

Prisoned Chickens, Poisoned Eggs: An Inside Look At The Modern Poultry Industry¹

Reviewed by Dylan Ravenfox²

All my pretty ones?
Did you say all? O hell-kite! All?
What, all my pretty chickens and their dam
At one fell
swoop?
~Shakespeare, Macbeth 4.3.222

Karen Davis's "Prisoned Chickens, Poisoned Eggs: An Inside Look at the Modern Poultry Industry" exhibits an exquisite assemblage of well-researched material documented with scrutiny and care, compellingly supported by compassionate, direct, and immediate experience—visual, audible, somatic, and olfactory—of the conditions affecting the animals themselves. While the writing is eloquent and, at points, profoundly poetic, it is nonetheless extremely difficult to read. The atrocities it narrates pass far beyond human understanding, even make one want to stick one's head in the oven. (If the digression may be allowed, Sylvia Plath speaks of her own intense intellectual and emotional sentiments relating to animal life, imprisonment, and digestion in "Zoo Keeper's Wife" and other poems.)

Davis aptly begins her exploration with some discussion of the metaphorical resonances of the original circular chicken-egg theme. She states of early Christian sects that, "The eggshell symbolized the tomb from which Christ had risen, and the

¹ Karen Davis (2009) *Prisoned Chickens, Poisoned Eggs: An Inside Look At The Modern Poultry Industry* Book Publishing Company (TN); Revised edition ISBN: 1570672296

² Dylan Ravenfox is an animal, mixed media artist, poet, writer and activist. His temporal mediums, including film, sculpture, signage, and performance have been exhibited at the Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. He recently graduated from Haverford College with a degree in English and wrote his honors thesis with Kimberly Benston on the language of race, animality and pain in the hybrid science-fiction of H. G. Wells. His poem, "Canvas" has received national recognition and is featured in the anthology "Where We Are, What We See; The Best Young Artists and Writers in America." Dylan continues to create temporal and site-specific artworks as well as self-publish critical review, short fiction, and poetry at postanimality.wordpress.com. He currently lives both with and as a communal group, and works at a Union labour law firm in Philadelphia, PA.

inner content of the egg symbolized the theme of resurrection and hope for eternal life" (22). By giving a Eucharistic reading of the inner and outer egg, Davis elicits a host of analogies that might be drawn between the harvested labor of layer-hens and the sacrificial logic of 'the passion', in which the figure(s) of innocence suffer(s) for the callousness, cruelty, and sin of someone else, before finally being wholly consumed by fire, other bodies, and/or mythology. Davis thus evokes the importance of considering the chicken as a totemic producer of human *nature and culture* in order to better understand the very symbolic economies used to construct our identities.

Inside Look also provides an informative and concise history of industrial poultry manufacturing and consumerism. Pithily, Davis reminds us that battery-cage egg production started in the early 40's as a response to WWII, discreetly summoning her equally important book *The Holocaust and the Henmaid's Tale; A Case for Comparing Atrocities*.

But then, she brings more compassionate ways of thinking with chickens to such vivid expression that we can't help but find exciting and different ways of perceiving and imagining avian life. Then, turning human culture's definitive archetype of the forgotten, neglected and ab-used back upon itself, Davis's text is able to emphasize the sentiment that it is those who are unwilling to look at--and think about for themselves--the intense degradation of the victims who are truly chicken.

Yet, the reality faced by billions of these birds every day remains the most important subject matter for Davis' book. A large portion of the text devotes itself to the seemingly endless task of listing various aspects of the modern egg and poultry industry that remain deliberately hidden from most consumers' view. In the Preface to the 2009 edition, Davis reminds us that "[t]hroughout the world, over 40 billion chickens are now being slaughtered for meat each year, and over 5 billion hens are in battery cages, many of them in egg-production complexes holding up to a million or more birds" (v). This means that for every living human egg consumer, approximately one hen is confined to a wire battery cage smaller than the inside of an oven, with 3-9 other birds, stacked in endless rows and columns, festering in the feces and urine of the birds above them, pus from their own open sores, and air saturated with ammonia and methane. Insofar as one can picture these conditions, they are beyond anything

imaginable. The circumstances that Karen Davis' text strives to both document and critique force it to struggle with the paradox of addressing subjects that, for some, can be nearly unbearable even to summon to mind {and subsequently body}, while for others, must emergently be addressed if the self-regenerating genocide of these beautiful and sensitive birds (as Davis herself demonstrates with touchingly personal turns) is ever to cease. That said, perhaps the latter suggests a false dichotomy between those groups/individuals who shudder to imagine the suffering and those who seek to ameliorate it.

(In the interest of making that end a bit less gruff,) please read this text with care and empathy, both to 'your'self and 'others'.

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