**Oryx and Crake and the New Nostalgia for Meat**

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### Abstract

Recent years have seen the development of a new trend in gastronomic discourse toward acknowledging and even valorizing the role of animal slaughter in meat production. This development problematizes some of the ideas of influential theorists of meat such as Fiddes (1990) and Adams (1991): namely, that the animal in (post)modernity has been rendered invisible in the process of meat production and consumption (Adams, 1991), and that meat itself is a commodity with a declining reputation (Fiddes, 1990). This paper analyzes the role of nostalgia in this trend toward do-it-yourself (or at least witness-it-yourself) slaughter, and takes these developments in cultural tastes and feelings as a context within which to analyze the special significance of meat in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*. In identifying this burgeoning nostalgia for meat and contextualizing it within a risk-reflexive, consumer-driven, dystopian near-future society of the author’s own devising, *Oryx and Crake* foregrounds and illuminates these real-world developments in the meanings of meat.

### Keywords

cruelty, human-animal relations, in vitro meat, Margaret Atwood, Oryx and Crake, meat, Nature, nostalgia, slaughter, vegetarianism

### I. Introduction

In 1990, anthropologist Nick Fiddes published what was to become a key text in the social scientific study of meat. *Meat: A Natural Symbol* (Fiddes, 1990) was an exhaustively researched and engagingly written compendium of statistics, literature, and qualitative interviews on the subject of meat. In it, Fiddes argued that meat is a powerful symbol of human dominion over “Nature.” He suggested, however, that such symbolic subjugation of “Nature” was no longer in line with the new social mores of ecology and environmentalism (pp. 230-232); this contradiction, combined with spiraling food scares and well-publicized health risks, was resulting in what he termed the “turbulently declining reputation of meat” (p. 233). Other theorists agreed—vegetarianism
was on the rise, and meat remained popular only because the animal had been rendered completely invisible from the act of meat-eating (Adams, 1991, p. 40). The enduring popularity of flesh-eating hinged upon this subterfuge: the slaughter of animals was kept safely obscured behind high walls in euphemistically named “food processing units” (Vialles, 1994, pp. 19-32), meat was presented neatly shrink-wrapped in anonymous shapes (Fiddes, 1990, p. 95), and even the language used to speak of meat served to obscure its violent origins (Adams, 1991, pp. 63-76; Fiddes, 1990, p. 97). Once the animal had truly been brought back into the equation, eating meat would naturally become problematic: as the popular adage holds, if slaughterhouses had glass walls, we’d all be vegetarians.

The theories sketched above all have valid points. Recent trends in gastronomy suggest, however, that something more complex may be at work: the meanings of meat in post-modernity, it appears, are not so easy to pin down. The last eight or nine years have witnessed an explosion of books, articles, and documentaries in which the slaughter of animals for food is openly acknowledged, even valorized. Celebrity chefs slaughter animals in front of live studio audiences (see Moskin, 2008); journalists “adopt” calves and follow their progress through the cattle-raising industry before finally eating them (Pollan, 2002); documentaries extol the spiritual benefits of raising and slaughtering one’s own animals (Young, 2005).

In order to make sense of these texts, it is illuminating to consider them in reference to another: the novel Oryx and Crake (2003a), Margaret Atwood’s dystopian vision of consumer capitalism run rampant. In what follows, I will use the developments in cultural taste and feeling described above as a context within which to analyze Atwood’s project in Oryx and Crake—a novel that foregrounds the theme of human-animal relations that underlies so much of Atwood’s previous work (Borrell, 2005; McKay, 2005). As Armstrong (2008) and Tiffin (2007) have noted, human-animal relations are of particular relevance in Oryx and Crake: ruminations on the edibility of human and nonhuman animals alike suffuse the narrative, with the story’s main character constantly under the threat of being eaten himself (Tiffin, 2007). Furthermore, the ethical ramifications of genetically modifying nonhuman animals for consumption is clearly one of the novel’s concerns (Armstrong, 2008), and Atwood herself recalls “noting with alarm that trends derided ten years ago as paranoid fantasies had become possibilities, then actualities” (Atwood, 2003b, p. 2). Oryx and Crake can therefore help in identifying some of the characteristics of the current shift in attitudes to meat and “meat animals.”
II. The Prestige of Meat in *Oryx and Crake*

In many societies, our own Western postindustrial one included, animal flesh is accorded a special prestige, and a special set of meanings, which far outweigh any strictly nutritional value it may possess (Fiddes, 1990, p. 12). This is emphatically the case in the near-future world of *Oryx and Crake*. Meat is viewed by the characters in the novel as the “real” thing, as more desirable than soy-based substitutes, and as somehow the incarnation of a golden bygone era when life was better and more meaningful. Furthermore, the “naturalness” of the meat in question is key to the amount of prestige that is accorded it: laboratory-grown meat is heavily derided, whereas meat from real, once-living animals is much more prestigious. These examples of the nostalgic fetishization of meat, although they are drawn from a fictional text, nevertheless accurately reflect recent trends in the real world, providing a framework within which to consider the inner workings and implications of this new nostalgia for meat.

In the broiling world of climatic upheaval and deepening social injustice that *Oryx and Crake* so vividly describes, meat is becoming harder and harder to come by. Not only is a warming world wreaking havoc on agricultural production, but disease and biological terrorism are running rampant through the meat production sectors. The novel opens with young Jimmy’s earliest complete memory: a bonfire of cows and sheep and pigs, burned because they have been dangerously contaminated, infected by saboteurs unknown with a “hostile bioform,” which necessitates their destruction (pp. 16-17). Such an image will have an immediate real-world referent in the minds of many readers: in the late 1980s and again in the mid-1990s in Britain, vast piles of cows were condemned to the charnel pits, amid fears that a human-caused (and potentially human-threatening) disease called Bovine Spongiform Encephalcy (BSE) was festering within them (Bell and Valentine, 1997, p. 51; Franklin 1999, pp. 169-170; Rifkin, 1992, p. 143). Further scares regarding other “food animals” were to follow (Bell and Valentine, 1997, p. 51): increasingly, eating meat is becoming a risky business (Fiddes, 1990; Franklin, 1999, pp. 162-168).

A brief discussion of the sociological concept of risk is in order here: in a nutshell, risk theory posits that as the control exerted by humans over the nonhuman world becomes ever more complete, the risks of catastrophe when that control slips become greater and greater (Franklin, 1999, pp. 57-60). Modern methods of meat production embody this double bind of control and catastrophe perfectly: the BSE crisis, after all, is widely thought to have been precipitated by the excessive, *unnatural* control that the modern factory
production of beef entails: namely, the practice of feeding protein-rich sheep offal to cows in order to cut costs and rapidly fatten them for slaughter (Rifkin, 1993, p. 143; Fiddes, 1991, p. 139; Franklin, 1999, p. 168). Writes British philosopher Mary Midgley of the BSE crisis: “[T]hese consequences are not, then, an accident. They flow directly from the moral obtuseness that goes with greed” (Midgley, 2004, pp. 104-5). *Oryx and Crake* simply takes this concept of “the moral obtuseness of greed” a step further: the burning piles of animals at the beginning of the novel have been intentionally infected, very possibly to drive up meat prices (Atwood, 2003a, p. 18). The inexorable logic of the market dictates that disasters can potentially be as lucrative as they can be devastating. As *Oryx and Crake* makes clear, ultimately it is consumer capitalism itself that is the method of control spawning such debilitating risks.

In this near-future world of risk run rampant, meat is becoming scarce, and safer and cheaper soy substitutes begin to dominate the market. Readily available meat, *real* meat, is the stuff of dreams, a fond memory from a bygone world. “Everyone’s parents moaned on about stuff like that,” Jimmy thinks to himself. “Remember hamburger chains, always real beef, remember hot-dog stands? Remember before New York was New New York? Remember when voting mattered?” (Atwood, 2003a, p. 63; italics in the original). Perhaps it is not surprising that this nostalgia for the lost golden days of the world before would manifest itself in a fetishization of an edible commodity, given that, in *Oryx and Crake*, hedonistic consumerism is essentially the new religion (Atwood, 2003a, p. 295). What *is* surprising, however, is that this longing for “real” meat would also be strongly exhibited by Jimmy and his peers, a cynical generation that has never known a world where meat was plentiful and who have little patience for stories of the good old days. Perhaps it is due in part to the politics of scarcity, whereby that which is not readily available becomes most desirable. However, “naturally” procured food of any kind seems to be scarce in *Oryx and Crake*; nevertheless, it is meat that is singled out for special attention.

A consideration of the enduring symbolic significance of meat in Western societies helps to explain why this might be so. Julia Twigg (1983) argues that it is the bloodiness of meat that helps perpetuate its prestige: in a society in which property and power are inherited through bloodlines, a food so rich in blood can itself come to be seen as a transmitter of power (Twigg, 1983, pp. 22-23; see also Fiddes, 1991, pp. 68-70). This idea, that in some indefinable yet crucial way you are what you eat, is remarkably consistent and pervasive (Murcott, 1986). Eating is, in a very literal way, an incorporation of the external world into the human body: in the case of meat-eating, this incorporation is doubly fraught because of its potential to upset the long-standing Western tradition of a strict human-animal divide (Franklin, 1999, p. 11). Although the act of eating meat can be seen as a powerful assertion of human
supremacy and dominance over nonhuman animals and the natural world (Fiddes, 1991, p. 65), thus serving to maintain this distinction, it simultaneously blurs it. The act of eating animal flesh has often been thought to transmit those desirable qualities which humans have filed under “animal,” such as strength and virility (Twigg, 1983, p. 23); the question of which kinds of animal are fit to be eaten by which kinds of people is often strictly regulated. The preponderance of animal-food taboos, of which there are far more than any other kind of food taboo, attests to the cultural importance of such regulation (Twigg, 1983, p. 18).

There is much about meat to make it such fertile ground, conceptually, for ideas of prestige to take root, and the world in which Oryx and Crake is set proves no exception. “Real” meat is for the powerful and the rich, a potent marker of prestige. Jimmy marvels at the food served at his scientist friend Crake’s university, the prestigious Watson-Crick Institute. There, the animal products are all “real”—real shrimps (not CrustaeSoy like Jimmy gets at his own run-down arts college), real cheese, real chicken (although Jimmy avoids this last for fear that it might be from laboratory-grown meat—a theme I will return to later). On a dinner outing with Crake, Jimmy watches in awe as Crake orders a plate of “real Japanese beef, as rare as diamonds. It must have cost him a fortune” (Atwood, 2003a, p. 289). In the world of Oryx and Crake, the old taboos regulating who gets what meat are more powerful than ever, and, just as housewives and children in the industrial revolution deferred their meat consumption to the man of the house (Adams, 1991, p. 29; Twigg, 1983, pp. 24-5; Rifkin 1992, pp. 242-3), meat in Oryx and Crake is for the rich, the powerful, the socially elite.

Since, in the world of Oryx and Crake, “real” meat is held up to be something extremely prestigious and socially desirable, it is illuminating to consider what kinds of meat are not considered “real” in the novel, and why this might be so. After all, until the fourteenth century, the word meat could mean any substantial nourishment, not necessarily animal flesh (Adams, 1991, p. 36; Fiddes, 1991, p. 3). So, what kinds of meat described in Oryx and Crake are not considered “real”? There seem to be several shades of authenticity. Soy products, although widely consumed in the world of the novel, are most inauthentic of all, derided as “fake” and merely a pale substitute for the real thing. Thus, Jimmy and Crake must reluctantly settle for SoyOBoy Burgers, since the chalkboard menus in their school cafeteria read, “No meat this month” (Atwood, 2003a, p. 72). There is also, however, another form of meat product which, although not as obviously inauthentic as soy substitutes, is still considered a far cry from “real” animal flesh. “ChickieNobs” are a genetically modified version of chicken in which the individual animals have been all but removed from the process: instead, there is merely a many-limbed, no-headed,
completely nonsentient “meat tuber” from which appendages can be harvested for human consumption (Atwood, 2003a, pp. 202-3). Atwood is not simply indulging in flights of fancy here: laboratory-grown, in vitro meat is currently in development, for medical, commercial, and even artistic purposes (see Catts and Zurr, 2002). In vitro tissue grown for the purpose of human consumption enjoys strong support from some animal advocacy and environmentalist organizations, which are appalled at what they perceive as the cruel and ecologically destructive methods of modern animal agriculture (see http://www.peta.org/feat_in_vitro_contest.asp; http://www.new-harvest.org/default.php).

In a development that would probably please such organizations, in the novel “ChickieNobs” undercut traditional factory farming expenses and eventually edge “real” chicken out of the fast-food take-out market. The product, however, never escapes the taint of its unnatural, vegetative origins. When Jimmy makes the mistake of bringing home a bucket of fried “ChickieNobs” to his pretentious flatmates, they stop speaking to him for a week (Atwood, 2003a, p. 242). And, although Jimmy himself (like many other people of modest income) has become used to eating “ChickieNobs” (Atwood, 2003a, pp. 285-6), when he gets the opportunity to eat the real thing while dining at a posh restaurant with Crake, he is quick to denounce them: “Jimmy was so used to eating ChickieNobs by now, to their bland tofu-like consistency and inoffensive flavour, that the capon tasted quite wild” (Atwood, 2003a, p. 292). Here, Jimmy resorts to a comparison with that most maligned of vegetarian products, tofu, in order to articulate just how “fake” “ChickieNobs” really are. Not only is their flavor and texture “tofu-like,” their method of production is similarly “inoffensive,” at least in terms of animal suffering. As one of Crake’s colleagues says, “[T]he animal welfare freaks won’t be able to say a word, because this thing feels no pain” (Atwood, 2003a, p. 203), and PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, a prominent animal rights organization) would tend to agree (http://www.peta.org/feat_in_vitro_contest.asp). Jimmy, however, is not concerned with what the animal welfare “freaks” have to say about the ethical merits of “ChickieNobs.” He prefers the “real” capon (the term for a rooster castrated at a young age), the production of which is currently banned in the UK on animal welfare grounds (see http://www.hsus.org/farm/resources/research/practices/welfare_capons.html). Current British legislation decrees that the process of capon production is intolerably cruel; for Jimmy, however, the cruelty of capon seems of little concern.

Fiddes (1991, pp. 44, 65) argues that historically it is precisely this intentional infliction of suffering, this overt and deliberate imposition of dominance over the nonhuman other, which has in part made meat so desirable. “The fact that most of us make little mention of the domination inherent in
rearing an animal for slaughter does not indicate that it is irrelevant”, he writes (Fiddes, 1991, p. 44). “Veal, for example, enjoyed high prestige for many years partly . . . because of the extreme subjugation of the creatures intrinsic to its production” (p. 44). Roberta Kalechofsky offers an extremely disturbing example from an iconic nineteenth-century cookbook in which a still-living goose or duck is partially plucked and then roasted alive (2003, pp. 17-18). The recipe concludes: “[S]he will cry as you cut off any part from her and will be almost eaten up before she is dead: it is mighty pleasant to behold!” (2003, p. 18).

Of course, social mores regulating cruelty to animals have shifted dramatically in the last couple of hundred years (Franklin, 1999, pp. 11-22), and such a gross display of raw dominance over nonhuman animals has certainly fallen out of favor in the post-modern world. Indeed, Adams (1991, p. 40) goes so far as to argue that the animal itself has been made completely invisible in the consumption of meat: so carefully do we keep the subject separate from the object, the living being from the inert product, that the animal has become what she terms the “absent referent” (p. 40). Vialles (1994, pp. 19-32) notes a similar conceptual divide between animals and meat in her study of the changing nature of French slaughterhouses, which were “banished” from the public eye from the nineteenth century onward, moved outside the city gates and later moved indoors into anonymous, high-walled buildings. Fiddes (1990) argues that this conceptual divide between animals and meat has begun to crumble, as a spate of food crises has hammered home the often unsavory origins of meat and other animal products (pp. 230-232). He contends that, as a result of these crises and of changing social mores, meat-eating has begun to fall out of favor: as mentioned earlier, he refers to “meat’s declining reputation” (1991, p. 233) and offers numerous statistics demonstrating a decline in red meat consumption in Britain over the last 50 years (1991, pp. 26-29).

Placed in the context of the recent backlash against industrial meat production and changing views on acceptable levels of animal cruelty, Fiddes’ theory that human domination of the nonhuman world is falling out of favor certainly rings true, and, at first glance, Atwood’s satire seems to be part of this suspicion of untrammeled human domination of nature. The meat-loving characters of Oryx and Crake positively revel in their control over and manipulation of nature: from “pigoons” carrying human organs (Atwood, 2003a, p. 23) to energy-sensing algae-wallpaper that changes color to complement one’s mood (Atwood, 2003a, p. 201), Oryx and Crake is full of examples of scientists absurdly and dangerously “playing god” (Atwood, 2003a, p. 51).

As Burt (2006) notes, however, these cultural attitudes to meat need to be understood as just that: cultural attitudes, a product of a particular configuration
of technologies and discourses, rather than “simply an abstract version of the human relation to the animal kingdom” (p. 124). Meat in *Oryx and Crake* is not sought after because it represents some essential and categorical human domination of Nature; rather, I believe that something quite to the contrary is happening. As I mentioned earlier, eating meat can be an ambiguous act that has the potential both to delineate and to blur the human-animal divide. Moreover, to consume “Nature” (or a symbol of “Nature”) does not necessarily mean to revel in its abject enslavement. Eating “real,” “natural” meat can be seen as a method of reconnecting to the natural world, as well as a statement about subjugating it. Fiddes himself notes that a consistent thread running through the discourse on industrial meat in the eighties and nineties has been its “implicit non-naturalness” (1991, p. 190); as the plethora of more recent gastronomic texts positively reveling in the slaughter of animals attests, this nonnaturalness can be resolved not through a wholesale rejection of human dominion over animals and Nature, but through a nostalgic revalorization of certain kinds of animal agriculture as traditional and thus “authentic” and “natural.”

This idea of (some) meat as “authentic,” so readily apparent in contemporary gastronomic texts, pervades the mindsets of the characters in Atwood’s novel. It seems that in consuming this “real” meat, these characters are seeking some kind of authentic experience of, or relation to, the nonhuman world. It is the heady aroma of untamed Nature, the thrill of the hunt, the primal dance of predator and prey that Jimmy is evoking with such rapture when he describes the “real” capon as “wild”—despite the fact that a castrated rooster is patently not a wild animal by any stretch of the imagination. The world in which Jimmy lives, the hermetically sealed mall culture of the Compounds, is about as far from “wild” or “natural” as one can get—and it is a world with which many of us are becoming more familiar than we might like. The continued prestige enjoyed in the novel by “real” meat, especially meat that can be re-imagined as “wild,” is due to a longing for something authentic and natural in a world where consumers are so fundamentally divorced from the process of production, where pastoral interaction with the natural world is a fond but distant memory, and clever facsimiles of “real” food products abound.


Again, Atwood’s ideas resonate so strongly because they are rooted in real, recent trends in gastronomy. For jaded members of today’s consumer-capitalist society, reconnecting to a more authentic, embodied mode of subsistence
through tracing the commodity chains of consumer-purchased comestibles
seems to have become extremely popular; if the comestible in question hap-
pens to trace back to a living animal, the intrepid explorer is all the more hon-
est and unflinching for meeting his or her meat, and eating it anyway. One
need only look at the growing popularity of the “kill your own meat” fad for
proof. From celebrity chef Jamie Oliver’s “avian snuff film” (see Moskin,
2008), in which he slaughtered a chicken in front of a live studio audience and
proceeded to prepare a meal with the body, to articles with titles like “Power
Steer” (Pollan, 2002) and “Killing a Lamb Called Dinner” (French, 1999),
numerous texts have recently begun to wax lyrical about the nobility, the
unflinching honesty, of killing one’s own dinner.

*Animal: Friend or Food?* (Young, 2005), a well-received documentary by
Canadian filmmaker Jason Young, is a typical example. We are told at
the beginning of the film that Young has decided that, if he is to continue eat-
ming meat, he must be willing to raise and slaughter it himself (and make a
documentary about it, to boot). Young resorts to an odd mixture of Judeo-
Christian teleological anthropocentrism and New-Age mysticism to justify his
carnivorous ways, drawing heavily upon the homely wisdom of the salt-of-
the-earth rural folk whom he interviews and who teach him how to raise and
slaughter his own pigs and sheep. Like so many other “conscientious consum-
ers” thinking piously about the origins and nature of the meat they eat, the
option of simply not killing and eating animals at all seems never seriously to
enter his mind. Meat, it is accepted a priori, simply must be eaten; in order to
do so honestly, the role of the living animal must be acknowledged, and proper
respect must be shown for the idyllic rural life-rhythms governing that ani-
mal’s life and death. Never mind that for the vast majority of animals whose
flesh becomes the meat on our supermarket shelves, this idyllic rural setting is
a complete fiction; in this and other texts, the slaughter and subsequent trans-
formation of animals into meat are openly displayed. The living animal that
the meat on the table once was, described by Adams (1992, p. 40) as the
“absent referent,” is absent no longer; in the texts discussed above, the animal
(or at the very least a nostalgic representation thereof) is very present. What
continue to be absent in Young’s text and others of its ilk (see French, 1999)
are the industrial processes behind the vast majority of meat consumed in
Western societies; indeed, such romanticized narratives of “honest” husbandry
and DIY slaughter play an important role in obscuring this mundane reality.

This is not always the case, however; in “Power Steer” (Pollan, 2002), jour-
nalist Michael Pollan “adopts” a calf and documents the animal’s life and death
as a beef steer in the America’s industrial beef complex. He describes the
squalid, antibiotic-drenched conditions of the giant feedlots and recounts how
the calves are routinely implanted with artificial growth-hormones to fatten them more efficiently for slaughter. The system Pollan describes in the article is a perfect example of Midgley’s aforementioned insight regarding “the moral obtuseness of greed” (Midgley, 2004, p. 105): Pollan acknowledges that “the economic logic behind the feedlot system is hard to refute” (Pollan, 2002, p. 15) but sharply criticizes the ethical and ecological ramifications of such an intensive, drug-laced system of production (2002, pp. 14-15). Texts like these serve to illuminate the dark underbelly of large-scale meat production, to highlight the gap between economic and ecological logic, and to bring the animal component of industrial meat to the fore. Still, Pollan’s response to these revelations was not to spare the life of “his” calf or to swear off industrial meat altogether (2002, p. 15), but merely to acknowledge the distasteful and dangerous origins of the meat on his plate, and to resolve rather half-heartedly to eat more grass-fed beef (Even though the meat is more expensive and he finds its texture “uneven” and “tough,” with time he has come to appreciate the flavor as “more interesting” [2002, p. 15].) Like Young, Pollan still accepts a priori that meat is a necessity; eschewing meat altogether is simply not presented as a legitimate option. Thus, nostalgia for the prestige of meat continues to play a pivotal role, even in texts like “Power Steer” which describe the realities of meat production rather unflinchingly.

This kind of nostalgia also claims to resolve an ethical dilemma outlined earlier in this essay, namely the inevitable cruelty associated with meat production. In *Oryx and Crake*, the argument that harvesting lumps of protein from a completely nonsentient “ChickieNobs” organism is a more humane method of procuring protein than the killing of (let alone the factory farming of) a living chicken, is of little concern for the characters in the novel. Here again, intentionally or not, Atwood reflects current trends. As the continued popularity of foie gras (goose-liver pâté from geese that have been force-fed to near death) in upmarket restaurants in the United States attests (Heath and Meneley, 2007), there remains a significant taste in gastronomic culture for the allure of “traditional” cruelty.

It is the association of such cruelty with “traditional” methods of husbandry, slaughter, and food production, and with “natural” animals that makes it more palatable. Cooking shows and DIY slaughter articles promoting such “traditionally” procured meat construct an idyllic, rural, preindustrial hinterland, in which humans lived closely and honestly with the animals they exploited, interconnected with, and attuned to, the natural life-rhythms of the countryside. Texts like these suggest that contemporary society has become alienated from these rural roots: meat procured from “naturally” raised and slaughtered animals thus becomes a powerful symbol not of the subjugation of nature, but
of a reconnection to it. A deep nostalgia for the rural golden days of yesteryear infuses these contemporary gastronomic texts: in this paradigm, vegetarianism becomes nothing more than a sentimental urban malaise, and nonsentient “meat tubers” of the kind envisaged by Atwood would probably be considered an abomination. The characters of Oryx and Crake, like many people in the real world—including, one suspects, Margaret Atwood herself—would rather eat the flesh of real, conscious chickens, with all the cruelty that such an act entails, than accept the blandness (conceptual as much as gustatory) of the completely inert and nonsentient “ChickieNobs.”

As we have seen, meat does have a special significance in Oryx and Crake, linked to ideas of power, prestige, Nature, and authenticity. Meat has also been linked historically to ideas of nationality, identity, and even racial superiority (Adams, 1991, pp. 30-31; Rifkin, 1992, pp. 55, 60-64); these ideas, too, play out in the novel. It is not insignificant that the Children of Crake—the peaceful, somewhat vacuous, genetically engineered humanoids created by a mad scientist and intended to inherit the Earth after he wipes it clean of the stain of conventional humanity—are vegetarians. The Children of Crake, for all their innocence and peaceful ways, are fundamentally nonhuman—are fundamentally subhuman, in point of fact.

Much is made in the novel of the supposed correlation between the dark and the light sides of human nature: the video game “Blood and Roses” has players trading off human atrocities for human achievements: massacres, genocides, and holocausts bartered for artworks, scientific breakthroughs, and other “[m]onuments to the soul’s magnificence” (Atwood, 2003a, p. 78; italics in the original). The novel seems to suggest that one can’t have the good without the bad—that human cruelties, even human atrocities, are a necessary price to pay to be truly human. The Crakers, then, may be peaceful and vegetarian, incapable of violence and content to live simply and harmoniously on a diet of grass and berries, but they are also incapable of abstract thought, of art or poetry or self-reflection (or, at least, that is how Crake intends them to be; they show some signs of these trappings of humanity by the end of the novel [Atwood, 2003a, p. 361]). For all their virtues, the Crakers are clearly something less than human. This is reminiscent of an interpretation of Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels (2002 [1726])—and in fact Atwood opens Oryx and Crake with a quotation from Swift’s classic—that is voiced by a character in J. M. Coetzee’s Elizabeth Costello (2003), as an argument against vegetarianism:

Are you not expecting too much of humankind when you ask us to live without species exploitation, without cruelty? Is it not more human to accept our own humanity—even if it means embracing the carnivorous Yahoo within ourselves—than
to end up like Gulliver, pining for a state he cannot attain, and for good reason: for it is not in his nature, which is human nature? (Coetzee, 2003, pp. 55-56)

If *Oryx and Crake* is anything to go by, Margaret would seem to agree. Jimmy, the last real human alive in the postvirus world, craves meat above all else: he longs to hunt and kill some stray animal but fears that the sight of his butchery would prove too much for the delicate Crakers (Atwood, 2003a, pp. 150-151), and resigns himself to being content with the fish that he has convinced the Crakers to hunt and cook for him (a task they find profoundly unpleasant) (Atwood, 2003a, pp. 100-101). Meat-eating may be cruel, but it is apparently fundamental to Jimmy’s survival, to his “human” nature.

Some perspective may be gained, however, by placing such an assertion in its historical context. The idea that carnivorousness is central to humanity is an old one, and it became popularized and disseminated through narratives of human evolution that posited that hunting and meat-provisioning was the key innovation that spurred the ever-upward ascent of “man” from “his” pri-meval beasthood (Fiddes, 1991, pp. 55-9; Noske, 1997, pp. 101-3; Landau, 1991, pp. 132-133). The gender-specific term is crucial here—as Noske (1997, p. 103) points out, the success of human evolution was attributed to the development of a set of skills designated as “male”—perhaps unsurprisingly, given that the scientists coming up with these theories were usually male themselves. Furthermore, these representatives of the race of “man” who were deciding that meat was so important to human cultural evolution were also members of a profoundly carnocentric society, in which the consumption of copious amounts of meat was held to be a marker of national identity and pride. “The rice-eating Hindoo and Chinese and the potato-eating Irish peasant,” wrote one nineteenth-century medical doctor in a remarkable passage that is nevertheless quite in keeping with the generally held opinion of the time, “are kept in subjection by the well-fed English . . . the nation of beef-eaters” (Adams, 1991, p. 31). Clearly, any assertion that eating meat is merely and inescapably “human nature,” the price that must be paid for the dizzying heights attained by civilized culture, is building upon some very specific ideas about just who counts as “human” enough for their “nature” to be of any relevance.

For the most part, *Oryx and Crake*, like most of Atwood’s novels, falls squarely within a certain strain of modernist aesthetic that tends to valorize primal, savage relations with Nature and with animals (Armstrong, 2008, pp. 143-154). The blood must go hand in hand with the roses: meat-eating is an inescapable part of *true* human nature, and vegetarianism is for subhumans and cranks. Throughout the novel, (human) vegetarians are ridiculed and derided, from Jimmy’s vegan roommate in college who burns his jockey shorts in a fit of righteous anger, to the crazed mob of “God’s Gardeners” who, as
Crake's virus is sweeping the world and the end is nigh, see fit to “liberate” a "ChickieNobs" production facility ("Brad, this is hilarious," guffaws a doomed news commentator filming the spectacle. "Those things can't even walk!" [Atwood, 2003a, p. 340]). This attitude of amusement and derision seems to be a common thread in Atwood's novels. Although her fondness for linking meat-aversion to issues of female disempowerment has ensured that she is often quoted in human-animal studies literature (Adams, 1991, pp. 129-130; Fiddes, 1991, p. 94), she always wryly undermines any vegetarian message that might be read into her work. For example, although in *The Edible Woman* (1987 [1969]), the main character, Marion, begins to identify with animals to the extent that she finds meat repulsive, she eventually finds even the consumption of vegetables to be intolerably cruel, and, by the end of the novel, she has resumed her meat-eating ways. As Sally Borrell (2005) writes, in *The Edible Woman* Atwood “paints vegetarianism as being as irrational and as unsustainable as non-eating” (p. 89), and the portrayal of vegetarians in *Oryx and Crake* seems to bear this out.

Nevertheless, although outright vegetarianism is ridiculed in the novel, a subtle critique of Western carnocentrism can be detected in the character of Oryx. Oryx observes that the white cameraman she remembers from her youth as part of a child pornography ring “smelled too strong, because he was a meat eater. He ate so much meat!” (Atwood, 2003a, p. 140). Western men play a pivotal role in her traumatic young life: it is mostly Westerners she performs sexual acts with, and it is mostly Westerners (like Jimmy and Crake) who consume these acts by watching them on the Internet. Oryx and the other children in the porn shows are described as “delicious midgets” (Atwood, 2003a, p. 90), and Atwood's use of an edibility metaphor is not accidental. The Western predilection for (land) animal protein is here strongly linked to the exploitation of the Third World's children by the unseemly appetites of Western men. Oryx seems to draw a pivotal distinction between fish, which she happily eats, and the flesh of farmed land animals, the consumption of which she sees as a particularly Western appetite. This is in line with common attitudes toward meat-eating: many self-identified “vegetarians” readily admit to eating fish (Franklin, 1999, p. 162). Oryx's ideas about flesh and appetite seem to have stayed with her into adulthood; although she is happy to let Jimmy eat the pepperoni from her pizza, she herself eschews it, preferring the mushrooms, the artichoke hearts, and the anchovies (Atwood, 2003a, pp. 117, 119). Jimmy himself must have noticed Oryx's red meat avoidance; in the mythology he creates for the impressionable Crakers in the chaotic postvirus world, animals are designated “the Children of Oryx,” and their slaughter is unthinkable. In a development that echoes Oryx's apparent pescatarianism, fish are again the exception to this rule: although the Crakers will not eat any
meat (fish included) themselves, they are nevertheless willing to kill fish in order to feed Jimmy. Thus, the (red) meat-hunger of Western men in the novel is linked to their carnal appetites for non-Western children—appetites considered unseemly by the adoptive progeny of Oryx (although the opinions of Oryx herself regarding her childhood experiences as a sex worker remain inscrutable).

IV. Conclusion

As it is in real life, the role of meat in Oryx and Crake is multilayered and at times ambiguous. “Real” meat is a symbol of prestige and social status, a commodity imbued with a profound nostalgia for a simpler, better time that has since passed. In the novel, substitutes for “real” meat (defined as flesh from once-living animals), are tolerated out of necessity but are always rejected when the opportunity to eat the real thing arises. As the subhuman Crakers’ vegetarianism demonstrates, meat is also implicated in notions of racial identity, and is considered central to the existence of a truly “human” nature. Furthermore, although Atwood’s novels make clear that she is no supporter of vegetarianism, a critique of the gluttonous carnal appetites of the Western world is nevertheless brought into focus by the character of Oryx, who knows what it means to be a piece of flesh marketed for consumption. These fictional examples of the meanings of meat-eating in a dystopic near-future world are strikingly consistent with the findings of contemporary cultural theory. Furthermore, they presciently reflect the burgeoning nostalgia toward meat that has become so apparent in recent gastronomic discourses, a trend that problematizes some of the assertions and predictions of prominent meat theorists like Nick Fiddes (1991) and Carol J. Adams (1990). Meat is indeed a symbol of “Nature”—however, its consumption can be experienced as a reconnection to a nostalgically constructed “natural” world, as well as a statement about that world’s subjugation. Oryx and Crake, then, is a work of speculative fiction that holds a mirror up to the ideas and ideals of our own society, particularly in regard to food production and consumption. Atwood has deftly identified the burgeoning nostalgia for meat that has recently become so apparent, and contextualized it within a consumer-driven, risk-reflexive, near-future society of her own devising, thus illuminating the issue all the more clearly.

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Notes

1. I am using the term “post-modernity” as Franklin (1999) uses it, to describe the period in the West from around the 1970s onward, after the breakdown of the postwar cultural consensus (pp. 57-61).

References


