

# Cannibalistic Capitalism in Agustina Bazterrica's *Tender Is the Flesh*

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**Abstract:** This article examines Agustina Bazterrica's *Tender Is the Flesh* as a dystopian allegory that challenges speciesist hierarchies and re-conceptualizes relationality within contemporary systems of consumption, commodification, and social transformation. The novel presents a post-apocalyptic world where a virus has supposedly contaminated all animal meat, leading to the normalization of breeding and consuming humans, known as "heads". The analysis first connects Bazterrica's grotesque vision to broader critiques of capitalism, arguing that the novel literalizes Nancy Fraser's concept of cannibal capitalism, a system that devours its own social and ecological foundations. This aligns with Jason W. Moore's notion of the Capitalocene, which frames capitalism as a system that devalues nature, labor, and life itself into expendable resources. The article then highlights how the society presented in the novel employs a chilling bureaucratic and linguistic system to render human beings as mere commodities, a process representing the mechanisms of denial inherent in a carnistic ideology. Through its exploration of linguistic sanitization and bodily mutilation, the novel exposes how violence is normalized when it is made morally and economically convenient. The article further argues that this manipulation of the human-animal division is a powerful tool of control, reinforcing societal hierarchies and reflecting historical instances where power dynamics dictated who was deemed fully human. The protagonist's internal struggle with the treatment of "heads" reflects how individual morality and consciousness can endure against systemic dehumanization. The article analyzes this by referring to Rosi Braidotti's perspective on biopolitical control, where advanced capitalism penetrates life on a biological level, turning the genetic code of living matter into a form of capital. Ultimately, the novel compels a posthuman reading, challenging human exceptionalism and revealing a shared vulnerability among all organic beings within an exploitative system.

**Keywords:** Agustina Bazterrica, *Tender Is the Flesh*, cannibalism, capitalism, biopolitics

## Introduction

*Tender Is the Flesh* by Argentine author Agustina Bazterrica depicts a dystopian reality where, supposedly, a virus has rendered animal meat toxic, resulting in the legalization and industrialization of human slaughter. The normalization of cannibalism in the society of the future makes the reader confront the ethical implications of human consumption habits and the existing divisions between human and nonhuman animals. The story follows Marcos Tejo, a man separated from his wife after the death of their son, who works in the human meat processing industry. Living in this gruesome reality challenges Marcos, who believes he is one of the last sane persons on Earth.

Critically, *Tender Is the Flesh* does not depict a societal collapse or a post-apocalyptic wasteland, but rather a terrifyingly stable social order, swiftly functioning despite what the reader may perceive as moral deterioration of the society. The government, media, and economy are fully operational, although they function under entirely different rules centered around human trafficking and cannibalism. This stability reinforces the novel's dystopian critique: the system did not break down; it adapted by discarding its morality. The horror of Bazterrica's world stems from its orderliness – the legality of the slaughter of humans, the regulations on breeding, and the normalization of the meat processing industry – demonstrating that capitalism can survive, and even thrive, by normalizing the unthinkable.

While the novel's imagery is grotesque, beneath the horror lies a complex allegory about language, dehumanization, and profit. This article argues that *Tender Is the Flesh*, as a work of dystopian literature, provides a gruesome reflection on the violence of late-stage capitalism, the invisible mechanisms of industrial animal agriculture, and the fragility of moral boundaries. The analysis draws on Nancy Fraser's concept of cannibal capitalism, Jason W. Moore's notion of the Capitalocene, Melanie Joy's discussion of carnism, and Rosi Braidotti's critique of biopolitics. Based on these concepts, the article demonstrates how the novel exposes the decline of humanity and reveals the unsettling consequences of a market-driven ethic rather than simply serving as a cautionary tale. Ultimately, the book compels a posthuman reading, challenging human exceptionalism and revealing how the logic of commodification reduces all living beings – human and animal alike – to exploitable biological matter.

## Capitalism, Cannibalism, and the Capitalocene

Bazterrica's novel presents a world where the functioning of capitalism is secured by cannibalism. Capitalism is often defined narrowly as an economic system based on private property, market exchange, wage labor, and the pursuit of profit. However, Nancy Fraser (2022) argues that such a definition obscures the broader societal dynamics that sustain it. Rather than merely an economy, capitalism functions as a societal order that authorizes a profit-driven sector to accumulate wealth by extracting and exploiting values and relations that are not formally monetized, including natural resources, public goods, and the labor, creativity, and care work of people—essential foundations for capitalist accumulation that remain undervalued or entirely unaccounted for (Fraser 2022, xv). By systematically converting collectively produced and ecological wealth into private profit, capitalist societies depend on ongoing extraction from both human and nonhuman systems while rarely replenishing or sustaining them. This structural dynamic, Fraser contends, renders capitalism inherently unstable, producing recurring crises and gradually eroding the social and ecological conditions necessary for its continued operation (2022, xv).

Fraser offers a framework for comprehending cannibalism in *Cannibal Capitalism* (2022), where she differentiates between two interconnected interpretations of the concept.

'Cannibalism' has several meanings. The most familiar, and the most concrete, is the ritual eating of human flesh by a human being. [...] But the term also has a more abstract meaning, which captures a deeper truth about our society. The verb 'to cannibalize' means to deprive one facility or enterprise of an essential element of its functioning for the purpose of sustaining another one. That, we'll see, is a fair approximation of the relation of capitalism's economy to the system's non-economic precincts: to the families and communities, habitats and ecosystems, state capacities and public powers whose substance its economy consumes to engorge itself. (Fraser 2022, xii-xiv)

By framing capitalism as cannibalistic, Fraser exposes a social system that devours its own foundations: democracy, care, ecosystems, and the very forms of life it depends upon. Moreover, she stresses that this cannibalistic logic not

only generates class struggle but also a wide array of boundary conflicts at the intersections of production and reproduction, exploitation and expropriation, and ecological crisis (Fraser 2022, xvii). As she writes, cannibal capitalism incites “conflicts over care, both public and private, paid and unpaid, [...] over ‘race’, migration, and empire, [...] and over land and energy, flora and fauna, the fate of the earth” (Fraser 2022, xvii).

It is crucial to note that Fraser explicitly redefines capitalism not merely as an economic system, but as a broader “societal order” (2022, xiv). She argues that this order is designed to empower a profit-driven economy to “prey on the extra-economic supports it needs to function” – specifically, the wealth expropriated from nature and subject peoples (Fraser 2022, xiv). While recognizing that the term “cannibalism” carries a significant historical burden, often used in a racially charged context relating to the exploitation of Black Africans by European imperial forces, Fraser uses the term to describe structural violence (2022, xiv). In this context, society essentially permits the corporate sector to accumulate financial wealth while exploiting the unmonetized assets of the general population. Fraser indicates that this system offers shared resources “on a platter” to investors, encouraging them “to exploit creative capacities and the natural environment that sustains life, without any obligation to replenish what they consume” (2022, xiv). This depiction of the earth being consumed as a “meal” provides the critical theoretical bridge to Jason W. Moore’s concept of the Capitalocene.

Moore’s critique of capitalism is expressed in his theorization of the Capitalocene, which he proposes as the name for contemporary times, highlighting the role of the economic system leading to ecological disaster. He emphasizes that Capitalocene should be understood in terms of its specific historical and ecological relations, rather than as a generalized feature of humanity, as capitalism organizes society through its metabolic interactions with webs of life, in which human labor itself functions as a “natural force” (2022: 155). As Moore argues, “The Capitalocene signifies capitalism as a way of organizing nature – as a multispecies, situated, capitalist world-ecology” (2016, 6). This world-ecology rests on the destructive accumulation strategy of Cheap Nature.

For capitalism, Nature is “cheap” in a double sense: to make Nature’s elements “cheap” in price; and also to cheapen, to degrade or to render inferior in an ethico-political sense, the better to make Nature cheap in price. (Moore 2016, 2–3)

In this view, capitalism thrives by degrading and devaluing nature, labor, and life itself, reducing them to expendable resources. As a result, human life is similarly treated as cheap and expendable (Moore 2016, 11), and is ethically devalued. Moore is blunt in his comment, "The first thing I wish to say is that Capitalocene is an ugly word for an ugly system" (2016, 5).

Rosi Braidotti offers a similarly critical perspective in *The Posthuman* (2013), stressing the bio-genetic dimensions of global capitalism:

Advanced capitalism and its bio-genetic technologies engender a perverse form of the posthuman. At its core there is a radical disruption of the human-animal interaction, but all living species are caught in the spinning machine of the global economy. The genetic code of living matter [...] is the main capital. (Braidotti 2013, 7)

In this sense, the global economy penetrates deeply into the biological aspects of life, reaching into the very processes of life itself, and produces a condition in which ethical, ecological, and social boundaries are continually reconfigured by market-driven forces. Moreover, Braidotti highlights the political and ethical implications of this transformation: this "perverse form of the posthuman" is not simply a theoretical abstraction, but a lived reality in which power, capital, and technological intervention intersect to restate what it means to be human. In this regime, life itself becomes both a site of production and a commodity, and traditional distinctions between nature, culture, and society are destabilized, while the relations between humans and other animals are fundamentally unsettled. In *Tender Is the Flesh*, the feeling of disconnect is clearly shown through the government's influence on people's fears. Citizens are forced to avoid any contact with living animals, seeing even harmless birds as potential sources of disease.

This radical restructuring of the living world introduces a form of relativity into ethical, ecological, and social frameworks: the value and meaning of life, labor, and nature are constantly recalibrated according to capitalist imperatives, rather than fixed or universal norms. By framing the genetic code as capital, advanced capitalism enacts a form of biopolitical control that extends beyond labor exploitation to the management and commodification of life processes. Such a point of view underscores how contemporary capitalism is not only a socio-economic system but a multifaceted force that can reshape ecological, social, and biological relations in ways that have deep consequences for life ethics.

Taken together, these critiques by Fraser, Moore, and Braidotti illustrate how capitalism operates in a cannibalistic way: it consumes not only resources and labor but also cultures, ecosystems, and the very life processes upon which it relies. Cannibalism is thus not merely a metaphor, but an accurate description of a system that devours its own conditions of survival.

*Tender Is the Flesh* by Bazterrica can be interpreted as a dystopian allegory reflecting the hidden reality of the Capitalocene. The novel literalizes Fraser's insight that capitalism feeds on the non-economic foundations of life, depicts Moore's "cheapening" of nature through the commodification of humans themselves, and dramatizes Braidotti's claim that living matter turns into capital. In Bazterrica's world, human beings become the ultimate cheap resource, confirming that cannibalism is not simply an aberration but the logical endpoint of capitalism's world-ecology.

### **Dehumanization, Carnism, and the Sanitization of Violence**

At the core of *Tender Is the Flesh* is not the act of cannibalism itself, but the chilling bureaucratic and linguistic systems that make it possible. Bazterrica presents how the new society has constructed a reality where the human "product" is stripped of personhood. This process aligns directly with Melanie Joy's concept of "carnism."

Carnism is the belief system that conditions us to eat certain animals. We sometimes think of those who eat animals as carnivores. But carnivores are, by definition, animals that are dependent on meat to survive. Those who consume animals are also not merely omnivores. [...] Both "carnivore," "omnivore" are terms that describe one's biological constitution, not one's philosophical choice. In much of the world today people eat animals not because they need to, but because they choose to, and choices always stem from beliefs. (Joy 2020, 47)

Joy argues that carnism is an oppressive ideology, much like racism or sexism, which uses a set of psychological defense mechanisms to prevent people from becoming aware of the violence inherent in the system of industrialized slaughter (2020, 47–48).

The society presented in *Tender Is the Flesh* employs the carnistic mechanism with ruthless efficiency. Humans bred for consumption are no longer referred to as people but as "special meat" and "heads." This linguistic manipulation serves

as the primary defense mechanism of denial, allowing the consumer to bypass the moral implications of their actions. The victims of this system are rendered invisible, much like the farmed animals who are kept out of sight and public consciousness. This dynamic illustrates Joy's theoretical insight that denial is crucial for maintaining the system: if the victims remain unnamed and out of sight, their suffering cannot challenge the ideology (2020, 50).

To maintain the illusion of legitimacy, the meat processing industry relies on a strict system of categorization that mirrors the grading of high-end livestock. The state intervention here is linguistic as well as economic: "The government [...] decided to resignify the product. [...] Instead of just 'meat', now there's 'special tenderloin', 'special cutlets', 'special kidneys'" (Bazterrica 2017, 8). This redefinition surpasses simple euphemisms and creates a value hierarchy rooted in biological exploitation, while masking the operations of power. The heads are divided into classes, such as "First Generation Pure", which indicates that they have not undergone genetic modification or received injections to speed up their growth (Bazterrica 2017, 15). Moreover, the market assigns premium prices to specific physiological states, for example, turning reproductive functions into luxury commodities. This is evident when a client discusses his order with Marcos, willing to pay a premium for cruelty: "Impregnated females cost three times as much. From four months on, the cost goes up further" (Bazterrica 2017, 106). The commodification extends even to bodily fluids, with niche demands for "blood from pregnant females" and "special" milk (Bazterrica 2017, 18).

Yet, this capitalization of life is not limited to the "premium" sector; it ruthlessly exploits the vulnerable at the bottom of the hierarchy as well. Just as the market creates luxury tiers, it also establishes a "bargain" economy for the disenfranchised. Marcos notes that: "It's known that in public nursing homes, when the majority of seniors die, or are left to die, they're sold on the black market. It's the cheapest meat money can buy because it's dry and diseased, full of pharmaceuticals" (Bazterrica 2017, 37). The horror lies in the fact that this is "meat with a first and last name" (Bazterrica 2017, 37). This stark contrast between the "special meat" and the diseased flesh of the elderly illustrates how the market replicates social stratification. Even in death, the poor and the aged are commodified, proving that in this system, no human life is too sacred or too degraded to be extracted for value.

In the novel, one significant physical modification that differentiates heads from socialized humans is the removal of their vocal cords, among other alterations. While ostensibly done to protect slaughterhouse workers from the trauma

of constant screams, this mutilation has a deeper ideological purpose. If language is understood as the defining characteristic of the human subject, taking away the ability to speak, sing, or scream turns people into objects and reduces them to mere commodities. This process of objectification is further reinforced through the mechanized slaughter and the linguistic detachment used to describe the victims. As Marcos, the protagonist, reflects, "There are words that are convenient, hygienic. Legal" (Bazterrica 2017, 5). Accordingly, by discursively framing humans as "special meat," society distances itself from the moral implications of its actions, which illustrates a profound loss of empathy.

Objectifying language can serve as a powerful distancing mechanism. Nevertheless, the moral burden can sometimes override systemic norms. The protagonist, Marcos, embodies this internal conflict. Initially numb to the horrors around him, Marcos represents the average citizen's complicity in this dystopian world. However, his internal struggle becomes clear as he grapples with the ethical implications of his work at the processing plant. His interactions with a female head, whom he begins to see as human and even gives a name, Jasmine, challenge his apparent desensitization. This relationship underscores the novel's exploration of how systemic dehumanization can impact, but not always mute, individual morality and consciousness.

### **The (Bio)Politics of Fear**

The dystopian world Bazterrica creates is a vivid depiction of moral crisis and corruption. The government and corporate entities play crucial roles in maintaining and perpetuating the meat industry, illustrating the novel's critique of power structures that prioritize profit over ethical considerations. This society's acceptance of cannibalism is enabled by propaganda, strict laws, and a culture of fear, resembling real-world instances where authoritarian regimes and corporate greed result in societal decay. Marcos himself believes that legalized cannibalism is likely to be the government's way of reducing the problem of global overpopulation and lack of resources. However, whenever a well-known biologist or activist tries to speak publicly about it, they are silenced. In the presented world, the system exerts absolute control over the public narrative, effectively obscuring the potential political manipulation behind the cannibalistic reality.

The governmental control relies heavily on the strategic manufacturing of fear. Throughout the novel, Bazterrica plants seeds of doubt regarding the

existence of the virus, suggesting it may be a “lie invented by global powers” (Bazterrica 2017, 86) to legitimize a new economic order. Marcos constantly suspects that the prohibition on animal meat is a form of social engineering rather than a sanitary necessity. He recalls the trauma of slaughtering his own dogs, Pugliese and Koko, not because they were sick, but because “keeping them could have been much worse” due to the threat of punishment from the authorities (Bazterrica 2017, 86).

The absurdity of this state-sanctioned paranoia is most clearly illustrated through the use of umbrellas. In a conversation with his sister, Marisa, Marcos challenges her belief that she needs an umbrella to protect herself from direct contact with birds, which the government claims are dangerous. When Marisa insists that “everyone uses an umbrella” because “it’s only logical,” Marcos counters with a critique of the economic system: “Have you ever stopped to think that maybe the umbrella industry saw an opportunity and the government got in on it?” (Bazterrica 2017, 73). This exchange encapsulates the novel’s logic: the government invents a fatal threat, creates a consumer need, and brands any skepticism as madness. Just as the umbrella industry profits from the fear of birds, the “special meat” industry benefits from the fear of the virus, which can suggest that in Bazterrica’s world, “truth” equals whatever generates the most capital.

The system presented in *Tender Is the Flesh* could function as a case study in biopolitics. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s ideas, the administration of “life” itself can be understood as a new form of power (1978, 139). This perspective highlights how modern governance and societal structures regulate and influence individuals’ lives, encompassing aspects such as health, sexuality, and population management. Scholars such as Rick Elmore have stressed that biopolitics cannot be understood apart from the material demands of capitalism. In elaborating this point, Elmore draws on Foucault’s own analysis to show how capitalist development was made possible through the regulation of bodies and populations. His reading emphasizes that biopower was not a peripheral phenomenon but a central condition for industrialization and economic growth:

It is only through biopolitical control that productive forces of populations could be mobilised on the scale demanded by capitalism and industrialisation: Capitalism “would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomenon of population

to economic processes”, as well as the forms of “docility” and “methods of power capable of optimising forces, aptitudes, and life.” (Elmore 2022, 82)

In Bazterrica’s world, biopolitical power manifests as a surveillance state that regulates not only the products for consumption and classes of workers but also the everyday activities of the citizens. The government maintains order through a modern Panopticon, where the boundary between public legality and private behavior is obliterated. As one character cynically notes, the virus narrative is merely a tool for social engineering: “Can’t you see they’re controlling us? If we eat each other, they control overpopulation, poverty, crime” (Bazterrica 2017, 117).

The authorities’ control extends into the domestic sphere, stripping citizens of privacy and autonomy under the guise of regulation. The state enforces strict laws that dictate how individuals must interact with domestic heads, and any deviation is met with punishment. This is illustrated by the regulations surrounding private homes, where the government utilizes special teams to inspect for evidence of “proscribed enjoyment” (Bazterrica 2017, 118). In one instance, an owner is found to have violated the bureaucratic protocols regarding the use of his “property,” that is, his female head; he is not fined or reprimanded, but instantly “sentenced and sent directly to the Municipal Slaughterhouse” (Bazterrica 2017, 118). This highlights the harsh reality: a citizen’s life is at risk the moment they stray outside the strict boundaries set by the state.

The biopolitical regime further exerts its authority by dismantling the cultural rituals that typically define human society, such as the mourning of the dead. The government has abolished the right to burial, reducing the citizens’ connection to their history and to each other. In the society created by Bazterrica, funerals are not held because “it’s very difficult to ensure that a body isn’t disinterred and eaten” (2017, 37). By removing cemeteries and mandating the disposal of bodies, the state removes the final private space of death from the family, ensuring that no aspect of human existence remains outside its control.

Surprisingly, the totalizing control over life and death has even affected the realm of spirituality, integrating organized religion into the logic of the slaughterhouse. At the intersection of faith and bureaucracy, the “Church of the Immolation” offers a legal path for individuals who choose to voluntarily enter the meat market and donate their body to the processing plant. This arrangement exists not out of respect for religious freedom, but because it addresses a logistical issue: the

legitimization of cannibalism. The process is defined by the same clinical detachment as the processing plant; the sacrifice requires papers “stamped and certified by a notary” and a medical exam to ensure the “protein value” of the volunteer (Bazterrica 2017, 96). The state tolerates this because, in exchange for tax breaks, the processing plants handle the “grim ordeal” of disposing of these bodies (Bazterrica 2017, 97). In the novel, religion becomes another administrative branch of the meat industry, processing human bodies under the guise of a religious act, while ultimately serving the economic necessity of waste disposal.

Ultimately, *Tender Is the Flesh* is a critical engagement with the theoretical underpinnings of biopolitics. By blurring the boundary between citizen and commodity, Bazterrica forces the reader to confront how power is wielded to define and control populations and suggests that the exploitation of people is not a flaw of the system but is, in fact, integral to its very functioning. The biopolitical machine presented in the novel not only regulates the “stock” but also reconfigures the entire social order, turning religion, law, and even death into mechanisms of state control.

### **Sovereign Violence and the Production of Bare Life**

In *Tender Is the Flesh*, the heads are stripped of all legal and moral standing, becoming an example of what Giorgio Agamben calls bare life—a life exposed to sovereign violence that can be killed but not sacrificed; a life that is “included in politics in the form of the exception, that is, as something that is included solely through an exclusion” (Agamben 1998, 13). By being designated as bare life, the heads are brought under the full control of a sovereign power that can kill them without committing homicide or celebrating a sacrifice, a power that is at the heart of the state of exception. The existence of the heads becomes the basis for the biopolitical system of consumption.

In the context of social norms, the world created by Bazterrica underscores the fluidity of the border between human and non-human animals, mirroring historical instances where power dynamics dictated who was deemed fully human. As Kirsten Guest explains, cannibalism has been employed in colonial discourse to dehumanize the colonized, and thus to justify exploitation and violence (2001, 2). Similarly, the redrawing of the boundary between person and meat-animal in Bazterrica's novel highlights that “that line is and has been moveable” (Castle 2021, 24).

The historical continuity of the colonial past is vividly captured in the character of Urlet, a wealthy game reserve owner, where the distinction between humans and other animals collapses. In his trophy room, Urlet displays human heads alongside “classic photographs of black people being hunted in Africa” (Bazterrica 2017, 104). This juxtaposition aligns with Rob Nixon’s analysis of the imperial “ethos of killing as an ennobling sport” (2011, 189). Urlet’s estate functions as what Anne McClintock terms an “anachronistic space”, a place where the violence of the past is preserved for aesthetic pleasure (Nixon 2011, 181). However, the novel expands this logic of commodification beyond race to include pure economic worth. Urlet reveals a program where debtors, including well-known figures, are hunted to settle their accounts. As he notes, the consumers are “willing to do atrocious things... Like hunting someone who’s famous and eating them” (Bazterrica 2017, 107). The scene when Marcos witnesses the slaughter of a famous rock star who is deemed the “best catch” (Bazterrica 2017, 108) confirms that in this society, human life, just like in the colonial times, is reduced to its market value.

Society’s acceptance of cannibalism is not only a method of resource management but also a powerful tool of control, which reinforces societal hierarchies and justifies atrocities under the guise of necessity. This manipulation of the human-animal divide is a profound example of the logic of exclusion, which is at the heart of biopolitical theory (Elmore 2022, 81). By defining who counts as a subject worthy of protection, the society in *Tender Is the Flesh* simultaneously creates a sphere of life that falls beyond the boundaries of law and ethics.

The logic of exclusion is also central to the works of Jacques Derrida, whose concept of sovereignty, as Elmore argues, is fundamentally biopolitical. While Foucault’s biopolitics focuses on the management of life within a population, Derrida’s analysis reveals how the sovereign act itself – the very founding of a political community and its laws – relies on an initial act of violence that posits a boundary between those who are included and those who are excluded. It might be argued that, according to Derrida, “every decision, every marking of a border, concept, and category is a marking of exclusion, a biopolitical decision” (Elmore 2022, 89). A deconstructive analysis shows that “the sovereign cut is more than a logical and quasi-transcendental demarcating of limits and conditions of possibility” and demonstrates “that sovereignty is a bio-decision and the deconstructive critique of sovereignty a biopolitical critique” (Elmore 2022, 89).

The societal “Transition” in *Tender Is the Flesh* is precisely this type of sovereign violence: a radical restructuring of legal and ethical norms in which

the state redefines what forms of life may be killed and consumed. After the outbreak of a virus that supposedly made all animal meat deadly to humans, governments banned traditional slaughter and established a new consumption regime focused on human bodies. What might otherwise appear as an unthinkable rupture is made socially tolerable through profound manipulation: a system of euphemisms, terminology, and clinical detachment that reframes killing as routine and consumption as necessity:

Many people have naturalized what the media insist on calling the "Transition". But [Marcos] hasn't because he knows that transition is a word that doesn't convey how quick and ruthless the process was. One word to sum up and classify the unfathomable. An empty word. Change, transformation, shift: synonyms that appear to mean the same thing, though the choice of one over the other speaks to a distinct view of the world. They've all naturalized cannibalism, he thinks. (Bazterrica 2017, 6)

The new laws are not merely an administrative shift; they are a founding act that legally and morally reclassifies a segment of the population, thereby justifying their subjection to industrial violence. This perspective illuminates how sovereignty and biopolitics are linked through a shared reliance on the exclusion of life to re-constitute the political subject and the political sphere.

While the Transition is publicly framed as a sanitary necessity caused by the virus that makes animal meat inedible, the novel reveals it to be a calculated capitalist restructuring. The dehumanization of heads is not only a linguistic defense mechanism for the individual consumer but also a deliberate corporate strategy to maintain the profitability of the meat industry in the face of seemingly ecological, but deeply economic, emergency. By redefining a subset of humanity as "special meat", the elite class successfully converts a crisis of accumulation into a new frontier for profit. This aligns with Fraser's argument that capitalism must cannibalize its social foundations to survive (2022, 15); here, the industry literally consumes the bodies of the vulnerable to sustain the market. Crucially, the meat processing industry did not just endure the extinction of animal livestock, but it took advantage of the situation to create a whole new demand among consumers. Marcos played a key role in facilitating this shift by adapting his technical expertise in animal slaughter

to the processing of heads and the creation of new rules, ultimately being tormented by the very system he helped to standardize.

By blurring the line between human and animal, Bazterrica forces the reader to confront how power is wielded to define and control populations and reveals that the exploitation of the marginalized is not a flaw of the system but is, in fact, integral to its very functioning.

### **Social Contract and Morality**

Social contract theory explores the implicit agreements that allow individuals to live together in a structured, cooperative society (Wright 2001, 18). While personal consent might seem sufficient to justify individual actions, philosophers like Thomas Hobbes caution that society depends on shared rules to prevent violence, chaos, and moral collapse. Hobbes famously warned, “Covenants, without the sword, are but words, and of no strength to secure a man at all” (1651, 124), emphasizing that agreements between people require enforceable structures to maintain order. Even in extreme cases, such as consensual cannibalism, the social contract reminds us that some acts, while privately agreed upon, may threaten the stability, safety, and moral fabric of the community. By prioritizing collective security and trust, social contract theory underscores that the freedoms of individuals must be balanced against the needs of society to function as a cohesive, civilized whole.

*Tender Is the Flesh* illustrates the consequences of the collapse of the ethical boundaries within the social contract. In a society where cannibalism is legalized and normalized, trust diminishes, and relationships become superficial and focused on transactions. The government enforces strict regulations to suppress opposition. However, even in the “perfect” society where people treat cannibalism like a form of social contract, there are individuals who cannot afford to buy meat. These marginalized figures, known as Scavengers, exist outside the formal economy and the sanitary laws of the Transition. They reside in a separate sector because people would risk being killed in broad daylight if the Scavengers were free. Marcos explains that “[t]he craving for meat is dangerous” (Bazterrica 2017, 48), to the point where human beings become monsters. The difference between the Scavengers and heads is minimal, yet they are still seen as a part of society. This ubiquity of regulation and exploitation mirrors past and present instances of societal decay, from authoritarian regimes to systemic deprivation.

Although Scavengers are often mocked as deranged societal misfits, they are simply engaging in what others do in secret. Even Marcos' sister fantasizes about practicing a new secret culinary trend: "There are people [...] who eat their domestic head alive, part by part. They say the meat tastes better, claim it's really fresh" (Bazterrica 2017, 35). There are even special guides explaining how to cut the meat so that the head does not die too early. This reveals a disturbing double standard: cruelty toward the "special meat" humans is permissible in private, but becomes unacceptable once it is exposed. However, ironically, slavery is prohibited. As Marcos recalls, when news about a family training their heads to be slaves spread across the country, the press reported the case as horrific because "[s]lavery is barbaric" (Bazterrica 2017, 36).

At the same time, *Tender Is the Flesh* can be read as a critique of anthropocentrism and the speciesist logic that underlies it. The novel emphasizes the arbitrariness of the boundaries that separate humans from other animals, demonstrating how easily these lines can be redrawn when convenient. By presenting a society that transforms humans into livestock, Bazterrica highlights the superficial nature of the distinction that has long justified the domination over nonhuman life. This underscores the way in which categories of "human" and "animal" are historically relative and socially constructed. As Timothy Clark observes, writing about the present ecological crisis, "the essential problem is anthropocentrism, the almost all-pervading assumption that it is only in relation to human beings that anything else has value" (2011, 2). Bazterrica's dystopia ironizes this logic by subjecting humans themselves to the reductive status traditionally reserved for animals, suggesting that the presumed superiority of the human species rests on unstable and ethically questionable grounds. This reversal also resonates with colonial histories in which the dehumanization of indigenous peoples was justified through comparisons to animals, making the novel's anthropocentric critique a darkly ironic commentary on the entanglements of speciesism and colonialism. Against this destructive logic, Clark outlines the possibility of a biocentric alternative: "All human actions should be guided by a sense of what is good for the biosphere as a whole. Such a biocentrism would affirm the intrinsic value of all natural life and displace the current preference of even the most trivial human demands over the needs of other species or integrity of place" (2011, 2). By dramatizing the collapse of human exceptionalism, *Tender Is the Flesh* pushes toward this biocentric perspective, in which the value of life is not measured solely in relation to human interests but recognized as intrinsic across species.

## Conclusion

*Tender Is the Flesh* by Agustina Bazterrica is an example of dystopian literature, a genre that serves as a vehicle for social critique by extrapolating present-day societal trends to their most extreme and disturbing conclusions. This critical function is a hallmark of the genre itself. As M. Keith Booker argues in *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature* (1994), dystopian narratives operate by exaggerating and distorting contemporary societal norms, political ideologies, and technological advancements to create cautionary tales that reveal how even ostensibly democratic and orderly societies can “have their nightmarish sides” (1994, 20). In this context, Bazterrica’s novel functions not merely as a work of speculative horror but as a critique of modern practices. The Transition in the novel can be read as a grotesque hyperbole of the industrial animal-agribusiness, forcing readers to confront the moral compromises inherent in a system built on commodifying and consuming other sentient beings.

By normalizing cannibalism, the novel literalizes the theoretical frameworks of the Capitalocene and cannibal capitalism. As Moore argues, the Capitalocene thrives by “cheapening” nature and life to sustain accumulation (2016, 2–3). Bazterrica’s novel takes this logic to its absolute limit, depicting a world where the ecological crisis – whether real or manufactured – is not alleviated but weaponized. The extermination of animals is not a tragedy for this system but a business opportunity, proving that capitalism will cannibalize the biosphere to generate new markets. This resonates with Rosi Braidotti’s warning that in advanced capitalism, “the genetic code of living matter [...] is the main capital” (2013, 7). In Bazterrica’s world, the distinction between human and animal is obliterated not to elevate the animal, but to reduce the human to “bare life”, a biological resource to be harvested.

The characters’ casual acceptance of human meat consumption reflects a broader commentary on how capitalistic societal norms can desensitize individuals to moral atrocities. Bazterrica also uses this dystopian premise to draw parallels with contemporary meat industries, questioning the ethical treatment of animals and the environmental impact of mass meat production. The allegory extends to discussions about industrialization, exploitation, and the disconnection between consumers and the sources of their food. This ethical critique is central to the novel’s dystopian vision, challenging readers to potentially reflect on their own consumption habits and the societal structures that sustain them.

*Tender Is the Flesh* stands as a striking work of dystopian literature, which uses its provocative premise to explore themes of dehumanization, carnism, moral decay, anthropocentric bias, and ethical consumption. Through its chilling narrative and portrayal of a world gone awry, the novel challenges readers to examine the moral boundaries and social contract of their society. It can serve as an allegory for human and animal exploitation and a comment on overpopulation and environmental catastrophe. Ultimately, the novel's ending abolishes any hope for a redemptive future, revealing that Marcos' apparent resistance to the system was a facade. His protection of the female head was never driven by empathy, but by his selfish desire to procure a child. What seemed to be a moral challenge was actually a dilemma focused on profit rather than ethics. Just as the government exploited the crisis to enforce control through fear, Marcos exploits the female head for his own gain, which demonstrates that in this setting, life is purely transactional, and children have become the ultimate commodity. Accordingly, the novel suggests that, in reality, the human species might be the most deadly and unscrupulous animal on Earth, despite being an "unnatural born killer" (Joy 2020, 53).

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