

Heather Steffen

Vegan Feminist: An Interview with Carol J. Adams

In her 1990 *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (Continuum) Carol J. Adams brought together the worlds of feminist and vegetarian thinking. She argued that male dominance and animals' oppression are linked by the way that both women and animals function as absent referents in meat eating, and that "feminist theory logically contains a vegetarian critique...just as vegetarianism covertly challenges patriarchal society" (17). Now in three US editions and Japanese, German, Korean, and Chinese translations, *The Sexual Politics of Meat* has become required reading for vegetarians/vegans, animal rights advocates, and ecofeminists. Since its publication, readers have sent Adams thousands of pop culture images that illustrate her claims. Adams presents and analyzes these images in a slideshow and lecture she has given over a hundred times. She followed *The Sexual Politics of Meat* with *Neither Man Nor Beast: Feminism and the Defense of Animals* (Continuum, 1994) and *The Pornography of Meat* (Continuum, 2003), which continue her critique of representations of women and animals.

Adams has been prolific, writing and editing work on animals, feminism, and Christianity. She has edited *Ecofeminism and the Sacred* (Continuum, 1993); *Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Explorations* (with Josephine Donovan; Duke UP, 1995); *Violence against Women and Children: A Christian Theological Sourcebook* (with Marie Fortune; Continuum, 1995); *Beyond Animal Rights: A Feminist Caring Ethic for the Treatment of Animals* (with Donovan; Continuum, 1996); and *The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics: A Reader* (with Donovan; Columbia UP, 2007).

Alongside her many scholarly contributions, Adams has worked primarily as an activist focused on issues of domestic violence, homelessness, racism, and animal rights. She has written a number of practical guides, among them *Woman-Battering* (Fortress, 1994); *Living Among Meat Eaters: The Vegetarian's Survival Handbook* (Three Rivers P, 2001; Continuum, 2003; Lantern Books, 2008); *Help! My Child Stopped Eating Meat!: An A-Z Guide to Surviving a Conflict in Diets* (Continuum, 2004); and *How to Eat Like a Vegetarian Even If You Never Want to Be One* (with Patti Breitman; Lantern, 2008). In *The Inner Art of Vegetarianism* (Lantern, 2000) and *Prayers for Animals* (Continuum, 2004), Adams suggests daily meditations and prayers for adults and children who value animals as peers. Recently,

Adams has returned to her early interest in literature, coauthoring *Bedside, Bathtub, and Armchair Guides to Frankenstein* (Continuum, 2007) and Jane Austen (Continuum, 2008) with Douglas Buchanan and Kelly Gesch.

Born in 1951 in Dunkirk, New York, Adams completed her BA at the University of Rochester in 1972 and a Master of Divinity at Yale University in 1976, during which she attended the Andover Newton Theological School for one year. In 1977 she was hired as Executive Director of the Chautauqua County Rural Ministry, a position which she held until 1987. There she founded a hotline for battered women, started a soup kitchen, and oversaw a lawsuit to fight racial discrimination in building low-income housing, among many other projects. Adams has lived in Dallas, Texas, since 1987, and she continues to travel and present the *Sexual Politics of Meat* slideshow while working on several new projects.

This interview took place on 23 April 2009 at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where Adams gave her “Sexual Politics of Meat” slideshow as part of the University’s Earth Day events. It was conducted by Heather Steffen, managing editor of the review and guest editor of its “Feral Issue” while a PhD candidate in Literary and Cultural Studies at Carnegie Mellon University.

Steffen You’re most well known for *The Sexual Politics of Meat* book and slideshow. The book came out in 1990, and you’ve been doing the slideshow since 1996. How did you come to the project in the first place?

Adams Its roots go back to 1974. As a feminist I already had this critically-aware consciousness, and once I became a vegetarian it was like these two tracks suddenly converged, because I was seeing feminism and vegetarianism overlapping everywhere, historically and in literature and in antiwar activism. I was involved in one of the first shelters for homeless women in Boston, and so many of the activists were vegetarian. In the Boston-Cambridge community at that time there were socialist vegetarians, antiwar vegetarians, radical feminist vegetarians, goddess vegetarians, spirituality vegetarians. I’ve always likened it to being in Paris in the twenties—for a feminist, being in Cambridge during this time was just so supportive and revolutionary in terms of thought. Within two months of arriving and becoming a vegetarian I had this realization that there was a connection between feminism and vegetarianism, and everybody supported me and gave me ideas and references.

After I wrote “The Sexual Politics of Meat” as a paper for a class on feminist ethics taught by Mary Daly, I sent it off to *Amazon*

Quarterly, which was a great radical feminist-lesbian quarterly, and the editors put it in the collection of articles that they published as *The Lesbian Reader* in 1975. Then I tried to figure out how to do it as a book. But at first all I could do was say, “Male dominance is being expressed in these ways, and look at these connections,” but I don’t think I had a critical theory. Having been a reader of theory and literary criticism and political tracts, I knew I only had one chance to make the argument, so I wanted to do it right. I kept feeling I was not done. So in 1977, I stopped working on it as a book. I was an activist for about twelve years, and I kept reading and collecting things. We were very involved in antiracist work in upstate New York, and this sent me to reading memoirs of the Civil Rights Movement. We started a hotline for battered women, and reading domestic violence stories made me recognize the connection between batterers killing animals and threatening their partners. I collected it all and kept running it through my mind, and revising my ideas. Then in 1987, I read *Bearing the Word*, where Margaret Homans introduces the concept of the absent referent. I read it as we drove through Arkansas when we moved from upstate New York to Dallas. I put the book down and thought, “That’s what animals are.” I must have worked on this idea in my sleep too, because the next morning I woke up and thought, “That’s what women are too. That’s what the connection is: women and animals are interchangeable absent referents.” Then the book just wrote itself—after false starts and six different drafts. It took sixteen years and, in 1989, when I finished I thought, “I can write about something else now.”

I don’t think the book was out two weeks before I started getting things in the mail.

Steffen Those are all the images of women and animals that you put in the slideshow?

Adams Yes. People picked up matchbooks and menu covers. They stopped and took photos of billboards and bought t-shirts. All this stuff started arriving or would be sent to my editor, and I’d look at it and think, “Oh Lord, how do I explain this?” So I always feel that my readers required me to continue to keep *Sexual Politics of Meat* relevant by interacting with what I talk about as the ephemera of popular culture.

Steffen Do you keep an archive of all of it?

Adams I do have an archive. At first I didn’t, because I did not know this was going on. I didn’t realize there was a pattern. Also, the

same week that *The Sexual Politics of Meat* won a women's studies award from the publisher, I gave birth. So some of the experience of the reception of the book is awash in birthing books and birthing babies.

Anyway, I started getting all this stuff, all these images. One woman who works against factory farming in Chicago has sent me images from animal farming magazines for fifteen years. A Dallas photographer/artist, Susan kae Grant, who'd gotten *Sexual Politics of Meat*, Niño sent me an invitation to a show. Her father had run slaughterhouses, and she had created an installation around that with sounds and viscera reproduced in a very sophisticated artistic way. (Images from the show are in *Neither Man nor Beast*.) Susan wanted me to take part in a panel for the Society of Photographic Education. She said, "We're going to invite slides and we'll talk about the slides that people send in, and by the way you should make *The Sexual Politics of Meat* into a slideshow." She offered to create slides from the images in my books.

There were only five images in the original *Sexual Politics of Meat*, plus the cover, and that's all that was necessary to confirm my arguments and to catalyze readers. The slideshow itself started with ten images, and the first place I showed it was Virginia Tech. It was all non-digital. I went up to 36 images, and as I worked on the script I saw where I needed to pause or create better transitions, and so it went to 70 images. I finally went to two slide trays showing images simultaneously. But at this time I was an unsophisticated lecturer, because I thought people coming to the slideshow came because they already knew the book, so I was not starting at a basic enough level for those new to the idea.

Steffen So the slideshow has evolved a lot over time?

Adams Yes. I finally had four slide trays, I'd run two at a time, and I was introducing all the ideas—absent referent, mass terms, how the absent referent's functioning, how racism, sexism, and speciesism are interconnected. It was interesting, but at one point I was invited to speak at the University of Tennessee, and students were assigned to go to the lectures, but it was generally understood that they could leave after half the show. There were probably 250 people there, and exactly halfway through half the people left. I thought, "You mean the teachers can get them there, and I can't keep them? Something's wrong." The next morning before I flew back, a student took me for a walk in the mountains, and as I was walking I realized that what was missing was me. Maybe if I could help people see that I didn't start out as this radical feminist vegetarian activist, they could see

the process of change and how people become more aware, using me as a case study. So I went home and undid everything. All four hundred slides were taken out of the slide trays, and I started from scratch.

Steffen That's when you added the autobiographical opening?

Adams That's right. And then in 2001 I spoke at the University of Wisconsin, and one of the graduate students said, "You must go digital. You're going to end up with the worst machines on campus." In fact that did happen at Harvard—the slide jammed! This graduate student stayed up all night and digitized all my slides. He biked to my Holiday Inn in Madison twenty minutes before I had to take a plane to go show it somewhere else and handed me the slides. But I was foolishly resistant to learning new technology and waited two and a half years before getting a Mac laptop. Once I got the Powerbook, I realized it was all so simple; before that if I moved one slide, I had to move 400 other slides. Here [at Indiana University of Pennsylvania] I inserted a picture I took yesterday afternoon.

Steffen That lets you localize the presentation, because if they see a "Hogwild Barbecue" sign just down the road from campus, they can't just brush off the images by saying something like, "That's *Hustler* thirty-five years ago, what do you expect?"

Adams Right. It is essential that I be able to show that this is still happening. In fact I think it's getting worse.

Steffen How so?

Adams I think what has happened is that those *Hustler* images of thirty-five years ago have entered popular culture. You can see the meat grinder image prettified in an ad for the HBO series *The Comeback* featuring Lisa Kudrow. Burger King takes the *Hustler* mentality—women as meat, as hamburger, and stylizes it for Super Bowl commercials. The 2009 *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue ("Bikinis or Nothing") includes an ad for Arby's with hands removing two hamburger buns as though they are taking off a bikini top. Of course, the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue shows the bankruptcy of everything around women's sports for *Sports Illustrated*.

To bring the story back, I realized that there were things in the slideshow that weren't in *The Sexual Politics of Meat*: my analysis of dualisms, and the ecofeminist aspect that is implicit in *Sexual Politics of Meat* is made explicit in the slideshow. In fact the term absent

referent was not in the slideshow I presented last night. (Though I am thinking of adding it back in.) It used to be that the idea that “animals don’t want to die” introduced the concept of the absent referent, but it took a little too long. People talk about the nineties and the early twenty-first century students being a Sesame Street generation; I don’t know what we would call this generation—the texting digital generation? You can’t let a presentation drag now.

The slideshow had evolved so far that my editor and I realized we should make the slideshow into a book, and that’s *The Pornography of Meat*. I had more space there than I would in the slideshow, so that let me look more at, for instance, race, sex, species, and female reproductivity in the treatment of women and animals. I always feel like there’s something more to say. Now there’s this guy who’s doing a Barbie-Q with a huge Barbie doll in a bikini outside of his barbecue place. CNN did a story on it earlier this week that someone sent me. I was talking to this young man last night, and he said, “I didn’t really relate to the pigs. I’m Jewish.” I’d like to research the barbecue mystique in the South and its role in expressing anti-Semitism.

Steffen Do you think you’ll look more into the classed aspects of the images as well?

Adams Well, I’ve been trying to figure out how to get class in there, because these barbecues are all over. These are upper-class events, middle-class events. I wonder if they like to think they’re slumming, whether this is retrograde memory production or something. That’s what was interesting about the Barbie-Q. The guy is clearly not trying to reproduce class; he’s trying to get the middle class and trying to increase his foot traffic. Have you seen the “I Am Man” Burger King ad? The man’s leaving an elite restaurant where there’s quiche, and then they show the working-class guys and the blue-collar guys, and it’s as though meat unites the classes. Meat unites the men. They’re not separated by class; they come together around meat.

Steffen Being male trumps their class status?

Adams These ads say, “All classes of men, this is your food.” The democratization of meat eating happened in the United States, so I wonder if there isn’t something ritualistic about barbecue. For instance, when I returned to Virginia Tech a few years ago they talked about a fraternity having a pig roast, and they said, “What bothers you about coming to Virginia Tech? Is it the slaughterhouse

on campus?” “No,” I said, “it’s male bonding around a pig roast.” Maybe the motivation is slumming, maybe it’s recapturing something, or maybe the motivation is like anthropornography, a denial: “we aren’t doing this to women, so it’s okay.” Like that Burger King ad, they’re trying to have it both ways: “we’re just having fun, don’t forget to eat meat.” They’re insulating or protecting themselves from critique by making it look like they’re just having fun, and I think that’s what’s so dangerous.

Steffen This is like the photo of LaToya Jackson with a snake that you have in the slideshow, which carries the whole history of animalized racial depiction. There’s a history of that with class too, if you look at the history of immigrant workers in the US.

Adams In my essay in *The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics*, I say that the problem with the human-animal dualism is that it looks so simple but actually has so many markers. How do we decide to compare humans to certain kinds of animals? The lowering of a class or the lowering of a sex or the lowering of a race happens around which animals they’re like. I think that one reason people don’t want to let go of what certain animals mean is because they want some humans to mean those things too.

Steffen Beside the focus on images, you have a literary slant in your work. What did you major in at college that led you there?

Adams I was an English and History major. I think there were two important things about me as a teenager before I went to college: First, I was immersed in the natural world. We lived in a place called Forestville, and I had ponies—riding out in the country you have a very immanent sense of the world. And I grew up a reader, though I never read the classics in high school except for the ones we had to. I was actually a very unsophisticated reader, and the revelation of what literature could be came to me when I was taking English classes at Fredonia State my senior year in high school. We were doing modern American poets and reading Roethke. I loved it, and there was something that clicked about understanding the material. Suddenly literature was something you interacted with; it wasn’t just something you received. Then I went to college and I think the transformative thing was that it was the fall of 68. I came from a rural background, and my father was very conservative and for the Vietnam War. The rest of the family were against the Vietnam War.

Steffen What did your father do for a living?

Adams He was a defense attorney. In fact he had one of the first suits for the pollution of Lake Erie, and he was one of the first lawyers in upstate New York to challenge jury makeup based on race. He was pro-choice. But around the Vietnam War he was fixed.

When I went to college in 1968, one of the first things that happened was that Anthony Hecht, the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, spoke at the opening convocation, and he said, "It's too bad about the earthquake: if the earthquake had happened in California and Richard Nixon was there, we wouldn't be having this problem in terms of the election." And I thought, "Oh, you can say radical things like that and you're not struck dead?" Then I took an English class with this professor (Alarik Skarstrom) who was ABD at Yale, and he showed us how there were so many myths about a flood, and I thought, "Oh, the Bible isn't the only flood story?" It destabilized what I had accepted as my tradition. Then in a history class the professor (John Waters) said, "When did we start celebrating George Washington's birthday?" And I realized the things I grew up with as received givens all could be questioned. By sophomore year I was involved in the very beginnings of a feminist group started by women in the major antiwar group on campus, Students for a Democratic Society [SDS]. In my junior year I tried to do a defense of the Wife of Bath for my Chaucer class, and the professor said there was nothing to defend. In my Romantic literature class I did a paper about *La Belle Dame sans Merci* where I argued that there's no proof that she led him on—this is all his projection, so why does he say she led him on? And by that evening when I went to an English department dinner they all came up to me and said, "So you've done a feminist reading of *La Belle Dame sans Merci*?" I said, "Is that what I did?"

Steffen So you didn't think of yourself through that label?

Adams I trace my "official" feminist identity to that SDS meeting in my sophomore year. I was bringing a feminist perspective to everything, but I didn't know that questioning the perspective of the knight in Keats' poem made the reading feminist. It seemed obvious to me. I *consciously* brought my feminism to my courses my senior year. My senior thesis for history was about women and revolution, and I used Rosa Luxemburg and Emma Goldman as my case studies. For my English major paper I wanted to write about Mary Wollstonecraft, but the English professor that I had wanted

me to do Willa Cather. I was twenty years old, so I did Willa Cather, and I was very unhappy.

I was also taking a reading course on Religion and Literature. We were reading Edwin Muir's "The Good Man in Hell": What if, because of an error, a good man ended up in hell? Would he surrender to hate, utter curses, wait patiently? Or would he "kindle a little hope in hopeless Hell" that all Eden would enter in? My professor read the poem out loud and then started violently sobbing. After a few minutes, he apologized and explained that I reminded him of his daughter and that she had been recently institutionalized after having a nervous breakdown. At that time, I thought how powerful literature is. I never forgot the power of poetry and that poem. And I often think that what Muir describes is what animal activists are doing—you just keep doing what you believe in.

During my senior year I thought, "What do I really want to do with my life? This material is not just academic to me; this material I believe. I want to make a difference in my life. I'm an activist." And I wrongly thought divinity school was where you would go to continue to ask questions about spirituality. If I were a little more, say, cosmopolitan or urban in my background, I probably would have been trekking in India, because certainly there was a lot about Christian tradition that I was arguing with. But I got an incredible scholarship that paid for the first year of divinity school. I applied for it because I was asking the question, how does one live one's life with purpose? But divinity school was a vocational place. It was training people how to interpret the Bible, be a pastor, write sermons, etc. I was asking more, I know now, meta questions.

Though I went to Yale I only lived in New Haven one year. I spent a year at the University of Pennsylvania as an intern for women at the Christian Association, and then I moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, studied with Mary Daly and studied at Harvard and other schools there, and then my last year I commuted to Yale from Cambridge. I actually transferred to Andover Newton Theological School to be in Cambridge. I did not want to go back to New Haven. Though it's funny—at the department of religion at Yale at that point were Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow and Naomi Goldenberg, women who went on to do really important things in feminism and religion, but the relationship between the department of religion and the divinity school wasn't strong enough that we all connected. So I connected to the feminists at the New Haven Women's Liberation Center. At Harvard Divinity School, we did this incredible class on metahistory and feminism, and we started with "Diving into the Wreck" by Adrienne Rich: "the wreck and not the story of the wreck." Can you ever in history get to the wreck

and not the story of the wreck, and whose story is it? In that class were incredible women doing incredible thinking about women and history. I presented my ideas about feminism and vegetarianism to that class.

Steffen How do you put together the Christian tradition, feminism, and your animal work? Have you encountered people that feel they're really incompatible?

Adams Emily Culpepper, who was also at Harvard at the time, has a really interesting article about how Christianity is like the compost that you use to create from. I'm not trying to avoid answering this, but I have a joke that when you're Presbyterian, you're Presbyterian more than you're Christian. If you want to get something done, get a bunch of Presbyterians together, and we will get the thing done. (My partner, by the way, is a Presbyterian minister.) But there's a lot about Christianity I don't accept and I don't believe—male language for God, the hierarchical nature of many denominations, the easy “forgiveness” so often granted to batterers because the church equates “regret” with “repentance,” the resistance to acknowledging animals have souls, just to name a few. I think the fundamental role of a faith community and of prayer and the experience of worship can be very important to someone. The faith community I am a part of believes strongly in challenging injustice and transforming communities. That is important. And when someone experiences grief, being surrounded and supported by a community is very important. I think what happens for animal advocates is that we do not have a place for our grief. In fact I think we need a “Little Book of Grief” to show people that how you work with grief is very important in the animal community.

I fought the Christian-feminist battle in the seventies. People were really terrible then. When we went to Yale they went from having, say, fifteen women in the refectory to sixty. It was a crisis for some of the men. I dropped out of my New Testament class because the professor was always telling jokes about little old women. I said, “Little old women make up the majority of the congregations at the places these guys are going to, so why are you putting these women down?” That battle for me has been over for a long time. When I go to church I am constantly editing. There's no God the Father; for me it's God the Creator. The battle I fight now with Christianity is the harm it does to women, and that's why I did a book for ministers around domestic violence.

Steffen This is *Woman-Battering*? I was wondering how that book fit into your trajectory.

Adams The audience is ministers. After starting a hotline for battered women in the 1970s, I could see how urgent it was to train clergy around this issue. A friend from Yale, Marie Fortune, has been a pioneer in this area; she started the FaithTrust Institute. It broke my heart to think of how often battered women turned to their clergy, who were clueless about the issue. If you are a battered woman and you come to an untrained minister, he's going to say, "Well, your husband called and he said he's sorry, so I think it's okay for you to go back." Or he'll do couples counseling, because the minister doesn't understand domestic violence at all. It's egregious, it's sinful. You've got clergymen who say it's not an issue, and then you've got clergymen who weep because someone was killed in their congregation and they were so unprepared. And the church is complicit in these tragic stories.

But I always get questions on animals and Christianity, and some people are just very unsophisticated about them. I just got an email from somebody who was at my lecture last week at the University of Florida, and she wrote, "If it was good enough for my Christ, it's good enough for me." What was good enough for your Christ? Factory farming? Jesus, I do not think, would be eating meat from factory farming, whatever your idea of Jesus is. The church is its own worst enemy. The homophobia is so dangerous and unforgivable, and the majority of things Jesus ever talked about were class and money. If Jesus were heard for what he was, we would not be in a capitalist culture. So I fight with Christianity, and I'm not willing to give it up.

Steffen Looking over your CV, I noticed that your work has always been about doing two tasks: you write theoretical, scholarly pieces, but also practical advice books and prayers, very on-the-ground texts to get people started with a certain kind of life, be it vegetarian, vegan, or more self-aware. Because of that dual focus, do people ever treat you like something of a therapist or consultant when they talk to you after the slideshow?

Adams Yes, but I believe that this is part of my role as a culture worker. I am not talking only about changing ideas, but changing how we live. Change is difficult; conflicts abound. The questions I am asked are often urgent and always important to them, and I try to respond to each of the questions in the best way I possibly can. I'll get asked very specific questions: "I'm being sexually harassed

by another activist, what should I do?” “My lover broke my nose and I am afraid to leave.” “Now that I’m a vegan, how do I go home for Thanksgiving?” Or, “why are people so hostile?” “How do we make connections with activists for other causes?” “I’m having conflicts with my daughter, son, spouse, mother, father, friends...” “My mother is feeding my child meat.” Or, “the rape crisis center I volunteer at is having a fundraiser—a barbecue. What can I do?” The questions show where, for vegan-feminism, the rubber hits the road.

When I started doing the slideshow, I found that I was asked so many questions like this during the question and answer period that we were never actually discussing the theoretical issues I was trying to raise. So I wrote books like *Living Among Meat Eaters* to organize the answers I was giving all around the country.

The prayers began because this woman brought a baby bunny who was very ill into the homeless day shelter my partner runs. People were very upset and said a homeless woman shouldn’t have a sick baby bunny. But homeless people are allowed to have pets. Who are we to say they can’t? The next day she came back and surrendered it at The Stewpot, and everybody knew that the bunny had to come home with me. We named her Snowball. I took her to the vet, and she had an infection. I had to feed her with an eyedropper, clean and soak her ears and her feet and her tail twice a day. Snowball was with us for a few years—we had other formerly homeless bunnies we had taken in—and then she died. There’s this poem, “Vegetarian” by Karen Lindsey: “It takes so long to grow a body,” so much work. It’s so true. And I just ached, I was in so much pain. I went to the local park and it had snowed—in Dallas!—and I watched the ducks land on the ice, and I thought, “That’s me, I’m just like those ducks walking on this frozen ice.” The trees were just starting to melt, and I thought those were teardrops. I ran to the car and wrote a prayer of thankfulness for my experience at that park. So for spiritual practice I started writing a prayer a day, and after a year and a half, I realized, “This was just for me to try to cope with the grief of this loss, but maybe there’s something more here.”

The children’s prayers arose because I was asked to give the Merrick Lecture in Theology at Ohio Wesleyan, and I wondered how I would get to students who are religion majors. I called the talk “The Pedagogy of Grief.” What do we learn from grief? In preparing for it I read about children’s experiences with their grief over animals, and I grasped that we handle this wrong and make it worse. So I charted what I felt should be done: we should be honest, and we shouldn’t say “get another one,” “it was just a dog,” or “you can get over it fast.” I wanted to give children examples of how to

respond to their emotions for animals. The prayers are attempts to let children know their feelings are okay, to speak to them where their hearts are—sad, fearful, loving, caring.

Just before I started working on the prayers and the books that followed, I thought, “Okay, I think I’m done writing about animals,” and then Snowball died, and the prayers appeared, and I realized, “Animals have touched me so deeply, I will never be ‘done’ writing about animals.”

Steffen Another topic that comes up again and again in both your theoretical and your practical books is what I’d call the rhetoric of anti-vegetarianism, and how to deal with being verbally attacked by those who are offended by vegetarians and vegans.

Adams In my blood I’m an activist. If *Sexual Politics of Meat* had existed, I would have read it, it would have given me so much, and I would have gone on being an activist. I think in my blood I’m also a writer. The first thing I tried to write was when I was eight years old, and it was going to be a recipe book with animals introducing recipes, but my mother found my notes lying around in the kitchen and she threw them out by accident.

I’m very practical too. I’m always thinking, what’s the effect of this? What’s the effect even of how I answer a question? If you take the logic of *Sexual Politics of Meat*, that animals are absent referents, then vegetarians and vegans change someone who thought they were just an eater into a *meat* eater. They’re just eaters until a vegetarian or vegan enters the room. We are the ones defining them, and they recognize that at an implicit level. So *Living Among Meat Eaters* says, “Even after you’ve restored the absent referent, it’s not all cheery, because the world doesn’t want this, and these are the things that are going to happen.” I saw it as the practical application of the insights of *The Sexual Politics of Meat*. Vegetarians and vegans are seeing the literal dead animal, so we’re already more literal-minded than the average person. We get trapped in anti-vegetarian arguments because we also literally believe that people want to know about our position, but then they buffet us with ridiculous questions. My definition of relentless is having one more answer than they have questions.

Steffen In my experience, even in supposedly enlightened academic circles, where people are conscientious feminists or Marxists or whatever, the vegetarian issue gets people’s hackles up in a way that not much else does.

Adams It's the one privilege left untouched. Look at how Marx defines consciousness: consciousness is something humans have, so it automatically disenfranchises animals. When I looked at liberation theology, which is coming out of a Marxist analysis, its definition of who needs to be liberated is humano-centric. Then you also have the question of privilege: "Who do you, graduate student, think you are telling me, professor, that I shouldn't be eating meat?" It's one reason I'm concerned about what Donna Haraway does with her work. I've pushed Donna and said, "For heaven's sakes, I can't see why you're not putting in at least one sentence about veganism. You are reinforcing livestock. You went to Burger King, why didn't you at least say, 'and I ordered the veggie burger?'" This is in her manifesto, but how is that a manifesto? There's no liberation. She does the "I'm not trying to tell people what to do" thing, but we live in a world of injustice. We are responsible for it, and if we're implicated, we should talk about it.

I think that the problem with academics is that they're going to work harder to protect their privilege. Academics have more skills for protecting their privilege and covering the fact that they're protecting their privilege.

Steffen So what do you think about the fact that animals have become so hip in academe? Have you been following the emergence of animal studies?

Adams Barbara Noske wrote a book, *Beyond Boundaries: Humans and Animals*, and she talks about meat eating as the ultimate capitalist product, because it takes so much to make the product, it uses up so many resources. I'm wondering if this is what animal studies is at the academic level. It's suddenly something that everybody's discovering. There are a series of professors that I've heard from since *Sexual Politics of Meat* came out—they were grad students then—that say my book liberated them to write about animals and showed them ways of doing that. They're literary critics or professors of philosophy or religion, and one thing that I find in their work that makes me more comfortable is that they definitively say, "I'm not just studying zoos. I don't take my kids to zoos." That's how Randy Malamud starts his book on zoos: "My kids do not go to zoos." I want to know what people are eating when they leave their animal studies conferences. In this trend are the animals still absent referents?

Steffen So do you think the academic project harms the political project?

Adams I think that's a complex question, and I don't know if I am the best equipped to answer it. I'm not in academia, and I really never have been. I have taught at Perkins School of Theology, and those were very practical courses. They were called Sexual and Domestic Violence: Pastoral and Theological Issues, and they were trying to equip people to do something in response. The other class I've taught is Justice Issues in Pastoral Care, and my partner and I taught it from the homeless day shelter he runs, so they could see the issues firsthand—addiction, mental health, prostitution on the street.

When you're at the axis of theory and activism, you're judging activism for its lack of being theoretical, and you're judging theory for its lack of activism. And I don't know that I understand all the trends in academia—it's just not been my world.

Steffen But you must have a sense of the field from going to a lot of the conferences or giving talks?

Adams I have met many wonderful scholars doing fascinating and important work in this field, opening up new ways of thinking about animals. I am constantly amazed by all the new insights! But I think animal studies needs to be alert to what happened to feminist studies. Feminist studies was the academic arm of the feminist movement of the 1970s; the first courses were created in response to feminist activism. But as it got institutionalized many programs underwent transformation, becoming first "Women's Studies" and then "Gender Studies." I guess the question is, at what cost "academic respectability"? How is animal studies related to animal activism?

Again, I wonder if the absent referent remains absent. The concept of the absent referent points out when reification is happening. My concern is that animal studies be liberatory rather than participate in reification. Who are they eating when they go home? Have they made a conscious decision? Is there just a vegetarian option at those conferences or is it all vegan? With all the interest in animal studies and Continental philosophy, I am surprised that people don't seem to get a basic fact about Derrida: if Derrida were really encountered in what he is saying in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, everyone who reads him would understand the need to become vegans and resist factory farms. Derrida does not mince words about what is happening to animals.

Steffen This issue's called the "Feral Issue" because I'm hoping it will go outside its domesticated academic place to get at something like

what you're talking about—more materialist, activist, and grounded work than some of what's going on in animal studies as it grows and expands.

Adams That's a great goal, but I'm worried that the wild is thought of as sexy. Domestication becomes equated with the feminine and with the appropriation of female reproduction. I think the domesticated animal seems inconsequential—*only* a cow, *only* a pig. We end up putting them away in this zone where they don't matter, and part of the reason they don't matter is because of their reproductive activities. Meat eaters say, "They wouldn't be here if I didn't eat them, so they should be grateful to me for their existence." We equate all domesticated animals with being female and passive. So I often feel that when peopleglom onto animal issues, the one area they don't want toglom onto is the domesticated, farmed animals, because they're too ordinary, too low in status, because they're female or equated with the female, because we brought them into existence because we eat them. There are some animals who probably would never go feral, and yet we're going to be responsible for them—and not by eating them.

Steffen In your work you tell a lot of stories, and the narrative of becoming vegetarian or vegan often includes a moment of seeing the absent referent, like the picture of Lisa Simpson with the sheep, and that powerful realization changes the person. So how do you explain lapsed vegetarians?

Adams When people tell me they tried to be vegetarian but it didn't work out, I say, "Try it again." Imagine going to a Buddhist monk and saying, "I tried meditation, but it didn't work." There are lots of ways to follow a path. How did you try it? What were your support systems? What did you eat? What did you crave? When did you change? Did you feel left out of a social gathering? Did you decide it was easier not to care? Did you experience a lowered status? There is actually a book on vegetarians who stopped being vegetarians, *To Eat Flesh They Are Willing: Are Their Spirits Weak?* It's a lot easier being a part of the dominant culture. There's a song from a feminist in the 1970s, "Sometimes I wish my eyes hadn't been opened." I think that explains part of it. Though the resources and the support are there much more so than twenty or thirty years ago, so are resurgent pro-carnivorism messages from celebrity chefs, the "slow food" movement, and "locavore" proponents. They have been dubbed the "Neo-carns" by animal activists.

Steffen In one of the biographical entries I read it mentioned that your mother was also a social activist. What sort of work did she do, and was it in upstate New York?

Adams My mother grew up in Minnesota. She was the daughter of a woman who clearly had been sexually harassed at a pivotal time. My grandmother was doing day labor cleaning for a Norwegian farmer, and he chased her around a kitchen table. This was probably 1910, but she lived in fear that something terrible would happen to her daughters. Her daughters had second-class status, but her son was allowed to have a bike, to run around after school, to have friends over. So my mother and her sister escaped their small town—my mother put my sister through business school by teaching in a one-room schoolhouse. After that her sister put my mother through business school, and then World War II came. They both went in: one became a WAC [Women's Army Corps] and one became Red Cross. She met my father, a Naval officer, in Hawai'i, and she came back with him to Western New York. He went to Yale Law School, then they came back and settled.

I think one of the effects of being in a rural area is we're not likely to be willing to be cogs in a system. Perhaps we're more likely to be iconoclasts. My father was offered \$3000 a year to be in a law firm in Manhattan coming out of Yale Law in 1949, but he wasn't going to go work in a big firm for that amount of money, so they moved back to where he had grown up. It was very difficult for my mother to be accepted because rural areas are often populated by generations of the same families. First she tried the PTA and got a new elementary school building built, and then tried the Easter Seals. In the early sixties, my sister came back from a summer in Bolivia and began volunteering to teach English as a Second Language to migrant workers. My mother started hearing my sister's disturbing stories about how the migrant workers lived and how they were treated. This was something she could respond to. She became good friends with women migrant workers whose families were resettling in the area and with African Americans who had come up to work in the canning factory but had settled down there. The canning factory was about ten miles away, and the workers were all given land on this flood plain. They would have a chaplain there for the summer to work with the migrant workers, and my mother became the person who maintained continuity throughout the rest of the year with people resettling. Through the early to middle sixties, she was doing this, and she just devoured all the progressive stuff—here was this progressive Minnesotan who was finally getting liberated. When my sister had to read *Feminine*

Mystique when she was entering Vassar in 1965, my mother read it. When there was a women's strike in 1970, she said, "I'm taking part in this." She took women for abortions and was on the committee to bring family planning services to Chautauqua County. Talk about rural activism.

I have all her letters to us from the sixties that trace her increasing radicalization, and she's very funny in them. Here's a great example: These poor farm workers would fly up from Puerto Rico and then be housed in terrible living situations provided by the farmers. The migrant committee she was on would go and check them out, and they'd find heaters with blankets on them, just fire traps, or that the places were actually chicken coops—and they had not been cleaned. So she went to the Department of Health, and she said, "Why aren't you closing down these camps? They clearly are uninhabitable." And they said, "Well, we do try to close them, and then the farmers hire Lee Towne Adams as their attorney, and he gets them off." That's my father, though the Department of Health guy did not realize he was talking to Lee Towne Adams' wife! So my mother went home, and after that my father did not defend any farmers on farm worker related things.

I think my mother found her voice through her letters. When my younger sister, the last daughter, was heading off to Vassar, my mother wrote, "I've been asked how I'm going to feel about an empty nest—what a stupid question!" Her letters really track the evolution of consciousness in the sixties. So I grew up knowing that you could make a difference, and I grew up with this sense that cities are very exciting places, but I know that in my blood I have to smell concord grapes in the fall, I have to smell leaves. That's all a part of rural life, but we don't recognize the activism in it. One of the first articles I ever wrote was "Wife Beating in Rural Areas." You call the police and it's on a scanner within seconds and everybody has scanners. How do you escape if there's only one car or a broken-down truck? And everybody knows everybody else. One time we were hiding someone in my partner's church, and we knew her husband was looking for her. He had a loaded gun in his car, and we had a lawyer trying to get him stopped while we were hiding her. The only thing they could charge him with was a violation of the conservation law for driving with a loaded gun in his car. That was it.

Steffen You've done activist work in both urban spaces and rural. Do you find you have different kinds of experiences in them?

Adams I think people want the rural to be a protected, idyllic zone. The rural is where you have your second house. People talk about

upstate New York, and they're going two hours from Manhattan. That's not upstate New York to me.

I think the hardest thing about being an activist in a rural area is that often it's only you or just a couple of other people. The minute you get to an urban area, because there's a wider population, you're going to have more people who can rise to the level of being activists and who can get things done. In a rural area, if you're going to get something done, you're often going to need to do it yourself, find ways to inspire people, widen your area, or get college interns.

Steffen It seems like that's what you did for a long time as director of the Chautauqua County Rural Ministry. How did you come to work for them?

Adams I finished at Yale hanging on by threads. I was really lucky. My last year they let me do half of my courses with a German Tillich scholar, on feminism and social change from a religious perspective. We just read and talked and talked. A close friend from Yale said to me, "Yale recognized it didn't really have what you needed, but it had the grace to allow you to shape your own studies." After graduation, I was trying to write *Sexual Politics of Meat*, but I didn't have my voice and didn't know how to do it. I came back to Western New York and was a little depressed, and then I ran into someone at a party who said I should apply for a Rotary fellowship for graduate study. So I applied for the fellowship, but they don't like to send you back to countries where you've been. I'd already spent some time in London reading at the British Museum, and I would have loved to go back there, but I applied to go to Australia. I sent in my application and headed cross country by bus to San Francisco where there was a Take Back the Night march in 1977. It was incredible; there were women everywhere. It was so powerful! Watching the marches in *Milk* reminded me of that march. The next morning I got a call from my mother saying the Rotary needed me to come back for an interview because I was one of the finalists, and also the person who was the head of the Rural Ministry was leaving, so maybe I'd want to do that for the summer. I said I would, and I did the Rotary interview, and they gave me the award. Because Australia starts school in January instead of September, and because no one had been found to take over the directorship at the Rural Ministry, I extended my stay. But in the meantime in New York I fell in love with Bruce, my partner, who happened to be the President of the Board of the Rural Ministry. I had gotten myself into some difficult places, and I noticed how strategically and politically helpful he was. One day, a migrant worker had gone

crazy in the fields and he was taken to the local mental hospital. The next day, I took an excellent translator with me and we asked to see the migrant worker and provide translation for him. To this day I don't know what was so threatening about this offer, but the head of the mental hospital came out and ordered us off the property and threatened to call the police. I was shaken, and found that it was Bruce I wanted to talk to about this.

So by the time January arrived, I was a different person than the year before when I had applied for the fellowship. But I wasn't going to give it up. I flew to San Francisco and stayed with the woman with whom I'd done the Take Back the Night march, Chellis Glendinning, who is now an author of numerous books and an ecopsychologist. That night, I had this dream.

In the dream, I was in a McDonald's with my sister and my mother, and I said, "I want a cheeseburger without the burger," but the person kept giving me a real cheeseburger. I woke up and I was crying. Chellis happened to have studied Gestalt psychology, and she said, "What are you giving yourself that you don't want?" And I realized it was the Rotary fellowship, that I wanted to go back, my work wasn't done, and I was in love with Bruce. So I went to the American Airlines office and handed in a round-the-world ticket for a one-way ticket to Buffalo. It just so happened that the day I made that decision the Rural Ministry was supposed to have interviewed the final applicant to replace me, but they had a snow storm and couldn't interview the person, so they hadn't filled the position and I could come back to my job. When I went to see my mother's friends in the community that week they said, "We prayed for this, this is why you're here. We prayed you back here."

Steffen People react rather strongly to your work from what I've read. Have you had any dangerous moments because of your work about animals or during the work with the Rural Ministry?

Adams With the Rural Ministry there were frightening times, and in Dallas Operation Rescue picketed our house because of Bruce's work. Our kids were traumatized by that. They were three and seven. One of the things I've done in the animal rights movement is to say, "Do not picket the homes of vivisectionists. Do not do this to kids." I know firsthand what the effect is, and it is not fair to kids to do that.

To tell you one other story: At the time *Sexual Politics of Meat* came out, Rush Limbaugh had people reading campus newspapers all over and sending things in. There was a young professor in Washington state who had written a dissertation about ecofeminism

and talked about *Sexual Politics of Meat*. She presented a paper on this and her school newspaper carried a story on it. Rush had already attacked my book as excessive political correctness and all that, so he went after this little school in Washington where she was. Alums were saying they wouldn't give any more money because the idea of a connection between feminism and vegetarianism was ridiculous. Several years later I was invited to show the slideshow there, and this woman drove me to the airport. I asked how she'd survived that time, and she said it was very hard and completely unexpected. I said to her, gently but firmly, "These are not just ideas! What did you think? These are very threatening concepts and they ask people to change." And I thought, I am so lucky, because before *Sexual Politics of Meat* came out, I already knew what a terrible thing it can be when people react to someone saying something boldly.

While I was working for the Rural Ministry, we'd had eggs thrown at our house, and people talked about us on the radio station—were we married? what did we make? how could a minister be doing this around racism?—because we were challenging the community, we were attacked. Anonymous letters were written to his church that Bruce should be fired. The radio station owner tried to run me off the road when I was bicycling. Plus we were working with battered women, and one day I ran into a batterer when I was helping his wife get her driver's license. It was a very tense time. Those are things you should be afraid about. Rush Limbaugh? That is a tempest in a teapot.

My senior year in college I thought, "How do I make a difference? And how do I live a life of integrity?" I'm not asking the first question any more, but how you live a life of integrity continues to be an important question. What do you reconcile yourself to, and what don't you?

Steffen From all the work you've done, you must be an incredibly energetic person. What does your work schedule look like?

Adams I start each morning writing in my journal. I'm on my 132nd journal or something like that. I always give them titles for what I want to focus on, and then at the end I'll add a title for what the journal really meant. I write down any dreams I remember (I have long dreams in which I explore theoretical ideas, and it can take me thirty minutes to get the dream down). Then I write about what happened the day before, conversations I had, things I noticed. If something frustrated me, I identify that. Sometimes the dream's meaning will become apparent by this disgorging. I end by identifying five things I am grateful for and one symbol for my day.

Then Holly, a border collie who lives with us, and I go for a walk; I row, practice a little yoga, and go to work. Ideally, I work on new projects in the morning and then try to do email and catch up with other work in the afternoon. *Ideally.*

I use deadlines to keep me on track. I impose them and if I don't meet them, I examine why. I try not to be hard on myself. During some months I might be moving three or four projects forward at a time. But when a deadline gets close, I plunge into the project and leave the others alone.

Steffen What are you working on now?

Adams I spent all of February doing the twentieth-anniversary edition of *Sexual Politics of Meat*, and now I'm trying to move forward. But that was fun. I had not read the book for twenty years, and I was surprised by it because I still like it very much. I did not dare touch a thing—except I added a definition of vegan—because I don't know what it is that's touching people the way it touches them.

I'm working on a memoir about my activism. I'm also trying to do something with my mother's letters from the 1960s. I have an idea for a story for teens. I'm working on something about homelessness. And a vegan chef and I are working on a great cookbook! I've also done a book on Jane Austen, and I'm going to do another book on her.

Steffen How did you get to Austen?

Adams At a critical time in my life, reading Jane Austen saved my sanity, and whatever I can give back to the world of Jane Austen lovers—and soon-to-be lovers—is barely commensurate with what I received. My second book on Austen is more personal and describes this time in my life. I'll trace how Jane Austen helped me cope with an incredibly traumatic experience. One of the things they say about suffering is that a survivor makes of their suffering a gift to others. That's what I have to do, because the gift isn't just my suffering, but through my suffering realizing something about Jane Austen's skills and insights.

I'm also doing something about the masculinization of the animal rights movement. Why is the animal rights movement constantly masculinizing itself? When I say in the slideshow that the footprint I leave doesn't have cleats, that's because the famous saying by Cleveland Avery about the animal rights movement in 1990 was "We're no longer little old ladies in tennis shoes." That

bothered me because I'm going to one day be a little old lady in tennis shoes, and we can't put down the work of the little old ladies in tennis shoes who got us to here.

So it's going to be about the masculinization of the animal rights movement, and why it's moving away from the very thing that matters, which is recognizing that people do care about animals. What would it mean if PETA's whole ad campaign was, "Hey, I care?" and you had famous people saying, "I care, and when I care I have to change my life"? Last week when I gave the slideshow at Florida, this one student said, "I care about animals, but I'm still going to eat them." Well, then you don't care about animals. Let's be clear about what care means.

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