



## REVIEW ESSAY

# ‘Happy Cows,’ ‘Happy Beef’: A Critique of the Rationales for Ethical Meat

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**ABSTRACT** The ethical food movement signals a significant transformation of cultural consciousness in its recognition of the intimate politics of what we eat and what kind of socio-political systems we sustain. The recent resurgence of economic localization exemplifies a grass roots attempt to undermine the hegemony of transnational corporations and build ecologically and economically sustainable communities. Social justice plays a key role in the guiding philosophies of these movements, and yet, while many ecocritical discourses examine the uncomfortable relationship of anthropocentrism and sustainability, some contemporary texts of the ethical food movement evidence a reluctant embrace of omnivorous eating, while simultaneously indicating a gendered, if ironic, machismo at odds with the principles of ethical eating. An analysis of the rhetoric of three popular nonfiction books that construct a similar narrative of the story of meat—Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, Susan Bourette’s *Meat, a Love Story*, and Scott Gold’s *The Shameless Carnivore*—reveals an attempt by these authors to naturalize what is essentially an economic and lifestyle activity. Working within a vegetarian ecofeminist framework, though recognizing that multiple compelling philosophical positions exist for considering the ethics of meat eating, this paper intends to argue, not that “ethical” and “omnivorous” are contradictory terms, but rather that a moral ambivalence prevails in these texts despite these authors’ claims to the contrary. In elucidating these authors’ reactions to their own participation in “the omnivore’s dilemma” this paper pinpoints those areas where a resistance to a deeper examination of human-nonhuman relations is in operation.

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## Introduction

A revolution is underway, taking shape in a rather unlikely place: the kitchens of foodies, today’s rather trendy food enthusiasts, who are transforming the culinary landscape in exciting and oftentimes empowering ways. Their rallying cries include “do it yourself” (DIY) and “back to the basics,” and their restaurants and storefronts are easily identified by the language they use: “locally grown,” “grass-fed,” “stress free,” “free range.” Unlike their organic-minded predecessors, the sprout-munching hippies, meat takes a prominent place in the diets of these foodies, so much so that popular butcher stores even offer gift certificates for butchering classes and sell t-shirts with their logos emblazoned across the front. Meat is no longer the second course of a meal, but a lifestyle, a movement. If the 70’s counterculture laid claim to an ethical diet for a small planet based on vegetarianism, the carnivores—or omnivores, depending on whom one asks—appear to be wrenching it back.

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While resurgent carnivorism aims to restore meat to its pride of place at the dinner table, the revolution won't come cheap. Like his ancestors a century prior, Christopher Forth writes in "Manhood Incorporated: Diet and the Embodiment of 'Civilized' Masculinity," the "ideal-typical gastronome was a man whose finely honed taste was enabled both through economic means and a cultured engagement with texts that mediated his encounter with food."<sup>1</sup> Gender and class are closely entwined in one's choice of cuisine (or lack thereof), Forth argues, and in its rise, the Euro-American middle class linked good taste to refinement and masculine-coded behaviors of self-discipline, moderation, and an educated and cultured palate. Today, this cultured engagement requires an awareness of the ways in which meat connects to issues of health, environment, climate change, and economic tensions between local and global.

For contemporary foodies, meat from concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) is a culinary and moral travesty: a concoction of chemicals, unnatural diets, and stress which, frankly, tastes bad. Good meat, on the other hand, is chemical free, grass-fed, free-range, and slaughtered presumably without trauma; terms referring to this type of meat include "sustainable meat," "ethical meat," "humane meat," "cruelty-free meat," and even "happy meat." Much current literature has exposed the cruelty and environmentally destructive practices of industrial feedlots and slaughterhouses, and the foodie movement's embrace of meat produced from animals that have been raised with some thought to the alleviation of their misery is a step forward for ethical consumerism. At the same time, it is fascinating that a measure of value arising from the treatment of animals is calculated by these spokespersons for ethical foodie culture into the presumed quality and taste of the meat consumed. As such, they integrate a commodification of pleasure, and this on the part of the commodity itself as defined by its *consumer*, into the gourmand's marketplace. At this juncture, a conscientious consumer and advocate for humane treatment of animals must ask herself whether these ethical meat eaters have resolved what author Michael Pollan refers to as the omnivore's dilemma: this moral and intellectual uncertainty surrounding what one, as a caring and knowledgeable consumer with enough privilege to choose, should eat.

This review article examines three contemporary narratives which describe the brutality and unsustainability of modern systems of meat production: Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Susan Bourette's *Meat: A Love Story*, and Scott Gold's *The Shameless Carnivore*. These authors and their texts have been reviewed widely in mainstream media: Pollan, the most prominent of the three, in such media as *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, *National Geographic*, and *Newsweek*, as well as appearing in the popular documentary film *Food, Inc*; Bourette, in *The Globe and Mail*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and *Elle*; and Gold, in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Post*, and *The New York Times Style Magazine*. Each of these books explicitly promotes a diet of humanely raised meat consumed in limited quantities, and advocates for prominent producers within the ethical meat movement. Furthermore, all three authors engage in a do-it-yourself battle with the demons of conscience, even attempting vegetarianism, only to dismiss it in a rhetorical sleight-of-hand to move their theses towards an embrace of ethically produced meat.

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher E. Forth, "Manhood Incorporated: Diet and the Embodiment of 'Civilized' Masculinity," *Men and Masculinities* 11, no. 5 (2009): 578-601.

The locus of this dismissal, and the reasoning surrounding their advocacy of an ethical meat diet, is what I examine here, in order to elucidate what these texts reveal about human attitudes and anxieties about human-nonhuman relationships, especially our relationships to animals we eat. In doing so, I explicate some of the means by which gender identity is encoded into cultural—and in this case, culinary—movements. I hope to reclaim, or at least leave open, some contested space surrounding the terms “ethical” and “humane” meat. My stance is aligned with feminist vegetarian Cathryn Bailey, who asserts that as conscientious eaters, we should, “... balance an appreciation for how eating practices are tied to identity with a critique of it.”<sup>2</sup>

### Vegetarian and Feminist Ethics

Paradoxically, it is due to concern over issues of class, gender, and ethnicity that feminist scholar Kathryn Paxton George opposes vegetarianism. To understand her position, it is first necessary to trace the development of contemporary ethical vegetarian philosophy from its roots in utilitarian and animal rights theory, and the subsequent building-upon and divergence of feminist vegetarian theories. Foremost among ethical philosophers today who argue for vegetarianism is Peter Singer, who maintains that a utilitarian vision of the greatest good for the greatest number requires the abstention from meat. The horrors of factory farming, the sheer numbers of animals it slaughters, and the lack of essential need for most humans to consume meat, leads him to conclude that people should abstain from animal products. The decisive factor, for Singer, is whether a being has interests. “To have interests, in a strict nonmetaphorical sense, a being must be capable of suffering or experiencing pleasure.”<sup>3</sup> To ignore their suffering is to wrongly treat animals as means to an end.

Ethical vegetarian Tom Regan argues that beings that are sentient have moral rights. They may not be able to make moral judgments but they are nevertheless moral patients: beings entitled to be treated as ends in themselves. Regan argues that granting rights based on reason or intellect could lead to the negation of rights for infants and other “marginal cases,” that is, humans with conditions that cause them to fall outside the category of those who possess reason. Sentience casts a broader net that “...will spill over the species boundary, so to speak, and enfranchise many hundreds, possibly many thousands of species of animals.”<sup>4</sup>

Even so, feminist vegetarian theory asserts, both Singer and Regan rely on dualistic reasoning that divides those with rights from the remaining, objectified and degraded beings. This dualistic reasoning upholds oppressive binaries such as masculine/feminine, reason/emotion, and culture/nature, wherein the former terms are not only considered separate from the latter, but also superior and dominant. Utilitarian and rationalist arguments for vegetarianism therefore reinforce ways of thinking about the world that contribute to the abuse of animals, nature, and marginalized human groups. Josephine Donovan explains, “Regan’s theory depends on a notion of complex consciousness that is not far removed from rational

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<sup>2</sup> Cathryn Bailey, “We Are What We Eat: Feminist Vegetarianism and the Reproduction of Racial Identity,” *Hypatia* 22, no. 2 (2007): 17.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Singer, “Becoming a Vegetarian ...,” in *Cooking, Eating, Thinking: Transformative Philosophies of Food*, eds. Deanne W. Curtin and Lisa Marie Heldke (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 181.

<sup>4</sup> Tom Regan, “The Rights of Humans and Other Animals,” *Ethics and Behavior* 7, no. 2 (1997): 110.

thought, thus, in effect, reinvoking the rationality criterion."<sup>5</sup> Likewise, Singer depends on a "quantification of suffering, a 'mathematization' of moral beings that falls back on the scientific modality that legitimates animal sacrifice."<sup>6</sup> Instead, Donovan and other feminist vegetarians such as Carol J. Adams espouse an ethic of feminist care as a means of overcoming oppressive binaries that separate humans from nonhumans and privilege men. Adams explains, "The subordination of animals is not a given but a decision resulting from an ideology that participates in the very dualisms that ecofeminism seeks to eliminate."<sup>7</sup>

The ethic of care stresses empathy for other beings, and is central to theories of vegetarian ecofeminists Greta Gaard, Deanne Curtin, and Lori Gruen. Gaard argues that "... only by forestalling our sympathies for other animals are humans able to overlook the enormity of animal suffering."<sup>8</sup> These ecofeminists advance a contextual moral vegetarianism that recognizes the needs of individuals in various situations, rather than enforcing universal vegetarianism. Curtin explains, "Caring ... urges us to move in the direction of less violence, even if perfect nonviolence may not be achievable."<sup>9</sup> Empathy, for Gruen, allows us to avoid the effect of third person distancing and identify with animals that can no longer be seen as food. Instead, "They are creatures with whom we share a way of being in the world."<sup>10</sup>

Not all ecofeminists agree that vegetarianism is intrinsic to feminist philosophy. Kathryn Paxton George, mentioned above, claims that a universal vegetarian ethic is anti-feminist, skewed toward a male bias that ignores the nutritional vulnerability of pregnant women, children, and the elderly. Even if excused from practising vegetarianism, nutritionally vulnerable people will be relegated to an inferior moral status. George is convinced that a universal vegetarian diet would require nutritional supplements, fortification, and doctors on hand to monitor the vulnerable vegetarians, thereby necessitating a western, imperialist, global-industrial food system. George favors eating limited amounts of ethical meat, even as she claims, "I continue to affirm that we have moral obligations to animals and that killing or harming any animal is an evil and is often wrong."<sup>11</sup> Ecofeminist Val Plumwood criticizes vegetarians for situating morally considerable beings outside of the food chain, and so reproducing the anthropocentric duality that separates nature from culture. Humans, too, are potential food for other animals; understanding this essential edibility situates humans properly within the food chain and puts humans on a more equal, because more reciprocal, relationship with other animals. Plumwood advocates an ethic that seeks not to abstain from killing and eating animals, but to limit unnecessary suffering resulting from meat eating. Advocacy of vegetarianism, she worries, could impede the development of less meat-centric diets and

<sup>5</sup> Josephine Donovan, "Animal Rights and Feminist Theory," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 15, no. 2 (1990): 355.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 358.

<sup>7</sup> Carol J. Adams, "Ecofeminism and the Eating of Animals," *Hypatia* 6, no. 1 (1991): 140.

<sup>8</sup> Greta Gaard, "Vegetarian Ecofeminism: A Review Essay," *Frontiers* 23, no. 3 (2002): 119.

<sup>9</sup> Deanne Curtin, "Contextual Moral Vegetarianism," in *Food for Thought: The Debate Over Eating Meat*, ed. Steve Sapontzis (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004): 280.

<sup>10</sup> Lori Gruen, "Empathy and Vegetarian Commitments," in *Food for Thought: The Debate Over Eating Meat*, ed. Steve Sapontzis (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004): 290.

<sup>11</sup> Kathryn Paxton George, "Should Feminists Be Vegetarians?" *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 19, no. 2 (1994): 407.

detract energy from activism aimed at ending factory farming, where animal suffering is greatest. "Meat is the result of a reductionist-instrumentalist framework, but the concept of animal food allows us to resist the reductions and denials of meat by honoring the edible life form as much more than food, and certainly much more than meat."<sup>12</sup>

What unifies these scholars is an opposition to factory farming of animals; it is the question of the morality of consuming "ethical meat" that is open for debate—that is, whether "humane meat" is genuinely sustainable and respectful towards nonhuman and human life. Synthesizing the complaints above, humane meat would have to honor the life as well as the context of each individual, admit that humans are also edible creatures within the food chain, be environmentally sustainable, and resist the patriarchal imperative to dominate and exploit. Does the ethical meat movement demonstrate these things? I am wary of the claims of its advocates, that respect for animals truly underlies ethical meat consumption, and that it restores appropriate balance between human wants and nonhumanity's needs. As the texts of Pollan, Gold, and Bourette indicate in explicit and subtle ways, ethical meat eating encourages a practice of masculinity that dominates over animals, women, and nature, a dominance that is predicated not on man's needs, but his tastes.

## The Story of Meat in Three Contemporary Narratives

### A. Meat and Humanity

Barbara Willard, in "The American Story of Meat," explores the historical development of the importance of meat consumption to American capitalism and cultural identity, and how this development upholds the dominant ideology of humanity's right to dominate other life forms. There is a story, she argues, of the rightness of meat eating that can be traced back to the economic transformation of the west by the prototypical American hero, the cowboy, for the sake of those who profited from cattle ranching and the sale of beef. At the heart—or gut—of this story, "is the glory of meat in a capitalist environment."<sup>13</sup> Essentially, Pollan, Gold, and Bourette contribute to this ongoing story, as they embark on their first-person journeys that take them far beyond the urban supermarket to the places where the production of meat is a visceral, daily reality.

These authors enact a classed and gendered performance wherein the simple activity of eating is elevated to a highly complex series of actions requiring knowledge and expertise, actions that call upon traditionally masculine traits such as strength, emotional detachment, know-how, cunning, brutality, and practicality. In a study of male and female foodies, researchers interviewed self-defined foodie men, who almost uniformly described themselves in conformity to "the masculine identity of the intrepid foodie who invests time and money seeking out exotic dishes, while positioning themselves as cultural connoisseurs." They also noted that the stories told by male foodies invariably "featured an unusual animal dish, reconfirming gendered narratives of man's voracious appetite for meat."<sup>14</sup> Likewise, Pollan,

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<sup>12</sup> Val Plumwood, "Integrating Ethical Frameworks for Animals, Humans, and Nature: A Critical Feminist Eco-Socialist Analysis," *Ethics and the Environment* 5, no. 2 (2000): 298.

<sup>13</sup> Barbara E. Willard, "The American Story of Meat: Discursive Influences on Cultural Eating Practice," 116.

<sup>14</sup> Kate Cairns, Josee Johnston, and Shyon Baumann, "Caring about Food: Doing Gender in the Foodie Kitchen," *Gender & Society* 24, no. 5 (2010): 608.

Gold, and Bourette indulge in such exotic dishes as rattlesnake, guinea pig, and wild boar. As a female participating in masculinized food culture, Bourette must frequently break taboos and struggle to perform masculinity with an obvious lack of success which is avidly pointed out by her male companions. Nevertheless, all three texts affirm the rightness of eating meat through their final act of presiding over a feast which replicates and restores tradition, and binds together kin.

It is a tradition earned because they have been initiated into what it truly means to consume meat; they have seen with their own eyes and participated with their own hands in its making, and through this act they have vindicated mankind's position at the top of the food chain. Bourette and Gold draw upon evolutionary theories to explain their consumption of meat, particularly the anthropological hypothesis that the large size of human brains is due to early human practices surrounding the hunting and eating of meat. Gold explicitly cites anthropology professor Craig Stanford's theory that "eating meat is the basis of human intelligence." Stanford argues that the distribution of meat required pre-humans to develop intense communication and trading strategies, which in turn helped to develop human intelligence. Gold seems to be arguing that since meat consumption was important to humans in our distant past, we should continue to eat it, even if we don't need to, because "Carnivorism is a philosophy, a way of life."<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Bourette affirms Stanford's theory when she concludes, "Meat-eating is what made us human."<sup>16</sup>

Annie Potts and Jovian Parry, in "Vegan Sexuality: Challenging Heteronormative Masculinity through Meat-free Sex," examine the online hostile reactions of meat eaters to self-declared "vegansexuals", that is, vegans who refrain from sexual activity with non-vegans. "[T]he most common appeals made by omnivores to the naturalness of meat-eating drew on evolutionary theory or religious doctrine. The ethos underlying the two was almost interchangeable: God and Evolution/Biology/Science alike, according to many online commenters, decreed that humans should eat meat."<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, Bourette acknowledges that due to the pressing nature of climate change, "As we climb the evolutionary ladder, it seems appropriate that our relationship with animals should evolve too."<sup>18</sup> And yet, she believes it "unlikely" that humans will give up meat eating. Gold, too, remarks that humanity's adopting vegetarianism would be "a huge service to Mother Earth," but a service that will never happen: "I hate to sound cynical, but we'd be most likely to wipe out the human race with global thermonuclear war before we arrived at a planet full of vegetarians. And even then, I'm obligated to ask: Would I even want to live in such a world."<sup>19</sup> Noticing that he has arrived at an untenable dilemma, he settles it the way he consistently does throughout the book, by relying on personal choice: "Go vegetarian if you must, if it matters that much to you, but you could make a difference simply by eating organic meat from a local farm."<sup>20</sup> It's not quite that

<sup>15</sup> Scott Gold, *The Shameless Carnivore: A Manifesto for Meat Lovers* (NY: Broadway Books, 2008), 9-10.

<sup>16</sup> Susan Bourette, *Meat, A Love Story: My Year in Search of the Perfect Meal* (NY: Putnam, 2008), 257.

<sup>17</sup> Annie Potts and Jovian Parry, "Vegan Sexuality: Challenging Heteronormative Masculinity Through Meat-free Sex," *Feminism & Psychology* 20, no. 1 (2010): 62.

<sup>18</sup> Bourette, *Meat, A Love Story*, 257.

<sup>19</sup> Gold, *The Shameless Carnivore*, 107.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

simple, though, as all three authors are forced through the unfolding of their own stories, to acknowledge.

### **B. Overcoming the Human-Animal Bond**

There are several shared themes within these narratives in praise of ethical meat. The first theme involves the author's coming to terms with what lies at the heart of the matter: blood, suffering, and death. I detected a kind of "moment of conversion" in each text, wherein the authors literally bloody their hands, look into the eyes of the condemned animal, suffer remorse, and undergo a psychic struggle which ultimately culminates in a confirmation of meat eating. In a novel, this moment of the book would serve as the climax, wherein the simultaneously dreaded and desired confrontation with the antagonist—the living, sentient animal—must take place. The prioritizing of the visual interaction that occurs at the moment of slaughter appears to uphold a necessary function of validation for the meat eater: he or she is no longer a blind participant in the eating of animals, but has seen the light and therefore knows that meat consumption is humane. Jovian Parry writes:

these loosely connected gastronomic texts strive to present animals' becoming meat as a humane, benevolent and wholly 'natural' process. In doing so, they soothe the anxiety that came to characterize the discourse surrounding meat production in the 1980s and 1990s ... They also counter the popular criticism that urban meat-eaters are fundamentally disconnected from the realities of meat production, willfully ignorant as to the death and violence that made possible the meat on their plates.<sup>21</sup>

What is especially interesting is that despite the moment of uncertainty and guilt that these authors encounter, they nevertheless proceed with their story of meat consumption.

This is the exact opposite reaction of nascent vegans to the witness of violence towards animals; seeing an animal's death with their own eyes facilitated their transition to veganism. Christopher Hirschler, conducting a series of interviews with former meat-eating vegans, discovered that "Following a catalytic experience, those who did not repress became oriented. This meant they intended to learn more and/or make a decision about becoming vegetarian or vegan."<sup>22</sup> In fact, for Bourette, witnessing the meat processing industry's conditions did catalyze an initial period of vegetarianism that she quickly abandoned, citing a lack of stamina due to meat deprivation. For Pollan, a lingering discomfort with his participation in the slaughtering of chickens causes him to be dubious about eating chicken. Gold, indeed the most shameless, suffers temporary remorse but is quickly appeased by the visual transition of an animal's body into fragmented chunks of meat. Out of sight, out of mind.

In *Omnivore's Dilemma*, Pollan stays and works on a small organic farm owned and run by Joel Salatin, a well-known proponent of biodynamic farming, and self-described Christian conservative. Under Salatin's tutelage, Pollan spends a few hours slaughtering and gutting chickens, out of a sense of obligation to face the truth of what meat eating means: "It seemed to me not too much to ask of a meat eater, which I was then and still am, that at least

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<sup>21</sup> Jovian Parry, "Gender and Slaughter in Popular Gastronomy," *Feminism & Psychology* 20, no. 3 (2010): 381-2.

<sup>22</sup> Christopher Hirschler, "'What Pushed Me Over the Edge Was a Deer Hunter': Being Vegan in North America," *Society & Animals* 19 (2011): 157.

once in his life he take some direct responsibility for the killing on which his meat-eating depends."<sup>23</sup> Pollan's moment of conversion, from hesitant to knowing meat eater, occurs when he looked "into the black eye of the chicken and, thankfully, saw nothing, not a flicker of fear. Holding his head in my right hand, I drew the knife down the left side of the chicken's neck."<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, in this scene, Pollan himself becomes a part of the machinery of production—a cog in the meat making machine:

After a while the rhythm of the work took over from my misgivings, and I could kill without a thought to anything but my technique. I wasn't at it long enough for slaughtering chickens to become routine, but the work did begin to feel mechanical, and that feeling, perhaps more than any other, was disconcerting: how quickly you can get used to anything, especially when the people around you think nothing of it.<sup>25</sup>

Pollan's sense of unease later in the day turns to shame as he reflects on the smell of death that rises from the pile of offal remaining after the slaughter. Salatin himself, on the other hand, has no such compunction, and tells Pollan: "People have a soul. Animals don't."<sup>26</sup>

On this point, it is uncertain whether Pollan agrees. Later, after hunting and killing a wild boar, he confesses, "I'm slightly embarrassed to admit, I felt absolutely terrific,"<sup>27</sup> only to have this feeling dissolve into disgust as he assists in the gutting of the pig: "Just then I could have made myself vomit simply by picturing myself putting a fork to a bite of this pig." This, he muses, might be because "So much of the human project is concerned with distinguishing ourselves from beasts that we seem strenuously to avoid things that remind us that we are beasts too."<sup>28</sup> His point, that this is the reality, the viscera, of what it means to consume meat, is apt. At the heart of the ethical meat movement's argument is the demand that consumers come to terms with what they are eating, what the relationship between humans and their livestock really is. The two aspects of this relationship are presented like opposite sides of the coin: the one, the death of the animal, a sort of necessary betrayal because of that animal's commodified value as meat, the other, the humane treatment of the live animal, from birth right up to (though probably not including) its slaughter. The cognitive dissonance takes effort to ignore. The human's killing of the animal is linked to animal, not human, behavior: "we are beasts too." And yet the very act that sickened the author is justified because it demonstrates the human (man) is not an animal, a creature to be eaten.

Gold's reaction of horror to witnessing an animal's death is surprising, since he has already devoted a whole chapter to deriding people's emotional responses to the consumption of "cute animals" as "an expression of profound idiocy," especially if these same people eat other, less, cute animals. But when he squats down beside the body of a squirrel he has just shot from a tree, he "suddenly felt a great sense of melancholy. 'What have I done?'"<sup>29</sup> This

<sup>23</sup>. Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, 231.

<sup>24</sup>. *Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>25</sup>. *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>26</sup>. *Ibid.*, 331.

<sup>27</sup>. *Ibid.*, 353.

<sup>28</sup>. *Ibid.*, 357.

<sup>29</sup>. Gold, *The Shameless Carnivore*, 230.



moment of self-examination quickly ends when he reminds himself of “the inevitable correlation between death and meat.”<sup>30</sup> Still later, he assists in the killing of Ernie, a calf, at a small organic farm. He is “rattled” and tries “to be stoic, to be the manly sort who isn’t shaken in the presence of such a scene” but nevertheless, he asserts that he feels no shame, since “like it or not, this had been Ernie’s fate since his birth, ... this is what happens to cows that become beef, and it’s been happening for thousands of years.”<sup>31</sup> In this way, Gold comes full circle to the tradition of meat eating as the justification for “what happens to cows that become beef.”

It would seem that the killing and eating of a nonhuman animal confirms for these authors their identity as a human male, in the case of Pollan and Gold, and not-a-man, an intruder, for Bourette, who nonetheless sees herself as benefiting from man’s behavior. The violence of meat production frightens Bourette away from meat, but only temporarily. At the book’s onset, she describes three days she spent working as an undercover journalist at a meat processing plant. After enduring the typical and brutal conditions of the industry that leave her so horrified, she walks out before her undercover assignment is through. “This is what they mean by hog futures? Hogs have no future. Bacon is not a career. Not for me, not for any human being in a rational and moral world.”<sup>32</sup> She promptly becomes a vegetarian, which lasts for five weeks and 37 hours, at which point she rushes to the nearest diner to work her way down the meaty side of the menu. She feels guilty, “But damn it, meat tasted so good!”<sup>33</sup> This failed attempt at vegetarianism propels her to seek a justification for eating meat, but with a lingering squeamishness compared to Pollan or Gold towards hands-on experiences. Bourette prefers a gendered seat on the sidelines rather than actually bloodying her hands. After witnessing the slaughter of a pig, she reflects with some anxiety on her participation in the animal’s consumption, and confesses, “Truthfully, I can’t help feeling a certain gallows empathy as I stare into the pot. After all, I made eye contact with this pig as he was being walked down the plank to his death. I take a big gulp of vodka and vow right here and now that this pig won’t have died in vain.”<sup>34</sup> A tasty meal, ultimately, is all the justification she needs, even if she prefers that someone else do the killing.

This theme of killing as a means of assuming responsibility for one’s meat eating has, in fact, an aspect of religiosity to it in its call to see with one’s own eyes, to wrestle with discomfiting demons—in these cases, the sentient being and the author’s own conscience—in order to arrive at a conviction of rightness and a sense of peace. Both Gold and Bourette essentially pray over the fresh corpses of the animals whose deaths they cause, or witness, that their deaths “will not be in vain.” It isn’t clear what a death in vain would be to these authors who clearly have a vast range of options for dinner. What is clear is that the act of killing an animal, or at least witnessing an animal being killed, and then eating it, is a ritual act meant to expiate the author/eater’s guilty conscience, and to allow him or her to assume the identity of an initiated meat eater who has, in essence, washed his or her hands with blood, unlike those hypocritical meat eaters who hide behind the symbol of meat without reckoning with what it

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<sup>30</sup> Gold, *The Shameless Carnivore*, 231.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>32</sup> Bourette, *Meat, A Love Story*, 38.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 244-5.

actually means. Ethical meat eaters, then, have sanctified their meat eating by the blood of their kill.

### C. Meat and Masculinity

Bourette is a welcome guest and willing participant in meat consumption, but she is out of her element, a transgressor of gender, when she assumes the role of hunter. While she was treated with great generosity and respect by Arnold Brower, who takes her with him to participate in an Inupiat whale hunt, she nevertheless feels distinctly out of place. Certainly, this is because, as a woman, she is breaking the Inupiat taboo against women taking a direct part in the hunt. Bourette encounters far more hostility in transgressing another taboo, more social than prescriptive, against women's participation when she goes moose hunting in Newfoundland. Here, the connection between hunting and sex, specifically heterosexuality which objectifies and feminizes animals and women, is made clear. When she enters the lodge where the hunters, all male, are relaxing the night prior to their first excursion, one of the men calls out, "Don't you think she'd look nice in a camo bikini?" Bourette comments, "For a moment I felt what the moose must feel when spotted by a guide and his party—not that I'm standing naked, just that I'm a target."<sup>35</sup> Unable to muster the desire, and perhaps courage, to shoot a moose with her crossbow, she ultimately dismisses her participation in the hunt as it is occurring, declaring herself merely having "fun playing along."<sup>36</sup> It's a form of playing in which she is firmly situated in opposition to her companions, who slip easily and fluidly between associations of meat and sex, as Bourette says, "like they're all part of the same course,"<sup>37</sup> the absent referent, to use Carol Adams' term, of the animal whose corpse signifies simultaneously two forms of consumption of flesh: meat, and sex.

Brian Luke explores the structural similarities between hunting and sexuality for white North American men, whose engagement with their prey is one of passionate taking possession of the animal with whom they claim to be in a relationship, one that must end in blood—the animal's.<sup>38</sup> It is not a one-sided relationship the hunters depict, for their rhetoric lays the foundation for a belief in the animal's seduction of the hunter; this come-on, and the violent ending, provides a structural framework for predational relationships in these men's sexuality with women. In fact, Luke states, "In noting the sexuality of hunting we may start understanding what might otherwise be a puzzling phenomenon, namely, the perception of hunting as a dating situation."<sup>39</sup> Luke quotes one poor woman who states, "I dated a man who looked forward to that first [day of deer season] with an ardor that I wished he would have reserved for me." Perhaps she ought to have been grateful to the deer, since, as Luke writes, "There can be no reciprocity, no element of mutuality between the romantic lover and the 'love object.' The quest (chase) is all that matters as it provides a heightened sense of being

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<sup>35</sup> Bourette, *Meat, A Love Story*, 128.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>38</sup> Brian Luke, "Violent Love: Hunting, Heterosexuality, and the Erotics of Men's Predation," *Feminist Studies* 24, no. 3 (1998): 630.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 630.

through the exercise of power."<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, Luke argues that this power and domination over another being, as expressed in hunting, is replicated in sexual behaviors toward other people, such as rape. Rape is, in fact, a normalized aspect of patriarchal masculinity in North American culture. "Rape is hardly a deviant activity, yet to acknowledge this conclusion, just as to acknowledge the normalcy of men's erotic enjoyment of hunting, suggests the threatening possibility that there is something seriously wrong with normal manhood in this culture."<sup>41</sup> The pleasure and "heightened sense of being" felt by Pollan and Gold when each man pursues and takes down his kill, in light of Luke's argument, becomes alarming.

At one point, while musing on the possibility that humanity could forego the practice of meat eating, Pollan argues that it would cause us to give up "a part of our identity—our own animality" and then goes on to assert: "Not that the sacrifice of our animality is necessarily regrettable; no one regrets our giving up raping and pillaging, also part of our inheritance."<sup>42</sup> That humanity has not, in fact, given up raping or pillaging aside, it is noteworthy that Pollan equates these violent (and still ongoing) activities to the animal side of our nature, and furthermore expresses potential regret at the loss of this animality, by which he presumably means a less civilized aspect of human identity. In a similar statement by Bourette, she wonders, "Will there be a day when the majority of humanity sees meat-eating as an act of depravity—much as we have historical customs like public stonings and slavery? It seems unlikely."<sup>43</sup> If only the majority of humanity did see enslaving and stoning people as depraved. These statements are more than simply naïve. They bracket out the violence humans commit against humans, at the same time as they advocate for a supposedly humane form of violence against animals. But as all of these forms of violence are still perpetrated widely today, it is quite possible that the motivating forces behind them are connected.

As noted earlier, Gold not only doubts humanity will forsake meat eating, but he is doubtful that a vegetarian lifestyle is worth living. Gold identifies as a carnivore, and he's "damned proud of it."<sup>44</sup> It is an identity that he links to a violent masculinity from the outset of the book. The prologue begins with a dream in which he imagines himself as Beowulf, home from his victorious killing of "a pair of vicious monsters—the murderous Grendel and his equally bloodthirsty mother." In his fantasy, he is served platter after platter of heaped meat by "voluptuous serving women, their silken tresses flowing as though on currents of enchanted air."<sup>45</sup> It is no surprise that he extracts from his experience hunting squirrel—not exactly a fire-breathing reptile—a lesson on the true identity of manhood, its authenticity marked by blood. In this scene of the hunt, he moves from a position of sympathy, possibly even empathy, for the dead squirrel, to one of heightened vigor and a sense of belonging to the culture of manhood, for he has made the transition from existing as a being among animals—like a woman—to the top of the food chain, a killer. He writes: "I had completed the deed, my very first kill, a task

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<sup>40</sup> Luke, "Violent Love," 629.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 633.

<sup>42</sup> Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, 315.

<sup>43</sup> Bourette, *Meat, A Love Story*, 257.

<sup>44</sup> Gold, *The Shameless Carnivore*, 4.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 1.

that in many cultures over many hundreds, even thousands of years, has signified the ascent of a boy into the realm of official manhood."<sup>46</sup>

#### **D. Meat Production and the Fragmentation of the Subject**

Though all of the texts I have examined detail the bloody journey to the dinner plate, none of them actually accomplishes the aim of being at peace with the killing of an animal for food until the animal is no longer recognizable. The authors are palpably relieved when the killed animal is dismembered and thus thoroughly objectified, no longer recognizable as an animal, and replaced with its absent referent: pieces of meat. The discomfort these authors feel when faced with the actual moment of reaffirming their meat eating through participation in slaughter, they make explicit. Paramount to their ability to move from killer to consumer is the moment at which the subjective animal "passes over" into the realm of fragmented and unrecognizable object. While skinning and gutting the squirrel he shot, Gold explains that "about halfway through the cleaning, something remarkable happened: once the fur and the inner organs had been removed and Leroy was cutting the squirrel into quarters, I began to think about what he had in his hands less as a dead animal, and more like, well ... lunch."<sup>47</sup> Gold is offered the same advice from a farmer whom he assists in killing and butchering a young cow, who tells him, "And once the skin's off, it gets much less emotional—you'll stop seeing a cow and start seeing a steak. Trust me, it's not so bad."<sup>48</sup> Pollan, too, has such a revelatory—or anti-revelatory moment—while watching the slaughtered chicken corpses pass through a series of processing machines. They are dunked in boiling water to loosen their feathers, at which point he remarks, "This is the moment the chickens passed over from looking like dead animals to looking like food."<sup>49</sup>

While Pollan always maintains a careful and thoughtful stance towards both his activities and the objects of his enquiry, Gold devolves into a childish state in which he literally plays with his food. On one occasion, he taunts some of his female guests to dinner with the dismembered heads of chickens, chasing them as they run screaming away from him. Another time, after performing the steps of a recipe for "Beer Butt Chicken" in which he stuffs a can half full of beer inside a whole chicken, preparing to bake it, he can't resist playing with the chicken's body, declaring that it looks like a "funny little guy" who might "get up and start dancing." Only after a female companion reminds him that "Our whole lives we've been bombarded with images of dancing chickens" does it cross his mind, "how twisted it was that this was such a ubiquitous image, since it is never live, happy chickens we see dancing, ... but dead chickens. ... It's pretty warped stuff, when you think about it."<sup>50</sup> And yet another time, after being informed by a butcher that he would have to purchase a bulk order of snakes rather than a single one, he joyfully anticipates the reaction of his friends when he tells them he "had

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<sup>46</sup> Gold, *The Shameless Carnivore*, 231.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 232-3.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 269.

<sup>49</sup> Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, 233.

<sup>50</sup> Gold, *The Shameless Carnivore*, 198-9.

a ten-pound bucket of snakes" in his kitchen, "which would surely be great fun, ... how awesome is that!"<sup>51</sup>

Gold's manipulations of the dead bodies of these animals jarringly contrast with the image of him praying over the animals that he has killed and promising their deaths will not be in vain. On the other hand, playing with their dismembered parts does serve to establish his dominance over them, and his place as top carnivore in the food chain. It could also serve the purpose of distancing Gold from the vulnerable feelings he experiences directly after he kills. What these instances demonstrate is a severed relationship from living nature, in favor of a dominance over nature, and an acculturation of the animals' corpse into a symbolic meaning that highlights Gold's identity as a human controlling nature—the actions of these animals as well as what they represent. Catherine Bailey writes, "Part of how one comes to think precisely of another as equal is by the relationships one establishes. Our relationship of superiority to animals is established, in part, by the fact that we eat and wear them and this congeals our identity as beings that are in charge."<sup>52</sup> Gold can manipulate these animal corpses as a means to his ends, and demonstrate to the humans around him—women, in particular, who scream or show disgust—that he is comfortable in doing so.

After all, it is their destiny, he has proclaimed, to become meat. As texts calling for ethical meat consumption, the overarching fate of the animals they describe is ultimately to pass from a state of happy animal to "happy meat"; this is central to the tracts of these authors, and the ethical meat movement overall, in that animals that are raised in more naturalized settings are therefore well cared for, even kept—a word that also refers to the relationship between a man and his mistress. The insistence on happy meat serves the twofold purpose of justifying the consumption of the animals' flesh, since the animal is a beneficiary of this supposed happiness, and furthermore making the animal taste better. The comparison bears a striking similarity to the old trope of the "happy hooker" who is presumed to enjoy the consumption of her body. On the other end of this reciprocal relationship, the consumer places emphasis on taste, thereby underscoring the ultimate utility of the animal, who despite the evidence of having been cared for in its shortened life, is a means not to the animal's subjective end, but a human's end: a tasty meal.

Bourette encounters the claim for happy animals making happy meat during her brief working visit to Stone Barns Center and its affiliated top-dollar restaurant, Blue Hill Restaurant. According to Bourette, the farm manager, Craig Haney, wants to "create a utopia for his feral charges." Haney validates this, saying, "More and more, I find that's my overriding purpose, ... Making sure that these animals have a happy life. After all, ... a happy pig is a great-tasting pig."<sup>53</sup> It is with some cognitive dissonance that this same farmer later informs Bourette, as he is remorsefully measuring a pig bound for slaughter, that:

"It's the only time I ever really think about it," ..., "I guess I do think about it more than I used to. Does that mean it's wrong to eat meat? No. I think we're omnivores and we've

<sup>51</sup>. Gold, *The Shameless Carnivore*, 182.

<sup>52</sup>. Bailey, "We are What We Eat," 56.

<sup>53</sup>. Bourette, *Meat, A Love Story*, 155.

evolved to where meat-eating is part of what we do. I think in the celebration of eating meat, you honor the animal too."<sup>54</sup>

This echoes Gold's full-circle argument, that because we *have* been eating meat, eating meat is what we will do.

Within a long section in which Gold explains his "three most important principles of carnivorism,"<sup>55</sup> under the subsection "Be Conscientious," Gold mentions several companies that produce ethical meat, one of which allows customers of turkey to "keep tabs on it via webcam to ensure that it's living the high life. It's the truth: happy animals make the tastiest meat."<sup>56</sup> Taste is paramount among Gold's concerns, and a stressed out animal, just prior to its slaughter, produces large amounts of adrenaline that alters the way the meat tastes. To these ends, ethical meat producers strive to keep the animals calm, and the killing swift. Gold assures us that at humane farms and ranches, "panicked or anxious animals will be pulled from the slaughter line until they are calm and relaxed."<sup>57</sup> Pollan spends some time observing the animals at Joel Salatin's farm, which leads him to assert their happiness. He writes, "The cliché that kept banging around in my head was 'happy as a pig in shit.' Buried to their butts in composting manure, a bobbing sea of wriggling hams and corkscrew tails, these were the happiest pigs I'd ever seen."<sup>58</sup> That Pollan, an urbanite, had actually seen many pigs in his lifetime is uncertain, nevertheless, this act of verification with his own eyes makes him confident enough to juxtapose the animals and the ham in the same sentence, validated by the evidence of their presumed happiness.

Neither Gold, Bourette, Pollan, or the farmers they encounter explain exactly how "in the celebration of eating animals" we honor the animals killed. The reader is left to infer that the honor derives from our gratitude to these animals for sacrificing their lives for our sustenance. And in fact, all three authors use the word sacrifice in relation to the killing of an animal they witness, the animal whose death will not be in vain. Sacrifice, however, implies a self that sacrifices, and these animals are offered no choice, rendering this honor hollow. The honor, then, must reside in our appreciation of the animal's flesh as nutritious and delicious. This is similar to the claim that sexually objectifying women is a form of tribute. In both cases, what is honored is limited and determined by the consumer, and not the consumed.

## Conclusion

Catherine Bailey writes, "While it is unclear how much freedom we have to reinvent ourselves, surely we ought not to conclude that the mere fact that one feels a practice to be central to one's identity entails that one is licensed to continue to engage in it."<sup>59</sup> All three authors closely align their meat eating with a desire to perpetuate a culturally constructed identity whose roots stretch deep into our past. This is understandable. Fostering a shared cultural identity and

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<sup>54</sup>. Bourette, *Meat, A Love Story*, 172.

<sup>55</sup>. Gold, *The Shameless Carnivore*, 10.

<sup>56</sup>. *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>57</sup>. *Ibid.*, 263.

<sup>58</sup>. Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, 217-8.

<sup>59</sup>. Bailey, "We are What We Eat," 57.

maintaining a link to our ancestral traditions is no doubt a part of what makes us human. But not all traditions—as these authors themselves point out—are equally laudable or necessary. Depending on the context in which meat eating occurs, it can be an essential act for survival or merely a gratification of one's preferences. Proponents of ethical meat eating involved in the new foodie movement have a range of options at their disposal, access to more varieties of foods than ever before in the history of humankind, and at prices far lower than those our ancestors had to pay. This fact of abundance raises the moral stakes in relation to their enthusiastic support for meat eating; for many of us, consuming animals is not necessary but a choice. Ethical meat eaters argue that it is not meat eating that is unethical, but our newly widespread methods of industrial farming, the brutality of the concentrated animal feeding operations and the environmental costs these entail, mass slaughterhouses, and thoughtless overconsumption of animals while remaining blind to the true costs of meat production.

The horrors of industrial meat production are undeniable. It is an environmental catastrophe. And yet, numerous studies suggest that to produce enough sustainably raised meat to replace the over 56 billion animals slaughtered worldwide each year would require all of the arable land in the United States, leaving none for vegetables or grains.<sup>60</sup> I have not found any argument for ethical meat eating that takes this into account, nor the recent data that suggests that free range, grazing livestock produce more greenhouse gases than those produced in Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), due in part to the longer amount of time it takes for free range animals to reach maturity for slaughter.<sup>61</sup> If it is possible for all people, and not merely the well situated one (or two, or ten) percent, much more research must be done to validate the claim that humanely raised meat is truly sustainable. In the meantime, even rotational-grazing farmer Joel Salatin must purchase grain from somewhere else to feed and finish his animals. And while it is true that ethical meat eaters advocate eating less meat—Bourette, for example, suggests eating meat only a few times a week—there is little evidence in their texts, in the rhetoric or the events they describe, that this is what they are doing. By all appearances, in the meals they describe, in their passions for the pleasures of meat eating, and in their enthusiastic advocacy of it, they appear to be “pigging out” and appeasing their troubled consciences at the same time.

While some of the proponents of an omnivore lifestyle are clearly at ease on a day-to-day basis with raising, slaughtering, and butchering animals, they are often economically sustained by these activities, and, as in the case of farmer Joel Salatin, they uphold a strong affirmation of speciesism. If, in the act of hunting, they envision themselves as part of the food chain, it is at its pinnacle, and involves no death on the hunter's part. One critic of humane meat, scholar Vasile Stanescu, states the dilemma succinctly: “What is of greatest concern to me about the ‘loca-vore’ movement ... is that these expressions of feelings of care for animals serve to mask the simple reality that for the entirety of their lives, these animals live as only buyable and sellable commodities, who exist wholly at the whim of their ‘owners.’”<sup>62</sup> Some justify this on the basis of religious tenets, such as that animals lack a soul. Others, on an

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<sup>60</sup> Brian Henning, “Standing in Livestock's Long Shadow: The Ethics of Eating Meat on a Small Planet,” *Ethics and the Environment* 16, no. 2 (2011): 64.

<sup>61</sup> Vasile Stanescu, “Why ‘Loving’ Animals is not Enough: A Response to Kathy Rudy, Locavorism, and the Marketing of ‘Humane’ Meat,” *Journal of American Culture* 36, no. 2 (2013): 102.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

economic basis: killing animals is a means to feed themselves and their families. Still others, like feminist Kathryn Paxton George, because of potential nutritional vulnerability—a strong claim, but one based in large part on nutritional research that is contested within the scientific community.<sup>63</sup> Even if we accept her argument about the increased burden for nutritionally vulnerable people on a meatless diet, this would not apply to a great many advocates of humane meat, many of whom make clear that the domination of animals through the production of meat is an important means of demonstrating man’s humanity—with an emphasis on the ‘man’ regardless of one’s sex and gender. The only author to address vegetarian ecofeminist examinations of the gendered nature of meat is Susan Bourette, who mentions having read Carol Adams’ *Sexual Politics of Meat*.<sup>64</sup> Even so, while she frequently describes her attempts to perform masculinity by pursuing masculine-coded activities surrounding meat eating, she avoids situating her behavior within a feminist framework, and instead settles for shadowing the men as they hunt.

For all of these reasons, it would seem that the humane meat movement is making its claims to sustainability and a caring and respectful interspecies ethic prematurely. There are still too many troubling aspects to this omnivorous foodie movement that need closer scrutiny, and more research to be conducted in order to support their assertions that they are indeed sustainable and humane, and not merely a kinder, gentler narrative that sidesteps the grim reality on which the vast majority of our meat consuming lifestyle is based. Consistently left out of the arguments of the ethical meat producers and lifestyle foodies is a recognition of the parallels between the power relations involved in dominating animals and the power relations under patriarchy. Ultimately, an analysis of these texts indicates that these authors, and many of the producers and ethical meat consumers they visit, have not resolved the “omnivore’s dilemma” for themselves, despite this being their aim, but have instead created another layer of defence, as more conscientious stewards of the earth, to separate themselves from the discomfort, or contradictoriness, they feel in eating animals.

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<sup>63</sup>. Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen, “Comment on George’s ‘Should Feminists Be Vegetarians?’” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 21, no.1 (1995): 231.

<sup>64</sup>. Bourette, *Meat, A Love Story*, 36.



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