

# Fifty Shades of Oppression

## Unexamined Sexualized Violence against Women and Other Animals<sup>1</sup>

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James, Erika Leonard. 2011. *Fifty Shades of Grey*. New York: Vintage Books. 514 pp. \$ 15.95. ISBN 978-1-61213-028-6.

He continues to fondle my liver with his fingertips until I can't stand it. He gently places my quivering offal into a skillet where some softened onions are waiting for me. [...] He stirs my insides with a deft wooden spoon, around and around [...]. (Fowler 2012, 103)

This first-person narrative of an eviscerated victim in the clutches of a sexually aroused perpetrator appears to be pulled from a horror story. Strangely, this is actually an excerpt from F.L. Fowler's<sup>2</sup> 2012 culinary release: *Fifty Shades of Chicken*. This cookbook is a parody on the novel, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, an infamous best-seller that glamorizes submissive sexuality and violence against woman. *Fifty Shades of Chicken*, a book "for chicken lovers everywhere", manages to take this disturbing subject matter to another level of degradation.

Throughout the book, a chicken's body is used to replace that of a woman. She is referred to as "Chicken" or "Miss Hen". The choice of "chicken" was not accidental. Chickens eaten by humans are almost always female. The body parts of chicken (breast, leg, thigh) are often applied to that of human women, and human women are often called "birds", "chicks", "chickens", or "hens" (Dunayer 1995). The cookbook features several images of a muscled, shirtless man dominating a chicken's corpse with knives, maillots, binding (twine), and other kitchen utensils. In one image he is shown sodomizing her with an upright roasting device. In

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<sup>1</sup> The current paper first appeared in the online blog *The Academic Abolitionist Vegan*, in January, 2013 (Wrenn 2013). Adapted by permission of the author.

<sup>2</sup> F.L. Fowler is a pseudonym.

others, he is shown penetrating her with a baster and crudely shoving cream into her bottom with his fingers. Most of the photographs of the finished “product” show the bird’s body splayed and ravaged. She is posed pornographically to quite convincingly mimic a defiled human woman.

Recipe titles continue this theme with labels like “Popped-Cherry Pullet”, “Extra-Virgin Chicken”, “Please Don’t Stop Chicken”, “Jerked around Chicken”, “Mustard Spanked Chicken”, “Cream-Slicked Chick”, “Chile-Lashed Fricassee”, “Skewered Chicken”, “Steamy White Meat”, “Bacon Bound Wings”, “Dripping Thighs”, “Thighs Spread Wide”, “Chicken Thighs Stirred Up and Fried Hard”, “Red Cheeks”, “Pound Me Tender”, and “Hog-Tied Porked Chicken”. The entanglements of oppression, violence, sexism, and speciesism are impossible to ignore.

These recipes are inextricably indicative of rape culture. Sexualized violence is presented as normative, the female body is objectified as a passive recipient of male desire and aggression, and the obligatory obsession with virginity and female purity is highlighted. Chapter Two, “Chicken Parts and Bits”, literally reenacts the fragmentation of the female body into consumable pieces. The shredded flesh and dismembered legs and wings are wholly divorced from the person they once belonged to. This objectification erases personhood and makes exploitative consumption all the more palatable. Fragmentation, as vegan feminist Carol Adams (2003) explains, renders the chicken (or woman) completely absent. Even the recipe instructions entail graphic violence, domination, and control:

Much pleasure and satisfaction is to be had from tying up your bird. Not only does it show your chicken who’s boss, but a tight binding ensures the chicken cooks exactly how you want it – evenly, moist, and tender. It also closes off the chicken’s cavity, so the juices swelling within can’t spill out, at least not until you’re ready for them. (Fowler 2012, 34)

Using large, strong kitchen shears and a confident hand, forcefully cut the backbone out of the chicken; first cut along one side of the backbone, then cut along the other side until it releases, then pull it out. Gently spread the bird open, pressing down on the breast to flatten it (see *Learning the Ropes*). Massage the flesh with 1 1/2 teaspoon of salt. (Fowler 2012, 116)

Position the chicken’s nether parts over the vertical roaster’s erect member and thrust the bird down. Tuck her wing tips up behind her wings, behind her body. Tie her legs together with a piece of butcher’s twine or cooking bands [...]. (Fowler 2012, 120)

It reads like a manual for serial killing. Several gruesome pornographic narratives are also included to preface the recipes. They serve to stir the reader into a hot bother in anticipation for the pleasurable consumption readily available to them. Take this example from “Backdoor Beer-Can Chicken”:

"Hush", he says. He smile and holds up a beer can.

"Yes, baby, have a drink, I'm sure you need it".

"Oh, no, this is not for me, Chicken". He quirks his mouth into a wicked smile.

*Holy f\*\*\* ... Will it? How?*

I gasp as he fills me with its astonishing girth. The feeling of fullness is overpowering.

He rests me on the grill and I can feel the entire world start to engorge. Desire explodes in my cavity like a hand grenade. (Fowler 2012, 137)

Or this story from "Flattered Breasts":

Suddenly he seizes me and lays me out on the counter, claiming me hungrily. His fingers pull me taut, the palms of his hands grinding my soft white meat into the hard granite, trapping me. I feel him. His stomach growls, and my mind spins as I acknowledge his craving for me.

"Why must you always challenge me?" he murmurs breathlessly.

"Because I can". My pulse throbs painfully.

He grabs a fistful of kosher salt.

"I'm going to season you now".

"Yes". My voice is low and heated.

He reaches for a rolling pin, then hesitates, looking at me.

"Yes, please, Chef", I moan.

The first blow of the rolling pin jolts me but leaves behind a delicious warm feeling.

"I. Will. Make. You. Mine", he says between blows. (Fowler 2012, 62)

These narratives often present the chicken's corpse as a willing accomplice (which is curious, given that she was beheaded and drained of blood weeks before she arrived in this man's kitchen under saran wrap). Her sexuality is strictly controlled and meant only for male entitlement. The relationship of domination that makes consent an impossibility is obscured. This oppressive relationship privileges men and leaves women and Nonhuman Animals in a position of subservience goes unexamined. Instead the chicken is "free-range", implying that she has a choice in the matter. These violent actions are supposedly done out of "love" and for her pleasure. It is not enough that women and nonhuman animals submit to male superiority, they must also be seen as *enjoying* their subjugation (Adams 2003). Certainly, if the consumer was made aware of the immense suffering that lies beneath the surface of pornography, prostitution, exotic dancing, dairy, "meat", "leather", zoos, horse racing etc., the pleasure of that consumption would be challenged. Previously unexamined oppression would come to light and this would undermine the ecstasy of entitlement.

This book takes the male fantasy of definitive control over a humiliated, submissive woman to its full fruition. One cannot *really* coerce women into

obliging sex slaves through force and fear. One cannot *really* fragment women into their body parts, strip them of their identity and self-efficacy, or pulverize and consume their bodies for sexual gratification (though more men than we like to admit *do*). But, one *can* have the next best thing – one *can* humiliate, torture, dismember, and objectify a female nonhuman animal for pleasure. One can molest her, sodomize her, rape her, bind her, break her, “pork” her, and “slick” her with cream to the point of physical arousal, salivation, the release of pleasure hormones in the brain. Control over the vulnerable is sexualized – domination and power is hot stuff; and it’s completely legal with the full support of a patriarchal society.

As traumatizing as this book is on its own, perhaps most problematic is the complete lack of criticism from the general public. This blatant attack on women and other animals has gone relatively unnoticed. The book racks up rave reviews by Amazon users who are seemingly beside themselves with laughter, folks who can’t get over just how darn *clever* this book is. Violence against women and nonhuman animals is often trivialized, masked by humor, downplayed, and made more or less invisible (Adams 2000; Joy 2010). The overwhelmingly positive reception of *Fifty Shades of Chicken* is a testament to this moral disconnect. The book earned an astonishing 4.9 out of 5 stars on Amazon. A top comment from a female user stated: “I gave them as Christmas gifts and everyone loved it”. Another woman reports: “[...] I laughed myself silly reading the cookbook last night!”. It appears that even women are unable to see through oppressive gender roles and normative misogyny.

The message could not be clearer: women are meat, nonhuman animals are meat, and both are sexualized and dominated for the pleasurable consumption of the privileged. This intersection of oppression is seen as mere parody, silly and laughable.

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