

Critical Education

Volume 2 Number 7

July 20, 2011

ISSN 1920-4125

Understanding Animals-Becoming-Meat

Embracing a Disturbing Education

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Citation: Rowe, B. D. (2011). Understanding animals-becoming-meat: Embracing a disturbing education. *Critical Education*, 2(7). Retrieved from <http://m1.cust.educ.ubc.ca/journal/index.php/criticaled/article/view/132>

Part of the *Critical Education* series: *The Lure of the Animal: Addressing Nonhuman Animals in Educational Theory and Research*

Abstract

In dominant consumerist societies, eating animals has become one of the most hegemonic and atrocious of all human-nonhuman relationships. In this article, I show how meat eating is a forceful educational issue that warrants critical analysis. I argue that understanding, and especially watching, animals-becoming-meat—that is, the processes through which animals are subjugated, confined, and killed in order to become edible food—is necessary to become aware of the suffering implicated in the exploitive practices of industrial animal agriculture and slaughtering. I locate the educative significance of animals-becoming-meat within a pedagogy of visual disturbance. Given the great extent that corporate agriculture goes to conceal the brutality behind its walls, I believe we must be unsettled with disturbing visuals of animals-becoming-meat in order to begin to think critically. We ought to see, for ourselves, how whole animal bodies become edible “pieces of meat.”



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Introduction

*As we talked of freedom and justice one day for all, we sat down to steaks.
I am eating misery, I thought, as I took the first bite. And spit it out.*
-Alice Walker¹

In dominant consumerist societies, eating animals has become one of the most atrocious of all human-nonhuman relationships. Undercover investigations of intensive industrial livestock farms, or factory farms, reveal horrific conditions and inhumane treatment of farm animals. In 2008, for example, investigators of the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) documented cases of rampant animal cruelty—workers “kicking cows, ramming them with the blades of a forklift, jabbing them in the eyes, applying painful electrical shocks and even torturing them with a hose and water in attempts to force sick or injured animals to walk to slaughter” (¶ 4). This investigation resulted in the largest meat recall in the history of the United States (Brown, 2008). All this from a slaughterhouse that provided meat to Westland Meat Co., the 2004-2005 “supplier of the year,” serving schools in 36 states as part of the National School Lunch Program (HSUS, ¶ 7). In this article, I show how meat eating—or, to put it more truthfully, consuming the dismembered, scorched flesh of dead animals—is a forceful educational issue that warrants sustained critical analysis. It is time more of us act toward freedom and justice for all—not for just humans—and spit out the misery!

This essay performs two broad functions. First, I hope to add to the growing literature calling for critical educators to incorporate, in both theory and practice, human-animal relationships as part of broader social justice projects intending to address human over animal *as well as* human over human structures of oppression (Andrzejewski, 2003; Andrzejewski et al., 2009; Best, 2009; DeLeon, 2010; Kahn, 2010; & Pedersen, 2010). And second, I want to enrich dialogue and generate critical pedagogies that expose, rethink, and challenge dominant ideologies of human superiority. More specifically, this essay expands Erika Cudworth’s (2008) discussion of animals-becoming-meat—that is, the processes through which animals are subjugated, confined, maimed, and killed in order to become food. I argue that understanding these processes is necessary to raise consciousness concerning the torment and suffering implicated in the exploitive practices of modern industrial animal agriculture and slaughtering.² I locate the educative significance of animals-becoming-meat within a pedagogy of visual disturbance. Given the great extent that corporate agriculture goes to conceal the brutality behind its walls, and since industrial consumerism gives us the luxury to not think about how we are contributing to the agony and death of animals, I believe we must be unsettled with disturbing visuals of animals-becoming-meat in order to begin to think critically. We ought to see, for ourselves, how whole animal bodies become edible “pieces of meat.”

¹ Walker, A. (1988). Am I blue? In *Living by the word* (p. 8). San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace & Co.

² In addition, food safety and environmental issues are of concern. *USA Today* (2009) reports that many fast-food chains have much higher standards for meat inspection and quality than the United States Department of Agriculture, supplier of meat for the National School Lunch Program. Also, meat production is arguably the most pressing environmental issue of our time. The Food and Agricultural Organization (2006) of the United Nations found that animal agriculture is the leading contributor to global warming, surpassing even the transportation industry in greenhouse gas emissions.

Before I continue, it is important to mention that, although I am sympathetic to the position that the killing of nonhumans for food, as an act in itself, is wrong, the moral basis of this article is that the systemic suffering in confinement feeding operations and in industrial slaughterhouses is unethical. For years I have struggled with the difficult philosophical question of whether meat eating is fundamentally immoral (Regan, 1983) or whether it is the pain and suffering (Singer, 1975) food animals undergo before we kill them that is morally wrong.³ In other words, what if animals live relatively pleasant, comfortable, and content lives before they are killed for food? Then would it still be wrong to eat their flesh? This is an important ethical question and at the risk of frustrating the reader with ambiguity and inconsistency, I do not write with a definitive judgment in mind. I will provide a lot of evidence that abhors the eating of animals. How exactly animals become meat in modern livestock farms and slaughterhouses has led me to refuse to comply with one of the most reprehensible, cruel, vicious, and ecologically destructive institutions (Eisnitz, 2007; Singer, 1975; & Steinfeld et al., 2006). Yet at the same time, I am unwilling to universalize vegetarianism as a moral imperative for *all* humans since, certainly, there are *some* humans who, out of sheer necessity, must take animal life in order to sustain life. I will also share my own experiences with farm animals in order to shed some light on the moral complexities of meat eating and to offer an alternative narrative, albeit a dying one, to the unsustainable methods of technocratic-corporate systems buttressed by global capitalism and the appetites of hyper-consumeristic societies responsible for the death of over *30 billion! animals per year* worldwide. Throughout this piece, my intent is not to condemn all those who kill animals for food. My aim is to provide good reasoning to resist any socio-cultural conditions that make willful ignorance and mindless allegiance to tyranny virtues among human beings.

The Force of Social Construction

Children—indeed, most of us—are blind to the cultural forces that promote the mindless consumption of animals. By *blind* I am referring to our inability to perceive the truth with respect to a fundamental part of everyday life: We know very little of the deprivation, stress, and torment of the animals we eat (Robbins, 2001; Scully, 2002; & Singer & Mason, 2006). And by *cultural forces*, I am referring to two broad phenomena. First, there are the deep anthropocentric roots of human history, religion, philosophy, and science that legitimize animals as inferior to humans. In this article, I explore the social construction of species as a cultural force, showing how this Enlightenment construct functions in nonhuman subjugation and provides a familiar, albeit problematic, rationale for eating animals. Species, I argue, is not a biological fact in the world but an ontology and epistemology of hierarchal domination that energizes structures of human supremacy over animals. The second cultural force is the ethos of commercial consumer culture that aggressively endorses meat eating—what I call *the cultural hegemony of meat*. The ubiquity of corporate food advertising and marketing is deeply troubling because consumers are relentlessly targeted to eat animal flesh, but at the same time, remain apathetic and ignorant

³ There is an ongoing debate in the animal rights literature between the deontological and utilitarian branches of moral philosophy. The former argue that, even if animals are treated humanely before death, it is wrong to kill and eat animals because it violates the principle of respectful treatment. The utilitarians argue that the suffering and pain that animals endure before killing is wrong, not the killing as an act in of itself. See Singer, P. (1975). *Animal Liberation*; and Regan, T. (1983). *The Case for Animal Rights*.

about the lives and deaths of the animals who make the meat possible. In the cultural hegemony of meat, it is not just acceptable, but strongly encouraged, to maintain an unreflective and slavish loyalty to consuming animals. Together, these cultural forces underlie pervasive ideologies and practices of anthropocentrism, hierarchy, and domination. I will now address them in turn.

Critically exploring nonhuman-human relationships questions conventional wisdom about what it means to be human and what it means to be animal. I fear that current generations are being (mis)educated about animals the way previous generations were (mis)educated about humans. Such education is not transmitted exclusively or primarily through schools but in the broader cultural ways in which we learn to make sense of the world. As Alice Walker (1988) so movingly puts it:

There are those who never once have even considered animals' rights: those who have been taught that animals actually want to be used and abused by us.... They are the great-grandchildren of those who honestly thought, because someone taught them this: 'Women can't think,' and 'niggers can't faint.' (pp. 7-8)

Most people are no longer taught that “women can't think” and “niggers can't faint,” yet racism and sexism are nevertheless taught as dominant discourses. These cultural teachings are bound to notions of animality. Sadly accurate, Walker's quote indicates how women and slaves, as human *Others*, have been historically viewed and treated as not only different, but less-than-human, as barbaric irrational beasts. And just like wild animals, so the ideology goes, human *Others* who resemble animals need to be conquered, enslaved, and tamed by white, civilized, intelligent humans, i.e., “more human” humans. Abraham DeLeon (2010) discusses how the social construct of *the animal* induces mutual meanings of inferiority and oppression for (some) humans and (all) animals: Both are de-humanized and dominated as “beasts” in the experiences of dominant racist, patriarchal, imperial societies. Linking humans to animals' inferior status in constructs of hierarchical domination fuels the fires of conquest, subjugation, and violence—against both humans and nonhumans. Walker wants us to recognize that, following the footsteps of our ancestors, we learn generational ideologies and discursive practices of interdependent oppression of humans and animals. Too many humans are taught that animals possess some essential characteristic that makes them inferior, usable commodities for human exploitation—just as it was in the inferior nature of slaves to not faint before their masters, just as it was the essential nature of the inferior, irrational woman to need a man's rationality. These pedagogies of hierarchal domination that drive the parallels and the interconnections of human-animal oppression are transmitted and absorbed through larger cultural forces.

While human and nonhuman *Othering* did not begin with the emergence of species during the Enlightenment, and while the question of animal oppression could be approached from a number of historical, theoretical, or religious paradigms (e.g., Cartesian and Kantian moral philosophy, Christianity, European colonialism), it is crucial to expose how structural domination is reinforced through the social construction of species—a broad construct encompassing plant and animal life but still intimately associated with the construct of *the animal*—in which humans have placed ourselves at the apex of the taxonomical order of all life. I do not think it is a stretch to presume that most people believe that species is an objective fact based on scientific understanding of nature. That is, to talk of species is to refer to an unbiased categorization of biological life-forms, a scientific way of classifying groups of organisms to document and arrange the natural state of the world. However, the very notion of scientific fact is

highly problematic because facts are not—they cannot be—formed independent of social context and circumstances. Like race, gender, and disability, species is not something that exists as an essential biological fact independent of human culture, waiting to be discovered out in the natural world, supported with a fixed, universal definition. Invented by a certain group of humans to exist, species is contingent upon socially shared meanings that differ with time and place (Elstein, 2003). Species is similar to race, a social construct that arises out of human interpretations of difference—in this case, Western Enlightenment conceptions of biological reality (Elstein, 2003; & Wilson, 1999).

In his important article, “Species as a Social Construction: Is Species Morally Relevant?” Daniel Elstein (2003), drawing heavily on the work of Charles Darwin, discusses how species functions as a conceptual and practical tool for human expediency, a mechanism to make things easier for scientists to catalog life-forms. The scientific and philosophical foundation of species is tenuous at best. How scientists use species depends on societal values and the epistemological standpoint of the particular field of inquiry; the concept of species is not employed throughout the sciences in a constant, objective fashion (as widely believed). According to Elstein, “there is currently no universally accepted species concept in the scientific community” (p. 6). Different scientific communities have different definitions and meanings of species, thus use the concept differently. Furthermore, scientists do not work in a vacuum and are influenced by, and beholden to, a variety of socio-cultural forces. “Societal values” influence the “biological categories,” and if science and the general public based notions of species on genetic similarity, then “humans should be considered apes, since we are genetically closer to chimpanzees than chimpanzees are to orangutans. It is only for historical and social reasons that biologists do not consider humans as apes” (Elstein, p. 14). As if fixed and absolute, modern scientists and philosophers continue to celebrate species hierarchy to further anthropocentric agendas. However, species is a problematic construction, highly relativistic and culturally situated.

Scholars theorizing the social construction of human difference deconstruct dichotomous identities such as man/woman, black/white, disable/able, etc. Scholars of critical animal studies explore how these socially constructed identities intersect with the human/animal binary, exposing how systems of hierarchy, language, and meaning are imposed onto both nonhumans and humans (Adams, 2006; Cudworth, 2008; Steeves, 2002; & Stibbe, 2001). When human beings craft categorical structures such as species, they simultaneously construct hierarchal value systems. Species functions as a way to not only classify and name, but to provide discursive meanings of superiority and inferiority, which then serve as a basis for subjugation. Difference and inferiority are normalized, institutionalized, and, in time, transpire into dominant practices that privilege and give power to some groups (whites, men, humans) while silencing and disempowering others (people of color, women, animals). The self-anointed ascendancy to the top of the species hierarchy brings with it ideologies and relationships of hegemony over all species other than *Homo sapiens*. Cudworth (2008) denotes how species constitutes the entire conceptual and practical order of human dominion:

We do not (just) live in societies which discriminate against non-human species. Rather, we live in societies which are organized around a species hierarchy, a hierarchy in which the needs, desires, interests and even whims of human beings shape the kinds of relationships we are likely to have with non-human species. (p. 34)

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The whims Cudworth mentions manifest themselves in, for example, the animal furs and skins we wear as shoes, belts, purses, jackets, and countless other commodities; to the zoos and circuses we frequent for entertainment; and to the focus here, the breeding, rearing, and killing of animals for food.

The social construction of species provides a powerful foundation for “the social construction of edible bodies” (Adams, 1999). One of the prevailing validations of eating meat is that it is natural to do so. The biological “evidence” of a natural species hierarchy eases individual and collective consciousness by reassuring us that killing and eating animals “lower in the food chain” is acceptable and inevitable because we are being true to our species, true to our natural selves. If empirical science has discovered, proved, and defined the species hierarchy, and if we are the highest of the natural predators within the animal kingdom, then it is not just acceptable, but unavoidable, to kill and eat species lower in the hierarchy. This is how many people continue to justify their meat eating. Challenging this familiar line of rationalization, Carol Adams (1999) refutes the claim that meat eating is acceptable because it is natural:

It is often argued that women's subordination to men is natural... The ‘natural’ predator argument ignores social construction as well... Meat is a cultural construct made to seem natural and inevitable. By the time the argument from analogy with carnivorous animals is made, the individual making such an argument has probably consumed animals since before the time she or he could talk.... The taste of dead flesh preceded the rationalizations, and offered a strong foundation for believing the rationalizations to be true... Thus individuals... may truly believe what they have been told endlessly since childhood—that dead animals are necessary for human survival. (p. 249)

Meat eating is constructed and accepted as natural not just through anthropocentric scientific taxonomies but by the multitude of ways humans construct our lives around the dominion of animals. Adams explains that we humans do not restrain our supremacy in eating animals. In her seminal work, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (2006), Adams describes how meat eating functions as the groundwork for other forms of human tyranny over animals:

Meat eating is the most oppressive and extensive institutionalized violence against animals. In addition, meat eating offers the grounds for subjugating animals: if we can kill, butcher, and consume them—in other words, completely annihilate them—we may, as well, experiment upon them, trap and hunt them, [and] exploit them. (p.81)

For Adams, meat eating is not only an institution of imprisonment and violence but, in addition, one of total annihilation. As she observes, meat eating is not the only way humans methodically deprive animals of their most basic needs, pleasures, and interests. However, the whole obliteration of the animal body, coupled with the enormous scale of this institution, is what makes meat eating a uniquely tyrannical human-nonhuman relationship.

I do not fully agree with Adams. I do not believe that we “completely annihilate” animals when we eat them. Killing animals for food indeed puts an end to their lives, but this is not the end of the existence of their bodies. Once we consume dead flesh, it is absorbed and transformed into our living bodies. Adams’s main point—that meat eating serves as a basis for other forms of

subjugation, like zoos and experimentation—still holds its force, perhaps even more compellingly. “Eating is thus the most intimate of all activities,” writes author of *The World Peace Diet*, Will Tuttle (2005), “in which we actually accomplish the complex and longed-for union of self and other, subject and world.... We cannot become more intimate with someone or something than by eating them” (p. 3). Similarly, food scholar Glen Kuehn (2004) understands eating food—which is to say literally consuming parts of the world—as an act of constitution:

Eating is a meaningful incorporation of the physical *other* that determines and transforms *our* physicality and health.... Food stands in an ontological relationship to the self in terms of potential assimilation, and therefore it cannot be seen as a radical other... As we ingest the other, we effectively eliminate the self/other dichotomy.... Eating is a profound act because what I am willing to put in my mouth defines a large part of what I am: I know that what I eat will be incorporated into my being. (pp. 236, 239; italics original)

The implications of this ontological relationship are profound. What are typically viewed as two unrelated questions—*What sort of person do I want to be?* and *What do I want to eat?*—are the same question, making it all the more disconcerting that we are not devoting greater awareness and critical energy to what, or, in the case of flesh food, *who*, is literally becoming a part of us.⁴ But again, there are larger cultural forces at work that thwart the cultivation of this critical awareness.

The Force of Cultural Hegemony

Meat consumption is aggressively marketed in our culture, pervading nearly every realm of our lives. The incessant—even fanatical—social pressure to eat meat is not only taken for granted but amounts to the cultural hegemony of meat. The overt and subliminal pedagogy of our hyper-active consumer culture zealously teaches us to eat meat but not think about it, manufacturing uncritical, feelingless—in a word, mechanistic—consumers. As Tuttle explains, “Eating animals is thus an unrecognized foundation of consumerism, the pseudo-religion of our modern world... Because our greatest desensitization involves eating—our most sacred, essential, and defining act of consuming—we inevitably become desensitized consumers with increasingly voracious appetites” (p.30). Eating dead animal corpses is normalized as just another part of our day in the cultural hegemony of meat. Blind consumption reigns, as it is in the profit interests of food corporations to advertise only the final product (the meat) and not the agricultural relationship or process (the animal-becoming-meat), wherein the “actual confinement, raping, mutilating, and killing are kept carefully hidden” (Tuttle, pp. 63-64). The cultural hegemony of meat is aggressive and exuberant, yet it exists because consumers are acquiescent and uncritical.

⁴ I will continue to use the pronouns “we” and “our,” but I do not intend to convey a grand story of all cultures’ attitudes and practices toward animals and meat eating; I am mainly referring to American culture. Because how we think and act toward food in America is vastly different from other regions of the world. For example, what is considered in India as a “holy cow” is in America something very different—a commodity of potential mass consumption.

Deciphering and deconstructing the ubiquitous endorsement of eating animals is important because too often critical views of meat eating are immediately discarded for the reason that people feel they are being told what to eat. This popular reaction is ironic, of course, considering that all of us are being told what to eat, but it is not coming from the vegetarian minority; the directive comes from the cultural hegemony of meat, which is a dynamic, multi-dimensional force. From the time we were infants, we have been trained—at home, in schools, in places of work and leisure—to eat nonhumans. Tuttle stresses that “we are all being constantly bombarded with subtle and not-so-subtle messages” to consume animals and animal by-products, and the “meat, dairy, and egg industries’ greatest sales promoters are, of course, our parents, families, neighbors, and teachers as we are growing up, and our colleagues, families, and friends as we get older” (p. 57). And now we find ourselves compliant of being told what to do—eat animal products—by those most dear to us and also by the most powerful and wealthy entities in our culture. As Ari Solomon (2010) elucidates:

‘Beef, it’s what for dinner.’ ‘Pork, the other white meat.’ ‘Milk, it does a body good.’ Sound familiar? These are the slogans of multi-million dollar ad campaigns paid for by multi-billion dollar corporations hard at work getting American consumers to eat more of the animal-based foods they produce and profit from... Or how about McDonald’s not only telling you what to eat, but also telling your children... The truth is that most people are just fine being told what to eat, as long as it validates what they’re already doing. What they’re really complaining about, when confronted with unpleasant truths, is: Don’t make me think about what I’m eating. (¶’s 5, 6, 9)

Aristotle famously said that it is the trait of an educated person to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it. I’m not suggesting that anyone accept vegetarianism uncritically. Rather, I am arguing for an education that cultivates reflective and imaginative persons who entertain thoughts about how the animals they eat end up on their plates; and who have been given the conceptual and practical conditions to resist the cultural hegemony of meat and the forces of industry and advertising that thrive off the slavish conformity of consumers.

Intersections of Human-Nonhuman Exploitation

The material conditions and practices of animal industries function in the intersectionality of animals *and* humans as exploitable, consumable objects in the cultural hegemony of meat. Understanding animals-becoming-meat involves becoming cognizant of the hidden, yet extensive, human exploitation in “the most dangerous industry in the United States,” the meat-packing industry (Eisnitz, 2007, p. 271). The human beings laboring to turn out the animal flesh our appetites crave also are victims of inhumane treatment. In her book *Slaughterhouse*, Gail Eisnitz (2007) provides a thorough expose of the conditions of under-paid, over-worked slaughterhouse workers. The sheer speed that which workers are forced to maim and kill the animals is shocking and reprehensible. “As line speeds have as much as tripled in the last fifteen years,” notes Eisnitz, “cumulative trauma disorders have increased nearly 1,000 percent” (p. 273). But more heart-wrenching than the physical injury are the personal accounts of those who do the slaughtering, the kill-floor workers. As the disassembly line maintains constant motion, workers are forced to repetitiously kill animals using conspicuously violent implements and methods. This comes with appalling, lasting psychological ramifications. The hardening or even total eradication of human empathy and compassion is apparent, as one seasoned kill-floor

employee explains to Eisnitz:

But when you're standing there night after night, digging that knife into those hogs, and they're fighting you, kicking at you, squealing, trying to bite you—doing whatever they can to try and get away from you—after a while you don't give a shit... You become emotionally dead. And you get just as sadistic as the company itself. (p. 75)

Another veteran kill-floor worker, having worked “at ten different plants,” tells Eisnitz:

The worst thing, worse than the physical danger, is the emotional toll... If you work in that stick pit for any period of time, you develop an attitude that lets you kill things but doesn't let you care...Pigs down on the kill floor have come up and nuzzled me like a puppy. Two minutes later I had to kill them—beat them to death with a pipe... My attitude was, it's only an animal. Kill it. Sometimes I looked at people that way, too...Every sticker I know carries a gun, and every one of them would shoot you. Most stickers I know have been arrested for assault. A lot of them have problems with alcohol. The *have* to drink, they have no other way of dealing with killing live, kicking animals all day long. If you stop and think about it, you're killing several thousand beings a day...Some of [the workers] end up abusing their spouses because they can't get rid of the feelings. (pp. 87-88; italics original)

Industrial animal production devalues *all* life, privileging output and efficiency over respect and compassion. Animals and humans are nothing but mechanical parts in the engine of corporate productivity and profit.

Because of the nature of their bodies, female farm animals are exploited as usable resources for human consumption on a massive scale, and to a brutal degree. Take dairy cows, for instance. She is raped—the industry prefers the term “artificial insemination”—forced to reproduce at unnaturally rapid rates in order to live a life of permanent lactation. And when she does give birth, her calf is stolen from her; then, still lactating, her milk is stolen by humans, for other humans. To turn a mother into an object is to isolate her by severing all meaningful relations. Like human mammals, a cow cultivates a close bond with her young soon after birth, but with objectification the mother is no longer interrelated but disconnected and thus devalued, making it easier to exploit her. These industrial procedures are endemic; as such, we must ask if they, in some way, shape us, the industrial consumers. Tuttle elaborates:

Dominating others requires us to disconnect from them, and from aspects of ourselves as well. In exploiting dairy cows and hens, we dominate them not just for their flesh...we specifically exploit their uterus and mammary glands. This inhumane desecration of the most intimate and life-giving functions of the feminine principle, that of giving birth to new life and of tenderly nourishing that life, harms us perhaps as deeply as it does the cows, though our wounds may be less obvious...[W]e become as a culture harder and more separate, competitive, aggressive, and self-centered. Ironically, we become commodities ourselves, controlled and enslaved by a system of our own making, yet we don't realize it because we've been taught to disconnect. (pp. 130-31)

When one sees the world through a lens of objectification, he reduces intrinsically complex phenomena to mere resources for utility—a world of quarantined objects instead of relational subjects, a world where everything and everyone are viewed not as intricate living beings but as potential products and commodities. This process not only occurs out in some distant place from the hands of agribusiness, but in the everyday discourse and norms steeped in meat consumption.

While animals are the ones who are literally eaten, both humans and animals are symbolically consumed as objects in meat eating culture. The significance of language and discourse should not be underestimated in the construction and rationalization of objectification and consumptive practices. As the case with species categorization, language is not merely a practical tool for communication; it is a powerful ideological construct infused with meaning. Language infiltrates systems of thought and behavior, shaping how we live our lives. Renowned cultural critic Neil Postman (1992) explains how:

Language is pure ideology...It divides the world into subjects and objects... In English grammar, for example, there are always subjects who act, and verbs which are their actions, and objects which are acted upon. It is a rather aggressive grammar... We are obliged to know the world as made up of things pushing against, and often attacking, one another. Of course, most of us, most of the time, are unaware of how language does its work. (p. 123)

Discourse is a powerful device in distancing and diminishing the lives of others—“you animal,” “niggers can’t faint,” and “women can’t think”—reinforcing hierarchy and objectification of others. Humans have designed and employ all sorts of metaphors and linguistic devices to exert and legitimize power over animals. Arran Stibbe (2001) finds that, “Animals are represented in language not only as *different* but also as *inferior*, the two conditions necessary for oppression” (p. 150; italics mine). Through the method of critical discourse analysis, Stibbe examines how animals are socially constructed as edible commodities by the discourses of animal industry as well as the “consenting majority of the human population” (p. 147). Stibbe argues that the role of language, in particular, is telling in how animals are conceived and understood as commodified products, fortifying the attitude that farm animals are lifeless units for human consumption.

Though it has been normalized as everyday vernacular, when humans speak of “meat” and not accurate terms such as, “dead, scorched animals,” we are perpetuating the social construction of meat eating—and, more generally, animal subjugation—by disguising an important part of the world. By calling dead animals *something* they are not, we add force to a dominant ideology that puts a comfortable distance between oppressor and oppressed, between victimizer and victim. One of the more pedagogical aspects of *The Sexual Politics of Meat* is how the role of language enables and reinforces the oppression of women and animals in the “cycle of objectification, fragmentation, and consumption” (Adams, p. 58). Particularly effective is fragmentation, the splitting of whole to part where “the object is severed from its ontological meaning” (Adams, p. 58). This occurs in the literal butchering of animals, which not only alters the whole creature into edible parts, but alters how we think of the animal; after butchering, the animal is pieces of consumable meat. Subsequently, language mirrors the literal dismembering of

the animal; after butchering, we speak of “breasts,” “legs,” or “wings” for consumption.⁵ And metaphorically, women are objectified, fragmented, and consumed in a similar fashion. “Language fuses women’s and animals’ inferior status in patriarchal culture” (Adams, 2006, p. 81). Some men fragment women by dismembering women’s thoughts and feelings from their bodies, seeing only “legs,” “tits,” or a “piece of ass.” Women are then constructed and consumed by men as sexualized objects. Adams explains that:

Manhood is constructed in our culture, in part, by access to meat eating and control of other bodies.... We may dine at a restaurant in Chicago and encounter this menu item: ‘Double D Cup Breast of Turkey. This sandwich is SO BIG.’ Or, we may dine at the restaurant chain Hooters.... [C]onsuming images such as these provide a way for our culture to talk openly about and joke about the objectification of women without having to acknowledge that this is what they are doing.... Thus everyone can enjoy the degradation of women without being honest about it. (p. 17)

The reason I have been using more honest and graphic phrases such as “murdered remains of animal carcasses” is to bring attention to the literal enslavement and murder of the animal, which is easier to forget about when we symbolically remove whole animal bodies by fragmenting our language with misleading terms such as “pork chop” or “steak.” We should not cut language into pieces with inaccurate phrases that devalue animal lives and deceive human beings.

Through everyday discourse, mass-marketed advertisement, and the norms steeped in the culture of meat eating, this cycle of exploitation is difficult to see, let alone understand, because it is so omnipresent. The cycle defies common sense: It is hard to see even though it is right before our eyes. The whole process is “invisible to us” because “it corresponds to the view of the dominant culture” and “the end product of the process—the object of consumption—is available everywhere” (Adams, p.16). It’s as if we see no other way, which aligns with the prevailing human blindness toward animal exploitation at large. Philosopher and animal scientist, Bernard Rollin (2003), affirms, “[T]he use of animals for our purposes without consideration of their interests is so pervasive and our dependence upon it so great, it becomes invisible to us, in much the same way that exploitation of women and minorities was invisible for too long” (p. 90). Thus, to reclaim visibility, our perceptive faculties must adapt. Instead of concealment and often purposeful deceit, we should educate for an honest answer to the question that relatively all children ask: “Where does meat come from?” The answer, of course, is *a* farm. The question, then, becomes: What kind of farm?

A Tale of Two Farms and Two FoodWays

In thinking about animals-becoming-meat, we must return to the farm. As Wendell Berry (1990) reminds us, eating is always an agricultural act. I want to return to my own experiences growing up in the rural Midwestern United States. What I learned from my grandparents on their traditional, small-scale family-owned and operated farm has given me good reason to protest

⁵ See Adams’s discussion of the “absent referent” in *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (pp. 51-56).

corporate agriculture. I have the privilege to know firsthand what a sustainable, free-range farm is in practice, and to know the joy, health, and love it brings to self, family, and community. My grandparents raised chickens, pigs, and steers on their eighty-acre farm in southwest Ohio. Small holdings were the norm; no more than twenty-two cattle at one time and no more than two dozen chickens and pigs. With this sort of traditional farming, commonly referred to as “family farming,” animals are not confined in stalls or crates but instead contently explore and graze the pastures, fertilizing the land with their excrement. (The farm was free-range and organic before “free-range” and “organic” became commodified for mass market and consumption). Subsistence-based farms like my grandparents’—the practices humans have engaged in for most of our history—are harmonious with the natural environment, never demanding more from the land than it can provide. What was obvious on the farm was the meaningful relationships and the sanctity of humans, nonhumans, and the land. Together, brimming with life, we literally fed off each other.

As I think about the (im)morality of meat eating, I think of the chickens raised by my grandparents, from their own coupe. The hens would squawk around, peck the ground, dust bathe outside in the fresh air and sun, spreading and stretching their limbs—all the things that a chicken ought to do, all the things a chicken cannot do in the battery cages and confines of industrial feeding operations. I remember how my grandparents lived pleasantly every day with the hens. One of my fondest memories is collecting their eggs with my grandma and watching the chickens live unencumbered lives—until it was time to kill them for food. By my grandmother’s own hands, while the chickens would struggle and fight for their lives, she would stretch the chickens’ necks across the chopping block and chop off their heads. She would immediately hang them upside-down to drain the blood, then put them in the bucket of scalding hot water to soften the skin for de-feathering. After which, my grandmother would remove the guts and fry the chickens to serve to our family. To see this ritual unfold, to live with the hen, to see her struggle in those final moments of life, to see her head chopped off, then to eat her—going from life to death to table—you recognize that all of this is not gross, but a cherished ceremony that induces laughter and tears, joy and sadness, love and fear. This is *a* story of animals-becoming-meat. It is teeming with meaning; it involves commitment, thought, intentionality, care, work, struggle, and morbid ritual. It is an intimate narrative of human and nonhuman creatures, how they live and die with each other. But it is a forgotten story, one being replaced with a story of corporate conquest and factory production.

With the expansion of global capitalism, the twentieth century was a period of rapid technological-scientific advancement that has streamlined and centralized agriculture, making diverse, traditional farming less feasible across a country that was once a predominantly rural landscape. Gradually replacing the artful human touch of family farming is industrial agriculture—the corporatization of farming, often referred to as “agribusiness”—a departure from the land that is turning the American family farm into nothing but romanticized illusion. Industrial agriculture is more mechanized and globalized. It uproots and replaces the local with the global, the small with the large, natural animal-waste fertilizer with chemicals, pesticides, and herbicides; it replaces human labor and small tractors with gigantic machines and equipment. Industrial agriculture supplants the free range, grass fed practices of subsistence based farms with Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFO’s) where thousands—in the case of egg-laying hens, hundreds of thousands and millions—of livestock (i.e., living inventory) are reared in one facility. Deprivation of basic comforts; rearing animals in crowded confinement stalls and

pins; veil crates, gestation crates, and battery cages; tail docking and beak clipping; hormones and anti-biotics; broken limbs and dysfunctional organs; transporting animals and meat over states and continents; and a disassembly line that never stops mutilating and killing—these are the standard practices of industrial meat production. Like my grandparents' farm, this too is *a* story about animals-becoming-meat. But it is a very different story, with a different climax, not of intentional familial ceremony, but of fast food, drive-thrus, and supermarkets.

Generally, those of us in consumerist societies experience a commodified relationship with the food we eat. Very few of us grow our own food, and even fewer of us kill our own animals for food. Invented in labs by genetic engineers and nutritional scientists, much of the food we buy in supermarkets is an assortment of preservatives, chemicals, and processed, refined, and artificial ingredients. It is manufactured, marketed, and distributed as commodity for multinational consumption. Today, when I enter the supermarket or restaurant, as a consumer, I participate in a monetary exchange where I buy a product with my money. I am not obliged to think about the farm, the origins of food, or about the once living and breathing creature or plant. All I see—and know—is right before me: an isolated object. Without the sights, sounds, and sensations of the farm, as a solitary consumer, I stand detached, empty, yet eager to purchase. I am now, as farmer, essayist, and poet Wendell Berry (1990) describes, an industrial eater:

The industrial eater is, in fact, one who does not know that eating is an agricultural act, who no longer knows or imagines the connections between eating and the land, and who is therefore necessarily passive and uncritical—in short, a victim. When food, in the minds of eaters, is no longer associated with farming and with the land, then the eaters are suffering a kind of cultural amnesia that is misleading and dangerous... And the result is a kind of solitude, unprecedented in human experience, in which the eater may think of eating as, first, a purely commercial transaction between him and a supplier... (pp. 146, 148)

Economic transactions and market concepts of the self are exactly what the corporate giants of food industry want. Profit is reaped not just through treating humans and animals as mechanical parts of factory production, but also through the dependency, ignorance, and complacency of consumers. That animals are being violently forced to die is of no concern to the industrial eater, as long as we eat in the social conditions, engineered by food profiteers, that encourage thoughtlessness and dependency. “The food industrialists,” writes Berry:

have by now persuaded millions of consumers to prefer food that is already prepared. They will grow, deliver, and cook your food for you and (just like your mother) beg you to eat it...The ideal industrial food consumer would be strapped to a table with a tube running from the food factory directly into his or her stomach. (p. 146)

The fate of industrial agriculture depends on unsuspecting consumers as much as it does the will of the corporate-techno-chemical conglomerates. It is in their greatest interest—profit—to keep us in our pathetic condition, to keep us thinking that we are better off eating their products, to keep us thinking that industrial agriculture feeds the world. They will never stop telling their story. They will never stop because it is an obscenely lucrative story. They will continue to destroy honor, care, family, community, work, and ecological health with more factories, petroleum, feedlots, manure lagoons, and chemicals. With the aid of massive government subsidies, they continue to implement more and better science, new machines, new

drugs, convoluted laws, more food technicians, nutritionists, and new biotechnologies—while persuading consumers these are all necessary for safer, cheaper food. With these advancements, has come more insidious myth telling through relentless marketing and advertising campaigns, which know no bounds, targeting captive children in schools.

Animal Flesh—or, Meat “Commodity”—in Schools

Meat eating in schools is importantly related to the corporatization, privatization, and commercialization of education. Recent scholars (Boyles, 2005; Brighouse, 2005; Molnar et al., 2010) discuss the ways in which corporations are increasingly infiltrating schools. Business-school partnerships are on the rise through food services and products, advertising, vending machines, sponsorships, fundraising events, television, videos, educational materials, computers, and other technologies (Molnar et al., 2010). This trend has many disconcerting effects for public education in a democratic society. The commercialization and privatization of education is more and more undermining public education and doing violence toward the public good, democratic participation, and civic engagement. In their place are the production of consumers, neoliberal market conceptions of self and others, consumptive learning that “circumvents process in favor of product,” and rampant consumer materialism that reduces “searching, being, thinking...to objectified and reductionistic particulars” (Boyles, 2005, p. 219). Over the next few pages, I show how schools play an abiding role in the cultural hegemony of meat and how most schools mirror the industrial-capitalist-consumerist society they are situated within by (re)producing passive consumers at the expense of engaged and critical citizens. Meat served in schools is part of a larger privatization goal of enlisting a life-long allegiance to companies and corporations that aggressively recruit consumers early and often, at all levels of schooling.

Through formal curricula and policies, as well as through their informal ethos, schools take up a vigorous role in the perpetuation of meat eaters. The vast majority of primary and secondary schools in the United States misrepresent animals as inanimate things, mere products and parts of the school day. It is the policy of food companies, school districts, and the USDA that dead animal flesh is a “commodity.” This mischaracterization reinforces callous dispositions where *farm animals* are nothing but mere resources for what are at times our most trivial and gratuitous interests. I emphasize farm animals because companion animals (dogs and cats) are conceptualized much differently for children than the animals they eat. On one hand, schools are places where children—through literature, sharing stories of their pets, other narratives and classroom activities—learn to “love” animals, while on the other hand, every day they gorge on the tortured remains of animal carcasses at lunch. Schools, it seems, are the foremost places that teach the “schizoid quality” of our relationships with animals, “in which sentiment and brutality exist side by side” (Pollan, 2006, p. 306). Schools are exceptionally good at both physically and psychologically distancing students from farm animals by disengaging minds and hearts. Schools inculcate absent-mindedness by distracting from, rather than bringing attention to, the connections with what students eat and the world beyond.

Ironically, school lunches are the fundamental way this distancing and distracting occur, even though this is the time when students physically interact with animals—by eating them. Daily, educators and students are complicit, whether they know it or not, in the patterns of exploitation and violence of nonhumans. And it is not just what students are eating in schools, but how they eat. Meat is shipped to schools in boxes, lunch staffers remove the packages, re-

heat and serve them up for students—processed slabs of product that do not resemble, in any way, an animal. Then, mindless eating abounds, as most American children are only allowed 20-30 minutes for meals.⁶ By the time children have passed through all twelve years of elementary, middle, and secondary schooling, they will have thoughtlessly consumed thousands of meals with meat as the centerpiece, ever the more desensitized to the suffering of others, ever the more socialized into the dominant culture. Of course, all this is not the fault of innocent children, as the colossal force of the cultural hegemony of meat has pervaded and perverted the minds and actions of their dearest role models and teachers.

Yet daily consuming the flesh of sentient animals should entail critical deliberation, for education should not thin the complexities of our relationships with the world. Ralph Waldo Emerson (2004) warned his fellow Americans to question the technological and economic “progress” of burgeoning industrialization. One thing he wanted us to do was contemplate the fraudulent aspects of industrial consumption: “[I]t is only necessary to ask a few questions as to the progress of the articles of commerce from the fields where they grew, to our houses, to become aware that we eat and drink and wear perjury and fraud in a hundred commodities” (p. 85). Emerson’s remarks bring me to an alternative vision to question and counter the thoughtlessness and violence perpetuated in schools. The hope, ultimately, is that students will have an education that raises their consciousness so that they become “stomach-oriented,” as Kuehn terms it. Stomach-orientation helps us rediscover the tale of farming and food. Kuehn expresses how the stomach-oriented eater is:

aware of and concerned about the specific means of transmission, because he or she does not believe there is a separation between the source of the food and how it finally arrived on the plate... [W]e do not assume that it grew in some ‘other’ place that is completely separate from us, from which it traversed unknowable territory and then magically appeared as food to be consumed. The stomach-oriented person sees the question of where the food came from as crucial to understanding the range of experiences surrounding the food from its point of origination to its eventual consumption. (pp. 242-243)

A stomach-orientation heightens propensity for awareness and critical reflection by seeking to understand the origins, connections, and consequences of food choices.

I believe that schools can hold emancipatory potential. Schools should be primary sites for “stomach-oriented” educators and students to explore the range of experiences with eating dead animals. Schools—as places where students are encouraged to cultivate and employ the aptitude to challenge hidden assumptions—sow the seeds of change and growth that spawn new ways of thinking and living. While a stomach-orientation certainly is not the remedy to eradicating industrial violence, it certainly is a step in the right direction in working toward understanding and protesting the repressive institution of meat eating. And if it is foolish to suppose that the institution of compulsorily schooling is a panacea for ameliorating the suffering

⁶ This is a general characterization of typical American public schools. There are exceptions of course; one of the more noteworthy exceptions is The Edible Schoolyard, a joint project of the Chez Panisse Foundation (founded by chef-author Alice Waters) and Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School in Berkeley, California. See <http://www.edibleschoolyard.org/>.

of animals, it is not foolish to believe that schools are places that should engage meat eating as a profound experience, one that entails multiple levels of intelligence to unveil the vast dimensions of the ideologies that undergird this prevailing practice of our culture. Revisioning and reimagining our interconnectedness with fellow humans, nonhumans, and the world should be a fundamental feature of an education that rejects the docile and passive consumption of mainstream culture.

Embracing a Visually Disturbing Pedagogy

Leo Tolstoy wrote, “We are not ostriches, and cannot believe that if we refuse to look at what we do not wish to see, it will not exist. This is especially the case when what we do not wish to see is what we wish to eat” (Walters & Portmess, 1999, p. 104). I wonder what Tolstoy would say today? We bury our heads in the sand, foolishly wishing that the brutality we do not wish to see does not exist. There is a reason why factory farms and slaughterhouses are located out of public view. There is a reason why they are purposefully kept out of sight and are not places just anyone can visit. If made visible, what goes on inside of them would surely move many persons—customers in the eyes of industry—to demand welfare standards, reduce meat consumption, or eliminate it completely. Yet no matter how much factories of animal death are hidden from us, removed beyond our immediate vision, we are participants. “You have just dined,” Emerson (2004) reminded us, “and however scrupulously the slaughter-house is concealed in the graceful distance of miles, there is complicity” (p. 369). Given the great lengths industrial agriculture goes to conceal the brutality that lies behind its walls, in order to understand the extent to which we are complicit requires an education that extends beyond the convention of books and lectures.

We need to interrupt and unnerve the complacent and routine habits we have learned to live by. In his illuminating piece “The Tragic Sense of Education,” Nicholas Burbules (1990) suggests that “Education that is worth anything” involves an element of uncertainty and loss: “Every gain is a loss; every deeper insight won is a cherished, comfortable, familiar illusion slipping away” (§ 2). When education provokes us to watch the lives and deaths of the animals we will eat, deep emotional chords are struck and the familiar notions of how we have been living our lives; our comfortable illusions of the idyllic family farm with picket fences, green pastures, and happy animals; and even our cherished sense of self, all slip away and we find ourselves asking the difficult questions of who we want to be and what sort of world we want to live in. Since what we, as the unseeing and inattentive consumers, buy is objectified, commodified, and obscured in neatly wrapped plastic and cellophane, we should make visible the sentient life-forms who make meat possible. Words are important but they are not disturbing enough. The visual, however, puts a struggling, squealing face with the bloody, dead piece of body on my plate.

I should reiterate that my purpose is not to argue that all killing of animals for food is an absolute moral wrong. Although Tom Regan (1983) presents a convincing argument for such a deontological position, I must keep my focus on the educative significance of viewing animals-becoming-meat. And although I make the case for watching animals-becoming-meat, it is necessary to provide a written account of what I mean by farm animal suffering. Peter Singer and Jim Mason (2006), two experts on the topic, detail the typical life of factory-farmed hens:

Most Americans know little about how their eggs are produced. They don't know that American egg-producers typically keep their hens in bare wire cages, often crammed eight or nine hens to a cage so small that they never have room to stretch even one wing, let alone both. The space allocated per hen, in fact, is even less than broiler chickens get, ranging from 48 to 72 square inches. Even the higher of these figures is less than the size of a standard American sheet of typing paper. In such crowded conditions, stressed hens tend to peck each other—and the sharp beak of a hen can be a lethal weapon when used relentlessly against weaker birds unable to escape. To prevent this, producers routinely sear off the ends of the hens' sensitive beaks with a hot blade—without an anesthetic... Artificial lighting is used to mimic the longest days of summer, to induce the hens to lay the maximum number of eggs all year round. A year of this leaves the hens debilitated, and they start to lay fewer eggs. Many American producers then cut off their food and starve them for as long as two weeks until they go into molt, which means they lose their feathers and cease to lay eggs. Some die during this period, and the survivors lose about 30 percent of their body weight. They are then fed again, and their laying resumes for a few more months before they are killed. (pp. 37-38)

Pause for a moment. Try to imagine, as best you can, what sort of life this must be for the hens. Out of the seemingly innumerable instances of agony in intensive confinement operations, I chose the above “standard practices” not because they are the most horrifying but because they illustrate the everyday suffering entailed in the conditions of contemporary livestock operations—and this is what we are blind to, what we unknowingly take part in.

Exposing animal suffering by either visiting intensive confinement farms or slaughterhouses, or by viewing undercover investigations and other expose documentaries, is necessary to see what has been concealed for too long.⁷ When we see suffering and death that we would have dismissed having not witnessed it ourselves, we are not merely gaining new information; we enrich and sharpen our empathetic and intellectual faculties. “We're troubled by suffering that we learn of through prose and statistics,” writes Kathie Jenni (2005) in her article “The Power of the Visual,” but “our unease remains vague, sporadic, and practically inert. We respond in dramatically different ways to suffering we *see*” (p. 1; italics original). Seeing that animals are enslaved and coerced to provide the fleshy tissue that becomes edible food expands our knowledge about the whispers and fragments of information about farm animal abuse that we may have heard about. “For those who *already* knew about a problem and perceived its relation to their moral values, the visual provides a different service: transforming abstract ideas into knowledge that is *felt* and absorbed” (Jenni, p. 3; italics original). Replacing the symbolic illusory of “meat,” the visual restores the literal, which in turn, exposes a perspective that we

⁷ See, for example *45 days: The life and death of a broiler chicken*, Compassion Over Killing; *Pig Farm Investigation*, Action for Animals; and Patty Shenker (Producer), *Life behind bars: The sad truth about factory farming*, A Farm Sanctuary production. In addition, footage depicting animals-becoming-meat can be easily accessed online. See, for example, Mercy for Animals (<http://www.mercyforanimals.org/>); The Humane Farming Association (<http://www.hfa.org/about/index.html>); Farm Sanctuary (<http://farmsanctuary.org/>); and PETA (<http://www.peta.org/>). For a broader treatment of industrial agriculture and consumption, see the documentary, *Food, Inc.* (2009). Also see “Resources” in Tuttle, *World Peace Diet* (pp. 309-311).

tend to lose sight of through deceptive socialization as we grow up.

A disturbing education from the standpoint of animal mortality provokes sorrow, hurt, disbelief, resistance, sadness, confusion, shock, and even anger. These feelings, these initial states of mind, are not the end of the story. Our primary reactions to seeing misery for ourselves can transpire into deep reflection and self-questioning. The emotional and mental conditions elicited are not to be dismissed as mere sentimental reactions but are to be attended to as catalysts toward further reason-based inquiries and rational deliberations. This is how we tear down the reason/emotion dichotomy—by reasoning with and about our intuitions and our emotional responses, by synthesizing our hearts and minds. Jenni emphasizes how:

Images of the suffering give substance and emotional power to our beliefs about them. Intellectual knowledge that there is a problem becomes, at least for a while, something more: a detailed grasp of what that fact entails and a deeply disturbing and salient awareness. When we see that ‘inhumane slaughter’ entails the struggles of exhausted pigs to escape workers who kick them, beat them, and cut them apart while they are conscious, abstract knowledge becomes richly informed and emotionally powerful awareness. (pp. 3-4)

Looking at what we have been socialized not to look at helps us move beyond apathy and inattention to concentration and responsiveness. Most people do care about how the animals they eat are raised but nevertheless are socialized to remain either unaffected or ignorant of the lives of factory-farmed animals. The visual helps bring intuitive care and empathy to surface, which is why, after watching animals-become-meat, it is not uncommon for individuals to change how they think and act. After watching footage of the cruelty on a factory farm, one viewer remarked:

I watched the video. It was almost like, it was like they say, the curtain was pulled back. The truth was made known. I felt like I had been born again. It was like there is no turning back now. Now I know the cruelty that exists. (McDonald, 2000, p. 9)

Not everyone will have a similar experience. Some individuals will change immediately, perhaps experimenting with vegetarianism or veganism, while others will not change at all, or, they might in time. In any case, the main idea is to bring animals-becoming-meat to purposeful awareness to understand a part of the world that the cultural hegemony of meat teaches us to take part in, but at the same time, remain ignorant of.

An Objection: What will Parents say?

I have attempted to articulate an argument for the educative project of understanding the processes through which the defenseless creatures, who have done nothing to deserve the injustices and violence committed upon them, turn into edible food. However, it is highly likely that some parents will disagree with the “stomach-oriented” vision of education that traces meat from plate to its origin, perhaps fearing their children are too young to witness the horror of animals being kicked, punched, and beaten. Some parents will say that their children should not see animals’ throats cut open and blood spilling out. I have not addressed this valid and important issue of age-appropriateness. Even though the particulars of teaching practices for younger school-age children have not been my primary concern, practitioners should be creative

and intelligent in presenting a disturbing education to children. Thus far I have been conflating the suffering involved in the practices of rearing animals for food on industrial farms and in killing animals for food in industrial slaughterhouses; but the two are different in practice and this matters pedagogically. The conditions of intensive confinement farms are a good place to start for younger children. There are some divulging children's books (Rochford, 1996) and other visual resources (*PETAkids Comics* and www.petakids.com) that present difficult questions of animal suffering in a sensitive manner for younger children.⁸ So, even though PETA's *Meet Your Meat*, which depicts vividly gruesome images of slaughtering, is appropriate for teenagers, it would not be appropriate for, say, eight year-olds. (Though I would still push us to ask why we intuit this). Children will react emotionally; they might feel guilty, disgusted, sad, and uncomfortable upon learning about the lives and deaths of the animals they eat. But these initial reactions are not good enough reasons to abandon further contemplation and understanding. "Although the issues are at once difficult, frightening, and challenging," maintains Marc Bekoff (2003), "this does not mean they are impossible with which to deal. *Certainly we cannot let the animals suffer because of our inability to come to terms with difficult issues*" (p. 122; italics original).

Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that the issue of graphic content is settled with pedagogically-sensitive, age-appropriate content and methods. This brings me to perhaps the most important aspect of this objection. Some parents will fervently disagree with this project, not because it is, at times, shockingly grotesque but because they disagree on a more fundamental level in that watching animals-becoming-meat challenges the values and beliefs they want to instill in their children. In this sense, the topic of animal suffering is no different than any other controversial topic that some parents find offensive or that violates their value system.

I see it fit to address this objection with the argument that of central concern in education is the facilitation of critical and autonomous thought.⁹ It is important to reiterate that nothing I have argued instills vegetarianism or bars children from eating meat. The education I envision supplies the conditions necessary for hard thinking and critical reasoning geared toward the cultural hegemony of meat, which is a form of domination that suppresses the aim of autonomous thought. How can students become autonomous thinkers if they are virtually coerced into a way of thinking and living that is dominant in their families and in popular culture? Eamonn Callan (1997) contends that, "The autonomy argument is correct to the extent that it affirms children's right to an education that liberates them from cultural domination, whether it be in the family or in some larger cultural unit" (p.149). The autonomy argument is strikingly pertinent to our topic, given that the cultural hegemony of meat leaves children with relatively no place to seek an alternative vision that would lead them to think independently about what is so fervently—and literally—being forced down their throats. By raising

⁸ For a thorough list of children's literature and films about the lives of farm animals see <http://www.humaneeducationteacher.org/booklist%20Farm%20Animals.html>.

⁹ For the sake of space, I must put aside the arguments for why autonomy should be a fundamental goal for education. For such discussions, see Brighouse, H. (2006). *On education*; Callan, E. (1997). *Creating citizens: Political education and liberal democracy*; and Reich, R. (2002). *Bridging liberalism and multiculturalism in American education*.

consciousness about the degree to which children are conditioned to be loyal, unquestioning, and life-long contributors to industrial animal agriculture and consumption, the point is not to demand vegetarianism. Rather, the central endeavor is to provide children with an education that cultivates autonomy through diversity of thought, critical reflection, and engagement with alternative ways of living. Exposing children to an education critical of the cultural hegemony of meat supports the right of children to understand this domination—domination specifically designed to instill blind dependence and hinder autonomous thought. So, there is strong reasoning for overriding this parental objection because an education that perpetuates the cultural hegemony of meat violates a student’s right to develop autonomy.

Concluding Remarks

I think we can—and must—do much better in questioning and resisting power structures that exploit both humans and animals. Collectively, the historical weight of species hierarchy, the unrelenting intrusiveness of the cultural hegemony of meat, the myth telling of industrial agriculture, and the convenience of industrial consumption, all seem to be insurmountable forces. None of them benefit from our looking at the disturbing deaths of farm animals, and all of them will do everything in their power to prevent us from looking. And worse, we don’t want to look either. But I do not think this is a matter of what we want to do but instead what we are painfully obligated to do. In trying to understand animals-becoming-meat, we suffer ourselves. “This is painful,” says John Robbins (2001), heir of Baskin & Robbins Ice Cream Company who left behind the family riches to advocate a vegan diet free of meat and dairy. “It can be shattering,” he continues, “to see that in our ignorance we have, perhaps for many years, unknowingly eaten the products of such a system. But this pain may serve a healing purpose. It may be the breaking of the shell that encloses our understanding” (p. 221). This is the human suffering that comes with embracing a disturbing education. No matter how difficult, by challenging the cultural forces that promote animal oppression, educators help foster the critical energy, space, and courage necessary for understanding and for change.

I have argued for the power of the visual in understanding animals-becoming-meat, but the power of words should not be forgotten. The visual complements written and verbal accounts of human and animal suffering. Though we all have different abilities with respect to our physical senses, we must integrate and employ all that we can. To see and hear suffering and death, to read about it, and to taste, smell, and feel it—this is the best way to deepen our understanding. I want to end with the timely words of philosopher Tom Regan (2001), who responds to being called “too cerebral”:

There are times, and these are not infrequent, when tears come to my eyes when *I* see, or read, or hear of the wretched plight of animals in the hands of humans. Their pain, their suffering, their loneliness, their innocence, their death. Anger. Rage. Pity. Sorrow. Disgust. The whole creation groans under the weight of the evil we humans visit upon these mute, powerless creatures. It *is* our heart, not just our head, that calls for an end, that demands of us that we overcome, for them, the habits and forces behind their systematic oppression. All great movements, it is written, go through three stages: ridicule, discussion, adoption. It is the realization of this third stage—adoption—that demands both our passion and our discipline,

our heart and our head. *The fate of animals is in our hands. God grant we are equal to the task.* (p. 330; italics original)¹⁰

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¹⁰ Much thanks to Abraham DeLeon and the anonymous reviewers of *Critical Education* for their extensive and insightful comments and suggestions. I am deeply grateful for the support of the Culture & Animals Foundation. This work was funded in part through the Foundation. A very special thank you to my grandparents. Your love and wisdom has shaped me in the deepest sense. I will never forget the Farm.

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Critical Education

criticaleducation.org

ISSN 1920-4175

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