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Abstract

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[Review]

Annie Potts (ed). Meat Culture.

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***Abstract:** Annie Potts has curated a particularly strong and essential group of perspectives on ‘meat culture,’ described here as a coherent framework within which exist ‘a wide range of domains of production and consumption of animals.’ Meat Culture distinguishes itself in its clearheaded focus on the centrality of the misery and slaughter of animals without which the culture of eating meat would not exist.*

Annie Potts has curated a particularly strong and essential group of perspectives on ‘meat culture,’ a coherent framework containing ‘a wide range of domains of production and consumption of animals.’ *Meat Culture* distinguishes itself in its clearheaded focus on the centrality of the misery and slaughter of animals without which the culture of eating meat would not exist. Other edited books – John Sanbonmatsu’s excellent *Critical Theory and Animal Exploitation* comes to mind – have taken on the task of facing the political and cultural ramifications of the exploitation and slaughter of other animals. The present collection, while building on and advancing others’ work on the place of meat in Western societies, scrutinizes particular examples of ‘meat culture’ in each of its well-written and eye-opening chapters.

Potts’ introduction, while using statistics to reinforce our understanding of the vast slaughter and production of animals on which ‘meat culture’ is based, goes further in detailing the individual misery of captivity and violent deaths of the most exploited: pigs, chickens, cattle, and fish. The crucial impacts of linked human abuse of human workers in this industry, extensive environmental degradation, and negative effects on human health are also highlighted. Potts has chosen a wide range of scholars to showcase the realities of ‘meat culture’, a term that otherwise might have been diluted by more abstract and academic approaches. The authors included represent not only some of the best writers in Critical Animal Studies (CAS), but also include some of the more hard-hitting and nuanced explorers of their fields of knowledge. Sociology, philosophy, politics, economics, the arts and literature, law, ecofeminism, cultural studies, gender studies and activism are all represented.

Each chapter offers a unique perspective on how, where, and why the consumption of meat is a driving force in the cultural aspect at hand. While historical narratives have unpacked some of the pre-industrial and pre-globalization rationales for a carnivorous diet, the continuation of ‘carnism’ as an ideology in contemporary global culture deserves to be interrogated. As Potts so clearly articulates in the introductory chapter, ‘When an ideology is considered a universal truth, part of “mainstream” lives, the “normal” or “orthodox” way to view things as better than all other ways; when it becomes entrenched, it becomes invisible’ (19). What better way to disrupt that abject acceptance than to carefully and critically reveal the ruptures that lie beneath the dense surface.

For instance, in a footnote, Potts summarizes a study by fisheries scientist Bonhommeau and colleagues in which the human trophic level is analyzed as part of the global species food

chain. Using ecological synthetic metrics, species' trophic levels are ranked from 1 to 5, representing the continuum from 1 (primary producers such as plants and phytoplankton) to 5 (polar bears and killer whales). According to these metrics, the current Human Trophic Level is 2.21, the same position as pigs and anchoveta, placing humans 'closer to herbivore than carnivore.' Potts points out that despite this, 'there clearly remains a deep investment in the idea that we are mainly meat eaters' (19).

What are 'the beliefs, representations, discourses, practices and behaviors, diets and tastes' (19) that keep us tied so completely to a false image of the very substance of our human lives, as eaters of others? The essays included in *Meat Culture* each focus on what may seem, at first, narrow snippets of the larger issues at hand, but work effectively in untying us from that fundamental misunderstanding of our place on this planet. Their particularity in clarifying the how, where and whys of each example offers methods of taking the measure of what that place may entail.

The book is divided into three general sections. The first section both advances and materializes what is called the 'absent referent', a term originally from linguistics, but made a useful tool by Carol J. Adams to describe the intersections of feminism and animal rights. In her pioneering book, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, Adams (1990) describes the brutal process by which a living being becomes an 'absent referent' in this way:

Through butchering, animals become absent referents. Animals in name and body are made absent *as animals* for meat to exist... One does not eat meat without the death of an animal. Live animals are thus the absent referents in the concept of meat. The absent referent permits us to forget about the animals as an independent entity; it also enables us to resist efforts to make animals present. (66)

Adams argues this process also is played out in the degradation of women, people of color, and LGBTQI people: 'Through the structure of the absent referent, patriarchal values become institutionalized. Just as dead bodies are absent from our language about meat, in descriptions of cultural violence women are also often the absent referent' (67). As are immigrants, adherents of dissimilar religions, people with disabilities, and other maligned groups. The first three essays rely on this concept covertly. In 'Derrida and The Sexual Politics of Meat,' continental philosopher Matt Calarco and Adams dialogue the intricacies as well as the usefulness of

Derrida's concept of *carnephallogocentrism*. Derrida's inability to fulfill the usefulness of that phrase for the needs of animals or our relationships with them is evident in Calarco's comments. Importantly, both Adams and Calarco articulate an essential issue with excising the meat-eating portion of the neologism without addressing the latter section. Calarco points out this works to limit strategies helpful in furthering animal defense, and offers important questions concerning the usefulness of such intra- and inter-philosophical concepts in generating radical change across social (and I would add political) movements.

Karen Davis' 'The Provocative Elitism of "Personhood" of Nonhuman Creatures in Animal Advocacy Parlance and Polemics' investigates examples of how a logic-centric approach to animal personhood runs the risk of undermining the long term work it seeks to support. She takes to task projects such as the Great Ape Project and its work on extending rights to the great apes, as well as other legal and philosophical campaigns that focus on animals seen as higher on the scale of intelligence and as such, closer to the human. She argues that though these programs have their uses, animals should not be ranked, but rather appreciated as having intelligences appropriate for their species. She also critiques the comparison of animals to developmentally-challenged humans by philosophers, such as Peter Singer, or I might add, Temple Grandin. Davis has been a pioneer, similar to Adams, in bringing to light faulty thinking about those animals generally used for meat consumption. Davis has focused on chickens in her writing and her activist organization, United Poultry Concerns, started in 1990. Her clear-headed and compassionate essay offers an essential look at the intelligence, emotions, and individuality of the chickens slaughtered for meat, and as Potts notes earlier in the book their numbers already had reached 'a staggering 58 billion chickens' in 2011. Needless to say, that number is higher as I write this review.

The other two chapters in this first section, written by two teams of well-respected CAS theorists, tackle the absent referents in media exposés. The focus is on issues of meat contamination in Nik Taylor and Jordan McKenzie's 'Rotten to the Bone,' and cruelty in transport and slaughter in Jacqueline Dalziell and Dinesh Wadiwel's 'Live Exports, Animal Advocacy, Race, and Animal Nationalism.' Exposing underlying disturbing cultural assumptions in these Australian cases, both essays carefully deconstruct racist, ethnic, and nationalistic drivers behind public critiques of issues in meat production elsewhere while remaining blind to the cruelty and abuse at home. As Dalziell and Wadiwel point out, 'What does not get called

into question throughout this conversation over who kills “their” animals the “right way” is the fundamental question of why it is that humans have an unquestioned entitlement to kill animals...’ (85).

The second section of the book includes cultural representations of ‘meat culture’ both through advertising and marketing of meat products and opposing visions from the arts and activism. The first chapter on advertising and marketing in this section, Vasile Stănescu’s ‘Whopper Virgins: Hamburgers, Gender, and Xenophobia’, focuses on that most recognizable symbol of American meat culture: the hamburger. Stănescu’s writing is always appreciated in its lack of academic jargon and its precision in dredging up every single detail necessary for a complete argument, often against the various sectors of the ‘humane meat’ movement. Here he sets his sights on the admittedly non-humane meat industrial complex in Burger King. One of the poignant aspects of the chapter is Stănescu’s deep knowledge of one of the locations Burger King has chosen for its marketing campaign: Maramureș, Romania, his family’s homeland. Stănescu misses nothing in this formidable flaying of the marketing of meat in today’s global world

The second chapter in this section, Tobias Linné and Helena Pedersen’s ‘With Care for Cows and a Love for Milk: Affect and Performance in Swedish Dairy Industry Marketing Strategies,’ focuses on the product we steal from the mouths of baby calves: milk. Linné and Pedersen detail the painful contradictions in an inter-country marketing strategy that purportedly hopes to foster child-animal relationships based on knowing where their food comes from. Their suggestions for counter-education strategies are important contributions to the discussions around meat culture, and I am glad to see them included.

The next three chapters address the power of the arts combined with activism to shift thinking and practice. Melissa Boyde’s beautifully written and lovingly photographed meditation called ‘Peace, Quiet and Open Air: The Old Cow Project’ is offered not as an argument, but as a piece of personal and deeply felt understanding of the personal cost for animals who are caught in the misery of the abattoir. Its placement in the book offers a much needed pause for compassionate reflection on the lives at the center of ‘meat culture.’

Following this is Kristy Dunn’s ‘Do You Know Where the Light is? Factory Farming and Industrial Slaughter in Michel Faber’s *Under the Skin*’. When made into a 2013 film starring

Scarlett Johansson, reviews of the film often missed the connection to factory farming or were loathe to tackle it, but Dunn fully accepts the responsibility to reveal how this fictional narrative exposes and questions the most distressing aspects of meat production and slaughter: ‘*Under the Skin* is a prime example of the power of the fictional narrative to elucidate real-world ideologies, and is one of a number of contemporary novels to address and critique many of the contentious issues that exists with the reality of Western meat production and consumption’ (160). While Faber is not a vegetarian, though ‘having strong feelings’ about the overconsumption of animals, his book has a life of its own, as good art often does. Dunn helps us to see each choice made by Faber as contributing to this continuing strength as affective fiction.

Yvette Watt’s chapter ‘Down on the Farm: Why Do Artists Avoid “Farm” Animals as Subject Matter?’ investigates that question with empirical data. Watt uses surveys to ferret out what are embedded attitudes of contemporary visual artists towards animals they still eat as food. The fact that animals are playing a pivotal role in contemporary art at present makes this chapter important and essential reading for anyone in any discipline who is interested in changing the human relationship with animals.

Chapters 11, 12, and 13 probe what Potts refers to as ‘carnism’s “counter-culture”’: veganism. Matthew Cole and Kate Stewart tackle the illogic of the internationally popular BBC program, *Dr. Who* in ‘Why Isn’t the Doctor Vegan? The Irruption and Suppression of Vegan Ethics in *Dr. Who*.’ Based on the main character’s long-standing opposition and resistance to everything involving domination and exploitation, Cole and Stewart insist the Doctor of the classic series was vegetarian. Additionally, the non-human aspect of the Doctor himself and specifically his interspecies fight for justice point to inconsistencies in the present incarnation of the show. Cole and Stewart offer creative challenges to the show’s present authors in an argument for the ‘restoration and extension of the Doctor’s epiphanic 1985 conversion through the future veganization of the character’ (200).

Erika Cudworth, in her ‘On Ambivalence and Resistance: Carnism and Diet in Multi-species Households,’ tackles a thorny problem for guardians of companion animals: whether or not to feed these animals meat. I have long been an admirer of Cudworth’s use of primary research through interviews and how she often chooses topics others might be afraid to touch for fear of not emerging from the inconsistencies. Here, as in her other essays, Cudworth

dexterously teases out dissonance while keeping muddiness at bay. This is an excellent addition to the collection in its demonstration of just how overarching ‘meat culture’ may be.

Richard Twine’s work is always informative and thought-provoking, and this essay is no exception. In his chapter ‘Negotiating Social Relationships in the Transition to Vegan Eating Practices’, he confronts the social complexity of food transition. The question he asks to begin is: ‘How might we sociologically begin to approach the challenge of sustainable dietary change?’ This question is one of the most important in the book. It reiterates the concerns put forward in the chapter by Adams and Calarco concerning the problems of wanting ‘to remove the *carn*, but leave the *phallogocentric* subject undisturbed’ (50). This chapter offers the most practical of answers complete with thoughts on obstacles along the way. Things change in what seems the smallest of ways, in the daily lives of each individual, but those small changes add up to larger cultural changes.

The book ends with Greta Gaard’s elegantly written and researched reflection on what the inclusion of plants into the circle of eco-feminist compassion might offer to a more full participation in ‘the cycles of planetary life.’ Rather than reacting to the emerging area of plant studies as a threat to the CAS vegan position, Gaard pulls on a wide range of eco-feminist positions as well as indigenous knowledge to attempt to bridge the divide that still views plants as outside the circle of ethical care.

Meat Culture is a fascinating and provocative book, one that will resonate in multiple academic circles for some time to come.

Works Cited

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