

[Review] Paula Acari.

Making Sense of 'Food' Animals:

A Critical Exploration of the Persistence of Meat.

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There are many audiences for Paula Acari's new book on the persistence of meat as edible matter, *Making Sense of Food Animals*, and not all of them academic. One of the striking facets of this well-researched, clearly argued and empirical analysis, drawing on 41 interviews with Australian meat eaters and meat producers, is the lessons for animal advocacy organisations for rethinking their messaging strategies. Central to the book's argument is Acari's challenge to narratives of transparency and visibility, often employed by such groups, made famous by activist Linda McCartney's claim that 'if slaughterhouses had glass walls, everyone would be a vegetarian' (often wrongly attributed to her husband, Paul). Acari demonstrates, drawing on interview data and a robust interpretation of Foucauldian theory, that both looking and knowing are easily absorbed into the 'already encoded eye' of a human gaze that comes pre-trained by the 'normalised entitlement' of animal exploitation (263); as such, without a 'de- or re-coding' of that human gaze, calls for *more* transparency of slaughtering merely reinforce rather than disrupt the sense of animals' edibility. As the cognitive linguist George Lakoff advises those advocating for change, it is unwise to utilise the stories of those whose power you wish to disrupt. Recirculating such stories strengthens the existing cognitive models and the beliefs which rest upon them. To challenge such cognitive codification, which, in relation to the edibility of animals, has 'been socially, culturally and economically normalised over centuries' (274), requires a more radical approach that highlights existing mechanisms of power, and has

'rigorous, comprehensive strategies ready to challenge and refute them, not simply piecemeal responses as part of an apparently balanced discussion or debate' (291). Acari's book is a useful tool in helping animal advocacy groups rethink their campaigns to construct (and test) new messages that might 'land' with meat eaters, whose cognitive models continue to 'make sense' of animals as edible. What Acari hopes is that we reach a 'heterotopia' where it makes 'no sense' that animals are edible. As she readily admits, this is a 'big nut to crack'. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try, nor try to be more effective in our efforts.

*Making Sense of 'Food' Animals* is not foremost a handbook for action, however, but robust qualitative academic research grounded in a deep, 'rhizomatic' reading of Foucault and the biopolitical works in Critical Animal Studies that have followed from his influence (such as Wadiwel 2015). Her theoretical model is an attempt to build 'a truly whole-of-body understanding of the mechanisms of power that keep food animals in a state of domination' that can be 'undertaken by traversing rhizomatically through Foucault' (68) and, to summarise, especially his accounts of:

1. Power/knowledge
2. The pleasure of knowing
3. The power of transparency or the gaze
4. The pleasure of looking

While other theorists are available (and employed), this grounding in Foucault's work gives *Making Sense of 'Food' Animals* a critical structure that can be clearly followed and, if one wishes, clearly critiqued. But this reviewer is convinced that Acari has surveyed the many current posthumanist and theoretical models available, and adopted the one which allows for the most productive moving forward from her data in doing *critical* academic work for animals – not only to study, but to change. Indeed, Acari does a good job of outlining the limitations of other posthumanist approaches to human-animal relations. Like Giraud (2019), Acari is subtly critical of the fêted posthumanism of theorists such as Plumwood and Haraway, for example, whom she argues, despite their anti-dualistic intent, fail to properly challenge human entitlement and animals' edibility. As Acari writes, 'Contrary to its anti-dualistic intent, the notion of an idealized

human-animal continuity [found in these theorists' work, and also taken up and reflected by discourses of ethical and sustainable meat consumers] conceals, justifies, and reinforces persistently dualistic practices of animal use' (93-4).

The book is organised into five sections, and, neatly, each chapter is referenced as standalone, allowing for an easy back and forth between citations and bibliography. Part I outlines the ways in which animals are 'ordered' through human discourses and practices, and in particular the 'variable 'truths' or 'knowledges' of what is ethical' (13) in the consumption of meat. Acari focuses on this question because, rightly, she claims that the entitlement to use 'animals for food, as it characterises traditionally meat-eating societies (which constitute the majority), is one whose attachments have not altered significantly for centuries' (13.) Why, she asks, is it so intransigent? What mechanism keep safe the belief that animals are always edible for us? Acari examines (and disrupts) the 'persistent structure of domination' that is 'how meat and food animals continue to be made sense of, or (re)constituted, as material objects of everyday practices' (70). For Acari, 'it is through unpacking these sense-making constitutions that relations and effects of power are revealed' (70) and the rest of the book is then a laying out of her evidence and argument.

Parts II and III explore the maintenance of categories, the negotiation of edibility, the pleasures of knowing (about animals and meat), and sensory connections that make knowledge (about animals and meat) emotionally acceptable. All are empirical, drawing on in-depth interviews with consumers of meat and those who farm animals and produce meat from their flesh. These chapters concentrate on the ways in which these participants justify their consumption of animals through the use of discursive categories such as 'humane', 'natural', 'good' (as opposed to 'bad', i.e. factory farmed) and 'better' practices of seeing, knowing and ultimately killing and eating the flesh of animals' bodies. It is often in such data that the means to reveal and challenge those mechanisms of domination can be found. Acari finds six such mechanisms, ranging across three 'types', which were used regularly by her participants in their defence of animals as edible. Not to give the game away – read the book so as to absorb the argument – but these three 'types' of mechanism reveal the 'validating discourses', the

'emotions of distinction' and the 'ethico-aesthetics' that her participants use in defending the edibility of animals (summarised on page 289).

Acari eschews what is often the easier target for analysis and advocacy – the highly disturbing imagistic and sensorial assault of the slaughterhouse; or, conversely, successful vegan praxis – to scrutinize the subtler, insidious ways in which humans justify their domination of animals, for example through 'love', 'respect', 'naturalisation' and especially 'humane' ethics. It is Acari's 'contention that it is precisely the transparent, visible, supposedly benign, humane, and ethical models of [animal] use that need to be more squarely critiqued. For it is here that entitlement reveals its staunchest resistance' (274).

Human entitlement is the real target here. On many occasions, Acari succinctly summarises what those who struggle to end the exploitation of animals are up against. This book is a sustained attempt to give 'attention to the entitlement of the human gaze' (299) to ask why it remains so persistent and powerful. Acari uses 'entitlement' rather than arrogance 'purposefully drawing on its positive connotations with privilege, right, proper due, and being deserving ... For the gaze that is most evident in my data is one that is constituted in decidedly positive ... productive terms' (268).

The discursive, sensorial and emotional practices of the participants are rigorously examined for their underlying mechanisms of 'power/knowledge/pleasure' in enabling entitlement. Both 'power/knowledge/pleasure' and 'entitlement' are terms carefully chosen and frequently used in the book; the former to indicate the rhizomatic nature of their productive interrelations, and the latter, as stated, to emphasise the positive and productive nature of power. Acari, following Foucault, makes the point that animals are dominated as much through productive pleasures reinforced in discourse and communicative practices as they are via restrictive physical boundaries, such as farrowing crates and kill chutes. This is not to undermine the physical terrors and exploitation that animals' bodies suffer, but to unravel the ways in which 'the rhizomatic pathways by which practice-appropriate emotions are constituted in relation to meat and food animals are both product and productive of the historically and systemically legitimised use of animals for food' (193). For Acari, drawing on Mary Douglas, it is the 'the

intensities of the emotional associations, how they shaped participants' practices, and how they were corrected or policed' that are instructive of how 'cultural categories are public matters [that] cannot so easily be subject to revision' (Douglas 2002: 40) and as such why animals remain so persistently edible.

Part IV is a critique of 'the power of transparency' in reinforcing the entitled human gaze, and is astute in exploring the failure of increased visibility to end animal exploitation. Visibility 'already plays an integral role in shaping, affirming, and maintaining understandings of what is real, normal, proper, and right' (273) and because of its productive, even pleasurable, role in supporting positive human emotions of 'doing better', then, as one example, 'faith in the power of animal liberation documentaries to deconstruct 'barriers to seeing' is overstated' (273). Rather, 'animals' domination is kept hidden even when almost everything about associated practices seems increasingly laid bare, both discursively and visually' (288). Following Cole and Stewart (2016), Acari wishes to decentre visibility as the privileged sense for how we interact with others and grasp meaning in the world. As such, this section is a critique of transparency, supporting her earlier chapters in their call to make advocacy for animals sense-making, rather than just sited/witnessed/sighted; that is, we must study all the senses of those who continue to exploit animals, their sensorial and emotional experiences, as well as visibility and the human gaze. An insightful element here is the interpretation of Timothy Pachirat. It is easy to read *Every Twelve Seconds*, his study of the inner workings of the slaughterhouse and an exploration of 'the politics of sight' as support for McCartney's call for glass walls. But as Pachirat writes, 'sight and sequestration exist symbiotically' (252). That is, just because we are able to 'see' more, does not mean that what we see disrupts our existing, deeply ingrained and normalised means of making sense of our world. As noted above, Acari extrapolates from her data that such 'mechanisms of transparency in themselves generate the "right" sort of practices, acting as a form of visive discipline' (257) when ultimately what we see is temporary, and subsumed back into existing cognitive models and belief systems of entitlement.

This is a valuable piece of research, and difficult for a Critical Animal Studies scholar, for it gives time and attention to the words, thoughts and feelings of those who justify their domination and exploitation of animals. Acari handles such material, and her participants, with

great compassion and respect. This book is a methodological model of best practice for ethical qualitative research that, nevertheless, remains 'critical' in the sense of wanting to disrupt the exploitative practices to which humans submit animals every day. Finally, what Acari argues is 'less for an expansion of this [entitled] gaze in a sort of benevolent 'becoming with' animals, and rather for its retraction' (290). The 'entitled human gaze, like a laser beam of normalised power/knowledge/pleasure, needs to be powered down before any 'beyond' can be glimpsed through its glare' (298) she writes, asking us to always question why we feel entitled to look at, see, know, or use, animals *at all*. Following Anat Pick's work on privacy, Acari hopes that there may be a world in which animals' bodies 'make no sense' to us, because we do not know them, approach them, or use them; because we no longer consider ourselves entitled to do so. This is the work she asks us to do. *Making Sense of 'Food' Animals* is a critical companion in that work, for academics and activists alike.

## Works Cited

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