MAT Medicine Anthropology Theory

THE NIGHTSTAND

Animals incorporated

Natalie Porter

I used to be very restrictive about how I incorporated animal products into my body and lifestyle. As a teenager I adopted a strictly vegetarian diet, eschewed leather, and refused products tested on animals. I continued these habits for over a decade, picking up health and environmental arguments to support my cause along the way.

But these habits changed when I began engaging in ethnographic research on bird flu in Vietnam. Anxious to partake in the everyday activities of Vietnamese poultry farmers I embraced a credo to just try everything, and today, six years later, there are only one or two animal products that I resolutely avoid. Fieldwork has changed more than my consumption habits. I have recently begun conducting multispecies research at US microbiology labs, where I participate in the manipulation and 'sacrifice' of experimental animals.

I do sit uncomfortably with these fleshy interactions, and I often wonder about the hierarchies of life that legitimate them. What can practices of animal incorporation tell us about how we render bodies and value lives?

In *The Transplant Imaginary: Mechanical Hearts, Animal Parts, and Moral Thinking in Experimental Science*, Leslie Sharp (2014) explores xenotransplantation – efforts to harvest organs from animals for use in humans. She is interested in exploring the moral thinking of the scientists involved in such practices: How do they imagine and reconfigure human bodies in relation to animal 'donors'? How do they articulate the promises, challenges, and dangers of interspecies organ transfer?

Sharp suggests that xeno science fosters ambivalence. Scientists express kindredness with animal subjects but also treat them as expendable research objects. This is particularly true in the context of promissory markets. To attract venture capital, scientists struggle to balance

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the demands of generating and harvesting viable organs with their commitment to upholding the integrity of animal life. Scientists temper the market value of animal parts with a moral framing that evaluates scientific rigor alongside animal welfare.

The ambivalence surrounding experimental animals goes beyond considerations of animal welfare, however, to encompass questions about what it means to actually 'embody interspeciality'. To what extent does animal incorporation upset the integrity of human bodies? Sharp shows that while xeno scientists may view boundary crossing as ingenious in experimental contexts, they are nevertheless troubled by the prospect of sustaining such crossings within a human body. Delineating which humans are suitable for xenotransplantation involves uncomfortable evaluations of life both within and across species.

Discomfort also surfaces in Gewertz and Errington's (2010) account of the controversial trade in, and consumption of, inexpensive, fatty cuts of lamb. In *Cheap Meat: Flap Food Nations in the Pacific Islands,* the authors follow flap commodities – tough, gristly cuts of lamb that contain thick bands of fat deemed inedible by 'First World' consumers – as they move from farms in Australia and New Zealand to markets across the Pacific Islands. This is a story about hierarchies of animal flesh and the bodies that consume it.

The consumption of meat flaps, the authors argue, defines groups in totemic ways. Flaps draw categorical distinctions between those who eat cheap meat (Pacific Islanders) and those who do not (everyone else). To be sure, such distinctions align with geopolitical and socioeconomic inequalities – inequalities that Pacific Islanders embody in a slew of 'lifestyle diseases', namely obesity. Careful not to equate obesity merely with flap consumption, however, Gewertz and Errington situate flaps within broader dietary habits. Pacific Islanders today not only eat cheap meat, but also energy-rich industrial foods like Twisties, a Pepsi Co. corn and rice product that is meant as a snack but more often than not taken as a meal. The global commodity chains reaching these island nations thus distribute a new set of risks alongside new kinds of 'food'.

What's more, this Islanders' fleshy form of animal incorporation determines the contours not just of individual bodies, but of social and national bodies, too. At stake in this story are the transnational inequalities and circumscribed choices that deem cheap (valueless) flaps 'good enough' for Pacific Islanders, and the repeated disappointments of development that prompt many islanders and their governments to agree. Like the experimental scientists who tack back and forth between viewing animals as kindred subjects and research objects, the proximities and distances drawn between social groups and meat flaps entail moral calculations that render unequal categories of life and uneven patterns of vulnerability.

I am particularly interested in Gewertz and Errington's assertion that a market rhetoric of supply and demand cannot silence the politically charged movements of fatty meat. It is disingenuous to speak of consumption 'choices' in places characterized by limited markets and social mobility. The Fijian ban on flap dumping illustrates one government's efforts to safeguard the health of its citizens in the face of powerful economic interests. But the fact that this ban remains contested, and the fact that no other Pacific Island nations have followed suit, suggest that the market value of fatty flesh may trump other valuations of human bodies and welfare.

Ambivalence and discomfort. The feelings that accompany my own interspecies interactions surface prominently in these distinct ethnographic arenas. This is not surprising, for as Donna Haraway (2008) shows, interspecies co-minglings always cause some indigestion. These texts remind us, as scholars and people in the world, to engage with apparent ambivalences, to explore those that may be silenced, and to probe their implications. In this way we might move past tendencies to frame animal incorporations in terms of choice, restrictions, or even ethics, and to seek out more flexible and site-specific ways of dealing with discomfort.

About the author

Natalie Porter is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Notre Dame, where she researches the social and political aspects of pandemic disease management in Vietnam and the United States. Articles related to this work have been published in *American Ethnologist, BioSocieties*, and *Public Culture*. Natalie is currently writing a book-length ethnography on bird flu control in Vietnamese poultry economies.

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