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Lisa and Phoebe, Lone Vegetarian Icons: At Odds with Television's Carnonormativity

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Lisa and Phoebe, Lone Vegetarian Icons: At Odds with Television's Carnonormativity

By Carrie P. Freeman



The best thing the animal rights movement has going on American television is Lisa Simpson, at least from my perspective as a vegan, a critical animal studies scholar, and a frequent viewer of American TV for many decades. Lisa's character has been advocating for progressive causes (to help human and nonhuman animals) since *The Simpsons'* premier in 1989. And since she decided to stop eating animals in 1995, she's the longest-running and most prominent vegetarian character in American TV history.¹ And I would count Phoebe Buffay (played by actress Lisa Kudrow) on the hit NBC sitcom *Friends* as the second-most prominent vegetarian character, as she avoided animal meat for the bulk of the decade that series aired, from 1994 - 2004.² These clever, independent, and progressive female TV characters stand out as they stand up for animals in a sea of carnonormativity.

For vegetarians and anyone who cares about the rights and interests of nonhuman animals, watching television can be a frustrating and alienating experience, reminding you how at odds your beliefs are with mainstream cultural practice. You see frequent commercials for seafood restaurant buffets and family-size buckets of fried chickens, body parts being fileted and sautéed on cooking shows, leather bags and jackets for sale on QVC, deer being bagged on outdoor channels, gastronomes reveling in eating grotesque parts and exotic species on reality TV, and news stories that largely ignore nonhuman animal issues, discussing farmed animals primarily as economic commodities or public health concerns.³

Television is reflecting (and reinforcing) the routineness of animal oppression in American society, as agribusiness breeds and slaughters over nine billion land animals every year (not counting the millions who die at hatcheries, factory farms, and in transit due to being ill, injured, or discarded), and the fishing industry captures and kills double that amount of sea creatures (plus many more “bycatch” individuals accidentally killed in nets but not meant for consumption).⁴ For most Americans, eating these animals is a cultural choice and habit rather than a biological requirement, as plant-based diets have been shown to be nutritionally adequate and often healthier in terms of disease prevention and longevity.⁵ Yet current polling estimates only 3% of the U.S. population is actually vegetarian (abstaining from animal flesh) and 1% is vegan (abstaining from all animal products), equating to somewhere between six and twelve million vegans and vegetarians.⁶ But up to a third of Americans, while not strict vegetarians, say they are eating meatless meals a significant amount of the time.⁷ This is a hopeful trend not just for animals and human health, but also for the environment, as the earth cannot continue to sustain a growing human population of animal-eaters, since raising animals for flesh, dairy and eggs is significantly more resource-intensive and polluting than growing plant-based crops.⁸ In an era of climate change, peak energy, freshwater shortages, and mass extinction of species, a paradigm shift to a plant-based diet has become an ecological imperative.

This raises the question as to how much television programming is aiding this socially and ecologically responsible shift toward vegetarianism. Yet studies of television, like the programming itself, are anthropocentric, often emphasizing gender, race, and class bias while ignoring species bias.⁹ This suggests a need to study the media’s portrayal of nonhuman animals and their relationship with humans, especially scholarship critical of humanity’s systematic oppression of nonhuman animals. In this article, I examine how human privilege operates by studying the characterization of ethical vegetarianism as an alternative lifestyle and comedic fodder in primetime television. The rebellious dietary choices of Lisa on *The Simpsons* and Phoebe on *Friends* provide an opportunity to analyze the construction of animal rights identities and how that is perceived and negotiated by the meat-eating mainstream. I articulate how, and to what extent, these smart and strong¹⁰ vegetarian females serve as a challenge to the hegemony of carnism, an ideology that normalizes the practice of using and consuming certain animal others.¹¹

To set the context for this critical television analysis of carnism, I begin by explaining ethical philosophy on why nonhuman animals matter, why that means we shouldn’t farm or kill them, and why we still do, despite our psychological discomfort with causing them harm. I establish the cultural importance of television as a site of cultivation and social learning, especially what it teaches us about ourselves in relation to food and farmed animals. Then I share the findings of my analysis of how comedic themes around vegetarians in *The Simpsons* and *Friends* function to both reinforce and challenge carnism. I end with suggestions for ways that television programming can be fairer to fellow animals and less carnionormative.

Animal Ethics, Vegetarianism, and Television

In the 1970’s, ethics philosophers began to articulate the moral relevancy of nonhuman animals based on their sentience, consciousness, and subjectivity.¹² If other animals are also feeling, thinking, social beings with a desire to live, this calls into question the basis of human entitlement to discriminate against them as “inferiors.” Peter Singer labeled that bias “speciesism,” an oppressive system comparable to sexism and racism.¹³ As it is unfair to

objectify humans subjects by enslaving or using them as mere resources, animal rights philosophy asks for moral consistency in applying this logic to respect other sentient animals. According to this logic, breeding and farming anyone for food items is an unjust, objectifying practice, as is hunting/fishing/killing anyone (unless done for sheer survival).¹⁴ Yet American society has largely accepted the practice of mass farming and fishing of certain nonhuman animal species (e.g.: pigs not dogs, tuna not dolphins), and an entrenched animal industrial complex has legally and economically integrated the habitual sale and consumption of animal products firmly into American culture.¹⁵

Psychologist Melanie Joy examined *why* humans do not tend to ethically question this unnecessary violence against fellow sentient beings.¹⁶ While most people might like to perceive meat-eating as merely a dietary *behavior*, Joy coined the term “carnism” to foreground and label the entrenched *ideology* that perpetuates and excuses this violent behavior. She calls meat-eaters *carnists* rather than *carnivores* or *omnivores* because, for most of us in America, eating animals is a “philosophical choice” based on an accepted belief system, not primarily a “biological constitution” or necessity.¹⁷ Society justifies carnism through its construction of meat-eating as “normal, natural, and necessary.”¹⁸ Eating animals becomes a taken-for granted, naturalized social norm as the majority of society puts it into daily practice. Social norms are constructed prescriptions that show us how our culture expects us to behave: “norms keep us in line by rewarding conformity and punishing us if we stray off course.”¹⁹ The social, psychological and physical *invisibility* of violence (in this case, cruelty and killing of farmed animals) is key to its social acceptance as a norm.

Joy explained that this violent carnistic system is on shaky moral ground as it is “riddled with absurdities, inconsistencies, and paradox” and thus requires a “complex network of defenses.”²⁰ These psychological defenses include a cognitive trio: 1) *objectifying* sentient farmed animals as things, 2) *deindividualizing* the animals whom we eat so they aren’t known as unique individuals or friends, and 3) *dichotomizing* animals into categories such as inedible/edible or sensitive/senseless to justify eating certain species and sparing others (including ourselves). The media (particularly the news media) represent one of the main institutions that legitimizes carnism. Joy claimed, “media fail to challenge the system and support carnistic defenses: they maintain the invisibility of the system and reinforce the justifications for eating meat.”²¹

Considering the pervasiveness of television in Americans’ daily lives, it is an influential and predominant source of cultural production rather than being merely just a source of entertainment. Cultivation analysis reveals that, over time, television, as a “common symbolic environment,”²² has a mainstreaming effect on heavy viewers, nudging their beliefs closer to the cultural norm and television’s version of social reality—a view that tends to conform to status quo power structures, fostering acquiescence rather than resistance. And social cognitive theory also supports television’s influence, as viewers may model behaviors they often see rewarded and reinforced on television and begin to identify with favorite characters. While television should be socially responsible, considering its impact, corporate-owned media are beholden to commercial interests more so than ethical or social imperatives.²³ That doesn’t lend itself to a heavy support of environmental and animal rights values and issues that could be viewed as threatening to “free-market” capitalistic growth and pursuit of profit, especially restaurant and food advertisers. Pro-environmental and pro-animal topics are therefore more likely to be symbolically annihilated in a commercial media system, giving viewers the impression they are a low sociopolitical priority.²⁴

The dominant way of viewing animals and food is through an anthropocentric and carnistic lens, so television generally reflects this carnism. ²⁵ Likewise, most people portrayed on television are assumed to be carnists by default unless proven otherwise. A cursory view of the television menu reveals that carnism is normalized through meat's emphasis without controversy or apology in popular genres, such as meat-centric cooking and culinary shows, hunting and fishing shows, and ubiquitous food and restaurant advertisements selling meat, egg, and dairy products. In particular, meat is associated with hedonistic pleasure and heterosexual masculine identity in fast food advertising. ²⁶ Ecofeminists parallel the commercial objectification of nonhuman "food" animals with that of human female bodies—both as pleasurable objects of male consumption. ²⁷ Generally, commercial meat messages visually emphasize animals as objects disassociated from their former existence as a living subject. ²⁸ Objectification of farmed animals is also common in American news coverage, as reporting tends to focus on farmed animals as economic commodities, considering them en masse rather than as individuals, and without considering their perspective and interests in stories that affect them. While some news stories supported farmed animal welfare reform ("happy meats"), a focus on animal rights (a vegan stance) was more infrequent. ²⁹ A UK study found the news failed to frame veganism as a legitimate challenge to speciesism, describing the news as "vegaphobic" in its tendency to represent vegans in more derogatory ways as ascetic, sentimental, or extreme. ³⁰

Methodology: Sampling Vegetarianism

Television is too vast a text to do a comprehensive examination of an ideology as pervasive as carnism, so as a qualitative researcher who goes for depth not breadth, I am focusing on a less common representation—vegetarianism—as a vehicle for revealing carnistic norms. Vegetarianism could be examined in a variety of television formats—those rare vegetarian cooking shows, soy product advertisements, or vegetarian reality show participants (whose diet is useful as a dramatic tool for conflict-building), but I thought it would be most productive to examine recurring vegetarian characters in fictional entertainment. There is a small cadre of these characters, including: Darlene from *Roseanne* (1988-1997), Angela from *The Office* (2005-2013), Rachel from *Glee* (2009-present), and Spock from *Star Trek* (1966-1969). But keeping significance and manageability in mind, I chose to study the most prominent long-time vegetarian characters in popular primetime shows, Lisa from *The Simpsons* and Phoebe from *Friends*, as these animal-inspired vegetarian icons have been in America's living rooms for almost two decades (especially considering the shows' syndication).

The Simpsons (1989-present), winner of a Peabody award and over 25 Emmy awards, is a Fox animated half-hour situation comedy created by Matt Groening that is now the longest-running scripted TV show in history. ³¹ Its subversive humor centers on a "dysfunctional" American family of five living in the fictional town of Springfield. The brainy eight-year old daughter Lisa Simpson is voiced by Emmy-winner Yeardley Smith. *Friends* (1994-2004), winner of seven Emmy awards, is a popular NBC half-hour situation comedy developed by Marta Crane and David Kauffman starring six friends (in their mid 20s through mid 30s) living and working in New York City. ³² Lisa Kudrow won an Emmy and an American Comedy Award for her portrayal as Phoebe. ³³ As a fan I have watched many seasons of these shows over the years, but to create a more focused and manageable sample for study, I selected only the episodes where food, particularly the characters' vegetarianism, was either a major or minor theme (seven episodes of *The Simpsons* and six episodes of *Friends*). Among my sample,

vegetarianism usually turned out to be a minor theme consisting of a conversation or just a one-liner. But it became a major theme once on *Friends*, in the 1998 episode, “The One with the Fake Party” in which Phoebe’s pregnancy had her craving and eventually eating meat,³⁴ and three times on *The Simpsons*, in the following episodes: “Lisa the Vegetarian” (when a petting zoo lamb inspires her to go vegetarian in 1995),³⁵ “Apocalypse Cow” (when the family rescues Bart’s 4-H cow in 2008),³⁶ and “Penny-Wiseguys” (when anemic Lisa temporarily adds insects to her diet in 2012).³⁷ As it is the richest episode, “Lisa the Vegetarian” will get significant attention in my analysis. The director’s commentary for this episode explained that it won a Genesis award from the Humane Society of the U.S. and an Environmental Media Award and is the favorite episode of executive producer David Mirkin, an animal advocate and vegetarian, who had to promise Paul McCartney to make Lisa a permanent vegetarian character (as part of McCartney’s agreement to star in the episode).

My main research question is: In what ways does the presence of vegetarians on these comedy shows serve to challenge and/or to reinforce carnism? I will examine this through comparing and contrasting the comic portrayals of:

- Vegetarian characters versus carnistic characters in their food-based interactions,
- Plant-based versus animal-based foods/diets, and
- Similarities and distinctions between Lisa and Phoebe in the social dynamic of each respective show.

Because I am studying the television genre of situation comedies, the philosopher Henri Bergson’s theory of laughter is useful, particularly two of his primary concepts.³⁸ First, he viewed laughter as a form of social corrective, used to nudge an eccentric person back into conformity. If people are out of line, yet not in illegal ways that justify imprisonment, laughter is used as a social tool of isolation to nudge the outsider to voluntarily rejoin the group norm. Second, difference itself is amusing, especially if it puts a character at an extreme, such as too rigid and inflexible (in body or mind) at one end of the spectrum, and too loose and elastic (in body or mind) at the other end. For example, a “rigid” person with uptight morals or mechanical movements is funny, as is a “loose” person with lax morals or clumsy movements.

This critical discourse analysis is informed by my critical perspective on speciesism, and is more specifically guided by the theoretical frameworks of Bergson’s theory of laughter, Joy’s psychological theory of carnism, and, to a lesser extent, the media’s social cognitive theory. This means I’ll highlight concepts such as use of comic extremes to contrast character traits, laughter/ridicule as a social corrective, the pressure to conform with social norms, psychological defense mechanisms and justifications for meat-eating, and audience identification with characters.

Tasting the Sample: Analysis & Findings

Use of Comic Extremes

Both Lisa and Phoebe possess similar likeable traits, making them admirable characters in some senses (e.g.: they are ethical, smart, strong, caring, reliable, honest, independent, feminist, and musical). But their animal-rights inspired vegetarianism is something that places them at a potentially amusing dietary and ideological extreme from a mainstream carnistic society. Despite

some similarities between these two committed vegetarians, I don't actually see them on the same end of Bergson's comic elasticity spectrum; Lisa is portrayed at the *rigid* extreme (as her righteous indignation, uptight over-achieving tendencies, and strident advocacy for causes make her a goody-goody) and Phoebe is portrayed more at the *loose* extreme (as her new age beliefs make her more free-spirited and open and often make her appear flaky, goofy, weird, or naively-idealistic). While both vegetarian characters are seen as idealistic, Phoebe's idealism is portrayed as cultural to who she is as a "hippie" type (it's more personal, almost an essentialized personality based on her unorthodox upbringing), while Lisa's idealism is portrayed as progressive and activist (it's more public—a political choice). Some sense of moral judgment toward carnism is implied by Phoebe, who will gladly explain her principled personal choice not to eat animals ("no food with a face"³⁹ and "meat is murder"⁴⁰), but she doesn't campaign for vegetarianism nor seem to expect any friends to go veg, unlike Lisa. Principal Skinner called Lisa an "agitator" after her criticism of meat-based school lunches and worm dissection set off the school's "independent thought alarm."⁴¹ Lisa actively tries to convert people to causes like vegetarianism. For example, in "Lisa the Vegetarian" she told everyone how she realized that killing and eating animals is wrong and expects others, especially her family, to be similarly enlightened (an amusing naivety that soon fades). In the "Apocalypse Cow" episode she tries to convert Bart to vegetarianism by hiding a CD of cow mooing sounds in his bedroom to make him think his 4-H pet cow, Lou, who he raised but reluctantly had to send to slaughter, was talking to him in his sleep.

Lisa's conversion tactics face resistance, serving as comic fodder. In the episode where Lisa went vegetarian,⁴² she tries to bring Springfield residents along with her, but the community uses ridicule and laughter to try to embarrass Lisa back into conformity, which is how Bergson says laughter works as a social corrective.⁴³ But what *The Simpsons'* producers meant to be humorous here isn't so much Lisa's different behavior/ideas (although her initial optimism is amusing) as much as the town's ignorant and unreasonable resistance to her reasonable ideas. In this way, *The Simpsons'* producers are using laughter as a way to ridicule morally inconsistent *social norms* rather than just encourage continued carnistic conformity. For example, Lisa's classmates laughed at her vegetarianism on two occasions using childish taunts such as "are you gonna marry a carrot?" and also repeating back the insults verbatim that they learned in a meat council marketing film that Principal Skinner showed to combat Lisa's dissent (there, her classmates called her "crazy" and a "grade A moron"). These particular examples make Lisa appear smarter and more of a critical-thinker than the other children, as they prove her point that they have been "brainwashed by corporate propaganda." While the adults don't tend to take the juvenile approach of outright laughing at Lisa (except when she suggests friends and neighbors eat tomato soup at the BBQ), all authority figures in her life (and meat marketing messages pervasive around town) demonstrate overwhelming resistance or at least a lack of support for her ideological stance (such as her dad giving her the silent treatment the next day after she ruins his BBQ). Considering Bergsonian notion of amusing extremes,⁴⁴ both Lisa as vegetarian and other characters as carnists can be viewed as extremely *rigid*, but in different senses—Lisa in her strident indignation and everyone else in their close-minded defense of their dietary habits. The community's pressuring tactics work to make Lisa feel isolated in her vegetarianism; exasperated, she finally exclaims "The whole world wants me to eat meat! I can't fight it anymore!" and deliberately, yet reluctantly, bites into a hotdog. But just then, vegans Apu and Paul and Linda McCartney become the adult mentors and role models she needed to remain

consistent to her cause. In addition she finds out Apu's hotdogs at Kwik-E-Mart are tofu-dogs, unbeknownst to any carnistic customers who eat them.

When it comes to laughter as a social corrective in *Friends*, laughter is often used to keep *the audience* conforming to carnism. Phoebe's circle of friends does not attempt to ridicule *her* into carnistic conformity, probably because Phoebe is not actively trying to convert them (so she doesn't face the resistance that activist Lisa does). Phoebe's main group (with the possible exception of dim-witted Joey) are portrayed as normal, respectable, mainstream characters who affectionately laugh (along with the largely-carnistic audience) at her quaint eccentricities; her friends snicker behind her back or through gestures to each other, such as eye rolling, meant to reinforce to themselves (and hence to the audience) that it's obvious to everyone except Phoebe that carnism is legitimate and her ideology is weird. We tolerate Phoebe's eccentricities because she's just being her uniquely authentic self. She can't help it; it's somewhat endearing and amusing. But in this way, I would say the audience is not encouraged to emulate Phoebe (unless they want to identify as "hippie") because she is not often socially rewarded for her vegetarianism and it is part of what makes her somewhat odd. So overall, laughter fails to function in *Friends* like it often does in *The Simpsons* to ethically critique social norms of meat-eating, as *Friends* could be seen as ethically legitimizing carnism by emphasizing its normalcy among good people (which highlights the unorthodoxy of Phoebe's Bohemian choice to eschew meat).

The contrast created by extremes in *The Simpsons* helps make Lisa's vegetarianism more overtly ethical or "right" than the way Phoebe's vegetarianism is more neutrally presented in *Friends* as the personal or cultural choice of a flower child. Because Phoebe's friends are more tolerant of her vegetarianism, and they themselves (while each possessing their own quirks/vices) aren't buffoons or fatally flawed, the diets and beliefs of the carnistic characters on *Friends* do not come across as wrong-headed, foolish, or ethically-hypocritical. Consider the fact that, once in an early episode during a fight with Phoebe, Monica gloated that she had lied to Phoebe about the pâté being vegetarian. Although Monica displayed blatant disrespect for Phoebe's ethical beliefs, the show's producers framed it so that we, like Monica, find this trick more amusing than reprehensible, indicating eating animals really isn't the serious offense, or unappetizing experience, that Phoebe believes it is.⁴⁵

When it comes to the *The Simpsons*, however, Homer and almost all the authority figures are generally self-centered, somewhat idiotic, and largely ineffectual. Because the social dynamic represents such a strong contrast between Lisa as the smart, committed, caring vegetarian and almost everyone else as somewhat shallow and unreflective meat-eaters, it makes Lisa's animal-friendly stance seem *right* and ethically preferable (even if we might make fun of her activism). Her moral wisdom is especially apparent when contrasted with Homer, as an extreme example of moral apathy. For instance, in Lisa's moment of vegetarian epiphany, when she realizes she can't eat the lambchops at dinner because she envisions them falling off the body of the lamb she met at the petting zoo, Homer ignorantly reassures her "This is lamb, not *a* lamb"—nonsensically disassociating the meat product from the living species. A few sentences later he further proves his ignorance about animals used for food, as Lisa has to inform him that bacon, ham, and porkchops all come from the same animal. He laughs "Yeah, right, Lisa, a wonderful 'magical' animal."⁴⁶

In Ann Marie Todd's eco-focused rhetorical analysis of *The Simpsons*, she agreed that Lisa and Homer represent "extremes of dietary conflict" with both being equally intolerant of the other (until the resolution of the "Lisa the Vegetarian" episode).⁴⁷ Lisa's character represents the

“environmental ethic of caring for non-human creatures”⁴⁸ as opposed to Homer’s character who represents humanity’s self-centered and thoughtless exploitation of others. Similar to my assessment, Todd agreed that Lisa’s vegetarian stance is meant to appear as morally right, saying “she represents a moral center to the show, which enables her to reveal the irony of her father’s anthropocentric actions.”⁴⁹

The Moderate Lacto-Ovo Vegetarian

There are times when Lisa and Phoebe are portrayed as less extreme, and thus more sympathetic, relatable characters. They can appear more moderate because they *do* eat some animal products (dairy and eggs) and haven’t ventured as far as veganism. The vegan comparison isn’t highlighted in *Friends*, but in *The Simpsons*, veganism is shown as more hard-core. For example, Lisa’s crush, Jesse, a teen eco-activist, condescendingly tells her vegetarianism is “a start” making her a “poser,” whereas he is a Level 5 Vegan and “won’t eat anything that casts a shadow.”⁵⁰ His nonsensical position (which in theory would include not even eating plants) makes the audience sympathize with Lisa’s meat-free diet as a reasonable compromise for an animal advocate. Hyperbole is again used to express the extremism of vegan ideology when Lisa compared herself to another vegan, Apu, and told Apu he must think she’s a “monster” because she eats cheese. Apu admits he does think that, but his tolerance keeps him from “badgering” people.⁵¹

Phoebe’s moderate side is seen not so much in comparison to veganism, but in her flexibility to be a team-player with carnists. Not only does she not mind being around animal flesh while hanging out with her friends, once she is shown eagerly partaking in the turkey “wishbone” ritual of breaking the bird’s bone, saying of vegetarians, “Just because we don’t eat the meat, doesn’t mean we don’t like to play with the carcasses.”⁵² And once, Phoebe was even willing to eat meat to fit in with her boyfriend’s snobby, disapproving parents who were serving veal at the group’s first introduction.⁵³ This demonstrates that Phoebe was “reasonable” enough to rank love (or at least social conformity) above her unconventional principles in this one significant instance. But *Friends*’ producers characterize her veal-eating as a big compromise when Phoebe’s overly-obliging, sarcastic commentary highlights the ethical controversy that *should* reasonably exist over eating babies: “That’s okay. I am a vegetarian except for veal. Yeah, no, veal I love. It’s any baby animals—kittens, fish babies, especially veal!” But Phoebe gets to remain meat-free in the end because, after only one bite, her nausea forces her to throw it up.

Portrayal of Meat Versus Vegetarian Foods

Neither *Friends* nor *The Simpsons* is for or against meat completely. Overall, meat-based diets and plant-based diets are portrayed in ways that are both positive and negative (see Table).

| DIETS | POSITIVE PORTRAYAL | NEGATIVE PORTRAYAL |
|-------------|---|--|
| PLANT-BASED | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More ethical • Healthier in many respects | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lacking in taste • Lacking in some nutrients (potentially protein and iron) |
| MEAT-BASED | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More impressive in taste and stature • Contains protein and iron • Popular and normal to American culture | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on violence/suffering • Can be gross • Often unhealthy |

Animal Meat

Meat is definitely portrayed as pervasive and central to the average American's diet, and quite essential to celebrate special occasions. For example, to celebrate Ross's birthday, Monica brought "five steaks and an eggplant for Phoebe" (which highlights vegetarians as different from the group norm).⁵⁴ And to celebrate Monica's promotion, the *Friends* characters, besides Phoebe, all order various meat-based dishes when they go out to dinner (except a financially-strapped Rachel who ordered a side salad because it was cheaper, so this vegetarian option appears less preferable),⁵⁵ and Phoebe's friends don't order vegetarian dishes even for her own birthday celebration.⁵⁶ Dinnertime at the Simpsons' house appears to be meat-centered with plant-based side dishes, and when Homer threw a party (in the "Lisa the Vegetarian" episode), he made it a BBQ. When Lisa objected, he informed her that "all normal people love meat . . . I'm trying to impress people." And then he and the family conducted a conga line dance in front of Lisa, repeatedly chanting "you don't win friends with salad! You don't win friends with salad! . . ." When Lisa then tried to interrupt Homer's meat-grilling at the BBQ by announcing "Good news everyone! You don't have to eat meat! I made enough gazpacho for all!" she was laughed out of the yard, with one guy yelling "Go back to Russia"—the ridiculousness of which indicates that labeling vegetarians as un-American is hyperbolic. Relegating meat-free entrees to a lower status, the party-goers let the dog eat the gazpacho.

Part of why meat "impresses people" is because it is portrayed as being *tastier* food, especially on *The Simpsons*. Homer is always salivating over bacon, and Bart, when once considering vegetarianism, said "it's not my fault there's nothing good to eat on this planet except meat!"⁵⁷ Homer described a portabella mushroom he was eating as a "rubbery fungus-like steak,"⁵⁸ and Chandler told Phoebe that "soyburgers suck."⁵⁹ Even Lisa once admitted her diet was "bland."⁶⁰ Veggie options can be seen as deficient, such as when the school lunch lady served Lisa an empty hotdog bun as her entree, sarcastically saying it was "filled with bunly goodness."⁶¹ On the other hand, sometimes producers portray certain animal meats as grotesque and unappetizing, such as the gray intestine-shaped tripe served once at Springfield Elementary⁶² and the insect smorgasbord at the "Springfield Insectivorian Society" (maggot stew, mug 'o slugs, and windshield casserole).⁶³

The healthfulness of meat-based diets is called into question at times when *The Simpsons*' characters are shown gluttonously stuffing themselves, such as at Homer's BBQ (especially the overweight, bloated, and immobilized police chief).⁶⁴ And when Marge surprisingly concluded that the family would be healthier if they moved vegetables from side

dish to main entree, the whole family, besides Lisa, ironically got sick off of the vegetarian meal Marge made from organic local produce.⁶⁵ Lisa blamed their poor immune systems, explaining “your bodies are so used to processed food. It’s a shock when you eat vegetables full of vitamins, minerals, and trace amounts of bug feces.”

Veggie Foods

Yet there are times that a *plant-based* diet is implied to be nutritionally insufficient, and these health issues caused identity crises for Lisa and Phoebe when they both made the hard decision to go back to eating animals for a limited time. For Lisa it was when she fainted due to anemia.⁶⁶ Marge was hoping she’d have to stop being vegetarian, but the doctor conceded that Lisa could just take humongous iron supplement pills. Lisa hated the pills and was talked into eating insects by the lunch lady who reasoned that we all already end up eating spiders in our sleep and bug parts in our peanut butter, therefore some vegetarians decided it was morally acceptable to eat insects (and Lisa herself wondered if they were really animals). Soon Lisa realized that was a slippery moral slope when she considered eating shrimp too. And when grasshoppers in her dreams told her they feel pain, she knew she couldn’t eat bugs anymore, so she was a vegetarian again by the end of the episode (without any more references to anemia).

Phoebe started eating animals to succumb to her pregnancy cravings and was thus able to blame it on someone else—the baby—saying “the baby wants me to eat meat.”⁶⁷ She couldn’t trick the baby with a soyburger, so she started eating Chandler’s meat sandwich, claiming “I can’t help it. I need the meat. The baby needs the meat!” After downing a whole steak off the bone, she frustratingly told Joey that if she eats meat for the next six months of her pregnancy she’d be eating “like a million cows.” So Joey makes a sacrifice for a friend and offers to stop eating meat during her pregnancy “so no extra animals would die. You’d be eating *my* animals.” Phoebe gladly takes him up on the offer and eats all types of meats with gusto during her pregnancy, giving the impression that meat-free diets don’t provide enough prenatal nutrients and that vegetarians would relish eating animal flesh if they could find a moral justification for it.

Carnistic Doubts

But moral issues arise for carnist characters on the shows too, as they occasionally acknowledge that meat involves suffering, or at least, death. It appears these characters are conflicted when it comes to meat, as they want to eat it but do not want to know the individual who it’s from (especially if they are friends) or to see the slaughtering. For example, Joey does not think about *who* he is eating, as he is fine eating chicken but not “birds.” When he finds out emu are birds, he ignorantly says “people don’t eat birds?! What, would they fly into our mouths?! What, would you order a big bucket of fried birds or their wings? . . . Wait. [pause] Oh!”⁶⁸ Our feathered friends get more attention on *Friends* with the recurring theme of Chandler and Joey keeping a duck and a chicken for pets. The guys never consider eating these particular birds since they become part of the family, yet they do still eat other ducks and chickens as “poultry.” The Simpsons don’t eat their pets either, but, granted, dogs and cats are not seen as “edible” species in American carnistic culture. As mentioned earlier, Bart briefly considered going vegetarian once.⁶⁹ He said he’d never eat meat again if he could save his 4H cow Lou from slaughter, but then a few sentences later admitted the death of unknown animals was a lower priority by saying

“Sorry, Lisa. I can’t be vegetarian. I love the taste of death. But please help me get my cow back.” During Lou’s rescue, some hippie animal rights activists used the secret signals “Milk is murder” and “Cheese is genocide” to emphasize killing in the dairy industry. Later in the same episode, Homer heroically disguised himself in a cow costume to impersonate Lou, and he himself ended up getting taken to the slaughterhouse. Homer was shaken up by his near death experience and came to this nonsensical revelation: “The things I saw! It makes me never want to eat meat again! . . . Just fish, chicken, burgers, veal on Fridays, deer, but only in season, and, if necessary, the sweetest meat of all—human.” Lisa patronizingly considered this a victory where her dad was concerned. Homer *did* express an animal rights sentiment in the “Lisa the Treehugger” episode, conceding that animals want to control and retain ownership of their own bodies by exclaiming, “I knew this day would come. The cows are taking back what’s their’s!” This was his initial concerned response to seeing “cows” holding the protest sign “Krusty Burger = Earth Murder,” before he realized they were actually human activists in costume.

Taking a Stab at Beef

Probably the best satirical critique on meat’s violence comes during the meat council propaganda video that Principal Skinner shows the class to try to get Lisa from forcing vegetarian lunch options on the school.⁷⁰ In it, cowboy Troy McClure takes little Jimmy on an educational trip from the “high density cattle feedlot” to “the killing floor” to show him how meat goes from ranch to stomach. The audience can’t see the killing and butchering; we just hear the screams and stunning and thuds repeatedly and then steaks fall onto a truck at the other end. Jimmy comes out shocked, shivering, and nauseated while Troy obliviously asks “Getting hungry, Jimmy?” The humor here emphasizes that slaughter is obviously an *unappetizing* experience. Jimmy then asks (on behalf of a “crazy friend”) if it is wrong to eat meat, and Troy informs him that his crazy friend is ignorant of the food chain (a chart where all nonhuman animals point to a human man in the middle). Then he scares Jimmy with more absurd science by dramatically claiming, “If a cow ever got the chance, he’d eat you and everyone you ever cared about.” It ends with Jimmy realizing you are a “grade A moron” if you question eating meat (with the pun further trivializing the seriousness of the killing). Because the film’s rationales for meat-eating were so poor and the violence too scary to stomach, *The Simpsons*’ producers made a clear statement that the ethical controversy over meat is warranted yet silenced by those in power.

Conclusions about Carnonormativity

Lisa and Phoebe live in a carnonormative social world where their ethical vegetarian stance represents a nonconformity that is tolerated by the community but not emulated or encouraged. Going against the grain puts these herbivores at comic extremes, exposing them to ridicule by the group at times. While Lisa and Phoebe are generally strong enough to withstand this peer pressure, the lesson viewers may take away is that vegetarianism is ultimately more isolating or socially challenging than it is rewarding, living up to Homer’s contention that “you don’t win friends with salad.” This is especially true with Phoebe’s character, as her vegetarianism is one of the traits that brands her as kooky and laughable, allowing the audience to dismiss her political stances. Rockler’s feminist analysis of *Friends* noted:

When *Friends* does present political issues, it does so through its most marginalized character [Phoebe], and in ways that mock and undercut these issues. Although she seems to believe that the personal is political, Phoebe's function is not to raise consciousness about issues, but rather to encourage viewers to laugh at them."⁷¹

Lisa's character, on the other hand, is less often the butt of the jokes (based on her vegetarianism, at least) and more often a vehicle for revealing the paradoxes of carnism, making the apathy, hypocrisy, or hedonism of carnists appear humorous. I also find it productive that Lisa's and Phoebe's rationales for vegetarianism are based on a prohibition against killing animals rather than just a protest against the poor welfare conditions on modern farms, as this resists the temptation for vegetarians to start eating so-called "happy meats" and shows a respect for animals' right to life.

While the treatment of vegetarianism on *Friends*' and *The Simpsons*' does challenge carnism in some ways, I believe that, ultimately, carnism is more often reinforced. The shows reinforce Joy's three traits of carnism by portraying meat as "normal, natural, and necessary."⁷² The first two traits are the most prominent, as, based on the shows' limited number of vegetarian characters, this dietary choice is clearly portrayed as an *alternative* to the norm and not necessarily a growing trend or ideal goal for everyone. The shows reflect the reality that the typical American vegetarian is likely to be a young, white, middle-class, atheist female,⁷³ but this portrayal risks stereotyping vegetarians and limiting the ideology's appeal to a diverse audience, especially males. The meat-masculinity connection is largely upheld,⁷⁴ as the one vegetarian male on either show, Apu, an Indian Hindu, is a minor "outsider" character overshadowed by the main male characters' hedonistic adoration of meat.

Related to Joy's⁷⁵ third carnistic trait, the shows don't frequently emphasize meat as nutritionally "necessary" because Phoebe and Lisa prove you can generally thrive without it, but there are times where their meat-free diet is portrayed as insufficient. In this way, a vegetarian diet is implied to be more *emotionally* satisfying to Lisa and Phoebe (by living their values) than it is *physically* satisfying (especially considering their cravings for meat and flavor at times).

The Simpsons and *Friends* do sometimes break through Joy's "cognitive trio"⁷⁶ of psychological defenses when they show farmed animal subjectivity and individuality. Lisa tends to envision the animals talking to her and actually sees the meat as belonging to someone—as animated portions of individuals' bodies. And even carnist characters individualize certain farmed animals with whom they have bonded, wanting to spare them from slaughter, even though these same carnists will routinely and willingly eat the body parts of other members of those species. Because the violence toward these other animals is widely accepted as a social norm, and their identities and suffering is concealed, carnism's moral inconsistency remains unexamined and its hypocrisy unspoken by the majority. In this way the shows perpetuate Joy's last psychological defense, dichotomization, as the carnist characters view humans as separate from (and more important than) other animals and put certain species in categories of edible/inedible based on cultural norms (ex: eat pigs and fish but don't eat cats and dogs, nor anyone you know personally).⁷⁷ This exemplifies the carnistic paradox Joy discussed, where carnists *know* their meat was someone but can avoid acknowledging this uncomfortable truth by maintaining a mental and physical distance from the live animals and the slaughterhouse. Vegetarian characters like Lisa and Phoebe disrupt this distance, not only through verbalizing that meat is murder, but also through visibly eschewing meat products, making every meal serve as both dietary protest and evidence of vegetarianism's viability.

Ultimately, the shows promote a moral relativism where a pluralistic society “agrees to disagree” and tolerates a diversity of dietary practices. In some sense, this cultural harmony sounds ideal, but it serves to excuse carnism by portraying it as a popular and democratic cultural choice rather than as an oppressive system that warrants moral justifications. Instead, it is the (mainly female) characters who reject this complicity toward animal violence and must defend their nonconformity and be tolerated by the mainstream, similar to how vegetarianism is tolerated in pluralistic American society. But in many ways, the carnist characters reveal they share many of the same compassionate values toward nonhuman animal life, and it’s only the invisibility, ignorance, and normalcy of this systemic violence that enables their continued complicity.

For television to be a less carnonormative environment in the future, the programming would need to portray a wider range of vegetarian and vegan characters, especially males, who remain contently animal-free for life and serve as role models who inspire their friends and family to reduce and eliminate flesh, eggs, and animal milk in their daily meals. If television incorporated more vegan characters and living animals commonly used for human food, it could provoke themes where the community acknowledges or debates the moral inconsistencies around breeding, killing, and eating other sentient beings. And if vegans were shown to be more common and mainstream and not at comic extremes of militancy or goofiness, it would make their ethical stance more appetizing and keep them from being perceived as the odd (wo)man out.

Vegan-friendly television programming seems more economically-viable, and therefore more feasible, airing on public or non-commercial entertainment venues, as they are not dependent on animal industrial complex advertising revenues. New media outlets available through the internet and consumer-driven content may also offer innovative opportunities to overcome the hegemony of carnonormative culture. One could argue that as long as carnism is the mainstream ideology and practice in American culture, television is bound to reflect this reality; this provokes “chicken and egg” (pun-intended) questions about whether our society is ever going to overcome its sense of separation from (and superiority over) the animal kingdom if we do not see a more humble and respectful humanity modeled on television—our main cultural storyteller. I think directional influence cannot be all chicken or all egg, so animal and environmental advocates must continue to push for legal and cultural reform to make veganism more socially viable and popular, while media consumers must urge media producers to see nonhuman animals as worthy of socially-responsible representation. I’d like to envision a television culture where only characters who don’t at least question our moral right to consume fellow animals come across as “grade A morons.”

NOTES

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9. While no comprehensive studies prove this, a cursory review of television and media studies' textbooks and academic journals reveals the focus is on human social justice rather than on fairness toward nonhuman animals in representation/content.
10. As a Mensa member and A student, Lisa is more clearly portrayed as intelligent and brainy, while Phoebe may not be perceived as intelligent by all viewers (although smarter than *Friends*

co-stars Joey and perhaps Rachel). Phoebe is more street smart, while Lisa is more book smart. I argue that, although Phoebe is spacey and silly much of the time, she is also a confident, problem-solving survivalist who is headstrong in her beliefs, displaying an underlying sense of cleverness and strength.

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21. Joy, *An Introduction to Carnism*, 103.

22. George Gerbner et al., "Living with Television: The Dynamics of the Cultivation Process," in *Perspectives on Media Effects*, ed. Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann (Hillsdale, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1986), 17.

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36. Nancy Kruse, "Apocalypse Cow," *The Simpsons* (Fox, April 27, 2008).
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