Women, Animals and Meat

A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Approach to Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman* and Michel Faber’s *Under the Skin*

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Introduction

At first glance, Margaret Atwood’s *The Edible Woman* (hereafter *Edible*) and Michel Faber’s *Under the Skin* (hereafter *Skin*) seem to have little in common. *Edible* tells the tale of a young woman, Marian, who on getting engaged to her boyfriend, Peter, develops an aversion to eating, and as the story progresses, she finds it increasingly hard to find any foods that she can consume. Her eating disorder is a manifestation of her feeling that she is being dominated and is losing her subjectivity. When she finally understands this, she bakes a cake that resembles herself and invites her fiancé to eat it, an act he refuses to partake in. Their engagement comes to an abrupt end, freeing her from its constraints, and she finds her subjectivity restored and is able to return to her previous eating habits. The novel can be loosely categorised as a feminist satire.

*Skin*, on the other hand, is a science fiction novel about a female alien, Isserley, who in her natural form resembles what humans would recognise as some kind of furry four-legged non-human mammal, but who has been surgically altered to look human. She cruises the roads in Scotland, looking for human male hitch-hikers to pick up, and if the men meet certain criteria, she abducts them and returns them to a farm where she and a number of other aliens are based. There, the men are placed in feeding pens, fattened up for about a month and then slaughtered, after which their flesh is shipped back to the aliens’ home planet. Isserley’s life changes, however, when Amlis Vess, the boss’s son, arrives from the home planet, declares that he is against killing for meat and tries to set some of the ‘vodsels’ (the alien word for humans) free. Partly as a result of the chaos that ensues, Isserley loses her focus, and after an encounter with a human rapist, starts to unravel, leading to dire consequences for her at the end of the novel.

Although two different types of texts, what *Edible* and *Skin* have in common is the theme of feeling or being edible, and this common theme makes them suitable to analyse together. In *Edible*, Marian’s aversion to food begins when she identifies with a piece of meat and recognises it as having once been a living animal. In *Skin*, the abducted male hitch-hikers are treated like livestock and literally turned into meat. This connection to animals raises the issue of speciesism (where a species sees itself as superior and other species as inferior, e.g. humans over animals) and the human-animal dualism. These two texts, however, also deal with issues of gender, patriarchy and the man-woman dualism. In *Edible*, Marian feels that she is being hunted and dominated, particularly in her relationship with her fiancé Peter, and in *Skin*, Isserley hunts men, but she herself is also victim to men who prey on her sexually. What makes these texts productive to study together is that although they both deal with the idea of being meat, they approach it from different angles.
In *Edible*, the connection to meat is metaphorical and stems from gender relations, whereas in *Skin*, the connection to meat is literal and extends from the idea of being animal. By including the animal perspective when analysing *Edible*, and the gender perspective when analysing *Skin*, a different dynamic in each text is highlighted. More importantly, examining the man-woman and human-animal dualisms together emphasises how they overlap and reinforce each other. These two texts therefore show how the oppressions of women and animals are interlinked, and how they are better understood in relation to each other.

In this thesis, I look first at gender and then at speciesism in both texts, and finally at how patriarchy and speciesism overlap and reinforce each other. Understanding how the oppression of animals functions, and how this oppression overlaps and interrelates with gender, requires an approach that incorporates animal rights and feminism. For that purpose, I am turning primarily to the works of feminist-vegetarian theorist Carol J. Adams, whose comprehensive theoretical ideas have been laid out in *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (hereafter *Sexual*) and *Neither Man Nor Beast* (hereafter *Neither*). I will discuss some of the concepts that Adams uses in due course.

Although Adams’s theory is the primary one that informs my own position, I have also been inspired by some other theorists’ ideas: Bettina Heinz and Ronald Lee look at the cultural construction of meat through an examination of commodity fetishism and cultural texts, Arran Stibbe examines the role of language in the social construction of animals as food, Joan Dunayer looks at how sexism and speciesism interlock in metaphors, and Jeffrey Sobal looks at the link between meat and different types of masculinity. I also draw on some of the literary analyses that look specifically at *Edible* and *Skin*, examined in the Research Context section.

I begin my analysis section with some introductory comments relating the narrative styles of the novels, my choice of a singular model of masculinity/femininity, the use of terminology and vocabulary in *Skin*, some concepts used in feminist-vegetarian critical theory, the implications of the genres of the novels for my analytical approach, and the structure of the coming sections. Thereafter, my analysis is divided into three main sections, where I look at gender, species and the interlocking oppressions of women and animals respectively. In examining gender relations in *Edible*, I focus on how Marian is a product of patriarchal society, and how she feels she has no subjectivity of her own, either in her life choices, or on a more personal level in her relationship with Peter. In *Skin*, I focus on how most of the hitch-hikers view Isserley as an object for sex and in some cases even for rape. Even though Isserley is not a human woman, she appears to be one to the men, and this provides the space to examine the gender relations between them and her.

In my section on speciesism, I focus on the human-animal dualism and on meat eating, looking particularly at concepts such as meat normativity, the animal as absent referent and the
social construction of meat. In *Skin*, I examine the way in which humans are targeted, bred and processed for meat, and how this encourages an awareness of and reflection over the way in which animals are used in the meat industry. I also look at the language use of the aliens, particularly in how they name the humans ‘vodsels’, and how this renaming of animals contributes to the social construction of meat. In *Edible*, my focus is on how Marian’s struggle with eating meat and eventually other foods as well, even certain vegetables, is more a type of vegetarianism than an eating disorder. Her rejection of foods that can be seen as living restores the idea of the living animal to the idea of meat. I also examine how her belief that it is abnormal not to eat meat reflects how animals are ontologised as meat only, and how this belief denies the possibility for her to develop true empathy for animals in the long term.

How the oppressions of women and animals are interlinked in the texts is the focus of the third section of the analysis. In *Edible*, this interlocking of oppressions is visible not only in how Marian identifies with the idea of being meat, but also in how she identifies with hunted animals. In *Skin*, it is my assertion that Isserley represents the returned gaze of women and animals. The interlocking oppressions of women and animals thus become manifest in the way in which human men are hunted by a female to be turned into meat. Isserley herself also intuits this interlocking oppression when she recognises how her being forced into the role of sexual object by the rapist resembles how the vodsels are forced to become edible objects.

Before my analysis, however, I start with a discussion of some of the existing literature around my two primary texts, showing that most of the literature around *Edible* focuses on the oppression of women, but not of animals, and that the literature around *Skin* focuses on the human-animal dualism, but not on the male-female dualism, and that in neither case is there a focus on the overlap between the oppressions of women and animals, with the exception of Adams’s analysis of *Edible*, which I am using as the starting point for my own analysis.

Both *Edible* and *Skin* can be regarded as subversive texts. Traditionally *Edible* is seen to deal with feminist issues, and *Skin* with animal rights issues (or the ethics of factory farming). In this thesis, however, I argue that both texts deal with both patriarchy and speciesism. By analysing the ways they address gender and the idea of being meat, I also argue that these two texts highlight the interlocking nature of patriarchy and speciesism. Through this analysis, it is my hope to contribute to new understandings of both texts, as well as to contribute to a small but growing body of work related to feminist-vegetarian literary analysis.
Research Context

Most of the criticism pertaining to *Edible* looks at how Marian’s refusal to eat meat, and later other foods that resemble something that was once living, is an eating disorder that is either a form of hysteria brought on by her feeling oppressed and symbolically consumed, or is an embodiment of her rebellion against that oppression. These critics do not see her eating disorder as potential empathy with animals, and it is feasible that Atwood did not intend that interpretation either. However, that Atwood chose to use a metaphor that would link women with hunted and consumed animals is nonetheless significant, as it acts to highlight the cultural construction of both women and animals as objects that are usable and consumable by men.

Coral Ann Howells analyses *Edible* in the context of Betty Freidan’s *The Feminist Mystique*. She focuses on Marian’s inability to eat as an eating disorder, and sees it as an embodiment of “victimisation, internal conflict and rebellion” (23). She describes *Edible* as a “subversive rather than confrontational novel, which engages obliquely with social problems” and which “explores the relation between consumerism and the feminine mystique, where one young woman’s resistance to consuming and to being consumed hints at a wider condition of social malaise” (21). In other words, she sees Marian’s eating disorder as a hysterical illness, one that is an “unconscious gesture of resistance” (29).

Like Howells, Sarah Sceats also expresses an awareness of *The Feminist Mystique*, as well as Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, as having an influence on Atwood (96). In her analysis of *Edible*, Sceats explores the relationship between Marian, her body and food, and writes that Atwood “brings food and eating (or not-eating) into direct relationship with gender and cultural politics” (95). Sceats focuses on the connection between Marian’s inability to eat and her body’s rebellion against conforming to gender expectations.

Emma Parker looks at the relationship between food, power and gender in some of Atwood’s fiction, including *Edible*. She argues that Atwood employs eating “as a metaphor for power and [it] is used as an extremely subtle means of examining the relationship between women and men” (349), and that in *Edible*, Marian stops eating when she “subconsciously feels herself being absorbed by Peter” (350). Parker adds that it is significant that “Peter’s power is demonstrated by his ability to directly control what Marian eats” when he orders for her at the restaurant (350). It is after this meal that Marian starts to reject certain foods, a sign that she is rejecting Peter’s power over her.

Despite discussing eating and food in detail and looking at how they relate to issues of control, Parker does not draw attention to the fact that the source of the food is animal, and does not
look at how animals are also subject to control. Howells does draw attention to Peter’s role as a hunter, and Sceats discusses the role of meat and other foods in triggering Marian’s inability to eat, but neither of them focus on the interconnection of patriarchy and speciesism or the possibility that Marian’s inability to eat meat could be a sign of vegetarianism rather than of hysteria or an eating disorder. The one who does look at this connection is Carol Adams.

Adams discusses *Edible* in the context of the sexual politics of war, and includes hunting and animal slaughter within her definition of an “expanded front” (*Sexual* 170). Adams sees *Edible* as taking place in a domestic war zone, where there are “only hunter or hunted, consumer or consumed” (174). Through hunting images in advertisements and hunting anecdotes told by her male friends (including Peter), Marian identifies with the victim, the hunted animal. Adams argues that Marian realises that “not only is she at the front, she is the front” (174, original emphasis), that Marian herself is the location for the domestic “sexual war” (175). Although I will not focus on Adams’s discussion of the expanded front, her analysis of how the oppressions of women and animals overlap forms the starting point for my own, and provides a contrast to the other literary criticism on *Edible*.

While the above examples are only a small sample of the literature available on *Edible*, it is clear that aside from Adams’s analysis, they focus on issues pertaining to consumerism, eating disorders, and the power relations between men and women; the issue of meat or animals is largely overlooked. Critics examining *Skin*, on the other hand, tend not to look at gender, and instead show a distinct interest in how the human-animal divide is dealt with in the novel and how it can be a critique of factory farming, and some also focus on the idea of human/animal metamorphosis.

Sarah Dillon investigates the role of language in creating a distinction between human and non-human animal in *Skin*. While she does not focus on gender specifically (though she does show an awareness of “the text’s broader concern with sexual politics and male-female relations” in one of her footnotes (Dillon 152)), her discussion provides a necessary context for understanding how language can construct a dualism between human and non-human that does not necessarily exist naturally. Dillon, starting from discussions by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, also looks at how the protagonist Isserley undergoes a “becoming-animal” transformation so that “her identity is defined in relationality with the other, and not in opposition to it” and how that breaks down the divisions between her and the other, as well as “her ability to distance herself ethically from them” (146). Dillon’s analysis shows how the construction of the other is cultural and that it can lead to oppression, and also how empathy and relationality can bring about ethical change.

David Punter, in an examination of pity and Scottish Gothic literature, also focuses on the idea of empathy, and describes *Skin* as a “satire on factory farming, where humanity constitutes the
animal” and claims that it “reverses the flow of pity […] as humans (‘vodsels’ as they are called) become the mere objects of attention of extraterrestrial farmers” (13). Although his focus is more on the nature of pity, his idea of being able to empathise with the animalised humans is key to understanding how the reversal of the human-animal dualism in the text is effective.

Marion Gymnich and Alexandre Segao Costa look at human-animal metamorphosis in a number of texts, including *Skin*, where they focus on the idea of “seeing oneself as the other” (84), with an emphasis on Isserley and her surgical transformation from alien to human. They discuss the effect that “anthropocentric assumptions” and “‘reverse’ metamorphosis” have in terms of the distinction between human and animal (85), and how it can cause the reader to reflect on humanity’s treatment of animals. While these issues do not relate directly to the issue of meat eating, they are relevant to the discussion of speciesism, and form a larger context in which to discuss *Skin*.

Wendy Woodward examines how the eating of humans in *Skin* problematises the relationship between human and animal. She writes that Faber is “challenging ontological commonplaces of who gets to eat whom” by “revers[ing] conventions of predator and prey; his representation of humans being transformed into meat highlights the ethical dimensions of factory farming through the reduction of the human body to its vulnerable animality and to its edibility” (53). She also writes that “*Under the Skin*, through what the reader would define as cannibalism, defamiliarises accepted practices of factory farming as Faber dramatises the parallels between eating humans and eating animals” (58). Woodward’s article is thus important for understanding how *Skin* draws parallels to the real world through reversing the relationship and dualism between humans and animals.

Although almost all research into *Skin* has focused on transformation and the ethics of factory farming, an alternative is offered by Pegah Mashouri who examines the intersection of gender and class, focusing on the connection between the body and identity. Many of her analyses regarding the gender relations between Isserley and the hitch-hikers mirror my own conclusions, but she extends her analysis to look at the class relations between Isserley and the other aliens on the farm, and her focus is on descriptions of bodies, particularly Isserley’s. Although Mashouri’s analysis is loosely set within the context of species, her focus remains on transformation and the intersection between gender and class, and thus does not look specifically at the intersection between gender and animals.
Investigating Patriarchy and Speciesism in *The Edible Woman* and *Under the Skin*

*Edible* is divided into three parts. Marian is the narrator throughout, but the first and third sections are written in first person, while the second section is written in third person. As I show in my analysis, the initial change to third person represents her loss of subjectivity, while the return to first person at the end of the novel represents her regaining her subjectivity. *Skin* is written in third person throughout, with the bulk of the narration belonging to Isserley. However, whenever she picks up a hitch-hiker, the narration switches to him. This enables the reader to know what the hitch-hiker is thinking and how he views Isserley. There are eleven hitch-hikers in total, and most are unemployed, working class or down on their luck.

Although the characters in the novels represent different types of masculinity and femininity, I have chosen not to focus on these differences. Multiple models of masculinity/femininity that take different types into account are good for examining the nuances of those types and how they function in their social context (Sobal 151), but because the focus of this thesis is to look at patriarchy as a system, I have chosen to use a singular model that focuses on masculinity/femininity as a single type, as the multiple model cannot provide useful generalisations and makes it difficult to analyse gender as a structure (151). I acknowledge, however, that the characters in the novels are not all of the same type.

In *Skin*, Isserley refers to her species as ‘human’ and to the males of her species as ‘men’, while referring to humans as ‘vodsels’ and sometimes ‘animals’. In this thesis, I tend to refer to humans as humans or vodsels, aliens as aliens, and animals as animals. In cases where there is room for ambiguity, I will clarify what is meant. Other terms that I will use from *Skin* include ‘voddissin’ (vodsel meat) and ‘icpathua’ (an alien sedative administered to the hitch-hikers via needles in the passenger seat).

Throughout my analysis, there are some concepts that I return to repeatedly, and these I will define and explain now. *Meat normativity* is the idea that meat eating is such an accepted part of social traditions that it is a norm. The *social construction of meat* is the idea that meat is a socially constructed and socially loaded concept, more than just the flesh of a dead animal. As Heinz and Lee argue, people do not eat meat so much as “socially produced meaning” (98): meat is associated with “appealing connotations of food, meal, tradition, masculinity, and health” (96), and its association to dead animals is avoided in discourse. With *objectification*, I refer to the sexualisation of women that renders them objects, and to the social construction of animals as objects for consumption.
The *absent referent* is a key concept in Adams’ critical theory, and her many ways of using it makes it complex. The absent referent refers to a necessary component of a concept that is absent in how that concept is perceived. The primary way that I will use the absent referent is in relation to meat. In the concept of meat, animals as living beings are by definition absent (they had to be killed to become meat), and are also absent in how we think about meat; even if we know that meat comes from a once living animal, meat becomes merely food when we eat it, and the once living animal is conceptually absent (Adams, *Neither* 16-17; *Sexual* 66). One way to restore the absent referent is to “[give] conceptual place to the significance of individual animals” (*Neither* 108), and to make the agents and the process of oppression visible as well.

Regarding human relationships with animals, Adams refers to the concept of personhood, which is the sense that an animal has a unique personality and identity, and a right to be seen as a person, which Adams argues that pets are usually granted (*Neither* 61). When animals are objectified, such as when they are regarded as products for meat, they are denied their personhood.

For the purposes of this thesis, I use the absent referent to refer to the following: animals are the absent referent in the concept of meat; in interlocking oppressions, women are the absent referent when animals are oppressed, and animals are the absent referent when women are oppressed; in the act of objectification, the person or animal that is objectified becomes an absent referent in the way they lose their personhood, and in the concepts of ‘battered/raped/sexualised’ women and ‘meat animals’, men/humans are the invisible agent, the absent referent, and their absence makes women’s and animals’ objectification seen natural, resulting in them being ontologised as usable.

My approach to analysing the two texts differs slightly. For *Edible*, which can be regarded as realist fiction, it suffices to do a close reading of what happens within the text. *Skin*, however, is speculative fiction, and this opens the possibility – or even necessity – to examine the novel in relation to its external social context. The reader fills the space created by speculative fiction with an understanding of social norms and how the real world functions, comparing the novel’s content with its external context. My analysis of *Skin* is dependent on this comparison.

Although my main argument is that the oppressions of women and animals need to be seen as interlocked, it serves a purpose to examine each of these oppressions in turn first, to show how these two texts can be read from both a feminist and a vegetarian perspective. I combine these analyses in the third section where I show how these oppressions are interlinked.
“A girl like you don’t need to think”: Women as (sexualised) objects

In this section, I examine the way that patriarchy and sexism manifest themselves in the two novels, and how they impact upon each of the female protagonists. In *The Edible Woman*, this includes looking at how consumer culture and society as a whole impact on Marian, as well as the effects that her relationship with Peter have on her. In *Under the Skin* I first examine Isserley’s experiences on her home world, then how the hitch-hikers react to Isserley when they enter her car. Throughout this section, I show the ways in which gender is socially constructed and how women are portrayed as (sexual) objects in these novels.

In *Edible*, Marian works for a marketing firm that conducts surveys on consumer responses to various products, and perhaps because of her job, she is particularly aware of marketing pressures in their various forms, from shop music whose purpose is to “lower your sales resistance to the point at which all things are desirable” (Atwood 172) to how people are manipulated into choosing particular brands, “doing precisely what some planner in a broadloomed office had hoped and predicted” (Atwood 173). One way that this manipulation takes form is through advertising, particularly with regard to how gender is constructed. An advertisement for Moose Beer portrays manliness as being active by suggesting that a “real man” takes a “real man’s holiday” of “hunting, fishing, or just plain old-fashioned relaxing” in nature with a “sturdy” beer that has “healthy, hearty flavour” with a “tang of the wilderness” (Atwood 26, original italics). This robust, active image of masculinity differs markedly from the sexualised image of femininity suggested in an advertisement for women’s girdles that depicts a young woman “skipping about in her girdle” (Atwood 93). Marian is confused as to who the advertisement is targeting, as “the female form […] is supposed to appeal to men, not to women, and men don’t usually buy girdles” (Atwood 93) and concludes that it is meant to be a “self-image; perhaps the purchasers thought they were getting their own youth and slenderness back in the package” (Atwood 93). The advertisement portrays women as objects of the male gaze, but by it being advertised as a self-image, women accept it and it becomes a social norm.

Men are depicted as active subjects, women as passive, sexualised and objectified, and through social processes such as advertising, these socially constructed roles become norms.

That Marian is affected by gender norms becomes clear from when she and Peter get engaged. When he asks when they should get married, Marian is “astounded” when she tells him that she is happy leaving all big decisions to him, especially as she “really meant it” (Atwood 90). In succumbing to what she perceives to be her role as Peter’s future wife, where his subjectivity is primary and her role is to be “submissive, domestically focused, approving, deferential, maternal” (Sceats 96), Marian suffers a loss of her own subjectivity and sense of self, marked in the novel by
the change from Marian’s first person narration in Part 1 to third person narration in Part 2.

Marian’s submission to Peter, while seemingly willing, creates an inner conflict between her perceived role as wife on the one hand and her loss of subjectivity on the other. This conflict is realised in her inability to eat, triggered when, as newly engaged, Peter and Marian have dinner together at a restaurant; Peter orders a steak for her, but after watching Peter violently cutting his steak and seeing her own as “a hunk of muscle. Blood red” (Atwood 151), she finds she cannot eat it. Sceats argues that the dinner represents the “brutal realities of gendered power politics” when “politely exercised private power […] is suddenly tilted into a different frame, indicating savagery and ruthlessness” (96, 97). Marian recognises the violence inherent in the way Peter cuts and eats his steak, and connects it symbolically to their relationship specifically and to gender relations and patriarchy generally. Sceats focuses her analysis on gender relations, but this restaurant scene is clearly connected to meat eating as well, and I return to this scene in the next two sections.

As Marian’s engagement continues, her sense of losing control increases as she tries to adjust to her new role of simply being Peter’s wife. Coinciding with this increasing loss of subjectivity, Marian finds that there are many foods other than meat that she cannot eat. Marian’s change from being an active consumer of food to hardly being able to eat at all represents her change from having her own subjectivity to the powerlessness of feeling herself being consumed by Peter. She subconsciously and metaphorically sees herself as food, or more specifically, as I will argue in the next section, she identifies with the animals who become food.

Marian’s powerlessness is not only apparent in her inability to eat, but in her inability to articulate why she cannot eat – “It was difficult to explain” (Atwood 206) – or understand what is troubling her about her relationship with Peter. Parker argues that “the patriarchal nature of language” is unable “to accommodate female experience,” and that “it is unsurprising that women choose an alternative, non-verbal form of communication” and adds that “eating and non-eating articulate that which is ideologically unspeakable” (Parker 358). Marian’s body’s refusal to eat is therefore not only a sign of her oppression, it is a resistance to it as well; as long as she continues to submit to patriarchal expectations, her inability to eat continues.

Marian’s submission to Peter is most apparent in how she accommodates his wishes for a party he is hosting: when he requests that she fix up her hair and buy a dress that is “not quite so mousy” as what she usually wears (Atwood 208), she buys a short, red, sequinned dress, spends the afternoon at the hairdresser and allows her flatmate Ainsley to “manipulate her features” with many layers of make-up (Atwood 222). With her new hair, face and dress, Marian feels unlike herself, but she has made this change for Peter’s benefit. As Sceats argues, Marian “[packages herself] for male delectation” in a way similar to how manufacturers package their products (99). At the party,
Marian asks Peter if he loves her and he responds affirmatively, adding “especially in that red dress” (Atwood 231); she has succeeded in packaging herself as a sexualised object for her man, fulfilling a patriarchal social norm. That this is Peter’s desire and not her own, though, is confirmed by the response of Duncan¹ – someone Marian escapes to when she needs space from Peter – who asks, “who the hell are you supposed to be?” (Atwood 239); he recognises that she is playing a role that conflicts with who she really is. It is in the wake of this party that Marian finally realises that her upcoming marriage to Peter would not be providing her with the security and safety she had assumed (263), and that instead she was dwindling away. She also realises that her submission to patriarchal norms was at the root of her inability to eat, and she finally decides to act on it.

Marian’s act is, like her inability to eat, a sign of the failure of language to be able to express a woman’s experience. Still unable to articulate herself in words, Marian uses food as her language, and bakes a cake, forming it into the shape of a woman that represents herself. While she is waiting to present it to Peter, she tells the woman-cake, “You look delicious. […] that’s what will happen to you; that’s what you get for being food” (270). Marian finally recognises that her passivity and loss of subjectivity made her metaphorically edible, and that Peter is metaphorically consuming her. By offering an edible manifestation of herself to Peter, she finds a way to make that consumption visible, and thereby highlight her oppression. When Peter refuses to eat the cake and leaves, and Marian is freed from their relationship, her appetite is finally restored, and she proceeds to eat the cake: “The cake after all was only a cake” (Atwood 271-272). She has stopped seeing food as a metaphorical extension of herself, and in being able to consume again, loses her powerlessness. The return of Marian’s subjectivity is marked in the novel by the return of her first person narration in Part 3.

Throughout Edible, Marian is aware of the social pressures on her to both consume and to behave in a particular way as a woman. Although she undergoes a change in the novel, by becoming aware of how adhering to patriarchal norms results in a loss of her subjectivity and by eventually overcoming her particular instance of those norms (her engagement to Peter), her situation does not change. She is never truly liberated from her oppression as a woman, as the system of patriarchy remains. I return to some of the issues discussed above in the next two sections, looking at them in the context of meat eating, animals and interlocking oppressions.

As already established, Isserley in Skin is an alien from another planet. At some point in the past,

¹ Duncan’s function as an alternative to Peter and as someone that challenges many of Marian’s preconceptions makes him a significant character for analysis, but I have chosen not to focus on him in this thesis.
this planet had experienced an environmental disaster, resulting in water and air being rare, which in turn led to moisture filtration plants and oxygen factories in the subterranean working-class Estates. Only the rich Elite still live above ground. Isserley was a favourite among the Elite, but on reaching the age of classification, she was classified as working class and sent down to work in the Estates. After only three days, she was offered an alternative, to work for Vess Industries on a distant planet, helping to catch ‘vodsels’ that would be turned into meat. So desperate was she to leave the “subterranean hell of the Estates” (Faber 117) that she accepted, even though it meant being surgically altered to resemble a vodsel.2

Through the novel, Isserley’s descriptions of her home world and of the meat farm community on Earth show that there is a rigid class system in place, and that this is the dominant structure of inequality in the alien society. Patriarchy, however, does exist, even if it is secondary to class and usually intersecting with it. Isserley resents the wealthy young men of the Elite who had promised to keep her out of the Estates, a place where they claimed “a girl as beautiful as her should never be forced to go” (251), but who then “[stood] by as [she got] sent down to the shithole” (241). These men sexualised her, using their power and false promises to get close to her, such as one man who “stroked her flank, straying inwards towards the soft genital slit” while insisting she was safe from the Estates (251). She saw a future among the Elite as a “matter of physical inevitability” because of her lush hair (67) and her sleek breast “with glossy auburn fur which men could hardly keep themselves from stroking” (250). Isserley, in recognising that her beauty could keep her out of the Estates, allowed herself to be used as a sexual object, but when she was sent to the Estates anyway, felt betrayed by all of the men who had used her.

That Vess Industries chose to surgically alter one of their own kind into a vodsel woman is yet another sign of the sexualisation of women in their society. Before Isserley, they had altered a man, Esswis, so that there would be someone at the farm to interact with the vodsels on important matters like business. Isserley’s alterations, however, were to make her a sexual object for vodsel men so that it would be easier to entrap them; she is given large artificial breasts based on a picture in a (vodsel) men’s magazine that Esswis sent them (Faber 178). Although her work is crucial for the operation – she is the only one hunting vodsels – she is not awarded the same status as Esswis, with many of her orders being sent via him, and this inequality is something she feels needs addressing (258-259). She also sees a gendered division of labour, with the men being like “[a]rmchair heroes” while she is “sent out to do the dirty work” (99). This division of labour is clear in how all the workers on the farm are men, and when it is rumoured that another woman is coming,  

2 Although it falls outside the scope of this thesis, it is worth mentioning that Isserley falls in love with her new world, as it has endless skies of fresh air and snow, forests of trees, and seas that extend to the horizon. The differences between Earth and her home planet raise the option for an eco-critical reading of the novel.
it is to do the same work as Isserley.

As much as Isserley detests the changes that were made to her body – she describes her body as being “carved up” (241), mourns the loss of her natural teats (178), and laments the scar tissue from the amputation site of her tail that buried her genitals (186) – she understands her role as sexual object when conducting her work. When she picks up a vodsel hitch-hiker, she makes sure that he can see her breasts, so that he opens up and talks about himself, and this ruse of “packag[ing] her[self] for male delectation” (to requote Sceats) is largely successful. Once she has determined that the hitch-hiker is unlikely to be missed, she flicks the toggle that administers the icpathua drug, sedating him, before taking him to the farm for processing.

Because Isserley does not regard these hitch-hikers as ‘men’ so much as male bodies for consumption, she tends not to contemplate the gender dynamics between them and her. The human men see her as a human woman, however, so their interactions with her highlight some of their social norms regarding gender, and are to be understood within a wider patriarchal context. I will focus on only a few of these in my analysis. The hitch-hikers represent different types of masculinities, but as mentioned earlier, my focus is less on this than on how patriarchy as a system is represented as a whole. (For the rest of this section, my use of ‘men’ refers to human men, and not to alien men).

When Isserley picks up a hitch-hiker, the narration switches to his point of view, revealing some of his thoughts and showing what he thinks of Isserley. Part of the reason for the change in narration is to highlight Isserley’s unusual appearance, such as that she looks “knobbly” with a “funny shape” (Faber 12) and has eyes that glow like “exotic bacterial culture” (43). The switch in narration also shows that the hitch-hikers notice the size of Isserley’s breasts, with comments such as “[b]loody big knockers” (81) and “fantastic bosoms” (121). Her odd appearance is adequately summed up by the first hitch-hiker’s observation that she is “[h]alf Baywatch babe, half little old lady” (12). While some of the hitch-hikers feel sorry for her due to her apparent disfigurements, others sexualise and objectify her because of her large breasts. A number of them consider having sex with her, and some also assume that because of the way she is dressed, revealing her cleavage, that she is making herself sexually available.

Some of the hitch-hikers’ narration reveals not only what they think of Isserley, but also how they see women and gender norms more generally. Two of the hitch-hikers believe that because Isserley picked them up, she must want to have sex with them, because it is unusual for women to pick up male hitch-hikers for fear of being molested (42, 121). That these two men think this suggests that within the depicted society, it is understood that men see women as being sexually available to them, and that women who want to avoid sex with a man will keep themselves out of
vulnerable situations. Simultaneously, however, the fact that women recognise that certain situations make them vulnerable, and that they therefore avoid them, suggests that women do not wish to be ontologised as sexually available to men. It is therefore through patriarchal culture that women are sexualised, even against women’s own resistance to this form of objectification.

The objectification and sexualisation of women in general, and Isserley in particular, is especially apparent through her interactions with two of the hitch-hikers. The first of these is the third hitch-hiker, who Isserley senses is trouble as soon as he enters her car (Faber 34). When the narration then switches to him, he is thinking:

“Women don’t dress like that, he thought, unless they want a fuck. The only thing was, she mustn’t expect him to pay. [...] That road in Invergordon [...] was a good place. Quiet. She could suck him off there. He wouldn’t have to see her ugly face then. Her tits would dangle between his legs. He’d give them a bit of a squeeze if she did a good job” (34)

The hitch-hiker makes a general assumption about women and through that a particular assumption about Isserley that because of how she is dressed, she wants to have sex, and he sees it as his right to claim her. He sees her as a sexual object for his gratification, and only if she does well will he consider giving her any satisfaction. In discussing the male gaze, Adams argues that when a man looks at a woman, “it is what the object does for the gazer and what the gazer does with the object that is important; the object’s own intrinsic subjectivity is irrelevant” (Neither 41). The hitch-hiker gazes at Isserley and sees her as an object for his sexual gratification; he does not for a moment grant her her own subjectivity.

While considering why he would settle for sex with an ugly woman, he thinks “It was just, he was here and she was. It was like... force of nature, wasn’t it? The law of the fucking jungle” (Faber 35, original italics). Here again is the assumption that women are ontologised as sexual creatures for men’s pleasure. The hitch-hiker assumes Isserley’s availability for sex as given. That he sees it as a force of nature highlights how the sexualisation and objectification of women is for him a social norm.

Isserley’s reaction to the third hitch-hiker reveals something of what she has learnt about how some men treat women. When she senses that he is trouble, she tries to obscure his view of her breasts, which she acknowledges is a “bad sign” (34), and also shows that she understands the potential dangers of being the recipient of the male gaze. She reflects over one of the first hitch-
hikers she picked up years previously, who has asked her if she wanted “a fat cock up each hole”, something she had not understood until he had exposed his penis (35-36); she had panicked and stung him with icpathua. That she is reminded of this old encounter suggests that she intuits that this hitch-hiker has similar intentions. When he turns the conversation to the topic of her breasts, she pulls the car over into a garage that they were passing, and abruptly ends the journey. She feels uneasy, but reflects that “[n]othing bad would happen now” (37, 38). Through this encounter, and her memories of the earlier one, it is evident that Isserley is aware of how her sexualised appearance can make her prey to men who objectify her sexually, and that this is one of the hazards of her job.

The other hitch-hiker whose interactions with Isserley highlight the objectification of women is the eighth one. In contrast to most of the hitch-hikers who get at least a page or two of narration when they enter Isserley’s car, the eighth hitch-hiker gets only one line: “He was thinking, My lucky day” (177). When he then says the same words to Isserley out loud, “an inexplicable chill travelled down her spine” as she, like with the third hitch-hiker, recognises that this one would be dangerous. What follows is a conversation where he repeatedly refers to Isserley’s breasts, despite her efforts to obscure them, making her feel increasingly uneasy (177-181). He also makes many sexual comments and innuendos: “You’re a bit of a goer, aren’t you?”, “Sex […] On the brain. I can spot it a mile off. You love it, don’t you?” and “A girl like you don’t need to think” (179). Particularly this last comment highlights the extremes to which women can be objectified, where they are not even granted the right to think, never mind their own subjectivity. The implication is also that a woman’s purpose is for sex only, and that a man can do the thinking for her: it is how he can use her that is important, so she does not need to think.

The eighth hitch-hiker not only sexualises Isserley with his gaze, her takes action and uses her as an object for his own gratification. He draws a knife on her, and forces her to drive the car away from the view of other traffic and give him oral sex, after which he attempts to rape her. Adams writes that “[b]eing a subject requires an object” (Neither 40); in the act of forcing his subjectivity on Isserley, the hitch-hiker not only sees her as an object, but forces her into being one. That he is prepared to act on his assumption of women’s objectification and sexualisation is extending the social construction of women as sexual objects to its inevitable conclusion: where women are seen as sexual objects, they become inherently rapable (Neither 101). This is particularly evident in the way that, even when he discovers that Isserley has had extensive surgery between her legs and asks her if she had been in a car accident, and even though he cannot find his way through the mutilated flesh to rape her, he is not discouraged; he still identifies her as primarily a sexual object and continues trying to rape her (Faber 186).

Although Isserley manages to gouge her fingers through the hitch-hiker’s eyes into his brain
and kill him, the incident unsettles her profoundly. When the rapist takes control of her, she loses her subjectivity and becomes an object. As there are obvious parallels between this and how she abducts men and takes control of them, I return to this in the third section.

When Isserley agreed to work for Vess Industries, she escaped the hell of the Estates and the class inequalities on her home world, but remained sexualised, albeit in a different way. While some of the hitch-hikers’ attitudes towards Isserley are sympathetic and friendly, many objectify and sexualise her, reflecting a wider social norm of seeing women as inherently usable for sex, and by extension, rapable. This objectification mirrors the way that Isserley sees the men as edible objects and will be examined in the next section.

What is clear from the above discussions of gender in *Edible* and *Skin* is how patriarchy moulds the idea of women as passive objects for the use of men. In *Edible*, Marian feels socially constructed to fulfil a particular role as a woman. She feels that this makes her consumable, resulting in her body refusing to consume certain foods. As a way of articulating her oppression, Marian presents Peter with an edible representation of herself and through that frees herself from her relationship with him, even if she is not liberated from patriarchal society itself. Isserley in *Skin* also experiences what it is like to be objectified, both on her home planet and her new one. The main difference between them is that Marian experiences her oppression predominantly in terms of the social role she is expected to fulfil as a woman, whereas Isserley experiences the blatant sexualisation that comes from being the target of the male gaze. That Marian also experiences the male gaze is something I return to in the interlocking oppressions section. In the next section, I focus on the ways in which speciesism creates the idea that animals are objects for the use of humans, and that through their objectification, they are socially constructed as edible.

**“Everyone eats cows, it’s natural”: Animals as (edible) objects**

In this section, I shall look at how speciesism manifests itself in each novel by looking at meat normativity and the social construction of animals as edible. In the case of *The Edible Woman*, this includes looking at Marian’s inability to eat meat as a type of vegetarianism, and the conflict that ensues between what her body wants and what she has been socialised into believing about animals and meat. In *Under the Skin*, this involves examining the aliens’ meat farming and the somewhat arbitrary nature of Isserley’s speciesism. I will also discuss how the novel causes the reader to reflect over factory farming and speciesism in the real world.

When discussing *Skin* in the previous section, I focused on how the male gaze of some of the hitch-hikers objectified and sexualised Isserley. The way that they looked at her is not unlike the way that she looks at them; she objectifies them and sees them as usable. The difference is that
while some of them sexualise her, she sees them as meat. Her job is to look for the meatiest specimens, and she takes this seriously, driving past them three times to get a proper look, and only picking up those with promising bulk. Those she sedates and takes to the farm are neutered and their tongues removed, removing their ability to speak, before being placed in feeding pens for a month before being killed and butchered for meat. The aliens’ exploitation of the humans is a form of speciesism and is sanctioned by their society’s meat normativity.

It is only when Amlis Vess arrives from the home planet that this speciesism is first challenged. As he is the boss’s son, Isserley expects that he has come to conduct an inspection, but when he declares that he “[doesn’t] believe in killing animals”, she “gaped at him for a moment in disbelief” (Faber 114); even though ‘voddissin’ (vodsel meat) is rare and expensive on the alien world, meat normativity is well enough established that Amlis’s stance against it shocks her. Amlis’s objection to their society’s meat normativity is particularly evident in the following conversation:

‘That meat you’re eating,’ he said softly, ‘is the body of a creature that lived and breathed just like you and me.’

Hilis [the cook] groaned and rolled his eyes in despair and pity, for the pretensions and dopey confusions of the young. [...]

‘Mr Vess,’ [Isserley] said icily, ‘I hate to tell you this, but I really doubt that there is any similarity between the way you and I live and breathe, let alone between me and [...] my breakfast.’

‘We’re all the same under the skin,’ suggested Amlis, a little huffily she thought. She would have to aim for this weak spot of his, his filthy-rich idealist’s need to deny social reality. (Faber 163-164)

The reaction of Hilis suggests that Amlis’s ethical stance is not to be taken seriously, an opinion that Isserley also holds. Isserley’s need to target his idealism, while partly resulting from the class dynamic between them (which falls outside the scope of this thesis), also suggests a need to silence those who would speak out against the “social reality” of speciesism in their society. Because she has assimilated her culture’s social construction of meat, and especially because her job requires a speciesist outlook, she does not take his ideals seriously. Adams argues that where normativity exists, there can be “no impartial semantic or cultural space in which to hold a discussion” (Neither 26), and this is suggested when Amlis’s attempt to discuss the ethics of meat eating cannot find common ground with those who adhere to meat normativity.

Isserley reasons that the vodsets are an inferior species primarily because they are unable to
“siuwil” and “mesnishtil”, they had not evolved to use “hunsur”, and have no concept for “slan” (Faber 174), and tells herself that their having language does not make them ‘human’ (i.e. like one of her kind). Despite this, when Amlis becomes convinced that the vodsels are trying to communicate and takes Isserley down to see them in their feeding pens, Isserley pretends that they do not have language. Annoyed, Amlis says, “‘All I’m trying to get across to you [...] is that the meat you were eating a few minutes ago is the same meat that is trying to communicate with us down here’” (172-173). Isserley decides against telling Amlis that the vodsels not only have speech but also writing since “she would be dignifying the vodsels, in his eyes”, but then asks herself, “isn’t it true [...] that they have that dignity?” (172). In that moment, she recognises that they are more than just objects for meat, but significantly, she denies this recognition, focusing instead on their “brute bulk, their stink, their look of idiocy” (172), thereby downplaying the significance of them having language and denying them their personhood.

By describing the vodsels in terms of how bestial they look as a result of intensive farming, rather than on how they look and behave naturally, Isserley is removing the agency of those who are responsible for the vodsels transformation and making it seem inevitable that the vodsels are meant to be animals for meat. This kind of negative redefinition “encourages the disregard of animal suffering” (Stibbe 156) and “establish[es] and maintain[s] [an] emotional distance [...] [that] permits abuse without commensurate guilt” (Dunayer 18). By depicting the vodsels’ bulk and stink as their natural state, she ontologises them as edible objects, allowing herself to believe that the continued exploitation of the vodsels is warranted.

Isserley’s use of pronouns in describing individual humans after they have been turned into livestock also objectifies them by linguistically changing them from someone (‘he’) to something (‘it’); she denies them their personhood, making it easier to view them as edible objects. That the aliens have separate words for the animal that the meat comes from, i.e. ‘vodsel’, and for the meat itself, i.e. ‘voddissin’, signals another way in which language use contributes to the objectification of animals as edible and renders them absent referents. The word ‘voddissin’, like ‘meat’, is a mass noun; it is an uncountable “something” that bears little resemblance to the living “someone” it once was (Adams, Neither 28, original emphasis). In death, the vodsels change from “object to substance” (Stibbe 151) and are not only rendered absent from the idea of voddissin linguistically, but cognitively as well.

Although Isserley maintains a speciesist attitude towards the humans for most of the novel, there is a sense that this is only because she needs to keep her distance from them to avoid “enter[ing] into some kind of ethical relationship” with them (Dillon 143). Her attitude towards non-human animals differs markedly, such as how she views rabbits as “winsome little creatures”
(Faber 90) and thinks that sheep resemble ‘human’ (alien) children (150). When encountering sheep, she is tempted “to reach across the species divide and communicate” (63), despite them not having language. This contrasts with her attitude towards humans, who she regards as inferior partly because they seem less advanced than her own species, and yet by Isserley’s own standards, they are obviously the most advanced species on the planet. She grants rabbits and sheep personhood, but denies it to the humans, an arbitrary distinction that exists only because of the aliens’ need to ontologise humans as edible objects.

One of the claims that Isserley makes to defend her speciesism is that the human language lacks concepts that exist in her own. It is ironic, therefore, that when Amlis takes her to the feeding pens because he thinks one of the vodsels is trying to communicate by scratching a word in the sand, the word written, “M E R C Y”, is a concept that does not exist in the alien language (Faber 171). Isserley dismisses this as “sheer chance” (171) and ignores the implication that maybe the human language is not inferior to hers, but rather just different.

Despite Isserley’s resistance to and occasional scorn of Amlis’s attempts to challenge her speciesist assumptions, her attitude does eventually change in part to his influence. By providing Isserley with alternative ways of thinking, and also through suggesting that she find a life for herself away from the farm, Amlis gives her a way out. When she realises that she could just walk away, her need to distance herself from the vodsels diminishes, and she starts to acknowledge their personhood. There are other factors that explain her change of attitude, and these I discuss in the next section on interlocking oppressions.

The similarities between what happens in Skin and our own meat-normative society cause the reader to examine these issues in relation to our own systems and prejudices. Humans also make an arbitrary division of species, seeing dogs and cats as pets in the home while condemning pigs and cows to short lives of misery and exploitation. The insistence of some that language is a necessary prerequisite for species equality with humans is mirrored by Isserley’s deeming the vodsels as inferior due in part to limitations in their language, but also challenged by how she reaches across the species divide to try to communicate with sheep.

That humans are called vodsels and are described in bestial terms, while the aliens call themselves ‘human’ and are the ones with subjectivity and humanity “constitutes an ontological source of dis-ease for the reader” (Woodward 54), and contributes to the way that factory farming is defamiliarised for the reader (Woodward 58). Seeing the living conditions the humans had to endure creates an empathy that questions the human-animal dualism, and challenges factory farming practices and ethics (Woodward 58; Punter 13; Dillon 138). Through his depictions of humans as edible objects, Faber also breaks the cultural taboo of keeping the meat industry and meat processes
invisible (Heinz and Lee 94). Animals are the absent referent in *Skin* when human men are transformed into meat animals; through extending our empathy for the human men in the novel to animals in the real world, those animals as absent referents can be conceptually restored.

In *Skin*, the idea of being meat is literal, embodied in the hitch-hikers who are transformed to become meat. In *Edible*, the physical living animals that become meat are absent, and it is only in how Marian thinks about them that they become present in the narrative. I will now examine Marian’s rejection of meat from a vegetarian perspective, and will discuss how meat normativity and the social construction of animals as edible objects creates a conflict of meaning for her that results in her denying the possibility of becoming vegetarian.

As discussed in the first section, Marian’s inability to eat begins in the restaurant where she and Peter are eating steaks. While Marian watches Peter cut into his steak and then looks at her own, she starts to think about the pictures in cookbooks of cows where dotted lines show what type of meat product comes from which part of the cow. As Marian notes, everyone knows that meat comes from animals, but there is a difference between seeing it as packaged food in the supermarket, and seeing it for the blood, muscle and flesh that it actually is, and to be gorging on it (Atwood 151-152). In recognising that the meat on her plate comes from a once living animal, Marian is unable to eat it. In that moment, the normally absent living animal is cognitively restored to the idea of meat and is no longer just an object for consumption. Through this process of restoring the absent referent, the activity of meat eating is interrupted.

It is not only meat that Marian stops being able to eat, but other foods as well. When her friend Len reveals that his mother once forced him to eat an egg that had an unborn baby chick in it, Marian later can no longer eat eggs (Atwood, 160-161). Len’s story opens up new ways for Marian to perceive the living in food, in this case unborn chicks. This awareness spreads until Marian starts to reject cake that feels “spongy and cellular” like tiny lungs bursting (207), rice pudding that reminds her of cocoons that have “miniature living creatures inside” (203)) and carrots that she imagines being uprooted and still living as she cuts them up (178). Even in these examples of non-animal foods that her body rejects, there is a common theme: what she connects with them is the idea of something that is living, that can experience pain, suffering or death, especially through her eating of that food. Even though these foods are not from animals, they metonymically stand for foods that require the death of something living in order for them to be foods. In this way, all of the foods that she stops eating represent a living animal that is killed to become meat.

The initial reason for Marian’s rejection of meat, plus her continued subconscious empathy for living beings thereafter, suggests the possibility of vegetarianism. Adams argues that after
Marian identifies the steak as having been a living animal, her “unconscious attitude toward food changes [...] and she realises to her surprise that she is becoming a vegetarian, that her body has taken an ethical stand” (Sexual 175). What is important to stress here is that despite her body’s rebellion against meat eating, Marian does not embrace the idea of becoming a vegetarian, “one of those cranks” (Atwood 153). She sees her divergence from meat eating as abnormal and therefore undesirable. Of meat normativity, Adams writes that “[o]ne version of reality appears to be the only version, and in this claims its own comprehensiveness. Conflicts in meaning are resolved in favor of the dominant culture” (Neither 26). Marian battles with conflicts in meaning regarding meat eating, and her initial empathy with animals that become meat is soon overridden by the dominant cultural belief that it is abnormal to be vegetarian. Instead of focusing on her initial reason for rejecting meat, she tries to reason and plead with her body to start eating properly (Atwood 178), considers seeking help from behaviourists (204-205), and is afraid to reveal her eating problem to other people, becoming obsessed with whether her friends still see her as normal (204, 206, 207). Her body’s rejection of meat is a result of her moment of empathy for animals that become meat, but that she resists the idea of being vegetarian highlights the influence that the ideology of speciesism has; her internal conflict is resolved in its favour, and the living animal once again becomes an absent referent in her understanding of meat.

The way that Marian reacts to her body’s rejection of meat reveals not only how meat eating is normative, but also how animals are socially constructed as meat. When her body first rebels against her eating meat, she thinks to herself, “This is ridiculous [...] Everyone eats cows, it’s natural; you have to eat to stay alive, meat is good for you, it has lots of proteins and minerals” (Atwood 152). That she deems it natural to eat cows reflects how animals are ontologised as creatures for meat, that “[f]lesh is a cultural construct made to seem natural and inevitable” (Adams, Neither 100). Her complete acceptance that cows are meant to be turned into meat highlights how thoroughly animals are socially constructed as primarily edible, and by extension how prevalent speciesism is. Furthermore, as Adams argues, because “[k]illing remains distasteful to most consumers [and] institutional violence of corpse eating requires killing, [...] a cloud of denial surrounds this” (Neither 167). Marian’s initial awareness of meat requiring the death of living animals is something she surrounds with denial; she suppresses this awareness so that her inability to eat meat becomes a mystery to her. While she is unable to eat meat, there is a struggle between her empathy for animals and her need to deny how they become food. At the end of the novel, Marian’s denial wins over her empathy, and through being able to re-establish the invisibility of the killing process, she renders living animals metaphorically absent and is able to eat them once again.
At the end of *Edible*, Marian starts eating meat again, despite her initial empathy with living animals who become meat, while in *Skin* Isserley chooses to leave her job of hunting men, despite her repeated attempts to defend her speciesism to herself and to Amlis Vess. I would argue that there is one particular difference in their situations that contributes to these different outcomes regarding speciesism and their respective interaction with meat. For Marian, meat normativity is so deeply entrenched that there is no space for her to consider vegetarianism as an ethical choice. Where vegetarians exist, they are regarded as health freaks rather than ethical activists. Because of this lack of space in Marian’s society for her to nurture her compassion for animals, she fights it and tries to return to normality. Isserley, on the other hand, despite also being in a meat normative society, has a space opened up by Amlis Vess in which she can consider the option of rejecting her job and overcoming her speciesism. His challenges of her speciesist assumptions and his suggestion to leave the farm create the space conceptually for her to consider alternative options. She stops maintaining the arbitrary boundaries between species, so they fall away, ending the way she had viewed the ‘vodsels’ as other and she starts granting them their personhood.

“*You just slit her down the belly and give her a good hard shake*/’like a bitch in heat’*: Interlocking oppressions of women and animals

In this section, I look at how the two novels reflect the interlocking oppressions of women and animals. In the case of *The Edible Woman*, this involves bringing together some of the points that I have discussed already in the first two sections, to highlight the link between Marian’s loss of subjectivity once she became engaged to Peter and her emerging vegetarianism. It also involves looking at some of the imagery in the novel that shows how Marian repeatedly identifies with the idea of being like a hunted animal. In *Under the Skin*, it is human men who are literally hunted to become meat, but as the novel repeatedly deals with reversals, it is Isserley as the female and non-human hunter of these men that represents the interlocking oppressions of women and animals through her returned gaze.

In the first section, I looked at Marian’s inability to eat as an expression of her loss of subjectivity once she became engaged to Peter. In the second section, I looked at her inability to eat as a form of vegetarianism. While these two interpretations may seem distinct from each other, their connection to each other is vital, and contributes to an understanding of the ways in which patriarchy and speciesism are interlocking oppressions.

Due to the way that women are objectified, for example in advertisements, and how they are socialised into being passive, Marian feels objectified, and with Peter she tends to be passive, rather than to act as if she has her own subjectivity. This is particularly the case after Peter proposes to her,
and she decides to let him make all the major decisions. By relinquishing her subjectivity and trying to adhere to a social norm that seems appropriate as ‘bride-to-be’, Marian’s situation starts to mirror those of animals in how she feels she has no control over her own life, and how she starts to feel invisible or absent from it; her own opinions no longer count, as she has to adhere to social norms and conventions.

When in the restaurant Marian sees Peter cutting into his steak, she recognises both his agency as a subject and the violence in his act. She recognises also that because he has agency, she is the corresponding object in their relationship, and is thus like the meat that is the object of his violent act. This awareness is heightened due to an earlier recognition of being like prey (see below for a detailed discussion of this). That she is able to make this connection is because she “intuits her link to other animals” (Adams, Sexual 175) and is subconsciously aware that both women and animals suffer from similar types of oppression in how they are both objectified. This results in a subconscious empathy with other animals, and a consequent inability to eat meat.

It is not only in the relationship between Marian and meat eating that the interlocking oppressions of women and animals are evident, but also in the way that Marian identifies with being prey in hunting scenarios. One clear example of this is described in Part 1, taking place during an evening that culminated in Peter proposing to Marian. While Peter, Marian, Len and Ainsley are at a bar at the Park Plaza hotel, Peter relates a hunting story to Len about how he had killed and gutted a rabbit, a story that highlights a violent side of Peter that Marian does not recognise. Peter mentions that he took photos of the scene, and Marian starts to imagine what it may have been like to be there:

I saw it as though it was a slide projected on a screen in a dark room, the colours luminous, green, brown, blue for the sky, red. Peter stood with his back to me in a plaid shirt, his rifle slung on his shoulder. A group of friends [...] were gathered around him, their faces clearly visible in the sunlight that fell in shafts down through the anonymous trees, splashed with blood, the mouths wrenched with laughter. I couldn’t see the rabbit. (Atwood 69).

Marian fails to see the rabbit, because in her fantasy she is there in the rabbit’s place. It is significant that in this image, Peter has his back to her, because she feels suddenly that she does not know him and that she is invisible, absent. While reflecting on this image, Marian “wanted Peter to turn and talk to [her]” at their table in the bar and notices to her surprise that she has started crying (69-70). In placing herself inside Peter’s story, she identifies with the rabbit rather than with Peter, and makes a connection between her own situation as Peter’s girlfriend and the rabbit’s situation as
What is particularly significant about Peter’s story is his use of language when describing the gutting of the rabbit:

“I picked it up and Trigger said, ‘You know how to gut them, you just slit her down the belly and give her a good hard shake and all the guts’ll fall out.’ So I whipped out my knife […] and slit the belly and took her by the hind legs and gave her one hell of a crack […] there was blood and guts all over the place.” (69)

By referring to the rabbit mostly as ‘her’, Peter feminises his prey, highlighting the interlocking oppressions of women and animals. When prey is feminised, women become the absent referent in how the animals are described. Adams argues that “One way in which animals are oppressed is by associating them with women’s lesser status, and vice versa. […] [L]inking the subordinated aspects of patriarchal dualisms (animal/woman) reinforces the subjugation of each” (Neither 132), and she gives the example of “the human ‘male’ hunting the animal who is called ‘female’ when seen as prey” (132). Men see prey as female because the way they gaze at women and animals is similar. Marian seems to recognise this in how she identifies with the rabbit and starts to see Peter as a threat.

Marian’s experience of feeling threatened continues later that evening after the four of them leave the bar and Marian unexpectedly starts running away from the others. Although surprised at herself, she at first thinks of it as play. When Peter opts to follow her “in the armour of the car”, however, Marian reflects that “All at once it was no longer a game. The blunt tank-shape was threatening” (Atwood 73). The seriousness with which Peter chases her makes her feel hunted, and she continues to run, clambering through hedges and over walls in her attempt to avoid capture, until she feels herself “caught, set down and shaken” by Peter “who must have stalked [her] and waited there” like a hunter (Atwood 74), the being shaken reminiscent of the ‘good hard shake’ of the rabbit in Peter’s story. Once caught, Marian feels relieved that the chase is over, but after they have returned to Len’s apartment, her feeling of being prey returns. Len and Peter are “fiddling with a couple of cameras, screwing various lenses onto them and peering through them” (75), an activity which suggests the male gaze. Marian, sitting alone on the bed, looks down the back of it and begins “to find something very attractive about the dark cool space between the bed and the wall. It would be quiet down there” (75) and climbs down under the bed where she was “underground, [she] had dug [herself] a private burrow” (76). Feeling threatened, Marion finds a place to hide, like a rabbit going underground to escape a predator. Once again her actions show how the experiences
of animals and women are interlinked.

Later that evening, when Peter and Marian leave Len’s apartment, Marian again flees from Peter, choosing to walk home alone rather than go in his car (Atwood 78). Peter again comes after her, persuades her to join him in the car (79), and later surprises them both by proposing to her (Atwood 83). Howells suggests that this is a continuation of the hunting metaphor, “for the trap is sprung with Peter’s marriage proposal” and that it is “not insignificant that Peter represents […] the hunter in Marian’s scenarios of violence, whereas she is the escape artist, identified with the spaces of wilderness” (29). Peter and Marian’s relationship is written in terms of a hunter stalking and capturing his prey, with Marian seeing herself as a hunted rabbit, trying to escape, but ultimately being caught.

It is significant that Marian’s urge to hide under the bed is triggered by the men discussing and playing with cameras. The connection between cameras, the male gaze, guns and hunting is especially evident in a later scene in the novel, one that clearly highlights the interlocking oppressions of women and hunted animals. At Peter’s party that Marian attends in the red dress, Peter wants Marian to pose for a photo, a request that makes Marian “unreasonably anxious” (Atwood 231). Peter asks her to “‘stand over there by the guns and lean back a little against the wall’” (232), which she does, but she is stricken with fear: “Her body had frozen, gone rigid. She couldn’t move, she couldn’t even move the muscles of her face as she stood and stared into the round glass lens pointing towards her, she wanted to tell him not to touch the shutter-release but she couldn’t move...” (232). The photo that Peter would take of her leaning against the wall and framed by his guns suggests the similar image of a hunter holding his gun while he rests his foot on a newly killed animal, but instead of having a dead animal as the trophy, it is a sexualised version of Marian. In the objectification of Marian, a hunted animal is the absent referent, not present in body but suggested metaphorically. Marian is aware of this connection, and in that moment where she freezes, like a rabbit caught in lights, she recognises her role as prey, and that Peter’s male gaze through the camera is akin to the hunter’s gaze down the barrel of a gun. Adams argues that “In patriarchal culture, gaze is an essential aspect of subjectivity – the act of looking is an aspect of being self-identified, active, assertive, knowing who one is” (Neither 40), with the implication being that those who are gazed at are passive and objectified. Peter’s gaze through the camera asserts his subjectivity and objectifies Marian, in the same way that a hunter’s gaze asserts the subjectivity of the human and objectifies the animal. As both women and animals are recipients of the patriarchal gaze, their objectification and oppressions are interlinked.

When Marian finally is able to eat foods again, including meat, it is because her empathy for animals is suspended. Adams argues that “[b]ecause both men and women assimilate patriarchal
culture, the human male gaze is exhibited by both when looking at other animals” (*Neither* 41); when Marian loses her subjectivity, her patriarchal gaze on animals is interrupted, but when she regains it, she also regains the arrogant gaze.

That Isserley also exhibits an arrogant gaze is particularly obvious in the opening pages of *Skin*, when she is out looking for men. Although it later becomes clear why she is looking for them, in the opening pages it seems that it is for sex, and that she is objectifying them is clear from the first paragraph: she is looking for “big muscles: a hunk on legs” (Faber 1). The sexual connotation is clear from phrasings such as “undress him […] in your mind” (1), “his body had been so good” (3), “a glimpse of his buttocks, or his thighs” (4), how “superb he’d be once he was naked” (5), “she imagined herself breathing heavily against him as she […] grasped him round the waist to ease him into position” (7), “the bulge in his jeans was promising” (10). Already from the beginning, her objectification of men seems to deviate from social norms, as the male gaze on women is more of a social norm than the reverse. So her actions of hunting down men for sex appears to challenge social norms, turning the male gaze onto them. That she is actually sizing them up as specimens for meat only makes her gaze on them more deviant, but that the phrasing of her hunting for meat has sexual overtones is the first suggestion within the novel of how objectifying for meat and sex can be intertwined. Her gaze highlights the similarities between the male gaze on women and the human gaze on animals, and how the gaze turns its target into an object, be it sexual or edible. In this way, the targets of objectification and oppression are interlinked.

Although Isserley is not actually a human woman, she is treated like one by the human men, and in this sense represents women in general for the reader. Even though she is an alien, she also represents animals, because in her natural form, she resembles a furry non-human mammal with a tail and who walks on all fours. In this way, traditionally rendered relationships between man and woman, human and animal, hunter and prey, and dominant and subordinate, are reversed. Even though Isserley is an alien female, she represents both women and animals in the text, and as a hunter of human men, she represents also the returned gaze of women and animals. Through her, the oppressor common to both animals and women is recognised in her arrogant gaze on human men. Through the speciesist attitude of the aliens towards humans, the traditional (hu)man-animal relationship of our world is highlighted, in the way in which humans, particularly men, hunt, breed and manufacture animals for meat. That the hitch-hikers in the text view Isserley as a sexual object reflects the man-woman dualism, but this is reversed when she in turn objectifies them as meat. Men who are normally ontologised as dominant and having their own subjectivity are hunted by Isserley who represents those who are normally ontologised as objects to be used.
Towards the end of the novel, Isserley has a change in attitude that reverses her speciesism, which creates a cognitive space for the reader whereby oppressions can be overturned when there is no objectifying gaze. Aside from Amlis’s role, discussed in the previous section, there is one key event that can be seen as a turning point for Isserley that leads to her change in attitude, and that is her encounter with the rapist. It is the first time that one of the men she is hunting takes control of her instead. In a similar way to how Marian identifies with animals when she sees Peter cutting violently into his steak, Isserley intuits a connection with the humans in the feeding pens. While the rapist is trying to force his way into her, she recalls the word that one of the humans had scratched in the sand: mercy. It was a concept she had little experience of, as it did not exist in her language, and she had rarely seen it in books, and never heard it said (Faber 171). But in that moment of being forced into a position where she had no control while someone else was violating her, she recognises the similarities between her situation and that of the humans, and through that recalls the word. Because she has not heard it spoken, however, she pleads of the rapist, “Murky” (186). Like the human who scratched it in the sand, she is unable to communicate her need properly.

Isserley manages to kill the rapist, but this act too causes her much distress; despite her role in hunting men, she never kills them. The distance that she maintains between herself and her prey is diminished when she has to take one of their lives herself.

As time passes, Isserley’s change in perspective becomes clearer as she starts to exhibit moments of compassion – or mercy – towards humans and even to a dog (280-281). She considers releasing one of hitch-hikers that she has abducted (278-279), starts taking note of the humans’ names (254, 278) and even wears one of their pullovers, a sign also that she no longer wishes to have her breasts visible (279). Her distaste for the work, her new empathy for the humans, and all the ideas that Amlis gave her combine into a decision to leave the farm and all connections to her home world, and not hunt humans again (282).

Before Isserley gets a chance to see how her new life might develop, however, her car skids on ice and crashes, breaking her spine (292). Knowing that she cannot be taken to hospital where people would see her alien body, she makes the choice to take her life instead, by activating the ‘aviir’, something powerful enough to blow up the car and herself in it(295-296). There is a sense that she does it willingly, as she no longer feels that she belongs in any society, being neither ‘human’ (alien) nor vodsel. Instead she welcomes the idea of becoming a part of the atmosphere of the planet that she has so grown to love.

In *Edible*, it is particularly in the idea of predator and prey that the interlocking oppressions of women and animals is most evident. Marian recognises that the way she is treated as a woman is
similar to the way animals are treated: the way she is looked at through a camera is reminiscent of how a hunter eyes his prey down the barrel of a gun, and the way in which she feels metaphorically devoured is similar to the way in which animals are literally eaten. In Skin, the traditional roles of patriarchy and speciesism are reversed. Where human males are usually the benefactors of these systems of domination, in Skin they are the victims, being hunted by a female and processed for meat. The traditional instigators of these oppressions is recognised in Isserley’s returned gaze. Isserley undergoes a transformation, however, when she intuits the interconnectedness of how women and animals (vodsels) are objectified, and in so doing puts an end to her role in the oppression.

**Conclusion**

There are similarities between the endings of the two novels in that both protagonists find themselves in a situation they want to get out of, and to a certain extent both find a way out. Marian bakes a cake in the shape of herself, and offers it to Peter, who ends their relationship, freeing her from her sense of being oppressed and consumed. Isserley gets out of her job as a hunter of vodsels by simply driving away, and chooses instead to try to live in their world. But both women are still victims of their circumstances. Marian is not freed from the social constructs that mould her and direct her actions; she is still subject to patriarchal structures that govern her choices. Isserley, as an alien, cannot truly become a part of vodsel society, something that becomes cruelly clear when she has her accident, and she has to take her own life. Marian’s ending is open-ended, and what she chooses to do in her future is left uncertain, whereas Isserley makes the decision to end her life, and as a result her story comes to a close.

But there are large differences between the protagonists as well. Where Isserley develops a compassion for the vodsels she used to hunt, Marian loses her empathy for animals and starts to eat them again. Marian exists in a meat-normative society where there is no space for challenging the meat norm, whereas Isserley, despite being in a meat-normative industry, has gained the space to violate the meat norm by how Amlis Vess challenges her speciesist assumptions.

In The Edible Woman, Marian is aware of the social role she has to play as a woman and a wife. These patriarchal norms stifle her and lead her to see Peter as a hunter, and she feels herself consumed by him. She intuits the connection to animals that are hunted or eaten, and finds that she can no longer eat meat or other foods that seem living. It is only through overthrowing her particular instance of patriarchal oppression by ending her relationship with Peter that she is able to regain her subjectivity. In the process of doing that, however, she loses her connection to other
animals and regains a patriarchal gaze when looking at them. While animals as absent referents are temporarily restored during the novel, they become absent referents once again when Marian recommences eating meat.

In *Under the Skin*, Isserley has a role of hunter, and hunts vodsels for meat. She convinces herself of her species’ superiority as a way to distance herself from the vodsels she hunts. She holds to her speciesist norms about animals and meat, even in the face of opposition from Amlis Vess. It is only when she herself experiences being forced into an unwanted situation and used as an object for someone else’s gratification that she intuits a connection to the vodsels, and re-examines her beliefs. Consequently, she abandons her life as a hunter of vodsels and attempts to create a life in their world. Through her change in beliefs, animals as absent referents are restored; how the novel mirrors real world factory farming, the meat process is made visible.

Through my analysis of these two novels, I have shown that the objectification of women as sexual objects and the objectification of animals as edible objects are interlinked, and that patriarchy and speciesism are interlocking oppressions.
Works Cited


