

**Meat and its Meanings: Representations of Meat-Eating in Selected Works of South
African Literature**

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Abstract

This thesis is situated within the burgeoning field of literary animal studies. Its aim is to analyse critically the way in which animals-as-meat are represented in South African literature. While meat pervades our lives and literature, there exists very little scholarship that considers literary depictions of meat. The thesis suggests that literary texts can offer useful reflections of the cultural environments in which they are immersed and, furthermore, can encourage what J. M. Coetzee calls the ‘sympathetic imagination’ in relation to animals.

The dissertation offers close readings of three primary texts, while also drawing on a broader range of local fiction. Chapter 1 discusses Eben Venter’s *Trencherman*, with a specific focus on Venter’s use of the *plaasroman* and literary dystopia. Both genres are important to the novel’s ubiquitous depictions of meat, serving to illustrate some of the destructive, and irreversible, excesses associated with traditional Afrikaner culture in South Africa. Meat consumption is not only depicted as being among these harmful excesses, but also comes to represent them collectively.

Chapter 2 offers a reading of Zakes Mda’s *The Madonna of Excelsior*, paying particular attention to its representation of the intersection between the objectification of women’s bodies and the transformation of animals into meat. In my approach to this text, I make use of Carol J. Adams’ notion of the ‘absent referent’. I suggest that while Mda ostensibly considers the subjugation of both women and animals, the novel does not ultimately demonstrate concern for animals in their own right.

The final chapter considers the representation of suffering in Damon Galgut’s *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs*. I argue that Galgut’s text is alone among the three primary texts in its attention to the animal suffering inextricably linked to meat production. The novel depicts this suffering as being comparable to human suffering, while simultaneously demonstrating humans’ indifference to their animal fellows.

The dissertation concludes that while meat is infused with a range of meanings in South African literature, the most obvious and intrinsic one – the fact of animal death and animal suffering – is the one most often ignored.

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I urge you to read the poets who return the living, electric being to language; and if the poets do not move you, I urge you to walk, flank to flank, beside the beast that is prodded down the chute to his executioner.

– J.M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*

Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Contents	v
Introduction: Why Consider Meat in South African Literature?	1
Preamble	1
Why Meat?	3
Why Literature?	11
Why South Africa?	16
Chapter 1: The <i>Plaasroman</i> , Dystopia and the Afrikaner: Meat in Eben Venter's <i>Trencherman</i>	29
1.1. Introduction	29
1.2. The <i>Plaasroman</i>	35
1.2.1. The Purpose of the <i>Plaasroman</i> and its Use in <i>Trencherman</i>	35
1.2.2. The <i>Plaasroman</i> , <i>Trencherman</i> and Meat	40
1.3. Dystopia	42
1.3.1. Dystopia and the <i>Plaasroman</i>	42
1.3.2. The Purpose of Dystopia and its Use in <i>Trencherman</i>	43
1.3.3. Dystopia, <i>Trencherman</i> and Meat	45
1.4. Concluding Remarks	51

Chapter 2: The Absent Referent in Zakes Mda's <i>The Madonna of Excelsior</i>	54
2.1. Introduction	54
2.2. The Absent Referent	57
2.3. The Absent Referent in <i>The Madonna of Excelsior</i>	60
2.3.1. The Butchery Scene	61
2.3.2. Scenes of Illicit Sex	66
2.3.3. The Baby Roasting Scene	71
2.4. Concluding Remarks	74
Chapter 3: Animal Suffering and Human (Dis)connection in <i>The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs</i>	78
3.1. Introduction	78
3.2. Suffering and Narration	81
3.3. Suffering and the Connection between Human and Animal	85
3.4. Animal Suffering and Human Disconnection	94
3.4.1. Blaauw	95
3.4.2. Howard	96
3.4.3. Ellen	97
3.4.4. Patrick	101
Conclusion	108
Bibliography	111

Introduction

Why Consider Meat in South African Literature?

Preamble

Any discussion that draws on the extensive intellectual debate about animals in the last four decades faces a great challenge at its start: where does one draw the line between what is included and what is left out from such a vast field? The animal rights movement (I am using this phrase here in its most general sense) is a fairly recent, though enormously prolific and wide-ranging arena. Its reach includes the philosophical and the psychological, the academic and the activist, the legislative and the literary, and a great deal beyond. In order to narrow the scope somewhat, I will limit my discussion of theoretical material in two ways. Firstly, I will only cover material that is in some way related to animals-as-meat, and, secondly, I will only discuss theoretical perspectives that have some bearing on the particular issues that emerge in my readings of the novels discussed in the coming pages. I mention this not merely to point to a commonplace concern faced by writers reviewing existing scholarship in any particular field, but also because limiting oneself to speaking *only* about meat is not a straightforward task. That is to say, meat cannot be easily untangled from other issues, as will become clear from the rest of this introduction and in the thesis overall. Both in reality and in representation (insofar as these areas can themselves neatly be delineated) meat is something that is inextricably tied to wider concerns. Consuming animal flesh does not terminate at the point of ingestion, but rather has consequences that reach well beyond the dinner table. And any in-depth reading cannot simply look at the depiction of meat in a text without also attending to the ways in which this depiction is bound up with other elements of that text. Consequently, this introduction will sketch briefly some of the ways in which meat is entangled with broader issues that may be obscured when it appears discretely on a plate as food, and the chapters that discuss various literary representations of meat will at times look at issues that might not *prima facie* seem immediately relevant to meat as such. If these chapters seem to digress at points, it is only because these ostensible asides or preambles are necessary for the overall argument regarding meat.

A further note of clarification – also involving the difficulties of delineating tidy boundaries – relates to terminology. In his path-breaking treatise, *Animal Liberation* (1975), the philosopher Peter Singer mentions that

The English language, like other languages, reflects the prejudices of its users. So authors who wish to challenge these prejudices are in a well-known type of bind: either they use language that reinforces the very prejudices they wish to challenge, or else they fail to communicate with their audience. This book has already been forced along the former of these paths. We commonly use the word “animal” to mean “animals other than human beings”. This usage sets humans apart from other animals, implying that we are not ourselves animals – an implication that everyone who has had elementary lessons in biology knows to be false. (xxiv)

This thesis faces a similar difficulty. I tend mostly to use the terms ‘animal’ and ‘human’, rather than more cumbersome phrases like ‘non-human animals’, ‘other animals’ or ‘humanimals’.¹ I have tried to use words that best suit the contexts in which they appear. Moreover, I agree with Steve Baker (another significant scholar on animals), who writes about his own use of commonplace terminology in this respect:

This is not to dispute the fact that perceptions are shaped by language, but it seems doubtful that the rallying-call for liberation of language in this particular way will prove a sturdy enough proposal to achieve acceptance in a popular context; and without the prospect of its acceptance the call would do little more than allow both writer and readers to feel unjustifiably self-righteous. (5)

One final explanation is necessary here regarding the structure of this introduction. I have divided the discussion into three sections, each headed by one of three questions: ‘Why meat?’, ‘Why literature?’ and ‘Why South Africa?’ One might well ask, in the first instance, why meat and its consumption by humans are worth discussing at all. In particular, why do so in the context of South Africa where there are so many other, perhaps more important, concerns to address? And what value does literature have in this respect? I seek to answer these questions in their respective sections and to demonstrate the importance of each of these three major facets of my research (which looks at *meat in literature from South Africa*). In so doing, I will simultaneously be laying the theoretical groundwork for the chapters that follow and situating

¹ See Sarah McFarland’s “‘The Animal’ is a Verb: Liberating the Subject of Animal Studies” (815-6) for a more in-depth discussion of terminological issues. For more on the term ‘humanimal’, see Nik Taylor and Tania Signal’s (eds.) *Theorizing Animals: Re-thinking Humanimal Relations*, especially Peter Beatson’s “Mapping Human Animal Relations” (21-58).

myself within a particular scholarly context. The end of the introduction will also offer a brief outline of each chapter's content.

Why Meat?

When wondering why meat and meat-eating are important issues to consider, among the best places to turn is the work of the philosopher Peter Singer, “the founding father of the contemporary animal liberation movement” (Rowlands 31). One simple and striking answer to this question offered by Singer is that “[f]or most human beings, especially those in modern urban and suburban communities, the most direct form of contact with non-human animals is at mealtime [when] we eat them” (95). Singer’s *Animal Liberation* – a seminal work of the contemporary animal rights movement – lucidly outlines in extensive detail why the practice of meat-eating, along with other forms of animal exploitation involved, for example, in product testing and scientific research, are morally condemnable and should be stopped. His argument is founded on the concept of ‘speciesism’, which Singer defines as “a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one’s own species and against those members of other species” (6). Like sexism or racism, it is a kind of prejudice based on features that should arguably be considered morally insignificant, such as sex, race, intelligence, reason, language and so on. Singer argues that, according to the utilitarian principle of equal consideration of interests (also called the principle of equality), what *is* morally significant is having interests and the capacity to suffer. Singer argues that “[i]f a being suffers there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration. No matter what the nature of the being, the principle of equality requires that its suffering be counted equally with the like suffering – insofar as rough comparisons can be made – of any other being” (8). And since, according to Singer, we can reasonably assume that animals feel pain because they exhibit pain behaviour and have comparable central nervous systems to our own, we should not harm or kill them for food (or any other purpose) as we would be causing them pain and violating their interests.

Tom Regan, another pivotal figure in animal rights discourse, defends a position that varies from Singer’s. Regan’s *The Case for Animal Rights* (1983), as the title suggests, takes a rights-based approach in contrast to Singer’s utilitarianism. The book argues “that animals have certain basic moral rights” and that the “recognition of these rights requires fundamental changes

in our treatment of them” (Regan xii). Regan’s argument is built on two key concepts: inherent value and being a subject-of-a-life (as opposed to simply being alive). He defines the latter as follows:

[I]ndividuals are subjects-of-a-life if they have beliefs and desires, perception, memory and a sense of the future, including their own future; an emotional life together with feelings of pleasure and pain; preference- and welfare- interests; the ability to initiate action in pursuit of their desires and goals; a psychological identity over time; and an individual welfare in the sense that their experiential life fares well or ill for them logically independent of their utility for others and logically independent of their being the object of anyone else’s interests. (243)

According to Regan, being a subject-of-a-life is a sufficient condition for having inherent value, and since many animals meet these requirements and are therefore subjects-of-a-life (Regan focusses on mammals in particular, though the principle can be extended to other animals as well), they have inherent value. Because of this inherent value, animals have *prima facie* rights to be respected and not harmed. As a result, it is wrong to eat or hunt animals, or to use them in scientific research, because these practices violate their rights.

As Mark Rowlands points out, “Singer’s *Animal Liberation* and Regan’s *The Case for Animal Rights* are the two seminal works of contemporary philosophical literature on animals” (2). There are, of course, many other significant contributors, such as Mary Midgley, who offers a milder version of Singer’s position, one that is welfarist rather than liberationist;² Martha Nussbaum, who makes a capabilities-based argument claiming that animals should be allowed to develop uninhibitedly so as to fulfil their individual potential (and so we should not inhibit this by ending their lives);³ and Rowlands himself, who offers a compelling version of contractarianism in which he shows, via a modified version of Rawls’ original position, that species is a morally irrelevant category.⁴

² See Midgley’s *Animals and Why They Matter* (1983).

³ See Nussbaum’s “The Moral Status of Animals” in Linda Kalof and Amy Fitzgerald (eds.) *The Animals Reader: The Essential Classic and Contemporary Writings* (2007).

⁴ See Rowlands’ *Animal Rights: Moral Theory and Practice (Second Edition)* (2009).

A further important contention, particularly for this dissertation,⁵ is put forward by ecofeminists like Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan. A recent book on the subject defines ecofeminism as follows:

Ecofeminism addresses the various ways that sexism, heteronormativity, racism, colonialism, and ableism are informed by and support speciesism and how analyzing the ways these forces intersect can produce less violent, more just practices. In the 1990s, ecofeminists worked to remedy a perceived problem in feminist theory, animal advocacy, and environmentalism, namely, a lack of attention to the intersecting structures of power that reinforce the “othering” of women and animals, and contribute to the increasing destruction of the environment. (Adams and Gruen 1)

The intersectional approach of ecofeminist theorists therefore uncovers underlying and intersecting power structures that are the source of ostensibly differing forms of oppression while showing “how problematic it is when these issues are considered separate from one another” (1).

According to Cary Wolfe, “arguably the single most important event in the brief history of animal studies”⁶ is Jacques Derrida’s “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)” (Wolfe 6). The essay covers a great deal of territory – it examines the intimate connection between humans and animals; their importance in our self-understanding; our relegation of all creatures from the kingdom *Animalia* to a homogeneous, indistinct whole when we refer to them collectively as “animals” or “the animal”, and so on – though what is most important for this discussion are the comments Derrida makes about the human exploitation of animals. We do this

by means of farming and regimentalization at a demographic level unknown in the past, by means of genetic experimentation, the industrialization of what can be called the production for consumption of animal meat, artificial insemination on a massive scale, more and more audacious manipulations of the genome, the reduction of the animal not only to production and overactive reproduction (hormones, genetic crossbreeding, cloning, and so on) of meat for consumption but also of all sorts of other end products, and all of that in the service of a certain being and the so-called human well-being of man. (Derrida 394)

He goes on to say that “[n]o one can deny seriously, or for very long, that men do all they can in order to dissimulate this cruelty or to hide it from themselves, in order to organise on a global

⁵ Ecofeminism is significant in this introduction, especially in final section (see pages 17 to 18), and in Chapter 2, which offers an ecofeminist reading of one of Zakes Mda’s novels.

⁶ I return to the subject of animal studies on pages 15 and 16 below.

scale the forgetting or misunderstanding of this violence that some would compare to the worst cases of genocide” (394). Derrida himself makes this comparison to genocide, suggesting that the massive scale of the suffering we cause animals – and, moreover, the fact that they *experience* suffering – is undeniable (394-7).

Derrida, like all of the scholars mentioned above, informs theoretical argumentation with details about the material reality of the ways in which humans exploit animals. When considering the appropriateness of meat as an area of study, it is necessary to consider this reality.

In *Animal Liberation* – not only one of the first, but still among the best books to uncover the extent of animal mistreatment by humans – Singer catalogues the “indisputable evidence of the fact that modern agriculture is based on treating animals as things, mere means to our ends, with no other reasons for existing” (ix). He writes later that “[t]he use and abuse of animals raised for food far exceeds, in sheer numbers affected, any other kind of mistreatment” and so it is “on our dinner table and in our neighborhood supermarket or butcher’s shop, that we are brought into direct touch with the most extensive exploitation of other species that has ever existed” (95).

Singer and others outline the disturbing conditions under which animals exist on so-called “factory farms”, which currently house two-thirds of the 70 billion farmed animals produced every year worldwide (Lybery and Oakeshott 4). In unflinching detail Singer catalogues the mistreatment of animals like chickens, pigs and cattle in these industrial “farms”: animals are kept in intensely overcrowded spaces or cages that often inhibit them from turning around or stretching their limbs; their confinement means that their natural social organization is inhibited; they suffer from extreme boredom, frustration and stress, and consequently often resort to acts such as cannibalism. To curb cannibalistic behaviour and its effects, chickens are ‘debeaked’ and pigs have their tails cut off without anaesthetic; animals rarely or never see natural light and the artificial lights they are exposed to affect their natural biological rhythms; they rarely or never get fresh air in the sheds in which they are kept; because of nutritional and genetic interference the animals grow so quickly that they often suffer from crippling deformities; they are killed far earlier than their natural lifespan would otherwise allow, often within just a few weeks of being born; they are painfully and traumatically slaughtered

(sometimes without being effectively stunned and are scalded or cut up while still alive); and so forth.⁷

Factory farming is not only horrible for the animals that have to endure its inhumane conditions, but is also detrimental in various other ways. It has negative environmental, health-related and humanitarian impacts. Philip Lymbery and Isabel Oakeshott outline many problems of this kind in their recent book, *Farmageddon: The True Cost of Cheap Meat* (2014), pointing out, for instance, that farmed animals “consume a third of the world’s cereal harvest, 90 per cent of its soya meal and up to 30 percent of the global fish catch – precious resources that could be fed directly to billions of hungry people” (5). Moreover, factory farms are hotbeds for disease, so animals are fed large quantities of antibiotics which often lead to the spread of antibiotic-resistant ‘superbugs’ among human populations (5). These farming sites are also often skirted by large lagoons of animal waste that cause far-reaching environmental damage and are detrimental to human health (182-6).

To return to animals, factory farming is not the sole form of ‘livestock’ rearing that is detrimental to animals’ well-being. As Singer points out “it is not only intensive farming that causes animals to suffer. Suffering has been inflicted on animals for human benefit whether they are reared by modern or traditional methods” (145). Animals kept in more traditional farming environments are still dehorned; branded; castrated; mutilated by having their ears cut, for example; are separated from their young; transported under cramped, stressful circumstances, often over long distances and without food and water, which can lead to fatalities in transit because of starvation, dehydration, freezing, heat exhaustion, suffocation and stress; and, of course, those who survive, are still ultimately slaughtered (Singer 145-50).

It could easily be assumed that most of the details outlined above, taken from international publications, do not apply to South Africa, but this is not the case. Singer himself points out that “[r]eaders in other countries may be inclined to believe that conditions in their own country are not so bad, but if they live in one of the industrialized nations [...] they have no grounds for complacency” (144). The extent of farm animal exploitation in this country is documented in Michelé Pickover’s *Animal Rights in South Africa* (2005) – an essential resource for anyone interested in animal rights, as it covers local and global issues comprehensively,

⁷ See Singer’s chapter on meat production in *Animal Liberation* (95-157) for further details and other abuses, as well as the specific treatment that particular kinds of animals are subjected to.

meticulously and clearly. Pickover not only details the particularities of the meat industry in South Africa, showing that its conditions of production are as severe as those of other industrialised countries, but also uncovers some issues that are more particular to this country, such as trophy hunting, trade in wild life, problems surrounding ‘game’ parks like the Kruger National Park (which contains its own meat packing plant [118]), informal and ritualistic slaughter, and so on. In terms of the specific details of the South African meat industry, she exposes some disturbing details. She reveals, for instance, that “[t]he Department of Agriculture and Land Affairs promotes factory farming” (146); that there is widespread lack of supervision and regulation of slaughterhouses (146-7); in addition to poor or non-existent legislation regarding animal welfare, with animals being “legally classified as ‘things’, ‘goods’ or ‘agricultural products’” (145). She also produces a range of staggering statistics:

In South Africa, chickens are the most consumed animals and from 1965 to 1998 the consumption of chicken flesh increased by 844 percent. National Department of Agriculture figures from 1999 show that the total poultry meat production amounted to about 1.121 million tons. In 2003 the number of broilers slaughtered for commercial producers was estimated at 545 million. (151)

Moreover, “50 percent of the country’s grain is fed to animals” (165) and the southern hemisphere has “two-thirds of the world’s farmed animals, becoming the main producer for the rest of the world” (142).

Overall, meat exacerbates climate change, since “[a]nimal agriculture makes a 40% greater contribution to global warming than all transport in the world combined; it is the number one cause of climate change” (Foer 43). It is detrimental to natural environments, as “[e]very kilogram of beef consumed needs approximately 10 000 litres of water” (Pickover 165) and “[n]early one-third of the land surface of the planet is dedicated to livestock” (Foer 149). There is mounting evidence that suggests it has adverse effects on human health, the most recent being a World Health Organization report from October 2015 detailing the carcinogenic effects of red and processed meat. The report considered “more than 800 studies that investigated associations of more than a dozen types of cancer with the consumption of red meat or processed meat in many countries and populations with diverse diets. The most influential evidence came from large prospective cohort studies conducted over the past 20 years” (1). Since “the conversion of grain into animal flesh requires about ten calories for every calorie provided for human

consumption”, animal farming wastes resources that could otherwise combat world global hunger (Fiddles 211). And, of course, meat-eating is especially terrible for animals. As Pickover puts it, industrial animal agriculture involves “cruelty, environmental degradation, long term job losses, pollution, climate change, animal-borne diseases and lifestyle health implications” (145). Yet meat remains a widely consumed commodity. Before moving on to the next section, it is worth dwelling briefly on some of the reasons why this is the case, particularly because it has some bearing on the importance of studying literature in relation to meat-eating.

Pickover writes the following about meat consumption:

The dominant global culture of eating meat ensures that farmed animals are the most exploited on earth. The routine brutality of farming for food causes more individual suffering than any other human practice. Meat consumption has reached an all-time high, despite staggering evidence of cruelty and increasing confirmation that meat-based diets are unhealthy and ecologically unstable. (141)

How can this be accounted for? A surge in literature on the sociological importance of food in the last few decades is useful in this respect.⁸ The text that is most pertinent to the focus of this discussion is Nick Fiddles’ comprehensive *Meat: A Natural Symbol* (1991). Fiddles points out that “in spite of all our reservations – and efforts to avoid its unsavory associations – something uniquely important about meat’s substance remains for most of us. However much we may feel uneasy about its source, those who feel able to abstain altogether remain a small, though perhaps growing, minority” (Fiddles 19). Fiddles accounts for this importance by arguing that meat is a significant and tangible symbol of human dominance over the natural world (6). As he puts it, “[k]illing, cooking and eating other animals’ flesh provides perhaps the ultimate authentication of human superiority over the rest of nature” (65). As a result, meat “has long held an unrivalled status among foods on account of this meaning” (45). It is worth noting that Fiddles does not suggest that this is necessarily true of every person’s conception of meat, but rather that meat is seen as a symbol of superiority and control over nature on a *cultural* (rather than individual) level. Fiddles makes a detailed and convincing case by surveying a range of different ways in

⁸ See, for instance, Pat Caplan’s (ed.) *Food, Health and Identity* (1997), Carole Counihan and Penny van Esterik’ (eds.) *Food and Culture: A Reader (Second Edition)* (2008), Amy E. Guptill, Denise A Copelton and Betsy Lucal’s *Food and Society: Principles and Paradoxes* (2013), Jean-Claude Kaufmann’s *The Meaning of Cooking* (2010) and Deborah Lupton’s *Food, the Body and the Self* (1996).

which people view meat, ultimately suggesting that his central thesis underlies all other understandings, from that of the avid meat-eater to the anti-meat animal rightist.

While Fiddles' book primarily aims to account for meat's underlying symbolic significance on a cultural level, it also covers many of the reasons why individuals eat meat. In this respect, Fiddles observes that "meat is a medium particularly rich in social meaning" (5). One could point to a number of factors that contribute to the continued consumption of meat products, and it is not simply a question of pleasure and taste. Fiddles demonstrates how taste – that is, "our view of [food's] edibility or desirability" (33) – "is not absolute" (32) but rather changes and varies over time and between cultures. Nor is it only a question of nutritional value, since "[a]ll over the world food means much more than mere nutrition" (38). Meat-eating is bound up with our identity in terms of family, culture, religion, ethnicity, geography, nationality, class, gender, ideology and occupation. It is tied to that which is perceived as healthy, fashionable and luxurious, and to what is familiar, habitual and traditional. In the words of Roland Barthes: "One could say that the entire 'world' (social environment) is present in and signified by food" (32). In other words, food is not just something we eat, but something which "signifies" (31), which means many things to us – and this seems especially true of meat.

It is therefore clear that the decision to ingest animal flesh is not purely based on rational decision-making rooted in factual evidence. In his nonfiction bestseller about meat consumption and production entitled *Eating Animals* (2009), the novelist Jonathan Safran Foer echoes this sentiment: "Food choices are determined by many factors, but reason (even consciousness) is not generally high on the list" (32). As such "food is not rational", but rather "[it] is culture, habit, and identity" (263). He writes towards the end of the book that "the messiness of food, the almost infinite meanings it proliferates, does make the question of eating – and eating animals especially – surprisingly fraught. [...] Food is never simply a calculation about which diet uses the least water or causes the least suffering" (263).

In contrast to a focus on reason, Foer places great emphasis on the importance of stories in relation to food and meat, perhaps because of his profession as a writer of fiction and because he thinks that people "are made of stories" (14). He notes that "the stories [...] served with food matter. [They] are stories about us – our history and our values (11). As such, "[e]ating and storytelling are inseparable" (11). I agree with Foer in this respect and the next section will

discuss the important role fiction can play in terms of reflecting our cultural stories in relation to meat, in addition to using stories as a means of empathising with animals.

To return for a moment to the subject of eating itself, however, Foer's personal conclusion regarding meat-eating, in light of the cultural importance meat holds, may be useful to those who are concerned with the welfare of animals slaughtered for meat. He suggests that "[c]hanging what we eat and letting tastes fade from memory create a kind of cultural loss, a forgetting. But perhaps this kind of forgetfulness is worth accepting – even worth cultivating [...]. To remember animals and my concern for their well-being, I may need to lose certain tastes and find other handles for the memories that they once helped me carry" (194).

Why Literature?

Foer is a useful figure for the purposes of this discussion since he acts as a bridge between the philosophical and the literary. He emphasises the importance of stories beyond fact or reason, writing that "[f]acts are important, but they don't on their own provide meaning [...]. But place facts in a story, a story of compassion or domination, or maybe both – place them in a story about the world we live in and who we are and who we want to be – and you begin to speak meaningfully about eating animals" (14). He writes elsewhere: "I'm not suggesting our reason should not guide us in many important ways, but simply that being human, being humane, is more than an exercise of reason. Responding to the factory farm calls for a capacity to care that dwells beyond information" (263). It is at this point – the point beyond mere information – where stories become important.

I would like to outline two ways in which literature can be useful in engaging with meat-eating. This is not intended as an exhaustive account, but rather one that is relevant to the novels discussed in the chapters below. The first is rooted in the relationship between literature and the cultural environment in which it is written. Edward Said's *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983) is useful in this respect. In it Said posits that "texts are worldly, to some degree they are events, and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moment in which they are located" (4). He affirms "the connection between texts and the existential actualities of human life, politics, societies, and events" (5). In other words, texts are socially and culturally embedded and, as such, they reflect

the conditions in which they are immersed. If one is interested in the culture of meat-eating, therefore, literature is a useful place to turn as it is bound up with that culture and can reveal much about the significance of meat within it. Since, as Nigel Rothfels, editor of the book *Representing Animals* (2002), puts it, “the way we talk or write about animals, photograph animals, think about animals, imagine animals – represent animals – is in some very important way deeply connected to our cultural environment”, looking at representations such as literary texts allows us to engage critically with the culture of meat-eating (and human ill-treatment of animals more generally) (xi).

The second reason why literature is of importance in relation to eating animals is perhaps most memorably articulated by another novelist writing about meat, J. M. Coetzee. In *The Lives of Animals* (1999) and *Elizabeth Costello* (2003)⁹ Coetzee’s protagonist, Elizabeth Costello – herself a novelist – emphasises the importance of what she calls “the sympathetic imagination” (*Costello* 80). Costello delivers two lectures on the subject of animals, one entitled “The Philosophers and the Animals” and the other, “The Poets and the Animals”. Coetzee, like Foer, therefore usefully straddles the fields of philosophy and literature here in regard to animals and the suffering of farmed animals in particular (Costello is a vegetarian and compares the industrial mass killing of animals for food to the Holocaust). As Amy Gutmann points out in her introduction to *The Lives of Animals*, Coetzee suggests that reason and philosophy are relatively “powerless to lead, or in any event to lead in the right direction, because [they] lag our sympathies” (4). By contrast, in the words of Costello, “[t]here are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination” (Coetzee, *Costello* 80). This means that in her view – in contrast to that of the philosopher Thomas Nagel to whom she is responding – “[t]here is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another”, including animals (80). Our sympathetic imagination “allows us to explore the worlds inhabited by others as well as attempt to see the world we share through other-than-human eyes” (Copeland 94). And it is to the sympathetic imagination that literature appeals (Gutmann 4). At the end of her response to Coetzee’s narrative (printed as part of *The Lives of Animals*) Margorie Garber asks: “In these two elegant lectures we thought John Coetzee was talking about animals. Could it be, however, that all along he was really asking, ‘What is the value of literature?’” (84). In fact, Coetzee is talking about both animals and literature, and is positing the value of the latter in regard to the former.

⁹ The two chapters that constitute *The Lives of Animals* reappear in *Elizabeth Costello* as part of a larger narrative.

Since the capacity of the sympathetic imagination is infinite, as Costello argues, and since literature appeals to the imagination, there is immense potential in the realm of literature in terms of engaging with animal subjectivity and suffering.

This emphasis on the importance of empathy in relation to literature is echoed by Marion Copeland, who suggests that “[p]erhaps the task of art and poetry has always been to connect or reconnect us to the beings who share with us a drama we have often mistakenly assumed to be only about the human animals” (95). She stresses “the power and potential of virtual animals and how they become a source of connection and sympathy to other forms of life” (97). Similarly, Andrew Linzey – who, along with Tom Regan, compiled an anthology of writing with animal-centred content, entitled *Other Nations: Animals in Modern Literature* (2010) – similarly argues that

literature enables these things that are essential to a full moral awareness: *seeing, feeling, and imagining*. Now, some may view these things as pretty insubstantial when it comes to making critical judgements and weighing conflict. But, while they may not dictate the precise conclusions we may come to, they nevertheless form part of the essential bedrock without which moral decision making is impoverished. (xvii)

Moreover, “literature can, at best, contribute to the development of moral sensibility” (xvii). He ultimately posits the value of literature in relation to animals in particular, suggesting that “[w]hat literature can do – as probably no other discipline – is to reconnect us with the world of animals. No matter how much we may learn about animals from disciplines such as psychology and biology (for they have much to teach us), that knowledge cannot replace the insights that can come from the disciplined exercise of our imagination” (xviii).

Regan and Linzey’s collection showcases a broad range of literature with animal-oriented content, much of which attempts to “reconnect us with the world of animals”. Cary Wolfe also points to the diversity of animal representation in literature and other art forms:

In my field alone, there’s not just, say, the starring role of bear, deer, and dog at the heart of William Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses* and the futility of trying to imagine Ernest Hemingway without his fraternity of bulls, lions, and fish or Marianne Moore without her menagerie of pangolins and jellyfish. There’s also *King Kong*, *Babe*, *Charlotte’s Web*, *Seabiscuit*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, *The Horse Whisperer*, and *The Fly*. There’s the art of Damien Hirst, Joseph Beuys, Sue Coe, William Wegman, Bill Viola, Carolee Schneeman, Lynn Randolph, and

Patricia Piccinini. And all those bird poems, from Percy Shelley's skylark and John Keats's nightingale to Edgar Allan Poe's raven and Wallace Stevens's black bird. [...] [T]here's also William Hogarth and Hieronymus Bosch, *The Faerie Queene* and *Beowulf*. And, of course, there is the central place of the animal in non-Western literature and culture, written and oral, which would require another essay altogether. (564)

As part of the broader category that Wolfe outlines here, there are also a number of texts that represent meat – its 'production' (via slaughter), its consumption and the animals it comes from. Among these there are, of course, the Coetzee texts mentioned above and to a lesser extent Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* (2002) – all of which contain a vegetarian protagonist who discuss issues related to meat-eating. Earlier examples include Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1908), which depicts the turn-of-the-century meat packing industry in Chicago, and Margaret Atwood's early novel *The Edible Woman* (1969), which contains the following remarkable passage:

She looked down at her own half-eaten steak and suddenly saw it as a hunk of muscle. Blood red. Part of a real cow that once moved and ate and was killed, knocked on the head as it stood in a queue like someone waiting for a streetcar. Of course everyone knew that. But most of the time you never thought about it. In the supermarket they had it all prepacked in cellophane, with name-labels and price-labels stuck on it, and it was just like buying a jar of peanut butter or a can of beans, and even when you went into a butcher shop they wrapped it up so efficiently and quickly that it was made clean, official. But now it was suddenly there in front of her with no intervening paper, it was flesh and blood, rare, and she was devouring it. Gorging herself on it.

She set down her knife and fork. She felt that she had turned rather pale, and hoped that Peter wouldn't notice. "This is ridiculous," she lectured herself. "Everyone eats cows, it's natural; you have to eat to stay alive, meat is good for you, it has lots of proteins and minerals." She picked up her fork, speared a piece, lifted it, and set it down again.

Peter raised his head, smiling. "Christ I was hungry," he said, "I sure was glad to get that steak inside. A good meal always makes you feel a little more human."

She nodded, and smiled back limply. He shifted his glance to her platter. "What's the matter, darling? You aren't finished."

"No," she said, "I don't seem to be hungry any more." (151-2)

There is also Ruth L. Ozeki's *My Year of Meat* (1998)¹⁰; Annie Proulx's *That Old Ace in the Hole* (2002), about industrial pig farming in the Texas panhandle; and Beat Sterchi's *The Cow* (2002) (originally published as *Blösch* in 1983), the spiritual descendant of Sinclair's novel, which gruesomely and relentlessly details the inner workings of a slaughterhouse. Regan and Linzey's collection likewise includes pieces on meat and farmed animals in particular, including Isaac Bashevis Singer's "The Slaughterer", João Ubaldo Ribeiro's "It was a Difficult Day when They Killed the Pig", and Lois-Ann Yamanaka's "Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers". There are also essays written by novelists in this regard – in the vein of Foer and Coetzee – such as Alice Walker's "Am I Blue" (also published in the aforementioned anthology) and David Foster Wallace's "Consider the Lobster".¹¹

Given the valuable insights literature can offer into the intersection of the public sphere and animal lives, in addition to the number of texts that deal with animal subject matter, it is unsurprising that literary animal studies has emerged as a burgeoning new field. It forms part of the broader interdisciplinary field of animal studies, originating in the 1990s, which is described by scholars like Wolfe and Copeland as a diverse and dynamic area of inquiry (Copeland 91).¹² A sense of the variety of the field can be gauged by the extensive bibliography on animal studies hosted online by Michigan State University,¹³ or from journals dedicated to the subject like *Society and Animals* or the *Journal for Critical Animal Studies*.¹⁴ Moreover, as Wolfe points out:

Given what we have learned in recent decades about many nonhuman animals – the richness of their mental and emotional lives, the complexity of their forms of communication and interaction – many scholars now think that we are forced to make the same kind of shift in the ethics of reading and interpretation that attended taking sexual difference seriously in the 1990s (in the form of queer theory) or race and gender seriously in the 1970s and 1980s. In such a genealogy, animal studies is only the latest permutation of a socially and ethically responsive cultural studies working to stay abreast of new social movements (in this case, the social movement often called "animal rights"), which is itself an academic expression of a larger democratic impulse toward greater inclusiveness of every gender, or race, or sexual orientation, or – now – species. (567-8)

¹⁰ The American edition of the novel is entitled *My Year of Meats*.

¹¹ I discuss the presence of meat in South African literature below on pages 19 to 28.

¹² See Wolfe's "Human, All Too Human: 'Animal Studies' and the Humanities" and Copeland's "Literary Animal Studies in 2012: Where We Are, Where We Are Going".

¹³ See <http://www.animalstudies.msu.edu/bibliography.php>.

¹⁴ See Wolfe, page 566, for further examples of publications dedicated to animal studies.

In an editorial for *Society and Animals*, Kenneth Shapiro and Marion W. Copeland outline three objectives of literary animal studies: to “[d]econstruct reductive, disrespectful ways of presenting nonhuman animals”; to “[e]valuate the degree to which the author presents the animal ‘in itself’, both as an experiencing individual and as a species-typical way of living in the world”; and the “analysis of human-animal relationships in the work at hand” (345). All three of these issues are addressed by the present dissertation at different stages.

Before going into the objectives of the project at hand, however, one final question needs to be addressed regarding a concern one might have about animal studies. It pertains particularly to the South African context: can we justify making animals the subjects of scholarly inquiry when this country faces so many other, arguably more pressing concerns?

Why South Africa?

The complexity of discussing animal-oriented concerns in South Africa is captured well by Jesse Arseneault:

[G]iven apartheid’s recent and violent history, any intellectual argument about animals made during a foray into the nation’s past might still need to (and probably should) justify itself. This justification is necessary not least because of a potential criticism that concern for non-human life is a frivolous interest in the face of the toll that traumatic histories exact on their human subjects. This oft-leveled criticism against animal advocates [...] represents an important line of inquiry and ethical consideration. (1)

Arseneault believes that a moral and intellectual interest in animals can be justified, however, arguing that such criticisms of animal studies reveal an anthropocentric bias that ubiquitously and persistently eclipses violence against animals in favour of considerations of violence against humans (1). Moreover, he writes that scholars working in animal studies are only now beginning to understand the complex ways in which animal lives intersect with our own and that “we know even less about the precarity of animal existence as it intersects with the myriad of politics knotted into the strands of thought left in the wake of apartheid and colonialism” (1). He continues by suggesting that some might nevertheless find “[t]he project of paying attention to or even citing the importance of animal life in a history such as apartheid’s [...] [to] be

controversial” (1). The concern here would be that discussing animal suffering in this context trivialises human suffering. However,

to entertain the lives of animals is not to suggest that their suffering should supersede forms of suffering experienced by humans; it is to allow ourselves to entertain more than one idea of suffering and violence, to allow ourselves to consider ontologies other than our own, and to acknowledge that we are capable of devoting our attention to more than one site of political struggle simultaneously. (2)¹⁵

Similar arguments are put forward by ecofeminist scholars. Josephine Donovan and Carol J. Adams, in discussing the perceived opposition between feminist and animal rights concerns, point out that

The presumption that these efforts are opposed to each other arises from the dualistic premise that humans’ and animals’ needs are in conflict. It also implies that human needs are paramount, reinforcing a status hierarchy that has favored neither women nor other animals. It is a haunting repetition of the tradition of trivializing of women’s issues. We could respond by saying that these efforts are not in opposition to one another. That is, we can, for instance, challenge homelessness *and* be vegetarian, work against violence against women while refusing to wear fur or leather. Should we have to justify concern for animals by indicating that human beings are not neglected? Just as feminists were charged with man-hating when we began to channel our energies and our theorizing to women’s needs and experiences, animal activists now stand accused of people-hating. Such charges reveal anxiety about the moral content of the activism as well as ignorance about the underlying and interconnected roots of oppression. (3)

The comments of Donovan and Adams here need not apply specifically to an ostensible conflict between feminism and animal rights, but are equally pertinent to a perceived opposition between animal and human concerns in the political environment of South Africa. Pickover, who writes particularly about a South African context, similarly asserts that “[i]f you respect animals it does not mean you pit animal interests against human interests. It is a mistake to think that people who work for animal rights are against human rights: it is not an either/or situation” (15). She also echoes an ecofeminist argument about intersecting oppression, writing that

¹⁵ I will be discussing his article in more depth in Chapter 3.

Globally and locally, the oppression and exploitation of animals is rooted in hierarchical human social arrangements and belief systems and the ‘entanglement of human and animal oppression’. Oppression of humans causes much of the mistreatment of other animals, and the awful treatment of other animals fuels human exploitation. I began to recognize that *all* forms of injustice, exploitation and cruelty are deplorable. They are not only inextricably linked but spring from the same source. (5)

Furthermore, she suggests that violence against animals and humans are not only rooted in the same underlying cause, but that in some cases the former enables the latter:

Not only does society depend to a large extent on institutionalised violence against animals – this violence can also be held responsible for the way humans treat each other. Abuse of fellow humans may be modelled on and inspired by abuse of animals. Philosophers concerned with animal issues suggest that the suffering and killing which goes on in commercial farming demeans people and coarsens their sensitivities, making it easier for them to contemplate and carry out the torture and killing of human beings. If we can begin to understand why many people fear and despise animals and want to harm them, we can then begin to understand the basis of the human violence which is inextricably enmeshed in the social and environmental crisis we now face. The similarity between the way in which we treat animals and the way we treat each other is starkly illustrated in a documentary on Sierra Leone on *Special Assignment* in 2000, in which a child soldier said that hacking off the limbs of his human victims and cutting off the head of a chicken were the same thing. (14)

She goes on to draw out the strong links between animal abuse and domestic abuse, suggesting that “[w]here you find cruelty to animals, cruelty to people is probably also going on. So the hundreds of maltreated animals in our society are the outward sign of the other kinds of violence that take place behind closed doors” (15). Consequently, an interest in animals does not supplant a concern for humans, but rather accommodates it because of the intersection of animal and human oppression.

Another writer who discusses animals in South Africa is Wendy Woodward, who suggests that the tide is already turning in favour of animals being viewed as legitimate subjects of concern in literature:

With transformation [...], and possibly because human rights are being ostensibly addressed, new ecological subject matter has been emerging, with writers imagining postcolonial relationships between humans and animals in ways which reflect on the lack of status of animals in post-apartheid South Africa. Now that

human rights appear to be in place in democratic South Africa – even while much of our racialized history remains intact – writers can represent animals more expansively without engendering criticism of foregrounding animals at the expense of humans. (13-4)

Indeed, many of the more recent works of fiction published in South Africa deal with animal concerns. Some of these are well known: Elizabeth Costello's ardent animal advocacy, the important presence of dogs in *Disgrace* (1999), Zakes Mda's narratives about the amaXhosa cattle killings and a southern right whale, the relationship between James Kronk and Piet the baboon in *White Lightning* (2002), and the prominence of dogs and farm animals in Marlene van Niekerk's *Triomf* (1994) and *Agaat* (2004) respectively.

Moreover, in the arena of scholarship, Woodward's work is itself a key part of this shift in the intellectual climate. As Arseneault points out, Woodward's monograph, entitled *The Animal Gaze: Animal Subjectivities in Southern African Narratives*, "is an important first step in literary criticism on South African animals" (17). Along with scholars like Arseneault, Dan Wylie and others, Woodward represents a small, but growing number of South African scholars working in the field of literary animal studies. Coetzee's texts have also been instrumental in this regard. *Elizabeth Costello* and *The Lives of Animals* have garnered a wealth of criticism, as has *Disgrace* in relation to its depiction of animals.¹⁶

Very little has been written about meat, however. Apart from discussions of Coetzee's work, a few brief mentions in Woodward's book, and one or two articles that I will mention in the chapters to come, there is a sizable gap in criticism in this regard. It is in this neglected part of the field of animal studies in South African literature that this thesis is located.

This marked dearth of critical material is particularly strange given the ubiquity of meat in South African literature. Such an abundance of meat in fiction makes sense since the practice of meat-eating is ubiquitous in most South African cultures (as it is on a global scale). As such – given the comments made above about literature reflecting the society in which it is immersed – it is natural that these behaviours would find their way into literary representations of these cultures.

The plethora of examples to be found in the pages of local fiction can be grouped in a number of ways. Firstly there is the passing use of meat as metaphor. In other words, there is no

¹⁶ See, for example, the many essays on these texts in Anton Leist and Peter Singer's (eds.) *J. M. Coetzee and Ethics* (2010), in addition to Laura Wright's *Writing "Out of All the Camps" J. M. Coetzee's Narratives of Displacement*.

‘actual’ meat depicted, but rather meat is used briefly in comparison to another thing. Consider, for example, the following two extracts from Russell Brownlee’s *Garden of the Plagues* (2005), Kopano Matlwa’s *Coconut* (2007) and Peter Merrington’s *Zebra Crossing* (2008):

It is clear the man is dragging something. He crouches and turns around so he can descend the ladder. Down he comes, but he does so holding on with only his left hand – his right grips a rope that stretches upward into the loft. Whatever the thing he has on the end of the rope it is not a bag of meal or a slab of beef; it is a thing that moves on its own accord. (Brownlee 105)

In a pew on the right, a couple of rows ahead of mine, sits a tiny chocolate girl. Her scraggy neck and jabbing elbows make me think of sticky chicken wings served with Sunday lunch. (Matlwa 1)

The anger [that] spills from Servaas and scourges the lives of those who live in his neighborhood runs deep in this withered old man. Like biltong, his goodness is all stored up and dried out. It will be tasted when something softens. (Merrington 86)

More substantial examples include those that contain ‘actual’ meat, particularly in mealtime scenes, though the meat is only referred to in passing, like these from Thomas Mofolo’s *Chaka* (1981) (originally published in Sesotho in 1925), André Brink’s *Devil’s Valley* (2000) (originally *Duiwelskloof* [1998] in Afrikaans), Jane Rosenthal’s *Souvenir* (2004), David Donald’s *Blood’s Mist* (2009), Shubnum Khan’s *Onion Tears* (2011), James Whyte’s *The Book of War* (2012), Claire Robertson’s *The Spiral House* (2013), Karin Brynard’s *Weeping Waters* (2014) (originally *Plaasmoord* [2009] in Afrikaans) and Henrietta Rose-Innes’ *Green Lion* (2015).

Zwide escaped by sheer miracle; Chaka pursued him until he crossed back to the other side of the river, and then came back. On the following day he pursued him farther right into his village, at Nongoma. The women at the place had stayed behind gathering piles of firewood in order to cook the meat of the Bathethwa’s cattle when their men returned; but now when they saw Zwide coming back in flight with only a few men, they were badly shaken. And when Chaka’s armies appeared, a great wailing arose at Nongoma, the wailing of the women, the children and the old people pleading not to be left behind when everybody was running away. (Mofolo 95)

And in the end Tant Poppie and I went home alone, where a massive meal was waiting: she had hung everything over the fire in the hearth before church, obviously knowing from a lifetime of experience how to go about it. Goat’s head baked in its skin, yellow rice with raisins from the Devil’s Valley, stewed quinces,

sweet potatoes, pumpkin, a fucking gargantuan meal for just the two of us.
(Brink 70)

Solomon brought out a stick of biltong which he sliced with a practiced hand with a lethally sharp penknife, carving towards himself, as they sat there, passing the pieces round by hand. We found many butterflies, Adam said. (Rosenthal 92)

That evening there were high spirits in the group, Xaa-ttin and ≠Kasin, the hunters whose arrows had found their mark, shared out the meat of the two buck. Generous portions of meat were first handed to the adults and they, in turn, gave out pieces to the youngsters. Even the toddlers got their share. (Donald 22)

Khadeejah, Summaya and Aneesa were having supper together. Khadeejah set a plate of fat fried fish on the table. Silver, burnt black with crispy bits that made crunchy sounds in the mouth. Aneesa scooped out a fish and began breaking it with her fingers. Summaya watched her for a moment and then broke into her piece with a fork. (Khan 209)

The Fingos were astonished that the Captain did not want the dead oxen and they skinned and dismembered the beasts. The new team was yoked and the Fingos hoisted great bloody lumps of flesh upon their shoulders and sang in the mode of call and response peculiar to them as they returned to the camp. (Whyle 167)

Whatever the reasoning, we out spanned before sunset beside a stream, by a stand of oaks. The boy led his unyoked team to drink, Melt flung a length of carpet to the ground and tossed out blankets, showing Le Voir that he must make his bed beneath the wagon. On the bed he pushed and pulled Le Voir's boxes to one side and lined the space with a blanket and showed it to me with a tilt of his head. Then he was quickly away, fetching rocks and firewood, building and stoking a fire, boiling water and making coffee and a supper of a chicken's eggs and wine, and bread and salt meat. (Robertson 17)

The call came through just after two. He was at his desk at the police station, having his lunch of vetkoek and mince. Washed down, as usual, with a mug of strong black coffee. Three sugars. (Brynard 7)

He'd tried to feed Lorraine something, as an adolescent: simple things, scrambled eggs, bacon, things that could be cooked all together in a pan, but that had a richness his childish mind turned to fat well-being. (Rose-Innes 104)

A quintessentially South African variation of this is the braai scene, like those in Annelie Botes' *Mountain of Lost Dreams* (2005) and Jane Galassi's *Cactus Letters* (2010), for instance:

He invited his wealthy friends to a celebration. Spent hundreds of Rands at the liquor store and bought a young lamb from the butcher. The braaivleis fires were stoked until the whole of Uniondale was covered in a veil of smoke. (Botes 111)

Joseph's father, Hamilton, is standing over the fire, cooking the meat, tongs in one hand, a beer in the other, honed butcher knives close by. He reflects the virility that is expected from his gender. Personal satisfaction is enacted in the ritual of fire scorching flesh. He examines the rawness of each piece as he turns the thick cuts of meat one by one, occasionally looking up in self-sufficient thoughts. (Galassi 2)

On some occasions meat is used as a means to unnerve or disgust the reader, such as in these extracts from Andrew Brown's *Coldsleep Lullaby* (2005), Lauren Beukes' *Moxyland* (2008) and Ingrid Winterbach *It Might Get Loud* (2015) (originally *Die Aanspraak van Lewende Wesens* [2012] in Afrikaans):

"I mixed some things together," his host said casually. "A drink I call *un péché* – a sin. It's a drink to toast my club. And you won't get it anywhere else, my friend. Where I come from, we're not shy to try and mix new things together. Where I come from, all things are to be eaten and drunk. I come from a country where we turn our dangers into food." He smiled warmly. "For example, the kihuta adder is both a dangerous killer and a delicacy in my town. We roast simbriki – the cane rat, our enemy in the field. We eat the insects that bother you at night: crickets, grasshoppers and termites. We sear them in burning pans with salt and hot peppers. Our children take the young of birds and monkeys from their fighting mothers for food. We make luku bread from roots. We snack on boudin made from peanut flour and Kikanda root. We are not a people who are afraid, my friend. *Nous dévorons nos ennemis.*" (Brown 111)

My BabyStrange is set to screensaver mode, so it clicks into a new image every two minutes. Here's a random sampling to give you an idea of what's displaying on the smartfabric that is so bothering Ten: close-ups of especially revolting skin infections, 18th-century dissection diagrams and, for a taste of local flavor, a row of smileys – that's sheep's head for the uninitiated – lips peeled back to reveal grins bared in anticipation of the pot. (Beukes 11)

At the market the following day she stood still for a long time in front of the baby turtles in glass bowls. There were flowers in containers. Big crabs on ice. The stink! Slaughtered rabbits like López Garcia's still-life with a dead rabbit, which they'd seen in Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid. (He'd liked it a lot.) Bull's, pig's and sheep's testicles. Sheep's and other brains. Fucking repulsive. He was terrified that he'd touch something by accident, or step on something: a scrap of meat, fish, crab, crayfish. (Winterbach 20)

Sometimes meat forms part of a meal that is used to underscore the tension or adversity faced in the situation depicted. See, for example, the following passages from Zoë Wicomb's *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987), Anne Landsman's *The Rowing Lesson* (2007) and Sifiso Mzobe's *Young Blood* (2010):

Pa takes a stick of biltong out of his pocket and the brine in my eyes retreats. I have no control over the glands under my tongue as they anticipate the salt. His pocketknife lifts off the seasoned and puckered surface and leaves a slab of marbled meat, dry and mirror smooth so that I long to rest my lips on it. Instead my teeth sink into the biltong and I am consoled. I eat everything he offers.
(Wicomb 24)

Your father says something about going back to the shop to lock up and your mother glares at him. Eat! You sit down and Bertie walks in, in his pajamas rubbing his eyes, and up he goes onto your mother's lap. The food is cold. Your mother was right about that. Flat meat, and boiled cabbage and boiled potatoes. I'm surprised she didn't boil the table and the chairs and the flypaper hanging from the ceiling, you're thinking, as you pick up your knife and put it down again.
(Landsman 20)

Musa returned with the food. He joined me on the balcony while Nana set the chicken on plates. [...] Our meal – chicken and chips with Coke – went down in silence. Nana slowly took bites of her chicken. She mimicked a frown, her lips pursed. In all honesty it made me laugh, for she looked like a little girl. Musa answered the intercom through a mouthful. He hurried for a change of shoes. [...] I sat in silence. Nana picked sulkily at her chicken. We sat on separate sofas, indifferent to each other. I tried to activate my starter pack but the battery on my phone was dead. Stretched out I flipped through the channels. She washed the plates and glasses.
(Mzobe 48-9)

Finally, there are novelists who use meat in a more substantial metaphoric sense than the first group mentioned above. In these cases there is 'actual' meat present and it is used as part of the narrative's broader critique. Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist* (1974), Ivan Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket* (2001) and Ken Barris' *What Kind of Child* (2006) offer useful instances of this:

The wine was secured to keep cool in the river among the reeds at the guests' backs and the picnic spot was carefully chosen to give the best view of the Katbosrand, a range of hills on the north horizon, over which, once or twice at least in a lazy Sunday, a huge jetplane, traveling so high it seemed slower than the flights of egrets or Hadedda ibis, would appear to be released and sail across the

upper sky on its way to Europe. To people like those on the grass drinking wine and eating crisp lamb from their fingers, the sight brought the sensation of freedom [...]

(Gordimer 23)

Herr Toppelman, Kurt, the proprietor, put my Bratwurst and two rolls on a plate, tonged out a goose-pimpled dill pickle, dabbed mustard and patted butter. Everyone else got a cardboard tray, but I had argued for the plate on medical grounds – my dysfunctional duodenum (entirely spurious, I might add) – and he'd conceded. I also got my sausage whole, rather than lopped into segments by the ingenious stainless-steel, counter-top guillotine, as the advertising to the trade might have put it. Most of the regulars went for the Currywurst, which meant that their sausage segments were smothered in tomato sauce and dusted with curry powder. They speared up the segments with two toothpicks, dispensed from a little drum like a schoolroom pencil sharpener. It could have been done with one toothpick, to tell the truth, but those in the know found that two afforded a certain German stability. I would have none of it. I told Herr Toppelman I wanted Bratwurst, whole, on a plate, and a knife and fork to eat it with, I don't need my food cut up for me like a child. I had to drag in the duodenum again, and the high blood pressure, when in truth I have the constitution of a man half my age, because there were principles involved, of linguistics and cuisine. Currywurst? It was ersatz, a jerry-built portmanteau if ever I heard one.

(Vladislavić 58)

I sauté finely sliced leeks, and when they're done, grate four large cloves of garlic into the oil. Then I turn up the gas and throw in medallions of fillet to seal them. Brandy goes in next. Bettina is taken aback when I set it alight. I have a little blowtorch that throws a two-inch spike of flame, very suitable for showing off. A blue flame licks around the meat while the alcohol sublimates, releasing its heavy smell.

“Are you sure you know what you're doing?”

I blink, mildly stupefied. “Not really. I have never done this before.”

“Oh.”

[...] The flame burns out and I take the meat from the pan to let it rest.

Then comes the sauce, starting with vermouth (her eyebrows go up, of course), which I reduce while I assemble a salad and make couscous. I then turn the heat right down, adding herbs from my window box, palm sugar, lime juice, slivered red pepper and mushrooms. Just before the end, black pepper and a knob of butter to thicken the sauce.

(Barris 65)

Malibongwe begins to pick up weight, living with Griffith. His mother stays at home and cooks samp and beans or maize porridge, cheap but nutritious meals. There is often meat to go with it. Griffith is particularly fond of cabbage boiled in brown soup, and likes chakalaka on his corned beef. Xoliswa carefully controls the flow of gas, keeping an eye on the stove to make sure that the flame doesn't blow out. Many of these dishes require very low heat and slow cooking. It can be draughty in the kitchen, and gas is dangerous. She often warns Malibongwe about

the dangers of gas. After every meal there is black tea and plenty of sugar to go with it, as much as they like. (Barris 136-7)

These are obviously only a few examples among a wealth of options. Because of the staggering number of potential candidates, I have tried to select samples from a wide range of texts: from the canonical, to genre fiction, to less well-known novels, and ones written by and depicting a number of different demographics. Once one starts looking, it is astonishing to see how much meat there is to be found in South African writing – and this is only from a fairly random sample of texts written mostly within just the last fifteen years, and merely a single example from each (two in the case of Barris), when in the majority of books and authors offered there are many options to choose from – but the fact that one has to consciously look is part of the point here.

What is significant about all of the various ways in which meat is depicted here – from the least noteworthy representations to the most prominent ones – is precisely how *insignificant* meat ultimately is in all cases. While animal flesh is everywhere in our books, it is mostly treated as simply being part of the *mise-en-scène*; an unremarkable aspect of the backdrop. Meat is pervasively depicted as a sanitized and unproblematic part of our cultural surroundings, as normal or quotidian, to the extent that the animals whence it came are forgotten. Animal subjects – who, as demonstrated above are necessarily put through great suffering in the process of becoming meat¹⁷ are disconnected from these depictions of meat. And the depictions that do contain tension, drama or suffering (such as those in the second last group) are like this independent of the presence of meat and its connection to animal hardship.

To be clear, I do not mean to pick on the particular authors quoted here. In fact, many of them show great care for animals in their work (Rosenthal to donkeys, Barris to marine life, Landsman to ostriches in *The Devil's Chimney* and to chickens in *The Rowing Lesson* and so on). The quotations in the final category even use meat as part of a broader satirical or critical enterprise. In Gordimer the sense of “freedom” experienced by comfortable, bourgeois whites as they lounge in fields and nibble on lamb is contrasted to the lack of freedom of other racial groups under apartheid depicted in the novel. Barris – with a more deliberate focus on food – similarly contrasts the disparity between the lavishness, pretention and immoderacy of high class

¹⁷ See pages 5 to 7.

white suburban cuisine with the simplicity and comparative wholesomeness of lower class black cooking. Moreover, in the Vladislavić excerpt, Aubrey Tearle's superciliousness, conservatism, pedantry and prejudice are all revealed in his idiosyncratic discussion of Bratwurst. Nor do I mean to be prescriptive here: I am not suggesting that every novel needs to deal with the problems surrounding meat consumption. Instead, I am making a general point about the South African public sphere as reflected by literature. Specifically, meat is generally portrayed as something that is entirely disconnected from animals and animal suffering. Even in passages like those from *The Conservationist*, *The Restless Supermarket* and *What Kind of Child*, where meat is used as part of a wider critique, the animal subject that the meat came from is ignored. Meat-eating is overwhelmingly an accepted, unproblematised practice that is part of our cultural landscape and the animal suffering attendant on it is mostly invisible.

This brings me to the three primary texts considered in this dissertation. Each of these contains more conspicuous and concerted representations of animals-as-meat and attend to some of the broader issues related to meat. The first of these is Eben Venter's *Trencherman* (2008), in which meat is depicted most prominently among the three novels. My reading of the text focusses on two of its most notable features: the use and subversion of the *plaasroman* or 'farm novel' (a longstanding generic staple of Afrikaans literature with a dubious political history) and literary dystopia. These two literary traditions are central to understanding Venter's portrayal of meat, in that meat is rendered (via the *plaasroman*) as being central to Afrikaner culture, and (via dystopia) as a macabre symbol of the destructive effects of this culture in South African society.¹⁸

The second chapter focusses on Zakes Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002). I approach the text through the lens of ecofeminist scholar Carol J. Adams' concept of the 'absent referent', which suggests that meat is widely portrayed as being unrelated to actual animals, despite meat necessarily coming from them. The animal (in this case, the referent of the signifier that is meat) – and, in particular, the suffering animal subject – is therefore seen as being absent

¹⁸ My reading of *Trencherman* is therefore rooted in a kind of anthropological approach to the novel. In this respect, similar readings might be offered of texts from other South African cultural groups, like the amaZulu and Bushmen, for instance. In this respect, texts like Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka* and David Donald's *Blood's Mist* (which I quote on pages 20 and 21 above) and others that are rooted in these cultures and contain representations of meat, might be discussed in the context of anthropological research, like that conducted by Eileen Jensen Krige in *The Social System of the Zulus* (1936), Axel-Ivar Berglund in *Zulu Thought-Patterns and Symbolism* (1975) and Alan James' *The First Bushman's Path: Stories, Songs and Testimonies of the /Xam of the Northern Cape* (2001), all of which discuss the place of meat in these cultures.

from meat. (It should be noted that this process is precisely what is at work in the passages from South African literature presented above). Adams suggests that the same is true of women, in that female subjectivity is absent from representations of women's bodies. Women and animals are therefore united in their similar subjugation within patriarchal society. I argue that Mda deliberately evokes the absent referent in certain scenes in the novel as a means to illustrate the shared oppression of women and animals under the patriarchal system of apartheid. I ultimately take issue with Mda's use of the absent referent, however, because despite his apparent attempt to illustrate the subjugation of both women and animals, he fails to represent animal subjugation as being important in itself.

The third and final chapter is on Damon Galgut's *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs* (1991). The novel focusses on suffering, both of humans and animals, and suggests that this suffering is, in fact, interrelated. Not only does Galgut's text therefore echo the sentiments expressed by many of the theorists presented here (the ecofeminists in particular), but goes on simultaneously to illustrate – despite our underlying connection to animals in terms of suffering – that the manifest reality of human-animal relationships is one of disjuncture. That, in other words, our psychological and societal detachment from animals denies our relation to them.

All of the chapters offer close readings of the novels. They aim to “follow after the storytelling” in these texts (to quote Woodward), rather than “imposing extraneous critiques” (17). While the content of the chapters vary in certain minor respects – for instance, Venter's text contains a great deal more meat than Mda's, Galgut's has received very little critical attention, and so on – they are united in their principal focus on the novels' portrayal of meat and what it means in the narratives. The overarching progression between chapters is that the first gives an account of a novel that is filled with meat, but (like those quoted above) contains very little concern for the suffering animal source of that meat; the subject of the second ostensibly shows greater concern for animal suffering, but ultimately proves not to; and the final chapter looks at a narrative that, in contrast to its precursors, not only considers animal suffering in detail, but also affirms its place alongside the suffering of humans. The thesis is interested throughout in what these novels reveal about the place of animals in the South African cultural landscape which the works depict, and whether the novels themselves give serious consideration to their animal subjects, partially with respect to the animal pain attendant on meat-eating. In this respect, all three novels offer valuable insights into the cultural place of animals and their flesh in South

African society, but only one – Galgut’s *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs* – evinces any substantial concern for the suffering of its animal figures.

Ultimately, while meat is so readily infused with a diversity of meanings in South African literature, the most obvious and intrinsic one – the fact of animal death and animal suffering – is the one most often elided or ignored.

Chapter 1

The *Plaasroman*, Dystopia and the Afrikaner: Meat in Eben Venter's *Trencherman*

1.1. Introduction

Of the three authors examined in this dissertation, Eben Venter might be the most obvious candidate for inclusion. He is perhaps less widely known than Mda or Galgut – at least to a non-Afrikaans-speaking readership – and is the only major author discussed here not to write primarily in English,¹⁹ but his work is pervaded by meat. The very title of his debut novel, *Foxtrot van die vleisetters*²⁰ (1993), explicitly refers to ‘meat-eaters’. His follow-up, *My Beautiful Death* (2006) (originally *Ek stamel ek sterwe* [1996]), like its predecessor, is replete with descriptions of meat dishes, this time not only because of its portrayal of meat-loving Afrikaners (though it contains these too), but also because it is populated by gourmets, including its protagonist, who trains to become a chef. And no discussion of animal flesh in South African literature would be complete without the inclusion of the “king of meat” from *Trencherman* (2008). Venter himself has said that “I have had this thing about meat from *Foxtrot* through *My Beautiful Death* to *Trencherman*. I am continuously exploring and reinterpreting what meat means to people [...] [and] have given meat a role in every one of the above-mentioned novels” (Venter, “Interview”). The aim of this chapter will be to explore and interpret what meat means to Venter – or, put another way, what his depiction of meat means – in the last-mentioned text above, *Trencherman*.

The novel was originally published in Afrikaans as *Horrelpoot* (2006), meaning ‘clubfoot’ – a reference to the talipes-afflicted narrator, Marlouw (Martin Jasper Louw), an Afrikaans expatriate living in Australia. The narrative charts his return from a comfortable life as

¹⁹ I have elected to use the English translations of all of Venter’s works rather than the original Afrikaans editions (with the exception of *Foxtrot van die vleisetters* which has not been translated into English). My decision is based on this thesis being written in English and presuming a like readership which might find the original texts inaccessible. Moreover, the fundamental thematic concerns of the novels are not distorted by translation in my experience, and any issues of translation are largely irrelevant to this discussion (see note 21 for more on this). Naturally, a great deal of Venter scholarship is written in Afrikaans. Hence I provide my own translations of quotations from these sources where necessary. Also for ease of reading, my English translations of longer Afrikaans quotations will be used in the body of the chapter with a footnote containing the original Afrikaans provided in each case. Where a translation is called for within footnotes themselves, these are provided in brackets after the original Afrikaans text.

²⁰ In accordance with the convention in Afrikaans, only the first letter of the initial word and proper nouns of Afrikaans titles will be capitalised, both in the chapter as a whole and in the bibliography.

a salesperson of upmarket cookware in Melbourne to a collapsed South African state at the behest of his sister, Heleen. She implores him to find and bring back her only son, Koert, who disappeared when traveling to South Africa, though there is reason to believe that he settled on the old Louw family farm in the Eastern Cape. There is an air of mystery about his activities, with rumours suggesting that he has taken command of the farm and its surrounds. Marlow is told that Koert “deals in meat and [...] controls everything there. If you want meat you have to be in his good books. The whole district is at his mercy” (Venter, *Trencherman* 17). This turns out to be true: Koert rules over an empire as “the King of Meat”, though his hold on power proves tenuous as his resources – particularly of ‘livestock’ – have begun to dwindle.

In this South African reworking of *Heart of Darkness*, as in Conrad’s novella, most of the narrative is spent in search of the elusive Koert. Marlow’s fraught travels take him across a South Africa that is much changed and alienating to him. His narration characterises the place as desolate, devastated and hostile. The same is true of Ouplaas, his erstwhile childhood home, now owned by the former Louw employees and their families, the property having been relinquished by Marlow and his sister when they emigrated. Even once Marlow has been staying on the farm for many days in abject conditions, he remains unable to gain access to his mysterious nephew. While the material Koert remains hidden, his influence is felt everywhere. It is evident in the farm’s former workers, for example, who, despite owning the property, continuously defer to Koert and abide by his rules; or in a scene at a police station in which a box of meat, sent by Koert as a bribe, appears unexpectedly to get Marlow out of a skirmish with corrupt law enforcement (187-91). When a desperate and increasingly unhinged Marlow finally accesses the guarded section of the farmhouse where Koert has hoarded most of the homestead’s furniture and resources, he is greeted by a monstrous figure. Koert has become grotesquely obese; a filthy, sweaty, bedridden mass who plays a Nintendo game obsessively and is dying of a gangrenous foot. His speech is as bizarre as his appearance, consisting of an unnerving and dissonant amalgam of languages and jargons that convey his sweeping, juvenile rhetoric.²¹ Marlow,

²¹ One of the few areas in which the translated version does prove inescapably problematic is in Koert’s use of language. The full effect of the mongrelization he inflicts on his mother tongue is lost when the book is no longer written in Afrikaans. The major part of the shock value of his speech in the original lies in the extent to which it has been coarsely anglicised, so when the entire narrative is written in English, this level of significance is obviously lost and cannot be replicated. While Koert’s idiolect may be mimicked in English, it necessarily loses some of its impact since English, unlike Afrikaans, is not a minority language which is often perceived by many of its speakers as being threatened by extinction or hybridization. I agree with Dawid de Villiers’ review of Luke Stubbs’ translation as being “generally well handled. As is often the case with translations, something of the colour and

dwarfed by his nephew's strength of character in addition to his bulk, and utterly defeated by his own travails, ultimately fails to convince Koert to leave the country with him. After some bizarre interactions – including a trip to the family cemetery to destroy the graves of their forebears – Marlow eventually narrowly escapes to Australia. In the novel's bloody climax, Koert dies from being repeatedly stabbed by a mutinous mob.

Trencherman, like Venter's other novels, is saturated with references to meat and food more generally. The English title accentuates this aspect of the text. A list of definitions that explain the various implications of its name precedes the narrative:

TRENCHERMAN – a feeder, an eater (of a specific kind), a person who cadges free meals, a parasite.

TRENCHER (Middle English) – a cutting instrument, a knife; a person who carves meat.

TRENCH FOOT – a painful condition of the feet caused by prolonged immersion in cold water or mud and marked by blackening and death of surface tissue. (ix)

The allusion to trench foot recalls the novel's Afrikaans title and Marlow's clubfootedness. The remaining two terms evoke the novel's pervasive interest in meat,²² along with the book's epigraph: "An organism that misses an opportunity for food may get another; an organism that misses an approaching predator is dead" (vii).²³ These framing devices locate meat and eating firmly within the novel's scope of concerns even before it begins. They also engender some of the sinister resonances and uses meat has throughout, as I will elaborate later.²⁴

One of Venter's trademarks as a writer is his detailed and extensive descriptions of food: dishes of all kinds, their ingredients, the cooking processes and so on. Working as a chef in Melbourne (as the dustjackets of his novels indicate) no doubt accounts for this culinary proclivity. While it does not have the same frequency of detailed description of dishes that one

originality of Venter's idiom is lost, and unavoidably the language question that drives much of the tension is placed at a remove". Stubbs' translation is, nevertheless, "competent and not without its own pleasures". (I return to the 'language question' on pages 37 and 38.)

²² In particular, it becomes apparent in the course of the narrative that these are references to Koert. He is obviously a parasitic feeder devouring more than his fair share, but he is also the trencherman. Shortly before his death he declares: "I am the trencherman, Marlow. I am he [...] I have devoured you and your language. I have cut you up into pieces" (Venter, *Trencherman* 301). Koert alludes here to his aberrant way of being and speaking Afrikaans. I will elaborate on this as the chapter progresses.

²³ Given his weight and the way he is killed, this is undoubtedly another allusion to Koert.

²⁴ Refer to Section 1.3.3.

finds in, say, *My Beautiful Death*,²⁵ allusions to food, especially meat-based fare, still abound in *Trencherman*, from the lavish “Marbled Black Angus rib-eye steak with porcini dust in a light sauce of parsley, oyster mushrooms and garlic” (308) in Melbourne to meagre portions of pap and sauce with “some meatiness” to it on Ouplaas (130). This begins from the opening of the novel, with Heleen recalling the “smoked salmon and lettuce” sandwiches she used to make for Koert, and continues throughout (3). There are, for instance, mentions of broth when Marlow espouses the merits of the cookware he sells as allowing “all your soup bones and vegetable stalks and pepper corns, even mustard seeds, [to] remain in the colander, [so] you’re left with a perfectly drained bouillon” (30), to the “caviar on brown farm bread for breakfast” served at the Colony Restaurant in Smithfield in the past (81), to Marlow’s Ouma Attie’s “delicious recipe for pigeon pie” (157) and his mother’s “chicken pie” (165), to the frequent allusions to the Afrikaner staples of braaivleis, biltong and beer (63, 93, 211, 215), and so on. These more extravagant victuals are contrasted to the comparable scarcity in the South Africa to which Marlow returns.

Trencherman has prompted a range of critical responses, largely concerned with the implications of the bleak image of South Africa Venter presents,²⁶ psychoanalysis²⁷ and dystopia²⁸ (I will return to the latter later on in the chapter). Compared to Mda or Galgut (where there is a noticeable lack in this regard), there has actually been some critical material that mentions Venter’s portrayal of meat, though given its prominence in his writing such scholarly

²⁵ In fact, the ubiquity of food in this particular book borders on gratuitousness. The number of gastronomic references in *My Beautiful Death* is staggering, though perhaps understandably since the novel’s characters, including its protagonist, are mostly gourmants, some of whom work in a (vegetarian) restaurant which also serves as setting for portions of the narrative. So while it may suit the narrator’s personality and profession that he thinks about food as much as he does (particularly since his story is written in stream of consciousness), it can become tiresome and at times Venter’s passion for cuisine for its own sake feels as though it may overshadow the novel’s other themes. By contrast, the prominent place of food in *Foxtrot* and *Trencherman* feels better handled, perhaps because of their larger hosts of characters and more spectacular narratives in which food, therefore, does not threaten to overwhelm the novels’ other elements. Overall, though, extremity and spectacle of various kinds seem to be Venter’s modus operandi. All of his books contain fairly sensational content: detailed descriptions of torture (*Foxtrot* 85-91), sexual assault (73-5) and ‘miscegenation’ in a barn between a black teenage girl and Afrikaner military officer (186-7) in *Foxtrot van die vleisetters*; the drawn out melodrama of the main character’s eponymous end in *My Beautiful Death*, and the entire plot setup of *Trencherman* fit into this. The latter novel is arguably the best balanced in this respect, since its attention to food clearly accords with the dramatic content of its plot, as the rest of the chapter illustrates.

²⁶ See, for instance, Phil van Schalkwyk’s “‘Against Extremity’: Eben Venter’s *Horrelpoot* (2006) and the Quest for Tolerance” and Ina Gräbe’s “Apokalips nou of later? Eben Venter se siening van die Suid-Afrikaanse samelewing in *Horrelpoot* (2006)” (Apocalypse now or later? Eben Venter’s view of South African society in *Horrelpoot* [2006]).

²⁷ See M. Postma & M. N. Slabbert’s “Memory, History and Oblivion in *Horrelpoot* by Eben Venter”.

²⁸ See Andries Visagie’s “*Horrelpoot* (2006) van Eben Venter: ’n Verkenning van die grense tussen utopie en distopie” (*Horrelpoot* [2006] by Eben Venter: An exploration of the boundaries between utopia and dystopia).

responses are unsurprising. The only essay that tackles this as its primary theme, however, is “Eben Venter as gewete van die vleiseter” (Eben Venter as conscience of the meat-eaters) by Marius Crous. In it Crous looks at the way meat is represented in *Foxtrot van die vleiseters*, *My Beautiful Death* and *Trencherman* and suggests that meat and meat-eating are used as metaphors for many of the problems associated with Afrikaner patriarchy. He demonstrates the ways in which Venter connects meat with issues such as race, economic inequality, sexuality and gender. The pattern that emerges, Crous suggests (drawing on scholars like Carol J. Adams and Roland Barthes), is that meat is rendered as being in the hands of the powerful, and those without power are represented as going without meat. As such, meat becomes a marker of power and oppression. In the three novels in question, power resides within the kind of Afrikaner farmer patriarchy that is valorised in the tradition of the *plaasroman*, or farm novel.²⁹ It is this genre and the values it espouses, Crous proposes, that Venter’s novels draw on and call into question. Crous argues that as part of this critique, Venter posits a counter-discourse of vegetarianism. In other words, since “meat-eating is conspicuously linked to the farm-tradition in Venter’s work and acts as a cultural marker”,³⁰ he deliberately operates within this tradition and uses vegetarianism to subvert this culture (Crous, “Venter as Gewete” 76). The basic trend that Crous sketches is Venter’s use of young, rebellious characters who reject the values of their Afrikaner heritage. This rebellion includes sexual ‘deviation’ such as promiscuity, homosexuality and sexual assault; leaving the ancestral farm for the city (often an international metropole); and, crucially, a rejection of the meat-based diet of their culture in favour of a plant-based one. Vegetarianism is therefore central to the destabilization of the conservative, heteronormative patriarchy of the Afrikaner farm.

Crous makes a compelling argument that I think accurately characterises the significance of meat (or its absence) in Venter’s writing, at least in the case of *Foxtrot van die vleiseters* and *My Beautiful Death*. Both of these neatly fit Crous’ model of using vegetarianism as a form of subversion. In *Foxtrot*, the eponymous ‘meat-eaters’ are the Afrikaner people – and they are

²⁹ ‘Farm novel’ is the direct translation of ‘*plaasroman*’. I will, however, be using the Afrikaans form throughout in order to differentiate it from farm narratives written in English by authors like Olive Schreiner and Pauline Smith which, as J. M. Coetzee demonstrates in *White Writing* (see “Chapter 3: Farm Novel and Plaasroman” [63-81]), often had concerns that differed from those of comparable Afrikaans novels.

³⁰ “Die eet van vleis word in Venter se werk pertinent gekoppel aan die plaastradisie en dien as kulturele merker.”

depicted as eating a staggering amount of meat –³¹ embodied in the novel primarily by the Steenekamp family of the farm Wildeperdehoek. As the end of apartheid looms, the Steenekamps not only face the escalating external forces of political change, but also threats to their familial integrity from within. For instance, Johannes, one of the sons, sexually assaults a woman in a parking lot in Johannesburg, leading his father to conjecture that Johannes did this because he no longer eats meat: “No, my son, you threw meat along with everything else that I taught you out the backdoor” (Venter, *Foxtrot* 149).³² In *My Beautiful Death*, Konstant Wasserman leaves his conservative, heterosexual, agrarian origins behind, first for Johannesburg and later Australia. He moves in with his gay, vegetarian partner, Jude, and adopts a largely meatless diet, in addition to working in a vegetarian restaurant,³³ before succumbing to AIDS at the end of the novel. This novel is also the only one that contains passages that are explicitly anti-meat. Thinking about his new diet, for example, Konstant muses: “I’ve so much more energy, it’s unbelievable what damage meat and dairy products do to your body. Actually, it’s totally believable: the evidence is all around us” (*Beautiful* 165).

Trencherman, however, is markedly lacking the necessary features of Crous’ contention. Most notably, it is devoid of any vegetarian presence. Moreover, while it does contain a rebellious youth who leaves his home and its values behind, Crous’ pattern is entirely inverted: Koert leaves a family that has itself eschewed traditional Afrikanerdom (Marlouw and Heleen abandoned their inherited farm for a foreign city where they rarely speak Afrikaans and are clearly embarrassed by their heritage) and instead returns *to the farm* and becomes an *excessive* consumer of meat. Hence, I do not think it useful to read *Trencherman* according to this model. Importantly, I am not suggesting that the novel does not offer a trenchant critique of many stereotypical tenets of Afrikanerdom – it certainly does – and meat is still an important part thereof, but I think Crous’ article misreads *Trencherman*. Its inclusion alongside *Foxtrot van die*

³¹ Given the title of the novel, this is unsurprising. References to Afrikaners eating meat conspicuously pervade the novel. See, for example, the first, fourth and eighth chapters (the last of which is actually entitled “Vleis”), all of which are based around meat-heavy meals consumed by Afrikaner characters.

³² “Nee, my seun, jy het die vleis saam met al die ander goed wat ek vir you geleer het by die agterdeur uitgegooi.”

³³ The figure of Petrus in *Foxtrot* also goes to Australia to work in a vegetarian restaurant. Venter seems to be drawing on his own biography in all three novels in terms of their being focalised through South Africans who emigrated to Australia and work in the culinary trade. Petrus is the most obvious cipher for Venter as he not only works in a vegetarian restaurant (*Foxtrot* is the only novel whose back cover specifies that the restaurant that Venter worked in was vegetarian and the author photograph depicts him standing in what appears to be the doorway of the establishment), but is also positioned as the ostensible author of the narrative, recording what he sees around him and even including an appendix in which he interviews the book’s fictional characters about how they feel about the novel in which they appear.

vleiseters and *My Beautiful Death* is ostensibly reasonable given their shared preoccupation with meat, but is ultimately misleading as this novel departs significantly both in narrative and theme from its predecessors, and is noteworthy precisely in that it does not offer a counter-discourse at all. In fact, it suggests that such a counter-discourse is no longer possible.

My objective here is to present a more useful and textually sound reading of the novel; one which takes on board some of Crous' argument, but ultimately comes to a different conclusion. Crous admits to not attending very closely to the particularities of the novels he discusses, instead opting to look at them "discursively" ("Venter as Gewete" 71).³⁴ As such it might be useful to unpack some of the theoretical and textual features Crous takes for granted. I will begin by expanding on Crous' claim about the *plaasroman* and the values it exemplifies, as well as the ways in which Venter undermines these. Then I will turn to dystopianism. This is a key move in the argument, because while the section on the *plaasroman* will mostly elucidate aspects of the novel and its criticism that Crous merely glosses, the section on dystopia will discuss an important aspect of the novel that Crous does not cover and is, in my opinion, crucial to understanding Venter's project regarding meat. My contention ultimately is that Venter is not offering a vegetarian counter-narrative in *Trencherman* at all, but that he is instead using dystopia as a means of pointing out the excesses of meat consumption and the Afrikaner culture it represents; and that these excesses are, in fact, too extreme and extensive to be meaningfully undermined in South Africa's contemporary situation.

1.2. The *Plaasroman*

1.2.1. The Purpose of the *Plaasroman* and its Use in *Trencherman*

The '*plaasroman*' is, at its foundation, a kind of writing that situates the farm as a source of meaning (Coetzee, *White Writing* 88, 91). This concise definition of the term, offered in J.M. Coetzee's seminal book, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (1988), is useful in that it not only goes to the core of the thematic preoccupations of these works, but also

³⁴ "Vir die doel van my bespreking gaan ek op Eben Venter se drie romans, naamlik *Foxtrot van die vleiseters*, *Ek stamel ek sterwe* en *Horrelpoot* konsentreer. Die drie romans word as diskursiewe uitinge binne die diskoers oor vleis gelees en word dus nie individueel bespreek nie" (Crous, "Venter as Gewete" 71). (For the purposes of my discussion I will be focusing on three novels by Eben Venter, namely *Foxtrot van die vleiseters*, *Ek stamel ek sterwe* and *Horrelpoot*. The three novels are read as discursive expressions within the discourse of meat and are thus not discussed individually).

differentiates this kind of writing from texts in which farms function merely as backdrops to the action and have no significant bearing on the actors (Lubbe and Wiehahn 155). In the *plaasroman*, the farm is of central hermeneutic importance to characters and readers alike. As Malvern van Wyk Smith suggests, by thematising the connection between the “boer” (farmer, Afrikaner) and his “plaas” (farm), these works expressed “the very soul of the Afrikaner’s being” (18).

Coetzee’s discussion sketches the circumstances that led to the appearance and near ubiquity in Afrikaans prose of early *plaasromans* between 1920 and 1940. He refers to widespread urbanization that began decades before because of, among other contributing factors, the mineral revolution and its attendant economic developments, expanding transport networks, ever-shrinking space due to subdivisions of inherited farmland with each new generation, and the many temptations the city holds for rural residents (Coetzee, *White Writing* 78).³⁵ The consequent threat to a lifestyle that formed the basis of Afrikaner social, economic, cultural and political developments for two and a half centuries, resulted in many Afrikaans writers of the time (like D. F. Malherbe, C. M. van den Heever, Abraham Jonker and others) responding to these changes with a kind of literature that enshrines their people’s former way of life (Lubbe and Wiehahn 156). As a result, old rural values such as benevolent patriarchalism; duty to one’s land, kin and ancestry; the importance of hard work and so on – in contrast to the “pettiness, selfishness, and lack of family feeling of the *verengelste* (anglicised) urban Afrikaner” – became the basic tenets of early twentieth century *plaasromans* (Coetzee, *White Writing* 83). The *plaasroman* is at its core then a pastoral form of writing, and one which is ideologically loaded with norms and values (Lubbe and Wiehahn 155). In essence, it becomes a means “through which nationalist ideology [is] both expressed and contrived” (Titlestad 90). H. P. van Coller consequently refers to the genre as an “ideologiese ‘voertuig’” (ideological ‘vehicle’) (30). Hansie Lubbe and Rialette Wiehahn similarly state: “It is clear that the traditional Afrikaans *plaasroman* conveys, whether consciously or unconsciously, an ideology in service of an exclusive Afrikaner culture and nationalism. When J.M. Coetzee refers to ‘the farm as source of meaning’, this meaning is tied up in the revelation of the farm as nexus of Afrikaner history,

³⁵ For a more detailed account of the emergence of the *plaasroman*, see Ampie Coetzee’s *’n Hele os vir ’n ou broodmes: Grond en die plaasnarratief sedert 1595* (A whole ox for an old breadknife: Land and the farm narrative since 1595). This monograph, published in 2000, usefully traces the historical trajectory of the *plaasroman* from its earliest origins through to contemporary revisionist texts and draws out some of the central recurrent issues surrounding these narratives, with a specific focus on land and Afrikaner identity.

lifestyle and values” (158).³⁶ It is therefore unsurprising that the farm and the genre built around it are regularly revisited and revised by Afrikaans writers, from Etienne Leroux in *Sewe dae by die Silbersteins* (1962), to Etienne van Heerden in *Toorberg* (1986) (translated as *Ancestral Voices* [1989]) to Marlene van Niekerk in *Agaat* (2004). Venter’s *Trencherman* is a key contributor to this continuing deconstruction of the *plaasroman* and what it represents.

Most scholarly discussions of the novel mention its subversion of this tradition. While this is well-trodden territory that I need not dwell on overlong, both Crous’ and my own argument rely on some outline of how Venter does this. The novel’s unraveling of its antecedent literary tradition is scrupulous; no stone is left unturned, no convention unquestioned. Rita Barnard points out that Venter deliberately attempts in *Trencherman* “to deal the deathblow to this sentimental and politically suspect genre” (234). He is clearly well acquainted with the genre and had already offered a reworking of it in *Foxtrot van die vleisetters*, which focusses on Wildeperdehoek and the farming community at large and subjects it to vigorous subversive scrutiny, and to a lesser extent in *My Beautiful Death*, where the farm is no longer the primary setting, but is nevertheless an important part of the hermeneutic concerns of the book.

In discussing *Trencherman*’s rewriting of the *plaasroman*, Koert is perhaps the most obvious place to begin, given his literal and symbolic stature in the text. As a gluttonous, videogame-obsessed, infirm despot, Koert is a perversion of the paragon of *plaasroman* Afrikanerdom: the proud, generous and hardworking patriarch who benignly oversees his domain. Moreover, his cartoonish, garbled speech goes to the core of a deep-seated Afrikaner fear about language. Rita Barnard describes Koert’s use of language as “a mish-mash of English, Afrikaans, German, hip-hop slang, and the acronyms of text messaging” (231). Consider, as a sample, this extract from a rambling email Koert sends to his mother, which is the first time his new ‘voice’ appears in the novel:

*Hey you people down under
There’s a max weight auf meine Herz . . . here he comes
I’ve got doubts bout cumin back to Auzzie, oi oi oi
Boom ***shakalak*

³⁶ “Dit is duidelik dat die tradisionele Afrikaanse plaasroman, bewustelik of onbewustelik, draer is van ’n ideologie in diens van ’n eksklusiewe Afrikanerkultuur en –nasionalisme. Wanneer J.M. Coetzee verwys na ‘the farm as a source of meaning’, dan lê die betekenis opgesluit in die openbaring van die plaas as sleutelruimte van die Afrikaner se geskiedenis, leefwyse en waardes.”

I sooo badly want to check you out, the ace family, I love...mmm.
(Venter, *Trencherman* 23) (emphasis in original)

And so it goes on. Barring the idiosyncratic punctuation, his speaking voice is akin to his writing. Venter himself comments on Koert's "babble-speak" in an interview with Charles Malan: "This is an important part of the story. In Afrikaans Koert literally bastardizes and destroys our beloved mother-tongue. The total destruction and eventual disappearance of Afrikaans represents a deep fear of mine, probably of most Afrikaans-loving persons" (Venter, "Interview"). Koert's locutory perversion, in addition to unnerving the reader (and writer, as Venter admits here), also shows up an ideology of linguistic purity latent in the *plaasroman*.

The novel's other major character, the narrator Marlouw, is a *volksveraaier* (traitor of the people) of another kind. His abandonment of his farm and nation by leaving for foreign, urban shores means that he is haunted by his guilt at this desertion, quite literally in the form of his father's ghost. This spectral embodiment of *volk* and family appears when Marlouw, like Hamlet,³⁷ is losing a sense of equanimity. His father bemoans the extinction of the family and the Afrikaner generally and implores Marlouw, as his last request, to destroy the family graves to save them from desecration, saying: "I don't want a single trace of me or Mammie or our family to remain in this land" (Venter, *Trencherman* 207). The appearance of his father refers to another of Marlouw's literary precursors: Oedipus, the archetype of paternal conflict and fellow sufferer of a foot malformation. Phil van Schalkwyk elaborates on this allusion, pointing out that

Oedipus means 'swollen foot', referring to the lasting effects of Oedipus' feet having been pierced and tied as a boy (with the aim to incapacitate him to such an extent that he would be unable to one day murder his father, as the prophecy had stated). The term 'horrelpoot' has a metonymic [sic] connection with the protagonist (Marlouw), and relates to his guilt-ridden relationship with his father and, indeed, his entire male ancestry. (Van Schalkwyk 90)

³⁷ Venter calls up quite a range of allusions here. There is *Hamlet* and *Oedipus the King* (see the rest of the paragraph above), but also intertexts far closer to home: canonical *plaasromans* themselves. As Lubbe and Wiehahn reveal in this respect: "Die voorgeslagte is op allerlei wyses teenwoordig in die verhale, hetsy deur grafte (*Somer*), gewete (*Die meulenaar*; *Somer*) en in *Laat vrugte* selfs as 'n soort tasbare teenwoordigheid" (157). (The ancestors are present in all kinds of ways in these tales, whether through graves [*Somer*] ['Summer' by C. M. van den Heever], conscience [*Die meulenaar*, *Somer*] ['The miller' by D. F. Malherbe] and in *Laat vrugte* ['Late fruit', also by Van den Heever] even as a kind of tangible presence). All three of these features appear in *Trencherman*.

Marlouw's clubfoot also aligns him with Koert via the latter's gangrenous leg – both, in other words, suffer from disfigured feet – marking him as another failure in relation to the *plaasroman's* model of manhood.

In addition to its most prominent characters, the setting of the novel – the *plaasroman's* pivotal feature, if we recall J. M. Coetzee's classification – is pointedly atypical. The all-important farm as presented by Venter is far from the halcyon locale depicted by his earlier twentieth-century counterparts. The conditions of the ironically named 'Ouplaas' (literally 'old farm') are poles apart from the homeliness and lineal prosperity its name connotes. Instead it is barren and dilapidated, scattered with sickly animals and soon to be without water. This is a farm to be escaped from, not returned to. While it is true that nature is often characterised as indifferent to the farmer's struggles and his material conditions frequently cast as unrelenting, the harshness of the farm as depicted in the *plaasroman* can nevertheless always be tempered by hard work and remains a conceptually Arcadian space. Conversely, in *Trencherman* there is no hard work of any kind – all of Ouplaas' inhabitants are indolent and lackadaisical.

This brings us to one of the focal points of *White Writing*. In the final paragraph of his chapter on the *plaasroman* and farm novel, Coetzee offers a key observation:

Our ears today are finely attuned to modes of silence. We have been brought up on the music of Webern: substantial silence structured by tracings of sound. Our craft is all in reading *the other*: gaps, inverses, undersides; the veiled; the dark, the buried, the feminine; alterities. [...] Only part of the truth, such a reading asserts [the kind of reading that Coetzee offers], resides in what writing says of the hitherto unsaid; for the rest, its truth lies in what it dare not say for the sake of its own safety, or in what it does not know about itself: in its silences.

(*White Writing* 81) (emphasis in original)

This comment is made largely in relation to the marked absence of black characters from these texts, but is also intended to have broader application. Early on in his book Coetzee points to the "occlusion of black labour from the scene: the black man becomes a shadowy presence flitting across the stage now and then to hold a horse or serve a meal [...]" (*White Writing* 5). In terms of the Afrikaner mythology created in these novels, the toil of black labour "threatens to deprive the white man of the labours that he, as Africa's new heir, must now not only perform but, more important, be seen to perform" (5). This is thoroughly unraveled in *Trencherman* since the black figures are not only made markedly present (Venter creates multiple, major black characters who

exhibit complexity and are treated as sympathetically as his white figures are), but are not seen as workers at all (that is to say that they are not employees, nor do they perform much labour). The fabled toil of the Afrikaner is equally undermined since Koert (the satiric patriarch) is slothful and bedbound and Marlow (the maimed clubfoot and former farming legatee) works but does so ineffectually, begrudgingly, without any romanticism and *alongside* black characters.

1.2.2. The *Plaasroman*, *Trencherman* and Meat

To return at this point to meat, I think Coetzee's evocative comment on the foregoing page also offers a useful insight into the place of meat and animals in the *plaasroman*. On some level, they are rarely entirely absent. Their 'presence', however, is like that of those black characters who do feature in these stories; that is to say without significance, subjectivity or empathy. While non-companion animals may appear in the fields or on the dinner plates of the *plaasroman*, they never do so in any substantial sense. They are merely part of the background, or, to put it in Coetzee's terms, among the gaps, undersides and silences. This is particularly pertinent because so much of farming and farm life is reliant on and suffused by meat which necessarily comes from dead animal subjects.

Consider the following examples in this regard. In Van den Heever's *Somer* (1935) animals are not given much consideration but – in a way that strikingly brings together Coetzee's thesis about black characters and mine about animals – they appear alongside farm workers with uncanny regularity. See for instance page 27 on which birds are chased away by “luidrugtige Kaffertjies” (clamorous black children, using a racist term); pages 47 to 48 and 123 in which an “outa” (an old black man, again a racist word) describes matters of the heart in terms of warring oxen, presumably to illustrate some perceived form of mystical, indigenous insight; or the description on page 91 of intoxicated farm workers wandering off beyond the sheep pen – a telling association. Moreover, black people are also regularly described in animalistic terms, though I will quote only a few of the more heinous examples. The drunken “volk” (here not referring to Afrikaners but to black farm-workers instead) are spoken of as being “gebraai” (barbequed) and “[gaar]” (cooked) (Van den Heever 90). A frog is used as part of a metaphor to describe a “meid” (a derogatory term for a black woman) who refuses sexual consent to a “Hotnot” (a pejorative term for a 'coloured' person) (90), but later runs away with him, at which point they are both referred to as “ding[e]” (things) and, respectively, as an “optel-meid”

(literally a pick-up ‘*meid*’, suggesting promiscuity and disposability) and a “plat-hakskeen-Boesman met vlakhaas oë” (flatfooted bushman with hare eyes) who should have been “ingebreek” (broken in) (134). And finally – and most strikingly given the subject of this discussion – a drunk black labourer is described as stumbling “soos ’n bees wat ’n koeël kry” (like a cow that gets a bullet) (90). The black figures in the novel appear mostly as fools for the sake of comic relief and are given no serious consideration at all, and the animals with whom they are often aligned are seen as having even less consequence.

In terms of meat in particular, D. F. Malherbe’s *Die meulenaar* (1926) offers some typical examples of the way animal flesh is portrayed in *plaas* narratives. Consider, firstly, a scene depicting slaughter:

For the people of Meulkloof [the farm name, literally mill kloof] it was an important day. Soon after sunrise a fire was burning under the big built-in kettle behind the cellar, and while a colossus of a pig still kicked in its death throes, Velbaadjie [the name of the foreman, literally ‘skin jacket’] already called for boiling water; and soon willing hands were scraping off the animal’s hair and far more than three hundred pounds were hanging on the large hook in the storeroom. For months they caged and fed the animal until its legs could barely carry the weight of its body. The last three weeks its menu has been monotonous but effective: acorns – morning, noon and night.³⁸ (Malherbe 67)

The language here is indifferent and indicative of a purely instrumental view of the pig. The animal is spoken of only in terms of his/her weight and the great amount of meat his/her body will yield for the eager farm inhabitants. The final sentence, in its mocking description of the creature’s enforced diet, even seems to suggest that the scene should be read as humorous. Later in the novel there is the following meal-time scene: “On the table there was a great variety of food. Two sucking-pigs lay there on giant dishes surrounded by large cabbage leaves, and there was barbecued meat and roasted meats and pie, and delicacies like desserts and jelly” (78).³⁹ The

³⁸ “Vir Meulkloof se mense was dit ’n dag van belang. Kort na sonop brand die vuur al onder die groot ingemesselde ketel agter die kelder, en toe die beesbak van n vark nog sy laaste doodsworsteling skop, skree Velbaadjie al vir kookwater; en gou het gewillige hande die dier se hare afgeskraap en hang veel meer as driehonderd pond aan die groot haak in die plakkemer. Vir maande het hul die dier of hok gehou en gevoer dat sy bene skaars die gewig van sy lyf kon dra. Die laaste drie weke was sy spyskaart eentonig maar doeltreffend: akkers – soggens, smiddag en saans.”

³⁹ “[O]p die tafel was [’n] groot verskeidenheid van kos. Twee speenvarkies het daar gelê op reuseskottels met groot koolblare omsoom, en braaivleis en gestoofde vleissoorte en pastei en hope toekos was daar, en lekkernye soos poedings en jellie was daar [...]”

luscious descriptions of massive quantities of meat here are as devoid of care for animal suffering as the slaughter scene that precedes it.

Even *plaas* narratives that ostensibly show slightly greater interest in animals ultimately fail to give them much thought. “Droogte” (1930), a story by Abraham Jonker, depicts a farm in the midst of the titular drought on which animals are starving and dying in large numbers. These “stomme” (dumb, speechless) animals are described with some concern when they die of hunger, though ultimately they are importantly indistinguishable from the farm’s ruined inanimate landscape and their suffering is used only to emphasise the plight of the farmer and his family (15,16). The same is true in Jochem van Bruggen’s *Ampie: die natuurkind* (Ampie: the child of nature) (1924), in which the eponymous hero, a young boy, is forced by his lazy and malicious father to sell his beloved donkey at an auction. Ampie effusively describes the admirable qualities of his animal friend, but any apparent sympathy accorded the donkey again serves simply to underscore the injustice suffered by Ampie himself (15).

These are only a few samples, but they represent a widespread phenomenon in *plaas* literature. Animals occupy a limited but very troubling place in these works.⁴⁰ Venter, by contrast, problematises meat in *Trencherman*, turning it into something conspicuous that cannot be ignored and must be confronted.⁴¹ And he does so by using dystopia, as the next section will demonstrate.

1.3. Dystopia

1.3.1. Dystopia and the *Plaasroman*

Coetzee alludes, in a somewhat offhand but nevertheless illuminating manner, to what he terms the “utopian programme” of the *plaasroman*. He remarks on this vis-à-vis its writers envisaging “a return to a peasant social order” (Coetzee, *White Writing* 76). By the same token, he suggests elsewhere that the telos of the genre is the representation of “an ideal Afrikaner consciousness”

⁴⁰ Given the limited space available here I cannot pursue this point further, but it would be a fertile area of research for anyone interested in the role of animals in literature.

⁴¹ He certainly does so with meat – it is one of the novel’s most conspicuous features – but whether he similarly brings animals themselves to the fore (rather than just their flesh), is another question that I will address at the very end of the chapter.

in order to “unite a social philosophy of agrarian conservatism” (114).⁴² The *plaasroman*’s preoccupation is, in other words, with a desire for an “ideal, nonexistent political and social way of life” (Abrams and Harpham 416). M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham define utopian texts as being ones that represent such a way of life, and insofar as the writerly concerns Coetzee outlines here exemplify precisely this, the *plaasroman* is patently utopian, with the farm being the nominal ‘good place’.⁴³ To be clear, I do not mean to suggest that the *plaasroman* is materially utopian, or that the farm itself is a kind of trouble-free Shangri-la. On the contrary, the farm is very often filled with strife, toil and apparent cosmic indifference. The novels are, however, conceptually utopian – in other words, they are utopian in terms of the ideals undergirding them.

One of the finest aspects of Venter’s subversive enterprise in *Trencherman* – and this is the last facet of it that I will discuss here – is his appreciation of and response to this fact. He seizes upon the nascent utopian strands of the *plaasroman* and chooses to upturn and reshape these so as to create from them a dystopian nightmare instead. In doing so, he brings to light the destructive tendencies inherent in many of the values attendant on old *plaas* narratives. Before going into the particular details of Venter’s dystopic vision (and its relation to meat), however, it would be useful to define what such a vision entails in general.

1.3.2. The Purpose of Dystopia and its Use in *Trencherman*

At its most basic, dystopia is utopia’s antithetical ‘bad place’. Dystopian works represent “a very unpleasant imaginary world in which ominous tendencies of our present social, political, and technological order are projected into a disastrous future culmination” (Abrams and Harpham 417). It is these “ominous tendencies” that I am most interested in here: that is to say, the ways in which dystopian fiction – Venter’s in particular – takes troublesome aspects of contemporary life and magnifies and distorts them into a reimagined scenario that is not quite the ‘real’ world, but uncannily resembles it. Along the same vein, Raffaella Baccolini writes:

⁴² This point is made at the end of a chapter on C. M. van den Heever’s novels in particular, but, as I read Coetzee, van den Heever’s novels can be seen as exemplars of a more widespread phenomenon. As such these observations have a more general application.

⁴³ The etymology of ‘utopia’, a term coined by Sir Thomas More in the early sixteenth century in his book of the same title, is a conflation of the Greek words meaning “good place” (*eutopia*) and “no place” (*outopia*) (Abrams and Harpham 417).

[Dystopia] is immediately rooted in history. Its function is to warn readers about the possible outcomes of our present world and entails an extrapolation of key features of society. Dystopia, therefore, is usually located in a negatively deformed future of our own world. In this respect, it clearly appears as a critique of history – of the history shaping the society of the dystopian writer in particular. (115)

Barnard, with specific reference to *Trencherman*, similarly observes that the novel “is animated, as all dystopias are, by the problems of the present moment” (235). She lists among these “the anxieties of whites about political corruption, land claims, and farm attacks, as well as more generally shared fears about AIDS, environmental degradation, and the shaky provision of services like water and electricity” (235). One might add to Barnard’s list worries about state collapse, government incompetence, pervasive abject poverty, homelessness, widespread violence, crime syndicates, the value of the Rand (which is replaced by the U. S. Dollar in the novel), inefficient transport services (perilous roads, low-grade flights), a lack of medical facilities and food shortages. These aspects of contemporary South Africa – whether they are temporary concerns or persistent trends – are all made manifest in the world of the novel in some form or another. The country pictured in *Trencherman* has been wrecked by a nuclear explosion, contains a wide “deaf belt” without cellphone reception (Venter, *Trencherman* 64), and has “no sign of any remaining plant or animal life” (73). In the words of Koert: “Nothin’ remains here, nothin’ left to salvage. All hope gone to hell-and-gone” (240). Venter’s vision is clearly uncompromisingly dismal.

The overall effect of these inflated and fictionalised elements is one of unhomeing and estrangement. This general process is perhaps true of all literature, but the mixture of exaggeration and a rootedness in factual truth makes it all the more extreme in this case. That is to say, one is *particularly* unnerved by *Trencherman* because of the bleak hyperbole of its vision *combined* with the uncanny awareness that at its core this vision is actually rooted in South Africa in the present-day. Contemporary South Africa, then, is the particular ‘present’ that Venter’s dystopia critiques, and the kinds of concerns listed above are its attendant ‘ominous tendencies’.

1.3.3. Dystopia, *Trencherman* and Meat

Central to the forbidding fictional landscape presented in the novel is its depiction of meat. The prominent and peculiar place that meat occupies in the novel is one of its most unsettling elements. I discussed at the beginning of the chapter some of the ways in which meat appears in the novel, though I have only touched very briefly on the more strange and unnerving ways in which it is presented. These are in abundance and begin at the very first appearance of animals in the book. After Marlow receives the precipitating phone call from his sister in the opening pages, he walks through the sepulchral “drowning city” of Melbourne (8). Cold and with his vision impaired, he narrates that “[i]n the gloom, the city emits no more than an unholy glimmer through the downpour” (9). He also feels distressed and disorientated by his conversation with Heleen and is nearly run over as a result: “Suddenly, the shock of a truck with livestock: cattle – sheep in fact. The smell of sodden wool rises up despite the rain; creatures of God, probably terrified out of their wits. I hear a feeble bleat, the remains of their primal language on a piece of open veld” (9). In the next paragraph, Marlow thinks about his old farm and country: “Lord, let me never see the fatherland and Ouplaas again; let me detach myself from it for the rest of my brief earthly existence. Lord God, help me!” (9). The obvious suggestion here is that Marlow is a lamb to the slaughter (indeed, he makes this association himself, saying “I realise that I share the fear of the sheep in the truck” [11]),⁴⁴ but the scene also appositely introduces the novel’s macabre treatment of commercialised animal flesh (here before it is turned into ‘meat’). The shocking apparition in an eerie atmosphere of a group of tormented creatures heading to their death seems a fitting anticipation for the dystopian rendering of meat. It also showcases a rare moment of sympathy for the animal lives behind the ubiquitous meat in a novel that is deliberately harsh and uncaring in its treatment of humans and animals alike.

The many meat-related vignettes to follow are similarly disquieting. Once in South Africa and traveling to Ouplaas, Marlow (who is increasingly rattled by his confrontation with the bitter reality of the country) stops in Reddersburg to buy food. All he can find is “Bull Brand Pap & Meat” (80). He chooses “the one that seems most conventional: Beef, Mince and Gravy” and eats it with a fork borrowed from the mocking shop owner in a menacing, cockroach-infested atmosphere (80). He pauses “like someone saying a prayer before finding the strength to

⁴⁴ The same image of a lamb sent to slaughter is used in *My Beautiful Death* when Constant thinks about his troubled relationship with his father and Afrikaner culture generally (Venter, *My Beautiful Death* 68).

push the fork into the concoction”, describing it as “[d]og food” (80). In Smithfield, at a restaurant that turns out to be hiding scores of dying people behind a mock wall, he is offered offal curry that never materialises as it appears to be fed to the patients instead (83-5). Other similar sights pervade the novel: “meaty burps” in disorienting crowds and “chunks of frozen meat dragged along on trollies” at the Bloemfontein airport (49); a fight over a soup bone on the city streets (66), anticipating a similar conflict, also over meat bones, in the graveyard scene towards the novel’s end (271-6); bartering in a shop with meat and tripe, including “a nice well-scraped sheep’s head” (162); the smell of offal on the farm (225) and in the city (67); “whole braaied pigs’ heads wrapped in dishcloths” at the feast at which Koert is killed (285), and so on. These scenes are all unnerving and deliberately repellent, with settings that are always threatening or uncomfortable and a kind of meat that is unsanitized and consequently abject.

The most obvious and substantial way in which meat is rendered macabre is through Koert. His character is utterly suffused by it: his living quarters on the farm include the old farmhouse meat room; he regularly doles out meat as a tool of manipulation, whether in bloody boxes dripping with sheep’s blood arriving as a bribe at the police station (187) or by throwing meat bones to the frenzied mob who destroy the Louw family graves (271);⁴⁵ and, of course, he runs an extensive empire according him the infamous moniker “king of meat”. We learn gradually, along with the incredulous Marlouw, about the extent of Koert’s ‘kingdom’, beginning with Heleen’s South African housekeeper relaying rumours from a niece who works at a slaughterhouse where Koert has “flocks of sheep and controls the meat that comes into the abattoir” (20). Later Marlouw hears in Aliwal North that Koert allegedly “buys sheep from here all the way to East London” (99). The reality that greets Marlouw on Ouplaas is not as illustrious, however. It becomes apparent that Koert’s dominion is in decline: his sheep are few and ailing, and there is a sense of discontentment among his ‘subjects’. For the moment at least, Koert nevertheless commands the workings on the farm from afar, and the dietary intake of its inhabitants in particular. Marlouw is told by Mildred, the farm matriarch, that “Koert says when we can slaughter sheep” (130) and “then there’re times when we go without meat for a whole month [...] We’re not allowed to slaughter. Everything belongs to him” (132). Moreover, this capriciousness also means that “we always have to make sure, even now, that there’s some

⁴⁵ Incidentally, one of the figures commissioned to destroy the graves does so with a meat cleaver (268). This is particularly fitting because of a nightmare, shared by the entire Louw male line up until Marlouw, of a man coming in the night to kill them in their sleep using a butcher’s knife (204).

cooked meat left over for him, even if he's stuffed himself silly, or he'll go into a frenzy"; "my meat my meat, he always says" (131). Like the furniture stockpiled in his quarters to the disadvantage of the farm's other residents, he greedily hoards and devours meat which, of course, accounts for his gargantuan size. Consequently, he is himself often described in terms of meat. When Marlow finally gets to see him, he describes Koert in the following terms:

The flesh of all flesh rises in front of me, flesh consumed by flesh that has multiplied and swollen into a malformed colossus of human dough with pink folds hanging from its sides. The giant rounding of the shoulders, the ox-like shoulder blades that shimmer with the secretions of fattiness, the droop of the breasts, the belly that shudders and is stretched to bursting point at the navel. (239)

This emphasis on animal-like "flesh" is repeated elsewhere. In the graveyard, for instance, Koert is referred to as a "lump of flesh" lying on the back of the bakkie they travel in and making sounds that "could only have been wrenched from an animal's belly" (264); in the same incident a dog is thrown onto the vehicle to bite Koert's loin, leading Crous to remark that "the provider of meat now becomes the meat that gets bitten"⁴⁶ ("Venter as Gewete" 73); his gangrenous leg is described as "an enormous column of meat rolled in bandages" (Venter, *Trencherman* 247); and the way in which he is killed resembles a kind of ritualistic slaughter (akin to a scene depicting precisely this in Francis Ford Coppola's film version of *Heart of Darkness, Apocalypse Now*)⁴⁷: "the knife passes from one hand to another as if they'd practiced for this: each drives the knife cleanly and accurately into the flesh of the master. Some of the women and children scream, the drums thunder" (302). As Van Schalkwyk notes: "The king of meat turns into a hump of meat, a bellowing likeness of the 'bait' he deals in. He, who strikes fear into the hearts of grown men, is the incarnation of the meat he sells" (98).

The tally of incidents involving meat related to Koert is extensive and could be expanded, but a more pressing question at this point is what the significance of this pairing is. As the novel's most towering figure (despite, like Conrad's Kurtz, appearing in the 'flesh' in very few scenes), the majority of commentators discuss what his significance in the text is. Most suggest that he is a perversion of a particular kind of Afrikanerdom. Postma and Slabbert, for instance, argue that Koert "symbolises the worst characteristics ascribed to Afrikaners" (55). Similarly,

⁴⁶ "Die voorsiener van vleis word nou die vleis wat gehap word."

⁴⁷ Van Schalkwyk also reads *Trencherman* as being indebted to Coppola's film in addition to Conrad's novella (90).

Dawid de Villiers writes that “[o]n one level he is the Afrikaner unmasked, on another he is the Afrikaner's deepest fear – in both senses he is the Afrikaner's heart of darkness”. Koert, in fact, says this of himself when speaking to Marlow: “I am he, I am the *taal* [language, that is, Afrikaans], the volk, I am your destiny, your fear, das Ende des Lebens, the one who shits last, the very heart of darkness who has remained” (Venter, *Trencherman* 247). As mentioned in the previous section, Koert’s primary role in the text is as an aberrant incarnation of a conservative conception of the ‘ideal Afrikaner’. He is ultimately a dystopian inversion of the values enshrined in the *plaasroman*, and thus demonstrates the destructive possibilities inherent in these values. Consequently, hard work and a dedication to the land become obsessiveness, acquisitiveness and greediness; patriarchalism becomes despotism; and so the farm becomes a place of deprivation and tyranny. As Russell West-Pavlov shrewdly puts it, playing on Marlow asking whether Koert has become the “new baas” on Ouplaas (Venter, *Trencherman* 132): “Koert may be named the ‘new baas’, but, in fact, he is just the old one in a new form” (West-Pavlov 44).

What then is the importance of meat in this context? Put simply, meat consumption is among the destructive values traditionally supported in the *plaasroman* – perhaps the most obvious instance of these in the book – and is, moreover, the nexus of Venter’s critique of Afrikanerdom. Along these same lines, Van Schalkwyk writes:

Venter’s Koert is lord of meat. In this respect *Horrelpoot* should be read as a sequel to an earlier novel by Venter (1993), *Foxtrot van die vleisetters* [...], which portrays the demise of the Afrikaner in the dying days of apartheid. The title alludes to the meat-eating habits of the Afrikaner, and to the fact that red meat has been a luxury item in South Africa and a symbol of (apartheid) wealth and privilege. In *Horrelpoot* the stereotypical white Afrikaans meat eater has grown out of all proportions. (92-3)

Van Schalkwyk here, like Crous, demonstrates the connection in Venter’s work between meat-eating and issues associated with Afrikanerdom. *Trencherman* takes up the baton from *Foxtrot* (and indeed *My Beautiful Death*) in its critique of Afrikaner ideology, ultimately looking back to the *plaasroman* and what it stands for, moving through apartheid, and into the present. Venter is thus examining the legacy of damaging Afrikaner traditions, largely represented by, but also including meat-eating. And, as Van Schalkwyk notes, in the context of *Trencherman*, the meat-eating Afrikaner has reached immoderate proportions. Marlene van Niekerk, in an acerbic essay

that traces a typology of Afrikaner eating habits, likewise discusses “over-indulgence” in Afrikaner (eating) culture, both in contemporary “extravagant consumer culture” and historically within “the Afrikaner culinary tradition”, which she contrasts to an alternative “tradition of domestic simplicity, modesty, even frugality” (64). As her first example of extravagance, Van Niekerk amusingly describes the type of Afrikaner that I have aligned broadly with the *plaasroman* and Koert in the following way:

This could be the appropriate moment to present the first type⁴⁸ in the classification of *The Eating Afrikaner: The Old Sort* (I mostly limit my observations to the Afrikaner man, who is generally at the receiving end of the culinary efforts of the Afrikaner woman). The Old Sort is the counterpart of his ideal black employee, whom he would refer to as ‘one of the old sort’. For this type of Afrikaner, and probably for his employee as well, the index of a satisfying meal would be the ‘Rondebordkos’ [the round plate of food]. The round plate of food should essentially include the following: a variety of meats and vegetables, one or more kinds of starch, plus something sweet, such as pumpkin or sweet potato, and something sour, such as tomato salad or beet salad with raw onions and vinegar. Without meat, the plate is definitely not round enough. Meat is absolutely essential. (68)

These round plates – round to the point of overflowing and of necessity containing a great deal of meat of different kinds – act as markers for the negative tendencies of “The Old Sort” of Afrikaner: not only greed and immoderation, but also misogyny, racism, homophobia (“For the Patriarch of the Round Plate [...] pasta, quiche and green salad is food for gays. Vegetarians are even more alternative than gays, they must be lesbian” [69]) and dubious masculinity (“The Afrikaner of the Round Plate believes in the scrum” and after the rugby “it is time for the Braai, time to bond with the men and with Castle Lager. The fire and the good cheer provide the splendour, supplemented by generous quantities of lamb chops, marinated pork sosaties and spiced boerewors” [69]). In an interview about *Trencherman*, Venter also voices his misgivings about overindulgence:

To most people meat on the table is a privilege. Plenty of meat becomes an indulgence. Heaps of meat is pure decadence and in the case of Koert, who exploits meat, devours and wallows in meat, it becomes repulsive. It reminds me of graffiti on the wall of a vegetarian restaurant in Melbourne: “eat meat ya

⁴⁸ The remaining types – the “Culinary Guild” (that is, suburban connoisseurs) (70) and the “New Afrikaner” interested in “the international gourmet scene” (73) – are also indulgent in their own ways.

bastards”, which expresses the grossness of meat indulgence.

(Venter, “Interview”)

The point here is ultimately one related to Afrikaner excess – including meat consumption, but also the whole of Afrikaner ideological ‘greed’ regarding land, resources, power, exclusivity and so on – encapsulated in *Trencherman* by the dystopian rendering of “the grossness of meat indulgence”, particularly by Koert.

To return at this point to Crous’ argument, despite part of this critique being of meat consumption in particular, it would be a mistake to suggest that *Trencherman* depicts a counteractive abstention from meat. The novel seems to include no interest in this and is strikingly devoid of the counter-narrative that Crous implies it has. There is, as I mentioned earlier, a conspicuous absence of any vegetarian presence in the text. In fact, despite Marlow saying that once he was back in Melbourne, “[m]eat would never taste the same again. When I took a bite of a lamb chop, I saw things worming their way out of it” (Venter, *Trencherman* 262), when he goes to dinner with Heleen once he has returned to Australia, he nevertheless orders “the most expensive steak on the menu” (308). In spite of his apparent reservations, he continues to take part in excessive consumption of meat, and, in fact, seems to revel in it. There is no reformation here, no moderation, no alternative offered.

This is the key to understanding what the representation of meat in the novel suggests. Venter is not concerned with presenting a solution or alternative to meat-eating and its attendant problems in *Trencherman*. His novel is not a critical utopia (that is to say, a more optimistic work that “tend[s] to reflect the sociopolitical concerns of an era *characterized by a demand for change* [Rogan 313] [my emphasis]), but a dystopia that, as such, “contain[s] *the least promise for the change or growth* of the posited future or parallel space” (313) (my emphasis). Visagie, who investigates whether or not *Trencherman* contains any optimistic elements, comes to the same conclusion, “given that the tale is ultimately characterized by outright pessimism” (63).⁴⁹ It is an unrelentingly grim narrative that foregrounds the severity of contemporary problems, without any real hope that these can be altered. It suggests that the extent of Afrikaner excesses in South Africa has become irreversible. Even once Koert, the token of all the Afrikaner values that the novel critiques, has been killed, Marlow still leaves a place that is without a hint of optimism for the future: the last windmill has broken down and cannot be repaired, so the farm is

⁴⁹ “[...]aangesien die verhaal uiteindelik deur ’n volslae pessimisme gekenmerk word.”

now completely without water (Venter, *Trencherman* 277-8); the few remaining animals are sickly and will soon die; it seems impossible that any of the people, many of whom are aged and ill, could ever prosper; and there is no suggestion that the country at large could improve. Koert, and the *volk* he represents, has inflicted devastation too extensive, too damaging for there to be possibility of redemption.

To be clear, depictions of excess often do constitute a kind of critique. This is certainly true of Venter's earlier work. Consider the scene in *Foxtrot van die vleisetters* where a greedy and wasteful farmer is described by one of his employees as hoarding meat and literally throwing away money by tossing a R1 coin for one of the farm ostriches to swallow, while his workforce live in "n armoedige bestaan" (a poverty-stricken existence) (Venter, *Foxtrot* 18). In this instance Venter is obviously critical of the dissipation described and implies that it should not be the case. It can certainly be read as a demand for change. But by the time he gets to *Trencherman* his critique is no longer coupled with a belief that things could be otherwise. The novel implies that the status quo is such that one cannot usefully harbour such optimism. The South Africa as pictured in this novel is no longer a country on the precipice of change as in *Foxtrot*, but rather one doomed to perpetuate its errors and trapped in irrevocable decline.

Trencherman's closing passages describe the farm in an imagined, Edenic state, having been given over to the forces of nature with its former Afrikaner owners gone forever. All the Louws have been eliminated: the old family graves destroyed, Koert murdered and Marlow exiled to Australia. The implication here is that there is no hope while the morally sullied Afrikaner presence remains. The ultimate concern of *Trencherman* then is to show us the bleakness of the excesses of Afrikaner patriarchal culture,⁵⁰ encapsulated in the novel's representation of meat; to confront us with a situation so severe it precludes any meaningful remedy.

1.4. Concluding Remarks

Trencherman is, finally, a narrative at odds with itself. On one level, it is a book that is originally written in Afrikaans while expressing horror at the prospect of Afrikaans dying out or becoming

⁵⁰ I should also point out at this juncture that Venter's evaluation, particularly of excessive meat-eating, is naturally not only pertinent to Afrikaners. On the contrary, it is true of the vast majority of modern consumer culture. The focus of the novel, however, is limited to Afrikanerdom and its observations in this respect are particularly poignant regarding South Africa's recent history and indeed its present.

hybridised beyond recognition. On another level, there is the conclusion that implies, in Marlow's words, that "I did not belong in this country, that my people, my forebears did not belong either" (*Trencherman* 159). This tension is, of course, not necessarily a problem – such ambivalence can make a book more compelling, and in this case captures the difficulty of Venter's own position as an Afrikaner and writer in Afrikaans, as well as the position of his implied Afrikaner reader.

The subject of my next chapter, Zakes Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior*, is a novel that contains a comparable veiled tension. The text commits itself to a particular set of principles and then fails to abide by the parameters that are accordingly incumbent upon it. In other words, it both sets up and then breaks its own rules, and in this case – unlike with *Trencherman* – the resulting conflict within the book ultimately undermines it. The source of this internal conflict is the way in which Mda draws on what Carol J. Adams calls the 'absent referent'.

While the absent referent is discussed in detail in the next chapter, I raise it here as it informs the final issue I want to consider regarding *Trencherman*. The absent referent is centrally about stripping animals of their subjectivity. It involves representing animals – specifically their dismembered body parts in the form of meat – without recognising them as holistic, significant subjects. It is worth asking about *Trencherman*, in which meat occupies such a central place, whether Venter depicts animal subjects (as opposed to just animals-as-meat) in any substantial way. I would argue that he does not. While the text is filled with copious amounts of meat, one would be hard pressed to find many actual animals that are given any serious consideration. There are a few scenes containing animals: *inter alia*, the incident involving the sheep on the truck quoted above;⁵¹ Marlow feeding the dogs on the farm ("poor things", he calls them [142]) and being scolded by Mildred because "pap is for *people* on Ouplaas" (143) (emphasis in original); and encounters with the sheep on Ouplaas who are "[b]ewildred, deathly thin and peeling wool" (172) and who Marlow calls "mongrels" (173) that are certainly "going to die" (172). These scenes are, however, not really about the animals themselves, but, like old *plaas* stories discussed earlier,⁵² ultimately rather serve to highlight *human* hardship: the 'livestock' in the truck represent Marlow's fear and the threat of his mission, while the dogs and sheep on the farm represent the desperate condition of its inhabitants. The novel contains no serious or

⁵¹ See page 45.

⁵² See pages 40 to 42.

substantial recognition of animal suffering, especially regarding slaughter, which is striking in a narrative where meat is so conspicuous. So while meat is brought into greater prominence by Venter than in previous *plaastronans*, the animals whence it came are still as hidden as they were in the works of his precursors. Ultimately – to use Coetzee’s words – the animals in *Trencherman* are still veiled among gaps and undersides, hidden in silence.

Chapter 2

The Absent Referent in Zakes Mda's *The Madonna of Excelsior*

2.1. Introduction

While Eben Venter in *Trencherman* offers a critique of traditional Afrikaner patriarchal culture from within the culture as an Afrikaans writer, Zakes Mda looks at it from the outside in the text discussed in this chapter. And, as with Venter, meat plays a significant part in Mda's narrative in this regard. By comparison to the omnipresence of meat in *Trencherman*, the episodes involving animal flesh discussed in the pages to follow are fewer, though no less striking. There is also a vegetarian connection: while Venter reportedly worked for many years in a vegetarian restaurant, Mda himself is a vegetarian, which perhaps partly accounts for the prevalence of animal-related content in his oeuvre (Mda, *Sometimes there is a Void* 506). As with Venter, however, Mda's depiction of meat in relation to animal subjectivity appears, on closer examination, to be somewhat disappointing.

The focus of this chapter is Mda's celebrated and oft-discussed fourth novel, *The Madonna of Excelsior* (2002). The story spans two generations in the small eastern Free State town of Excelsior, beginning in the early 1970s and extending through to contemporary democratic South Africa. The earlier parts of the narrative, told from the perspective of a communal narrative voice that pervades the text, focus on a group of young Sotho women who are sexually preyed upon by a number of Afrikaner men. These men use the power that their race, sex and economic status accord them to engage in illicit sexual affairs with these women, sometimes consensually, sometimes by force, but never without skewed power dynamics at work. The ensuing carnal exploits culminate in the notorious charges and arrests involving contraventions of the Immorality Act in Excelsior between 1970 and 1971.⁵³ These initial developments are central to the narrative as a whole. Indeed, the opening and closing lines of the novel – “All these things flow from the sins of our mothers” (Mda, *Madonna* 1) and “From the sins of our mothers all these things flow” (268) respectively – act as somewhat chiasmic bookends that suggest the ubiquitous effects of these pivotal events.

⁵³ As I will not be discussing the historical elements of the narrative in much depth, see J.U. Jacobs' “Towards a South African Expressionism: *The Madonna of Excelsior*” pages 279 to 284 for more information on the actual events on which Mda's novel is based.

As is characteristic of Mda, the book contains a large, multigenerational ensemble of characters, in this case individuals and families from the Sotho and Afrikaner communities in Excelsior, both before and after the transition to democracy. The principal focalisers, however, are Niki, one of the so-called ‘Excelsior 19’, and her daughter, Popi, born from an affair with an Afrikaner man. The novel is also presided over by the presence of another significant character: the painter Frans Claerhout, referred to in the novel as “The Trinity”, since he is at once “man, priest and artist” (2). His artworks form epigraphic openings to most of the chapters in the novel. Indeed, it is from his paintings of members of the Excelsior 19 and their ‘illegitimate’ children in the archetypal mode of Madonna and Child that the novel’s title derives its most obvious signification. This is, as is typically the case in Mda’s work, a novel with a wide scope of interests that extend beyond the Excelsior ‘miscegenation’ trials. These interests include, *inter alia*, apartheid atrocities; the shortcomings of the post-transition government; corruption at local, municipal levels; various postcolonial themes; as well as more general concerns relating to identity, family and art.

Mda’s work in general also tends to grapple with various feminist concerns – an area in which my reading can be situated – and *The Madonna of Excelsior* certainly fits this mould. His depiction of women can be divisive, though. Consider, for instance, the very different arguments about the representation of female figures in Mda’s third novel in Nettie Cloete and Richard Ndwiyani’s “Zakes Mda: Shifting Female Identities in *The Heart of Redness*” and Meg Samuelson’s “Nongqawuse, National Time and (Female) Authorship in *The Heart of Redness*”. The former praises “Mda’s skillful portrayal of changing female roles” (Cloete and Madadzhe 48) by depicting women “becoming progressive leaders in their communities, defying the traditions of female suppression and oppression, expecting to be respected, developing their own identities, articulating their own views and being allowed to live full, fulfilled lives” (49). The latter, in contrast, criticises Mda’s depiction of the complex female author-figure of Nongqawuse, suggesting that he reduces her to an “empty vessel: an uncontaminated container for the words of men” (Samuelson 248). Most of the feminist responses to *The Madonna of Excelsior* in particular are still locked in unpublished theses. These readings also reflect the divisive nature of Mda’s ostensibly feminist concerns.⁵⁴ One published article by Marius Crous

⁵⁴ While, for example, Nokuthula Mazibuko in “Mothers, Madonnas and Musicians: A Writing of Africa’s Women as Symbols and Agents of Change in the Novels of Zakes Mda” and Stephane Serge Ibinga in “The Representation

grapples with gender issues by examining the relationship between the representation of masculinity and femininity in the narrative, positing “the female body as site of contestation of socio-political assumptions about masculinity and femininity” (“Lust and Loathing” 79). My own response to *The Madonna of Excelsior* in a way straddles all of these issues: it explores the way in which the novel depicts women, draws out some issues regarding representation within a feminist framework, and deals with socio-political issues in relation to women’s bodies.

But where, one might ask, do animals fit into all of this? This question seems all the more pertinent when considering some of Mda’s other novels, many of which contain overt animal content. Of central concern in *The Heart of Redness* (2000), for instance – arguably Mda’s best known and most written about text – are the infamous mid-nineteenth century amaXhosa ‘cattle killings’. Similarly, the central relationship in *The Whale Caller* (2005) is between its eponymous protagonist and a Southern Right Whale named Sharisha. By comparison to these texts, *The Madonna of Excelsior*, with its lack of any obvious animal-related content, might seem an odd choice of a Mda text for this dissertation.

The selection of this novel can, however, be accounted for in a number of ways. Firstly, as I argue in the pages that follow, it does offer useful material for discussion surrounding representations of animals. Secondly, the subject of animals in the aforementioned books, *The Whale Caller* in particular, has already been fairly extensively discussed elsewhere by scholars like Harry Sewlall,⁵⁵ Gail Fincham⁵⁶ and especially Wendy Woodward.⁵⁷ Thirdly, taking cognisance of critical attention this book has already attracted, focussing on a more minor theme is a justifiable enterprise. It is also partly a function of Mda’s broad range of interest and sprawling style, which is perhaps best approached by following a particular narrative thread, rather than by attempting the kind of holistic close reading that I employ elsewhere in this thesis (I do, however, still offer in-depth analysis of particular passages). Finally, of all of Mda’s novels, many of which deal with animals in various ways, *The Madonna of Excelsior* is perhaps

of Women in the Works of Three South African Novelists of the Transition” praise Mda’s depiction of women in the novel, Jennifer Mishaela Fuhler in “Her Violated Body: Sexual Violence and the Limits of Political Allegory in Post-Apartheid South African Fiction” calls this into question.

⁵⁵ See “Border Crossings: Mapping the Human and the Non-Human in Zakes Mda’s *The Whale Caller*”.

⁵⁶ See the seventh chapter of Fincham’s book *Dance of Life: The Novels of Zakes Mda in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, entitled “‘Our Only Physical and Psychic Home’: Ecology and Community in *The Whale Caller*”.

⁵⁷ See “Postcolonial Ecologies and the Gaze of Animals: Reading Some Contemporary Southern African Narratives”, “The Nonhuman Animal and Levinasian Otherness: Contemporary Narratives and Criticism”, “The Killing (Off) of Animals in Some Southern African Fiction, or ‘Why Does Every Animal Story Have to be Sad?’” and “Whales, Clones and Two Ecological Novels: *The Whale Caller* and Jane Rosenthal’s *Souvenir*”.

the most interesting in its treatment of *meat*, which is, of course, my primary interest and an issue not dealt with by existing scholarship. By contrast, *The Heart of Redness* naturally contains a great deal of ‘livestock’ killing, but surprisingly little meat consumption (since the animals were not killed to be eaten in this case), and *The Whale Caller*, while containing some references to meat, treats the subject far less significantly than *The Madonna of Excelsior* does.

Regarding my particular interest in the novel’s depiction of meat, I am principally concerned with a theory, as formulated by Carol J. Adams, called the ‘absent referent’. This will be the lens through which I approach the novel, and one which the novel itself invites, though this has not been dealt with in critical discussions of *The Madonna of Excelsior*. I will begin by defining the term ‘absent referent’, particularly in the context of Adams’ work. Next I turn to the primary argument of the chapter, which will unpack passages from Mda’s novel that can usefully be understood with reference to this particular theoretical framework. The concluding section addresses a major shortcoming of the employment of the absent referent in Mda’s text – that is, that despite frequent invocations of meat-imagery in the development of one of his central socio-political critiques, he ultimately elides the suffering animal subjects who are the source of this meat.

2.2. The Absent Referent

At the heart of the present chapter is the notion of the absent referent. My use of the term derives from its ecofeminist formulation by Carol J. Adams, the writer, independent scholar, activist and animal rights advocate. She did not coin the phrase, however, and Josephine Donovan’s essay on ecofeminist literary criticism usefully tracks the term’s etymology:

The absent referent [is] an idea developed in structuralist and poststructuralist language theory [...]. It is central to the Freudian linguistics of Jacques Lacan and has been reworked for feminist and ecofeminist critical purposes by Margaret Homans and Carol J. Adams, respectively. (Donovan 162)

In fact, Adams acknowledges Homans as the source of her own development of the term. While searching for a theoretical underpinning for what she felt to be a significant and intuitive underlying connection between vegetarianism and feminism, Adams discovered the basis for precisely such a framework in Margaret Homans’ *Bearing the Word: Language and Female*

Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing (Adams 14). Before the feminist and later ecofeminist reworking of the term, however, it was conceived of in the following way by Donovan:

The absent referent refers to the real or material entity signified by the linguistic symbol, the word, which is termed the signifier. In classic structuralist theory there is, in effect, a threefold layer of signification: the elided referent, the concept that designates the referent (termed the signified), and the word that designates the concept or signified (termed the signifier). While structuralist theory originally focussed on language itself as a sign system, the concepts signifier, signified, and referent are pertinent to any symbolic discourse, including art forms and cultural ideologies, which may be seen as operating like languages. (162)

While Homans applied this thinking to women's positioning as absent referents within a male-dominated ideological system, Adams took this further to include animals (Homans 4, 7). She proposed an analogous process at work in the "symbolic discourse" of meat. She therefore developed the phrase from Homans' purely feminist conception, to a more broadly ecofeminist one. Adams defines her particular formulation of the absent referent as follows in her groundbreaking first book, *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990):⁵⁸

Through butchering, animals become absent referents. Animals in name and body are made absent *as animals* for meat to exist. Animals' lives precede and enable the existence of meat. If animals are alive they cannot be meat. Thus a dead body replaces the live animal. Without animals there would be no meat eating, yet they are absent from the act of eating meat because they have been transformed into food. [...] While the cultural meanings of meat and meat eating shift historically, one essential part of meat's meaning is static: One does not eat meat without the death of an animal. Live animals are thus the absent referents in the concept of meat. The absent referent permits us to forget about the animal as an independent entity; it also enables us to resist efforts to make animals present. (51)

The preface to the Tenth Anniversary edition of *The Sexual Politics of Meat* offers another formulation of her use of the term:

⁵⁸ The book has gone through several reprints and is either famous or infamous depending on who is consulted. It has become a seminal text in ecofeminist thinking, but has also long been a soft target for political conservatives. Adams herself reflects on this in the preface to the book's 10th anniversary edition, saying that while the book resonated with many readers who proceeded to send her countless pieces of evidence to support her argument, there were, "[o]n the other hand, reporters and commentators who were seeking for the ultimate example of 'political correctness' [and] landed upon *The Sexual Politics of Meat* and trumpeted it as the academic excess of the year" (15).

Behind every meal of meat is an absence: the death of the animal whose place the meat takes. The “absent referent” is that which separates the meat eater from the animal and the animal from the end product. The function of the absent referent is to keep our “meat” separated from any idea that she or he was once an animal, to keep the “moo” or “cluck” or “baa” away from the meat, to keep *something* from being seen as having been *someone*. Once the existence of meat is disconnected from the existence of an animal who was killed to become that “meat”, meat becomes unanchored by its original referent (the animal), becomes instead a free floating image [...]

(14-5) (emphasis in the original)

When we eat meat, the actual animal it came from, with which it is necessarily associated or refers to, is ignored, obscured or absent. What remains is only sanitized, renamed⁵⁹ and discrete food with no allusion to its animal origin. Peter Singer similarly suggests that “[i]n general, we are ignorant of the abuse of living creatures that lies behind the food we eat” (95). When we buy meat in a shop or restaurant it is “the culmination of a long process, of which all but the end product is delicately screened from our eyes. We buy our meat and poultry in neat plastic packages. It hardly bleeds. There is no reason to associate this package with a living, breathing, walking, suffering animal” (Singer 95).

Adams’ next crucial move is to suggest, continuing on from Homans, that animals and women are united in this respect. In Adams’ words, “the absent referent [is] what enabled the interweaving of the oppression of women *and* animals” (14). This is specifically within a male-dominated society which subjugates and erases both women and animals in favour of a masculinist discourse that places men above both these two groups. Both are objectified for the sake of consumption: women as sexual objects and animals as meat. Adams’ particular focus in

⁵⁹ While this does not enter my reading of Mda’s novel, one of the crucial points that Adams makes about the absent referent regards nomenclature: “Animals are made absent through language that renames dead bodies before consumers participate in eating them. Our culture further mystifies the term “meat” with gastronomic language, so we do not conjure dead, butchered animals, but cuisine. Language thus contributes even further to animals’ absences” (51). The words used to describe meat, therefore, often hide the animal from which it came. So, as Adams points out, “[a]fter death, cows become roast beef, steak, hamburger; pigs become pork, bacon, sausage. Since objects are possessions they cannot have possessions; thus, we say “leg of lamb” not a “lamb’s leg”, “chicken wings” not a “chicken’s wings” (59). As Michelé Pickover puts it, “Words lose their meaning, become incorporated and gain acceptance and respectability. The effect is to disconnect us from reality. For example *slaughterhouse* becomes *meat processing plant*, *dead bodies* become *meat*, *chickens* become *poultry*, *sheep* become *mutton*, a *calf* becomes *veal*, animals used for food collectively become *livestock* and they are *grown* and *harvested*, pigs tails are *docked*, not *amputated*, and chickens have their beaks *trimmed*, they are not *debeaked*. Animals that are killed for food or used in the farming process are usually referred to as *farm animals*, which implies that they naturally belong on a farm. This is similar to using the term *laboratory animals* rather than *animals in laboratories*” (Pickover 144) (emphasis in original).

this respect is on abuse. A patriarchal system instils “a structure of overlapping but absent referents [that] links violence against women and animals” (53).

While Adams’ style (and indeed those of Homans and Donovan) is at times somewhat abstruse, at the core of her writing is a compelling and significant idea: that we almost never think about the animals we eat. This ability not to think about them is largely what enables us to eat them at all. It is not only our own psychology that conspires to enable this, but also the construction of many languages and social systems. The same is true of women in many ways. It becomes easy to avoid female subjectivity and agency, instead reducing women to thing-like status, when seeing them through an objectifying, misogynist gaze. It is precisely these kinds of issues that Mda raises in *The Madonna of Excelsior* – though not entirely satisfactorily, as I will discuss in the final section.

2.3. The Absent Referent in *The Madonna of Excelsior*

One of the most salient features of *The Sexual Politics of Meat* – and indeed especially of a later publication, *The Pornography of Meat* (2004), which deals with very similar concerns – is the profusion of examples Adams provides in support of her claims. Without this evidence, her arguments might seem outlandish or extreme; alongside it they become uncanny. She reproduces and alludes to a staggering number of sources, including images of restaurant menus, advertisements, billboards, cartoons and pornographic material. One of the most prominent of these, for instance, is the image of “Ursula Hamdress”, later called “Taffy Lovely”, an actual pig (whether she is dead or alive is unclear) dressed in women’s underwear and manipulated into a masturbatory pose while apparently in a state of ecstasy as printed in *Playboar: The Pig Farmer’s “Playboy”* (52). Adams also draws on an abundance of popular and academic publications, including works of literature. These references range from Ancient Greek myths to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (to which an entire chapter is dedicated) to Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint* and a great many in between.

If Adams were an enthusiast of South African literature she might have counted Zakes Mda’s *The Madonna of Excelsior* among her case studies. Indeed, the ‘sexual politics’ of the book are obvious: hypermasculinised white men in an overtly oppressive, patriarchal society exploiting and often abusing disadvantaged black women. The relationship to meat, as I

mentioned in my introductory remarks, is certainly less explicit. However, Mda's novel offers a useful and I think deliberate demonstration of the operation of the absent referent.

2.3.1. The Butchery Scene

The extract below could have been taken directly from Adams' catalogue of examples. Placed early on in the narrative, the passage depicts Niki being cruelly humiliated in the butchery where she works. This is a rich and complex scene and is worth quoting at length. In it we find Niki alongside a number of sundry workers and patrons, in addition to the Cronje family: Cornelia, who supervises the daily operations of the butcher shop; Stephanus, her husband, who owns the butchery and is also "the secretary of the local branch of the ruling National Party and the mayor of Excelsior" (Mda, *Madonna* 22); and their young son, Tjaart, whose nanny at the time is Niki herself. The events, presented here in their entirety, proceed as follows:

Cornelia Cronje had started a new custom of weighing workers twice a day to make sure they were not stealing any of her meat. The morning clock-in weight had to tally with the afternoon clock-off weight. Any discrepancy meant that there was some chicanery somewhere.

Niki clocked in one morning and stepped on the black iron heavy duty scale. Her weight was recorded at 61 kilograms. A good weight for a mother of one who still kept the body of her maidenhood.

It was at the end of the month. Workers had received their wages and pensioners their old age pensions. The butchery was a necessary stop-off whenever people had bank notes burning in their purses and pockets. So, it was a busy day for Niki and the other workers. She could only eat her lunch at four o'clock in the afternoon, an hour before knocking off. She was very hungry. She stuffed herself with a lot of pap and meat, generously supplied by the Cronjes to all their workers every lunchtime.

At five it was time to go. As usual she stepped on the scale while Cornelia Cronje recorded her weight. It was 62 kilograms.

"You are hiding something," said Cornelia Cronje.

"It is not true, Madam Cornelia," protested Niki. "I am not hiding anything."

"Your weight was 61 kilograms in the morning. It can't just increase by a kilo for nothing. You must be hiding meat under your dress," insisted Madam Cornelia.

Curious workers crowded around them. They wondered among themselves: how could Niki be so foolish? Didn't she know that the penalty for theft was instant dismissal? How could she play with her job like this when jobs were so scarce in Excelsior? Was she not aware that the scale would catch her out? The scale never lied.

Madam Cornelia was determined to teach Niki a lesson. And to teach the other workers by example. She ordered her to strip. Right there in front of everyone. When she hesitated, Madam Cornelia threatened to lock her up in the cold room with all the carcasses, as it was obvious that she loved meat so much that she had now become a meat thief. Niki peeled off her pink overall and then her mauve dress. She stood in her white petticoat and protested once more that she was not hiding any meat on her person. Then she peeled off the petticoat and stood in her pink knickers and fawn bra.

“Raise your arms” ordered Madam Cornelia.

She did.

No chunks of meat rained from her unshaven armpits.

“Take them off Niki,” insisted Madam Cornelia. “Everything! You must be hiding it in your knickers.”

No meat hiding in her bra. Only stained cotton-wool hiding in her knickers.

She stood there like the day she was born. Except that, when she was born, there was no shame in her. No hurt. No embarrassment. She raised her eyes and saw among the oglers Stephanus Cronje. In his khaki safari suit and brown sandals. And little Tjaart. Little Tjaart in his neat school uniform of grey shorts white shirt, green tie and grey blazer with green stripes. Grey knee length socks and black shoes. Little Tjaart of the horsey-horsey game. His father had just fetched him from school. And here he was. Here they were. Raping her with their eyes.

“Magtig, Niki,” said Madam Cornelia, “were did the kilo come from?”

And she burst out laughing as if it was a big joke. Everyone giggled. Including Niki. But there was no laughter in her eyes.

She put on her clothes and tamely went home.

Niki’s triangular pubes loomed large in Tjaart Cronje’s imagination. Threatening pleasures of the future. A sapling looking to the starless sky for a promise of rain. He knew already that it was the tradition of Afrikaner boys of the Free State platteland to go through devirgination rites by capturing and consuming the forbidden quarry that lurked beneath their nannies’ pink overalls.

For Stephanus Cronje, Niki’s pubes, with their short entangled hair, became the stuff of fantasies. From that day he saw Niki only as body parts rather than as one whole person. He saw her as breasts, pubes, lips and buttocks.

While the Cronje men were seized by the fiends of lust, anger was slowly simmering in Niki. A storm was brewing. Quietly. Calmly. Behind her serene demeanour she hid her dark motives of vengeance. Woman to woman. We wondered why she did not resign from the Excelsior Slaghuis after being humiliated like that. But she knew something we did not know. She was biding her time. She had no idea what she would do. Or when. In the starless nights of the Mahlatswetsa Location, she was nursing an ungodly grudge. (40-2)

This is among the most memorable and harrowing set pieces in the novel. It serves to illustrate the radical disempowerment inflicted upon Niki and other black women under

apartheid. As N. S. Zulu points out, “Niki’s ‘place’ under apartheid and African patriarchy appears to be that of the black woman suffering double oppression as the subaltern female who occupies the lowest social position” (323). The extent of Niki’s subjugation is painfully clear here. Even the command over her own body has been usurped.

The passage above not only illustrates Niki’s fundamental lack of power, but also the dissolution of her dignity. By callously forcing her to undress in a crowded, public place, Cornelia is treating Niki inhumanely, not only in the sense of her utter lack of compassion, but also because of her denial of Niki’s humanity. As Niki is humiliated and undressed further and further she becomes less and less human and more and more like an object. Niki’s own behaviour seems to corroborate this. At first she protests her ill-treatment, but gradually as she is both physically and psychologically stripped down, she becomes silent and subservient. Perhaps at this point, in a Fanonian sense, she is herself internalising her objectification. Crucially, however, while this is true of what happens among the characters within the scene, the opposite response is engendered within the reader. As the characters increasingly come to see Niki as an object, the passage becomes steadily more difficult to read and the reader’s sympathy for Niki only grows.

Niki’s treatment here seems analogous to that of animals gradually being stripped of their subject-status by the act of butchering. Adams refers to butchering as “the quintessential enabling act of meat eating. It enacts a literal dismemberment upon animals” (Adams 51). Thus, “[t]hrough butchering, animals become absent referents. Animals in name and body are made absent *as animals* for meat to exist” (51). In other words, they too are stripped of subjectivity and become merely fragmented objects. Given Adams’ thesis about the overlap of animals and women as absent referents, it is thus entirely fitting that this scene takes place in a butchery.

Consider, moreover, the numerous ways in which an objectified Niki is subtly aligned with meat in this passage: Niki and the other “girls” (the word is printed in scare quotes in the text itself)⁶⁰ who are responsible for cutting, weighing and handling the meat (Mda, *Madonna* 22) are not only being forcibly weighed to check if they have stolen meat, but are weighed on the same “black iron heavy duty scale” used for animal flesh; Madam Cornelia threatens to “lock [Niki] up in the cold room with all the carcasses”; and there is a suggestion that Niki is menstruating (“Only stained cotton-wool hiding in her knickers”), which perhaps underlines the

⁶⁰ See note 11 below for a discussion of the novel’s narrative point of view.

painful and visceral corporeality of her own flesh. There is also young Tjaart's anticipation of ritually "consuming" the flesh of his nanny, in addition to the animalising description of Niki in his so-called "horsey-horsey game", in which he works himself into a frenzy of sexual excitement while strapped to her back. Even the colour scheme sets up an underlying association between Niki and the meat in the butchery: The mauve of her dress and the pink of her overall and underwear not only connote a kind of childish innocence, further underscoring the injustice of this very sexual form of exploitation, but also recall the colour of meat. In a novel that pays such close and deliberate attention to the use of colour (in its many detailed descriptions of Claerhout's paintings, for instance) it is not, I think, too strong a claim to make this kind of association. There seems, therefore, to be a deliberate overlap of absent referents in this scene.

The clearest instance of this intersection of absent referents, however, is the reference to Tjaart and Stephanus "[r]aping her [Niki] with their eyes" and the assertion that "[f]or Stephanus Cronje, Niki's pubes, with their short entangled hair, became the stuff of fantasies. From that day he saw Niki only as body parts rather than as one whole person. He saw her as breasts, pubes, lips and buttocks". In this disquieting depiction of the extreme way in which women can be objectified, Mda not only demonstrates the phallogocentric nature of this perspective, but also suggests its potential for violent dismemberment. This characterisation also strikingly recalls Adams' assertion that many men, when questioned about their sexual fantasies, described "pornographic scenes of disembodiment, faceless, impersonal body parts: breasts, legs, vaginas, buttocks" (69).⁶¹ Indeed, this is, as she goes on to suggest, precisely what "[m]eat for the average consumer has been reduced to [...]: faceless body parts, breasts, legs, udders, buttocks" (69). Again, Niki's perceived dismembered body parts are placed within a setting scattered with the dismembered body parts of animals; especially pertinent because within Adams' reading of patriarchal spheres "meat is a symbol of male dominance" (43) and so, "the presence of meat proclaims the disempowering of women" (199). Indeed, this is a fair characterisation not only of the space in which the scene takes place, but also of its events. Here the control wielded by those favoured by the patriarchal system of power over those it subjugates is patent. Stephanus is not only the owner of the shop and therefore Niki's boss, but is also the mayor of Excelsior – the highest seat of power in the town. Furthermore, his role as secretary of the local branch of the

⁶¹ Adams is here quoting from a study discussed in *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography*, ed. Laura Lederer.

National Party ties this particular instance of persecution to the broader apartheid context as a male-dominated regime that oppressed black women in particular. His wife too, despite being a woman, is still in some sense doing men's bidding here. As Marius Crous points out in relation to the passage in question, "[i]n the South Africa of the 1970s white women were just as instrumental in sustaining the machinery of apartheid as were men, as is evident from this incident" ("Lust and Loathing" 82).⁶² Even Tjaart, despite only being a child, already dominates Niki as his nanny, and, as mentioned earlier, in a particularly animalising way. Moreover, he is in the process of being initiated into the kind of masculinity that facilitates this process as he anticipates the 'rite of passage' of losing his virginity to his nanny.⁶³ Furthermore, his childhood fantasies – which cast Niki in terms of sexual parts ("Niki's triangular pubes loomed large in Tjaart Cronje's imagination") – already mirror those of his father and anticipate the suggestively phrased sentiment expressed later in the novel that "[y]oung Afrikaner boys were eager *to taste* what their fathers were *eating* on the sly" (Mda, *Madonna* 94) (my emphasis).

In order to underscore the problematic male gaze that Stephanus and Tjaart embody here, Mda plays with narrative point of view in the scene. While we begin in the familiar mode of the communal voice for roughly the first three quarters of the episode, towards the end there is a shift in perspective. Once Niki has been thoroughly humiliated and dehumanised, and herself become an absent referent, the focus of the narration narrows to the perceptions and fantasies of Tjaart and Stephanus. At this point, Mda overtly forces us to assume an exploitative male perspective, thus emphasising the fundamentally misogynistic nature of Niki's mistreatment. It is obvious though that Mda is critiquing this outlook and what it represents and the end of the passage further confirms this. Immediately after depicting Tjaart and Stephanus' thoughts, the narrative point of view finally comes to rest with Niki's consciousness. Crucially, this is where the scene ends. This is a significant choice as it demonstrates an ultimate allegiance to Niki, in addition to undermining what all the characters have been doing to her up until this point. That is to say, it demonstrates and recognises that Niki *does* have interiority and agency. Her imposed status as an object is thus undermined.⁶⁴ It is at this point that readers discover exactly what she

⁶² For more on the subject of women performing functions of patriarchal domination see pages 70 to 71.

⁶³ He does not actually sleep with Niki in the novel, but, as the passage in question points out, this kind of behaviour is considered the norm in the community.

⁶⁴ Clearly, Mda pays close attention to his use of narrative point of view. N. S. Zulu suggests in "Narrating Transformative Possibilities: The Collective Voice in *The Madonna of Excelsior*" that the narration of the novel is "complex and multiple, self-critical and self-mocking, ironic and satirical" (315). This captures the complexity of

is thinking: she is quietly plotting revenge for her abusive treatment. Niki's involvement in the next aspect of the novel to be discussed is, at least in part, due to this desire for retribution.

2.3.2. Scenes of Illicit Sex

Outside of the butchery, the central narrative events – the illicit sexual liaisons that would lead to the notorious ‘miscegenation’ trials – are already in motion. Niki herself has been drawn into them at this point. In the early pages of the novel, Niki, along with two friends, Maria and Mmampe, are collecting cow dung when they are accosted by Johannes Smit: “He had materialised before them with a whip in his hand. He cracked it and laughed” (14). While Maria and Mmampe are apparently titillated by Smit’s appearance as they are already on familiar terms with him, Niki has never been the object of his lascivious advances, though “[s]he had heard of white farmers whose great sport was to waylay black girls in the fields. They chased them around and played harrowing games with them” (15). Smit’s lewd intentions become even more overt as he starts giving Niki bank notes and eventually grabs her by the arm and drags her into the field while her companions keep watch. What proceeds is a harrowing description of Smit’s sexual assault on Niki. While in this instance he ejaculates prematurely – this is also true of their ensuing encounters, thus causing him to use Niki as “a masturbation gadget” (19) – on a later occasion “he entered her, rupturing and haemorrhaging her maidenhood” (19). Despite Niki initially relenting to his subsequent advances because of Maria and Mmampe’s urgings and the promise of material and financial gains, following this incident “[s]he vowed: never again” (19).

Here once more, as in the butchery scene, Niki’s agonising lack of agency is illustrated. This is accentuated by the fact that following her initial sexual assault by Smit, she goes home

Mda’s subtle and ever-shifting mode of telling. The scene just discussed is a good example of this. Not only does it demonstrate sophisticated manipulation of focalization and sympathy, but is also filled with moments of irony and mockery. Consider, for example, the suggestion that Niki had a “good weight for a mother of one who still kept the body of her maidenhood” in light of the novel’s overt feminist concerns, or the suggestion that the Cronjes “generously” supplied their workers with food in light of the way Cornelia treats Niki moments later.

Zulu also argues that there is a political dimension to the narrative perspective: “It is also a voice that subverts notions of racial and political homogeneity during and after apartheid. The voice offers corrective, but de-totalising post-apartheid alternatives that dismantle past social and ideological categories and foster nation-building. The collective voice is therefore transformative” (315-6). This becomes clear when reading many of the passages quoted in this chapter: the scare-quoted terms “girls” in the butchery scene (see page 61 above) or “coloured” with reference to Popi’s race (page 71 below), for instance. These are terms that Mda does not use lightly and his narrative setup suggests the reader should likewise not pass over unthinkingly. At times, as evinced by the quotation regarding the ‘mixed’ blood on page 64 of the novel, his approach is perhaps clumsily and naively direct in its transformative didacticism, but his critique is all the more explicit as a result.

only to find her father “drunk as usual [...] fuming because she has not cooked any food” and threatening to “beat the laziness out of her”, to “lash her buttocks with a belt until they were sour” (16-7). Furthermore, she cannot go to the police to report Smit because she would be arrested under the Immorality Act and the police would not believe her testimony over that of a white, Afrikaner man.

By the time Niki has been forced to undress in the butchery, therefore, she, along with the reader, is acutely aware of the extent of her oppression. It is thus understandable that by the end of it she is seething with rage and rancour. Niki’s vengefulness manifests in her taking Stephanus Cronje as a lover. Indeed, Mda overtly links the first time the two characters have sex to the butcher shop scene: “she peeled off her pink overall. The same pink overall she had peeled off that afternoon of shame” (50). While Stephanus’ lusting after Niki is undoubtedly linked to his fantasies about her naked body, this connection to the events in the butchery is particularly pronounced in Niki’s own thoughts at this point:

He was deep inside her. Under the stars. She looked into his eyes in the light of the moon. She did not see Stephanus Cronje, owner of Excelsior Slaghuis. She did not see a boss or a lover. She saw Madam Cornelia’s husband. And he was inside her. She was gobbling up Madam Cornelia’s husband, with the emphasis on the *Madam*. And she had him entirely in her power. Chewing him to pieces. She felt him inside her, pumping in and out. Raising a sweat. *Squealing like a pig being slaughtered. Heaving like a dying pig.*

Ag, shame. Madam Cornelia’s husband. She who had the power of life and death over her. He became a whimpering fool on top of her, babbling insanities that she could not make out. Then there was the final long scream, “Eina-naaa!” *A dog’s howl at the moon.* And two sharp jerks. It was all over. His body had vomited inside hers.

He was in control again. He had the power of life and death. (50)
(my emphasis, except for the word “Madam,” which appears in italics in the original)

Niki’s affair with Stephanus (not to mention Smit’s own obsession with her) earns her an invitation to an orgy on Johannes Smit’s farm. The resulting events are portrayed as follows:

Five women sneaked into the barn. Five supplicants walking into a wanton temple. When they left their homes, they were going to collect cow-dung in the velt. And everyone knew that. Cow-dung in the fields and not in a big barn built of corrugated-iron sheets. There was no cow-dung in the barn. But here they were, walking gingerly on the hay that carpeted the floor. Bales of hay were stacked in

one corner. Some were scattered around the floor. Creating little havens of joy. Five men sat on some of the bales. Five men in khaki shorts or grey wash 'n' wear pants. Five men drinking Johannes Smit's cherry liqueur. Two bottles from the ten that were not sold at the [cherry] festival. Johannes Smit, threatening to burst out of his grey safari suit. Johannes Smit, proudly serving the dark liquid in beer and coffee mugs. He was the host. This was his barn on the farm. His territory. The four men and five women were his guests.

He had made elaborate arrangements for this gathering of the partakers of stolen delicacies – to the extent that he had neglected some of his crucial duties. He had, for instance, left his cows at the mercy of summer pastures. Even though he knew that cows needed to be fed green-coloured legume hay in order to maintain high milk yields. Even though he was aware that cows start preparing for their next lactation as soon as they are dried off. The gathering in the barn was more important than dry cows. More important than his docile Brahmin cattle, three of which were loitering outside the barn, collecting strands of hay with their tongues and dispatching them to their stomachs. (52)

As the orgy begins, the following description is offered:

The romps on the hay deteriorated into moans. Moans relayed from one pair to another. Simultaneous moans. A barnful of moans. And howls of enjoyable pain. The baby cried [a 'mixed-race' child conceived at a similar gathering and brought along by his/her mother]. But no one paid attention. The baby bawled and bawled. The Brahmins outside went berserk. With their big ears, they had very keen hearing and were sensitive to strange noises. The Brahmin bulls bellowed and raised dust. No one paid any attention to them. A cacophony of moans, howls, baby cries and the deep bellowing of bulls. (55)

Throughout the scenes described here, there are again allusions to meat and animals. Johannes Smit is introduced menacingly brandishing a whip, an instrument that captures the oppressive force underlying the absent referent in that it is a phallic symbol used to exert power over animals and people, and is presumably made of the skin of a dead animal. His wielding a whip is part of the “great sport [of] waylay[ing] black girls in the fields”, terrorising and herding them like animals (15). Later in the novel this same activity is jarringly referred to as “*hunting expeditions for what they called swart poes*” (94) (my emphasis). Significantly, this particular characterisation of Smit's appearance and his subsequent attempted rape of Niki is the first depiction of sex in the novel, aptly foreshadowing the domineering and objectifying nature of similar acts to follow.

Furthermore, the orgy scene takes place in a barn, where cows act as a framing device: the women go to Smit's farm under the pretence of collecting cow-dung, the cows on Smit's farm are referred to during the course of the scene, and the deep bellowing of the Brahmin bulls comes towards the culmination of the orgy. They act throughout in juxtaposition to the activities within the barn. Like the women, the cattle notionally 'belong' to these men and are at their mercy. For instance, if Smit wants to have an orgy, the women are his "supplicants"; if he "left the cows at the mercy of summer pastures", they have no choice but to graze there (52). Moreover, both groups' bodies are used for the men's purposes, whether sexual or dietary and they are seen purely in terms of instrumental, rather than intrinsic value. Furthermore, as in the butcher shop, a lexical set of consumption is used in relation to the women: Smit is referred to as having "made elaborate arrangements for this gathering of the partakers of stolen *delicacies*" (52) (my emphasis), the men at the orgy are described as having "had a taste" of each other's partners (53), and, in an exchange that immediately precedes Stephanus – himself, of course, a butcher – and Niki's first copulation, Smit refers to Niki as "padkos", meaning 'food on the go' or, as Smit himself says, "my provisions for the road" (49). Once more there is an intermingling of sexual and consumptive imagery akin to Adams' proposition of

a cycle of objectification, fragmentation, and consumption, which links butchering and sexual violence in our culture. Objectification permits an oppressor to view another being as an object. The oppressor then violates this being by object-like treatment: e.g., the rape of women that denies women the freedom to say no, or the butchering of animals that converts animals from living breathing beings into dead objects. This process allows fragmentation, or brutal dismemberment, and finally consumption. (58)

There is a peculiarity about the use of the absent referent in these scenes, however: it is regularly used in relation to men as well. In other words, rather surprisingly, men themselves become absent referents here. After Smit climaxes in his initial sexual attack on Niki, he is described as lying "like a plastic bag of decaying tripe on top of her" (16); Stephanus is seen by Niki as "[s]quealing like a pig being slaughtered", as "[h]eaving like a dying pig" while having sex with Niki for the first time and then letting out "[a] dog's howl at the moon" at the point of orgasm (50); and during the orgy scene, one of the men is said to have "bleated like a goat" every time he had his underarm-hair pulled by one of the women (54). Furthermore, Niki is here

cast as the consumer. She imagines herself “gobbling up” Cornelia’s husband and “[c]hewing him to pieces” (50).

How does one account for this surprising reversal of roles? I think this inversion – in which the men are described in terms of animals and Niki is placed in the position of observer and consumer – can be accounted for via Niki’s desire for revenge. In enacting her vengeance on Cornelia by sleeping with her husband, Niki is in a broader sense claiming retribution for her subjugation more generally. In other words, she is not just getting back at Cornelia but at the patriarchal structure Cornelia operates within; not just her specific oppressors but the mode of oppression more generally. Her desire for justice means that she wants to inflict on her tormenters precisely what they have done to her. She treats men who have objectified her in the past in similar ways in these scenes; she was seen as being meat and so here they are too. There is therefore an unspoken economy of meat underpinning the power dynamics at work here. Niki’s score-settling state of mind also accounts for the particularly macabre or grotesque manifestation of the male-directed absent referent in these scenes. That is to say, the images of the men as animals or as meat underscore Niki’s sense of vindictiveness, resentment and disgust: a bag of rotting offal, a pig being slaughtered.⁶⁵

The shift in power that takes place here is also key. In treating men like absent referents, Niki is momentarily usurping their own patriarchal dominance in a way that is similar to when Cornelia becomes an agent for patriarchal oppression in the butchery. In other words, this means that she is in some sense seeing things through male eyes, again accounting for the use of the absent referent. Importantly, of course, her revenge here cannot be seen as being in any way substantial. The control she is able to exert over her oppressors is fleeting, superficial and never truly her own. While having sex with Stephanus she experiences herself as “ha[ving] him entirely in her power”, this man “who had the power of life and death over her”, but once it is over “[h]e was in control again” (50). She may be able to access or interrupt this control briefly, but she cannot ultimately escape her entrenched subaltern position. Like Cornelia in the butchery, she can only act (however briefly in Niki’s case) within the bounds of the male-dominated structure itself.

While Adams does not explicitly address this phenomenon of women seeing men as absent referents, this is not incompatible with her argument. Niki’s is not a true inversion, but

⁶⁵ These images also reflect Mda’s critique of Afrikaner masculinity.

rather one that still operates within a patriarchal structure, and as such is still part of the mechanisms that Adams and other ecofeminists critique. Ecofeminism examines *structures* of oppression rather than fixating on who is being oppressed and by whom.⁶⁶ As such, Niki's momentary operation within a pre-existing edifice of domination is entirely consistent with Adams' theory.

At the end of the orgy scene the narrative shifts once more into Niki's consciousness. She "suddenly felt the weight of a chilling ball of iron somewhere between her stomach and her lungs" (56). She realises that she is pregnant and that the child is Stephanus' and not her husband Pule's, who is a migrant mine worker. This pregnancy, and the child – Popi – to whom Niki gives birth, is what ultimately leads to the final, and perhaps most harrowing of examples of the absent referent to be discussed here.

2.3.3. The Baby Roasting Scene

When Niki gives birth to Popi, no one is surprised by her skin tone: by this time, many "almost white babies" had been born to black mothers (59). The news of the "coloured" babies soon spread beyond the Mahlatswetsa Location to the police (59). Niki receives word that they have been incarcerating 'mixed race' infants and their mothers, including Maria and Mmampe and their children. A doctor has even been called for from Bloemfontein "to confirm that the blood was indeed mixed" (64). Niki is initially puzzled by this, wondering "how it was possible for a doctor to tell if the blood was mixed or not. Mixed with what? Was it not all red?" (64).⁶⁷ Once the truth of this news and the danger she is in becomes undeniable, however, Niki panics. Her consequent actions are as follows:

She scurried back to her shack. Like a field-mouse sensing a rainstorm.

She retrieved the brazier from the back of the shack where it had been gathering summer rust, waiting for its winter tasks of warming the house and cooking the food. She carefully placed the dry grass and twigs at its base. She piled dry cow-dung on the twigs and ignited the dry grass.

While the fire was burning outside, she pumped the primus stove and boiled a little water in a kettle. She poured the water into a blue enamel washing basin, placed it on a grass mat and knelt next to it, holding Popi's head over the steamy water. The baby cried as her mother worked up a rich lather of Lifeboy

⁶⁶ See the introduction of this thesis (5).

⁶⁷ See note 64.

Soap on her head. Her hair slid between Niki's fingers like green algae filaments. The top of her head was pulsating like a wild heartbeat. With a Minora razor blade, she shaved her little daughter's head clean. No stranger would know that the hair that belonged on that bald head was not black and matted. Not nappy. Not frizzy.

But Popi was still pink. They would see that she was of mixed blood.

Niki took the smoking brazier into the shack and placed it on the floor. She held a naked Popi above the fire, smoking the pinkness out of her. Both heat and smoke would surely brown her and no one would say she was a light-skinned child again. The baby whooped, then yelled, as the heat of the brazier roasted her little body and the smoke stung her eyes and nostrils. Cow-dung smoke is gentle in reasonable doses. But this was an overdose. There was so much that it made even Niki's eyes stream. She assured the baby that it was for her own good. She sang a lullaby as she swung her over the fire. Rocking her from side to side. Turning her round and round so that she would be browned on both sides. Evenly.

(65-6)

This goes on for five sleepless nights before the police come. By this stage "the baby's skin began to peel from her chest right up to her neck. [She] became truly coloured, with red and blue blotches all over" (66).

This moment is in some sense the prime example of the absent referent in the text. It is this process depicted in its most extreme, shocking and literal incarnation. We see Niki described as quite literally cooking the flesh of her baby. Mda again explicitly chooses language to cast the scene in precisely these terms: Niki uses the brazier employed to warm her house and cook her food; she is said to have "roasted" Popi; and in doing so, "[t]urning her round and round so that she would be browned on both sides. Evenly".

This passage also shows the process of the absent referent in its most bizarre manifestation. That is to say, how can one account for a mother roasting her own child – particularly when just a few pages earlier Niki was described as lovingly and attentively "enjoying the softness of the baby's body against hers, careful not to hold her too tightly against her breast, lest she squeezed all life out of her tiny body" (59)? The answer seems to be rooted in Niki's sense of desperation (Mda likening her to a scurrying field-mouse is another fitting animal analogy). As in all the scenes discussed above, Niki is trapped by her situation and here it is at its worst. Throughout the foregoing passages we also see Niki losing a sense of levelheadedness, precisely because of her restrictive and threatening facticity: she fervidly plots revenge, she sleeps with Afrikaner men out of desperation and vengeance, and she begins to see things as

those who oppress her do. Here Niki's lack of mental equanimity is at its worst – it has become bad enough to enable her to inflict serious burns on her infant daughter.

Beyond merely losing a sense of perspective because of her desperate circumstances, however, there is a more particular and disturbing process at work here. That is, Niki's behaviour demonstrates that her baby has become an absent referent to her. This has to be the case in order for her treatment of Popi to be at all possible. Despite her baby's crying and screaming, Niki continues to burn her over the fire. In order for her to be able to do this – these actions would surely be otherwise impossible for a parent to commit – she has to have stopped thinking of her offspring as being anything other than flesh, as being just meat. Following Adams, this is what needs to happen to enable anyone to cook another being's body, and exponentially more so for a parent to do so to her child.

Moreover, this is, of course, an externally imposed perspective. Niki would obviously not naturally feel this way. She has instead come to see her child as others do – specifically, through “the myopic, distorting lens of apartheid's Office for Race Classification”, as well as through the eyes of the police, the Afrikaner community and, at core, the patriarchal system of oppression (Kennelly 5). This is analogous to her assuming a male gaze in regarding Smit and Stephanus as meat, but here it lacks any sense of justice or retribution and is merely tragic. Niki's child is being hunted down just because of her race – because of her flesh, in other words – and consequently Niki is forced to see her child only in these terms in order to try to manage the situation. This is thrown into sharp relief by Niki's tender and loving treatment of Popi in the foregoing pages (as quoted above), her attempts to soothe her (for example, “[s]he sang a lullaby as she swung her over the fire. Rocking her from side to side” [Mda, *Madonna* 66]) and her own awareness of the absurdity of the search for babies with “mixed blood” (“Was it not all red?”). She has clearly not gone insane, but is rather trying to contend with her dire circumstances. This moment therefore marks the final extent of Niki's subjugation, desperation and her ultimate defeat.

It also brings the concept of the absent referent into an overtly racial realm, since Popi becomes an absent referent purely because of her supposedly problematic skin-colour. The subject of race has naturally been of importance throughout this discussion, but in this scene the connection is established most concretely. Adams dedicates various portions of *The Sexual*

Politics of Meat to discussing race, but this is mostly in terms of the historical evidence she considers. With regard to the absent referent itself, she really only gestures briefly towards race:

Through the structure of the absent referent, a dialectic of absence and presence of oppressed groups occurs. What is absent refers back to one oppressed group while defining another. This has theoretical implications for class and race as well as violence against women and animals. Whereas I want to focus on the overlapping oppression of women and animals, further exploration of the function of the absent referent is needed [...]

(Adams 55)

This is to be found in Mda's narrative. In it race has a bearing on the absent referent.⁶⁸ All of the foregoing textual excerpts demonstrate some sense in which race forms part of the dialectic Adams describes here: the fact that these women are black is a crucial aspect of their treatment as meat. They are often seen from a male Afrikaner perspective as being sub-human, over-sexualised and object-like precisely because of the intersection of their skin colour with their sex. These are markedly *black* female subjectivities that are elided and seen as meat.

Beyond this, there are no more major scenes in the novel that deal with the absent referent. Following this episode are Niki and Popi's arrest and the miscegenation trials, as well as their aftermath, traced through into contemporary South Africa with Popi as an adult and Niki as an ageing woman. Perhaps the reason the novel does not really engender the absent referent after this point is because it is so closely aligned with the apartheid regime in the novel, and soon after the trials, the nascent transition to democracy begins.

There is, however, a further issue that requires consideration here: a shortfall of Mda's depiction of the absent referent in the novel, to which the final section of this chapter is dedicated.

2.4. Concluding Remarks

This final section aims to address what I will suggest is a major limitation of the novel: that Mda's rendering of the absent referent in *The Madonna of Excelsior* is ultimately *only* focussed on women, not both women *and* animals. In all the passages quoted above, Mda is only

⁶⁸ Apropos of Adams' comment, class also plays a role in the novel with regard to sex and meat. Consider, for example, the fact that Niki eventually caves in to Smit's sexual advances because of the prospect of financial and material improvements, or the emphasis placed in the butchery scene on the status of meat as a luxury product ("The butchery was a necessary stop-off whenever people had bank notes burning in their purses and pockets" [40]).

concerned with Niki and other black women's positioning under apartheid generally, not with the animals and animal bodies they are compared to. Or, to paraphrase a sentence from one of these passages, to Mda the gathering in the barn is more important than the cows outside (Mda 52). Simply put, he cares about women here and not about animals and their consumption by humans.

This is to some extent understandable. Niki, along with Popi, is one of Mda's main characters and as such he is primarily concerned with telling her story. Depicting individual narratives is, after all, one of the core concerns of literature as an art form. Moreover, a purely feminist approach (that is to say, one that is concerned *only* with women's oppression) is not in itself a problem, nor is a particular focus on blackness.

However, the novel itself invites an *ecofeminist* reading, as the foregoing discussion has demonstrated. By deliberately evoking the absent referent, Mda is committed to a fully intersectional approach if he is to do the concept justice at all. Adams states this very simply, suggesting that "in analysing the oppression of human beings, the oppression of animals ought not to be ignored" (56). The point here is that within an *ecofeminist* framework the objectifications of women, black people and animals are necessarily interrelated, as they are subjugated by the same oppressive force. This indelible interconnection means that speaking of one necessitates addressing the others. But Mda does not do this, or at least not entirely. While he depicts the overlap of female and black persecution, he only gestures towards animals. Mda includes them in order to explore an ostensibly *ecofeminist* theme, but ultimately uses animals merely as means to his narrative ends while not seriously considering them as suffering subjects in the way he does with, say, Niki. In this sense, Mda's treatment of animals is typical of the works of South African literature quoted in the introduction to this thesis, and is analogous to Venter's and the old *plaasromans*' discussed in the previous chapter.

Moreover, he is, ironically, himself falling into the trap of the absent referent. He uses animals and their flesh throughout the novel, while eliding them *qua* animals. Adams addresses this tendency when defining the absent referent:

There are actually three ways by which animals become absent referents. One is literally: [...] through meat eating they are literally absent because they are dead. Another is definitional: when we eat animals we change the way we talk about them, for instance, we no longer talk about baby animals but about veal or lamb [...] the word *meat* has an absent referent, the dead animals.⁶⁹ The third way is

⁶⁹ See footnote 59 for more on this sense of the term.

metaphorical. Animals become metaphors for describing people's experiences. In this metaphorical sense, the meaning of the absent referent derives from its application or reference to something else. As the absent referent becomes metaphor, its meaning is lifted to a "higher" or more imaginative function than its own existence might merit or reveal. (Adams 51-2)

Adams goes on to characterise this third, "metaphorical" use of the term as follows:

Metaphorically, the absent referent can be anything whose original meaning is undercut as it is absorbed into a different hierarchy of meaning; in this case the original meaning of animals' fates is absorbed into a human-centered hierarchy. [...] The absent referent is both there and not there. It is there through inference, but its meaningfulness reflects only upon what it refers to because the originating, literal, experience that contributes the meaning is not there. We fail to accord this absent referent its own existence. (52)

Mda is certainly guilty of this "metaphorical" use of animals as absent referents for the sake of the more 'important' purpose of representing human suffering, thus omitting animal experience in service of "a human-centered hierarchy".⁷⁰ Adams critiques this tendency in "[f]eminist critics [who] perceive the violence inherent in representations that collapse sexuality and consumption" but then offer a markedly one-sided account (71). She observes that "[t]hese feminist theories take us to the intersection of the oppression of women and the oppression of animals and then do an immediate about-face, seizing the function of the absent referent only to forward women's issues, not animals', and so reflecting a patriarchal structure" (72). These words could equally have been written about Mda's novel.

The novel discussed in the next chapter marks a significant departure from this. Not only does it bring meat into conspicuous prominence, as in the Venter and Mda texts, but goes further to pay serious attention to animal suffering as well. That is to say, it does not just use animal

⁷⁰ It might be objected that any literary treatment of animal subjects necessarily omits animal experience in this way, merely due to the (rather platitudinous) fact that literature is by its very nature "human-centered" by virtue of being written by humans, for humans. As Marian Scholtmeijer puts it: "As soon as language begins to articulate the vital inner experience of animals, the suspicion arises that culture is learning more about itself that animals *per se*" (89). This is, however, more a question of the accuracy or authenticity with which animal experience can be conveyed in a human-centered project, rather than a question of eliding animal experience altogether in service of human ends. It is this elision that the notion of the absent referent is problematising (when meat is separated from the animal subjects whence it came; when names given to meat distinguish it from actual animal bodies; and when animals are used as mere metaphors to shed light on human characters).

anguish to punctuate human problems, but in fact posits that human and animal suffering are of the same order.

Chapter 3

Animal Suffering and Human (Dis)connection in *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs*

3.1. Introduction

The final major subject of this thesis, *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs* (1991) by Damon Galgut, is a markedly different novel from those examined in the two preceding chapters. Most notably, it is the only one of the three principal texts that substantially (rather than merely superficially) gives consideration to animal subjects. Independent of this, I also think it is the finest among the three books. *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs* is more tightly constructed and carefully weighed than either *Trencherman* or *The Madonna of Excelsior*, despite the latter texts' many merits. There is a Coetzee-like meticulousness to Galgut's writing. These two authors also, of course, share a mutual concern for animals, though unlike Coetzee – and, indeed, Mda and Venter – Galgut's reflections on animals are limited to this single text. As a result, *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs* will be the only Galgut novel referred to here. Moreover, because of the novel's complexity, particularly in its treatment of animals, this chapter will be the one most extensively occupied in the project of close reading.

Unlike *The Good Doctor* (2003) – arguably Galgut's most famous work – *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs* has garnered very little critical attention. It has received some brief, general mentions in a number of books and papers, and on a few occasions is discussed more extensively in relation to other texts. However, apart from a single exception (to which I will turn in a moment), there have been no academic articles dedicated exclusively to the novel. This seems strange since, as Andrew van der Vlies points out in his review of Galgut's revised reissue of the novel⁷¹ “*The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs* offers keenly observed, disciplined writing [...] [and] is Damon Galgut's strongest work” (23).⁷²

⁷¹The novel, Galgut's second, was originally published in 1991. However, after the publication of *The Good Doctor*, Galgut revised the early version of *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs* and republished it in 2006. He writes in the “Author's Note” to this new edition: “This book has troubled me since it was first published [...]. The rhythms of the language have always sounded discordant on my ear. It has been many years since it was last in print, but now that it is being reissued, I have taken the opportunity to rework it. It is not a new book, but it's not quite the old one either”. This poses an interesting challenge to scholars of the text (notwithstanding their small number) since the novel effectively exists in two distinct forms. I have chosen the 2006 version for a number of reasons: firstly, because it is clearly the version Galgut himself prefers. Secondly, as van der Vlies notes, the later version is “lightly rewritten” and “devastating in the lucidity and austere assurance of its prose”, thus echoing Galgut's own feelings about the text's language in comparison to its earlier incarnation (23). Finally, the later edition is also currently more widely available. While some of the criticism I refer to here is based on the original edition, this does not make any

The few academic responses that mention the novel can be grouped according to four broad (often overlapping) themes: homosexuality;⁷³ gender, with a particular focus on masculinity;⁷⁴ transition and post-apartheid writing;⁷⁵ and literature dealing with war, particularly the so-called ‘Border War’ between SWAPO (South West African People’s Organisation) and the SADF (South African Defence Force).⁷⁶ While these issues will enter my consideration of the novel peripherally at times, my focus lies elsewhere: with the book’s portrayal of animals. The animals depicted in the text, particularly those slaughtered for meat – clearly an important aspect of the novel given its title – have been almost entirely ignored by critics.

The only article dedicated exclusively to the novel and which pays due attention to its animal representations is Jesse Arseneault’s “Brute Violence and Vulnerable Animality: A Reading of Postcoloniality, Animals, and Masculinity in Damon Galgut’s *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs*”. This paper, like my chapter, approaches the novel from the perspective of animal studies. According to Arseneault, “animal studies obliges us to acknowledge, in its most fundamental arguments, that the categorical cleavage between human and animal is [...] faulty” (3). This is the starting point of his discussion and it is this “cleavage” that he suggests Galgut disrupts. Arseneault is most interested in the subject of suffering in this regard, “particularly where the lines between human suffering and animal suffering become blurred, where ostensibly easy distinctions fall apart” (3). He looks at this within the context of postcoloniality generally, but especially with regard to apartheid South Africa. Given the country’s colonial history, and its legacy of patriarchal dominance over black people, women and indeed animals, he suggests that “animals and animality are intimately connected particularly to notions of violence and colonial

substantial difference, in part because their references to the novel are brief and without major importance to my own discussion of the text, but also because both versions are fundamentally about the same concerns, despite some cosmetic semantic differences.

⁷² The lack of critical interest in the novel could be accounted for by its content: the story of a young white man dealing with his traumatic experience of the Border War. It also explores animal welfare issues. While these are the central concerns of this chapter, they were outside of the scope of interest of post-apartheid literary criticism around the time of the novel’s release.

⁷³ Some of the more extensive discussions of the novel in relation to the themes mentioned above can be found in the following texts: Shaun de Waal’s “A Thousand Forms of Love: Homosexual Desire in South African Literature” and Michiel Heyns’ “Gay Writing and the State of Emergency”.

⁷⁴ Anne Reef’s “Try These: Tackling Representations of Rugby in Recent South African Novels”.

⁷⁵ Deirdre Byrne’s “Versions of Transgression: Recent South African Writing”, Annie Gagiano’s “Two Late Apartheid-Era Novels: Balancing the Books in the South African Present” and Heyns “The Whole Country’s Truth: Confession and Narrative in Recent White South African Writing”.

⁷⁶ Paul Mason’s PhD thesis, entitled “Contesting Masculinities: A Study of Selected Texts of Resistance to Conscripted into the South African Defence Force (SADF) in the 1980s”.

manhood and masculinity” (3). Arseneault’s concern with this distinction between animals and humans in terms of suffering is thus seen as deeply linked with the kind of hypermasculinity, initially ushered in by colonialism, which bled into apartheid South Africa. His argument is that *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs* “represents a foundation to burgeoning contemporary conversations about animal life in postcolonial criticism”; that is to say, the kind of conversation his article explicates and which is outlined here (17). He reads the novel as an early recognition of the connection between animal suffering and oppressive masculinity. Moreover, according to Arseneault, the text erodes a dichotomous conception of humans and animals.

I agree with him in this regard. My reading of the text also sees it as fundamentally concerned with the suffering of animals and with our connection to them. As such, I will be referring to Arseneault’s article throughout. However, our arguments diverge significantly in terms of content and methodology. I attempt to move beyond the intangible conceptual or ethical relation the text establishes between human and non-human animals to suggest that it simultaneously points to a manifest disjuncture between the two. Moreover, my approach to the text is very different from Arseneault’s. While he establishes a complex philosophical framework through which to approach the text, my project is one of close reading. In other words, Arseneault is more concerned with theoretical analysis, while I attempt to look more closely at the novel itself. These two approaches are by no means mutually exclusive, however. In fact, while this chapter is not written as a response or continuation of Arseneault’s text, it could certainly be fruitfully read alongside it. The final, and perhaps the most crucial difference, given the broader subject of this dissertation, is that Arseneault pays little attention to the subject of eating, whereas this is my overriding concern.

In terms of the particulars of my argument, the core theme of this chapter, as mentioned above, is the way in which *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs* deals with the subject of suffering. Specifically, I am interested in the psychological trauma experienced by the novel’s narrator and how this affects his narration, the continuity the text establishes between human and animal suffering, and finally, the disruption of this continuity in the novel, as well as the way in which the narrator’s psychological trauma ultimately serves to illustrate the mechanisms through which humans are able to dissociate themselves from animal suffering. The discussion is divided into several sections, each dealing with one of these concerns. I will be looking extensively at

passages from the novel, drawing, where relevant, on the limited secondary material available, in order to unpack these ideas carefully.

3.2. Suffering and Narration

The novel is narrated by Patrick Winter, a white, English-speaking South African man in his early twenties, who tells of a journey he takes with his mother to Namibia to visit her boyfriend, Godfrey, a black Namibian not much older than her son. Godfrey is one in a series of transient companions that Ellen, Patrick's mother, has had following her divorce. The visit to Namibia takes place on the eve of the country's first democratic elections in the late 1980s – a period of political tumult in which Godfrey is deeply involved as a SWAPO-activist. Upon their arrival in Windhoek, where Godfrey lives in one of the townships, the Winters are informed that they will be leaving again the next day for Swakopmund where Godfrey's fellow activist, Andrew Lovell, has been killed. While Ellen is displeased with this arrangement, having expected a more romantic reception, she concedes to drive west with Godfrey. Once in the city, they help organise Lovell's memorial service, which is equal parts funeral and political rally. This affords Patrick the opportunity not only to get to know his mother's latest lover, but also to become more acquainted with the political activities in which Godfrey and Lovell had been involved. By the time the funeral is over, the increasingly strained relationship between Patrick's mother and Godfrey has ended and she has seemingly moved on to a new prospective partner: Dirk Blaauw, a middle-aged, conservative Afrikaner whom they meet in their hotel. Patrick's mother offers him a lift and so, after dropping Godfrey off in Windhoek to join a long queue at the polling station on voting day, they drive back to South Africa together.

Patrick's first-person narration of his journey to Namibia is regularly interspersed with memories and reflections. In fact, his recollections occupy a significant proportion of the narrative space; some as asides interposed among contemporary events, others taking up entire chapters. The focus here will be predominantly on this more contemplative aspect of Patrick's narrative, rather than on the major plot developments outlined above. Patrick recalls moments from his childhood, his family life and his recent experience as a conscript in the South African army. A salient feature of these regular recollections is that they are predominantly painful. Furthermore, one gets a sense early on that Patrick has suffered some kind of trauma which might account for his state of mind. Annie Gagiano suggests that from the very "strange" title of

the novel “one senses that something in Patrick has gone awry, has been twisted away from what is wholesome” (98). Moreover, in the opening pages, as the Winters arrive on Patrick’s grandmother’s farm en route to Namibia, there are already subtle intimations of there being something amiss with the novel’s narrator:

I was given the room in the attic, where the roof sloped down. I had always slept here, since I was a small boy, in the days and days I’d stayed on this farm, when my mother still loved my father.

I unpacked my clothes, though it was not necessary to do so: we were leaving again the next day. But for some reason the orderly routine, as well as the friction of fingers on cloth, was comforting to me. I sorted and stashed my clothes into drawers and pushed them carefully closed. Then I sat on the bed, staring out the window, to where the last of the sunlight was fading. It gave me a small shock when I turned to see my mother watching me from the doorway, her arms folded across her chest. I didn’t know how long she’d been there.

“You gave me a fright,” I told her.

“Sorry. I thought you knew I was here. Do you want a pill?”

“No. Thank you.”

“Supper’s almost ready.”

“I’ll be there,” I said. “I’m coming now.”

But she didn’t go. She stayed there, watching me. (Galgut 1-2)

This initial passage is peppered with hints of Patrick’s troubled state of mind: the reference to his parents’ marital problems, the pointlessness of the act of unpacking, his need of comfort (“the friction of fingers on cloth, was comforting to me”), the meticulousness of his actions (“I sorted and stashed my clothes into drawers and pushed them carefully closed”), the telling stare into the distance, his mother quietly observing him, the shock he experiences upon seeing her, the strained and loaded nature of their exchange, and, most tellingly, the reference to his pills (we later learn these are Valium). Moreover, the entirety of this brief scene (quoted in full above) has an eeriness about it. Even the slope of the ceiling seems foreboding. These subtle cues establish the tenor of the strange, strained and restrained narration that Patrick delivers.

The information regarding his uneasy disposition slowly begins to accumulate. There are several ominous scattered references to an unnamed illness – an interaction with his grandmother in which Patrick reveals that his health “will take a long time” to fully recover (3), another tense exchange between parent and child when his father asks him over the phone if he has been taking his medicine (4), and so on. Patrick begins referring more explicitly to his health a few chapters later. Once he and his mother have arrived in Windhoek and are preparing to meet up with

Godfrey for the first time, Patrick has an experience in his hotel room that recalls a kind of Sartrean nausea:

While the water gushed into the tub, sending up clouds of steam, I sat on the edge, feeling weary and worn out. Suddenly and without apparent reason, a familiar sensation started up at the base of my belly, spreading outwards to my arms and legs. It was a spasm, a shaking, a shadow passing over my soul. These little episodes had come to be referred to, in the language that has evolved between me and my doctors, as ‘attacks’. My attacks were part biological, part psychological, and they tore me up like a thin piece of paper. My teeth chattered. My bones vibrated. I perched on the enamel rim, trying to assuage my grief. I was oppressed and horrified by things. The angularity of objects. The symmetry of tiles. (42)

These are the ripples of an ordeal that lies somewhere at the centre of the narrative; they gesture towards a disturbance, but reveal nothing about its cause.

The actual details of this disturbance – the major trauma at the heart of the novel – are only explicitly brought to light in Chapter 9, more than three quarters of the way through the book. Patrick ultimately reveals that he experienced a breakdown as a soldier in the border conflict. He suggests that “[i]t seemed to begin when Lappies was killed” (98). Lappies was the one person Patrick was able to relate to in the army and was not only a close friend but also, briefly, a sexual partner. Lappies was killed when ambushed during a patrol and left in the bush to die. Patrick characterises his response to his friend’s death as follows:

Afterwards I walked alone through the camp, not sure of where I was going. I felt deeply, vulnerably alone. There was a sudden, pervasive sense of unreality to everything. [...] I walked between the tents, the faces, as though they were very far away from me, unable to touch on my life. The sky was vibrating overhead like a white translucent veil, concealing immanent truths behind it, on the point of revelation. But it didn’t quite tear. (98)

Following this is a spiralling series of hazy and disjointed memories – including, most disturbingly, a suicide attempt and having to dispose of Lappies’ and the other ambushed patrol members’ corpses – narrated by an increasingly fractured consciousness. Patrick continually draws attention to this, reflecting on the “intermittent, patchy feel to [his] memory, in which certain random moments are clear” (100) and the sense that his “life was receding, becoming transparent and thin. It was as if the world was wearing around me, leaving only bright,

particular patches of memory” (102). Patrick eventually reaches the point at which his “mind finally tipped over” (103), the imminent “point of revelation” (98) referred to above:

It happened slowly. I was lying in bed, very calm and quiet, still wet from taking a shower. Other soldiers were moving around me, doing their little everyday tasks. Then time altered shape. Seconds stretched out like years; a lifetime unfolded inside me. I stood up from the bed, trying to say something, but I didn't know what, or how.

A soldier in the next bed, looking very alarmed, said, “What? What?”

Life, I saw clearly, was pain. A white, molten stream, it poured without end, hardening into temporary form: the bodies around me, the beds, the tents, the ground, were the physical shape of this pain. But I was melting, I was breaking the mould. I felt my knees cracking. I sank to the ground. Then I started to cry. I beat my fists on the ground.⁷⁷ (103) (my emphasis)

Patrick's revelation that the essence of life is suffering provides, at least as I read it, the key to the rest of the text.

This central traumatic event – one that posits pain as the essential truth of existence – is what accounts for the nature of Patrick's narration. His story is told in a somewhat reticent way, and is revealing only in brief glimpses. He seems distracted and cut off from his surroundings throughout. While he is not unreliable or untruthful, one senses clearly that his suppression is the result of his gradual processing of distress. As Patrick himself points out early on: “A numbness had crept into my life, so that no fact could hurt me again” (7). Patrick's psychological breakdown in the war is what causes this continuing numbness. It explains the scattered hints of a trauma throughout the text, as well as this trauma's belated disclosure. When Patrick's psychological ordeal is revealed, one becomes aware of its resounding presence in his life and the story he tells. It reverberates through the narrative like the cry Patrick lets out shortly after he collapses on the ground: “I opened my mouth and fetched up a scream from deep inside me, from all the years of my little life behind me” (103).

Not only does this crucial moment of realization explain the *form* of narration that we are confronted with, but also the *content*, the actual things that Patrick speaks about and remembers; all the things “from all the years of [his] little life”. The events and experiences he focusses on are mostly painful. Patrick's description of his memory following his breakdown in the army

⁷⁷ There is another major attack of this kind which happens in the narrative present at the Lovell memorial service in Chapter 10. I will return to this point later on pages 105 to 106.

works as a microcosm for how memory operates in the novel generally: the “bright, particular patches” that remain burn ultimately with anguish (102). Pain forms the lens through which Patrick experiences the world and it therefore shapes what he narrates.⁷⁸ This reaches its zenith in his recollections about the border, but it is true of most of what he recounts. In addition to his ‘national service’, he mostly meditates on his strained family relationships: his parents’ unhappy marriage and eventual divorce; his fear of his brother, Malcolm, and his father and their fraternising exclusion of him; his complicated relationship with his mother; and his brother’s death in “an ordinary traffic accident” while in the army (18).

Similarly, the contemporary events that preoccupy him are as troubling: his mother’s capricious and demanding character, his sense of guilt and regret regarding his personal life, Namibia’s political turmoil that often results in violence and death, his confrontation with pervasive racism and so on. These themes are amplified as they are filtered through his jaded and detached experience of the world and acquire an added poignancy as they are told from the perspective of a damaged, perpetual outsider.

3.3. Suffering and the Connection between Human and Animal

At this point, I can turn to the main concern of this chapter: the relevance to animals of the prevalence of pain in the novel. A centrally important incident in this respect occurs in the third chapter. It is the episode that gives the novel its title, in which Patrick meditates on the cry of a pig facing death. On the morning following their arrival on his grandmother’s farm he “woke to the sound of a pig being killed” (27). He sits up “rigidly” in bed, “not moving until the noise suddenly stopped” (27). This is what he recounts (it is worth quoting at length):

I had forgotten this about the farm. Its calendar runs on slaughter: Tuesday morning, the pig; on Wednesday, a sheep; on Friday, a goat. In between all these,

⁷⁸ At this point, it might be appropriate to address a divergence between my reading of the novel and Arseneault’s. At the end of his article, Arseneault accuses Galgut (by way of Mahmood Mamdani) of fixating on animal death in a way that embodies a kind of “pornography of violence” – that is, an uncontextualised and gratuitous fascination with gory details (16). He refers to this in relation to Galgut’s depictions of slaughter (which I will turn to presently) and suggests that Galgut rarely depict animals as “legitimate subjects for concern in the text” (16). If we take seriously the insight that life is pain and that this informs the narration, then it becomes clear that Galgut’s depictions of violence are neither gratuitous nor pornographic, but demonstrative of the suffering that pervades existence. Pain presupposes a sufferer of that pain and the focus on animal pain in the novel entails a consideration for animal subjectivity on Galgut’s part. The remainder of this chapter attempts to illustrate this point, specifically that Galgut takes animal suffering seriously. Moreover, I account for why, at times, the novel might seem to exhibit impassivity in this regard.

at arbitrary times, any number of chickens meet their fate. All of this death to support human life: the flesh goes into our bodies, to keep us alive, to keep us going.

Animals are killed in different ways. There are specialized methods according to which each one meets its end. When I was younger, my mother had brought me up here for weekends and holidays, and I watched many of these executions with appalled fascination. Chickens had their heads chopped clean off with an axe. Goats and sheep had their throats cut. They were led out to a patch of bare ground beneath the stable, where they were pinned to the ground, their heads were pulled back and their arteries opened. What horrified me most was the mechanical indifference of the killing, the impassive face of the man who held the knife, which contrasted obscenely with the panic of the dying animal. Chickens were the most frenzied: they ran around insanely, spouting blood. The sheep were the most docile. They stood almost stupidly as they bled, watching the world fade away.

Pigs were a different matter. The pigs had their legs trussed up and were rolled onto their backs. Then a thin iron filament was pushed into them, into the heart. (27-8)

Patrick's retrospective gaze falls unflinchingly on the killing of the animals on the farm in all of its cruel, bloody detail. Not only are the forms of execution brutal – decapitation, throat slitting, impalement – but so is the simultaneously random and methodical nature of the killing. That it is at once arbitrary and particular – some animals are only killed on certain days, others whenever 'needed' – evinces a deep and unflinching lack of concern for the creatures themselves, despite their obvious distress and pain. The animals seem to be seen by their executioners as no more than inanimate resources to exploit, part of the farm's landscape, with no concern for the pain they feel. This is a visceral illustration of Adams' absent referent at work.⁷⁹

The second salient feature is the tone of Patrick's narration. His characteristically detached tone is perhaps here at its starkest. Despite the cruelty his words convey, his voice is markedly impassive. His tenor mirrors the "mechanical indifference" of "the man who held the knife". Patrick is also captivated, however. In reliving this childhood experience, he reveals much about his current state. A disparity between his youthful and present self is evident: as a child he was both fascinated and horrified at watching the slaughter; now he is only fascinated. This is, of course, indicative of his disturbed condition. This early moment in the narrative is thus another clear tremor of an as yet unrevealed horror. Patrick himself is aware of this. He muses about his response to the sound of the dying pig – which he compares, among other

⁷⁹ See the previous chapter of this thesis, which deals with the absent referent throughout.

things, to the sound “of the hinges of the world tearing loose” (more on this below)⁸⁰ – suggesting “[i]t was a sign of my state of mind or soul that on this particular morning the screaming of the pig sounded almost beautiful to me” (28).⁸¹

As further evidence of his questionable mental state, he goes on to say that the dying animal’s scream “didn’t evoke violence or fear, but a train of gentle childhood memories. Soft-focus memories, moments on the farm” (28-9). Naturally, as is the case throughout the narrative, these memories are not entirely pleasant. As he walks around, he is struck by recollections of his youthful experiences of the farm. He thinks in particular of “a little coloured girl” named Margaret who was his playmate and whom he “loved as much as [his] age would allow” (33):

Her father was one of the workers on the farm. But to me Margaret was an equal, a companion provided by the strange spaces of the farm. She wore soiled cotton dresses and men’s broken shoes. She picked her nose and the scabs on her legs. We wandered around the countryside together, finding things to amuse us, only parting at the end of the day when it was time for me to go inside the big house again. (33)

Characteristically, what is striking about Patrick’s memories of Margaret is the pain at their core, but they contain another salient feature: they are filled with animals. In fact, animals feature about as prominently in these recollections as the human figures do. They are what trigger his memory of Margaret in the first place, in much the same way as the nostalgic remembrance of his youth spent on the farm is triggered by the slaughter of the pig. When Patrick comes across the old farm well he recalls how he used to hunt frogs there with this long forgotten childhood friend:

Looking down now over the edge of the well, I saw a picture of Margaret and me, tense and trembling with excitement, eyes shining, as we lowered bread-covered hooks on lines of thread. A twitch, a pull, and in a moment we had a frog: a struggling fistful of slime.

⁸⁰ See pages 93 to 94.

⁸¹ Slaughter is a prominent trope in South African literature. In particular, it is widely used to illustrate tension, anxiety or trauma in relation to human characters. See, for example, J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, in which David Lurie is unsettled by the prospect of two tethered Persian sheep being slaughtered (123-6); Marlene van Niekerk’s *Agaat*, in which the eponymous character is traumatised when learning how to slaughter a sheep (94-100), Zoë Wicomb’s *October*, in which the character Sylvie prays as a small child that her beloved kid, Bokkie, would not get have to be slaughtered and asked: “Could she not herself be slaughtered instead?” (72); and in David Medalie’s “The Shooting of the Christmas Cows”, in which a young girl is disturbed by witnessing the killing and dismemberment of a cow on a friend’s farm. Investigating this trend would be a fruitful area for further research.

There was a rock nearby – our operating table. We would lay out the frogs on their backs and cut open their bellies with a sharp piece of glass. Unzipped, exposed, their tiny hearts beat for our gaze. This innocent cruelty spun my mind around, half in shame, half in joy. Where was Margaret now? What had happened to her? (33)

His recollection of their hunts is at once tenderly nostalgic and starkly medical, and is tinged with a sense of regret that pervades his remembrance of Margaret. In the same moment he also recalls an event involving a cormorant.

Nearby was a windmill, broken, lopsided, disused. And I remembered a day when a cormorant – exhausted and lost, far from the sea – had landed on one of the sails to rest. Cormorants struggle to fly, they need space in which to take off, and on this particular day a wind came up and set the windmill suddenly moving. Margaret and I, at work on our frogs, had turned to the sight of a bird dropping cleanly out of the sky. We ran to it, frightened, with our frog bloodied hands. It died on the ground as we watched. (33-4)

Following this, Patrick recalls a similarly puzzling and peculiar incident involving a pair of dogs mating and his terrifying grandfather:⁸²

Another memory: this one nearer the house, on the old see-saw. Margaret and I were playing, going up and down in a regular, gentle rhythm. Near us, on the grass, two dogs were mating. They were mongrels that belonged to the workers; bony, sick-looking creatures. As they staggered around in their weird dance we paid them no attention; we had seen it before. All around the farm, in between the death we casually inflicted, life was making more life: cattle and chickens and pigs were all at it, a rampant, blind, voracious rutting.

All at once, from the back of the house, my grandfather came running. [...] He had his whip in his hand and for a terrified instant I thought that we were the object of his fury. But it was the dogs that he fell upon, spastic with rage, lunging and swearing in a hot vortex of dust. The dogs ran for cover while the old man still lashed about at his own shadow. Then, muttering softly, he stalked back inside, trailing the leather behind him, not looking at us. (34)

Patrick also recounts the events that followed this whipping. Later that day, “without consultation, as though it was planned – and I saw now that it followed on from the dogs that morning – we started to touch each other. We put our hands under clothes and explored” (34).

⁸² He describes his *oupa* in unflattering terms, claiming that he “had never made a tender gesture towards me or my mother” (31).

The encounter is very brief and, soon afterwards, “shame rose” in Patrick and he begins to threaten Margaret (35). With “a first intimation of power” he promises that he would get her father fired if she told anyone about what happened (35). She begins to cry and fearfully begs him not to and desperately promises not to tell anyone. This is the last time they see each other.

What is the significance of Patrick’s lengthy and somewhat puzzling animal-themed asides? One way of reading these ostensibly random recollections is to note the way in which each subtly entwines animal and human pain. In each case, the animal suffering appears to be in some way intermingled with the humans’. The slaughter of the frogs, the cormorant’s death and the beating inflicted on the dogs seem to be metaphors for the humans’ emotional states and circumstances (I use the term ‘metaphor’ reluctantly here – keeping in mind Adams’ discussion of the metaphorical incarnation of the absent referent –⁸³ in that I think the vehicle is given equal weight to the tenor. In other words, the animals here are important in themselves, rather than just in relation to what they signify).⁸⁴ Margaret in particular can be seen in conjunction with all three kinds of animals represented here: like them, she is subjected to unwarranted suffering against which she is unable to protect herself. Her innocence and vulnerability, as well as her lack of agency within the farm’s power structure (where white men – even ones her own age – are ultimately in control of her fate) renders her as helpless as the frogs who cannot escape capture and dissection. She is also a victim of adverse and stifling circumstances that are out of her control, just like the cormorant who dies because it cannot take off in the harsh, unnatural environment of the farm. Furthermore, she is poor and ill-cared for (“She wore soiled cotton dresses and men’s broken shoes. She picked her nose and the scabs on her legs” [33]) like the workers’ dogs. In this respect, Margaret is in a comparable position to Niki in the butchery scene in *The Madonna of Excelsior*.⁸⁵

The memory of the dogs in particular draws a connection between the humans and animals. There are hints throughout it that suggest this. Initially when Patrick’s *oupa* approaches, Patrick fears he and Margaret are the objects of the man’s rage; an instinct that is probably correct in that his grandfather’s otherwise inexplicable action seems to be a transference of a

⁸³ See Chapter 2 of this thesis (75-6).

⁸⁴ Arseneault discusses the use of animals as metaphors in colonial literature, suggesting that they “appear everywhere, but only as *empty signifiers* with a figurative essence of violence” (2) (my emphasis). This is true of Galgut himself elsewhere in his oeuvre. In the short story “The Clay Ox” in *Small Circle of Beings* (1988), the publication that precedes *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs* – the tale ends with the use of oxen as a metaphor for crumbling colonial heritages. Here the animals are used only as means to an end, as “empty signifiers”.

⁸⁵ See Chapter 2 of this thesis, Section 2.3.1.

desire to beat the children. Since he is unable to do so, perhaps because he feels as though there is no concrete reason that would justify it, he whips the dogs instead. The cruelty inflicted on the mating animals is therefore perhaps best understood as a frustrated attempt to prevent a friendship and similar coupling of his grandson and this unsuitable partner, to his way of thinking. The fact that the old man completely ignores the children and continues furiously beating the air after the dogs have disappeared is telling in this respect. Simply put, he beats the dogs because he cannot beat the children; his anger at the children is transferred onto the dogs. In this act of cruelty then, the human and animal victims intersect. This intersection is made explicit by Patrick when he thinks about the moment of innocent intimacy he and Margaret share later in the day, suggesting that he saw their sex play as “follow[ing] on from the dogs that morning” (34). Again then, the dogs are not mere cyphers for some human end, but rather tied up in a shared abuse and are significant in themselves.

There is another, earlier memory of Patrick’s in which his own fear and oppression is drawn alongside an animal’s. In Chapter 2 he recalls hearing about his father killing an impala with a knife⁸⁶ and says that he “nodded solemnly, entranced and appalled. The knife was at my throat” (17). Arseneault says of this passage that

The suggestion that the knife is at his throat imagines a shared suffering, one in which Patrick and the animal live a shared precarious existence, stifled by the proverbial knife at their throats. Patrick’s narration of this stifling speaks into being a kind of relational vulnerability in the face of his and the animal’s shared subjection under the violent hand of his family’s masculinity. That Patrick is “appalled” also signals, at the very least, some concern for the violence with which animal life here is deprived for sport. (11)

Arseneault’s characterisation of “the violent hand of [Patrick’s] family’s masculinity” in relation to himself and animals is equally true of his grandfather and the dogs.

Thus, Galgut intermingles human and animal pain. The cruelty inflicted on the animals is cast as being significant in itself, I believe, but also as linked to human afflictions. The animals do not only shed light on these human issues, but form part of these very issues; they are victims of the same hardships, as writers such as Donovan, Adams and Pickover point out.⁸⁷ Arseneault echoes this sentiment, stating that “animals’ lives are not so separate from ‘our’ discourses about

⁸⁶ I discuss this again later on pages 96 and 97.

⁸⁷ See pages 17 to 18 of the introduction to this thesis.

trauma and violent history as we might like to think” (3). Furthermore, the memories discussed above are initially sparked by the vision of the pig’s death, as Patrick reminds us: “Other memories [i.e. the ones in question] tumbled into my mind, also let loose somehow by the sight of the dead pig that morning” (Galgut 33). Galgut is therefore interlacing complex layers of suffering into the narrative (all of this is naturally combined with Patrick’s mode of narration and the anguish at its core as well). He is weaving together different kinds of pain on different levels to create a complex web in which human and animal suffering cannot easily be untangled.

This deep interconnection of animal and human pain is a vital point here. Galgut makes this link clear throughout this key chapter in a number of ways. When Patrick first goes in search of the slaughtered pig, he also looks for Jonas, the man responsible for executing all the pigs on the farm. Pushing the thin iron filament into their hearts is “a highly skilled task”, one that only Jonas performed (28):

In all the years of my childhood I had only ever seen one man doing the pig sticking: Jonas, old even then, his face all shattered with lines, who would come out of his room, bent forward as if with the inordinate weight of his duty. He prodded a little with the tip of the metal rod, divining the exact spot, the heart. Then, like a picador, he would throw his frail weight behind it as he drove it in. (28)

Notice how here too, even as one kills the other, the sorrow of both creatures is subtly underlined and, in this case, how their mutual mortality is brought into focus: Jonas’s aged, frail body – itself seemingly on the verge of expiration – is juxtaposed with that of the animal who is about to die at his hand. Galgut continues to employ this technique as Patrick finds out Jonas has passed away. He goes into the barn to look for the dead pig and sees the following:

Framed by the door like a painting, the glowing carcass hung upside down, suspended from hooks in its legs, dangling in a way no pig was meant to do. Strangely colossal, amplified in death. And next to it was the figure of a young black man, maybe the same age as me. He was wearing dirty overalls, blotched with maps of dried blood. On his feet, also stained, were galoshes. In his hands, a long silver knife.

I came closer. He raised his head, watching me with sullen eyes.

“*Waar is Jonas?*” [Where is Jonas?]

He didn’t speak. He raised his long arm and pointed over my shoulder, into the charred brown veld. When I turned back in confusion he said:

“*Dood.*” [Dead]

The single syllable dripped from his mouth. Then he turned his back on me, and went to work on the pig. The blade punched down with delicate violence and in a moment I was watching as complicated guts, parcels of organs, came tumbling to the ground.

The stench of it – deep, bilious, foul – hit me. I took a step back and found myself in motion, stumbling away through the killing ground, where the marks of the dragged carcass showed like cryptic signs in the dirt. Down the hill, past the cramped laager of workers’ huts, to a dry field where little cartridges of earth marked the sites of numerous graves. There were no headstones, no plaques. On some of them a little cross of wood had been planted and on some of the crosses a name had been burned out in black. Here and there were wilting bunches of flowers.

It was to this dusty plot that the young man had pointed; and I found Jonas’s grave at the western edge of the area, in an exposed patch of ground. It was one of the newest. Stuck into the earth next to his tiny wooded cross, the iron pig-sticker was planted: rusting quietly, trembling gently in the breeze, an aerial sending signals from the grave. (29-30)

Here we have one of the most graphic descriptions in the entire novel – that of the recently living pig’s carcass suspended unnaturally from hooks and disembowelled in preparation for its dismemberment before consumption. This sight, and its accompanying scent, is enough to nauseate even a deeply desensitized Patrick. The overwhelming nature of this encounter, and the reader’s vicarious experience of it, is made worse by the added dimension of Jonas’s death: immediately after Patrick is confronted by the suspended body of the dead pig, he hears Jonas has died, followed directly by the pig being cut open, which drives Patrick frantically out of the barn across the killing ground to the cemetery where he discovers Jonas’s grave. Through jarring, successive juxtaposition, Galgut carefully melds in Jonas’s death with the death of the pig. Not only are both Jonas and the pig no longer alive, but we learn of Jonas’s passing in the same instant as we are confronted with the pig’s corpse; their bodies are united by the common territory of “the killing ground”; and, in some sense, they are equally anonymous: the pig is indifferently suspended from hooks, no longer recognizable as a living creature, and Jonas’s mound of earth does not bear his name, marked only by an anonymous cross and his “iron pig-sticker”. This iron filament is not only a symbol of their shared mortality (as seen in the quotation provided on page 91), but also further interlinks their deaths as Jonas’ grave is itself literally impaled here, giving the sense that his body is stuck in the same way as the pigs he killed. Galgut therefore entwines these deaths with prodigious intricacy. Crucially, the death of

the pig is aligned with the death of a recognisable (human) subject. The pig is therefore rendered a dead subject, rather than an absent referent.

This point is made again later on in the novel through a similar juxtaposition between the site of Andrew Lovell's murder and a nearby butchery. In this case, residual blood on the pavement from Lowell's shooting seems connected to the "red carcasses" hanging in the butcher's window (85). In fact, this incident explicitly recalls the one discussed above: "There was a pig, dangling upside down, and I thought of my grandfather's farm. I saw the surly black man, the torrent of slimy guts. Offended by the memory, by those nude,⁸⁸ hanging bodies, I got up and walked away from the small flower of blood" (85-6).

The subject of interconnected death entails a similar interconnection of life. Arsenault articulates this well when he suggests that "Galgut draws attention to animals as having lives *capable of being deprived* bring[ing] into question the insularity of the human category that has influenced what we have hitherto come to think of as a life, a term that I use not simply to refer to basic biological functions, but also to consider its biopolitical and ontological dimensions" (10) (emphasis in the original). He goes on to argue that this causes "the foundational barriers that delineate the human and separate it from the animal [to] come undone" (10).

Among the most crucial moments, not only for the purposes of this argument but in the book as a whole, is the passage where the significance of the title becomes apparent:

There is no sound on earth like the sound of a pig dying. It is a shriek that tears at the primal, unconscious mind. It is the sound of babies being abandoned, of women being taken by force, of the hinges of the world tearing loose. The screaming starts from the moment the pig is seized, as if it knows what is about to happen. The pig squeals and cries, it defecates in terror, but nothing will stop its life converging to a zero on the point of that thin metal stick. (Galgut 28)

This, like the depiction of the pig's slaughter in the barn, is among the most jolting depictions of cruelty in the novel. It is also the moment in which the equivalence of animal and human pain is cast most explicitly and memorably. By comparing the sound of a pig's dying scream to the cries of abandoned infants or of women being raped, Galgut is clearly comparing some of the cruellest

⁸⁸ Interestingly, in the butchery scene in *The Madonna of Excelsior* when Niki is made to strip on the scale, her naked body is aligned with meat (as I discuss in Section 2.3.1. of the foregoing chapter). Here, the body of a dead pig is described as "nude". The widespread alignment of meat and sexual objectification that I discuss in Chapter 2 is once again evinced here.

instances of human suffering with the act of slaughter. Moreover, the pigs' pain is equivalent here to that of the children and women. It is not just a reminder of these other kinds of misery; it is itself like them. These forms of anguish are sufficiently similar that they merit equivalence. This, I think, is the key to understanding what Galgut is suggesting about animals in *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs*. He is subtly but clearly suggesting that animal suffering and human suffering are of the same order. Arseneault expresses this deftly: "Galgut's handling of violence against non-humans presents animals in their own corporeality, as bodies capable of suffering alongside human ones, as beings in a complex socio- and eco-political network of oppression shared between species" (4). He goes on to suggest, towards the conclusion of his essay, that "Galgut's figuration of animal death posits it as a traumatic event. His text's humanization of animal death – in the sense that it aligns it with grievable forms of trauma – asks readers to invest their attention in one pig's death and acknowledge the typically unacknowledged slaughter of farmed animals" (16).

As further evidence for this claim, it is worth noting the importance the passage above is accorded by virtue of it elucidating the meaning of the book's title. Moreover, it anticipates the crucial moment where Patrick breaks down in the army and realises that the essence of existence is pain. Both instances are precipitated by death, both are fundamentally concerned with suffering, and, most significantly (when considering the novel's title), both contain a scream that resonates loudly and disturbingly through the rest of the novel.

3.4. Animal Suffering and Human Disconnection

It is interesting to consider the other characters in the novel in relation to the thesis (posited above) that Galgut forges a kind of link between humans and animals, and in conjunction to the seriousness with which he regards animal pain. Until this point, only a small selection of characters – mostly Margaret and Jonas – have been considered in this respect. What becomes apparent when one applies this model to the remaining characters, however, is that, unlike Margaret and Jonas, many are disconnected from animals, and quite deliberately so. Three major figures in particular – Dirk Blaauw, Patrick's father, as well as his mother – have some relation to animals, but in a way that is quite different from the kind sketched above. Rather than placing them in unison with animal suffering, they are noticeably removed from it, decidedly disconnected.

3.4.1. Blaauw

Consider, firstly, the least prominent of these: Dirk Blaauw. He enters the narrative towards the end of the novel, appearing for the first time in Chapter 10. Blaauw makes a sinister entry, appearing initially only as a voice over Patrick's shoulder as he watches television coverage of Andrew Lovell's murder in the foyer of the hotel in Swakopmund. He cuts an unsettling figure. It is almost immediately apparent that hidden beneath a veneer of intelligence and charm is malice. Patrick describes him as giving "the impression of quiet power" (Galgut 110). While he is given comparatively little narrative time, he looms large in the novel as a disconcerting, threatening and manipulative figure.

It also emerges that Blaauw is politically conservative and racist. The first words he speaks, before he even appears in the flesh, are "He deserved it" in relation to Lovell's death. He explains to Patrick that he "has no time for people who turn their backs on their own kind. It's all right for blacks who want to change the system – if I was in their place, I'd want to do the same thing. But whites who go joining the black side...I ask you, what do they want?" (110). Furthermore, later in the novel, while driving back to South Africa with the Winters, Blaauw comments about Godfrey: "I'm not a racist. [...] In my book, black and white are the same. But some people are kaffirs. And that was a kaffir back there" (140).

Significantly, Blaauw is also characterised as being "meaty" (110) – this is the first adjective Patrick uses to describe him – and as having "a thick bull neck, muscled and brown" (138). It also transpires that he is an animal farmer. These are significant traits for a character to have in a novel so concerned with a central symbol of farm animal slaughter. Furthermore, en route home when they stop at a restaurant for a meal, an important meat-related episode occurs:

We sat at a low wooden table in the shade. To the sad German woman who was taking our order, my mother said:

"I'll have a steak."

When the woman was gone I turned to my mother. "I thought you were vegetarian."

"I need the protein," she said. "I have a craving for protein."

"You're doing the right thing," Dirk Blaauw said. "We weren't meant to eat vegetables. Man is a hunter by instinct. A killer. The world is a jungle. *Né* Patrick?" He punched my shoulder and laughed. "I have animals on my farm," he went on. "Cows, sheep, goats. And pigs. I have pigs. You must come up and visit my farm." (140-1)

The significance of this episode in relation to Ellen will be discussed shortly, but with respect to Blaauw, it cements him finally as a supremely unlikeable character. The weighted reference to pigs here indelibly connects Blaauw to the novel's central symbol of pig slaughter and its cruelty. This, combined with his racism, the pleasure he takes in endorsing violence and murder, and his role as an animal farmer, marks him as a figure that is unambiguously cast in a negative light in the novel.

3.4.2. Howard

Much like Blaauw, Patrick's father is also a troubling male figure in the text. His character largely conforms to a conservative stereotype of masculinity; it is defined by excessive displays of 'manliness' through sport, ostentatious displays of success and wealth, ruthless business pursuits and ultimate mastery over the domicile. Another way in which this type of masculinity regularly exerts itself is through hunting, and indeed Howard is an avid hunter.⁸⁹ A large part of Patrick's thoughts on his father deal with this topic. He says, for instance:

His real love was hunting. The walls downstairs were filled with animal heads. He had killed every one of them, he would tell his visitors proudly, as he showed his collection of guns and rifles. He never tired of handling them, taking them apart and cleaning them, his hands more loving on those hard bits of metal than they'd ever been on us. "With this," he would tell you, "I killed that," pointing to the head of a kudu above the fireplace. "And with this one, I took that." An Impala near the door. "This little baby brought that one down." A warthog, its bristles shining.

His proudest claim of all was the leopard in the entrance hall. Preserved in its entirety on an island of wood, teeth drawn back in a snarl.

As a boy I was horrified and fascinated by the leopard. I would lie for hours on the cool tiles of the floor, trying to look down its throat into the darkness it contained. I imagined my father down on one knee, holding steady while the leopard charged. It was a huge disappointment to learn later – from Malcolm, who had been there – that this wasn't the way it happened at all. "We chased it for miles in the Land Rover," he said. "It was wounded, it couldn't run properly. Dad shot it in a tree when it tried to get away. He didn't even get out." (12-3)

Howard's hunting evinces a deep lack of concern for the animals he kills. Similarly, when he takes his son Malcolm along to shoot his first impala, the animal is wounded, "lying on the

⁸⁹ See Arseneault pages 7 to 9 for a more extensive discussion on the subject of masculinity and hunting.

ground, kicking”, before Howard kills the buck with his hunting knife (17). Howard’s hunting forms part of his general ruthlessness as a character. This is captured by the image of the walls of his study, where “between the disembodied heads of animals that he had deprived of life, were cryptic certificates framed in gold” (15-6). These are the trophies of his business successes, as the animal heads are the equivalents of his hunting exploits. Patrick suggests this connection between business and hunting more explicitly when he mentions Howard’s friends, a group of “loud and hairy and intense” men: “Most of them were people he did business with, for whom the savagery of nature was a metaphorical substitute for the world of money” (16-7). Like these other men, Howard’s cut-throat capitalist spirit is deliberately aligned with his ability to kill animals unflinchingly. Thus, in a telling description, Patrick refers to the way in which these men would all “congregate at our home sometimes, before or after these trips, wearing designer outdoor gear, drinking beer and *braaing* steaks on the lawn. They were, and behaved like, people in no doubt of themselves, laughing unrestrainedly and slapping each other violently on the back” (17). Here is another apt image that captures the nature of these men: a violent, self-satisfied congregation of businessmen, soon to go hunting, gathered around the flesh of a slaughtered animal. A young Patrick, while partially intrigued by his father’s hunting (in much the same way as he is described as being drawn to slaughter elsewhere),⁹⁰ is mostly appalled, and poignantly replies to his father’s request to take Patrick along on one of his trips: “Killing things isn’t my idea of fun” (23). The fact that this is Howard’s idea of fun alienates him not only from his son, but also from the reader.

3.4.3. Ellen

Next there is Patrick’s mother, who is, apart from himself, perhaps the character who features most prominently in the text. She is a complex, fascinating and frustrating personage. This springs most of all from her ever-changing personality. Her marriage to a domineering husband subsumed and constricted her character. When she was married at twenty she remoulded herself according to Patrick’s father’s wishes, erasing her “rustic Afrikaans beginnings” in favour of an English accent and more “cosmopolitan tastes and values” (8). She even changed her first name from Elsa to Ellen (9). The eventual breakup of her marriage and the death of her oldest son freed her from domestic constraints, but triggered an even more unstable sense of identity. She

⁹⁰ See pages 85 and 86 above.

goes from being a submissive, repressive housewife, to a flamboyant, worldly actress (both in terms of her personality and intermittently as a profession) who experiments wildly with different jobs, drugs and lovers. The most recent of these experiments is Godfrey whom she claims to have slept with initially as “a political act” (46). She certainly fancies herself a political radical. One of the manifestations of this is an irregular interest in animal rights and vegetarianism. Patrick characterises his mother during this new phase of her life as follows:

She said that she had finally become a real person, but who she really was remained a mystery out of reach, even to herself. As if through the years of her marriage she had been holding herself painfully static, my mother gave into motion. This was obvious on a physical level: she was constantly restless, looking around her, moving about. But her condition ran deeper than this. She threw herself with wild abandon into different fads and movements, and then discarded them for others. She took up diets, played with different styles of clothing, she joined clubs and societies for two weeks at a time. She ate only red meat for a while, then became vegetarian. She joined Greenpeace. She campaigned for animal rights, standing in the rain on street corners with placards and grizzly photographs. And from animals she moved on to human beings: for the first time in her life she became passionate about politics. One of the things she held against my father was his patriarchal brand of capitalism. She joined the Black Sash, the End Conscription Campaign, the Detainees’ Parents’ Support Committee. She became rabid and incoherent on the subject of the Crossroads carnage. I listened – at first with amazement, later with resignation – to the rhetoric of liberation.

(20-1)

While Patrick seems to empathise with Ellen to some extent here, he nevertheless sees past the façade of her apparently noble pursuits. The brevity and inconstancy of her commitments calls her motivations into question. As her son reflects: “She changed her positions the way she changed her clothes, and she didn’t care to remember how she felt in the past” (114).

Accordingly, her interest in animals here seems vacuous. It is yet another role to play; one in a number of causes to pursue, none of which really matters to her. As Patrick puts it, all “her glamorous strivings were hollow” (133).

What becomes apparent from the book as a whole is that Ellen is fundamentally self-obsessed. All that truly matters to her is herself. For instance, in the letters she sends to Patrick while he is in the army, she writes effusively about her own life, with little or no interest in her son’s situation, and apparently fails to notice when he stops replying to her (24). While Ellen is not a wholly unsympathetic character – particularly when one considers her oppressive marriage,

the loss of her son and her deep-seated sense of being restless and lost – she is denounced overall in the text. By the end of the narrative, she is even cast off by her son. This occurs shortly after the incident in the restaurant cited above.⁹¹ After Blaauw affirms Ellen’s decision to eat meat, he invites them to visit him on his farm (as quoted earlier). Ellen responds to his request in the following way:

“We’d love to,” my mother said. “Patrick?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Instead of driving through tonight,” he said, “why don’t you stay over? What’s the hurry? Have a good sleep, I’ll give you breakfast in the morning... Stay over with me tonight.”

“All right,” said my mother. “Thank you. All right.” To me she added. “That’s alright, Patrick?”

“Yup,” I said.

Later, while we were eating, he got up and went to the bathroom. She leaned forward to me. “His eyes are amazing,” she said. “So blue. I’m falling in love with his eyes.” She giggled.

“I think,” I said slowly, “I think I might move out of home.”

“What?”

“It might be a good idea for me to live on my own. To get a flat by myself.”

She looked at me, then she looked away. “You can’t do a thing on your own.”

“Yes, I can.”

“Well,” she said, with strangulated gaiety. “If you think you’d like that. We’ll talk about it another time.”

When Dirk Blaauw came back, my mother smiled at him. Her steak was underdone and she had a thin line of blood on her teeth. (141)

Here Patrick’s growing disillusionment with his mother reaches its tipping point and he finally rejects her outright. Again, as in the cases considered above, this denunciation of her character in the novel can be understood through her ill-treatment of animals. The line of blood on her teeth leaves her as tainted by animal suffering as Blaauw and her ex-husband are. Here she has unambiguously abandoned her vegetarianism, which she had adhered to throughout the duration of the novel.⁹² The choice to eat meat again marks yet another shift in her character and an abandonment of her principles. This is made worse by the fact that she has clearly decided to

⁹¹ See page 95.

⁹² Patrick suggests in one of his current rather than reflective narrations that his mother “had recently become vegetarian again” and so it is clear that in the narrative present she does not eat meat until the final chapter (52).

take Blaauw as her next partner, having grown tired of Godfrey. Her return to carnivorousness and romantic pursuit of a “meaty” man who farms animals for their flesh is hardly the mark of a former campaigning animal rights activist. If anything, this final change in Ellen does not signal a characteristic change in personality, but rather a deterioration. Her attraction to Blaauw in particular seems to mark a degeneration, in that he is so similar to her husband: both characters embody the oppressive, colonial hypermasculinity Arsenault describes. The two men even have the same eyes, the exact feature that Ellen claims to be attracted to in Blaauw.⁹³ He is also, as he points out, “nearly neighbours” with the farm she grew up on, symbolising the extent of her regression (112). By the end of the narrative, we cannot but feel disdain for Ellen.

What emerges very clearly then is the way in which these three figures are condemned in the narrative. They are all ultimately unsympathetic. Moreover, this condemnation is linked in each case to their ill-treatment of animals. Specifically, I would like to suggest, the ultimate reason why these characters are rejected in the text is precisely because they do not take suffering seriously. Moreover, it is precisely through their interaction with animals that this lack of concern for suffering is emphasised. In the case of Blaauw, he is a meat farmer who openly endorses violence, despite his ostensible charisma. Howard is a hunter whose merciless approach to killing animals translates into his business pursuits and family life. And Ellen’s solipsism precludes any concerns for humans or animals other than herself, despite her ostensible championing of both groups’ rights. These are figures who are not interested in or sensitive to pain experienced by others, whether human or animal. They are callous and lack compassion, and the reader is deliberately alienated from them as a result.⁹⁴

⁹³ Howard is described as having “blue eyes so pale as to be almost without colour” (13) and Blaauw’s eyes are characterised as “blue and limpid as gas” (110).

⁹⁴ Before turning to Patrick, it may at this point be worth considering the only major figure other than Patrick whose relationship to animals has not been discussed: Godfrey. A small but significant moment in the text suggests that Godfrey is far closer to Margaret and Jonas in the novel’s schema than he is to Ellen, Blaauw or Howard. Shortly after Patrick first meets Godfrey at his home in Windhoek, he sees Godfrey go “down on one knee to pet” (51) what Patrick describes earlier as a “skeletal dog” (49) who barked at him and his mother “furiously, maniacally, but somehow without passion” (49) before they enter the house. Upon seeing him do this, Patrick realises that Godfrey “was just a young man, not much older than me, who also, perhaps, felt a little shy and awkward in my company” (51). This moment of mutual kindness serves to simultaneously ‘humanise’ both the dog and Godfrey. This is the only occasion on which Godfrey interacts with an animal, and while this is a brief incident, it is nevertheless significant, given the emphasis Galgut places on human-animal relations in the text.

3.4.4. Patrick

So where does this leave Patrick? What is his relation to animals and to suffering generally? Since he is the novel's focaliser and most important character, the figure through whom all the reader's experiences are mediated, his relation to the subject of animal suffering (something which has thus far only been explored tangentially) is sure to have major significance. Does Patrick perhaps provide the final clue to our understanding of what the novel ultimately suggests about animals and our relation to them?

There is a case to be made for Patrick falling into both camps that have been considered here – that is, one group of characters that demonstrates a unity between human and animal anguish, and another that is deliberately disconnected and uninterested in all forms of distress. Patrick could fit into either of these. He can either be seen as a figure who understands suffering and feels compassion for those who experience agony, or he can be viewed as someone who is too fatigued and traumatised to care meaningfully about anything, or he can be read as a character who falls from one state into the other.

On the one hand, Patrick clearly has an intimate understanding of suffering, given his horrific experiences in the army. Moreover, there is a degree of compassion (albeit of a somewhat reserved nature) with which he regards those around him. He expresses a sense of empathy with Andrew Lovell,⁹⁵ for instance, he defends Godfrey when Ellen decides to leave him,⁹⁶ and even regards his parents, who at most times seem to care very little for him, with a degree of sympathy. He also feels a sense of guilt and regret when confronted by his own involvement (or lack thereof) in the fraught political landscapes of Namibia and South Africa.⁹⁷ There is a quiet and sensitive awareness of others that pervades Patrick's narration. It even seems to extend to animals at times, as Arseneault points out regarding his response to his father killing an impala with a knife.⁹⁸

Conversely, there is also a clear sense in which Patrick is extremely benumbed to suffering, his own and others'. He describes himself as "convoluted, involuted, bent in on myself

⁹⁵He goes so far as to say "Andrew Lovell was my other impossible self" (120) and "I am him" (127).

⁹⁶Also see page 105 below.

⁹⁷He expresses this most explicitly when he imagines saying the following to Andrew Lovell's girlfriend when he meets her at Lovell's funeral: "I have longed for a way to vent my country from me, to bawl it out of my head" (120).

⁹⁸See page 90 above.

[...] I didn't connect with the world. I stood outside movements and masses and words. There was too much desert in me" (133). Following his breakdown in the army, he has become a very vacant figure. His empathy is undercut by a general lack of meaningful action. When he does something seemingly out of empathetic motivation – helping Godfrey distribute pamphlets for the Lovell memorial service, for instance (87-91) – he appears to be less motivated by genuine concern than a simple impulse to do something rather than face doing nothing. He mostly moves numbly through the world, without being much affected by it. Also, his relation to animals is largely questionable. While he relays all of the animal trauma that the novel deals with, he seems little affected by most of it (at least as an adult). His narration conveys a great deal of trauma and horror, but, at least in part, this is the case because of it being filtered through his damaged consciousness.

The complexity of Patrick as a central character makes it difficult to group him definitively along these clearly delineated lines. He is significantly different from Blaauw, Howard and Ellen – not least because of the deep sympathy he engenders in the reader – but ultimately Patrick is a character who, like those in the second camp, is deeply benumbed to pain. Moreover, once again, this positioning of a character in relation to suffering is a deliberate and significant choice by Galgut and one that I think reveals the novel's most important point regarding animals.

As discussed at the beginning of the chapter, during the course of the narration it becomes very obvious that Patrick has suffered psychological trauma and that this has resulted in a certain kind of disconnection in him from the world and those around him. This includes his relation to animals. He describes at length, and on several occasions, graphic details of animal abuse and slaughter, but without apparently being affected by it. This suggests a crucial point about animal and human relation in the novel, revealed to the reader through its protagonist. Patrick as a character shows something about our own general dissociation from non-human creatures. His emotional disconnection is a metaphor for human disconnection from animals. By letting Patrick relate the novel's depiction of brutality towards animals from his remote point of view, Galgut shows a fundamental similarity between inner psychological detachment and a displacement between animal and human. Animals have become alienated from us – a sorry occurrence, as implied by the fact that Patrick is unwell. In other words, Galgut sets up a

connection between humans and other animals and then uses Patrick to reveal a rupture of this connection and illustrate a manifest and dysfunctional reality.

An incident in the novel that aptly captures this jarring disconnect between animals and humans is relayed during Patrick's recollection of his breakdown while on the border. He remembers coming across an elephant carcass which he describes in the following way: "a dead elephant, shot by soldiers for cruelty or fun, lying on its side, swelling with gas and maggots. Its tail had been cut off and someone had carved their initials into its side with a pen-knife" (102). That such disregard and cruelty is possible is a stark and disturbing illustration of the radical disconnect between these two species.

Furthermore, an aspect of this distance is that humans are typically unmoved by animal suffering. We are able to witness abuse and slaughter, particularly of farmed animals, and mostly condone or even endorse this behaviour. This is also why we are able to eat them. Indeed, Patrick enacts this in the novel. In the third chapter, immediately after the distressing episode in which he witnesses the slaughter of the pig, Patrick, overwhelmed by the Proustian nature of the experience, returns to the house for breakfast:

They were still at the table. "Where have you *been*?" my mother said.

"I went for a walk."

"Do you want to eat?"

Without waiting for an answer, my grandmother rang her little bell. Anna came in, still without shoes, carrying a tray. I sat down to a plate of bacon and scrambled egg and toast.

"Everything you're eating," *Ouma* said, "comes from the farm [...]"

(35-6)

It is very telling that he is served bacon at this point, having just witnessed a pig being killed and butchered. His grandmother's comment about the food coming entirely from the farm is equally significant. Patrick is all too aware of this, and so is the reader. It is also worth noting that supper on the farm the night before is also narrated, and in quite a bit of detail, but with no reference to the content of their plates (2-3). Now it is mentioned, using the language of edible meat ('bacon'), showing up the way in which the recently living pig has become an absent referent.

The focus on Patrick's food here is, therefore, deliberate,⁹⁹ as is his apparent reluctance to eat it (his grandmother complains about him not eating and needing to "put on some weight" [36]). It seems as though Patrick has in this moment briefly managed to bridge the psychologically imposed distance between human and animal, in addition to the disjuncture between the meat on the table and a once living creature who suffered. The bacon in front of him recalls the animal it was cut from, the pain this caused and the way in which that pain is linked to that of humans (having just visited Jonas' grave).

Yet Patrick eats meat nonetheless. This happens again later when he is in a restaurant with his mother and Godfrey. She, being vegetarian at this stage, orders a salad and Godfrey orders a steak. Patrick, "after a hesitation" decides to also eat steak (52). Here again, Patrick is confronted by meat (the signification of which he has now fully glimpsed and understood), hesitates, and then decides to eat it anyway. This moment of hesitation is revealing, but so is his eventual decision to order steak nonetheless. He is aware of the suffering that meat is connected to, but this does not ultimately deter him. The reason Patrick is able to do this is that, despite these brief glimpses of an otherwise obscured connection between all animals, he is able to retreat, as all human animals are,¹⁰⁰ into the psychological convolutions and attendant cultural habits that enable our detachment. As Derrida puts it "[n]o one can deny seriously, or for very long, that men do all they can in order to dissimulate [...] cruelty or to hide it from themselves" (394). Marian Scholtmeijer similarly points out: "the conceptual abyss that culture has created between humans and nonhuman animals is in the case of meat most vividly and eerily apparent" (148).

It is interesting to consider whether Patrick undergoes any change in this particular respect. It seems as though he generally undergoes a *bildung* in the text. Despite some insecurities Patrick expresses about the prospect of change, saying in the penultimate chapter: "In a little while, I knew, I would walk back up the road to the hotel, and we would pack our bags and go, and our usual lives would resume", he does seem to improve in some ways by the end of the novel (134). He becomes progressively more of an agent. That is to say, he no longer

⁹⁹ Notice that here, in contrast to Venter's use of deliberately unpalatable kinds of meat in *Trencherman* (Chapter 1, Section 1.3.3 of this thesis, especially pages 44 to 48), Galgut manages to make a very commonplace kind of meat seem gruesome.

¹⁰⁰ Adams is useful in this regard. She argues that "[w]hile the cultural meanings of meat and meat eating shift historically, one essential part of meat's meaning is static: One does not eat meat without the death of an animal" (51). In other words, irrespective of what meat means to different people, underlying it is always a recognition of the fact of animal death.

simply does whatever he is told or happens to be doing, but rather begins to challenge others and make his own decisions. For example, he challenges the racist hotel manager when she suspiciously asks him who Godfrey is by angrily telling her that Godfrey is his father (82), as well as refusing to have a drink with Blaauw and his mother when invited to join them (122). He also does not respond to Ellen in the way that she would like when she breaks up with Godfrey. He explains: “I had sat through these unburdenings countless times before. I knew what she wanted of me; I was supposed to murmur in agreement, nod my head, endorse by little signs the momentous decision she had taken. I had always played my role in the past, but something was different today” (131-2). He then uncharacteristically tells her that he thinks she should not break up with Godfrey. Patrick’s *bildung* culminates in his rejection of Ellen in the final chapter. His development here is contrasted to her degeneration. At this point he finally decides to fully break away from his overbearing mother and embrace his autonomy and independence. Gagiano concurs on this point, saying that Patrick “has healed and grown sufficiently towards the close of the novel to criticise his mother for ending her relationship with Godfrey, realising the ‘enormous’ change that has occurred in him[self] [...] [having] acquired sufficient moral and emotional strength to disaffiliate himself from her and her new relationship [with Blaauw], announcing quietly that he has decided to go and live on his own” (100).

He also seems to become more capable of feeling as the novel progresses. While he remains markedly impassive for most of the narrative, the attack he suffers at Andrew Lovell’s funeral is perhaps an indication of a gradual return of emotional connection. Standing on a dune in the desert where the memorial takes place, he narrates the following:

Down below, the service, if that was what it was, had finished, and the crowd was singing. Freedom songs, songs I didn’t know, but the rhythms were stirring.

Godfrey was humming along, the deep vibrations transmitting themselves from his chest, and swaying gently from side to side. For a second I saw how things could be: part of a mass, of a singing congregation, the family to which I’d never belonged... and then time fell suddenly away.

I was back in a white hospital bed, with a doctor sitting beside me. “Try to describe how you feel,” he said.

“I feel dislocated,” I told him. “Not part of life.”

“Whose life?”

“Mine. Everybody’s. *Life*.”

And the familiar sensation started up in my belly, the shaking spread into my arms. I covered my face with my hands, but I couldn’t block out what I saw.

(Galgut 127-8)

Here we see Patrick feeling moved by his surroundings: the “stirring” music, Godfrey’s singing and swaying, a glimpse of communion with other people. His attitude towards himself also evinces this growth as the novel progresses. Recall, Patrick claims that his experience of the dying pig’s scream as “almost beautiful” was demonstrative of his “state of mind or soul *at the time*” (28) (my emphasis), thereby implying that his state of mind in the narrative present has changed, thus evincing possible progress.¹⁰¹ The fact that he is “offended” by the memory of a dead pig in a butchery indicates this as well (86).¹⁰² However, Patrick’s psyche ultimately remains deeply traumatised. The sense of emotional connection that he feels at Lovell’s funeral precipitates a violent attack that sends Patrick running frenziedly down the dune. His psychological development is thus not absolute.

This does not answer the question of his development in relation to animals, however. While he does show some progress as a character generally, this concern remains more difficult to address. A sympathetic reading might propose that his ultimate dismissal of his mother is indicative of precisely this kind of growth. Her eventual reversion to meat-eating, her decision to pursue an animal farmer and her eagerness to visit his farm were perhaps the final straw for Patrick, given his newfound understanding of animal suffering. This interpretation is perhaps partially true. While this may have been part of what motivated him at this point, however, it remains unclear whether Patrick himself has changed in any way in relation to animal suffering. Although the narrative brings the suffering animal subject that is elided by meat and slaughter out of its usual silences – unlike Venter’s and Mda’s texts discussed in previous chapters – Galgut’s novel does remain curiously silent on whether or not its protagonist has ultimately come to take this animal subjectivity seriously. The odds are unlikely: his carnivorous diet remains unchanged it seems, he sits quietly awaiting their arrival on Blaauw’s farm as Blaauw and his mother prattle in the front seat, and he remains far from healed psychologically (as his attack in the desert demonstrates).

Ultimately Patrick’s final relation to animals remains ambiguous, as indeed does his overall development to some extent, since the novel ends without the reader having knowledge of whether Patrick will follow through on his plans for independence. What is clear, however, is the fact that Galgut wants us to keep animals and meat-eating in mind, right until the very end of

¹⁰¹ See pages 86 and 87.

¹⁰² See pages 93.

the novel. In addition to Ellen's steak-eating incident on the last few pages, the final words spoken are Blaauw saying to Ellen, "I think you're going to like my farm" and her replying "I have a feeling I will too" (142). This ominous promise of the farm on the horizon ends the novel as they travel homeward. Therefore, Galgut foregrounds animals until the final page. The reader is not allowed Patrick's ability to forget. We are confronted at the novel's close, as we are throughout, with a reminder of animal suffering, perhaps as a challenge to our usual psychological and emotional detachment from this suffering. Since *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs* posits an interconnection of human and animal suffering only to present us with characters who, to varying degrees, fail to recognise this connection, perhaps it can be read as a kind of corrective – implicit and not didactic – regarding our relation to our fellow animals. It urges us ultimately to reconsider the connections that have been eroded by our own psychological and socially acquired detachment.

Conclusion

Galgut's *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs* represents the high-water mark among the three primary texts discussed in this dissertation. It is the only novel that gives due consideration to the animal pain that lies behind the meat that we eat. Galgut ultimately recognises – and makes the reader recognise – the most constant, though also the most forgotten and ignored fact about meat: that animals suffer and are killed in the process of turning them into ‘food’ for our consumption. Moreover, Galgut's novel places this animal pain on an equal footing with human pain and illustrates the interconnectivity of animal and human suffering. It therefore not only reminds us of the muted misery of our fellow animals, but encourages us to view it as being of the same order as the suffering of our fellow humans.

In this sense, Galgut's novel engages what Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello calls the sympathetic imagination. *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs* encourages us to consider and “think ourselves into the being” of other animals, even as its protagonist struggles to do so (Coetzee, *Costello* 80). While Venter and Mda's novels go some way towards prompting an awareness of various issues related to meat – in *Trencherman* the excessive meat-eating habits of Afrikaners, in *The Madonna of Excelsior* the way in which animal subjects are made absent from their dismembered flesh – these texts really only use meat metaphorically; that is to say as a means of illustrating some other, ultimately anthropocentric point. Mda comes closer to transcending this than Venter does: his novel gestures at a more serious regard for animals as subjects by ostensibly positing the interconnected oppression of woman and animals, but ultimately does not take cognisance of animal suffering in its own right. Galgut's novel is thus alone among these in its evocation of the animal sorrow that is obscured by our cultural and psychological blinkers, and in its appeal for a sympathetic engagement with these creatures.

There is considerable room for more texts of this nature in South African fiction. As demonstrated in my introduction,¹⁰³ the prevailing trend in the country's literature is the omission of animal suffering and subjectivity when it comes to representations of meat and its consumption by humans. Wendy Woodward suggests in *The Animal Gaze* that “the representation of animals as subjects tends to be a recent phenomenon in southern African writing” (13) and (towards the book's end) that “[t]exts, both fictional and non-fictional, both

¹⁰³ See pages 19 to 26 above.

southern African and international, which depict close human-animal relationships are burgeoning” (167). Hopefully as texts which represent animal subjectivities and the relationship between humans and animals grow in number, more of them will portray some of the animals that are most often elided and seem most disconnected from us: the ones that we eat.

A great deal more can also be done in the arena of scholarly inquiry. Literary animal studies is only beginning to explore the importance of meat as part of its purview. This thesis has focussed on a mere handful of texts and suggests only the beginnings of ways in which the depiction of meat and meat-eating in works of South African fiction might be approached. My own focus has been on meat in terms of culture (in relation to Afrikanerdom in particular, especially as employed by Venter to symbolise the damaging excesses of Afrikaners in South Africa), its intersection with human oppression (particularly with the subjugation of women as depicted in Mda’s novel), and its connection to animal pain and suffering (which Galgut demonstrates while also gesturing at human dissociation from this pain). Along similar lines, one could, for instance, look at novels immersed in other local cultural, social or linguistic groups and consider what the depictions of meat in these texts may reveal about the spheres they portray.¹⁰⁴ Different texts might illuminate more about our interconnection with the animals we eat and yield further insights into the suffering of these animals, in addition to any number of other, novel directions that might be heralded by further close readings. It would also be worth pursuing some of the minor threads drawn out at various states in this dissertation: the place of animals in the *plaasroman*,¹⁰⁵ or the trope of slaughter in local fiction.¹⁰⁶ Other less explicitly identified themes might also be fruitfully pursued further: the representation of farms as sites of animal oppression or the role of economic disparities in terms of depictions of diet and the treatment of animals, for instance.

There is a plethora of potential candidates to select for further analysis in terms of their representation of meat and meat-eating: the many novels cited in the introduction;¹⁰⁷ ones mentioned only briefly, like Cartwright’s *White Lightning*, Van Niekerk’s *Agaat* and *Triomf*, or Wicomb’s *October*, and many that have not yet been alluded to, like Jo-Anne Richards’ *The Innocence of Roast Chicken* (1996), Wilma Stockenström’s *The Expedition to the Baobab Tree*

¹⁰⁴ For examples of texts that could potentially be useful in readings of this kind, see footnote 18 on page 26 above.

¹⁰⁵ See pages 40 to 42 above and footnote 40 in particular.

¹⁰⁶ See footnote 81 on page 87.

¹⁰⁷ See pages 19 to 24 above.

(1983), or Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), the latter of which contains – in the form of Waldo's sacrificial offering of a 'mutton chop' (Schreiner 8-10) – one of the most memorable depictions of meat in the South African literary canon.

It might also be useful to consider various narrative forms other than the novel, such as short stories (like Medalie's "The Shooting of the Christmas Cows"), children's writing (like Stephen Marcus Finn's *The Story of Humphrey the Hereford* [2012]), autobiographical writing (such as settler reminiscences or hunting diaries), or folklore.

Further inquiries of this sort should be encouraged, since the study of animals in literature might have a significant influence on our views of animals in the real world. As Steve Baker suggests about his own writing on 'virtual' animals:

It is worth restating that one of the central purposes of this book is to consider the possibility that attitudes to living animals are in large part the result of symbolic uses to which the concept of the animal is put in popular culture. This is not to set the representational or the popular-symbolic 'over' the real. It is simple to say that any understanding of the animal is inseparable from knowledge of its cultural representation. (25)

Some scholars go so far as to suggest that representations of animals can have some positive bearing on our treatment of animals. Woodward argues that "representations resonate ethically as they influence the way humans conceptualise and respond to 'real' embodied nonhuman animals" (8). Similarly Scholtmeijer writes that "[a]nimals abound in modern literature; they are all around us in life. Attention must be paid to them. Paying attention is the first among the ethical acts which should one day lead us to stop victimizing them" (9). The significance of Costello's sympathetic imagination should thus not be underestimated. In this respect, Copeland points to "the power and potential of virtual animals and, in turn, how they become a source of connection and sympathy with other life forms" (97). As such, it remains important to continue considering animals killed for their flesh in fiction as we hope to improve their plight in reality.

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