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The Future of Meat without Animals

Published by Rowman & Littlefield International, Ltd.
Unit A, Whitacre Mews, 26-34 Stannary Street, London SE11 4AB
www.rowmaninternational.com

Rowman & Littlefield International, Ltd. is an affiliate of Rowman & Littlefield
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706, USA
With additional offices in Boulder, New York, Toronto (Canada), and Plymouth (UK)
www.rowman.com

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: HB 978-1-7834-8905-3
PB 978-1-7834-8906-0

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Donaldson, Brianne, editor.

Title: The future of meat without animals / edited by Brianne Donaldson and
Christopher Carter.

Description: Lanham : Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016. | Series: Future
perfect : images of the time to come in philosophy, politics, and cultural studies |
Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016027650 (print) | LCCN 2016028116 (ebook) |
ISBN 9781783489053 (cloth : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781783489060 (pbk. : alk. paper) |
ISBN 9781783489077 (Electronic)

Subjects: LCSH: Meat substitutes. | Artificial foods. | Animal culture—Moral and ethical
aspects. | Meat industry and trade—Moral and ethical aspects. | Animal welfare.

Classification: LCC TP447.M4 F88 2016 (print) | LCC TP447.M4 (ebook) |
DDC 664/.9—dc23 LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016027650>

∞™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American
National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library
Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

Chapter 15

Ethical Spectacles and Seitan-Making *Beyond the Sexual Politics of Meat – A Response to Sinclair*

Carol J. Adams

In her 1997 book, *The Vegetarian Compass* – published posthumously – Karen Hubert Allison describes her initiation into the ‘brave new gluten culture’ of seitan-making (200).¹ ‘A group of us were gathered in the rectory hall of a small-town church’, begins Allison as she describes how she was there ‘to learn the basics of seitan preparation’ from three tall Seventh Day Adventist women, with their hair nets, starched aprons and open faces.

Through its flavours and textures, seitan (say-tahn) also known as *wheat meat*, is a versatile vegan alternative to eating dead animals. It is derived from gluten extracted from wheat flour and then simmered or braised in water over the stove or in the oven. Dorothy Bates and Colby Wingate explain in *Cooking with Gluten and Seitan* that it has been ‘a traditional food among Buddhists for hundred of years’ (5). Barbara and Leonard Jacobs’ *Cooking with Seitan: The Complete Vegetarian ‘Wheat-Meat’ Cookbook* describes how the word *seitan* was coined by George Ohsawa, a macrobiotics teacher. Translated from the Japanese it means ‘the right protein substitute’ according to the Jacobs (6) or ‘gluten cooked in a soy sauce broth’ according to Bates and Wingate (5). *New York Times* food writer Mark Bittman explains seitan’s popularity: ‘Among nonanimal products, it has a uniquely chewy texture, absorbs flavorings extremely well, and can be roasted, panfried, breaded, or even grilled or broiled – just as if it were meat’ (668).

Back in the Seventh Day Adventist kitchen, the tallest woman explained to Allison and the others about mixing flour and water, and kneading this into dough. ‘We watched and listened as she proclaimed the gluten covenant: protein and fiber without cholesterol or fat’.

Karen asked whether a Kitchen Aid electric mixer could replace hand kneading. Then came the rinsing of the ball of dough under water as the starch washed away. When I made seitan this way in my own kitchen I thought of

the water it required. Karen Allison thought of this too, and learned about soaking the dough in water overnight to conserve water.

The people present joined in kneading the dough: 'We kept stretching and kneading and rinsing the dough'. When the ball of dough was ready, a broth of soy sauce and vegetable bouillon was prepared.

Karen asked, 'Can you use miso, or garlic, or hey, how about wine?' She writes, 'I had begun to get the hang of this gluten thing: it was full of possibilities. I knew I shouldn't be asking so many questions, but now I wanted to find out if things like diced vegetables or currants could be kneaded into the dough before it was cooked, and whether it was possible to fashion different shapes, like thin scaloppine or jelly rolls, out of it'.

Only then do Karen and the others learn they can use instant gluten flour to make seitan. 'Now she tells us', a friend whispered to Allison. Ruth, one of the teachers, handed Karen the box of instant seitan mix. 'This is for you', she said. 'You'll need it. It's easier to work with, and you seem to be the type who likes to experiment'.

After that, whenever Karen made seitan she consulted her notes from that day in the rectory hall, and remembered the kitchen, the women, the delicious food and 'the gift of encouragement given to me by someone who was not *experimental*, like myself, but who did not stand on ceremony when it came to passing on culinary information'.

The above vignette depicts a moment in our culture – the transfer of knowledge from one group who had preserved it, namely Seventh Day Adventist women – to a new group of outsiders, including Allison, one of two people who ran one of the hottest restaurants in the 1990s in New York City, a place called Hubert's (Asimov 1997). The seitan-making workshop was an initiation, a hieratic yet inclusive ceremony, a passing of knowledge and gifts.

The question that interests me is: at what point did the sexual politics of meat enter this seitan-making process? Does it take place once this food is made and named *mock*, *faux* or *fake*? Or are the sexual politics of meat lurking there before the women even entered the kitchen, before we enter the kitchen if we are cooks? Were the sexual politics present when it was assumed that the women were the cooks? Catharine MacKinnon says women live in sexual exploitation the way fish live in water (149). The reference is attributed to communications theorist Marshall McLuhan who famously said if fish were asked to describe their environment the last thing named would be water. How do we get out of the water? How do we imagine a world without sexual exploitation and its accompanying violence? If the primary question for feminists is 'Of what does our resistance consist?', feminist-vegans bring the additional question 'What does resistance taste like?'

There is a Samson and Delilah secret held within the sexual politics of meat. The presumptive 'strength' that comes from eating corpses is so

fragile that one tofu meal can undo it. An ad for Red Lion beer says, 'Putting together a BBQ: +374 Man Points. Cooking tofu sausages on it: -417 Man points'. How fragile these 'man points' are! Manly acts are so unstable that they can be undone by cooking tofu on a barbecue grill. As I have mentioned elsewhere, tofu often functions as the synecdoche, or shorthand phrase, for all veganism to destabilize normative masculinity (Adams 2015).

As a sign of male dominance, meat-eating must be reiterated. The aggressive rearticulation shows how anxious and unsettled identity is. Apparently, one must continually participate in the construction of maleness by eating animals, proving meat-eating and masculinity as both normative and yet unstable. The instability of identity is frightening for the dominant culture to acknowledge as it expresses a weakness at the heart of the project.

Vegan meals also threaten non-vegan consciousness. Most non-vegans say they do not want to know about the structure of the 'absent referent', which I defined in *The Sexual Politics of Meat*:

Through butchering, animals become absent referents. Animals in name and body are made absent as animals for meat to exist. Animals' lives precede and enable the existence of meat. If animals are alive they cannot be meat. Thus a dead body replaces the live animal. Without animals there would be no meat eating, yet they are absent from the act of eating meat because they have been transformed into food. While the cultural meanings of meat and meat eating shift historically, one essential part of meat's meaning is static: One does not eat meat without the death of an animal. Live animals are thus the absent referents in the concept of meat. The absent referent permits us to forget about the animal as an independent entity; it also enables us to resist efforts to make animals present. (2015, 21)

The cow is the absent referent in hamburger, the pig is the absent referent in bacon, pork, ham, the chicken in Buffalo wings, individual fishes in 'fish', or 'salmon'. For dairy products and eggs, female animals are particular kinds of absent referents, kept in a sexual slavery while alive to produce what I called 'feminized protein'. Through the structure of the absent referent, the animals do not only disappear as living beings, they disappear conceptually and their oppression is leveraged as a metaphor for other oppressions. What is happening to animals begins to matter only metaphorically rather than literally (for instance, someone else may feel like a piece of meat, but the actual 'piece of meat' is of no importance). Women, too, become absent referents in a patriarchal culture, and we find this especially in advertisements for meat. The structure of the absent referent thus creates a constant tension of referentiality; reaching beyond the originating oppression and mirroring, reifying, and not challenging, another oppression.

Those who eat flesh do not want to be reminded there is a referent behind the food on their plate. Non-vegans would not interrupt vegans saying, 'I don't want to know, don't tell me', if the idea of what they do not want to know was not *already* known. They want the sacrifice but not the details because this knowledge may affect their feelings. Specifically, they may fear feeling sadness or grief and rather than learning to trust the experience of having emotional responses to animals' death, they chose to embrace the absent referent.

In *The Pornography of Meat*, I argue that pleasure arises from privilege by which I mean privilege created by inequality that allows for a status quo of violence. In meat-eating, this privilege disappears and the pleasure is seen as existing on its own. The pleasure (in this case, of eating corpses) does not want to be questioned, does not want to be 'aware'. Complicating this is the narrowing of choices for individuals in late capitalist society so that their perception that they are 'choosing' what (who) to eat is one of the few things left for them to choose.

What, then, is the way in? How do we create the space for others to experience the unethical practice of killing and using other animals for food? How might we get past the braided sense of anxiety and entitlement?

Rebekah Sinclair makes a compelling case that, according to my own theory in *The Sexual Politics of Meat* – along with Derrida's insights about carnophallogocentrism – meatless meats are a part of the sexual politics of meat rather than a form of resistance to it.

It seems some want to assuage the sexual politics of meat by a kind of reversal that announces 'real men eat plants'. Always the question seems to be, what are the men eating? This inquiry itself is a way of ignoring and erasing women's presence. Always the question seems to be, where do you get your protein? Because *meat* is the 'meat' of the meal.

I was asked to provide an endorsement for a book on veganism that contained the phrase 'seitan strips like Gypsy Rose Lee'. It was the only objectionable line in the entire book, but still I said no. Always we are confronted by the intractable sexual politics of meat. Sinclair recognizes this.

Should flesh from animals be the only source of a certain texture known as 'meaty'? Is there an inherent phallic, or masculinized, nature to 'meaty' foods? What if the foods are plant-based and handcrafted, such as tofu steak or veggie balls? According to popular tradition and ancient Chinese and Japanese references, 'The method for preparing both soy milk and tofu was discovered by Lord Liu An of Huai-nan in about 164 [BCE]' (Shurtleff 1975, 92). Freezing tofu and achieving a different, more 'meat-like' texture has been known for centuries. Is the problem our language or our symbolic structure? One of Upton's Naturals seitan products – their bacon – has an image of a pig on its packaging, but is the pig featured on this plant-based alternative

a representation of those bodies allowed to live? Might the image bespeak a presence rather than an absence? Does this say something about the imagery of bacon-without-a-pig or am I admitting my own failure to think deeply enough by asking the question? Is there an absent referent or is there no referent?

It is a dizzying experience to explore my concerns in response to Sinclair's analysis that understands the sexual politics of meat so well. For, yes, I agree with much of her analysis, but I still prepare seitan. I freeze tofu, then defrost it and make 'sloppy janes'. I bake tempeh in a marinade and then skewer it and grill it, or barbeque it.

Certainly I am concerned about plants, but I do not see plants as Sinclair asserts, the 'absented, sacrificial bodies of meat analogues'. This argument feels either to have dipped too fully into a holistic worldview or Cartesian doubt – unable to make appropriate distinctions. As I argue in *Neither Man nor Beast*, 'It may be theoretically asked whether carrots are being exploited, but once we situate ourselves within the lived reality we know as this world, we must surely know or intuit that the eating of a horse, cow, pig, or chicken is different from the eating of a carrot' (107). This is embodied knowledge, knowledge arising from the feminist ethics of care. I am not saying we do not have a responsibility to plants, but I do believe that responsibility is different.

I would like to suggest something that is obvious, but might help as we parse the idea of meatless meats. A meal is a spectacle. Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* argues that 'the spectacle is the existing order's uninterrupted discourse about itself, its laudatory monologue. It is the self-portrait of power in the epoch of its totalitarian management of the conditions of existence' (thesis 24). He continues: 'The spectacle ... is its own product, and it has made its own rules: it is a pseudo-sacred entity'.

Meals that contain dead animals and feminized proteins, such as milk, eggs and cheeses that come from female bodies, are spectacles that participate in the totalitarian management of the conditions of existence. These meals are so totally imbricated into this culture, people wonder of vegans 'What do you eat?' The question affirms the success of the dominant system, the uninterrupted discourse. But as I argued in *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, vegetarians interrupt the discourse, just as they do a meal. They stand in opposition to this unquestioning of the conditions of existence. Just what is the vegetarian, specifically the feminist-vegan, eating?

I believe that the control over the spectacle produced by the dominant culture can be overthrown. The clue is in the instability of the sexual politics of meat – because the reifying act of flesh-eating has to be done over and over again, because the identities from meat-eating are fragile, slippery is possible.

Opposed to this totalitarian spectacle is the progressive ethical spectacle. The ethical spectacle educates. Stephen Duncombe's *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* defines the ethical spectacle: 'A progressive ethical spectacle will be one that is directly democratic, breaks down hierarchies, fosters community, allows for diversity, and engages with reality while asking what new realities might be possible' (126, original emphasis). An example of an ethical spectacle is the bicycle protest known as Critical Mass that announces 'Critical Mass isn't BLOCKING traffic – We ARE traffic' (Duncombe 137). Duncombe asserts, 'As opposed to the spectacles of commercialism and fascism, the public in an ethical spectacle is not considered a stage prop, but a co-producer and co-director' (127).

In *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (a book that heavily influenced the TV show *Mad Men*), Thomas Frank shows definitively how Madison Avenue co-opted the cool, the hip and alternative culture to sell products. Is 'meatless meat' an example of the reverse, the co-optation of mainstream culture to sell a product of the alternative culture?

In *Living among Meat Eaters*, I observe, 'Nonvegetarians are perfectly happy eating a vegan meal, as long as they are not aware they are doing so' (208). When my son, now 26 years old, was in third grade, his science fair project was: 'Do people know when they are eating meat?' He enlisted his friends' mothers to prepare meatless meals one night and observe the response of the families. We provided Morningside Farms veggie burgers and TVP (textured vegetable protein crumbles) for 'meat' spaghetti sauce. Scientifically, it was not the greatest science fair project as we had no control groups and each family was influenced by the specific 'mom' and her ability to keep a secret or not. But his findings in general revealed that people do not know when they are not eating meat.

In Dallas, I often playfully serve Garden of Eatin's Crispy Tenders or a faux 'cheese' made out of tofu, or my famous BBQ that Dallasites eat without noticing anything until that moment of whiplash when they remember I am a vegan. Isn't this the secret no one wants to admit? The lynchpin of the meal is replaceable and *no one notices*.

My goal in the vegan 'propaganda' meals I create is one of incubation: the shock of the absence of dead flesh after the fact shakes up an omnivore who thinks they know what, or actually who, they are eating. So many of us have encountered the corpse eater's panic. It is prompted by acculturation and lack of imagination: 'But I love my hamburger' or 'I can't live without chicken'. These sentiments persevere until they discover they are confused about what they might love to eat and actually they *can* live without consuming corpses. With my meals, I assume people do not want to eat ethically, or assume they cannot, or have never imagined that meals have anything to do with

ethical living. The serving dishes are selected to accentuate colours. We see it before we consume it. We smell it, too. It all becomes part of announcing there is a different way to live. It is an ethical spectacle.

In Toronto, on May 30, 2015, as part of National Animal Rights Day, each activist held a dead animal, creating a presence of the absent referent. The photographs from that day are intensely beautiful and moving as each activist cradles the dead body with loving care. It invites people to re-awaken compassion.

Grief does not kill, though people fear it will. When they say they 'don't want to know', they reveal they know something already and it scares them. They might care, and caring requires work, requires change.

The Sexual Politics of Meat – the book, not the phenomenon – desires something. It desires compassion, an enaction of empathy and an end to objectification. The book desires to empower the consumer to refuse to consume what is materially and conceptually violent.

At the heart of feminist-veganism is a vision, protest and boycott: a refusal. Yet, one cannot survive on refusal alone. A meal served by a feminist-vegan is a radical act of caring and teaching to care. These spectacles are linked: protest and feeding those who protest and inviting others to learn enough that they too might protest.

NOTE

1. This particular story of seitan-making is found in Allison (1997), 199–202. All quotes from and references to this story can be found on these pages.

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