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## Eating Ursula

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Eating Ursula

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# Eating Ursula

**Abstract:** This paper examines issues surrounding the values of farmers, consumers, chefs, and other food activists who are working to expand the production and consumption of pastured pork in central North Carolina (a region known as the Piedmont). What I try to demonstrate in this paper are the ways that an “ethics of care” (Heath and Meneley 2010) is often articulated in terms of the cultural categories of “connection” and “authenticity.” These consciously expressed categories are shown to undergird a range of commitments, from concerns about animal welfare, to support for “local” economies, to parental care for children. My discussion considers the relationships among the lives of animals and the meat they yield, as well as the craft that brings about that transformation, and shows how the ethical questions embedded in these

relationships and processes depend upon a wider set of cultural practices and values that are pressing concerns in our larger economy and society. I further consider how examining everyday understandings of “connection” and “authenticity,” as revealed in ethnographic work with farmers, consumers, restaurateurs, and other food activists in the Piedmont, can highlight certain tensions within this “ethics of care”—such as tensions about food taboos and certification processes—that speak to the politics of food activism in the region and elsewhere.

**Keywords:** pork, pasture-raised, animal welfare, authenticity, connection.

THE PAST TEN YEARS have seen a substantial growth in the niche marketing of artisanal meats across the United States. Pasture-raised pork and grass-fed beef are in ever-wider demand, and are increasingly available at farmers’ markets, restaurants, and grocery stores in many regions of the US, as farmers, chefs, consumers, and others articulate their desire for an alternative to industrially produced meats. These “natural” meat advocates often describe this desire in terms of their interest in realizing a more powerful “connection” between themselves and the sources of their food. This notion of “connection” is one of the critical indigenous terms among the locavores with whom I have been working on an ethnographic project on pasture-raised pigs (and their pork) in the Piedmont of North Carolina, a region that incorporates the cities from the Triangle (Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill) to the east, to the Triad (Greensboro, High Point, and Winston Salem) to the west, a region just adjacent to eastern North Carolina, where industrial hog production has been rapid and pervasive since the 1980s (Niman 2009). This pursuit of meaningful “connections” to food is manifest in people’s concerns and claims about linkages between taste and place; cuisine and heritage; farmers and their market customers; and between those who are included and those who are excluded in communities of food production, provisioning, preparation, and consumption. Moreover, the notion

of “connection” is equally critical to understanding how producers and consumers in such regional worlds (which are truly global in their scope) express their commitments to the value of “authenticity.” As I demonstrate below, this latter term can be understood as one that refers to the authority of heritage and tradition, in a way that is similar to most of the ethnographic illustrations in this issue. But it can also refer to a “craft” or “skill” that is carried out in a labor-intensive, artisanal fashion; or to an association with production processes that are suited to the micro-environments of a region, or even the physiological process of animals and so can be construed as “natural”; or as a way to confront what many see as the detrimental effects of “industrial” foods.

In this paper, I want to adjust the focus of this question by reframing the problem of “authenticity” and “connections” in a way that does two things. First, I deploy these as *indigenous* terms, that is, as elements of the discourse that food advocates and residents of the Piedmont use *themselves* to articulate their own values and perceptions. Further, this paper foregrounds associations between animals and connoisseurs as sites where “authenticity” and “connections” can be expressed. This connoisseurship will also entail a consideration of those who do *not* eat animals including, quite interestingly, vegetarians and vegans whose concern for animal welfare has led them to seek out meat (to feed to others)

produced by committed farmers raising pastured pork and grass-fed beef. What I try to demonstrate in this paper are the ways that an “ethics of care” (Heath and Meneley 2010) is often articulated in terms of these categories of “connection” and “authenticity.” These consciously expressed categories can be seen to undergird a range of commitments, from concerns about animal welfare, to support for “local” economies, to parental care for children. My discussion, then, considers the relationships among the lives of animals and the meat they yield, as well as the craft that brings about such transformation, and shows how the ethical questions embedded in these relationships and processes depend upon a wider set of cultural practices and values. I further consider how everyday understandings of “connection” and “authenticity,” as revealed in ethnographic work with farmers, consumers, restaurateurs, and other food activists in North Carolina’s Piedmont, highlight certain tensions within this “ethics of care,” tensions that speak to the politics of food activism in the region.

In the spring of 2010, I met two friends for lunch at the Saxapahaw General Store, a wonderful little “5-Star Gas Station” catering to the locavoracious throng at the crossroads of Orange and Alamance counties in North Carolina’s Piedmont.<sup>1</sup> One was Ross, an aspiring farmer and food entrepreneur, and the other Sam, a young chef on the verge of opening his restaurant, *The Pig*.<sup>2</sup> On the menu for the day was barbecued pulled pork belly, which we all sampled. This, in itself, is a bit noteworthy. Pork belly is often braised, or served in a confit (when not turned into ubiquitous bacon), but it is typically too fatty to be successfully barbecued. Merely featuring pulled pork belly on a menu, then, signaled the aspirations of the chef, his innovative craft, and—implicitly—his grasp of his customers’ interest in indulging this kind of creativity.

To add to the innovative character of the meal, Ross, who works at nearby Cane Creek Farm, said to me, “You know this belly comes from Ursula.”<sup>3</sup> I told Ross that I did. The previous Saturday I had been selling Cane Creek Pork at the Carrboro Farmers Market, where we sold the other half of her belly. It was a *huge* cut, much bigger than the 4–5 pound bellies we normally sell. Ross told me that Ursula had been a real pain. What? I asked. Which pig? “That weird looking pig,” he said. “She looked like a Martian, like some kind of demonic pig.” I tried to remember which sow she was from my time working at Cane Creek, and asked what breed she was. Was she an Old Spot? Or some Berkshire mix? Surely not an Ossabaw, because she was way too big for that. Ross was not certain, but he was pretty sure she was a Farmer’s Hybrid, an old-timey, hardy crossbreed that is extremely



FIGURE 1: *The ethnographer at fieldwork.* PHOTOGRAPH BY BRAD WEISS © 2009

popular in efforts to revitalize pastured pork across the Carolinas, and beyond.

“Wait a minute,” I said, “was she the pig in the garden pen, who was really ornery?”—to the point of regularly attacking the staff. “Yeah,” Ross said. She’s the one who was impossible.

Of course, I now remember Ursula, because Ursula was one of the first sows I met when I started carrying out my field research at Cane Creek. I showed up there in December of 2008, after persuading Eliza MacLean, who is raising a wide range of pastured pigs (along with a collection of livestock and poultry, all in regular rotation) on several hundred acres in Snow Camp, North Carolina, to let me have a look at how the operation works. My research consisted mostly of doing chores—feeding and watering every animal in sight—and offering two hands to do whatever else needed doing.

At the time, I could not help but notice the piglets—called “pigs” on a farm—that are more or less free to roam wherever they like on the farm.<sup>4</sup> The wooden fences that enclose sows and boars on pasture are not deep enough to hold in little pigs, who prefer to hang out together and investigate anything and everything at Cane Creek. But they are not interested in running off and getting lost while their mothers are still nursing them. In the course of feeding sows in the large “garden pen,” I—in my utter inexperience and frank stupidity—grabbed a small, mottled, calico-colored pig as it snuck under a fence in front of me, picked it up by its hind leg, and held it up to look at it while it squealed and screamed bloody murder in my face. Who could resist such a cute pig?

What happened within a few milliseconds was that the sow who was this pig’s mother barreled toward me, and had I not leapt out of the way up the fence, she would easily have clamped her jaws around my knee and snapped my leg in



FIGURE 2: *Pigs on the ground.* PHOTOGRAPH BY BRAD WEISS © 2009

half. I did not make it back into that pen again for several weeks, and every time I did walk past the pen, the sow, Ursula herself, would take a good long look at me, and often rush toward me to back me off.

When I had asked earlier if Ursula was part Berkshire, Sam said, “Aren’t Berkshires bad mothers?” Isn’t that one of their characteristic qualities? Ross was not sure about that—most of the pigs at Cane Creek are not purebred anything, anyway—but he did say that part of what makes any sow a really good mother is equally what makes her really lousy to raise and handle on the farm. And, indeed, it became increasingly impossible, with Ursula, to try to get her pigs away from her, to then “grow them out” (that is, bring them up to market weight), to castrate them (the fate of all market boars), or otherwise make them independent of her so that they could be raised up for the market. And so Ursula was taken off to slaughter, not, as was the case with other sows I knew, because she proved incapable of further “farrowing” (that is, of reproducing), but rather because she was *such* a good mother that she was far too ornery to keep on the farm without doing damage to the staff, to other farrowing pigs, and so to the farm as a whole.

This anecdote raises a number of scholarly and ethical problems. First, it demonstrates the extent to which pigs contribute to their own domestication. That is, pigs’ abilities to be “good mothers” are not just “natural attributes” of a particular breed, they are part of the behavior that pigs can exhibit relative to the kind of farmwork and labor that is needed to see the sow through the processes of reproducing, and raising her offspring up for market. “Maternal qualities” are the outcome of a “naturalcultural” process (Law 2004; Haraway 2008) whereby pigs are selected and bred for attributes that

contribute to their husbandry. Being a good mother means being well suited to raising pigs for slaughter.

What, then, did it mean to *eat* a pig that did this *too* well? How were we treating a sow who protected her pigs with such ferocious skill and alacrity that the farm staff had to put a stop to it? Ursula was caught in a double-bind; the very qualities that had made her so valuable also made her the most vulnerable.

Moreover, what did it mean for Ross and me to eat a pig with whom we had a history? Certainly I did not feel any sense of vengeance in eating the pig that had tried to assault me. She was well within her rights to do so for my having been so careless in handling her pigs—and right in the vicinity of her teeth. It does raise questions, though, about our obligations to animals and the extent to which those obligations require us, not only to make sure these animals have a good life (and a “good death” if such is possible), but also to think about whether there can ever be reciprocity in a relationship with another creature whom one ultimately eats.

I should note here that I do eat these animals. More importantly, I work with farmers, chefs, butchers, and other entrepreneurs across the Piedmont studying how they work to provide pastured pork to their customers. These same questions about care and obligation inform the efforts, now legion across the South, and found in North Carolina where I live and work, to raise animals in a humane fashion in the wake of the intensive industrialization of farming—and hog production, in particular—that has so transformed the agricultural and culinary worlds that so many Americans inhabit. What can it mean to provide animals such a “good life” when the purpose of caring for them is to bring them to slaughter so they can be effectively, successfully, and delectably eaten? Ursula’s pursuit of her “good life,” the particular attributes she had, the interests she sought—we might even call it her personality—raise these questions.

### (Not) Eating Animals: Some Anthropological Perspectives

There are a host of ways that we might pursue these questions. Classic scholarly literature, from Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (1950) to Douglas’s (1966) and Soler’s (1997) semiotic accounts of the Abominations of Leviticus, offers a range of approaches to food taboos: what kinds of animals do people eat, what kinds of animals do they not eat, and why? With regard to whole species of animals (why a person or group of people may or may not eat pigs, for example) it is often pointed out that, in most European and North American societies, pigs are denied relationships of intimacy and

friendship with humans of the kind that are extended, for example, to cats and dogs, but also to animals such as milk cows—animals that Euro-Americans never intend to eat, and may indeed find quite disturbing to eat. Although pigs are rarely treated with this kind of intimacy, in all sorts of interesting ways they may be given personalities that alternatively “subvert” or “mimic” these close feelings of friendship. American Southerners, in particular it seems (Bass 1995), use imagery of pigs as human-like eaters, gleefully enjoying the meat at, perhaps, a pig roast. They not only look like happy animals, as in the cartoon depictions used to sell milk and cheese and chicken parts, they also appear as happy consumers of pigs (happy as people would be) eating barbecue.

Such depictions are a way of giving pigs a “personality,” but the most distinctive thing about this “person” is how edible they are. This undermines, all the more, the notion that pigs could be a person like other people, who, in the normal course of things, do not gleefully indulge in cannibalism.

Edmund Leach’s account of animal taboos (1964: 50–51) suggests that these representations tell us something about why pigs are both the most prized and the most loathed of animals:

We feel a rather special guilt about our pigs. After all, sheep provide wool, cows provide milk, chickens provide eggs, but we rear pigs for the sole purpose of killing and eating them, and this is rather a shameful thing, a shame that quickly attaches to the pig itself. Besides which, under English rural conditions, the pig in his backyard pigsty was, until very recently, much more nearly a member of the household than any of the other edible animals. Pigs, like dogs, were fed from the leftovers of their human masters’ kitchens. To kill and eat such a commensal associate is sacrilege indeed!

Pigs are meant for eating, they are all about eating itself, in both English rural history and throughout much of the contemporary United States. When Americans eat plentifully they may say they “make pigs of themselves,” although it is not clear that pigs are more ravenous than any other creature. But even their being eaten carries with it a sense of the person-like creature that is consumed. The pleasure pigs are perceived to take in eating makes them wonderfully edible; yet it also makes them akin to *us* humans and our own affective participation in gustation, a dilemma that is revealed in both the taboo on eating pigs and in the celebratory character of pig roasts, or the paroxysms of pleasure that bacon (iconic among “sinful” cuts of pork) can inspire. This duality is aptly expressed in the anthropomorphized image of cannibalistic pigs. Pigs are good to eat, but there is always something transgressive about it—even if that uneasiness is smuggled in with humorous depictions of dancing pigs at a cookout.

In Sahlins’s (1976: 174) noted discussion of the question of animal edibility, he cites the Red Queen, from *Alice in*

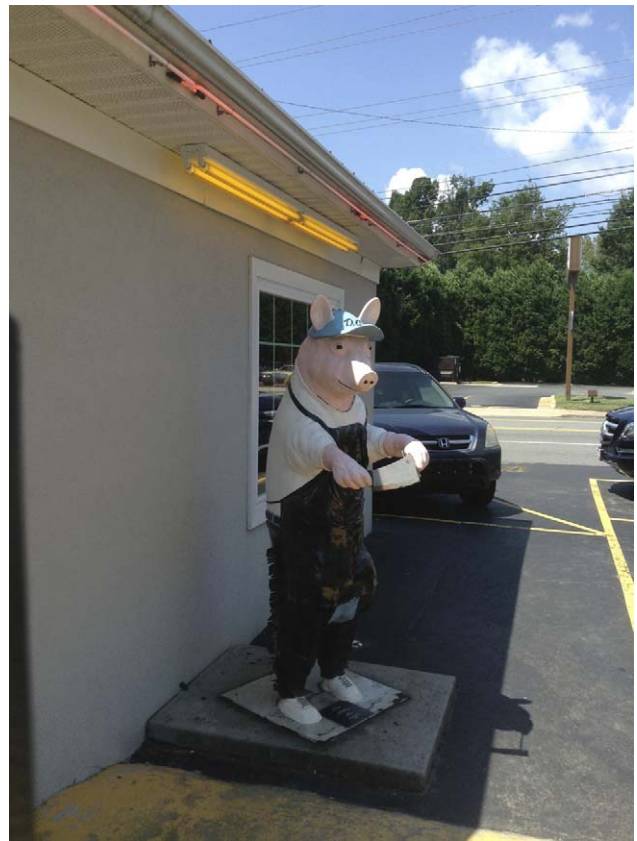


FIGURE 3: *The happy cannibal*. PHOTOGRAPH BY BRAD WEISS © 2013

*Wonderland*, who says, “It isn’t etiquette to cut anyone you’ve been introduced to (Remove the joint!)” Naming is certainly one of the ways we introduce ourselves and attribute personal qualities to animals to whom we extend human-like relationships. But what small farms are increasingly recognizing is that the animals they have *do* enter into relationships with people. This is central to the esteemed “connections” to the land, place, and interspecies meeting that motivate so many American advocates of contemporary food revitalization. Yet those relationships are not so privileged that those animals will not end up eaten if they do not carry out what is expected of them. So here is Ursula, named and known and enmeshed in human relationships—which did not save her from the barbecue pit. How is that possible?

### Carnivores, Locavores, and Other Converted Vegans

These relationships of “connection,” it seems, are not barriers that keep many of us from eating particular animals. My work with consumers at farmers’ markets and restaurants in North



FIGURE 4: *Pigs are for eating.* PHOTOGRAPH BY BRAD WEISS © 2009

Carolina suggests that these relationships are of exactly the kind that people now *want* in their food. Many farmers and their customers alike no longer want to deny the reality of the animal in question; they want to have relationships with the animals they eat, and explicitly acknowledge that the meat they eat was once an animal. This willingness to confront the vitality of the animals that consumers intend to eat can be seen in a host of practices associated with this “niche market” in pork. Customers will, for example, routinely ask those purveying pork and beef at farmers’ markets about the healthiness of the diets of the animals whose meat they purchase. They also ask about the living conditions of the livestock (e.g., “are they confined?” “can they go outside?”), and even about the quality of the facilities where the animals are slaughtered.

This in itself is a major change in attitudes, a shift away from the industrial production of meat that conceals not only the animals, but also the other people—the human labor and inhabitants of toxic agro-industrial ecologies—that make it possible for cryovaced packages to end up in your grocery store (Blanchette 2013). This wider commitment to animal vitality and welfare is, I would submit, part of a wider set of cultural projects, projects that demonstrate broader forms of “connection” that motivate farmers, chefs, locavores—in short, consumers and producers of many sorts—especially across North Carolina. As I indicated above, pork belly is rarely consumed as barbecue, yet this was an apt end for Ursula. Why? In part, barbecue itself bespeaks the “heritage” of North Carolina. As anyone with a passing familiarity with the Tar Heel state knows, Carolinians are passionate about barbecue, and highly particular about the various regional techniques by which it is prepared. It is an iconic feature of a “foodway,” a preparation that is particular to the region, a taste



FIGURE 5: *Meat full of animal vitality.* PHOTOGRAPH BY BRAD WEISS © 2012

for which is rigorously, indeed interminably, cultivated among the discerning denizens of the state (Reed and Reed 2008).

At the same time, pork belly is rarely barbecued as a separate “cut” of pork (although it often ends up in the mix when “whole hog” barbecue is on the menu, as is typical of Eastern-style NC ‘cue). Pork belly, though, *is* iconic of contemporary, locavoracious interests in meat. As I have argued elsewhere, pork belly is one of those cuts that has largely been overlooked in industrial production, and has only recently been revitalized on cosmopolitan menus by chefs who are interested in “snout-to-tail” cookery (Weiss 2012, 2014; see also Gewertz and Errington 2010 for a distinctly noncosmopolitan perspective on the use of such cuts in the Pacific).<sup>5</sup> It exemplifies, therefore, a commitment to making use of every possible part of a once-living animal, a practice that is at once frugal, environmentally conscious, and socially committed to the well-being of the farmer who raises “natural” pigs. In all of these ways, then, combining pork belly and barbecue is a way to craft a distinctive type of “authentic taste.” Here the registers of “authenticity” incorporate both long-standing culinary preferences for Carolina barbecue, as well as socioeconomic and agrarian practices that, while highly innovative, are esteemed for the ways that they treat pigs in an “authentic” fashion, that is, as real, living animals (and never merely industrially products) whose very vitality is expressed in the distinctive character of the meat they yield. These various registers of the authentic can also serve as points of comparison to the examples offered by Aistara and Bowen and Hamrick (this issue). Both of those ethnographies also demonstrate how authenticity emerges in a complex political process that conjoins regionally specific practices that are thought to imbue products with a unique set of qualities, with innovative

methods of marketing and “lifestyle” preferences. Like the Latvian wines that Aistara describes, innovative pork cuts can be implanted in the Carolina *terroir* in a way that extolls the “authentic” character of “natural” pigs and their very pork (albeit in a way that may be unrecognizable to most fans of barbecue).

It is further fitting that this entanglement between regional legacy, ethical agrarianism, and flavorful meat should be embodied in a pig who not only has a name (Ursula), but her own “heritage” breed (Farmer’s Hybrid). This interest in recognizing “heritage” and in defining heritage (in part, at least), in relation to the quality of the pig herself—her fitness as a mother, her (un)suitability for animal husbandry—provides a wider rubric for bringing together an interest in regional history, land stewardship, culinary discernment, and social “connection.” All of these elements make up the “authenticity” of these tasty pigs, which the categories of “heritage” work to certify. Such commitments to “authenticity,” and to the range of practices meant to bring it into being, go a long way toward helping us to understand what makes it possible, even desirable, to eat an animal with a name and a face and a history.

But that does not quite answer the question: is this permissible? While many of us farmers’ market-going consumers think more about the lives of animals as being an important part of the meat that is available to us, should that not make more of us less willing to eat meat altogether? Is there a way to eat meat without violating the notion that animals have lives worth living?

Rather than offer merely personal reflections or a set of clear principles here, I want to consider some ethnographic illustrations that illuminate not *what* the answers to these questions should be, but *how* these questions have been engaged by meat consumers and purveyors (including chefs, farmers, butchers, and others) in the Piedmont. A central component of my research involves selling pastured pork at the Carrboro Farmer’s Market in the Triangle. I have also worked with a number of chefs and food distributors, and asked them, in particular, about the preferences of their customers and consumers. What are customers looking for when they develop a taste for pastured pork? As I indicated above, customers routinely ask about the well-being of the animals that farmers raise and whose meat they sell. Restaurants and local markets also routinely display artful photographs of “their” farmers in verdant pastures working with healthy pigs, sheep, and cattle. Clearly, “care” for the animals is a primary value for consumers who purchase pastured pork, and “natural” meats more generally.

It is also important to note how this care for animals also translates quite readily (for many) into care for human

interpersonal relationships. This can be seen most readily in the number of mothers who shop at farmers’ markets. Middle-class, white women form the significant plurality, if not majority, of such markets across the country (Zepeda and Li 2006; Zepeda 2009), and many of these women provision their household through farmers’ markets. A significant number of “my” customers at the market ask me about pastured pork in ways that make clear that they have an ambivalent relationship to meat eating. They will ask me how to cook meat because they are unfamiliar with how to do so. Or they will ask what to prepare for a particular occasion to provide meat for a friend or relative, because they themselves do not eat meat. It is not uncommon for mothers to purchase pastured meat because they are interested in providing “healthy” food and an optimally “balanced” diet for their children, even though they are vegetarians themselves. A few of our customers, in fact, have been practicing vegans but have come to feel that they can express the values of veganism to which they are committed (e.g. animal welfare, stewardship of the land, or a healthy, “natural” diet) by eating meat—and, more specifically, by feeding meat to their own children. One erstwhile vegan mother makes bulk purchases of what she calls “life changing bacon” that she “feels good about feeding [her] kids.”

One interesting, public discussion of the ways that a concern for “care” translates into a concern for interpersonal relations also illustrates the wider cultural patterns I am describing here. At the first Carolina Meat conference held in 2011, a discussion was held on certification programs, that is, efforts to provide third-party documentation to assure consumers of the various qualities (“hormone-free,” “natural,” “organic,” “grass-fed,” etc.) they were looking for in their meat purchases. The discussion revealed a significant rift between those activists looking to expand these programs to provide more detailed and transparent certification, and those who were opposed to any such procedures on the grounds that all systems of certification were subject to exploitation and manipulation (as Bowen and Hamrick’s work on mezcal demonstrates in this issue). What is relevant for this argument is the way that both certification and anticertification activists drew upon notions of both “connection” and “authenticity” to advance their positions. The certification advocates wanted, as they said, to “help to make that connection between farmers and customers,” which was logistically challenging for dispersed consumers and for farmers with limited marketing time or communication skills (see also Grasseni’s discussion of Italian solidarity purchasing groups in this issue). “Authentication” in the form of certification was intended to enhance, rather than displace, these connections. Opponents of



certification, though, denounced these programs as *undermining* what one activist described as the “connection that each consumer can make with that individual farmer.” Explaining this further, the activist commented, “If you want to know how that animal is treated, and you want to know that they are authentic farmers, you have to get out there, face-to-face, and make sure for yourself.” Aside from the merits of either position, what is critical here is that from *each* perspective, “care” is realized by forging personal “connections” that are seen as the best means of assuring the “authenticity” of the meat production process.

If we consider these commitments to “care” as a way of articulating a concern for a wider set of “connections” (loosely defined, even as the specific term “connection” is used repeatedly in the circles I am describing), other frameworks for assessing these values also emerge. From my own disciplinary perspective of anthropology, many attempts to take principled stands against all animal slaughter, or to pursue humane forms of slaughter, can be seen to use animals as a kind of proxy—a tangible, concrete substitute—for the many complex problems that we all live with as consumers. Virtually anywhere in the world today, people are hopelessly unable to know fully the conditions under which what we encounter, and especially what we consume, is produced. We cannot know what the lives of so many producers of the consumer goods that fill up our lives are really like. In the absence of knowledge, many imagine that those lives cannot be very satisfying. It is this experience, I suggest, that reveals how consumption routinely exemplifies a *failure* of “connections” for many consumers, a failure that consumption with a commitment to “care” is meant to remedy. And while people may be at a loss to take meaningful action to change this vast, complicated, hidden process, many feel that they can—or at least, should be able to—exercise control over what they eat, what they put directly into their bodies.

It is ironic, but the logic of refusing to eat animals is almost identical to the logic that is typical of animal sacrifice in many contexts. In his exemplary discussion of sacrifice, Lienhardt (1961: 291) describes the ways through which a challenging human situation is addressed by means of consecrating a concrete, manageable entity—often an animal (the sacrifice)—such that how the animal is treated demonstrates both one’s own fragile condition and one’s wider intention to change the challenging situation one confronts. Whether slaughtered or saved, the treatment of that living creature is meant to model, act on, and reform the problem—here, of disconnection from the pervasive features of consumption—at hand.

## A New Ethics of Consumption: From Connection to Commitment

In all of these ways, “caring” for animals can be seen to incorporate an interest in eating animals. By way of conclusion, I would like to address a few contemporary perspectives on eating meat as a mode of expressing concern for animals. Recent discussions of animal welfare in the popular press, for example, suggest that trendy chefs feel that it is vital to learn how to slaughter the animals they serve as a way of owning up to their role in eating the beast and, as many of them put it, of taking responsibility for the life of the animal (Moskin 2008). But to see killing a creature as a way of taking “responsibility” depends on a very specific understanding of this term. Most animals have long, intricate lives before they are slaughtered. “Taking responsibility” might, for example, have more to do with acknowledging the social, collective dimensions of our consumption, and recognizing that a lot of (other peoples’) work goes into birthing, and feeding, and treating, and housing, and moving that animal. How do we “take responsibility” for all of this work simply by putting knife to throat as we take the life of a beast, or knowing how best to braise its otherwise expendable internal organs? Bearing responsibility would seem to depend here on a notion of personal participation, or intimate “connection.” Again, it is akin to the role of sacrifice, described by Lienhardt, where the life of the animal provides a model for the slaughterer (the “sacrifier”) to express their moral commitments.

There is also an argument that suggests people should eat meat because it is only through eating meat that these fully domesticated animals can endure. Michael Pollan makes the point that for domesticated species to thrive they must be raised by meat farmers or else these forms of biodiversity will die out. He counters animal rights advocates by saying that, while saving animals from slaughter may protect individual animals, animal *species* also have an “interest” in surviving, and that animal rights activists thus threaten species survival (Pollan 2002: 320). I disagree. It is not that barnyard pigs and cows will not become extinct if we fail to husband them; they will. Even wild pigs need domestic stocks to effectively reproduce their small numbers. But it is not the case that “species” have an interest in survival. Species are categories, they are ideas that biologists use to classify the world. So one might think it would be a shame if domestic species became extinct, and for very compelling reasons, but it would be a stretch to imagine that the species itself should think so. The species’ “own interest” in its survival, then, cannot provide an effective foundation for thinking of eating animals as a mode of “care.”

At the conclusion of her important work *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway discusses a feast centered on a wild pig roast, addressing the ethical challenges this posed for her academic dinner partners (her “messmates”). For Haraway (2008: 296), eating such animals is, or can be, part of what she calls “killing well,” a recognition of the fact that eating and killing go together, but that does not mean we should accept any and all kinds of killing as inevitable and permissible. “[O]utside Eden, eating means also killing, directly or indirectly, and killing well is an obligation akin to eating well. This applies to a vegan as much as to a human carnivore” (ibid.). Indeed, this is the very logic that many of the Piedmont pork consumers I work with embrace. Haraway’s argument does not offer, or even search for, some moral absolute, or some act of personal responsibility to redeem the world, but instead suggests that there is an ongoing conversation we all — meat eaters and abstainers alike — need to be a part of in order to improve what are clearly the dangerous, destructive conditions with which we live. Too often, she asserts, the question of “what to eat” is reduced to an effort to fix precisely such absolutes: “Reasons [are] well developed on all sides; commitments to very different ways of living and dying [need] to be examined together, without any god tricks and with consequences” (ibid.: 298). Humans have no privileged position that exempts us from slaughter (you might have noticed we slaughter each other all the time — *not* that it is defensible), but this is not because other animals are just as capable as humans are of living *the same* rich, compassionate, compelling lives. It is because we are all, together, *limited and different* in our ability to do these things fully and completely. Our commitments, as Haraway notes, have consequences. We are incomplete, thus we are fallible, and we cannot escape these limitations by reference to abstract principle alone.

It is this understanding of *commitment* to living and dying that underlies the concern with “care” which motivates a host of actors dedicated to transforming American’s relationship to meat. As Heath and Meneley (2010) demonstrate, the often-polemical debates around foie gras production in the United States can overlook the practices of care through which artisanal producers attune themselves to the lives and welfare of the ducks they tend. A “being-with” is generated in the daily practices of duck and human, and manifest in the health of the animals, the sensitivity of the farmer to animal lives, as well as in the exceptional gustatory quality of the meat this process generates.

This is surely the logic that informs the concern with Ursula, a sow whose characteristics were distinctively, mutually attuned to her own caregiving farmers. This paper draws on and, I think, complicates these perspectives by showing

how an ethnography of consumers, chefs, and farmers focused on an interest in the well-being of animals produces a wide range of “commitments” — both appreciating the character of the pig personality, as well as recognizing when the aptitude of an animal can challenge the process of effective (even compassionate) animal husbandry; refusing to eat meat, or animal products, and yet supporting animal farmers in order to feed one’s family and children healthy meat; and working to support the marketing of pastured meats through very different tactics of bringing this meat to consumers, celebrating “heritage” while also fomenting “innovation.” Ursula’s life and death exemplified all of these possibilities — like many of the consumers that took an interest in her, she, too, tried to provide excellent care for her children. From an anthropological perspective, the fact that all of these diverse commitments can be articulated in terms of “connections” that need to be nurtured, or “mediated,” points toward wider social processes, processes that might lead us to ask in future research (and as each of the contributors to this special issue on the “Reinvention of Food” does): How has *disconnection* become the lived experience of daily life for so many in the United States and elsewhere? How and why has food become a privileged medium for reestablishing connection? And which connections are the ones that (should) count? ●

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## NOTES

1. [www.saxgenstore.com/](http://www.saxgenstore.com/).
2. [www.thepigrestaurant.com/](http://www.thepigrestaurant.com/).
3. [www.canecreekfarm.us](http://www.canecreekfarm.us).
4. See the video at <https://picasaweb.google.com/lbradweiss/CaneCreek122010?authkey=GvisRgCNLQILCA-nYiQE#slideshow/5555367375168499058>.
5. Industrial pork bellies are, of course, incorporated into bacon; but the belly from industrially produced pigs is rarely available to chefs, or consumers, as an uncured product available for other “applications.”

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