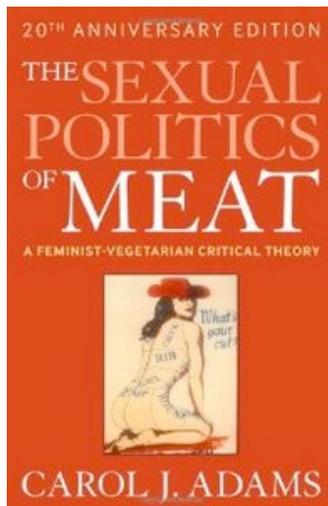


The 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of *The Sexual Politics of Meat*:

An Interview with Carol J. Adams

by Rhea Parsons, M.D.



In 1990, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* by Carol J. Adams was released sparking decades of inspiration, controversy and a groundbreaking way of thinking about the link between meat-eating and the various oppressions of a patriarchal society. Called “a bible of the vegan community” by the New York Times, this provocative book celebrates twenty years in print with a newly released updated anniversary edition. In this interview, the author, activist and university lecturer, Carol J. Adams, reflects upon her journey, eco-feminist theory, and the continued and ever-growing importance and influence of her book.



**RP: Carol, congratulations on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *The Sexual Politics of Meat*. It took 16 years for you to consider the book ready for publication. Why was that?**

CA: Thank you! I guess I needed that long to incubate the idea! I had so much to learn about writing and about theory and about writing theoretically! I had to learn how to write about what is hidden from cultural consciousness. How do you make the invisible visible? With something so normative in our culture as meat eating and the use of female animals to produce milk and eggs, I had, also, to figure out how to unravel its deeply embedded and sanitized nature, to pull apart the strands that have made it normative and show it for what it really is.

When you think about it, writing theoretically involves several aspects: what is the theory you are proposing, how do you write compellingly about this theory, and -- since I was writing about oppression -- how do you handle your anger so that people will want to read what you write? Moreover, since I was writing about what most people view as food, I had to struggle with the problem, first identified by Cato, "It is hard to speak to a stomach that has no ears."

The theory I was proposing isn't just about meat eating and dairy consumption. The theory is that there is a connection between oppressions, and specifically between the oppression of women and the oppression of the other animals. I didn't want simply to say, "Look at this example and now look at that example and see how they are *structurally the same*." I wanted to say, "Look at how

women and the other animals (especially farmed animals) are positioned and see how they are *structurally interrelated*.”

I also had to figure out how to overcome my own, and our culture’s, assumption that working for animals is a luxury when human beings are suffering from oppression. So I had to resolve my own internal activist orientation. I had the original idea when I was 23, and one other thing I had to learn was how to take my desire to be a writer seriously enough to act on it. That was probably the most challenging issue of all! So I incubated the idea, and gathered examples, and thought about it, and went about being an activist for more than a decade, and I kept writing drafts, and harboring the desire to see the ideas become a book.

In 1987, I read Margaret Homan’s *Bearing the Word*, and that was revelatory! It consolidated my feminist-vegetarian theory by introducing the concept of “the absent referent” to me and because it is an incredible piece of literary criticism. I read the book as we were moving from upstate New York to the Dallas area. I was leaving behind the activism that had filled my life for a decade and I was planning on working full time on finishing the book. We stopped for the night in Arkansas. That night I read: “For the same reason that women are identified with nature and matter in any traditional thematics of gender (as when Milton calls the planet Earth “great Mother”), women are also identified with the literal, the absent referent in our predominant myth of language... literal meaning cannot be present in a text; it is always elsewhere” (Homan, 1986:4). I stopped reading. *The absent referent*... isn’t that what animals are too? Politicized, the term defined animals consumed as meat, and recognized the tension between

presence/absence and living/dead. Without animals there would be no meat eating, yet they are absent from the act of eating meat because they have been transformed through violence into food.

The absent referent is that which separates the flesh eater from the animal and the animal from the end product. The function of the absent referent is to allow for the moral abandonment of a being – while also emptying violence from the language. *Hamburger, pork loin, drumstick* – there is no “who” in these words, so how can there be a being who has been harmed?

The next morning as we prepared to drive our final leg of our journey from Arkansas to Dallas, I realized that women, too, were absent referents in a patriarchal, meat-eating culture. By the time we arrived at Dallas, I had the organizing theory for my feminist-vegetarian critical theory: a structure of overlapping but absent referents links violence against women and animals. Women’s objectification becomes the basis for cultural constructions about meat animals and the status of animals as meat is used in a patriarchal world to say something about women. And finally it all came together--the theory, the time to write, and my faith in myself as a writer.

**RP: What was the public reception to *The Sexual Politics of Meat* and how did you react to that?**

CA: Well, simply put, people and reviewers were *never* neutral about it. They loved it or hated it. People who loved it starting writing to me about how it had changed their lives; right wing commentators loved hating it. Especially virile, vile,

and virulent in his defense of meat-eating was Rush Limbaugh. Not realizing that I wasn't an academic, that the book had been written by a feminist, anti-racist, grassroots activist, right-wing commentators like Limbaugh took it as the latest and most absurd example of academic excess and political correctness.

As an activist around racism and fighting for integrated housing in the 1980s, I had discovered how raw and personally threatening responses to local activism can be. So, in 1990, I found the constant criticism on radio call-in shows about my book unthreatening and sort of laughable. I knew what was really threatening: hate letters to your home, anonymous letters to your partner's place of employment, heated discussions about whether I was married -- and who did I think I was? -- on the radio. My activism had prepared me to handle the negative reaction to the book at a more sophisticated level than I might otherwise have done.

It wasn't until the Tenth Anniversary Edition that I hired my son to put all of the reviews in chronological order and discovered the hundreds of reviews the book had generated. Some were full page reviews from Australia or Great Britain. Sure, most of them were negative, but I thought, "Well, at least they took it seriously enough to argue with!"

Throughout the years, what has moved me the most are the numerous letters, con-versations, emails, and now Facebook postings and tweets that tell me how my book changed someone's life. I am honored by someone's trust of and response to my ideas. This is what I hold closest to my heart; this deep

connection between something I wrote and someone else's life.

**RP: For those who have yet to read your book, what is the link between feminism and vegetarianism?**

CA: Oh gosh, I have struggled with that question since 1974! In *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, I propose a connection between the abuse of farmed animals and male dominance, arguing that women and animals become interchangeable objects of oppression through the structure of the absent referent (Adams, 2010, 64-91).

It's never been easy to give a synopsis of the book, but when I show "The Sexual Politics of Meat Slide Show" I've started giving out a handout with nine feminist-vegan points, which are:

1. Meat-eating is associated with virility and masculinity. Meat eating societies gain male identification by their choice of food. At this point in time, because of the successes of the feminist movement, and the threats to masculinity as it has been traditionally constructed, I find there is an obsessive need to reinscribe and ironize the association.
2. Animals are the absent referents in the consumption of meat. Behind every meat meal is the death of the animal whose place the "meat" takes.
3. A process of objectification/fragmentation/consumption connects women and animals in a patriarchal culture (they become overlapping absent referents). The visual "joke" that substitutes one fragmented object for another can be found throughout our culture.

4. Feminist-vegan theory is eco-feminist, that is, environmental issues can't be understood without a feminist perspective and feminist issues can't be understood without an environmental perspective. I place animals into the middle of this insight. As an eco-feminist theory, it recognizes the environmental costs of animalizing protein. Meat production contributes to water pollution, climate change, habitat fragmentation, and desertification of arable land. All protein is from plants; animalized protein requires that a living animal process the protein and then be killed.
5. Female animals are the absent referents in meat eating and in the consumption of dairy and eggs. There would be no meat eating if female animals weren't constantly made pregnant. Female animals are forced to produce feminized protein (plant protein produced through the abuse of the reproductive cycle of female animals, i.e., dairy and eggs).
6. Women are animalized and animals are sexualized and feminized. These acts are interrelated, interconnected. A patriarchal, sexualizing discourse is deployed in talking about and depicting animals. Animals, especially those used, farmed, or hunted by humans are feminized or described using female associations. We encounter not just an animalizing discourse, but a feminizing one—for consumable beings which I call *anthropornography*. All animals eaten for meat become symbolically female. Feminized animals aren't individuals but "chicks," "cows" "bitches," and "sows."
7. *Anthropornography* naturalizes sexual trafficking in and use of women. Contemporary capitalist agriculture has developed into a multibillion dollar

industry that, like the porn industry, makes money off of the bodies of others, that controls female sexuality, is obsessed with nipples and pregnancy and uses vibrators (yes, these are all aspects of industrialized farming's treatment of female animals) in ways that blur the line between the pornographer's world and the world of industrialized farming. This is one meaning of the term "the pornography of meat." Another meaning to the term is found in the imposition of common conventions in pornography (rear-entry shots; sexualized poses; and language about sex) on animals, so that the message becomes that animals, too, want to be desired. Through such references, meat advertisements presume they are talking to users of pornography. In the ways that farmed animals are depicted as "lusty" females wanting to be consumed, the sexualized, prostituted, pornographed woman is the absent referent. Women's objectification becomes the basis for cultural constructions about meat animals.

8. In its analysis, the sexual politics of meat intersects with "carnophallogocentrism." French theorist Derrida coined the term in an attempt to name the primary social, linguistic, and material practices that go into becoming a subject within the West. Derrida was showing how explicit carnivorousness lies at the heart of classical notions of subjectivity, especially male subjectivity.
9. I urge resistance to the ideological construction of living objects as objects through adopting a feminist ethics of care. The feminist ethics of care is a political ethic: it understands that ideology influences how we choose whom

to care about.

**RP: You discussed a cycle of objectification, fragmentation and consumption – both literal and as metaphor. Can you explain this cycle?**

CA: Objectification permits an oppressor to view another being as an object. It can begin with depersonalizing a living being through language (a batterer will stop using his partner's name, for instance; meat eaters refer to animals as "its"). The goal of objectification is to cut off the potential empathetic or sympathetic response that could surface when someone is being mistreated.

Objectification paves the way for violence. Now seen as an object, rather than a living, breathing being, s/he receives object-like treatment: rape which makes the raped individual the object of another's sexual violence, an object with no right to say "no", or the butchering of animals that converts animals from living beings into dead objects. This process allows fragmentation--literal and figurative. Animals are literally fragmented, cut into pieces, and women are often described by their body parts, or attacked in specific places on their bodies. (And it is interesting, that rape is defended by saying "she wanted it," and meat eating is defended by saying, "I thank the animal for its sacrifice"; both defenses imputing that the "object" desired to be harmed. The desire to live free of harm cannot be acknowledged, but the desire *to be harmed*, that is another thing altogether.)

Finally there is consumption. Consumption is the end goal in raising and killing

and purchasing dead farmed animals. While the occasional man may literally eat women, we all consume visual images of women all the time. Consumption is the fulfillment of oppression, the annihilation of will, of separate identity. So too with language: first a subject is objectified, through metaphor. Through fragmentation, the object is severed from its ontological meaning; the object's status or experience becomes a metaphor able to be consumed without reference to the specific "object's" experience of violation. Finally consumed, it exists only through what it represents. When someone says "I felt like a piece of meat," that is an example of the metaphoric consumption of the animal's experience. What happens is that the animal killed to become someone's meat disappears a second time, becoming someone's metaphor.

**RP: In your book, you speak highly of the late Mary Daly as a mentor and dedicated the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition of your book to her. How did she inspire and/or influence you?**

CA: Actually, in the book I build on some of Mary's insights and critique others. Mary had incredible insights into how language worked to mask and normalize forms of violence. I draw on those insights in Chapter 3. But in Chapter 2, I include Mary with other radical feminists who seemed to use animal oppression as a metaphor for women's oppression, but did not actually challenge the oppression of animals.

I know Mary Daly is criticized these days on several issues; nevertheless, I

believe, historically speaking, her role in feminist theory in the early 1970s cannot be ignored or minimized. I felt it was very important to acknowledge that role in my life and in the genesis of the book. The most important thing to me, about Mary, was that she created the space for countless others, including me, to do our own thinking. Her leap from accepting patriarchal institutions and beliefs to positioning herself outside of them brought many of us along with her. Mary exposed “gynocide and biocide” - the “taming and killing of women and animals and all life”- and necrophilia -- which I believe operates whenever someone eats a dead animal. I believe that radical feminist theory is the logical home for decentering humans and expanding our vision to including other than humans, so it makes sense that I would turn to someone like Mary as a teacher.

It wasn't just that Mary created a place for me to think creatively, to take her ideas and build on them, to reject the dominant culture, but she created the space for me to disagree with her and I think that was a very generous act. And others have told me that I influenced her, too, which I think is wonderful. By the time she wrote *Outercourse* in the early 1990s, she was citing *Animal Factories* by Jim Mason and Peter Singer. Regarding the cow who jumped over the moon, she remarks the cow was “seen by some foolish farmer as basically no more than an udder and a breeder, perhaps as a large package of potential hamburger.”

But before that, when *Gyn/ecology* came out in 1978, I wrote in the margin of my copy of the book, “use Mary[’s ideas] to critique herself as sister...” I was

disappointed because I wanted her to more explicitly identify domesticated animals as victims within the necrophiliac state. Where do we see death where they see life? I believe this is a basic question for feminist and progressive theology. I see it on the plate of meat eaters, and in the glass of (cow's) milk.

I wanted feminists, including Mary, to acknowledge this and was disappointed when they, and she, didn't. In the first edition of *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, I wrote, "When Mary Daly suggests raiding the Playboy's playground to let out 'the bunnies, the bitches, the beavers, the squirrels, the chicks, the pussycats, the cows, the nags, the foxy ladies, the old bats and biddies, so that they can at last begin naming themselves' we, her readers, know that she is talking about women and not about actual bunnies, bitches, beavers, and so on. But I argue she should be." I wanted the conscious, active articulation of interconnected oppressions, not the subtle, linguistic acknowledgement.

Late one night, Mary and I discussed this passage and my charge that "feminist theorists' use of language describes, reflects and perpetuates oppression by denying the extent to which these oppressions are culturally analogous." Mary challenged my way of challenging her and writing about this problem in radical feminism. My marginalia on my own copy of *The Sexual Politics of Meat* includes this quote from Mary next to the passage where I challenged her. Mary had said, "We do our best." And she was right; we do our best. So, in the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition, I removed that specific quote of Mary's, and changed my conclusion: "Feminist theorists' use of language should describe and challenge oppression by recognizing the extent to which these oppressions are culturally analogous

and interdependent.”

I learned something important. How does one critique sister theorists? There is a more honest way to do it than simply publishing one’s disagreements. The reason I tell you about this is that this illustrates how conversations between feminists can occur. How do we have these discussions that animals should be included in feminist theory? How do we build on what’s gone before. How do we hold each other accountable? How do we move forward? And that is why I dedicated the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition to her, writing: “In memory of Mary Daly, my first reader. She opened worlds where we found ourselves at home.”

**RP: Feminist theory often uses metaphors of animal oppression to describe women’s experiences, i.e., “he handled me like a piece of meat.” Can one use metaphors such as these yet not acknowledge or protest the origin of the metaphor and the actual pain and suffering behind it?**

CA: That’s what I mean by the consumption of the referent. And this is why I had my interesting conversation with Mary Daly.

**RP: How does meat-eating correlate to misogyny and the objectification of women?**

CA: Misogyny has found a safe avenue for expressing itself--through representations and discussions of meat eating. It’s not that misogyny has gone underground; it has fled the human, and found a way to express itself by referring to animals or dead animals who have become meat. We need to recognize that the category of species in our culture carries gender associations. Even male

domesticated animals are depicted as females in ads about turkey *breasts*, barbecues that show pigs as though they are buxom women wanting to be eaten, or “tasty chicks.” Without the reproductive abuse of female animals, who are forced to manufacture “meat” for production through their *reproduction*, there would be no animal bodies to consume. Hostile terms for women such as cow, chick, sow old biddy, and hen derive from female beings who have absolutely no control over their reproductive choices. Their ability to be exploited lowers their standing and gives a powerful, negative charge to the meaning of the slang arising from their exploitation. So, misogyny gravitates to images of powerless females. In this we see how the category of gender in our culture carries species associations.

Another way that misogyny and meat eating are related is through the ways that misogyny uses the human/animal species divide to suggest women are less human than men. Disowning our animal connections is part of dominance. By definition in this dominant culture, the human transcends animality. Western philosophy defined humanness not only as *not animal*, but also as *not woman* and not “colored.” In Western philosophy, the concept of manhood applied not just to adult men, but to the attributes of being human -- rationality, autonomy, unemotional. Women’s status is lowered by being seen as animal-like; men’s status is raised by being seen as the definition of what is human.

**RP: Do you also see links between meat-eating and race and/or class?**

CA: Yes, many! To begin with, until the settling of the United States by

Europeans through the appropriation of Native lands, meat eating in the Western world was associated with royalty and the upper class. In *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, I show how meat eating was democratized in the United States in the nineteenth century. Because there was sufficient land (again, taken from Native Americans), everyone could eat meat. Thus, the class demarcations regarding meat eating that Europeans knew disappeared in the United States.

The result is that now we associated meat eating with the democratic subject (look at Presidential campaigns and how they get associated with meat eating, for instance, Hoover's "a chicken in every pot"). The notion of the democratic subject is that he is entitled to meat eating, and that this meat eating is a privatized act. What is interesting is that for this aspect of the democratic subject, he is not racialized. Everyone is entitled to meat eating in the U.S. The implication is that this is one of the things that makes the U.S. so great! French theorist Jacques Derrida discusses how the Western subject is known for "carnivorous virility." In the debates about whether the United States is an imperial nation, I think we have to look at this imperialism as including the exporting of our foodways around meat. We are exporting the idea the democratic meat eating ideal; that the carnivorous, virile human subject is entitled to meat.

Burger King has done a recent series of videos about "burger virgins." They take their hamburgers to some culture in the world where hamburgers haven't been eaten (and so the people are "virgins") and then film them eating a burger. It is all

such a dangerous act, suffused with attitudes about the standard American diet of meat, about cultural imperialism, about exploitation.

The democratization of meat eating has caused us to forget in our collective memory, that daily meat eating, meat eating of the kind now practiced in the Western world and being now exported used to be the domain of the wealthy and royalty in Europe. Most working class/peasant traditions had vegetarian meals (beans, pasta fazioli, cabbage and mashed potatoes, lentils, hummus, corn and beans, tortillas and beans, etc.). It is as though through the democratization of meat eating, these folkways have been lost or unremembered.

While some people believe that vegans reveal class presumptions, and that it is too expensive a diet for working class folk, the fact is that one does not need to eat ersatz meats to be a happy vegan. In addition, one activism I would like to see is for all meat subsidies to be removed from the federal budget. Without federal support, people would not be buying cheap hamburgers because there would be no cheap hamburgers. Our government actively supports the production and consumption of meat by artificially keeping the costs down. It is said that without government support, the true cost of a hamburger would be \$35. It is also pointed out that the only true way to identify the cost of eating meat and dairy is to include one's health bills as part of one's food bills as 6 of the 10 leading diseases in the United States are related to the Standard American Diet (meat-heavy). We also know that numerous studies show that one can reverse

heart disease by adopting a low-fat vegan diet. A new book, *By Any Greens Necessary*, addresses these issues for African American women, as its subtitle announces: *A Revolutionary Guide for Black Women Who Want to Eat Great, Get Healthy, Lose Weight, and Look Phat*.

Important work on this subject is being done by a diverse group of activists, including A. Breeze Harper, who edited an anthology entitled *Sistah Vegan* and is working on developing a critical race theory of veganism. She writes, “a collective black racialized consciousness has created different reasons to become vegan that usually don’t reflect animal rights as the FIRST impetus to go vegan. Collectively, a significant number of black folk’s reasons stem from fighting against legacies of racialized colonialism such as health disparities, environmental racism, nutritional racism, etc. Many black folk also enter veganism as a way to decolonize their bodies and minds from such legacies and use it as a tool of anti-racism.” Lisa Kemmerer has edited a forthcoming book *Sister Species: Women, Animals and Social Justice*, which contains first person stories from a racially- and class-diverse group of women activists.

**RP: You have amassed a large collection of cultural images demonstrating the interconnection of women and animals that you present in a slideshow and have published in a book called *The Pornography of Meat*. Which stand out most to you as exemplars of your theory?**

CA: It’s really hard to say which stands out, there are so many that are really

awful! I keep thinking I have seen it all, and then I discover that I really haven't lowered my expectations as low as they need to be.

In the original edition of *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, I used very few images. We ended up using an image on the cover because the promotions team felt people wouldn't "get" it without an image.

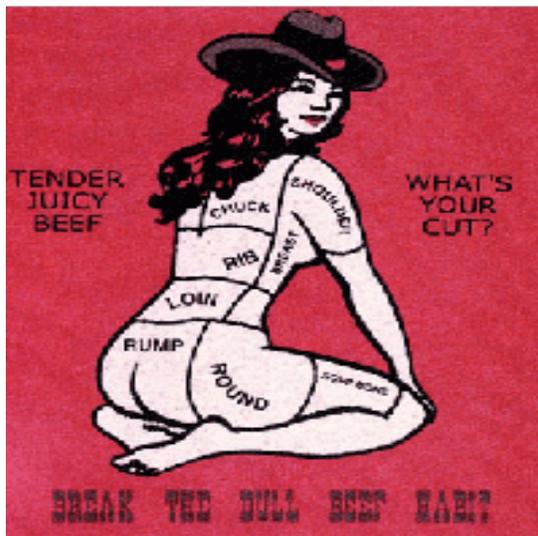
And I use an example, inside the book of anthropornography, a pig posed as a prostitute. I think as iconic representations, they demonstrate two of my main points: the animalizing of women, especially saying women are meat, which is misogynistic. And the feminizing and sexualizing of animals, which is a way of saying, "Hey they like it! They want to be consumed!"



And those two images were all that was necessary to cause a torrent of images

being sent my way. This still happens; whenever I show *The Sexual Politics of Meat Slide Show*, people who were there notice images and send them to me.

Let me discuss the genealogy of the cover image for a moment. In the 1960s, a Cattlemen's restaurant in N.Y. created this image which was put on posters (these could often be found in butcher shops).



Later in that decade, the image was used for a beach towel. At the famous protest against the Miss America contest in 1968, the Cattlemen's poster was used to protest the objectification of women. Second wave feminists protested the treatment of women as cattle/ as meat, and recognized that objectification and violence is wrong. But animals were the absent referent. It's about how women were treated as animals.

In *The Pornography of Meat*, I showed that animals in bondage, particularly farmed animals, are shown "free," free in the way that women are seen to be

“free”—posed as sexually available as though their only desire is for the viewer to want their bodies. It makes animals’ degradation and suffering fun by making animals’ degradation sexy. Simultaneously, it makes women’s degradation fun because to be effective the advertisement requires the implicit reference to women’s sexualized status as subordinate. For women, through pornography, their degradation is always already sexy. The sexualization of animals and the sexual objectification of women thus overlap and reinforce one another. The body parts of females, at times dead females, are subjects pornography has already sexualized. In a fluid move, these conventions are used to sell dead bodies.

**RP: You have worked extensively with battered women. Do you see a link between meat-eating and violence?**

CA: Of course, the first thing to say is that meat eating is violence; it requires violence at its source. But this is also a very complicated question to answer fairly. First, we are now reading well-thought out scholarly papers on the increase of violence around slaughterhouses. This is attributed to many things, but we can’t ignore that, in general, people who have choices usually choose not to work in a slaughterhouse. It is thought that perhaps as a result, the pool of possible employees is reduced and so slaughterhouses employ people who already have been arrested and have records. Or, another explanation is that engaging in acts of violence every day desensitizes workers who bring this desensitization into their private relationships as well, through battering. That is, once you learn how to accept incredible acts of violence as normal, you can’t turn that off when you

leave the slaughterhouse. I know a feminist sociologist is working on this issue and I am looking forward to hearing what she finds.

What of the meat eater who doesn't work at a slaughterhouse? When *The Sexual Politics of Meat* came out I would be asked on radio talk shows, "Do you mean if I eat a hamburger I am going to beat my wife?" I would say, "No. The connection isn't that linear." People were looking for sound bites, and it's a book that is hard to have a sound bite for, so they created these crazy ones.

In terms of battering, we do know that it is about control. The batterer wants to exercise control. The reasons offered for the violence (you didn't vacuum; you were flirting; I wanted sausage on my pizza) keep the victim from recognizing that it is about control. Because we know now for the batterer there will always be something wrong.

What happens is that batterers can draw upon the cultural notion that men need meat, and when they don't get meat, use that as their excuse for battering. That tells us something about the cultural assumptions about masculinity and meat eating, but doesn't really prove anything about domestic violence and meat eating because the real motivation is control.

I think a third thing is going on as well and that is the way that our culture normalized both meat eating and domestic violence. Before the mid-1970s, there was not a lot of help for battered women. One of the earliest scholarly papers, called "The Wife-Beater's Wife" (Snell, et al; 1964) ended up interviewing battered women because their husbands refused to be interviewed. So, without

ever finding out why the men chose to be violent, the researchers “discovered” that battered women were masochist, etc. It was a terrible study, but exemplified the idea from that time that somehow the batterer did not have to be held accountable for what he was doing. It perpetuated the division between scrutiny of what one could do in private and what one could do in public (i.e., your privacy in your home was protected, “a man’s home is his castle,” etc., and it is in the home that much of the violence against women happens). There is a great book, *The Sexual Contract* by Carole Pateman, who suggests that before there was a social contract regulating how people were to behave in public, there was a sexual contract that allowed the private sphere to be unregulated in terms of how women would be treated by their partners. I think there is a species contract as well, an agreement that ALL humans are much more important than ANY nonhuman animal. Domestic violence exemplifies how the sexual contract functions, and meat eating exemplifies how the species contract functions--so that, until recently in both instances, violence was both normalized and naturalized.

Finally, there is a question about how our bodies react to meat and dairy products. You’ve got toxins breaking down into the body as the meat passes through the colon, you’ve got the cholesterol from the animals’ bodies increasing the cholesterol in body, you’ve got a huge number of people who are lactose intolerant and don’t know it and are consuming dairy products, and you’ve got animals who, when they are being killed, release their fear into their muscles and then that fear is literally consumed. How can all of this not affect someone’s

body? An early book on domestic violence advised battered women to stop eating meat because they were already under so much stress, and vegetarianism might be a more helpful diet to follow, because it would cause less stress on the body.

**RP: The term “meat” is considered a symbol of maleness and virility yet the majority of flesh eaten is female and female animals are exploited before slaughter for their products that you labeled as “feminized proteins.” Why do you think people, especially women, fail to realize this or make the connection?**

CA: I think it’s the power of the structure of the absent referent that allows us to keep animals absent from our consciousness. People think it’s so much easier not to make these associations. But once you start looking, you can’t ignore the experience of female animals. With meat eating, women’s power of reproduction is reduced to female enslavement—making more babies for meat eaters (veal calves, for instance, are the by-product of the milk industry). I coined the term “feminized protein” to indicate that eggs and dairy products are from plant protein produced through the abuse of the reproductive cycle of female animals; humans require a sexual slavery with chickens in battery cages. Without the control of nonhuman female’s reproduction, there would be no meat eating. It is her exploitation we avoid encountering. And it’s our willingness not to challenge the structure of the absent referent that allows this to happen.

**RP: Does it follow that women protesting a patriarchal culture have more responsibility to acknowledge this connection and then act to reduce the exploitation and oppression of other female beings?**

CA: Yes, though I don't think I would phrase it quite that way. I quoted feminist philosopher Sandra Bartky in the original edition of *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, saying "Feminists don't see different things than other people; they see the same thing differently. Feminism, it could be said, turns a fact into a contradiction" (Adams, 2010, 238). I believe one of the things that feminism equips us to see differently is animalized and feminized protein; protein that comes from other beings.

Now, it is true, that many feminists don't want to turn the fact of, say, a hamburger, into a contradiction by asking themselves, "How can I possibly eat this food that is a product of oppression?" That shows how difficult it is to overcome oppressive worldviews. It reveals just how thoroughly the oppression of animals has inflected our consciousness about comfort food, national and ethnic identity, and personal pleasure: "Any nonhuman animal's life is less important than what I *want* to eat for supper." And so feminists eat steaks or hamburgers, dead chickens or dead fishes.

Let's talk for a moment about something as quintessentially American as the hamburger. That hamburger could contain parts from more 100 different cows; cows, who, at their death, were depleted from being pregnant and nursing (nursing, that is, human beings – their milk wasn't for their own offspring). In "The

Sexual Politics of Meat Slide Show”, I say, oppression isn't just an idea, it's specific actions, it's this act...eating a hamburger, or a chicken's wing.

Feminism challenges hierarchical structures; it also challenges the idea that ends justify the means. The production of food from dead animals or captive female animals occurs because of a hierarchical structure (the interests of humans over the interests of non-humans). The means of production are widely recognized to be inhumane, violent, and harmful not just to the animals, but to the environment, and to human health. How can the “end” in that equation -- the hamburger, the dead chicken, the glass of milk-- justify the means?

The cow--who makes the milk and hamburger possible--is reduced to this, a nonentity, a means, someone whose meaning as a living being is dead in the mind of the eater before she ever was actually dead and macerated on the plate to be consumed. It's not just that the cow is reduced to this; but our imagination about other species and our sense of justice concerning violence has been reduced to this--that it doesn't matter.

Who wants to think of themselves as oppressors when they are eating? A friend of mine had just returned from Rwanda and a visit to the Rwanda Genocide Memorial Centre. She's a meat eater. But after that visit, she went to see the movie, *Julie and Julia* and the scene in which Julie must kill a lobster caused my friend to want to scream. She found it disturbing to be in the theatre with people

thoroughly unaffected by watching the death of a living being.

**RP: Throughout your life you have been an activist. You pursued your education, published papers and gave presentations, traveled, started a hotline and shelter for battered women, started a soup kitchen, chaired a housing committee and were appointed to Governor Mario Cuomo's Commission on Domestic Violence. Is this what you mean by the term "engaged theory?" Can you explain what you mean by that term?**

CA: Yes. For me, as much as feminism and vegan/animal theory is related, so, too, is theory and activism. As you indicate, activism has been a central part of my life and it is threaded throughout my writings. It cannot be otherwise. As I describe in an article in a forthcoming anthology *Species Matters: Humane Advocacy and Cultural Theory*, "What Came Before the Sexual Politics of Meat," my activism taught me so much about the world and how one articulates a radically dissenting opinion.

I believe I was able to write about and theorize about interconnected oppressions because I have been involved in challenging racism, domestic violence, poverty, homelessness, misogyny, and antiabortion politics. THE insight of radical feminism of the early 1970s when I began my activist involvement was not just that the personal is political, but also that feminist challenge to injustice is deeply embodied. The political is how we are living our lives, what I choose to wear, where I work, with whom I am friends. Justice begins with our forks, our clothing,

our household tasks (and who does them).

What is engaged theory? Engaged theory arises from these insights; it has its roots in and informs activism. One aspect, but only one aspect of engaged theory, is eating as a vegan. Understanding what contemporary animal agriculture is and refusing to support it. I believe theory must be anchored in lived experiences, that theory is accountable to those who are experiencing oppression. I also believe activism needs theory; otherwise it may be reinscribing forms of oppression in its activism. When you're at the axis of theory and activism, you're judging activism for its lack of being theoretical, and you're judging theory for its lack of activism.

Let me reflect on this for a moment, because the evolution of my engaged theory owes so much to activism, and my ability to think critically about my activism. One of my journal notes from the early 1980s when I was deeply involved in fighting for integrated housing says:

*Being an advocate in the pure sense of the word*

*is being willing to risk with people*

*is living on the raw edge of experience*

*being forced to be a filter*

*to let a variety of experiences filter, move through you.*

I believe these insights remain true.

After all, in *The Sexual Politics of Meat* and my other books, I am not talking only

about changing ideas, but changing how we live. Change is difficult; conflicts abound. I know because when I travel I'll get asked very specific questions: "I'm being sexually harassed by another activist, what should I do?" "My lover broke my arm and I am afraid to leave." "Now that I'm a vegan, how do I go home for Thanksgiving?" Or, "why are people so hostile?" "How do we make connections with activists for other causes?" "I'm having conflicts with my daughter, son, spouse, mother, father, friends..." "My mother is feeding my child meat." Or, "the rape crisis center I volunteer is at having a fundraiser—a barbecue. What can I do?" The questions show where, for vegan-feminism, the rubber hits the road. And I try to answer them, drawing on theory and applying it to those specific situations.

*The Sexual Politics of Meat* is engaged theory, theory that arises from anger at what is; theory that envisions what is possible, theory that arises from and is accountable to activism. *Engaged theory makes change possible*. I don't know if you can discuss ideas about animals, treatment of animals, the killing of animals, without already inflecting the "academic" voice toward activism. One cannot be a theoretical vegan; vegan is a theory and practice, recognition of injustice animates someone to change and act, to act conscientiously day after day.

**RP: Do you see the criticism that vegetarians/animal rights activists and feminists get when they try to exert change as the same or different and how so?**

CA: Both groups are often accused of being “puritans,” of wanting to deny people pleasure. They are accused of meddling with someone’s private life. But recently, because of the really strange cultural positioning of feminism (as passé, that we are in a post-feminist time, as though what we fought for was trivial and even remembering that there was something to fight for is trivial, and the idea that we might actually *still* have something to fight for is trivial), I think, at this time, feminism and veganism are occupying different places in social change. (But I will say, if we saw recognized the problem with the human/animal boundary, I think a part of the antiabortion movement would lose its forcefulness, because it fetishizes the human embryo over the full term nonhuman animal.)

Veganism is getting more media attention, and is seen as popular, yet it is charged with being elitist or something only someone with privilege can practice. I think veganism gets a bad rap. Criticisms like that reinforce the idea that veganism is about being a consumer. I see it is a boycott. When I say I see it as a boycott I don’t mean that it is solely by individual change that we will achieve change; but that without individual change, it can’t happen. Demands influences production patterns, as the early 1970s boycott organized by “housewives” demonstrated. They weren’t boycotting for moral reasons but for economic reasons, but regardless of the motivation, the result was that the boycott was successful enough that for a few weeks the number of animals being slaughtered diminished because there was no demand for the product.

I know, economically speaking, we are in a different time. The globalization of this kind of meat production is downright scary. One third of the land mass of the

Earth is devoted to feeding livestock. With a problem this large, systemic change is needed, and veganism struggles with how to bring about this systemic change.

I also think vegans and animal activists struggle with what I have called “retrograde humanism”—that is, a reaction that charges that we should be caring about what happens to disenfranchised human beings (battered women, the homeless, the poor, the illiterate, etc.) rather than animals. Retrograde humanism is a knee jerk reaction, prompted by defensiveness. People want to believe they are good people. The structure of the absent referent in which the animal disappears both literally and conceptually allows them to believe that they are good people. Until they are among vegan or animal activists, the culture supports them in this belief. We animal activists restore the absent referent by talking about what animals are experiencing. We are saying: you are either harming animals or not. There is no neutral position here. Which side are you on? We might not even be saying this verbally.

Retrograde humanists clearly haven’t figured out you can be doing both – working for social justice for human beings and for animals. Indeed, we could argue that in working for animals we are doing both, that animal activists are including animals as a social justice concern. We could argue this for many reasons, (some of which end up reinforcing the human/animal division I would like to see eliminated). Slaughterhouses are deadly for animals, but they are also the most dangerous places to work for humans. Often undocumented workers

are employed there, and have few protections against rapid line speed. People who live near factory farms often get ill from the effluvia. Concentrated animal farm operations cause water pollution. Eating vegan can lower one's chances of high blood pressure, heart disease, high cholesterol, and diabetes. It reduces the suffering that these illnesses can cause.

Human-centered thinkers want to provide a human-centered critique of a theory or practice that de-centers humans. They re-center humans by trying to expose that we have decided to *eliminate* humans from our realm of concern. They uphold the idea that "Humans must come first." All the while, failing to recognize that incorporating animals into the dialogue and activism of social change doesn't eliminate humans from concern; it just reassembles the players by disempowering that human/animal boundary that enforces oppression. It refuses to view the world hierarchically.

But maybe the most important thing to say is that including the other animals within my social activism liberates me from calculations about being humane and what it means. I am charged by my critics as being somehow *less* humane because I include animals in my understanding of compassion. In that accusation, retrograde humanists reveal the human-inflected limitations to "humane" which haunt these discussions. Learning to feel compassion for animals enables one to approach the world, all of it, more compassionately. For me, it's not a restriction that closes up the heart and sends it in only one

direction. Being alert to how animals experience their lives enriches my life, even when from that alertness I encounter overwhelming grief, sadness, and despair. I have learned that it is okay to feel grief, that grief may be inevitable in thinking about the lives of farmed animals; but that grief does not incapacitate me. It teaches me that we are connected and that my capacity for handling difficult emotions is much greater than I ever knew. (I wonder if, when it comes down to it, retrograde humanists are frightened by the overpowering sense of grief that they recognize will be experienced if they engage with the lives of animals?)

**RP: There is a saying that one cannot eat meat and call themselves an environmentalist. In your opinion, can someone call themselves a feminist and not be vegan? What about female vegetarians who don't eat flesh but continue to consume "feminized proteins" such as eggs and dairy?**

CA: There would be no milk, if cows weren't kept lactating; no eggs if chickens weren't kept ovulating. All flesh eaters benefit from the alienated labor of the bitches, chicks, (mad) cows, and sows whose own bodies are their labor and whose names reveal a double enslavement –an interpretative climate in which female freedom is not to be envisioned. In *Animals and Women*, Josephine Donovan and I wrote, "We believe that feminism is a transformative philosophy that embraces the amelioration of life on earth for all life-forms, for all natural entities." We follow that first affirmation with a second, "We believe that all oppressions are interconnected: no one creature will be free until all are free." We were trying to imbed within feminism the transformative ethic that calls us to

recognize what is happening to other species, especially those who are the most lowered within each domesticated species, the female. This transformative ethic requires both societal and individual change. Obviously, this is why feminist-vegan scholars are both feminists and vegans! Encountering ideas and treatment about “animals” asks for engagement. As we say, there is no neutral place from which to observe evil.

**RP: What is your opinion about animal rights activists who use the sexualization of women for the cause such as nude campaign posters?**

CA: I think they are making a huge mistake. In making veganism a political decision, animal activists rightly draw attention to the relationship between the personal and the political. However, the movement has remained extraordinarily indifferent to the ways in which the seemingly impersonal structures of patriarchy introduce patterns of sexual dominance and submission within the movement itself.

While several organizations have promoted their causes using sexual images of women, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) is most notable for its choices to use women models, naked women, and to associate itself with pornographers like Hugh Hefner and Playboy. In a world in which sex is what women have to sell, PETA provides a way to “sell” their sex for a cause. A January 2007 example was PETA’s “State of the Union Undress” (available at YouTube for anyone who verifies they are 18 or older), a video in which a young

woman is depicted (through the magic of video intercutting) addressing the US Congress on the subject of animal exploitation--as she slowly strips off all her clothing. One of the implicit, if not explicit messages of such advertisements is, "Yes, we're asking you to give up animals as objects, but you can still have women as objects!" You can become aware of animals' lives, but you don't have to give up your pornography. Thus, rather than challenge the inherent inequality of a culture structured around dominance and subordination, the ad instead tries to leverage sexual inequality on behalf of the other animals. In fact, every time PETA uses a naked or nearly-naked woman to advertise animals' concerns it not only benefits from sexual inequality, it also unwittingly demonstrates the intransigence of species inequality. When a group like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) depicts women cut up like pieces of meat (having women pose like the image on the cover of my book), they are benefiting from misogyny. The dead animal's fate is effectively layered upon the woman's fate as an object.

I think what groups like PETA struggle with is the question: How does someone become awakened to consciousness of his or her individual responsibility for the death of animals? How does a culture learn to care about domesticated animals? As I have argued, one powerful structural barrier to caring about animals is the ideology by which domesticated species have been "lowered" through their equation with femaleness. So effective and total is this ideology that campaigns on behalf of animals believe that they cannot win over animal oppressors simply

by showing the actual lives of domesticated animals. Farmed animals are inevitably seen as a nothingness, associated as they are with femaleness. To get around this problem, some campaigns on behalf of animals have ironically chosen to substitute a different subject for their campaigns, one who has also been desubjectified: the woman who lives in a state of perpetual undress. In doing so, however, they are only reinforcing the very system of sexual objectification that consigns both women and animals to perpetual domination.

PETA is trying to repurpose an image, an entire discourse, and says it has the ability to do it, to unanchor it from its history of misogyny (as though it can be done), and reinscribe it with new meaning. But women's bodies, like animals' bodies, have always been written upon in many ways. In this context, while some argue that PETA's ads using naked or nearly-naked women are liberating, not only for animals but, in transgressive ways, for women too, such practices in fact only substitute one absent referent for another.

The challenge for the animal movement is how to restore the absent referent to a dominant culture that refuses to acknowledge it. Logically, there can be no politically liberatory substitution of woman for animal, because what is being replaced carries its own marker of inequality. What appears superficially as substitution is actually the layering of one oppressive system on top of another. What we in fact see is one debased subject being substituted for the other: the lowered status of the first (animal) is applied to the other (woman), who however

already carries her own low status -- marked as "female" in a world of sexual inequality. If animals are burdened by gender, by gendered associations, by the oppression that is gender, then clearly they can't be liberated through representations that demean women.

**RP: What is the reaction to your theory and *The Sexual Politics of Meat* today? Has it changed in the last 20 years?**

CA: It has been both the same and changed. The fury at me for suggesting that there might be a connection, that fury is still expressed. Now you can find it on blogs, or tweets, or in online responses to newspaper articles. I continue to be surprised by feminist commentators who object to sexist ads that show women as meat and don't recognize the way the sexual politics of meat is working.

Because veganism has gained so much support in the past twenty years, it has received a lot of attention in those circles. It was just selected as one of the top ten books for 2010 by *VegNews*.

I wrote the book believing I was making a contribution to feminist theory. But upon publication it was greeted as a representation of eco-feminist theory. My goal--to demonstrate the importance of decentering the human in feminism and recognizing intersectional oppressions--was treated as illustrating specifically an environmental feminist approach to animals. The implication was that my theory

spoke to this *part* of feminist theory. I saw this as marginalizing my ideas. It also allowed feminists who already had an idea of what “eco-feminism” was, and who didn’t agree with what they believed to be its premises, to neglect the book. I think eco-feminist theory is important. I have edited a book on the subject and written several articles that build on and challenge the premises of eco-feminist theory. But, I continue to believe that my work, and other feminist work in this vein (including the work of Josephine Donovan, Lori Gruen, and Greta Gaard among others) is misunderstood if it remains moored solely to “eco-feminism.”

I think *The Sexual Politics of Meat* is intervening in a culture that has changed. In terms of overlapping cultural images involving animals and women, things have gotten worse. Meat advertisements that sexualize and feminize animals have been around for more than thirty years, and during this time, they have become more widespread and more explicit. What *Hustler* pornographically imagined women as thirty-five years ago, Burger King, Carls’ Jr, and many other dead animal purveyors recreate and suggest now. You can find *Hustler’s* image of a woman going through a meat grinder image prettified in an ad for the HBO series *The Comeback* featuring Lisa Kudrow. Burger King takes the *Hustler* mentality—women as meat, as hamburger, and stylizes it for Super Bowl commercials. The 2009 *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue (“Bikinis or Nothing”) includes an ad for Arby’s with hands removing two hamburger buns as though they are taking off a bikini top.

**RP: *The Sexual Politics of Meat* has turned you into a hero and cultural icon. The New York Times referred to your book as “a bible of the vegan community.” You were even portrayed as a character in a *Law & Order: SVU* episode entitled “Beef.” What have these experiences been like for you?**

CA: In one sense they have been fascinating and surprising. I think it helps to put them into the context of what happened to me after *The Sexual Politics of Meat* was published. As I said above, within weeks people were sending me images, responding to the book with such enthusiasm, and saying “your book changed my life.” I still get these letters and meet people who tell me that. This experience has been a great gift to me; I know the book from the inside out, these readers give me the experience of the book from the outside in. And I think that reaction, of how the book changes people’s lives, is what the *New York Times* was acknowledging when it called it “a bible.” Which I see in secular sense as saying “this book has been important to people; it has informed how they live; they are faithful to the insights of this book.”

As for *Law and Order: SVU*, I was absolutely shocked to see a fictional “me” showing *their* version of *my* slide show saying “patriarchy and meat eating go hand in hand.” I thought, “Can this be possible that *Law and Order: SVU* is presenting these ideas AND, on top of that, the detectives aren’t challenging her perspective?” I realized that someone associated with the script-writing must have heard of or seen the Sexual Politics of Meat Slide Show or been exposed to my ideas while in college. And then I laughed to myself and thought, “this fictional

depiction of my work, in a sense, proves my claim: we can't talk about meat eating without naming its context--a patriarchal culture!"

Basically, my *Law and Order* counterpart, like me, is saying, "You are committing discursive violence which allows for a material form of violence." And what I now say in the Sexual Politics of Meat Slide Show, after discussing the *Law and Order* scene, is that

"I am not just asking you to look with resistance, to recognize that images can't be unanchored from their referent. I am asking you to refuse to consume the images on their own terms. I am asking you to refuse to consume, literally, that which exists because of violence. Real violence. Life-ending and life-destroying violence." And I think the *Law and Order* scene helps me make my point.

**RP: If you could choose one point you would hope readers get out of this interview, what would it be?**

CA: Since this is going into a special issue on feminism and food, let me say something about eating as a vegan. I want to speak about the positive aspects of eschewing animalized and feminized protein. I don't mean the health benefits, though they are considerable, but the aesthetic, intellectual, and gustatory delights of changing and in changing of expanding (not restricting) one's diet. Meat eaters might choose a hamburger as a "fast food" (of course it took time for that animal to grow large enough to be killed and become someone's dinner). If someone really wants a burger as fast food, why, I can have a lentil burger, a

black bean burger, a walnut burger, a beet burger, a pine nut burger, a tofuburger, even a lima bean burger, in less than thirty minutes. That's actual fast food.

It's true that people fear change, and when it comes to food choices people are very protective and often combative. The response is often, "How do I dare challenge their personal choice?" Even though feminism popularized the statement "the personal is the political," somehow food choices are supposed to remain in this privileged zone of the personal. What I want to say is, "You think change is hard. Not changing is even harder; you just haven't discovered it yet." It's not a choice between comforting food that you are familiar with or really lousy food that makes you feel deprived. It's a choice between being part of oppression, day in and day out, by eating foods that arise from suffering and death, or embracing plant-based, delicious foods.

In *Living Among Meat Eaters* I propose this maxim: People are perfectly happy eating vegan meals as long as they don't know that's what they are doing. Most people fear change; they dislike being told what to do (including what to eat), and are apprehensive that they will have to be conscious about what they are eating. People don't like feeling apprehensive and self-conscious in general and especially when it comes to food. They also want a sense that their food choices aren't limited, restricted, etc.

But just think for a moment about the variety of ways of eating a plant-based diet. Take leafy greens, for instance. Just think of how many kinds there are! Kale,

spinach, collards, chard, beet greens, snow pea leaves, water spinach, Chinese broccoli, mustard greens—I've probably forgotten some. I've learned so many ways to fix them—in salads or steamed, in soups or spaghetti, in Italian or Chinese or Indian cuisine, stuffed in pumpkins or eggplants or mushrooms, with barley, or couscous, or quinoa. Well, you get the idea.

I didn't know how to cook when I was a meat eater and consuming feminized protein. Now my friends say, "I'd be a vegan if Carol cooked my meals for me." I didn't have to learn everything in one day! Anyone can change and it's much easier than people realize. That's one reason I co-wrote *How to Eat Like a Vegetarian Even if You Don't Want to Be One*, to make it as easy as possible to change.

We are not powerless against the culture of the sexual politics of meat. People fear giving up pleasure, but they aren't! Something actually interrupts the fetishization associated with the sexual politics of meat, offers alternative endings, inserts itself against the associations between "pleasure" and "meat"--it's actual vegan meals.

**RP: Thank you so much, Carol, for sharing your time, theories and ideas with us.**