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Abatthorror: Tracking the Animal-Industrial Complex in Agustina Bazterrica's *Tender is the Flesh*

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An expanding corpus of contemporary fiction critically engages with the animal-industrial complex and the violence of the slaughter of so-called "food animals," shifting the slaughterhouse from narrative periphery to thematic centre.[1] In Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* (1998), for example, the protagonist Jane exposes the collusion between the pharmaceutical and animal agricultural industries, unmasking how both women and cows are subjected to diethylstilbestrol (DES), a synthetic hormone marketed as a pregnancy drug and as a growth stimulant for livestock. Similarly, Jean-Baptiste Del Amo's *Animalia* (2016; *Animalia* 2019) maps the cross-generational transformation, ecological upheavals, and social impacts of a rural French family farm accelerating towards industrialisation.[2]

A provocative subset of this category of fiction reconfigures humans as "food animals." The institutionally sanctioned cannibalism in these texts unsettles species boundaries and forces us to confront the mechanisms and structures that sustain animal-based food systems. They serve to defamiliarize the ontological construction of "meat," generate cognitive and

[1] Many human languages are inherently anthropocentric and often objectifying. They are "structured to convey the acceptance" of institutions that perpetuate nonhuman animal violence. (Adams 2000, 48). As such, I employ quotation marks to signal the reductive categorisation of normative terms such as "food animals" or "beef," which solidify the status of the nonhuman as property. Regarding the broader terminology, I adopt the terms "other animals" and "nonhuman animals" interchangeably, though inconsistencies in usage may occur, which themselves are symptomatic of the entrenched biases this article seeks to critique.

[2] Other notable examples include Robin Cook's medical thriller *Toxin* (1998), in which an E. coli outbreak becomes the narrative mechanism for exposing the meat industry's corporate negligence, and Ana Paula Maia's *Of Cattle and Men* (2014; English trans. 2023), which confines readers within the grim routines of a Brazilian slaughterhouse. A parallel thread runs through a cluster of chicken-centred narratives, or what Gina Lyle wryly dubbed "chick-lit" during a 2024 conference in Glasgow, that foreground the species most intensively farmed and most systematically erased. Mark McNay's *Fresh* (2007), Elle Nash's *Deliver Me* (2023), Lucie Rico's *Fowl Eulogies* (2023), and Deb Olin Unferth's *Barn 8* (2020) variously explore the industrial logics, affective entanglements, and dislocations that shape contemporary "poultry" farming. These narratives compel readers to confront the often-overlooked realities of meat consumption and the socio-economic, ecological, and affective regimes that sustain it. For an in-depth survey of this slaughterhouse turn, see Sune Borkfelt's *Reading Slaughter* (2022a).

affective rupture, and compel readers to confront what Anat Pick calls "the flesh and blood vulnerability of beings, whether human or not" (2011, 5). By replacing nonhuman "food animals," these works elicit discomfort that demands recognition of the "suffering and death of nonhumans as comparable to that of humans" (Borkfelt 2022, 99).[3]

In this article, I draw upon Agustina Bazterrica's *Tender is the Flesh* (2017; English trans. 2020—hereafter *Tender*) as a key example of the subset of narratives that take on industrial cannibalism. I advance "abatthorror" as a subgenre and literary critical mode of analysis that combines close reading with material investigation to bring focus to the aesthetics of horror in *Tender*. The narrative's affective register serves as a revelatory lens through which to comprehend the systemic violence of meat production. The novel takes place in a near-future Argentina where a zoonotic virus has purportedly rendered all nonhuman meat lethal to consume. This ecological catastrophe precipitates mass animal slaughter, while the persistent demand for meat products drives a state-sanctioned shift to cannibalistic human husbandry, which the novel terms the "Transition".

Narratives that appropriate humans as "food animals" have attracted considerable scholarly attention in recent times, particularly within literary and feminist animal studies. The thematic content of these texts, which illuminate operational intricacies of the slaughterhouse, has provided scholars with especially fertile ground for examining the political, social, ecological, and economic structures that underpin the accelerating meat industry.[4] Scholars have variously categorised these works as "farmed animal narratives" in science and speculative fiction (Bauer 2024, 6), "literary meat works" (Singer 2024), "slaughterhouse fictions" (Borkfelt 2022a) or as "slaughterhouse novels" (Aldana Reyes 2014). However, with some notable exceptions (Aldana Reyes 2014; Borkfelt 2022a, 2022b; Packham 2019) and the essays in this special issue, there has been a paucity of substantial engagement with the generic, formal, and aesthetic elements of horror that permeate these works. This lack of dialogue between literary animal studies and horror studies is especially striking when examining systemic domination and violence against nonhuman animals in the meat and other co-constitutive industries. Animal-based food systems are predicated upon

[3] Other examples of this subset include, Kristopher Triana's *They All Died Screaming* (2020), Vandana Singh's "Are You Sannata3159?" (2018), M.C. Ronan's *The Shed* (2018), Ana Levley's *Beasts* (2018), Don LePan's *Animals* (2009), Joseph D'Lacey's *Meat* (2008), and Michel Faber's *Under the Skin* (2000), which represent only a selection of works that reconfigure humans as "livestock."

[4] See, for example, Nora Castle's "'You Eat or You Die' Sixth Extinction Cannibalism in Contemporary Speculative Fiction" (2021), in which she analyses LePan's *Animals* and D'Lacey's *Meat* to argue that cannibalism is both a method for highlighting the inhumane factory farming practices and as a metaphor for capitalism.

control, violence, and the biopolitical management of bodies. Their production requires splatter, rivulets of blood, viscera, and pain. Thus, reading slaughter *as* and *through* horror brings into focus the systematically concealed violence of meat production.

The shock and dread elicited by *Tender* provides a seemingly paradoxical but potent contribution to the vegan studies project. As Sune Borkfelt argues, a text does not have to explicitly endorse veganism to have what he terms "vegan sensibilities" (Borkfelt 2022b, 97, 98). Such a sensibility is less a matter of didacticism or authorial intent than of affective response. He suggests that the feelings of horror that overwhelm the senses when confronted with the bloodied nature of bodies in pieces lead to an "affective experience that triggers the imagination, allowing for an implicit comparison between the suffering and deaths of nonhuman and human animals" (Borkfelt 2022b, 98). Thus, depictions of slaughter, even of humans, unsettle the normalised violence that remains unnoticed and largely unremarked upon in industrial meat production. By making visceral what is ordinarily abstracted, sanitised, or euphemised, these narratives rupture the perceptual and linguistic barriers that occlude the material realities of flesh production.

However, it is important to acknowledge that scholars have cautioned that replacing nonhuman animals with humans in industrial animal agriculture narratives risks reproducing anthropocentric readings that leave conceptions of animality unchallenged (Chetwynd 2025). While this is a crucial critique, I suggest the absence of other animal slaughter mirrors the systematic erasure that underpins real-world meat industries, where animals can only be perceived as the "absent referent" (Adams 2000). *Tender* presses on this tension between presence and absence, compelling readers to question the systemic invisibilization of animals at the heart of global food systems. Rather than reading the cannibal meat industry as a substitution or direct equivalence, I suggest these works employ what María Elena García calls "critical juxtaposition" (2019), which places human and animal flesh alongside one another not to collapse difference but to expose capitalism's shared logics of domination across species, race, gender, and class.[5] *Tender* thus allows us to see how industrial meat operates as a closed-loop system, one in which the violence of animal slaughter cannot be disentangled from histories of colonialism, global capital, and speciesist ideologies.

To date, much scholarship on "slaughterhouse fictions" has concentrated on the space of the abattoir itself (Borkfelt 2022). I argue instead that the horror of meat production begins long before the blade

[5] I borrow this concept from María Elena García, who, in her interview in *Messy Eating*, explains that, inspired by Chadwick Allen's theoretical approach, she finds the term "critical juxtaposition" helpful in thinking through the impact of violence on both humans and nonhumans (García 2019).

meets flesh. To comprehend the full spectrum of this industry's horror requires moving beyond the spatial boundaries of the slaughterhouse. It requires attending to the extended apparatus of violence that constitutes the animal-industrial complex and uncovering the hidden regimes of control and violence inextricably linked to global and local meat cultures, including colonialism, capitalism, and the neoliberal capture of what Jason Moore terms "cheap nature" (2016). In this way, I not only underscore anxieties around eating meat through the spectacle of cannibalism, which makes visible blood, gore, and guts implicated in meat production, but also demonstrate how violence against animals intersects with colonial histories, neoliberal commodification, and world-systemic patterns of domination.

Abatthorror: a critical mode for reading meat and the industry's closed-loop system

To capture the double movement of exposing the cold and calculating industrialised meat industry, while staying attuned to the horror of this process, I advance the neologism *abatthorror* to define a *critical mode of reading* texts that attends to the often-invisibilized horrors underpinning contemporary meat cultures and meat regimes.[6] I also conceptualise abatthorror as a *distinct subgenre* that turns the industrial apparatus of killing into both setting and method. The French term "abattoir" derives from the French term *abattre*, which means to "bring down that which is standing" or to "cause to fall". It is appropriated from the vocabulary of the mining and logging industries (Vialles 1994, 22, 23), and thus places nonhuman animals, minerals, and trees in the same matrix through the language of commodification. Within Anglophone contexts, the term creates a linguistic distance and acts as a euphemistic device that obscures the horror within the slaughterhouse.[7] I deliberately retain the term "abattoir", instead of "slaughterhouse" and combine it with "horror" in my formulation of "abatthorror" to highlight the discursive mechanisms that obscure violence while insisting that horror's aesthetic tools can pierce through such

[6] Annie Potts defines "meat culture" as the concrete practices that give carnism social life, encompassing "the representations and discourses, practices and behaviours, diets and tastes that generate shared beliefs about, perspectives on, and experiences of meat" (2016, 19–20). This cultural framework operates within what Dominic O'Key identifies as capitalism's "global meat regime," which systematically transforms nonhuman animals into commodities, positioning them as "free gifts" for capital accumulation rather than subjects deserving moral consideration (2021, para. 9).

[7] According to Ngram data, a tool that charts the frequency of words and phrases across a vast corpus of digitised books published between 1800 and 2022, the term "slaughterhouse" appears approximately 20 times more frequently than abattoir (Google Ngram Viewer 2024).

concealment.

The necessity for this critical mode becomes evident when we situate the slaughterhouse within the broader animal-industrial complex (A-IC). Coined by Barbara Noske (1989), the A-IC encompasses the interconnected network of institutions that transform living beings into commodities: grain suppliers, breeding operations, slaughterhouses, financial institutions, lobbyists, pharmaceutical companies, and scientific establishments (Twine 2012, 20; Nibert 2013; Hunnicutt, Twine, and Mentor 2025). The scholarly project to formulate the A-IC as an organising principle stems from a drive to extend the concerns of critical animal studies beyond the political question of nonhuman animal exploitation. It attempts not only to focus on the fact *of* exploitation, but also on *why* and *how* these mechanisms are sustained. As such, this critical project attempts to excavate "how the complex endures across different regional, national and global scales" (Twine 2012, 20). To apprehend the global and transnational implications of meat production within the literary form is to read it as a part of the world-food-system.

Building on the Warwick Research Collective's (WReC) theorisation of world-literature as that which registers the modern capitalist world-system (Deckard et al. 2015), Campbell and colleagues maintain that since the development of the modern world-system necessarily implies the development of the modern world-food-system, its pressures "will be discernible in any modern literary work" (2021, 6). This perspective, grounded in Jason Moore's world-ecology framework, allows us to position the A-IC as what Philip McMichael calls the "world factory" (quoted in Campbell, Niblett, and Oloff 2021, 6), a globally integrated system of production that operates through patterns of uneven development and resource extraction. Contributions to the world-ecological literary analysis have predominantly focused on commodity frontiers—such as plantation economies, energy, and water regimes—to track the socio-ecological transformations wrought by capitalistic developments (Bhattacharya 2024; Deckard 2016b; 2017; Boast 2021). But, as Dominic O'Key observes, the historical turn to intensive industrial agriculture is "one of the most wide-reaching transformations of production in modernity," and yet it remains under-studied in world-literary analysis (2021, para. 8). Apart from a few scholarly exceptions (Paye 2019; 2020; O'Key 2021; Young 2021; J. Taylor 2025), dialogue between animal studies and material-comparative literary criticism is underrepresented. This lacuna sets the stage for a reading practice attuned to how horror literature confronts the global meat regime.

My aim, then, is to track how the world-systemic dimension manifests in literature through the "worlded" aspects of abatthorror—the specific formal techniques through which texts register the A-IC's global operations. My approach follows Kerstin Oloff's call to "embed food horror

within its world-systemic, world-literary, and world-ecological context" (2021, 194). While Oloff's work has examined the anxieties surrounding current food systems through the figure of the zombie (2012, 2021), I focus on how literature represents meat in human cultures as a planetary commodity. I suggest that while reading texts as abatthorror requires investigating how the ecological ruptures of the meat system have imprinted themselves on texts, it crucially needs to foreground the violence of the animal-industrial complex to articulate that which carnist capitalism systematically obscures.

As a subgenre of horror, abatthorror shares features that recur with striking frequency across disparate geographic settings—from Argentina to India, Britain to the United States, periphery to core. While formally, these texts may be variously categorised as science fiction, speculative fiction, or post-apocalyptic fiction, horror is diffused throughout their structures and surfaces as an embedded modality. Abatthorror texts draw on horror's affective grammar of estrangement, disgust, and dread, especially through highly descriptive, repeated set-pieces that insistently stage horrific, prolonged scenes of dismemberment where flesh is rendered abject. The various capacious categories of horror, such as ecohorror and body horror, provide valuable analytical tools for reading abatthorror texts. Ecohorror, Stephen Rust and Carter Soles argue, "promote[s] ecological awareness, represent[s] ecological crises, or blur[s] human/non-human distinctions" (2014, 509–10), a definition that has been expanded by some scholars to critique agribusiness and corporate greed (Angierski 2021; Sharp 2021). Body horror, however, has traditionally been narrowly conceptualised around "graphic violations of the *human* body" (L. Taylor 2018, emphasis mine), its corporeality, dismemberment, transformation, and dissolution. Contending that body horror's transformative potential can "actively encourage empathy for others and change in oneself," Aldana Reyes suggests that the vocabulary and tools of the genre can reveal "the arbitrary construction of the normative body" (2024, 17-18). Because of its political potential and its capacity to create empathy by blurring and merging differences between bodies, body horror proves crucial in my reading of the slaughter and breeding processes in abatthorror texts. However, while dominant conceptions of body horror focus on the human body as the primary locus of horror, I argue that the category should be expanded to include the bodily transformations of nonhumans as well. This broadening is not merely a theoretical provocation but a necessary reconsideration of body horror's material and aesthetic foundations. Since textual body horror inherits its visceral repertoire from cinema's practical effects toolbox, the genre's cross-media history is inseparable from literal animal flesh. The terrifying xenomorph creature in *Alien* (1979), for example, was brought to

life with the flesh of real nonhuman animals: the innards of the alien egg were "dressed with cow's stomach and tripe" (The Los Angeles Film School, n.d). Numerous body horror films, even today, utilise animal entrails and gelatin in the "production and consumption of these decomposed, destroyed, and dismembered special effects bodies," which are "so often created with the aid of animal flesh" (Ball 2020, 110).

By obscuring these effects' animal origins, filmmakers and scholars of body horror replicate the structural erasure of nonhuman suffering endemic to industrialised slaughterhouses. Recognising these continuities demands a reconceptualization of body horror that does not artificially limit itself to human flesh. Instead, I suggest that body horror scholarship needs to acknowledge the genre's complicity in and reflection of systems of nonhuman corporeal violation. Recently, Aldana Reyes has identified an "ethically underpinned" and "reconstitutive phase" within contemporary body horror (2024, 10). So, if horror is a mode of aesthetic and ethical reckoning with the vulnerability of bodies, then to exclude nonhuman animals from its purview is to ignore the vast, industrialised networks of dismemberment and transformation that have shaped the genre. Folding the slaughter of animals and reading it as a violation of their bodies can elicit empathy not only through *identification* but also by recognising the creaturely vulnerability of another body.

In the remainder of the article, I will develop my reading of abatthorror through *Tender is the Flesh* (*Tender*) to consider how Bazterrica's novel operates within specific geographical and political contexts.[8] I begin by situating the text within the Argentine literary scene and political lineage that bridges the historical regime and the present day. This allows me to consider the depiction of the novel's cannibal "protein transition" against Argentina's entrenched meat imaginary. It recodes existing slaughter infrastructures and imposes them on human bodies and dramatises their fungibility. Through its dystopian conceit, *Tender* strips away the species boundary that typically obscures slaughter's horror and serves to reveal the discursive strategies that reproduce the A-IC. Next, I turn my analytical focus towards the breeding facility and gestational pens depicted in the novel to trace the shared histories of forced reproduction and systematic butchery that organise both human and nonhuman life under patriarchal capitalism. I conclude by deliberating on horror's constraints and potentialities.

"Meat is meat, it doesn't matter where it's from": the Argentine meat imaginary and *Tender*'s cannibal protein transition

[8] Translated by Sarah Moses from the Spanish original *Cadáver exquisito* (2017). All citations refer to the English translation unless otherwise noted.

Tender offers a compelling narrative through which to interrogate horror and contemporary meat culture. The novel emerges from Latin America, a region that is currently witnessing an extraordinary flourishing of horror fiction that "repurpose[s] horror conventions" to confront the traumas of colonial plunder, military dictatorship, and "the entangled forces of environmental destruction, financialization and extraction" (Stuelke 2019, para. 5). This politically aware tradition variously addresses "socio-political injustices of Argentina's past and present" (Santos 2019, 159) as Mariana Enríquez's incendiary collection, *Las cosas que perdimos en el fuego* (2016; *Things We Lost in the Fire*, 2017) does. Similarly, Samanta Schweblin's *Distancia de rescate* (2014; *Fever Dream*, 2017) can be read as an ecohorror narrativizing of the toxic agribusiness in Argentina (Sarkar 2023; Ferebee 2021); Fernanda Trías's *Mugre rosa* (2020; *Pink Slime*, 2023) uses horror's affect to register the transformations of capitalism and capitalogenic climate change associated with cheap meat (Bentancor 2024); while Ana Paula Maia's *De gados e homens* (2013, *Of Cattle and Men*, 2023) shows how environmental devastation and labour alienation converge in Brazil's industrial meatscape (Lehnen 2020; Campisi 2023). *Tender* contributes to this growing body by presenting a cannibalistic protein transition that intensifies Argentina's *longue durée* frontier history and projects its post-neoliberal present into an imagined future.

In Argentina, the "beef" imaginary is a dominant cultural force intricately woven into the fabric of the national identity. It is one of the main cultural drivers of the country that forms the "imaginary of the nation" (Meiller 2021, 6, 8), linking livestock and slaughterhouses to Argentine literature, visual art, and architecture. The lineage dates back to Esteban Echeverría's *El Matadero* (c. 1839), whose graphic descriptions of cattle slaughter make the abattoir a stage for political and social conflict (Skinner 1999, 206). This bovine imaginary has survived colonialism, developmentalism, and neoliberalism, continually adapting and recoding itself. Argentina's identity as a "beef" loving nation (*nación de la carne*) holds strong: it is one of the top exporters and consumers of bovine flesh (Ramseyer and Terr 2023). The country's historic status as a world "beef" powerhouse was forged in the colonial *vaquerías* (wild-cattle hunts), solidified by the myth of the *gaucho* (cowboys), and industrialised in the *frigoríficos* (meatpacking companies) of the elites. Since the nineteenth century, the fertile grasslands of the pampas have functioned as the archetypal cattle frontier, supplying chilled and then refrigerated "beef" to imperial centres. Mid-twentieth-century technological shifts, such as refrigeration, grain surpluses, and assembly-line slaughter, consolidated what Tony Weis calls the "meatification" of the global diet (2013, 75). Today, four corporations together account for 85% of the U.S. "beef" market (Reuters 2021). The

stronghold of multinational companies is also evident in Argentina's export channel, where Brazilian groups Swift Argentina SA and Marfrig Global Foods are key leaders in total export volume (CNDC 2023, 42). The other gargantuan agribusiness in Argentina is soya, which has become the country's most important export commodity (Stølen 2021, 63). To make space for these plantations, "livestock" have been moved into feedlots where they are fattened on soy meal, creating a hyperefficient economic system that Weis dubs the "industrial grain-oilseed-livestock complex" (2013). Both industries are responsible for alarming levels of agrochemical contamination and pollution and create a fully fossil-fuelled circuit of feed, feedlots, and slaughter.

The country's trajectory from frontier cattle economy to industrial meat producer reflects broader patterns of peripheral incorporation into world-systems of accumulation. Today, a new phase of extractivism, which has been hailed by some as post-neoliberal, reproduces older asymmetries: northern corporations maintain technological monopolies while southern economies remain "mere colonies for the export of raw materials" (Deckard 2016a, 12). *Tender* imagines the logical endpoint of such extractivism. Since sustaining the A-IC requires "intentional effort and adaptation in order to maintain itself" (Hunnicutt, Twine, and Mentor 2025, 5), when all animal flesh is declared to be "fatal to humans" (Bazterrica 2020a, 12) rather than shifting to a more ecologically sustainable food system, the definition of meat is reconstituted in *Tender*. If Eduardo Galeano's famous metaphor of the "open veins" of Latin America (1971) imagines "the continent as a body whose life-force is perpetually being drained away" (Deckard 2016a, 3), the cannibal transition in *Tender* literalizes that drainage, recasting the A-IC as a national infrastructure that finds new vitality and blood for its market through a reorganisation of flesh.

It is within this specific capitalistic context that the post-"Transition" socio-economy in *Tender* registers an attempt to provide insight into the operations of the global meat regime in Argentina. Bazterrica's novel maps the operations of transnational corporations, their lobbying powers, and how these forces perpetuate state violence to serve both national industries and foreign capital. The "Transition," or the systemic shift aimed to address the zoonotic crisis, operates as an ironic subversion of its usual associations, which typically imply a transformative shift toward progress or sustainability. By superimposing its "naturalized" cannibal Transition (Bazterrica 2020a, 12) onto current debates about protein diversification, the novel exposes the techno-optimist rhetoric that frames sustainable transitions as a new mode in the appropriation of nature. Contemporary discourse increasingly calls for a protein transition that reduces or eliminates animal-derived protein (Duluins and Baret 2024). Food systems already account for 34% of global

greenhouse gas emissions, with animal agriculture and feed production at the centre (Crippa et al. 2021). A protein transition aimed at reducing or eliminating animal-based protein consumption is considered crucial to meeting the Paris Agreement temperature target (The Good Food Institute and Climate Advisers, n.d.). If oil is, as Imre Szeman contends, the ur-commodity "without which it is hard to imagine life on the planet today" (2012, 3), we will be equally hard-pressed to envisage a post-meat planet. This difficulty is a feature of any so-called sustainable transition. As Frank Geels reminds us, existing infrastructures are "stabilized through various lock-in mechanism[s]… institutional commitments, shared beliefs and discourses, power relations, and political lobbying" which make it "difficult to dislodge existing systems" (2011, 25). These existing lock-in mechanisms are contingent on corporate domination and state-sanctioned violence, social inequalities, and the stratification of lives.

Tender dramatises this collusion between state and corporate oligarchs that legitimises the cannibal protein transition:

> Legalization [of cannibalism] occurred when the governments gave in to pressures from a big money industry that had come to a halt. They adapted the processing plants and regulations. Not long after, they began to breed people as animals… . (Bazterrica 2020a, 14)

The reappropriation is facilitated by tapping into the cultural esteem of scientific and medical authorities: "Prestigious universities claimed that animal protein was necessary to live, doctors confirmed that plant protein didn't contain all the essential amino acids," and "magazines published articles on the dark side of vegetables"; while other articles "spoke of the revenge of the vegans" (Bazterrica 2020a, 15, 12). Through moments of dark humour, Bazterrica launches a biting critique of neoliberal regimes co-opting institutional credibility to sanctify extractive systems. The allusions to vengeful vegans and vegetables' villainous dark side are frivolous in their hyperbolic illogic, yet their horror stems from their plausibility within capitalist structures, where profit dictates truth.[9] Cannibalism here is grotesque not just because of its tabooed nature but also because it mirrors, however dramatically, the real-world collusion between multinational corporations and governmental complicity: "These industries [Big Meat and Big Oil] have worked in tandem for years to undercut climate policy" (Samuel 2021). In the same vein, Twine documents how "meat scientists" legitimise the violent practices of animal agriculture while labelling pro-

[9] For more on how the capitalistic political economy maintains business-as-usual through lobbying, subsidisation and protectionism, state determinism and repression of activism, see Richard Twine, *The Climate Crisis and Other Animals* (2024, 293–312).

animal rights campaigners as sentimental ideologues (Twine 2025, 21).[10]

Bazterrica turns the novel's *circuito de la carne,* or meat circuit, into a gothic map, which invokes Argentina's entanglement with foreign capital. The names of every organisation that Sarah Moses retains in the English translation from the original *Cadáver exquisite* (2017) provide a blunt onomastic cue. The novel's slaughterhouse, Krieg Processing Plant ("krieg" meaning "war" in German), confirms Dinesh Wadiwel's provocation "that our mainstay relationship with animals is combative" (2015, 5; see also Banwell 2023). The Hifu (Japanese for "skin" or "leather") tannery reduces its function to a single, grotesque act of stripping and processing hides. It evokes Argentina's long-standing trajectory as a global hide supplier, from colonial-era *cueros* to its modern status as a major exporter of bovine hides and leather (Tong 2025). Similarly, the Tod Voldelig breeding centre fuses the Germanic for death (Tod) with the Scandinavian for violent (voldelig); while the owner's name, El Gringo, is suggestive of a "foreigner" or "white man" in Latin America, embodying the unbroken domination of foreign capital over Argentina's A-IC. From the British and American *frigoríficos* of the early 20th century to today's multinational meat conglomerates, Argentina's role as a supplier of raw flesh and hides for external markets has remained remarkably consistent. The Germanic names also invoke Argentina's own fraught history as a refuge for Nazi war criminals. This connection is amplified by the reference to the "laboratory of horror" run by Dr Valka, who is dubbed "Doctor Mengele" by her staff (Bazterrica 2020a, 15, 12). The novel explicitly associates her with the so-called Auschwitz Angel of Death, who (in)famously fled to Argentina after WWII and was harboured by the Argentine government. Unlike Orwellian doublespeak, Bazterrica's corporations revel in their violence. The globalised names of the institutions and their foreign owners collapse historical timelines and bind the novel's speculative horror to Argentina's colonial legacies and the intensification of neoliberal regimes that gained momentum with President Menem's reforms in the 1990s.[11]

Reading a text as abatthorror, then, is to attend to these

[10] For example, in 2023, scientists with direct ties to the animal industry signed the scientifically dubious Dublin Declaration, favouring the industry's narratives and highlighting the social importance of so-called livestock, thereby maintaining the status quo (Twine 2025, 36). See also, "The Dublin Declaration: Gain for the Meat Industry, Loss for Science" (Krattenmacher et al. 2024).

[11] During the 1990s, under President Carlos Menem's neoliberal reforms, Argentina opened its markets to multinational corporations, which transformed its beef sector into a globalised commodity chain controlled by foreign entities. His policies directly resulted in the 2001 economic collapse in Argentina due to foreign debt, leading to years of economic and social upheaval. For more on how the pulse of the crisis can read through the imaginary of flesh and meat, see Valeria Meiller's *A Nation of Flesh* (2021, 94-97).

transhistorical, transnational meat regimes, and to tease out their connections to contemporary techno-eugenic, pharmacological infrastructures that sustain the animal-industrial complex. While a comprehensive discussion accounting for these dynamics exceeds the scope of this article, I will focus next on the specific ways in which *Tender* mobilises horror aesthetics to reveal the gendered and racialized violence underpinning meat production. Through a brief close reading of a slaughter scene in the processing plant, I turn to the active management of bodies in El Gringo's breeding farm. Together, these readings illuminate how *Tender* maps the shared logics of subjugation that entangle human and nonhuman lives, treating bodies as raw materials to be controlled, exploited, and ultimately consumed.

Of Meat, Milk and Mothers

The contemporary animal-industrial complex (A-IC) is founded upon the absolute control and management of the metabolic and gestational labour of nonhuman animals (Wadiwel 2023). If the slaughter of "food animals" is rarely framed "as a horrible and despicable violent act" (Piatti-Farnell 2017, 136), an even more insidious silence attends the slower violence of selective breeding, forced impregnation, and the endless extraction of milk and eggs. Yamini Narayanan names the regime that underwrites this process of bodily extractivism as "anthropatriarchy." It refers to "the human, gendered oppression, exploitation, and control of nonhuman animals *via* their sexual and reproductive systems, which is required to sustain all animal agriculture" (2019, 2 emphasis in original). Thus, it is likely that Bazterrica leverages the feminised body as a conscious strategy to expose the operations inside the slaughterhouse, thereby amplifying the horror of the killing.

The narrative pairs the cold, procedural register of corporate discourse with an eruption of revelatory horror, deploying ekphrastic set pieces and a prolonged, microscopic emphasis on body becoming flesh. In the novel's central meatpacking plant, a zip-tied, wet, "naked female barely twenty years of age" enters the knocking box. The graphic narrative follows each sickening detail as the female collapses on the floor, which is "splattered with excrement." Her skin is soon coated in the blood of those slaughtered before her. When she regains consciousness on the slaughter line, a common occurrence in contemporary slaughterhouses, "the worker turns around and looks at her with indifference" before firing the captive bolt a second time. The account unflinchingly continues to describe the relentless process in its entirety—she is bled dry, dunked into a "scalding tank where other corpses are floating in boiling water," and dismembered with cold precision

(Bazterrica 2020a, 69–83). While the moment of killing in the industrial slaughterhouse is touted as quick and painless, Bazterrica here "experiments with representations of slow violence by literally decelerating the narrative to a walking pace," forcing the reader to attend to each room of the plant (Singer 2024, 128). Each granular detail of slaughter is revealed for five excruciating chapters until, at the end, she is "unrecognizable, without skin and extremities, becoming a carcass" (Bazterrica 2020a: 69–87). The descriptions are suffused in blood, "tonnes of blood that fall into the bleeding trough and splatter the walls, the coveralls, the floor, the hands" (73). The language here functions ekphrastically within the tradition of body horror, insisting that the reader's sight, smell, and touch remain in the rooms.

The novel's slaughterhouse and kill room scenes fixate on the dissolution of bodily boundaries and the spectacle of flesh made abject. Yet, apart from this overt, abject efflorescence of blood and gore that accompanies the slaughter process, *Tender* forces a reckoning with the more insidious and often overlooked dimensions of violence within the farmstead and dairy pens. Given the irrefutable fact that the gestational labour of nonhumans is required not only for the production of milk (and eggs) but also for the continual supply of new animals for meat production, Bazterrica narrates a further sequence of horrors taking place in the Tod Voldelig breeding centre. During a guided tour of this "great living warehouse of meat," the owner, El Gringo, explains that the "heads" are artificially inseminated to maintain genetic control and create "homogenous lots for the processing plants" (Bazterrica 2020a, 25, 26). This techno-eugenic programme echoes contemporary "livestock" production in which nonhumans are a product of a long line of genetic manipulation to express so-called desirable traits that are profitable for capitalist enterprises (Wolfe 2013, 36; Gillespie 2014, 1326; Wadiwel 2023, 101–2).[12] In the A-IC, "food animals" are bred to be docile, placid, and "good mothers" (Cudworth 2008, 38), in order to reduce workplace accidents and increase productivity. Bazterrica amps up this otherwise routinised and banal form of reproductive violence in her depiction of the "dairy-head sector" at the breeding farm (Bazterrica 2020a, 29).

Docile, motherly traits are prized within contemporary livestock

[12] This connection between the slaughterhouse and the Nazi regime becomes thicker given that eugenics programs, which sought to eliminate so-called undesirable genetic traits to promote the purported Aryan purity, relied heavily on technologies of reproductive control. As carceral geographer Karen Morin reminds, Frodist production "paved the way for the slaughter of humans in the Holocaust: 'the road to Auschwitz begins at the slaughterhouse' (and in fact some of the soldiers who worked in the death camps first worked in slaughterhouses)" (2018, 35). Relatedly, the Heck brothers during the Nazi regime created their own perverted versions of "cattle" breeds through genetic manipulation in their bid to create "vigorous wild traits" in the cows (Lorimer and Driesseny 2016, 7).

breeding because they promise a lifetime of profitable litters (Cudworth 2008, 39). As one farmer tells Erica Cudworth, "the udder is probably the most important factor in selection really. You want a 'milky' cow, if she doesn't give a good yield, she's done for" (38-39). *Tender* transposes this logic onto re-signified human mothers in the dairy-head sector. El Gringo pauses by the suction machines and boasts that "the milk from these udders is top-quality" (Bazterrica 2020a, 29). Here, udders are breasts, the milk is not for offspring but for consumers, revealing a cycle in which bodies are exploited until they are "spent" and "culled" for cheap meat (Gillespie 2018; 20). Female "heads" therefore endure "a short productive life… when they're no longer of use, their meat has to be sent to the processing plant that supplies the fast-food industry" (Bazterrica 2020a, 29-30). The farm applies the wider repertoire of A-IC mutilations, including clipping, debeaking, tail docking, castration, and tooth-knawing, to its human stock. Pregnant females are rendered limbless to suppress insurgent maternity:

> They have no arms or legs… at many breeding centres it's common practice to maim the impregnated females who otherwise kill their fetuses by ramming their stomachs against the bars of their cage, or by not eating, by doing whatever it takes to prevent their babies from being born and dying in a processing plant. (30)

Indeed, a similar refusal to procreate and resistance to being objectified is found within the lives of incarcerated nonhuman animals. Every effort to maim and control is a sign of resistance and a testament to its capture by newer technologies built to save "precious" production time. As Wadiwel reminds us, the industry works hard "to nullify this resistance in order to realise the full value of death: any acts of creativity or resistance by animals that delay, compromise, or ineffectively congeal value become a threat to system efficiency" (2015, 44). Bazterrica condenses this logic into the mutilated "heads" for whom the flesh is disciplined the moment it resists.

The systematic control over reproduction and feminised bodies finds new narrative potential when read in the light of the historical and political context of Argentina. Bazterrica was penning her novel in the midst of a pivotal moment in the feminist movement of the country, which galvanised people across the nation under a sea of green handkerchiefs symbolising the collective struggle for legal, safe, and free abortion; a campaign that succeeded in 2021 yet coincided with a record 322 femicides in 2023, a 33% rise on the previous year (Barber 2024). Bazterrica herself connects the unflinching acceptance of "animal cruelty" with the routine killing of, and violence on, women, Indigenous peoples, and the economically disadvantaged, noting that the public meets both with "brutal indifference"

(Bazterrica 2020b). Meditating on the abortion debate in 2020, before its legalisation, Verónica Gago, a key figure in Argentina's #NiUnaMenos (Not One More) movement, reminds that "the right to abortion is linked to the refusal to accept the free and servile naturalization, based on gender mandates, of domestic servitude. In this sense, money and abortion are indelibly linked" (2020). Bazterrica's novel enters this political arena and pushes the idea further to connect the violence on bodies from the slaughterhouse to the domestic and public spaces.

This entanglement of reproductive violence and state-sanctioned slaughter reaches back to the infrastructures that once disciplined both animals and political prisoners. During the brutal military dictatorship (1976-1983), dubbed the "dirty war," an estimated thirty thousand people were forcibly disappeared (Tondo and Jones 2023). Among these *desaparecidos* were pregnant detainees who were kept alive until they gave birth and were then killed. At least 500 children were given to military couples, prompting the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo to become enduring symbols of resistance (Tondo and Jones 2023; Goñi 2016). During the same regime, the cattle prod—the *picana eléctrica* and the *parrilla*—became the defining tool for state torture. Its effectiveness in suppressing resistance was directly inherited from slaughterhouse innovations. As Darius Rejali argues, these technologies follow distinct "chains of transmission": devices first engineered to discipline livestock migrate into police armouries and medical clinics. Its medical cousin, electroconvulsive therapy, similarly owes its genesis to animal slaughter. In 1938, the psychiatrist Ugo Cerletti perfected the method by "spending a day at the slaughterhouse electrocuting pigs" before testing the procedure on human patients (Rejali 2007, 137, 139). Such technologies would have been unthinkable "without the enormous growing mass consumption of meat" that normalised the application of electricity to sentient bodies (Rejali 1999, para. 7). Mariana Enríquez extends this genealogy in her account of the ex-ESMA concentration camp, where, in 2013, government staff held an *asado* on the very grounds where prisoners were once tortured and disappeared. The *parrilla*, she notes, not only lent its name to the electrified table but also served as slang among torturers for cremating a detainee's remains: "having an asado" meant rendering a body to ash (Enríquez 2017).

Bazterrica writes within this literary and political lineage that has imagined itself through "beef" and the slaughterhouse since Echeverría's *El Matadero*, where the slaughteryard allegorises the state violence. Her narrative insists that the same infrastructures that process livestock also process political enemies and pregnant prisoners. In her fiction, "heads" that are bred for slaughter serve to reveal a brutal continuity of the A-IC through a shared grammar of violence. A macabre scene of carnivorous celebration

crystallises this continuum of violence:

> The smell of barbecue is in the air…the farmhands are roasting a rack of meat on a cross. El Gringo [the owner] explains…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 kid. "It's the most tender kind of meat, there's only just a little, because a kid doesn't weigh as much as a calf. We're celebrating because one of them became a father," he explains. (Bazterrica 2020a, 33)

Through this unsettling depiction where the birth of one child is celebrated by consuming another, Bazterrica collapses the boundaries between species and exposes how anthropatriarchy naturalises the conversion of vulnerable bodies into profit. The rhetorical slippage between "kid" as goat or human child underlines that as long as "it is taken for granted that it is all right to systematically exploit and kill nonhuman animals simply because of their species, then the humanist discourse of species will always be available for use by some humans against other humans as well, to countenance violence against the social other of whatever species – or gender, or race, or class, or sexual difference" (Wolfe 2003, 8). It is precisely these interconnected structures of oppression that abatthorror seeks to foreground. To read them carefully is to unravel the material and symbolic systems that make bodies, both human and nonhuman, available for violence.

The limits of abatthorror: Is an alimentary counterfactual possible?

The interplay between eating an infant's "head" to celebrate the birth of a desirable human allows for a critical reading of the novel's denouement, which critics have read as an expression of fatalistic nihilism. While the descriptive excesses and structural repetitions in *Tender* foreground the violence of slaughter through horror's affective register, they also mark its formal limits. In keeping with the generic formulation of dystopian and postapocalyptic horror, the *status quo* is restored in the final moments, a move that has frustrated casual readers and critics alike. Tyler Austin Harper concludes that texts like *Tender* exemplify "a kind of cannibal realism" that forecloses the possibility of "even *imagining* political hope" (Austin Harper 2022, 306 emphasis in original; see also, Bauer 2024, 134–35). However, it is essential to recognise that it is not incumbent on any literary text to offer hopeful counterfactuals. The impossibility of imagining an alternative that is embedded within such narratives is, I contend, itself a generic and political strategy that mirrors contemporary crisis and inertia.

This "cannibal realism" self-consciously reproduces what Mark

Fisher terms "capitalist realism," the pervasive belief that "not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (2009, 2, emphasis in original). But Fisher also reminds us that it is possible to threaten the apparent pervasiveness of capitalist realism "if it is shown to be in some way inconsistent or untenable" (2009, 16). By forcing readers into a crisis of imagination with no presented alternatives, *Tender* reveals the unsustainability of a growth-obsessed capitalist system that sinks its teeth into human bodies once the supposedly self-replenishing "commodity" of nonhuman animal meat is annihilated.

The novel also presents the capitalistic system as inconsistent through its protagonist, Marcos Tejo, whom I have deliberately refrained from introducing in this article until now, not to grant him the last word but to implicate him in the system that perpetuates the value extraction from bodies. Marcos, right-hand man to the owner of the Krieg Processing Plant, inherits both his father's slaughterhouse and the brutal logic of the A-IC. Readers are made to align with Marcos's emotionally deadened perspective through a detached third-person narration that withholds explicit judgment and presents his perspective as one possible reaction among many. His psychological state can be described as what Fisher calls "reflexive impotence": the condition of knowing that things are bad while simultaneously believing that one is powerless to change them, a knowledge that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (2009, 21). Though disgusted by his work, Marcos cannot envision alternatives and remains complicit, working ostensibly to care for his ailing father. His refusal to eat meat after the death of his infant is a private grief, not political dissent: "Since his son died he hasn't gone back to eating meat" (Bazterrica 2020a, 100). He "moves through life with a hole in his chest" (157), even as he continues to hold a key position within the fictional A-IC. Even after his father's death, Marcos merely avoids the laboratory that offends his mortality the most (190), a minimalizing manoeuvre typical of neoliberal regimes where micro-ethical choices are encouraged, leaving macro-structures untouched.

Marcos's final horrifying act reveals how capitalist realism is sustained by a deeply ingrained reproductive futurism. Obsessed with securing a legacy, he helps draft post-"Transition" regulations, declaring them "the mark I'll leave behind" (Bazterrica 2020a, 173). This obsession leads him into the ultimate private project of projecting himself into the future by securing the heteronormative family unit. When he receives a domestic "head" as a bribe from El Gringo, he knows sexual exploitation of "heads" is illegal, "but he does it anyway" (129). Through non-consensual surrogacy, he secures a progeny: "… his child. The child that was really his" (143). Having acquired his patrilineal legacy through heteropatriarchal violence, he

kills the surrogate and enacts a private version of state terror that was inflicted upon the disappeared mothers during the dictatorship.

Contemporary societies view children as human capital essential to a nation-state's prosperity (Edelman 2004, 121). The heteroreproductive family unit fuels capitalism through labour and consumption, leading Benatar and Edelman to describe it as a "procreative" Ponzi scheme based on "reproductive futurism" (2015, 130; 2004, 4). Within this system, Marcos's son does not symbolize a new beginning but the violent, static repetition of the present, ensuring the continuation of the system that consumes other (human) animals. As heir to a slaughterhouse, his family's wealth is forged in the same *frigoríficos* that industrialised the *gaucho*'s tools into a capitalist mechanism of extraction. It aligns him with Argentina's history of complicity with ruling elites. Marcos's violent, individualist solution reminds us that the crisis cannot be resolved at the level of the family or personal ethical moves, because, as Wadiwel contends, "humanity's addiction to industrial animal agriculture" is not "merely a moral problem but also a structural problem" (2023, viii). It is this intractable, systemic nature of the A-IC that abatthorror as a mode is uniquely equipped to address. A critical reading of these texts forces a reckoning with the immediate suffering of other animals and the broader systems necessitating such commodification.

Thus, even while these works do not imagine a post-meat, vegan, alimentary counterfactual, this does not amount to a collapse of imagination. Rather, they perform the vital work of what Liza Bauer terms "deindustrializing the imagination," liberating readers' mental perceptions so they can cease (however briefly) reading nonhuman animals simply as exploitable resources or livestock (2024, 45). The vegan sensibility, as Borkfelt reminds, manifests not through prescriptive messaging but through affective, visceral response to systematic brutality (2022b, 98). The more intolerable the depicted world becomes, the more urgently readers must conceive ways to negate it. While utopian alternatives remain foreclosed within the narrative frame, the spectacle of horror may provoke the reader beyond the text and compel them to viscerally register the suffering endured by creatures subjected to the abattoir's brutality and "outthink the animal industry and become capable of thinking beyond the cages at least" (Bauer 2024, 329). Horror, in this sense, makes the unbearable undeniable. If structural change is imaginable, it first recognises that the system itself is unsustainable and horrific. It must relocate agency from isolated conscience to collective transformation, preparing the ground for abolitionist agro-ecological, vegan counterfactuals that challenge the foundational premises of the animal-industrial complex itself.

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