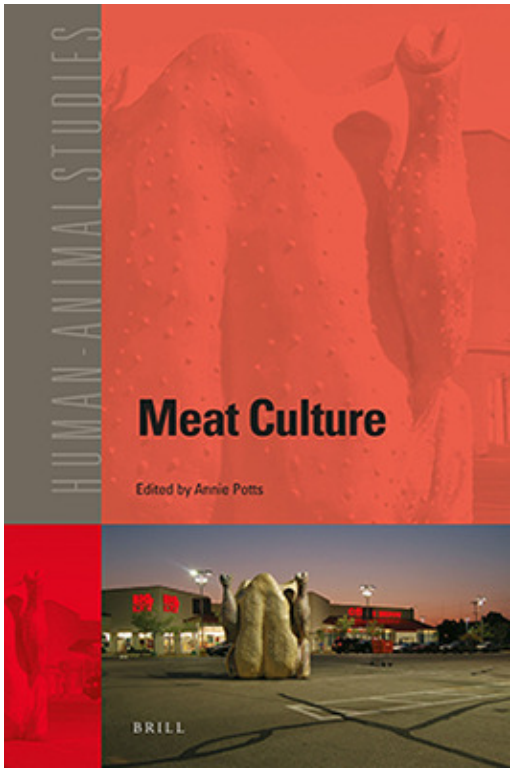
Reviews

Carrie P. Freeman

A Well-Done "Meat Culture" is Best Served Rare(ly)

Annie Potts (Ed.), *Meat Culture*. Boston: Brill, 2016. 296 pp. $45 (pb).



Having no long-winded title, *Meat Culture* may mislead. If readers are looking for a whimsical exploration of backyard BBQs and cowboy culture, or even a more sophisticated global gastronomic journey of multi-cultural culinary traditions, this is not the book for them. One hint to its animal-friendly stance may be in its placement within Brill's "Human Animal Studies" book series, and if you look further at the many well-known critical animal studies scholars contributing to this anthology, you'll realize that the book takes a decidedly anti-carnistic stance in favor of cultural transformation to veganism.

Although, I don't want to mislead. All of its 14 chapters are not about veganism, and it's more accurate to say, or better yet, have its editor Annie Potts say "each chapter

interrogates some aspect of the animal industrial complex ... and meat hegemony in the 21st century" (2), with its broad range of articles on the topic of "production and consumption of animals" finding cohesion within a framework she refers to as "meat culture" (2). Given the excessive harm caused by animal agribusiness, fishing, and human consumption of animal products (and the relatively low levels of critique it gets in mainstream culture, politics, and academia), this rigorous critical exploration of its cultural roots is needed.

Its editor, Cultural Studies Associate Professor Annie Potts, is well positioned to curate this particular collection of essays, with her active book authorship and expertise in human-animal studies and activism. Along with Philip Armstrong, she co-directs the New Zealand Centre for Human-Animal Studies at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch. While international in nature, this anthology doesn't claim to be a global critique, and situates itself within Western cultural perspectives from scholars in Australasia (primarily Australia, but also Tasmania and New Zealand), Europe (primarily the UK but also Sweden), and North America (primarily the US). Its interdisciplinary scholarship centrally draws from the humanities but also pulls from social science via sociology. *Meat Culture* is most useful to those in human-animal and critical animal studies, but also has appeal within studies of food, sociology, media, marketing, philosophy, and art. It isn't an easy-read textbook with student discussion questions; instead, this scholarly collection is most useful for graduate-level classes or for senior undergraduate students to read assigned chapters.

The anthology's chapters are not grouped into sections; the book simply begins with Potts's introduction to Meat Culture — both the content of the book itself and broader material realities. For those new to the topic and wanting to better understand its significance, Potts's introductory chapter provides a useful summary of meat's abundance in global markets, growing trends in consumption, the cost in trillions of animals' lives annually (segmented by species), and the suffering caused by meat production. The suffering section is segmented by animal species, with an overview of the (factory) farming conditions for pigs, cattle (including individuals used for meat and those used for dairy), chickens (including birds used for meat and those used for eggs), fish and other sea animals, and the effects on human farm workers, and environmental impacts on our planet.

To describe the remaining 13 chapters, I have grouped them into some related topic areas that explain the useful ideas they provoke.

(Feminist) Philosophy. Chapter 10 debates whether pursuit of legal "personhood" status for the most intelligent and self-aware (human-like) animal species is elitist and problematic, and author Karen Davis, founder of United Poultry Concerns, argues it is. Although, in her explanations of the complex capacities of chickens, she could be said to fit these farmed animals into that criteria for personhood. Rather than ranking species by mental development, Davis advocates for understanding other species through "anthropomorphism based on empathy and careful observation" (193). Instead of seeking personhood, she proposes that we enter an era of "animal dignity" (195) (quoting Frank Bruni). I think engaging with the disability studies scholarship on critical animal studies would strengthen this chapter even further. Chapter 3 is a philosophically dense chapter where humanities animal scholars from the United States, Carol Adams and Matthew Calarco, engage in a dialogue comparing Derrida's carnophallogocentrism — a "human, animal-flesh-eating" male subject (33) — to Adams's ideas in *The Sexual Politics of Meat*. Both Derrida and Adams understand one cannot analyze male subjectivity in Western culture without considering carnivorism. Adams presents a parallel feminist critique over the way that animal activism is often masculinized through the logocentric pursuit of rational moral argument within a political sphere (including seeking personhood status), which can, ironically, alienate the nonhuman subject even further. Instead, she proposes we "rethink in a fundamental manner, the way one relates and is related to other animals (oneself included)" and better "attune one to animals and their lives" (47). I was most surprised by the final chapter, written by American ecofeminist Greta Gaard, where she introduces readers to "plant studies" — a field advocating plants' capacities and critiquing animal studies for its anthropocentrism and zoocentrism in "treating plants like meat" (273). Gaard thoughtfully applies an ecofeminist lens to examine the complexities of these arguments and offer ways that plant and animal studies could, via ecofeminism, explore human continuity and "kinship across plant and animal species" (273) to seek a less harmful, more mutual and reciprocal way of being in the world, while acknowledging we "will never reach a moral destination of universal non-harming" (279).

Racial Prejudice and Civilized (White) Meat Eating. In Chapter 3, Australian sociologists Nik Taylor and Jordan McKenzie examine the European horsemeat scandal when horseflesh was discovered in beef products, resulting in mass recalls not because of health risks but due to ideas of "contamination." Focusing on the UK press coverage, the authors surmise that British society avoided a self-reflective critique of meat-eating practices in favor of using the horsemeat scandal to reinforce their own "civilized" and pure, meat-eating, racialized, white, human identity in contrast to the uncivilized "less than human" (57) people who would eat horses. In Chapter 4, Australian sociologists

Jacqueline Dalziell and Dinesh Joseph Wadiwel analyze an animal rights campaign that highlighted the mistreatment of Australian cows exported to Indonesian slaughterhouses, causing public outrage against Indonesia and a temporary ban on live exports there. Authors propose that Australians' outrage was primarily generated by their desire to protect the superiority of whiteness (which applies by extension to their property) by saving their "white animals from non-white people" (79) who have presumably lower welfare standards (despite inhumane animal treatment by Australian farmworkers as well). The authors express concern that if "animal welfare is coded as a marker of modernity" (86), Western agribusiness can exploit this bias to charge higher prices and expand the global meat industry.

Representation in Marketing. In Chapter 5, Vasile Stanescu, a United States speech professor, critiques Burger King's "Whopper Virgins" advertising campaign that applied a colonial and xenophobic mindset when introducing rural villagers in Transylvania to the whopper hamburger, as if it were humanitarian assistance to provide the strength-building Western diet to these "effeminate rice eaters" (91). Stanescu highlights the irony of how Burger King proposed burgers as a charitable hunger solution when "excessive and cheap meat consumption" (106) is actually a causal aspect of global hunger (and the mass destruction of animals and ecosystems). In Chapter 6, Swedish critical animal scholars Tobias Linne and Helena Pedersen critique the Swedish dairy industry's staged PR "open farm and pasture release" (120) events to get schoolkids visiting Swedish farms. The authors problematize the ethically unproblematic nature of the PR discourse in which the cows are personalized while also objectified just enough to uphold the species boundary where their exploitation goes unnoticed and unchallenged. To disrupt this hypocrisy, the authors suggest that teachers provide "dairy counter-education" (125) and critical pedagogy instead of marketing-based edutainment.

Representation in Media. In Chapter 11, British sociologists Matthew Cole and Kate Stewart make a convincing argument that the iconic, long-running TV character, Doctor Who, should return to his early roots of eschewing animal products, as eating animals is incongruous with his character's sense of justice and moral leadership. It reinforces meat's cultural hegemony for the show's producer to use Doctor Who's animal-based standard diet as a mechanism for increasing this alien character's relatability with British audiences. The authors share useful examples where *Doctor Who*'s storylines could seamlessly critique animal exploitation, especially with Doctor Who as a vegan lead character. Another storyline featuring alien meat-eating lead characters is in author Michel Faber's 2000 book *Under the Skin*, but this time the animals the aliens are eating are humans. In Chapter 8, New Zealand literature scholar Kirsty Dunn explores the

ways that this civilization from outer space uses many similar concealment techniques that we humans use to mask our discomfort felt over physically manipulating and killing sentient beings for consumption. In particular, the techniques for "distancing the consumer from the meat production process" (152), and using camouflaging language. Dunn commends Faber for skillfully contrasting "the calculated euphemisms employed by the characters with potent and visceral third-person descriptions of slaughter" (158).

Representation in Art. Australian art professor Melissa Boyde celebrates the potential for properly contextualized photographs to memorialize individual cows in her Chapter 7 essay. She uses contrasting images to illustrate the reverence she has for her own sanctuary of rescued cows and their extended family, and the Australian government archive's slaughterhouse images of nameless cows before or during their dismemberment at the Homebush Abattoir in Sydney in the mid 1900s. Boyde expresses the ability of cow photographs to elucidate them as *someone* conceivably lovable and memorable or to obscure them into *something* utterly forgettable and unknowable. Yvette Watt, an arts lecturer in Tasmania, answers the question she poses in Chapter 9 "Down on the farm: Why do artists avoid farm animals as subject matter?" Based on a survey with artists, Watt finds that while artists often like to feature (wild) animals in their work, farmed animals are less popular as subjects, except with vegan artists. This may be due to artists' perceptions of farm animals as "unnatural" in comparison to free-living, undomesticated wildlife, as well as the moral ambivalence that non-vegan artists potentially feel over their own meat-eating practices. Watt calls for artists not to use farm animals (their flesh and skin) as art materials but rather to use them as symbolic subject matter to "question the social context that culturally sanctions animal abuse" (181).

Opinions on Veganism for Humans and their Companions. In Chapter 13, UK sociologist Richard Twine interviewed British vegans to ascertain how their decision to go vegan affected their social relationships. Filled with interesting quotes, the study reveals new vegans experienced much resistance and defensiveness from family and friends. But over time, vegans' companions often became "non-vegan vegan advocates" (258), as cooking and eating vegan foods became normalized and less "awkward" (257) in their social circle. Twine contends that vegan advocacy must arm vegans with more than just ethical arguments and also provide social competency skills to cope with the "relational complexities" (262) new vegans will experience in daily practice. In Chapter 12, feminist animal studies professor Erika Cudworth applies Joy's notion of carnism to explore how that ideology pervades the discourse around feeding companion animals farm animal meat from the pet food industry. Interviews with dog "owners" revealed

the vast majority fed animal meat to their dogs and found it largely unproblematic morally, despite the contention they cared for animal wellbeing in general. While vegetarians in multi-species households experienced more ethical anxiety over the practice, most ultimately also fed other animals to their dogs out of a sense of biological necessity and consideration for the dogs' preferences.

While unfortunately there is not a conclusion chapter to the book, in conclusion of this review, I will say that Meat Culture offers a wide variety of thoughtful approaches to examining the hegemony of animal flesh in Western culture, but always through a critical lens that seeks increased justice, not only for farmed animals or all nonhuman animals, but also for marginalized human groups, and at times, plants. In this way, Meat Culture is well done and offers hope that a meat-based culture could itself become rare.