

## Claws of Catharsis

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### The food narrative of lobster eating

*When it comes to eating meat, humans employ many techniques to distance themselves from the animal, or the animal from the meat, in order to mask the reality of eating a once-living being. However, the practice of eating lobster is a special occasion in which many North Americans seem to set aside wilful blindness in order to indulge in their gustatory desires. How do urban meat eaters rationalize eating lobster when the distance that they have created between themselves and the animal, and the animal and the meat, has collapsed? By analyzing the common techniques used to assuage guilty feelings when eating meat and demonstrating how eating lobster, like most cruel foods, intentionally defies those conventions, I explore humans' need to create a harsh and definite distinction between human and animal. This analysis contributes to the study of animals in human cultures, and how perceptions of the animal both crystallize and confound our understanding of the human. It is through the practice of lobster eating that humans reassert their dominance over animals while simultaneously indulging in animal-like behaviour. The pleasure of lobster eating exists within the contradiction of ignoring, yet acknowledging, not only a lobster's humanity, but a human's animalness.*

The majority of people who feel bad about eating animals are often too invested in the habit to change their behaviour (Adams, 1998, p. 60). To assuage such guilty feelings, these people employ common techniques to shape their knowledge about the meat, the animal, or the process. This can include denying sentience to the animal, arguing that the animal's life does not have much or any value, or that the animal does not feel pain. People also tend to circumvent the reality of meat both physically and mentally by avoiding the animal-meat association: "Don't tell me about that, it will ruin my dinner" (Adams, 1998, p. 65). Yet some foods glorify the connection between meal and animal as its culinary high point, where the reality of meat is "acknowledge[d] or even celebrated" (Strong, 2011, p. 168). Accordingly, in popular North American cuisine, eating lobster un masks the realities behind eating meat. In such a situation, how is the tension between guilt

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and pleasure resolved? In understanding the human-animal distinction and the imaginary boundary that humans fervently attempt to uphold, it can be argued that the infrequently enjoyed lobster meal provides humans with a special and rare occasion to reassert their dominance over animals while simultaneously indulging in animal-like behaviour. This is done by pushing the tension of eating animal meat to centre stage, so that the pleasure of lobster eating exists specifically within the contradiction of ignoring yet acknowledging not only a lobster's humanity, but a human's animalness.

Lobster eating is most anomalous to other meat eating by the physical interaction involved in the process. As a primary method of evading guilt, most people physically avoid the animal they will be eating, which is made particularly easy in a contemporary urban lifestyle. Few urban and suburban dwellers ever come into contact with the living animal to be eaten or need to play a part in its slaughter. Particularly in suburban centres, "the redder or more 'animalized' a cut of meat is—the more it resembles a carcass—the more it turns the average consumer off," so companies marketing to mainstream grocery store shoppers purposefully package their meat product to erase its history as a once-living being (Herzog, 2010, p. 190; Armstrong, 2007, p. 125). Further still, when served on a plate, most meat does not resemble the animal it came from regardless of how it was presented when purchased. In short, North American meat eaters' physical interaction with the living animal they are to consume is limited. This is significant because it distances the reality of eating meat: the natural human instinct to project mental states and emotions onto other creatures (anthropomorphism) disappears when the eyes with which humans empathize are lost (Herzog, 2010, p. 60). This disconnection makes it easier to depersonalize an animal and to debase it to the status of object or food as opposed to a living being.

On the contrary, lobster eating purposefully creates a physical encounter. There are two startling aspects about the consumption of lobster, both of which encapsulate the novelty of the food. First, live lobster is coveted—buying pre-cooked frozen lobster would not be the same. Some argue this practice ensures the meat's absolute freshness, though this argument could be applied—yet is not—to any other kind of meat. This preference, then, insists upon an encounter with the animal in the meat-eating process. Moreover, lobsters are the only animal that urban people typically slaughter in their kitchens. David Foster Wallace (2004) describes the lively and uncomfortable lobster-cooking experience:

The intimacy of the whole thing is maximized at home. ... However stuporous the lobster is from the trip home, ... it tends to come alarmingly to life when placed in boiling water. If you're tilting it from a container into the steaming kettle, the lobster will sometimes try to cling to the container's sides or even to hook its claws over the kettle's rim like a person trying to

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keep from going over the edge of a roof. And worse is when the lobster's fully immersed. Even if you cover the kettle and turn away, you can usually hear the cover rattling and clanking as the lobster tries to push it off. Or the creature's claws scraping the sides of the kettle as it thrashes around. (p. 5)

In some cases, people have chefs cook the lobster on their behalf, but often not before picking the live animal out of a tank. The second novelty is the actual eating of the lobster. Lobsters are most prestigiously served whole, making a recognizable animal body a part of the eating experience. Significantly, the eating process also requires diners to use their hands and to continually return to and interact with the lobster's carcass. The use of specially designed tools affirms this ritual as a cultural act. Overall, the presence of the lobster's animality in its preparation, cooking, and consumption contradicts the conventionally evasive treatment of meat. How do urban meat eaters cope with their guilty feelings of eating a once-living lobster when the physical distance they normally create between themselves and the animal, and the animal and the meat, is abandoned?

To navigate this collapsed physical distance, one may utilize a number of mentally distancing techniques to ignore what meat is. One popular method is to deny the animal's sentience. Much of this debate revolves around whether animals feel pain or whether they recognize their own existence. It is anthropocentric to assert that the ability for high-level reasoning constitutes the best way to define significance within the animal kingdom; still, society is built upon it (Ingold, 1988, p. 10). Crustaceans are held, specifically for this reason, as lesser beings relative to mammals, as Peter Singer (2001) implies in his reflection on J. M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* (p. 90). Descartes' groundwork in solipsism, which has had a major influence on modern thinking, rejects the parsimonious explanation of animal behaviour, in effect discrediting animals of consciousness (Midgley, 1988, p. 42). Yet David Foster Wallace (2004) delves into the possibility that lobsters may feel pain, concluding that, at the very least, "the lobster's behavior in the kettle appears to be the expression of a *preference*; and it may well be that an ability to form preferences is the decisive criterion for real suffering" (p. 7). Alternatively, in an affective appeal, Wendy Doniger (2001) incorporates Berger's idea of the *look* in arguing that an animal's eyes voice its consciousness to humans (p. 104).

The lobster's physical appearance may also play a role in easing the tension of confronting and eating a lobster. Humans understand animals according to a sociozoologic scale, which categorizes animals based on cultural rather than anatomical distinctions (Herzog, 2010, p. 48). For Westerners, lobsters are gross: they are arthropods, meaning they are part of the insect family and resemble centipedes or millipedes. They have spindly legs, thick antennae and eat dead things in the sea (Wallace, 2004, p. 1). Although cuteness does not matter in the world of ethics and morals, it matters a lot in the way humans think about and treat

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other animals (Herzog, 2010, p. 38). This obsession with cuteness—or neoteny—is culturally based and drives people to make irrational decisions about animals (Herzog, 2010, p. 53). Part of neoteny is how closely an animal resembles a human, with special emphasis placed on the eyes. According to anecdote, residents of an African village would trap and kill baboons that ate their crops but warned hunters never to look into the animals' eyes because it made it much harder to kill them, since baboons' eyes look so human (Herzog, 2010, p. 38; Herzog, 2010, p. 62). Chicken and other birds have become a more popular meat than beef, arguably because cattle are more relatable and cute (Herzog, 2010, p. 192). This is consistent with Berger's *gaze*, where he describes an animal's look to have powerful effects on humans (1980, p. 3). But he is assumedly referring to animals with distinct and identifiable eyes. Crustaceans, such as lobsters, do not have eyes that are remotely similar to those of humans—if you can even find them. Fish have obvious and glaring eyes; however, they are less powerful than other animals' eyes, since “[s]emantic moral distancing is apparently less necessary as we descend the phylogenetic scale” (Herzog, 2010, p. 45). Lobsters' appearance in combination with their place on the phylogenetic scale (based on their evolutionary history) may mean that, although humans interact more with lobsters before and during eating than with other animals, the lobster does not hold the hypnotic powers that the animal gaze otherwise might.

Another tactic to deal with the contention between guilt and a physical encounter is to alienate animals from their *real* selves. An animal's context informs how humans perceive its identity. By changing the environment in which humans see animals, the natural, or *real*, animal disappears and is in turn supplanted by a reinvented identity (Berger, 1980, p. 23). A pig, lobster, or horse observed in its natural environment—for example, a forest, the ocean, or a lea—can present the animal beyond its human utility. However, most people only see animal representations in film, literature, zoos, and as pets (Berger, 1980, p. 24). As a result, the animal's value is situated around its human use, for all these artificial environments exist for human satisfaction. At restaurants, lobsters are kept in large numbers in giant, brightly lit tanks—despite the fact that they are actually ocean-bottom dwellers, preferring dark spaces and solitude (Wallace, 2004, p. 7). Lobsters' claws are also bound as a way of preventing them from attacking one another, their natural response to being under such stress (Wallace, 2004, p. 7). Consequently, the context erases the *real* animal and sets up the meat eater to identify the lobster based on the constructed circumstance: a waiting meal.

This alienation is reinforced through language, which can be powerful in shaping the way people think. In the case of animals as food, language dissociates the animal from the meat. Consumer terms like meat, pork, beef, or poultry diminish the animal's complexity by limiting its definition to solely a product to be eaten. For example, the difference between “pig” and “pork” is that one of them

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can only be understood in terms of food. Moreover, these words distance the consumer from the animal's history and source. Even meat that goes by its animal name (e.g., lobster, chicken, lamb) undergoes grammatical change when referenced as food by becoming a non-count noun ("I see some lobsters" compared to "I want some lobster"). Normalized language can also neutralize an animal's death. The Lobster Institute (n.d.) refers to the lobster's actions during cooking as "twitch[ing] its tail," "movement," "activity," and "reflex action." These taciturn labels and descriptions reinforce the objectification and depersonalization of animals.

Yet despite these coping mechanisms, many people still care about the lobster's well-being during slaughtering, requiring an acknowledgement of the lobster as a creature with possible feelings, desires, and preferences. On the Lobster Institute's (n.d.) website, an organization that works with the lobster industry to sustain viable lobster fisheries, one of the first questions answered regarding lobster cooking is whether the animal feels pain when it is killed—an indication that the organization sees this question as a pressing dilemma for its readers. Despite the controversy around the website's adamant "no," why would one care about the animal's possible suffering if the lobster is deemed to be without consciousness?

Lobsters may be categorized as a cruel food. A cruel food is that which subjects an animal to unnecessary and excessive pain and suffering for gustatory pleasure. One of the key elements to enjoying cruel foods is knowing about the suffering of the animal, where "the element of cruelty figures not as a by-product but as a vital ingredient" (Strong, 2011, pp. 161, 159). Many fish and crustaceans are eaten alive or freshly killed, with the diner either having seen the fish alive before it was killed, or dead but presented to look particularly alive (Strong, 2011, p. 167). Sado-aesthetics, for example, is when one gains gustatory pleasure in seeing a dead or dying animal, including many seafoods that change colours in their end-of-life moments (Strong, 2011, p. 167). This fetish grants certain foods "being" status yet removes their significance as "beings" in the same breath (Baker, 2001, p. 136). People seem to savour the knowledge that the lobster is a living being by insisting upon a physical encounter before and during consumption and by attributing notions of pain and preference to the animal. The lobster, like all cruel foods, is thus a Derridean supplement to the narrative of food: lobster eating highlights humans' contradictory concern to hide, yet not hide, the animal behind the meat (Baker, 2001, p. 139).

So why do people tolerate—and even seek out—this tension? The use of cruelty can be a marker of distinction and exclusivity (Strong, 2011, p. 168); allowing social class to determine edible and appropriate foods is a common phenomenon in all cultures (Messer, 2007, p. 56). Another powerful driver to enjoying cruel foods is the feeling of domination and superiority one gets through the process. Consumers of cruel foods seek to multiply and intensify cruelty and death in order

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to fulfill “a desire to annex and conquer more than one’s proper share” (Strong, 2011, p. 190; Strong, 2011, p. 171). Seeing and choosing the lobster before killing it and then exacting force during consumption provide tremendous power to the diner (Strong, 2011, p. 166). Consistent with Baker’s Derridean supplement, this tyranny is made possible because the lobster as a living, feeling animal is both included and excluded from the food narrative, “disturb[ing] the logic and consistency of the whole” (Baker, 2001, p. 139).

Another reason to enjoy this kind of food is sin: the guiltier one feels about the food, the more pleasant it is (Strong, 2011, p. 160). This was explored in Stewart Lee Allen’s *In the Devil’s Garden: A Sinful History of Forbidden Food* in relation to fatty foods and desserts, but can be applied to meat products as well (Strong, 2011, p. 160). Humans define themselves, especially in relation to animals, as the civilized, cultured, and reasonable species (Midgley, 1988, p. 35). To call someone “an animal” means that she or he has “acted on motives which human beings are supposed either not to have at all or to prevent from ever giving rise to actions” (Midgley, 1988, p. 35). There is, therefore, a pleasure for some that derives from animal cruelty because of the opportunity to break social conventions, which demand that humans respect animals. Gluttony, excess, and selfish behaviour are social sins, but they feel so good to indulge in. Perhaps, then, lobster eating presents itself as a form of catharsis, a letting-go of cultural restraints in order for people to tap into their more “primitive” selves. Being human is tantamount to being socialized and acculturated. To abandon one’s responsibility, to pursue uninhibited desires of power and to give permission to cognitive dissonance without attempt to reason through it, would be to revert to one’s “natural,” “raw,” and undisciplined self—ultimately, to abandon humanness (Ingold, 1988, p. 5). This is critical, since the definition of humanity is hinged upon a hostile and exclusive distinction from animals (Midgley, 1988, p. 37). Cruel foods return people to the animal they harbour within, by way of animals.

The fact that most people enjoy lobster only once in a while is significant. Up until the 1800s, lobsters were considered poverty food. “In 1622 Governor William Bradford of the Plymouth Plantation apologized to a new arrival of settlers that the only dish he ‘could presente their friends with was a lobster ... without bread or anyhting else but a cupp of fair water’” (Mariani, 2013, pp. 307-308). Its abundance in New England was probably the main factor behind this revulsion, for food availability regularly plays a large role in determining what is culturally tolerable or intolerable to eat (Herzog, 2010, p. 183). Accepting that eating lobster is a form of asserting excess and domination, over-eating lobster equated to continually indulging in sin and destruction. No less, the taste for lobster grew quickly, with the first lobster fisheries established in the 1840s (Mariani, 2013, p. 308). Notably, the creation of lobster fisheries coincides with the major anti-cruelty reforms in England, which in turn overlap with the emergence of Darwin’s theory

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of evolution (Franklin, 1999, p. 14). Darwinism “connected us more closely than ever before with those animals,” meaning that, while beliefs in natural history and the biological sciences once created clear boundaries between humans and animals, humans suddenly needed new ways to distinguish themselves from animals (Franklin, 1999, p. 12; Midgley, 1988, p. 38). The ways in which humans differentiate themselves from animals can change so long as that boundary is always maintained (Franklin, 1999, p. 12). Lobster eating thus presented itself as a new form of demonstrating dominance over animals precisely when the need arose. By the twentieth century, the sudden growth in popularity of lobster eating reduced the number of lobster beds from which to fish, leaving lobster as a delicacy to be enjoyed and subjugated only periodically (Mariani, 2013, p. 308).

Animals share an incredibly complex relationship with humans, reflected in our association with them through food. Appetite is a driver that people seldom want to deal with at a cognitive level—valuing appetite over ethics, desire over reason (Adams, 1998, p. 65). People often distance themselves physically and mentally from the history of their meal to make the *real* animal disappear. Yet lobster as food does not conform to people’s normal coping strategies for eating meat. It is a Derridean supplement to humans’ eating habits in that it thrusts forward the contradiction that lies within a narrative of animal treatment (Baker, 2001, p. 139). The North American ritual of lobster eating illustrates that the way many people think about animals and the way they treat them are often in conflict (Baker, 2001, p. 148). But people cope with this tension for the cathartic, sinful, yet ultimately self-reassuring pleasure it provides. Although “[w]e imply that [animals] are in some way alien to us,” the way many people define animals turns them into the embodiment of what people wish humans were not primitive, unmannered, and uncivil (Midgley, 1988, p. 35). Because animals stand for the unhuman, it is important that people always distinguish themselves as separate from them (Midgley, 1988, p. 35). Ironically, through lobster eating, the very primitiveness that we often insist only lives in animals is what we release in ourselves to create that distinction.

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