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Citation Details

Hunt, Alastair (2013). Death by Birth, *English Studies in Canada*. (39)1: 97-124.

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Death by Birth

Alastair Hunt
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Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down.

John Keats
“*Ode to a Nightingale*”

RED MEAT takes years off of cow’s life¹

American political scientist Timothy Pachirat’s recent book, *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight* (2011), begins with death.

In 2004, six cattle escaped from the holding pen of an industrialized slaughterhouse in Omaha, Nebraska. According to the *Omaha World Herald*, which featured the story on its front page, four of the six cattle made an immediate run for the parking lot of nearby Saint Francis of Assisi Catholic Church, where they were recaptured and transported back to be slaughtered.

¹ Just to be safe, I should point out that *The Onion*, from which I quote this news article headline, is a satirical newspaper.

A fifth animal trotted down a main boulevard to the railroad yards that used to service Omaha's once-booming stockyards. The sixth, a cream-colored cow, accompanied the fifth animal partway before turning into an alleyway leading to another slaughterhouse. (1)

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As you can probably guess, for the sixth cow—as for the five others—things end badly. In the alleyway leading to the second slaughterhouse, police shoot it multiple times with a shotgun, and then it dies. I borrow this story, and so also begin with death, because it is the most economic way I can think of to announce my opening point: being killed is a defining predicament of animals labouring in the commercial agricultural industry. Pachirat's rendering of the story makes this point so efficiently and pointedly, and in a manner not a little reminiscent of Kafka,² in part simply because, while the cows attempt to escape their institutional fate of being killed, their efforts are in every case futile. The details of the futility underscore the point. For instance, the irony of the fact that four of the cows effectively seek, but fail to find, sanctuary in the parking lot of a church dedicated to the Catholic patron saint of animals, and the images of the other two cows wandering through an urban space, the construction and architecture of which suggests that although they may have left one slaughterhouse, the building apparently has no outside.

Companion animals, feral animals, and wild animals die in a *variety* of ways. Some are killed by humans, some are killed by other animals, some die of old age, disease, accident, and so on. The deaths of agricultural animals, however, almost always take the form of being killed. For such animal labourers as beef cattle, domesticated pigs, and turkeys, as well as dairy cows, breeding sows (female pigs), and egg-laying hens, the horizon of life is not the multifarious forms of death that snare all mortal creatures. It is a specific form of dying. This unique situation is accentuated by the fact that nearly all such animals die in mechanized facilities in which massacre and bureaucracy converge, facilities that have been called “machines for dying in,”³ facilities designed solely for the purpose of killing animals and,

2 Pachirat's story is reminiscent of a particular Kafka story, namely “A Little Fable,” in which a mouse observes, “there in the corner stands the trap that I must run into,” to which a cat responds, “You only need to change your direction,” before eating the mouse (257). What's really Kafkaesque about the story, however, is that the animal protagonists are, as Maurice Blanchot argues so many of Kafka's protagonists are, effectively suspended between life and death.

3 In her introduction to *Meat, Modernity, and the Rise of the Slaughterhouse*, Paula Young Lee coins the phrase by way of an arch reference to Le Corbusier's description of a house as “a machine for living in.”

afterwards, disarticulating their bodies into portions to be packaged and sold as, for the most part, food for human beings.

To be sure, the sixth cow is killed *at* but not *in* such a facility and indeed is part of a gang of cows that defer being killed through an escape, albeit a temporary one.⁴ There are, moreover, a number of cases of animals that *successfully* elude the institutionalized process of being killed that is devised especially for them. In May 2011, for instance, a six-year-old dairy cow called Yvonne, and slated to be transported to the slaughterhouse, escaped from a farm near the town of Mühldorf in Bavaria, Germany, and spent three months on the run before she was recaptured and bought by an animal sanctuary. Indeed, one could even go so far as to say that Yvonne's adventure occasioned, as such stories routinely do, something like the "wishful participation that borders closely on enthusiasm" that Immanuel Kant affirmed as the proper affective response of contemporary spectators of the French Revolution ("An Old Question Raised Again" 143–48). The *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, for instance, called her "a sort of freedom fighter for the animal-loving republic" (*so etwas wie einer Freiheitsheldin für die tierliebe Republik*) (Heidenreich). However, just as Kant ultimately denied those subject to a sovereign power the right to revolution ("Towards Perpetual Peace"), so the affective thrill over agricultural animal escapades exhibited in the news article takes as its condition of possibility resignation to an institutionalized capture of animal life so regularized it seems inexorable, part of the order of things. More generally, the kind of affect on display in this new story almost never turns into an ethico-political contention that in any way questions if the fate designed for agricultural animals is just.⁵ The number of agricultural animals killed as they are intended to be simply dwarfs the number of those that go on any escapade, let alone those who successfully escape being killed. Regardless of whether agricultural animals die by being efficiently processed by professional slaughterhouse workers or die in a more ad hoc manner, say, by being shot by police in the alleyway leading to a slaughterhouse, I think no one, with perhaps the exception of the animals themselves, really finds it a surprise that the dying of agricultural animals with very few exceptions takes one specific form,

4 The non-instituted manner of the cow's being killed is of key importance for Pachirat, who retells the story. He suggests that it is the unplanned, anomalous nature of the animal's being killed that occasions in spectating workers at the slaughterhouse the indignant affective response they normally do not experience during their regular work killing animals and disarticulating their dead bodies.

5 For an incisive discussion of agricultural animal escapes, see Robert McKay.

that of being killed.⁶ In a way, Martin Heidegger was, at least with regards to the world of industrialized agriculture, spot on when he said, in *Being and Time*, that animals do not properly speaking “die” but not quite right when he said they merely “perish” (46–53).⁷ The truth is they are killed.

Pachirat’s story is the perfect opening to his book’s broad central and convincing claim that what goes on in industrial slaughterhouses is only possible because of the institutional organization of the sensory perception, affective responses, and critical thinking of both off-site consumers of the slaughterhouse’s products and its on-site workers. “An examination of the everyday realities of contemporary slaughterhouse work,” he contends, “illuminates not only the ways in which the slaughterhouse is overtly segregated from society as a whole, but—paradoxically and perhaps more importantly—how the work of killing is hidden even from those who participate directly in it” (8–9). To more fully explain how the mass killing of agricultural animals is made acceptable, however, we need to move beyond the scenography of the slaughterhouse so as to also take into account the conditions of possibility in place *before* animals get to the machines for dying. Hannah Arendt indicates a way of gaining a broader perspective when, in the penultimate chapter of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, she writes, “The insane mass manufacture of corpses is preceded by the historically and politically intelligible preparation of living corpses” (447). This essay seeks to take seriously Arendt’s suggestion that mass slaughter is a productive, and not simply a destructive, process, especially her suggestion that those who are destined to be transformed into corpses need to be produced, from the beginning, as so destined. What I find interesting about modern industrial agriculture is that it exercises not just the awesome power to take life but also the perhaps *more* awesome power to make life by actively prosecuting birth through the practice of mass breeding. Agricultural animals are made to live and made to make live. This is in no way to suggest that the industry makes up for or undoes what happens in the slaughterhouse. For what is truly interesting is that,

6 To be sure, the discomfort or shock experienced by many people when invited to think about killing animals in slaughterhouses—even their resistance to thinking about such killing (and to thinking about their resistance to such thinking)—is evidence of a sort of surprise. But this just makes our experience of industrialized animal killing a good example of ideological disavowal (“I know very well, but ...”). My point is less about our perception of animal killing than about the fact that, regardless of our perception of it, it happens.

7 I am deliberately abusing Heidegger’s terms here so as to point out that the deaths of animal labourers in the modern agricultural industry are not simply a biological exigency but a biopolitical one.

as Arendt's metaphor of "living corpses" indicates, those who are prepared for slaughter are, prior to slaughter, somehow already dead. That is, the life that they nevertheless live exists before slaughter but after an earlier form of death. In the case of industrial agriculture, my argument will be that before animals are massacred in slaughterhouses, their life is marked by a form of dying that is indistinguishable from their being born. While agriculture wants them to be born, it does not want them to live. Once we take into account the mass breeding of animals as well as their mass slaughter, industrial agriculture comes into focus as a biopolitical project in which it becomes as difficult as it is urgent to say exactly when the life that begins with birth ends in death.

The Work of Birth

Looked at from the point of view of the animals employed at food production facilities, agriculture appears to be little more than a massive enterprise of killing. The more common-sense point of view, however, is that the ultimate meaning of animal agriculture is not death but life.⁸ And indeed, as the practice of rearing livestock and producing such foodstuffs as milk and eggs, animal agriculture is an exemplary form of what Arendt, in *The Human Condition*, terms "labour," something to be distinguished from "work." Whereas work is activity that engenders the human-made world of artifacts—cars, buildings, appliances, hydro-electric dams, novels, jewelry, and so on—labour is an activity that provides for the biological life of human beings. "Labor," claims Arendt, "ensures not only individual survival, but the life of the species" (8); "it never 'produces' anything but life" (88). Given that the vast majority of products that agriculture produces are forms of food, it is, like other forms of labour such as medicine, a form of activity that quite directly sustains the conditions for life itself. The American classic rock musician Ted Nugent and his wife Shemane Nugent put it succinctly in their book *Kill It and Grill It: A Guide to Preparing and*

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8 This is how Elizabeth Costello describes the view of animal agriculture she critiques in *The Lives of Animals*:

And to split hairs, to claim that there is no comparison, that Treblinka was so to speak a metaphysical enterprise dedicated to nothing but death and annihilation while the meat industry is ultimately devoted to life (once its victims are dead, after all, it does not burn them to ash or bury them but on the contrary cuts them up and refrigerates and packs them so that they can be consumed in the comfort of our homes) is as little consolation to those victims as it would have been—pardon the tastelessness of the following—to ask the dead of Treblinka to excuse their killers because their body-

Cooking Wild Game and Fish when they write, “MEAT IS LIFE!” (181).⁹ Of course, the syntactic minimalism and copulative certainty of this statement, along with the all capital letters and the exclamation point, try a little too hard to efface any sense that, as English pop singer Morrissey once put it, “Meat is murder.”¹⁰ And it does have to be admitted that the “life” that meat “is” is not that of the meat itself or that formerly living creature which became the “meat.” Nevertheless, even though animal agriculture necessarily requires killing animals, the meat (and other food) that animals become once they are dead nourishes, in a very material way, human life.

Of course, it is this very logic by which killing produces life that makes the animal agricultural industry such a textbook case of what Michel Foucault called the “death-function” of biopolitics (*“Society Must Be Defended”* 258). In his seminal account of biopolitics in the mid 1970s, Foucault contrasted biopower, the power to “make live,” with sovereign power, “the right to kill” (241). As Foucault himself well knew, however, if the power to make live has proven proficient at making anything over the last two centuries, it is a pretty impressive number of dead bodies. A significant amount of work within biopolitical theory since Foucault has been preoccupied with explaining the ways in which the project of making live is also a project of making die, how biopolitics is also thanatopolitics or necropolitics.¹¹ Foucault’s own elegant explanation is that biopolitical power, in executing its project to make live, first, projects onto the living in general under its management a hierarchical opposition between two sorts of living beings: those that must live and those that must die, and second, establishes between them a biologicistic notion of sacrifice whereby the killing of the latter increases the vitality of the former. Once this structure is in place, acts of making die can contribute to a project of making live because they are directed at a particular part of the population whose best contribution to the life of society may very well be dying. Applying this model to the specific case of animal agriculture is simple. Agriculture’s official objective is to provide food. As the motto for the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN says, *fiat panis* (“let there be bread”). And with the moderniza-

fat was needed to make soap and their hair to stuff mattresses with. (22)

9 To be fair to the Nugents, the kind of meat they specify “is” life belongs to wild animals and not to agricultural animals.

10 “Meat is Murder” is the title of a 1985 album, and a song on that album, by the band The Smiths, for which Morrissey provided the voice and lyrics.

11 Giorgio Agamben uses the term *thanatopolitics* in *Homo Sacer*, while *necropolitics* comes from Achilles Mbembe’s “Necropolitics.”

tion of production techniques beginning in the eighteenth century, animal agriculture has exemplified the biopolitical project of making live in a remarkably successful way. The production of food for human beings to eat turns, of course, upon a presupposed opposition between the human and the animal parts of the population. This opposition might seem given in the nature of things, merely a function of biological taxonomy. But without even taking into account the consequences of Jacques Derrida's point that the very category of "the animal," as something to be opposed to "the human," is about as unnatural and empirically inaccurate a concept as there ever existed (129–34), it does not take much to see that the subdivision of all living creatures into two groups is biopolitical precisely to the extent that it is confused with a distinction between those with a fundamental right to life and those whose right to life, if they have one, is every time trumped by that of the former group. To say this might seem an affront to common sense, but it is merely to restate two assumptions that subtend agriculture: the decision to externalize the lethal costs of its activities onto animals and the fantasy of sublation that turns these costs, via a sacrificial logic, into human life. Like all living creatures, humans surely have both a need, and, yes, even a right, to eat, and to eat well, but reducing the living in general to two categories of things, distributing life and death along that distinction, and then acting as if death can magically turn into life is hardly a necessity. Nor, it must be said, does it seem particularly just. It is a biopolitical exigency.

To describe animal agriculture as an unambiguous instance of the death-function of biopolitics, as I have been doing, captures something that, I think, very few people would bother denying. However, even as it is not wrong, neither is it wholly satisfactory, for it ignores what is really interesting about the industry's management of animal life. Consider that Foucault grounds his account of the biopolitical justification for taking life in the example of a racism that hallucinates one part of the population as not so much an "enemy" as a "threat" to the other (a threat being a menace but not an adversary) (*Society Must Be Defended* 255–56). No matter how one looks at them, agricultural animals are not threats to human beings. The only time in which the latter can *feel* true is when pathogens amongst domestic animal populations jump the species boundary and infect human beings. As Cary Wolfe notes, when zoonotic pathogens, including those resistant to antibiotics, are seen to "pose a risk to national biosecurity, the results are depressingly familiar": for example, "millions of chickens, turkeys, and ducks killed worldwide—80 million alone in Southeast Asia, 19 million more in Canada—to combat H5N1 avian influenza in the spring

of 2004” (49). However, what is key here, and what Wolfe does not explicitly point out in his analysis, is that the “depopulation” of animals, as the official term puts it, aims not at the animals themselves but at the pathogens they carry, diseases which also threaten *them*, the animals. This is hardly the logic of the “threat” Foucault talks about, because animals are strictly speaking only hosts to the real threat to human beings, and the whole point of emergency “depopulations” is to protect not just human beings but also the animal population itself. If animals themselves were biological threats, then we would certainly kill them, but we would not reproduce them again!

We can further dilate this wrinkle in the application of Foucault’s model of the death-function of biopolitics. Foucault himself well appreciated that it is possible for the death-function, once set in motion, to authorize the massacre of the very population it is supposed to protect. The Nazi state, for instance, aimed to protect the biological existence of its population more rigorously than any state had before. At the same time, it was extremely liberal with its exercise of sovereign power’s right to take life, and not just toward those it deemed non-German, such as Jews, but also, in the end, toward true-blooded Germans. This possibility was, Foucault argues, built into the Nazi biopolitical project from the beginning:

The destruction of other races was one aspect of the [Nazi] project, the other being to expose its own race to the absolute and universal threat of death.... Exposing the entire population to universal death was the only way it could truly constitute itself as a superior race and bring about its definitive regeneration once other races has been either exterminated or enslaved forever.

The Nazi state was, thus, not just “murderous” but also “suicidal,” and the result was not just the Final Solution but also “Telegram 71, in which, in April 1945, Hitler gave the order to destroy the German people’s own living conditions” (“*Society Must Be Defended*” 259–60).

In terms of the logic authorizing the exercise of the right to kill, the main difference between what happened in Nazi Germany and modern animal agriculture is that whereas Nazism tried to make the German people live by killing Jews, only to end up trying to *kill the German people*, agriculture undertakes to make human beings live by killing animals but, in order to do so, puts a lot of effort into *making animals live*. Not only are agricultural animals not threats to be exterminated; they are, in the practice of husbandry, actively bred into existence. As much as the agri-

cultural industry makes animals die, it also makes them live, and literally so, by breeding them, the very population that it also kills. Just as animals employed in the agricultural industry do not simply die, but are systematically killed, so we must say that they are not simply born, but are systematically bred. That is to say, neither cattle nor pigs nor poultry reproduce in a way that could fairly be described as spontaneous. Ever since animals were domesticated some twelve thousand years ago—and the first domesticated species was the dog—their reproduction can be said to have been influenced by human beings, even if unintentionally. Over the last two hundred years or so, as I will detail shortly, human regulation of animal sexual reproduction has become much more controlled and consequential to the point that agricultural practices regulate the births of animals as efficiently as their dying. Agriculture is as much an exercise in the highly organized mass breeding of animals as it is an exercise in the highly organized mass killing of animals. If industrial agriculture were simply a thanatopolitical exercise in the mass killing of animals for the benefit of humans, it would be a short-lived enterprise. Modern slaughterhouses, with their high capacity, high efficiency kill rates, would make short work of all existing agricultural animals. Out of necessity, if nothing else, the agricultural industry must be, for want of a better word, pro-life, and the life it sustains, cares for, and fosters is not just human but also animal. Ted Nugent, yet again, expresses the point in his paradox-accentuating clipped style with some ironic advice to environmentalists concerned about the extinction of wild animal species: “If you want to save a species, simply decide to eat it. Then it will be managed—like chickens, like turkeys, like deer, like Canadian geese” (“I have the American Dream licked”). The agricultural industry’s logic is, we could say, the reverse: because it wants to kill animals, and so produce the food that sustains human life, it has to call animals into existence. The result, however, is the same. Every animal labourer the industry kills is one it has already bred. And for every one it kills, it breeds another.

In fact, it is more accurate to say that for every animal it kills, the industry breeds *more than one* new animal. Take poultry, which are globally the most populous type of domesticated animal. In 1961 the world domesticated chicken population was almost four billion. Now it is nineteen billion. The dramatic increase at a rate that is historically unprecedented is not unrelated, of course, to a similar increase in the human population over the same period, from just over three billion to almost seven billion. Yet as these numbers indicate, the agricultural animal population is not just far greater than the human population; it is growing at a

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rate considerably larger than that of the human population. By the year 2050, moreover, the human population is projected to increase to over nine billion. In that same period the global demand for meat and dairy products is projected to double largely because of the westernization of diets in so-called developing countries. The increase in the agricultural animal population this necessitates—largely thanks to the introduction of industrialized factory farm production techniques into said nations—will far outstrip the increase of the global human population. In sum, the already vast population of animals managed by the industrial agricultural industry is growing vaster at a rate that is itself accelerating (“Counting Chickens”). Insofar as the reproduction of agricultural animals through birth is regulated in such a way that, over time, more animals are born than are killed, we can say that industrial animal agriculture is, even as regards the animals themselves that it kills, *more* a project of making live than it is a project of making die.

Such a situation constitutes, I suggest, an oddity for accounts of the death-function of biopolitics offered by Foucault and theorists who have followed him. Consider that Roberto Esposito opens *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* with five examples, drawn from the contemporary period, of the “double tendency” of power to simultaneously, in the same gesture, to make live and to kill. “It is,” he writes, “exactly the same paradox that Michel Foucault, in a series of writings dating back to the middle of the 1970s, examined. Why does a politics of life always risk being reversed into a work of death?” (7–8). We will return to one of Esposito’s examples of this paradox below, but for now I think we can see that insofar as the mass breeding of animals is a constitutive feature of industrial agriculture, then what the husbandry-slaughtering complex presents is a paradox that is a bit more complicated than that which Esposito identifies. For while agriculture is undoubtedly a politics of life that proceeds as a work of death, it also proceeds as what we can call *a work of birth*. And as we shall see, the real perplexity lies in the fact that the work of birth and the work of death are indistinguishable.

The Death of Birth

To examine the work of birth as organized by the husbandry industry, let’s think briefly about the relation between birth and death structuring the predicament of animal species that face extinction. It is well known that agricultural production is one of the leading causes of environmental degradation. According to the widely read 2010 report by the United Nations Environmental Programme, *Assessing the Environmental Impacts*

of *Production and Consumption*, “Agricultural production accounts for a staggering 70% of the global freshwater consumption, 38% of the total land use, and 14% of the world’s greenhouse gas emissions” (2). The same study also highlights the particular impact of animal agriculture, which, no matter how industrialized, “is and will remain an inefficient transformation process compared to most industrial processes”: “Animal products, both meat and dairy, in general require more resources and cause higher emissions than plant-based alternatives.” Looking to the future, it says, “A substantial reduction of impacts would only be possible with a substantial worldwide diet change, away from animal products” (75, 79, 82). Another fact, one hidden in even such statements, emerges when we frame the environmental impact of animal agriculture in terms of animal population sizes: the extraordinary expansion, over the last decades, of the size of already vast standing agricultural animal populations has produced a corresponding decrease in wild animal populations. According to the World Wildlife Fund’s 2012 *Living Planet Index Report*, between 1970 and 2008, exactly the same period over which the global agricultural animal population began to boom, the world’s non-domesticated animal populations, including birds and fish, declined by an average of 30 percent. In many cases entire species have already gone extinct or face imminent extinction. Many biologists agree that we are living through the sixth great mass extinction of life forms in the history of the planet and that many of these extinctions that have occurred in the last two hundred years are directly or indirectly, and even if unintentionally, anthropogenic. In his 2002 book *The Future of Life*, E. O. Wilson, the biologist well known equally for his inventing sociobiology and for his vigorous environmentalism, posited that if the current rate of biodiversity loss continues unabated, one half of the planet’s higher life forms will be extinct by 2100 (23).

Beyond rehearsing what everyone already knows about the loss of biodiversity, however, I want to see what we can learn from one phrase sometimes used to describe species extinction: “the death of birth,” a phrase widely said to originate with Wilson, although I have not been able to track it down in his writings—something perhaps appropriate given that the phrase signifies effacement of origins.¹² In the popular 2003 documentary *The Corporation*, CEO-turned-ecologist Ray Anderson recounts his experience of being struck by the phrase while reading Paul Hawken’s *The Ecology of Commerce*: “very quickly into that book I found the phrase,

¹² A similar phrase appears in Michael Soulé and Brian Wilcox’s *Conservation Biology: An Evolutionary-Ecological Perspective*: “Death is one thing. An end of birth is something else” (8).

‘the death of birth.’ It was E. O. Wilson’s expression for species extinction, ‘the death of birth,’ and it was a point of a spear into my chest, and I read on, and the spear went deeper, and it became an epiphanal experience, a total change of mindset for myself and a change of paradigm” (37). As Anderson’s account of reading suggests, “the death of birth” has a painful poignancy that “species extinction” does not. I encountered this myself when, during a lecture Wilson gave on biodiversity at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in January 2006, I, too, had a near-death reading experience. Projecting a colour photograph of a male golden toad (*Bufo periglenes*), a member of a species indigenous to high-altitude tropical forests in Costa Rica, he explained that the last time a living specimen of this species was seen was in on 15 May 1989, and the species has since been declared extinct by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. I remember being sharply moved, as if physically punched, when he called species extinction “the death of birth” and explained that not only is this particular toad dead, but no more individuals of this species will ever be born in the future.

The pathos that colours attempts to read “the death of birth” registers the way the phrase describes species extinction not as an empirical phenomenon but as an ontological event. A species is often said to become extinct when the last member of that species, the one who has survived the deaths of all conspecifics, dies. Through a synecdochal identification of part and whole, the death of the specimen *is* the death of the population. And indeed, there can be something deeply poignant about images of the last surviving individuals, such as the famous black-and-white film footage, shot in 1933, of the last Tasmanian Tiger, aimlessly pacing back and forth in a cage. But what is any such last surviving individual really a specimen of? If from the moment it is the last, can its singular existence be said, in all rigour, to have the exemplarity of a specimen of a species? The concept of a species as a population that can successfully reproduce, dominant since biologist Ernst Mayr’s formulation, suggests that a species actually becomes extinct when a population is no longer reproductively viable: not when a death, the last death, happens, but when birth does not happen, is no longer able to happen. Species extinction is less about death happening than it is about birth *not* happening, or not happening as much as death happens. Indeed, whatever the particular circumstances and causal factors at work, a species goes extinct when its birthrate is less than its mortality rate. As *Children of Men*-type scenarios demonstrate, it is possible for a species to go extinct without any increase in the mortality rate, even without any killing, as opposed to dying, taking place. Hence

biologists refer to species where several members are still alive but are, for various reasons, incapable of reproducing, as “functionally extinct” (Wilson 37). What renders “the death of birth” a conceit, or extravagant figure of speech, worthy of the renaissance English metaphysical poets, is that it precisely emphasizes that a species goes extinct not when the last individual member of that species departs the world by dying but when the act of entering into the world by birth itself departs the world. Collapsing the distance separating the modes by which mortals enter into the world and depart from it, it sends the light of natality into the darkness of mortality, thus closing the openness of coming-into-being. The paradox is so sharp because what comes to an end is not just a thing but the generative iterability that makes this thing possible in the first place. It is not that the species disappears but that its mode of appearance disappears, not that something ends but that what ends is beginning itself, not that life dies but that birth dies.

Making Live

If endangered animal species face the ontological predicament of the death of birth, then how do we describe the predicament faced by animal populations held in agricultural production facilities? The answer lies in what we can call the “birth-function” of biopolitics. While species facing extinction have no future, this is a problem that agricultural animals will never face, so long as something like current conditions of production persist. Indeed, their problem is that they have a guaranteed future, perhaps too much future. Clearly this is not because of enforced legal or normative interdictions on killing individual agricultural animals. Members of non-agricultural threatened species are (at least in theory) so protected, but the killing of agricultural animals is, as we have seen, an efficiently organized affair that happens on a massive scale: domesticated cows, pigs, and poultry die in numbers that easily outstrip, indeed dwarf, those of any threatened species. (Which makes one ask: Are agricultural animals not also “threatened”?) If agricultural animals have, nevertheless, such a certain future, it is because it is not just their deaths but also their births that are subject to careful biopolitical management. In fact, we could say that animal agriculture turns two important features of the ontology of living creatures to its advantage. On the one hand—and this is easy to grasp—it recognizes that that cows, pigs, and poultry, like all mortal creatures, leave the world by dying and can be made to die. Exploiting this fact, it kills them in great numbers. But it also knows full well that animals, like all natal creatures, enter the world by being born and can be made to be born.

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dies.

Exploiting this fact, it breeds animals in numbers at least equally great. After all, the world's most effective animal breeding programs are found not in the field of wildlife conservation but in the agricultural industry. This is odd to think, given that the animals bred are also the ones killed, but such breeding programs are, nevertheless, so well funded and so successful that conservationist groups working to save dwindling populations of wild animal species can only marvel.

It is at this point that we need to pay attention to an unremarked upon double meaning audible within Foucault's description of biopower's basic operation as the power to "make live" (*faire vivre*). To "make live" can mean to allow, enable, or empower to live, where the action of making organizes the conditions of possibility for living, all the while preserving the activity of the one who actually does the living. However, to "make live" can also be more coercive. To make live can have the effect of compelling or forcing the living to live. I think much work within biopolitical studies, that concerned with normalization, interprets this coerciveness to mean that power often makes human beings live in certain ways, according to particular models or standards. More radically, however, to make live in a coercive sense can also take the form of making something be alive in the first place, by being born.¹³ The practice of breeding that goes on in the wing of industrial agriculture known as husbandry is an example of the biopolitical project of making live in the latter sense. Manipulating reproductive capacities possessed by all living creatures, it refuses agricultural animals the option to not be made to live.

Animal husbandry turns birth into a function of the biopolitical project to make live in two ways, for it *makes animals make other animals live* and it *makes animals live*. The first form of making live is most apparent in the way in which the process of conception is, in the case of many agricultural animal species, so completely managed by technical interventions that animals themselves are not required, not permitted, or not able to sexually copulate. For most of the twelve-thousand-odd year history of animal domestication by human beings, any human influence on animal reproduction was slight and mostly unintentional. However, beginning with the modern Agricultural Revolution human beings have mediated the reproduction of animals in increasingly hands-on ways. In the 1760s Robert Blakewell of Dishley Farm in Leicester conducted influential experiments in selective breeding with sheep, cattle, and horses, most

13 Foucault notes a similar ambiguity in the death-function of biopolitics: "When I say 'killing' [as in "the right to kill"], I obviously do not mean simply murder as such, but also every indirect form of murder" ("*Society Must Be Defended*" 256).

notably in inbreeding (reproductive copulation within the same family) so as to increase the chances that offspring would inherit desired traits, in the case of cattle this being size, form, flesh, and fattening propensity (Carlson). While such recognizably modern husbandry practices transformed the existence of animals as living creatures, they did, nonetheless, require animals to copulate in order to conceive. With the development of assisted reproduction technologies (ARTs) in the first half of twentieth century, however, the impregnation of female animals became possible without copulation. The rationalization of conception through ARTs was first achieved on a truly mass scale in the cattle industry in the United States during the 1970s. Ever since that time the conception of a dairy calf can involve a number of stages:

1. the collection of semen from a carefully chosen breeding bull by means of a manually operated “artificial vagina” or by inserting electrodes in a bull’s rectum to stimulate ejaculation;
2. the extension, sex identification, and sorting of the semen;
3. cryogenic freezing, and storage of the semen in semen tanks;
4. the transportation of the semen via networks capable of stretching across nations, regions, and the globe;
5. the thawing of the semen and artificial insemination of a cow of high genetic quality, in natural or artificially induced estrus, by means of a needleless syringe;
6. the hormonally induced multiplication of eggs (superovulation) in cows;
7. the flushing of the embryos from the cow;
8. the cryogenic freezing the embryos;
9. and the transfer of the embryos into the recipient herd of lower genetic quality in synchronized estrus—two embryos for each to enable twinning.¹⁴

As is clear, the reproductive capacities of all animals involved is rationalized for efficiency. Without ARTs a bull can cover thirty to fifty cows per year. With the use of ARTs, the number of calves one bull can produce is fifty thousand (Clarke 160). Transfer of embryos to the herd of cows allows the high-quality cow to be re-impregnated again as soon as is desired and

14 Adele E. Clarke discusses developments in the theory and practice of reproduction in the agricultural sciences and industry in *Disciplining Reproduction: Modernity, American Life Sciences, and “the Problem of Sex”* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 159–62.

practical. “As in any other area of Fordist manufacture,” Melinda Cooper notes in *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era*, “the aim of these procedures is to increase the production of relative surplus value (in milk and meat) by getting the most out of each unit time of reproductive labor. In line with the standard rules of assembly line production, animal reproductive science seeks to eliminate unproductive (or rather *unreproductive*) time,” the result being that “reproduction is reduced to production” (132–33).¹⁵

It does not feel right to say that such assisted reproductive techniques require human beings to have coercive sex with animals or that modern agricultural husbandry amounts to a program of mass rape by proxy. However, it is remarkably suggestive that such techniques also do not require animals to physically copulate with each other and that any erotic pleasure necessary to get a bull to ejaculate into an artificial vagina is entirely co-ordinated by human beings. Indeed, in many cases the morphological oddities breeding techniques introduce render animals physically incapable of successfully copulating. Given that one of the things the American Christian pro-life movement laments is sex without reproduction, it would be logical to think that the reproduction without sex involved in the artificial reproduction of agricultural animal life can, for them, only be a wet dream. Surely, at this point the difference between violently fucking animals and radically invasive forms of fucking with their fucking becomes a real question.

Breeding is, of course, a process directed at bringing more animals into existence. If the use of these breeding techniques to force animals to conceive is a first step in the process of making live, a final step is forcing animals to be born.¹⁶ The term “forced birth” has been used to describe a practice of compelling pregnant women to bring a fetus to term and deliver it. Forced birth can, for instance, describe the effects of pro-life

¹⁵ The most recent development in agricultural husbandry is the combination of ARTs with techniques of selective breeding oriented by molecular biotechnologies of marker-assisted selection, genomic selection, transgenics (genetic modification), and cloning, although the mass implementation of such new technologies is unevenly developed across cattle, pigs, poultry, and other species. For an in-depth discussion, see Richard Twine, *Animals as Biotechnology*.

¹⁶ Technically such animals as poultry and fish are hatched, not born. However, described from a biopolitical, as opposed to a purely physiological, point of view, differences between viviparous and oviparous ways of entering the world are less important. In what follows, I will, purely for stylistic purposes, use “birth” to refer to both parturition and the process of laying of fertilized eggs that then develop and hatch outside the body.

movements on women's reproductive rights. Whether a woman becomes pregnant freely or forcibly, anti-abortion laws and norms can prevent her from securing an abortion even when she does not freely choose to give birth.¹⁷ I do not think that it detracts from our appreciation of the very real violence to which women are subjected to consider that "forced birth" also describes the manner in which female animals in the agricultural industry have no option but to perform the labour of birth necessary to bring other animals into existence. At the moment of this labour, such animals are *made* to make live. And more than this, the violence implicit in the phrase "forced birth" can also be directed toward those whom the birth makes live, namely, the animals who are born. While Penelope Deutscher points out that treatments of reproductive politics in biopolitical theory focus, for no good reason, on "fetal life" while ignoring "reproductive maternal life," I do want to suggest that agricultural husbandry practices deny animals not just the option to give birth but also the option to not be born.

Of course, in saying that industrialized agriculture forces living creatures to be born might seem to put the horse before the cart, or—perhaps more precisely—to put the horse before the horse, in the sense that it would seem to assume that an animal exists before it exists. This is one of Esposito's criticisms of the French Appeals Court's decision to recognize the right of a baby named Nicolas, born with serious genetic lesions, to sue the doctor who misdiagnosed a case of German measles in his pregnant mother.

What appears to be the legally irresolvable object of controversy in the entire incident is attributing to small Nicolas the right *not* to be born.... The difficulty is both of a logical and an ontological order. If it is also already problematic that a being can invoke his or her right not to be, it is even more difficult to think of a nonbeing (which is precisely who has not yet been born) that claims the right to remain as such, and therefore not to enter into the sphere of being. (3)

17 After several Republican Party candidates in the United States who during the 2012 election cycle publically asserted that women do not have a right to an abortion, even in the case of rape, comedian Jon Stewart responded by summing up the logic at work in such statements: "If a women wants to have a child through IVF, she cannot. If she does not want to have a baby conceived during rape, she *has* to." His comments explicitly characterize the pro-life position as a second form of coercion continuous with that of rape. For our purposes, they also highlight the fact that animals who do not expressly signal their desire to have offspring are, nonetheless, forced, through ARTS, to have them.

In the case of animal agriculture, saying that something that does not exist is forced to exist is indeed a contradiction in terms. And yet it is surely a cop-out to say that animals who have not yet been born (or even conceived) cannot have anything done to them, including be made to be born. The question is political, not strictly metaphysical, and it is undecidable if *any* subject pre-exists its subjection to a power to make live, for, as Judith Butler argues, the interpellative address of power is directed to subjects even as it calls them into life (2). Recognizing the ontological ambivalence of a referent that is the effect, and not simply the source, of the structure of reference allows us to see that subjection is productive of the subject, without effacing all the ways in which power is also, in the same gesture, deductive or subtractive. This holds, I suggest, even when the effect of power's ambivalent interpellation is making live in the sense of forcing something to be born. Consider Adam's apostrophe to God in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, famously excerpted by Mary Shelley on the title page of her novel *Frankenstein*: "Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay / To mould me Man, did I solicit thee / From darkness to promote me?" (x 743–45). Here Adam addresses to God a rhetorical question about if, before he was created, he addressed to God an appeal to be created. In all the prenatal activity by which agricultural husbandry industry, like any expectant author of population policy, prepares for the arrival of newborns, it simultaneously recognizes and denies that it is similarly addressed by animals. Indeed, all its prenatal preparations effectively say to animals who have not been born, "You may *not* not be born."

Let me be clear that, in and of itself, this point has nothing to do with the welfare concerns over the quality of life made available to animals. Animals labouring for the agricultural industry are certainly forced to live in some pretty unpleasant places. Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), for instance, force large numbers of animals—say, seven hundred or more dairy cows, one hundred and twenty-five thousand or more laying hens—in such inventively inhospitable conditions that we should not hesitate to call such life a "slow death," Lauren Berlant's term for a condition in which being worn out and living are indistinguishable. In addition, many animals, thrown by the powerful hand of biotechnological manipulation such as growth hormones, hurtle toward death at an accelerated rate, one far beyond that of their domesticated ancestors or their wild species peers. For example, the lifespan of broiler chickens is standardized for maximum efficiency to six weeks, at which point, having reached what is called their "slaughter weight," any more life would be surplus to the labour the industry requires them to perform. But both unsavoury living

conditions and not having enough life can characterize the existence of creatures only once they are alive. More fundamentally, animal labourers are, through mass breeding, made to live in the first place.

Birth Kills

The account of the mass breeding practices of modern agriculture I have been offering up to this point has served to contest the assumption, widespread in the field of animal studies, that, as the introduction to the appositely titled essay collection *Killing Animals* puts it, killing is the “most extreme” and “ultimate expression of human power over animals” (4). However, the point of doing this has been to prepare us to deepen our appreciation of the genius with which the agricultural industry massacres animals. What happens in slaughterhouses is, to invoke Arendt’s phrasing, “the insane manufacture of corpses,” but this does not mean that what happens in husbandry practices is the opposite, the reasonable calling of living creatures into life. Rather, husbandry’s management of birth makes live creatures that will be killed because they are born already dead. Agriculture might say, “You may *not* not be born,” but that does not amount to saying, “You may live.” For husbandry inscribes onto the births of animals a death that anticipates their being killed in slaughterhouses.

In order to draw toward this conclusion, I want to offer a reading of an event that echoes the futile stories of animal escapes with which I began but this time in the explicit context of sovereignty and the law. Just before American Thanksgiving each year the National Turkey Federation of the United States presents a live turkey to the White House.¹⁸ The tradition began in 1947, but at the presentation ceremony in 1989, George H. W. Bush did something new, something that all presidents ever since have followed suit in doing: he granted the turkey a presidential pardon. The pardoned turkeys have been permitted to live out the rest of their unnatural born lives at a number of places: first the unfortunately named agricultural park Frying Pan Park, then from 2005 to 2009 either Disneyland or Disney World, and since 2010 Mount Washington, George Washington’s Virginia home.

Staged before the national news media, this encounter between the beast and the sovereign, which has become known as the Presidential Turkey Pardon, is a piece of public relations theater performed in the style of a black comedy. The following quip by Barack Obama in 2009 is

¹⁸ Unofficially, two turkeys are presented, one being the official offering, the second being the understudy on hand in case the first gets sick or, as has happened, dies before the event.

a good example of what I mean: “Thanks to the intervention of Malia and Sasha [his children]—because I was ready to eat this sucker—Courage [the name given to the turkey] will ... be spared this terrible and delicious fate” (Slack). Here is an example of the gallows humour with which George W. Bush peppered his speech at the ceremony in 2005: “This is what we call—the White House is called the people’s house, and we’re going to call Marshmallow and Yam the people’s turkeys. They made it here through a democratic process. There was a nationwide election on the White House web site. In the end, the voters made the choice, and it was a close election. You might say it was neck and neck.”

One way of explaining what gives the humour of the Presidential Turkey Pardon its dark quality is the oblique evocation of the annual mass slaughter of turkeys that the president does not pardon—some forty-five million turkeys in the United States for Thanksgiving, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Remember that the group that presents the turkey to the White House each year, the National Turkey Federation, is not, as its name might reasonably suggest, an organization representing the interests of turkeys. It is, as its website, www.eatturkey.com, puts it, a Washington, D.C.-based lobby group “providing services and conducting activities which increase demand for its members’ products”—its members being businesses who breed, raise, and slaughter turkeys for profit. Moreover, up until 1989, the turkeys presented each year to the White House were never pardoned and almost always served up for dinner a few days later.

The performance of the Turkey Pardon in the genre of black comedy can also be explained as a function of the ambivalence of the act of pardoning. To receive a pardon is, for the one being pardoned, undoubtedly a good thing. However, as an exemplary speech act of sovereignty, a pardon mobilizes the sovereign’s defining “right to kill.” In his performance of the role of the forgiving sovereign President Obama attributes his decision to save Courage the turkey to his daughters, thus deftly fulfilling the imperative that the president be masculine, adult, and carnivorous, a supreme example of what Derrida calls the “carno-phallogo-centric” subject (“Eating Well”). Perhaps the best demonstration that the sovereign’s power to pardon, and thus allow to live, co-exists with a right to kill is a photograph showing President Gerald Ford standing over two turkeys placed side by side on a table, one living, the other dead.¹⁹ Whereas in a declaration of

19 That the photograph is from the period when turkeys presented to the White House were not pardoned does not take away from the point here.

a state of exception, the total situation of law is suspended, a pardon suspends only its application on one thing. Nevertheless, the pardon is also an example of the sovereign's ability to suspend law.

But the real source of the wrinkle that occasions the near absurdist dark humour of the Presidential Turkey Pardon, and the true oddness of the kind of pardon being offered, emerges only once we ask, What is the turkey being pardoned for? After all, to pardon is to forgive someone who has committed a crime and to annul the punishment that goes along with conviction. But in this case, everyone knows that no turkey, even the lucky one presented to the president, has committed or could commit a criminal action that we could forgive. Nevertheless, with one exception, turkeys are subject to the annual violence of systematic mass killing. If the mass slaughter of turkeys has no relation to anything that they have *done*, then the unavoidable conclusion is that it can only be a figural reflection of what they, like all agricultural animals, *are*.

What these animals are is, moreover, outside the law in the sense that they are fundamentally rightless. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Hannah Arendt says of those she calls "the rightless," "*Their plight is not that they are not equal before the law, but that no law exists for them; not that they are oppressed but that nobody wants to even oppress them*" (295–96). To say that no law exists for agricultural animals might seem like an exaggeration. Are there not a number of laws that protect the lives of animals? While welfare laws do indeed exist, they are not only radically inconsistent, as Siobhan O'Sullivan has handsomely demonstrated, and even absent where most needed—in the United States agricultural animals are *not* among the animals protected by the Federal Animal Welfare Act—they do not, strictly speaking, exist *for* animals as subjects of legal rights. The obligation to obey animal welfare laws is owed to the state, not to animals. This is why animals do not have standing in the eyes of law, because the law does not recognize animals can be injured by any actions or laws. The position of animals with regard to the law is underscored when we considered whether or not, in their case, it is true, as Arendt says, "The best criterion by which to decide whether someone has been forced outside the pale of the law is to ask if he would benefit by committing a crime.... As criminal even a stateless person will not be treated worse than another criminal, that is, he will be treated like everybody else. Only as an offender against the law can he gain protection from it" (*Origins* 286). The fact that creatures whose mere existence is grounds for being killed, far from being assigned a lawyer to represent them in a court, where the accusation about ontology must be proven, is instead executed without a trial—indeed the fact that the whole

The death of
birth means not
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Presidential Turkey Pardon is a sham cannot be explained by saying that turkeys are *by nature* incapable of being recognized as persons before the law. Rather it demonstrates that turkeys, like all animals, are an example of what Foucault calls the “biocriminal” (“*Society Must Be Defended*” 258). How, he asks, does one justify capital punishment within a governmental paradigm where life is a fundamental value to be fostered? The answer is to “invoke less the enormity of the crime itself than the monstrosity of the criminal, his incorrigibility, and the safeguard of society. One had the right to kill those who represented a kind of biological danger to others” (*History of Sexuality* 138). I have met some pretty nasty turkeys, but no one justifies killing them, or any agricultural animals, by appealing to their threatening nature. This does not mean, however, that we do not appeal to what they irremissibly, irredeemably are. As Cary Wolfe points out, the mass killing of animals is not genocide, in part because it does not aim to eliminate a group of living beings of a certain “biological constitution” (45). Rather, it happens for economic reasons. As Wolfe well understands, however, what happens to animals happens because their biological constitution is rendered as a death sentence.

This is to say that its birth is a death sentence. The pardoned turkey’s crime is—along with all other turkeys—nothing more and nothing less than being born a turkey. In our earlier consideration of the phrase “the death of birth,” we read birth as that which dies. However, as with all genitive phrases, the subject and object can be reversed so as to read it as signifying that birth is something that kills. The death of birth means not just death *over* birth but also death *by* birth. How is this possible? Consider that the reproductivity of the maternal body, particularly the moment of birth, is central to the human rights imaginary. As the first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights reads, “All human beings are *born* and remain equal in dignity and rights” (emphasis added). Industrial agriculture also treats animals as if they are born with an ethical or political significance. It is, however, an inverse one, for it breeds animals in such a way that they are born symbolically dead, equal in absolute rightlessness by which they bear the being killed as a birth right—a right to be killed possessed by humans. It is, after all, almost certain that the life animals begin by being bred will end by being killed. At least within the fantasy world of biopolitics, history, in the sense of contingency, has ended for such animals; they live in the time that remains. Hence, their birth is best thought of, not as a presencing but as an absencing or, more accurately, as a presencing that absents, as an arrival in the form of a departure, an addition that achieves a subtraction or a loss. In *The Fall of Hyperion*

John Keats compared the mortal Apollo's rebirth as the god of poetry to a moment when

one who should take leave
Of pale immortal death, and with a pang
As hot as death's is chill, with fierce convulse
Die into life (III 127–30)

Agricultural animals are, by contrast, those who are born into death. Not just born for death, as all mortals are, but born in such a way that the result is not life, but death. To put it sharply, industrialized agriculture organizes the births of animals in such a way as to make them a form of dying.

Let me conclude by turning to a passage that I suspect many readers may have had in mind while reading this essay. In *The Animal That Therefore I Am* Derrida observes that in agriculture and elsewhere animal life is being destroyed on such a massive scale that it calls to be regarded as genocide. Yet he also says that the massacre of animal life, if it is a genocide, would be an odd kind of genocide:

[T]he annihilation of certain species is indeed in process, but it is occurring through the organization and exploitation of an artificial, infernal, virtually interminable survival, in conditions that previous generations would have judged monstrous, outside of every presumed norm of a life proper to animals that are thus exterminated by means of their continued existence or overpopulation. As if, for example, instead of throwing a people into ovens and gas chambers (let's say Nazi) doctors and geneticists had decided to organize the overproduction and overgeneration of Jews, gypsies, and homosexuals by means of artificial insemination, so that, being continually more numerous and better fed, they could be destined in always increasing numbers for the same hell, that of the imposition of genetic experimentation, or extermination by gas or fire. In the same abattoirs. (*The Animal* 26)

The first reason why the mass killing of animals does not look like genocide is that, as Cary Wolfe emphasizes in his reading of this passage, the acts of killing cannot amount to an extermination, because the acts of breeding that accompany them make the job of killing an infinite one. Extermination is just not extermination if it is deliberately interminable (45).²⁰ The second

²⁰ Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello also voices the point about interminability: "Let me say it openly: we are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty, and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed

reason, one that evokes the argument I have been making, is that animals are killed not just through traditional means, such as slaughterhouses, but through the inventive one of a systematic program of breeding. I think Derrida overstates the case a bit when he implies that agriculture breeds animals “so that” it can kill them. Could one also not say it kills them so that it can breed them? The real point, and one that I think his hyperbole is calculated to make, is that in such circumstances it is incredibly difficult to distinguish an act of giving life from an act taking life. In this respect, agriculture would amount to an unusual program of genocide by forced birth. “Whereas the Nazis and all their imitators carried out genocide by preemptively destroying birth,” writes Esposito, “those of today do so through forced birth” (7).²¹ For instance, the rape of Tutsi women and girls by Hutu men and boys was intended to issue in children who were Hutu. Thus the Tutsi, whose lives were, from the point of view of the Hutu, not worth living, would be bred out of existence and replaced by Hutu children whose lives *were* worth living. The forced birth in animal agriculture is different, not just insofar as it does not involve any crossing of different populations but more importantly insofar as it is not intended to produce offspring whose lives are, *unlike* their mothers, worthy of living. It is intended to produce living creatures whose lives are, exactly like their mothers, unworthy of living. Thus it is different from both Nazi and Hutu genocidal rape, which attempt to make live through the death of the certain parts of the population. In animal agriculture making live and making die converge in a more acute way, for these projects are exercised on the same population. As a spokesman for the Disney Company, at whose parks the turkeys pardoned by presidents between 2005 and 2009 were sent to live, said in explaining why the turkeys died so quickly after arriving, “They’re not bred to live a long time. These turkeys are bred for Thanksgiving” (Greenwood).

dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without end, self-regenerating, bringing rabbits, rats, poultry, livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them” (22).

²¹ Catherine Mackinnon notes that the same strategy was also pursued in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In an unnerving present tense, she writes, “In genocide, it is more usual for the babies on the other side to be killed. Croatian and Muslim women are raped, and then denied abortions, to help make a Serbian state by making Serbian babies” (191).

Acknowledgements

I want to thank the organizers and participants of two events at which early versions of this article were presented: the Sawyer Seminar, Biopolitics: Life in Past and Present, hosted by the Center for Humanities at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in April 2012; and Epistemologien des Untöten, a conference organized by the Graduiertenkolleg Lebensformen und Lebenswissen, at the University of Potsdam and the Europa University Viadrina, Frankfurt an der Oder, Germany, in June 2012. I owe a special thanks to John Ackermann for his careful commentary. And thank you also to Cassia Gammill for timely research assistance at the end.

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