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MURDER, SHE WROTE

Legitimizing the Meat Economy with “Femivorism”

by John Sanbonmatsu, Ph.D.

As the ecological, health, and ethical contradictions of animal agriculture and the fisheries industries worsen, imperiling all life on earth, a “legitimation crisis” has developed around the animal economy.¹ To restore the lost luster of meat, both the meat industry and society at large have sought to find new rationales for our killing of billions of nonhuman animals each year. As part of this effort, movements for locavorism, organic farming, Slow Food*, and regenerative and silvopastoral† agriculture have promoted the idea that smaller-scale, organic animal husbandry offer a solution to the ecological and moral harms of industrial farming. By raising farmed animals more naturally and “sustainably,” allowing them to graze or forage outdoors, instead of forcing them to live in cages and feedlots, we might thus create a “humane” animal system that would be a win-win for everyone—for the environment, farmers, consumers, and the animals too. Millions of consumers have responded to this vision, seeking out animal commodities marketed as “welfare-certified,” “free-range,” and “humane.”²

* Slow Food is an anti-corporate movement promoting local food, traditional cooking, and the communitarian pleasures of shared meals.

† Silvopastoralism is a form of agriculture that integrates animal foraging and grazing with forest environments.

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One of the most striking things about this new carnivory is that it is being promoted with the greatest enthusiasm and moxie not by men, as one might expect, but by women. For centuries in Western culture, killing and eating animals was closely associated with masculine virility and power through the myth of “Man the hunter.”³ Though it is still overwhelmingly men who run the cattle, dairy, and meat industries—and who hunt, fish, and trap animals for sport—a sea change is underway in the way society represents relations between men, women, and animals. In thousands of news and media reports, books, blogs, and films, women have been celebrated for taking up new roles as pig farmers, cattle ranchers, butchers, and hunters. Killing animals is no longer men’s work, the stories and images tell us, but the very horizon of women’s empowerment. As Lily McCaulou writes in *The Call of the Mild: Learning to Hunt My Own Dinner*, an account of her transition from urban journalist to big-game hunter, “hunting is the final frontier of feminism.”⁴

Such a notion, that dominating and hurting animals could be construed as a path to women’s liberation, would have startled feminists of earlier generations. “Scarcely a human being in the course of history has fallen to a woman’s rifle,” Virginia Woolf observed in *Three Guineas*, “the vast majority of birds and beasts have been killed by you, not by us.”⁵ From the vegetarian Amazonian women in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s utopian sci-fi novel *Herland*, published in 1915, to Frida Kahlo’s famous self-portrait as a wounded deer pierced with arrows, feminists have long emphasized the parallels between male domination of women and male aggression and cruelty toward nonhuman animals. By contrast, for today’s “femivores”—as *The New York Times* has dubbed the scores of women who have flocked to farming, hunting, and butchery as a way to achieve a sense of empowerment—nothing could be more repugnant than the musty feminism of their predecessors, with its specter of an angry activist clutching her dog-eared vegetarian *Moosewood Cookbook* as tightly as she clung to her millenarian fervor. These post-feminists don’t want to unseat patriarchy, they want a seat at the table; they want to *lean in*, and they want their grass-fed steaks lean, too. If the feminist slogan of the 1970s was that a woman needed a man the way a fish needed a

bicycle, the message of femivorism is that today's liberated woman needs only a butcher's knife, killing cone, or hunting rifle.

More than a cultural curiosity, the femivore phenomenon has become central to society's efforts to stabilize and legitimate the failing meat economy. By depicting violence against animals as a form of women's empowerment and maternal care, femivorism is providing society with a new set of rationales for maintaining its endless violence against other beings.

THE NEW FEMININE MYSTIQUE

Until recently, the literary expositors of husbandry and hunting were nearly all men: writers like hunter-rancher Wes Jackson and organic agriculture expert J.I. Rodale, among others. More and more, however, it is now women who are leading the charge. Over the last decade, dozens of women have written memoirs recounting their experiences participating in forms of violence against animals as a way of achieving a purpose-driven life. Women have written books about designing "humane" slaughterhouses (*Humane Livestock Handling* by Temple Grandin) or becoming taxidermists (*Still Life* by Melissa Milgrom), about becoming cattle ranchers (*My Ranch Too: A Wyoming Memoir* by Mary Budd Flitner), or marrying them (*Righteous Porkchop* by Nicolette Hahn Niman), becoming butchers (*Killing It: An Education* by Camas Davis), or marrying them (*Cleaving: A Story of Marriage, Meat, and Obsession* by Julie Powell). By far the most common books in the genre are memoirs by women recounting their experiences as novice animal farmers. With dozens of such books in print, sporting titles like *Hit by a Farm*; *Confessions of a Counterfeit Farm Girl*; *Barnhart: The Incurable Longing for a Barn of One's Own*; *The Dirty Life: A Memoir of Farming, Food, and Love*; *A Girl and Her Pig*; *Sheepish: Two Women, Fifty Sheep, and Enough Wool to Save the Planet*; and *One Woman Farm: My Life Shared with Sheep, Pigs, Chickens, Goats, and a Fine Fiddle*, the women's farming memoir has become one of the most popular genres in contemporary women's nonfiction, and many of the books have become national bestsellers, earning lavish praise in *The New York Times* and on NPR's "All Things Considered" (among other venues).

The woman's farming memoir resembles nothing so much as the *bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age novel, popular in the 19th century, which depicted the moral and psychological development and maturation of a

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youthful male protagonist. In the classic bildungsroman, the protagonist feels restless and lost, and casts about for some life purpose adequate to his passions and ambitions. The hero may struggle with self-doubt, lost love, and other hardships. By the end, however, after suffering and overcoming setbacks, he has triumphed, forging a new, more authentic self in the process. What we might term the *femivore bildungsroman* traces a similar narrative arc, recounting its author's painful journey on the road to self-discovery and self-reliance, but with this signal difference—the narrative path to self-transformation involves cruelty to others. Only by dominating and killing nonhuman animals can the hero forge a new self in the smithy of her soul.

In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan famously addressed the tedium and alienation of the suburban American housewife. Women who had most benefited from the economic boom of the 1950s, for whom life was now supposed to be good, now felt “a strange stirring, a dissatisfaction, a yearning” for something more. In interviews, women from all walks of life (though mostly middle-class white women) told Friedan of a “problem that has no name.” “Sometimes,” Friedan wrote, “a woman would say ‘I feel empty somehow . . . incomplete.’ Or she would say, ‘I feel as if I don’t exist.’” One tells her, “I’ve tried everything women are supposed to do—hobbies, gardening, pickling, canning, being very social with my neighbors, joining committees, running PTA teas,” but nothing works.*⁶

The authors of today's femivore farming memoirs, nearly all of them white and either comfortably middle-class or affluent, sound a lot like women profiled by Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*, describing similar feelings of dislocation and alienation. As the books begin, the women are reeling from romantic or professional blows, or both. One former food reporter for the *Chicago Tribune* takes up animal farming when she finds herself “without income, heartbroken, and terrified” after being dumped by her husband and fired from her job. *Killing It: An Education*,

* As critics have pointed out, Friedan tended to conflate the experiences of educated white, heterosexual, middle- or upper-class women with women “as such,” ignoring differences of class, race, and sexual orientation. However, this makes Friedan's analysis all the more relevant for my discussion here, since most “femivore” authors are drawn from much the same demographic group.

Camas Davis's chronicle of her transformation from magazine editor to celebrity butcher, finds the author walking away from her own personal ground zero, having recently lost a 10-year relationship and been fired from her job at the foodie magazine *Saveur*.⁷ "I broke my own heart. I wrecked my career," Davis writes. "Who was I? Where was I?" Like many a restless American writer before her, Davis flees the wreckage of her life in the U.S. for the relative safety of Europe. Ernest Hemingway went to Spain to drink and watch bullfights; Davis travels to southwestern France to be tutored the fine arts of butchery and *charcuterie*.

For most of the memoirists, however, the problem isn't losing a job—it's having one. Alienated from corporate life and feeling "burned out, apathetic, and bored" with their "sheltered" or "spoiled" urban lives, the women walk away from jobs as journalists, editors, novelists, food critics, and marketing directors. Other privileged white women in the memoirists' Louboutin shoes might cope with their spiritual desolation by undergoing psychoanalysis, coaching soccer, or organizing a saving mission to Africa. For these women, however, only the farming cure will do. Feminists once dreamed of changing the world; all these memoirists want, however, is a farm of their own. Or, rather, an *animal* farm of their own. Though many of the women grow vegetables and fruit too, it is not part of their vision to lord it over an apple orchard or petunia patch. Forty acres, yes, but the mule's the thing. Driving the women from their urban lives is what Jenna Woginrich, the author of two farming memoirs, calls "barnheart," a condition suffered by "those . . . who wish to God we were outside with our flocks, feed bags, or harnesses instead of sitting in front of the computer screen," women who "are overcome with the desire to be tagging cattle ears or feeding pigs."⁸ As Woginrich observes in *One Woman Farm*, farming is a way to prove that "as a single woman I can manage an entire flock."⁹ For professional white women who've grown tired of having to please their boss one minute, then rush home to begin the second shift the next, controlling animals is a way to escape feeling controlled themselves—a way to signal a break not only with the corporate world, but also with the conventional aspirations of their sex and their class. "I'm damn sure an ewe trying to deliver a lamb doesn't care about meeting a spreadsheet

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deadline,” Woginrich writes, defiantly.¹⁰ Tired of being tethered to the corporate machine, now *she’ll* do the tethering.

Bereft of community and a sense of deeper purpose, the women leave behind lucrative jobs in thriving metropolises like New York, San Francisco, or Seattle to homestead in rural townships in Michigan, Virginia, or Wisconsin either alone or with a lover, spouse, or (more rarely) a family in tow. For Susan McCorkindale, a senior marketing director at *Family Circle*, not even \$400 sea-salt pedicures and a \$30,000 year-end bonus can relieve the tedium and stress of her privileged life, leading her and her husband to buy and move to a 500-acre beef farm in Virginia. Jessie Knadler, a senior editor with a women’s magazine, exchanges her life in Manhattan, where she “splurged on Miu Miu, partied hard, and lived for Kundalini yoga,” for down-home life on a farm in “the badlands of Montana.”¹¹

Once ensconced in their farmhouses, however, the troubles begin. The amateur farmers make blunders, struggle with self-doubt, and are confronted with a slew of new challenges, from early frosts to broken farm equipment. The true flint against which the women strike their souls, however, are the animals they raise for slaughter. In *Chickens in the Road*, Suzanne McMinn’s “coming-of-age story of a woman in her forties”—the chronicle of her transformation “from publishing diva to reluctant pasture princess”—raising animals satisfies her “deep-seated need to test myself” (“[m]ilking a cow made me prove myself every single day,” she writes).¹² Similarly, for Kristin Kimball, an Ivy Leaguer from an aristocratic East Coast family, dominating animals effects her metamorphosis from party girl who “stays out until four, wears heels, and carries a handbag” to cowgirl who can “shoot a gun, dispatch a chicken, dodge a charging bull, and ride out a runaway behind panicked horses.”¹³

Scenes in which the author exerts mastery over a large animal feature prominently in many of the books, as signposts along the road to self-sufficiency. Seeing another woman controlling a horse for the first time, Woginrich admires how she “converses with Steele through the black leather lines, her voice, and her carriage whip.” Soon, Woginrich has learned this “language” herself, “the way a child learns it, by holding up things and repeating what they are out loud: *Carriage whip. Blinders.*

Singletree. Lines."¹⁴ When a horse she's riding named Merlin balks at carrying her up a hill, Woginrich digs him sharply with her heel, then gives him the taste of rawhide—a piquant reminder to Merlin of the true nature of their "conversation." Crucially, the mastery the women achieve is real, not merely notional—the mental and physical domination of another being. As Kimball writes in *The Dirty Life*, controlling a horse means "you're on top, a position of power."¹⁵ Indeed, for the first time in their lives, the women feel in control. "I rise up on the big pasture from the back of a horse," Suzanne McMinn reflects in the closing pages of her memoir. "And in my hands, I hold the reins."¹⁶ In mastering the animal other, she has mastered herself.

Though each of the memoirs ostensibly tells a unique story of self-discovery through domination, there is a striking sameness to the books that complicates the authors' claims to having achieved existential authenticity. The title of Ellen Stimson's bestselling *Mud Season: How One Woman's Dream of Moving to Vermont, Raising Children, Chickens and Sheep, and Running the Old Country Store Pretty Much Led to One Calamity After Another* is representative of the themes—and literary sensibilities—of memoirs across the genre. The women all poke fun at their "greenhorn" farming ways, marvel at their new Carhartt mud boots, and crack wise about goat and sheep penises. Several recount identical "comical" show-downs with "mean" roosters, whom they "courageously" vanquish at the chopping block. "Bats and Bears and Skunks. Oh My" reads one chapter title; "Calves' Heads and Black Snakes and Groundhogs, Oh My!" reads another in a different book by a different author. Even as the women depict themselves as roughing it, meanwhile, enacting pastoral rituals that "people have been doing for thousands of years,"¹⁷ they surf the internet, play FarmVille on their iPhones, and curl up at night to a Netflix movie and a fine Chablis after a hard day wrangling sheep, milking cows, and cutting off the heads of the sensitive creatures they lovingly depict as their infants and children.

MOTHERING "BABIES"—THEN KILLING THEM

There have been any number of farming memoirs written by men, including the bestselling *Bucolic Plague* by Josh Kilmer-Purcell, in which

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a gay couple leave their jobs in Manhattan to set up an animal farm on an old estate in the country.¹⁸ As in the women's memoirs, the gentlemen farmers portray themselves in a self-deprecating and comedic light, as smug city slickers who get their comeuppance wading in cow dung and pig entrails. Like their female counterparts, too, the men portray their rural experiments as a way to achieve a sense of authenticity and connection to nature. Yet there are far fewer farming memoirs by men and, unlike the memoirs by women, the male authors don't couch their farming adventures as cure-alls for low self-esteem, romantic failure, or professional dislocation. Nor do they depict animal husbandry as a revelatory exercise in parental care-giving.

The first book to popularize the new gentlewoman farmer narrative, and the first to weave maternal and natalist themes into the discourse of a "new" animal husbandry, was Barbara Kingsolver's influential bestseller, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*—a critique of corporate agribusiness wrapped in a personal account of the Kingsolver family's experiences running a small organic animal farm. Portions of *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* were devoted specifically to attacking animal rights and ethical vegetarianism, with the author chiding vegetarians for finding nothing wrong with "cutting the heads off lettuces," but becoming upset when farmers cut the heads off "crops that blink their eyes."¹⁹ "Who among us has never killed living creatures on purpose?" Kingsolver asks, rhetorically. But Kingsolver, in fact, professes not to like the word "killing" at all, preferring instead to speak of "harvesting." While "harvesting" animals "is a lot less fun than spending an autumn day picking apples off trees," Kingsolver writes, it is "a similar operation on principle and the same word."²⁰

Notwithstanding her attack on vegetarians as sentimentalists, Kingsolver anthropomorphizes the animals on her own farm, analogizing them to her own children. "April 23, my babies due!" she writes in her calendar, to mark the day the chicks she has ordered are to arrive from the hatchery. "Our turkeys would be pampered as children," she writes, explaining that she wants to instruct her daughter in the responsibilities of mothering. "Some parents would worry about a daughter taking on maternal responsibility so early in life, but Lily was already experienced," having helped care for chickens at the family's previous home.²¹

Since its publication in 2007, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* has inspired scores of similar memoirs by women who have emulated Kingsolver by running their own small-scale animal farms. Maternalism has appeared in these books too—a theme signaled on the books' covers, most of which feature photos of their smiling authors in mud boots and clutching chickens, lambs, or baby pigs, infant-like, to their gingham-clad chests. "We would make babies," Catherine Friend writes in *Hit By a Farm*, after she and her partner buy a farm in Minnesota to raise sheep.²² Another author puts a "basket of gear and supplies" by her back door, like "a hospital suitcase for a mother-in-waiting" or "a midwife . . . preparing for a midnight delivery."²³ For memoirist Ellen Stimson, the decision "to foster a little girl and a little boy"—a pair of lambs—fills the author with trepidation, because "it had been a long time since I had had a baby."²⁴ As the pregnant animals approach their due dates, the women anxiously take their temperatures and check their cervixes. When the babies are finally born, the women are over the moon. "Ohmygodohmygodohmygod," Friend enthuses on birthing day. "We'd made a baby boy."²⁵ Cradling the "sturdy little wool-baby" in her arms, Suzanne McMinn feels "starry-eyed."²⁶ Pastures in birthing season are described as "nurseries" and "out-of-control daycare" centers,²⁷ while herding lambs is said to resemble a "fire drill in a kindergarten."²⁸

For femivore memoirists who are single and childless, rearing farmed animals becomes a way to achieve an elusive motherhood. "I had become a single parent raising a goat," Jenna Woginrich writes, recounting how she learned to let down a goat's milk by massaging her teats.²⁹ Another author, lacking children of her own, writes of her joy in having "a baby on my lap," while boasting that her "skills progress to the point I can feed five babies at once."³⁰ In controlling the bodies of other animals, the women are able to demonstrate superhuman maternal powers. Slipping out of bed in the wee hours of the morning after breast-feeding their own newborns, the women go out and milk cows and goats, yielding brimming vats of milk that would make La Leche League green—or white—with envy. Ordinarily, a nursing mother goat can produce only a few pints of milk each day; Woginrich however is soon producing "more than 45 gallons of fresh milk" per month. "Holy cow!" she writes.

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“Strike that. Holy goat! *I’m doing it!*”³¹ In a fantasy of limitless fertility, the women “produce” thousands of eggs and breed llamas, sheep, pheasants, peacocks, ponies, cows, geese, pigs, alpaca, rabbits, ducks, and goats.

The traditional human dependent is of course not the domesticated pig, chicken, or llama, but the human infant. However, that kind of dependent, the sort demanding unwavering parental attention and care, has long been symptom and sign of woman’s subordinate cultural status in patriarchal society. As long as women remain solely responsible for bearing and raising children, they remain socially disadvantaged. Having a child, in a way, is not merely to *have* a dependent, it is to *be* dependent. Hence the importance placed by feminists in the 1960s and 1970s (and still today) on universal free childcare, as a way of freeing women to pursue careers without feeling the need to bear children at all. Today’s femivores, however, have gravitated to a new kind of “dependent,” one that allows them to engage in the pageantry of maternalism but without the risk of being tied down. These are babies who can be “loved” and “cared for,” but also gotten rid of once their company grows tedious. The memoirists want only ersatz children, ones requiring only a simulation of maternal love and responsibility. Casual indifference to the fates of their “babies” is thus the norm in the memoirs. When the women aren’t killing the animals outright, they’re killing them through malign neglect.

Animals die left and right on the women’s farms, with such frequency that the reader needs a scorecard to keep up. Sheep get crushed to death between bales of hay. Chickens fall between slats of pallets or get “mashed between the side of the feeder box and the wall of the chicken house,”³² or have their necks broken when the women accidentally crush them with heavy objects. One rabbit gets her leg caught in the steel mesh floor and tries to gnaw it off, dislocating her vertebra and paralyzing her “from the waist down.”³³ Snowstorms on the McCorkindale farm leave behind what the author jokingly calls “a very nice dusting of dead chickens,” when the suffering birds freeze to death.³⁴ Cows give birth alongside electric fences, incinerating their newborn calves. “Bad things happen,” Catherine Friend observes blandly after one ewe gives birth along an electric fence, killing two lambs.³⁵ When she and her partner accidentally get their herd of sheep pregnant out of season, they correct

the error by selling them all for slaughter. As more than one memoirist remarks, “There’s a saying in farming, ‘if you’re going to *have* livestock, you’re going to have deadstock.’”³⁶

Such perils are meant to distract the reader from the fact that it is the authors themselves who’ve placed their vulnerable charges at mortal risk. It is they too who will betray their “babies” in the end, ensuring that not one of them escapes a violent death. When Kingsolver’s chicks first arrive from the hatchery, the author finds them “adorable,” recounting how “they imprinted on me as Mama and rushed happily to greet me wherever I appeared.” Kingsolver confesses to feeling like “Cruella de Ville” for having deceived the young turkeys into mistaking her for their mother, since she has only taken them under her own wing in order to eventually kill them. However, once the chicks mature into young adults and begin exerting their own agency and will, Kingsolver no longer wants them around. “Many of us were relieved that year at harvest time,” she writes. Right up to the moment of slaughter, Kingsolver nonetheless is still comparing her relationship to the birds to a relationship between mother and child, in a tacit acknowledgment that, unlike picking apples off trees, the violence she is to inflict is an act of betrayal. Moments before delivering the coup de grace, Kingsolver registers the “downy softness and a vulnerable heartbeat” of the animal whose life she is about to extinguish. “I felt maternal,” she observes, “while at the same time looking straight down the [kill] pipe toward the purpose of this enterprise.”³⁷

In *Macbeth*, after Lord and Lady Macbeth have determined to murder King Duncan and his men, guests under their roof, Lady Macbeth privately begs the “spirits” to “unsex” her by “damming up the access and passage to remorse.” Only by tamping down any “compunctious visitings of nature,” compassion, can she proceed with her “fell purpose.” The memoirists similarly suppress natural stirrings of empathy in order to destroy their vulnerable young charges. The result is a succession of grotesque scenes in which maternal love ends in unfeeling betrayal. “I stroked his warm, warty head . . . I could feel his heart beating, slowly,” writes Novella Carpenter in *Farm City: The Education of an Urban Farmer* of Harold, the loving turkey she has raised, seconds before cutting off his head.³⁸ Catherine Friend meanwhile describes how she “clung fiercely

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to this tender animal in my arms, wanting to protect her from whatever dangers lay ahead,” except for the most lethal of all—herself. When an affectionate lamb becomes smitten with Friend, following her around and demanding to be nuzzled and patted on the head, she names him “Mr. Playful” and gushes to her partner, “I feel like kissing him right on his nose.” Weeks later, Friend sits in her pickup outside a slaughterhouse, weeping, as “Mr. Playful” is killed. By suppertime, however, she’s right as rain again, and sits down eagerly to dine on the lamb’s body. Eating Mr. Playful’s “savory and incredibly tender” flesh, she writes, is her way of “honoring the lamb *that died*”—a telling use of the passive voice which, like Kingsolver’s preference for euphemism, is meant to conceal the author’s moral culpability in an unnecessary act of violence.³⁹

Thinking about killing the pigs she’s raised, Carpenter wonders whether the animals are “really as intelligent as everyone” says they are, and hence whether she would “end up keeping the beasts as seven-hundred-pound pets” or instead melt them down into fat. “Of course it would be the latter,” she writes, “I knew myself well enough by then. A pragmatic farmer, not a soft sentimentalist.”⁴⁰ Though Carpenter and other femivores often accuse vegans of “sentimentality,” however, it is they who engage in sentimental depictions of the animals they exploit and kill, treating them not as individuals worthy of dignity or respect, but as platforms for the authors’ own narcissistic displays of affect. In a conversation with another farmer about killing chickens, Carpenter remarks, “It’s solemn,” and recounts how they “both touched our hearts.”⁴¹ These sorts of empty gestures, like Friend crying in her pickup, or the *de rigueur* ritual of “thanking” the animal corpse before a meal, recur throughout all of the memoirs.

But sentimentality, a form of disguised bad faith, is not to be confused with genuine *sentiment* or feeling. As James Baldwin observed in his critique of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and similar efforts by liberal white race reformers:

Sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel; the wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his aversion to experience, his fear of

life, his arid heart; and it is always, therefore, the signal of secret and violent inhumanity, the mark of cruelty.⁴²

Baldwin's observation helps explain how sentimentality in these accounts can bleed so readily into open sadism. A dark undertow of violence runs beneath the femivore narratives, as caring and killing get woven into a lethal maternalism, in which images of infant care segue effortlessly into Grand Guignol spectacle. In *Bones, Blood and Butter*, Gabrielle Hamilton's memoir about becoming a chef, the author thus confesses that each time she changes diapers on a "noncompliant child" she's reminded of trussing chickens and wrangling eels. After Hamilton sends her lambs, "with their little crooked sets of teeth and milky eyes," to the butcher, she skewers their lifeless bodies "onto ten-foot poles made of ash" and recounts how she "roasted four or five of the whole little guys." In a macabre parody of maternal watchfulness, the author writes, "The lambs were arranged over the coals head to toe and head to toe, the way you'd put a bunch of kids having a sleepover to bed." Hamilton is fascinated by the sound of the lambs' blood as it drips "down into the coals with a hypnotic and rhythmic bliss . . . Hiss. Hiss. Hiss."⁴³

Many of the memoirists speak of "getting their hands dirty," a euphemism for enacting violence. "I had daily intimacy not just with *dirt* but with blood, manure, milk, pus . . . the grease of engines and the grease of animals, with innards," writes Kimball in *The Dirty Life*.⁴⁴ Another memoirist observes that "most of my story" was "written in sweat, tears, and even a little blood."⁴⁵ And there will be blood. Buckets and buckets of it. Blood pouring out of the torn tracheas of cows, blood gushing out of the throats of thrashing pigs, caught with giant buckets. Perhaps, confesses Catherine Friend, even "more blood than I was comfortable with."⁴⁶ With despotic fury, the women stab rabbits, shoot terrified raccoons, dismember deer, and roam the barnyard lopping off heads. Farms become abattoirs, cemeteries, killing fields. In *Chickens in the Road*, Suzanne McMinn traps a raccoon, then shoots him with a rifle as he cowers in the cage. "Wow," she writes, "I felt strange. I'd just killed an animal. I felt good and bad all at the same time."⁴⁷ But the truth is, she feels very, very good. Though the women wonder whether they'll be

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“tough enough” when the moment of truth comes, they prove eager and even impatient to kill.

When journalist-cum-hunter Lily McCaulou kills her first animal with a well-placed “head shot”—“a clean, perfect kill” of a pheasant in a canned hunt—she experiences “euphoria.” Driving home, “I roll down the windows, crank up the radio, and sing at the top of my lungs,” she recounts. Like a man boasting of having deflowered his first virgin, the author writes that “no other kill . . . evokes such pure elation as my first.” McCaulou—who compares herself to a modern-day Diana the Huntress—soon graduates from killing birds and small mammals to exterminating much larger animals. Her moment of arrival comes the day she finds herself “kneeling before a bull elk, up to my shoulders in blood,” “drenched in blood and laughing” at her “earlier squeamishness.”⁴⁸ For other memoirists, too, shedding the blood of animals becomes a way to symbolically reenact earlier rituals of female maturation—a way to signify loss of a childlike innocence in the acceptance of the “adult knowledge”—as Lierre Keith puts it in her anti-vegetarian screed, *The Vegetarian Myth*—that “death is the substance of life.”⁴⁹ In a kind of reverse transubstantiation, real blood gets transformed into something metaphysical—an aesthetic of the sublime and a newly “authentic” self. In Carpenter’s *Farm City*, the author symbolically invokes the rite of menses when she renounces her former vegetarianism by throwing out her *Moosewood Cookbook* and replacing it with *The Encyclopedia of Country Living*, an instruction manual on DIY slaughter that becomes “marked with blood,” Carpenter says, with her first kill.⁵⁰

A leading force in locavore politics in the San Francisco Bay area, Carpenter is an especially eager killer of animals, someone who enjoys seeing them die. Of the first pigs she has raised, Carpenter writes, “I was going to have to kill one of Simon’s babies . . . Yeah I gotta find someone to execute those fuckers.” She hires a female butcher named Sheila to do the deed, telling her, “I really want to see the pigs die.” Later, when she learns in a phone call that Sheila has gone ahead and killed the animals without her being there, Carpenter is so infuriated that she slams down the phone and screams, “Cunt!” Seeing the dead pigs’ dismembered bodies for the first time, Carpenter impulsively reaches over to a pig’s

severed head and scoops its raw brains into her mouth, pronouncing them “delicious.”⁵¹ In another passage, Carpenter boasts of the “bloody revenge” she enacts on an opossum who’d made his way into the poultry enclosure one night. Recalling “the cuteness of my ducks, and the goose who would rest her head in my lap,” Carpenter takes a shovel and brings it “down on the opossum’s neck,” thrusting repeatedly until his head rolls off. “Caught up in protecting my babies,” she quips, “I had become a savage.”⁵² Yet her fierce determination to protect her “babies” is nowhere in evidence just a few weeks later, when she carries a trusting white duck into her house, places him in the bathtub, and decapitates him with a pruner. “He quacked and swam around for a few minutes . . . I merely squeezed the loppers shut. The duck went from being a happy camper to being a headless camper. I plucked and eviscerated him outside on a table.”⁵³

Such flippant passages, in which the author openly mocks her victims, give the lie to the memoirists’ repeated claims to “love” and “respect” animals. Friend finds it amusing when a lamb strays against an electric fence and receives an 8,000-volt shock (a voltage so high that it burns a hole in a leather glove), causing him to shoot “straight up in the air” and to run crying to his mother as the other lambs “scatter in panic.”⁵⁴ When lambs are born on Friend’s farm, she and her partner “steal it from its mother” in order “to do things to it.” “We sneak up to a pair of sleeping twins and each pick one up. The ewe no longer sees her babies on the ground and panics.”⁵⁵ Similar heartbreaking scenes, of traumatized sheep and cows returning day after day to the ground where they last saw their babies, sniffing the ground and lowing in distress, can be found in many of the memoirs, their authors betraying not the slightest remorse or sympathy for their victims. The women even joke about the impending doom of their victims, finding humor in their very guilelessness and vulnerability. Woginrich, observing that the pig she has raised will soon “die in the same place where she has spent the last three months sleeping and eating,” remarks, “It will surprise the hell out of her.” And it does. On the fateful morning, as Woginrich reaches down and scratches the pig’s ear, the pig turns and looks at her “curiously,” wagging her “little curled tail” and making “gentle” noises. “I’m proud

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of this Pig,” Woginrich writes. Soon, a trio of hired killers arrives in a truck, seizes the trusting animal, slashes her throat, and carves her body up into slabs. Woginrich sticks around to watch. It’s her way of taking “responsibility,” she writes. “I *need* to be there,” she says, to bear witness to the “whole process, from holding a piglet in a dog crate, squealing in my arms, to the day its head lies on a snowbank.”⁵⁶

HUNGER GAMES

In 1974, a young chef at a feminist food collective called Moosewood published a new book of vegetarian recipes.^{*57} The *Moosewood Cookbook* soon became one of the most popular cookbooks of all time, and the name of its youthful author, Mollie Katzen, became synonymous with vegetarianism. In 2007, however, the author of the iconic *Moosewood* announced that she had started eating meat again. “For about 30 years I didn’t eat meat at all, just a bite of fish every once in a while, and always some dairy,” Katzen told an interviewer with *Food and Wine* magazine. “Lately, I’ve been eating a little meat. People say, ‘Ha, ha, Mollie Katzen is eating steak.’ But now that cleaner, naturally fed meat is available, it’s a great option for anyone who’s looking to complete his diet.” Katzen now claimed to have been misunderstood all these years. She’d never said that she didn’t “want people to eat meat;” she’d only “wanted to supply possibilities that were low on the food chain.” The heroine of vegetarians everywhere now mocked them. “For people who are against eating meat because it’s wrong or offensive to eat animals,” Katzen said, “even the cleanest grass-fed beef won’t be good enough.”⁵⁸

Katzen’s about-face represented more than a change in diet—it was the repudiation of a movement and a moment when many Americans, particularly many women, had for the first time become open to a new way of relating to food and to animals. How had the nation gone from the feminist-vegetarian *Moosewood* to the spectacle of women hunting moose in the woods?

* Moosewood was one of a number of feminist restaurant collectives at the time that sought an alternative to hierarchical (hence patriarchal) managerial practices.

Undoubtedly, many women have been drawn to animal husbandry for many of the same reasons that men have, including a longing for a more “authentic” relation to nature and the food economy, and as part of a more general cultural reaction against veganism and animal rights. However, to fully grasp the significance of the femivore phenomenon, we must attend to the specific historical and cultural plight of women in the early decades of the 21st century. As we have seen, the mass media have depicted the mania for women hunting, fishing, and animal husbandry as “feminist.” However, whether that is indeed so depends on how we construe the history and meaning of feminism itself, and specifically whether we find ourselves satisfied with a conception of women’s progress that emphasizes women’s formal, rather than substantive, equality with men.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, radical feminists had sought not only formal parity with men, such as equality in the workplace and in government, but also a broader transformation of patriarchal norms and institutions, including the overcoming of rape culture and an end to militarism, imperialism, and racism. As the feminist poet and essayist Adrienne Rich wrote in “Toward a Woman-Centered University” in the early 1970s, the question facing women wasn’t merely whether they should be equal participants in society alongside men, but “whether this male-created, male-dominated structure is really capable of serving the humanism and freedom it professes.” Rich and other radical feminists suggested that it was not, and that patriarchal society’s “suicidal obsession with power and technology” was incompatible with general liberation and a just society.⁵⁹ True women’s liberation thus implied not merely formal equality between men and women, but the creation of a new society, one based on principles of universal equality, freedom, and nonviolence. It was out of this same vision of a more just world that eco-feminist theorists like Marti Kheel, Josephine Donovan, Ynestra King, and Carol J. Adams would soon go on to highlight human oppression against other animals as one of the most destructive features of patriarchal society. The highwater mark of these efforts was Adams’ breakthrough book, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*. Published in 1990—the 20th anniversary of Kate Millett’s influential feminist classic, *Sexual Politics*—Adams’ *The Sexual Politics of Meat* argued that the killing and

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consumption of animals had long been associated with masculinity, and that women and animals alike are objectified, fragmented, and subjected to violence under patriarchal relations.⁶⁰ By the time Adams' book appeared on the scene, however, the women's movement had been in decline for years, and feminist interest in vegetarianism, too, had waned. With the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1981, a period of broad political reaction had set in, transforming the political and cultural landscape and leading to a retrenchment of traditional gender norms. The conservative backlash against feminism—along with internecine squabbles within the women's movement itself, including conflicts over identity politics, movement priorities, and competing currents of feminist theory—had fragmented the women's movement and sapped it of its former grassroots momentum. Liberal feminism, oriented largely around winning formal parity with men, now came into ascendancy. As a consequence, more radical elements within the movement—those that had questioned the underlying structures and values of the patriarchal system, including speciesism—were eclipsed. Mainstream feminism thus moved further away from environmentalism, vegetarianism, and animal rights.

By 1990, many women had gained entry into previously closed professions and had won key legal victories for reproductive rights and against discrimination in the workplace. However, women's advances in the workplace hadn't altered their fundamental status, which remained one of social subordination to men. Women remained responsible for the bulk of domestic labor and child-rearing, they were still paid less than their male counterparts, and they remained as susceptible as before to male sexual assault and abuse. For white middle-class and upper-class women, the group that had gained the most from post-70s feminist reform, equality had come to seem both tantalizingly close and frustratingly out of reach. As Susan Faludi observed in *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, in an echo of Betty Friedan's diagnosis of "the problem that has no name" decades earlier, "Behind this celebration of the American woman's victory, behind the news, cheerfully and endlessly repeated, that the struggle for women's rights is

won, another message flashes. You may be free and equal now, it says to women, but you have never been more miserable.”⁶¹

I want to suggest that it was this contradiction—between the promise of gender equality, on the one hand, and women’s continuing status as the social inferiors to men on the other—that created the cultural opening for a regressive project in which middle-class white women, partly under the mantle of feminism, have channeled their frustration and rage over the unfinished business of sexual equality into animal husbandry and other forms of animal harm. The fact that the phenomenon has arisen during a period of patriarchal retrenchment and neoliberal austerity—i.e., amidst a rollback of women’s rights and a cultural retreat into various private “localisms” that came at the expense of broader civic engagement—is no accident.

The publication of Michael Pollan’s bestselling *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* in 2006, followed the next year by Kingsolver’s *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, helped to consolidate a new pastoral ideal in America, one that romanticized small-scale animal farming and the meat economy. During this same period, a group of women in San Francisco issued a manifesto for “locavorism,” a new grassroots consumer movement oriented around buying locally farmed produce and animal products. Locavorism became popular among middle-class consumers interested in pushing back against corporate agribusiness and hoping to regain a sense of “connection” to the land. Men and women alike were drawn into locavorism. But the effects of that were unequal. The influx of women into animal pastoralism siphoned off women’s activist energies into a communitarian and depoliticized movement that substituted rural domesticity for a more robust conception of feminist struggle. As Kristin Kimball writes in her book, before she began running an animal farm, “the word *home* could make me cry,” because “I wanted one. With a man. A house. The smell of cut grass, sheets on a line, a child running through a sprinkler.”⁶² After forsaking professional lives in the city, she and other post-feminist pioneers set furiously to work canning, preserving, pickling, gardening, knitting, sewing, quilting, baking, and making homemade jerky, transforming themselves into “domestic superheroes” (as one

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memoirist describes herself), in a ferocious return to stereotypically “feminine” activities improbably re-cast as tactics of *empowerment*.

However, since few women today welcome the idea of a total retreat to the domestic sphere, some countervailing demonstration of women’s power within the domestic sphere is plainly needed, in order to paper over the contradiction between the femivore memoirists’ avowed quests for authenticity and independence, on the one hand, and their longings to fulfill traditional gender roles, on the other. Domination of animals provides it. In the femivore memoirs, violence against animals serves as a kind of psychic ballast, keeping the women from sinking entirely under what would otherwise be merely another form of conventional domesticity. By “mothering” animals, then killing them, the women have found a way to square the circle of the new femininity, which demands that women be both vulnerable *and* strong, domesticated *and* self-sufficient. By raising pigs and sheep—then bearing eager witness to their deaths—the women are able to exhibit traditional caring behavior, while at the same time demonstrating the toughness and ruthlessness we stereotypically associate with men. Having spent their whole lives in a world centered around men and their brutal deeds, women can now take a piece of the action for themselves. Hence the “swagger”—as Jessica Applestone, co-owner of Fleisher’s Grass-Fed and Organic Meats, calls it—among women taking her butchering class for the first time. “There’s a macho performal [*sic*] nature that some of these people crave,” she writes. “And what better a performance than the blood and guts of butchery?”⁶³

Femivorism has given concrete form to cultural fantasies of a militarized white femininity, allowing women to claim a “transgressive” status while nonetheless engaging in practices that keep them within the safe bounds of existing patriarchal values, norms, and institutions. Many of the memoirists, while ostensibly seeking to demonstrate their strength and autonomy, nonetheless seek out male approbation, rather than (in most cases) meaningful connections with other women. The ritual of learning to wield a gun, that most potent cultural symbol of masculine power, features prominently in many of the accounts. “I ran my hand over the smooth, dark wood of the stock and shivered,”

Kimball writes, caressing her first rifle. “Hand me a bow and arrow or a rifle and *it makes sense*,” Woginrich confesses. Fielding a gun for the first time, Catherine Friend thinks, “Gosh, this is fun. Hand me more bullets.” After considering different weapons, Friend finally settles upon an air pistol, which she will use to kill groundhogs and other “pests” on her farm. (A young woman staying with her vows, “we’re going to shoot those SOBs.”) “I yearned for more space, more breathing room,” Friend writes.⁶⁴ And, indeed, how better to carve out a little *Lebensraum* in the wilderness than with a blazing firearm? Soon, the hills around the memoirists’ farms are alive with the sounds of gunfire, as the farms and their surrounds get transformed into free-fire zones for killing deer, opossums, pigeons, squirrels, and any other living being hapless enough to wander across the women’s defense perimeter in search of food or shelter or a mate. Memoirists who describe themselves as liberals and progressives suddenly reveal a patriotic fascination with all things military. “I’ve always fantasized about being one of those Navy SEALs, Special Forces, or Delta Force dudes, I think it would be a blast,” McCorkindale writes.⁶⁵ “I begin to understand why hunting is often compared to war,” McCaulou confesses. Like a soldier victorious in battle, she and the other women keep the body parts of their victims—feathers, tails, teeth—as fetishistic tokens. Suzanne McMinn nails the tail of the raccoon she has shot to the front porch—as a warning to other “pests,” just as colonial officials used to impale the heads of defeated Native warriors on poles at the town gate.

One might well argue that women waging war on animals is merely the continuation of liberal feminist politics by other means. However, as I have suggested, only in the context of the historical decline of feminism could causing harm to other animals come to be mistaken for women’s empowerment. If animal agriculture really is a way for affluent white women to work through the conflictual nature of 21st-century femininity, it has yet to serve as an effective vehicle for challenging the prerogatives of men. With its false pieties of “respect” for animals, its love of guns, knives, and blood, femivorism is indeed best seen as a reactionary movement—a maladaptive response to the contradictions of patriarchal society—allied with some of the most destructive features of patriarchal

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culture. Femivorism is displaced aggression. Today's real-life Dianas and Katnisses may not be able to shatter the corporate glass ceiling with their arrows or send conservative state legislators scattering for cover before they can shutter another abortion clinic, but they can make some deer or pig *pay*. At the end of the day, however, sticking pigs is not the same as sticking it to the Man. Even the memoirists' insatiable hunger for meat and blood as "enlivening" foods—a recurring theme in many of the accounts—suggests nothing so much as a sublimated desire to participate in society as the true equals of men.

FEMININE "CREDIBILITY"

As one might have expected, the idea that animals can be raised and killed "humanely" and with "compassion"—a myth crucial to perpetuating the injustices of the meat economy—has been adopted not only by organic farmers and locavores, but also by the world's largest meatpackers and industrialized farming companies. Smithfield, owned by the WH Group in China, the world's largest killer of pigs, thus advertises itself as the "World's Leader in Animal Care," while Tyson Foods, the world's biggest killer of chickens, boasts that its "Animal Well-Being" program "promotes the health, safety and well-being of the animals," while its company personnel act as "stewards" of the animals they exploit.⁶⁶ Indeed, the humane hoax is not confined to health food stores and farmer's markets. The very plasticity of "humane" discourse, the fact that it can be successfully deployed across small- and large-scale contexts, organic farms and inorganic ones, shows just how critical it has become to the functioning of the meat system. Within this discourse, femivorism is an important strategic asset. If "sustainable" organic animal farming is merely the flipside of industrialized animal agriculture, then femivorism is the ideological ligature that now binds the two systems together.

Judith Capper, a self-proclaimed "livestock sustainability consultant" to the U.S. cattle industry, has explicitly invoked her femininity to legitimate large-scale farming in agriculture. In a blog entry entitled "Do Moms Have Instant Beef Credibility?" Capper promotes the beef industry by linking stories of women as mothers, domestic providers,

and nurturers to the “caring” work of industrialized animal agriculture. Noting that women “who have children are trusted by female consumers more than the traditional scientific image of an older man in a white lab coat,” Capper urges male ranchers to ask their “wife, girlfriend, daughter, mother, granddaughter, or niece to . . . let the female consumer know why . . . beef is a great choice for our families, and why we spend time caring for baby calves almost as if they are our own children.” Only women, Capper explains, can make “that female–female connection that, like it or not, does promote an instant degree of trust.” At a meeting of the International Livestock Conference, one prominent cattle lobbyist praised Capper for helping “to improve the image of beef sustainability,” noting that “Jude Capper is credible because she is female” and suggesting that Capper would become “even more credible when she has children” of her own. Recounting this incident on her blog, Capper revealed to her readers that she was seven months pregnant. “I am gaining credibility by the day . . . pound by pound . . . literally,” she wrote. And with her new “baby bump,” she would have even “more opportunities for conversations about the importance of beef in pregnancy nutrition.”⁶⁷

CONCLUSION

Reading the femivore accounts, it is easy to forget that the majority of vegans, as well as many of the leading figures in contemporary animal advocacy, are women—courageous individuals like Karen Davis of United Poultry Concerns, patrice jones, the director of VINE Sanctuary, and Jenny Brown, co-founder of the Woodstock Animal Sanctuary. Such women are modeling relations of genuine care and respect for nonhuman animals by rescuing them from slaughterhouses, managing sanctuaries, and educating the public about the true nature of the animal economy.^{*68} Notably, however, it isn’t these women’s experiences being profiled in *The New York Times* or *The New Yorker*, nor their memoirs being awarded six-figure contracts with Harper & Row or Penguin or other big publishing houses. Nor has the culture industry taken any interest in publicizing the experiences of the many caring men who have also devoted their lives to animal advocacy—men like Robert

* An estimated 60% of vegans in Britain and nearly 80% in the U.S. are women.

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Grillo, director of Free from Harm, or longtime animal advocate Kim Stallwood. Only women who kill are deemed worthy of media attention.

The reason why should be obvious. By creating a false distinction between “good” and “bad” forms of animal exploitation and violence, the animal industry has convinced the public that there is nothing wrong with animal agriculture, per se, only with the way it is practiced. However, it isn’t just the animal industry that has a stake in this. Capitalists and consumers, conservatives and liberals, small-scale farmers and corporate industrial farms alike all wish to re-“naturalize” animal husbandry as a permanent, benignant fixture of the human condition. The new hoax of “humane” meat is thus a convenience for all, a way to neutralize animal advocacy and to fend off the bad conscience of society. In this context, cultural stereotypes of women as “natural nurturers” are proving more and more indispensable. By blurring the line between caring for animals and killing them, femivorism is reshaping cultural narratives around animals, gender, and dominion. And in doing so, it is removing from our collective grasp one of the last resources we have for resisting the violence at the core of our civilization—compassion.

John Sanbonmatsu, Ph.D. is an associate professor of philosophy at Worcester Polytechnic Institute. He is the author of *The Postmodern Prince: Critical Theory, Left Strategy, and the Making of a New Political Subject* and the editor of the book, *Critical Theory and Animal Liberation*. A leading critic of cellular or cultivated meat, Dr. Sanbonmatsu created and now curates the CleanMeat-hoax.com website and is currently at work on a new book, *The Omnivore’s Deception: What We Get Wrong about Meat, Animals, and the Nature of Moral Life*.