Living Otherwise

Transformative Veganism in John M. Coetzee’s
Elizabeth Costello and Margaret Atwood’s
MaddAddam-trilogy

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A Thesis Presented to the Department of
Literature, Area Studies, and European Languages
Faculty of Humanities

UNIVERSITY OF OSLO

June 2019
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IV
Summary

In this thesis, I re-claim the term ‘veganism’ as to represent the challenge it poses to the current anthropocentric order, which is based on a false conception of the human as exceptional. As we learn more about the complexities of other animals, we need new ways of relating to them that are not heavily detrimental, and I present veganism as such an option, being an alternate subjectivity and moral framework. However, it is necessary to set it apart from its current conception as being strictly a dietary preference and sentimental response to the ways in which other animals are used and abused in contemporary times, which is why I re-conceptualise it as ‘transformative veganism.’ Transformative veganism,’ which is primarily based on Cary Wolfe’s affirmative biopolitics, Rosi Braidotti’s nomadic theory, and Matthew Calarco’s zone of ‘indistinction,’ brings to the fore the epistemologically disruptive, critical potential of the practice, and how it is always in search for the affirmative encounters in our relation with other animals. Furthermore, it is particularly applicable in the Western discourse, in which institutions such as the factory farm mark the ultimate disregard for other animal life. Transformative veganism is then applied in readings of John M. Coetzee’s Elizabeth Costello and Margaret Atwood’s MaddAddam-trilogy, both of which have been read by critics and reviewers as either undermining such topics, or of presenting them in a negative light. I argue for the importance of reading these texts in such a way, and the potential it could hold if it is taken seriously of radically changing the ways in which we not only view other animals, but also ourselves, in our shared enmeshment.
Foreword

I would like to thank my supervisor, Michael Lundblad, for his encouragement, immense knowledge, and for always asking the right questions during these last few months. Without him, this thesis would not have been what it is today.

I would also like to thank my friends, family and boyfriend, not only for their continual support, but also for their insight in knowing when to steer clear of my office.

Lastly, I want to thank all my fellow earthlings in fur, scales and feathers. Although it took me some time to wake up, I am here now, and I will continue to be your voice for as long as I draw breath. This all started with you, after all.
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1 Introduction

In the last two decades, the word ‘animal’ has been one of great attention in a wide range of disciplines, and in the face of gaining knowledge on the complexity of other animals, animal studies has grown as an academic field. Historically, the notion of the ‘Man’ has been established on the oppositions of what the ‘animal’ is not, but since Darwin and his theory of evolution, and Peter Singer’s monumental *Animal Liberation*, this view has been challenged. Human beings, despite our denial, share biological lineage with many other species, and in a time where we are constantly learning more about the cognitive, social and mental complexities in the lives of other animals, the assumed superiority of our species has become impossible to substantially backed up. In light of these advances, how do we continue to justify the war human beings are currently waging against other animals, especially in sites such as the factory farm, which has been repeatedly compared to the Holocaust of the Jews during the Second World War?

Every time other animals are proven to possess capacities which were perceived as specific to the human being, we simply draw new lines and create new rules to uphold this arbitrary and unfounded divide. Rather than adapt and change accordingly, we desperately cling to the fictional categories of “human” and “animal” even as the scaffold for such categories come tumbling down around us. We are in grave need of a new way in which to relate and respond to other animals, one which is not intrinsically anthropocentric and open to complexities. That is what I aim to do in this thesis through looking at the theme of veganism in contemporary fiction. I will argue in what ways my chosen texts urge us to think about veganism, how effective they are in this regard, and why it is important that we think about them in such a way.

In the current climate with factory farming being the norm, at this point of utter fracture in our relationships with other animals, I believe veganism is the most productive and viable option, presenting a material, political response to the detrimental discourse that is human exceptionalism. However, as identified by vegan scholar Laura Wright (2015), there is a contemporary trend that—due to the threat the vegan body poses to “the status quo in terms of […] [choosing] not to participate in many aspects of the mechanism that maintain what constitutes the mainstream”—seeks to “bully [veganism] out of existence during a moment when it is most capable of altering the dominant cultural mindset” (Wright 19).
Contemplating it seriously as more than a dietary practice is therefore of a matter of great importance and urgency.

1.1 The Power of Fiction

She can think her way into other people, into other existences […] Isn’t that what is most important about fiction: that it takes us out of ourselves, and into other lives? (Elizabeth Costello 22-23)

Fiction provides a powerful tool in contemplating the topic of veganism in how it “reveals […] the complex cultural, social, and representational issues tied up with conceptual shifts” (Hayles 24). Annie Potts also establishes how fiction creates the necessary distance readers and audiences need “in order to make the invisible, visible,” consequently providing a platform from which to reflect on different aspects about day-to-day life, especially on those which are so heavily ingrained that they are allowed to go unquestioned, such as and human exceptionalism and all of its ramification. (160). Furthermore, as animal studies has grown as an academic field, and with fields such as posthumanism’s growing influence, the human/animal divide has been treated more fluidly in contemporary literature as opposed to before. Also, there has in recent years been an upsurge in literature in which there is a distinct promotion of—to use Robert McKay’s (“The Literary Representation”) term—‘pro-animal’ thought, which in a limited sense can be described as work which is dismissive of the current anthropocentric order. This has in turn created growing tendency of other animals being presented in literature not just as stand-ins for human emotions or symbols for human attributes— which has been the common function of other animals in literary contexts for a long time—but on their own terms, reflecting a shift towards taking the ‘animal question,’ as well as the ‘animal condition,’ seriously.

Animal studies scholar Derek Ryan notes how this trend “forces us to face uncomfortable truths about the way our culture, our language and our thoughts have become distant from animal being and from our own animality” (Ryan 76). Due to these anxieties, there is inevitably opposition to such a focus: Catherine Parry, for example, notes that within the academy there is a scepticism towards the “seriousness” of critical literary work done on other animals, as if literature centred around how we treat other animals “must have a
political fervour that ignores matters of human social justice, as if compassion for animals deletes compassion for humans, as if literary critical work that is not about animals must be the naive anecdotes of an ‘animal lover’” (Other Animals vii). Moreover, despite evidence to the contrary, there still exists widespread denial towards acknowledging how other animals are also capable of leading complex lives, and thus, depicting them as such is often framed as unscientific. Due to science being “the dominant paradigm of our time,” advancing knowledge on the lives of other animals tends to be short-circuited (Postcolonial Ecocriticism 194). The situation is complicated further by a “[reluctance] to admit our involvement with [other animals],” seeing as we “necessarily disguise our feelings towards [them] from ourselves [due to how] the structure of most human societies, dependent as they are on animal products, would collapse” otherwise (Postcolonial Ecocriticism 194, emphasis in original).

Thus, it seems paramount that we are able to challenge such harmful preconceptions, and to explore alternate traditions and subjectivities, such as veganism. ‘Man’ has for so long been presupposed on what other animals are not, providing an ever-ready derogatory discourse to ‘animalise’ not only other species, but minority groups as well, connecting different kinds of oppression. Moreover, ’animal’ is nothing but “a word that men have given themselves the right to give,” supposedly encompassing all that is not human, oblivious to individuality and differences (Derrida and Wills, 400). Fiction has risen to the challenge of opposing this subjectivity, this harmful understanding of the order of things, and is, compared to philosophy, better equipped as to extend our sympathies, as well as to expand our exceedingly narrow perception of ourselves. It furthermore does so in a way that grants us the necessary distance to critically view our current practices, and open our eyes to alternative, more affirmative, ways in which to engage with what we like to call the ‘animal.’

1.2 Text Selection

The books explored in this thesis are both from contemporary fiction, seeing as I wanted them to reflect current attitudes and responses to the ‘animal question’ as well as to the practice of veganism. Firstly, I chose Elizabeth Costello (henceforth referred to as EC) by John M. Coetzee, which deals directly with the concept of being vegan in a world where the majority culture is not. Realistic fiction proved the obvious choice, given that it perhaps best
represents how the practice is currently conceived and normalised. Furthermore, critics of this genre are often more inclined to ignore topics such as veganism in favour of other isms, and more often than not read the works anthropocentrically—which is indeed the case with many reviews of Coetzee’s book.

Some critics do however acknowledge the potential of *Elizabeth Costello* in this regard, one of which is Robert McKay, who opines how *Elizabeth Costello* offers a “fascinating study of the effect of fiction on the moral philosophy of pro-animal thought,” moreover noting how he finds it to be one of the most compelling pro-animal works ever written (188). Due to its direct approach to topics such as factory farming, philosophical positions related to ‘the animal question’ as well as to veganism, Coetzee’s book proved an obvious choice for this thesis. *Elizabeth Costello* has been read in a many ways, but the protagonist’s ethical veganism—which I deem to be the perhaps most important of the themes explored by Coetzee in his novel—is rarely brought forth as a defining trait, and even if it is, it is either to demonstrate some larger point, or to prove Costello an eccentric sentimentalist.

As for my second text selection, I chose Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam*-trilogy, which is compromised of *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009) and *MaddAddam* (2013). The trilogy deals directly with human-nonhuman animal relationships in the age of transgenics, the ethics of consumption in a hyper-capitalist society, the agency and subjectivities of other animals, as well as the unsettling of human exceptionalism. I chose to write on the whole trilogy rather than just one of the books because I wanted to include the evolving narratives and changes in perceptions that happen as the story progresses. There are also specific aspects of all the three books which are relevant for my thesis question. Thus, there will be no overt focus on one book or the other, but rather on the trilogy as a whole.

In her trilogy, Atwood satirises contemporary trends in developed capitalist societies and project them into the foreseeable future, providing the reader with the distance required to view ourselves and our actions critically, de-familiarising the familiar. She writes through what animal studies scholar Susan McHugh identifies as narrative ethology, a trend in literary analysis in which other animals are read as animals—not as symbols, objects or metaphors for human beings—and where “embodied relations of agency and form” are emphasised over the shelving of narratives as “political problems of representations” (*Real Artificial*
Atwood grants other animals the status of independent subjects with inherent value in themselves, taking the important first steps to move beyond their objectification, and think through the ethical implications of their agency. A trend in continental philosophy has for so long been one based on the Cartesian-self, that other animals are mere automata that can be used and abused for whatever trivial purpose. Atwood’s *MaddAddam*-trilogy is therefore useful in exploring topics such as veganism and the human-animal divide due to it having less of a predisposition as to be read anthropocentrically.

Other works which I read prior to beginning working on this thesis—and which would have been interesting to examine—include *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang, *My Year of Meats* by Ruth Ozeki and *Under the Skin* by Jonathan Farber. Kang’s novel was not selected mainly due to it being a translation into English from Korean, potentially obscuring meaning in the translation. Ozeki and Farber, on the other hand, were both tied with Coetzee for some time before I chose the latter, primarily because *Elizabeth Costello* provided a more philosophical and direct stance which I thought would be interesting to compare with Atwood’s speculative fiction. Furthermore, Coetzee’s book more accurately describes what it is like being vegan in a world in which anthropocentrism is the norm, whereas Atwood explores its relevance when this framework has been torn down, presenting an interesting contrast.

### 1.3 Framing Veganism

With the risk of sounding somewhat cliche, I present the broadest and most common definition of veganism as framed by *The Vegan Society*, which is “a way of living which seeks to exclude, *as far as is possible and practicable*, all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose” (emphasis added). Thus, in its very definition, veganism does not present itself as a universalising concept, which is important to keep in mind moving forward with this analysis.

In likeness with thinkers such as Anat Pick—who conceptualises veganism as “a world mode of engagement that acknowledges the realities of violence […] a way of living, an act that, far from assuming the position of moral superiority […] entails in its very incompleteness and imperfections, a conscious participation in the world” (Pick 69)—and Matthew Calarco—who in an interview said that he identifies veganism as “an effort to
release [other animals] from a world and en established order that has blocked them from constituting their own worlds, their own relations, their own becomings, joys, and passions,” “not a hatred of disgust of meat or of embodiment, but a profound indemnification with and passion for meaty bodies and their wide range of potentials” (Caffo 89)—I want to view veganism rather as a continual effort to ethically engage with other animals, as opposed to an accomplished state of self-assuredness. Veganism is a deep identification with other animals, not one presupposed on a false conception of the human nexus, but rather based a shared sense of being alive in the world. Furthermore, veganism is a point of resistance to the well-established anthropocentric order, particularly applicable in developed capitalist societies: here, where choices are almost unlimited and individual consumer choices carry a massive impact, veganism as a subjectivity, a way of life, holds the potential to shatter the epistemological ground on which human exceptionalism rests.

Even though mostly ignored in literary contexts, I will argue that veganism is an important aspect to contemplate in both Elizabeth Costello and the MaddAddam-trilogy, both of which are works that urge their readers to reevaluate the ways in which we relate to other animals. However, as of now—both in cultural and critical understandings—veganism is associated with being first and foremost a dietary preference, and a way of viewing other animals through what Karen Davis—in Annie Potts’s Meat Culture—calls a “disneysque” lens (Potts 192). This, in turn, serves to obscure other aspects of the practice, robbing it of its critical potential, as well as to make it an aspect of literary work that is easily ignored, and which hold negative connotations. Carol J. Adams, for example, asserts that “the [vegan] aspect to a writer of her work” is oftentimes overlooked by literary critics (Adams, Sexual Politics 14), and Emilia Quinn and Robert Westwood identifies as “the neglected [vegan] aspects of literary texts” (Quinn and Westwood 150). Before moving on to applying the term to my chosen texts, it is therefore crucial to lay out the current debate in which the concept of veganism is situated in order to argue for its conceptual value. Understanding what critical traditions I am drawing from, what affiliation veganism has with a range of different fields of study, is important in order to ground the re-conceptualisation I will be laying out, as well as for establishing its potential. In the following, I will therefore present the conceptualisation of veganism at it is most prevalent in both critical and popular discourses, in order to shed some light on its negative connotations, as well as to point the way to a new conceptualisation of the practice.
1.3.1 Critical and Popular Understandings of Veganism

Placed within the frame of animal studies, which is itself being negotiated in between several complicated and somewhat incompatible contexts, veganism is rarely—if ever—theorised. There a several reasons for this, one of them being that animal studies is itself faced with the struggle of stitching together a critical conversation between and amongst radically different approaches to what so-called ‘animal question’—such as for example critical theory, philosophy and cultural studies. To take the example of philosophy, animal studies must work with the fact that fundamental texts from its “founding fathers,” Peter Singer and Tom Regan, base themselves on transposing capacities which are morally relevant for human beings onto other animals, which reduce other animals’s claim to ethical consideration to how similar they are to human beings.

In the wake of this troublesome legacy, then, new trends within animal theory—such as those based in the continental tradition—must time and time again grapple with an ethics that moves from the inside out, and which is intrinsically anthropocentric. Moreover, critical threads within the field must not only deal with the general wilful ignorance displayed towards institutions such as the factory farm by the majority culture, but also with how to engage with these topics without resorting to argumentation which ultimately ends up immunising potential responses, which is usually what ends up happening when topics such as veganism are brought up. There is also the renewal of “ethical carnivorism” in promoting an awareness of where your food comes from rising as a response to the atrocities of the factory farm, supposedly minimising veganism’s relevance. The reluctance to theorise veganism is born from these tensions, leaving it comfortably untouched. Furthermore, given the high regard for meat in western culture, there are “direct and personal implication[s]” in challenging the majority viewpoint’s “way of life” (Parry, “Reading Animals” 153).

Val Plumwood, Donna Haraway and Jacques Derrida are among the influential figures who have voiced their negative opinions on veganism, and are also all thinkers whom can also be said to be pre-occupied with ‘the animal question’: they are critical of the sharp divide between other animals and human beings, and of how this divide has been used to justify our uses and abuses of other species, and are thus interested in opening the conversation as to how to better relate to other animals. However, veganism does not necessarily contribute to this goal: quite the contrary, they find the practice to be problematic.
on several scores, the reasons for which will be laid our shortly. Although impossible to lay out in detail within the scope of this thesis, I will attempt to briefly present why Plumwood, Haraway and Derrida are all critical towards veganism as a practice. This is not an attempt to prove any of them wrong, I simply find it necessary to establish the current critical milieu in which veganism exists, which is effectively brought to the fore through these three thinkers.

Ecofeminist Val Plumwood, best know for her work on ecology, claims veganism is an “ecologically disembodied theory” in which practitioners conceptually exempt themselves from the food chain, and try to extend this status as of inedibility to all “morally considerable beings,” effectually rendering the act of meat consumption unethical on all scores (Plumwood 300-301). Plumwood sees veganism as equating, on ethical terms, indigenous peoples’s right to hunt and fish to factory farming in capitalist societies, adopting a “culturally universal interpretation of food practices” (Plumwood 299). Plumwood is however vegetarian herself, and sees many a good reason for a contextual veganism, such as in the the mass-capitalist “Western” societies marked by practices such as contemporary factory farming, or “flesh factories,” as she calls them (Plumwood 289). However, in her promotion of her ‘ecological animalism,’ she short-circuits every conversation that is to be had about veganism, reducing the practice to its ontological and universalist understanding.

Moving on to Donna Haraway, who views the human being as one of many “critters” inhabiting our planet, and works towards developing an ethics that is reconcilable with an erasure of the human-animal distinction, arguing for a notion of “becoming-with” other animals. She urges people to ‘stay with the trouble,’ acknowledging our enmeshment with our fellow critters, rather than opting for easy solutions—something she accuses veganism of doing. In her book, When Species Meet, Haraway primarily associates the practice with notions such as ‘animal rights’ and as a way of living in which you attempt to remove yourself from the cycle of harming and killing that is life, which is a notion she—rightfully—finds to be both impossible and naive, as “there is no way of living that is not also a way of someone, not just something, else dying differently” (80). Haraway does not condemn the act of killing, but rather how other animals are made ‘killable’ within institutions such as the factory farm (80). Although she goes as far as characterising ethical veganism as a “necessary truth” that “bears crucial witness to the extremity of the brutality in our “normal” relations with other animals” (105), Haraway also identifies veganism as a “exterminationist
nonsolution” (105) that condemns domestic animals to extermination on both a collective and individual level. She grounds veganism in “a love for animals” that leads to an opposition to “meat eating and hunting of all sorts, not just factory farming” (299), furthermore restricting it to an avoidance of “eating or wearing any animal products” (80). Moreover, as noted by Matthew Calarco, rather than being in favour of an elimination of the usage of other animals in food production, laboratories and so forth, Haraway argues for a refashioning within the practices to allow for more respect for animal subjectivity and agency: she finds veganism, and it more abolitionist stance, to shut off some of these potential inter-species relationships (Calarco, Thinking Through Animals 68).

Lastly, there is French philosopher Jacques Derrida, who took a great interest in ‘the animal question’ in the later years of his career. For Derrida, veganism is not aligned with his famous notion of “eating well,” which essentially entails “determining the best, most respectful, most grateful, and also most giving way of relating to the other and relating the other to the self” (Derrida & Nancy 281-82). Put dreadfully simply—seeing as he is a complex thinker who is hard to sum up—Derrida’s issue with “absolute” veganism can be summed up as two-fold: 1) he believes vegans fail to acknowledge their own role in the sacrificial nature of their own lived experience, and 2) that practitioners of veganism tend to subscribe to thinking of ethics more like a prescriptive program than an continual, critical effort of relating oneself to others. Derrida would, as pointed out by Cary Wolfe, necessarily be sceptical towards any notion that “reduces ethics to the very anthesis of ethics by reducing the aporia of judgement in which the possibility of justice resides to the mechanical unfolding of a positivist calculation” (Animal Rites 69).

Derrida is thus, in likeness with Plumwood and Haraway, opposed to a veganism that is based on universality and purity. As Matthew Calarco notes, in relation to Derrida and his philosophy, “insofar as [veganism] holds itself up as the moral mode of eating, it risks stalling the question of eating well and collapsing into a self-assured form of good conscience (a tendency that is evident in a number of contemporary discourses on [veganism])” (“Deconstruction is not vegetarianism” 195). The question of ‘eating-well’ is not simply a question of what one should eat, but rather one which would necessitate a complete reorientation of the self in the world. The work of Derrida is therefore asking us how to relate in the world when we acknowledge the necessity of consumption, turning us away from
questions of purity altogether. He does not acknowledge veganism as such a way of ‘eating well,’ or even as a partial resistance to his notion of carnophallogocentrism—a subjectivity in which “being a subject means being a self-present, speaking, virile eater of flesh” (Calarco “Deconstruction is not vegetarianism” 190)—even though there can be little doubt that many vegans turn to the practice for that very reason. However, holding Derrida up to whatever standards only functions to entrench us in debates which deflect from the larger issues, and is better left alone. As Matthew Calarco notes,

Derrida is not our pastor or physician, he should not see as our guide to eating well. If [he] is hesitant to openly declare that, for those who live in contemporary western, urban societies, [veganism] is generally a more respectful way of relating to animals than meat eating is, then we should proceed without him. Let us not get mired down in such debates. (“Deconstruction is not vegetarianism” 197)

Now, having established the conception of veganism as it currently stands in popular and cultural contexts, it has become clear that it does not allow for much room in which to further explore the concept, especially when even thinkers as influential as Plumwood, Haraway and Derrida only see it for its potential immunising properties. In light of this, I see the need for a re-conceptualisation of the term in which it is rather valued for its disruptive and transformative potential. ‘Transformative veganism’ is the conceptualisation I have settled on as a way of setting it aside from its current negative connotations.

1.4 Transformative Veganism

‘Transformative veganism’ originates at the juncture between posthumanism, continental philosophy and critical animal studies, and is primarily inspired by Cary Wolfe’s notion of affirmative biopolitics, Rosi Braidotti’s nomadic theory, and of Matthew Calarco’s theory of indistinction, all of which will be laid out in the following. I want to clarify that, apart from Calarco, none of the aforementioned thinkers argue explicitly for veganism, but all are sceptical of anthropocentrism and encourage alternative ways of relating to other animals than what is currently the status quo.

The word ‘transformative’ points to how the practice transforms the individual that
subscribes to such a mindset, radically changing the ways in which it relates to the animal other in ways which are not intrinsically detrimental to the latter, not taking for granted the exceptionalism of anthropocentrism. Furthermore, ‘transformative’ is meant to ground veganism not as an immunising concept, but rather one acutely aware of contextual and situational factors. On this note, it is important to mention that transformative veganism is first and foremost a response to the instrumentalisation of life within the frames of “Western” capitalism, in which institutions such as the factory farm—which pose as the ultimate disregard for life beyond the anthropos—is the predominant way of “farming” other animals which we wish to eat. This might seem a narrow focus, but in the current climate, it is the more pressing. In his contribution to Paola Cavalieri’s *Death of the Animal: A Dialogue*, Matthew Calarco legitimates how veganism should focus on limiting the violence inflicted on *particular* other animals—those found within the animal industrial complex—by framing it in the context of challenging the epistemologies of anthropocentrism as well as through addressing the unfathomable cruelty of the factory farm. He argues that it is a risk worth taking to set our focus on so-called ‘food animals,’ although it is a risk “without any pretence of fully representing or understanding those singular beings we call animals” (Cavalieri 84).

Calarco grounds this focus in how “[c]ontemporary ethical discourse and practice does not take place in a vacuum, but emerge from[…]a series of background practices and beliefs that have placed the interests of most animals outside the scope of moral and political considerability,” and that “in order to challenge the established order of things in this context, it’s necessary to take up the terms of the discourse as they currently stand and transform them” (Cavalieri 81-82, emphasis in original). “[T]he lives and deaths of animals themselves,” by which he means given “the present conditions under which many animals exist,” are thus important, given how there has “[n]ever before in human history [been] so many animals […] subjected to horrific slaughter, unconscionable abuse, and unthinkable living conditions” (Cavalieri 83).

These conditions are furthermore unique, seeing as there are no historical precedents for them, and thus require both material and philosophical analysis. Calarco therefore urges us to think of this discourse it in its specificity so that we learn how to better respond to it and “transform it for for the present and the future” (Cavalieri 83). Cary Wolfe, in a discussion of Derrida, also addresses this, talking about Derrida’s “focus on the *technology* of abuse” and
how this is the root for the “infernal hell” of other animals in our newfound “ability to constantly supply this machinery of suffering and abuse with fresh bodies, new “lives” (if one can even call them that)” (Cavalieri 126). I therefore find there to be sufficient reasoning for making the primary target of transformative veganism that of the animal industrial complex—which is first and foremost a Western enterprise—as well as the larger, conceptual underpinnings that uphold these structures.

1.4.1 Cary Wolfe and Veganism as Affirmative Biopolitics

Cary Wolfe is one of the spearheads within the fields of animal studies and critical posthumanism, and is relevant to the sort of veganism I want to promote in how he grounds the consumption of meat in capitalist societies as being closely linked to the ipseity of the consumer, stressing how it should be viewed as a political issue. This brings to the fore the totalising structures underpinning ‘carnism,’ a term coined and defined by psychologist Melanie Joy as the underlying belief-system and psychology of meat eating. In his book Before the Law, Wolfe notes “the specific role and character of industrially produced meat as a central element and tool in the biopolitical process of globalatinization,” in which the “prosperity” and “well-being” of the subject consumer [is] channelled through not just the consumerist “choice” that capitalist globalisation says it offers and on which it depends, but also through the complex psychodynamics and sacrifice of eating flesh as a sign of the subject’s autonomy, security and “indemnification” […]. In other words, “carnophallogocentrism” is a key export for the success of capitalist globalisation, one borne on the backs of billions of dead animals (100-101).

Here, Wolfe draws a parallel between the the very act of meat consumption in the developed world to capitalism on a global scale. The bodies of other animals are thus not simply being turned into capital fodder, but furthermore function as symbolic referents which depoliticise the biopolitical facilitation of industrialised mass-slaughter. This is a symbolic dimension that few other thinkers grapple with in their work.

Haraway, even though she is not in favour of factory farming, does starkly contrast it with relations farmers have with their livestock and hunters have with their prey, providing a
contrast to Wolfe, who ties even individual acts of meat consumption—albeit in specific contexts, cultural or situational—up with the humanist epistemologies that underpin such relations. This contrast becomes evident in *When Species Meet*, in which Haraway discusses the relationship between an acquaintance of hers and the feral pigs which he hunts: “His approach is resolutely tuned to ecological discourses, and he seems tone deaf to the demand individual animals might make as ventriloquized in rights idioms […] Adept hunters…treat [their prey] like wily animals with lives of their own” (298). Whilst both are against—what Wolfe calls—the “massification” of other animals that render them as “killable”—as Haraway would say—without need for ethical consideration, Wolfe differs from Haraway in that he rightfully foregrounds how also individual relations between humans and other animals are capable of a rendering “killable” of the other.

These are arguments are best represented in Wolfe’s discussions on—to borrow a term from Susan McHugh (*Real Artificial*)—‘real artificial’ meat, a concept which he finds to be “continuous with the practices of domestication, manipulation, and control of life that characterise the factory farms” (*Before the Law* 97). The production of such cultured meat, Wolfe argues, does nothing for removing other animals from their position as inherently killable, but rather reinforces “the technologies and dispositifs that are exercising a more[…] finely tuned control over life and ‘making live’” (*Before the Law* 97, emphasis in original). This eases into Wolfe’s argument concerning the fundamental structures of carnism, in which he brings together a discussion of Derrida’s ‘carnophallogocentrism’ and his own discussion of biopolitics in order to ask: “would many of us find that ‘real’ meat is ‘better,’ more authentic, that [real artificial] meat because it indexed the sovereignty and ipseity of a subject who engages in sacrifice?… Indeed, is [sacrifice] what makes meat ‘meat?’” (*Before the Law* 97). Wolfe then goes on to explore these epistemologies and how they work, in what is considered to be ‘ethical consumerism’ on an individual level, where he identifies “an important deep structure of the […] ‘ethical carnivore’ phenomenon,” and that is that its subscribers “do not sacrifice sacrifice” (*Before the Law* 97).

Wolfe is thus arguing how the very act of consuming meat is one closely tied to the scaffold supporting the ipseity of the humanist subject, a notion dependent on other animals remaining in the category of always readily killable. Having identified this structure, it becomes vastly more problematic to reject the potential of a vegan praxis based on it being
totalising: carnism has now been established as a totalising ideology itself after previously having been exempt from such categorisations, being the majority viewpoint. What is so crucial about this, at least in relation to veganism as a practice, is that Wolfe—as compared to Derrida (from which he draws much inspiration)—is able to combine the concept of carnophallogocentrism and biopolitical thought, relying on the routinised killings in the context of the factory farm (and other such sites of mass exploitation) rather than on a notion of sacrifice which is far more vague. Carnism is thus essentially tied with the notion of the freedom of the subject to do, as well as consume, whatever it wants.

In this context, veganism presents a practice which challenges and proposes a removal of this the for granted assumption, which has “graduated from the category of lifestyle choice to that of collective responsibility” with the increasing demand and in-sustainability of contemporary meat production (Paul Roberts as cited by Wolfe in Before the Law 101). As Castricano and Simonsen note in their book Critical Perspectives on Veganism, “[w]hen a behaviour becomes a choice, it takes on a much more ethical dimension,” thus destabilising the naturalness of meat eating in the developed world (vi). Intervening at this junction, then, rather than being a totalising practice, veganism presents itself as a possible form of Wolfe’s “affirmative biopolitics” (Before the Law 104). Through a bringing to the fore of the biopolitical dimension of carnism, and a nonconformity to the taken-for-granted relations between humans and other animals supporting it, veganism thus successfully intercedes in the before unrecognised wielding of biopower from this site.

Establishing this new-found community as being epistemologically disruptive and open to complexities rather than static in nature is important, however, which Wolfe himself stresses: “An affirmative biopolitics need not—indeed, as I have argued cannot—simply embrace ‘life’ in all its undifferentiated singularity” (104), but must rather "choose [what to include in our ethical sphere], and by definition we cannot choose everyone and everything at once. But this is exactly what ensures that, in the future, we will have been wrong” (103).

Veganism—and its realisation through being a material practice, taking a stance in stark opposition to the underlying values and epistemologies which take for granted the exceptionalism of the human being—is possibly more transparent and open in its approach than others which stay in Haraway’s trouble, but fail to facilitate room to identify and critically engage with the ethical dead-zones which are upheld by a very specific conception
of the human, and which are so prevalent within cultural norms that they present themselves as natural.

1.4.2 Rosi Braidotti, Nomadic Theory and Veganism

Critical posthumanist Rosi Braidotti confronts the ‘animal question' and its relevance within posthumanism. She vehemently opposes anthropocentrism, instead promoting her zoe-centric ethics, with zoe being “the non-human, vital force of Life” in which both generic- and human life is valued on equal terms (The posthuman 60). Another central concept in Braidotti's work is that of ‘nomadic theory,’ which “expresses a process ontology that privileges change and motion over stability,” doing away with distinction such as “Man” and “animal” (Nomadic Ethics 344). Braidotti proposes nomadic theory to stand in direct opposition to contemporary capitalism, combating this “self-interested, greedy system” that leaves “power structures unchanged and unchallenged” with an ethics that values “qualitative transformations[…]and rests on the recognition of complexity and affirmation,” thus challenging the already existing power structures (Nomadic Ethics 344). Braidotti asserts how “no qualitative becoming can be generated by or at the centre, or in a dominant position,” seeing as the current conceptualisations of the human is but “a dead static core of ego-indexed negativity” (Transpositions 107).

Through a working from the outside and in, we would be able to move away from creating a rights discourse which only furthers devaluation disguised as emancipation, which posthumanism finds the current animal rights discourse guilty of doing. As Braidotti notes, “[t]he challenge today is to deterretorialize, or nomadize, the human/animal interaction, as to bypass the metaphysics of substance and its corollary, the dialectics of otherness, secularising the concept of human nature and the life that animates it” (“Animals, Anomalies" 526). Nomadic thought thus bases itself off of estrangement substituting a way to liberate subjectivity from the normative vision of the self, turning the referencing context into trans-species and diverse modes of becoming through the interaction with several others (Nomadic Theory). Now that “[a]nimals […] have developed a voice […] and relevance of their own,” Braidotti believes critical theory has a duty to do them justice by constructing “transversal alliances across disciplines and discursive communities” (Transpositions 133).

As a way of looking into how the meddling of posthumanism with the animal
question can have an actual effect on the exploitation other animals go through within sectors such as the animal-industrial complex, animal studies scholar Helena Pedersen suggests Braidotti’s nomadic theory and its potential to “travel between and beyond posthumanism and critical animal studies, eliciting the potential of vitalism embedded in effective critique of oppression” (78). Pedersen proposes the potential of nomadic currents between the fields to elect and absorb the forces resulting in positive transformations on the subject into itself, noting how “these nomadic elements flicker [...] between ontologically different spheres, that might turn out to not be ontologically separate at all, but rather containing each other” (78). What Pedersen observes here is the possibility of these nomadic elements picking up on the constructive elements of both animal studies and posthumanism as an alternative to deeming the two incompatible, arguing that this cross-contamination does not negate their differences, but rather “[infects] animal studies with some healthy impurity [...] and [roots] posthumanism in (un)firm political soil with consistent and committed critical attention towards any oppressive institutions, arrangements, and practices that regulate and exploit the life conditions of humans and nonhumans alike” (78).

1.4.3 Matthew Calarco, Indistinction and Veganism

In displacing anthropocentrism “within the context of current debates on critical animal studies and post-anthropocentrism,” continental philosopher Matthew Calarco—who is himself an outspoken vegan—calls for a “zone of profound identity” that “radically undercuts the human-animal distinction,” placing all animals, including the human, in the category of what he calls *indistinction* (“Being Toward Meat” 422-423). He furthermore notes indistinction’s potential in order to elaborate on the concept of “meat,” and how it could be a “zone of shared, exposed embodiment among human and animal” as opposed to strictly applying to other animals which we want to eat (“Being Toward Meat” 423). Calarco contemplates the possibilities of arriving at an ethical veganism that originates from such a juncture, where all animals are always framed as potentially edible, but never reductively categorised as such (“Deconstruction” 427). To Calarco, veganism is a way of releasing other animals into different potentials: potentials which have been denied them in the western tradition, in particular, in which we are meant to regard other animals only as “food-animals.” To live in such a zone of indistinction thus entails a refusal of “the dominant culture’s way of
creating a sharp split between human and man” (*Thinking through animals* 60), as well a coming to terms with Val Plumwood’s “shocking reduction” of coming to share the zone of edibility with other animals (Plumwood 2000b). Calarco sees within the Derridean notion of “eating well” a starting point from which to articulate a veganism which “is impassioned by an ideal of maximum respect for animals and that structural disallows complacency or good conscience of any sort (*Zoographies* 136). For Calarco, then, veganism does not necessarily negate acknowledging the impossibility of not inflicting violence upon others, and which—through a “proceed[ing] agnostically and generously, as if we might have missed or misinterpreted the Other’s trace” (*Death of the Animal* 81)—with the Derridean notion of eating well.

Now, having established my notion of transformative veganism—which is rooted in a notion that we, all the animals, are in this together, is in search of the affirmative encounters between human beings and other animals, and which bases itself as not being totalising, but nomadic—I will move on to a reading of my chosen texts in which I identify the ways in which they urge us to think about the practice in ways which further its disruptive, transformative and affective potential rather than its many detrimental associations.
2 Life at the Fringes of the Western Tradition: Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello*

Positioning John M. Coetzee within the field of animal studies is no easy task. *Elizabeth Costello* has been read in many different ways, and with the South African writer only ever approaching issues related to other animals in an oblique way, as well as expressing himself through a fictional alter-ego, reviewers and critics of his book are left unsure as to what extent Coetzee’s own views and opinions are presented in this book. In his review, Stephen H. Webb argues that Costello’s talk about the lives of animals can to a large degree be reduced to her own sense of isolation, loneliness and awareness of her mortality. This may be partially true, but is surely not more than a smaller part of a larger reading, seeing as such an interpretation blatantly ignores the importance of what Coetzee conveys through Costello on an ethical level—which is what I deem to be the most important aspect of the book. Webb is furthermore reluctant to associate the views of Costello with those of Coetzee altogether— which is a common theme in readings of the book—claiming that the position of Costello is legalistic and utopian, and that the persona pursue “moral superiority” and a “[separation] of [herself] from the cares of this world” (Webb).

Although it is wise to be aware of the postmodernist trait utilised by Coetzee in distancing himself from Costello, and thus not to equate them on all counts, there are striking similarities between the two which are important to address. Richard Alan Northover notes how, even though the the writer upholds and “ironic distance” between himself and his fictional persona, with Costello being “far more outspoken and blatant” than what is characteristic for Coetzee himself (“J. M. Coetzee and Animal Rights” 3), Coetzee and Costello have views which are “virtually identical” on issues related to other animals (“J. M. Coetzee and Animal Rights” 39). As evidence for this, Northover presents a speech written by Coetzee to be presented in Sydney after he had won the Nobel Prize in 2003, as well as an interview he did with *Satya*, both of which point to their undeniable similarities. To say that the views of Costello coincide closely with those of Coetzee himself is therefore perfectly legitimate, and I find that readings such as Webb’s, which imply otherwise, are limited in the sense that they fail to see the ethical magnitude of what Coetzee tries to convey through his fictional persona.
Costello is attacked left an right for her views, with most of the criticism—seemingly wilfully—misinterpreting what she is trying to communicate. Although she is exposed to intelligent criticism, as well, she is ultimately ridiculed for her views and values, facing unnecessarily hostile charges that often target her as a person rather than the points that she raises. This accurately depicts what it is like to be a vegan in contemporary society, as well, in which you occupy the fringes of the Western tradition of anthropocentrism, and thus—perhaps inevitably—invite criticism. In my view, we should not think of Costello’s veganism in the terms sketched out by Webb, but rather as a protest against the moral conduct of the world, as a disagreement with the status quo, which is the baseline for the reading I will pursue and lay out in the following.

2.1 The Failure of Rationalism, the Sympathetic Imagination and Western Arrogance

Elizabeth Costello centres around the protagonist carrying the same name, a distinguished Australian novelist, whose life we gain insight to through eight “lessons,” two of which focus on other animals and our relationships with them. Costello, in likeness with thinkers such as Braidotti, calls into question what she calls the “the great Western discourse of man versus beast, of reason versus unreason” (EC 69). She is highly sceptical towards “the specialist of a rather narrow self-generating intellectual tradition whose forte is reason” and how it “tries to install [its own motives] at the centre of the universe” (EC 69). For anyone but ‘Man,’ she argues, reason is nothing but “a vast tautology” which validates itself through necessity: “Of course reason will validate reason as the first principle of the universe — what else would it do? Dethrone itself?” (EC 70). Here, Costello is not necessarily devaluing reason itself per se, but critiquing its use as a weapon wielded against other animals, and as a foundation on which we justify their uses and abuses for whatever trivial purpose: Coetzee’s persona opposes how reason stands as the defining criteria on which the right to life is based.

Although often framed as being extreme, sentimental and radical, there are precedents for most of Costello’s views in contemporary debates surrounding other animals, especially so in the views of Tom Regan and Peter Singer. Where Costello differs from such thinkers, however, is in how she does not share their faith in reason and its capacity to make us act in
morally sound ways. Coetzee seems to suggest that even though reason might make us realise the injustice in our current treatment of other animals, it has so far proved inefficient in moving us emotionally, making us actively change the ways in which we relate to others—such as material practices like veganism urge us to do. Costello believes that, in putting too much value and emphasis on the importance of reason, it takes away from the sheer joy that comes along with being an embodied individual, which is the way in which the majority of other animals exist. She opposes Descartes’s “cogito, ergo sum,” seeing as it implies “that a living being that does not do what we call thinking is somehow second-class” (EC 78).

Costello is at one point faced with the question of whether she is “expecting too much of humankind” when she asks for them “to live without species exploitation [and] cruelty,” with the questioner asserting that it is a part of human nature to be carnivorous and violent (EC 100). The questioner evokes Gulliver’s Travels by Jonathan Swift, in which the protagonist is rejected by the peaceful, vegan horse-creatures when he requests to join their ranks, seeing as it is in his nature to never be like them—it is in his nature, his human nature, to be what they are not. This question takes for granted as a priori that we should eat other animals, and fails to consider—in fact, blatantly ignores—the ethical dimension of meat consumption, ignoring the potentials and interests of those animal currently found within the animal industrial complex. Costello responds that they could do that, but also encourages, as a way of pushing Swift to the limits, that “embracing the status of man has entailed slaughtering and enslaving a race of divine or else divinely created beings and bringing down a curse thereby” (EC 103).

Instead of mindlessly subscribing to the self-reproducing, static discourse of anthropocentrism, and taking for granted what is considered as “natural,” Costello proposes an alternate way of responding—as well as of relating—to other animals, namely through the “sympathetic imagination” (EC 80), which necessarily entails that if one believes in the rational human being, one should also believe in him or her having a moral obligation of putting themselves in the position of the other which has no way of making sure that their moral rights are not infringed upon. “To thinking, cogitation,” Costello proposes “fullness, embodiedness, the sensation of being — not a consciousness of yourself as a kind of ghostly reasoning machine thinking thoughts, but on the contrary the sensation — a heavily affective sensation […] of being alive to the world” (EC 78). She furthermore notes the wrongness of
asking ourselves whether or not “we have something in common—reason, self-consciousness, a soul—with other animals” when the corollary is “that if we do not, then we are entitled to treat them as we like” (EC 79).

In a debate in the book, Costello is hit with how “[t]he notion that we have an obligation to animals themselves to treat them compassionately — as opposed to an obligation to ourselves to do so — is very recent, very Western” (EC 106) phenomenon, a point to which she concedes: however, she adds how she thinks that “those who pioneered the industrialisation of animal lives and the commodification of animal flesh should be at the forefront of trying to atone for it” (EC 107), effectively placing “the narrative in the context of the postindustrial and late capitalism system of husbandry known as the confined feedlot operation” (DeLoughrey and Handley 211). Both by voices in the novel and from literary critics, Costello is accused of wielding the “radical language of animal rights” (Haraway 81), and of subscribing to “the Western crusade against the practices of the rest of the world” (EC 105). I find that these accusations do not hold precedents in the books, as seen in Costello’s response to clarify her position on the various uses and abuses of other animals, where she says that “I was hoping not to have to enunciate principles,” offering the vague answer “[i]f principles are what you want to take away from this talk, I would have to respond, open your heart and listen to what your heart says” (EC 82). Elsewhere, the novelist also notes how the support of “animal-rights sentimentalists” mostly embarrass her (EC 156). In this vein, Coetzee himself, when asked where he stands on animal rights in his interview with Satya, similarly answered that:

Strictly speaking, my interest is not in legal rights for animals but in a change of heart towards animals. The most important of all rights is the right to life and I cannot foresee a day when domesticated animals will be granted that right in law. If you concede that the animal rights movement can never succeed in this primary goal, then it seems that the best we can achieve is to show to as many people as we can what the spiritual and psychic cost is of continuing to treat animals as we do, and thus perhaps to change their hearts.

Costello too explains how she has “never been much interested in proscriptions, dietary or otherwise” (EC 82), and avoids questions which would force her to take a defined stance,
rather attempting to encourage an ethical responsibility in us towards other animals. Coetzee thus echoes his fictional novelist and her encouraging her listeners as to open their hearts to other animals. Moreover, Costello does not deny the differences between human beings and other animals, even acknowledging that other animals have “[n]o consciousness that we would recognise as consciousness” (EC 90). What she minds is “what tends to come next”:

They have no consciousness therefore. Therefore what? Therefore we are free to use them for our own ends? Therefore we are free to kill them? Why? What is so special about the form of consciousness we recognise that makes killing the bearer of it a crime while killing an animal goes unpunished? (EC 90).

Norma, Costello’s philosophically trained daughter-in-law, finds her “philosophising rather difficult to take,” mostly because of her take on “the nature of rational understanding” in how “rational accounts are merely a consequence of the structure of the human mind” and “that animals have their own accounts in accordance with the structure of their own minds, to which we don’t have access because we don’t share a language with them” (EC 91). She finds this to be naive, “the kind of easy, shallow relativism” that sways those who are easily impressed (EC 91), calling for respect for each creature’s world view, eventually leading to “intellectual paralysis” (EC 92). It is not that Norma does not believe in a world-view of animals, but rather that she finds them to be extremely limited, comparable to that of machines, which echoes Descartes: “You cannot […] distinguish between an animal mind and a machine simulating to be an animal mind” (EC 92). Costello challenges such a view for several reasons, one of which being that she finds rationality to be a poor criteria on which to base moral worth, and another being how she is more open in her approach to other animals, and less certain in the traditional workings of human exceptionalism, therefore posing a challenge to the established norms.

2.2 Elizabeth Costello Challenging Norma(tivity)

Both Costello’s son, John, and his wife, Norma, refuse to take Costello’s commitment to other animals seriously. Whereas John simply thinks of it as her latest “hobbyhorse” (EC 60), Norma finds “her opinions on animals, animal consciousness and ethical relations with animals [to be] jejune and sentimental” (EC 61). This is very much in line with popular and
cultural understandings of veganism. Norma goes on to characterise Costello’s veganism as “nothing but food-faddism, and food-faddism is always and exercise in power” (*EC* 112), claiming she has “no patience when [Costello] arrives…and begins trying to get people […] to change their eating habits,” “extend[ing] her inhibiting power over the whole community” (*EC* 113).

In her book, *The Dreaded Comparison*, Marjorie Spiegel writes how “the desire to oppress others is so ingrained in many humans that they readily distort even a liberating theory or concept into its inverse, creating another wall of defence against positive change” (90). This is what generally tends to happen with veganism, seeing as it poses a threat to the majority culture’s way of life. If what Norma takes away from Costello’s lectures is that she is trying to change people’s eating habits, it is clear that she has not grasped what she is trying to convey, which is that of veganism “as an ethico-political practice” (McKay, “Metafiction, Vegetarianism” 207). This fact is perhaps most explicitly brought forth during the dinner conversation, in which the topic demanding most of the attention is veganism: the driving force of the discussion is how the discourse of exclusion functions to cast some types of foods as taboo, or as being clean and unclean, and how these various exclusions function culturally as triggers for social exclusion. For Norma, Elizabeth’s veganism fits well within this conceptual framework, seeing as “[t]he whole notion of cleanness versus uncleanness has a completely different function, namely, to enable certain groups so self-define themselves, negatively, as elite,” and “the ban on meat eating that you get in [veganism] is only an extreme form of dietary ban […] and a dietary ban is a quick, simple way for an elite group to define itself” (*EC* 87). Norma criticises Costello for creating what she views to be an elitist separation between those who eat meat and vegans, even though what Costello is really promoting is viewing other animals and human beings as worthy of the same moral standards. Through her explicit focus on food, Norma reduces veganism to nothing but a dietary choice, and obscures what Emilia Quinn and Robert Westwood names “the reality of veganism as a profound identification […] with what we call animals” (Quinn and Westwood 253).

I do not deny the fact that there are indeed vegan discourses that rely on notions of purity, asceticism and naturalism, and of these it is wise to be sceptical. What makes Norma’s position troubling, however, is that in her exhaustive critique of veganism’s power of
exclusion through being a dietary restriction, she is oblivious to the similar forces at work in her own carnophallogocentric stance (McKay “Metafiction, Vegetarianism”). The irony of Norma’s opinion—on vegans wielding their power through a withdrawal from a society they deem as inferior—is exemplified most strongly at the point of Costello’s breakdown, a result of the psychological devastation she suffers as a vegan in a world in which carnism is the norm (EC 83), as well as in her mentions on Mahatma Gandhi’s veganism, which Costello opines “can hardly be conceived as the exercise in power [seeing as] it condemned him to the margins of society” (EC 88). Norma’s condemnation of veganism therefore comes across, more than anything else, as a way of her protecting her own norms through granting the practice more influence than it realistically has, presenting it as a threat to the status quo. Understandably so, Costello equating the factory farm—which is by far the largest contributor to contemporary meat production—to the concentration camps incites a response of defiance in someone like Norma, who—in likeness with most people—has no scruples with meat eating, and is unable to see the cultural and psychological underpinnings of her own views. What can be drawn from this example is that both veganism and carnophallogocentrism can be equally exclusive, and that the latter does not get a free pass simply due to it being the majority view. Cary Wolfe’s analysis of carnism is relevant here, in showing the perhaps more totalising underpinnings of carnism as opposed to veganism.

When John suggests that Norma sees Costello as “a preacher, a social reformer, rather than an eccentric trying to foist her preferences on other people” (EC 113), Norma brushes him aside, identifying it rather as a “crazy [scheme] to divide mankind” (EC 113). She then goes on to rant about Costello and ridicule her stance: “Elizabeth Costello and her Second Ark, with her dogs and cats and wolves, none of whom, of course, has ever been guilty of the sin of eating flesh” (EC 113). Norma continues to be oblivious as to what Costello wishes to convey, again reducing veganism to a food preference, and her rant accurately presents how the majority culture responds to ‘fringe’ movements such a veganism once they find them to gain too much influence: either frame them as having an unrealistic amount of power, as Norma does, or to short-circuit them as being sentimental or radical, not worthy of proper consideration. However, there is nothing eccentric nor extreme about Costello’s veganism, seeing as such practices are gaining momentum in the Western world each and every year, and her opinions are no more radical than those of others within the field of animal studies.
Her attack on reason, for example, at least as a defining criteria for moral worth, is one she shares with many influential thinkers, perhaps most notably Tom Regan; her Holocaust-analogy has been made before, by the likes of Peter Singer and Jacques Derrida, both of whom have Jewish ancestry.

The name “Norma” sets the her up for her purpose in Coetzee’s book: Costello’s daughter-in-law, who holds a PhD in philosophy, seems altogether unable to question any conventional norms related to other animals, and provides an opposite to Costello herself, who continuously aims to look past the contemporary moral framework, which she deems insufficient and exclusive. Of course, Norma is not wrong in questioning the various reasons for which people turn to veganism—as seen in the worries of Plumwood, Haraway and Derrida—as these can be very different: it could, like for Costello, stem from an ethical conviction toward other animals and their right to life; from a dietary preference, such as finding the taste and texture of flesh off-putting; or it could indeed be a way of obtaining some unrealistic notion of ethical purity, putting oneself above the cycle of life. However, as pointed out by John—“she’s [Costello] perfectly sincere” (EC 113)—Norma has no reason as to question the sincerity and seriousness of Costello’s ethical convictions, and despite being philosophically trained, she fails to critically engage with her own preconceptions and prejudices. Coetzee thus seems to suggest that, when Norma describes Costello as having “no self-insight at all,” the daughter-in-law might unknowingly be describing herself (EC 113).

By allowing room for such criticisms within his own text, Coetzee makes it clear to his readership that he is aware of other opinions and stances, and does not present his as the only one—possibly as a way to avoid having these very same criticisms levelled at him by readers of his novel. Elizabeth Costello is thus no echo chamber, and accusing it of dogmatism, as Webb does in his reading, and inhabiting the, seems misdirected. Whereas voices from a philosophical tradition, such as those of Norma, only seek to reinforce the existing framework, Costello and her poetic imagination is better equipped as to challenge and question the status quo, thus arguably better fulfilling what Peter Singer has identified as being the critical function of philosophy. Furthermore, it established Costello as not claiming complete certainty on any of the issues she is raising, acknowledging their complexities, whereas Norma shows no signs of self-insight and reflection on any of the issues raised by
Costello, time and time again showing the utmost confidence in her own views and opinions, and of their infallibility.

2.3 Dreaded Comparisons: The Holocaust-analogy

What do they know — all these scholars, all these philosophers, all the leaders of the world — about such as you? They have convinced themselves that man, the worst transgressor of all the species, is the crown of creation. All other creatures were created merely to provide him with food, pelts, to be tormented, exterminated. In relation to them, all people are Nazis; for the animals it is an eternal Treblinka (Singer, 1984)

Perhaps the most controversial point raised by Costello is that of the Holocaust-analogy, which she invokes on several occasions throughout the novel, but perhaps most explicitly in the following:

Let me say it openly: we are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty, and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed, dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without end, self-regenerating, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry, livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them (EC 65).

In the book, Costello is accused by a poet named Abraham Stern of “insul[ting] the memory of the dead” (EC 94) by invoking the Holocaust-analogy. In my opinion, Costello is misunderstood by the poet in how she does not call on such an analogy to trivialise or otherwise insult the extermination of the Jews, but rather to spike an awareness in people’s willed ignorance towards what she regards to be very comparable atrocities that are carried out against other animals on a daily basis. The Holocaust of human beings, after all, ended, whereas the holocaust of other animals continue. In fact, is it rapidly gaining momentum, with developing countries, in which most people used to be vegan or vegetarian, adopting Western “farming” methods. This continuity, and the unwillingness of the general public to react to such injustice, seems to be the main target of Costello’s analogy. Finding such a comparison radical is to acknowledge a belief in a sharp divide between human beings and other animals: a divide which, as mentioned, is becoming more and more arbitrary. Stern,
who refused to attend the dinner party following Costello’s lecture due to her use Holocaust-analogy, exemplifies this. In noting that “if Jews were treated like cattle, it does not follow that cattle are treated like Jews,” Stern acknowledges and condemns the first part of the analogy, but does not engage with the second, which is telling. Him being offended by what he calls Costello’s “trick with words” brings to the fore his own biases, which people generally tend to accept as a priori, being a part of the majority viewpoint (EC 94).

Moreover, I do not believe the aim was ever to compare the suffering of other animals to that of humans, as it is rather beside the point whether it was the Jews that were treated like cattle, or the other way around. Degrading living beings to nothing more than production units in the first place, which should be considered a crime regardless of which species it targets, seems to be the bigger point raised by Costello. It is the very normality, or humanity, of the people who “close their hearts” that is the object of her critique, and whose choices she struggles with comprehending and accepting. Other people seem blind or indifferent to the what is happening around them, events which Costello deem to be of the same ethical magnitude as the human genocide during the Second World War. This failure of others to take the situation seriously astounds her, explaining why she only responded with a sigh to the handwritten note from Stern explaining how he refused to join the dinner-party due to her “[trading] on the horrors of the camp in a cheap way” (EC 94).

Costello’s sympathetic imagination—or her “becom[ing] so intense about this animal business” (EC 114) as her son John calls it—leaves the ageing novelist feeling ostracised from society. In Stanley Cavell’s Philosophy and Animal Life, Cora Diamond asserts that apprehending other animals’s suffering, as well as realising our capacity to share in said suffering as fellow beings, “is capable of panicking us. To be able to acknowledge it at all, let alone as shared, is wounding; but acknowledging it as shared with other animals, in the presence of what we do to them, is capable not only of panicking one but also of isolating one” (74, emphasis added). The burden of this information eventually causes Costello to break down:

I no longer know where I am. I seem to move around perfectly easily among people, to have perfectly normal relations with them. Is it possible, I ask myself, that all of them are participants in a crime of stupefying proportions? Am I fantasising it all? I must be mad! But every day I see the evidences. The very people I suspect produce the evidence, exhibit it, offer it to me. Corpses. Fragments of corpses that they have bought for money. It is as if I were to visit friends, and to make some polite remark
about the lamp in their living room, and they were to say, “Yes, it’s nice, isn’t it? Polish-Jewish skin it’s made of, we find that’s best, the skins of young Polish-Jewish virgins.” And then I go to the bathroom and the soap wrapper says, “Treblinka — 100% human stearate.” Am I dreaming, I say to myself? What kind of house is this? (EC 114-115).

This excerpt marvellously sums up what it is like to vegan in an anthropocentric world, which I think is what is being highlighted by Coetzee. As you become aware of the oppressions all around you, the underpinnings of human exceptionalism and its unfairness, it becomes overwhelming and confusing that others are seemingly unable to see it for what it is, carrying on with their detrimental ways. And it is not due to it being inherent in human nature to be evil, as Coetzee himself notes in his interview with Satya: “We are not by nature cruel […] but we have evolved psychic, social and philosophical mechanics to cope with killing [other animals] that, for complex reasons, we use to allow us to kill human beings only in time of war.” Costello neither believes that it is due to our evil nature that we treat other animals in such ways, and when she looks into the eyes of her son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren, she see[s] only kindness, human kindness” (EC 115). In fact, it is this kindness that is the root cause for her breaking down, sobbing in her son’s arms: “Calm down, I tell myself […] This is life. Everyone else comes to terms with it, why can’t you? Why can’t you?” (EC 114-115).

“We look […] or used to look […] askance at Germans of a certain generation because they are, in a sense, polluted; in the very signs of their normality (their healthy appetites, their hearty laughter) we see proof of how deeply seated pollution is in them” (EC 65). According to Costello, these “healthy appetites” of the German population during WW2, as well as of the present generation of people who eat meat and use other animal products, are a sign of their pollution; their very sense of normality is corrupt. It is this pollution that explains her veganism as a desire to save her soul: finding meat-consumption disgusting is based on—at least in the discourse of advanced capitalism—the effect it has both on the other animals being eaten, as well as on the people who are contributing to their misery. Costello sees how we close our hearts to uncomfortable truths to be a failure of our very humanity. Although perhaps somewhat anthropocentric and narrow-minded, this answer does imply that “truly moral reform of a society must start with the individual,” with “one’s individual choices, as moral agent and consumer in an industrial age, [being] powerful statements… against unjust and exploitative systems” (Northover, “J.M. Coetzee and Animal Rights” 364).
To Costello, the “particular horror” of the concentration camps was not that the humanity of the offenders suffered in their relation to their victims, but rather:

that the killers refused to think themselves into the place of their victims, as did everyone else […] In other words, they closed their hearts. The heart is the seat of a faculty, sympathy, that allows us to share at times the being of another. Sympathy has everything to do with the subject and little to do with the object […] There are people who have the capacity to imagine themselves as someone else, there are people who have no such capacity […] and there are people who have the capacity but choose not to exercise it. (EC 79, emphasis in original)

The wilful ignorance displayed by the Germans towards the Nazi death camps is likened in Elizabeth Costello to the ways in which contemporary consumers relate to factory farms and other sites of nonhuman animal suffering. As novelist Jonathan Safran Foer notes in his influential book, Eating Animals, “We can’t plead ignorance, only indifference […] We have the burden and the opportunity of living in the moment when the critique of factory farming broke into the popular consciousness” (252, emphasis in original). Furthermore, it is this normativity, this perception of what is considering to be normal, that is polluted.

2.4 “We Are All Animals”: The Value of Individual Lives

When comparing herself to Kafka’s ape, Red Peter, Costello explicitly denies whatever irony or allegorical meaning that might be read into it: “It means what is says. I say what I mean” (EC 62). This can be seen as a “refusal to evoke the animal as a figural […] representation of human traits or types” (Randall 216). Through Costello, Coetzee strives to identify and reinforce a perspective on life which denunciates “piddling distinctions” (EC 111) that ultimately seek to name the human perspective the only perspective. In comparing Costello to Kafka’s ape, Coetzee challenges his readers in their ignorance about the beings of other animals, bringing to the fore some uncomfortable truths. In her comparison, Costello identifies the ontological wound she finds any human who chooses to exercise his or her animality to have: in how Kafka’s ape, Red Peter, “was not an investigator of primate behaviour,” but rather an embodied individual being, a “branded, marked, wounded animal” who “[presented] himself as speaking testimony to a gathering of scholars” (EC 70), Costello
also regards herself to be “an animal exhibiting, yet not exhibiting, to a gathering of scholars, a wound, which [she] covers up under [her] clothes but touch on every word [she] [speaks]” (EC 71).

When telling the story about the frogs that lived by some riverbank in Australia, Costello notes how the “story I present transparently, without disguise…[for] the life-cycle of the frog may sound allegorical, but to the frogs themselves it [but ]the thing itself” (EC 217). Again, she emphasises that the story is not meant to be allegorical, but as to represent the frogs’s umwelt, to borrow the term of 20th century ethologist Jakob von Uexküll. Put simply, umwelt describes each individual being’s subjective understanding and experience of the world: it is not static, but “an active exchange between psychological receptors that are attuned to specific features of an animal’s surrounding milieu” (Herman 68).

In emphasising the individual life of each being, Coetzee achieves not only to distance himself from and challenge contemporary rationalist approaches to animal ethics, but also to question the philosophy of ecology, in which the species is always put before the individual, therefore making some animals inherently more valuable than others. This is a view heavily opposed and contested by Costello, who notes how this “ecological philosophy that tells us to live side by side with other creatures” validates itself through appealing to “an idea of a higher order than any living creature,” with “the crushing twist to the irony” being that “no creature except Man is capable of comprehending,” because only “Man understands the dance as the other dancers do not” (EC 99). However, regardless of what we “managers of ecology” may think, “[e]very living creature fights for its own, individual life, refuses, by fighting, to accede to the idea that the salmon or the gnat is of a lower order of importance than the idea of the salmon or the idea of the gnat” (EC 99). To them, their existence is inherently meaningful. To Costello, the frogs in her story “exist whether or not [she] tell[s] you about them, whether or not [she] believe[s] in them […] It is because of the indifference of those little frogs to [her] belief […] that [she] believe[s] in them” (EC 217).

In contemplating the lives of other animals, in contemplating their being and complexities, Costello realises how we, all the animals, share an embodiedness, an aspect which is lost as soon as the focus turn towards fleeting notions of rights and level of rationality. The closest bond we can be said to share with others animals is just that of sharing a body, of being “a mere bag of blood,” which “is all it means to be alive: to be able to
die” (EC 211), echoing Calarco and his zone of ‘indistinction.’ This might sound awfully pessimistic, but I think that Coetzee here is laying the groundwork for a fundamental shift in the way we perceive ourselves and other animals: a shift that perhaps has better start with the individual, through a change of heart.
3 ‘Children of Oryx and Children of Crake, both’: Atwood’s *MaddAddam*-trilogy

*MaddAddam* is set in the foreseeable future, allowing Atwood to critique contemporary trends to great effect. With its precedents in contemporary society, the world of *MaddAddam* is simultaneously alienating and familiar. Atwood herself rejects categorising her work as science fiction, preferring speculative fiction, given how it concerns “things that really could happen but just hadn’t completely happened when the authors wrote the books” (*In Other Worlds* 6).

My reading of the theme of veganism in the trilogy problematises the readings of critics such as Jovian Parry, who claims that Atwood “wryly undermines any [vegan] message that might be read into her work,” and that “outright [veganism] is ridiculed” in her writing (253). Additionally, Chloe Taylor notes how “[veganism] and compassion for nonhuman animals are[…]consistently represented by Atwood in her fiction as a self-defeating persecution-paranoia and a loss of touch with reality,” furthermore arguing that the work of Atwood promotes a naturalisation of meat-eating (135). Although I do agree that it is impossible to detect a wholesale pro-veganism message in Atwood’s trilogy, I disagree with how both readings utterly negate the possibilities of any positive representation of veganism whatsoever to be found in the books, as well as with the notion that they promote a naturalisation of meat as essential for human thriving. If anything, I think one would be hard pressed to find a vindication of any worldview in *MaddAddam*, be that cannibalism or veganism, which is exactly why the trilogy is so useful: it does not seek out to provide answers, per se, but to explore different worldviews and invite us to think critically of the practices of today, especially related to mass-capitalism and our relationships with other animals. Furthermore, I think many aspects of the trilogy speaks positively towards reading it as affirmatively engaging with transformative veganism, seeing as it directly furthers many of the ideas upon which this subjectivity is built.

3.1 Other Animals and Purist Veganism in *MaddAddam*

The *MaddAddam*-trilogy serves an important purpose in how it provides a platform from which cultural representations of characters which are close to never represented in popular,
contemporary literature, can be highlighted. With the God’s Gardeners, Atwood presents radical environmentalism and ethical veganism through their religious philosophy, which is significant because of how anti-environmentalist groups and those indifferent to the uses and abuses of other animals in contemporary society, often call upon a rhetoric based on the belief that God has gifted human animals the earth, and the other animals on it, to do with as they please. Through the focus on such a group, who resist the dominant system responsible for so much harm from within, MaddAddam leaves the door open, even welcomes in, alternative ways of life, which oppose the status quo.

The estrangement of MaddAddam, both when it comes to the genetically modified inhabitants and the changed world, relies on what Rosi Braidotti (The posthuman) calls an “intense de-familiarisation of our habits of thought through encounters that shatter the flat repetition of the protocols of institutional reason” (169). These “protocols of institutional reason” are in the MaddAddam-universe the presumed exceptionalism of the human being, the discourse of speciesism and advanced capitalism as something inherently good. After the flood, human beings are no longer able to hold their suffocating grasp on planet earth, and are effectively reinstated as one of its many inhabitants. Although there is an abundance of animals in the imaginary—if ever imminent—world of MaddAddam, they are almost exclusively of the kind genetically engineered by humans in order to provide fodder for human, as well as corporate, interests: they represent the fictional embodiment of our disrespect towards other animals taken to its logical extremes if we continue down the same path that we are currently on (Northover “Strangers in Strange Worlds”). Through these other animals, Atwood establishes how contemporary society, and the underpinning of its values and practices, has no scruples in violently exploiting zoe-life. Thankfully, she does so in a way that also promotes alternate ways of living, which will become apparent in the following.

In likeness with Plumwood, Haraway and Derrida, Atwood seems to oppose the presumed moralistic aspect of veganism, which is something she makes clear on several occasions in the trilogy, especially through the God’s Gardeners. One example is the Gardeners’s “relocation” of snails and slugs, which before the pandemic entailed “throwing them down onto the street,” and then, when their numbers grew too great after the flood, “by common though unspoken agreement they’re being dropped into salt water (MaddAddam
Well-knowing, we might assume, that the slugs would die on impact with the pavement below—or subsequently be trampled and killed by people passing by—and referring to this as “relocation” rather than calling it what it is, it is no wonder that Toby views the Gardeners as a “clutch of sweet but delusional eccentrics” (Year 103). There is also the ambiguity of pigeon eggs and whether or not they should be eaten in the trilogy:

Adam One said that eggs were potential Creatures, but they weren’t Creatures yet: a nut was not a Tree. Did eggs have souls? No, but they had potential souls. So not a lot of Gardeners did egg-eating, but they didn’t condemn it either. You didn’t apologise to an egg before joining its protein to yours, though you had to apologise to the mother pigeon, and thank her for her gift (Year 134-135)

Again the notion of sacrifice is evoked. The ethical complexity of the human-animal relations and interactions these examples showcase would likely resonate with Haraway, highlighting the ambiguity of our relationships with nonhuman others. Rebekah Sheldon, in her reading of “the problem of eating” in the trilogy, furthermore establishes this when she opines how MaddAddam implores the reader to acknowledge how “[s]ome thing’s survival is always some other thing’s loss” (Sheldon 139). Sheldon’s sentiment is presented in trilogy in a story Toby tells the Crakers:

The people in the chaos cannot learn. They cannot understand what they are doing to the sea and the sky and the plants and the animals. They cannot understand that they are killing them, and that they will end by killing themselves. And there are so many of them, and each one of them is doing part of the killing, whether they know it or not. And when you tell them to stop, they don’t hear you (MaddAddam 290, emphasis added).

This furthermore echoes Haraway, who contends in When Species Meet that “[t]ry as we might to distance ourselves, there is no way of living that is not also a way of someone, not just something else, dying differentially. Vegans come as close a anyone…” (80). Here, I agree with the first part of Haraway argument, but have some difficulty accepting the second. Because, if this is taken at face value, then it does not matter what one does, and seeing as
you will either way be complicit in the killing and suffering of others, you might as well continue with your detrimental ways. This is probably not what Haraway is really suggesting, but this is regardless the sort of “either-or” ideological argumentation that shies away from the sort of complexity which she herself want to promote.

Atwood also seems to be sceptical of this sort of logic, as exemplified in her trilogy, in which an anti-environmentalist group display advertisement billboards with a “cute little blond girl” alongside "some particularly repellent threatened species, such as the Surinam toad […] with a slogan saying: This? Or This? Implying that all cute little blond girls were in danger of having their throats slit so the Surinam toads might prosper” (MaddAddam 182). Here, Atwood echoes animal studies scholar James Stanescu, who notes how the question is not “to prefer guilt over innocence [or] to prefer the profane over the sacred,” but “rather to find ways to exit from such economies all together, to find ways to be neither a beautiful nor damaged soul” (Stanescu 41). The conversation that needs to be had, and which Atwood makes paramount in her trilogy, is not one of ‘pure or tainted’ or ‘human or nonhuman,’ but one that acknowledges our interconnectedness and promote better way to relate to one another—as Calarco rightfully notes, “[w]hat it might mean to live thoughtfully and respectfully with regard to animals in an age of radical ecological degradation is a question that can no longer be avoided” (“3 Animal Studies” 43).

Transformative veganism presents one such way of relating, and in the current environment of habitat destruction, factory farming and environmental deterioration, I argue that it might be the most productive. I will now go on to explore in which ways I find MaddAddam to be furthering such a notion, particularly through the character of Toby, the uncovering of the absent referent and through an exploration of nonhuman agency and how the species divide is made arbitrary.

3.2 Arbitrary Distinctions, Agency and New Beginnings

Perhaps the most important of the genetically modified other animals in the MaddAddam-universe is the pigeon, or “sus multiorganifer” (Oryx 22). Due to being spliced with human neocortex tissue, and growing human organs inside of them, the pigoons are the source of much unease in the books. They are, simultaneously, available sources for meat—originally being the contemporary pig, one of the most eaten other animals in our time—as
well as as part human, or ‘people in porcine masks,’ to borrow Chung-Hao Ku’s phrasing (114), effectively challenging the sharp distinction placed between human beings and other animals. The concept of the pigoon project might come across as strangely alien, but it has very real ties with developments in contemporary times. Heart valves, among other things, are already being transplanted from pigs to human beings in regular xenotransplantation procedures. Recently, in Germany, researchers managed to sustain the heart of a pig in the body of a bonobo for a period of six months, referring to it as a massive breakthrough for the future transplant of pig hearts into human bodies (Adams “Baboon survives”). Some literary critics—such as Ku and Lars Schmeink—stress the shared genetic material between the pigoons and human beings as the most important feature in their approximating the status of human in being categorically challenging and transgressive, which I do agree with, but only partially. To me, Atwood seems to place equal importance on the various ways in which the contemporary pig already resembles the human being, and that the pigoons’s primary function is to accentuate this likeness and how arbitrary the species divide really is.

Contained within the field of animal experimentation is somewhat of a paradox: other animals are claimed to be sufficiently similar to human beings as to make the process worthwhile, but also dissimilar enough from us as not to make it unethical. Pigs are used in xenotransplantation both due to their organs being similar in size to those of human beings, in addition to it posing less of a an ethical dilemma using a “food” animal than for example baboons, who hold a greater resemblance to us. In Simmons and Armstrong's *Knowing Animals*, Helen Tiffin points out how pigs are “anatomically, physiologically, psychologically, and even sociologically” similar to human beings, with human and pig flesh allegedly being similar in texture and taste, our skin getting sunburnt in much the same way —Toby even ponders this fact in the trilogy, wondering if “pigs get sunburn” (*MaddAddam* 284)—and share the same food preferences (246). Furthermore, Sayers et. al also note how “genetically similar” the pig is to the human being (373), and Peter Singer also singles out the pig as the most intelligent of the other animals currently consumed in the western world. In the books, before the successful transferral of neocortex tissue, Jimmy notes how if pigoons had “had fingers they’d have ruled the world” (*Oryx* 267), and, when going to visit them with his father, he had found their gaze frightening, as if “they saw him, really saw him, and might have plans for him later” (*Oryx* 26)—which it is confirmed later that they actually did. Furthermore, in the last instalment of the trilogy, the ones to propose the truce between the
species are the pigoons, not the human beings. They are the ones who realised that they would be better off working together, and that they needed one another to eliminate a common. Atwood could therefore possibly be suggesting that the pig is already far too human, bringing to the fore the multiple ethical implications of their treatment at the hands of human beings in modern times, where pigs are viewed solely for their production value. In granting the pigs their agency and other becomings back, Atwood asks her readers to reflect on this relationship in contemporary times through her pigoons, and how we continually can justify maltreatment despite us arguably being more alike than different.

The concept of interspecies empathy is crucial when it comes to thinking through other animals in such ways, seeing as others who have attempted the same have done so with a species that already engages the reader through familiar affection, such as Derrida with his cat and Haraway with her dogs. Atwood attempting to do the same with pigs therefore presents a much bigger challenge, given how it would necessitate her readers being willing to contemplate what it is like to be a pig in a pig-eating society, and empathise with a “production” animal, first and foremost reductively as food. Janet Grace Sayers et. al note how “[c]onfronting [the] lack of willingness to engage in meat-animal alterity is challenging” due to how “[t]he symbolic and actual violence towards meat-animals is perpetuated in morally neutral tones and evolves an almost incomprehensible level of disavowal” (Sayers et. al 374). Atwood, however, squarely places the pig back into the conversation through contemplating the ethical dimension of their many uses and abuses.

Although already used in xenotransplantation, and thus arguably just an extension of their use as such, Atwood’s choice of and focus on the pig should be viewed as unconventional and non-anthropocentric, contributing affirmatively to reading her trilogy as sympathetic to a notion of transformative veganism: it urges the reader to consider the relevance and agency of the other animals which they only ever meet on their plate, and which they have been conditioned into believing that only exist in order to be eaten by human beings. As Toby muses in the concluding instalment of the trilogy, “hungry or not, [the pigoons will] kill in spite. Or for revenge. We’ve been eating them” (MaddAddam 155). She might here simply be referring to the pigoons in the novel, but it could also be read as a referral to the pig in our time. With the tables flipped, the pigoon—and the pig—is now taking revenge on the species which has exposed their kind to thraldom and continual exploitation.

This is also seen in how the exploiter becomes the prey, as the pigoons, free from
their confines after the flood, take to hunting humans. Jimmy experiences an eerie shift in perceptions, imagining how the pigoons must perceive him: “What they see is his head, attached to what they know is a delicious meat pie just waiting to be opened up” (Oryx 268). The pigoons, previously reduced to their value as the unwilling donors of human spare parts and always readily available flesh—and representative of animals in contemporary times perceived as such—rise up to claim their agency in a world in which the human/animal distinction means absolutely nothing. The MaddAddam-universe thus constitutes a zone of indistinction that Calarco urges us to regard as the starting point from which we relate to other beings in order for future relations with them not to be anthropocentric, but rather zoe-centric, transformative and affirmative. In the end, the pigoons have gained their agency, and stand next to the human survivors in the MaddAddam-universe as independent actors. Through the pigoons, Atwood urge us to see other animals for their intelligence, their complex emotional and social capacities, and their sense of companionship and community. Within their interspecies alliance, there lies hope. Hope of a future in which hierarchal thinking is done away with, in which respect is key, and where enmeshment, openness and affirmatively engagement are central tenets.

3.3 Unmasking the Absent Referent in MaddAddam

The MaddAddam-trilogy can overall said to be preoccupied with the many ways the human animal use and abuse others, and displays vegan potential in its unmasking of the “absent referent,” a concept identified and coined by vegan scholar and feminist Carol J. Adams. The absent referent “separates the meat eater from the animal and the animal from the end product […] to keep something from being seen as having been someone” (Sexual Politics 14). In contemporary times, buildings such as slaughter houses and animal experimentation laboratories are walled-up, extremely difficult to gain access to, and often placed in remote locations, out of the public eye: thus, consumers rarely “meet their meat” nor have to critically reflect on these aspects of their foodways and lives. Atwood, however, effectively puts other animals back into the conversation by unmasking the absent referent in multiple ways, challenging our wilful ignorance.

Initially, it is important to establish how the looming presence of the factory farm itself can be viewed as its own ‘absent referent’ in the MaddAddam-universe, with production
having been moved exclusively into the laboratory. As readers, we are asked to reflect on the cause of this. Most likely it is a result of global warming, to which the animals industrial complex is a huge contributor, as noted by Susan McHugh, who notes that the global meat consumption is likely to increase twofold by 2050, causing the “carbon hoofprint...of [the] industry that already accounts for 18 percent of global greenhouse-gas emissions” to reach an unprecedented crisis (“Real Artificial” 185). How “meat became harder to come by” is also mentioned in the trilogy, as a consequence of a series of devastating blows to the climate, such as “the northern permafrost [melting],” causing “the vast tundra [to bubble] with methane” (Oryx 24).

Furthermore, the ‘absent referent’ is exposed multiple times through Jimmy, who, before being indoctrinated into anthropocentrism in adult life, was highly sympathetic towards other animals. His first complete memory was that of a large bonfire” of “cows and sheep and pigs”: Jimmy had been concerned for burning animals, because surely the fire was hurting them, to which his father urged him to think of them as “steaks and sausages [which] still had their skins on” in an attempt to console him (Oryx 16). Jimmy, however, was not convinced, realising the connection between the the actual animal other and the product they become in the discourse of “meat”:

> Steaks did not have heads. The heads made a difference: he thought he could see the animals looking a him reproachfully out of their burning eyes. In some way all of this — the bonfire, the charred smell, but most of all the lit-up, suffering animals — was his fault, because he’d done nothing to rescue them (Oryx 16).

In seeing their bodies intact, and meeting their reproachful gaze, Laura Wright notes how Jimmy not “only [claims] responsibility for their deaths but also for their transition from animals to meat” (Wright 517). Jimmy tries to come to terms with the ways in which human beings and other animals are treated differently, as seen in how he asks why the other animals were burned up, to which his father responds that they had a disease, much like when Jimmy has a cough. Jimmy then asks: “If I have a cough, will I be burned up?” (Oryx 19). He displays similar emotions towards the pigoons upon learning that they too were eaten if they were considered to be defunct: “he was confused about who should be allowed to eat what.
He didn’t want to eat a pigoon, because he thought of the pigoons as creatures much like himself” (Oryx 24). Jimmy has at this point no clear definition of what is considered human and what is considered other, and is consistently shown as being anxious about norms in the society in which he lives, which hold a complete disregard for zoë-life.

Through having Jimmy acknowledge his complicity in the other animals being burnt, Atwood challenges the reader to see the reality of our ways our current relationship to the other animals, acknowledging the part we play as consumers. She accentuates that, before we are indoctrinated into anthropocentric ways when older, we hold a predisposition towards relating to other animals that is affirmative rather than exploitative, echoing Huggan as Tiffin, who claim that children have an “uncomplicated way” of treating “[other] animals, not necessarily with kindness, but as partners in their environment, moral equivalents of themselves” (Huggan and Tiffin 194). This child-like innocence is thus presented as the baseline for our ethical relations to other animals, whereas we need to learn to treat them without reverence in later life. Children are “effectively socialised as speciesist well before they can be regarded as ethically aware individuals,” bringing to the fore the psychological workings of carnism and the importance of challenging these epistemologies (Yates 25, emphasis in original). Transformative veganism can be seen as a refusal to accept such an indoctrination, maintaining as our foundation a more relational and affirmative approach to other animals.

The ‘ChickieNob’ is another such unmasking of the absent referent, and better than anything represents capitalism’s instrumentalisation of life. Upon first witnessing it, Jimmy describes it as a “large bulblike object […] covered with stippled whitish-yellow skin”: headless, the “animal protein tuber” is only left with the capacities of “digestion, assimilation and growth,” as well as having a high growth rate built in, providing chicken parts with a “three-week improvement on the most efficient low-light, high-density chicken farming operation so far devised” (Oryx 202-203). Furthermore, they cannot feel pain, so “animal-welfare freaks won’t be able to say a word” against it on an ethical level (Oryx 203). Jimmy is horrified upon encountering the creature for the first time, thinking “this thing was going too far” (Oryx 202), asking himself: “Why is it he feels some line has been crossed, some boundary transgressed? How much is too much, how far is too far?” (Oryx 206). Linking her creation to the modern-day hen used in factory farms, Atwood also seems to imply that this is but its logical extension: after all, from a production standpoint, the bird does not need
anything but the parts most normally consumed by human beings, and many would probably welcome the ChickieNob as an improvement to current practices.

The ethical aspect of killing another animal for its flesh is supposedly removed with the introduction of the ChickieNob. Its very creation suggests that there are certain qualms regarding taking the life of another for the purpose of consuming them, at least on the scale that it is currently carried out. The way in which Atwood presents the ChickieNob, however, brings one to question our relationships with so-called ‘production animals,’ as well as what exactly is the nature of such ‘real artificial’ meat. In my opinion, Atwood seems to disagree with the likes of Jimmy’s dad, who refers to life as “just proteins” and claims that there “is nothing sacrilegious about cells and tissue” (Oryx 57). She has continuously promoted a non-anthropocentric view of life throughout the trilogy, seemingly in agreement with Adam One’s “mild contempt” of “[the] interpretation of Genesis [which stated] that God had made the animals for the sole pleasure and use of man, and you could therefore exterminate the at whim” (MaddAddam 194). I find it highly unlikely that she would condone such a brutalisation of zoe as is evident in the ChickieNob (Oryx 203). Far from promoting a naturalisation of meat eating, as Taylor argue in her reading of the trilogy, I think Atwood urges us to critically reflect on our eating habits, and proposes alternate views besides those of the majority culture.

Lastly, the absent referent is also brought to the fore through Toby and her relationship with Blanco. Before becoming the abusive manager at ‘SecretBurger,’ Blanco was in and out of jail. In the MaddAddam-world, there is a concept called ‘Painball,’ which is quite similar to Suzanne Collins’s ‘Hunger Games’ in which participants fight each other to death, with the last person standing going free. The main difference is that, in Painball, the participants are convicts. Painballers who had been in the game for some time were considered to be less than human, assumably for the reasons which become apparent in the following (MaddAddam xv). Painballers who had been in the game for some time “would hang their kill on a tree,” “[c]ut off the head, tear out the heart and kidneys […] Eat part of it […] to show how mean you were” (Year 98-99). The Painballers thus unmask the absent referent in how their way of killing and butchering their victims is reminiscent of the way in which other animals are slaughtered in the food industry, as depicted in work such as that of Sue Coe’s Dead Meat—in which there are paintings portraying other animals being
slaughtered—and in the depictions in Foer’s *Eating Animals*, in which the processes are vividly explained. This bringing to the fore of butchering practices can furthermore be seen critique of the contemporary excessive meat consumption, at least if seen in relation to similar sentiment elsewhere in the trilogy. For example, the same notion is furthered in the following excerpt from a story Jimmy told the humanoid Crakers, in which “[t]he people in the chaos”—meaning human beings—“were eating up all the children of Oryx. […] Every day they were eating them up. They were killing them and killing them, and eating them and eating them. They ate them even when they weren’t hungry (*Oryx* 103). The gluttonous ways of the human being is here highlighted, as well as the suggestion that it is unfounded. At a later occasion, Zeb also notes how: “There’s at least a hundred new extinct species since this time last month. They got fucking eaten!” (*Year* 252). It is hard to read these examples as anything but Atwood’s mild contempt of trends in contemporary society, openly critical of the ways in which we treat other animals.

### 3.4 ‘Transformative Toby’

In a post apocalyptic world where the food chain has been reversed, human beings are at this point simply one of many other species in the world, inhabiting no pedestal. The setting echoes an ecological standpoint, with wildlife multiplying at an intense rate, and the cities being taken over by greenery. Nature is asserting itself in the wake of humanity’s near destruction. The characters in the books need to come to terms with their new positions, in an environment which no longer favours the human being over other species. They are now in a zone of ‘indistinction,’ to borrow Calarco’s term, in which they are not only reduced to the category of ‘animal,’ but also the the category of potential ‘meat’ to the pigoons and other carnivorous or omnivorous other animals which inhabit the MaddAddam-world. Atwood thus likens humans to other animals through a radical uprooting of the once rigid species hierarchy, downplaying the exceptionalism of human beings.

Toby will be highlighted and used to exemplify how the books urge us to live in relation to others, and also as representative of someone who subscribe to the conceptual values of transformative veganism. Her interactions with nonhuman others heavily contests the notion of human exceptionalism, and proposes an alternate way to relate to other animals which is not heavily detrimental to the latter part, but rather disruptive toward the status quo.
Toby, as will become evident, is prone to seeing other animals through a lens which is not paternalistic or reductionist, but rather grants them worlds of their own that are independent of human wants. She is furthermore framed as being very realistic, which makes it hard to ground her way of seeing other animals as sentimental, making her well-suited to exemplify someone living by a notion of transformative veganism.

Northover describes Toby as a “figure of good, practical sense, without illusions” (“Strangers” 127). In the book, she is described as a “hardass” that holds people accountable (Year 62). She was raised largely in a lower class household in the pleeblands—areas ridden with crime and disease, as opposed to the Compounds, in which the wealthy separates themselves from the outside world—where she had to fight in order to survive, especially after her mother died—being the unaware consumer of a trial product from the drug company which she worked for was testing—and her father committed suicide due to economic and emotional stress (Year 25-27). Not having much choice but to quit school, she takes on several low-paying jobs, one of them being a ‘furzooter,’ which consists of dressing up as an animal and handing out advertisements to whomever passes by. Several times, Toby is attacked by bestial fetishists, and the symbolism suggested here is rather interesting: Toby does not experience these attacks as herself, but rather through the skin and eyes of a nonhuman other. The text seems to suggest that both she, as a female, and the animal which she at the time inhabits, are subjected to objectification through the carnophallogocentric gaze through which they are reductively viewed, echoing Carol J. Adams (1994) and her linking of female and animal oppression. At this point, Toby also lives right above a shop which sells the skins and flesh of endangered species: her living situation contributes to her giving up the job, seeing as she finds it “distasteful” to “[dress] up as bears and tigers and lions and other endangered species [which] she could hear being slaughtered on the floor below her” (Year 31). She then moves on to sell her hair and eggs in order to make a living, but due to an infected needle, she is left sterile after the second extraction, landing her in the fast food chain ‘SecretBurger,’ where the ‘secret’ consists of “no one [knowing] what sort of animal protein [is] actually in the [patties]”: “The meat grinders weren’t 100 percent efficient; you might find a swatch of cat fur in your burger or a garment of mouse tail. Was there a human fingernail, once? It was possible” (Year 40). At SecretBurger, Toby is repeatedly raped and otherwise mistreated by her boss, Blanco, who treats his female staff
like “meat” who he uses and disposes of as being mere products, bringing women and nonhuman animal suffering together. Saved by the God’s Gardeners—a pacifist, neo-Christian, eco-vegan cult— and their leader, Adam One, Toby is able to escape from Blanco. She joins the ranks of the Gardeners when they show up outside of ‘SecretBurger’ carrying signs that say “Don't Eat Death! Animals R Us!,” chanting “No meat! No meat!” (Year 39). Although taking their vows of abstaining from the consumption of flesh once joining their ranks, and even after years of being in their group, she never considers herself “a convert,” (Year 45) viewing the Gardeners as “fugitives from reality” (Year 47). Blanco eventually locates her, however, and Toby takes another measure in order to escape from him, one which even further solidifies her liminal position. She gets a hair transplant from a Mo’Hair, sheep which are genetically engineered to grow human hair. Her new mane, which “smells of mutton” (Year 17), causes an attraction in both cats—“[w]hen she woke in the morning she was likely to find one of them sitting on her pillow, licking her hair and purring”—and Mo’Hairs (Year 262). When living in the Maddaddamite-community, Toby would often wake to finding one of the sheep being in close proximity to her, sometimes licking her leg, which she at first she attributed to her skin being salty, but then realised was due to “the faint smell of lanolin. It thought she was a relative” (MaddAddam 30).

Toby’s way of relating to nonhuman others is therefore likely influenced by her many hardships growing up, making her more sensitive to the injustices towards marginalised others. Also, her many years with the God’s Gardeners would necessarily also play a part in it, seeing as the perhaps most important tenet of the Gardener-philosophy is respect and empathy towards other animals. The relationship Toby has with other animals is one characterised with complexity and necessary contradictions, but fundamentally she shows a general awareness for animal agency and exemplifies a healthy example of what it means to live in an interspecies world, even after apocalypse hits. As will be shown, Toby is able to make her liminality constructive, which makes her better equipped to exist within the zone of indistinction that is the MaddAddam-universe.

Already from the first pages of The Year of the Flood, which is the volume in which Toby is first introduced, her way of relating to other animals becomes apparent: “there’s no longer any sound of traffic to drown [the sparrows] out. Do they notice that quietness, the
absence of motors? If so, are they happier? Toby has no idea. Unlike some of the other Gardeners [...] she has never been under the illusion that she can converse with birds” (Year 3). At a later occasion, when “[t]iny iridescent moths are shimmering around their heads,” Toby muses: “What do we smell like to them?” (MaddAddam 106). Toby is also, in likeness with Costello and her frogs, crucially aware of her own insignificance to other animals: “Mourning dove, robin, crow, bluejay, bullfrog. [She] says their names, but these names mean nothing to them” (Year 349). Toby is open to and acknowledges that there is a world which has nothing at all to do with humans, and which she knows next to nothing about, echoing ethologist Jonathan Balcombe, who notes how “we go astray [in] thinking that ours is the only viewpoint. The […] harmful, active anthropocentrism sees the human condition as the…only condition[…] Reining in our anthropocentrism requires recognising that other species perceive their world in their own unique ways” (in Taylor & Signal, Theorizing Animals 282). She does not project her own assumptions onto other animals, but simply acknowledges and respects that their lived experience as inherently meaningful to them. Through Toby, the novel urges us to broaden our horizons, and realise, as Barbara Noske puts it, that “animals are not lesser humans,” but “other worlds, whose otherworldliness must not be disenchanted and cut to our size but must be respected for what it is” (xi).

The story of the two eggs, or “the story of creation” of the Crakers, marks another such example of Toby’s inclination towards seeing other animal life with reverence and potential. In the following the two versions of the stories will be compared, as told by Jimmy and as told by Toby. Jimmy’s version goes like this:

[Oryx] laid two eggs: one full of animals and birds and fish, and the other one full of words. But the egg full of words hatched first, and the Children of Crake had already been created by then, and they’d eaten up all the words because they were hungry, and there were no words left over when the second egg hatched out. And that is why the animals can’t talk (Oryx 96).

And then Toby’s version:
The other egg [Oryx] laid was all of words. But that egg hatched first, before the one with the animals in it, and you ate up many of the words, because you were hungry; which is why you have words inside you. And Crake thought that you had eaten all the words, so there were none left over for the animals, and that was why they could not speak. But he was wrong about that. Crake was not always right about everything.

Because when he was not looking, some of the words fell out of the egg onto the ground, and some fell into the water, and some blew away in the air. And none of the people saw them. But the animals and the birds and the fish did see them, and ate them up. They were a different kind of word, so it was sometimes hard for people to understand the animals. They had chewed the words up too small (MaddAddam 290).

Jimmy’s story holds a definite humanist undertone, with only human beings and the humanoid Crakers—in other words, the ‘Children of Crake’—being given the ability to communicate. Toby, on the other hand, allows ‘the Children of Oryx,’ the other animals, to consume the words as well. She explains how they have a different kind of word because they chewed the words up too small, necessarily laying the blame on our lack of understanding rather than on other animals and their presumed inability to communicate meaningfully. This echoes influential German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and his reduction of human intellect and capacity of speech as emerging from the frailty of ‘Man’: “as the most endangered animal…[the human animal] needed help and protection, he needed his equals; he had to express his neediness and be able to make himself understood” (Calarco, “Being Toward Meat” 421). Some of the central tenets on which human exceptionalism has been assumed are therefore by Nietzsche framed as attributes which would necessarily place us beneath other animals on the evolutionary scale. Therefore, citing David Williams, “[a]n animal’s ‘dumbness’ [is really just] the measure of [our] ‘deafness” (Taylor & Signal 238).

Toby being open to the complexities of other animals also comes to the fore in her interactions with the pigoons. At the spa where she is holding up after the flood, the genetically modified pigs constantly attempt to break into and throttle her garden, which is her main source of food. In order to protect it, she fatally shoots a boar, and at this point she considers a “switch to full-blown carnivore,” due to her food-supply shrinking rapidly (Year
363): nevertheless, she decides to leave the body of the boar, seeing as “animal protein should be the last resort” (Year 19). However, she decides to collect the maggots from the corpse, and when she does, she notices something peculiar:

> Fronds scattered about, on top of the boars’s carcass and beside it. Fern fronds. Such fronds don’t grow in the meadow. Some are old and dry and brown, some quite fresh. Also flowers. Are those rose petals, from the roses by the driveway? […] Could the pigs have been having a funeral? Could they be bringing memorial bouquets? She finds this idea truly frightening.

But why not? says the kindly voice of Adam One. We believe Animals have Souls. Why then would they not have funerals? (Year 328)

Here, Atwood tackles the concept of the complexity of other animals’s emotional lives through Toby and her contemplations on the pigoons’s capacity of grief. In drawing the link between how elephants have actually been shown to express distress and mourning upon someone in their number dying—thus reminding the reader of this fact—and the pigoons displaying similar emotional capacities, Atwood implies how other animals lead more complex lives than previously perceived, and that the possibility is there even if we are reluctant to see it (Year 328). Contrary to the reductionist common opinion, “[t]he problem is not […] one of anthropomorphism” but rather one of “anthropocentrism, the limited view that [other] animals are not capable of having the emotional relationships we have ourselves” (Huggan & Tiffin 195, emphasis in original). Atwood urges us not to underestimate the intelligence, empathy and sense of community other animals have, and keep this in mind in our relations with them. Through Toby, she also displays what this would necessarily entail if taken seriously.

Toby is also interested with other animals’s capacity of communication, and voices this interest at several times in the trilogy, as when she wonders what the pigoons are saying to one another: “A low level of grunting is going on, from pig to pig. If they were people, […] you’d say it was the murmuring of a crowd. It must be information exchange; but God knows what sort of information” (MaddAddam 268). At a different point, the humans survivors are literally left out of the conversation when the pigoons come to the MaddAddamite-encampment to ask for help in removing the vicious Painballers who have been killing their young. Toby, at first puzzled as to why the pigoons choose to communicate
through the Crakers rather than asking them directly, realises that “[w]e’re too stupid, we
don’t understand their languages” (MaddAddam 268); also, when Toby is talking to Zeb, a
fellow, inquiring as to what the pigoons are saying, he replies: “We’ll find out […] when
they’re damn ready to tell us. We’re just the infantry as far as they’re concerned. Dumb as a
stump, they must think, though we can work the sprayguns. But they’re the
generals” (MaddAddam 340-41). This displays a shift of political power between the pigoons
and the humans: humans have to let go of their anthropocentric pride in order to build new
modes of relating and communicating with an animal they most commonly have been
viewing as products first and beings second.

Lastly, other animals are also the main focus in the many of Toby’s dreams, as in the
one she has after a self-induced hallucination in which a pigoon played a major part:

The sow stops, turns sideways: a perfect target. She looks at Toby out of her eye. The
five little ones gather in her shadow […] Her mouth upturns in a smile, but that’s
only the way it’s made. Glint of light on a tooth […] The sow does not move. Her
head remains up, her ears pricked forward […] She gives no sign of charging. The
piglets freeze in place (MaddAddam 223).

Meeting the gaze of the sow had a profound effect on Toby, causing her to dream about
piglets that night: she dreamt about “innocent piglets, adorable piglets,” “[a]ll of them happy,
none of them dead” (MaddAddam 261). Through their gaze, other animals establish their
agency in the MaddAddam-trilogy, and the following morning “Toby can’t manage the ham”
at breakfast, “not after a night full of waltzing piglets,” and not after “what the sow had
communicated to her” (MaddAddam 261-262). Northover describes how she experienced a
“deep change, a shift in her attitude towards [other] animals” upon her gaze meeting with that
of the sow (“Strangers” 135). As Northover argues elsewhere, “the animal gaze has an
uncanny power as an aesthetic signifier of (or incitement to) cross-species empathy,” which
rings true for the characters in the MaddAssam-universe as well (“The Literary
Representation” 109). From this point, Toby consistently starts viewing the pigoons as active
agents, as subjects rather than objects. Upon catching herself referring to the sow as an “it,”
she immediately corrects herself: “It—she gave me a very strange look” (MaddAddam 262).
Also, at a later point: “Her back. The Pigoons were not objects. She had to get that right. It was only respectful” (*MaddAddam* 351).

As noted by Matthew Calarco in his book *Zoographies*, completely inhabiting the vegan ideal is purely impossible: “no matter how rigorous one’s [veganism] might be, there is simply no way to nourish oneself in advanced, industrial countries that does not involve harm to animal life (an human life as well) in direct or indirect forms” (134). Indicting veganism on this count is very common, framing it as a reason against such a practice, but I suggest to rather look to Toby to see the potentially productive element of it. The very impossibility of being a pure vegan paves the way for another subjectivity, which does not build on having achieved or accomplished a particular relationship with other animals, but rather one where one has to constantly strive in continually attempting to reach such a goal. This echoes soundly with of Braidotti and her “process of becoming-nomadic,” which is “anti-essentialist [and]…beyond received notions of individuality […] You can never be a nomad; you can only go on trying to become nomadic” (*Nomadic Ethics* 346). The very same way, it is impossible to be a pure vegan, but that does not mean one should not continuously try. Toby is such a continual struggler: as a marginalised person—both when it comes to her gender and economic status—she is arguably more sensitive to the perspective of others who are mistreated by the larger forces in society than others, seeing as she has been subjected to such wrongs herself. She is perceptive of the connection between the commodification of other animals in advertising—such as furzooters—and the slaughter of nearly extinct species for their flesh, fur and skin: thinking of this connection as being distasteful in itself speaks to Toby’s inclination to viewing other animals as having value in themselves, refusing the Cartesian view of other animals being automata who are merely reacting to stimulus, always objects rather than subjects.

Perhaps surprisingly, Haraway can be seen as moving in a direction very similar to my notion of transformative veganism, by building an ethics which moves from being based on the imperative “[t]hou shalt not kill” to being based on the notion that “thou shalt not render killable” (Haraway 105-106). For clarification, Haraway is in no way making an argument for veganism here: she is openly critical towards the practice, as shown earlier. However, this goes to show that it is possible to adapt originally non-vegan-friendly arguments into a revisited vegan philosophy, and how philosophical nomadism can enter an
elicit these potentials. Haraway, in her formulation “not render killable,” necessarily shifts the emphasis from reaching a state of moral perfectionism to the pursuit of an ethics sceptical of the necessary sacrifice of such a false purity: it urges us to collectively and continually acknowledge our responsibility in being alive to the world, which does not amount to good-conscience, but rather a continuous disruptive and transformative effort. Transformative Toby showcases what it could look for the human subjectivity not being forged in ways that rely on suppressing other species, but rather acknowledges other animals’s individual experience of the world, acknowledges enmeshment and that is acutely aware of the injustices of the world.
4 Conclusion: One of Many

In his book *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, Michael Pollan notes how he “envies the moral clarity of the [vegans], the blamelessness of the tofu eater[s],” but also pities them since “[d]reams of innocence are just that; they usually depend on a denial of reality” (Pollan 362). Pollan is of course correct in assuming that purely emotional responses can lead to arrogant disconnects, but I question whether it is the person that dreams of innocence which is the one to be pitied. In our time, where we have reached a point of utter fracture in how we relate to other animals, are the ones who are critically engage with these harmful preconceptions those who are denying reality? Or is it perhaps those who close their eyes, and their hearts, mindlessly subscribing to a harmful conceptualisation of the human animal? Having read *Elizabeth Costello*, few could claim that the protagonist has obtained moral clarity through her veganism, as Pollan suggests. The very opposite rings true, with Coetzee’s protagonist suffering a psychological breakdown trying to come to terms with the ways in which we treat our fellow creatures.

In moving towards a more compassionate and optimistic future, we need to come to the same realisation as Elizabeth Costello, namely that “we are all animals” (*EC* 78). We all have multiple possibilities, becomings and interests, which should be considered to be important regardless of the beneficiary of such a conclusion. With the death of human exceptionalism, the need for a new way of forging the human subjectivity presents itself, and in the current climate, I have argued that transformative veganism presents the arguably most viable alternative. Being epistemologically disruptive, in search of the affirmative encounters in our relations with other animals, and extremely aware of the ethical dead-zones that we have constructed to apply to the other animals that we wish to eat, transformative veganism is in search of radically re-think the ways in which we relate to other animals beside ourselves. In re-claiming veganism—and contrary to its common conception—I have argued that subscribing to such a mindset is not a withdrawal from reality, but rather a continual, critical and responsive engagement with the status quo, challenging how it views the human condition as the only condition.

Transformative veganism urges us to consider how drastically the epistemological framework of the carnophallogocentric subject would have to change upon the realisation that the vegan imperative can only be pursued on the basis that it can never be perfectly
obtained. It is not an endpoint, but a journey, a critical apparatus. As brought to the fore in the fictional works explored in this thesis, in our current environment—where factory farming reigns supreme—transformative veganism could provide a particularly productive mode of engagement with other animals. There are no historical precedents for the ways in which we relate to other animals in contemporary society, and most production happens within institutions such as factory farms. Donna Haraway’s “becoming-with” and Val Plumwood’s “ecological animalism” are admirable goals to work towards, and certainly important to think through, but they are also utterly unworkable within our current system. Opting out of and opposing the underpinnings of such sites of mass-exploitation seems to be the most morally sound choice at our disposal, and veganism presents such an opting-out.

I have argued how Elizabeth Costello and the MaddAddam-trilogy, even though neither explicitly argue for veganism, are concerned with topics which contribute positively to reading them through such a lens, and for such a reading to be meaningful and important. Both works concern what it is like being at odds with the majority culture; and which question the limits and arbitrariness of human exceptionalism. They both bring forth the absent referent, critically tackle the many uses and abuses of other animals within the context of the Western industrial animal production complex, establish how our primary mode of relating to other animals is with reverence, and reinstate the human being as one of many animals. Especially so in Coetzee’s book, more so than being a set of restrictive dietary guidelines, veganism is presented as a change of heart towards other animals, a change in one’s very orientation in the world. The MaddAddam-trilogy most valuably points to the potential of forging new relations between species, and what such a relationship might look like moving beyond the human horizon.

Our relationship with other animals is as fractured as it will ever be, and moving forward, reworking the existing framework is not enough if we are to take ‘the animal question,’ as well as ‘the animal condition,’ seriously. Fiction has proved to be an important ally in this pursuit, effectively bringing to the fore the hurdles in the way, but also shedding light on the way forward. We need, in likeness with Elizabeth Costello and Toby, to live otherwise.
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