Part 3. Processes of Dispossession

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Environmental destruction appears in different forms, and the industrial food system has been one of the forces most disruptive to nature in the modern era. Intensive crop and livestock production have ripped up landscapes while natural waterways have been torn from their existing context and rerouted to feed thirsty farmlands. The introduction of chemical fertilizers and pesticides have disrupted and degraded soil organic matter at the same time that livestock farms release large volumes of greenhouse gases such as methane, thereby accelerating global warming. These detrimental effects of food production on the environment arise to no small degree from consumer choices. In their preference for particular foods, consumers play a large role in shaping the market and, by extension, food production. Extensive food cultures lie behind consumer choices, and these cultures valorize food products and dishes—thus establishing hierarchies of food. Food cultures normalize people’s food choices in their everyday life. As the chapters in part 3 show, producers and consumers combine to form a potent driver of environmental change, molding patterns of land use to align with the changing tastes and predilections of Korean society.

In the Global North, industrial food systems emphasize the production and consumption of beef. South Korea, in particular, features an extensive beef-eating culture, which has a relatively short history. Before the twentieth century, Koreans mostly employed cattle for work and transportation. Agricultural cultivators relied mainly on cows and bulls for tilling fields. Beef was mostly consumed by the royal family and landed elite. Raising cattle for beef production took off during the Japanese colonial period. At that time, efforts were made
to build more livestock farms to breed cattle not only for domestic consumption but also for the export of cattle and beef to neighboring countries. Eating beef became more mainstream only in the 1970s and 1980s, when beef became more affordable. The domestic production of beef grew during that time—a time when eating beef was glamorized as a sign of modern life. Since the early 1990s, the import of inexpensive beef products from the United States and Australia has only increased beef consumption. In fact, South Korea’s rate of consumption has outpaced levels in China and Japan. In 2020, according to the OECD, South Korea’s per capita consumption of beef was 11.9 kilograms, while China’s was 4.2 kilograms and Japan’s stood at 7.6 kilograms.

The beef industry in Korea is a multi-billion-dollar enterprise that involves parties inside and outside Korea. In 2020 alone, US companies exported $1.7 billion of beef and beef products to South Korea—making the country the top destination for American beef—while the export value of Australian beef to Korea totaled AUD$1.6 billion. In South Korea, producers and wholesalers fuel the beef market as they sell and distribute beef to a variety of outlets, including food markets, grocery stores, butchers, and restaurants. At homes or in restaurants, beef is pervasive on Korean tables. Normally, any gathering, celebration, or important ritual features family and friends sharing beef-based dishes. Its central place in the Korean diet unsurprisingly makes beef into a ready-made symbol with different meanings and purposes. The 2008 Candlelight Protest, for example, turned beef into a signifier of political kowtowing. At that time, people protested President Lee Myung-bak’s decision to resume US beef imports despite issues about the safety of imported beef. In terms of nationalism, Koreans praise hanu—a breed of cattle that is indigenous to the Korean peninsula and is known for being on par with Japanese wagyu beef—as a symbol of their prestigious food culture. Increasingly, the consumption of beef has come to symbolize virility, strength, and prosperity because narratives of the ideal modern life have promoted beef-eating as a sign of an advanced society.

Beef, in short, holds a central place in Korean society and its industrial food system. It therefore shapes the pathways of nonhuman and human life and the overall environment. In part 3, Anders Riel Muller and Lindsay S. R. Jolivette’s chapters help to elucidate the relationships between beef and human and nonhuman processes. Together, they highlight meat production and consumption as processes that not only unsettle and determine landscapes and ecologies but also raise important questions about the treatment of animals and the sometimes invisible costs of the industry. For both authors, meat or, more specifically, beef serves as a vital connection point between human and nonhuman concerns. In particular, the two chapters explore concerns of dispossession through beef and the environmental costs of this process. Whereas Muller’s chapter speaks of dis-
possession as a vehicle for depriving land from non-Koreans outside of the peninsula and shaping the landscapes of South Korea, Jolivette’s chapter treats dispossession as a biological process that strips away the humanity of individuals and forces the questioning of what it means to be human. In paying greater heed to acts of land expropriation and ideas of dehumanization, both chapters speak to how beef has unsettled the worlds of humans and animals alike.

Three particular themes structure their approach to the political, cultural, and affective contours of beef and dispossession in South Korea—destruction, seizing, and systems. Destruction highlights the role meat and beef have played in the decline of planetary health through the ripping up of lands for livestock production—a process that, as Muller shows, requires that we look beyond the Korean peninsula. Setting her sights on the cultural anxieties that have taken shape around meat consumption, Jolivette considers destruction in a different sense: the imagined decimation of the human race because of the slaughtering of animals and the insatiable consumption of beef. Additionally, both essays touch on the theme of seizing—that is, taking hold of resources, foodways, or other bodies in a sudden manner. Their chapters approach seizing by showing how Korean companies have requisitioned land for the production of feed overseas or how Korean films have depicted Korean bodies being taken over by viruses and pathogens and becoming zombies after eating meat. A third theme—systems—draws our attention to the various ways that meat production and consumption bind the human and nonhuman worlds together and mediate relationships between the two, whether through markets, culinary practices, or even geopolitics. Taken together, these themes reveal beef to be not just an item for consumption and celebration, but also a vital arena of environmental politics and a source of considerable ecological anxiety.