

# 10. CHICKEN

ROOSTER: *Ego dixi: Coccadoodul du.*

CHICKENS: *Gallus magnifice incendens exclamat. Nunc venit agricola.*

—GRUNT, PIGORIAN CHANT FROM SNOUTO DOMOINKO DE SILO

Chicken is no coward. Indeed, this warrior bird has plied his trade as a fighting cock around the world since the earliest days such fowl consented to work for people, somewhere in South and Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup>

Anxious if brave, Chicken Little has long worried that the sky is falling. He has a good vantage point from which to assess this matter; for Chicken, right along with his overreaching companion, *Homo sapiens*, has been witness to and participant in all the big events of Civilization. Chicken labored on the Egyptian pyramids, when barley-pinching pharaohs started the world's first mass egg industry to feed the avians' co-conscripted human workers. Much later—a bit after the Egyptians replaced their barley exchange system with proper coins, thus acting like the progressive capitalists their exchange partners always seem to want in that part of the world—Julius Caesar brought the Pax Romana, along with the “ancient English” chicken breed, the Dorking, to Britain. Chicken Little knows all about the shock and awe of History, and he is a master at tracking the routes of Globalizations, old and new. Technoscience is no stranger either. Add to that,

Chicken knows a lot about Biodiversity and Cultural Diversity, whether one thinks about the startling variety of chickenkind for the five thousand years of their domestic arrangements with humanity or considers the “improved breeds” accompanying capitalist class formations from the nineteenth century to now. No county fair is complete without its gorgeous “purebred” chickens, who know a lot about the history of eugenics. It is hard to sort out shock from awe in chickenland. Whether the firmament takes a calamitous tumble or not, Chicken holds up a good half of the sky.

In 2004 C.E., Chicken Little donned his spurs once more and entered the war on words thrust on him by Current Events.<sup>2</sup> Ever a gender bender, Chicken joined the LGBT Brigade and outdid himself as a post-colonial, transnational, pissed-off spent hen and mad feminist.<sup>3</sup> Chicken admitted that s/he was inspired by the all (human) girl underground fight clubs that s/he found out about on [www.extremechickfights.com](http://www.extremechickfights.com). Ignoring the sexism of *chick*, extreme or not, and the porn industry and pedophilic scene that vilifies the name of chicken, our Bird raptured those fighting girls right out of History and into his trannie sf world, fit to confront the Eagles of War and the Captains of Industry. S/he felt this rapturous power because s/he recalled not just the exploits of Cousin Phoenix but also the years when s/he too was a figure of Jesus Resurrected, promising the faithful that they would rise from the ashes of History’s barbecues.

Barbecue. An unkind reminder of where Chicken Little had best concentrate her attention. For, at the end of a millennium, in 2000, ten billion chickens were slaughtered in the United States alone. Worldwide, five billion hens—75 percent in cramped, multioccupancy quarters called battery cages—were laying eggs, with Chinese flocks leading the way, followed by those in the United States and Europe.<sup>4</sup> Thai chicken exports topped \$1.5 billion in value in an industry supplying Japanese and E.U. markets and employing hundreds of thousands of Thai citizens. World chicken production was 65.6 million tons, and the whole operation was growing at 4 percent per year. Captains of Industry, indeed. Chicken could conclude that a major avian vocation seems to be breakfast and dinner while the world burns.<sup>5</sup>

Contrary to the views of her pesky friends in the transnational animal rights movement, our Opportunistic Bird is not against surrendering

a pound of flesh in exchange for pecking rights in the natural-cultural contractual arrangements that domesticated both bipedal hominids and winged gallinaceous avians. But something is seriously foul in current versions of multispecies global contract theory.<sup>6</sup>

One way to tell the trouble (one detail among myriads) is that a three-year study in Tulsa, Oklahoma—a center of factory chicken production—showed that half the water supply was dangerously polluted by poultry waste. Go ahead, microwave sponges in your kitchens as often as the clean food cops advise; inventive bacteria will outwit you with their fowl alliances.

Well, one more detail. Manipulated genetically since the 1950s to rapidly grow megabreasts, chickens given a choice choose food laced with painkillers. “Unsustainable growth rates” are supposed to be about dot-com fantasies and inflationary stock markets. In Chicken’s world, however, that term designates the daily immolation of forced maturation and disproportionate tissue development that produces tasty (enough) young birds who are often enough unable to walk, flap their wings, or even stand up. Muscles linked in evolutionary history and religious symbolism to flight, sexual display, and transcendence instead pump iron for transnational growth industries. Not satisfied, some agribusiness scientists look to post genomics research for even more buffed white meat.<sup>7</sup>

Since chickens were the first farm animals to be permanently confined indoors and made to labor in automated systems based on Technoscience’s finest genetic technologies, research on feed-conversion efficiency, and miracle drugs (not painkillers but antibiotics and hormones),<sup>8</sup> Chicken might be excused for being unimpressed by the McDonald Corporation’s grudging agreement in 2000 to require that its suppliers give 50 percent more space per bird destined to be Chicken McNuggets and Eggs McMuffin. Still, McDonald’s was the first corporation in the world to admit that pain and suffering are concepts familiar to underrated bird brains. Chicken’s ingratitude is no wonder, when few “humane” slaughter laws in the United States or Canada to this day apply to chickens.<sup>9</sup>

In 1999 the European Union did manage to ban battery cages, beginning in 2012. That should allow for a smooth transition. Perhaps more sensitized to ever-ready Holocaust analogies, the Germans will make those cages illegal in 2007. In the market-besotted United States,

Chicken's hope seems to be in designer eggs for the omega-3 fatty acid-conscious and free-range certified organic chickens for the conscience-stricken and pure of diet.<sup>10</sup> The up-to-the-minute ethically fastidious might procure their chicken fix like the citizens in *Oryx and Crake*, Margaret Atwood's sf, especially in the sense of speculative fiction, novel (published in 2003). There, "ChickenNobs"—tasty organs without organisms, especially without annoying heads that register pain and perhaps have ideas about what constitutes a proper domestic bird's life—are on the menu. Genetically engineered muscles-without-animals illustrate exactly what Sarah Franklin means by designer ethics, which aim to bypass cultural struggle with just-in-time, "high technology" breakthroughs.<sup>11</sup> Design away the controversy, and all those free-range anarchists will have to go home. But remember, Chicken squawks even when his head has been cut off.

The law cannot be counted on. After all, even human laborers in the chicken industry are superexploited. Thinking of battery cages for laying hens reminds Chicken Little of how many illegal immigrants, ununionized women and men, people of color, and former prisoners process chickens in Georgia, Arkansas, and Ohio. It's no wonder that at least one U.S. soldier who tortured Iraqi prisoners was a chicken processor in her civilian life.

It's enough to make a sensitive Bird sick, as much from the virus of transnational politics as from the other kind. An avian flu outbreak in seven Asian nations shocked the world in the winter of 2004 and fear of a global pandemic remains lively in 2007. Luckily, by mid-2006 only about 130 humans had died, unlike the tens of millions who succumbed in 1918–19. Mass culling remains the officially recommended response to every appearance of the disease in domestic flocks, and sporadic threats to kill migrating birds are not empty.<sup>12</sup> Chicken Little could not find figures for total estimated bird deaths worldwide, from the disease and from culling. But before the end of 2004, about twenty million chickens were prophylactically slaughtered in Thailand alone. Global TV news showed unprotected human workers stuffing innumerable birds into sacks, tossing them undead into mass graves, and sprinkling on lime. In Thailand, 99 percent of chicken operations are, in Global Speak, "small" (fewer than one thousand birds, since it takes more than eighty thousand

to be “large”) and could not afford biosecurity—for people or birds. Newscasters waxed eloquent about a threatened transnational industry but spoke nary a word about farmers’ and chickens’ lives. Meanwhile, Indonesian government spokespeople in 2003 denied any avian flu in those salubrious quarters, even while Indonesian veterinary associations argued that millions of birds showed signs of avian flu as early as October of that year. And then came Indonesia’s unpleasant number-one world rank for human deaths in 2006.

Perhaps the *Bangkok Post* on January 27, 2004, got the war of worlds, words, and images right with a cartoon showing migratory birds from the north dropping bombs—bird shit full of avian flu strain H<sub>5</sub>N<sub>1</sub>—on the geobody of the Thai nation.<sup>13</sup> This postcolonial joke on transborder bioterrorism is a nice reversal of U.S. and European fears of immigrants of all species from the global south. After all, prototypes for



technoscientific, export-oriented, epidemic friendly chicken industries were big on the Peace Corps agenda (a theme picked up later by the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade), right along with artificial milk for infants. Proud progenitor of such meaty progress, the United States had high hopes for winning the Cold War in Asia with standardized broilers and layers carrying democratic values. In Eugene Burdick and William J. Lederer's 1958 novel, *The Ugly American*, set in a fictional Southeast Asian nation called Sarkan, Iowa chicken farmer and agricultural teacher Tom Knox was about the only decent U.S. guy. Neither Knox nor subsequent Development Experts seem to have cared much for the varied chicken-human livelihoods thriving for a few thousand years throughout Asia. In 2006, it seemed, the TV news showed unstandardized chickens living in close contact with ordinary people only to illustrate backwardness and public health failures, except for occasionally advertising tasty free-range birds living in the European Union and North America and destined for transnational affluent niche markets. Even those birds have to go indoors when H5N1 comes calling.

Sub-Saharan Africa entered the story in the most abject way, seemingly naturally once again; postcolonial tropes, not to mention postcolonial injustice, demand it.<sup>14</sup> In February 2006, the H5N1 strain of bird flu was confirmed on three farms in northern Nigeria, initiating large-scale culls. Making public health control measures especially difficult, customary poultry husbandry, in which people and birds associate closely, exists cheek by jowl with a fledgling agribusiness chicken industry that would make Iowa's Tom Knox proud. By August 2006, human cases of bird flu were confirmed, tens of thousands of birds had died, poultry markets were closing down, and the World Health Organization had approved fifty million dollars to try to stem the trouble.

Two suspects, both signifying transborder crossings outside the reach of the law, emerged for spreading the virus to Nigeria—migrating birds and illegally imported baby chicks. Closer scrutiny of the geographical pattern of affected farms indicated that migrating birds were insignificant compared with that staple of global neoliberalism: illegal trade involving the world's poorest populations tied to the most economically entrepreneurial configurations.<sup>15</sup> Without reliable climate-controlled hatchery facilities, Nigerians sought to cash in on the lucrative global poultry trade

through obtaining extralegal chicks from China. Smuggling of all sorts between Africa and China is not news; comprehending that a global pandemic coupled to ordinary African farmers' further immiseration might be one of its fruits did open a few eyes.<sup>16</sup> But never enough eyes.

How many good citizens of the above-ground world would be surprised by the news that an illegal trade in chicken parts makes more money than even weapons trafficking in another abjected, war-riddled geopolitical zone, namely, the borderlands joining Moldavia, Trans-Dniestria, and Ukraine in the former Soviet Union? Spicing this particular story is the name locals give to the trafficked chicken hind quarters: "Bush legs," a moniker tracing to George senior's program to ship U.S. poultry to the Soviet Union in the early 1990s.<sup>17</sup> Worldwide, the illegal animal trade of all sorts is second in total value only to illegal drugs.

Chicken is, of course, no virgin to debates about political orders. Our fowl was the darling of savants' disputes about the nature of mind and instincts, and the "philosopher's chick" was a staple of European nineteenth-century learned idioms. Translated into the only proper global language, famous experiments in comparative psychology gave the world the term *pecking order* in the 1920s. Chicken Little remembers that this research by the Norwegian Thorleif Schjelderup-Ebbe, a serious lover and student of chickens, described complex social arrangements worthy of fowl, not the wooden dominance hierarchies in biopolitics that gained such a hold on cultural imaginations.<sup>18</sup> Behavioral sciences of both human and nonhuman varieties continue to find anything but dominance and subordination hard to think about. Chicken knows that producing better accounts of animal doings, with one another and with humans, can play an important role in reclaiming livable politics. But first came the hard years for chickens, whose subjection to the scientific, commercial, and political dreams of aspiring communities, entrepreneurs, and nation builders alike is not yet over.

In the 1920s, seeking to escape urban poverty, several hundred Jewish families—idealists, secularists, socialists, Jews from the shtetls of Eastern Europe and the sweatshops of New York's Lower East Side—got the word that they could make a living in the "Chicken Basket of the World," the little town of Petaluma in California.<sup>19</sup> Economic crises and unbridgeable debates about Israel or the Soviet Union all but tore the

once-thriving community apart after World War II, but not before Chicken had brought the Petaluma Jewish Folk Chorus together with Paul Robeson in concert. Chicken fared less well; Petaluma was a major center of the industrialization of animal life, and neither socialism nor communism of that period had any strategies to offer laboring bodies who were not human. Perhaps partly because of that gap in the visions of those who most knew how to work toward communitarian freedom, the hyperexploited laboring bodies of both chickens and humans are joined in a terrifying global industry by the early twenty-first century.

The hopeful and tragic politics of Jewish chicken farmers turns up one more time in Chicken Little's research, this time joined to the fowl's reading pursuits in science fiction. From the first decades of the twentieth century, Rutgers, the state university of New Jersey, like other U.S. land-grant colleges, was a leader in poultry science linked to the industrialization of the chicken in American and world agriculture. After World War II, multitudes of veterans looked to poultry farming as a way to prosperity. Among the avid students studying at Rutgers's Poultry Science Department in the late 1940s was a young woman with a job in wartime army photo intelligence behind her (and ahead of her, a role in the development of the CIA from 1952 to 1955 as well as a PhD in experimental psychology earned in 1967). This chicken science student would become known to the sf world in the late 1960s as a reclusive male writer named James Tiptree Jr. But in the 1940s she was Alice Sheldon, who, with her husband Col. Huntington Sheldon, ran a small chicken farm in New Jersey from 1946 to 1952. Tiptree's biographer records Alice and Huntington's love of the Rutgers scene, all of it, including the science, the business, and the comradeship. "Most of their fellow students were veterans like them, though several were on their way to Palestine to lend their farming skills to the proposed new state of Israel."<sup>20</sup>

Whether publishing as James Tiptree Jr., Alice Sheldon, or Racoon Sheldon, this category bender worthy of Chicken Little wrote science fiction that toyed mercilessly with species, alternation of generations, reproduction, infection, gender, genre, and many kinds of genocide. Did those chickens inspire some of her quirky sf imagination and unsettling feminist thought experiments? Tiptree "once told [fellow sf writer] Vonda McIntyre she was sketching out a plot about 'a chicken hatchery set in



the asteroids, run by women in competition with a huge processed-foods corporation.”<sup>21</sup> Were Tiptree’s chickens ever free-ranging fowl pecking at insects, or were they hatched in incubators for the developing post-war animal–industrial complex? Did *Racoon* Sheldon resonate with that greatest threat to outdoor chickens in the United States, the wily raccoon? Did the luxuriating brutalities of industrial chicken production that took off in the 1950s fuel any of Tiptree’s many dark alien biological stories?<sup>22</sup>

Laying hens and fertile eggs dominate Chicken Little’s closing thoughts. Perversely, s/he finds there the stuff of still possible freedom projects and renewed awe. The British claymation film *Chicken Run* (2000) stars 1950s Yorkshire hens facing a life of forced toil. The appearance of Rocky, the Rhode Island red, catalyzes a liberation drama that gives no comfort either to “deep animal rights” imaginations of a time before cospecies domestication or to millennial nation builders and free traders in chicken flesh. Pecking hens have other biopolitical tricks tucked under their wings.

Perhaps the Rare Breeds Survival Trust (RBST) and its sibling organizations around the world are incubating what socialists, communists, Zionists, Asian industrial tigers, nationalists in the Caucasus, transnational poultry scientists, and Iowa Democrats failed to imagine: ongoing chicken–human lives that are attentive to complex histories of animal–human entanglements, fully contemporary *and* committed to a future of multispecies naturalcultural flourishing in both wild and domestic domains.<sup>23</sup> RBST works against the premises and practices of factory farming on many levels, none of them reducible to keeping animals as museum specimens of a lost past or as wards in a permanent guardianship, in which utilitarian relations between animals and people, including eating meat, are always defined as abuse. RBST maintains a database of breeds of poultry threatened with disappearance through industrial standardization; plans in advance how to protect rare-breed flocks from extermination by culling in bird flu and other epidemic disasters; supports husbandry conducive to whole-organism well-being of both animals and people; analyzes breeds for their most economical and productive uses, including new ones; and demands effective action for animal well-being in transport, slaughter, and marketing. None of this is innocent, nor is

the success of such approaches guaranteed. That is what “becoming with” as a worldly practice means.

Chicken Little returns in the end to the egg—fertile eggs in school biology labs that once gave millions of young hominids the privilege to see the shocking beauty of the developing chick embryo, with its dynamic architectural intricacies.<sup>24</sup> These cracked-open eggs did not offer an innocent beauty, but neither did they give warrant to colonial or postcolonial arrogances about Development. The contact zone of the chick embryo can renew the meaning of awe in a world in which laying hens know more about the alliances it will take to survive and flourish in multispecies, multicultural, multiordered associations than do all the secondary Bushes in Florida and Washington. Follow the chicken and find the world.

The sky has not fallen, not yet.