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“Sausage-Wielding Extremists”: Meat, Masculinity, and Nationalism in Tbilisi’s Kiwi Café

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Abstract:

Owners of the Kiwi Café in Tbilisi, Georgia opened with the goal of raising awareness of alternative ways of eating and consuming. The non-profit community vegan café, formerly located in Tbilisi’s Old Town, was the first of its kind. This popular social meeting space and site of counterculture espouses progressive causes such as environmentalism, animal rights, and equality. These issues often divide public opinion in Georgia. Veganism itself in Georgia remains peripheral, as is vegetarianism in Eastern Europe as a whole. As such, the Kiwi Café represents a harbinger of change: a symbol of encroaching westernization and liberalization. After just a year in business, more than a dozen “sausage-wielding extremists” stormed the café in an act of intimidation, bearing strings of sausages round their necks and carrying slabs of meat on skewers. A scuffle ensued after the men began throwing chunks of meat and fish onto patrons’ plates. Employees identified the men as members of “Georgian Power,” which is part of a larger far-right, ultra-nationalist movement championing “traditional values” (social conservatism) under the banner of “Georgians For Georgia.” Presented through an (eco)feminist perspective, this paper explores how gastronomy becomes a manifestation of disputed identities, nation building, ideological conflict, and cultural division. Examining the 2016 incident at the Kiwi Café demonstrates how food nationalism symbolically links meat consumption and dietary hierarchies with hegemonic masculinities and contested constructions of the nation within the geopolitical imagination of postcommunist Georgia.

Keywords:

Veganism, food nationalism, homophobia, masculinity, Georgia

Biographical Note:

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Sausage-Wielding Extremists Attack the Kiwi Café

In May 2016 when I was in Georgia conducting fieldwork for my dissertation, roughly a dozen men described as wearing sausages on their necks and carrying meat on skewers attacked restaurant customers and staff at the Kiwi Café, located in Tbilisi's Old Town. During a screening of Adult Swim's sci-fi sitcom, *Rick and Morty*, patrons were pelted and bludgeoned with grilled meat, sausages, and fish (Synovitz 2016; Guarino 2016; Lomsadze 2016a; "Tbilisi Vegan Cafe Appeal over Meat-Wielding 'Extremists'" 2016). This carnivore-vs.-vegan scuffle proceeded to spill onto the street. Joining in the brawl, neighbors yelled that the cafe's customers and staff were "punks' who were 'not Georgian' and 'had no respect for traditional values" (Rollet 2016). Minor injuries were reported. The attackers fled before police arrived and no arrests were made. Multiple eyewitness accounts reported that the police not only blamed the café staff for what happened but found the incident comical (Woolf 2016). A statement issued on May 30 through the Kiwi Cafe's Facebook page described the incident as "an antivegan provocative action" ("Kiwi Vegan Café" 2021). Although the assailants were never officially identified, the attackers have been widely characterized as "neo-Nazis" and "sausage-wielding" nationalist extremists.

The Kiwi Café opened on July 4, 2015 and was the first vegan café in the Republic of Georgia. With a logo of a kiwi (animal) riding a bicycle with kiwi (fruit) wheels, the vegan bistro offers a menu consisting of Middle Eastern, Indian, Asian, and Mexican inspired dishes (Rimple 2018). Pro-animal-rights slogans such as "Meat's not green" and "Animal testing breaks hearts," formerly appeared on the lime-colored façade of what VICE News described as a "hipster enclave in the city" (Rollet 2016). The café's Facebook page advertises that they are "Where people who care about animals, social issues and the environment can meet, share ideas and find solutions together, or 'simply enjoy a great meal.'" Beyond being a restaurant that promotes vegan food, the café describes itself as a free social meeting space, "where you or your organization who are working on important changes in the society, can arrange events, educational programs, workshops, etc." ("Kiwi Vegan Café" 2021; "Interview with the Co-Founder of Kiwi Vegan Café – the First Vegan Place in Tbilisi" 2018). The venue is home to a book club, movie screening nights and even a language exchange group. Moreover, their Facebook page showcases images and messages about animals and quotes, which reinforce their solidarity with social and environmental justice causes. Evidence of the business's social activism can be viewed in their support of Bolt Food's striking couriers during the pandemic, World Animal Day, International Women's Day, and a recent Climate Strike in 2019.

When the Kiwi Café first opened, mostly foreigners were customers, though local patronage has increased with time. Overall, the owners generally believed they had received positive reactions from locals; however, a few incidents foreshadowed the meaty attack that occurred in May 2016 (Földi 2018; Lomsadze 2016a). For example, some reports recall an incident one month before the attack, when a group came by asking whether foreigners or members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community frequented the café. After the incident, the embattled vegan café began looking for a new location after complaints from the landlord and neighbors (DFWatch staff 2016; Rimple 2018). Since then, the café has moved from its original location to 6 Ivane Machabeli St. in Sololaki, where you can still find it today.

The incident grabbed international headlines from the BBC to BuzzFeed (“Tbilisi Vegan Cafe Appeal over Meat-Wielding ‘Extremists’” 2016; Brown 2016). This prompted me to ask why all the vitriol over vegan food? In the space below, I respond to this question by providing a reading of the May 2016 incident at the Kiwi Café through an ecofeminist perspective. Doing so examines how the small café on a backstreet just off Liberty Square came to represent a harbinger of change: a symbol of encroaching westernization and liberalization. The paper explores how gastronomy became a manifestation of disputed identities, nation building, ideological conflict, and cultural division. Examining the incident demonstrates how food nationalism symbolically links meat consumption and dietary hierarchies with hegemonic masculinities and contested constructions of the nation within the geopolitical imagination of Georgia.

An Ecofeminist Framework Understanding Food Nationalism

Reading the Kiwi Café incident through an ecofeminist perspective is essential to taking seriously the relationship between food and nationalism in the study of politics (Ichijo and Ranta 2016; Long 2021; Ichijo 2020). As applied here, food nationalism, also referred to as culinary nationalism or gastronationalism, relates most closely to Ichijo’s (2020, 215) description of the concept as “a tool for investigation as to what meaning is attached to food in a particular country as an expression of nationalism.” This is informed by the work of authors writing in the early 2010s such as Michaela DeSoucey (2010, 433), who described gastronationalism as signaling “the use of food production, distribution, and consumption to demarcate and sustain the emotive power of national attachment, as well as the use of national sentiments to produce and market food.”

As exemplified with this case study, food is not only life sustaining, but deeply symbolic, emotive, and imbued with meanings. As Ichijo and Ranta (2016, 164) explain in *Food, National Identity and Nationalism: From Everyday to Global Politics*, “Food features prominently in politics: in defining the problems that are important for a society.” While there have been numerous noteworthy studies related to food nationalisms in Eurasia, food nationalism and gastronationalism remain under development (Caldwell 2002; Rosenberger 2007; Polese et al. 2020; Mincyte 2011; Klumbyté 2010). Moreover, even less attention has been given to the gendered dimensions of this conversation. Therefore, an ecofeminist perspective not just reveals connections between the axes of food-and-nationalism, but also gender-and-environment. Like feminist attention to other forms of banal nationalism (particularly in political geography), an (eco)feminist approach to food nationalism especially emphasizes epistemology and asserting the connections between the smallest and most intimate spaces everyday life with the more abstract ideas of national politics (Billig 1995; Christian, Dowler, and Cuomo 2016; Militz and Schurr 2016; Koch and Paasi 2016; Hearn and Antonsich 2018).

Ecofeminist philosophy broadly rests upon a dynamic set of political theories that sees how oppressions are interconnected. Emerging out of the 1970s alongside first wave feminism, anti-nuclear proliferation, and green political activism, the field sought to draw attention to gendered human perceptions of nature as well as gendered material and sociocultural links to the

environment, which have varied over place and time and among cultures. In viewing the environment as a feminist issue, the movement has been closely aligned with the work of animal liberation scholars and activists (G. C. Gaard 1993; Singer 1975; Plumwood 1993; Merchant 1989). Multiple strands of ecofeminist thought have evolved as the field has matured. This has included the highly criticized cultural ecofeminism, which reclaims women-nature connections as liberating and empowering expressions of women's capabilities to care for nature, as well as social and materialist (or socialist) ecofeminism (Plumwood 1993; G. Gaard 2011). Although not a unified philosophy, these latter categories draw on social constructivism and making visible the interconnections among various forms of human (e.g., sexism, racism, classism, heterosexism, ethnocentrism) and nonhuman oppression through an ethic of care. This drives an effort to radically critique, disrupt, and dismantle systems of oppression and domination, including masculinist hierarchies, patriarchal privilege, and even speciesism (Isaacs and Otruba 2021). As applied to this paper, I work from the burgeoning intersections of vegan ecofeminism and queer (ecology) theory concerned with the sexual politics of veganism (G. Gaard 1997; Morton 2010; Simonsen 2012; G. Gaard 2002; Calvert 2014; Adams 2000; Cudworth 2010; Sumpter 2015). This framework is used to construct an analysis that seeks to explain the gendering of food; how meat consumption is linked to the symbolic and messy constructions and performances of heteronormativity, hegemonic masculinity, and nationalism in Georgia.

Queering Veganism: Far Right Nationalism, Homophobia, and Anti-Genderism in Georgia

Why attack the Kiwi Café and why in this manner? In a broad sense, it might be helpful to begin from the premise that veganism generally represents a threat to the status quo and these types of cultural changes make people anxious. As Lomsadze (2016a) writes, “The Kiwi Café incident underscores Georgia’s emergence as a frontline state in a broad, regional culture clash that pits Russia, which casts itself as the defender ‘traditional’ values, against the European Union and United States as the proponents of Western values.” The attack at the café closely followed a Georgian ultra-nationalistic movement march days before, bearing the infamous slogan, “Georgians for Georgia.” Many accounts of the Kiwi Café incident identify the attackers as part of groups called “Bergman” and Kartuli Dzala (“Georgian Force” or “Georgian Power”). However, Lomsadze (2016b) reports that Georgian Power denied any involvement in the incident, maintaining on its Facebook page that “Forcing meat upon vegetarians is not our priority.” There may be some truth to this, as Lomsadze uncovers in a later interview with one of the attackers at a “war-themed den of Georgian nationalism” called Military Bar. In his interview, Lomsadze learns that the attack was retaliation for vandalism caused to the bar by a man named “Aaron,” who was believed to be the bartender at Kiwi Café. In the end, it turns out that this “Aaron” was merely just a regular customer. Nonetheless, the symbolism of the incident is still worth analysis. For onlookers, the incident still performs a kind of ultra-nationalist, xenophobic, and homophobic violence. This is especially salient when you put the incident in context with an episode just months later, when another group of men, presumably men of Kartuli Dzala, marched down Agmashenebeli Avenue and broke into Turkish cafes and restaurants shouting nationalist slogans (Badasyan 2016). Whether intentional or not, the hostility towards these cafes links gastronomy to violence committed in the name of a particular vision of Georgian nationalism.

Over the past several years, right-wing extremists have begun to proliferate in Georgia and their visibility has noticeably increased alongside LGBTQI activism. This has seemingly occurred in the political space and polarization that followed the departure of the United National Movement (UNM) as the ruling party to the Georgian Dream in 2012 (Gelashvili 2019). These extremist groups come in the form of political parties, NGOs, and informal groups. They are characterized by holding anti-constitutional and anti-democratic attitudes and generally unified by misogyny, racism, homophobia, and anti-immigration. Some noteworthy groups include Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, the Georgian March, and the National Unity of Georgia. Human rights activists and movements, including the LGBTQI movement, are among the major targets of these organizations (Beria 2020).

Here it is necessary to discuss the queering of veganism in this incident and the association forged between homophobia and veganism by far right nationalists. While this European Union (EU) and NATO aspirant has ranked far higher than its neighbors on attitudes towards LGBTQI people, the former Soviet Republic remains rife with anti-gay discrimination and is generally hostile toward other subcultures, religious and ethnic minorities, and foreign nationals (especially those from Asian and African countries) (Chitanava et al. 2019). Despite their own “sense of themselves as one of the world’s most tolerant peoples,” Elkabidze (2008, 39) argues “thrives the idea that Georgians are the country’s ‘hosts’ (or owners) and all other peoples are ‘guests’, and that hosts and guests should behave accordingly. She explains further, that “Georgians’ notion of their own tolerance betrays a perceptible sense of forbearance and a certain condescension towards those (as it were, ‘less worthy’) who are ‘tolerated’.” This is not only important to understanding Georgia’s protracted conflicts with the Abkhazians and South Ossetians but helps to unpack the relationship between vegan politics and queer politics in this incident. Here we see how the far-right lumps together vegans and others with “alternative lifestyles” such as punks, goths, gays and even immigrants. Veganism as queerness is part of a series of groups that are deemed non-native, “alien” and unwelcome Western cultural imports, which threaten the order of things. This occurs because just as queerness disrupts heteronormativity and other normative constructions of gender, veganism upends the normativity of eating animals in an overwhelmingly meat-eating society.

Homosexuality is a divisive issue in Georgia and was not legalized in Georgia until a decade after Soviet collapse. After 2000, closer European integration and adoption of a Western model of human rights led to the adoption of more liberal and progressive laws, including a range of anti-discrimination laws banning discrimination based on gender identity and hate crime laws for sexual orientation. However, most of these have been criticized for their problematic enactment and efficacy. As Anna Rekhviashvili argues, queer activism in Georgia “must be understood in the context of the country’s geopolitical history.” She discusses the development of LGBTQI knowledge and activism out of the political and economic conditions of social fragmentation in the 1990s and the investment in developing civil society with the backing of Western support. It was not until the period before 2010-2012, when Georgian politics were again in upheaval, when LGBTQI activists began to “create noise,” especially through a series of street demonstrations. As she describes, it was precisely this increased visibility that triggered the countermobilization of extremist, right-wing groups, including the Georgian Orthodox Church. As an illustration, the

first pride parade was met with counter-protests led by the Georgian Orthodox Church, who continues to hold “family purity day” rallies each year on the same days at the UN-sponsored International Day Against Homophobia. As “Family [Purity] Day” has grown in popularity in recent years, many Pride events have been canceled. Other incidents drawing international attention abound. This ranges from recurring acts of vandalism against the Tbilisi Pride office to the protests in 2019 by about 500 men, who tried to force their way into a cinema in Tbilisi's city center to disrupt the screening of the Swedish-Georgian production about gay love, *And Then We Danced*. It can also be seen in the backlash against Georgian footballer, Guram Kashia, who wore a rainbow armband for National Coming Out Day in the Netherlands (Crosby 2017; Lomsadze 2019; Beria 2020; OC Media 2019).

Georgia remains a socially conservative place. Although it has changed significantly as the country bounds toward democratization, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender identities and practices are generally not accepted or tolerated in Georgian society (Aslanova, Badasyna, and Shahnazaryan 2016). This has been highly influenced by, among others, views expressed by the Georgian Orthodox Church. Homophobia and negative attitudes toward homosexuals remain widespread in Georgia. This is widely documented by the Ombudsman and organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Tbilisi Pride, and ILGA-Europe. For example, the ILGA-Europe “Rainbow Europe 2020” map and index, which looks at equality for LGBTI people, gave Georgia a 30%, falling in the bottom third. The Rainbow Map and Index ranks 49 European countries on their respective legal and policy practices for LGBTI people, from 0-100% (“Rainbow Europe 2020” 2020). A 2015/2016 Pew Research Center survey on acceptance of homosexuality in East Europe also found that Georgia ranked as one of the least tolerant with 93% of respondents saying homosexuality should not be accepted by society (Gilbreath 2020). Moreover, a 2019 survey by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) asked two questions proxying homophobia. The first asked whether people would approve of someone like them doing business with a homosexual. The second question then asked people to name the group they would least like to have as neighbors from a list of difference groups that included homosexuals, criminals, people of different religion, and people with different political views, drug addicts, and foreigners. The results showed that nearly nine in ten people (87%) would disapprove of a person like doing business with a homosexual, while 24% of those surveyed said they would least like a homosexual as a neighbor among groups asked about. Further analysis of the results showed that those that held more tolerant views toward homosexuals included people in Tbilisi, ethnic Georgians those with more education, women, people in wealthier households, and younger people. In an NDI/CRRC poll, 38% of young people ages 18-35 said that protecting the rights of ‘sexual minorities’ was important with 36% saying it was not, while 21% answered that they were neutral on the question. Those outside of Tbilisi, men, and ethnic minorities are more likely to express homophobic attitudes (Gilbreath 2020; Mestvirishvili et al. 2017)

Discrimination and violence against queer people remain widespread in the South Caucasus nation even as the practice of discrimination against sexual orientation is illegal. Homophobia not only drives prejudices, which has led to social exclusion, but hate crimes are common and many have experienced homo/transphobic violence. Notable cases against transgender persons include: Sabi Beriani, who was stabbed and set ablaze in 2014; Zizi Shekeladze, whose throat was slashed in the fall of 2016; and another woman, Bianka Shigurova, who died of gas poisoning in her apartment (Lula 2021). Just as I was writing this paper OC Media published an

article describing a lesbian couple, who were “spat at, threatened with a knife, and subjected to homophobic slurs near their home” in Saburtalo District (Kinchā 2021).

Homophobic violence coincides with what many regard as the increased visibility and organization of far-right groups. Advocates of “traditional” values in Georgia – including nationalists and social conservatives – are becoming increasingly vocal. Scaling up the attack allies it within the “traditionalism” of the Russian imperial project and situates it within the growing anti-genderism movement across Eastern Europe and Eurasia. Following decades of steady progress in terms of gender and sexual rights, many parts of Europe are facing resistance to “gender ideology” and “gender theory,” which are blamed for destabilizing the traditional family and the natural order of society (Hovhannisyān, n.d.; Čepo 2018). This opposition to progressive gender equality is manifested in challenges to marriage equality, abortion, gender mainstreaming, sex education, transgender rights, antidiscrimination policies and even just the notion of gender itself. Prominent examples have emerged alongside right-wing populist movements and democratic backsliding in Poland over abortion rights, Austria and immigration, and even Russia over domestic violence. One important explanation for Georgian far-right mobilizations might be that they are a part of the transnational far-right network. I argue that gastronomy therefore offers another realm or dimension for considering this important regional trend.

Meat, Masculinity, and Nationalism

The relationship between food and identity is not a new one: beyond the dinner table, social scientists have long studied the role of gastronomy in cultural identity. As the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai defined it, food is a ‘highly condensed social fact’. In the words of Lévi-Strauss, food can be compared to language in its power to express social structures and cultural systems. Therefore, basically, the story of a nation’s diet is the story of a nation itself, its episodes of colonialism and migration, trade and exploration. Food is a symbol of cultural exchange, but most importantly, cultural integrity.

-Post Pravda Magazine, 2017

But why has veganism provoked such hate in this case and in a much broader global sense? In a café just off Stalin’s Square in Gori, a fellow researcher and I found ourselves sharing a meal with two friends. My colleague, who is also from the US, is vegetarian. After ordering potato khinkali, our friends jokingly asserted that those are not “khinkali.” Khinkali are typically a kind of meat-filled dumpling. Aside from khachapuri, khinkali serves as a *de facto* national symbol of Georgia. Having since heard this joke numerous times, it resounds as a powerfully mundane illustration of the important role of meat within Georgian culinary tradition. Nonetheless, I continue to react to this sentiment as journalist Andrew Wrobel does in his recounting of a time he tried to order a soy cappuccino from popular coffee shop chain, Coffeesta, on Rustaveli Avenue. He explains, “How is it possible that Georgia, whose cuisine offers a wide range of vegan options, especially in the Christmas and Easter fasting periods, is so devoid of plant-based milk and vegan-friendly cafes and restaurants?”

Like other cultures around the world, Georgians cultivate and symbolically express nationalist

sentiments through their food choices. There is incredible national pride tied to gastronomy in Georgia from the mineral waters of Borjomi and Sairme and the ancient and diverse viniculture, to the regional interpretations of the cheesy bread dish, khachapuri. Several studies have made important advances at establishing the national significance of Georgian hospitality and food (Costanza Curro 2020; 2014; Constanza Curro 2020; Goldstein 2018; Nodia 2014; Muehlfried 2008; Manning 2014). As an article in Post Prava Magazine (“You Are What You Eat: Food Is Nationalism In The Caucasus” 2017) explains,

National identities are expressed and maintained through dietary choices. However, when national identities and territorial integrity are contested, the food you eat becomes a tool for political and historical assertion. The dinner tables in the Caucasus, a region of ancient historical heritage, but also highly disputed territories and identity clashes, are the epitome of such food wars.

As a convenient tool for bringing populations together, food wars extend far beyond the table to exemplify battles of the territorial and national imagination. Such literature should be carefully put in conversation with those studies, which have emphasized gender regimes and the gendered ritualization of eating in Georgia. These have primarily been done through the lens of supra, which is a traditional feast, and analyses of the role of tamada, or toastmaster (Linderman 2011; Tsitsishvili 2006; Constanza Curro 2020). Doing so helps to bring in conversation Laura Linderman’s (2011) complex and reading of men and women’s performances during supra, which debates the “paragon of masculinity at the center,” and Ghia Nodia (2014) argument that supra is “the pinnacle of Georgian nativism.”

Ecofeminist perspectives are well suited to deconstruct the gendering of meat consumption within Georgian culinary traditions. Just as Lomsadze (2017) writes, “Georgia’s rich culinary tradition are the essential components of the country’s machismo national identity.” In fact, vegan ecofeminism, which is a more intersectional type of analysis, works to understand how the cultural construction of meat-eating as a form of patriarchal domination becomes aligned with a certain kind of conservative hegemonic masculinity. This is where the work of authors such as Carol J Adams (2000) and her book *The Sexual Politics of Meat* can be informative. Adams posits how veganism is the only logical solution to a social system that has reduced both women and animals to desirable, but disposable, flesh. Meat continues to hold primacy in cultures across the world—its consumption associated with prosperity and class position. Even in Georgia, there has cultural and economic significance to meat consumption, which has long been used as a primary measure of societal socio-economic progress. While I defer analysis on how Georgian women and animal liberation might be tied together for another time, the incident at the Kiwi Café does begin to expose how Georgian manhood and heteronormativity is co-constructed in part through the consumption of meat.

While meat eating is central to national imaginings, it is also important to the gender ideologies and regimes, as well as sexual hierarchies in Georgia. There is a growing field of gender studies in Georgian scholarship that explores gender roles and gender-based violence. Much of this literature, which includes a limited emphasis on masculinities, has centered on civil society/civic participation, migration, conflict-affected populations (e.g., IDPs), domestic violence, and social

fragmentation related to post-socialism and economic development (Kabachnik et al. 2013; Frederiksen 2011; 2013; Otruba, n.d.; Barkaia and Waterston 2017; Hofmann and Buckley 2013; Hofmann 2014; Torosyan, Gerber, and Goñalons-Pons 2016; Sumbadze 2008; Brun 2000; Regulska, Mitchnek, and Kabachnik 2018).

Food nationalism offers a fresh avenue for looking at power imbalances within the patriarchal gender regimes studied in these other places and contexts. The literature widely characterizes the prevailing gendered organization of Georgia as a “traditional” patriarchal society, often framed through the work of R.W. Connell (2005; 2005) and her contemporaries. Feminist theory generally understands the concept of patriarchy as referring to male-dominated power structures, i.e. the privileging of men, and those systems of beliefs and values that enforce an idea of proper relations between gender categories. Within this research, there is an emphasis on hegemonic masculinities within the domains of gender relations. Hegemonic masculinity centers on the practices that legitimize men’s dominant position in society vis-à-vis the subordination of other identity categories. The wielding and consumption of actual meat by attackers at the Kiwi Café is tied to masculinized political behavior and this imagining of what it means to be a man in Georgia. In general, the incident casts (queer) veganism in contrast with traditional values. As Abrahamyan, Mammadova, and Tskhvariashvili (2018, 54) explain in the context of gender norms and peacebuilding in the South Caucasus, “Traditional values here imply heteronormative, patriarchal, and nationalistic norms, which often rely on women taking on and maintaining acceptable feminine gender roles in relation to men, family structures, and the state apparatus.” While widespread prejudices about what is acceptable for women (and men) are entrenched in this case, a recent CRRC’s Caucasus Barometer survey, among other research, does indicate a restructuring of roles in society, moreover that some attitudes and gender norms are changing (Saldadze 2020; Corso 2014; Rakshit and Levtov 2020). It’s important to place this emphasis on queer veganism in relation these dynamic and shifting gender norms.

Veganism poses an imagined threat to patriarchal social ordering within Georgian society. This resembles Adams's (2000) theory on the sexual politics of meat linking feminism and vegetarianism. As with the MacInnis and Hodson’s (2017) research, what we see here is a relationship between anti-veganism and those with a rightwing background, who seek to uphold traditional gender values and who perceive something alarmingly subversive and worthy of derision in any person who prefers tofu to mtsvadi or ojakhuri. Ultimately, veganism represents both an environmental and social change that would upset the order of things—i.e. a social world which views heterosexual men as breadwinner and defender of the nation. In the story of the Kiwi Café, meat symbolically becomes the great protector of Georgian traditions. Meat becomes a weapon and emblem of resistance against the encroachments of progressivism and (contested) imaginings of what it really means to be Georgian (Koch 2021). What it means to be a good Georgian man is inflected by the consumption of animal flesh. This is illustrated in one account of the attack at the café, when a girl recalled one of the attackers yelling, “Aren’t you a Georgian? How can you not eat the meat?” (DFWatch staff 2016).

Yet I would be remiss if I did not mention one of the fascinating and messy twists within the greater story of food nationalism in Georgia. This is perhaps tangential, but it is worth mentioning recent recognitions of the feminist undertones of Georgian food. This has been

epitomized by the story of Barbare Jorjadze, for whom the upscale Barbarestan restaurant is named. As Lauren Collins (2019) writes in *The New Yorker*, “Young Georgian women today are less interested in her [Jorjadze] arguments than in the fact that she had the courage to make them.” The 19th century woman and daughter of Prince Davit Eristavi, Barbare Jorjadze, is credited as the country’s “first feminist,” though she is most known for her famous cookbook, *Georgian Cuisine and Tried Housekeeping Notes*. The book is recognized as being foundational to some of today’s most coveted dishes, such as satsivi, and has been a key tool in reclaiming forgotten flavors in the wake of the Soviet Union’s homogenizing influence. While her cookbook can easily be read as another “a patriotic endeavor,” Jorjadze’s disciple, chef, and restaurateur, Tekuna Gachechiladze, argues that Jorjadze was in fact the queen of Georgian fusion cuisine. Gachechilidze claims, “She wanted Georgians to keep an open mind about what’s going on food-wise around the world, to preserve the tradition, but also to be receptive to new ideas.” Considering the story of Jorjadze, Collins importantly recognizes, “Even the most venerable cuisines are not static.” Jorjadze has especially inspired not just those in Tbilisi’s food world, but it has enshrined the idea of equality as part of Georgian history rather than a Western important. This upholds or supports a competing national imagining of a multiethnic, “modernizing” and “westernizing” Georgia. As for how this relates to the veganism in Georgia, the point requires further exploration. However, I hope it helps to complicate the lively and competing, simultaneously operating and evolving visions of femininity/masculinity and Georgian food nationalism that are represented Kiwi Café or even Military Bar.

Veganism as a New Frontier to the Culture War in Georgia and Beyond

Intolerance toward diversity in Georgia can perhaps be attributed to fears that the small country, both young and ancient at the same time, is being diluted by globalization. Since it gained its independence from the USSR twenty-five years ago, dogmatism has been on the rise in Georgia in everything from religion to social norms and food. But this tidal pull of conservatism is confronted by a no less powerful urge to explore and innovate.

-Giorgi Lomsadze, 2016

The incident at the Kiwi Café in May 2016 is not an isolated incident. Like the rise of right-wing extremism and anti-genderism in Eastern Europe and Eurasia, food nationalism and anti-veganism should be placed within larger regional and global contexts. For example, much controversy has surrounded the mandate by the National Front in France to include pork within school meals, explicitly disregarding Muslims, Jews, and presumably, vegetarians (Moffat and Gendron 2019). As this example demonstrates, the National Front is communicating that those who won’t adopt its vision of French culture don’t belong in France. Deploying a cuisine is a way of asserting and imposing identity, which means that it is an important to the processes of inclusion and exclusion.

As authors Cara MacInnis and Gordon Hodson (2017) have shown in their research, vegans are viewed more negatively than atheists, immigrants, homosexuals, and asexuals in many contexts. On a global scale, escalating enmity toward vegans is also tied up in an intense environmental politics built based on arguments that eating less meat would ultimately be better for the environment and climate. This is premised on findings that meat-heavy food production is one of

the largest sources of environmental degradation. In the ecofeminist movement, veganism was recognized not just as pursuit of a diet so much as an ideology that rejected not just animal protein but also the way animals had become part of an industrial supply chain. In the West, some de-stigmatization of veganism has been accomplished through more approachable language and advertising, using terms such as “plant-based.” However, veganism still faces considerable backlash from commercial agriculture and the “Big Meat” industry. Moreover, food is expressive of identity and therefore diet choices tend to be intricately linked with morality and ideology. Even Kiwi co-founder Soroush Negahdari explained in an interview in the *Georgian Journal* (“Interview with the Co-Founder of Kiwi Vegan Café – the First Vegan Place in Tbilisi” 2018), “We knew that expats and tourists would like the place, but I think the main goal was to serve Georgian people and make them more familiar with and aware of the concepts of animal rights, veganism, and environmental issues related to them.” In the case of Georgia, it’s perhaps less about veganism and environmentalism per se than the way vegan wars are a proxy for other types of politics, such as animosity over LGBTQI rights. This is where an ecofeminist reading of this incident is so helpful for understanding this as an intersectional issue.

As such, this incident at the Kiwi Café provides a powerful case study about the alignment of meat, masculinity/heteronormativity, and nationalism in Georgia. The attack on the café represents a symbolic act of gender-based violence on Tbilisi’s counterculture and the perceived Western liberal values epitomized by the café. The episode is a symptom of cultural friction, calling attention to deep divides in public opinion over issues of environmentalism, animal ethics, and LGBTQ+ rights. Through an ecofeminist perspective, this paper has sought to show how gastronomy has become a new frontier in anti-genderism and the culture war in Georgia. Examining the 2016 incident at the Kiwi Café demonstrates how food nationalism symbolically links meat consumption and dietary hierarchies with hegemonic masculinities and contested constructions of the nation within the geopolitical imagination of postsocialist Georgia.

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