CHAPTER 1

What is Meat Culture?

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The exploitation of animals for profit is enabled by a cold, calculating Trinity of Science, Technology, and the Market that has stripped our public life of empathy.

KIMBRELL 2010, 29

More people eat meat than ever before, and global meat consumption continues to grow. This is not simply an effect of the rising human population (7.3 billion as of January 2016): it is the result of rapid scientific, technological and sociocultural changes that have transformed meat production and consumption over the past one hundred or so years, and especially in industrialized countries following World War II. The history of creating contemporary 21st century ‘meat culture’ is an industrial history that blends agricultural science and technologization with mass production, vertical integration production systems with globalized economies, and the hyper-stimulation of consumer demand emblematized by the rise of suburban fast food outlets since the 1950s. Colossal shifts have occurred over the last half century with respect to the breeding, farming, slaughtering and consumption of animals. Genetic engineering and selective breeding have created new ‘hybrid’ animals who confound nature by eating less but growing fatter faster. Smaller family farms have been replaced by massive Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs or factory farms), where animals are incarcerated their entire lives in cramped cages, pens or sheds and subjected to extreme physical, mental, social and emotional stress. Slaughtering processes have been sped up to cope with the vast numbers of animals being killed each year to meet the demand for animal flesh. At the start of the 20th century the city of Chicago—known as “the cradle of the slaughter industry”—was killing up to 12 million animals annually (Meat Atlas 2014, 14). Today, in just one of the meat industry’s key companies,

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Tyson Foods, over 42 million chickens, 170,000 cattle and 350,000 pigs are killed each week, these animals coming from the company’s own CAFOs (ibid).

The analysis of meat and its place in Western culture has been central to Human-Animal Studies as a field. Texts published in the early 1990s problematizing the hegemony of meat-eating—such as Carol Adams’ *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* and Nick Fiddes’ *Meat: A Natural Symbol*—were pivotal in establishing and growing this new cross-disciplinary area of study. In the 25 or so years since these first publications emerged, scholars in the humanities and social sciences have continued to interrogate the various representations, meanings, practices, ethics, and modes of identity associated with meat production and consumption (and also its opposite, veg*nism). Attention has been directed to issues such as meat’s portrayal in popular culture, including meat (and dairy) industry marketing and advertising (Adams 2003, Packwood Freeman 2009, Cole 2011, Pilgrim 2013, Taylor 2016); the gendered construction of meat consumption (and of animal slaughter) (Adams 2010, Luke 2007, Parry 2010, Potts & Parry 2010); the shifting technologies and capitalist economies connected to meat production, distribution and procurement (Noske 1989, Horowitz 2006, Marcus 2005, Twine 2010); the politics and ethics of selective breeding and genetic modification of ‘farmed animals’, including the killing of infants born into but ‘surplus’ to the meat or dairy industries (Imhoff 2010); the suffering of animals contained in Concentrated Animal Feed Operations (CAFOS), as well as those born into free range farming situations (Eisnitz 2007, Foer 2010, Joy 2010, Lappe 2010, Pachirat 2011); and the environmental impacts of intensive farming (Twine 2010, Taylor 2012).

This volume builds on and advances the existing critical examination of meat’s place in Western societies, bringing into urgent focus a wide range of domains of production and consumption of animals within the coherent framework of what we have chosen to call ‘meat culture’. Featuring new work from key Australasian, European and North American scholars, each chapter interrogates in depth some aspect of the animal industrial complex (Noske 1989) and meat hegemony in the 21st century.

This first chapter presents an overview of the global meat industry, drawing attention to the actual lives and deaths of the animals that are integral to, yet routinely obscured by, meat industry statistics, narratives about farming, and economic rhetoric. It also introduces the concept of ‘meat culture’, and describes how each chapter comprising this volume scrutinizes a distinct manifestation of carnist ideology.

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2 The term ‘veg*n’ is commonly used to connote both vegetarians and vegans.