

Exuent: Or, When Killability Defines a Life

Published in Catalyst 3(2) 10-11 (2017)

Schrader, A. and Johnson, E. (Eds) (2017). Considering Killability: Experiments in Unsettling Life and Death. Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience, 3(2) 1-15

<http://www.catalystjournal.org> | ISSN: 2380-3312

Mourning his slain daughter Cordelia, King Lear asks: 'Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, and thou no breath at all?' (Lear, V, iii). Only the companion animal, the functional animal and the nuisance animal, each, along with the food animal, is killable. "Thou shall't not kill concerns only man', writes Derrida (2002: 416). Killing is the original ontological act not just because it renders only animals uniquely bare-of-life and thus killable but also because it makes humans uniquely response-able in how we kill non-humans 'with reasons but knowing there will never be sufficient reason' (Haraway, 2009, 81). Farm animals are defined by killing, both as non-humans and as human property; they are 'killable' through an acts defined as 'necessary' or 'acceptable' by law (Bryant, 2008). Indeed, they exist to be killed, their lives are stage-managed to arrive at a pre-defined killing, usually when a desired level of productivity has been reached or exceeded. We might ask whether their killing an act of ending or of beginning, a state of being or of not being? Farm animals are killable long before they are killed, before even they are born. Engineered, through breeding and, increasingly, genetics, to produce meat or eggs or milk at some somatically enhanced way, their killing is not only assured, it is precipitated, it is definitive. There are two means of escape: to die (though this is uncommon as an ill or injured animal is usually 'put down' to avoid the costs of veterinary care or unnecessary feeding) or to be unborn. Amongst the vast numbers of chickens and dairy cows, male animals and birds are unwanted and are killed soon after birth or hatching. Soon, sexually selective bull sperm and pre-hatching sexing techniques will deny them even that. Of course, the killing of animals is not the end; farm animals don't die (as subjects of an act), they are killed (as objects of an act) they are not 'grievable.' Their killing is a moment of transition from the vibrant materiality of the living body to the very different silent materiality of the edible product (but also, more prosaically, from cost to profit). This is a transition of different killings; the anticipated killing upon leaving the farm, the (recoverable) killing of sensibility when an animal is stunned, the somatic killing of bleeding out, the corporeal killing of the body during cutting up and processing. Sometimes, when animals are slaughtered using gas or low atmospheric pressure, the heart needs to be electronically started to facilitate bleeding; a further killing. And yet, to be killable is also to be alive, to have lived. If humans must learn to kill responsibly, they must also learn to let live responsibly.

Bryant, T. (2008) Sacrificing the sacrifice of animals: legal personhood for animals, the status of animals as property and the presumed primacy of humans Rutgers Law Journal 39, 247-330

Derrida, J. (2002) The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow), Critical Inquiry, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Winter, 2002), pp. 369-418

Haraway, D. (2009) When species meet. Minnesota, Minneapolis University Press

Henry Buller
October 2016