Review Article

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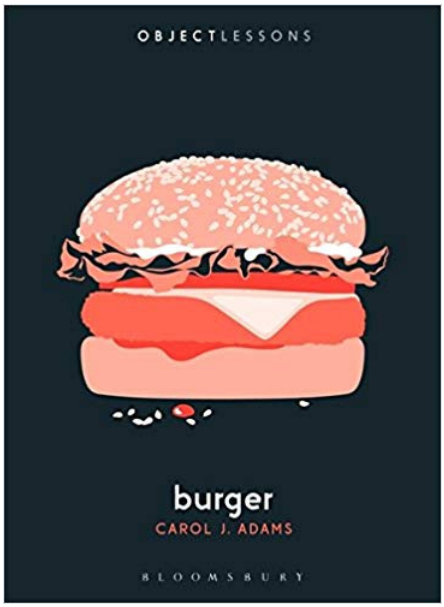
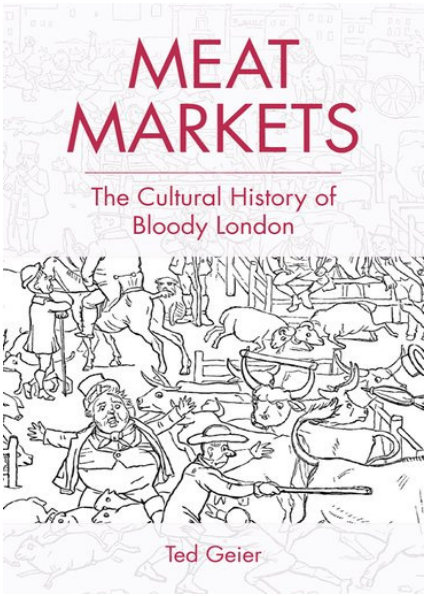
Meat Cultures

Adams, Carol J. *Burger.* Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. 192 pp. $13.45 (pb)

Geier, Ted. *Meat Markets: The Cultural History of Bloody London.* Edinburgh University Press, 2017. 200 pp. $110 (hc)





When he stepped off his ship in Calais in 1782, the Englishman Frederic Reynolds reported that a hostile French crowd congregating at the docks "hooted, hissed, hustled, and" — in an attack that treated the English diet as itself a basis for damnation — "called me *'rosbif'*" (2: 179). Reynolds's journal entry provides early evidence of the popularity of rosbif ("roast beef") as a continental insult reserved especially for the English. It is an epithet that retains its currency more than two centuries later.

No doubt the appeal of *rosbif* owes much to its simplicity: it does little more than associate the English with a food they often eat. Yet there is a something deeply strategic beneath this apparently straightforward logic. Even in 1782, the widespread availability of roast beef had long been a point of national pride for the English. One

Swiss traveler reporting on England in 1725 observed that "Roast-Beef ... is the favourite Dish as well at the King's Table as at a Tradesman's.... And this may be said to be (as it were) the Emblem of the Prosperity and Plenty of the *English*" (Muralt 39-40). When the French seized on this point of pride and transformed it into a curse word, they called into question both the naturalness and the desirability of eating such meat — forcing the English to see their customary cuisine through quizzical, alien eyes. They thus sowed insecurity around those everyday eating rituals that help define culture and community, attacking the Englishman's heart by way of his stomach.

Two recent scholarly books repurpose this age-old tradition of culinary critique to reveal the intellectual and ethical fruits of approaching our edibles with increased critical distance. The political power of both Ted Geier's *Meat Markets: The Cultural History of Bloody London* and Carol J. Adams's *Burger* resides in their ability to cast entrenched Anglo-American affections for meat in a new light — a light that makes our carnivorous culture look increasingly unsavory. *Burger* draws on an accessible combination of history and pop culture to reconsider America's obsession with the molded-ground-beef sandwich. *Meat Markets* looks across the pond to ask how nineteenth-century English literature might read differently if we understood the production and consumption of such literature in relation to the production and consumption of animal flesh that sustained its authors and publics alike. As they question the stories traditionally told about meat, these books also explore alternative modes of offering cultural critique, pushing against traditional divisions between academic and popular writing, and between history and critique, in search of new, more palatable forms of packaging the unsettling stories behind the Anglo-American diet.

This kind of genre-bending writing is rather old hat for Adams, who popularized the analysis of meat as a form of sociopolitical critique in her groundbreaking work *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990). There, Adams freely mixed feminist theory with history, literary criticism, and analyses of pop culture to build a powerful intersectional argument about the intertwined oppression of women and animals. Borrowing the term "absent referent" from semantics to describe animals' paradoxical place in modern Western society, she explored how the slaughter of animals is everywhere legible in our food choices, our clothing, and our language, even though the animals themselves are rarely referenced or acknowledged: "[A] process of language usage engulfs discussions about meat by constructing the discourse in such a way that these issues need never be addressed" (*Sexual Politics* 48). This rhetorical absence enables us to live peaceably while the signs of oppression and cruelty proliferate around us.

Adams's latest book, *Burger*, shows her turning the full force of her rhetorical analysis on the most iconic example of animal erasure in the American diet: the hamburger. *Burger* takes a cultural commonplace — the idea that the burger is a quintessentially American food — and proceeds to demonstrate, through a critical but compulsively readable history, that America's infatuation with the hamburger is both appalling and apt. Crucially, Adams's target is not just the burger but also the elaborate metaphors and storytelling that surround it. This mythos cloaks the burger's unsavory origins and material composition, easing its mainstream acceptance by insistently ignoring the animals who are ground up into it.

The first two chapters of *Burger* dive into this triumphalist narrative, rehearsing the burger's storied rise as a mass-market commodity while paying special attention to the jingoistic language and imagery that greased the way. Although ground meat patties have a long and contested history, Adams convincingly argues that the burger's actual origins are finally less important than its many competing origin stories. Those tall tales all revolve around small-town Americana as they recycle the same narrative elements (a lunch counter or county fair; an enterprising small-business owner; customers demanding a meal that is fast and filling and portable) to personalize and Americanize the burger — a product that is now primarily consumed at homogeneous franchises licensed by sprawling multinational corporations such as Burger King and McDonald's.

Adams's range of reference in these short but informative chapters is impressive: she moves easily between high and low culture, past and present, gathering into her survey texts from Upton Sinclair's muckraking novel *The Jungle* (1906) to the stoner comedy *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle* (2004). At times she indulges in sardonic asides as she trots through this survey, inserting a cynical distance toward the burger that might be a bit confusing or off-putting for an unsuspecting reader. As she delves deeper into the burger's history and her own vegan-feminist critical theory, however, it comes to make sense. It is in these later chapters — which cover cattle farming, sexist marketing, hamburger controversies, and meatless burger options — that Adams makes her most important contributions to our understanding of this ubiquitous food.

Against the kind of entrepreneurial narrative "that grants inevitability to the success of the hamburger," Adams advances her own history — one that restores the burger's absent referent, the cow, to the starring role (6). Her chapter on cattle usefully deploys critical environmental history, first rooting the Americanness of the hamburger in the arrival of cows in North America, then tracing the burger's success as a function of the

growth of Western ranching and meat packing industries. The result is an account of the burger's origins that underscores the cow's significance as both unwitting accessory to, and victim of, colonialism and industrialization.

The frontier masculinity inherent in this history leads Adams into the kind of intersectional feminist work that established her as a major voice in critical animal studies. Chapter 4, "Woman Burger," reveals the startling relations between women and the widespread acceptance of the burger as an unimpeachably American food. As Adams tells it, restaurants peddling the burger in the early decades of the twentieth century met with fierce opposition from the traditional custodians of home cuisine: women. In the wake of exposés about the unsafe practices of the meat packing industry, women remained suspicious of the ingredients hidden within the amorphous masses of meat cooked into commercial hamburgers. For the hamburger to succeed, then, restaurateurs had first to win over women. White Castle spearheaded this effort, hiring female ambassadors who invited housewives to personally inspect the restaurant's kitchens. These ambassadors emphasized an aspect of the burger that proved far more mouthwatering than the sliders themselves: the promise of nights off from the constant drudgery of kitchen work. Once the burger industry won over American women with this small taste of liberation, however, it quickly sold them out, turning to misogynistic advertising campaigns to sell its products, linking burgers and sex in ways that reduce women to little more than meat.

As this summary of Adams's chapter shows, her focus throughout *Burger* is trained on the myriad contingencies and moments of resistance that preceded the burger's rise to cultural dominance — the many points that suggest how, had history simply gone a bit differently, the burger would never have become such a ubiquitous and beloved American icon. Her history of the veggie burger is especially enlightening on this head, as she moves beyond conventional accounts of the emergence of boxed veggie burgers in the 1980s to show that the veggie burger has a history at least as extensive, and at least as American, as its carnified counterpart. By the end of the book it is clear that the hamburger, far from remaining the plucky homegrown hero of American cuisine, has become a kind of undead monster: a culinary commodity so powerful that even the growing ethical, environmental, and epidemiological concerns about it seem helpless to halt its march toward world domination.

The final chapters of *Burger* offer hope for another future. They include Adams's experiences touring the facilities of Impossible Foods and Beyond Meat, two start-ups that have had some success developing "plant-based meat" that offers the sensory

experience of eating a hamburger without relying on any animal products, soy, or gluten (112). There is much to be excited about here, and these chapters benefit from Adams's decision to fully inhabit her always individual voice by openly addressing her personal experiences in the text.

The book's general exuberance about these newer, better alternatives overlooks some of the insidious rhetoric of these technological innovations, however. The language of Pat Brown and Ethan Brown, the (unrelated) founders of these ventures, shows no more concern for animal ethics than that of the average burger purveyor. By their own accounts, their goal is not to save cows, but to more thoroughly and completely eliminate them from a process in which the animals' messy fleshiness looks antiquated and inefficient. "The cow is never going to get better at making meat," one of them observes: "It was not optimized for beef" (qtd. in *Burger* 112). "We've always tried to make the animal more efficient," the other laments in an unrelated interview, "and there's a biological limit to that" (qtd. in *Burger* 117).

If we are headed toward a meatless future, then, that trajectory may be a sign that our culture is not so much reconsidering animal erasure as perfecting it. Burger makes no mention of this possibility; it ends on a hopeful note rather than a critical one. The book's uplifting conclusion only adds to its already substantial crossover appeal: although Burger is riddled with original insights and serious academic rigor, the book shares a number of features with other titles in Bloomsbury's Object Lessons series — quick chapters, enticing images, and portable format — that ensure it will go down easy with academics and popular audiences alike.

The promise of a cleaner, more efficient, animal-free burger of the future looks less revolutionary in light of the conjoined cultural histories of industrialized slaughter and urban modernity that Ted Geier explores in *Meat Markets: A Cultural History of Bloody London*. *Meat Markets* sketches out a revisionist literary history structured around Smithfield Market, the notoriously noisy, bloody, and messy open-air market for the trading and slaughter of livestock located right in the City of London. Both beloved and reviled, Smithfield was a London institution from its founding in the Middle Ages until 1852, when an Act of Parliament ordered the removal of animal traffic to a new market outside the City. That market opened in 1855, leaving Smithfield abandoned until a smaller meat market — one without the unwelcome noise and chaos of living animals — opened on the site in 1868.

While Victorian sanitary reformers and animal welfare advocates celebrated the shuttering of Smithfield as a shared victory, Geier rightly recognizes this relocation of livestock as something more sinister: "an erasure of the animal body from the city scene and, in the process, from the conception of meat in the consuming public" (88). The celebrated clean-up of Smithfield Market thus provides an important precursor to the ongoing development of "clean" meat, plant-based meat, and other technology-intensive alternatives to animal slaughter. All these developments participate in modernity's movement toward what Michel Foucault called biopolitics — that is, a politics in which authorities seek a new kind of pervasive, invasive "power that has taken control of both the body and life or that has, if you like, taken control of life in general" (Foucault 253). This "biopower," Foucault argues, draws on discourses of medicine and hygiene to enforce behaviors that help integrate the individual into the population, seeking increasingly absolute jurisdiction over massified bodies in order to transform society into a predictable, well-oiled machine of production and consumption.

Meat Markets surveys 19th-century literature through a loosely biopolitical frame, arguing that the formation of modern mass culture, of modern literature, and of modern meat products are inextricably interlinked. Like the meat rendering process itself, Geier's first chapter begins with living, breathing animals. Although it surveys Romantic through mid-Victorian literature rather broadly, the chapter's principal focus is on those moments when literature admits human limitations — especially humanity's inability to fully understand animals. This inability, Geier argues, is particularly privileged in the Romantic usage of apostrophe, the literary device in which human beings attempt to speak to and commune with nonhumans despite the fact that the objects of their address cannot really understand them or respond. Close-reading the apostrophes in works like Robert Burns's "To a Mouse" (1785) and William Blake's *The Book of Thel* (1789) demonstrates how "authors try everywhere to adequately attend to nonhumans while simultaneously evaluating the violence, or merely the irony, of address" (57).

For Geier, such moments acknowledge animal difference in productive ways, granting nonhumans a form of autonomy from human control — an autonomy that will vanish over the 19th century as animals are transformed by urbanization and industrialization from fellow laborers into mere cogs in a mechanical process of manufacturing human sustenance. The book's second chapter leaves literature to the side to chart the long history of debates that led up to the 1852 Smithfield Market Removal Act, which serves here as a case study demonstrating the rise of modern biopolitics and its impact on

humanity's relationship to nonhuman animals. The book's third and final chapter returns to the literary, drawing on works such as Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1837-9), Edgar Allan Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" (1840), and the penny dreadful *Sweeney Todd* (1846-7) to draw out links between industrial slaughter, mass literature, and the urban subject.

Meat Markets suggests the generative, even revolutionary power of understanding 19th-century literature through a biopolitical frame that foregrounds humanity's consumption of other animals. Yet the book itself does not exactly settle on this project as its central intervention. *Meat Markets* is, in fact, a bit vague on its place within the scholarly tradition and its signal contributions to that tradition. Perhaps that is because the book is engaged with so many emerging and interdisciplinary fields (posthumanism, animal studies, food studies, and biopolitical theory) that it is difficult to locate the right scholarly genre for this kind of story about culture, modernity, and meat. *Meat Markets* seems especially torn between the dictates of a standard literary critical monograph — with its combination of explicitly stated methodology and literary close readings broken into individual chapters — and a more amorphous, more accessible type of broad-brush cultural history.

So, while the overarching structure and political orientation of the book demonstrate an investment in Foucauldian biopolitics, Foucault's name only crops up twice outside the endnotes. The concept of biopolitics, too, is only summarily referenced, without any clear definition or consistent inclusion in later chapters. This decision to rush past critical theory makes sense if *Meat Markets* aims to be more of a cultural history (as its subtitle indicates) than a work of criticism. Historians are, in fact, referenced with far more frequency than either theorists or literary critics, with Geier acknowledging an especially significant debt to Hilda Kean's *Animal Rights: Political and Social Change in Britain Since 1800* (1998) and Robyn Metcalfe's *Meat, Commerce, and the City: The London Food Market, 1800-1855* (2012). What *Meat Markets* adds to the story of Smithfield, however, is not so much new historical detail as a combination of biopolitical critique and investment in literary texts. Consequently, it would have been helpful for *Meat Markets* to devote more time to clarifying its place in ongoing conversations at the intersection of animal studies, literary studies, and biopolitics.

To my mind, *Meat Markets* is best understood as a foray into 19th-century zoopolitics. Zoopolitics, in Nicole Shukin's formulation, is a version of biopolitical critique that extends its inquiry beyond the species boundary as a "challenge to the assumption that the social flesh and 'species body' at stake in the logic of biopower is predominantly

human" (Shukin 9). *Meat Markets* joins a small but growing body of zoopolitical works such as Cary Wolfe's *Before the Law* (2013) and Colleen Glenney Boggs's *Animalia Americana* (2013) in investigating "the crucial role animals play ... [in the] formation of biopolitical subjectivity" (Boggs 11). Geier's focus on meat brings this zoopolitical approach to bear on literature and food, another growing field of 19th-century cultural criticism that has remained strangely mum on questions of human-animal relations. Even when critics hone in on "novels ... [that] express a general anxiety about meat" — as Michael Parrish Lee does in his wonderful work on food plots in the 19th-century novel — the analysis tends to focus on the carnivorous and cannibalistic subjects of hunger, rather than the unfortunate beings sacrificed to satisfy such cravings (Lee 183).

A more explicit engagement with these traditions of literary scholarship would have highlighted Geier's originality and entitled him to expand his illuminating but often abbreviated close readings. Indeed, *Meat Markets* is laced with compelling literary theses that never quite receive the elucidations they deserve. Of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), for example, Geier asserts: "One of its central revelations is that bringing unlife to life is not more horrible than bringing life to unlife. Both seem a form of murder, if murder is the sovereign negation of the life status of another object" (55). It's a fascinating sketch for a biopolitical reading of the novel, but one that is never fleshed out; close reading soon takes a backseat to broader overviews of literary and cultural history. At another point, Geier suggests that Esther Summerson — the impossibly docile heroine of Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852-3) — "resembles a bit too much the captive meat animal spared jostling, striking and other blows from the traffickers that might diminish her quality and her value to the end consumer" (72). Again, this intriguing observation is dropped without further development, and *Meat Markets* whets the readers' appetite for more extended interpretation that it never fully satisfies.

Still, to leave readers hungering for more is no small thing. Taken together, *Burger* and *Meat Markets* provide illuminating examples of the range of work currently underway at the intersection of animal studies, food studies, and cultural criticism. Each is, in its own way, trailblazing: each offers a new pathway through relatively uncharted territory, as well as inspiration for future scholars developing their own ways of negotiating the sociopolitical dynamics of meat. If our disheartening modern system of meat production may finally be nearing its end, these books suggest, the enlightening field of meat studies is only just beginning.

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