Hierarchies of Consumption: The Relationship Between Sexism and Speciesism

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Abstract
The act of consumption, both physical and metaphorical, is wrapped in ideology and indicates people’s learned beliefs about how the world works. Within Western society, both non-human animals and women are relegated to the status of Other. Violence enacted towards the Other is justified through language, which further the separation between Self and Other and conceals violent actions, rendering them to be seemingly ‘non-threatening’ through the use of coded words. Because of the interconnected nature of oppression, it is necessary for feminists and animal rights activists to work together to break apart the oppressive ideology that masks violence.

In his influential book *The Physiology of Taste: Or, Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy*, Jean Anthelme Brillant-Savarin wrote, “tell me what you eat, and I will tell you what you are,”1 which has been transformed colloquially into “you are what you eat.” What we eat is a continual testament to our personal, cultural and political experiences. What we choose to consume and incorporate into ourselves, and how we do so, is indicative of how we view the world. The consumption of meat is particularly complex and vital; constructed by the language we use and closely tied to views about the Self and Other, the discourse surrounding meat-eating is problematic and is linked to the violence prevalent in patriarchal Western culture. The parallels between vegetarianism and feminism are extensive, just as the ideology supporting meat-eating is the same ideology that supports the subordination and exploitation of women.

Western values support dualism, the belief that the world is divided up into two categories which are mutually exclusive. This becomes evident when the Self is viewed as being distinct from the rest of the world. While “in some Eastern mythologies we do have a certain amount of fluidity between the human and animal categories, with movement in

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both directions,” in the Judeo-Christian tradition sharp boundaries are drawn between the categories of human and animal. The way we employ language supports this distinction, using the term animal to refer to non-human animals, and the term human to refer to human animals. Both are biologically defined as animals; however, the word “animal” is regarded as an insult when referring to a human. This denies the connection between the two and contributes to speciesism. While Joan Dunayer cautions that “when used to denote other species only; animal falsely removes humans from animalkind,” for the purpose of this paper I will use the term animal to refer to non-human animal, while noting that this can endorse problematic, divisive language.

The production of the English language is marked by male control of the social structure, thus reinforcing patriarchal values through language. Using language that denies the connection between humans and animals contributes to the reduction of animals to the status of object. Renowned animal rights activist Peter Singer explains that “once we place nonhuman animals outside our sphere of moral consideration and treat them as things we use to satisfy our own desires, the outcome is predictable.” When one takes the subject position, relegating the Other to object, as is evident with man/woman and human/animal dichotomies, the outcome is exploitation and cruelty. The objectification of the Other is the “common mentality that underlies all forms of abuse,” thus linking women’s and animal’s rights. While the “interconnectedness of all forms of oppression” seems clear, these connections are often left unexplored. When delving below the surface level, the links between the ideas underlying feminism and animal rights become apparent. Often, “vegetarianism and animal activism in general can accompany social activism on behalf of disenfranchised people.” There is no need for the fragmentation of activism. It is imperative to recognize that arguing for a link between animal rights and feminism does not mean that one is arguing that animal=woman, or supporting the essentialist view that women are naturally more attuned to others’ needs. Instead, “when one lacks power in the dominant culture, such disempowerment may make one more alert to other forms of disempowerment. Privilege resists self-examination, but exclusion does not.” By endorsing the exploitation of animals, people are supporting the destructive underlying ideology of the

6 Kheel, 6.
8 Adams, 22.
Self/Other, which also promotes the exploitation of women.

Carol Adams, a pioneer in feminist-vegetarian critical theory, argues that "the coherence [meat] achieves as a meaningful item of food arises from patriarchal attitudes, including the idea that the end justifies the means, that the objectification of other beings is a necessary part of life, and that violence can and should be masked." While applicable to the production and consumption of meat, these ideas also underlie patriarchal views of women, as there are strong sexist undertones within the mythology of meat-eating. How one views the world affects how one acts in it, and when one views the world as hierarchical, cruelty can arise. Inherent in the conception of a hierarchy is the idea that beings have different levels of power, and are assigned different levels of value. Violence only flows one way, downwards, because those who are lower are seen as having little or no inherent value. The violence is sustained through the hierarchy and becomes invisible, so common that it is considered natural.

Dichotomous Western conceptions of the Self/Other relationship perpetuate hierarchies of power, furthering the separation between these two categories and making violence against the Other invisible. Within Western culture, woman is the Other of man and animal the Other of human, with exploitation against one contributing to an ideology that justifies the exploitation of both.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas describes the act of eating as a patterned activity that expresses a social code. She states that "if food is treated as a code, the message it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries." Food acts as a text to express and perpetuate ideology. Each food in a meal has an assigned value, with vegetables being given a lower value and meat a higher value. "The ordered system which is a meal represents all the ordered systems associated with it. Hence the strong arousal power of a threat to weaken or confuse that category." Removing meat from the meal threatens the structure of the larger patriarchal culture by disrupting the value system in place. Without "king meat," the value of the feminine vegetable could increase. Woman is in the role of object in relation to man; as Simone de Beauvoir asserts in her key feminist work *The Second Sex*, "he is the subject...she is the Other." Identity is formed through what one lacks, the definition of Self being based on the existence of the Other. Man's identity as Self or subject relies on Woman's identity as Other or object, and anything that threatens this elicits a strong negative reaction. Similarly, human

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9 Adams, 24.
11 Douglas, 273.
12 Adams, 44.
identity as Self is based on the idea that animal is Other. Human is human because s/he is not animal, just as man is man because he is not woman. This dichotomous relationship furthers the separation between the two categories by producing a disconnection. This process, looking at someone and not seeing their humanity, is what allows us to reduce them to an object and to use them to our advantage and commit violence against them. Their merit is measured not by their inherent value as living beings but by their use value. Women and animals are dehumanized, both becoming instruments for others’ use.

Adams argues that the absent referent is what “enabled the interweaving of the oppression of women and animals.”14 The absent referent is learning not to see something which is right in front of you, which allows someone’s humanity and suffering to be made invisible, “to keep something from being seen as having been someone.”15 The “absent referent” is “that which separates the meat eater from the animal and the animal from the end product,”16 separating actions from their concrete effects. The same process that allows people to look at a hamburger and not see a cow allows people to look at others without really seeing them, thus perpetuating exploitation. There is a strong relationship between the structure of the absent referent and inequality prevalent in patriarchal society.

Once the existence of meat is disconnected from the existence of an animal who was killed to become that “meat,” meat becomes unanchored by its original referent (the animal), becoming instead a free-floating image, used often to reflect women’s status as well as animals’ [...] animals are the absent referent in the act of meat eating; they also become the absent referent in images of women butchered, fragmented, or consumable.17

The parallel between animals and women in the context of the absent referent becomes apparent in acts of violence against women. “The process of viewing another as consumable is usually invisible to us. Its invisibility occurs because it corresponds to the view of the dominant culture. The process is also invisible to us because the end product of the process—the object of consumption—is available everywhere.”18 Singer contends that

[W]e are ignorant of the abuse of living creatures

14 Adams, 14.
15 Adams, 14.
16 Adams, 14.
17 Adams, 15.
18 Adams, 16.
that lies behind the food we eat. Buying food in a store or restaurant is the culmination of a long process, of which all but the end product is delicately screened from our eyes. We buy our meat and poultry in neat plastic packages [...] there is no reason to associate this package with a living, breathing, walking, suffering animal.  

The invisibility of the processes involved in meat-production further contributes to the increasing discrepancy between what we’re eating and the cruelty inherent in the process. Abjection, which is “a horror at the body’s vulnerability to a blurring of self,” threatens the distanced relationship between the Self/Other by incorporating the Other, who is lower in the hierarchy, within the Self, who is higher in the hierarchy.

Within this hierarchy, the Self is valued and Other devalued. In her renowned work on the concept of abjection, Julia Kristeva describes herself as “at the border of my condition as a human being My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border.” Since the identity of the Self is based on the existence of the Other, incorporating the other into the self threatens body boundaries. In terms of gender, this means woman is seen as separate from and subservient to man. This also means that animal is seen as distinct from human; in the case of xenotransplantation, the transplantation of living cells, tissues or organs from one species into another (often part of a pig into a human), the blurring of human/non-human boundaries creates a strong repulsion on the part of the human. The incorporation of the Other into the body threatens people’s very sense of self. In this context of organ transplants, other humans are seen as comparable to and easily incorporated into the Self; animals, however, are seen as Other. Daar writes that “at a very fundamental level it seems to transgress those boundaries which define us as human, and so challenge and threaten our identity and sense of order; the sense of order and disorder, according to some anthropologists, is the very basis of our entire cognitive world.” The general reaction of public to xenotransplantation demonstrates that “abjection stimulates a social response in the communal regulation of law and taboo;” however, this reaction differs greatly from that towards eating meat. While both xenotransplantation and meat-eating involve incorporating bodily parts of the Other into the body of the Self, the responses to them are quite different. We can consume pigs, experiencing enjoyment in having their flesh enter our body, but are disgusted at the prospect of having a pig’s

21 O’Connell, 218.
22 A.S. Daar, 77.
23 O’Connell, 219.
heart as part of our body. People don’t view the consumption of animal flesh with the same revulsion as the incorporation of an animal organ into the human body. This demonstrates that the feelings of abjection surrounding xenotransplantation have little to do with the animal itself and more to do with the way we categorize and theorize our existence. Even when the object is the same, human subjects make arbitrary distinctions, determining what is acceptable and what is not. This exposes an inconsistency in our thinking that it is important to explore if we are to create a new ethic of care.

When woman threatens the dominant group, she is barred from her subject status as human and is made an object to be used. Women are rendered non-threatening through acts of metaphorical consumption. A woman’s image and identity are consumed through images within the mass media and regulations on how she is supposed to act. Within patriarchal society, men hold the power and ability to consume, relegating women as the object to be consumed. A woman’s power is often dependent on her physical attractiveness, because she is perceived as something to be visually consumed. To be considered masculine, a man has to consume another, whether metaphorically consuming woman or literally consuming animal. Nineteenth century philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel asserts that “the difference between men and women is like that between animals and plants. Men correspond to animals, while women correspond to plants because their development is more placid.”24 In the mythology of meat eating, woman=vegetable and man=meat, with the vegetable representing “the least desirable characteristics…[such as] passivity or dullness of existence.”25 In contrast, meat is endowed with importance, and is thought of as the principle part of the meal. With this gendered distinction the mistaken idea that meat gives strength and that men need meat is promoted. “Meat is upheld as a powerful, irreplaceable item of food. The message is clear: the vassal vegetable should content itself with its assigned place and not attempt to dethrone king meat.”26 Relying heavily on the nature/culture divide, in which biology determines behaviour, the cultural aspects of meat-eating are ignored in favour of a reductive approach emphasizing how people, mainly men, “need” meat in order to survive.

Hierarchical distinctions within heterosexual romantic relationships, coupled with the strong cultural association between masculinity and the consumption of meat, provide a justification for violence against women. Relegated to the private sphere and typified as the nurturer, it is woman’s “natural” obligation to be responsible for the nourishment of her family. Her success as a woman is dependent on her fulfillment of that function. When coupled with the myth that men need meat, the imposed

24 Adams, 47.  
25 Adams, 46.  
26 Adams, 44.
identity of the domestic woman becomes increasingly problematic and contributes to the confinement of women to a subservient and easily-exploitable position. In many cases, women feel that it is their duty to make sure that their family is satisfied, which hinges on the serving of meat because of the close ties between meat and masculinity. When male partners find the meal unsatisfactory, female partners can sometimes find themselves subject to abuse. Adams claims that “men who batter women have often used the absence of meat as a pretext for violence against women.” While this is just an excuse that violent men use for their actions, “because ‘real’ men eat meat, batterers have a cultural icon to draw upon as they deflect attention from their need to control.” Because the vegetable is coded as a feminine food and meat as a masculine food, serving a man vegetables rather than meat threatens his masculine self-conception. His very identity as a man, with all that means within Western culture, is called into question when he is given a feminized food. With Brillant-Savarin’s theory that “you are what you eat,” to eat a feminine vegetable would mean that a man becomes feminine himself. Eating meat has become a symbol and celebration of male dominance, and when that status is threatened he lashes out to reassert his dominance over whomever he can, usually his female partner. Thus, the mythology of meat allows male violence against women to persist. There have been numerous accounts linking patriarchal ideas about meat-eating and violence against women. One woman stated: “a month ago he threw scalding water over me, leaving a scar on my right arm, all because I gave him a pie with potatoes and vegetables for his dinner, instead of fresh meat.” Meat is far from neutral and has become a symbol of male sexual desire, a desire which it is a woman’s duty to fulfill.

Adams asserts that “metaphorically, the absent-referent can be anything whose original meaning is undercut as it is absorbed into a different hierarchy of meaning,” and it is through the structure of the absent referent that “patriarchal values become institutionalized. Just as dead bodies are absent from our language about meat, in descriptions of cultural violence women are also often the absent referent.” This is evident in the discourse of sexual violence, where terms such as “butchered” and “slaughtered” are commonplace: “Cultural images of sexual violence, and actual sexual violence, often rely on our knowledge of how animals are butchered and eaten [...] thus, when women are victims of violence, the treatment of animals is recalled.” The language used to describe the “slaughter” of women and the bondage equipment of pornography, which often includes prods, dog collars and ropes, mimics the cruel and degrading treatment of animals. Activist Marti Kheel explains that

27 Adams, 48.
28 Adams, 48.
29 Adams, 48.
30 Adams 53.
31 Adams, 54.
“for some feminists, vegetarianism is a concrete means of disassociating from this violent rape culture.” When one can justify exploitation in one instance, it becomes easier to justify it in other contexts as well. Vegetarianism and feminism are related theories which feed into each other, each furthering the other’s cause.

When one becomes accustomed to looking into another being’s eyes and seeing it as less than living, it only takes a small step to apply the same worldview to other humans. Adams asserts that “the texts of meat which we assimilate into our lives include the expectation that people should eat animals and that meat is good for you. As a result the rendering of bodies as consumable is one of those presumptions that under girds our attitudes.” The way we think of the world determines how we act in it, which makes a change in consciousness vital. Injustice and exploitation are based on a system of oppression in which no one is left untouched. Forms of violence are interdependent, with the rationalization of exploitation and cruelty in one area of our lives contributing to a worldview that supports cruelty elsewhere while calling it something else. Joan Dunayer suggests that, perhaps because comparisons between women and nonhuman animals so often entail sexism, many women are anxious to distance themselves from other animals [...] however, if our treatment and view of other animals became caring, respectful, and just, nonhuman-animals metaphors would quickly lose all power to demean.

A new ethic of care is needed which values all life, not only human life, because “it is essential for all of us to care and acknowledge relationships.” We need to refigure the ethics of our relationships that extend beyond humans. The many contradictions present in ideas about the Self/Other and what the acceptable relationship between the two categories is, could actually work advantageously to create a shift in consciousness. These discrepancies are the cracks that we must use to further break down this destructive dichotomy, thereby rendering the invisible visible. The culturally-reinforced myths about meat-eating are strongly linked to culturally-reinforced myths about gender. There is a symbiotic relationship between the two, which warrants a critical analysis of both in order to create change. If meat-eating and the cultural perceptions it supports endorses the exploitation of women, then one way to dismantle patriarchy is through consumption—examining what we consume, how we consume, and why we consume. Thinking critically about what we are actually putting into our bodies and who is affected.

32 Marti Kheel, 7.
33 Adams, 24.
34 Dunayer, 19.
35 Adams, 22.
by our actions is the key to becoming conscious of the contradictions prevalent in what we theoretically believe and how we act in reality.
Works Cited


