



Eat the Poor: The Cannibalistic System of Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Speciesism in Bazterrica's Tender Is the Flesh

by Elisabetta Di Minico
(HISTOPIA)

ABSTRACT: *Tender is the Flesh* (originale title: *Cadáver Exquisito*) is a dystopian novel written in 2017. Argentinian author Agustina Bazterrica imagined a world where cannibalism is legal but disguised. After a pandemic that led to the extermination of animals, society began the “transition” to the “special meat”: human meat. The first “specimens” to be selected to be “bred” came from marginalized and impoverished communities. Based on a strong manipulation of language, a deep socio-political process of dehumanization convinced public opinion that human “heads” (deprived not only of their rights but also of their voices, since their vocal cords are cut out) are to be considered as edible animals. Also brutally reflecting on the current meat production system, *Tender Is the Flesh* satirically shows the extremes to which hegemonic capitalism can go, marginalizing and oppressing both environment and otherness (women, the poor, animals, etc.). Through the story of Marcos and his abused “female head” Jasmine (Jasmín in the original text), Bazterrica shows us that “the domination of nature by man stems from the very real domination of human by human” (Bookchin *Ecology* 1). The article analyzes four main themes: 1) the processes that lead to the biopolitical hierarchies of bodies, exposing society’s privileges, double standards, structural injustice, and mechanisms of exploitation, 2) the influence of racism, social status, patriarchy, speciesism, and economic factors in the construction and repression of otherness, 3) the use of language and (forced) silence in real and fictional forms of cannibalistic thanatopolitics, and 4) the Animal Studies and ecocritical perspectives within the book.

KEY WORDS: Dystopia, Cannibal Capitalism, Gender-based Violence, Speciesism, Eco-criticism, Intersectionality



INTRODUCTION

In *The Ecology of Freedom*, Murray Bookchin states that “the domination of nature by man stems from the very real domination of human by human” (*Ecology* 1), underlining that discriminating behaviors such as racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and ableism are connected to the same greed and lust for power and advantages that justify the destruction and the capitalization of the environment. By exposing privileges, double standards, structural injustice, and mechanisms of exploitation, the processes that lead to the biopolitical hierarchization of social and individual bodies have been and continue to be influenced by colonialism, patriarchy, and the economy. And they are similar to the processes that exploit nature and animals, guided by a logic that seeks the maximization of profits above ethics and morality. We are ruled by a system that Fraser defines as “cannibal capitalism”,

not a type of economy but [...] a type of society [that] authorizes an officially designated economy to pile up monetized value for investors and owners, while devouring the non-economized wealth of everyone else. Serving that wealth on a platter to corporate classes, this society invites them to make a meal of our creative capacities and of the earth that sustains us – with no obligation to replenish what they consume or repair what they damage. (XV)

Nature, animals, and individuals who do not fit into the normative categories of the *status quo*, such as minorities, immigrants, women, and/or the homeless, become elements of crisis, bearers of conflict and instability, on the margins of society. Otherness is dehumanized, marginalized, feared, and hated. It must be limited, oppressed, canceled, or assimilated. Devalued through propaganda or language, or silenced. However, it can always be exploited for the benefit of the ruling power. Hegemonic humanity does not recognize the pain it causes, designs a utopia for those who reflect the face of power, and lets everyone else drown in a dystopia. Quoting Milan Kundera, “once the dream of paradise starts to turn into reality, [...] here and there people begin to crop up who stand in its way, and so the rulers of paradise must build a little gulag on the side of Eden” (235). The boundary between utopia and dystopia, between the ‘good place’ and the ‘bad place,’ is fragile, blurred. It depends on the perspective, the political thought, the social class, the gender, the color of the skin, the species.

This article aims to critically examine the dystopian drifts of hegemonic capitalism within contemporary society, using *Tender Is the Flesh* (2017), a horror-filled dystopia by Argentinian author Agustina Bazterrica, as a point of departure. By embedding its fictional themes within a broader socio-political critique, including eco-criticism, feminism, animal studies, and critical race theory, among others, the study explores how the novel’s dark imaginative visions address systemic intersectional injustice by examining the interconnections between gender, race, class, and species, and highlighting how these categories interact and mutually influence each other.

Originally related to racism and Black feminism, the term intersectionality was coined by critical race theory scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. Since then, it “has broadened to include the intersections between other forms of inequality such as



homophobia, transphobia, ableism, classism, and more” (Gand) because “racism, sexism, class exploitation, and similar oppressions may mutually construct one another” (Hill Collins 46). As Crenshaw explains, “Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It’s not simply that there’s a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there” (“Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality”).

Applying an intersectional lens to Bazterrica’s work, the portrayal of otherness in *Tender Is the Flesh* reveals powerful reflections: the novel’s dystopian reality is shaped by multiple, interconnected, and interdependent levels of discrimination, exploitation, and domination that metaphorically denounce contemporary systems of misery, cannibalistic consumerism, and structural oppression.

DEHUMANIZED OTHERNESS AND CANNIBALISTIC POWER

Winner of the Clarín Prize, *Tender Is the Flesh* explores the biopolitical and thanatopolitical control of bodies, unrestrained and hungry consumerism, and the marginalization and oppression that affect both the environment and otherness (women, the poor, animals, etc.). Published in English in 2020 under the title *Tender is the Flesh* and translated into Italian in 2024 by Francesca Signorello under the title *Cadavere Squisito*, the novel focuses on overpopulation, hunger, and catastrophe. “Overpopulation and hunger - linked to human-caused climate and environmental disasters - are [fundamental] themes present in *Tender Is the Flesh*” (Yeyati Preiss 5): the plot centers its reflections on the scarcity of resources, “the rise of individualism, and the survival of the strongest” (Yeyati Preiss 5) in a world where strength is mainly economic and socio-political power.

Cadáver Exquisito, the original Spanish title of the novel refers to the *avant-garde* game from the 1920s *Cadavre exquis*, which counts among its creators the French writer and poet André Breton, one of the fathers of the Surrealist movement. It is “a practice of artistic creation” (Robles Murillo 151) and/or collective poetics that consists of writing or drawing part of a work without knowing what the other players have done or will do. It results in a “unique” product due to its “different intentions” (Breton 9), which spontaneously and in an original, unconscious, and heterogeneous way integrates “the multiple perspectives and visions of the world” (Robles Murillo 150).

However, in Bazterrica’s novel, playing *Cadavre exquis* is less of a psychological exercise and much more of a material one, because it consists of guessing what the flesh of a specific person would taste like. It is a cynical and voracious game that reflects the new reality of a world where cannibalism is legal but linguistically and conceptually hidden.

After a dangerous virus that led to the extermination of almost all animals, instead of opting for a vegan diet, society began the “transition” towards “special meat”, human meat, because



prestigious universities claimed that animal protein was necessary to live, doctors confirmed that plant protein didn't contain all the essential amino acids, experts assured that gas emissions had been reduced, but malnutrition was on the rise, magazines published articles on the dark side of vegetables. (Bazterrica)

Using strong linguistic manipulation, a deep sociopolitical process of dehumanization convinced public opinion that human "heads" (Bazterrica) should be considered as edible animals. The animalization of otherness is a disturbingly classic process of anti-democratic, authoritarian, and repressive policies that transform minorities, women, lower classes, and/or non-normative bodies into monstrous, unreasonable, and ridiculous beasts:

"Rational" white, male, wealthy, privileged, propertied elites designated women, people of color, and other groups to be deficient in rationality, and thus in humanity, they declared them to be subhuman, "mere animals," closer to nature and animality than to culture and humanity, and thus could be thrown to the dungeons of damnation where they could be exploited, enslaved, and slaughtered like animals. (Best)

Language justified this social change and the normalization of cannibalism, one of the most terrifying universal taboos, by simply removing the recognition of humanity from the victims. "The exclusion and predation of certain bodies is naturalized through their animalization in the social discourse, which differentiates living bodies from bodies destined to die" (Yeyati Preiss 1), bodies that deserve to live and bodies that have to feed deserving lives. "Language minimizes a bloody reality and sanitizes it" (Yelovich 320) and "it is central to the articulation of the new health paradigm that unifies predation and social health" (Yeyati Preiss 2). The use of linguistic manipulation in *Tender Is the Flesh* recalls George Orwell's *1984* (1949) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). As in Orwell's Oceania, where Newspeak is used to deplete vocabulary and rational thinking, or in Atwood's Gilead, where rapes are called "ceremonies" and ritual greetings glorify vigilance, obedience, and fertility, the language of this new anthropophagous society is limited and simplified. It helps to annihilate the possibilities of discussion and criticism, to disguise violence, and to assimilate the hierarchical difference between human and non-human. In Bazterrica's dystopia, words like "cannibalism" or "human" cannot be used in reference to the heads: for example, the new meat is called "special," and customers use "the cuts of pork to refer to upper and lower extremities" (Bazterrica).

MEAT DOES NOT SPEAK

There is also an additional level of linguistic control that affects the livestock-humanity. Branded with hot irons, the heads are products deprived not only of their rights but also of their voices, as their vocal cords are cut out. They do not have the possibility of speaking or socializing with each other and they can only express themselves in a basic way, as if they were truly animals: "They do communicate, but with simplified language.



We know if they're cold, hot, the basics" (Bazterrica). With striking nonchalance, human-farm owner El Gringo remarks that the "vocal cords [of the heads] are removed so they're easier to control" (Bazterrica). In this way, owners and society can nullify heads' identity and reject their humanity: "no one wants them to speak because meat does not speak" (Bazterrica). Animals do not speak, humans are the only ones who possess the gift of an articulate language.

The absence of voice and relationality erases the heads' potential for cognitive and emotional development, for connection, and, most importantly, for rebellion. This speechlessness echoes real life processes of silencing and marginalizing oppressed groups. "Silence has many forms and functions" (Jaworski 27), including oppressive ones: "Silence is oppressive when it is characteristic of a dominated group, and when the group is not allowed to break its silence by its own choosing and by means of any medium controlled by the power group" (Jaworski 27). The voices of dominated groups can be legally criminalized, socially censored, physically suppressed, politically debased, excluded, and/or ridiculed. This systemic silencing reflects the broader mechanisms through which hegemonic authority neutralizes dissent, normalizes injustice, and enforces control and surveillance.

In his essay on speech, animals, and the Other in Homer, Aeschylus, and Plato, Heath underlines that, already for the Ancient Greek thinking, "the ability to speak is what makes us human" (171), separating us from animals. This axiom is further "used metaphorically to distinguish other categories of human status: men and women, humans and gods, the living and the dead, Greek and non-Greek, the young and the old, the heroic and the rest of us" (Heath 171). *Logos*, reason, and power are inextricably connected and individuals or groups deprived of their socio-political voices are demoted to the irrational, unconscious, unworthy, and savage "realm of the animal" (Heath 172). Thus, since the dawn of civilization, the suppression of the possibility to speak or be acknowledged has fueled violent processes of dehumanization. These processes have served to justify genocide, slavery, colonialism, rape, depredation, and abuses against disadvantaged, devalued, underrepresented, and subjugated groups. The trope of silenced and/or unheard voices is a recurring literary and artistic motif used to metaphorically emphasize domination and the physical and conceptual cannibalization of the Other.

In 1937, two years before the outbreak of World War II, English author Katharine Burdekin wrote *Swastika Night*, a novel set in a future where, after a global conflict, Nazism reigns over the world obliterating racial, religious, and sexual otherness. Brutalized and shaved, stripped of beauty, knowledge, individuality, speech, and free will, women exist solely for reproductive purposes. They are confined to restricted, degraded, and crumbling spaces, far from the male ones, in prisons without bars, where submission and manipulation run so deep that rebellion and resistance are inconceivable (Di Minico, "Spatial" 5-8). Like Bazterrica's heads, women are not only treated like animals but also mentally animalized, reduced to the status of cattle: "[Women] were no more conscious of boredom, imprisonment, or humiliation than cows in the field. They were too stupid to be really conscious of anything distressing



except physical pain or the loss of children” (Burdekin 158). Women have no chances to be heard and their language is severely limited and entirely servile. They have been erased from public and cultural life and from historical records. Deprived entirely of self-representation, the female gender vanishes into the margins of the narrative, lacking substance, presence, and protagonism.

Tender Is the Flesh's heads also evoke the abused and silenced child in Ursula K. Le Guin's short story *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* (1973) who serves as the archetypal scapegoat. The suffering of this single child ensures the prosperity and harmony to the utopian city of Omelas and it is both seen and heard by the entire community.

Through the symbolical body of this tormented child, Le Guin exposes the authoritarian and dominant trajectories of hegemonic capitalism, offering a sharp critique of the systemic injustice at the base of Western society and its obtunded but comfortable sense of happiness.

Once again, the obliteration of the victim is enacted not only through psycho-physical and social isolation, but also through linguistic suppression. Locked away in filth and darkness, the child is described as barely able to speak or even understand language. This absence of speech is not incidental, it is crucial to the process of deindividualization that legitimizes the scapegoat's sacrifice. The child, who “could be a boy or a girl, [...] used to scream for help at night, and cry a good deal, but now it only makes a kind of whining, ‘eh-haa, eh-haa,’ and it speaks less and less often” (Le Guin). Without the ability to coherently express and denounce his/her condition, or to appeal to others, the child's identity is stripped away because the deprivation of language entails the erosion of humanity. The child's pain is devalued and normalized for the sake of society's *status quo*, allegorically mirroring the mechanisms of denial, cynical rationalization, and moral compromise of citizens who choose to ignore inequality, exploitation, poverty, gender-based violence, environmental degradation, animal suffering, and the consequences of the social, economic, racial, and sexual privileges they have, among others.

The supposed mythical “process of transferring and eliminating evil” (Douglas 1) through a sacrificial victim—whose bloody death is presented as a regenerative act of life—(Adams 37) has ancient roots. The victim could be an animal, like, *nomen omen*, the goat ritually killed in the Yom Kippur ritual described in the Jewish *Torah* (Leviticus 16: 8-10), or a human, like the *pharmakos* in Ancient Greece, a generally marginalized member of the community, humiliated, banished, or executed in order to cleanse the society. The mythical or religious idea of purification from evil has always carried political implications: the blood of enemies, the excluded, and the dangerous heals the body of the state. The deaths of bodies considered as social waste guarantee protection and benefits to the *status quo* (Di Minico, “Omelas” 517-519). Like the child of Omelas, the heads of *Tender Is the Flesh* represent a vessel that absorbs pain and frees the righteous from the evil of famine, revealing a utilitarian and thanatopolitical logic.



EATING THE POOR

The heads are condemned to be abused in order to feed the capitalist and predatory utopia of a classist society, reversing the threat attributed to the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau that “when people have nothing to eat, they will eat the rich!” or cannibalism as an allegorical attack against the system of “cadaverous” imperialist and missionary ideas of the 1928 *Manifiesto Antropófago*, written by the Brazilian modernist poet Oswald de Andrade. *Tender Is the Flesh’s* cannibalism is a gruesome allegorical representation of real socio-political and interpersonal tendencies through which social injustice and tyrannical exploitation ‘devour’ the rights, the freedoms, and the possibilities of subordinate classes and groups.

Cannibalism is not a modern trope, it has long been used as a metaphor for power, domination, and consumption, traversing, just to quote some examples, classical myth, the biting irony of Enlightenment satire, and the hopeless visions of contemporary dystopian fiction. In Greek mythology, Cronus, leader of the Titans, eats his own children to prevent them from usurping his throne, representing the brutality of absolute power and the consuming passing of time. In *A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People from Being a Burden to Their Parents or Country, and for Making Them Useful to the Public*, a satirical essay written by Jonathan Swift in 1729, the author of *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726) proposes to resolve the miserable condition of the “poor people” of Ireland by transforming their children into delicacies for the elites. During a time of famine and extreme poverty, Swift grotesquely commodifies the most vulnerable part of society, the poor children, and exposes the utilitarian logic and the insatiable greed of the ruling class: “In Swift’s ironic world, greedy appetites will become an institutionalized remedy for the very thing that fostered poverty in the first place: greed” (Sanders 66).

Cannibalism is also a central element in dystopian fiction. Several works use the trope to reflect on corporate control, environmental disaster, alienation, exploitation, and the annihilation of empathy and solidarity. One such example is *Ministerio* (1986), an Argentinian comic by Francisco Solano López and Ricardo Barreiro. In the 5,000-story skyscraper where the surviving part of humanity took refuge after an apocalypse, the old elite, who lives on the highest floors of the building, feeds on the energy of the youngest and the promoted workers end up killed by giant meat grinders and turned into food. Also in *Soylent Green*, a 1973 film by Richard Fleisher based on the novel *Make Room! Make Room!* (1966) by Harry Harrison, in an overpopulated world close to ecological collapse, the population has no access to fresh and healthy food and unwittingly eats products made from corpses.

Bazterrica’s work situates itself firmly within this long-standing literary tradition that employs the trope of cannibalism. In the novel, dehumanization and annihilation of the Other still pass through mechanisms of ferocious consumption and commodification, but Bazterrica intensifies the metaphor presenting a world where cannibalism is not a disguised, accidental, or transgressive practice, but a normalized economic and cultural habit. Taking Fraser’s concept of cannibal capitalism to an extreme dystopian outcome, she brutally and powerfully exposes exploitation,



intersectional injustice, and inherent violence of our capitalist and consumerist society where the rich metaphorically and literally cannibalize the most dispossessed otherness.

Bazterrica does not merely echo her predecessors, she amplifies their warning and their satire and radicalizes the critical function of cannibalism in dystopian literature, denouncing the ravenous ethical void of a system that capitalizes even death and suffering.

The slaughterhouse in *Tender Is the Flesh* becomes the ultimate site of necropower, where the biopolitical control over bodies extends into necropolitics, allowing the state not only to control life but to regulate death and give an economic value to the slaughtered human body. The abhorrent conditions of this intensive farming mirror slavery, colonialism, genocide, military occupation, and other similar “repressed topographies of cruelty” where “vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead” (Mbembe 92). Under necropolitical systems, bodies are not just killed, they are nullified and reduced to worthless breathing non-beings, inhuman “anti-bodies” (Vallorani 19) to be exploited, processed, and consumed. In death, Bazterrica’s heads gain a value they never had in life. The first “specimens” selected to be “bred”, in fact, came from discriminated realities: immigrants, the marginalized, and the poor. Thus, society solved the food problem, poverty, and overpopulation with one horrific solution.

The metaphorical hunger for profit and exploitation leads to the destruction of nature, causes ecological disasters, and also condemns humanity, dragging society to physical hunger and amplifying its systemic injustice, violence, and hierarchical inequality.

As Baylón emphasizes, “the relationship with heads is one of possession” (117). For “the capitalist system,” heads are “disposable bodies without [social and personal] identity” (Yeyati Preiss 21). They are reduced to material goods with an economic value: they can produce wealth for their owners and be consumed by the rich or bourgeois part of the population. The poorest citizens, who clearly do not have the power to literally and metaphorically have a seat at the table, are called “scavengers” (Bazterrica). They resort to rotten meat as well as kidnapping, stealing, and murdering in order to eat.

The refiguration of a part of the human species as a product aimed at commercial, industrial, scientific, and even recreational purposes reinforces a utilitarian view of these humans turned into meat. The objectification of the human body allows new forms of violence against it to be normalized. The immolation of these bodies is not limited to death in the slaughterhouse to feed the population, but, in this process of erasing the face, of disfiguring it, these bodies are redefined as an object of luxury. (Romano 18)

BUILDING NON-HUMAN AND CONDEMNING HUMAN

The protagonist of the novel is Marcos Trejo, manager of the Krieg slaughterhouse. He knows that it is not animals but humans that are being butchered, and he hates his job.



Despite his critical opinions, he remains part of the system “because he’s the best and they pay him accordingly” (Bazterrica). Empty, broken, desentimentalized, he is marked by the death of his son, the abandonment of his wife, and the obligation to take care, even financially, of his sick father, while his hypocritical sister does not help him. Marcos apparently rediscovers joy and affection when he is given a female head and transforms this product that he “can kill [...], slaughter [...], and make [...] suffer” (Bazterrica) into a submissive partner. Committing a very serious crime, he has sexual relations with the woman and impregnates her. This forbidden relationship is highly toxic and abusive, as it is imposed upon a subject who is incapable of understanding its implications, a subject deprived of voice, agency, and consciousness, ultimately reduced to the status of an object. Despite this, Marcos seems sincerely committed to the woman and he cares for her. He even suffers at the thought of her pain

He runs his hand over the mark on her forehead where she’s been branded. Then he kisses it, because he knows she suffered when they did it to her, just as she suffered when they removed her vocal cords so she’d be more submissive, so she wouldn’t scream when she was slaughtered. He strokes her neck. Now, he’s the one who trembles. (Bazterrica)

He helps her develop an identity and a form of expression. He gives her a name, Jasmine (Jazmín in the original Spanish text), violating a fundamental rule of this dehumanizing reality where meat has no name. “The name separates her from the rest of the heads without identity. [...] The name transforms Jasmine into a woman; she is no longer meat or a head; the name confers her humanity” (Romano 24-25). And this humanity allows the woman to “develop skills inherent to her nature, such as drawing, which is a form of language” (Romano 25), and to ultimately assert her individuality. The recognition of the rights of a certain group involves the recognition of its existence. Without a name, otherness does not have a voice, both physically and politically, as in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, where the handmaids lose their names and their identity and become an object of possession (Of-fred, Of-glen, etc.); as in Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We* (1924), where depersonalized citizens are name-numbers and their lives belong to the collectivity; as in the Nazi concentration camps, where prisoners were tattooed with serial numbers; or as in livestock farming, where animals are herded and labeled.

While Jasmine discovers and builds her humanity, Marcos seems to rediscover his, reawakened by the relationship and the imminent fatherhood. This potential hero’s journey from complicity in crime to rebellion, from void to empathy, however, turns into a cruel mockery because, just after giving birth to his son, the man kills Jasmine, once again an object, once again a product, an unconscious surrogate mother turned into meat to be slaughtered. But Jasmine was and is human. Screaming without a voice, she tries to reach her son, her body instinctively expresses her maternal love. Marcos’s wife, who returned to help during the birth, is shocked by her husband’s action, but not out of compassion, simply because the head could have given them more children. However, Marcos can no longer bear the “human look of a domesticated animal” (Bazterrica).

The world of *Tender Is the Flesh* is a dissociated reality where physical and mental survival is linked to the human ability to manage what Orwell called Doublethink:



To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them, to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it, to believe that democracy was impossible and that the Party was the guardian of democracy, to forget whatever it was necessary to forget, then to draw it back into memory again at the moment when it was needed, and then promptly to forget it again, and above all, to apply the same process to the process itself—that was the ultimate subtlety: consciously to induce unconsciousness, and then, once again, to become unconscious of the act of hypnosis you had just performed. Even to understand the word—doublethink—involved the use of doublethink. (Orwell 37-38)

The insane *coincidentia oppositorum* that in 1984 makes it impossible to distinguish war from peace and freedom from slavery, is used in Bazterrica's novel to separate flesh and meat, humans and human-animals in a convenient and exploitable way. This separation reaches paradoxical extremes, as when we read about the celebration of a breeding center worker who just became a father with the barbecue of a child head:

The smell of barbecue is in the air. They go to the rest area, where the farmhands are roasting a rack of meat on a cross. El Gringo explains to Egmont that they've been preparing it since eight in the morning, "So it melts in your mouth," and that the guys are actually about to eat a. "It's the most tender kind of meat, there's only just a little, because a kid¹ doesn't weigh as much as a calf. We're celebrating because one of them became a father," he explains. "Want a sandwich?" (Bazterrica)

The same dissonance characterizes Marcos's actions. He and his wife see Jasmine's baby as their son, thus recognizing his humanity. But this does not stop Marcos from brutally killing the mother of his child to reestablish an order that cannot tolerate the humanization of livestock and the confusion between masters and cattle.

The marginal body is functional and worthy only when it is productive and disciplined, when it is "docile and useful" (Foucault 305). If it does not provide benefits or has already completed some required duties (e.g., work, pregnancies, etc.), it is useless, like the bodies of the Non-women in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In Atwood's novel, infertile, sexually unexploitable, and non-obedient women go through a process not only of dehumanization, but also of defeminization, both linguistically and practically. If they cannot deferentially provide domestic work, children, or pleasure, women are considered damaged goods, to be confined in the Colonies, contaminated labor camps.

FEMALE MEAT AND THE PRICE WOMEN PAY

In *Tender Is the Flesh*, human heads suffer unspeakable violence, but, as in many dystopias with feminist perspectives, women end up being abused twice, by both biopolitical and/or thanatopolitical authority, as well as by patriarchy. Hegemonic

¹ The word "kid" adds a disturbing nuance to the phrase, as in English, *kid* can also refer to a baby goat, amplifying the unsettling comparison between human and animal farming.



capitalism is inherently tied to female oppression. The empty and commodified body of women can be occupied through multiple forms of control and appropriation by power and masculinity. Women are “meat [...] born to make meat” (Wood 122). This ferocious line is written by Australian author Charlotte Wood in her speculative novel *The Natural Way of Things* (2015), where she brutally criticizes rape culture in our society by portraying ten women suffering from sex scandals and sexual abuses who are kidnapped and imprisoned in the remote Outback. In dystopias and in patriarchal realities, the female body cannot be separated from its gender and potential motherhood, having predetermined sexual and reproductive functions imposed on it by politics, tradition, and biology. For this reason, Bazterrica imagines that the female heads are the most exploited in the meat industry. Before being slaughtered, they are victims of forced pregnancy and lactation, hunting, and rape (despite the death penalty for zoophilia, a contradiction that further exposes the system’s hypocrisy). Some of the most difficult pages of the novel describe pregnant female heads lying on tables, without arms or legs because they often try to end the pregnancy and kill themselves and the fetuses. Sometimes, they are sold to hunters for a very high price because motherhood makes them more ferocious and desperate and allows men to better enjoy the predatory experience.

Sadly not only in fiction, the toxic “version of appropriate behavior for men links power and sexuality with violence” (Reid-Cunningham 284) and the affirmation of hyper-masculinity is supported by a strong desire for domination and exploitation, as also shown in *Westworld* (2016-2022) by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy, an HBO TV series that depicts a Western-themed amusement park where humans can interact with sentient androids and abuse them without consequences. In episode 1.01, the sadistic Man in Black is annoyed by the submissiveness of Dolores, one of the hosts that he is going to rape, and screams at her demanding a more entertaining resistance: “I didn’t pay all this money ‘cause I want it easy. I want you to fight”. (“The Original”).

Jasmine’s lack of voice reflects the incommunicability of women’s rights and demands, their struggle to be heard. As previously discussed, the silencing of bodies reinforces structures of domination and the dehumanization of otherness. And women are situated within the category of the Other, as emphasized by Simone de Beauvoir’s notable assertion in *The Second Sex*: “He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other” (6).

In patriarchal realities, women have often been marginalized and denied access to public discourse, civic participation, legal autonomy, and self-representation. They have been silenced metaphorically, linguistically, medically, and socio-politically, through oppressive traditions, discriminatory social and legal norms, sexual repression, systemic violence, structural injustice, institutionalized *bias*, and practices such as victim blaming, among others. In dystopian fiction, women’s silence is often employed as a hyperbolic and theatrical tool to denounce historical and contemporary limitations and erosion of women’s rights and their voicelessness in everyday practices of objectification, gender-based violence, and reproductive control. A powerful example is *Vox* (2018), a novel by Christina Dalcher where women’s voices are suppressed by a technological device that allows them to pronounce only 100 words per day,



neutralizing their capacity for resistance and naturalizing their roles in domesticity, passivity, and obedience.

Jasmine's body and the bodies of the other female heads in *Tender Is the Flesh* are doubly silenced, as women and as meat. Jasmine's voiceless body symbolizes all the intersectional female bodies subjected to violence, disempowerment, and discrimination.

Jasmine's body represents the bodies of abused women, one in five worldwide, up to 736 million according to the World Health Organization.

Jasmine's body represents the bodies of the women mass-raped in warfare to destroy and erase an ethnic, national, ideological, or religious group, as during the Nanjing Massacre in 1937, when the Japanese Army raped and tortured between 20.000 and 80.000 women; the occupation of Germany in World War II, when the Soviet troops raped more than 2.000.000 women (95.000-130.000 just in Berlin); the war in Ex-Yugoslavia between 1992 and 1995, when 25.000-50.000 women were victims of sexual violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina (with almost 20.000 forced pregnancies and 5.000 newborns abandoned or killed); or in Rwanda, where, during the 1994 genocide resulting from the tribal war between two ethnic groups, Hutu and Tutsi, almost 500.000 Tutsi women were raped, leading to 2.500-5.000 forced pregnancies (Reid-Cunningham 282-283).

Jasmine's body represents the bodies of the mothers deprived of their sons and daughters as punishment for dissent during the Argentine dictatorship (1976-1983): the government

kidnapped, detained in clandestine prisons, and disappeared up to 30.000 civilians - including up to 500 infants and young children either stolen at the time their parents were captured or taken from their mothers when they were born in secret detention centers, and handed over to families who in many cases supported military rule. (Bystrom and Werth 425-426).

Jasmine's body represents the bodies of the Afro-descendant slaves in the United States, products and producers, victims not only of forced labor but also of sexual and reproductive exploitation, routinely raped by their "masters" and forced to "produce" enslaved children to guarantee more wealth for their owners:

Enslavers' claims on Black women's labor included their reproductive capacities. The sexual coercion and abuse of enslaved women was systematic in the *antebellum* U.S. South. The rape of Black women by white overseers and enslavers was widespread, a feature as central to the slavery system as labor exploitation. [...] Children remained a key objective; enslaved women's reproductive labor ensured the next generation of people in bondage. (Wilson Marshall 93)

Moreover, sexual assaults against enslaved bodies were "symbolic of the effort to conquer the resistance the Black woman could unloose" (Davis 11).

Jasmine's body represents the bodies of all the women victims of colonialism, imperialism, sex trafficking, human trafficking, forced prostitution, and many other execrable systems.



THE ANIMAL BODY AND ITS UNHEARD SUFFERING

From an ecocritical and animal rights perspective, *Tender Is the Flesh* shows that it is easier to imagine the end of cannibalism as a taboo than the end of the meat industry. Violence against the heads is the exact replica of the violence suffered by animals in intensive farming. The animal body and the dehumanized human body are both victims of exploitation, cruelty, and death.

Kemmerer relates in particular the animal body to the female body, underlining how speciesism, sexism, and the objectification of bodies intersect:

Females—sows and cows and hens and women—suffer because of their sex in Western patriarchal cultures, where female bodies are exploited as sex symbols, for reproduction, for breast milk, and/or for reproductive eggs. As such, farmed animals are at the very bottom of the contemporary, Western hierarchy of beings—and this is speciesism. (19)

The animal body and the woman's body are interpreted as shared sites of consumption, control, and domination. They are often perceived or depicted as passive, irrational, and disposable. They embody fertility, domesticity, and sacrifice: "in Western patriarchal culture, both women and non-human nature have been devalued alongside their assumed opposites—men and civilization/culture" (Kemmerer 15).

"Speciesism strips animals of all intrinsic value to reduce them to instrumental value," to products "devoid of reason [and] autonomy," non-worthy of "mercy or compassion" (Best). Animals epitomize otherness and the assumed deficiencies that normative and dominant society accused them of.

"Once again, the human being classifies different existences and determines unequal values for them. After the extermination of animals, a new otherness is created, defined in the same terms of the former: irrational, useful, threatening" (Romano 17). Part of the discomfort we feel reading the novel is connected to the awareness of our double standards: "the story horrifies not only for what it narrates, but for what it tacitly reproaches: the lack of indignation at the same practice against non-human animals" (Romano 15). In a clear and poignant reflection, Derrida emphasizes that

no one can deny the unprecedented proportions of [the] subjection of the animal. Such a subjection [...] can be called violence in the most morally neutral sense of the term. [...] No 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 organize on a global scale the forgetting or misunderstanding of this violence that some would compare to the worst cases of genocide (there are also animal genocides: the number of species endangered because of man take one's breath away). (394)

The novel also sparks retro-mediated feelings because it was written three years before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. Bazterrica imagined a deadly and global disease transmitted from animals to humans that forced society to re-write its behaviors, actions, and possibilities.



Retro-mediation is [...] a media logic of reimagining the past. It works as a retroactive and affective “repair,” through which users project dystopian symbols, icons, and visual elements, drawn from the visual imagery of the pandemic, onto audiovisual objects produced in the pre-pandemic era. [...] Retro-mediation allows us to transfer to cultural objects of the past the feelings of anxiety, distress, and disorientation experienced during the pandemic. (Tirino and Denicolai 72-73)

Reading and retro-mediating *Tender Is the Flesh* in post-pandemic times highlights the extreme dangers of a society that does not respect nature and animals and causes potentially apocalyptic environmental destruction, paralleling or extremizing related socio-political problems, such as repressive policies, restrictions of human and civil rights, systemic injustice, racism, homophobia, gender-based violence, exploitation of marginalized communities or nations, anti-scientific attitudes, crisis, and conflicts. Quoting Bookchin again, “As long as hierarchy persists, as long as domination organizes humanity around a system of elites, the project of dominating nature will continue to exist and inevitably lead our planet to ecological extinction” (*Toward* 37).

INTERSECTIONAL HOPES AND CONCLUSION

Tender Is the Flesh tells of the traumatic extremes of hegemonic capitalism and its ability to turn bodies into consumer goods, and shows the invasive power of discrimination, racism, patriarchy, speciesism, inequality, language manipulation, and political propaganda.

The present analysis focuses on three main levels of intersectional violence: human bodies massacred by capitalism, systemic injustice, and racism, female bodies exploited for their sexual and reproductive value, and animal bodies slaughtered for profit, with no regard for their suffering. Whether it is humanity against nature, one class against another, one gender against the others, the narrative and actions of violence are always driven by privilege and exploitation. Each injustice is different in its essence, but all arise from the same logic of domination and profit. Bazterrica leaves readers in a black hole of inhumanity, literal and ethical hunger, and blood. The powerful novel implicitly suggests that we can avoid dystopia through empathy and the exaltation of otherness, with the fight for nature and for the Other, recognizing the intersectionality of resistance. Quoting Kemmerer:

We cannot end just one form of oppression, so we need to be on board with other activists. If we are not, we doom social justice activists to perpetually pulling up the innumerable shoots that spring from the very deep roots of oppression. Furthermore, inability to see one’s own privilege and ignorance of the struggles that others face (in a homophobic, racist, ageist, ableist, sexist society) are major impediments to social justice activism. Those who are privileged must give way so that others can take the lead, bringing new social justice concerns and methods to the activist’s table. (28)



We write the reality of tomorrow every day, with every action we take. It will be our choice to build a shared and fair tomorrow for all or a future where a rich, powerful, and untouchable capitalism will feast on the rest of society.

WORKS CITED

Adams, Rebecca. "Narrative Voice and Unimaginability of the Utopian Feminine in Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas*." *Utopian Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1/2, 1991, pp. 35-47.

Baylón Medina, Evelyn. "La relación humano-naturaleza en *Cadáver Exquisito*." *Revista de Estudios Sociales Contemporáneos*, no. 29, 2023, pp. 114-122.

Bazterrica, Agustina. *Tender is the Flesh*. E-book, Pushkin Press, 2020.

Best, Steven. "The Rise (and Fall) of Critical Animal Studies". *LIBERAZIONI Associazione Culturale Antispecista*. 24 March 2014, <http://www.liberazioni.org>. Accessed 15 Mar. 2025.

Bookchin, Murray. *The Ecology of Freedom*. Cheshire Books, 1982.

---. *Toward an Ecological Society*. Black Rose Books, 1980.

Breton, André. *Diccionario abreviado del Surrealismo*. Ediciones Siruela, 2003.

Burdekin, Katharine. *Swastika's Night*. Feminist Press, 1985.

Bystrom, Kerry, and Brenda Werth. "Stolen Children, Identity Rights, and Rhetoric (Argentina, 1983-2012)". *JAC – Rhetorics Regulating Childhood and Children's Rights*, vol. 33, no. 3/4, 2013, pp. 425-453.

Dalcher, Christina. *Vox*. Berkley, 2018.

Davis, Angela. "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves." *The Black Scholar*, vol. 3, no. 4, 1971, pp. 1-14.

de Andrade, Oscar. "Manifiesto Antropófago." *Vanguardia latinoamericana, Tomo VI. Brasil. Historia, crítica y documentos*, edited by Klaus Müller-Bergh and Gilberto Mendonça Telles, Vervuert, 2015, pp. 133-138.

De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Pan Books, 1988.

Derrida, Jacques. "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2002, pp. 369-418.

Di Minico, Elisabetta. "Omelas." *Diccionario de Lugares Utópicos*, edited by Juan Pro, Silex, 2022, pp. 517-519.

---. "Spatial, Linguistic and Psycho-physical Domination of Women in Dystopia: *Swastika Night*, *Woman on the Edge of Time* and *The Handmaid's Tale*." *Humanities*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2019, pp. 1-15.

Douglas, Tom. *Scapegoats. Transferring Blame*. Routledge, 2003.

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*. Vintage Books, 1995.

Fraser, Nancy. *Cannibal Capitalism*. Verso Books, 2023.

Gaind, Sabine. "The Future is Intersectional: Why Inclusivity in Activism Matters." *Overachiever Magazine*. 30 July 2020, <https://www.overachievermagazine.com/activism/the-future-is-intersectional-why-inclusivity-in-activism->



matters#:~:text=In%20an%20interview%20with%20Time%20magazine%20thirty,as%20homophobia%2C%20transphobia%2C%20ableism%2C%20classism%2C%20and%20more. Accessed 18 Apr. 2025.

Harrison, Harry. *Make Room! Make Room!* Spectra, 1994.

Heath, John. *The Talking Greeks. Speech, Animals, and the Other in Homer, Aeschylus, and Plato.* Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Hill Collins, Patricia. *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory.* Duke University Press, 2019.

Holy Bible. New International Version, Holman Bible Publishers, 1988.

Jaworski, Adam. "How to Silence a Minority: The Case of Women." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, no. 94, 1992, pp. 27-41.

Kemmerer, Lisa. *Sister Species. Women, Animals, and Social Justice.* University of Illinois, 2011.

"Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More than Two Decades Later". Columbia Law School. 8 June 2017, <https://www.law.columbia.edu/news/archive/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality-more-two-decades-later>. Accessed 28 Mar. 2025.

Kundera, Milan. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting.* Penguin Books, 1981.

Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas.* E-book, Harper Collins, 2017.

Mbembe, Achille. *Necropolitics.* Duke University Press, 2019.

Orwell, George. *Nineteen Eighty-four.* Penguin Books, 2000.

Reid-Cunningham, Allison Ruby. "Rape as a Weapon of Genocide." *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, no. 3, 2008, pp. 279-296.

Robles Murillo, Keylor. "Cadáver exquisito poético: politizando los géneros literarios mediante estrategias didácticas." *Innovaciones Educativas*, vol. 22, no. 33, 2020, pp. 146-161.

Romano Hurtado, Berenice. "La mirada que engulle en *Cadáver Exquisito* de Agustina Bazterrica." *Visitas al Patio*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2024, pp. 14-29.

Sanders, Barry. "From a Modest Proposal to the Final Solution: The Cauterizing of the Popular Imagination." *The North American Review*, vol. 275, no. 3, 1990, pp. 66-71.

Solano López, Francisco, and Ricardo Barreiro. *Ministerio.* Toutain Editor, 1986.

Soylent Green. Directed by Richard Fleischer, performances by Charlton Heston, Edward G. Robinson, and Leigh Taylor-Young, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1973.

Swift, Jonathan. *A Modest Proposal and Other Satirical Works.* Dover, 1996.

"*The Original.*" *Westworld*, created by Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy, season 1, episode 1, HBO, 2 Oct. 2016.

Tirino, Mario, and Lorenzo Denicolai. "The Virus Filter: Retro-mediation, Dystopia, and the Remediation of Audiovisual Imaginaries." *Futuri. Rivista italiana di futures studies*, special issue *Apocalypse, Hope, and Dystopia between Fiction and Society*, edited by Elisabetta Di Minico and Stefano Locati, 2024, pp. 63-75.

"Violence against Women." *World Health Organization*, 2024, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/violence-against-women>. Accessed 14 Mar. 2025.



Vallorani, Nicoletta. *Anti/Corpi*. Libraccio, 2012.

Wilson Marshall, Lydia. "Women, Slavery, and Labor in the United States." *Journal of African Diaspora Archaeology and Heritage*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2022, pp. 93-96.

Wood, Charlotte. *The Natural Way of Things*. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2016.

Yelovich, Israel. "Cadáver Exquisito de Agustina Bazterrica: viaje al centro de las distopías." *Tenso Diagonal*, no. 11, 2021, pp. 317-321.

Yeyati Preiss, Paula. "Cadáver Exquisito: distopía y tanatopolítica." *Argus-a. Artes y Humanidades*, vol. X, no. 39, 2021, pp. 1-28.

Zamyatin, Yevgeny. *We*. Canongate, 2017.

Elisabetta Di Minico is a member of the HISTOPIA* research group. She has recently completed a UNA4CAREER postdoctoral fellowship at the Faculty of Political Science and Sociology of the Complutense University of Madrid, with a project on "The Enmity of Otherness." She also taught Comic History at IULM – Free University of Language and Communication in Milan. She works on the relations between fiction and history. Her research primarily focuses on dystopia, control, otherness, and violence (racial and gendered). Elisabetta uses novels, comics, movies, and TV series to provocatively analyze the real "bad places" of contemporary society from a historical and socio-political point of view.

*This article is part of the R&D&I Grant PID2021-123465NB-I00 (*Transatlantic Utopias: alternative imaginaries between Spain and America*), funded by MICIU/AEI/10.13039/501100011033 and by "ERDF A way of making Europe".

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8079-5071>

elidimin@ucm.es

Di Minico, Elisabetta. "Eat the Poor: The Cannibalistic System of Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Speciesism in Bazterrica's *Tender Is the Flesh*." *Altre Modernità*, n. 33, *Letteratura ed eventi politici in un orizzonte mediterraneo. Nuove voci in campo culturale dopo i movimenti dei cittadini in Spagna, Francia e Italia (2011-2021)*, Maggio 2025, pp. 160-176. ISSN 2035-7680.

Disponibile all'indirizzo:

<<https://riviste.unimi.it/index.php/AMonline/article/view/28887/24182>>.

Ricevuto: 20/06/2024 Approvato: 30/09/2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54103/2035-7680/28887>

Versione 1, data di pubblicazione: 17/05/2025

Questa opera è pubblicata sotto Licenza Creative Commons CC BY-SA 4.0