the Anglo-centric, heteronormative ideals promoted by the romcom, might relate specifically to our understanding of the construction of human identity discourses and the acknowledgement of veganism as a radical queering of what it means to be human. Furthermore, I also seek to draw attention to the representation of veganism in order to explore the place veganism currently occupies in modern culture and the importance of recognising its cultural history, as a minority queer mode of being.

The contemporary romcom is a significant starting point for a vegan intervention because of its historical association with the denigration of LGBT and ethnic minority identities. Furthermore, it is situated within a context in which the term vegan has emerged into popular Western discourse. By relying on close-readings I seek to show how a subtle, but distinct, shift in the representations of canine companion animals as principle characters within the diegesis influences how the representation of veganism proves central to a re-

working of queer theory, showing it to be emerging as the dominant cultural and social anxiety in a genre that has historically either silenced or denigrated queer identity.

An analysis of the role of canine companion animals in the contemporary Hollywood romcom occupies an oft ignored theoretical terrain. Whilst canine-human relationships are found as a staple feature of family melodrama, from the success of *Lassie Come Home* (Wilcox, 1943) to contemporary releases such as *Beethoven* (Levant, 1992) and *My Dog Skip* (Russell, 2000), they have rarely featured as anthropomorphic agents within the diegesis of what Mortimer (2010) describes as the reassuring predictability of the romcom. I use *Marley and Me* (Frankel, 2008) and *Legally Blonde 2: Red, White and Blonde* (Herman-Wurmfeld, 2003) as case studies, both being box office successes that show the increasing infiltration of the anthropomorphic canine companion into the generic plot structure of the genre.

I argue that this new incidence of canine protagonists, in that which McDonald (2007) notes as the dominant “neo-traditional” form of the genre, contributes to the muting of queer identity discourses in ways unique to the heteronormative standard of the romcom. This heteronormative rhetoric has long been noted across both scholarly and journalistic works. For example, Modellmog (2009) notes that despite a contemporary age of increasingly liberal attitudes to gay and lesbian relationships, the genre continues to posit heterosexuality as “the privileged mode of desire and marriage the sanctioned form of bonding” (163). Where gay and lesbian identity is featured on-screen it is often in the form of comic bit-parts reinforcing derogatory stereotypes (see, for example, Kirkland, 2007) or reliant on pre-established codes of sexual desire, presenting deviant sexualities as an immaturity prohibited access from the signifiers of mature, successful adulthood. McDonald (2007) has noted that the dominant neo-traditional form of the genre, consistent over the last twenty years, expresses an “aversion to sex” (112) where “giving in to the promptings of physical desire is [...] associated with teenagers, with immaturity and relationship problems, while love and stability are associated with *not* having sex” (151). Such attitudes to sex are

reflected in the problematic representation of gay and lesbian characters. For example, releases such as *Kissing Jessica Stein* (Herman-Wurmfeld, 2001) and *No Strings Attached* (Reitman, 2011) feature lesbian and bisexual characters, however, the explicit focus on the erotic sexuality, whilst the heterosexual resolutions are sexless, emphasises what Halberstam (1998) notes as the definition of alternative sexual identities in terms that “inevitably fall short of the ‘ideal’ of heterosexuality” (180). Such work lays the groundwork for the romcom’s heteronormative tendencies. Whilst dogs have long been used in family melodrama to reinforce heteronormative standards, their role in the films explored below establishes how the generic muting of queer challenges to heteronormative expectations is becoming inseparable from a desire to silence queer challenges to what it means to be human.

Stockton (2009) explores how literary companion animals have been able to offer the queer child, battling against heteronormative expectations of its future, “a lateral community that understands, affirms, and offers sorrow for unsupported choices” (100). This supports what Serpell (2005) lays out as a common criticism of keepers of domestic animals who are seen to “resort to pets as counterfeit substitutes for unattainable reality” (125). Thus, the relationship between keepers, particularly children, and their companion animals can be associated with queerness; carving a space within a rigid societal structure in which relations can be freed from identity categories such as gender, sexuality, race and class. However, an examination of the role of canine companions in discourses of assimilation, race and sexuality, within the following close readings, shows them as signifiers that reinforce such rigid binaries and promote the superiority and dominance of Anglo-heteronormative values. This forecloses the possibility of queering binary categories of human identity and, most significantly, the potential of radically breaking from identity discourses that define a sense of self through what it means to be human.

In previous work I have explored the radical queer potential of “vegansexuality”, a term coined by Potts and Parry (2010), referring to vegetarian and vegans who choose sexual and/or romantic relationships solely with other vegetarian or vegans. I concluded that if attempting to queer normative standards of human identity, one must first challenge the reliance on the subordinate position of what it means to be “animal”, where activities such as meat-eating and hunting have grown to be central to the assertion of a virile, heterosexual masculinity (see, for example, Adams, 1990 Mackenzie, 1988). Thus, to redefine what it means to be “civilized” - read white, cisgendered and heterosexual - one must first challenge the foundation of speciesism that underlies the subordination of black, non-binary or non-heterosexual identity. McHugh’s (2004) overview of the cultural history of dogs argues that the wide range of body types and sizes; irretrievable patterns of interbreeding; and ability to produce fertile offspring with members of other “species” means that dogs present “special challenges to species-centred notions of history” where “[a]s is the case with the human, the very definition of the dog is at stake in scientific attempts to date the origin of the species” (12). Furthermore, as Rosenberg (2011) has argued, dogs have come to stand as a marker of racial difference, where “portrayals of dogs work out [anxieties around racial difference] through the category of breed, tapping into assumptions about pedigree, heredity and race” (116). Thus, whilst dogs have historically shared in the development of human civilization, with breed dogs often coming to symbolise “aristocrat[s] with strong ties to family and home” (McHugh, 2004, 130), they also stand as the category of nonhuman animals that has the strongest potential to queer the most cemented and powerful identity category of them all: the species barrier.

Marley and Me

Marley and Me, an adaptation from an autobiographical text (Grogan, 2006), can be read as a film that intermeshes the conventions of both the romcom and family melodrama. This enables Marley the dog to be positioned at the centre of its narrative with little disruption to formal expectations. However, it fits the generic expectations of romantic comedy by having the pursuit of love as the central narrative. That protagonist John (Owen Wilson) is already happily married from the beginning of the film places the relationship between him and Marley as the central relationship that drives the finale resolution. However, the reassuring predictability of a monogamous, heterosexual happy ending, noted by Mortimer (2010), is maintained as Marley's death at the film's finale allows John to realise, and express, the "extraordinary" nature and power of love within a white, heterosexual family environment.

John's voice-over immediately prior to the end credit sequence appears to consciously allude to nineteenth century romanticism around canine companions. Mangum (2002) notes that the emergence of narratives of "the aged autobiographical dog" (35) in this period saw the gradual repositioning of dogs "at the center of rather than as marginal or adjacent to domestic life" (37). In order to emphasise these changing relationships between people and their companions animals, she quotes romance novelist Ouida: "For your dog you are never poor; for your dog you are never old" (44). This quote is mirrored in the colloquial speech of John in his finale monologue: "A dog didn't [sic] care if you're rich or poor, clever or dull." These reflections present dogs as possessing ideal virtues found lacking in human society. However, this does not mark their transcendence from human culture as these ideal values of unconditional love, loyalty and companionship are firmly integrated into the ideals of heteronormativity.

It is in this sense that the film rejects the possibility of companion animals providing support for that which Stockton (2009) terms as the queer child. From the beginning of the film Marley both embodies and naturalises white, heterosexual values. For example, whilst the opening shot of the film features a young boy walking his dog as John's voice-over

narrates the significance of child-pet relations, it is soon interjected that Marley was not the typical childhood companion. The voice-over states “of course that wasn’t my experience, that kid’s not even me”, drawing attention to the fact that Marley was adopted once protagonist John was already a married and thus affirmed heterosexual adult man. However, the juxtaposition of the snowstorm that starts the flashback narrative, previous to John’s purchase of Marley, with the opening sequence of the two running together with adventure, through the same utopian golden meadow as the anonymous child, gives an overt aesthetic emphasis that this is still to be a relationship of key significance to his growth as an adult male.

Marley signifies the acceptance and celebration of monogamous, heterosexual life seen through John and Jen’s (Jennifer Aniston) marriage and children. Much like the iconic Lassie, of novel, film and television series fame, Marley affirms the human family structure where “[m]iddle-class, heterosexual, white and Anglo-American ideals are reproduced” (McHugh, 2004, 106). His disruptive and seemingly untameable nature initially suggests a subversion of the obedient, loveable family companion animal. However, this is not viewed as a departure from normative conventions, as seen through Jen’s memorial speech, following his death at the end of the film, figuring him as the anthropomorphized first child of their nuclear family. Furthermore, there is a special connection with Marley that only John has access to, bound to the idea of a common possession of the convention of “maleness.” In choosing to buy a dog to delay Jen’s desire for a baby, John equates being a “master” with being “a guy” in comparison to “Dad” being seen as a destruction of masculine identity; “you’re not you anymore.” This obsession with his own male power is transferred onto his dog when Jen decides upon Marley’s castration in an attempt to tame his wild temperament. John’s distress at putting Marley through the procedure – describing it as an “evil plan” – enforces such fragile gender boundaries onto the animal kingdom. Such discomfort over Marley’s genitals comes to mirror the simultaneous fears he has about

having children putting a hold on his professional aspirations and male autonomy. However, the light comic tone encourages that the Christian ideal of the nucleic family is as of little consequence to autonomous identity as the common castration of companion dogs in contemporary society. This fits McDonald's (2007) markers of the neo-traditional generic standard, where Marley's destructive behaviour is attributed to him being ruled by sexual desire. Thus, Marley's completed castration and growth within the family becomes an undisguised metaphor for John's own growth as he learns the romcom's generic trope of the pleasures that reward monogamous, heterosexual family life over the immaturity of sexual passion and lust.

This is further emphasised by the use of Marley, as a puppy, to seduce attractive young women for John's heterosexual, bachelor friend Sebastian (Eric Dane). It is only once John and Marley integrate fully into family life that a growing distance appears between the two friends and John rejects the lifestyle he had previously envied. Learning this distinctly conservative Judo-Christian American lesson through the figure of a Labrador signals that on-screen animals are unable to be "vehicle[s] for the child's strangeness" (Stockton, 2009, 90) and are instead intimately bound to a submission to normative conventions. Whilst the wearing of leather and large dairy cake at the centre of John's surprise birthday party figures the exploitation of nonhuman animals as absent referents, the anthropomorphism that posits Marley as an adoptive son places the audience as witness to his death, and subsequent mourning. Marley's assimilation into heteronormative family life by the end of the film, keeping the children safe and comforted at night and providing the principle source of income for the family as John's career takes off following stories of Marley's antics being published in a weekly column, thus reinforces a hierarchy between those animals that can assimilate into normative Western values and those that cannot.

This pseudo-father role shows how Marley's success as a loveable member of the family relies on assimilation into normative conventions. This distinction reinforces both a

hierarchy that promotes both white, heterosexual values and the notion of what it means to be human, not animal. A further example of this can be seen during the brief beach scene featuring an appearance from actor Alec Mapa policing the only beach in two counties on which dogs are allowed. Having played flamboyant, openly gay characters across mainstream American television prior to this smallest of roles, such casting and camp characterisation suggests a self-conscious attempt to associate the restrictions placed on dogs with the restrictions on queer bodies. Furthermore, Mapa is one of the only ethnic minorities to feature in the cast, creating significance to his status as Other and forced confinement to one specific beach. Thus, queerness and ethnic otherness become symbolically aligned with dogs. However, no closure is granted to this minor episode which features merely as a comic aside. Instead, Marley's ability to be taken to the beach later in the film is premised around his growing domestication and alignment with John's embracing of heteronormative value systems. Marley's reinforcement of white heterosexuality is thus seen as the only way for the space of the Other to exist. Indeed, the comic aside by John that Marley doesn't realise "how easy [he's] got it" in not belonging to Mapa's uptight character emphasises that despite the sympathies drawn in paralleling dogs with racial and ethnic minorities, one can only be part of the happy-ending if committed to heteronormative standards. That Marley is idolized in John's finale monologue through nineteenth century romantic ideals promotes heteronormativity both as the ideal as well as a 'natural' occurrence which canine companions can teach humans.

Thus, Marley's place within the family home rejects the queer potential of dogs: the romanticising of companion animals functions only to support generic expectations, foreclosing the possibility of them challenging normative human identities or what it means to be "human" itself.

In *Legally Blonde 2* the central love quest expected from the Hollywood romcom is also transferred onto the key canine companion, in this case Elle's (Reese Witherspoon) Chihuahua, Bruiser. Once again this works in the service of reinforcing white, heterosexual monogamy as Elle's fight to free Bruiser's mother from a testing laboratory is time-limited by her upcoming marriage to fiancé Emmett (Luke Wilson). The film actively plays with the hierarchies that define dogs as integrated into human domestic life by using comedy to emphasise that these human-canine kinships should have no bearing on the treatment of other nonhuman animals. The dogs of this film, whilst anthropomorphised to show their agency, desire and experiences of both pleasure and pain, serve only to reinforce the dominance of white, heterosexual norms by showing the success, in relations to rights discourse, of those who support the existing hierarchy that prioritises Anglo-heteronormative human identity.

As in *Marley and Me*, Elle's relationship with Bruiser is one that began in adulthood, where she is affirmed as a heterosexual woman, embodying a third-wave feminist logic of fulfilment achieved through engagement with consumerism. However, unlike Marley, Bruiser is not a straightforwardly all-American, heterosexual companion. Whilst the central driving force of the plot, Elle's desire to find Bruiser's biological mother in time for her wedding, reinforces the significance of a biological heritage and family ties, Bruiser himself is defined as "gay." Bruiser falls in love with the – also gay – dog of a congressman who, through his struggle and eventual pride in his dog's sexuality, helps Elle to win her case outlawing animal testing.

On the most basic level, the film appears to use a gay canine relationship as a mirror for human social relations. Allusions are made throughout to the gay rights movement within the US. For example, conservative congressman Stan Marks' (Bruce McGill) struggle to come to terms with the grooming parlour's indictment of "your dogs are gay" is

eventually resolved through the “Gay Dogs of America” action group. His speech to congress, convincing them of the need for an anti-vivisection bill, adopts the language of the historically troubled relationship between the US conservative party and the gay rights movement, where he announces: “I’m a Conservative Republican NRA spokesman and my dog is gay. And guess what? I couldn’t be prouder of the little flamer!” Furthermore, the scene in which Bruiser is seen to fall in love with the Rottweiler Leslie can be read as a subversion of the heteronormative expectations of the genre through the use of self-parody. The hyperbolic use of shot-reverse-shot, close-ups of eyes meeting and melodramatic music creates comedy out of the traditional love at first sight romance convention. Furthermore, Bruiser has been dressed by Elle in a pink tutu for this scene, contrasting the rugged masculinity signified by the Rottweiler breed. This can be seen to emphasise and play with the performative nature of normative gender roles. In this sense, the film appears to use a gay canine relationship to satirise and challenge the heteronormative expectations of the genre and carve a space within its generic tropes for same-sex relationships.

Thus, the film can be read as expressing pro-gay sentiments through the “natural” world of the animal kingdom in order to resist the discourse through which “homosexuality has been so persistently demonized as ‘unnatural’” (Soper, 1995, 120). Serpell (2005) explores that anthropomorphism appears as an inherent trait of humanity. Just as Marley comes to be seen as the first child of an all-American family, the relationship between companion animals and their keepers has morphed into a world in which “dogs are most likely to be defined by their human coactors as possessing minds that operate in many ways like our own” (Arluke and Sanders, 2007, 66). However, whilst anthropomorphism can be seen as an inevitable process in establishing animal agency the fact that the film ends with the two dogs embedded within the institution of marriage, pictured in a “Just Married” sidecar following Elle and Emmett’s wedding, reflects on the culture in which the film is set; anthropomorphism can only extend to monogamous unions, where applying human minds

to animals cannot extend to queer modes of being. Anthropomorphism does not extend to dismantling the human-animal divide.

This can be seen where once Bruiser has been labelled as gay, the film cuts to a shot of him playing alongside Leslie dressed in leather. This use of costume acts as a comic nod to stereotypical representations of homosexual subculture, where Elle is seen to embrace Bruiser's new identity through an engagement with consumerism and fashion. However, this use of leather is significant in establishing that whilst this gay canine relationship may subvert the heteronormative expectations of the genre, it is not one that will seek to queer the hierarchy that maintains the divide between humans and animals. Bruiser's ability to assert a gay identity reinforces existing hierarchies of human experience, where no consideration is given to the absent referent cow slaughtered for the creation of this costume. Indeed, whilst the leatherfolk community to which this signifies a belonging oft claims to challenge and transgress cultural taboos (Thompson, 1991), the lack of engagement with the types of power and consent that enable the production and wearing of leather means that the types of power, consent and masculinity with which it does actively seek to challenge remain embedded in the speciesism and anthropocentrism that shapes normative models of subjectivity. Thus, the film's anthropomorphism promotes the upholding of speciesism rather than animal agency, where canine homosexuality is approved by its allegiance with speciesism. This ties into to the taboo that continues to surround bestiality in contemporary culture, outside of the diegesis, as a sexuality that fundamentally breaks the human-animal divide, thus subverting the very notion of "human" sexuality.

Similarly, the happy-ending convention of the film features a caption celebrating that "Paulette finally got her hotdog" resolving an earlier scene in which Elle's best friend Paulette (Jennifer Coolidge) craves the meat she associates with Fourth of July celebrations. In having its own caption, meat-eating becomes part of the *Legally Blonde* trademark, established in the first film of the franchise, in which titling is used to establish the future

happy, and heterosexual, resolutions of the film's characters. This celebration of patriotic meat-eating further contradicts the film's central animal rights narrative by disregarding the reality of a commercialised meat industry. However, this appears as a self-conscious contradiction, deploying irony by cutting between shots that juxtapose the triumphant release of dogs from a testing laboratory with Paulette biting into her desired meat. The very semantics of the meat she craves being a hot "dog" emphasises such a self-reflexive play with contradictions. Thus, within this happy-ending convention the audience are forced to engage with the message that whatever may happen with regards to animal rights, meat-eating is seen to be of no ethical consequence. By drawing attention to this discrepancy between anthropomorphism and carnivorous appetites, the film shows meat-eating to be a palatable form of animal exploitation that does not disrupt the narrative's feel good sentiment.

A further point to consider is the notion that film, as a medium, "cannot easily delimit the meaning of the animal within its fictions" (Burt, 2004, 11). Whilst an audience is assumed to acknowledge that the characters they witness on-screen are actors, playing out a fictional script, the eating of a hotdog or the wearing of leather must be acknowledged as related to the death of real animals, outside of the diegesis. Indeed, a global web of speciesism which could be manifested in anything from the provision of meat and dairy by on-set catering to the use of leather shoes by the costume department means that virtually all films must be seen as in some way reliant on the harm of animals. The filmic medium means that unlike the representational nature of literature, we witness the physical manifestations of an animals' death wherever meat or leather or fur, and more, are present. This unique quality of the medium enforces the triumph of speciesism within this hotdog scene.

The act of eating the hot dog is also tied to sexual innuendo. Paulette's hotdog is presented to her by her husband and is unmistakably phallic in shape. Such a symbolic

choice reinforces Adams' (1990) work on the cultural link between meat-eating and male virility. The film concludes with the inevitability of heterosexual intercourse, where Paulette bites into her husband's phallic hotdog just as newlyweds Elle and Emmett are seen setting off for their wedding night. Heterosexual intercourse and meat-eating are thus aligned as inevitable and uncontested occurrences. The relationship established between the meat industry, happy-endings and patriotism and the segregation of animals as pets deserving of rights and animals as food, introduces the paradigm to Elle's fight for animal rights that justice will be sought only in relation to breaches that do not challenge patriarchal dominance.

These elements come together to openly mock vegan identity, despite the anti-vivisection narrative, replacing the generically derided LGBT characters for what I would argue is the ultimate queer; an identity that is not reliant on animal exploitation of any kind. Elle explains to a bemused private investigator why she is seeking out Bruiser's biological mother before her wedding: "if I have to make room for my second cousin's vegan diet coach, you better believe I'm gonna make room for the mother of the one living creature who's always been there for me." The priority given to this nonhuman animal, as loyal companion, places veganism as an inconvenient, unnecessary extravagance and ultimately unwelcome at the heterosexual wedding table. This absent vegan character is posited as a far more distant relation than either Bruiser or his mother and reliant on kinship with a paid escort in the form of an ever-present diet coach. This exclusion retains a distinction between Bruiser and the dogs in testing laboratories as anthropomorphised domestic companions and those animals that are to be seen as edible.

Furthermore, the anthropomorphism that sees Bruiser situated within domestic human spheres sees him subject to specific racialized identity discourses. As discussed in the introduction, Rosenberg (2011) links the obsession around pedigree to the idea of eugenics and racial purity. She argues that we cannot ignore the significance of media representation

of animals, where “in American popular culture, pedigree equals white privilege” (122). Marley as a Labrador taps into dominant cultural representations of white, middle-class life. In contrast, Rosenberg situates the Chihuahua as commonly tied to Hispanic culture. Indeed, Bruiser is described by Elle as “Chihuahua American”, connoting assimilated racial categories of American identity. The use of pedigree pure-breed dogs throughout both films encourages the idea of a racial binary that erases the blurring that occurs across ethnic divides. Containing the mating of a Chihuahua and a Rottweiler within a same-sex relationship maintains that which Sheen (2005) notes as Hollywood’s receptiveness to “breed-based conceptions of image” (238), ensuring the impossibility of cross-breeding and supporting mainstream cinema’s role in denying fluid conceptions of identity.

This can be further seen through the presentation of the film’s one ethnic minority character, Grace (Regina King), who reinforces the idea of a rigid sexual and racial binary. As the unapproachable, sceptical antagonist to Elle’s likeable and optimistic character, the film promotes a superficial easing of racial tension as Elle grants Grace temporary relief from her political disillusionment whilst Grace ensures that Elle is able to present her bill at Congress. However, despite her crucial role in the success of Elle’s animal rights bill, she is notably excluded from the succession of captioned scenes at the film’s finale which promote the resolved, and heterosexual, futures of each character. For example, as we observe Elle’s wedding guests, a caption informs us of her female colleague Reena’s impending engagement; “Reena is proposing to Timothy. Tonight.” There is even a self-referential joke in doorman Sid and Paulette having to reject their anticipated finale kiss, because she is already married following the finale of *Legally Blonde*. However, his subsequent adoption of ‘Bruiser’s Mom’ grants him a pseudo-heterosexual resolution, completing an interspecies family tree given the father-figure role he takes on in mentoring Elle throughout the film. In contrast, Grace is denied access to this celebration of heterosexuality and lacks the futurity within the diegetic space granted to the other key characters.

Thus, *Legally Blonde's* Grace reinforces the uncomfortable racial associations created by the breeds of the gay dogs by showing the black body to be noticeably absent from the otherwise triumphant celebration of white heterosexuality. As Bruiser's characterisation allows Elle's fight for animal rights to symbolise a broader fight for racial, sexual and economic equality, the "very vagueness of an animal's status as property" (Sheen, 2005, 247) alludes to parallels between the ruling class position over minority groups. Bruiser lacks a voice of his own and it is only through Elle's embracement of her middle-class, hyper-feminine identity that allows her to win her case; her triumphant speech to Congress shows her apply her experiences with a bad haircut in a top salon to the American political climate. Thus, the potential for radical political change is positioned as achievable through an adoption and embracing of middle-class, heteronormative values.

Thus, animals occupy two opposing spaces within the film: anthropomorphized companions and faceless sources of culinary indulgence. The supposed triumph of animal rights has little connection to the reality of animal welfare in the diegetic world. This can be read as a significant parallel for the way in which the film uses the notion of gayness in Bruiser to celebrate homosexuality whilst ensuring its difference from, and inferiority to, the privileged position of white, human heterosexuality.

Conclusion

To conclude, the increasing presence of canine companion animals, whose very being has presented scholars with distinct challenges to species-based conceptions of life on Earth, raises significant questions about how we are to approach reading the Hollywood romantic comedy. Investing animals with a right to dignified existence would threaten to dismantle that which "makes natural the structures of order that support human primacy and power" (Fudge, 2010, 149). Indeed, the anthropomorphic dogs in both *Marley and Me* and *Legally*

Blonde 2 are used as sympathetic props to support existing human social hierarchies. This marginal status affords them no autonomy as animals, as they occupy an imaginary space that functions only to serve dominant human discourse.

A vegan mode of reading seeks to expose this speciesism, recovering the absent referent animal wherever possible, whilst exploring the representation of the vegan as subject; building a history of a radically queer alternative to species-based conceptions of self. Thus, it differs from current critical animal studies by seeking to relate the representation of human-animal relations specifically to modes of identity and selfhood. The contemporary romcom provides an apt starting point for this mode of criticism as a conservative genre often typified by its staunch promotion of Anglo-centric, heteronormative values, situated in an age in which the term vegan has filtered into popular Western discourse. By perceiving an increased incidence of nonhuman animal representation, specifically domestic companions, within a genre fixated on rigidly defined categories of human identity, this analysis seeks to contribute toward a cultural analysis of the notion of queer veganism.

Principally, I have argued that the romcom uses canine companion animals to reinforce the speciesist roots of normative identity and actively denigrate veganism. Thus, a vegan reading of the romcom exposes both the speciesist basis of identity, intimately bound to notions of gender, sexuality and race, as well as an increasing cultural anxiety around veganism. Furthermore, the presence of veganism in films centred upon human relationships with canine companions, whether overtly criticised, as in *Legally Blonde 2*, or noticeably absent, as in *Marley and Me*, is significant in reproducing the representation of LGB identity critiqued across the history of the genre.

Numerous contemporary romcoms could be listed here for their replication of this trend, including the hugely successful *Sex and the City* (King, 2008) film. For example, as protagonists Carrie (Sarah Jessica Parker) and Samantha (Kim Cattrall) leave a high-end

fashion show, dressed in fur coats, they have red paint thrown over them by animal rights protestors. We are encouraged to applaud these women's indulgence in a third wave feminism in which independence and femininity can be achieved through an engagement with consumerism. In contrast to the happiness and fashionable status of these key protagonists, the activists are presented as frumpy, miserable, angry women. They lack access to the signifiers of successful womanhood, in this case represented by heterosexual unions and high fashion clothing. The ease at which their attack can be laughed off by the characters as part of the New York landscape mutes the activist's threat to the speciesist foundations of human identity; presenting it as a failed womanhood. Just as with the historical denigration of LGB identities, veganism here occupies a marginalised queer identity that is ridiculed in order to reinforce the superiority of the key protagonist's heterosexual, fur-wearing sense of self. Indeed, in future work the overt link often made between gay and lesbian characters and the following of a vegan lifestyle would be worth exploring further.

Thus, this paper has sought to introduce a distinctly new way of reading the romcom and proffer the importance of recognising veganism as a queer mode of being with an unexplored history of cultural representation. I conclude with the questions: if the mainstream Hollywood romcom has established the figure of the vegan as a queer target of ridicule, how has this emerged throughout film history and why is the term so noticeably absent from scholarship within the humanities?

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Response to Review Points (Second Revision)

In response to the comment that the article should be established as an investigation, to indicate what a focus on animals might offer understanding the romcom genre, I have sought to edit the introduction to make clear that my close-readings are not to be read simply as criticism of the genre but as a way of introducing veganism as a queer mode of being and the potential of developing a distinct vegan mode of reading. I have framed the article as a way of beginning to explore a history of vegan representation and what it may offer us as readers.

I have also sought to make it clear that whilst I take on board the point that this speciesist critique is not necessarily surprising, the fact that it has not been recognised in film criticism, or indeed the term vegan has been so neglected across a wealth of cultural theory, is surprising and is worthy of note. I have striven to use my close-readings to explore the potential of veganism as a radical category of analysis and begin to build a history of representation, beginning with a mainstream popular genre focussed on rigidly defined categories of human identity. Significant edits have been made to the introduction and conclusion to make this clear.

Thus, in response to the point that the article should seek to go beyond simply a diagnosis of speciesist attitudes where they are expected to be found, I have sought to clarify in my introduction the impact of such a diagnosis in specific relation to our understanding of human identity, of the radical queer potential of veganism, and the importance of establishing its cultural history.

I have added additional analysis and open-ended questions to the conclusion to establish the article as a call for more work on vegan representation and vegan modes of analysis.

**No Country for Queer Dogs:
Queer Veganism in the Contemporary Hollywood Romcom**

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No Country for Queer Dogs: Queer Veganism in the Contemporary Hollywood Romantic Comedy

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the potential of developing a distinct vegan mode of reading. It uses the increasing incidence of anthropomorphic canine companion animals in the contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy as a starting point, focusing on close readings of the films *Marley and Me* and *Legally Blonde 2: Red White and Blonde*. An analysis of the increasing incidence of domestic dogs in the romantic comedy is shown to have significance for examining social and cultural anxieties around how veganism, as the rejection of animal exploitation of any kind, might challenge the rigid human-animal divide that defines contemporary society. Building an analysis that seeks to explore the latent speciesism of popular cinema and noting how this relates specifically to the representation of vegan identity, within a genre noted for its muting and denigration of queer identity, this paper seeks to situate veganism as a radical queer mode of being.

Keywords

Hollywood cinema; romantic comedy; companion animals; dogs; veganism

The process of reading nonhuman animals within the contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy (romcom) offers a way of establishing the potential intersectional, radical queerness of veganism. To date, the field of critical animal studies has appeared reluctant to critically engage with the term “vegan,” particularly in relation to the process of reading animals within cultural texts. Building on Derrida’s (1991) notion of “carnophallogocentrism,” I posit veganism not simply as a dietary fad, or an identity category within which one can claim

1 membership, but as a radical queer mode of being that rejects the speciesist foundations of
2 human identity. This paper explores how the increasing incidence of anthropomorphic
3 canine companion animals in the contemporary Hollywood romcom genre provides fertile
4 ground for beginning to explore the potential of developing a distinct vegan mode of
5 reading.
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11 By diagnosing the human exceptionalism characteristic of the genre, I highlight the
12 basic premise that discourses of human identity are built on a foundation of speciesism. This
13 paper thus seeks to contribute a close analysis of the speciesism of the genre to a body of
14 film criticism in which human-animal relations have been left noticeably neglected. This
15 involves, principally, exposing the absent referent animal as far as possible, defined by
16 Adams (1990) as the way in which animals “in name and body” are made absent through
17 meat eating, language, and metaphors (pp. 40-42). However, I also recognize that it is to be
18 assumed that many readers, particularly those drawn to this journal, would not necessarily
19 see the latent speciesism of a famously heteronormative, conservative genre as a
20 particularly surprising turn within a global context of institutionalized abuse against
21 nonhuman animals.
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37 Thus, it is important to note that this analysis is used to establish how an
38 examination of speciesism, in relation to the Anglo-centric, heteronormative ideals
39 promoted by the romcom, might relate specifically to our understanding of the construction
40 of human identity discourses and the acknowledgement of veganism as a radical queering of
41 what it means to be human. Furthermore, I also seek to draw attention to the
42 representation of veganism in order to explore the place veganism currently occupies in
43 modern culture and the importance of recognizing its cultural history, as a minority queer
44 mode of being.
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56 The contemporary romcom is a significant starting point for a vegan intervention
57 because of its historical association with the denigration of lesbian, gay, bisexual,
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transgender (LGBT), and ethnic minority identities. Furthermore, it is situated within a context in which the term vegan has emerged into popular Western discourse. By relying on close readings, I seek to show how a subtle, but distinct, shift in the representations of canine companion animals as principle characters within the diegesis influences how the representation of veganism proves central to a re-working of queer theory, showing it to be emerging as the dominant cultural and social anxiety in a genre that has historically either silenced or denigrated queer identity.

An analysis of the role of canine companion animals in the contemporary Hollywood romcom occupies an oft-ignored theoretical terrain. While canine-human relationships are found as a staple feature of family melodrama, from the success of *Lassie Come Home* (Wilcox, 1943) to contemporary releases such as *Beethoven* (Levant, 1992) and *My Dog Skip* (Russell, 2000), they have rarely featured as anthropomorphic agents within the diegesis of what Mortimer (2010) describes as the reassuring predictability of the romcom. I use *Marley and Me* (Frankel, 2008) and *Legally Blonde 2: Red, White and Blonde* (Herman-Wurmfeld, 2003) as case studies, both being box office successes that show the increasing infiltration of the anthropomorphic canine companion into the generic plot structure of the genre.

I argue that this new incidence of canine protagonists, in what McDonald (2007) refers to as the dominant “neo-traditional” form of the genre, contributes to the muting of queer identity discourses in ways unique to the heteronormative standard of the romcom. This heteronormative rhetoric has long been noted across both scholarly and journalistic works. For example, Modellmog (2009) notes that despite a contemporary age of increasingly liberal attitudes to gay and lesbian relationships, the genre continues to posit heterosexuality as “the privileged mode of desire and marriage the sanctioned form of bonding” (p. 163). When gay and lesbian identity is featured on-screen, it is often in the form of comic bit-parts reinforcing derogatory stereotypes (see, for example, Kirkland, 2007)

1 or reliant on pre-established codes of sexual desire, presenting deviant sexualities as an
2 immaturity prohibited access from the signifiers of mature, successful adulthood.
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4 McDonald (2007) has noted that the dominant neo-traditional form of the genre,
5 consistent over the last twenty years, expresses an “aversion to sex” (p. 112) where “giving
6 in to the promptings of physical desire is [...] associated with teenagers, with immaturity and
7 relationship problems, while love and stability are associated with *not* having sex” (p. 151).
8 Such attitudes to sex are reflected in the problematic representation of gay and lesbian
9 characters. For example, releases such as *Kissing Jessica Stein* (Herman-Wurmfeld, 2001)
10 and *No Strings Attached* (Reitman, 2011) feature lesbian and bisexual characters; however,
11 the explicit focus on the erotic sexuality, while the heterosexual resolutions are sexless,
12 emphasizes what Halberstam (1998) notes as the definition of alternative sexual identities in
13 terms that “inevitably fall short of the ‘ideal’ of heterosexuality” (p. 180). Such work lays the
14 groundwork for the romcom’s heteronormative tendencies. While dogs have long been used
15 in family melodrama to reinforce heteronormative standards, their role in the films explored
16 below establishes how the generic muting of queer challenges to heteronormative
17 expectations is becoming inseparable from a desire to silence queer challenges to what it
18 means to be human.
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40 Stockton (2009) explores how literary companion animals have been able to offer
41 the queer child, battling against heteronormative expectations of his/her future, “a lateral
42 community that understands, affirms, and offers sorrow for unsupported choices” (p. 100).
43 This supports what Serpell (2005) lays out as a common criticism of keepers of domestic
44 animals who are seen to “resort to pets as counterfeit substitutes for unattainable reality”
45 (p. 125). Thus, the relationship between keepers, particularly children, and their companion
46 animals can be associated with queerness. This relationship carves a space within a rigid
47 societal structure in which relations can be freed from identity categories such as gender,
48 sexuality, race, and class. However, an examination of the role of canine companions in
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discourses of assimilation, race, and sexuality, within the following close readings shows them as signifiers that reinforce such rigid binaries and promote the superiority and dominance of Anglo-heteronormative values. This forecloses the possibility of queering binary categories of human identity and, most significantly, the potential of radically breaking from identity discourses that define a sense of self through what it means to be human.

In previous work, I have explored the radical queer potential of “vegansexuality,” a term coined by Potts and Parry (2010), referring to vegetarians and vegans who choose sexual and/or romantic relationships solely with other vegetarians or vegans. I concluded that if attempting to queer normative standards of human identity, one must first challenge the reliance on the subordinate position of what it means to be “animal,” where activities such as meat-eating and hunting have grown to be central to the assertion of a virile, heterosexual masculinity (see, for example, Adams, 1990; Mackenzie, 1988). Thus, to redefine what it means to be “civilized” — read white, cisgendered, and heterosexual — one must first challenge the foundation of speciesism that underlies the subordination of black, non-binary or non-heterosexual identity.

McHugh’s (2004) overview of the cultural history of dogs argues that the wide range of body types and sizes, irretrievable patterns of interbreeding, and ability to produce fertile offspring with members of other “species” means that dogs present “special challenges to species-centred notions of history” where “[a]s is the case with the human, the very definition of the dog is at stake in scientific attempts to date the origin of the species” (p. 12). Furthermore, as Rosenberg (2011) has argued, dogs have come to stand as a marker of racial difference, where “portrayals of dogs work out [anxieties around racial difference] through the category of breed, tapping into assumptions about pedigree, heredity and race” (p. 116). Thus, while dogs have historically shared in the development of human civilization, with breed dogs often coming to symbolize “aristocrat[s] with strong ties to family and

home" (McHugh, 2004, p. 130), they also stand as the category of nonhuman animals that has the strongest potential to queer the most cemented and powerful identity category of them all: the species barrier.

Marley and Me

Marley and Me, an adaptation from an autobiographical text (Grogan, 2006), can be read as a film that intermeshes the conventions of both the romcom and family melodrama. This enables Marley the dog to be positioned at the center of its narrative with little disruption to formal expectations. However, it fits the generic expectations of romantic comedy by having the pursuit of love as the central narrative. That protagonist John (Owen Wilson) is already happily married from the beginning of the film places the relationship between him and Marley as the central relationship that drives the finale resolution. However, the reassuring predictability of a monogamous, heterosexual happy ending, noted by Mortimer (2010), is maintained as Marley's death at the film's finale allows John to realize, and express, the "extraordinary" nature and power of love within a white, heterosexual family environment.

John's voice-over immediately prior to the end credit sequence appears to consciously allude to nineteenth century romanticism around canine companions. Mangum (2002) notes that the emergence of narratives of "the aged autobiographical dog" (p. 35) in this period saw the gradual repositioning of dogs "at the center of rather than as marginal or adjacent to domestic life" (p. 37). In order to emphasize these changing relationships between people and their companions animals, she quotes romance novelist Ouida: "For your dog you are never poor; for your dog you are never old" (p. 44). This quote is mirrored in the colloquial speech of John in his finale monologue: "A dog didn't [sic] care if you're rich or poor, clever or dull." These reflections present dogs as possessing ideal virtues found lacking in human society. However, this does not mark their transcendence from human

1 culture, as these ideal values of unconditional love, loyalty, and companionship are firmly
2 integrated into the ideals of heteronormativity.
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4 It is in this sense that the film rejects the possibility of companion animals providing
5 support for that which Stockton (2009) terms as the queer child. From the beginning of the
6 film, Marley both embodies and naturalizes white, heterosexual values. For example, while
7 the opening shot of the film features a young boy walking his dog as John's voice-over
8 narrates the significance of child-companion animal relations, it is soon interjected that
9 Marley was not the typical childhood companion. The voice-over states "of course that
10 wasn't my experience, that kid's not even me," drawing attention to the fact that Marley
11 was adopted once protagonist John was already a married and thus affirmed heterosexual
12 adult man. However, the juxtaposition of the snowstorm that starts the flashback narrative,
13 prior to John's purchase of Marley, with the opening sequence of the two running together
14 with adventure, through the same utopian golden meadow as the anonymous child, gives an
15 overt aesthetic emphasis that this is still to be a relationship of key significance to his growth
16 as an adult male.
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18 Marley signifies the acceptance and celebration of monogamous, heterosexual life
19 seen through John and Jen's (Jennifer Aniston) marriage and children. Much like the iconic
20 Lassie, of novel, film, and television series fame, Marley affirms the human family structure
21 where "[m]iddle-class, heterosexual, white and Anglo-American ideals are reproduced"
22 (McHugh, 2004, p. 106). His disruptive and seemingly untameable nature initially suggests a
23 subversion of the obedient, loveable family companion animal. However, this is not viewed
24 as a departure from normative conventions, as seen through Jen's memorial speech
25 following his death at the end of the film, figuring him as the anthropomorphized first child
26 of their nucleic family. Furthermore, there is a special connection with Marley that only John
27 has access to, bound to the idea of a common possession of the convention of "maleness."
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29 In choosing to buy a dog to delay Jen's desire for a baby, John equates being a
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1 “master” with being “a guy” in comparison to “Dad” being seen as a destruction of
2 masculine identity; “you’re not you anymore.” This obsession with his own male power is
3 transferred onto his dog when Jen decides upon Marley’s castration in an attempt to tame
4 his wild temperament. John’s distress at putting Marley through the procedure – describing
5 it as an “evil plan” – enforces such fragile gender boundaries onto the animal kingdom. Such
6 discomfort over Marley’s genitals comes to mirror the simultaneous fears he has about
7 having children putting a hold on his professional aspirations and male autonomy. However,
8 the light comic tone encourages that the Christian ideal of the nucleic family is as of little
9 consequence to autonomous identity as the common castration of companion dogs in
10 contemporary society. This fits McDonald’s (2007) markers of the neo-traditional generic
11 standard, where Marley’s destructive behavior is attributed to him being ruled by sexual
12 desire. Thus, Marley’s completed castration and growth within the family becomes an
13 undisguised metaphor for John’s own growth as he learns the romcom’s generic trope of the
14 pleasures that reward monogamous, heterosexual family life over the immaturity of sexual
15 passion and lust.

16 This is further emphasized by the use of Marley, as a puppy, to seduce attractive
17 young women for John’s heterosexual, bachelor friend Sebastian (Eric Dane). It is only once
18 John and Marley integrate fully into family life that a growing distance appears between the
19 two friends and John rejects the lifestyle he had previously envied. Learning this distinctly
20 conservative, Judeo-Christian American lesson through the figure of a Labrador signals that
21 on-screen animals are unable to be “vehicle[s] for the child’s strangeness” (Stockton, 2009,
22 90) and are instead intimately bound to a submission to normative conventions.

23 While the wearing of leather and large dairy cake at the center of John’s surprise
24 birthday party figure the exploitation of nonhuman animals as absent referents, the
25 anthropomorphism that posits Marley as an adoptive son places the audience as witness to
26 his death, and subsequent mourning. Marley’s assimilation into heteronormative family life

1 by the end of the film, keeping the children safe and comforted at night and providing the
2 principle source of income for the family as John's career takes off following stories of
3 Marley's antics being published in a weekly column, thus reinforces a hierarchy between
4 those animals who can assimilate into normative Western values and those who cannot.
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9 This pseudo-father role shows how Marley's success as a loveable member of the
10 family relies on assimilation into normative conventions. This distinction reinforces both a
11 hierarchy that promotes both white, heterosexual values and the notion of what it means to
12 be human, not animal. A further example of this can be seen during the brief beach scene
13 featuring an appearance from actor Alec Mapa policing the only beach in two counties on
14 which dogs are allowed. Having played flamboyant, openly gay characters across
15 mainstream American television prior to this smallest of roles, such casting and camp
16 characterization suggests a self-conscious attempt to associate the restrictions placed on
17 dogs with the restrictions on queer bodies.
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31 Furthermore, Mapa is one of the only ethnic minorities to feature in the cast,
32 creating significance to his status as Other and forced confinement to one specific beach.
33 Thus, queerness and ethnic otherness become symbolically aligned with dogs. However, no
34 closure is granted to this minor episode which features merely as a comic aside. Instead,
35 Marley's ability to be taken to the beach later in the film is premised around his growing
36 domestication and alignment with John's embracing of heteronormative value systems.
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45 Marley's reinforcement of white heterosexuality is thus seen as the only way for the
46 space of the Other to exist. Indeed, the comic aside by John that Marley doesn't realize
47 "how easy [he's] got it" in not belonging to Mapa's uptight character emphasizes that
48 despite the sympathies drawn in paralleling dogs with racial and ethnic minorities, one can
49 only be part of the happy-ending if he/she is committed to heteronormative standards. That
50 Marley is idolized in John's finale monologue through nineteenth century romantic ideals
51 promotes heteronormativity both as the ideal as well as a "natural" occurrence in which
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1 canine companions can teach humans. Thus, Marley's place within the family home rejects
2 the queer potential of dogs: the romanticizing of companion animals functions only to
3 support generic expectations, foreclosing the possibility of them challenging normative
4 human identities or what it means to be "human."
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10 11 *Legally Blonde 2: Red, White and Blonde*

12 In *Legally Blonde 2* the central love quest expected from the Hollywood romcom is also
13 transferred onto the key canine companion, in this case Elle's (Reese Witherspoon)
14 Chihuahua, Bruiser. Once again this works in the service of reinforcing white, heterosexual
15 monogamy as Elle's fight to free Bruiser's mother from a testing laboratory is time-limited by
16 her upcoming marriage to fiancé Emmett (Luke Wilson). The film actively plays with the
17 hierarchies that define dogs as integrated into human domestic life by using comedy to
18 emphasize that these human-canine kinships should have no bearing on the treatment of
19 other nonhuman animals. The dogs of this film, while anthropomorphized to show their
20 agency, desire, and experiences of both pleasure and pain, serve only to reinforce the
21 dominance of white, heterosexual norms by showing the success, in relations to rights
22 discourse, of those who support the existing hierarchy that prioritizes Anglo-
23 heteronormative human identity.
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42 As in *Marley and Me*, Elle's relationship with Bruiser is one that began in adulthood,
43 where she is affirmed as a heterosexual woman, embodying a third-wave feminist logic of
44 fulfilment achieved through engagement with consumerism. However, unlike Marley,
45 Bruiser is not a straightforwardly all-American, heterosexual companion. While the central
46 driving force of the plot, Elle's desire to find Bruiser's biological mother in time for her
47 wedding, reinforces the significance of a biological heritage and family ties, Bruiser himself is
48 defined as "gay." Bruiser falls in love with the – also gay – dog of a congressman who,
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1 through his struggle and eventual pride in his dog's sexuality, helps Elle to win her case
2 outlawing animal testing.
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4 On the most basic level, the film appears to use a gay canine relationship as a mirror
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6 for human social relations. Allusions are made throughout to the gay rights movement
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8 within the US. For example, conservative congressman Stan Marks's (Bruce McGill) struggle
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10 to come to terms with the grooming parlor's indictment of "your dogs are gay" is eventually
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12 resolved through the "Gay Dogs of America" action group. His speech to congress,
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14 convincing them of the need for an anti-vivisection bill, adopts the language of the
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16 historically troubled relationship between the US conservative party and the gay rights
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18 movement, where he announces: "I'm a Conservative Republican NRA spokesman and my
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20 dog is gay. And guess what? I couldn't be prouder of the little flamer!" Furthermore, the
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22 scene in which Bruiser is seen to fall in love with the Rottweiler Leslie can be read as a
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24 subversion of the heteronormative expectations of the genre through the use of self-parody.
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30 The hyperbolic use of shot-reverse-shot, close-ups of eyes meeting and
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32 melodramatic music creates comedy out of the traditional love at first sight romance
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34 convention. Furthermore, Bruiser has been dressed by Elle in a pink tutu for this scene,
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36 contrasting the rugged masculinity signified by the Rottweiler breed. This can be seen to
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38 emphasize and play with the performative nature of normative gender roles. In this sense,
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40 the film appears to use a gay canine relationship to satirize and challenge the
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42 heteronormative expectations of the genre and carve a space within its generic tropes for
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44 same-sex relationships.
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49 Thus, the film can be read as expressing pro-gay sentiments through the "natural"
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51 world of the animal kingdom in order to resist the discourse through which "homosexuality
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53 has been so persistently demonized as 'unnatural'" (Soper, 1995, p. 120). Serpell (2005)
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55 explores that anthropomorphism appears as an inherent trait of humanity. Just as Marley
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57 comes to be seen as the first child of an all-American family, the relationship between
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1 companion animals and their keepers has morphed into a world in which “dogs are most
2 likely to be defined by their human coactors as possessing minds that operate in many ways
3 like our own” (Arluke & Sanders, 2007, p. 66). However, while anthropomorphism can be
4 seen as an inevitable process in establishing animal agency, the fact that the film ends with
5 the two dogs embedded within the institution of marriage, pictured in a “Just Married”
6 sidecar following Elle and Emmett’s wedding, reflects on the culture in which the film is set;
7 anthropomorphism can only extend to monogamous unions, where applying human minds
8 to animals cannot extend to queer modes of being. Anthropomorphism does not extend to
9 dismantling the human-animal divide.

20 This can be seen where once Bruiser has been labeled as gay, the film cuts to a shot
21 of him playing alongside Leslie dressed in leather. This use of costume acts as a comic nod to
22 stereotypical representations of homosexual subculture, where Elle is seen to embrace
23 Bruiser’s new identity through an engagement with consumerism and fashion. However, this
24 use of leather is significant in establishing that while this gay canine relationship may subvert
25 the heteronormative expectations of the genre, it is not one that will seek to queer the
26 hierarchy that maintains the divide between humans and animals. Bruiser’s ability to assert
27 a gay identity reinforces existing hierarchies of human experience, where no consideration is
28 given to the absent referent cow slaughtered for the creation of this costume.

42 Indeed, while the leatherfolk community to which this signifies a belonging oft
43 claims to challenge and transgress cultural taboos (Thompson, 1991), the lack of
44 engagement with the types of power and consent that enable the production and wearing of
45 leather means that the types of power, consent, and masculinity with which it actively seeks
46 to challenge remain embedded in the speciesism and anthropocentrism that shapes
47 normative models of subjectivity. Thus, the film’s anthropomorphism promotes the
48 upholding of speciesism rather than animal agency, where canine homosexuality is approved
49 by its allegiance with speciesism. This ties into to the taboo that continues to surround

1 bestiality in contemporary culture, outside of the diegesis, as a sexuality that fundamentally
2 breaks the human-animal divide, thus subverting the very notion of “human” sexuality.
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4 Similarly, the happy-ending convention of the film features a caption celebrating
5 that “Paulette finally got her hotdog,” resolving an earlier scene in which Elle’s best friend
6 Paulette (Jennifer Coolidge) craves the meat she associates with Fourth of July celebrations.
7 In having its own caption, meat-eating becomes part of the *Legally Blonde* trademark,
8 established in the first film of the franchise, in which titling is used to establish the future
9 happy, and heterosexual, resolutions of the film’s characters. This celebration of patriotic
10 meat-eating further contradicts the film’s central animal rights narrative by disregarding the
11 reality of a commercialized meat industry. However, this appears as a self-conscious
12 contradiction, deploying irony by cutting between shots that juxtapose the triumphant
13 release of dogs from a testing laboratory with Paulette biting into her desired meat.
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28 The very semantics of the meat she craves being a hot “dog” emphasizes such a self-
29 reflexive play with contradictions. Thus, within this happy-ending convention the audience
30 are forced to engage with the message that whatever may happen with regards to animal
31 rights, meat-eating is seen to be of no ethical consequence. By drawing attention to this
32 discrepancy between anthropomorphism and carnivorous appetites, the film shows meat-
33 eating to be a palatable form of animal exploitation that does not disrupt the narrative’s
34 feel-good sentiment.
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45 A further point to consider is the notion that film, as a medium, “cannot easily
46 delimit the meaning of the animal within its fictions” (Burt, 2004, p. 11). While an audience
47 is assumed to acknowledge that the characters they witness on-screen are actors, playing
48 out a fictional script, the eating of a hotdog or the wearing of leather must be acknowledged
49 as related to the death of real animals, outside of the diegesis. Indeed, a global web of
50 speciesism which could be manifested in anything from the provision of meat and dairy by
51 on-set catering to the use of leather shoes by the costume department means that virtually
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1 all films must be seen as in some way reliant on the harm of animals. The filmic medium
2 means that unlike the representational nature of literature, we witness the physical
3 manifestations of an animal's death wherever meat or leather or fur, and more, are present.
4 This unique quality of the medium enforces the triumph of speciesism within this hot-dog
5 scene.
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11 The act of eating the hot dog is also tied to sexual innuendo. Paulette's hotdog is
12 presented to her by her husband and is unmistakably phallic in shape. Such a symbolic
13 choice reinforces Adams's (1990) work on the cultural link between meat-eating and male
14 virility. The film concludes with the inevitability of heterosexual intercourse, where Paulette
15 bites into her husband's phallic hotdog just as newlyweds Elle and Emmett are seen setting
16 off for their wedding night. Heterosexual intercourse and meat-eating are thus aligned as
17 inevitable and uncontested occurrences. The relationship established between the meat
18 industry, happy-endings, and patriotism and the segregation of animals as companions
19 deserving of rights and animals as food, introduces the paradigm to Elle's fight for animal
20 rights that justice will be sought only in relation to breaches that do not challenge
21 patriarchal dominance.
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37 These elements come together to openly mock vegan identity, despite the anti-
38 vivisection narrative, replacing the generically derided LGBT characters for what I would
39 argue is the ultimate queer: an identity that is not reliant on animal exploitation of any kind.
40 Elle explains to a bemused private investigator why she is seeking out Bruiser's biological
41 mother before her wedding: "If I have to make room for my second cousin's vegan diet
42 coach, you better believe I'm gonna make room for the mother of the one living creature
43 who's always been there for me." The priority given to this nonhuman animal, as loyal
44 companion, places veganism as an inconvenient, unnecessary extravagance that is
45 ultimately unwelcome at the heterosexual wedding table. This absent vegan character is
46 posited as a far more distant relation than either Bruiser or his mother and reliant on kinship
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1 with a paid escort in the form of an ever-present diet coach. This exclusion retains a
2 distinction between Bruiser and the dogs in testing laboratories as anthropomorphized
3 domestic companions and those animals who are to be seen as edible.
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7 Furthermore, the anthropomorphism that sees Bruiser situated within domestic
8 human spheres sees him subject to specific racialized identity discourses. As discussed in the
9 introduction, Rosenberg (2011) links the obsession around pedigree to the idea of eugenics
10 and racial purity. She argues that we cannot ignore the significance of media representation
11 of animals, where “in American popular culture, pedigree equals white privilege” (p. 122).
12 Marley as a Labrador taps into dominant cultural representations of white, middle-class life.
13 In contrast, Rosenberg situates the Chihuahua as commonly tied to Hispanic culture. Indeed,
14 Bruiser is described by Elle as “Chihuahua American,” connoting assimilated racial categories
15 of American identity. The use of pedigree pure-breed dogs throughout both films
16 encourages the idea of a racial binary that erases the blurring that occurs across ethnic
17 divides. The mating of a Chihuahua and a Rottweiler within a same-sex relationship
18 maintains that which Sheen (2005) notes as Hollywood’s receptiveness to “breed-based
19 conceptions of image” (p. 238), ensuring the impossibility of cross-breeding and supporting
20 mainstream cinema’s role in denying fluid conceptions of identity.
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24 This can be further seen through the presentation of the film’s one ethnic minority
25 character, Grace (Regina King), who reinforces the idea of a rigid sexual and racial binary. As
26 the unapproachable, skeptical antagonist to Elle’s likeable and optimistic character, the film
27 promotes a superficial easing of racial tension as Elle grants Grace temporary relief from her
28 political disillusionment while Grace ensures that Elle is able to present her bill at Congress.
29 However, despite her crucial role in the success of Elle’s animal rights bill, she is notably
30 excluded from the succession of captioned scenes at the film’s finale which promote the
31 resolved, and heterosexual, futures of each character. For example, as we observe Elle’s
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wedding guests, a caption informs us of her female colleague Reena's impending engagement; "Reena is proposing to Timothy. Tonight."

There is even a self-referential joke in doorman Sid and Paulette having to reject their anticipated finale kiss, because she is already married following the finale of *Legally Blonde*. However, his subsequent adoption of "Bruiser's Mom" grants him a pseudo-heterosexual resolution, completing an interspecies family tree given the father-figure role he takes on in mentoring Elle throughout the film. In contrast, Grace is denied access to this celebration of heterosexuality and lacks the futurity within the diegetic space granted to the other key characters.

Thus, *Legally Blonde's* Grace reinforces the uncomfortable racial associations created by the breeds of the gay dogs by showing the black body to be noticeably absent from the otherwise triumphant celebration of white heterosexuality. As Bruiser's characterization allows Elle's fight for animal rights to symbolize a broader fight for racial, sexual, and economic equality, the "very vagueness of an animal's status as property" (Sheen, 2005, p. 247) alludes to parallels between the ruling class position over minority groups. Bruiser lacks a voice of his own and it is only through Elle's embracement of her middle-class, hyper-feminine identity that she is allowed to win her case; her triumphant speech to Congress shows her apply her experiences with a bad haircut in a top salon to the American political climate. Thus, the potential for radical political change is positioned as achievable through an adoption and embracing of middle-class, heteronormative values.

Therefore, animals occupy two opposing spaces within the film: anthropomorphized companions and faceless sources of culinary indulgence. The supposed triumph of animal rights has little connection to the reality of animal welfare in the diegetic world. This can be read as a significant parallel for the way in which the film uses the notion of gayness in Bruiser to celebrate homosexuality while ensuring its difference from, and inferiority to, the privileged position of white, human heterosexuality.

Conclusion

To conclude, the increasing presence of canine companion animals, whose very being has presented scholars with distinct challenges to species-based conceptions of life on Earth, raises significant questions about how we are to approach reading the Hollywood romantic comedy. Investing animals with a right to dignified existence would threaten to dismantle that which “makes natural the structures of order that support human primacy and power” (Fudge, 2010, p. 149). Indeed, the anthropomorphic dogs in both *Marley and Me* and *Legally Blonde 2* are used as sympathetic props to support existing human social hierarchies. This marginal status affords them no autonomy as animals, as they occupy an imaginary space that functions only to serve dominant human discourse.

A vegan mode of reading seeks to expose this speciesism, recovering the absent referent animal wherever possible, while exploring the representation of the vegan as subject and building a history of a radically queer alternative to species-based conceptions of self. Thus, it differs from current critical animal studies by seeking to relate the representation of human-animal relations specifically to modes of identity and selfhood. The contemporary romcom provides an apt starting point for this mode of criticism as a conservative genre often typified by its staunch promotion of Anglo-centric, heteronormative values, situated in an age in which the term vegan has filtered into popular Western discourse. By perceiving an increased incidence of nonhuman animal representation, specifically domestic companions, within a genre fixated on rigidly defined categories of human identity, this analysis seeks to contribute toward a cultural analysis of the notion of queer veganism.

Principally, I have argued that the romcom uses canine companion animals to reinforce the speciesist roots of normative identity and actively denigrate veganism. Thus, a vegan reading of the romcom exposes both the speciesist basis of identity, intimately bound

1 to notions of gender, sexuality and race, as well as an increasing cultural anxiety around
2 veganism. Furthermore, the presence of veganism in films centered upon human
3 relationships with canine companions, whether overtly criticized, as in *Legally Blonde 2*, or
4 noticeably absent, as in *Marley and Me*, is significant in reproducing the representation of
5 LGBT identity critiqued across the history of the genre.
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11 Numerous contemporary romcoms could be listed here for their replication of this
12 trend, including the hugely successful *Sex and the City* (King, 2008) film. For example, as
13 protagonists Carrie (Sarah Jessica Parker) and Samantha (Kim Cattrall) leave a high-end
14 fashion show, dressed in fur coats, they have red paint thrown over them by animal rights
15 protestors. We are encouraged to applaud these women's indulgence in a third-wave
16 feminism in which independence and femininity can be achieved through an engagement
17 with consumerism. In contrast to the happiness and fashionable status of these key
18 protagonists, the activists are presented as frumpy, miserable, angry women. They lack
19 access to the signifiers of successful womanhood, in this case represented by heterosexual
20 unions and high fashion clothing.
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35 The ease at which their attack can be laughed off by the characters as part of the
36 New York landscape mutes the activist's threat to the speciesist foundations of human
37 identity: presenting it as a failed womanhood. Just as with the historical denigration of LGBT
38 identities, veganism here occupies a marginalized queer identity that is ridiculed in order to
39 reinforce the superiority of the key protagonist's heterosexual, fur-wearing sense of self.
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41 Indeed, in future work the overt link often made between gay and lesbian characters and
42 the following of a vegan lifestyle would be worth exploring further.
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52 Thus, this paper has sought to introduce a distinctly new way of reading the romcom
53 and proffer the importance of recognizing veganism as a queer mode of being with an
54 unexplored history of cultural representation. I conclude with the questions: if the
55 mainstream Hollywood romcom has established the figure of the vegan as a queer target of
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1 ridicule, how has this emerged throughout film history, and why is the term so noticeably
2 absent from scholarship within the humanities?
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