According to Murdoch (2004), at the heart of humanism is the tenet that the human can be, “liberated from the ‘natural’ with the effect that human beings come to inhabit more fully a world of pure rationality” (1356). In other words, humanist theory posits a break in the connection between humans and nature, suggesting that humans are unique rational creatures, capable of controlling their natural environment. Post-humanist theory, on the other hand, demands a careful re-consideration of the connection between humans and nature.

In *Politics of Nature*, Bruno Latour outlines how the concern – or re-consideration of – nature comes appropriately at the time when we can cease to see nature as a public dumping ground. It is the threat of ecological crises that forces humans to, as Latour (2004) states, “internalize the environment that it had viewed up to now as another world” (58). In the process of internalizing the environment, Latour (2004) also suggests, “that we can no longer leave the entire set of nonhumans captive under the exclusive auspices of nature” (58). Instead, we must reconsider the initial humanist division between humans and nature and work towards reconnecting humans, nonhumans, and nature in what Latour (2004) understands as a new collective; a new *democratic* collective in which humans, nonhumans, and nature are all equally important actors. The extent to which Latour’s theory can be applied to a society is questionable, but his work does force one to begin to think about the possibility of extending human rights to animals, and even extending rights to more ambiguous entities such as ‘nature’. In my paper, I will outline the importance of post-humanist theory for articulating an animal ethics with regards to farmed animals, but will also outline how the fetishization of meat may limit the extent to which post-humanist theory may be realized.

Post-humanist writing often asserts that post-humanism cannot do away with humanism, but rather must carefully re-consider what humanism presents (Badmington, 2003; Murdoch, 2004). Badmington (2003) states that many post-humanist writers are “a little too quick to affirm an absolute break with humanism, and [are] a little too reluctant to attend to what remains of humanism in the posthumanist landscape” (15). Badmington (2003) instead suggests that post-humanist work needs to be “complemented by work that
speaks to humanism’s ghost” (15). But incorporating an exploration of humanism in post-humanist writing is not a regressive gesture. Instead, by drawing upon Derrida’s work on deconstruction, Badmington (2003) suggests that post-humanism demands a deconstruction of humanism, “in order to expose the overwhelming uncertainty” of humanism. Badmington (2003) also outlines a very simple – but effective – observation that the “post” of post-humanism speaks to the ghosts of humanism, and forces us to recognize that we “cannot simply forget the past” – the humanist past (15).

The post-humanist task of speaking to the ghost of humanism is essential to articulate an animal ethics in connection to the industrial production of meat. In order to approach animal rights from a post-humanist perspective, the important task of de-tangling the complex ideology of ‘meat’ is essential. I take the position that meat is fetishized in North America, and therefore, in order to effectively approach animal rights from a post-humanist perspective, it is essential to de-tangle the ideology of meat that supports its fetishization. Considering the wide range use of the term ‘fetishism’, I want to delimit the term by following Marx. According to Marx, the “‘real’ value of a commodity is analysed as a social relation determined by the amount of labour that has gone into its production,” and value has “nothing to do with the material form of the commodity” (Dant, 500). The fetishized value of an object “obscures the real relationship between people” that produces the object of value, and instead of being imbued with value determined by the ‘work’ put into the commodity, the fetishized object’s value is determined by its exchange value (Dant, 500). Marx’s understanding of commodity fetishism assumes that the consumer remains unaware, and distanced from the social relations, which are essential for the creation of the commodity. Regarding the commodity of meat, an attempt to account for the obscured relationships behind it must recognize not only the relationship between human workers, but also the relationship between humans and the commodity itself – the once living animal. Again, I must stress that this understanding is determined by a post-humanist perspective. From a humanist perspective, the animal remains disconnected from humans – as part of ‘nature’ – and hence can be controlled and even exploited by the rational human. In an attempt to account for cow subjectivity, Holloway (2007) suggests that the post-humanist discourse that works at “decentering human subjectivity [should] become relevant to
conceptualizations of nonhuman subjectivity” (1044-5). At this point Holloway (2007) introduces the concept of the ‘hybrid cow’: a being that, “first, emerges from histories of human intervention (for example, selective breeding practices), and, second, exists in relation to the different and specific material and social relationships cows are caught up in (i.e. different types of farming practices)”. This argument forces us to recognize the cow as “a hybrid of the ‘natural’ and the ‘social’” (Holloway, 1045). In other words, the ‘farm animal’ cannot simply be seen as ‘natural’ – as merely part of nature – but instead, because of the domestication of these animals, and the long history of controls set upon the bodies of farm animals, they must in part be seen as social beings. Holloway (2007) goes on to suggest that, “bovine subjectivity has a history rather than an essence, and bovine being and bodily capacities are relational in terms of the different technologies, economies, and social relations (with humans and with other cows) that cows are associated with” (1055). By granting farm animals subjectivities, and recognizing the relations between farm animals, and between farm animals and human (i.e. farmers), Holloway’s work can be properly incorporated into my argument that the commodity of meat is fetishized, and that the final product of meat, sold to and consumed, obscures the real social relations of human and nonhuman social agents essential to the final product.

The maintenance of a fetishized understanding of meat is primarily the result of cultural practices that permit meat to remain as a fetishized commodity. These practices are the primary interest of my paper, however, before continuing, I must speak to the limitations of Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism. As Baudrillard (1981) explains, “[b]y referring all the problems of “fetishism” back to superstructural mechanisms of false consciousness, Marxism eliminates any real chance it has of analyzing the actual process of ideological labor” (89). Even though I have outlined a use for Marx’s definition of commodity fetishism, I find Baudrillard’s work helpful to work beyond the materiality of Marxism, and develop an understanding of ideological practices that enables commodities to remain fetishized. Baudrillard (1981) understands fetishism not as “a fetishism of the signified” – not a fetishism of the material object – but rather a “fetishism of the signifier” – or, as he alternatively puts it, commodity fetishism is the “passion for the code” (92). Therefore, “the fetishization of the commodity is the fetishization of a product emptied of its concrete substance of labor and subjected to
another type of labor, a labor of signification” (Baudrillard, 93). With this in mind, perhaps it is best to ask: how is meat coded? How does the signification of the commodity of meat distance itself from the actual product of meat?

The first step in the de-construction of the ‘code’ of meat is to speak of the language used in the signification of the commodity. Probyn (1999) states that there is a, “fine distinction between flesh, which is usually alive and typically, human; and meat, which is dead, inert, animal and intended for consumption” (221). Probyn’s statement asserts the humanist division between humans and animals, and speaks to the fact that animal flesh is typically recognized as a commodity. Probyn’s statement also speaks to a specific language practice that obscures an aspect of reality, specifically it obscures the potential to draw similarities between human and animal flesh/meat. Stated differently, it obscures the actual ‘meatiness’ of human flesh and the ‘fleshiness’ of animal meat. Probyn’s suggestion of obscured language use can be used to elaborate on the terms used to differentiate between living animals, and the meat their bodies provide. For example, the obscured ‘meat’ language use is that the word ‘beef’ is used to refer to the commodity we consume, whereas ‘cow’ is the living animal. Other examples of different terms used for the living animal as opposed to the meat consumed include: sheep/mutton, pig/pork, and chicken/poultry. I want to take this simple idea one step further, by using the example of the cow. In examining the terms used for the different cuts of beef, the terms signify not just an area of the animal’s body, but also signify the type of food prepared. At this point that meat becomes wrapped in a culture of food, and distanced from the once living animal. In other words, cuts of beef still refer to the living animal, but are also wrapped into the codes of culinary practices. A cut of beef becomes something unto itself – the source, or region of the cow from which it is cut is downplayed, and instead the function of the cut is what it can add to specific meals. I would even go as far as arguing that the connections between the different cuts of beef are obscured, and instead we see a hierarchical ordering of the ‘qualities’ of the cuts interpreted in their monetary value as they appear at the supermarket. Baudrillard would argue that these different cuts of meat do not have inherent use-value, which is not hard to perceive considering that culinary practices are socially developed. In fact, Baudrillard (1981) states that “[t]he empirical “object,” given in its contingency of form, color, material, function and discourse… is a
myth” (63). The object is in fact “nothing but the different types of relations of significations that converge, contradict themselves, and twist around it, as such” (Baudrillard, 63). But how does this understanding of the ‘culturally constructed commodity of meat’ affect the consumer? According to Baudrillard (1981), “[needs] can no longer be defined adequately in terms of the naturalist-idealist thesis [but rather,] there are only needs because the system needs them” (82). This argument becomes muddled when it comes to food commodities – we do ‘need’ food to survive, but Baudrillard’s statement points out that our need for a specific food could potentially be influenced by cultural discourses. It must also be stressed that Baudrillard’s point does not exclude the potential for individual choice. Rather, he is suggesting that all choices – whether that be for food commodities or not – are already wrapped in codes of significations, that interpolate the individual subject to the desired characteristics of their specific commodity choice.

Aside from the use of language to fetishize commodities, the moment of commodity consumption itself must be explored in order to understand the full extent to which a commodity is in fact fetishized. Dant (1996) outlines that a moment of consumption, “refers not merely to the purchase of objects but the use, enjoyment and disposal of the capacities of those objects” (510). The fetish quality of a commodity is realized over and above simple consumption, and is, “attested through ritualistic practices that celebrate or revere the [commodity]” (Dant, 510). Dant (1996) stresses that, “[u]nlike sexual fetishism where the fantasy is usually personal, the fetishism of consumption involves the social negotiation and sharing of the value of the object so the ritualistic practices that fetishize objects will involve discursive action related to the object and its capacities” (511). The types of social practices Dant (1996) outlines that are used to fetishize a commodity include: “celebrating the object, revering it, setting it apart, displaying it, extolling and exalting its capacities, eulogizing it, [and] enthusiastic use of it” (511-2). I have chosen to explore the social practices that fetishize meat by using the example of “The World’s Longest BBQ”. In response to the BSE crisis in Alberta, Camrose residents Dallas and Kyle Ramey organized an event that aimed to break world records – ‘The World’s Longest BBQ’. The event was first hosted starting October 27, 2004 and ended 83 hours later on October 30th. Initially, it was supposed to be a one-time
event, but thanks to the success of the first year, the city of Camrose hosted two more annual events sporting the same name. On the website for the event, it boasts that “the idea of the World’s Longest BBQ was to raise awareness of the BSE issue, to show support for the Alberta beef industry and the hardworking individuals who make it a great success, as well as to showcase the greatest beef in the world in a positive manner” (World’s Longest Barbeque, para. 2). Essentially, “The World’s Longest BBQ” was a social event that enthusiastically supported mass consumption of the commodity of beef. The event successfully drew from the local cultural ideology that ‘Alberta beef is the best in the world,’ and the attendees celebrated, extolled, exalted, and enthusiastically consumed a commodity produced by one of the most successful agricultural industries of the area. It must be stressed that it the ‘commodity’ was celebrated in the absolute act of consumption, and not the origin of the commodity – the cow itself. Granted, the event was an exaggerated display of social practices that fetishize meat, but there are less exaggerated examples to draw from. Dant (1996) outlines the use of advertising in setting and defining ‘modes of consumption’ that maintain a fetishized understanding of the qualities of a commodity. Therefore, even something as simple as a photograph of a steak as displayed in a steakhouse menu, fetishizes the commodity. By displaying a steak in this manner, the commodity is stripped of its origin, and instead seen as something unto itself. Technically, it is seen in connection to other types of food typically assumed to be consumed with steak – such as vegetables and potatoes – but even considering this, these already established culinary discourses of how steak is expected to be consumed, maintain a fetishized understanding of steak. In continuing with my analysis of the ideology of steak, Roland Barthes (1972) is helpful in articulating the myth of the phenomenological experience of consuming steak. Barthes (1972) states that steak, “is the heart of meat, it is meat in its pure state; and whoever partakes of it assimilates a bull-like strength” (62). Barthes’ analysis of steak brings to light the often silly interpretations of the power of food; interpretations that fetishize the actual potential of food commodities.

Cultural practices – whether that be language use, advertising that presents the mythical powers of meat, or a cultural event that uncritically promotes the mass consumption of meat – work to fetishize the origin of meat. The fetishization strips meat
from its origin – the once living animal – and instead promotes a mythical relation between consumer and commodity that exploits the life of the once living commodity. Post-humanist writers work to reconnect humans to exploited farm animals by bridging a connection between humans and nonhumans. But as already outlined, some post-humanist writers are, “too quick to affirm an absolute break with humanism, and [are] a little too reluctant to attend to what remains of humanism in the posthumanist landscape” (Badmington, 2003). Unfortunately, I would argue that we have yet to even experience the post-humanist landscape. It is not simply a question of needing to “speak to the ghost” of humanism, but rather there must be a critical deconstruction, and equally as critical reconstruction of simple social practices that maintain a humanist outlook. These practices maintain a strict division between humans and nature, and allows for humans to assume the position that they can in fact control nature, and non-humans.

**Works Cited**


