

# CONSUMING FLESH: THE BIOPOLITICS OF BEEF CONSUMPTION

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## ABSTRACT

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(Under the direction of Lawrence Grossberg)

This dissertation explores contemporary cultural politics via the optic of beef consumption. Drawing from the work of Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, Bruno Latour and Jacques Derrida, I examine the discursive conditions that both normalize and pathologize the consumption of animal flesh in terms of what resonates as natural, good or ethical consumption, what is considered marginal or fringe, and what is regarded as unethical, unnatural or unhealthy. My interest is how discourses surrounding the health and ethics of flesh consumption articulate with broader regulatory regimes. I focus on beef because of its centrality in North American diets. Beef has recently become the target of health and environmental concerns, in part due to the emergence of vegetarianism as well as animal rights organizations that are calling contemporary agricultural and gastronomic practices into question. Beef is also a salient trade and political issue with recent outbreaks of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (mad cow disease), a fatal disease that can cross the species divide from cattle to humans via flesh consumption.

I propose that underlying the contemporary politics of beef consumption are deeper struggles over the nature of the divide separating humans from animals as well as culture from nature. These boundaries are continuously constructed, maintained and challenged by our beliefs about and accepted practices of flesh consumption (who or what we deem acceptable to eat). They are bound up in the ways in which we categorize eating practices (herbivores, carnivores, vegetarians) and how we respond when these categories are

transgressed. To conclude, I explore alternative ways of conceiving an ethics of flesh consumption, one that takes into account our often troubled relations with animal bodies. Following the work of Jacques Derrida, I propose that such an ethics be framed in terms of hospitality and conviviality: we never eat entirely on our own because we are inherently in relation with other beings and situated within particular environments, both material and symbolic. This acknowledges and respects the boundaries imposed by the particularities, contingencies and contradictions so intimately bound up with our need to consume other bodies as well as other bodies that need to consume.

## DEDICATION

In memory of my father  
Dale Layton Blue (1944 – 2004)

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION AND PRELIMINARY CONCERNS

This dissertation uses beef consumption as an optic or lens into contemporary cultural politics. It stems from two intriguing events. The first was my experience of becoming a vegetarian in the early 1990s. Although I returned to eating animal flesh, I have wondered why I framed my refusal to eat meat in terms of an identity category. Being vegetarian meant I not only changed my eating practices, I also transformed my identity.

The second event was the emergence in the mid 1990s of a gruesome yet curiously mundane monster that surfaced within the public imaginary: the cannibal cow. Although it had never been encountered before, it immediately began circulating in a range of discourses, from television talk shows, to prizewinning journalism, to esteemed scientific journals. Almost overnight, the cannibal cow changed the face of global food politics and contemporary animal husbandry practices and, in its wake, left people horrified, bewildered and concerned about the contemporary state of our modern food system. The cannibal cow first appeared in 1996 after the British government announced that mad cow disease (bovine spongiform encephalopathy or BSE) could potentially spread to humans via the consumption of beef. This announcement turned a domestic agricultural issue into an international public health concern as British beef was exported to a number of countries. As the name suggests, spongiform encephalopathies literally eat away at the neurological tissues of animals. If humans contract the disease, it is almost always fatal. According to current understanding, cows contract BSE by eating meat or tissues from infected cattle or sheep. Humans who eat infected beef can develop a comparable disease, known as new variant Creutzfeld-Jacob

Disease (vCJD). BSE also has similarities with kuru, a rare human disease that is ostensibly spread by the practice of human cannibalism.

In divergent but interconnected ways, the vegetarian and the cannibal cow center around politics of flesh consumption. Both raise questions and concerns about beef consumption thereby challenging its ordinariness, and some might argue orthodoxy, in North American culture. Taking methodological direction from Bruno Latour (1993, 1999), I follow the convoluted networks comprised of both human and non-human actors in order to gain insights into contemporary configurations of cultural power. To enter these networks, Latour suggests that we locate controversies ‘in the making’ and unravel them to gain insights into the forces and alliances that contribute to their formation.

I use the term flesh rather than meat because the term is more general, encompassing both food and ‘not’ food. Flesh refers to the muscle tissue of animals. Depending on the various cultures we inhabit, certain flesh will be considered ‘food’ and other flesh will be off limits. Since most ethical institutions prohibit acts of anthropophagy and autophagy (or cannibalism), the flesh we are permitted to consume must come from animal bodies, or, more generally, those bodies deemed ‘not human’. As such, the flesh we eat plays a role in constituting and maintaining a human / animal division.

Flesh is not a neutral term. It is laden with historical meaning. It suggests the earthly mundane realm characterized by (often out of control) physical and sexual appetites, one that stands in opposition to the purity and invincibility of spirit<sup>1</sup>. Because we are flesh, we must consume. If we do not, our body will eat itself. Because we are flesh, we are susceptible to hunger, disease and death, always ontologically open and vulnerable. Flesh also challenges

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in 1830 the temperance lecturer Sylvester Graham and Bronson Alcott argued that meat has aphrodisiac qualities. To avoid the temptations of the sexual appetites, they argued one must avoid the consumption of animal flesh (Spencer 2000).

the assumption that we inhabit isolated bodies as it directs our attention to the complex ways we are interconnected through our needs and desires to eat, as well as the needs (and desires?) of other creatures who can potentially consume us.

Social categorization based on flesh consumption has been a salient part of human history, where groups are demarcated, and at times devalued, by the flesh they consume. Meat consumption is often used as a way to mark social and cultural difference. The meat that some groups cherish are reviled, scorned and rejected by others. Hindu's spurn beef, Jews and Muslims abominate pork, North Americans reject the idea of eating dog, horse and rat meat. Food preferences and revulsions are not simply symbolic, they are also visceral: for example, the very thought of ingesting certain meats can evoke profound disgust while others offer pleasure. The consumption of food of animal origins, especially the flesh of animals, is accompanied by some of our strongest feelings, taboos and moral indignation (Simoon, 1961). Transgression of the implicit codes that bind our relations with flesh can evoke a range of responses, from mild scorn to loss of social status to social excommunication. We may feel disgust at the gastronomic practices of other groups, but, even if we can accept these in other contexts, we police our own cultural norms very vigorously. Conformity to group restrictions on flesh consumption is not based on individual whim or choice, but is a complex social, cultural and biological process, held in place, not only because violators might encounter the most severe of social sanctions, but also because of our embodied responses of disgust at the prospects of consuming certain types of flesh that lie outside of our cultural norms.

Flesh also has the connotation of kinship (as in flesh and blood). It evokes those mysterious relations (familial, animal) that make up the essence of our being but that often evade critical sense making. Thus, to reflect on the flesh we can and cannot eat is also a

reflection on questions of subjectivity, identity and kinship. Kinship, according to Donna Haraway (1997), is not a natural or neutral relationship; rather, it is a technology that produces the material and semiotic effects of natural relationships. These relations of kind 'matter' because they construct a natural / artifice divide, one that plays out in broader political debates about 'natural' forms of eating. Relations of kin and kind, of flesh and food, are constructed and maintained vis a vis biological categories. They are, in other words, biopolitical constructions.

### **Flesh consumption as an optic into cultural power**

I take the idea of eating as an optic from Elpeth Probyn (2000). For Probyn, food and eating provide a privileged lens into power because they forefront the viscosity and materiality of our daily lives. The question of how to live today, according to Probyn, is best seen at the level of our mouths and gut. Probyn's work, and my own, is guided by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's suggestion that the complex intermingling of bodies is regulated, not only by symbols, rationality and ideology, but "an alimentary regime and a sexual regime" (1988, p. 90). If this is the case, our inquiries into cultural power must be broadened to include the complex biological (or 'animalistic') activities of bodies engaged in consumption and sexual reproduction<sup>2</sup>.

Whereas sexuality has garnered a great deal of attention in critical analysis, eating has received a lot less. Perhaps the ordinariness of food, its accessibility, our everyday need for it, and its banal materiality can make it seem less important than it is. Yet, eating is a

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<sup>2</sup> The terms 'body', 'corporeality' and 'embodiment' have become central to feminist theory, particularly in recent decades, as a way of moving beyond dualistic perspectives that privilege the mind and rationality over the body. The concept of corporeality has emerged in feminist literature as a way to overcome the association of reflective subjectivity with the mind and mechanical behaviorism with the body (Grosz, 1994). What corporeality suggests is that we use our entire body rather than just our mind to engage our worlds. I take from the concept of corporeality the idea that our bodies relate in ways that are often not taken into consideration when we associate culture solely with the mind, symbolic interaction, and rational engagement.

symbolic, political and highly vulnerable act that we engage on a daily basis. As Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik write, food is deeply embedded in every aspect of our social and cultural lives,

Food is the foundation of every economy. It is a central pawn in political strategies of states and households. Food marks social differences, boundaries, bonds and contradictions. Eating is an endlessly evolving enactment of gender, family and community relationships. (1997, p. 1)

Eating is a fundamental and universal activity, giving us a unique lens into elements that unite human and non-human beings (Callicot 1988). We may not all eat the same things, but we all need to eat.

In very simple and profound ways, food and eating puts us in relation with others. Eating links us with a multiplicity of bodies, not all of which are human. When we eat meat, we enact a sensuous, intimate but not necessarily explicit engagement with animals, livestock producers, supermarket retailers, even microbes— the list of possible encounters is long. These relations are simultaneously obscured and revealed in our contemporary moment. They are obscured because most people are increasingly removed from systems of agricultural production. Complex systems of urbanization, industrialization, transportation, packaging and food marketing have contributed to a gap between how most people experience food production and how it is actually carried out (Lang and Heasman 2003). Most people who live in urban and suburban environments, and who eat meat, do not raise nor kill animals. Rather, animal husbandry and slaughter is relegated to a group of people (butchers, ranchers) who perform these tasks, most often out of sight and mind of those who eat the final product. Furthermore, the mechanics of industrial farming are equally erased from the public eye so that most people do not know what is happening within its confines. In contrast to the urban slaughterhouses at the turn of the century, modern slaughterhouses

tend to be located in remote rural locations (Nierenberg 2005). Modern systems of food packaging also remove people's awareness of where their meat comes from and how it is produced. Agribusiness marketing often makes rhetorical appeals to small scale farming and anthropomorphized 'happy' farm animals, while hiding the environmental damage as well as the treatment of animals that ensues from its practices (Dunayer 2001, Glen 2004).

Yet, the dynamics of food production have simultaneously been revealed. In recent years, there has been a plethora of studies, journalistic, activist and academic, devoted to demystifying food chains with the intent to bring a clearer picture of the journey from field to fork. This demystification tends to operate under the assumption that things are wrong with our current industrialized food economy, and need to be brought to public attention.

Although challenges to the industrial food system have been made in the past, they were often associated with fringe or marginal voices and hence were rarely taken up in broader political debates (Belasco 1989). For example, in *Diet for a Small Planet*, Francis Moore Lappe (1971) points to the wasteful resource use of the livestock industry as well as to the myth of poverty and scarcity that framed most debates over food and agriculture at the time. Lappe argued, quite presciently, that the problems surrounding malnutrition and hunger are not due to a scarcity of food, but an overproduction of agricultural commodities that are unevenly distributed throughout the human population. In other words, the problem lies with a scarcity of democracy rather than agricultural production. Lappe's work, as well as other critiques of the food and agriculture industry at the time, were known only in relatively small circles and did not have a dramatic influence on broader cultural debates.

By contrast, current critiques of agricultural practices have become relatively mainstream and popularized. The focus of critique tends to lie with problems associated with modern industrial agriculture, in particular, how systems of agricultural technology,

transportation and trade are endangering our food supply, our personal health, our natural environment and the health and welfare of livestock. Consider, for example, the following titles: Christopher Cook's *Diet for a Deadly Planet: How the Food Industry is Killing Us* (New Press, 2004), Andrew Kimbrell's *Fatal Harvest: The Tragedy of Industrial Agriculture* (Island Press, 2002), and Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the American Meal* (Perennial, 2002). These critiques aim to challenge the view that modern, industrial agriculture as well as our current food supply are safe and problem free. To the contrary, they maintain that our current system of agriculture is harmful, and potentially even fatal to people, animals and the environment.

Rather than taking these discourses at face value and assuming an essential problem exists with modern modes of meat production, I propose that the genesis of norms around the consumption of flesh as well as broader concerns and assumptions about food safety are important to understand in terms of the role they play in the broader construction and maintenance of global food and agriculture economies. I am not suggesting that critiques of modern meat production are invalid. However, I am suggesting that when placed into a different context of power relations, they may be serving different interests than are immediately apparent.

### **Articulating beef consumption**

The metaphor of an optic into cultural power can suggest eating regimes be read for an underlying structure of power. This is not what I intend in this study. To clarify the method I am taking, I distinguish it from other forms of analysis that explain meat consumption vis a vis an underlying power relations. For example, in her feminist analysis, Carol Adams (2000) argues that meat consumption can be read as a mirror of patriarchal



relations and values. As such, for Adams, eating meat reinscribes male power at every meal: “if our appetites re-inscribe patriarchy, our actions regarding eating animals will either reify or challenge this received culture. If meat is a symbol of male dominance then the presence of meat proclaims the disempowering of women” (2000, p. 187). As a result, Adams advocates that women (and men) abstain from eating meat as a proclamation of their feminist values.

Adams’ analysis proposes that meat consumption reflects or even absorbs underlying power relations. Unfortunately, such an approach subsumes the object under investigation into a pre-determined set of relations, without taking into consideration the complex, contradictory and ambiguous meanings meat might deploy in different contexts and for different people. As Bruno Latour (1993) argues, such perspectives tend to start from the assumption that a social macro context exists (such as patriarchy, capitalism, etc) and that this context *directly* influences, forms, or reflects the object at hand. According to Latour, we are left with tautological reasoning where our object of analysis is used to investigate a context we theoretically assume exists:

If artifacts are nothing but social relations, then why must society work through them to inscribe itself in something else? Why not inscribe itself directly, since the artifacts count for nothing...Critical theory thus deploys a tautology – social relations are nothing but social relations – to which it adds a conspiracy theory: society is hiding behind the fetish of techniques. (ibid, p. 197)

To avoid this, my approach is to view discourses about meat consumption as complex articulations. The core idea behind the concept of articulation is that cultural formations are not static or immutable; rather, they emerge as a result of complex, situated political, economic, ideological and historical forces (Grossberg 1992, Hall 1985, Laclau and Mouffe 2001). Articulation enables a study of relations of power; how certain truths, realities and situations arise and are maintained and how others are suppressed, denied or aborted. The

intent is to understand the specific configuration of forces (political, ideological, economic) that structure events during a given historical period.

However, these forces (or context) cannot be assumed in advance. As Lawrence Grossberg (1992) writes, context is not the same as backdrop or environment. It is not ‘underlying’, waiting to be discovered or revealed. Rather, it is the outcome of a complex set of articulations, ones that contingently form and structure the field of possibilities. Context is what we discover after research, it is not something we assume before.

To view beef consumption via the lens of articulation means there is no natural (as in essential or inevitable) reason why we might have a proclivity (or not) to eat beef. To understand the context, we need to take into account for a multitude of forces (political, economic, cultural, symbolic), without assuming in advance which ones will hold more weight. The simple and seemingly innocuous act of consuming a hamburger or steak is enabled by an articulation of many forces that make that very act possible. These forces are ideological (the assumption that cattle are food), cultural (the accepted practice of beef consumption among one’s social group), economic (the ability to afford beef), technological (the processes of animal husbandry and food production that bring the flesh of the cow to one’s table), etc. Likewise, there is no natural reason why we should eschew animal flesh and eat primarily vegetable matter.

Beef consumption is a cultural matter, embedded within a host of shifting economies, in particular, symbolic economies. Beef is extraordinarily freighted with meaning, shaping what Arjun Apparurai (1986) refers to as its ‘social life’. Beef can be read as a polysemous site of conflicting, contradictory and competing definitions: it is safe and healthy to eat; a sign of male dominance, class divisions, nationalism and colonialism (Adams 2000, Rifkin 1992); a potentially risky encounter with a deadly flesh consuming pathogen (Rampton and

Stauber 1997). Beef is a paradoxical symbol, representing power, success, virility, status, ‘Americanness’, ordinariness, mass culture. Beef, of course, is derived from the cow, herself an ambivalent conjuncture of meaning, from a source of income, to the reviled symbol of capitalism, to sacred entity, to a cherished icon of maternal femininity, to a scorned image of complacent domesticity. Similar to the pig in Peter Stallybrass and Allon White’s analysis, the cow and her flesh “articulate the symbolic and metaphorical resources of different classes and groups whose anchorage points occupy distinct and different sites and locations” (1988, p. 49). This quote suggests that we cannot read the connotations associated with beef outside of their context, as meanings are articulated in different ways depending on (but not reducible to) the economic, cultural and social locations of the people articulating them.

Meat is also very contested site of meaning; it is both an unquestioned aspect of daily life in North America as well as a site of much political controversy. Meat is often considered ‘real food’, the centerpiece of the meal whereas grains and vegetables are supplementary. To live without meat is often considered a form of privation as its lack is somehow symptomatic of impoverishment. The centrality of meat eating often leads to the assumption that vegetarianism<sup>3</sup> is an aberration to be explained against the orthodoxy of meat consumption. As such, vegetarianism is sometimes categorized as weird, abnormal, a fad, or a political ideology. Vegetarianism has been denounced and trivialized in western culture for a long period of time, not only because it challenges the relatively orthodox practice of

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<sup>3</sup> The only attribute that characterizes all vegetarians, regardless of race, creed, class, gender, age or occupation is an avoidance of animal flesh. According to the British Vegetarian Society, a vegetarian is someone who eats no meat, poultry, game or fish, and who also avoids slaughterhouse by-products such as gelatin, rennet (an enzyme from a calf’s stomach sometimes found in cheese) and animal fats. The reasons for becoming a vegetarian include: a concern for the suffering of animals, the harmful effects of meat production on the environment, such as the destruction of vast areas of rainforest for cattle ranching, concern about links between meat production and poverty and famine in developing countries, the health advantages of a vegetarian diet, a dislike for the taste of meat and religious reasons. I am interested, specifically, in ethical vegetarianism.

consuming meat, but because it is also articulated with political resistance and reformist movements, in particular, socialism and feminism (Maurer 2002, Spencer 1993).

Yet, the centrality of meat in North American diets can also be read as a historical anomaly as the widespread popularity of meat is a fairly recent phenomenon. In an exceedingly short period of time, meat has displaced complex carbohydrates and vegetable based proteins. Once reserved for the wealthy, elite sectors of society, quotidian meat consumption now crosses class lines (Fiddes 1991). Modern agricultural science and highly technologized transport systems have improved the efficiency of meat production and distribution. This has made it affordable for most people, regardless of their economic status, to consume meat on a daily level. The quotidian consumption of relatively large quantities of meat is, to a large degree, a product of industrialization and modernization<sup>4</sup>. Yet, the disavowal of meat consumption under vegetarianism can also be read as a product of industrialization and modernization. They are, in a sense, two sides of the same coin.

Why focus specifically on beef? For the past century, beef has occupied center stage in North American cuisines, from the hamburger, to the hot dog, to roast beef, to steaks on the grill. If the automobile has been cited as the single most influential machines of the twentieth century (Packer 2003), we might say that cattle have been the most influential animals and beef one of the most influential foods in the formation of North American culture (Carlson 2001). Cattle are intimately linked with the colonization of the Americas. As Alexander Cockburn writes, the global change in economic, political and social patterns in the Americas and elsewhere was signaled by “the vast cattle herds that began to graze the pastures of the western US, Australia and Argentina” (1996, p. 24). Cattle were a symbol of

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<sup>4</sup> This statement needs to be qualified as certain cultures, in particular indigenous ones, have historically persisted on large amounts of meat. However, I am suggesting it is not just the daily quantities of meat consumed but the amounts that signal a shift.

wealth during colonization of the Americas, and became linked symbolically with capital. Wealthy conquistadores, missionaries and later landed aristocrats owned cattle and bought (or, depending on one's perspective, stole) land in order to graze them. The British role in the expansion of the American west, as well as the pasturelands of Canada, Australia, and Argentina, is tied to the unique history of what Jeremy Rifkin calls the English cattle complex, "a history punctuated by the continual conquest and confiscation of other lands and the subjugation of other peoples to provide the British with an ever-expanding supply of beef" (1992, p. 52).

Once a mark of status and wealth in Europe, red meat increasingly became the food of twentieth century proletarianization, particularly in America (Friedmann 1990, p. 201). The introduction of beef into the working class diet is similar to the cultural evolution of sugar. As Sydney Mintz (1985) writes, historically sugar was a rare commodity; the wealthy elite classes' ability to display and consume sugar was a sign of their power. However, as the production of sugar became more industrialized, its price fell and its consumers multiplied. This change was also linked with a broader shift of power, from monarchies to democracy. Even with the democratization of sugar, it still retains its ability to wield power relations. For those who still lack the means to afford it, sugar symbolizes wealth, a privilege often taken for granted in industrialized nations. Similarly, beef is simultaneously a symbol of status and prestige (especially certain cuts of beef such as the tenderloin). It is also a food of the 'masses' as it is accessible and affordable due in part to the development of a comprehensive highway system, the industrial production of beef, and the rise of the fast food restaurant in the latter half of the twentieth century (Schlosser 2002).

North Americans' propensity for beef over other forms of meat is a fairly recent phenomenon as beef preference rose above other red meats for the first time only in the

1950s (Harris 1986). Pigs, goats, sheep, fish and wild animals were more important sources of meat than cattle at the time of the earliest European settlements. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, intensive cattle production in North and South America (as well as Australia and Argentina) supplied the appetites of the wealthy consumers; as such, most of it was exported to more lucrative markets. It was only after the evolution of systems of integration among feed producers, feedlot technology and intensive livestock producers, as well as the development of more efficient delivery systems, that beef became a regular food in the North American diet. For the past 30 years, there has been a visible hierarchy of red meat in North American diets: with beef at the top, then pork, lamb, mutton and goat (Harris, 1986).

However, in recent years in the United States and Canada, beef consumption has declined, due primarily to dietary concerns, with an increase in pork and poultry consumption. If we were to target the most popular meat in our global economy, it would be chicken not beef (Dixon 2005). In 2001, Americans consumed approximately 63 pounds of beef per year, 50 pounds of pork, and 71 pounds of chicken and turkey<sup>5</sup>, whereas Canadians consumed, respectively, 49, 48, and 67<sup>6</sup>. In Canada, beef consumption has been on a steady decline since the 1990s with a slight rise in 2003, paradoxically as a result of mad cow disease. One of the major challenges to beef consumption has been its association with heart disease and obesity due to concerns over dietary cholesterol. Yet, in recent years, it is also associated with weight *loss*, a position promoted primarily by the Atkins and Zone diets but also government advertising of beef as a healthy alternative to junk food<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Source: UDSA. Taken from Average Annual Per Capita Consumption of Meat. [www.reapinc.org](http://www.reapinc.org), Accessed on November 25, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Source: Stats Canada. From Canfax. [www.canfax.ca](http://www.canfax.ca). Accessed on October 25, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, the 'Beef. It's what's for dinner' campaign created by the USDA.

In spite of this recent decline, beef still retains a symbolic centrality in North American culture, indicated most saliently by the amount of criticism it evokes. When condemnations are made about contemporary meat industry, beef receives a disproportionate amount of concern. For example, there is no equivalent to Jeremy Rifkin's book *Beyond Beef*, even though the pork and poultry industries also are associated with insalubrious industrial practices (Dixon 2005, Scully 2003). Why are there likewise no books advising us to move *Beyond Pork* or *Beyond Chicken*?

Beef is also one of the first foods to be given up when one becomes a vegetarian. In her cookbook *The Gradual Vegetarian*, Lisa Tracy (1985) advises her readers to give up flesh incrementally, beginning with beef and lamb then moving to pork, chicken, and fish. By its absence, red meat moreso than white meat, and beef moreso than pork or lamb, defines the core of vegetarianism. It is feasible, for example, for people to utter the following claim: 'I am vegetarian, but I occasionally eat fish and chicken', but one could never say 'I am vegetarian, but I occasionally eat beef'.

Beef has also been a site of significant trade disputes in the past few decades. Disagreements over the presence of growth hormones in milk as well as the severity of the risk of mad cow disease have lead countries to close their borders to cattle products from the UK, Canada, and the United States. These countries then retaliated with their own trade closures and embargos. These disputes were the result of increased public concern over industrial livestock production and its impact on human health. For example, in the early 1980s, North American regulators approved hormones that would promote growth in cattle (Phillips and Wolfe, 2001). These hormones (recombinant bovine growth hormone) were banned in Europe, in part due to consumer concerns about safety. As a result, the EU banned imports of North American beef. North American producers responded by diverting their

exports to other markets, thereby increasing competition with other meat producing countries. EU and North American trade organizations are bitterly divided on this issue, resulting in a dispute that has lasted over two decades, hindering negotiations in GATT and subsequently the WTO. Another salient dispute revolved around mad cow disease and industrial agricultural practices. In August 1999, France refused to join the rest of the European Union in lifting the 1996 ban on British beef imposed because of mad cow disease. An EU report issued immediately after this accused French rendering plants of using sewage in their livestock feed (Koppinen 1999). These trade bans have been interpreted as more than issues about food safety, they have also made their way into claims about national identity. By rejecting the safety of British beef, the French made a statement about not trusting Britain as a nation, or at least it could be interpreted as such (Rogers 2004). These trade wars became symbolic wars, as much about defining and defending national identity as they were about economic trade.

In 2003, the trade wars over beef moved to Canada, fuelling trade disputes between Canada and the United States. In May of that year, a cow from a herd in Northern Alberta tested positive for BSE. That December, the first American BSE case was found in a cow that had been imported into Washington State from Alberta. Two more cases were found in Alberta in January 2005. Following the announcement of the initial positive BSE test, the United States and all other important beef and cattle trading countries immediately closed their borders to Canada, leading to severe economic consequences for Canadian, and especially Albertan cattle ranchers and beef producers. Certain borders (such as Japan) were also closed to American beef. Although the Canadian border recently opened in July 2005, the economic impact on Canadian ranchers was devastating.



Public response to BSE has been paradoxical and bewildering. Even though there is a great deal of scientific uncertainty about the causes and modes of transmission of BSE to humans, this uncertainty is often erased in the public sphere. Government and industry groups in Britain, Canada and the United States assure people that there is little to no risk for consumers; in effect, the risks associated with the disease were routinely trivialized or downplayed by government and industry officials (Leiss and Powell 1997; Ritvo 2005). The flurries of alarm that attended each media account of BSE quickly died down, and the possibility of infection to humans was repeatedly downplayed. These displays of confidence were also made into public spectacles. For example, in 1990, to mollify public fears over the consequences of mad cow disease, the British Minister of Agriculture John Gummer posed for a publicity shoot that featured him and his four year old daughter eating a hamburger. In 2004, one year after trade borders were closed to Canadian beef, George Bush was fed Alberta beef on his first visit to Canada. After BSE was discovered in Britain and Canada, eating domestic beef was seen as a declaration of loyalty to the nation, and regarded as an assurance of national courage and common sense in the face of “scare monger” activists and foreigners.

When concern is expressed, however, it is done in a very alarmist fashion with scenerios of impending doom, uncontrollable plagues, and ‘end of the world’ narratives. Richard Rhodes’ best seller *Deadly Feasts: Tracking the Secrets of a Terrifying New Plague* raises the possibility that the prion (the agent responsible for the mad cow disease) would soon become so widely disseminated that stopping its destructive spread would be nearly impossible. Activist groups such as Center for Media and Democracy and the Organic Consumers Association tend to present mad cow disease as if it were a government or industry conspiracy to hide a deadly truth in the name of corporate profit.

Yet, the reality is that there is no such certainty. The causal agent of mad cow disease, and its human variant represent scientific mysteries. The responsible agent is elusive, not known. Public reaction to mad cow disease raises very paradoxical questions. Why is there such a widespread willingness to ignore a risk that, although, it might not exist at all, might also lead to the most horrific consequences? Conversely, why are activist groups so ready to grab on to fatalistic and sensationalist narratives, when scientific evidence suggests that the risk is not large and that a pandemic is highly unlikely to occur? And, on a more general level, why at a time when beef consumption is being called into question for its possible detrimental impacts to human, animal and environmental well being, do we have an increase in cattle production worldwide, an increase in the number of restaurants (such as the Brazilian Churrascaria, Argentinian and American steakhouses) that pride themselves on serving very large portions of beef, as well as the emergence of diets such as the Atkins and Zone diets that promote increased beef consumption?

### **The Politics of Beef**

In recent years, meat consumption has shifted from a personal health issue to a public and political one due in large part to rapid and historically unprecedented changes in agriculture and food systems. According to food policy analyst Tim Lang and food researcher Michael Heasman (2004), the productionist model of food production has characterized modern agricultural societies for over the past two hundred years. This system originated in the industrialization of the food system and the concomitant advances in chemical, transport and agricultural technologies. In this time period, the global food supply has moved from small scale farming to industrial manufacturing with mass distribution and concentrated production. As consumers, we have moved from an agriculture/rural base to a

hypermarket/urban food culture in a remarkably short time. Since World War II, global agricultural systems have undergone further commercial and technological expansion, and are capable, in theory, of providing enough food to satisfy the unprecedented growth in human population. For those with means and access, this food system provides an array of convenient foods that transcend the constraints of seasonality and locality.

However, this model is coming under increasing public scrutiny and disapproval: “the current food system appears to lurch from crisis to crisis: from new health scares such as BSE to environmental disasters such as over-fishing and the collapse of fish stocks” (ibid, 2004, p. 3). It also faces new challenges: from increasing surges in population, to introduction of new technologies such as genetic modification, to corporate control and consolidation of the food industry, to loss of consumer confidence in food governance and institutions, to persistent health problems associated with diet ranging from diseases of excess consumption (heart failure, diabetes, obesity) to inadequate consumption (malnutrition, famine).

Rural and farming communities are also suffering, forcing many small farmers to sell their land assets to large agribusiness oligopolies. As food scholars and activists Helena Norberg-Hodge, Todd Merrifield, and Steven Gorelick describe,

Food is at the center of a storm the world over ... all of this turbulence has its origins in the industrialization and globalization of food and farming. With food reduced to a commodity in a volatile market, farming is becoming ever more specialized, capital intensive, and technology based, and food marketing ever more globalized. These trends are proving disastrous for consumers, farmers, local economies and the environment (2002, p. 1).

These authors tell us that there is an opposition, a small but rapidly growing network of consumers who are critical of contemporary practices and are seeking change. Consumer activist groups including vegetarian and vegan alliances, animal rights organizations, organic consumer groups, Fair Trade and Slow Food movements, all claim that we can transform our

broader world by changing our consumption habits. What unites these groups is a desire to reconfigure relations with food: from a disconnected, chemical, industrial, global model to a compassionate, organic, small scale and local one. As Andrew Kimbrell writes in the preface to *Fatal Harvest*, “we find ourselves in the midst of a historic battle between two very different versions of the future of food in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The decades long battle of the industrial model of food production is now being challenged by a strong, grassroots movement in favor of ecological, organic and humane food” (2002, p. 1).

Meat consumption does not often come to mind when we think of pressing cultural, political or environmental issues. However, according to the editors of *World Watch* magazine,

The human appetite for animal flesh is a driving force behind virtually every major category of environmental damage now threatening the human future – deforestation, erosion, fresh water, scarcity, air and water pollution, climate change, biodiversity loss, social injustice, the destabilization of communities and the spread of disease (Ayers and Prugh 2004, p. 12).

The overall global demand for meat has increase five fold over the past half century. Coupled with an increase in human population, this increase in demand puts strains on natural resources. To provide space for cattle production, we risk contributing to deforestation as well as the destruction of grasslands. Not only does livestock production use a great amount of water resources, but the vast amounts of excrement from livestock on intensive farming operations can threaten surrounding communities’ water and air quality.

One of the more serious concerns raised about modern meat production is the spread of communicable diseases. Because of our highly integrated food economies, outbreaks that previously may have only affected a single community now can have a global influence. The discovery of BSE in the late 1990s brought public attention to this integration: parts of a single infected cow had been distributed to many different places, with no way of tracking

where these parts ended up. Furthermore, the increased use of antibiotics in intensive farming operations means that certain pathogens develop resistance to antibiotic treatment. BSE (as well as avian flu and SARS) are referred to as ‘emerging zoonoses’, diseases caused by either new agents or previously known micro-organisms appearing in places or in species in which the disease was previously unknown (Klempner and Shapiro, 2004). Infections from animals to humans are fairly common (for example, rabies or lyme disease); however, it is rare that humans can transmit these agents to each other. One of the concerns about emergent zoonotic diseases is that they might fuel pandemics in human populations, leading to outbreaks of uncontrollable infections

Critiques of industrial farming have recently been taken up in a more sustained fashion in popular, activist and scholarly arenas (Adams 1990, Cockburn 1996, Coe 1996, Lyman 1988, Nierenberg 2005, Rifkin 1994, Spiegel 1996). John Robbin’s expose of factory farming *Diet for a New America* (1998) as well as Eric Schlosser’s *Fast Food Nation* (2001) brought public awareness to some of the insalubrious conditions of modern livestock production. These writings challenge the sustained efforts and assurances of industry, government and marketing groups that our contemporary food system offers a source of safe and abundant food.

For Jon Mooallem (2005), critiques of industrial meat production have become so commonplace they form a genre he tongue-in-cheek refers to as ‘Popular Meat Writing’. Orville Schell’s *Modern Meat* (1984) was one of the first contemporary books to question new technologies, such as hormones and feed additives, used on the industrialized American farm. Schell raises concerns about the consequences of these technologies, given that they depart from agrarian practices that have, for Schell, proven safe over hundreds of years. Schell’s book was followed by Gail Eisnitz’ *Slaughterhouse: The Shocking Story of Greed,*

*Neglect and Inhumane Treatment Inside the U.S. Meat Industry* (1997), Howard Lyman's *The Mad Cowboy: Plain Truth from the Cattle Rancher Who Won't Eat Meat* (1988), Carol Adams *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (2000) Jeremy Rifkin's *Beyond Beef: The Rise and Fall of Cattle Culture* (1992), Ken Midkiff's *The Meat You Eat: How Corporate Farming Has Endangered America's Food Supply* (2004), Matthew Scully's *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy* (2003)<sup>8</sup>. These writings dovetail with the efforts of animal rights activists and organizations, granting a fairly standard narrative reminiscent of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906), detailing the graphic horror as well as the deplorable and unsafe conditions that occur behind the closed doors of industrial farms and slaughterhouses.

In light of the current changes in animal livestock production and industrial agriculture, it is reasonable to change our consumption habits by decreasing (or eliminating) meat from our diets or to make an effort to buy locally produced food from small producers. However, one of my concerns is that critical accounts of contemporary meat production consistently blame industrial agricultural practices and factory farming for the ills associated with our food system, often at the expense of other possible narratives.

For example, one of the advantages of these critiques is that they reframe food borne diseases from a naturally occurring phenomenon to an industrial one. According to Danielle Nierenberg (2005), a researcher for Food First, the dominant players in agriculture and food industries refer to the emergence of food borne pathogens as a natural disaster. However, she argues that emergent zoonotic diseases, such as BSE, are symptoms of a larger change taking place in agriculture: the spread of industrial farming. This reframing places the focus of

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<sup>8</sup> In addition to the 'popular meat writing', Michael Pollan's article in the New York Times 'Power Steer' (New York Times Magazine, March 31, 2002) and Peter Lovenheim's *Portrait of a Burger as a Young Calf: The Story of One Man, Two Cows and the Feeding of A Nation* (New York: Random House, 2003) both give accounts of the actual process of raising beef cattle.

public attention on the possible harmful effects of industrialization; however, it does so in a way that tends to limit the scope of possibilities, focusing mainly on questionable feeding practices.

As Howard Lyman expressed on the ‘Dangerous Foods’ segment of the Oprah Winfrey show in 1996, we need to be concerned about contemporary industrial agricultural practices because they have not only turned the naturally herbivore cow into a carnivore, but turned it into a cannibal<sup>9</sup>! The cannibal cow, according to critical theorist Pricilla Walton, signals that we have degenerated beyond comprehension and potentially even hope; it is an indication that our contemporary state of globalization and industrialization has taken us to a place where “we are becoming increasingly savage in our civility, to the point where our civility is actually beginning to consume us” (2004, p. 34). Vegetarian and animal rights groups use mad cow disease as a sign that industrial meat production is inherently unsafe, and should become a bygone practice of a less civilized past.

Canada’s leading environmental scientist and writer David Suzuki, echoes a similar claim,

Is it just me or is it a really dumb idea to feed cows to cows? Or pigs to cows, or chickens to cows? Aren’t cows supposed to eat grass?... Feeding cows to cows is believed to be how mad cow disease originally spread in the U.K. This practice is now banned. But you can still feed cows to pigs and then feed those pigs to cows. Somehow, this just doesn’t seem very bright. Eating meat infected with BSE could cause the deadly variant Creutzfeldt Jacob disease (vCJD) in humans, but most food safety experts say the risk is low...But, this doesn’t change the real problem, which is inherent in ‘factory farming’<sup>10</sup>.

Nierenberg, Lyman and Suzuki sum up a fairly common sentiment that circulates among activists, but also scientists and government officials: BSE is spread by factory farming, the

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<sup>9</sup> Transcript of Dangerous Foods episode of Oprah Winfrey Show, April 16, 1996. [http://www.mcspotlight.org/media/television/oprah\\_transcript.html](http://www.mcspotlight.org/media/television/oprah_transcript.html).

<sup>10</sup> [www.davidsuzuki.org/wol/challenge/newsletter/feb2004\\_food](http://www.davidsuzuki.org/wol/challenge/newsletter/feb2004_food)

mode of transmission is flesh eating and all we need to interrogate and change are modern systems of agricultural production. The ambiguity of the science behind BSE is erased or subsumed into the phrase ‘could cause’. In effect, BSE seems to affirm what is commonly argued, that industrial farming is breaking the ‘natural’ cycle between farmers, their animals and the land with collateral damage to human health and local communities.

I am interested, particularly, in discourses of resistance to industrial agriculture as taken up and mobilized by various activist and consumer groups. I draw insight from Julie Guthman’s (2004) analysis of organic agriculture in California in which she questions the current idea that farmers and consumers can transform our food system simply by pursuing organic foods. Guthman refutes the popular portrayal of organic agriculture as a small scale family farm endeavor in opposition to ‘industrial’ agriculture; rather, she shows how organics is located within and helps maintain the very system it sets out to oppose. Likewise, I am curious whether vegetarianism, as well as critiques of industrial farming, also maintain the very systems these discourses are attempting to transform. My aim is to question the assumption that we live within a context of unsafe livestock production, and that these conditions are leading to the spread of infectious diseases previously unknown. I also examine the following paradox: at a time when there has been so much attention drawn to the meat and beef industries in terms of the environmental and health problems they are causing, as well as an emergence of social movements dedicated to questioning the use of animals for meat, we are witnessing an increase in the size and number of industrial animal use as well as a dramatic increase in the number of animals slaughtered per year.

### **The biopolitics of flesh consumption**

My concern with the aforementioned critiques is that, although they focus on the politics of meat consumption, they do not take into account its biopolitics. In contemporary



academic literature, the term biopolitics is used frequently, and often quite indiscriminately. In its general sense, it refers to the political control and organization of life. My use of it is rooted in a specific definition as formulated by Michel Foucault (1990, 1991, 2003) as well as Giorgio Agamben (1998, 2002) where it refers to the ways in which life is categorized into normative categories that reinforce systems of social inclusion and exclusion. Biopolitics, in this sense, refers to broader issues of governance.

Biopolitics works via the construction of categories of normal and pathological; this categorization serves to regulate society and ensure the authority and control of its governing body. Both Foucault and Agamben are interested in how modern democratic political formations create conditions of social exclusion by demarcating certain groups or practices as dangerous, impure or pathological. To create the conditions for governance, a practice or a group of people need to be thought of as a problem to be overcome. Once a problem is constructed, this justifies policing mechanisms that in certain cases, violate democratic principles.

According to Foucault (1991), modern, capitalist, democratic countries are governed, not necessarily by direct government intervention or military force, but by systems he calls 'governmentality'. This term extends his analysis of political government to forms of self regulation, or technologies of the self. It addresses the question of how people become self governing in democratic societies, in other words, how we engage in modes of living that foster the continuation of the state often times without our awareness. In Foucault's formulation, state power is not all encompassing; rather, governmentality comes from numerous sources and via an array of techniques that are usually defined as 'culture'. Unfortunately, Foucault's analysis often centers on human – human relations. What gets left out of his analysis are the ways in which modern politics works to maintain, police and

control human and non-human relations. If we extend biopower to include the ways in which human and non-human relations are controlled, we can draw new bio-political networks with a focus on institutions, practices and beliefs previously left uninterrogated such as agriculture, food and our relations with livestock.

Agricultural commodities have historically been regarded as an economic and cultural good; however, they are simultaneously problematized according to the dangers they pose to the population. In this sense, discourses of vegetarianism as well as broader concerns about industrial agriculture can serve the interests of governing the population because they aid in creating a problem (in particular, with modern industrial livestock production) that will subsequently need policing and administration in order to (re)establish the security of the population. The governing body must then play a role in constructing the discursive conditions for safety, security and health.

### **Cultural Studies, Post Humanism and the Question of the Animal**

In his call for a 'Parliament of Things', Bruno Latour remarks that "the human, as we now understand, cannot be grasped and saved unless that other part of itself, the share of things, is restored to it" (1993, p. 136). Extending this, I suggest that we also cannot fully understand ourselves unless we rearticulate our history with our relations with animals. According to Cary Wolf, most cultural analysis is organized by a fundamental repression that underlies most ethical and political discourse: "repressing the question of nonhuman subjectivity, taking for granted that the subject is always already human" (2003, p. 1). By neglecting the question of our relation to the 'non human', we forego a great deal of understanding of our humanness.

There is, of course, no reason why the question of animals should not be taken up within a study of culture, particularly within cultural studies. This field (or ‘anti-discipline’) is at once a normative and descriptive endeavor that entails empirical description, an explanation of cultural practices, as well as a commitment to transform oppressive power relations. Since its inception, cultural studies has championed the marginalized, engaging topics and relations not taken up within broader social debates. Cultural studies allows the opportunity to experiment with new ideas because it is not bound to a set of disciplinary constraints; rather, it continuously transforms itself in relation to salient political problems at hand by remaining open to “unexpected, unimagined, and even uninvited possibilities” (Nelson et al. 1992, p. 3). This means a commitment to expand the agenda of critical theory and progressive politics, to questioning taken for granted objects and issues: “doing cultural studies is not a matter of merely continuing the work that has already been done, staying on the same terrain, but asking what is left off the agenda in relation to specific contexts and politics” (Grossberg 1992, p. 21). To work within cultural studies means to struggle to keep the definition of the field alive, to retain a corpus of work that is protean, dynamic, and open rather than fixed, static and closed (Zylinska, 2005). One of the frustrating but invigorating aspects of cultural studies is the refusal to take culture for granted, to work without a clear definition of its specificity. Thus, paradoxically, the thing we study is the very thing that evades our understanding – we do not seek to find culture in our objects of analysis, but to use our analysis to open up the question of ‘culture’, to put new definitions on the table that include groups, ideas and perspectives previously marginalized, devalued or ignored.

In this sense, I examine issues surrounding agriculture and livestock as intimately bound up with North American culture. As Jennifer Slack and Laurie Whitt contend “what needs re-examination – both within cultural studies and for use by cultural studies – are the

kinds of connection through which we understand the relations between the human and the other-than-human world” (1992, p. 6). Narratives of culture and power told via animals are taken up only in rare instances, such as with Donna Haraway’s *Companion Species Manifesto* (2004) or Mette Bryld and Nina Lykke’s (2000) *Cosmodolphins*. Livestock seldom, if ever, figure into our accounts of culture, politics and ethics<sup>11</sup>. As Virginia Anderson (2004) writes, if they do appear, they are usually regarded as part of the environment or scenery rather than as agents worthy of critical attention. This is a somewhat odd oversight, given that it is hard to ignore the sheer presence of livestock on this earth. Consider, for example, in addition to the almost six billion people on the planet, there are also over one billion cattle grazing on six continents. Furthermore, much of the grain (such as soybeans and corn) that our agricultural systems produce is intended for cattle feed rather than directly for human food (Friedmann 1990). Livestock are a significant, although often overlooked, part of western cultural formations.

Because I am interested in the normalizing dimensions of flesh consumption, I situate this analysis within a larger context of posthumanist theory. Posthumanist theorists signal a trend, or shift, in dominant western consciousness about animals, both in mainstream as well as academic thinking. By the beginning of the twentieth century, scientific common sense became organized around the understanding that biotic life shares a common origin (Mayr 2004). Animals and humans are not separate beings, we share biological kinship because we evolved from a similar origin. Although this understanding of shared biological kinship has had a slow uptake in the humanities as well as the populace as a whole, people have begun to take the question of the animal seriously with regard to its ethical and moral standing.

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<sup>11</sup> One exception would be Stallybrass and White’s (1988) analysis of the transgressive potential of the pig. They instruct us, in effect, to begin to think with ambiguous and troubling creatures such as livestock.

Posthumanism aims to expand our understanding of subjectivity beyond the confines of liberal humanism where the focus tends to rest on the individual self. The term itself, paradoxically, comes from work in cybernetics and information theory where the posthuman suggests a condition enabled by modern science and technology in which we are able to transcend our fleshy, material bodies. As Katherine Hayles (1999) describes, posthumanism is a view that privileges information pattern over material instantiation, considers consciousness as an epiphenomenon, views the body as a replaceable prosthesis, and configures humans as seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines (1999, p. 3). The posthuman subject is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction (ibid, p. 3). Although Hayles writes to put embodiment back into this disembodied definition, she does not discard posthumanism entirely; rather, she takes it as an opportunity to expand our understanding of what we mean by humanity by embracing the fluidity and constructed materiality of the machinic body.

In a similar sense, Donna Haraway (1991) proposes the metaphor of cyborg (cybernetic organism) as a posthumanist indication that the boundary separating humans, machines and animals has thoroughly been breached. Haraway's cyborg directs our attention to the complex intersections that comprise modern networks. Not only does she emphasize taking the nonhuman into account, but also looking at the changes brought forth in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by science, technology, trade and the military industrial complex. As Joanna Zylińska writes, the fascination with the cyborg as a new form of being was symptomatic of discourses around identity and identification that took place in cultural studies in the 1990s (2005, p. 139). The specificity of Haraway's project, unfortunately, often was lost amidst an overenthusiastic celebration of the 'transgressed boundaries' and 'potential fusions' offered

by the cyborg. Discourse of cyberfeminism (Balsamo 1996, Springer 1996, Plant 1997, Sofoulis 2003) sought to imagine new models of corporeality that were not subsumed by information sciences where the virtual body overpowered the fleshy one. However, even within these discourses, attention remained on the intersections between technology and humanity, but left animal / human relationality relatively uninterrogated.

Haraway's more recent work offers a corrective to this, and brings the question of the kinship and 'significant otherness' of animals and humans into focus. In *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2004), Haraway playfully aims to make thinking and writing about dogs a branch of feminist theory. She offers companion species as a way to theorize non-human and human relations. According to Haraway, the term 'species' suggests a more heterogenous inclusion than 'animal'. It refers to the ways in which we are bonded, not via identity, but significant otherness via evolutionary co-constitution, biological difference, impurity, historicity and complexity. Species do not exist in isolation; rather, they co-evolve in relation. There is no hierarchy because no one species pre-exists nor pre-determines the other. According to Haraway, humans are the product of a complex system of co-habitation, co-evolution, and embodied cross-species sociality with dogs, and vice versa (ibid, p. 4).

Haraway's focus on companion species is similar to Derrida's observation that when we use the term 'animal', we engage in a profound disavowal of our animality, signaling a "complicit, continued and organized involvement in a veritable war of the species" (2002, p. 124). Derrida contends that the border separating human and animal is not singular but multiple and heterogenous. According to Derrida, this border has a history that, far from being closed, is now passing through a phase where anthropocentric subjectivity is being called into question. What lies beyond the human (so called) is not the animal, or animal life, but a heterogeneous multiplicity of organizations of relations of life.

This multiplicity is often denied because of the institutionalism of speciesism, a term coined by Richard Ryder (1974) to refer to the hierarchical divide that separates and privileges humans over animals, and that often leaves the animal outside of political and ethical consideration. The hierarchical divide separating humans from animals is so deeply ingrained in our consciousness and language that we rarely recognize it as a form of oppression. Yet, the formation of Western subjectivity relies on the tacit agreement that to be human means to sacrifice, within us, the animal and the animalistic elements of ourselves. This speciesism makes possible a symbolic economy in which we can engage in what Derrida (1991) refers to as the ‘non criminal putting to death’ of animals.

Derrida extends his conception of metaphysics (phallogocentrism) to encompass the ‘sacrificial structure’ that lies at the heart of western culture. He uses the term ‘carno-phallogocentrism’ to represent the foundation of all hierarchical intersubjective relations in Western culture. For Derrida, the animal, like writing and the feminine, poses a threat to the discourse of humanism, in which authority and autonomy are “attributed to the man (*homo* and *vir*) rather than to the woman, and the woman to the animal” (1991, p. 114). This hierarchy of subjects and values dominates our understanding of subjectivity. Because carnivorous sacrifice is essential to the structure of subjectivity, it forms the basis for our laws and culture.

Derrida’s analysis lends support to Nick Fiddes (1991) claim that meat consumption is a tangible representation of human control over the natural world. Fiddes argues that the principle of power over nature is an omnipresent thread running through the culture in which we are raised; it forms the context of our thought and debate. Throughout western history in general, human subjugation of the natural world has been a central theme, at times almost a

religious imperative. For Fiddes, the consumption of animal flesh is an ideal exemplar, a 'natural symbol' of that control.

One of the central concerns of posthumanist theorists is that the difference constructed between the human and the animal is deployed in diverse contexts to render the category of the animal beyond political and ethical consideration. The category 'human' is constructed as that which is ethical (or has the capacity for ethics); however, certain humans, in certain historical contexts, have been rendered more animal than human and hence robbed of the necessity to be treated as ethical beings. Posthumanist ethics incorporates the question of the animal and its relation to the human in the attempt to release the animal from its position on the outside of ethics, and thereby articulating a politics and ethics that is structured by 'life' more generally. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith writes, "as post humanists, we have begun to chart the costs and limits of the classic effort to maintain an essential species barrier and have sought to diminish those costs and to press against those limits in our own conceptual and other practices" (2004, p.17).

By focusing on livestock, those animals we eat and use for industry and profit, I aim to complicate our understanding of our relations with food, animals and each other. Livestock are property and objects of commercial exchange (literally, they are 'live' rather than virtual, immaterial or paper stock). We can kill them, and, in some quarters are expected to, without legal, social or moral ramifications. Perhaps one of the most significant interventions of discourses of vegetarianism and animal rights is that they raised the question of the ethics of consumption. What kinds of relations comprise our 'culture' when we raise sentient creatures as objects for trade, profit and capital? These discourses, as well as emergent academic queries, force us to re-examine our anthropocentrism and consider the



question of the animal: what is the status of an animal? Are animals subjects? What rights, if any, should animals have?

However, granting rights to cattle (or to animals in general) raises a host of other complications, particularly for those who make a living raising animals for slaughter. Do the rights of animals supercede the rights of individuals to make a living off of their flesh, particularly since human populations have lived off animals for such a long time? Does the framing of the consumption of animal flesh as an ethical problem lead to a deepening of class politics, given that most people working in animal husbandry industries occupy lower social economic strata? Are discourses of animal rights leading to a deepening political rift between urban and rural populations?

Animals raised for food raise complicated questions about the role of ethics and politics as we take into consideration the range of competing forces, interests and bodies that warrant consideration, especially those people whose livelihood depends upon animal husbandry. Furthermore, consuming the flesh of animals puts us into contact with another set of agents: food borne pathogens. As I will discuss later, these pathogens are changing our food and social systems in radical and significant ways.

### **Dissertation outline**

The remainder of this dissertation is divided into three parts: the national body, the species body, the animal body. Each chapter takes a different angle on flesh consumption, at times situating it in specific political formations (such as with Alberta beef), at other times, taking a more historical and theoretical view into the formation of regimes of flesh eating. Although these chapters take up divergent topics, I use them in order to grasp a larger context for the contemporary politics of flesh consumption. I engage biopolitics via emergent

discourses of health and ethics associated with flesh consumption. My aim is primarily exploratory, with the intent to raise questions for further research.

Initially, I take up the question of beef consumption at the level of the national body. I am interested, specifically, in the emergence of global and national systems of governance based on discourses of health, safety and ethics. I also explore the centrality of sectoral politics in creating discourses of local and regional food. In particular, I am interested in how beef lobby groups in both the United States (R-CALF) and the province of Alberta, Canada (Alberta Beef Producers) construct themselves as industries in need of protection. In both cases, these lobby groups enable the formation of discourses of local foods. R-CALF does this through an appeal to traceability via country of origin labeling. The Alberta Beef Producers does this via erasing the industrial aspects of modern beef production by making appeals to an antiquated image of the cowboy. Unfortunately, both mask some of the problems associated with modern beef production, such as the vertical integration of beef production corporations as well as the environmental and social damage that is associated with these industries.

In the second section, I explore how meat eating (and, more generally, flesh consumption) is normalized and demarcated at a species level in order to construct and maintain a boundary between humans and animals. I examine the biopolitics of flesh consumption by focusing on how the categories herbivore and carnivore serve to demarcate, and in some cases, police animal human relations at the species level. By tracing the genesis of these terms, I explore the conditions that articulated vegetarianism with identity. Drawing from Jacques Derrida's notion of carno-phallogocentrism as well as Giorgio Agamben's distinction between zoe and bios, I discuss how human subjectivity can be read as articulated by the practice of flesh consumption, and how this informs a hierarchical relationship with

animals based on sovereign relations or, the ability to enforce a non criminal putting to death of another being.

In the following chapter, I explore how tropes and categories of eating have been instrumental to the formation of BSE or mad cow disease. Specifically, I examine how the cannibal is serving to erase the ambiguity and controversy surrounding this disease. I argue that the trope of the cannibal serves to articulate a sentiment that BSE is caused by flesh consumption, even though this conclusion has not been proven definitively.

In the final section, I explore the some possible alternatives for an ethics of flesh consumption. I begin with the emergence of animal rights discourse, in particular, its contestation of factory farming. Drawing from Foucault's theory of governmentality as well as Laclau and Mouffe's conception of hegemony, I argue that these groups are forming a new hegemonic framework in which 'animal rights' are becoming a salient factor. Within a broader governance system, these rights discourses, as well as discourses about the safety of 'factory farms', can contribute to deepening sets of regulatory frameworks and security measures. If moral frameworks based on animal rights as well as discourses of safety and certainty in the midst of scientific uncertainty are leading potentially to a closing of the political sphere, how might we interrogate industrial farming and meat consumption without falling into polarizing and moralizing debates?

I conclude with a discussion of a posthumanist ethics that takes into consideration our disavowal and troubled relations with the animal body, but that also takes into consideration the human lives that depend on quotidian slaughter of the animal body.

## CHAPTER II

### THE FLESH OF THE NATION

This chapter explores how agriculture and livestock production can provide a lens into contemporary formations of governmentality. By examining the formation of food safety with regards to global regulatory bodies as well as the role of agricultural sectoral politics and subsidization, I aim to draw attention to some of the complex ways in which politics are being played out in agriculture and food systems. I begin with a discussion of the movement in the early 1990s to a global endorsement of open markets with implications for discourses of health, agriculture and food. In this context, food safety has become an important, although complex, signifier.

Foucault developed his concept of governmentality in relation to the emergence of the nation-state in sixteenth century Europe. The newly conceived nation-state, with its institutions of democracy and capitalism, had to devise unique methods of ruling over its people. The problem facing governments was how to get people to consent to being governed: “how to govern oneself, how to be governed, how to govern others, by whom the people will accept being governed, how to become the best possible governor” (Foucault 1991, p. 87). According to Foucault, by the middle of the eighteenth century in Europe, the craft of governing well became an art of managing the economy and the population for the common welfare of all. The purpose of governing was to ensure the security, health and well being of the nation. Governmentality was a specific, albeit complex, form of power that had as its target population, as its principle form of knowledge political economy, and as its

essential means apparatuses of security” (1991, p. 102). For Foucault, political power constantly reinscribes itself into a fundamental relationship of force that manifests in social institutions, systems of economic inequality, even spheres of personal and sexual relations.

However, several theorists have argued that the modern nation-state is increasingly undergoing radical configurations, due in large part to the ascendance of a neoliberal global economic agenda (Gupta 2000; Hardt and Negri 2000, 2004; Haraway 1991). We are moving, ostensibly, into a new world order where power and control is shifting dramatically, where new sets of institutions, practices and configurations of power are being forged. Alongside these shifts come paradoxically changes in politics. For example, Akhil Gupta (2000) argues that we are witnessing the birth of a new regime in which governmentality is increasingly unhitched from the nation-state and is located increasingly in international organizations. Furthermore, the idea of a nation articulated with a state is itself coming under challenge. Nation-states are not so much obsolete, but their statelike functions (policing, disciplining) are increasingly being privatized and globalized, particularly within transnational corporations and international treaties. As such, the optic of nationalism and the nation state is a somewhat antiquated lens to understand the ways in which politics is being played out.

In a similar vein, Michal Hardt and Antonio Negri argue we have moved into a new set of power dynamics from the contracts and treaties of the nation-state to the constitution of a new supranational world power, a global Empire (2000, p. 10). Drawing insight from Foucault’s ideas in *Society Must Be Defended*, Hardt and Negri maintain that war has become a regime of biopower, a form of rule aimed not only at controlling the population but producing and reproducing all aspects of social life. Traditionally, war was an armed conflict between sovereign political entities. However, increasingly, wars are being fought within

countries. For example, civil wars are armed conflicts between sovereign and / or nonsovereign combatants within a single sovereign territory. Although these conflicts are local and specific, Hardt and Negri read them as profoundly implicated within the global imperial system (2004, p. 4). Certain wars involve armed combat and lethal force; however, in these wars, there is often little difference between outside and inside, between foreign conflicts and ‘homeland’ security (ibid, p. 14). These wars are often fought against immaterial and indefinite enemies. Yet, sovereign power cannot kill all of life; it must simultaneously promote life as well as take it over. As such, threats of war become as effective in controlling populations as do the actual manifestation of warfare.

Extending Hardt and Negri’s insights into the global conditions of war, I suggest that war is taking place in non-traditional ways within the realm of agriculture. It is being fought between and even within nations, but its weapons, strategies and perceived enemies are profoundly different than traditional mechanisms of warfare. Under the banner of health and safety, war is increasingly being fought over the body of livestock. The ‘enemy’ in this case is invisible agents, microbes and toxins that threaten to hurt the broader political body. The casualties of this war are animals and people involved in livestock industries. The consequences are a fueling of nationalist impulses, leading to a deeper entrenchment of difference and hostility between nations. In the context of free trade between nations, we have the emergence of new forms of power. At stake is not so much the health of a specific nation, but the health of the global trade community. To ensure this, certain areas undergo trade restrictions – they are cordoned off, pathologized, limited from participating in broader trade community. We might say that what used to happen at the level of the nation (the disciplining and quarantining of certain people or regions that don’t ‘fit’ with the dominant regime) is now happening at a global level.

The relationship between war, nationalism and food is not new as war underpinned discourses of nationalism and beef in Europe. As Roland Barthes remarked, beef is as much a part of the mythology of French nationalism as wine. To eat steak is to take on the characteristics of virility and power, to assimilate a bull like strength: “Being part of the nation, it follows the index of patriotic values: it helps them to rise in wartime, it is the very flesh of the French soldier, the inalienable property which cannot go over to the enemy except by treason” (1957, p. 63).

By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, beef became one of the most popular dishes in England. It also became endowed with notions of British nationalism, in particular, the strength and virility of its soldiers. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as suggested by Richard Levenstein’s patriotic ballad *The Roast Beef of Old England*, beef was infused with a sense of nostalgia, particularly as the power of the British empire began to fade. According to this song, the mighty roast beef “ennobled the brains” and “enriched the blood” of English soldiers. However, the English dwindled to a “poor sneaking race, half begotten and tame, who sully the honours that once shone in fame”, mostly because they have “learnt from the all vapouring France, to eat their ragouts as well as to dance” (Rogers 2003). In *Beef and Liberty*, Ben Rogers depicts the way in which Englishmen identified themselves in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in opposition to their French counterparts. During these centuries, the English were battling against the French and English nationalism reached its peak. This nationalism was largely expressed through a relationship with roast beef: as Rogers claims, “after language, food is the most important bearer of national identity” (2003, p. 3). The English perceived themselves as masculine and virile, in relation to the somewhat effeminate Frenchman who sipped wine and toiled with refined cooking techniques. The “red blooded” Englishmen proved their loyalty to the British nation by their consumption of beef. However, beef was

linked with certain classes in Britain, as upper class Englishmen developed a liking for French food, roast beef came to symbolize working class identification. As such, beef came to symbolize the separation of classes, where the patriots' nationalism was simultaneously a display of love for their country and fear of changing times.

### **The harmonization of safety and trade**

Beef offers a good place to read contemporary power dynamics because beef production, distribution and consumption are global phenomena. Most beef producing countries export their cattle products with the intent to capture more lucrative markets elsewhere. To get a perspective of the major beef exporting countries: in 2004, Brazil was the largest exporter with 23% of world exports, followed by Australia (21%), New Zealand (9%), Argentina (9%), Canada (9%) and the US (3%) (GIRA 2004 cited in Canfax<sup>12</sup>). The U.S. is the largest importer of beef, taking 30% of the world imports; approximately 80% of these come from Canada. The U.S. markets its exports primarily to Mexico, Canada, Central America and Japan.

Beef is constructed to fit this global market, as most beef is standardized with the intent for export. The integration of beef production into a global market has led to global standardization, which was subsequently incorporated into the tastes of consumers worldwide. According to Sanderson (1986), beef signals an international standardization of a variety of producer technology and social relations including American feedlot technology, European antibiotics and Japanese markets for boxed beef as well as international standards for consumption and trade (the grading of beef, immunity from contagious diseases, etc).

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<sup>12</sup> [www.canfax.ca](http://www.canfax.ca)



Beef is mass produced, often boxed, and sent along many distribution chains (supermarkets, restaurants) to all regions of the world. As such, it is difficult for consumers to know where their beef comes from. Alongside these systems of production and distribution has emerged a profound disconnection between consumers and the production of livestock. Although meat production is often associated with the local farm and the butcher, it is increasingly a product of industry, laboratories and off shore operations. Furthermore, because of stricter environmental and labor regulations in the United States, Canada and the European Union, large agribusiness corporations are increasingly moving their animal production operations either overseas, to countries with less stringent regulations, or to rural areas of developed countries (Nierenberg, 2005). If Upton Sinclair's expose of the meat packing industry *The Jungle* were written today, it would not be set in the urban American mid West, but in rural areas of developed and developing nations (ibid, 2005).

One of the most amazing, and potentially frightening, aspects of our modern cattle industry is the extent to which cattle products have entered our everyday systems. Preventing the spread of a disease such as BSE is a staggering task because once cattle have reached the slaughterhouse, there is no way of tracking where the constituted parts have gone. As Verlyn Klinkenborg (2004) notes, the problem with BSE isn't just a global meat system, it's the global cow. To give an example of just how deeply integrated cattle parts are in our daily lives, Klinkenborg cites the following: in 2002, commercial slaughterhouses in the United States killed upwards of 36 million cattle and calves. However, only a certain percentage, from 50 – 70%, of the slaughtered cow is used as meat. The rest of the remains go to rendering plants where they are converted into raw materials (proteins, fats, fatty acids) that are then used for other purposes such as vaccines, steroids, dietary supplements, animal feed, cosmetics, soaps, glycerin, collagen, plastics, paper coatings, rubber, asphalt, etc. This high

degree of integration and interconnection is what makes the presence, whether actual or hypothetical, of an infectious or toxic agent in beef or cattle so frightening. If a diseased cow or infected meat enters these commodity chains, there is no telling how widespread the infection or toxicity might be.

Institutions of modern food safety were founded on the grounds of protecting people from infectious disease due to trade. Trade can be thought of as a vector that brings bodies, ideas, commodities, and even pathogens into contact with one another. Technology can compress distances between continents and markets, but it cannot always ensure and maintain barriers against contagion and contamination. As such, trade fosters anxieties about the dangers of contact as much as it engenders hope for the increased access to goods, ideas and services. According to international and national organizations, the harmonization of food safety standards is a prerequisite to the protection of consumer health as well as allowing the fullest possible facilitation of international trade. Harmonization can only be achieved when all countries adopt the same standards.

As a result of increased international trade in the early and mid twentieth century, an extensive array of agreements and institutions were established to both facilitate trade as well as to ensure the safety of food. Since the formation of Breton Woods in 1944 when the financial architecture of a transnational economy was drawn up, there have been attempts to standardize and universalize trade regulations and health standards. In addition to national institutional bodies of food governance and trade promotion, international bodies (such as the Office International des Epizootes, Codex Alimentarius as well as the WTO) increasingly take a role in governing food production and distribution.

The basic institutional framework of modern food safety governance took shape in the industrialized world by the early twentieth century. In 1889, the first conference on food

hygiene was established (Friedberg 2004). During this time, food was progressively getting less expensive, as well as more abundant and varied. However, it was also being produced further away and passing through many more hands. The rapid economic, technological, and social changes of the time fuelled anxiety about food purity and quality, not unlike what is happening today.

There are three main organizations that are involved in determining the safety of global food trade: the WTO, the OIE, and Codex Alimentarius. International standards on food safety are established by the Codex Alimentarius Commission, as stipulated by the Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS Agreement) of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Under the terms of the SPS Agreement, the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) is responsible for standards relating to animal health and zoonoses (animal diseases transmissible to humans). Since many zoonoses can be transmitted to humans through food, the OIE standards apply to animal products that could spread pathogens via international trade.

Agricultural trade has historically been one of the most problematic and sensitive areas of trade negotiation because agricultural policies often run counter to liberal trade rationale. Agriculture is often treated different from other industries. It carries a 'special case' status attributed to unique constraints (perishable products, errant climatic conditions) as well as a tendency to romanticize agriculture and agricultural workers as a part of a local, authentic heritage in need of protection and support.

The General Agreement on Tariff and Trade (GATT) had been largely ineffective in regulating agricultural trade. According to Robert Wolfe (1998), GATT came under scrutiny as a result of the international agricultural conflicts or 'farm wars' in the 1980s. These conflicts emerged because the sudden increase in food prices in the early 1970s, in

particular prices of wheat, lead to an increase in food production under the assumption that this increase would be a profitable trend. However, world food prices decreased in the 1980s, but production remained at a high level leading to a world surplus of agricultural goods. This resulted in governments granting subsidies to farmers in order to compensate for gaps between increasing production and decreasing global market prices. The call to assemble trade ministers in Punta del Este, Uruguay in September 1986 was an attempt to end these trade conflicts (falling prices and increased production) by launching a new round of multilateral trade negotiations.

Most of the WTO agreements are the result of the 1986–94 Uruguay Round negotiations, finalized at the Marrakesh ministerial meeting in April 1994. These negotiations consist of a ‘final act’ to which is attached an agreement establishing the WTO, as well as agreements on goods, service, intellectual property, dispute settlement, trade policy reviews and agriculture. The Uruguay agreement on agriculture was intended to provide guidelines for agricultural trade reform, with the objective of securing progressive reductions in domestic support and protection. The specific commitments focus on improving market access as well as decreasing domestic support and export subsidies. The key idea behind the Uruguay round was that by deregulating the market (that is, by reducing subsidies and tariffs), international trade of agricultural commodities would operate more smoothly.

One major emphasis of reform with the WTO lies with the progressive reduction of tariffs on agricultural trade as well as a reduction in domestic subsidies. However, an exception to this commitment is applied to domestic support measures that are perceived to have a minimal impact on trade, what the negotiations term “green box” policies. These policies include general government services such as research, disease control, infrastructure, food security, direct payments or income support for producers, structural adjustment

assistance, as well as direct payments under environmental and regional assistance programmes.

The Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) and Technical Barrier to Trade (TBT) aspects of the WTO agreements are attempts to reconcile the competing demands of national regulatory systems, while facilitating international standards in food safety and trade (Phillips 2001). Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS) and Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) both encourage the international harmonization of food standards. The Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade seeks to ensure that technical regulations and standards, including packaging, marking and labelling requirements, and analytical procedures for assessing conformity with technical regulations and standards do not create unnecessary obstacles to trade. The SPS Agreement recognizes the rights of countries to establish their own levels of protection, and to impose measures necessary to protect human, animal and plant health. It does not permit Member Governments to discriminate by applying different requirements to different countries where the same or similar conditions prevail, unless there is sufficient scientific justification for doing so. Scientific evidence is called upon to avoid arbitrary discrimination of nations against imports. Although the SPS creates a set of international standards, these are not binding, and countries are not obligated to adopt them. Provided that regulations are based on some level of scientific risk assessment, nations can adopt measures that are not in compliance with international standards.

In *French Beans and Food Scares*, Suzanne Freidberg (2004) writes that one of the consequences of the current harmonization of trade and food safety, in particular, the WTO's green box policies, is that the defense of consumer health and safety has become one of the few permissible non tariff trade barriers under the WTO. As such, food safety has become a political issue, often used at the expense of small scale producers. This is particularly

relevant in terms of trends in industrial food distribution, where supermarket retailers control a vast amount of the distribution market. Products need to conform to increasing standards of convenience, aesthetic quality, standards of hygiene and accountability. Questions about the goodness or safety of food, although framed ecologically, ethically or technically are fundamentally questions about social power. Friedberg draws on postcolonial scholarship to examine how discourses about food are contained within a broader civilizing mission, where historical relations of inequality are often concealed and couched in discourses of progress, ethics and social uplift: “the power to demand goodness in food – as defined by cultural norms of what makes food safe, natural, moral and appetizing has introduced new forms of domination and vulnerability into postcolonial food networks” (2004, p. 5).

Friedberg writes that the food safety laws that are in place today often create a sense of confidence in the power of science to assure citizens’ rights to pure and safe food. However, even as science overcomes certain obstacles to providing safe food, it also creates new ones. The safety of the food supply was considered more or less a given, until the late twentieth century when a new round of food crises challenged the authority of the state, industry and science.

Of particular interest are the emergence of food scares in Europe from 1980 – 2001 (salmonella, BSE, foot and mouth disease) which unleashed restructuring processes that have dramatically influenced modern food systems (Friedberg 2004). Food scares are episodes of acute collective anxiety that are set off by reported risks of invisible food borne pathogens or toxins. These scares often have less to do with proven danger than the alarm experienced when people discover that risks are neither well understood by science nor well regulated by government. Preventative measures usually include the destruction of millions of animals, most of them healthy. Alternative practices, such as vaccination, are often rejected because

of fears of consumer backlash based on fears over the safety of vaccination. This results in the devastation of already struggling agriculture and tourism based rural economies.

Wealthy nations frequently invoke a defense of consumer health and safety to justify embargos or closures on trade. According to food activist Jose Bove (2001), one consequence of the agreement on agriculture was that countries were no longer free to adopt their own food policies; rather, they were obliged to lower tariffs and take a percentage of imports, effectively, US and EU products. Another consequence was that nations can now refuse to import agricultural or food produce on the grounds of protecting the health of its population and livestock. However, this refusal is often not balanced as more powerful export countries often have the ability to bar imports from less powerful countries, but not the other way around.

For most of the twentieth century, new food products that were approved in their country of origin were generally granted unrestricted access to global markets (Phillips 2001). However, by the end of the twentieth century, consumer concerns about food safety began rising, along with widely varying concerns about the environmental, social, economic and ethical aspects of food. With respect to genetically modified foods, for example, these concerns have translated into reviews of and, in some cases, restrictions on the production and distribution of GM foods. The development of more sensitive testing technologies and analytic knowledge about the nature of food, its qualities and associated health hazards, coupled with an increase in communications technologies (radio, television, magazines, newspapers, etc) has increased public awareness and concern over the safety and reliability of our food system. Food sciences also developed rapidly, enabling the detection of new risk factors (microbes and toxins) as well as creating technologies with relatively unknown risk factors (genetic modification, hormones, pesticides, etc). This is complicated by regulatory

systems that often fall behind scientific and market advances, leaving new developments (relatively) unregulated, or regulated by old standards that do not fit new processes, products and safety factors.

International food safety organizations played a central role in the formation of consumer awareness of food safety. Whereas Foucault's analysis of biopolitics instructs us to look at the institutions of health for human populations, Codex and the OIE suggest that another configuration of governance: those institutions that are responsible for ensuring the health of livestock in order to preserve the health of the global trade between nations. The Codex Alimentarius<sup>13</sup>, also known as the international food code, serves as a reference point for consumers, food producers and processors, national food control agencies and the international food trade. Codex was officially established in 1961, and is overseen by the Food and Agriculture Organization as well as the World Health Organization. Its two interrelated goals are the protection of consumer health and fair practices in the food trade. Although this institution ostensibly has the mandate to protect consumer health, it is also explicitly geared towards fostering trade. According to the official Codex website, the officials and experts who laid the foundations and determined the direction taken by activities of the Joint FAO/WHO Food Standards Programme and the Codex Alimentarius Commission were first and foremost concerned with protecting the health of consumers and ensuring fair practices in the food trade. Through harmonization, they envisaged fewer barriers to trade and a freer movement of among countries, which (ostensibly) would be to the benefit of farmers and their families and would also help to reduce hunger and poverty.

The World Animal Health Organization (or Office International des Epizooties OIE) is in charge of determining the health and safety of the trade of animals. This

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<sup>13</sup> FAO/WHO (1999) Understanding the Codex Alimentarius.  
[http://www.fao.org/documents/show\\_cdr.asp?url\\_file=/docrep/w9114e/W9114e00.htm](http://www.fao.org/documents/show_cdr.asp?url_file=/docrep/w9114e/W9114e00.htm)



intergovernmental organization was formed in 1924, after outbreaks of rinderpest devastated Belgium's livestock population<sup>14</sup>. The two goals of this organization are to avoid the international transfer of pathogenic agents that infect animals and humans, while at the same time avoiding the unjustified barriers to trade. Its main legislation lies with the Terrestrial Animal Health Code, developed to assure the safety of international trade in animals and their products. This code is enforced through the measuring of health standards by veterinary authorities of importing and exporting countries.<sup>15</sup> The OIE is harmonized with other institutions because of its official agreements with a host of other international organizations with the intent to standardize animal health legislation at a global level. These agreements have been struck with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the World Health Organization, the World Trade Organisation, the World Bank, the World Veterinary Association, and the International Federation for Animal Health.

The first Conference of the OIE met in Geneva in 1928. According to the OIE, this conference established the basis for an 'international sanitary police'. The articulation of sanitation with an institutional disciplinary power is significant because this conference mandated that "only sanitary documents emanating from nations with correctly organised veterinary services can be considered as providing importers with sufficient guarantees".<sup>16</sup> This signals the formation of a regime of power in which certain institutions (veterinary medicine, the OIE) are given the power to construct and enforce divisions between the

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<sup>14</sup> The rinderpest outbreak in Belgium was predated by one in Africa in 1889 (Dudley and Woodford, 2002). To give a sense of the magnitude of the epidemic, it killed an estimated 90 – 95% of the cattle, buffalo, and wildebeest in East Africa in three years. It is significant to note that this massive epidemic happened before integrated systems of trade and transportation. Rinderpest also played an important part in the history of the veterinary medicine (Mammerickx 2003). The methods used to control this disease since the beginning of the 18th century are at the source of the principles of hygienic prophylaxis required today to eradicate the contagious animal diseases.

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.oie.int/eng/publicat/en\\_code.htm](http://www.oie.int/eng/publicat/en_code.htm)

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.oie.int/eng/OIE/en\\_histoire.htm](http://www.oie.int/eng/OIE/en_histoire.htm)

normal or healthy agricultural regions of the world and those that are pathological or diseased. The sciences and institutions of veterinary medicine, in particular, maintain the knowledge that ensures the health and stability of global trade as much as it does the health and safety of livestock. Almost all the official representatives of the 167 OIE member countries occupy strategic positions in their country's veterinary services<sup>17</sup>. They are responsible for sanitary controls at the production, distribution and processing levels. In some countries, they are also responsible for controls on products in supermarkets, catering and restaurants. They prepare 'sanitary certificates' for the export of animals and animal products, as well as provide sanitary inspection of animal products imported into their country.

These organizations play a biopolitical role because they create and maintain the statistical and medical information necessary to make decisions based on the health of the population. They also provide the terrain on which food wars can be launched. As described by Codex Alimentarius,

Throughout much of the world, an increasing number of consumers and most governments are becoming aware of food quality and safety issues and are realizing the need to be selective about the foods people eat. It is now common for consumers to demand that their governments take legislative action to ensure that only safe food of acceptable quality is sold and that the risk of food-borne health hazards is minimized. It is fair to say that, through its elaboration of Codex standards and its consideration of all related issues, the Codex Alimentarius Commission has helped significantly to put food as an entity on political agendas. In fact, governments are extremely conscious of the political consequences to be expected should they fail to heed consumers' concerns regarding the food they eat<sup>18</sup>.

This emphasis on consumer education is significant in the context of shifts in global food governance. One significant change that has occurred with regard to our food system is that

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<sup>17</sup> [http://www.oie.int/eng/Edito/en\\_edito\\_feb05.htm](http://www.oie.int/eng/Edito/en_edito_feb05.htm)

<sup>18</sup> FAO/WHO (1999) Understanding the Codex Alimentarius.  
[http://www.fao.org/documents/show\\_cdr.asp?url\\_file=/docrep/w9114e/W9114e00.htm](http://www.fao.org/documents/show_cdr.asp?url_file=/docrep/w9114e/W9114e00.htm)

the control has changed substantially in the past few decades, moving from control situated with producers to a more diffuse control with many agents: consumers, corporations, as well as distant and local markets (Lang and Heasman 2004). Consumers, or more specifically consumer opinion, holds more power than it did in the past because corporations attempt to win consumer approval by marketing their goods to them. If consumers are worried about food safety, then food marketers need to respond accordingly, with assurances of safety (Friedberg 2004). Agrofood activists, whose efforts revolve around exposing and revealing the health hazards of modern agricultural industries, often unwittingly play into broader political tactics. Food activists, for example, can push retailers to demonstrate accountability through performances of social responsibility. This can include demonstrating the safety of food. However, because these protocols are expensive to implement and retain, smaller suppliers and manufacturers are often run out of business as they find it difficult to compete with larger corporations (Friedberg 2004).

### **The agricultural sector and lobby groups**

International agreements over agricultural trade and food safety enable food to become politicized, precisely because they both educate consumers about food safety, as well as provide regulatory means by which food safety is policed. However, because the green box policies allow nations to determine (to a degree) their own scientific protocols, there emerges room for dispute and contradiction. It is within this space of safety and trade that disputes can be fought and trade wars between nations waged. What is particularly fascinating about agriculture is that it is guided, to a large degree, by sectoral politics. So, when we speak about governance with respect to food, we need to take into account, not only international agreements, and consumer groups, but also agricultural industry lobby groups.

The agricultural sector emerged as a useful entity in Europe and North America during the last quarter of the nineteenth century when agriculture became increasingly institutionalized; “states do not have sectoral policies until the sector’s interests can be seen to diverge from those of society as a whole. When most people were farmers, states had no agricultural policy” (Wolfe, 1998, p. 54). When farmers were a majority, then political parties would serve their purposes; as the numerical importance of farmers declines, they turn to interest or lobby groups. With the emergence of the agricultural sector came agricultural organizations, ministries, co-operatives, and credit banks; institutions that became pillars of society. As a result, the state came to “recognize agriculture as being in need either of protection or special incentives, an independent sector that required a special policy on similar terms with other sectors of society” (ibid, p. 54). Domestic agriculture tends to be supported by powerful lobby groups that act in the interest of agricultural production industries. These lobby groups market agriculture as an integral part of a community and as a sector in need of collective support. In some cases, the interests of lobby groups intersect with economic globalization (particularly in export driven countries); however, in others, they work at cross purposes.

One example is an advertisement printed by the Dairy Farmers of Canada in February 21, 1992 after the publication in December 1991 of the draft Final Act of the Uruguay Round (Wolfe, 2001, p. 9). The advertisement shows two pictures, one of a vibrant farm and the other at the bottom of the page of a decaying farm. The text reads: ‘Each time a dairy farm dies, part of Canada dies too!’ On that very day, 30 000 farmers protested in Ottawa, on the grounds that the Final Round of the agreement on agriculture would destroy family farms. However, as Wolfe points out, the photos are shown in chronologically reversed order. The decaying farm had been in a state of disrepair for some time, but was revamped to create an

appropriate ‘before’ photograph for a television advertisement for the dairy industry prior to the signing of the Final Round. The causal links shown (WTO = demise of family farm) were not based on empirical evidence, but on a marketing scheme to promote government subsidizing of the dairy industry. Since the 1960s, milk marketing boards have demanded, for better and worse, social and economic support from government agencies.

This example shows some of the contradictory and complicated ways in which agricultural politics play out. Here, the assumption that free trade would necessarily lead to the demise of the family farm was taken up prematurely. Moreover, this campaign was launched to promote federal subsidization of the dairy industry as much as it was done with the view to helping small scale farming. The role of agricultural sectoral politics is important to understand in contemporary discourses and politics surrounding livestock. In the following section, I explore two examples of this. One, the emergence of politics of traceability with the US lobby group R-CALF. Second, I examine the role the Alberta Beef Producers played in constructing narratives about local, wholesome beef industry.

R-CALF (Ranchers Legal Action Fund) was founded in 1998 to represent and file trade cases on behalf of the U.S. cattle industry. They filed an anti-dumping (selling below the cost of production) case against Canada and Mexico, and another case against Canada for subsidizing the production of cattle. In 1999, R-CALF expanded to a national association for cattle producers and independent feeders with a mandate of representing the U.S. cattle industry in national and international trade to ensure the continued profitability and viability of U.S. cattle producers. R-CALF USA is one of the fastest growing national cattle associations with over 18,000 members. On March 2, 2005 Federal District Judge Richard Cebull granted a preliminary injunction preventing the United States Department of Agriculture from allowing additional Canadian beef and live cattle from entering the United

States. This injunction was filed by R-CALF as an effort to stop the USDA from opening the U.S. border to Canadian live cattle. In July 2005, this injunction was overturned by a panel of three judges on the U.S. 9<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court of Appeals, saying that Judge Cebull should have respected the expertise of the USDA about the safety risks of Canadian beef (Cotter, 2005). Although trade in live cattle resumed between the U.S. and Canada on July 18, 2005, R-CALF petitioned the Appeals court to a rehearing.

Debates over border closures due to mad cow disease are framed such that both sides (R CALF and the USDA) argue they have ‘science’ on their side. According to R-CALF, BSE poses sufficient risk that borders should remain closed. According to the USDA, their decision to open the border was also based on ‘sound science’. In a March 15, 2005 New York Times editorial, the USDA was criticized for stating that there is minimal risk with Canadian beef. Judge Cebull is cited as saying that the USDA has made “a decision that subjects the entire U.S. beef industry to potentially catastrophic damages and that presents a genuine risk of death for U.S. consumers”. This editorial concludes “the Agriculture Department can cling, if it likes, to the notion of unproven ‘minimal risk’. But all it takes is one sick cow to shut down a border. It doesn’t get more minimal than that”.

However, groups such as the Center for Global Food Issues, the Frontier Centre for Public Policy, and the Center for Consumer freedom argue that the problem lies, not with the beef industry, but with hysterical and misguided activists who use dubious science and scare tactics to advance their claims. In response to the Times editorials, for example, Steve Dimmer (2005) of the Agribusiness Freedom Foundation, an organization that promotes free market principles for agriculture, writes that the Times has been “sucked into Cebull’s and R-CALF’s misleading science” and that “the Times is making proclamations based on ideology, not science or facts”. However, it is not so much that government and industry are

‘covering things up’ or that activists are scaring the public with ideology, but that our understanding of diseases such as mad cow disease is limited and uncertain. However, this scientific ambiguity is often obscured in broader political debates.

One of R-CALF’s prime focuses is the promotion of a mandatory country of origin labeling. This labeling enables consumers to know where their beef is coming from, and, ostensibly, to promote the sale of U.S. raised beef over imports from other countries. From one perspective, country of origin labeling is instrumental in promoting locally grown foods; from another, it can promote unfair trade restrictions. If a country is marked or stigmatized as being the origin of a food borne illness, then consumers might be scared, for just reasons or not, from consuming its products. Since our agricultural trade system is global and highly networked, with a large number of people depending on global trade, these restrictions and stigmas can have devastating consequences, especially for countries with less international power.

### **The Genesis of Alberta Beef**

I turn now to look at the role the Alberta Beef Producers, the Albertan equivalent of R-CALF played in the construction of Alberta beef as a local food. Whereas R-CALF has tried to keep the borders closed under the auspices of ‘unsafe’ beef from Alberta, the Alberta Beef Producers have marketed their beef as, not only safe, but as a commodity in desperate need of support. In both cases (R-CALF and Alberta Beef Producers) the ambiguity and uncertainty of the risk associated with BSE was erased. Whereas R-CALF magnified the dangers associated with BSE, the Alberta Beef Producers downplayed them.

Beef is central to Alberta’s culinary, agricultural and social landscapes. As food journalist Cinda Chavich writes, “Alberta beef is the phrase that slips off the lips of almost

anyone thinking about food in this province” (2001, p. 41). Most of Canada’s beef cattle are raised and processed in Alberta, which has the largest provincial cattle and calf herd (5.22 million head) in Canada, accounting for approximately 70 per cent of the national beef export market (Dunn, 2004). Alberta also houses the largest cattle feeding networks and beef processing plants, making the agricultural and its associated industries the second most important area of economic activity in Alberta, following oil and natural gas.

Beef is also operates symbolically to mark regional identity. Some would go so far as to argue that Alberta is beef! As described in one Calgary newspaper,

Alberta beef has been such a strong provincial symbol, a trademark for quality that speaks to both our ranching heritage and the quality of life within the province. Nothing captures the emotional connections that Albertans have with their province as well as photos of cattle grazing in the foothills of the Rockies, under a clear blue Alberta sky (Gibbins, 2003).

Alberta beef (ostensibly) emerges naturally and inevitably from the soils of her expansive rangeland and from the toils of her farmers and ranchers<sup>19</sup> It serves as part of the defining myths of what it means to be an Albertan, operating, to paraphrase Aritha van Herk (2004), as yet another knot in the eloquent slippage that regionalize us. Untying these knots involves unraveling the complex threads (global, industrial, economic, ideological) that weave together to form the fabric of regional identity, a fabric that conceals a much deeper, convoluted historical struggle for power.

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<sup>19</sup> This image is particularly popular in tourist literature:

Alberta really is the True West. We aren't just putting on a show for the city slickers: this is the real thing. ([www1.travelalberta.com](http://www1.travelalberta.com))

With thousands upon thousands of acres at their disposal, Alberta cattle farmers graze their herds in the fresh air on natural forage and wholesome barley feed. This tradition of natural farming techniques, combined with some of the most stringent quality standards in the world, add up to a difference you can really taste. ([www.travelcanada.ca](http://www.travelcanada.ca))



Paradoxically, the popularity of Alberta (and Canadian) beef in Canada increased after May 2003, when a cow from a herd in Northern Alberta tested positive for BSE. The following December, the first American BSE case was found in a cow that had been imported into Washington state from Alberta. Two more cases were found in Alberta in January 2005. Following the announcement of the initial positive BSE test, the United States and all other important beef and cattle trading countries immediately closed their borders to Canada, leading to severe economic consequences for Canadian, and especially Albertan cattle ranchers and beef producers.

Relatively speaking, Canada is not a very large beef exporter, compared to the Brazil or Argentina. However, trade with the United States is crucial for Canada's economy as most of Canada's beef is exported to the United States. Approximately 50% of Canada's beef production is exported, with about 70% exported to the United States (Dunn, 2004). In 2002, the export market was worth approximately 4.2 billion dollars (Canadian); however, in the months following the ban, exports dropped to virtually zero (Poulin and Boame, 2003).

As much of the world eliminated Canadian beef from their diets due to risk of contracting the human variant of BSE, beef consumption in Canada increased five percent from 2002 to 2003 (Stats Canada 2004). Although this may not seem like a large amount, it is relative to the steady decline in beef consumption in previous years. Since the 1980s, Canadians have significantly reduced their consumption of beef, due primarily to health, ethical and environmental concerns, from an average of 65 pounds per person per year in the mid 1980s to less than 50 pounds per person per year in the early 2000s (Dunn, 2004, p. 17). Yet, even though Canadian beef consumption fell during this time period, production increased due to expanding export markets. To be expected, after the closure of trade borders, there was an oversupply of slaughter cattle in the Canadian market, leading to a

supply in desperate need of a demand. Although this increase in consumption may be explained, in part, by the emergence of dietary regimes that emphasize increased meat consumption as a way to manage weight loss (such as the Atkins and Zone diets), it may also have been informed by the discourses of powerful beef lobbies in Canada that made appeals to the public to show support for the beef industry by consuming more beef.

Canadian's support for the beleaguered beef industry was impressive: not only were massive amounts of government funds made available to help the beef producers, but also cross country barbecues were organized, restaurants and top chefs began showcasing Alberta and Canadian beef, tourists could taste Alberta beef at Tourism Alberta centers, Alberta businesses raised money to support beef producers, and at provincial agricultural fairs across Alberta, the friendly folks from the Alberta Beef Producers were more than willing to give away bumper stickers, pens, recipes, and assorted paraphernalia advertising the beef industry. Although public support for the Alberta beef industry is laudable and points to the generosity and compassion of Canadians for ranchers and beef producers, it is also worthy of critical investigation. What is intriguing about the Canadian example is the amount of public support for, recognition of and trust in the beef industry. Contemporary discourses about beef are largely created and informed by beef producer lobby groups, who have a vested interest in the marketing and sale of their products.

In Canada, beef industry lobby groups are found at national and provincial levels. At the national level, they include: the Canadian Meat Council, that represents the interests of meat packers and processors whose aim is to promote a 'free and expanding market environment conducive to appropriate economic returns'; the Canadian Cattleman's Association, a federation of eight provincial member organizations; the Canada Beef Export

Federation whose aim is to improve export markets for the Canadian cattle and beef industry, with offices in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, China, Mexico.

Each province also has its own beef producer board. The Alberta Beef Producers (ABP) is the biggest marketing organization for beef producers in the province. It was established in 1969 by five groups (the Alberta Cattle Breeders Association, Alberta Dairymen's Association, Alberta Federation of Agriculture, Farmers Union of Alberta and the Western Stock Growers' Association). Its mandate is to strengthen the sustainability and competitiveness of the Alberta beef industry by increasing consumer demand for beef both domestically and internationally, ensuring access to land and water resources for the benefit of cattle producers, enhancing communications with local and national politicians, improving the beef cattle industry's image, and establishing relations with other beef producer groups<sup>20</sup>. ABP is directly supported by national producer organizations, such as the Canadian Cattlemen's Association and the Canada Beef Export Federation.

The ABP's marketing strategy relies on a dominant tourist image associated with Alberta: a wholesome, wild, unsettled cattle country, relatively untouched by the advances of urban and technological culture, and miraculously retaining the spirit of the wild western frontier. One of its dominant discourses is that Alberta (and Canadian) beef producers are in need of protection in order to save a way of life and a mode of production historically rooted in Alberta's history, culture and regional identity. However, images of expansive, wild land, as well as preindustrial ranching methods belie the reality of Alberta's contemporary beef production industry which is modern, industrial, and highly integrated. Although the 'I Love Alberta Beef' cookbook published by the ABP provides a detailed description of the beef production chain in Alberta, from cow/calf operations, to backgrounding (a process of

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<sup>20</sup> [www.alberabeef.org](http://www.alberabeef.org)

feeding young cattle a high forage diet to increase their weight), to feedlot finishing and beef processing; the visual images produced for ABP's campaigns do not feature any recognition of this level of modernization. Rather, they focus solely on small scale cow/calf operations, and the rugged cowboys and cowgirls who work to make those operations profitable.

My claim is not that beef producers hold power over consumers, nor that they are simply concealing broader truths for short term economic gain. Canadian beef producers have to work to establish their industry presence, reputation and economic survival, as they face competition from other agricultural and manufacturing sectors, at regional, national and international levels. They also need to counter concerns about beef production and consumption in terms of issues surrounding environmental sustainability, animal welfare, human health and, more recently, fears about mad cow disease. One of the primary issues in terms of public relations is convincing Canadians as well as international consumers that the beef supply is indeed safe and that there is no need for public concern. As Marion Nestle writes, from a science based perspective, meat related food illnesses such as mad cow disease are of uncertain or low overall risk to human health, but they do rank high as causes of dread and outrage (2004, p. 25).

The beef industry makes very little attempt to hide its self interested political activities. Its mandate is very clear: to increase the market for beef at domestic and international levels; to remove barriers to global cattle trade; to foster good relations with local and national governments. In terms of its projected goals and objectives, the beef industry is very successful and deserves recognition. However, it is the forces behind this success that interest and concern me, for these lobby groups have managed to articulate and galvanize a somewhat inchoate public sentiment organized around the belief that beef cattle

production is a natural, inevitable and politically neutral feature of Alberta's history, and, as a result, should be protected at all costs. As the ABP marketing division describes,

Consumers continue to be moved by genuine images of rugged ranchers in the heart of Alberta's cattle country where the air is fresh and there's an abundance of rangeland, the right conditions for producing the world's best beef.<sup>21</sup>

This is relevant in terms of the recent turn in academic, activist and popular discourses towards advocating local or regional commodities as a way of fostering environmentally and economically sustainable consumption habits. Local food is celebrated as a means by which consumers can contribute to their own health as well as the general well being of their surrounding communities and ecosystems (Halliwell, 2002a, 2004; Norberg-Hodge et al, 2002). However, this focus on local foods as a site of resistance and possibility tends to be based on the assumption that local and global forces are opposing, separate and antagonistic (Wilk, 2002). More specifically, the sentiment seems to be that global agricultural trade and its concomitant industrial, commercial practices are antithetical to diverse, good tasting food, and that local foods are somehow more wholesome, natural and good. What Alberta beef illustrates, however, is that cattle production as well as public taste for beef has been established as regional, historical and natural in origin by various political and economic interests.

The ABP's most popular and lauded project is the award winning 'If it ain't Alberta, it ain't beef' campaign. Intended create wider recognition for Alberta beef, this project commenced in 1988 for the XV Winter Olympic Games in Calgary. The initial campaign ran from 1988 – 2001, and featured three cowboys in posed in front of a mountain range. In the second campaign launched in 2002, the original cowboys were replaced by three female

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<sup>21</sup> [www.albertabeef.org/marketing2](http://www.albertabeef.org/marketing2)

Albertan ranchers, who, according to ABP, reflect the contribution made by women to Alberta's ranching legacy as well as women's role as primary household food purchasers. According to the ABP marketing website,

Behind almost every successful family ranch is a woman who is at once a wife, mother, homemaker, ranch hand and business person. Beyond their traditional domestic roles, most ranch women are able to step in and manage calving, fencing, planting, harvesting and tending to cattle. Like the men, ranch women wear many hats: cattle producer, electrician, mechanic, welder, equipment operator, construction worker, truck/tractor driver and more<sup>22</sup>.

This campaign highlights the contributions made by the following Albertan ranchers (sic): Erin Butters, a fifth generation rancher who is also studying psychology at the university level; Patti Scott, a mother of two and fourth generation rancher, who owns and operates a cow-calf ranch entirely on her own; and Lenore McLean, a wife, mother and grandmother with over 60 years on the ranch.

In January, 2004, over one million postcards featuring these women were sent to Alberta consumers in order to offer gratitude for supporting the Alberta beef industry. These post cards featured a recipe for meatballs, as well as the following text:

Being part of the Alberta beef industry presented its share of struggles this year, and thanks to your support, we're getting through it. But our challenges aren't over yet.

We still need you.

So, as we turn the pages on 2003, it is with sincere appreciation that we thank you for being there for us. We'll continue to provide a safe and healthy product in addition to being a major economic contributor to our province.

The ranchers are spokeswomen for the Alberta Beef Producers, and from January – March, 2004, they visited communities across Alberta, making appearances at events to encourage Albertans to eat more beef, and to remind people of the challenges faced by the beef industry.

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<sup>22</sup> [www.albertabeef.org/marketing2](http://www.albertabeef.org/marketing2)

I draw attention to this campaign because of its centrality in the construction about beef production in Alberta. The rhetorical strategy is to rely on relatively benign figures – wholesome cowboys and ‘ranchers’. The use of women in the campaign is significant, as these figures serve to feminize and domesticate the beef industry, making it appear closer to home. By having these women materially appear in communities, the beef industry furthers its rhetorical appeals: not only is the industry safe, but we have real people to prove it.

Although these representations present beef production in the context of a wholesome, local and small scale farming operation; in reality, Alberta’s rural population and cow / calf operators have been on a slow decline long before the emergence of BSE and the subsequent border closures. Alberta had a predominantly rural, farming population in the first half of the twentieth century; however, today the great majority of Alberta’s population lives in urban centers. In 1951, over half of the Alberta population was urban. A decade later, the figure was over 70 percent. By the 1980s, less than 10 percent of Alberta’s workforce was employed in agriculture. Moreover, according to a 2001 Agriculture census, the average age of farmers and ranchers in Canada is 55 years old. Farming and ranching literally are dying industries, as the average age of agricultural workers increases with each census year without being replaced by younger populations.

It’s somewhat ironic that the core image used by the Alberta Beef Producers to signify modern cow / calf operators is the cowboy. This image is grounded more in tourist marketing narratives than in the regionally specific modes of agricultural production. The cowboy and even cattle are not ‘homegrown’; rather, they are imports from the United States. Furthermore, this itinerant laborer played a relatively minor role in the history of the Canadian west, compared to other more influential people such as businessmen, bankers, lawyers, railway tycoons and real estate agents (Seiler and Seiler, 2004). In spite of the

romanticized image of farm workers that it presents, it unwittingly gestures towards the class and labor dynamics at play within modern agriculture. The American cowboy (as well as the Chilean *hauso*, the Argentinean *gaucho*, the Venezuelan *llanero* and the Mexican *vaquero*) were migrant, indentured laborers who belonged to a class of people poorly paid and mercilessly exploited by the nineteenth century cattle businessmen. Likewise, laborers in the modern beef production are still poorly paid and exploited (Broadway 2001).

The cowboy did enjoy a brief heyday in the genesis of the cattle industry. The first cattle in North America were introduced in southern Texas and California (Brado, 2004). They were initially herded, not for meat but for dairy purposes. When they were slaughtered, it was for their tallow and hides. Texas long horns evolved from these cattle due to evolutionary adaptation to the environmental conditions of Texas. Due to favorable conditions, Texas cattle herds grew exponentially, going from 100 000 head in 1830, to 3.5 million in 1860 (ibid, p. 11). From 1830 - 1880, cattle production was a lucrative operation for investors and entrepreneurs in western North America. It was during this time that the cattle drives began, as entrepreneurial Texans found markets for Texas beef in Illinois and Missouri. Markets for beef grew during the time of the Civil war in America, which fostered the development of industrial factories, and alongside an increase in immigrant populations, provided a burgeoning consumer market for beef. By the 1870s, during what has been coined the 'beef bonanza', there was a dramatic expansion in cattle production, processing and consumption due to the opening of northern ranges in Wyoming and Montana, as well as the expansion of the railroad and the development of refrigeration technology which allowed carcasses to be delivered to eastern American markets, and even Europe, without spoiling.

As a result of the gold rushes of late 1850s and early 1860s, the cattle industry expanded from the US into British Columbia, Southern Alberta and Saskatchewan. Warm,



dry 'Chinook' winds that kept the range relatively free of snow and enabled year round grazing opportunities made Alberta particularly attractive to cattle ranchers. Cattle traders from Montana were the first to exploit the commercial possibilities of Alberta, as well as investors and entrepreneurs from the United States, Britain and Scotland. However, by this time, cattle prices had already been weakened because of a drought in 1884 and a harsh winter in 1886. The open range cattle system was subsequently transformed into a grain farming economy, in part because of increased immigration and settlement in the western provinces, as well as the steady decline of the cattle industry and the socio-political power of the cattlemen. The upsurge of new immigrants settling the plains as well as the invention of barbed wire in 1873 transformed the open range system into agricultural settlements (Brado, 2004; Seiler and Seiler, 2004). Although the cattle system dominated a great deal of territory in the United States, in Canada it was limited to a fairly small region in the southern parts of British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan. Canadian open range ranching ended in 1906, one year after the inception of the province, and was marked by more mixed farming operations rather than pure open range ranching (Elofson, 1996 in Seiler and Seiler, 2004).

Although the actual history of the cowboy was relatively short, its image was captured, packaged and distributed by entertainment, advertising and tourist industries. 'Buffalo Bill' Cody was one of the first creators of the western images that inform contemporary imaginations. Cody launched the Buffalo Bill Wild West in 1883 in Nebraska to dramatize the frontier life that was fast passing away, and toured this show successfully in North America and Europe until 1913 (Seiler and Seiler, 2004, p. 159). Although by the time of the first World War, most 'wild west' shows had faded from public notice, the romantic image of the cowboy was distributed by the dime novel, the country and western movie, pulp magazines and western art. The rodeo replaced the Wild West show in the 1920s and in

Alberta, the romanticized image of the cowboy and the rodeo was taken up by the ‘greatest show on earth’, the Calgary Stampede, an annual rodeo and fair that celebrates southern Albertan history and regional identity. Every July, the Calgary Stampede packages and sells the western cowboy as a tourist attraction, using an imported antiquated icon as a way to celebrate southern Albertan history and regional identity.

One of the possible explanations for this disjunction between the rhetoric of the visual images presented about Alberta cattle ranching and the reality of this industry is that these images play a role in the construction of national or regional cuisines, which themselves are tied to the construction and maintenance of the nation. Popular discourses of the nation often present the nation as timeless, apolitical and ahistorical, as naturally and effortlessly emerging from a particular place and people. Erased from these discourses are modern processes of nation formation, which are deeply dependent on international trade relations as well as on complex processes of industrialization, urbanization, tourism and modern systems of communication.

Rather than seeing regional and national cuisines as representative of what people in specific locales actually eat, we can read them in terms of broader politics of nation formation (Appadurai, 1988; Cusack, 2005; Penfold, 2002; Wilk, 2002). Certain commodities can come to signify regional and / or national identity because they are articulated with what Benedict Anderson (1991) calls imagined community, acts of imagination that galvanize disperse groups of people under a banner of common identity. These acts of imagination are shaped by images and narratives that circulate in broader cultural representations, ranging from popular movies and novels, to tourist literature and journalist accounts. Because foods signify and, to a degree, maintain national identity without recourse to overt nationalistic rhetoric or flag waving, they often escape critical examination in terms of which groups and

ideologies are included and which are excluded (Cusack, 2005). Although nations require flags, constitutions, and official languages, they do not necessarily share common cuisines or foods. When a cuisine emerges as a defining feature of a region, this is not a politically neutral phenomenon. Rather, like most of material culture, national cuisines emerge from power struggles, contingent historical, social and political alliances as well as diverse contestations over meaning.

Alberta beef is one point around which Albertans can symbolically unite against more powerful national and international forces. According to J.M.S Careless (1989), the Canadian rural west needs to be understood in terms of core – periphery or heartland – hinterland relations. The Canadian west has always been controlled, managed, and dictated by outside interests, especially those situated in Britain, the United States and Eastern Canada. In the fur trade era, it was controlled by two rival trading empires of England and France. After the North West territories were purchased by the Canadian government in 1870, the west was controlled by the metropolitan centers of Montreal, Ottawa and Toronto. In the post world war II era, the heartland has shifted to the United States due to the emergence of transnational corporate power.

Although Alberta is one of Canada's wealthiest provinces, it is often regarded as a bit of a rural backwater due in large part to the hierarchical positioning of eastern Canada over western Canada, and more specifically, urban industrial manufacturing over rural agriculture. This devaluation of the west has historical roots, even within the agricultural industry. In the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Great Plains of North America were shunned by agriculturalists (Brado, 2004, p. 9). The 98<sup>th</sup> meridian marked a transition zone, from eastern forest to western grassland, from dependable rainfall to areas that were potentially drought stricken. It also

marked a line of civilization and economic prosperity: to the east laid bustling cities, to the west, an area relatively uninhabited by British and European Caucasian populations.

Since its inception, Alberta has had a tense relationship with eastern Canada, in particular, Ontario. Alberta has a conservative political agenda, more in line with the contemporary politics of the United States, than the Canadian Liberal federal government. This history of antagonism is rooted in economic power struggles: historically, Alberta has an agricultural base that provided the raw materials for the large manufacturing centers in Ontario and Quebec. Many Albertans felt that they were being taken advantage of in the Canadian federation. This was exacerbated in agricultural communities by the Crow Rate, a rail transport subsidy in place from 1903 to 1995 that encouraged the export of feed grains such as wheat and barley from western provinces. Western provinces were forced to pay more for rail freights than those living in the eastern provinces.

Furthermore, most of Canada's population is concentrated in major urban centers (Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal). This leaves vast amounts of land open for logging, farming and cattle ranching, industries that comprise large segments of trade with the U.S. These industries have also lead to some of the most salient trade disputes between the two nations. In addition to the closure to Canadian beef, the US has currently placed steep import tariffs on Canadian lumber, an issue now before the World Trade Organization. This is why is was significant when President George W. Bush made his first visit to Canada in November, 2004, Canada's Chief of Protocol Robert Collette arranged for a private banquet that highlighted Alberta beef. Although a lot of 'what if' jokes circulated about the potential risk of Bush falling victim to mad cow disease, in an interview on Newshour with Jim Lehrer, Bush himself made light of situation, as well as the US border closure to Canadian beef, by stating "I proudly ate some Alberta beef last night... and I'm still standing".

Although Alberta beef is showcased, particularly at political functions, in order to regain public trust in the beef industry, there is more happening than simply a temporary appeal for public support. With the emergence of Alberta beef, Alberta comes into the discourse of the nation not only as an economically powerful actor but also as a site of cultural production. As Sydney Mintz (1996) writes, a national cuisine is essentially a contradiction in terms for there are really only regional cuisines, of which only certain ones become articulated with a sense of national identity. This is particularly true of Canadian national cuisines. As literary critic Northrop Frye wrote, “Canadian culture is not a national development but a series of regional ones, what is happening in British Columbia being very different from what is happening in New Brunswick or Ontario” (1982, p. 63). With regards to foodstuffs, the staple exported symbols of ‘canadian cuisine’ (maple syrup, back bacon and even the donut) are more firmly rooted in Eastern Canadian gastronomic practices and narratives than Western Canadian ones. As Steve Penfold (2002) notes, what passes for ‘official’ nationalism is often southern Ontario regionalism, which resists precise territorial definition as this area has the cultural capital to represent what counts as Canada’s “national” cultural production.

Although the ABP’s campaign successfully markets itself on an antiquated tourist icon, rooted in a bygone era of open range ranching, modern beef production has very little resemblance to its nineteenth century counterpart. In effect, changes in the integrated, industrialized beef commodity chain *enabled* beef to be associated with Alberta. According to Max Foran (2003), up until the end of the Second World War, Alberta’s beef cattle industry was not integrated into a regional feeding and finishing system. It did not produce ‘good’ Alberta beef, especially not for the average Canadian because ranchers and stock farmers reserved quality cattle for lucrative export markets. Furthermore, the primacy of the

export market detracted attention from the establishment of an integrated feeding industry, both regionally and nationally, because feeding was not essential for the export market and it was assumed that the domestic market would not pay more for finished beef products (ibid, xiv).

The association of beef with ‘Alberta’ was enabled by a series of changes to the beef commodity chain. Even though cattle were raised in Alberta since the turn of the twentieth century, the final product was not associated with its place of origin. If beef was identified, it was usually associated with the packing plant or retail outlet rather than with the site of production. Between 1890 and World War II, industrialization and rationalization of the meat packing industries fostered the development of an agro-industrial complex in major urban centers, particularly in Ontario (MacLachlan, 2001). The post war period marked a shift of processing plants from urban centers to smaller centers in the west, enabled by more efficient refrigerated truck cattle liners that replaced railways, as well as the construction of smaller beef processing plants that were closer to ranching communities. The biggest change occurred in the late 1980s when the Canadian beef processing industry began the initial stages of a major transformation towards rationalization and consolidation. One consequence of this shift was that feeding and meatpacking moved from central Ontario, where it had been focused for most of the twentieth century, to Alberta. Alberta now has over 40% of the national cattle inventory, and 72% of the national packing capacity (Dunn, 2004).

So, paradoxically, the emergence of Alberta beef depends on the very technological and industrial processes that are erased in beef lobby marketing images. One consequence of this is an erasure in the public consciousness of the beneficiaries of the industry. Although the marketing literature produced by the ABP and other beef producer organizations suggests that small scale cow/calf producers are the ones they are rallying to support, this is not

necessarily the case. The price paid to Alberta and Canadian ranchers for slaughter cattle decreased dramatically after the announcement that Alberta was BSE positive; however, during this time, prices for beef at the supermarkets stayed constant (Dunn 2004). In the year following the border closure, Canada's three largest meat packing companies (Cargill, Lakeside Packers and Levinoff meats) made over 280 % profit (ibid 2004). These companies were also held in contempt of Parliament in May 2004 because they refused to give financial statements to a federal committee examining whether the industry had profited from the mad cow crisis, by misappropriating funds meant for ranchers and other small scale producers. Although they were exonerated of any wrong doing by an Auditor General's report released in August 2004, this report acknowledged that these companies did profit from the border closures. Furthermore, the US owned packing companies (Cargill Foods and Lakeside Packers), are the only ones licensed by the United States government to export boneless meat to the US from animals under 30 months of age (Kilgour, 2004). So, although the US – Canada border was closed to the export of live slaughter cattle, these packing companies profited from the increase of slaughter cattle by buying them at low costs, processing them, and selling them to the US market.

Marketing discourse notwithstanding, the beef industry as a whole is not in dire need of community support because it is a highly subsidized industry. Since 2003, upwards of 8 billion dollars has been allocated from federal and provincial governments to help beef producers. In 2004, the Federal government, in conjunction with the Canadian Cattlemen's Association, launched a 'Repositioning the Livestock Industry Strategy' in order to increase domestic slaughter capacity by providing financial support to the beef sector. This program includes an additional 54 million dollars to support loans for building and expanding small and medium sized slaughter and processing facilities. In March 2005, Agriculture and Agri-

Food minister Andy Mitchell announced that the federal government would contribute an additional 50 million dollars to the Canadian Cattlemen Association's Legacy fund to launch a marketing campaign to reclaim and expand markets for Canadian beef.

Even at the inception of the beef industry at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, federal subsidies were integral to the industry's formation and sustainability. By giving tax breaks as well as low land prices, the Canadian government was able to attract foreign investors who would provide the necessary capital and infrastructure for the beef industry. Yet, even with this government aide, the cattle industry did not always have profitable returns (Brado, 2004; Foran, 2003). Although Alberta had a brief spurt of economic prosperity with beef cattle at the end of the nineteenth century, for the first half of the twentieth century, wheat was more central to Alberta's agricultural sector than beef. Cattle production was not as lucrative as cereal grains as it was more inelastic and capital intensive. It was also more vulnerable to shifts in consumer tastes, as well as to the vagaries of climate, markets, and cost of farm inputs (oil, fertilizer, pesticides, machinery, etc). It is only with the help of subsidization, as well as technological and commercial integration of the beef industry that Alberta beef came to be a local food, one cherished for its 'heritage' and wholesomeness.

One of the disadvantages of these processes of collective identification (whether it exists at a familial, state or national level) is that, alongside creating a sense of continuity or cohesion, it also conceals a certain foundational violence, an exclusion of differences, contradictions or problems that make this unity possible. This is perhaps why, with the exception of a few dissenting voices in student newspapers and vegetarian and environmental publications, the promotion of Alberta beef is not publicly challenged. For example, in 1990, singer k.d. lang, in conjunction with the animal rights organization PETA, recorded a television commercial that called into question the dominance of the beef industry. In the



advertisement, she stated “If you knew how meat was made, you’d probably lose your lunch. I know— I’m from cattle country and that’s why I became a vegetarian” (Bennetts, 1993). As a result, lang’s music was removed from the play lists of Alberta country and western radio stations, and her popularity in Alberta diminished. For a country music industry and a province that resonates with cowboy images and is characterized by a predominantly meat eating culture, lang’s challenge to the beef industry was a serious transgression of orthodoxy, one that garnered a lot more public hostility than her subsequent announcement that she was a lesbian. The reaction to the commercial was all the more interesting since it never actually aired; rather, it was reported in a feature on the television show Entertainment Tonight, and subsequently became a news item (Rowan et al, 1999).

Public debates should be given more attention, given the concerns raised about the social and environmental consequences of the meat packing industry. Michael Broadway, a geography professor who studies social changes brought about by the meat packing industry in both Canada and the US, has documented the impact of foreign owned meat processing industries of Cargill and Lakeside Packers in the communities of High River and Brooks, Alberta. Although these industries have brought jobs to these communities as well as supplied a market for locally raised cattle, they have also lead to increased rates of violent crime, domestic violence, homelessness as well as increased demand for social services. This is in part due to the nature of the industry. Jobs within meat packing industries are characterized by low pay, high injury rates, physical and emotional stress. These conditions lead to a high employee turnover. As such, these industries recruit workers from outside the region, with an emphasis on highly mobile adult single males and recent immigrants. This leads to a highly transient working population, one that makes community cohesion difficult. However, under the mandates of fiscal belt tightening and debt reduction, the provincial

government has systematically cut social services, including health care and education, therefore has passed much of the costs of the beef processing industry to local communities and charitable organizations.

The major beef processing industries as well as beef producer organizations have enabled Alberta to play a more integrated role in the beef industry and hence strengthened Alberta's agricultural economy. Alberta beef may also feed a deeper hunger for western Canadians to occupy a viable national and global subject position because this commodity enables a certain degree of regional pride as it allows Alberta to make its economic and political presence noticed, not only nationally but also globally. It also enables Alberta to challenge its status as a cultural hinterland, in comparison with the metropolis' of eastern Canada as well as the powerful presence of the United States. However, the current trends in cattle production and beef consumption are also costing Albertan's a great deal in terms of tax dollars as well as long term social and environmental degradation. These costs are not often acknowledged, due to marketing campaigns by beef producer organizations that appeal to natural, wholesome but antiquated modes of agricultural production.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE CATEGORIZATION OF SPECIES

I examined the role of biopolitics in a global governance sense. Here, I turn to the biopolitical categorization of the species via discourses of flesh consumption. One question that emerges from Foucault's analysis of power is how the power over death is exercised in a political system centered upon biopolitics. What is paradoxical about modern regimes of power is that they protect and augment life, but also authorize mass genocides. How can modern power kill if its basic function is to improve life? For Foucault, democratic political struggles are more centered around citizens' right to life (as well as health, happiness, satisfaction of needs) and the protection of the health of the population than on issues of the law and the rights of the sovereign. If the underlying mechanism of power in modern societies is not military or juridical but biological, then what are the mechanisms that enable the state to justify killing and the taking of life? How is it that modern democratic societies accept and tolerate mass slaughters such as war and genocide, as well as the taking of individual lives by the state?

Foucault raised these questions in his 1975 – 76 series of lectures entitled *Society Must Be Defended* (Foucault, 2003). These lectures addressed the politics of modern warfare, and served as an attempt to synthesize his work on disciplinary power (applied at the individual) and biopower (applied at the level of the species and population). Foucault was interested in the relations between democratic and totalitarian states: in his estimation, these are part of a similar continuum as a strange kinship exists between liberal and repressive

regimes. The biopolitics of exclusion and extermination of the politically dangerous and ethnically impure are policed as much by the medical and scientific professions as they are by the military. The ostensibly benign bedrocks of modern liberal societies, the institutions of medicine, psychiatry, biological sciences, etc, can, at times, be imbricated in wars that pit humans against humans based on notions of degeneracy, criminality, and pathology.

Thus, even within the generative conditions created by biopower, the state still retains the right to kill those who present a biological danger to the population as a whole. Killing does not only mean murder, it also means indirect forms of murder such as increasing the risk of death, shunning people by expulsion, rejection, excommunication, and so on. For example, capital punishment is allowed (or is de-criminalized) because it is predicated on the monstrous incorrigibility of the 'criminal' and the necessity of safeguarding society from people who are irredeemable. The war on 'terror' works in a similar fashion. Terrorists are identified as threats to the population in order to justify a different treatment of those so labeled as well as to implement laws that restrict the freedom of its citizens in the name of safety and protection of the broader population.

In modern society, war is justified in a different fashion than it was in pre democratic societies. It is not so much the sovereign that is under attack (and in need of protection) but the entire population:

Wars are no longer waged in the name of a sovereign who must be defended; they are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity: massacres have become vital ... the existence in question is no longer the juridical existence of sovereignty; at stake is the biological existence of a population. (1978, p. 137)

Biopower does not necessarily supplant sovereign power because in certain instances it works in its service. It does so when medical and biological views as well as statistical means of accounting for populations converge in the identification of potential threats and

possible measures of security. The enemies to this normalized population are not adversaries in the political sense of the term; they are threats, either internal or external, to the population (2003, p. 256). According to this logic, the death of the impure, the inferior, the degenerate or the abnormal race will make the lives of the 'normal' better; when the enemy dies, not only is safety guaranteed, but this will also make normal lives more healthy and pure.

Foucault finds a point of convergence with his work on disciplinary and biopower by situating them within broader regimes of *racism*. His definition of racism is specific: it refers to the ways in which the State creates hierarchical separations of groups based on biological criteria. It involves:

the appearance within the biological continuum of the human race of races, the distinction among races, the hierarchy of races, the fact that certain races are described as good and that others, in contrast, are described as inferior: all this is a way of fragmenting the field of the biological that power controls. (2003, p. 255)

Biological racism works by fragmenting populations by creating caesuras, divisions and separations that are subsequently linked with systems of value. Certain categories of populations are considered impure, inferior, degenerate or abnormal in relation to others. These divisions are often maintained and supported by the ostensibly neutral, objective and secular biological sciences that link with already established moral and religious codes.

For Foucault, the new procedures of power devised in modernity changed the dynamics of power from a symbolics of blood to an analytics of sexuality (1990, p. 148). During the ancien regime, blood was a reality with a symbolic function (1990, p. 147). This is because power spoke through blood: the honor of war, the fear of famine, the triumph of death, the sovereign with its sword, executioners, and tortures all held their power over and through blood. For a society in which famines, epidemics and violence made death imminent, blood constituted a fundamental value and point of concern. During the ancien regime, death was a moment of transition, from a terrestrial to a celestial sovereign. In modern times, death

is something that is warded off, or trivialized, because it challenges new regimes of power. Death threatens power because it points to modern power's limits to improve life by eliminating accidents, random elements, and any threat to life. Whereas death was once a public act, performed in terms of public executions or ceremonial wakes, it has now become a private, and almost shameful, thing.

While blood represents the ancien regime (law, death, transgression, the symbolic and sovereignty), Foucault maintains that modern societies are a society of sexuality where the mechanisms of power are addressed to the body, to life, to what causes it to proliferate, what reinforces the species. Sexuality is the paradigmatic figure for normalizing project of modern disciplinary power. By the nineteenth century, sexuality, more than blood, is the object of excitement and fear, of repression and celebration. Sex is the product of biopolitics: an imaginary element created by joining bodies, organs, somatic localizations, functions, sensations and pleasures. The forces of power / knowledge made sex into something with intrinsic properties and laws of its own. Sex also became naturalized, as a biological and instinctive function. It is through sex that each individual has to pass in order to have access to his own intelligibility (it is the hidden aspect and the generative principle of meaning).

In certain cases, these regimes of power (sanguinity and sexuality; sovereign and modern) overlap. The thematics of blood are called on to lend weight to the political power exercised through the devices of sexuality. For example, the mythical concern of protecting the purity of the blood and ensuring the triumph of the race can lead to the assumption that society is in need of protection by policing who could have sex with whom.

I propose that, in contemporary western society, power is increasingly taking *flesh* as its object. Like sexuality, the consumption of flesh is an object of excitement and fear, of contestation and celebration. It is not, however, within the same power configuration as

regimes of sexuality for the increased emphasis on flesh foreshadows a new way in which power is manifesting, not via governing the human body, but via the bodies of animals.

To develop this, I turn to the work of Giorgio Agamben who brings Foucault's analysis into the domain of animal-human relations. Foucault's work on biopolitics was cut short by his untimely death in 1984. Giorgio Agamben (1998, 2002) takes up the thread of Foucault's insights, in particular, Foucault's insistence that biopolitics marks the emergence of modernity. For Agamben, the inclusion of biological life into the political realm constitutes the original nucleus of sovereign power. Agamben's insights provide a way of viewing the continuity of power relations, in particular, how deeply embedded sovereign power is in our habits and practices of everyday life. By sovereignty, Agamben refers to figures of power that hold the right of exception. Under the guiding moral and legal code 'thou shall not kill', the sovereign is the one who can define the state of exception to this rule. Thus, sovereignty is exercised by the right to kill or to let live.

Agamben's main objection with Foucault lies with Foucault's assumption that "for millennia man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics calls his existence as a living being into question" (Foucault, 1990, p. 143). This statement sums up Foucault's view that biopolitics constitutes the decisive event of modernity. For Agamben, however, "the production of a bio-political body is the original activity of sovereign power" (1998, p. 6). Modernity provides the conditions for a profound *continuation* of classical binaries because modern politics is constituted on a classical distinction between what Agamben calls bare life (zoe) and political existence (bios); "we are not only, in Foucault's words, animals whose life as living beings is at issue in their politics, but also – inversely – citizens whose very politics is at issue in their natural body" (1998, p. 188).

According to Agamben, classical western traditions created a separation between *zoe* (the simple fact of living common to all living beings) and *bios* (the form of living proper to an individual or group). In the classical world, *zoe* (simple, natural life) was excluded from the polis, and remained confined to the sphere of the *oikos* (home). The politics of bare life are often concealed precisely because they have been parsed into a nature / culture divide. Until we understand this foundational moment, Agamben argues that we cannot understand the ways in which modern power is operating via bare life, for today, *bios* is increasingly living in *zoe*. If, for Foucault, modern and sovereign power coalesces via racism; following the work of Giorgio Agamben, I argue that modern power works via *speciesism* (a term I will elaborate shortly) and is carried out and maintained via our mundane acts of flesh consumption.

In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben makes the following claims about power: first, the original political relation is the ban (the state of exception as zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion). Second, the fundamental activity of sovereign power is the production of bare life as the originary political element and as threshold of articulation between nature and culture, *zoe* and *bios* (1998, p. 181). According to Agamben, “to ban someone is to say that anybody may harm him” (ibid, p 104). Agamben is emphatic that in order to have proper political analysis, “we must learn to recognize this structure of the ban in the political relations and public spaces in which we will live” (ibid. p. 111). It is not so much that life is an object of the projections and calculations of State power, but that the realm of bare life, originally positioned at the margins of political life, is increasingly coinciding with political realm:

At once excluding bare life from and capturing it within the political order, the state of exception actually constituted, in its very separateness, the hidden foundation on which the entire political system rested. When its borders begin to be blurred, the bare life that dwelt there frees itself in the city and becomes both subject and object of the



conflicts of the political order, the one place for both the organization of State power and emancipation from it (1998, p. 9).

The state of exception is represented by the image of homo sacer, an entity that can be killed but not sacrificed. For Agamben, the state of exception represents a constant possibility within the social order, which arises whenever the city is believed to be threatened. This threshold is neither simple natural life nor social life but bare or sacred life, the always present and always operative presupposition of sovereignty' (1998, p 106). The figure of homo sacer is not an animal that is cast out of culture by linking it with nature; rather, it represents a threshold of passage between animal and man.

Before proceeding any further, I want to address the question of the political and theoretical relevance of the concepts zoe, bare life and the state of exception. Do these concepts add anything to Foucault's notion of biopolitics? Do they further our understanding of the mechanisms of modern power? Is the concept of sovereignty applicable to our current moment? Agamben's entire theoretical framework, according to Ernesto Laclau (2005), is based on abstractions that have no bearing on our current moment. Furthermore, Laclau argues that Agamben's attention diverts us from relevant questions regarding the system of structural possibilities that each new situation opens. As such, Laclau maintains that the concept of hegemony (the relations and possibilities enabled when the limits of objectivity are revealed by antagonisms) offers a better way of conceiving modern power than sovereignty.

One of Laclau's points of contention lies with Agamben's claim that the outsider is absolutely outside the law. In order to have a 'bare life', the receiving end of the ban has to be entirely indefensible and fully submitted to the 'abandonment' dictated by the sovereign power. The outsider is wholly exposed to the violence of those inside the city; at that point, then sovereign power is absolute. For Laclau, we do not have lawlessness against law, or any

outside to the law; rather, the outsider can be explained by two laws that do not recognise each other. The outsider does not need to be outside *any* law, what is inherent to the category is only the fact of being outside the law *of the city*. The outsider simply signifies the formation of the constitutive nature of a radical antagonism, radical in the sense that its two laws cannot be reduced to any objective meaning to which both would be submitted.

Laclau takes issue with Agamben's claim that Greeks used two terms to refer to life: *zoe* (the simple fact of living common to all living beings) and *bios* (the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group). Living beings are not distributed between two categories, for who have *bios* also have *zoe*. As such, Laclau maintains that *zoe* is primarily an abstraction for it is a property of all without belonging to any. Laclau contends that if Agamben's thesis is going to hold, he would have to prove that, in some circumstances, *zoe* (or bare life) ceases to be an abstraction and becomes a concrete referent.

I suggest that Agamben's concepts of *zoe*, the state of exception, and even the radical exclusion of groups of people are deeply relevant to our contemporary moment. If we extend Agamben to consider the relations between human and non-human relations, then his work does provide a theoretical framework for some of the radical transformations occurring within our contemporary times. I propose that consuming flesh is one example of *zoe* (the condition of living of all beings). I will explore how this is categorized and demarcated into a *bios* (a condition specific to certain beings). In particular, I examine how the sciences of functional morphology gave us systems of classification that we have normalized (the carnivore, the herbivore, the omnivore). It is within these frameworks that discussions about flesh consumption are taken up, where our own conduct is policed by broader classification systems. The term 'vegetarian' acts to police behavior by marking it as an identity category. Once one 'is' a vegetarian, the practice of flesh avoidance becomes a marker of, not only a

political affiliation and an individual choice, but a policing mechanism based on one's identity. To eat meat, and particularly red meat, becomes a challenge to one's core identity. The category of identity serves to regulate the practice.

However, this demarcation of zoe into categories of bios does not fully address the question of sovereignty (the right to kill or let live). Following the work of Jacques Derrida, I propose that sovereignty was predicated upon the ability to consume the flesh of other beings. The act of meat consumption is a signal of this power over other life forms. The violence and political nature of this power is erased because this sovereignty has been naturalized (via the category of the carnivore) but also normalized in our eating regimes. Furthermore, I maintain that the concept of *homo sacer* (the ultimate state of exception) is tremendously applicable to our current political moment. It is enabled and enacted via the trope of the cannibal.

### **The vegetarian, the herbivore and the carnivore**

Vegetarianism is an interesting entry point into the networks that form our modern biopolitical configurations because its political and historical contingency has not yet been erased in the public imaginary. It retains, to evoke Bruno Latour's (1993) terms, its Janus face, revealing both its works of translation (its political hybrids and networks) as well as its purification (its claim to be a natural and not a political state). Latour argues that when we take 'modern' cultures into account, we tend separate practices into two distinct realms: purification – which separates nonhumans/nature and humans/culture; and translation, which creates mixtures between new types of beings, hybrids of nature and culture (1993, p. 10). As such, we create asymmetrical relations between humans (culture/humanities) and non humans (nature/sciences), granting history, power and sociality to humans but denying these to non-humans. To overcome these divisions, Latour advises that we direct our attention to the work of both purification and

translation, to see them working simultaneously rather than at odds with one another.

Because vegetarianism emerged within relatively marginalized groups, particularly those who distanced themselves from orthodox common sense, it is often viewed as a political formation, a trend or a faddish phenomenon. However, whereas we might accept that vegetarianism is a political configuration, we rarely make the same claims about carnivorous or herbivorous nature. Yet, these, too, have historical moments of emergence where a particular political and ideological context enabled them to become naturalized and ‘purified’. In order to reconstruct that context, I first unravel the threads and forces that enabled vegetarianism to emerge. My intent here is not to provide a history of vegetarianism (see Adams 2000, Belasco 1989, Fox 1999, Maurer 2002, Spencer 1993 for overviews), but to contextualize vegetarianism in terms of emergent biological categories of flesh consumption.

Prior to the genesis of this term in the nineteenth century, someone who eschewed meat was called a Pythagorean, in response to the ideas of the Greek philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras (570 – 470 B.C.E.). Pythagoras advocated for the avoidance of the flesh of slaughtered animals and wrote extensively about the health benefits of abstaining from meat (Spencer 1993). Pythagoras was opposed to consuming animal flesh because he believed in the process of metempsychosis, or the transmigration of souls. For Pythagoras although the material realm is mutable, the spiritual was not. His ideas about soul, life and death became intimately bound up with his dietary practices, in particular, within his belief that abstinence from the consumption of animal flesh will lead to a purer spiritual existence because one abstained from taking the soul of another being.

The term ‘vegetarian’ became official in the mid 1800s. It was coined and promoted by the British Vegetarian Society, comprised of people interested in emergent ideas about the relationship between health and lifestyles of abstinence (Belasco 1989, Spencer 1993).

Vegetarianism was an attempt to signal a more natural eating regime, by playing on a double meaning of the Latin prefix *vegere*, which signals both plant origins as well as lively or vivacious. In the early 1800s, the founder of the Bible Christian Church in the UK, Reverend William Cowherd, asked his congregation to refrain from eating meat. He later became the president of the Vegetarian Society. Two followers of the Reverend Cowherd, William Metcalfe and James Clark emigrated to the United States in 1817 and formed the vegetarian movement in America. A meeting held in September 1847 resulted in the formation of the official Vegetarian Society in England. In North America, an official Vegetarian Society was formed over a century later, in 1974.

The change of name from Pythagoreanism to vegetarianism did not happen in a political vacuum. The rearticulation of this eating regime from a philosophical stance to a categorization of eating in terms of food was in line with the dominant scientific traditions of the time, in particular, the emergence of the biological sciences and their emphasis on classifying life. Of particular relevance is the influence of the French naturalist Georges Cuvier whose theories of functional morphology formed the basis of our contemporary categories of carnivorous, herbivorous and omnivorous nature. The writings and lectures of Cuvier as well as his protégé Richard Owen brought to public awareness the classification of animal life in terms carnivora, the order of flesh-eating mammals, and herbivora, the order of animals that eat vegetable matter. Although these terms had been circulating for some time, Cuvier's use naturalized them, and, in doing so, transported ideas about the fixity of species into a public imaginary about the natural order of flesh consumption.

Morphology (the study of form) is often considered a long dead enterprise in the life sciences. As Lynn Nyhart (1995) writes, it is enmeshed with a long-discredited idealistic view of nature where organisms were made to conform with Ideal Types. However,

morphology was one of the main streams of biological investigation in the nineteenth century and was a foundational part of the life sciences in France, England and Germany. In France, George Cuvier was one of the most powerful researchers at the time – rivaled only by Etienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire. In Toby Appel's (1987) analysis of the famous Cuvier – Geoffroy debate, she shows how the differences between the pure formalists (exemplified by Geoffroy) and those who viewed form as a result of function (exemplified by Cuvier) were bound up with other philosophical, political and intellectual commitments. Cuvier, by far the more conservative of the two, won the debate due in part to his conservatism that resonated with the political context at the time. His views became part of our common sense lexicon about the natural order of animals. Richard Owen, a student of Cuvier, became one of Britain's leading morphologists and his writings contributed greatly to our classification of life via eating regimes.

The significance of Cuvier's work is that he changed the categorization of life from one based on a Linnaean taxonomic system to one in which an abstract organic structure became a verifiable entity for comparison (Mayr 2001). In other words, Cuvier brought forth a new way of perceiving and classifying biological life. For Cuvier, the form each species takes is derived from its function or its complex engagement with its environment. Because function gives rise to form, the form holds keys to the animal's function. We can ascertain the functional aspects of an animal by examining its individual parts because the function – form relationship is fixed and static.

In his essay *Discourse on the Revolutionary Upheavals* (1825), Cuvier argued that an organic being forms a unique system in which all the parts work together through a reciprocal relationship. Opposed to the notion of developmental evolution, Cuvier claimed that each organism exists within a closed holistic structure. If one part of the structure is

harmful or deficient, the structure itself would be impaired. With respect to the relations between eating regimes and functional morphology,

if the intestines of an animal are organized in such a way as to digest only fresh meat, it is necessary also that its jaws be constructed to devour its prey; its claws to seize and tear it apart; its teeth to cut and chew it; the entire system of its organs of motion to rush and catch the prey; its sense organs to perceive it from far away. It is even necessary that nature has placed in its brain the required instinct to know how to hide itself and set traps for its victims.

Cuvier's claim that this represents the universal (and essential) conditions for the kingdom of the carnivores is significant. As Ernst Mayr (2001) writes, preevolutionary morphologists like Cuvier were informed by a deeper essentialism. Cuvier distinguished four major phyla (vertebrates, mollusks, articulates and radiates), all members of which he thought had the same body plan. For Cuvier, these phyla descended from a common ancestor, a belief in line with evolutionary principles, but he also considered each type to be completely separate from the others, defined by a constant essence that did not undergo an evolutionary process.

According to Foucault, Cuvier's work demarcates a significant shift in the biopolitical categorization of life: from the classical system that analyzed life through a grid of natural history (general, species, individual, structures, organs) to a system of relations defined primarily by function. What emerged was a system of resemblances that do not require identical elements. Under this new system, gills and lungs belong in a similar category, not because they share similar features or forms, but because they share a similar abstract function: respiration.

This created a new context, not only classification but also for perception: "what to Classical eyes were merely differences juxtaposed with identities must now be ordered and conceived on the basis of a functional homogeneity which is their hidden foundation"

(Foucault 1994, p. 265). From Cuvier onward, an abstract, and purely functional definition of life provided the basis for the external possibility of classification:

The classification of living beings is not longer to be found in the great expanse of order: the possibility of classification now arises from the depths of life, from those elements most hidden from view. Before, the living being was a locality of natural classification; now, the fact of being classifiable is a property of the living being (ibid, p. 268).

Thus, the underlying form that, for Cuvier, provided the basis for organizing life was an abstraction made concrete for the purposes of classification. By claiming that this form was constant, rather than dynamic, Cuvier created a static system of classification that itself was immutable to change.

According to Foucault, Cuvier's system of classification also lead to new assumptions about the dynamics of 'natural' eating. These include assumptions about coexistence, internal hierarchy and dependence at the level of organic structure. Coexistence suggests that a system of organs cannot be present without another system of organs also present: the form of the teeth (molars, incisors) varies with the digestive system (the length of the intestines, the type of stomach chamber, etc.), the digestive system cannot vary independently of the limbs (carnivores require large nails, herbivores have cloven hoofs, etc). Furthermore, every functional unit within a biological system obeys an internal hierarchy, with circulation subordinate to digestion, and everything subordinate to the nervous system. This hierarchy of functions implies that the organism obeys a pre-existing plan. All of these internal relations of functions enabled the formation of the great families of living beings, demarcated according to their nervous systems (vertebrates and invertebrates) but also according to their alimentary systems (carnivores, herbivores). These new systems of relations (hierarchies, classifications, immutable essences) provide a new way of perceiving life whereby the



structuring principles are organized into a common sense about what constitutes ‘natural’ eating regimes.

This biopolitical organization of animal life into categories of eating formed the template on which vegetarianism was articulated. The idea that an animal’s function could give insights into its underlying form provides the foundation for the construction of an underlying nature. At the time, digestion was a black box. The term black box is used by cyberneticians whenever a piece of machinery or a set of commands is too complex (Latour 1987, p. 3). In its place, they draw a little box, with inputs and outputs, which signifies that they know nothing about its internal workings. In terms of digestion, what was measured and observed were inputs and outputs, as the sciences of nutritional physiology as well as more honed observational technologies had not yet been established.

One of the influences that Cuvier’s functional morphology has had on contemporary thought is the idea that we can compare certain biological aspects of humans (such as the shape of our teeth) with other animals in order to ascertain a desired or normative set of functions. Although functional morphology has been displaced by evolutionary biological models, its key tenets continue to inform contemporary debates. For example, in the field of evolutionary anthropology (or paleoanthropology), functional morphology and the related science of comparative anatomy is sometimes used to argue for the ‘origins’ of human dietary behavior. The presence of canine teeth in humans, for example, is read as a vestigial index of our once carnivorous nature. However, one of the problems with understanding contemporary meat consumption is that it does not fit with the conclusions offered by functional morphology and comparative anatomy. Humans are placed within the following categories: we belong to the order Primates, the suborder Anthroidea, the superfamily Hominoidea – this classification reflects the close evolutionary relationship between humans

and apes (Harris 2003). Due to this common kinship, evolutionary anthropologists consider the dietary behavior of primates in order to ascertain what early humans ate under the assumption that each animal species builds on the genetic template inherited from its ancestors. Primates are generally described as omnivores, but they tend to eat mostly fruits and vegetables; in fact, most of the apes are markedly herbivorous rather than omnivorous.

This genetic kinship has been taken up in vegetarian discourses as a rationale for the ‘naturalness’ of a plant based diet. For example, in his writings on the virtues of vegetarianism, the poet philosopher Percy Shelley notes that:

Comparative anatomy teaches us that man resembles the frugivorous animals in everything, the carnivorous in nothing. He has neither claws wherewith to seize his prey, nor distinct and pointed teeth to tear the living fibre....man resembles no carnivorous animal...the structure of the human frame, then, is that of one fitted to a pure vegetable diet in every essential particular. (1813 quoted in Williams 2003, p. 225 - 226)

The argument that humans are ‘naturally’ herbivorous circulates quite regularly on vegetarian and vegan related websites. Of particular relevance is the frequently reproduced article *The Comparative Anatomy of Eating*<sup>23</sup> (publication date unknown), by physician Milton Mills. Mills challenges the classification of humans as omnivores, which, for him, is based on the observation that humans generally eat a wide variety of foods from plant and animal origins. According to Mills, humans are ‘behavioural’ omnivores; however, he believes that a more ‘objective’ view leads to the conclusion that we are ‘naturally’ herbivores. He writes,

Mammals are anatomically and physiologically adapted to procure and consume particular kinds of diets. (It is common practice when examining fossils of extinct mammals to examine anatomical features to deduce the animal’s probable diet.) Therefore, we can look at mammalian carnivores, herbivores (plant eaters) and

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<sup>23</sup> [http://www.vegsource.com/veg\\_faq/comparative.htm](http://www.vegsource.com/veg_faq/comparative.htm). Accessed Oct. 25, 2005.

omnivores to see which anatomical and physiological features are associated with each kind of diet<sup>24</sup>.

By comparing humans with traits of carnivores, herbivores and omnivores (including size of oral cavities, composition of saliva, gastrointestinal tracts), Mills concludes that humans are biologically conditioned to eat vegetables rather than animal flesh because we resemble the anatomy of herbivores the most. Mills makes appeals to the science of comparative anatomy in order to construct a more objective viewpoint; however, in doing so, he neglects to consider that comparative anatomy is a contested and relatively antiquated scientific theoretical perspective.

Yet, the links between humans and primates is used to argue precisely the opposite: that meat eating is what distinguishes the humans from the less intelligent apes. For example, anthropologist Katherine Milton (2003) argues that meat eating is what defines the genesis of the human race whereby the “routine inclusion of animal source food in the diet was mandatory for the emergence of the human lineage” (2003, p. 3981)<sup>25</sup>.

What is significant about Mill’s claim (and to a lesser degree Milton’s) is his reliance on an essence of categorization based on regimes of flesh consumption: debates over what constitutes a proper human diet are taken up within the context of a broader depoliticized system of categorization of animal life. The conditions of possibility for ‘natural eating’ are predicated on the following logic: a specific act of consumption (eating grass, fruit or flesh) is made into an abstract underlying form (herbivore, frugivore, carnivore). This form is

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<sup>24</sup> [http://www.vegsource.com/veg\\_faq/comparative.htm](http://www.vegsource.com/veg_faq/comparative.htm). Accessed Oct. 25, 2005.

<sup>25</sup> This argument is a more nuanced version of the ‘Man the Hunter’ body of theory in evolutionary anthropology where big game hunting was believed to contribute to skills of communication and coordination that eventually led to the enlargement of the human neocortex. This theory was challenged in the 1980s however has been taken up again in the 1990s with a more moderate view of hunting and scavenging (Stanford and Bunn 2001).

turned into a broader class (herbivora, frugivora, carnivora) within which specific anatomical features (claws, teeth, intestinal tracts) are then related to a naturalized consumption.

One of the consequences of categorizing life into eating regimes is that our relations with flesh consumption are naturalized, thereby erasing their political genesis. If we are naturally omnivores or even carnivores, then our acts of flesh consumption are ‘normal’. If we are naturally herbivores, then our acts of flesh consumption are unnatural, and even pathological. By placing these categories within Foucault’s concept of biopower, we can read them as means by which bodies (both human and nonhuman) are disciplined vis a vis systems of categorization in order to serve the purposes of modern power. Although humans are broadly categorized as omnivores, as Milton suggests, our carnivorous nature is what sets us apart from our evolutionary cousins, the apes. To eat meat, therefore, is to be a ‘more human’ primate. Meat consumption is thus intimately linked with human subjectivity, a claim I will elaborate in more depth shortly. Meat consumption is also tied to gender, under the assumption that men are more ‘naturally’ inclined to eat meat than women (Adams 2000).

The naturalization of meat consumption (or even vegetarianism) is a biopolitical formation, but it also intersects with a more complicated and deeply entrenched form of power. It is precisely this intersection that I think warrants examination, for flesh consumption can serve the interests of the state in ways that not only foster life (by inserting into modern power relations), it also serves as a site in which sovereign power (the ability to kill or let live) is maintained and reproduced. To explore this, I turn to Giorgio Agamben’s concept of the anthropological machine.

## **The anthropological machine and carnophallogocentrism**

In *The Open*, Agamben extends his analysis of zoe and bios to consider the relations of humans and animals. In western culture, according to Agamben, humans have often been thought of as the articulation of a natural living body and a supernatural, divine or social element. Agamben argues that we need to think of the human as the outcome of the practical and political separation of humanity and animality. The human results from the simultaneous division and articulation of the animal and the human (2004, p. 92). Agamben claims that the decisive political conflict that governs every other conflict is that between the animality and the humanity of man (ibid, p. 80).

The *anthropological machine* of Western thought is what accords the privileged place of the human, according to Agamben. It works by creating linkages and separations within the concept of life. Because life is such a complex, abstract notion, it cannot be clearly defined, and for this reason is ceaselessly articulated and divided between the human, the animal and the inhuman (2004, p.13). In both its classical and modern variants, the anthropological machine works to create an absolute division between the human and the animal. This caesura elevates the human over the animal, and places the animal outside of the conditions that make the human a subject. Drawing terminology from Heidegger, Agamben argues that the anthropological machine places the animal outside of the human's characteristic openness to the world. By suspending animality, humans thus abandon animality in a zone of exception. Animality is what binds us to the animal kingdom, yet it is paradoxically the condition that makes us inhuman.

The anthropological machine erases a nature proper to *Homo sapiens*, which effectively holds humans suspended between a celestial and terrestrial nature. Whereas other creatures (the animal, the non-human) are accorded a strictly terrestrial (or more 'natural')

nature (2004, p. 29). The division of life into strategic binaries (organic / relational; animal / human; reflex / reason) provides the basis for the decision of what is human and what is not. According to Agamben, our distance from and proximity to animals has been measured and recognized in the most intimate of spaces, within our own bodies. Agamben asserts that before we take positions on the ‘great’ issues of human rights, values and ethics, we need to interrogate in what way – *within the human body* – humans have been separated from non-humans, animals from humans, etc.

Agamben’s work primarily takes up the question of the animal vis a vis the writings of philosophers. Although he points to the materiality of the caesura separating humans and animals, he does not provide concrete examples of this separation. However, Jacques Derrida’s more recent work offers a useful starting point for inquiring into the ways in which the human / animal divide is constructed and maintained first ‘within man’ by the consumption of the flesh of animals. I propose that *zoe* is not so much the body of the animal, but the condition of animality (the consumption of flesh) that is simultaneously taken up and suspended in the human body. We are ‘allowed’ to consume the flesh of animals. This can be read as an enactment or performance of our sovereignty over the natural world. Furthermore, our humanity is removed when we are articulated with animals. We become ‘meat’ to the degree that we lose our right to self determination, respect, and, in certain instances, life.

In an interview with Jean-Luc Nancy entitled “Eating Well: the Calculation of the Subject”, Derrida raises the question of the determinative center of humanist definitions of subjectivity. Derrida uses the term *carno-phallogocentrism* to refer to the ‘unsacrificed sacrifice’ that maintains a relatively fixed boundary between the animal and the human. The term *carno-phallogocentrism* draws from Derrida’s neologism *phallogocentrism*, a term that

signifies the privileging of logos in western culture (reason over emotion, the signified over the signifier) as well as the masculinist basis of subjectivity. Phallogocentrism attempts to call attention to the ways in which subjectivity ostensibly requires language, that language is inherently grounded in the Phallus as a universal signifier. Derrida argues that even though the western critical philosophical tradition (including Heidegger, Freud, Lacan, Althusser, Marx, and Foucault) has disrupted, destabilized and interrogated the rational, unitary, self – sufficient subject integral to the humanism, this critical tradition has failed to acknowledge that it is informed by a phallogocentric understanding of subjectivity that retains language, as well as the adult male, as its determinative center. Phallogocentric definitions of subjectivity are founded on dualisms that have not been sufficiently interrogated (human / animal; mind / body; masculine / feminine); as such, they limit our understanding of the complexity of human relations, the multifaceted nature of cognition and the diversity of living bodies. Phallogocentric definitions of subjectivity also serve to reinforce these binaries as well as the hierarchical social relations that enabled their formation.

Derrida writes that, even though they demonstrate a commitment to rethinking relationality, the works of Heidegger and Levinas in particular remain profoundly conservative in their humanism because they do not “sacrifice sacrifice” (1991, p. 279). One consequence is that they do not interrogate the deep divide separating the human and the animal:

The subject (in Levinas’s sense) and the Dasein are ‘men’ in a world where sacrifice is possible and where it is not forbidden to make an attempt of life in general, but only on human life, on the neighbor’s life, on the other’s life as Dasein (ibid, p. 279).

Eating flesh, Derrida argues, constitutes a carno-phallogocentric humanism that allows for the unacknowledged hierarchy of man over animal because it normalizes the sacrifice of one form of life by another. Carnophallogocentrism “installs the virile figure at the determinative

center of the subject” (ibid, 280). Under this regime, to be symbolically at the center, to have virility, power and sovereignty, to be truly (hu)man means to have the power to articulate, appropriate and assimilate the flesh of the Other.

A public example of the intersection between sovereignty and flesh consumption is the annual Turkey Pardon at the White House<sup>26</sup>. Intermittently for 58 years, the President of the United States has been offered a turkey by an agricultural group. The President publically ‘pardons’ the live turkey as well as an alternate, who then live out their days on a farm. For the past three years, the public has been able to vote on the names of the turkeys. The presidential pardoning of ‘Marshmallow and Yam’, ‘Biscuits and Gravy’ and ‘Stars and Stripes’ takes on a festive and almost whimsical air; however, according to anthropologist Mangus Fiskesjo (2003) this symbolic pardoning serves to establish and manifest the sovereign's position at the helm of the state by highlighting his power to control matters of life and death. This performance of sovereignty over the life of a turkey underscores the President’s ability to take life or let it live. The body of the turkey could equally be replaced with the body of a ‘criminal’ or ‘terrorist’, beings that themselves have been animalized into a state of exception. It is also significant that the President’s pardon enables the turkeys to escape their fate as a food: the president not only has the ability to kill the turkey, he also has the ability to foster its life, to save it from other regimes of power (in this case, the regimes of commercial agricultural trade).

This ‘unsacrificed sacrifice’ is naturalized within the English language. Underlying the term meat lies a set of cultural assumptions about our relations with certain animals, including our social right to a form of non-criminal putting to death. Rhetorically, the concept of meat acts to separate certain animals from us by erasing an awareness of their

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.whitehouse.gov/holiday/thanksgiving/2005/>



existence. When this term is applied to humans, it signifies a loss of subjectivity as it functions linguistically to reduce someone to a sexual being, implicitly not valued in terms of their emotional, intellectual or social qualities (Adams, 1990). When we say beef for the flesh of cattle, pork for pig, lamb or mutton for sheep, venison for deer, we separate the animal from its flesh. This linguistic caesura operates, in part, to lessen our anxiety about the slaughter of animals because it keeps them associated with objects, rather than living subjects. We do, however, use the same word for the animal and its flesh with ‘chicken’ and ‘fish’ perhaps because they are adequately different from us (with feathers and wings, gills and fins) that we do not need to parse out a linguistic divide.

In ‘The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)’, a sequel to his ‘Eating Well’ interview, Derrida expands on what he means by this unsacrificed sacrifice. He writes that the term animal is an institutionalized word, one “men have given themselves the right to give” (2004, p.124). This term distinguishes one sector of life from another. ‘Animal’ invokes for us our own natural state, and the natural state of other beings, whereas ‘human’ signals a cultural (political, economic, relational, ethical) state. One consequence of this naming is that leads to an asymmetry, and in certain cases, a profound disavowal of the violence committed towards animals:

No one can deny seriously, or for very long, that men do all they can in order to dissimulate this cruelty or to hide it from themselves, in order to organize on a global scale the forgetting or misunderstanding of this violence that some would compare to the worst cases of genocide (there are also animal genocides: the number of species endangered because of man takes one’s breath away) (2004, p. 120).

Humans have subjected animals to forms of violence for centuries, including industrial, mechanical, chemical, hormonal, and genetic forms. Derrida’s concept of carno-phallogocentrism directs our attention to the ways in which subjectivity is held in place by eating regimes. We exercise our sovereignty over certain animals because we have the power

to kill them or let them live. However, this does not apply to all animals as we have sovereignty over some and not others. Certain animals (pets & endangered species) are protected under the law; others are regulated by the law (animals that are hunted); others are property (livestock) and some have no protection or regulation (coyotes, squirrels, insects, certain birds, etc).

By denaturalizing our carnivorous (or omnivorous) nature, Derrida argues that the definition of 'human' is related to our right to consume the flesh of animals. Not all humans, of course, consume flesh; however, there is a subtle implication that the powerful (or more complete) ones do. As Derrida asks, what modern head of a western state would claim to be a vegetarian? Eating meat is a way of demonstrating one's power over other beings, even if this demonstration is rarely questioned or noticed in our critical awareness of the formation of human subjectivity. By pointing out the power dynamics contained within our right to consume the flesh of animals, Derrida opens up the question of the animal, and the ways the animal body serves as an (often unacknowledged) support for the construction of human subjectivity and sovereignty over the natural world. Yet, alongside this, Derrida argues a new form of compassion is emerging, one that attempts to extend the rights and dignities accorded to humans to our animal brethren. According to Derrida, this compassion is located mostly within weak, marginalized, minority voices, who, under eating regimes such as vegetarianism as well as the somewhat problematic umbrella of animal rights, are attempting to awaken us to our responsibilities and obligations to the living in general. Derrida proposes that, this compassion, if taken seriously, would challenge the basis of the philosophical problematic of the animal (ibid, p. 120).

In summary, systems of classification (herbivore, carnivore) are naturalized at the species level, often within essentialist frameworks that presuppose a fixed material realm (for

example, a cow is naturally an herbivore). To evoke Agamben's terms, whereas the sciences of functional morphology served to move eating regimes to the region of zoe and bios, vegetarianism moved it back into bios and the polis. According to Agamben, one thing the anthropological machine of humanism accomplishes is the erasure of a nature proper to humans – this holds humans suspended between a celestial and terrestrial nature – whereas other creatures (the animal, the non-human) are accorded a strictly terrestrial nature (2004, p. 29). This terrestrial nature is the terrain on which zoe is constructed, for it is believed that it is beyond human or political intervention. Animals are put into set categories (herbivore, carnivore) whereas humans are given a broader range of dietary options (we are omnivores or vegetarians). Our dietary 'natures' however are justified by comparing us to animals – we construct the bare life of animals via scientific institutions, only to compare ourselves to this bare life to justify our behavior via naturalized categories.

The construction of a carnivorous nature for man provides the conditions of sovereignty over animals. If we are 'naturally' inclined to eat meat, then we do not need to interrogate the political aspects of our relations with animals. Discourses of vegetarianism emerge on this terrain of naturalization – and evoke its own naturalist appeals (we are not 'made' to eat meat). Even though our dietary regimes are based on an antiquated, pre-evolutionary modes of scientific inquiry, we continue to evoke them, and to base our construction of the animal body on their foundations. In our common sense, animals 'belong' to the great systems of classification laid down in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, whereas humans have the right of choice with regard to these classifications.

What this demonstrates is how biopolitics informs our relations with animals. By comparing our eating classifications with that of animals, we become animalized and naturalized, thereby erasing the political construction of these categories. This biopolitics

intersects with sovereign power because in the construction of the carnivore, it provides humans with a naturalized condition of sovereignty over other life forms. The cannibal serves as a condition of exception in order to create a condition of extreme flesh eating, one that is not containable within the structures of the law. In the next chapter, I will examine how this is taken up within discourses of mad cow disease.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE PERILS OF UN/NATURAL CONSUMPTION

On the April 16, 1996 episode of the Oprah Winfrey show, food activist Howard Lyman claimed that capitalist agribusiness, in search of efficiency and profit, has turned the grass eating cow into a flesh-consuming cannibal. Lyman described how it is common practice in the beef industry to grind up dead cows and sheep and feed them back to cattle, and how that practice could be spreading mad cow disease to humans.

Oprah replied, "But cows are herbivores. They shouldn't be eating other cows." "That's exactly right," Lyman responded. "We should have them eating grass, not other cows. We've not only turned them into carnivores, we've turned them into cannibals." Oprah's followed with her infamous (and costly) reply: "It just stopped me cold from eating another burger." This comment caused major declines in beef contracts in Chicago cattle futures markets, and triggered the Texas Cattlemen's Association to sue Oprah for causing a substantial devaluation of beef prices, what industry analysts now call the "Oprah crash."

Although this episode has received a lot of publicity and has generated a great deal of discussion because of the food disparagement lawsuit against Oprah Winfrey, as well as the unsavory and risky practice of feeding rendered animal proteins to cattle, what fascinates me is Lyman's comment that contemporary agribusiness has turned the cow into a cannibal. Not

only has this comment received little critical attention, it represents a fairly common way in which both experts and lay people are making sense of mad cow disease<sup>27</sup>.

In *Mad Cow U.S.A: Could the Nightmare Happen Here*, journalists Rampton and Sheldon sum up a fairly common sentiment:

The irony of the mad cow crisis is that notwithstanding its complexities, the main regulation needed to minimize human risk is quite simple. We must ban the practice of feeding animals with the remains of their own species. Even in the absence of science, simple common sense tells most people that this practice of animal cannibalism is a bad idea, and yet it continues, a perverse and bloody ritualistic tribute to the power of the modern agribusiness industry. (1997, p. 5)

This passage is significant because it shows a common attitude towards mad cow disease: first, that its cause is cannibalism (a ‘bad idea’) and second, that it caused by modern agribusiness.

I propose that the cannibal is enabling us to make sense of a novel disease phenomenon because it reduces ambiguity and uncertainty in order to create culturally, socially and scientifically intelligible and manageable entities. Because scientific investigations do not occur in a cultural vacuum, they are susceptible to the biases, hierarchies and anxieties of the cultures in which they are situated. Cannibalism means more than acts of anthropophagy (human eating) or autophagy (self consumption); it is a morally charged concept that serves to demarcate an individual or group as savage and brutal, and hence beyond the reach of civilization, modernity, and humanity. Because cannibalism is taboo (in most global contexts), it serves to distinguish natural eating (consuming the flesh of

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<sup>27</sup> The narrative of the cannibal circulates among many divergent discourses, including scientific, journalist, and activist accounts of mad cow disease. Consider, for example, the following: the March 2001 cover of Newsweek *Cannibals to Cows: The Path of a Deadly Disease* (Cowley, 2001). Or, Australian journalist Jennifer Cooke’s award winning *Cannibals, cows and CJD catastrophe: Tracing the shocking legacy of a 20th century disease*. Physician Robert Klitzman’s personal account of his epidemiological studies, *The Trembling Mountain: A Personal Account of Kuru, Cannibals, and Mad Cow Disease*. Prentice Hall recently released *Mad Cows and Cannibals: A Guide to the Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies*, as part of its ‘exploring biology’ textbook series. Nobel laureate Stanley Prusiner titled one of his articles *Prion biology and diseases--laughing cannibals, mad cows, and scientific heresy*.

other beings) from unnatural or pathological ones (consuming one's own species). When the term 'cannibal' is articulated with a group, whether this is people or animals, it often justifies unethical behavior towards them. Because they are 'cannibals', we are not bound to the responsibilities that we accord to more 'civilized' beings.

I am not disputing that BSE is transmitted via animal feed. To dispute any scientific theory requires a vast amount of capital and affiliations, in terms of links to laboratories, instruments of research, and scientific communities. Nor am I claiming that there is no risk associated with ruminant proteins in animal feed. As Powell and Leiss (1997) argue, consumers need to receive timely explanations of the risks associated with contemporary food systems; however, this is rarely the case. Often, what is communicated is that industrial food systems pose no risk whatsoever. This 'no risk' position tends to fuel suspicions amongst the public when risks are subsequently announced. Unfortunately, governments frequently downplay the risks associated with mad cow disease, leaving citizens unaware of the potential known dangers.

Mad cow disease (or bovine spongiform encephalopathy) is a fatal neurological disease of cattle first diagnosed in Great Britain in November 1986 (Wells, et al, 1987). It is clinically similar to other transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSE), such as scrapie in sheep and goats, chronic wasting disease in deer and kuru in humans. Although BSE only recently emerged, TSEs are not new diseases. Scrapie, a natural and fairly common affliction in sheep and goats, was first identified in sheep populations in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Scrapie is characterized by the presence of sponge like formations in the brain. Although scrapie was originally believed to be a genetic condition, in the 1920s, French researchers presented evidence that it was infectious among sheep and goats (hence it became understood to be a

‘transmissible’ disease). What is unique and frightening about BSE is that (ostensibly) it is suited for interspecies transmission via the food chain.

CJD (Creutzfeldt Jakobs Disease) is the more commonly known human TSE, first diagnosed in the 1920s. CJD tends to affect people in their sixth to eighth decade of life, and involves a rapid dementia eventually leading to death (Cashman, 1997). CJD is considered to emerge sporadically (with no known source), from familial genetic transmission or from iatrogenic (physician or medical induced) routes of transmission including contamination with human pituitary growth hormone or the use of inadequately sterilized neurosurgical instruments (Brown et al, 1985). Other human TSE’s include kuru (Alpers, 1987); Gertsmann-straussler-Scheinker (GSS) syndrome (Gertsmann et al, 1976); and fatal familial insomnia (FFI) (Merdori et al, 1992). These diseases, although fatal, are extremely rare in human populations, and hence are considered to be of limited public relevance.

In 1996, scientists reported a new strain of CJD in the UK. This new variant (vCJD) appeared 10 years after BSE was first identified. It claimed 10 victims in the UK in 1996 (Will et al 1996; Brown, 1997), one in France (Chazot et al, 1996) and 10 more in the UK by 1997 (Wilesmith et al, 1996). It is different from CJD because it affects young (19 – 39 years) rather than older (55 – 70 years) adults, and has a slower rate of progression (Will et al, 1996). Psychiatric symptoms also accompany vCJD, but are not found in CJD. vCJD is more similar to BSE than other types of CJD; as such, BSE is widely believed to be the source of this new disease (Bruce et al, 1997, Collinge et al, 1996).

Current scientific evidence suggests that BSE results from feeding cattle muscle and bone meal (MBM) protein nutritional supplements contaminated with scrapie and BSE infected flesh (Wilesmith et al. 1992, 1996; Kimberlin and Wilesmith 1994; Collee and Bradley 1997). By the end of 1989, the UK banned the use of specified risk material (SRM)



in animal feed. SRM includes brain, spinal cord, tonsils, thymus, spleen and intestines from cattle older than six months. In 1997, the Food and Drug Administration in the United States similarly banned the use of SRM from ruminants (cattle, goats, sheep, and deer).

Although some people have claimed that mad cow disease is or will become an epidemic of unimaginable consequence (eg. Rhodes 1997), in actuality, it poses relatively little risk in relation to other human and animal health hazards. According to a report from the Center for Disease Control, from 1995 through August 2004, 147 human cases of vCJD were reported in the United Kingdom, seven in France, and one each in Canada, Ireland, Italy, and the United States<sup>28</sup>. More people die annually from auto accidents, smoking, diabetes or cancer than from contracting the infectious prion associated with BSE. Yet, the public reaction to BSE has been one of fear and outrage. BSE has had devastating economic consequences for the cattle industry in both the UK and Canada, and has resulted in the culling of millions of head of cattle since the late 1990s.

### **An epidemic of signification**

With mad cow disease, I propose that we are facing what Paula Treichler, in reference to the AIDS crisis, has called an ‘epidemic of signification’ (1999, p. 4). According to Treichler, diseases are invested with an abundance of meanings and metaphors that guide how the disease is understood and regulated. Each linkage (or articulation) can have many different material and ideological consequences. Complex phenomena like frightening and unpredictable novel diseases produce a diversity of interpretations; however, in the midst of this diversity, dominant meanings tend to emerge that become default explanations. Because

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<sup>28</sup> [http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/cjd/bse\\_cjd.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/diseases/cjd/bse_cjd.htm)

they resonate with deeply held cultural assumptions, they become widely, and often uncritically, accepted.

Consider the plethora of explanations for the origins of mad cow disease, caused by:

- Margaret Thatcher's cost cutting agenda that lead to a lowering of standards in the rendering industry (see Ramonet 2001 for overview)
- Infection from an African cattle herd (Arthur 1997)
- Cattle being fed human remains (Colchester and Colchester 2005)
- Bioweapons research (Lange and Talbott 2003)
- Organo-phosphate poisoning (Purdey 1998)
- Manganese / copper mixed with sonic acoustic shock (Purdey, 2003)
- Chemical environmental factors (Haywood and Brown 2003)
- A slow virus (Gajdusdek 1966)
- An infectious protein (Prusiner, 1996)
- The consumption of infected animal flesh by cattle (Hill et al 1997)

Some of these explanations were very short lived (such as the 'african origins', Thatcher's cost cutting, the bioweapons research accounts); others (such as the chemical origins theory) are routinely downplayed; and some (such as infectious protein and consumption of flesh) have become standard explanations.

In order to understand the mechanisms by which dominant meanings take place, it is important to put them in the context of other social frameworks. New phenomenon are often linked (or articulated) with pre-existing issues, social arrangements, and ideological frameworks in order to help us make sense of them. Burdens of history, in particular those associated with social hierarchies, often shape policies, representations and narratives through which diseases are understood. As such, pre-existing stereotypes and biases are reinforced by virtue of dominant disease narratives. This does not deny that there is a material reality to disease, but that certain diseases are configured, understood and mobilized in terms of historically embedded systems of signification that can prevent us from more deeply understanding their material manifestations.

Cultural taboos, prejudices and hierarchies have informed our explanatory frameworks for a range of diseases. This has had consequences for whom we hold responsible, and what preventative measures we take. The danger of falling victim to these taboos is that we might miss seeking out alternative explanatory frameworks, ones that may prove to be more effective, humane and reasonable. For example, although AIDS is now understood to be a disease that affects a wide range of people, it was initially understood as a disease that afflicted mostly homosexual populations. In the early 1980s, when AIDS research was in its infancy, risk was associated with being a certain kind of person (homosexual, heroin addict, hemophiliac, Haitian) engaged in morally corrupt behavior (homosexual acts, drug use). As such, in the public imaginary, AIDS became the price paid for either being the wrong kind of person or engaging in illicit behavior; as such, narratives about AIDS served as much to police populations and behaviors as to stop the spread of the disease. Furthermore, these narratives contributed to already existing social prejudices, particularly against homosexuality.

Diseases are also linked with certain origins, as if their emergence from a particular sullied or 'dark' place explains their pathological etiology. A great number of discourses position diseases as originating in Africa. Africa is often positioned in western cultural imaginaries as an active space that emits fatal agents (people, bacteria, viruses) with the potential to consume and destroy civilization as we know it: the colonial based image of Africa as a site of disease, danger, sickness continues within modern disease discourses.

According to Tapper (1999), sickle cell anemia is one example of a racialized disease; the dominant narratives surrounding this disease are that it is limited to people of African descent. When the disease was discovered in other peoples (Sicilians, Greeks, Puerto Rican, Mexican), early researchers drew on stigmas surrounding miscegenation. Its presence in non

black populations was explained by crossbreeding (Puerto Ricans, Mexicans) or proximity (Sicilians, Greeks) with the African Other. To this day, sickle cell anemia remains a black illness in medical circles, despite evidence to the contrary.

Diseases are often linked with marginalized groups as a way of justifying racial or class inferiority. This also justifies the grouping, sectioning off and blaming of sectors of certain population. For example, yellow fever was initially believed to be spread by African Americans and Latinos, although the real culprit was the mosquitoes that thrived in poor sanitary conditions of post Reconstruction South (Humphreys 1992).

The ways in which we conceive of disease is also shaped and shadowed by our deepest anxieties about social and technological change. In 19<sup>th</sup> century, disease was believed to arise from filth and ‘dirty’ people. According to Leavitt (1996), America has a long history of fear of contamination from abroad. In America at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mass immigration magnified an already recurrent fear of immigrants, what Alan Kraut calls “the health menace of the foreign born” (1994, p. 146). According to Nancy Tomes (1998), poor, immigrant and nonwhite Americans were believed to be more likely than their affluent white peers to spread diseases such as typhoid and cholera. For many middle class Americans in the early 1990s, the association of poor, immigrant and non-white citizens with disease germs only deepened their feelings of class prejudice, nativism and racism and hence increased the stigmatization of the sick and the poor. The specter of infection served nativists and racists as it legitimated immigration restriction and racial segregation.

I propose that the animal origins and flesh eating theory of BSE is an attempt to place the blame of the disease on the body of the animal as well as those people who work in close association with animals. In order to understand how this is occurring, I take a closer look at the genesis and development of mad cow disease, and its relation to the cannibal.

### **Mad cows and cannibals: a brief history**

BSE and other transmissible spongiform encephalopathies defy what Thomas Kuhn calls normal science (1970), an accepted body of knowledge that eventually evolves into a fairly fixed paradigm. One characteristic of normal science is that it filters new information into a pre-existing set of assumptions, theories and modes of inquiry. However, certain phenomena continuously violate paradigm induced expectations, and force scientific disciplines to reconfigure their core beliefs.

Until the early 1990s, TSEs were a medical mystery as they did not conform to viral or bacterial infection models. Kuru, for example, does not produce detectable antibodies, nor has any viral agent been depicted under an electron microscope (Lindebaum, 1979, p. 27). BSE was clinically similar to scrapie but it was not assumed to spread to humans because scrapie was localized within sheep and goat populations. It wasn't until links were made between scrapie, BSE and kuru that certain scientists concluded that an infectious protein (a prion) was the agent responsible for spreading this disease.

Stanley Prusiner (1991, 1994, 1997) brought forward a hypothesis about the etiology of TSEs that radically transformed contemporary scientific understanding of infectious diseases. Drawing from the work of British mathematician J. S. Griffith (1967) who was the first to propose the idea that proteins could be infectious, Prusiner hypothesized that TSEs are caused by an infectious protein rather than by traditional infectious agents such as bacteria or viruses (Shell, 1998). In 1982, he coined the term prion, which refers to proteinaceous infectious particles. According to Prusiner's hypothesis, prions occur normally in neurological tissue (PrP<sup>C</sup>); however, they are transformed upon infection by a virulent

prion into an insoluble and enzyme resistant form (PrP<sup>Sc</sup>) which then becomes the transmissible infectious agent.

The notion that proteins could replicate without the aid of genetic material (nucleic acid) runs counter to the received knowledge of modern microbiology. Even viruses, the simplest infectious microbes, require nucleic acids to direct their growth. However, even though Prusiner initially received sustained resistance to his hypothesis, he was later awarded a Nobel Prize for his efforts, and his theory constitutes our contemporary understanding of the etiology of TSEs.

According to some accounts, scientists have ‘solved’ the problem of mad cow disease and now, all we need to do is test and control it further. Khachatourians (2001) cites mad cow disease as an example of how scientific paradigms shift where new information (infectious proteins) is incorporated into paradigms that did not previously allow for its recognition. However, there are other accounts that suggest that BSE remains a scientific uncertainty. A recent study published in *Lancet*, for example, points to the uncertainty still associated with the origins of BSE (Colchester and Colchester, 2005). These researchers acknowledge that, although most experts believe that the main source of transmission of BSE is contaminated animal feed, there is still a great deal of controversy about its original cause, whether it emerged intrinsically (from a spontaneous mutation of the prion protein gene) or extrinsically (transmitted via sheep scrapie or a previously undetected sporadic form of BSE to cattle). The latter theory, although widely favored in scientific and policy circles, does not provide a satisfactory explanation because meat and bone meal containing sheep material has been fed to cattle for as long as 70 years (Priola, 2004). BSE, however, did not appear until 1986. Furthermore, all attempts to transmit scrapie to experimentally to cattle via an oral route have failed (Culip et al, 2001).

The Colchesters hypothesize that BSE was transmitted to cattle via the consumption of human remains. According to these researchers, in the 1960s and 1970s, the UK imported from India and Pakistan a large amount of bones and mammalian carcass tissues to be used for fertilizer and animal feed. Unfortunately, this trade was not very well regulated; as such, there is concern that some of these bones and carcasses may have been human. It is a Hindu practice to dispose of cremated human remains in a river (preferably the Ganges); however, some families do not have enough money to afford cremation and dispose of the bodies directly into the river. These bones are collected (often by local peasants) and taken to processing mills for export.

If we place this hypothesis in a broader historical context of colonial relations, this explanation can also be read as a reinforcement of the assumption that diseases arise from the colonized other, in this case, the dark ‘uncivilized’ Indian continent is now coming back to haunt and devour the British Empire via the very flesh (beef) that constitutes the British nation. The tenacity of the cannibal to discourses of mad cow disease is remarkable, given that this narrative is rarely challenged even in spite of evidence to the contrary.

According to Mark Purdey (2003), although it is well established that the key pathological hallmark of the spongiform diseased brain is the presence of a malformed prion protein, it is not conclusive that the prion is the infectious agent. Rather, Purdey contends that the malformed proteins associated with TSEs emerge from a combination of high manganese/low copper imbalance in the brain, brought on by environmental chemicals, and exacerbated by acute shocks of light and sound.

Purdey became interested in the possible chemical origins of BSE because of his own farming experience. In the early 1980s, his farming business was exempted from the compulsory warble fly eradication imposed by the U.K. government that involved treating

dairy cows with systemic organodithiophosphorus (OP) insecticide. According to Purdey, there is a correlation between the mandatory use of this insecticide, which began in 1982, and the emergence of BSE in 1986. He was particularly intrigued by the fact that no cases of BSE have emerged in cows born and raised on organic farms, even though these cows had ingested the incriminated MBM feed. Purdey's hypothesis is supported by the research of biochemist David Brown (2001). However, this alternative hypothesis is not supported by the dominant scientific community. In fact, it is often trivialized, denounced, or dismissed as having "very little experimental or epidemiological evidence" (see, for example, Colchester and Colchester, 2005, p. 857). However, even though there is evidence arguing against the hypothesis that mad cow disease is spread by the consumption of cattle or sheep flesh, this hypothesis is still accepted as true, whereas Purdy and Brown's work is written off as having no 'supporting' evidence.

The link between BSE and cannibalism can be traced to the Fore people, inhabitants of the highlands of Papua New Guinea. The Fore were of interest to anthropologists and medical researchers for two reasons: they practiced cannibalism and were susceptible to a progressive, fatal dementia, locally called kuru (which means 'shaking with fear' in Fore language). Kuru expresses itself symptomatically by loss of balance, incoordination, and tremors. Initial tremors would progress to complete motor incapacity and death in about a year. Women were the prime victims of the disease (Lindebaum, 1979, p. 9).

As Langness and Edgerton write in the preface to anthropologist Shirley Lindebaum's work on kuru, "the discovery of the link between the exotic neurological disorder known as kuru and the related practices of cannibalism and sorcery was the result of a truly interdisciplinary effort, but one in which anthropologists played an unusually important role" (1979, p. xi). According to Lindebaum, record keeping of kuru began in 1953, at the time



when the Australian government established a patrol post in the area (1979, p.6). In 1957, Vincent Zigas (Papau New Guinea Department of Health) and D. Carleton Gajdusek (the US National Institutes of Health) began an intensive study of the disease, in particular, its association with cannibal practices. In the early 1960s, Lindebaum and Robert Glasse gathered evidence to support the claim that the spread of kuru through the Fore population was a recent phenomenon, and that it was related to the cannibalistic practice of consuming deceased kuru victims (ibid, p.19). The Fore adopted cannibalism in imitation of their neighbors where this practice was more common – for the North Fore, cannibalism was adopted around the turn of the century whereas the South Fore adopted it later, about a decade or so before the appearance of kuru. Cannibalism was abandoned by the Fore in the 1950s, as a result of government and missionary interventions (ibid, p. 26).

When the clinical descriptions of kuru were first published, it garnered a lot of international attention. W.J. Hadlow (1959), a British scientist working on scrapie, reported similarities between kuru and scrapie. It was accepted knowledge at that time that scrapie was a transmissible disease spread by inoculation; however, unlike most infectious diseases, it took many years to manifest its symptoms. Scrapie was also not believed to be spread via the food chain; as such, it was not associated with an interspecies disease.

In a fairly well known experiment, Gajdusek injected the brains of chimpanzees with post mortem brain matter from kuru infected Fore people. These experiments lead Gajdusek and his colleagues to formulate the ‘slow virus infection’ theory of kuru. There were two implications to this research: one, that kuru was transmissible and two, that it had a slow incubation period. Gajdusek received a Nobel Prize in 1976 for this work. Michael Alpers continued Gajdusek’s work and his accounts furthered the claim that cannibalism was

responsible for the spread of kuru. Gajdusek's work has been popularized by Richard Rhodes (1997) much quoted book *Deadly Feasts*.

Yet, there is controversy in anthropology over whether cannibalism is an empirical reality or a myth. This became pronounced in late 1970s when William Arens overtly challenged the fact of cannibalism. Arens argued that there is no reliable evidence for the practice of cannibalism, and that it served solely to create a savage 'other' beyond the frontiers of civilization. According to Arens, cannibalism is a myth in the sense of, first, having an independent existence bearing no relationship to historical reality, and second, containing and transmitting significant cultural messages for those who maintain it: "At the concrete level of experience, this means that the idea precedes whatever evidence has been offered to support it and that in some instances the position is maintained in spite of evidence to the contrary" (1979, p. 182). For Arens, the myth of cannibalism enables the discipline of anthropology to uncritically lend its support to the collective representations and prejudices of western culture about non-western others (1979, p. 9-10). Arens sentiments are supported by Salmon (1995) who also expresses doubt that cannibalism ever was a culturally sanctioned practice in any society and that accusations of cannibalism are loaded with political motives to discredit and dehumanize members of other societies.

Arens' work, however, has been met with a great deal of dismissal and controversy, as his accusations call into question the legitimacy of anthropological ethnography (see Brown & Tuzin 1983; Sahlins 1979; Sanday 1986; Petrinovich 2000 for criticisms of Arens work). Interestingly, some of Arens' critics simply critique him on his 'style' or 'tone' or accuse him of holding too high of standards or of having a 'faulty methodology' (see Petrinovich for an overview of these critiques). However, they do not substantially address

his claim that cannibalism as a concept may have been linked with a deeper colonizing sentiment and project.

Rather than viewing the cannibal as a myth (which carries with it the connotation of a lie, or an ideology that is separate from truth), I approach it as a well articulated proposition. As Latour (1993) writes, the concept of a proposition moves us beyond reality/myth oppositions. If we operate from a perspective that separates reality and myth, then ‘truth’ emerges if our concepts correspond with a pre-existing reality and ‘fiction’ or ‘myth’ if there is little or no correspondence. In the realm of propositions, however, there are no such clear distinctions. Reality, truth and facts emerge when certain propositions are well *articulated* or shared by a large number of people; anecdotes or fictitious accounts occur when propositions are not widely shared or are inarticulate. Thus, I do not deny the existence of cannibalism, but I do deny that it has an existence outside of a specific institutional discursive framework.

We can also approach the cannibal as a substance, something that “gathers together a multiplicity of agents into a stable and coherent whole” (Latour, 1999, p. 151). According to Latour, substances work to rewrite history, they “retrofit a recent occurrence, making it appear as an underlying element behind all other entities” (ibid, p. 170). Cannibalism links kuru with BSE and vCJD; it gathers together acts of autophagy, prejudices against non-christian groups, arguments for brutal civilizing projects, etc. This may explain its staying power with regards to discourses of mad cow disease.

### **Unnatural eating practices**

One of the consequences of the BSE-vCJD theory, or what might be called the animal origins theory of BSE, is that it brought public attention to contemporary food industry practices, in particular the ways in which animal flesh is recycled within industrial food

production systems. At stake is the industrial, scientific methods of livestock production that have become common during the last three decades.

One dominant argument that circulates is that, for reasons of efficiency and increased profit, cows are fed practically anything, including the flesh of other cows. As journalists Rampton and Stauber describe,

TSE's are sometimes called 'cannibal diseases'. Although difficult to spread naturally, they can be spread through unnatural feeding practices such as cannibalism, or through 20<sup>th</sup> century medical innovations ... described as 'high tech' cannibalism because they transplant tissue from one human's body into the body of another (Rampton and Stauber 1997, p. 2).

According to their narrative, it is only from 'unnatural' feeding practices (the feeding of animal flesh to ruminants) that TSEs spread between species. These practices are deemed to be unnatural based on the idea that cows are naturally inclined to consume vegetable matter, and that the consumption of flesh is not something a cow would 'normally' do.

A similar sentiment appears in geographer Sarah Whatmore's *Hybrid Geographies* in which she draws from the work of Bruno Latour to complicate nature/culture dualisms. Whatmore argues that the prion was an unlikely ally that brought to light the problems with industrial agriculture and enabled the emergence of alternative food networks. What is surprising about Whatmore's analysis, however, is that she uses appeals to 'unnatural' consumption (the consumption of bovine flesh by cattle) without critically interrogating what this means. According to her analysis,

The ethical (and political) import of the BSE – vCJD epidemic in Britain begins by acknowledging the corporeal specificities of cows as herbivorous ruminants, and following the incongruous rationale of a feeding regime indifferent to them through to the eating habits and food choices of consumers. The practice provoked revulsion and disbelief in equal measure among an unsuspecting public. What kind of rationality was it that could make sense of such routine cannibalism? The rationalities both exposed and overshadowed by the spectre of the disease were those of the cost cutting and profit margins in a corporate animal feed industry careless of the offensive detail of how their products were derived, and of balance sheets and

productivity gains for farmers accustomed to gauging their husbandry in terms of metabolic conversion of inputs into outputs. (2002, p. 163)

Whatmore states that cows have a corporeal specificity as herbivores, but it is not clear how this is anything more than an assumption about a 'natural' eating regime. Herbivore, as I discussed, is a broad classification used to describe a range of different animals with a range of different digestive functions. This mode of classification was derived from the biological sciences of functional morphology, and is not necessarily in accordance with contemporary animal physiological sciences that favor an analytic understanding of digestive functions. Whereas digestion used to be a black box, it has now been opened for investigation where new agents such as bacteria are now recognized as part of the digestive process.

Cattle aren't technically herbivores, they might best be described as parasites. Cattle, in effect, live off micro-organisms that inhabit their digestive organs (Church, 1988). One evolutionary advantage herbivores have is their ability to extract energy from cellulose. Over half of the earth's carbon resources are stored in cellulose; however, not all animals possess the enzyme cellulase required to break it down. Many microbes, on the other hand, do secrete cellulase allowing them to convert cellulose into glucose. These cellulolytic microbes inhabit the digestive tract of all animals and break down cellulose into usable byproducts by fermentation. Fermentation occurs in the colon of humans, but our digestive tract is relatively small and the benefit we gain from it is negligible. Herbivores, in contrast, can digest cellulose because they possess large stomachs for microbial fermentation.

A cow is a ruminating mammal, similar to sheep, goats and deer, yet rumination refers to only one level of digestion: the process of remastication (or mechanical digestion) that occurs when the 'cud' is brought up from the cow's stomach. This mechanical digestion increases the surface area of the ingested material to prepare it for chemical digestion. In

herbivores, the end product of the fermentation of cellulose is glucose, which is taken up and metabolized, not by the host animal but by microbes. The host animal ingests both the waste products of microbial metabolism as well as the microbes themselves. The upshot of this is that when a cow eats grass or grain, it does so to feed the bacteria in its gut that it subsequently digests. The question that remains is whether the amino acids from animal sources cause significant difficulties for the balance of these microorganisms in the gut of the cow because the cattle are, in theory, capable of digesting the amino acids. Whether these dietary sources are 'natural' or not does not necessarily tell us anything about their effects on the cow's overall health and well being<sup>29</sup>. Cattle also eat bovine placenta after they give birth (Murch 1988). Does this not suggest that autophagy (self consumption) is part of the natural eating regimes of cattle? The practice of cows eating protein derived from other cattle may not be as unrealistic or outside the limits of corporeal rationality as Whatmore proposes.

One reason cattle are fed protein supplements is to increase their weight (North, 2001). Protein supplements are available in the form of fishmeal (of limited use because it imparts a taint to cow's milk); processed soya (expensive, high in estrogen and lacking in essential amino acids) and meat and bone-meal. The latter, according to North, is ideal not only because it gives good protein supplementation but also because it converts slaughterhouse waste into a valuable by-product. Depending on one's perspective, of course, this conversion of 'waste' into valuable by-products can be seen as an appropriate and cost effective way to recycle animal materials from slaughterhouses, or it can be read as an

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<sup>29</sup> The contemporary knowledge of animal nutrition is itself bound up with a host of biopolitical forces; as such, I am not arguing that we know now the 'definitive' truth about herbivore digestion, and the functional morphologists were simply 'unenlightened'. I draw from this example to show that there is a disconnection between common sense about flesh consumption and our contemporary scientific understanding. If, as Foucault (1994) suggested, functional morphology made the abstract concept 'respiration' into a concrete object for modern perception, then likewise microbes are also abstractions made concrete. What remains to be investigated are the ways in which our contemporary understanding of animal nutritional physiology fits into and maintains a broader economic and political context.

unjustified practice that, in the name of profit, stops short of interrogating our deep dependency on a system that exploits animals.

In the above quoted passage, Whatmore slips into the rather vague assertion that the practice of feeding MBM to cattle provoked revulsion and disbelief in equal measure among an unsuspecting public. However, this ‘unsuspecting public’ refers specifically to those people not familiar with contemporary animal husbandry practices, as those working within animal industries (ranchers, scientists, veterinarians, feedlot operators, etc) would already be aware of this practice. Could this revulsion and disbelief, if they are in fact as widespread as Whatmore claims, be explained as a form of cognitive dissonance, the sense of disorder or wrongness as well as the sensations of alarm or revulsion that accompany it, when our deeply ingrained categories are unexpectedly violated (Smith 1999)? Might it be an indication that we have created a norm around the eating regimes of cattle (as natural herbivores), and that the practice of feeding rendered animal protein to cattle challenges our deeply held beliefs about what cows ought to eat rather than an understanding of what cattle physically (and safely) can ingest?

More profoundly, could it be that the revulsion and disbelief were channeled and constituted by the term cannibalism? Whatmore evokes the cannibal in her reference to ‘routine cannibalism’, a phrase that brilliantly intertwines the macabre with the mundane. This articulation creates an intense and value laden chain of associations: our everyday, taken for granted cow is now a cannibal, and hence is taken out of the realm of modern safety and put into a historically preconfigured realm of savage horror and brutality. Consider the following claim, which holds much less rhetorical force: we are feeding rendered bovine and ovine proteins to cattle; as such, we have ‘turned them’ into omnivores. This claim, of course, is scientifically inaccurate, as it is impossible to ‘turn’ a ruminating animal into

anything other than a ruminating animal without a long term evolutionary process occurring within an entire population of cattle.

### **Cannibalism as a state of exception**

I propose that the rationalities both “exposed and overshadowed by the spectre of the disease” are not, as Whatmore suggests, those of the cost cutting and profit margins in a corporate animal feed industry. Rather, the rationality at play revolves around the countless cannibal images that have haunted and titillated the West’s cultural imaginary, from the headhunters of anthropology texts and situation comedies such as *Gilligan’s Island*, to the countless zombies of post WWII B movies, to real and fictional celebrity serial killers, to industrial diseases (cancer, AIDS, ebola) that literally and figuratively eat away at our flesh and blood.

The cannibal functions to create an absolute state of exception by enabling the construction of beings who are abandoned by the law. As Agamben points out, the sovereign holds the ability to define the state of exception, but he can only do so in particular circumstances. Elspeth Probyn writes that the figure of the cannibal replicates the functions of homo sacer: “the cannibal reminds us of that which cannot be included in the polis, the social life of man” (2000, p. 88). Yet, its very exclusion defines humanity – to be human (civilized, modern) is to not be a cannibal. To develop this argument, I first turn to a discussion of how the meaning of the cannibal has shifted in the last two centuries. The cannibal is a term that is replete with symbolism and it has been articulated with certain groups, at certain times, to justify their extermination.

The term ‘cannibal’ emerged in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The primary definition of the term is ‘a man that eats human flesh; a man-eater, an anthropophagite’ (OED). According to most



etymological accounts, it was a neologism that described the practices of anthropophagy of the Carib people, a 'fierce' nation of the West Indies. However, as Peter Hulme (1995) argues, the cannibal was a key figure in the processes of colonial discourse that operated to separate the 'savage' indigenous people from the 'civilized' Europeans.

Cannibalism may appear to bear a superficial relationship to contemporary life, but according to Priscilla Walton, it embodies one of the fundamental axes of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century culture. Walton's analysis is useful as she instructs us to read cannibalism, not as an objective fact, but as an indication of the structure of Western discursive practices:

"cannibalistic narratives can reveal more about Western discursive formulations than they do about actual cannibalistic practices" (2004, p.33). Walton writes that explorer narratives and imperialist writings of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, cannibals resided in dark and remote lands (usually Africa and Asia), lurking in the jungle, awaiting innocent intrepid (white) explorers. These images justified missionary narratives, founded on the claim that these 'savages' needed to be civilized in order to coax them away from their brutal, inhumane ways. During this time, the cannibal represented an Other from somewhere else. The threat, however, was not imminent to the homeland; instead, they were part of broader adventure narratives of explorers, traders and missionaries traveling elsewhere and encountering savage natives.

Over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, a displacement took place. The previous object of imperial gaze became a subject with a gaze, demonstrative of migrations of people from 'elsewhere' to the home space. In the 1950s, for example, the cannibal became a popular motif in B movies where human flesh eating monsters from outer space or zombies with out of control appetites served as exogenous threats to American values of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the cannibal again changed form and was taken up within discourses of disease, eating, and consumer practices. As Walton writes, “late 20<sup>th</sup> century consumer practices and commodity culture increasingly draw on the rhetoric of the cannibal both to drive consumption and to shape conceptions of the body, suggesting a transformation from modern industrial culture to postmodern, postindustrial culture” (2004, p. 6). In our current time, the cannibal is extended to the processes and products of global capitalism. The underlying fear is that unregulated, global flows will unleash new agents (diseases, industrial and economic practices) that would cannibalize the human body. In the 1980s and 1990s, cannibalist narratives were linked with ‘emergent’ diseases (such as AIDS, ebola, and SARS) where micro organisms eat away at us, attacking our immune system, our central nervous system, or our cellular mechanisms. Walton concludes, paradoxically, by claiming that the cannibal, the creation of Western colonialism, has returned home to haunt us. The emergence of new infectious diseases is for her a sign that we have degenerated beyond comprehension and, potentially even hope; an indication that our contemporary state of globalization and industrialization has taken us to a place where “we are becoming increasingly savage in our civility, to the point where our civility is actually beginning to consume us” (2004, p. 34). In other words, because of industrialization and capitalism, the metaphor of the cannibal has become a reality, word has become flesh.

I suggest that the cannibal is still deploying a rhetorical function. It is not so much that it has materialized in terms of the diseases that cannibalize us, but that it is marking a new site on which to locate anxiety and fear and hence enables deepening conditions for governance. The cannibal has moved from being a savage human denizen of the primitive jungle (who is savage because he lacks civilization) to a savage animal of the ‘jungle’ of modern industrial agriculture (who is savage, ostensibly, because of too much technology).

Whereas cannibalism used to be articulated with images of primitive savages, it is increasingly articulated with industry. What is the significance of a discourse that argues modern institutions of power (capitalism, industry, science) have turned the natural cow into a cannibal? These are, after all, the institutions of biopolitics, the ones that are supposed to enhance and produce life. According to philosopher Daniel Cottom (2001), cannibalism presents a site in which the modern machine and the primitive cannibal are articulated. In other words, the connotation of cannibalism is not simply a primitive savage (as discussed by Hulme 1995); rather, it evokes the articulation of industrialization with the wild beast of the primitive jungle. Cottom argues that, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the cannibal became a receptacle for anxieties, not only about ‘savage primitives’ but also about changes experienced in the twentieth century such as industrial technology and capitalism. Thus, for Cottom, the machine and the cannibal are as intimately coupled as the virgin/whore and the noble/savage native.

The machine might press its image upon plants, animals, organs, humans, and everything else in the universe; the cannibal swallowed the distinctions among such things. In place of the recursive modeling provided by the machine, we have the progressive destruction of identity imaged through the cannibal. The machine is the technological abstraction of the cannibal; the cannibal, the sensuous realization of the machine. (2001, p. 189)

Cottom argues that the machine / cannibal articulation worked its way through the Enlightenment to the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century movement of naturalism in which organic nature is portrayed as man eating machine. With the cannibal cow, it seems to be reversed: by transgressing ‘nature’, industry has created the conditions of cannibalism. In

other words, cannibalism no longer emerges from the wild jungle, but from the urban ‘jungle’ of the factory<sup>30</sup>.

In the twentieth century, cannibalism is evoked as the ultimate metaphor for capitalism, in particular, postmodern capitalism. The shift is that the primitive savage is articulated onto processes of culture rather than nature. As Walton writes, postmodern capitalism can be read in terms of metaphors of eating, where formal boundaries between familiar and strange, known and unknown, have become porous, allowing bleeding and leakages between the two: “divisions between us and them no longer hold as systems of communication and transportation bind us more closely – leaving the Other to slip and slide with no firm grounding” (2004, p. 151). This link between capitalism and cannibalism has entered into contemporary common sense. The alternative band, Anthrax, for example, titled its 1982 album ‘Capitalism is cannibalism’. Literary theorist Stephen Pflof (1992) suggests that there is a link between postmodern capitalism and the global flows of information. According to Pflof, in our contemporary society, the powerful elites have become predatory where ultramodern male power is advancing into unprecedented regions of psychic and bodily control over the destinies of others:

The bodily invasion of an expanding host of fleshy human animals by a cold, uncanny and consumptive addiction to a seemingly endless flow of information bits and pieces, fragments of a world that never existed, electronic memories of fears and attractions that have no substance independent of the simulative re-structuring of experience within the vacant if omnipresent data banks of advancing transnational CAPITAL (1992, p. 7).

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<sup>30</sup> Such a techno-organic coupling is evident in Upton Sinclair’s choice of ‘The Jungle’ as the title for his book where he articulates modern industrialization with the primitive jungle. During the time of the industrial revolution, industrialization was supposed to be the site of civilization, of making things better for us. However, as Sinclair points out, it has created the conditions that are as brutal and uncivilized as ostensibly occur in the jungle.

This idea of capitalism as a place of unregulated consumption figures into discourses of alternative forms of capital exchange. According to John Elkington,

In our rapidly evolving capitalist economies, where it is in the natural order of things for corporations to devour competing corporations, for industries to carve up and digest other industries, one emerging form of ‘cannibalism with a fork’ sustainable capitalism – would certainly constitute real progress’ (1998, ix)

The primitive savage, once the fierce threat to western nations, is now articulated with the modern machine and global flows of capital. What is the significance of this, beyond the naturalist claim that the cannibal has returned home to haunt us, that we have finally gotten our ‘just desserts’ with the cannibal cow? The dominant narrative about BSE seems to run as follows: the cow has been turned into a cannibal by the cannibalistic forces of globalization and industry. It is from this demonic site that a new form of flesh eating disease emerges, a cautionary tale for any of us who arrogantly defy the laws of nature. Cows are ‘naturally’ herbivores, after all.

I maintain that the cannibal is still serving to signal an Other on who fears and anxieties can be projected and who characterizes all things that threaten us. According to Crystal Bartolovich (1998), cannibalism is not the product of capitalism nor does it represent the nature of capitalism; rather, it was and still is capitalism’s Other. It is summoned at certain historical periods to justify and ensure the movement of capitalist forces. Cannibalism is capitalism’s Other because it marks those things that stand in the way of capitalist expansion. By marking them as Other, they are more easily exterminated. In the nineteenth century, these ‘obstacles’ to capitalism were the people who lived in the places that European nations wanted to colonize. In the late twentieth century, the cannibal is attached to animal as a way of justifying draconian practices (such as the mass slaughter of cattle) as well as trade regulations against people working in rural agricultural industries.

According to Richard North, an agricultural policy expert in the United Kingdom, the emergence of diseases affecting livestock such as BSE (but also salmonella and foot and mouth disease), and the way it was dealt with by government officials, practically decimated the agricultural industry in the UK. In each of these cases, North writes that the MAFF (Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food) response was the same: slaughter animals and blame the animal feed as the source. One of the consequences of BSE was that it led to tightened regulations as well as heightened public panic regarding rural practices of animal husbandry, especially those involving the rendering industries. As a result of increased regulations, surveillance, and culling in response to the threat of BSE, small farming has become further economically unsustainable, forcing cattle production to be concentrated more than ever before in large corporate operations (2001, p. 17). North writes that food scares are a motivating force behind increased regulations: “the pressure induced by the scare dynamic is so powerful as to be almost irresistible, forcing a disproportionate legislative response” (ibid, p. 263).

Scare dynamics also result in the need to place blame. Once we are convinced that the cannibal cow is a menace, we look further to find the source: who is turning these cows into cannibals? Besides science and industry, an easy target is the farmer or rancher, guided (or blinded) by the search for profit. Whatmore echos this sentiment with her assertion that mad cow disease reveals to us “the cost cutting and profit margins in a corporate animal feed industry careless of the offensive detail of how their products were derived, and of balance sheets and productivity gains for farmers accustomed to gauging their husbandry in terms of metabolic conversion of inputs into outputs” (2002, p. 163).

According to North, however, the tendency to blame agricultural workers and the industry as a whole might be informed by a thinly guised rural prejudice as well as a degree

of ignorance about the state of current agricultural production and trade. By arguing that farmers are simply complicit with the broader agricultural industry, we continue a narrative that places the blame on complicity of workers in the 'capitalist machine' without looking at other possible scenerios. The feeding of rendered animal proteins (or MBM) to cattle might assault our sensibilities about what cattle 'ought' to eat, but this does not necessarily mean MBM is the source of the infection. What we end up with, according to North, is a well worn mantra that the problem facing our food supply is unsafe intensive farming methods, enabled by our own desire for cheap food as well as ranchers and farmers who reduce farming to a profit making industry. What gets left out of the analysis are the specific circumstances that might be leading to food borne illnesses as well as the economic stresses that are forcing small scale farmers out of business.

What North points to is a question about governance. Discourses around BSE that blame animal feed tend to position certain agricultural practices as a problem to be overcome in terms of the dangers they pose to the population. As a result, these practices need policing and administration in order to (re)establish the security of the population. The governing body must then play a role in constructing the discursive conditions for safety, security and health. The use of reconstituted animal proteins was banned worldwide under the assumption that this was, necessarily, the cause of the disease. This puts a system of surveillance on farmers (who have to prove they are not using MBM in their feed). It also enables an industry of surveillance devices, such as rapid BSE tests, which must be used by nations as a proof of their sanitary fitness. It also problematizes the rendering industry, forcing them to come under more legislation and control. This, of course, is not a bad thing in and of itself, but if the cause of BSE is still uncertain, we might, as a whole, be placing the burden of responsibility on the livestock industry without looking at other possible

explanations. Mark Purdey draws attention to the draconian policing that occurs when a farm is labeled 'BSE' positive:

My tiny farm in the UK has suffered three cases of BSE, yet thankfully we never had to endure the arrival of a slaughter squad of manic mandarins who took out every animal for miles around, or zipped us up into space suits, closing down the farm into a biohazard zone. (2005, p. 1)

When a farm is marked BSE positive, the cattle are usually slaughtered (or 'culled') in order to prevent the spread of infection. When we slaughter a herd of cattle, or close barriers to trade in livestock because of the threat of a disease ostensibly originating in animals, we also decimate the people and industries who depend on those animals.

By disarticulating the cannibal from BSE, we can raise different questions and pursue alternative explanations and practices. There may be other explanations of the origins of BSE that we do not take seriously because we are focused on (and convinced by) the idea that the infectious agent of TSE is caused by flesh eating. These include the chemical, industrial and military origins arguments. If, for example, as Mark Purdey proposes, insecticide (organophosphates) contributed to mad cow disease, the British government would be liable, as would the chemical companies that manufacture them. It would be easier for them to escape responsibility if animal feed were the source rather than an imposed pesticide, especially because those bearing the burden are relatively powerless industries such as the rendering industry and small scale farmers.

Another explanation suggests a more chilling narrative. In a letter sent to the Canadian Medical Association Journal, Lange et al (2003) propose that BSE may have resulted from yet another unconsidered source, the use of bioweapons. Although their proposal is speculative, these authors write that there is little stopping a group from obtaining animal prions and injecting this into cattle, or placing it into feedstocks for the purpose of



crippling a segment of the economy. If interspecies transfer of TSE is possible, then animal prions could easily be obtained from wildlife. As such, they submit that bioweapons should at least be investigated as a potential source of BSE. Bioweapons are defined as biological organisms and substances derived directly from living organisms that can be used to cause death or injury to humans, animals or plants (Dudley and Woodford 2002). Diseases and biological toxins have been used for centuries against human populations. The historical use of biowarfare included animal carcasses, human cadavers, disease contaminated clothing or blankets, and fecal matter. Most government bioweapons programs include research on the culture and testing of disease agents intended specifically for use against livestock and crops (Ban 2000 in Dudley and Woodford 2002). Genetic engineering has enabled scientists to create new strains of infectious agents; three of the four genetically modified pathogens created specifically for bioweapon attacks against human populations are zoonotic diseases capable of infecting humans and animals (anthrax, plague, tularemia). It is not outside the realm of possibility, given the technological sophistication of modern virology and genetics, that emergent diseases are being manufactured in laboratories rather than being derived from nature. They may also be used by nations against nations, for the purposes of economic warfare.

When a highly infectious pathogen enters into a modern livestock operation, the effects can be devastating. The foot and mouth disease epidemics that hit Britain and Taiwan practically decimated their industries. The BSE outbreaks in Britain and Canada had similar impacts. Given the current state of agricultural trade policies that enable border closures due to health and safety reasons as well as an increasingly consumer concern over health and safety, the threat of zoonotic diseases in livestock could pose potential and serious problems for small scale agricultural industries in the future. Although it is entirely speculative, I think

it is worth pursuing the possibility that BSE may have origins other than the consumption of MBM by cattle. The chemical and bioweapons theories at least warrant more sustained investigation. Unfortunately, the articulation of the cannibal with BSE provides an ideological barrier to these inquiries because the cannibal transposes onto BSE a set of morally charged connotations: a fear of the primitive other as well as a fear of technology, trade and industry. To a degree, the cannibal makes flesh eating an ‘always already’ condition of BSE. Because it is deeply articulated within western cultural imaginaries, the cannibal cow ignites in us feelings of fear and outrage that might blind us to other possible explanations.

## CHAPTER V

### ANIMAL RIGHTS: MORALIZING FLESH CONSUMPTION

This chapter begins by providing a context for the ways in which morality and ethics are articulated with flesh consumption. My interest lies with animal rights organizations as well as ethical vegetarianism<sup>31</sup>. I focus, particularly, on how ethics are linked with broader regulatory regimes. Industrial farming has been one major factor contributing to the articulation of ethics and flesh consumption (Degrazia 2003). These farms signal a change since the 1950s, where large scale, industrialized farms have replaced smaller, family operated ones. Several activists and theorists argue that industrial farming is inhumane and environmentally destructive (Adams 1990; Cockburn 1996; Dunayer 2001; Fox 1999; Rifkin 2002); hence, they maintain people should become vegetarian to stop these practices.

In significant, protean and emergent ways, ethical vegetarianism and animal rights organizations suggest a shift in a new form of governance, one that is articulating animal rights as a foundation for a new consciousness as well as a new set of relations with animals. Two salient issues are raised by animal rights and vegetarian groups: is factory farming safe and is the use of farmed animals moral?

One possible outcome of this is the proliferation of discourses around safety and morality with respect to farmed animals. When an issue is problematized as unsafe, it legitimates public concern, media attention, litigation or government regulation (Packer

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<sup>31</sup> There are generally five major arguments for becoming a vegetarian (Stephens, 2002): a concern for distributive justice, environmental harm, sexual politics, moral consideration for animals and health concerns.

2003). This channels public discussion and debate about what is good, not in terms of what is democratic or economically just, but in terms of what is safe and moral. Issues around safety and morality are abstractions like issues of democracy and justice; unfortunately, they are often made into objective, rigid categories that limit the range of other possibilities. This is particularly true when discourses are moralized. As animal rights become legislated, the body of the animal becomes a site for legal discourse, and introduces the possibility of litigation if someone is found in violation of laws protecting animal rights. By and large, this is not a bad thing as the protection of animals against harm is a perfectly legitimate appeal. However, criminalizing the use of animals as food can serve to criminalize and pathologize certain groups of people. From the perspective of animals rights, it seems like a perfectly legitimate stance to protect an animals rights. However, from a rancher's perspective, whose livelihood depends on slaughtering cattle, it is not.

### **Industrial agriculture and the ethical treatment of animals**

Protests against the industrial slaughter of animals began in the nineteenth century with several groups appalled by the conditions in industrial meat packing plants. As Upton Sinclair's muckraking expose of the Chicago meat packing industry *The Jungle* (1905) revealed, workers had to work amidst the stench and shrieks of animals being slaughtered. Immigrant laborers worked long hours in cramped conditions. Employers could keep wages low and withhold benefits due to the ready supply of workers desperate to earn a living. As Sinclair describes, there were many swindles in packing houses, where profit was more important than sanitation or even concern for animals,

There would be meat that had tumbled out on the floor, in the dirt and sawdust, where the workers had trampled and spit uncounted billions of consumption germs...the packers would put poisoned bread out for the rats; they would die, and then rats, bread and meat would to into the hopper together...there was no place for men to wash their

hands before they ate their dinner, so they made a practice of washing them in the water that was to be ladled into the sausage... in barrels would be dirt and rust and old nails and stale water – and cartload after cartload of it would be taken up and...sent out to the public's breakfast. (2001, p. 112)

Sinclair's book sparked an immediate public reaction, and led to the United States Congress passing of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906, which barred adulterated or mislabeled food from interstate commerce (Rifkin, 1992, 133). It also instigated the Federal Meat Inspection Act of 1906 that mandated federal inspections and minimum sanitary standards at slaughterhouses. Although the focus of Sinclair's book was on the intolerable labor practices and the unsanitary conditions of Chicago's stockyards, he also raised awareness of the plight of livestock. In response to the continuing public pressure raised because of concern over the cruel methods recounted in *The Jungle*, the United States Congress enacted the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act of 1958 (HMSA)<sup>32</sup>. This act requires that cattle, calves, horses, mules, sheep, pigs and other livestock (such as poultry) be slaughtered in accordance with humane methods, which include established ritualistic or religious slaughter (such as the Jewish Kosher method) or methods that render livestock insensible to pain before they are slaughtered.

It wasn't until the 1960s and 1970s that public attention was drawn to the ethics of industrial agriculture. Critiques of modern factory farming (or high intensity farming) began with rather fringe voices: Ruth Harrison's *Animal Machines* (1964), Francis Moore Lappe's *Diet for a Small Planet* (1971), Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* (1975) and Peter Singer and Jim Mason's *Animal Factories* (1980) were some of the first texts to raise critical questions about the impacts of modern meat production in terms of its ecological sustainability and its treatment of animals. Ruth Harrison (1964) coined the term 'factory farming' as a means to describe the highly regimented conditions of slaughterhouses and the meat packing

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<sup>32</sup> [http://www.hsus.org/farm\\_animals](http://www.hsus.org/farm_animals)

companies and, in doing so, questioned the right of humans to make animal husbandry into an industrialized, profit driven industry. The problem with today's large farms, according to Harrison, is that they are guided by the logic of industrial factories, with an emphasis on efficiency and profit, with little to no concern for animal or human welfare. Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* addressed issues of animal cruelty in industrial farming as well as scientific research. He argued that modern food production uses (and abuses) more animals than all other industries. His writings, in particular, have been instrumental in sparking and galvanizing the contemporary animal rights movement.

The animal rights (or animal protection) movement is one force responsible for the politicization of meat. This group represents one of today's fastest growing and most effective protest movements, and has impacted discourses and practices of industrial agriculture, laboratory research and the fur industry (Jasper and Nelkin 1992). This movement is driven by the following position: animals are similar enough to humans to deserve serious moral considerations. They are sentient beings entitled to dignified lives, and should not be treated as means to an end (ibid 1992, p. 3). For some, this extends into the claim that to do harm to animals is to commit a criminal act.

The first groups aimed at preventing cruelty to animals were established in the 1820s. Lewis Gompertz founded the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) in London in 1824. The American SPCA was founded in 1866 in New York City and the Canadian SPCA in Montreal in 1869. The London SPCA was the first national animal protection society in the world. At the time, animals were treated as commodities or objects that supplied food, transportation or sport. The idea of animal 'rights' was not in the public consciousness. These organizations had two mandates: to promote animal anti cruelty legislation and to enforce it. They were most concerned with cruelty towards pets. When the

organization began in London, a single inspector was appointed to check on the conditions in slaughterhouses and other animal organizations; this position was later expanded into an animal law enforcement body. Interestingly, the protection of animal rights preceded, and even contributed to, the protection of some human rights. According to the Canadian SPCA literature, legislation for the prevention of cruelty to animals predated protection of children in most areas<sup>33</sup>. In England, children were forced to work longer hours in the coal mines than the pit mules, who were protected by law. In 1884, the Secretary of the RSPCA John Colam helped form the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. Alongside his efforts in forming the SPCA, Lewis Gompertz published *Moral Inquiries on the Situation of Man and of Brutes* (1824). In this, he defended animal interests, upholding the position that the right of living beings to their own bodies is greater than the right that others have to use or profit from it. Another influential text at the time was the founder of the Humanitarian League, Henry Salt's *Animals' Rights*, published in 1892. Salt introduced the idea that animals should be liberated from human use, because if humans have moral rights, then animals must too.

The concerns and efforts of the SPCA were further expanded in the 1950s with the founding of the Humane Society of the United States. This organization shifted its focus from issues surrounding animal cruelty to discourses of animal welfare. Whereas the SPCA dedicates its efforts to protecting pets, the Humane Society is concerned with animal welfare as it applies to livestock, zoo animals, and animals used for research. Founded in 1954, the Humane Society is the United States' largest animal protection organization. Their main focus is to reduce suffering and to advocate for public policies to protect animals. They target

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<sup>33</sup> [http://www.sPCA.com/SPCA\\_a/history](http://www.sPCA.com/SPCA_a/history)

four issues: factory farming, the use of animals for fighting sports, the fur trade and inhumane sport hunting practices<sup>34</sup>.

A new ideological agenda for animal protection emerged in the late 1970s by adding a new language of 'rights' as the basis for demanding the liberation of animals from human oppression. In particular, Australian philosopher Peter Singer's book *Animal Liberation* (1975) sparked widespread concern over the use of animals in agriculture, industry and medical research. Drawing inspiration from Henry Salt's ideas of animal liberation, as well as utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham's work, Singer claims that we are obliged to stop experiments on animals, as well as the production of animals for food, because animals have interests just as we do. Animal liberation is different from the anti-cruelty movement (including the SPCA), which was built on the assumption that the interests of non-human animals deserve protection only when serious human interests are not at stake (Singer, 1986). For liberationists, animals need to be accorded the same rights as other beings. This idea draws from Jeremy Bentham's claim that:

The day may come when the rest of the animal creation may acquire those rights which never could have been withholden from them but by the hand of tyranny. The French have already discovered that the blackness of the skin is no reason why a human being should be abandoned without redress to the caprice of a tormentor. It may one day come to be recognized that the number of the legs, the villosity to the skin...are reasons equally insufficient for abandoning a sensitive being to the same fate (quoted in Singer 1996, p. 5).

Drawing from Bentham, Singer articulated the civil rights movement call for racial equality with animal rights discourse. In doing so, he drew a set of relations that had been gestating for over a century, one that placed humans and animals in the same circle rather than drawing a boundary between them. Bentham's utilitarian philosophy linked with his desire for social reform, and he extended this to concern for animals. Within his calculus of pleasure versus

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<sup>34</sup> [http://www.hsus.org/about\\_us/](http://www.hsus.org/about_us/)



pain, he argued that, since animals could suffer, then their pain provides the moral basis for regulations preventing cruelty against animals. In this sense, Bentham articulated the suffering of animals with a broader legislative body. In doing so, he not only brought the animal body into the juridical realm, he also introduced new forms of regulatory action against people who committed cruelty to animals.

For Tom Regan, the animal rights movement is committed to the following goals: the total abolition of commercial animal agriculture, the fur industry and the use of animals in science (2001, p. 127)<sup>35</sup>. According to Regan's position, if animals have moral rights (the right to bodily integrity and life) then the way they are treated on farms and in biomedicine is wrong because it violates them. As such, all animal use should be stopped, regardless of how much humans benefit (Regan, 2001, p. 154). Regan is emphatic that we can't simply reform our actions (by treating animals more humanely, or by decreasing our consumption of meat); rather, we need to change the entire structure of the system: "you don't just change unjust institutions by tidying them up" (1983, p. 3)

Singer and Regan's ideas led to the galvanization of a new form of social movement. The 1980s witnessed an explosion in the number of animal rights organizations, as well as an equal growth of interest in traditional welfare groups (Jasper and Nelkin, 1992). The Animal Liberation Foundation, People For the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), In Defense of Animals (IDA) and Attorneys for Animal Rights (AFAR) all began in the 1980s, and represent a new generation of animal rights organizations. These groups were followed by others with a specific interest in reforming agricultural practices.

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<sup>35</sup> Perspectives similar to Regan's include Bernard Rollin *Animal Rights and Human Morality* (New York: Prometheus, 1992); Steve Sapontzis, *Morals, Reason, and Animals* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987)

In the early 1990s, Jeremy Rifkin, Andrew Kimbrell, John Stauber, Howard Lyman and Ronnie Cummings formed the Beyond Beef Coalition, with the mandate to raise awareness of the problems associated with modern livestock production. By the late 1990s, the Beyond Beef coalition split into different groups, with each member taking on a different issue: John Stauber formed the Center for Media and Democracy in 1993 and also wrote an expose of the US beef industry with Sheldon Rampton; Howard Lyman formed Voices for a Viable Future, a non profit organization with the mandate to promote a vegetarian lifestyle; Andrew Kimbrell established the International Center for Technology Assessment (CTA) in 1994 and the Center for Food Safety(CFS) in 1997; Jeremy Rifkin is President of the Foundation on Economic Trends; and Ronnie Cummings helped form the Organic Consumer's Association in 1998. According to Howard Lyman<sup>36</sup>, the move from the Beyond Beef Coalition to the formation of six interest groups allowed each member to approach the same problems (ie. industrial farming) from different angles. Each one of these organizations has been instrumental in raising awareness about the ill effects of industrial farming. The Organic Consumer's Association, for example, has one of the more comprehensive public information resources with respect to BSE (or 'mad cow disease' as they prefer to call it)<sup>37</sup>. Under the guidance of Michael Greger, a medical doctor with training in agricultural science, this resource tends to portray BSE as a government 'cover up', where BSE is referred to as the 'plague of the 21<sup>st</sup> century'. Their featured articles repeatedly focus on government lies, the link between factory farming and BSE, the need for more surveillance and testing, as well

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<sup>36</sup> Personal Communication, November 2005.

<sup>37</sup> In addition to the Organic Consumer resource on mad cow disease, there is also [www.mad-cow.org](http://www.mad-cow.org), which is often described as the official mad cow disease reference page with over 7 000 articles on its webpage. Until April 2001, it was run by Thomas Pringle of the Sterling Biomedical Foundation. This website is now linked to Organic Consumers webpage. Pringle, Stauber and Greger are often called upon by journalists, especially the New York Times, for expert positions on BSE.

as the heightened risks of BSE spreading to the US population. They feature similar information on what they call ‘mad deer disease’ or chronic wasting disease, a transmissible spongiform encephalopathy that affects ungulates<sup>38</sup>.

Beyond Beef Coalition was one of a number of livestock industry reform movements founded in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Farm Animal Reform (FARM) was founded in 1981 with the aim to prevent animal cruelty on farms (it also sponsors the Great Meat Out, an annual daily awareness raising event to promote plant based diets); Animal Welfare Trust is a non profit formed in 2001 with the mission to prevent animal cruelty especially on farms; and Farm Sanctuary, an organization devoted to providing shelter for farm animals. With over 100 000 active members, this organization aims to change farm animals from agribusiness commodities to their rightful place as ‘living, feeling animals’. According to its literature, “most farmed animals are raised on factory farms, where they spend their entire lives in cages or crates so small that they can not even turn around. Farmed animals are not protected from cruelty under the law. In fact, the majority of state anti-cruelty laws specifically exempt farm animals from basic humane protection — so abandoning a sick animal on a pile of dead animals is considered “normal animal agricultural” practice.”<sup>39</sup>. This organization has made its way into popular literature. For example, in Peter Lovenheim’s novel, *Portrait of a Burger as a Young Calf* (2002), he raises two calves (Snort and Daisy) in the attempt to connect himself with his food supply. By the end of the novel, he finds he can’t slaughter Snort and Daisy, and sends them to live out the rest of their lives at the Farm Sanctuary.

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<sup>38</sup> This resource also makes an interesting rhetorical slippage by referring to chronic wasting disease as ‘mad deer disease’. In doing so, it articulates the two diseases, although there is not definitive proof that they are part of the same epidemiological family (Brown 2001). It is also linked to a webpage (maddeer.org) with articles warning about the imminent spread of CWD. The Center for Media and Democracy’s page on CWD leads its articles with headlines such as ‘mad deer disease is not a food scare: it’s a crisis’. The Wall Street Journal referred to CWD as a ‘spreading plague’, due to interviews with John Stauber.

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.farmsanctuary.org/about/index.htm>

## **Meat is Murder: Criminalizing animal slaughter**

Heifer whines could be human cries  
Closer comes the screaming knife  
This beautiful creature must die  
A death for no reason  
And death for no reason is murder

And the flesh you so fancifully fry  
Is not succulent, tasty or kind  
It's death for no reason  
And death for no reason is murder

It's not natural, normal or kind  
The flesh you so fancifully fry  
The meat in your mouth  
As you savour the flavour  
Of murder  
The Smiths, Meat is Murder

One of the claims to come out of the animal rights movement is that 'meat is murder'. This is accomplished by drawing a line of equivalence between the animals right to life and the taking of it by another being (a criminal act). One of the more extreme variants of this narrative is the comparison of our contemporary meat industry with the holocaust. In *Eternal Treblinka: Our Treatment of Animals and the Holocaust*, Charles Patterson (2002) argues that the use of animals in agriculture and medical research is comparable to the holocaust in WWII. For Patterson, the horror over how people were treated like animals during the holocaust should also be extended to our current treatment of animals, as they, too, are subjected to confinement, experimentation, starvation and mass extermination.

John Coetzee takes up a similar perspective in his novel *The Life of Animals* (1999), the story of a writer Elizabeth Costello who is concerned with the topic of animal rights. In the novel, Costello is asked to deliver two speeches on the topic of her choice to a small university. She decides to talk about what she thinks is a crime of stupefying proportions

that people routinely commit: the abuse of animals. Coetzee delivered his address for the 1997 – 98 Tanner Lecture Series at Princeton University by inviting his audience into Costello's world. In his lecture in a lecture, he asked his audience to imagine an academic occasion, similar to the Tanner lectures, where Elizabeth Costello delivers two lectures. Coetzee proceeds to read her lectures to his audience.

Costello's (and Coetzee's) most contentious remark in her speech was that the crime of the Third Reich was to treat humans like animals. The discourse of the concentration camp, she contends, reverberates with the language of the stockyard and the slaughterhouse where people went "like sheep to slaughter" and were killed by "Nazi butchers" (1999, p. 20).

We are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without end, self regenerating, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry, livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them. (ibid, p. 21)

Costello argues that we cannot ignore the comparison between the holocaust of humans and the current holocaust of animals. She states, if Treblinka was an enterprise ultimately dedicated to death and annihilation, how can we argue that the meat industry is ultimately devoted to life? The meat industry might foster human life, but it does so at the expense of the lives of animals, to such a degree, in fact, that the amount of animal slaughter is practically inconceivable.

The articulation of animal slaughter and the holocaust is taken up in literature in animal rights organizations, granting their mission a form of urgency. For the Animal Liberation Front, David Weseloh writes,

The word "holocaust" can apply to both the animal holocaust and the Jewish Holocaust and does not take away from the Jewish Holocaust. The comparison is valid since both get rounded up and placed into cages (concentration camps)...They are both eventually slaughtered...I think that we should do anything ethical to stop the killing of animals for food and experimentation ...There is a real animal

holocaust in the world and we are on the front lines to save them. We cannot surrender! We cannot retreat! We must go forward!<sup>40</sup>

Animals rights groups reveal the limits of a culture of meat eating by calling into question, not only the practice of flesh consumption, but also the logic behind the ‘non criminal putting to death’ of animals. By reframing meat as ‘murder’, they managed to rearticulate public debates by forming new lines of equivalence. If meat is murder, then we commit a criminal putting to death of another being, and, as such, can be legally held accountable. Although such acts of reframing may seem trivial, they can have political and juridical consequences. For example, the slaughter and sale of companion species (dogs and cats) is prohibited by law in California, Delaware, Georgia, Michigan, Mississippi, New Jersey and New York. As such, companion species are juridically categorized as ‘not food’. In Hawaii, a state legislator recently proposed a bill to ban the slaughter of dogs and cats for food, which drew protests from members of some Asian groups who felt the measure was aimed at stereotypes of their culture rather than any real problem with dogs and cats being butchered for food (Lee 2005).

The concept of equivalence bears some examination. According to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), for a relation of equivalence to be established, it is done via the articulation of different elements. Otherwise, we would have a relation of identity. This articulation of different elements is enabled because a common enemy (or exterior) is established such that a new form of similarities can be established. By articulating meat with the holocaust, this creates a new system of equivalence based on the common denominator of murder, but also a common enemy where those working in the livestock industry are linked with fascists. The slaughter of livestock and the consumption of flesh becomes a criminal act, but moreso, it

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<sup>40</sup> The Animal Holocaust. [www.animalliberationfront.com](http://www.animalliberationfront.com). Accessed November 30, 2005.

becomes a criminal act of unimaginable proportions, one that is as evil as the holocaust. By not rising against this evil, we all become as complicit as the German citizens in World War

II. To evoke the words of Elizabeth Costello,

It is not because they waged an expansionist war and lost it that Germans of a particular generation are still regarded as standing a little outside humanity, as having to do or be something special before they can be readmitted to the human fold. They lost their humanity, in our eyes, because of a certain willed ignorance on their part. Under the circumstances of Hitler's kind of war, ignorance may have been a useful survival mechanism, but that is an excuse which, with admirable moral rigor, we refuse to accept. In Germany, we say, a certain line was crossed which took people beyond the ordinary murderousness and cruelty of warfare into a state that we can only call sin...I return one last time to the places of death all around us, the places of slaughter to which, in a huge communal effort, we close our hearts (1999, p. 20 and p.35)

By drawing a line of equivalence between meat and murder, the differences between a criminal act (the putting to death of humans) and a gastronomic one (the slaughter of animals) are collapsed. One consequence of drawing lines of equivalence is that the political discursive space is narrowed and polarized, thereby erasing the complexities and differences within the social sphere. As Laclau and Mouffe write, "the logic of equivalence is a logic of the simplification of political space, while the logic of difference is a logic of its expansion and increasing complexity" (1985, p. 130). In this sense, the animal rights groups can be thought of as enacting in a hegemonic practice by partially fixing public discourse in an organized system of differences (ibid, p. 135).

In order for a discursive practice to be hegemonic, Laclau and Mouffe argue that it must be able to unify a social and political space by constituting tendentially relational identities (what Antonio Gramsci calls a historic bloc). The type of unity created is not unity in the form of a historic a priori, but 'regularity in dispersion' (ibid, p. 136). By linking the question of the animal with a pre-existing discourse of rights (including the 'right to life'), animal rights discourse might reorganize the political sphere that divides the right and the left

in North America. In other words, people on the left, who ‘tend’ to be associated with the liberal right to chose, are drawn into a moral debate about the right to life. In this sense, the animal’s right to life becomes more important than a farmer’s right to make a livelihood, much like the Christian Right attempts to make a fetus’ right more important than a woman’s right to her own choices and self sovereignty. We may end up with what Laclau and Mouffe refer to as a popular struggle, where certain discourses tendentially construct the division of a single political space in two opposed fields, rather than a democratic struggle where a proliferation of public spaces emerges (ibid, p. 137).

According to Jasper and Nelkin (1992), animal rights is a moral crusade. Its adherents tend to act on strict moral beliefs and values to pursue a social order consistent with their principles. Ethical vegetarianism, for example, is based on the refusal to eat meat because doing so would be inherently wrong. Even for environmental or health reasons, the eating of meat is regarded as an essentially ‘bad’ practice either because it is bad for the environment or bad for health. There is rarely any room for contingency or context (for example, bad for whom, when, in what situation, with what effect?). Furthermore, because these debates are framed as a moral dilemma (and I think the same would apply under the banner of health), there is often the disavowal of a larger partisan agenda or even consideration of the consequences of this ostensibly ‘good’ act. Animals, as Jasper and Nelkin write, are a perfect cause for such a crusade as they are often seen as innocent victims whose mistreatment demands immediate redress. Extreme, and even illegal, strategies are sometimes justified in order to stop widespread immoral practices.



## **Flesh Consumption and Class Politics**

The urgency felt by animal rights groups to ‘save’ animals from exploitation can in part be explained by class dynamics. As Jasper and Nelkin (1992) describe, the social roots of this movement lie in the changed relationship between humans and animals that resulted from the urbanization and industrialization in the nineteenth century. As urban dwellers began to encounter animals as family pets, or via mediated representations on film and television, more and more people began arguing that all animals should be treated as partners, or ‘companion species’ rather than as food and transportation. Jasper and Nelkin argue that the formation of animal rights can be articulated with the emergence of a new urban middle class from the aristocratic, agrarian societies of sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe. As the family became privatized and idealized, so did the family pet. A new moral sensitivity emerged towards vulnerable members of society; this was eventually extended to animals. This class changed the direction of western culture as it led to an increased sentimentalization of the nuclear family. These new bonds provided the base for changing attitudes towards animals as animals increasingly became part of the family. Urbanization also removed many people from their direct dependence on animals as a resource; with the advent of the automobile in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, people also stopped depending on animals for transportation. People owned less chickens and cows, and more dogs and cats.

The nineteenth century expansion of industry and urbanization accelerated the spread of middle class moral sensibilities, including the sympathy for animals. Because urban people do not depend on the land for their livelihood, some of the harsher aspects of the natural world were erased, leading to the image of nature as a pleasant, pastoral environment. One of the consequences of the increased industrialization, particularly in the nineteenth

century, was a concern about the state of 'nature'. As people became more urbanized, and as the landscape became more technologized, people became increasingly preoccupied with the question of the purity and integrity of nature.

As Leo Marx (2000) suggests, a dominant narrative surfaced during the industrial revolution, one that has survived in our contemporary imaginary. Marx refers to this as the 'machine in the garden'. This narrative proceeds as follows: a machine, or some other token of industrial power, suddenly intrudes into a pastoral, idyllic setting. The event arouses feelings of dislocation, anxiety and foreboding. It derives its evocative power from the contrast between the industrial machine (signifying also power and wealth) and the green landscape (fecundity, beauty, serenity, virginity). The recurrence of the 'interrupted idyll', according to Marx, signifies a certain relationship to and attitude towards technology and industrialization: one of fear, apprehension and pessimism.

The 'factory in the farm' might well be a modern reinstantiation of this 'interrupted idyll' and its associated imaginary. In other words, alongside our polarization of humans and animals, we also may be engaging in discourses that separate culture from nature, where any intrusion of one into the other is considered to be a problem. For example, in *Beyond Beef*, Jeremy Rifkin argues that the cow is an ideal mirror for our own evolving relations in the modern world. It has moved from ancient systems of what he calls 'revered generativeness' to modern systems of controlled productivity. Rifkin laments the passing of the bull and cow from ancient icons of virility and fertility to objects "desacrilized and denatured, stripped of their aliveness and turned into machines of production...robbed of their being, deconstructed in to sheer matter for manipulation, and made into things" (1992, p. 287). Here, the modern machine of industrial farming violated the cows 'generativeness' in ancient times. As a solution, Rifkin advocates that we should stop depending on beef in order to move to another

stage of human evolution: “by choosing not to eat the flesh of cattle, we serve notice of our willingness to enter into a new covenant with this creature, a relationship that transcends the imperatives of the market and profligate consumption” (ibid, p. 288). For Rifkin, this will allow us to treat cattle, not as objects but as partners and participants in the larger community of natural life. By getting rid of the machinery of industrialization (and also capitalism), Rifkin seems to imply that we move ourselves into a mythical garden of purity; although this time as equal species in a postcapitalist pastoral where all carnivorous impulses have been tamed and civilized.

According to food historian Warren Belasco (1989), the key tenets of the Pythagorean diet resonated with the conservative puritanical and romantic movements of the mid 1800s. Belasco argues that the popularization of vegetarian critiques in North America has occurred in cycles, predominantly during times of social upheaval and change. One of the key characteristics of these times was a broader conservative turn, where tradition, ancient wisdom and a return to ‘nature’ were favored over the flux and change caused by industry, science and commerce. The first dominant stage of vegetarian critiques in North America was during the Jacksonian period (1830s); the second during the Progressive era (1900 – 1914) where a critique of processed foods mirrored widespread concern about irresponsible corporations and dangerous urban-industrial conditions. The next came during the Johnson – Nixon years (late 1960s – early 1970s) in the context of the emergence of the counterculture and its attack on science, technology, nuclear technology, war and the oppression of weak. Arguably, we are entering into another phase of vegetarianism. In July 2002, for example, the cover of *Time* magazine inquired if we should all be vegetarian, suggesting that this dietary regime is gaining more acceptance within public consciousness.

According to dominant critical narratives about modern agriculture, in the name of profit, agricultural industries ostensibly began hurting animals by a regime of antibiotics, cheap feed, and strict confinement. The assumption, often, is that this period of agricultural industrialization shifted relations with animals. As philosopher Bernard Rollin writes, traditional agriculture was based on a system of shared interests where proper animal treatment followed from self interest: “producers did well if and only if animals did well...producers put animals into optimal conditions for which the animals were biologically suited and supplemented their ability to survive with food during famine, water during drought, protection from predation” (2003, p. xiii) Ostensibly, with the move to industrial agriculture, the link between self interest and proper animal treatment has been severed.

However, one might equally argue the opposite: that animals are better treated now than they ever have been. Traditional small scale farming can lead to isolationism and ignorance, or can be based on the repetition of traditions that do not take animal welfare into account. Animals were not necessarily treated better back in the ‘good old days’ of small scale farming: often, however, the abuses (or what we might now call abuses) were normalized and taken for granted. The assumption that industrial agriculture necessarily leads to abuse may be predicated as much on technophobic myth, romanticization of the past and sensationalization of the present as it is on actual occurrences of wrongdoing.

Industrialized agriculture may even be the place where some of the most humane actions are taking place, in part due to public pressure. The work of Temple Grandin is one example (1993). Grandin is well known for her design of special chute systems for handling cattle in slaughter plants. Although, in the United States, the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act was passed in 1978, when Grandin did a study in the mid 1990s, she found that many did not adhere to this act (1993). Her research led her to develop more humane structures for

slaughter. She also created and implemented the American Meat Institute scoring system, an audit that is being used increasingly in large and small slaughter and packing plants throughout North America. One of the first corporations to take up this audit was McDonalds Corporation. This is significant because McDonalds is one of the largest world buyers of meat and thus has a great deal of influence on meat production. It may be in fact be that corporate agribusiness is facilitating more rather than less compassionate approaches to animal slaughter. They also may be providing more stringent safe guards for human health and animal well being than have ever been in place.

Unfortunately, animal rights discourses tend to document factory farming in a fairly polarized, simplistic fashion as an inherently immoral practice, often using sensationalized images in books, magazines and documentaries. The most explicit example of this is British artist Sue Coe. Coe describes herself as a graphic witness to realities often overlooked or avoided in public discourse. Through visual imagery, she explores issues as diverse as meat packing, sweat shops, prisons, AIDS and war. Her art has been used by animal rights activist groups to raise awareness of the ways in which animals are treated in contemporary, industrial farming practices.

Her 1989 art exhibition *Porkopolis: Animals and Industry* (published later as *Dead Meat* (1996)) drew attention to the problem associated with animal cruelty in factories. Using evocative graphics, Coe depicts the horror of modern pork production. She also represents workers as stripped of dignity, much like the animals. She tends to resort to a caricature of those who engage in livestock production (butchers, ranchers, etc.), presenting them as faceless, almost inhumane workers, often with an air of psychosis or dementia. Her work tends to vilify the material organization of modern food systems, leaving us with a fairly clear, but woefully simplistic, ethical mandate (factory farming is essentially bad, bordering

on evil). This imagery is consistent with a great deal of animal rights activist literature which tends to couch its rhetoric in terms of an overly reductionist ‘us’ versus ‘them’ (Jasper and Nelkin, 1992, p. 143). Meat producers are depicted as villains, or callous profiteers who are consistently willing to place economic value over moral concern and animal rights activists are the knights in shining armor who will, at all costs, protect the vulnerable, violated animals. My concern with this narrative is that it does not allow for the complexities, subtleties and nuances of our contemporary agricultural system.

One of the key assumptions behind animal rights discourses is that they make the rights of animals equivalent with the rights of humans. Animal rights theorists often use analogical arguments, claiming that prejudice against animals is ethically equivalent to racism, sexism, even anti-Semitism. Under the assumption that any being who is capable of suffering warrants ethical consideration, animals rights movements attempt to extend juridical rights to all animals. For example, Peter Singer (1987) argues that speciesism is what prevents us from acknowledging the suffering of nonhuman animals, and from taking their interests into account. As a utilitarian, Singer aims to reduce suffering and maximize satisfaction across species. His work, as well as the work of Tom Regan, enlarges the ethical sphere to include nonhumans. Such efforts are laudable; however, without interrogating the ‘self’ that is being extended, they often fall short of providing a theoretical perspective that is applicable to our current time. As I mentioned, if we extend rights to animals, we then bring them into juridical frameworks as moral rights can easily become the basis for juridical ones. Animal law is already becoming a viable subdiscipline of law, with organizations (Animal Rights Legal Foundation), information centers (Animal Legal and Historical Web Center), even scholarly journals (Michigan State University’s Journal of Animal Law). Read through a Foucauldian lens of biopower, we can interrogate the implications of these organizations for

the disciplining and surveillance of the population: in what ways is flesh consumption pathologized, normalized, regulated, disciplined? What flesh is made off limits by animals rights discourses, and, by extension, what people are criminalized or pathologized? Furthermore, what systems of regulation are enabled when animals rights problematizes modern systems of livestock production – what regimes of surveillance are made necessary when we mobilize discourses about the ostensible harmful effects of industrial farming? Who shoulders the cost and bears the burdens of these surveillance and regulatory systems?

The assumption behind animal rights claims is often that ‘we’ have extended rights to women and blacks, and so should ‘we’ extend them to animals (Cuomo 1998). At the heart of animal rights discourse (especially as espoused by Singer and Regan) is the liberal assumption that human selves are discrete individuals with the capacity for ethical agency. By making animals equivalent to humans, animals also have rights because they are like us in that they can suffer. The underlying idea is that we are individuals first, and our individual rights should be protected. As ecological feminist Chris Cuomo writes, “ethical positions that focus on animal rights can only conceive of nonhuman animals as significant in so far as they are sentient or conscious individuals – not as members of communities, not as repositories of human conceptualizations, not as individual agents fundamentally shaped and determined by their social or ecological immersions” (1998, p. 101). The failure of animal rights discourse, according to Cuomo, is that it fails to take into consideration how we are all intimately embedded and interwoven in complex relationships, environments and economies. Conflicts are not between polarized groups (compassionate animal activists versus profiteering industry advocates, for example); rather, they are mobilized within very rich, complex and nuanced environments. Within animal rights discourses, differences are routinely erased where all animals are seen as deserving equivalence to all humans.

Unfortunately, such utopian pluralism rarely plays out as such in hierarchical social settings. Singer, for example, is often criticized for his comment that urban rats who bite ‘slum children’ have moral rights equivalent to the children (ibid, p. 102). If he used the example of an urban dog, one might go as far as to say that the dog can have more rights than the ‘slum child’, depending on the economic and social position of the dog’s owner.

Furthermore, animals rights discourse tends to neglect the broader social and political context. By routinely focusing on industrial farming, for example, these discourses can lead to a broader consumer concern, which can then fuel more regulatory frameworks within industrial agriculture. Because these are costly to implement, they can squeeze out smaller operations and favor those that have abundant resources, such as large, integrated corporations (Freidberg 2004).

### **Agroterrorism, animal rights and homeland security**

A Foucauldian framework is helpful for contextualizing animal rights discourse because it points to the ways in which discourses of health and ethics feed into the maintenance of a broader political body. This is particularly relevant in an era of terrorist discourse and measures to protect ‘homeland security’.

For example, the Animal Agriculture Coalition (ACC) recently put forth a petition to the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry calling for the need for more stringent Animal Agroterrorism protection<sup>41</sup>. The health of the nation, according to this document, depends upon the health of its livestock, pets and wildlife. The ACC proposes putting more legislative power with the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Services (APHIS) to regulate the health of the nation via livestock. This document also notes that

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<sup>41</sup> <http://www.nmpf.org/govIssues/index.cfm>



during a May 18, 2005 hearing of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, animal rights and ecoterrorism were cited as the greatest domestic terrorist threats in the US today. The ACC submitted a document to this hearing, stating:

Today every U.S. livestock and poultry producer lives under the threat of potential violence against his or her farm or ranch because the use of land, crops and animals to produce meat, milk, eggs, leather and fiber is offensive to environmental and animal rights extremists who use personal philosophy to rationalize violence against people and property. Companies providing feed and animal health products to help farmers maintain the health and welfare of their animals are targeted as 'conspirators' in animal exploitation; meat processors are vilified; livestock auction markets, restaurants and supermarkets have been vandalized and individual companies subjected to corporate blackmail in the media (2005, p. 3).

The ACC is lobbying to the Senate Agriculture Committee to support stronger federal criminal penalties for those who commit animal rights and ecoterrorist acts. They also urge the US Department of Justice to use, and potentially even share, its database on radical animal rights groups in order to identify possible threats.

There are two immediate implications of this document. First, it suggests a new configuration of governance is emerging, one that is increasingly regulating the security of the national body via institutions associated with animal health. Second, placed in the context of bioterrorism, animal rights groups are increasingly vulnerable to criminalization and prosecution. People may unwittingly, via their compassion for animals, join in activist activities that are increasingly becoming criminalized.

This can result, paradoxically, in extreme measures taken *against* animal activist organizations. As Bonner Cohen for the National Center for Public Policy Research writes,

In contemplating how to prevent future terrorist attacks on the United States, we should bear in mind that the Islamic terrorism of Osama bin Laden isn't the only threat to life and property posed by extremist groups. For years, the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) and the Animal Liberation Front (ALF) have been carrying out acts of violence all across the United States. The FBI believes that the two organizations have committed over

600 acts of terrorism over the past seven years.<sup>42</sup>

Cohen argues that we need to be as concerned with acts of ‘ecoterrorism’ as we are with other terrorist activities after 9/11. Ecoterrorism is an offence punishable by law. As of 2002, under Section 336 of the Public Health Security and Bioterrorism Preparedness and Response Act, it is a criminal offence to cause physical disruption or property damage to the functioning of an ‘animal enterprise’<sup>43</sup>. Being accused of these offenses can result in financial penalties as well as prison sentences. As Norma Woolf of the National Animal Interest Alliance writes, “while not specific to animal rights and environmental terrorism, the USA Patriot Act signed by President Bush nonetheless gives government the tools it needs to go after those who use intimidation, vandalism, harassment, arson, theft, and other crimes to frighten researchers, farmers, and others whose livelihood depends on animals and to cripple businesses and research efforts that the activists don’t like.”<sup>44</sup>

The Animal Agriculture Alliance published an article on the possibility of agricultural terrorism that warned ranchers and farmers of the possibility of agroterrorism (Bopp 2005). The article begins by introducing the possibility of terrorist attacks being waged against livestock, as such measures have been a standard feature of warfare in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Agriculture is an easy target for terrorists because the food chain is so intertwined with citizens lives, chemical or biological contaminants can spread easily. By threatening agriculture, groups can effectively terrorize citizens. The article then advises farmers to take matters into their own hands by increasing their own surveillance

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<sup>42</sup> Cohen, B. (2005) Ecoterrorism: A Real Threat to Homeland Security. <http://www.nationalcenter.org/NPA488.html>. Accessed November 30, 2005.

<sup>43</sup> 2002. H.R. 3448 Animal Enterprise Terrorism Penalties. <http://www.amprogress.org/News/News.cfm?ID=274&c=64>

<sup>44</sup> Woolf, Norma. USA Patriot Act also covers terrorist acts of radical animal rights, environmental, and anti-capitalist groups. [http://www.naiaonline.org/body/articles/archives/patriot\\_act.htm](http://www.naiaonline.org/body/articles/archives/patriot_act.htm)

mechanisms:

Of course, you can't defend the country, but you can make efforts to protect yourself. "Everybody's vulnerable," says Philip Lobo, communications director of the Animal Agriculture Alliance. "The question is who is the most vulnerable. They'll most likely be targets." To make yourself less vulnerable, he recommends trying first to determine the threats to your particular location. "If you're close to a town with an incidence of biomedical terrorism or animal-rights marches, somebody might one day think, 'What he's doing out there is wrong and we've got to stop it.' It could mean liberation, where they come in and steal animals, or there have been incidences where they poison animals" (Bopp 2005)<sup>45</sup>

Agroterrorism is quickly subsumed into the activities of animal rights activists, who then stand in for 'terrorists'. The issue of bioweapons, even the possibility of military involvement, is not given any attention; rather, farmers and ranchers fears and anxieties are directed towards animal rights activists.

As Barbara Herrnstein Smith writes, discourses of our shared biological kinship with animals shape and shadow some of our most compelling appetites and revulsions. These complex discourses are revealed in the distinctions we make of animals (human, pet, livestock, spirit guide, wild beast, vermin, game, site for experimentation, etc) which instruct us how to treat animals: whether we should approach or flee, capture or rescue, kill or let live, consume or offer food (2005, p. 3). Yet, these categories and practices are also constantly shifting, where things that were previously unacceptable or unthinkable become possible and taken for granted, and vice versa. Given the multiplicity and variability of categories and practices in modern democratic societies, it is inevitable that conflicts will arise, both within and between us, in terms of the proper, just, natural way to treat animals (both human and non-human), and conversely, what we consider to be absurd, cruel, and inhumane treatment, and, by extension, what is proper and improper to eat.

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<sup>45</sup> Bopp, S. 2005. Terrorism on the Farm? Drovers. November 21.  
[http://www.mycattle.com/news/dsp\\_vance\\_article.cfm?storyid=17950](http://www.mycattle.com/news/dsp_vance_article.cfm?storyid=17950)

Our concerns should be evoked when these conflicts are erased, not when they emerge, for this suggests that we have moved outside of the realm of change and possibility. The challenge is how to allow these conflicts to fuel productive dialogue rather than having them end in war or deepening social divisions. But also, we need to be attentive to the ways in which our moral (or ethical) qualms about the use of animals translate into juridical law. By increasing regulations over use of animals, we lead to more possibilities for surveillance and policing. Again, this is not necessarily a bad thing, but if it comes at the cost of someone's livelihood, it can spark political antagonisms that can further polarize public debate. For example, if animal rights groups are discursively positioned as 'agroterrorists' or as being inherently against agricultural industries, this closes down the possibility of productive dialogue between ranchers and activists. Similarly, if livestock and agricultural industry officials are positioned as criminals or as callous profiteers, this also closes down the possibility of productive dialogue. It is for this reason that I think we need to be cautious of discourses that articulate morality with the use of animals for food. By moralizing our meat, we run the risk of fuelling deeper political divides.

## CHAPTER VI

### BIEN MANGER: AN ETHICS OF CONSUMING FLESH

A friend recently sent me a postcard that features two talking heads caught in a dispute. One shouts ‘flesh eater’ and the other responds with ‘nagging moralist’. If we took this postcard at face value, we might assume that ethics lies on the side of vegetarians, whereas the ‘flesh eaters’ are motivated, ostensibly, by non-ethical concerns such as their gastronomic pleasure, greed or desire for power. However, if we place this within a broader context, we might ask why food has become such a powerful vehicle for moral issues, beyond the simple assertion that morality enters into the ways we relate to food.

According to Sydney Mintz (2002), American culture is prone to categorize eating habits as morally good or bad. North Americans tend to juggle food intake to create moral equilibrium, balancing the ‘sins’ of consumption with purification rituals of exercise, dieting, abstinence or purging. As Mintz argues, this morality is not derived from the intrinsic value of food, but on a social history that conspired to make our relationship to food morally contested. Perhaps food is a privileged site for moral considerations because of the relative affluence of American society, the ubiquity and abundance of food, the attractive diversity of the foods we have access to, the loaded connotation of ‘rich’ foods (fats, sugars), and the thrill of sin and transgression, those necessary backdrops for the production of virtue. Because food is not forecast by its intrinsic value, but by the cultural and material matrix in which is perceived and consumed, we can approach the rift between the ‘flesh eaters’ and the ‘nagging moralists’ as an indication of a broader social and historical context.

Rather than moralizing flesh consumption based on the ostensible rights of animals, I suggest an ethics of consuming flesh, one that reveals the dynamic interconnections of our bodies. Western conceptions of humans and cultural life are founded on beliefs that the human is somehow separate from and superior to nature. Recognizing the ways in which we devalue nature and the nonhuman and then working to shift this, is an ethical engagement. I don't think this needs to necessarily be bound up with whether we eat meat or not, but that a greater awareness of the complexities associated with flesh consumption is the beginning of an ethical encounter.

In the second volume of his history of sexuality, Foucault raises the question of why sexual experience became a moral issue whereas other appetites of the body, such as hunger, were not subjected to the rules, regulations and judgments that define and confine sexuality. My inquiry suggests otherwise: that in our current moment, the consumption of flesh has also become a site of moral concern. Discourses of animal rights and vegetarianism facilitated the articulation of flesh consumption with morality by posing the question of the ethics of the animal. If animals are sentient beings, and because we are related by a common kinship, then how can we consume animals without entering into a moral dilemma? If cannibalism is a prohibited practice, then isn't being a carnivore a similar moral problem once we destabilize the boundary separating human from animal by revealing our common kinship?

Unfortunately, although Foucault's theories of biopower and governmentality provide a lucid lens into the materiality of power, his theorization of ethics provides much less direction. For Foucault governmentality was not ultimately about being controlled but about seeking freedom that, for him, constitutes the very essence of ethics. Governmentality, in this case, defined as "the relation of the self to itself...the range of practices that constitute, define, organize and instrumentalize the strategies which individuals in their freedom can use

in dealing with each other” (1991 in Rabinow 1994, p. xvii).

Foucault (1990a) distinguishes his ethics from morality by placing emphasis on practices of living rather than on assuming a vantage point. Ethics, for Foucault, is an active rather than a reflective experience. Foucault advocates ethics as a place where one is never completely at ease with what seems self evident. Ethics is a practice of thought formed in direct contact with social and political realities. In this sense, we can view ethics as a responsibility to the political contingencies of the moment.

In his later work, Foucault explores ethics as care of the self (1988, 1990a). He distinguishes this from the imperative to ‘know oneself’, which, for Foucault, had become the primary aim of most philosophical ethics. Foucault does not attempt to erase power dynamics (the strategies that individuals use to control one another); rather, he views ethics as a minimization of domination (1991, p. 298). To regard only a person’s rights is to keep them placed as subjects of law. These rights can either be granted or removed by an institution of political society (ibid, p. 300). Governmentality, on the other hand, brings out the freedom of the subject and its relationship to others.

It is hard, however, to understand how such a freedom might become a material phenomenon in our lives, particularly in the context of increasing levels (or at least perceptions) of surveillance, policing and governance. Foucault seems to suggest that such freedom lies with theorization, especially modes of theorization that open us to new ways of seeing. Ethical theoretical engagement, for Foucault, is “that which is susceptible to introducing a significant difference in the field of knowledge, at the cost of a certain difficulty for the author and the reader, with, however, the eventual recompense of a certain pleasure, that is to say of access to another figure of truth” (1994 in Rabinow 1994, p. vii).

## **Ethics and Undecideability**

Perhaps eating can provide access to another way of conceiving ethics. As Elspeth Probyn (2000) writes, eating can provide a lens for configuring a new ethics because eating allows us to rethink the ethics of bodies in radically different ways than those proposed by orthodox western philosophical and theological traditions. An ethics of eating and consumption may not be the same as other ethics, ordered in terms of romantic, fraternal and professional relations, but it can provide a way of approaching ethics that takes embodiment into account. Living creatures need to eat; therefore, living bodies need to kill and destroy other bodies. Our bodies are never pure, never innocent; they are as intimately bound with death and destruction as with life, production and reproduction. Eating forces us to confront our own contradictions, vulnerability, and mortality as well as that of other beings. Eating can encourage us to be less naïve and simplistic about our notions of the good. Eating is complicated, raw, impure, contingent: it is not the place for moralizing. Eating can make us more attuned to the violence, the fragility, the quotidian dangers of living.

The consumption of animal flesh is a particularly murky ethical terrain. Flesh itself is a hybrid, impure term. It is raw, as much about death as it is about life because our flesh is mortal, finite and situated. As Temple Grandin writes, she is often asked how she can care about animals and still be involved in their slaughter:

People forget that nature can be harsh. Death at the slaughter plant is quicker and less painful than death in the wild. Lions dining off the guts of a live animal is much worse, in my opinion. The animals we raise for food would never have lived at all if we have not raised them. (2002, p. 186).

She also notes that people who are completely out of touch with nature are the ones most afraid of death and tend to be the most horrified of places such as slaughterhouses. By denying the reality of their own mortality, most people also deny the morality of other



beings. Life is intertwined with death; death is not something that will occur ‘somewhere down the line’, it is constantly with us, everyday, as intimately present as our ability to breathe, move and eat.

I propose an ethics of consuming flesh as a posthumanist ethics. This means taking seriously the responsibility we have to those creatures we consume, but also to the livelihoods of those who raise animals for consumption. I am not advocating eating meat, nor am I advocating giving it up. Rather, I advocate moving off the solid bedrock of morality into what Jacques Derrida calls undecidability. According to Derrida,

there is no responsibility, no ethico-political decision, that must not pass through the proofs of the incalculable or the undecidable. Otherwise everything would be reducible to calculation, program, causality, and at best ‘hypothetical imperative’ (1991, p. 273).

Derrida’s notion of undecidability does not mean that we waiver in our decisions, that we are doomed to political quietism or that we are incapable of making any moves whatsoever. Rather, he simply instructs us to question our certainty before we act. We often feel we need such certainty to act ethically; yet, often this certainty is not questioned.

Derrida provides insights into such an ethics with his suggestion that we learn to ‘eat well’. For Derrida, the question is not “should one eat or not eat, eat this and not that, the living or the nonliving, man or animal, but since one must eat in any case and since it is and tastes good to eat, and since there’s no other definition of the good (du bien), how for goodness’ sake should one eat well?” (1991, p. 256). It is significant that Derrida poses this as a question rather than as a declaration. To eat well is a project, a pursuit, a dilemma. To eat well, we must first recognize that, ontologically, we are flesh that consumes. Eating well evokes disturbing notions of necessity, pleasure and the inherent violence of living.

Eating well is also about hospitality and conviviality: we never eat entirely on our own because we are inherently in relation with other beings and situated with particular

environments, both material and symbolic. The simple recognition that we are ‘consuming flesh’ means that we cannot approach issues of politics and ethics in terms of what is ‘good’ to eat, with abstract, decontextualized, universal or romanticized principles. Rather, we need to acknowledge and respect the boundaries imposed by the particularities, contingencies and contradictions so intimately bound up with our need to consume other bodies as well as other bodies that need to consume. Because we are so deeply interconnected, our ethics needs to extend to a multiplicity of bodies, animal and human.

The issues surrounding our food systems and agricultural trade are complicated, and deserve complicated ethical responses. For example, how can we be hospitable and response-able to the lives of farmers worldwide who are bound together in complex and often violent webs of dependence due to the dynamics of global trade? Consider the tragic story of the South Korean farmer Lee Kyung Hae, leader of the Korean Federation of Advanced Farmers Association. On September 10, 2004, Lee climbed the barricades at the Fifth Ministerial of the World Trade Organization in Cancun with a sign that read "The WTO Kills Farmers" and then committed suicide by puncturing his heart with a swiss army knife. Lee ran a prosperous farm with a focus on beef production in North Cholla province of South Korea, until the Korean government opened the market to imports of Australian cows and encouraged farmers to expand their stocks by offering them loans (Watts, 2003). This led to a collapse in the price of beef in Korea. Lee’s herd, bought with loans, was suddenly almost worthless, leaving him with no secure income source to repay his debts. After losing his farm, Lee began active political engagement, marked by periods of self inflicted violence. In 1987, he was a central to the formation of the Korean Advanced Agriculture Federation which has since become South Korea’s biggest farmers' organisation. In 1990, he attempted to disembowel himself in a protest outside the WTO office in Geneva against a Uruguay

Round agreement that opened the Korean market to rice imports for the first time. Although Lee's suicide did not garner very much international media attention, it did influence the activists at Cancun. Italian activists splattered themselves with red paint and shouted the slogan: "The WTO kills farmers." During international solidarity rallies over the weekend, activists chanted "We are all Lee, we are all Lee."

His death has been interpreted by food activists as a sacrifice made in the name of countless rural struggles in the global countryside. As journalist Jonathan Watts (2003) describes,

Locals say they are up to their necks in debt - a common complaint in Korea, where the average farmer borrowings have more than quadrupled in the past 10 years, while their incomes have crept up by less than 10%. Some speak of people committing suicide or running off in the middle of the night because they cannot make their interest repayments. They fear the situation will get worse as their government sacrifices domestic agricultural protection to open markets overseas for the finance and manufacturing sectors. With 80% working as small-scale tenant farmers, they know they can never compete head-on with rice produced by the huge agri-businesses of the US, or apples grown in Chinese farms that can tap into unlimited cheap labour. The young are deserting the fields in droves, and in the past 20 years, the town's population has almost halved.

The complexities of global agricultural trade are difficult to understand, in particular, the relations of dependence and hierarchy they create. For example, while beef and cattle production are subsidized in the U.S and Canada, this is done often to increase export markets for beef. As such, we need to think in terms of our ethical relations, not only with livestock as well as cattle producers in our own countries, but also in terms of the complex global relations that are being fostered via the cattle trade. Sjur Kasa (2003) writes that global trade policies, in particular those of the United States, are pushing consumption patterns in North East Asia. One of the most dramatic changes has been with the consumption of beef. In North East Asia, beef consumption was traditionally associated with special occasions; however, from 1985 to 2000, beef consumption has almost doubled in

Japan and South Korea where rice consumption has declined considerably in the same period. Much of this increase in production is based on imports, mostly from America and Australia.

Thousands of animals have been slaughtered because of the fear of diseases of animal origins. In the UK and Canada, hundreds of farmers have had their livelihoods decimated (or have taken their own lives) because they no longer could find viable markets for their animals. Given the loopholes in current agricultural trade policy that enable border restrictions based on health concerns, as well as a public desire for safe, natural and pure food, I believe that we will witness many more animal and rural slaughters. But, our current agricultural system also slaughters millions of animals each year for food and our voracious global appetite for meat, and other animal products such as leather support this. At a global level, we are not eating well.

## **Conclusion**

If, as Foucault argues, racism is the demarcating of human life into categories of distinction and hierarchy, then speciesism may be another way in which we are enacting social power, accomplished by regimes of eating that divide the animal world into categories of flesh that can be eaten and flesh that can't, as well as flesh that eats other flesh and flesh that doesn't.

For some, the slaughter of millions of cattle per year is not considered to be of concern nor even a notable occurrence for these bodies are outside of the purview of ethical and political consideration. They are, after all, 'just livestock'. However, if we take the concept of speciesism seriously, we recognize that we operate within a profound dissymmetry between the human and the animal body where the animal body lies beyond ethical consideration. When this dissymmetry is destabilized, it is hard not to feel profoundly

disturbed about the ways in which animals are treated in our contemporary society. With modern industrial agricultural production, this occurs on a scale that defies imagination. The bloodsheds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are not limited to humans, they also apply to animals. Modern cattle ranching was itself built on the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of bison, as well as the hundreds of thousands of indigenous people in North America whose lives were so intimately linked with the bison. And, if we extend our ethics, our compassion, our hearts to the plight of these beings, the impact is chilling.

This speciesism has been accomplished by a host of forces including the biopolitical regimes of the biological sciences. When we define ourselves, and other creatures as belonging to a particular category (carnivore, herbivore, vegetarian), we not only describe what is eaten by whom, we also make normative claims about what ought to be eaten by whom. These categories serve to maintain relations because we tend to perceive them, and their attendant value, as fixed and constant. Because we are destabilized when these norms are transgressed, we often take measures to correct them rather than questioning the norms themselves. Contemporary debates are then taken up within these eating categories: we create categories of distinction based on our consumption of flesh: eating meat is more central and normal than being a vegetarian; vegetarians form alliances against flesh eaters under the banner of health and ethics; herbivores should never eat meat for this would disrupt the order of nature, and all of us, animals included, ought to ward off cannibalism, the ultimate taboo.

Mad cow disease signals a broader narrative that is circulating about emergent diseases, one that is blaming the animal as the source of infection. The narratives of mad cow disease focus on consuming flesh, where the source of infection is the animal body either from dead cows and sheep or dead human bodies. This is also being taken up in the

context of other emergent zoonosis. In the case of SARS in 2003 and the emergence of Avian flu in 2005, the story runs as follows: the infection arises in bird populations, then mutates and spreads to human populations. In the case of SARS, poor sanitation in rural poultry markets were blamed as providing the conditions for the virus' mutation (Bell et al, 2003). For Avian flu, the disease is believed to spread from wild geese to domestic ones. Because of our increasingly interconnected world, these diseases have the opportunity to spread into global pandemics. The rapid spread of SARS from mainland China to Canada illustrated the tight relationship between contagion, transportation, and transmission where the World Health Organization (WHO) played a vital role in the narrative by creating coordinating patient data, gathering reports from hospitals, issuing air travel advisories, and select regions that are the 'cause' of the disease (Thacker, 2005).

We could leave the explanation of emergent diseases as is, without digging deeper into alternative causes. However, if we take seriously the claim that modern power is working through speciesism, then we might be less inclined to accept 'animal origins' disease narratives. As I previously discussed, in racist regimes, racialized bodies were blamed as the source of infection even when evidence suggested otherwise. AIDS is a classic example of how bodies 'othered' by a regime are targeted as the source of an infection. If our current regime is operating via speciesism, then perhaps the animal body is unfairly being targeted as source rather than as victim of a more elusive source. Perhaps we rarely interrogate animal origins narratives because we don't fully understand the sciences of modern bacteriology and virology enough to launch critiques, but also because we have inherited a deeply rooted devaluation of the animal body.

Often our understanding of food is informed by romanticized, idealized visions of agricultural production perhaps as a result of the majority of the population being removed

from elementary food production but also potentially due to a technophobic, Frankenstein-esque narratives in north American culture where any intervention into god's divine plan (or 'nature') is believed to necessarily lead to problematic consequences. Industrialized food production often remains outside of the public imaginary. This does not mean that people are not aware of it, for we have a rich tradition of journalism that brings industrial practices to broader awareness. However, this awareness is often configured within a deeper longing, desire and nostalgia for natural, wholesome food produced and consumed in a natural, wholesome manner. As Rampton and Sheldon write, "The consumer movement exists because Americans want safe food raised in old fashioned and environmentally sound ways by caring family farmers. Consumers want to base their food buying habits on plentiful information about how it was raised and what chemical additives or unnatural processes might have occurred from the journey from the farm field to their plate" (1997, p. 4).

As I discussed with the 'cannibal cow', fearful reactions often result when the workings of an industry are 'revealed' to the public. When we challenge our preconceived imaginary, we are left in shock and disbelief. Attempts by industry officials to explain the mechanics and science of food production are often met with distrust, suspicion and, at times, outright hostility. This can leave larger governmental institutions in the position of telling the public that there is no risk associated with food production, rather than educating the public about the relative and potential risks associated with each industry (Leiss, 1997). As a result, as a collective, we do not learn how to direct our inquiry into the nature of the risk – whether it is catastrophic or negligible. The risk of contracting vCJD is relatively negligible, and did not warrant the border closures, the slaughter of millions of cattle and the economic hardships imposed on British and Canadian ranchers. It does, however, warrant more attention paid to the processes of modern livestock production, as well as a potentially a

rethinking of the ways in which we are globalizing these practices. Marketing groups such as Alberta Beef Producers appeal to, articulate and galvanize such romanticized public sentiments. If we articulate food production with wholesomeness, nature and the toils of honest working men and women, and then make the slippage that this is how we ought to produce our food, this leaves a large lacunae in our ability to make sense of the dynamics, benefits and drawbacks of modern food production.

Interesting compromises may also be struck in the future to harmonize fears of animal based food pathogens with concern for animal rights as well as a desire to continue eating animal flesh. For example, the non profit research organization New Harvest is currently working to develop new meat substitutes, including meat produced in vitro (cell culture) rather than in vivo (animal derived). According to this organization's website, meat substitutes are produced under controlled conditions that are impossible to maintain in traditional animal farms. Whereas meat substitutes were recently considered a fringe food, there is now an increasing market for products that have the taste and texture of meat but do not have the problems associated with meat production and consumption. Meat substitutes can be made from plants such as soybeans, peas, or wheat; mycoproteins (fungus derived); or from animal tissues grown in culture. There are already several plant- and mycoprotein-based meat substitutes available including tofu hotdogs, tofurky, vegetarian hamburgers, meatless breakfast sausage. Experimentation is now underway to raise animal tissue in a laboratory. In a recent article in *Tissue Engineering*, Edelman et al (2005) describe how 'cultured meat' is technically feasible. The advantages of cultured meat are that fat content can be controlled, foodborne disease could be reduced and resources could be used more efficiently. As journalist Marion Heselsmans writes, our future kitchens may even provide us with the ability to generate our own meat:



In the evening we throw some pig stem cells in the warm bioreactor and the following morning we get minced pork. During the night, we sleep soundly, not feeling guilty about stressed piglets and vast soy fields, as the stem cells transform into myoblasts, the myoblasts transform into small muscle fibers and the muscle fibers form tissue (Heselsmans, 2005).

Although Heselsmans' description is not and may never be technologically possible, it is probable that we might encounter laboratory raised artificial meat in the near future.

Vegetarianism and cultured meat may represent our collective gastronomical future as we experiment with new options to cope with the myriad of consequences of modern animal production.

To a degree, eschewing beef is good advice for if we continue to raise cattle and consume beef in the way that this is dominantly practiced, we risk contributing to the depletion of relatively non-renewable resources such as top soil, water, and fossil fuels, as well as creating profound and potentially irreversible impacts on ecological cycles (Ayers & Prugh, 2004; Norberg – Hodge et al, 2002). Our global levels of consumption, and our 'tastes' for meat as well as access to a diversity of food stuffs from around the world, are eating away at relatively non-renewable resources like oil and water. The pertinent, and frightening, question of our time is whether our system as a whole will adapt and change before we experience a drastic decline in these resources. If we run out of oil, we will be inconvenienced. If we run out of water, we die. There are already populations dying from lack of water, although their deaths are rarely taken up in our collective consciousness. Beef, in particular, is one of the most environmentally troublesome global commodities as it is energy, land, water and pollution intensive (Kasa, 2005). As beef producer groups compete for global markets, the North American style of beef consumption is also exported. As Kasa argues, with its emphasis on consuming large portions of meat, the North American diet is extremely unsustainable.

I conclude with advice from Anne Weinstone, who writes, ‘delight taken in the act of assimilation, in the act of eating, may be the paradigmatic transgression for post World War II ethical theory and its heir, posthumanism’ (2004, p. 2). For Weinstone, posthumanist ethics cannot sidestep intimacies in favor of abstractions; rather, we must “continuously expose ourselves to our entanglements” (ibid, p. 213). We are not separate individuals, hierarchically placed in a great-chain-of-being food pyramid, with man on top and the rest of the living creatures below. Rather, we are one, intertwined: we all have responsibilities to one another.

When I put the flesh of an animal in my mouth, I am faced with an imperative of other beings, an imperative that has the opportunity to touch me deeply and profoundly. I recognize that the fate of the animal is my fate, and that our lives, as well as the lives that brought the flesh to my table, are intimately interwoven. This ethics is in line with what Gary Snyder (1993) calls the practice of active compassion (ahimsa) for all beings. This compassion is active because it is never fully resolved: it may necessitate eating meat in certain instances in order to sustain a particular set of economic and ecological relations; it may also mean that we seek to understand other practices of flesh consumption that may appear problematic from our own ethical perspectives.

How do we acknowledge the cow whose flesh comprises a great deal of our cultural products from meat, to medicine, to animal feed, to leather. Her body is intimately intertwined with our own. She gives a livelihood to many people; nourishing us, providing her fluids and flesh. Can we learn to respect her contributions to our world, to see her body as more than an animal ‘other’? Will she someday be a relic of a time long past – a time of animal husbandry, living in relation to livestock and the land? Are we more ethical if we deny ourselves her flesh or if we feast on it?

To be ethical is not to rehearse ethical theories (to know the self), but to be moved by the suffering of others, moved to a place of compassion, to a place of undecidability. Ethics is also about pleasure, about celebration, about our profound connections, and the possibilities for even more connections. We can be ethical towards livestock by visiting ranches, by making friends and relations with people who in the livestock industry, by talking and sharing ideas, concerns, food. By recognizing and coming to terms with our own devaluation of those systemically marginalized in western culture, such as rural populations and the animal body.

Ethics, for Weinstone, means acknowledging that we are deeply, intimately entangled with one another, and as such, are all responsible for and to each other.

Not knowing my self, not knowing what I mean when I say 'I', and you say 'I' places us in the most intimate relation of capacitation, of effect, and thus, of responsibility for everything. You are my body, too (Weinstone 2004, p. 214).

Perhaps, if we devoted ourselves to these words, to our profound intimacy, to remembering our relations with our flesh, with our animal bodies, we can make good of our undecideable belonging to each other. This is the basis for hospitality and, hopefully, a guideline for eating well with respect to the many animal bodies that surround us.

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