

Emotive ethics and the food animal-human boundary

A boundary is a limit of “duration, lawful or possible action, feeling, etc.” The examples in *The Oxford English Dictionary* include “1737 H. Walpole I should be out of all bounds, if I was to tell you half I feel” and “1821 *Edinb. Rev.* ‘He sometimes carried beyond the bounds of calm and neutral reason’.” As feminist, Continental, and posthumanist philosophy have shown, to save ourselves and our planet, we need to integrate reason with emotion, even when that puts us “out of bounds” (Bump 2014; Haraway 2007; Plumwood 2002, Grosz 1993).

Telling even half of what you feel is difficult especially on the family farm, as we see in multimedia and popular culture, purveyors of many if not most public emotions about the food animal-man boundary. For instance, in a documentary titled *The Peaceable Kingdom* (2004), we are introduced to a man who sponsors a pig at a farm animal sanctuary in Watkins Glen, New York. He recalls his first experience of the pig slaughter on the family farm. He said that when he was five or six years old and he came out the door, he felt the horror of bodies hanging from trees, and saw the pig heads and blood in wash tubs, and then he “blacked out” (Stein 2004). His trauma was so great he did not remember what happened after that, but the family told him that he “freaked out and became hysterical” and had to stay with this aunt in town for the next few days. Even in town he had nightmares and did not want to go back home. Years later, talking to other people, he realized that that we all have some basic compassion, that he was not a specially sensitive child, and that other farm kids had similar experiences but were not bold enough to talk about it.

Next in the documentary we meet a farmer named Harold who recalls how as a child he was allowed to have feelings about the family pets, especially the dogs, but not about the “farm” animals, whom he was not even allowed to name. He was told that he could not go on being a farmer unless he shut down his feelings about the farm animals, especially those raised for slaughter. He said it was like he had a light in him that he was told to turn off. Later in life, that light, those feelings, began to surface. He knew all along that the farm animals themselves had feelings, recalling the mourning he witnessed when a cow “lost” a calf, and their terror when he “helped out” at the local slaughterhouse, where their “screaming sounded like people.”

Eventually, to deal with those lingering memories, Harold sponsored a steer at a farm sanctuary. When he returned a year later, he called to “his” steer who ran to him and thumped Harold’s chest with his head and just stood there leaning against him. Recalling this for the documentary, Harold is overcome by sadness, and can not speak for a while. Harold says that the steer knew “just where to hit me,” “opening me up to that part of me that had been closed off.” Again Harold’s sorrow prevents him from speaking for a while. “He hit me right in the heart and I knew right then that was exactly what I had shut off ever since I was a kid. I had this image in my head of a big light switch in me that had been off” and had been “on” only for my dogs and the people in my “circle of compassion.” He testifies that turning that light off had enabled him to abuse, kill and eat animals. When his steer thumped him in the chest, the light switch was turned back on; Harold said, “That’s when my life turned around, big time.”

From the point of view of the giant agribusinesses that have replaced the family farms, more out of bounds than Harold’s feelings are the undercover videos included in the *Peaceable Kingdom* documentary. Even adults who have long since learned to shut off feelings can re-experience some of their original trauma when they witness the incredible mass torture and slaughter of farm animals perpetrated by agribusiness.

Marion Nestle has demonstrated that we “make a political statement every time we eat” and has shown how agribusiness controls even the government information about what food is healthy, (2007, 372; Salih 2012, 57), but more shocking is agribusiness’s use of “ag-gag” and food disparagement laws to prevent disclosure and even discussion of the food animal-man boundary. About twenty-five years ago three states passed laws to criminalize undercover videos of the horrors of industrial farming and slaughterhouses. At the beginning of this century, a conservative lobbying group originally founded to attack the Environmental Protection Agency came up with the “Animal and Ecological Terrorism Act,” a draft of a law that required a “terrorist registry” of those convicted of undercover videos of animal cruelty in agribusiness. They won the support of the FBI: in fact, the chief of domestic terrorism testified before Congress to the serious threat of what he called “eco-terrorism.” In 2006, a state legislator stated that “according to the F.B.I.,” *People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals* is “the number one domestic terrorist group in America” (Tennessee 2006). In the same year Congress passed

the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act prohibiting “picketing, boycotts and undercover investigations if they ‘interfere’ with an animal enterprise by causing a loss of profits,” effectively silencing “peaceful and lawful protest activities of animal and environmental advocates” (CCR 2007). Six more states have now passed ag-gag laws and the lobbying continues in others.

Thirteen states have effectively prohibited even discussion of the issue by passing food disparagement laws enabling agribusinesses to sue anyone who criticizes them in public, granting punitive damages and attorney's fees for plaintiffs alone, regardless of the case's outcome. In 1998, for example, Oprah Winfrey and one of her guests, Howard Lyman, were sued by a feedlot operator for disparaging the beef industry. Even though the feedlot operator “lost,” he won, not only because he made the defendants pay huge sums for their defense, but also because he enforced the food animal-man boundary: Winfrey longer speaks publicly on the issue or supplies copies of the original interview. (Something similar may have happened to the *Peaceable Kingdom* documentary, which is no longer available.) Lyman, however, refused to be silenced and paid the price, as he testified in the documentary *Cowspiracy* (Andersen 2014): “It took five years and hundreds of thousands of dollars to end up extricating myself from the suits from the cattle industry....you can go today and tell the truth and you will be guilty because if you cause a disruption in the profits of the animal industry you are guilty under the Patriot Act.” Kip Andersen, the maker of *Cowspiracy*, asks him, “Do you think there should be any concern of us making this documentary?” Lyman replies, “Of course. If you don’t realize right now that you’re putting your head on the chopping block, you know, you better take that camera and throw it away.” Anderson concludes, “When I learned about the activists being killed in Brazil I was disturbed but I felt removed, but to learn about American activists and journalists being targeted by the industry and by the FBI? ...I was beyond frightened to imagine what could possibly happen if I pursued this subject any further.” (Over a thousand activists have been murdered trying to prevent the transformation of Brazil’s rainforest into cattle ranches, including the American nun, Sister Dorothy Stang, who worked for the Sustainable Project.)

Nevertheless, the food animal-man boundary is even more effectively enforced by our own psychological denial. Even when adults watch a popular documentary such as *Earthlings*

(Monson 2005), which includes more extensive undercover videos of the mass torture and killing of food animals than *The Peaceable Kingdom*, they return to denial soon enough. As children, some of us were aware of the horror of carnism on some level, as one of the most popular videos on Youtube demonstrates: “Three-year-old explains why he doesn’t want to eat meat”(“Three-year-old” 2013). Watching *Earthlings*, after the initial shock, many in the audience renew their feelings of solidarity with animals, but the scale of the horrors causes them to become overwhelmed by feelings of helplessness, despair, and loss of faith in humanity. Eventually these emotions give way to compassion fatigue, emotional exhaustion, numbness, depression, and denial, effectively restoring the human-other boundary for food animals.

This goes beyond the classic dilemma of new knowledge not prompting moral action: in the case of food there is “no necessary connection between knowledge, or even love, and ethical change,” partly because food choices are so responsive to urges and desires that seem to be beyond our will (Salih 2012 55). Sara Salih proposes a more ethical set of food associations and a “moral sensation transference” that can generate the kind of “break-through or break-down” (2012 60-61) that causes a radically new, more ethical perception of food. Harold and the pig farmer experienced similar break-downs and break-throughs, but they remain rare.

The usual responses are still apathy and denial, all too familiar to those who have tried to address the climate crisis (Norgaard 2011, Nemeth 2012, Weintraub 2013). (The two crises are linked: fifty-one per-cent of greenhouse emissions are caused by animal agriculture. Akhtar 2012 121). One version of global climate mourning has been identified as *solastalgia*, “a new type of sadness” associated with “trauma,” “serious mental illness” and “suicide” (Thompson 2008 70). For most people this sadness becomes an intolerable emotion that must be repressed, a form of “psychological denial” more complex than “cognitive denial” of the fact that there is a climate crisis. In psychological denial there is recognition of the problem, but the scale of the crisis is so overwhelming that feelings must be repressed.

“The solution is straightforward. We must acknowledge, validate, and share people’s sadness about the plight of the world’s global warming victims – and thus help them bear their

sadness so they won't trip that emotional circuit-breaker into denial" (Sandman 2009). In other words, one way out is to promote something like the "catharsis" experienced by the viewer of a tragic drama. According to Aristotle, effective tragedy uses various plot turns, including the Reversal, the Recognition, and the Scene of Suffering, to excite and purge fear and "pity" (Poetics VI, XIII). "Pity" is too ambiguous a translation because "in modern use" it sometimes implies "disdain or mild contempt for a person as intellectually or morally inferior" (O. E. D.) Aristotle's *eleos* is more accurately translated as "compassionate grief" (Stanford 1983, 23-24). *Catharsis*, moreover, is related to purgation, cleansing and purification not only of fear and *eleos* but also, originally, the "blood-guilt" associated with sacrificing animals (Burkert 1992 56,58). In modern times Freud encouraged free association to re-experience the original trauma and allow expression of the repressed feelings. However, Bertholt Brecht objected to any idea of catharsis that frees the audience from any need to take action. As it happens, when the feelings are not merely individual but as public and social as they are in the climate or food animal crises, the emotions are not then fully discharged but remain available to motivate political action.

Hence this is a useful model for how to deal with the emotions aroused by the food animal-human boundary. The first step to breaking through our denial of food animal suffering is recovering and expressing blocked trauma, restoring the repressed feelings that may have triggered apathy and depression. Then, allowing the compassionate grief to surface, we can direct it outward rather than inward and make the boundary more permeable.

In the tradition of Critical Animal Studies (Taylor and Twine 2014), we can also learn from methods developed to deal with the ethical failures of racism, classism, sexism, and anti-semitism. In fact, one of the reasons why agribusiness wants to ban a documentary such as *Earthlings* is that it begins by comparing speciesism to racism, anti-semitism, and sexism (Monson 2005). In *Earthlings*, the narrator's focus on how "those who stand at the power end of a power relationship treat the less powerful as if they were mere objects" is followed by graphic images and finally one of Isaac Bashevis Singer and his book, *Enemies, A Love Story* (Monson 2005). After an undercover video of a slaughterhouse worker killing three pigs, the narrator then quotes from the book: "As often as Herman had witnessed the slaughter of

animals and fish, he always had the same thought: in their behavior toward creatures, all men were Nazis. The smugness with which man could do with other species as he pleased exemplified the most extreme racist theories, the principle that might is right” (Monson 2005).

Combatting such theories motivates Anne Cvetkovitch’s *Depression, a Public Feeling* (2012), which calls for “transnational histories of genocide, colonization, slavery, and diaspora” to demonstrate “the need to connect with histories of trauma that have not yet been overcome” (17). To transcend the food human-animal boundary, I would argue that we need global histories of our genocide, colonization, and slavery of animals as well, and especially of eating their corpses. We can then begin to retrieve the memories in our collective unconscious of the traumas in our relationships with animals that have not yet been brought to the surface, much less overcome. *Peaceable Kingdom* documents this happening to individuals like Harold and, as Aristotle has shown, viewing such tragedies promises to have similar effects on viewers, but the primary focus must be on collective rather than individual feelings, that is, not just a psychology but a sociology of emotional responses (Norgaard 2011; cf. Peggs 2012).

Other sources of inspiration for the food animal crisis are methods used to defeat anti-semitism. One way to combat denial and/or forgetting of the Holocaust of the 1940’s is to compare it with meat production today (stressing, of course, that a comparison is not an equation). In *Earthlings*, for example, after the “all men were Nazis” quote, we see aerial views of Auschwitz and “OF A FACTORY FARM, WITH COWS HUDDLED TOGETHER IN MASSES FOR AS FAR AS THE EYE CAN SEE” (caps in original). The narrator then baldly states, “The comparison here to the holocaust is both intentional and obvious.”

The analogy became famous in academia when Derrida spoke on the animal question for ten hours at Cerisy-la-Salle in July 1997 and when Coetzee delivered the Tanner Lectures on “The Lives of Animals” at Princeton in October, 1997. Perhaps the most striking version of the argument appears in Derrida’s seminal essay “*L’Animal que donc je suis (ti suivre)*”: “as if, for example, instead of throwing people into ovens or gas chambers (let’s say Nazi) doctors and geneticists had decided to organize the overproduction and overgeneration of Jews, gypsies, and homosexuals by means of artificial insemination, so that, being more numerous and better

fed, they could be destined in always increasing numbers for the same hell, that of the imposition of genetic experimentation or extermination by gas or by fire" (2002, 395).

Derrida identified "the sharing of this suffering" of the animal as the source of "a new experience" of compassion: "voices are raised -- minority, weak, marginal voices, little assured of their discourse, to awaken us." He describes a war being waged" between those who appeal to this compassion and "those who violate not only animal life but even and also this sentiment"; he insists that we are all "obliged to become soldiers in this war" (2002, 397). What kind of soldiers? What assignments? Some will increase support for emotive ethics in general, some for the feminist ethic of care, some will focus our attention directly on the suffering of food animals.

What can cultural and literary studies contribute? The slaughterhouse appears in American novels from Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906) to Richard Powers' *The Echo Maker* (2006) and Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects* (2006). Sinclair begins his novel with the slaughterhouse while the latter locate slaughterhouses in the web of sickness in their novels. *The Echo Maker* revolves around the mental and emotional illness of Mark who worked at the beef processing plant in Lexington, Nebraska that was exposed by Eric Schlosser in *Fast Food Nation* (2001). More famous is the author of the best-selling *Gone Girl*. In Flynn's *Sharp Objects* the narrator follows her sister Amma to the family business:

The squeals made my ears sweat. Like screams from a rusty well. My nose flared involuntarily and my eyes started watering . . . Like you should be able to cut a hole in the stink to get some relief. You can't. . . . Most sows are repeatedly inseminated, brood after brood, till their bodies give way and they go to slaughter. But while they're still useful, they're made to nurse -- strapped to their sides in a farrowing crate, legs apart, nipples exposed. Pigs are extremely smart, sociable creatures, and this forced assembly-line intimacy makes the nursing sows want to die. Which, as soon as they dry up, they do. Even the idea of this practice I find repulsive. But the sight of it actually does something to you, makes you less human. Like watching a rape and saying nothing. . . . The pig lay nearly comatose on its side, its belly exposed between metal bars, red, bloody nipples pointing out like fingers. One of the men rubbed oil on the goriest one,

then flicked it and giggled. They paid no attention to Amma, as if it were quite normal that she was there. She winked at one as they snapped another sow in a crate and drove off to get the next pack. The piglets in the stall were swarming over the sow like ants on a glob of jelly. The nipples were fought over, bouncing in and out of mouths, jiggling tautly like rubber. The sow's eyes rolled up into her head. Amma sat down cross-legged and gazed, fascinated. After five minutes she was in the same position, now smiling . . . I drove away from the stink and sound. And that child. (2006, 99-100).

“That child” turns out to be the most vicious murderer of children in the novel.

Another category of writers is that of scholars who explore the connections in contemporary fiction between such places and what Heather Hauser calls “environmentally induced ailments” (2014, 1). (Incidentally, she demonstrates the important role of wonder at the astonishing beauty of nature in Powers’ novel as a palliative if not a cure for ecosickness.) Other scholars pursue the origin of related themes in the nineteenth century (MacDuffie 2014, Bump 2014).

Derrida cites Rilke’s “*Schwarze Katze*” and “*Der Panther*” but his most extensive literary allusions are not to lyrics but to *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. Indeed, he said, “although time prevents it, I would of course have liked to inscribe my whole talk within a reading of Lewis Carroll” (Derrida 2002, 376-377). Why? As famous examples of popular culture, they reach a more global audience and thus invite cultural as well as literary study of the “friendly chat with bird and beast” that Carroll promises (7). In addition, the free-association origin and the dream genre of *Wonderland* fit Derrida’s sense of poetry as the “learned unconscious of *Verdichtung*,” a journey down into a realm that precedes cognition, “beyond languages, even if it sometimes happens that it recalls itself in language” (1991, 225, 227).

Literary theory and criticism has prepared us to study individual reader response to such works, to pay attention to our memories of childhood emotional experiences, to our current personal feelings, and sometimes even to our family-sized “emotional fields” (Bump 2010). Cultural studies, sociology, and social psychology demonstrate the need to pay attention also to larger, collective, sometimes political “structures of feelings” (Williams 1961, 74), so that we

can *re-feel* the pain inflicted on other species and ourselves by the current man-food animal boundary.

Carroll's multivalent Alice books call for such approaches. His original title was *Alice's Adventures Under Ground* and the first chapter, "Down the Rabbit-Hole," begins with Alice following an animal down a tunnel and ending up far below the surface, inviting us to take the archetypal journey of the collective unconscious back to the origins of our species, back to the time when the human-nonhuman boundary was highly permeable (Fagan 2015), a journey repeated thousands of times each year now as people go down into a caves such as Lascaux to marvel at the depictions of animals on the cave walls. (Coleman 2012).

Far down in the cave/tunnel, Alice looks through "a small passage, not much larger than a rat-hole . . . into the loveliest garden you ever saw," invoking another archetypal Western journey back to human origins: the Garden of Eden. However, unable to squeeze through the small passage, Alice "began to cry again." Taught to repress her feelings, she scolds herself, but experiences what Salih might call the "break-through or break-down" (2012 60-61), "shedding gallons of tears, until there was a large pool all round her" (21), large enough to represent the sadness of humans as the only beings expelled from Eden. Overwhelming as they are, Alice is expressing her feelings (and ours?), and is seemingly rewarded with the sound of a "little pattering of feet" announcing the return of animal who led her underground. With Rabbit's help, Alice shrinks enough to fit into the "small passage," but instead finds she must confront more sadness. "Up to her chin in salt water," she fears that she will be "drowned in my own tears!" Then the pool becomes "quite crowded with" animals, including the extinct Dodo. Recapitulating their ancestral journey, all the land animals emerge from the water onto the shore and form a kind of family. "After a few minutes it seemed quite natural to Alice to find herself talking *familiarly* with them, as if she had known them all her life" (29). Nevertheless, Alice cannot help but reveal the family secret, that the some animals are to be murdered and devoured by others. After all the animals have fled from Alice, she "began to cry again" and "was soon left alone" (36), in the human condition, alienated from all the other animals.

On this and other occasions Alice, who, at seven years of age, can not but be the voice of the Victorian Zeitgeist, seems to be the messenger of God's promise to Noah: "the fear of

you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, upon all that moveth upon the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hand are they delivered” (KJV: Genesis 9:1-2). Would Carroll have agreed with such an interpretation of his protagonist? In a letter published in *The Pall Mall Gazette*, he anticipated “a cry of anguish from the brute creation that will ring through the length and breadth of the land,” a time when the vivisectionist “shall exult in the thought that he has made of this fair green earth, if not a heaven for man, at least a hell for animals” (1875). At times the Alice books do seem to be a hell for animals, especially during the gleeful deception and devouring of the oysters by the walrus and the carpenter and the jovial abuse of animals for entertainment throughout the books, from Alice’s kicking of Bill the Lizard to her use of flamingos to hit hedgehogs, to the smothering of the guinea pigs, to the shaking of the kitten.

However, eventually there is a Reversal. At the banquet celebrating Alice’s coronation as Queen, the Red Queen boldly brings to the surface the dinner-table secret that everyone knows but wants to keep hidden: “You look a little shy; let me introduce you to that leg of mutton’, . . . The leg of mutton got up in the dish and made a little bow to Alice” (261). Shocked, Alice threatens it with her knife, but the Red Queen grants the food animal human status: “it isn't etiquette to cut any one you've been introduced to’.” When the Red Queen replaced the mutton with a plum pudding (made with animal fat) Alice quickly “cut a slice,” but the food animal is now given human speech as well: “I wonder how you'd like it, if I were to cut a slice out of YOU, you creature!” (262-263). Then all the animals mutiny and riot until Alice comes up with a Final Solution. She pulls the tablecloth out from under them, they are all “disappeared,” and we are left with the keynotes of the animal drama: loneliness and loss.

These keynotes have been struck many times from the Pool of Tears to the Scene of Suffering after the croquet game. Then Alice “saw the Mock Turtle in the distance, sitting sad and lonely . . . sighing as if his heart would break. She pitied him deeply” (95). Eventually, the Turtle was asked to sing “Turtle Soup”: he “sighed deeply, and began, in a voice sometimes choked with sobs ...” One cause of his tears is apparent from the beginning of the episode when Alice asks the Red Queen “what a Mock Turtle is” and the Red Queen replies, “It's the thing Mock Turtle Soup is made from” (brains and organ meats, often from cattle). Tenniel, operating

under Carroll's supervision, made this connection clear when he drew the Mock Turtle with a calf's head and hind hooves. To reinforce the connection, at the end of *Wonderland* there is a Recognition: "the lowing of the cattle in the distance [takes] the place of the Mock Turtle's heavy sobs" (126). *[insert mock turtle image]*



The calf-turtle's sadness seems to be partly due to his subconscious awareness that his fate is to be killed and devoured, perhaps in a few months (like male dairy calves today who are

“tenderized” on the hoof by being kept on diarrhea-inducing diets and tethered by the neck in tiny crates so they can’t move for the rest of their lives).

In this one incident Alice’s “pity” seems to be a compassionate grief revealing that beneath the surface of what was supposed to be a “friendly chat with bird and beast” (7) there was, and still is, the tragic emotions of the food animal-man boundary, including a collective grieving, a mourning, that can be experienced by some on some level throughout the world when texts and multimedia versions of this classic of popular culture are encountered. When that happens we become a little more aware of the “tradition [that] assigns to nature and to the animality named by Adam a sort of 'deep sadness (*Traurigkeit*)' . . . the great sorrow of nature”; we begin to hear its “mute but audible lament,” and perhaps to hear “weak, marginal voices” among us, “little assured of their discourse,” trying “to awaken us” (Derrida 2002, 38, 397).

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