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Morality on tap: The production and consumption of morality by “Vegandale”

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Abstract

This article details the development of “Vegandale”, a corporate-vegan retail project within the borders of the traditionally marginalized Toronto neighbourhood of Parkdale. This retail development has set out on a spatial discursive branding takeover of the neighbourhood, with the goal of changing the space—and the wider features of capitalism—through decontextualized consumption practices. This paper seeks to understand the social space and discursive consequences of this incursion of “ethical entrepreneurialism” into a marginalized but gentrifying neighbourhood. Ultimately, this paper will show the imaginary of post-speciesism and moralistic consumption masks the structural realities of capitalism and invisibilizes humans in its exploitative social relations, rendering its project as just another aspect of actually-existing neoliberalism in the gentrifying creative city of Toronto.

Keywords: urban neoliberalism, Toronto, creative city, gentrification, ethical entrepreneurialism, ethical consumption, neoliberalism, social space

Résumé

Cet article analyse le phénomène du “Vegandale”, un projet de développement de commerces végétaliens au sein d’un quartier défavorisé de Toronto nommé Parkdale. Ce développement promeut une redéfinition de l’image de marque du quartier dans le but d’en redéfinir l’espace et les pratiques légitimes, notamment par de nouveaux rapports au capitalisme et des pratiques de consommation décontextualisées. Cet article cherche à comprendre l’espace social et les conséquences discursives de cette incursion de «l’entrepreneuriat éthique» dans un quartier marginalisé mais embourgeoisé. Finalement, cet article montrera comment l’imaginaire du post-spécisme et de la consommation moraliste tend à masquer les relations sociales d’exploitation inhérentes aux contraintes structurelles du capitalisme, faisant de Vegandale un avatar parmi d’autres de la gentrification néolibérale de la ville de Toronto.

Mots-clés: politique urbaine néo-libérale, Toronto, ville créative, embourgeoisement, entrepreneuriat éthique, consommation de façon éthique et responsable, espace public

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Introduction

Beginning in 2016, a vegan-based corporation called the 5700 Inc. began a project of opening what it referred to as “morally superior” vegan businesses in the Toronto neighbourhood of Parkdale. Growing to at least four physical businesses (with more planned to open), the corporation has set out on a spatial (both material and discursive) branding takeover of the neighbourhood, referring to their cluster of businesses as “Vegandale”. This paper seeks to understand the spatial, discursive, and material consequences of this incursion of “ethical entrepreneurialism” and outside capital into a marginalized but gentrifying neighbourhood and community. Critically questioning the claims of ethical superiority by a corporation promoting both gentrification and a consumptive form of individualized and responsabilized consumerism generally, but more so within a heavily marginalized and racialized community with a deep history of inequality, is necessary. The first section of the paper will situate the historical context and spatiality of Parkdale, in addition to describing the Vegandale project within a continuation of this context. The second section articulates how Vegandale’s vision promotes a decontextualized vision of capitalism predicated on ethical consumption that ignores material and discursive inequalities both structurally and in the immediacy of space that it occupies. The third section will further contextualize this project as predicated on the production and reproduction of a hipster, or performative progressive subject, one who believes consumption and capitalism are not the salient issue, and one who consumes vegan capitalism while moralizing in a classist and oppressive manner. Both section two and section three will be inter-disciplinary and provide a clear focus on materiality and space, but will be additionally focused on a critical discursive analysis of the messaging and mission statements of the founder of Vegandale and its associated advertising and branding project. This will allow for an understanding of power and the dynamics behind vegan capitalism and Vegandale as a process, but place it within a foundation of articulating the associated material consequences of this project as well without resorting to creating a caricature of a diabolical evil corporation or consumers of veganism who do not care about other injustices.

The methodological focus is predicated on treating Vegandale as a snapshot of the gentrification and moralized branding processes as they unfold in the context of Toronto. While this is related to the materiality of gentrification, the ultimate focus is on the elements of moralization and the consumption of morality, both discursively and as they are enacted and reproduced daily in the social space represented by the streets of Parkdale. Understanding social space as a process, rather than a naturally-existing entity, is key to situating the consequences of the overt attempts at subject-formation articulated by Vegandale and its moralistic and emancipatory discourse. Mazer and Rankin best articulate “social space” as:

Constituted not just through physical access to places but also through social relations from which places are produced, and within which they are embedded. Experiences of shame, insecurity, and harassment pose significant barriers to neighbourhood accessibility, in addition to the cost barriers that are typically the focus of gentrification studies. Shame and feelings of nonbelonging are partly the result of people not seeing themselves reflected back in symbolic representations of the neighbourhood’s trendy storefronts, cafe culture, art galleries, renovated homes. They also result from (often inadvertent) shaming practices of higher-class residents who have claimed neighbourhood social space for themselves. Together, these forms of marginalisation and self-regulation constitute a new regime of public order in which cultural norms reflect the tastes and habits of the gentrifying classes (Mazer and Rankin 2011, 831).

While others provide great examples of how environmentalism and green-capitalism tie into gentrification and place branding (Kern 2012; 2015), veganism has become intertwined with claims of social justice based placemaking and ethical consumption. Certain neighbourhoods, like The Junction, appeal to a brand that is “part yogi, part skateboarder, and part granola (“crunchy”) chic” (Kern 2015, 68), the claims of Vegandale have many similarities with these articulations of placemaking. This culminates in an opportune case study that illustrates the mutual constitution of forms of embodiment and processes of urban change (Kern 2015), as well as demonstrating how moralistic consumption claims are intertwined within them. It is fundamental to understand both the consequences of these claims, as well as the substance (or lack thereof) that systematically exists below the surface of soundbite branding.

While this case study is not situated in wider debates about gentrification as a generalizable process or theory, it aims to take up Tom Slater’s project¹ of contesting the absolutist and monolithic emancipatory claims of gentrification embedded in a positionality of class privilege (2004a, 23). Understanding the discourses of emancipation and structural social change through consumption, in which the materiality of gentrification is masked, is key to

unpacking what gentrification looks like in Toronto neighbourhoods. Emancipation when framed through the position of more affluent newcomers to a pre-existing space and community provides an exclusive conceptualization and actualization of emancipation.

Much of Toronto's gentrification over the last 20 years, both physically and in discourse, has occurred within a scope of the turn of the "creative class" and the image of the "hip, bohemian, cool, arty tribes who occupy the cafes, galleries, and cycle paths of formerly disinvested neighbourhoods once in lacking in 'creativity,'" which in mainstream politics is often rendered as a "sign of a healthy economic present and future for cities across the globe" (Ley 2003, 2527). Peck notably argues that creative and hipster-consumption scripts mesh well with developmental visions that are primarily market-oriented and individualistic (creative subjects as free agents and consumers) (2007, 36). But of course, these scripts can be both place and historically specific, which prioritizes the necessity of thick-descriptive case studies. Therefore, it is crucial to understand Vegandale in particular, and Toronto in general, as a subject outside of a "unitary phenomenon" that needs to be examined "according to its own logic and outcomes" as a case study (Butler and Robinson 2001, 2160; in Slater 2004b). Understanding subject formation and reproduction within the discourse of Vegandale's claims is key to unpacking the logic and outcomes of Vegandale itself. Instead of being embedded in gentrification studies and debates, the research design is structured to answer questions both regarding the individualization and responsabilization of "ethical consumption" and spatial politics of vegan-capitalism in gentrifying neighbourhoods. The goal is to create a snapshot and discursive analysis of the attempts to gentrify and change social space specifically by Vegandale. So, the question about Vegandale becomes: morally superior, affordable, and emancipatory for whom? Additionally, who is rendered invisible by this process?

Historical specificity of South Parkdale

The history of South Parkdale as a physical neighbourhood in Toronto has undergone drastic changes throughout its history. Annexed by the City of Toronto in 1889, Parkdale had been—and continued to be—and upper-income neighbourhood that featured notable architecture and mansions throughout its borders. This remained the case until two major events happened: the 1955 beginning of construction on the Gardiner Expressway² that partially ran through Parkdale and separated it from the waterfront, and the mid-1970s decision of the Government of Ontario to deinstitutionalize long-term mental health patients from its nearby hospitals. The former was labeled a project that was rooted in "progress" (Filey 1996) and led to a flight of much of the upper-income households to other areas of the city away from the highway, while the latter would lead to a large number of persons experiencing homelessness, people with mental health issues who receive little to no support, and a rise in poverty in the general area of South Parkdale. These discharged patients suffered from a shortage of affordable housing options, and much of the area was not designed for single-occupancy residency, leading to a rise of substandard rooming houses and (often illegal) bachelorettes, of which South Parkdale is disproportionately represented in when it comes to city-wide numbers (Slater 2004a). Over the last 40 years, Parkdale has consistently been one of the lowest-income neighbourhoods in the city, as well as its residency-basis being heavily skewed towards rentals rather than ownership. In the early 2000s, South Parkdale had a rental-accommodation rate of 93%, while North Parkdale had a 67% rental-accommodation rate, both vastly higher than Toronto's 37% average (Slater and Whitzman 2006). As of 2016, the median household income was \$41,761, considerably lower than the \$65,829 average for Toronto as a whole, while having noticeably higher low-income and poverty rates than Toronto as well (Parkdale Neighbourhood Profile 2016).

During the 1980s onward, South Parkdale transitioned towards a newcomer and immigrant demographic, with large settlements of people arriving from the Caribbean, Vietnam, Philippines, China, Tibet, among other regions. Due to the large number of newcomers there are a number of immigration and settlement agencies located in the area alongside many other non-profit agencies such as the Parkdale Community Legal Services and Parkdale Community Info Centre, that serve the marginalized and precarious persons within Parkdale. Of course, this is a very surface level treatment of historical trends of South Parkdale's spatiality (for more in-depth historical analysis see: Slater 2003, 2004a; Slater and Whitzman 2006; Whitzman 2010), but it addresses key changes and trends over the course of its history. This is the context the recent wave of gentrification has been occurring over the last couple of decades.

Starting with the opening of Doomie's (a stylish vegan restaurant) in 2016 on Queen Street West and Brock Street, two other vegan businesses³ were opened within a few hundred feet in 2017, as well as the Vegandale Brewery in 2018. All these businesses are owned by the 5700 Inc., which has unveiled plans to have as many as (but not



Figure 1

A map of South Parkdale and the expanding area associated with the Vegandale project

Source: Google Maps

limited to) 10 vegan businesses that take advantage of the rent-gap in gentrifying South Parkdale and expand the Vegandale network.

In the context of gentrification, young people and artists with low levels of economic capital—but often possess what is referred to as “high cultural capital”—“discover” what are deemed to be authentic local spaces; these spaces and commodities are then mimicked by later waves of more affluent newcomers who reproduce the commodification of these trends through consumer capitalism (Hyde 2014). This movement of capital into South Parkdale has drastically changed the composition of the neighbourhood both as it pertains to resident demographics and the growth of businesses like those associated with “hipster” culture and consumption. Indeed, South Parkdale has been one of the most popular gentrifying areas within Toronto, with the classical process of low rent attracting artists, young professionals, and others who move into a neighbourhood and attract lifestyle businesses that aim to similarly profit off of low rent and newcomers at the expense of pushing out pre-existing amenities that served the original communities in that area. Over the last few decades Parkdale has featured several qualities attractive to these groups beyond just affordability, namely attractive Victorian architecture, walkability, and proximity to downtown (Mazer and Rankin 2011). A quick internet search yields many descriptions of South Parkdale by realtors, but this perhaps best captures the discourse being sold by developers:

Something started to happen in the last twenty years, shops and galleries started appearing on this section of Queen Street, old hotels such as The Drake and The Gladstone were transformed into *hip urban* night spots and *property values began to rise* in the *once grand* neighbourhood of South Parkdale (Klugel Real Estate, emphasis in italics added).

The language here (which is representative of real estate company descriptions of Toronto's gentrifying neighbourhoods) situates South Parkdale as having deteriorated from its former past as economically powerful, but due to gentrification and the opening of new businesses that property values have gone up in a neighbourhood described on this website as "no longer the postal code of Toronto's most affluent, South Parkdale is still a proud neighbourhood with many reasons to feel that way" (Klugel Real Estate). The financial incentive to push out tenants to raise rents or sell at inflated market rates in this gentrifying market is so strong that multiple groups have organized campaigns revolving around rent strikes, naming and shaming realtors like Nick Brewerton (who specializes in selling rooming houses), and combatting the growth of upper-class lifestyle branded boutiques and restaurants that contribute to gentrification (Tamar 2018; Goffin 2018). This resistance has recently culminated in the targeting of the entities and discourses associated with Vegandale (Figure 2). While this article is focused on points one and two (and to a degree, three), it does not downplay the incredible importance of the two remaining issues.

Branding, power, and subjectivity

While some may dismiss the Vegandale project as just another restaurant or lifestyle storefront that is representative of a general trend of gentrification by external capital, there are a few factors that complicate this reductionist and simplistic analysis. What makes it different is the focus on its branding of ethical superiority via capitalist consumption of veganism as a commodity. Framed as more than just another gentrifier interested in accumulating profit, the 5700 Inc. promotes itself as a progressive project aimed at improving the world through, the words of its own founder, Hellenic Vincent de Paul, "vegan extremism" and "aggressive absolutism" (Krishnan 2018; Ferreira 2018). Due to this, he claims that all the backlash he is receiving is entirely due to anti-vegan sentiments, people unable to "have fun" and being "triggered" (Ferreira 2018).

Based on these claims, this section will be applying a two-prong analysis focused on discursive analysis⁴ of primary source material in the form of Vegandale advertising, website information, and interviews by its founder. Secondly, it will utilize a theoretical lens that understands the role of Vegandale as key in the production of a subjectivity rooted in the neoliberal notions of individual and privatized responsibility via ethical consumption and vegan capitalism. Additionally, more than just a top-down production of a subject, it is important to understand how this subject is reproduced daily through everyday activities of the individual, namely that of the identity of the "hipster" or the "performative progressive" in the gentrifying urban environment. Much of the branding associated with Vegandale is advertising-based signage on the various exteriors of its associated stores and is therefore completely viewable to anybody in the public and the community. One of the most explicit examples of this is the storefront of Imperative (Figure 3), which aggressively boasts, "Sometimes you have to remodel your space in order to remodel society. #Vegandale". This is the literal mimicking of critical analysis by Henri Lefebvre—and the discourse of gentrification and the emancipatory city—to lay claim to moral superiority and progressive values.

The banner-based signage at the adjacent Vegandale Brewery features their slogan "Morality on Tap" underneath every indication of the name of the brewery (Figure 4), proving it is just as crucial to the ethos of its brand as the name itself. Their menu features a further messaging of "Strong Beer. Stronger Convictions" and features vegan craft

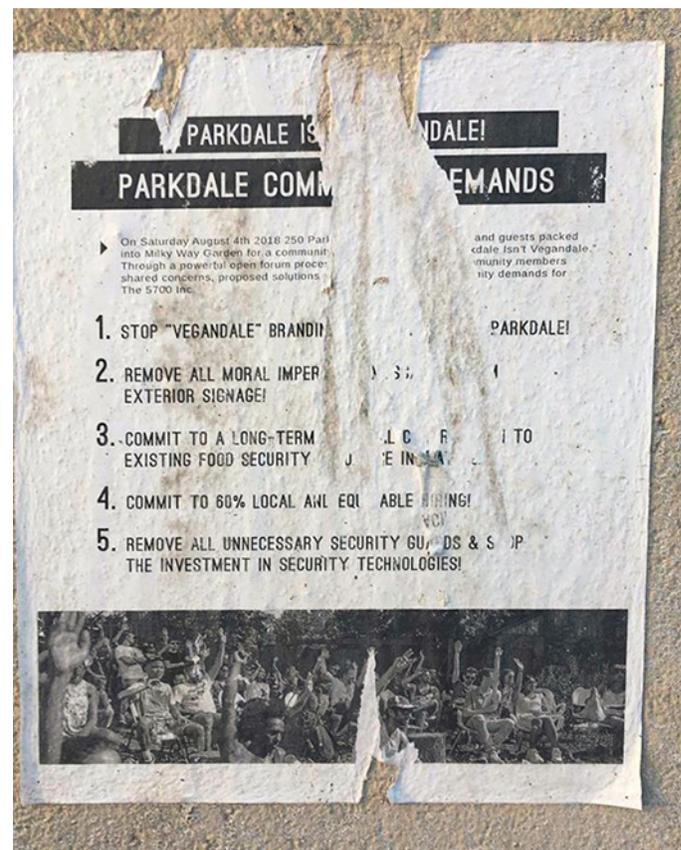


Figure 2

"Parkdale isn't Vegandale" poster; one of many types of political action flyers located in South Parkdale during any season of the year. Most of the posters found appear to have been purposefully vandalized.

Photo: Ryan Kelpin



Figure 3
The publicly viewable storefront of Imperative in Vegandale
Photo: Ryan Kelpin

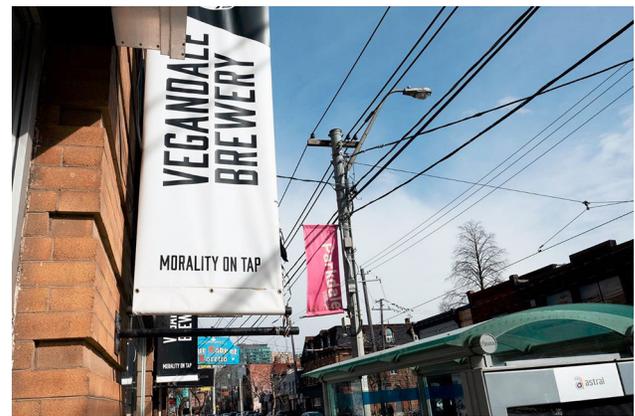


Figure 4
One of the three large and publicly consumable banners adorning the storefront of Vegandale Brewery, reflecting both the size and style of the adjacent official Parkdale banners.
Photo: Ryan Kelpin

beers with names such as Principled Pilsner, Sour Truth, Shining Example Stout, Morally Superior IPA, and I.Prefer. Animals IPA (vegandalebrewery.com/menu). Each of them have a description of the style of beer underneath, but in a smaller font than another typeface that has pro-vegan capitalist messaging such as “Should our principles uphold non-violence for all beings? Yes.”⁵

Imperative features various items labeled with “High heels. Higher morals” and the most popular product appears to be a toque and gloves that simply say “vegan” and are made in China.⁶ Founder, Hellenic Vincent de Paul, has referred to his form of vegan-capitalism as a “social justice movement”, that it is located in Parkdale due to “restaurants going under” and general affordability and proximity to downtown, as well as viewing the surrounding community as, “If you look at the neighbourhood we’re in and the age of our most of our clientele, that it makes sense” (Shea 2018). Bold, yet inaccurate, claims of “social justice” alongside erasures of whole parts of the community in Parkdale aside, informs what Vegandale’s own website describes as its vision for “utopia”. The question becomes: what type of utopia and for whom?

A glass half empty of principled pilsner: The consumption of moral superiority

From this, it becomes clear that the Vegandale project is rooted in two complementary processes: profit-making through individualized consumption, and the moralizing effects of framing veganism as a commodity within a discourse of “ethical entrepreneurialism” to cyclically promote that consumption. The issue with the idea of an idealistic form of ethical entrepreneurialism is that it construes it as wholly authentic and lacking the potential for a problematic ontology, one that can facilitate deeply contradictory consequences (Dey and Steyaert 2014).

The specificity of Vegandale’s ethical entrepreneurialism is predicated on notions of moralistic consumption practices under capitalism, or the idea that one can vote or exercise power with their dollar despite their class position. This reduces political action and “resistance” to the status quo as the mere act of purchasing a commodity, a commodity produced for the express purpose of enriching a private corporation that is actively gentrifying the space within a precarious community. The act of having a glass of beer or purchasing a toque that identifies one as a vegan becomes framed as emancipatory, framed by a corporation that is expressly committed to obtaining a profit from its growing network of businesses. It is expressly rooted in an ontology that places prescriptions for structural issues within a free market rendering of choice and consumption. Not only this, but it also moralizes the choice as inherently emancipatory and ethically superior, commodifying a concept of ethics that can be purchased, yet doing so with a complete blind spot to the social relations of capitalism and class. Further, these discourses of environmental and capitalistic improvement are mapped onto people and practices that compound the naturalization of certain trajectories of social and economic change: those who do not fit the agenda of capitalist “progress” (and morality claims of superior living) are cast as inferior to the virtuous consumer (Dooling 2009, in Kern 2015).

Responding to a wave of criticism (Krishnan 2018; Ferreira 2018), the 5700 Inc. gave a non-specific \$100,000 donation to facilitating “growth in Parkdale”, reasoning that they have a “responsibility to give back to Parkdale”. However, does this giving back involve critical self-reflection on the material and discursive consequences of its brand of capitalism and gentrification, or is it merely capital that corresponds with their limited views on structural inequality? No. Instead it represents the notion that the contradictions of capitalism can be solved through an injection of benevolent capital. Hyde argues that when gentrifiers face increased scrutiny from the community, these companies tend to react in “preservationist” ways, often focusing on how they can “give back” to the community (2014). However, this giving back often takes the form of throwing money at the issue, rather than addressing structural inequalities that constitute their foundations. They create an oversimplified remedy to larger issues of structural inequality, while positioning consumers with the ability to “give back” or be politically active through consumption (Hyde 2014). This form of “utopia” or a “social justice project” seems to invisibilize the contradictions of capitalism, and at times, invisibilize inequality and humanity from the conversation entirely. Invitation into the new “space” that this model of vegan capitalism has created is predicated on the ability to consume. Much of the discussion around vegan capitalism and commercialism occurs online in conversations by academics and activists alike, who debate many of these issues at a structural level:

Commercialization has made veganism easier than ever (for upper-class folks). Instead of eating frozen chicken nuggets, eat these frozen soy nuggets. The only catch is, of course, that as trendy health food, vegetarian processed substitutes now cost more than the actual products they’re competing against. Eating fake meat isn’t just missing the point -- it’s more expensive than eating animals” (Pinch 2013).

In December 2018 there were reports of multiple severely lactose customers of Vegandale Brewery becoming ill due to the consumption of milk-based products used in the manufactured ingredients within the food from the brewery (Sing 2018). The response from Eva Lampert, the Director of Vegan Operations⁷ at the 5700 Inc., is indicative of the commercialization and corporatization of veganism that is occurring within the scope of the Vegandale project. After an apology, she noted that Vegandale Brewery would be adding notices on the menus to include information about “potential cross-contamination at the factory level”:

In our restaurants, we promote justice for animals by cooking without the use of any animal products (meat, dairy, eggs, honey, etc.). When we caution our guests that items «may contain milk,» we are referring to the *manufacturing of food ingredients we purchase that are produced in facilities* that sometimes share equipment with items that do contain animal milk. Cross-contamination can become an issue for those facing allergies, but does not render items non-vegan. We look forward to the *demand for vegan items improving the availability of facilities* that can create our restaurant staples without cross-contamination (O’Neill 2018; emphasis in italics added).

There are multiple glaring issues that must be addressed with this statement. First, they feel the need to re-state the promotion of their overall ethical project, facilitating a demand for veganism through consumption, before immediately blaming the horizontal integration of factory, manufacture and supply based capitalism for the incidents, and absolving themselves of responsibility. They lament that the manufactured products they purchase are made in what appear to be large-scale manufacturing facilities, by unstated companies, that do not uphold their vegan principles. Second, they fall back on their reformist capitalist notions that consumption will solve the issue of being “forced” to utilize these companies, through demand reforming the supply chain. It falls back on the old trope that consumption is the path to solving social issues, a process that is imbued with social, cultural, and economic practices: “The promise that the ideology of consumerism makes is that consumption is the answer to all of our problems; consumption will make us whole again... consumption will return us to the blissful state of the imaginary” (Sandin and McLaren 2010, 4, in Harper 2013). This imaginary is what allows a double and contradictory move that both blames the structures of capitalism for the issue but restates the imperative that consumption will change those structural necessities of capitalism.

This raises further questions of whether their ethos involves issue of scale: such as a critical reflexivity on its carbon footprint, an ethos of purchasing locally produced goods and services, and what companies and suppliers they are dealing with. These issues are invisibilized due to the exclusive focus on animal-based justice.⁸ Of course, conscien-

tious capitalism can have some benefits (ideas of care, solidarity and collective concern), however, these same ideals can serve to obscure the structural incentives and inequalities that allow the worst forms of business under capitalism to thrive (Hill 2016, 108). The worry that a campaign focused on emancipation through vegan consumption (and hipness) without a critical attention to structural inequalities and features of all industrial firms within capitalism (rather than just the industrial meat industry) does not address the key exploitations of these structures, looks even more possible with this understanding. When morality and ethics are added into an aggressive branding campaign that demarcates certain people as morally superior, it becomes doubly problematic. It creates a sort of ethical vanguard predicated on the ability to materially participate; even critical scholars who are sympathetic to the idea of market-based social justice note that an account of consumer behaviour must recognize that economic and social inequalities renders many unable to change their practices (Quastel 2008). It becomes so focused on a specific goal (animal liberation) that it completely disregards its place in the gentrification of space and its role as a corporation in the exploitative nature of capitalism. Building on his sympathetic interpretation, Quastel understands ethical consumption as “considering how we are related to, intertwined with, and responsible to others and to ourselves through our practices” (2008, 34).

Ultimately, this is not what is occurring in either the spatial or discursive branding campaign of Vegandale; it is promoting a form of veganism that becomes exclusive immediately upon the foundational assumption that consumption within a free market drives social change, an assumption that ignores the “ways in which food, restaurants, and veganism are all interconnected in the continued oppression of marginalized groups and in the gentrification of low-income neighbourhoods” (Pawlak 2018, 6).⁹ When space is used in this manner, it allows those with resources to “appropriate ethical consumption into a mode of class distinction” that takes advantage of knowledge and power, while erasing logistical and material issues with structural inequality and the concept of consumption (Quastel 2008, 42). Moving beyond a reductionist reification of monolithic class, race is always at the forefront of gentrification processes as well. If the packaging of vegan consumption and products only addresses harms against animals, it signifies what Harper argues “how both post-humanism and post-racism work to disconcertingly conceal the violence of neoliberalism and racism” (2013, 23). If actualized through a lens that is so post-humanist and post-racist, coupled with pro-vegan consumer activism, there are problematic erasures of the exploitations and suffering that neoliberalism and capitalism cause by virtue of consumer-capitalist moral economies exploiting all as their inherent structure (Harper 2013; Wrenn 2011). It may be that Vegandale’s owners are completely aware of these tensions and indeed even support wider social justice movement goals, but, the total absence of this information and discourse in any of their aggressive branding material or their “moral imperative” maintains the myth of ethical and moralistic purity that buying their product establishes in the process of consumer subjectification. For Wes Hill (and Mark Fisher), this “conscientious creative consumer” conceptualization is best understood as believing that ethical purchasing as an act is rendered as an inherently political action that can change the world, a naïve view of Western consumerism that removes consumption and capitalism from the intrinsic involvement in global inequality (Hill 2016, 107). In reality, this ethical consumption of vegan capitalism becomes flawed when moving past even the thinnest of surface analysis. The aforementioned examples of customers becoming sick due to dairy contamination in Vegandale Brewery’s food and ingredients is part of this branding of myth:

Beneficiaries of a neoliberal capitalist economy do not really want to know from *where* and *how* commodities get to them. A process of estrangement erased is the genealogy of how these objects arrived there and how they took on the ‘harmless’ meaning that have. Hence, estrangement teaches the holder of such objects that what they have in their hands is pure and innocent; so that they have no responsibility to investigate any further, how it got there in the first place (Harper 2013, 50; emphasis in italics added).

5700 Inc. has made no effort to clarify their commodity or supply chains to demonstrate how they manufacture or purchase their products. This combined with a lack of critical discourse in their branding makes it clear that the moral imperative of consuming vegan food in their social justice project is purely to free animals from exploitation, without an equally important regard for human lives. A deeper analysis by Harper (2009; 2013) highlights how North America’s access to tomatoes is predicated on the labour of racialized women, many of who work in toxic and inhumane conditions, as well as the implantation of neoliberal free trade policies like NAFTA; this is a form of geopolitical privilege where the consumer is not educated on the health and well-being of the people where ingredients are extracted and commodified, especially those associated with racialized slavery. Even rescaling these issues to commodity chains

within just Canada or Ontario does not remove the exploitation of workers inherent in capitalistic industrial based farming of fruits, vegetables, and other ingredients like sugar and spices.

These privileges must be systemically reproduced, as well as obfuscated, daily in the social spaces they inhabit both materially and discursively. By definition, these enactments are not singular events, they are process-oriented and must take place repeatedly (ie. the claim to property is sustained not only by the original act of acquisition, but by continuing acts, both discursive and physical in boundary-building and access-limitation) (Parrish 2017, 237). More than just subject formation, they reproduce the conditions necessary to manifest “displacement pressure”, which emphasizes the social, emotional and symbolic dimensions of displacement that are enacted in everyday life in a manner that dislocate people from the social spaces of neighbourhoods, even if they continue to physically inhabit them (Mazer and Rankin 2011, 822). The language of “Morally Superior” beers, needing to “remodel society and space” through being ethical consumers, and “High heels, Higher morals” denote symbolic and material inferiority of those who do not consume their conditional morality. The signage that reflects these ideas is public facing and bold, serving as a continued reminder of the wider project of Vegandale and its placement within marginalizations and exploitations. The inferiority and superiority dichotomy and stereotypes manifested by this function as sites of accumulation that “reinvent” the commercial street and are generative in that they function as opportunities to envision “better” commercial uses (McLean and Rankin 2015; Rankin, Kamizaki, and Mclean 2015a; 2015b). Ultimately, these “better” commercial uses are tied into both ethical entrepreneurialism and a consumer identity rooted in environmental and social consciousness, continuously reproducing the dichotomy of consumptive superiority and morality.

When it comes to subject reproduction, Greif (2010, 10–11) asserts that the “hipster’ fetishizes the violence, instinctiveness, and rebelliousness of lower-middle-class [neighbourhoods]” while simultaneously whitewashing them and adding salient class dimensions, thus effectively serving to “recolonize urban neighbourhoods with a new aesthetic”. This is what needs to be avoided: the fetishization of retail change through “authentic” green and healthy consumption [in this case, vegan capitalism], while aesthetically “improving” local shopping streets in low-income areas, encourages the colonization of these spaces by the more affluent (Hubbard 2016). The creation of inaccessible spaces for many in the community merely underscores its aim to attract higher income patrons for the purpose of achieving greater profit, or of attracting more business and more capital to increase the value of the company or the spaces it inhabits. It is a form of emancipation that does not take into account the vulnerable and long-time residents, rather, it reduces consideration only to newcomers and those who benefit from the gentrification and the product that is being sold (Slater 2004a; Turner 2016). So, if emancipation and “remodeling society” takes place through consumptive practices, the issue of who makes decisions on what remodeling constitutes is problematized when it is held in private hands, leading to questions as to who or what the subject of emancipation is.

Consumption-based progressivism and harm reduction hipsters

It seems, then, that it is extremely difficult to approach the topic of consumption without touching upon contentious issues of how to reconcile autonomy and responsibility, individual agency with collective obligations. This is because the historical development of systems of commodified social reproduction and of associated consumer cultures inevitably generates a set of questions about the relationship between how people want to live and how society should be organised (Barnett et al. 2005, 5).

In the discourse of Vegandale’s branding and ethos, the idea of consumer wants and “what is good” are denoted by consumption and demand; indeed, this consumption by financialized individuals regarding social change as rooted in electing where to spend reflect classical conceptualizations of supply and demand within capitalism. However, they are also deepened through the language of individuals as “little financializations” (acting as human capital in an individual sense of responsabilized market behaviour) and a prioritization of a limited form of individual entrepreneurialism at more micro levels and scales, while upholding the structural inequalities of capitalism (Brown 2015). This notion of individualized market action can be seen not just in a concept of vegan capitalism, but also within sustainable consumption, environmentalist agendas, and even something as seemingly small as personalized recycling (Quastel 2009). The notion of heightened individualization and responsabilization merges with a heightened awareness by consumers of the process behind the manufacture of products, as well as the potential ethical implications of their consumption choices (Quastel 2008). These ethical choices are key to the process of subject formation of those living in urban (and argued to be progressive) spaces and social circles in Toronto.

Peter Miller and Nikolas Rose (1997) provide a context to this within the realm of consumption by arguing that in order for a relation to be formed between the consumer and the product (in the production and reproduction of the subject) the key is linking the psyche, characteristics and social sectors of persons to possibilities and promises that might be discerned within particular commodities. So far, from a unilateral production of desire by a singular corporation, understanding the consumption of vegan capitalism with moralistic branding takes place in a far more complex assemblage at the levels of discourse and materiality, the individual and society, beliefs and practice. The discourse and material consequences of moral superiority branding are produced and reproduced through daily interaction, lived experiences, and the production and consumption of its discourse by both customers (or vocal supporters) and corporation. Academic perspectives attentive to both structure and agency should insist that hipster or creative newcomers are involved in gentrification by both moving into neighbourhoods and refiguring local taste cultures encouraging processes of displacement but noting that they are not solely to blame for making spaces unaffordable for marginalized persons (Hubbard 2016). At the same time, Deborah Cowen (2006) notes that it appears hipsters are “actively working to institutionalize themselves in the city” and that they have become agents of neoliberalism, colonizing impoverished neighbourhoods and claiming them as their own. The answer likely lies in a combination of both of these arguments when it applies to the moralistic vegan capitalism of Vegandale.

Understanding how this discourse can complement various forms of social, spatial, and political displacement within Smith’s reading of much harm reduction discourse is key to understanding the “emancipatory”, “social justice project”, or “utopia” associated with Vegandale’s branding project. He defines harm reduction hipsters as:

Mostly young, educated, white, middle class, ex-suburbanite kids with relative socioeconomic privilege [who worked in various harm reduction capacities] and dressed in accordance with normative late-capitalist hipster style: skinny jeans, plaid shirts, black horn-rimmed glasses, thrift shop t-shirts bearing working class signifiers, and among men, ironic facial hair (i.e., handle-bar moustaches etc.) (Smith 2016, 210).

While this definition appears reductionist, there is some weight to the general ideas and signifiers it brings forth. What it lacks is the pseudo-inclusionary aspects of the neoliberal city and ethical-consumption that reproduces itself within a language of diversity and post-politics. While the dynamism of this quote conjures a mental image, it is necessary to understand that “hipsters” in the “creative city” cannot be predicated on their whiteness (or even socioeconomic privilege, at times). While this definition is rooted in a primary focus on aesthetic, there are clear elements that go beyond surface-level visual depictions of fashion choices to understand common positionalities and political orientations. Smith’s definitions are rooted in a complementary conceptualization of class, space, and gentrification that can be used to understand the potential surface level political orientation predicated on a model of ethical consumption, and how this does not deal with the structural imperatives of capitalism, nor the suffering of human bodies within this model of consumption. Returning to aesthetic context, it is quite similar to descriptions of urban participants within the conceptualization of the creative class. It additionally highlights their place as “enjoy[ing] complaining about gentrification even though they are responsible for it themselves” and their relation as an economic group to notions of class displacement (Smith 2016, 213). The discourse around modern gentrification and young creatives is predicated on the imperative of creativity and entrepreneurialism, with the heroic figure of the creative subject found at the center of motivational philosophies, economic development proposals, and ethical consumption, all denoting a drive to “generate new possibilities of action” (Grundy and Boudreau 2008). It is key to further unpack Parrish’s use of the “vital politics of gentrification”, which represents the normative claims to the health of bodies and rationalities associated with gentrification. This allows us to understand that these “new possibilities” and “better” uses of space can be articulated and deployed by those appropriating the “material and discursive successes of the environmental justice movement” to serve development and capitalistic purposes (Checker 2011, in Parish 2017). These discourses, as shown throughout this article, produce bodies and spaces relationally through rationalities (and claims to ethics) rooted in a sense of “who belongs where” and what constitutes a “good” or “healthy” use of space (Parish 2017, 26). When appropriated, these normative claims are rendered as apolitical and outside of the systemic exploitations of capitalism. This post-political rallying cry rooted in the construction of identity and ethics contributes to the compounding of the structural depoliticization of subjects, the weakening of political action and conflict, and the protection of neoliberal capitalism and its associated institutions and structures from revolt (Hill 2017, 37). These scripts and aesthetics prove to be quite complementary with consumption-based models of emancipation and the principles behind vegan capitalism. As Hill argues:

This activist left is essentially understood as the creative class who appropriate anarchist ideals such as collective living, individual autonomy, DIY art and artisanal forms of commerce, but who are unable to articulate or undertake any of the practical strategies required to undermine the forces of capitalist hegemony (2016, 105).

This being said, it is important to not lay complete blame at the feet of these persons, as well as to avoid falling into a form of critique that becomes a form of authentication of the self through the hipster archetypal other. Facilitating an understanding of how moralistic branding and ethical consumption work in tandem and cyclically with the reproduction of the self is key to understanding the shifting terrains of late capitalism and cultural consumption specifically in Toronto. Indeed, the hipster archetype acts as a mirror or distinction for the “hipster hater and sociological critic” alike, who reproduce themselves through boundary-making and the ability to identify “blind individuals” who are unwilling, or unable, to “grasp the hidden class inequalities perpetuated by their tastes” (Hill 2016, 60). While at the same time it is necessary to recognize that persons holding “unwittingly” conservative and choose “distinctive cultural preferences” are potentially not worthy of our condemnation (Hill 2016, 61), due to obscuring structural imperatives of capitalism and neoliberal discourses of entrepreneurialism and self-responsibilization. Naming and shaming a group of people will do little on its own to change these structures and opens resistance to gentrified moralistic consumption to be rendered as a reductionist argument focused on individuals and their “market” or “aesthetic choices”.

Conclusions

This paper has argued that the Vegandale branding projects utilizes a discourse of corporatized ethical entrepreneurialism and ethical consumption as a method of social awareness and change. In contrast, this analysis uncovers how Vegandale’s vision promotes a decontextualized vision of capitalism predicated on ethical consumption that ignores material and discursive inequalities both structurally and in the immediacy of space that it occupies. Indeed, Vegandale’s vision can be seen to represent “moralistic vegan branding [that] promotes a decontextualized, a historical, capitalistic version of veganism that does not take into account human suffering under industrial meat and dairy production” (Pawlak 2018, iii) and a form of “feel-good ethical entrepreneurialism which in fact does nothing to deal with underlying issues of structural inequalities” (Hyde 2014). However, consuming a moral imperative and sense of superiority is a key aspect to this subject formation and constant reproduction. The imperative drives the consumption further, and while the branding contains an ethos of being vegan in your whole life as opposed to just inside their walls, this does little for the performative and consumptive nature of the reproduction of the self. It is this reproduction of vegan capitalism through everyday consumption and practice, and the invisibilizing of the other human, race, and class-based exploitations of commodity chains and bodies under neoliberalism and globalizing capitalism, that reifies the myth of moral superiority that Vegandale claims and markets as emancipatory.

It is also made clear that there is a necessity to move beyond gauging the tastes of “gentrifying creative classes” (Slater 2006), and more work must be done beyond creating a snapshot of Vegandale’s discursive moralizing project and physical incursion into the space of Parkdale. There is much space for building upon the limitations of the research in this article and engaging with political agency and articulating resistance to gentrification (Lees 2008), which activates a far greater praxis within scholarship to produce research in conjunction with those resisting on the ground (Mazer and Rankin 2011). Understanding how resistance continues moving forward is key to complementing the purposes of the research in this article.

A development in March (and the following months) of 2019 led to the opening of a new snack bar and restaurant in the former location of Doonies (owned by the 5700 Inc.), cloaked with advertising that is designed to be anti-Vegandale. This property was purchased from the 5700 Inc. by IST Snackbar (Figure 5), a company that aims to provide both vegan and non-vegan Indian food. Its relationship to Vegandale is unclear (the owner of the new restaurant denies any affiliation with Vegandale) (Carlberg, 2019; Ngabo, 2019); at the very least, it appears to be a reaction predicated on consumption to the moralistic consumption practices of Vegandale, and ends up trapped in the same gentrifying cycle where differing forms of consumption lay moralistic claims to virtuosity and emancipation.

This brings questions in moving forward in Parkdale: is the mantle of resistance to moralistic consumption to be replaced by a counter-moralizing corporatized claim of emancipation and inclusivity? Will gentrifying corporations take heed from moralizing sentiments of “social justice” and “emancipatory” from discourses like that of Vegandale,

and further use them to attempt to paint a progressive veneer over the material realities of gentrification and the exploitations of capitalism? Neoliberal discourse and its grounding in these moralizing forms of consumption potentially brings a new, or at least politically reworked, variety of progressive and emancipatory veneer to the fundamental contradictions of capitalism. Research moving forward will do well to focus on these developing trends in major metropolitan areas that are the focus of both heavy gentrification and instituting the conditions necessary for the neoliberal creative city.

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Notes

¹ Also articulated through a case study of Parkdale.

² Can be conceptually related to the “creative class” conceptualization popularized by Richard Florida in the 2000s (2006, 2010) and his later work lamenting how urban crisis is affecting “affordability” and the “middle class” (2017).

³ The Gardiner Expressway is the major thoroughway to reach Downtown Toronto from west of the city (notably from multiple large-scale suburb-based commuter cities within the Greater Toronto area, ie. Mississauga, Oakville, Burlington).

⁴ The Imperative, a lifestyle and clothing boutique, and Mythology, a diner.

⁵ A large amount of Ontario craft beer is vegan.

⁶ Their principle of non-violence for all beings seems predicated on a narrow view of violence as being the act of causing physical harm or death. This fails to address other violences that exist far beyond a reductionist view of violence as physicality, or a process in which one subject directly commits a physical act against another. It is due to this assumption that the violences inherent to capitalism and its exploitations are made invisible. In the specific case of PETA’s vegan capitalistic discourse around vegan consumerism as “peaceful, non-violent, and cruelty free”, Harper argues that this is “contingent upon racialized human exploitation (coloniality)” and that we should move toward a conceptualization of violence that can take these more distant and abstracted factors into account, allowing us to “include the harm of failing to interrogate the lenses through which we see – lenses that simultaneously make visible and obscure” (2013, 49).

⁷ While it says the products are sourced “sustainably from China”, it gives no actual detail on what sustainable means. It seems likely that it does not include a high quality of workplace conditions, and certainly does not entail a fair distribution of wealth between workers and ownership.

⁸ What makes this corporate title “vegan”, I am unsure of.

⁹ In addition to this, many of their online supporters (who are also active participants in the 13,000-member Facebook group called “Toronto Vegans” took to Facebook to attack the vegetarian orientation (note: not fully vegan) of one of those customers that got sick. Utilizing language that can be rooted as symbiotically related to the moralizing discourse of Vegandale’s branding, multiple people told this person that she was an immoral person, an “animal eater” and some threatened her and her kids lives, including one who told her to “go drink bleach”(Sing 2018). Again, this leads to critical questions regarding emancipatory and inclusive for whom.



Figure 5

Retail-based display (March 2019) targeting the development of Vegandale-related projects in Parkdale

Photo: Jess Baumung

¹⁰ One example very indicative of this was PETA's Animal Liberation campaign, which compared the enslavement of black bodies to that of the animal farming industry. Harris argues that predominantly white (and white-lead) organizations utilizing institutionalized racism as a comparison for the treatment of livestock animals in the US is explicitly inappropriate and racist (Harper 2013, 13).

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