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2010

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Adele Wessell
Southern Cross University

Publication details

Wessell, A 2010, 'Making a pig of the humanities: re-centering the historical narrative', *M/C Journal*, vol. 13 no. 5.
Published version available from:
http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/issue/view/pig

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M/C Journal, Vol. 13, No. 5 (2010) - 'pig'

Making a Pig of the Humanities: Re-centering the Historical Narrative

http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/289

Adele Wessell

As the name suggests, the humanities is largely a study of the human condition, in which history sits as a discipline concerned with the past. Environmental history is a new field that brings together scholars from a range of disciplines to consider the changing relationships between humans and the environment over time. Critiques of anthropocentrism that place humans at the centre of the universe or make assessments through an exclusive human perspective provide a challenge to scholars to rethink our traditional biases against the nonhuman world. The movement towards nonhumanism or posthumanism, however, does not seem to have had much of an impression on history as a discipline. What would a nonhumanist history look like if we re-centred the historical narrative around pigs?

There are histories of pigs as food (see for example, *The Cambridge History of Food* which has a chapter on "Hogs"). There are food histories that feature pork in terms of its relationship to multiethnic identity (such as Donna Gabaccia's *We Are What We Eat*) and examples made of pigs to promote ethical eating (Singer). Pigs are central to arguments about dietary rules and what motivates them (Soler; Dolander). Ancient pig DNA has also been employed in studies on human migration and colonisation (Larson *et al.*; Durham University). Pigs are also widely used in a range of products that would surprise many of us. In 2008, Christien Meindertsma spent three years researching the products made from a single pig. Among some of the more unexpected results were: ammunition, medicine, photographic paper, heart valves, brakes, chewing gum, porcelain, cosmetics, cigarettes, hair conditioner and even bio diesel. Likewise, Fergus Henderson, who coined the term 'nose to tail eating', uses a pig on the front cover of the book of that name to suggest the extraordinary and numerous potential of pigs' bodies.

However, my intention here is not to pursue a discussion of how parts of their bodies are used, rather to consider a reorientation of the historical narrative to place pigs at the centre of stories of our co-evolution, in order to see what their history might say about humans and our relationships with them. This is underpinned by recognition of the inter-relationality of humans and animals. The relationships between wild boar and pigs with humans has been long and diverse. In a book exploring 10,000 years of interaction, Anton Ervynck and Peter Rowley-Conwy argue that pigs have been central to complex cultural developments in human societies and they played an important role in human migration patterns. The book is firmly grounded within the disciplines of zoology, anthropology and archaeology and contributes to an understanding of the complex and changing relationship humans have historically shared with wild boar and domestic pigs. Naturalist Lyall Watson also explores human/pig relationships in *The Whole Hog*. The insights these approaches offer for the discipline of history are valuable (although overlooked) but, more importantly, such scholarship also challenges a humanist perspective that credits humans exclusively with historical change and suggests, moreover, that we did it alone.

Pigs occupy a special place in this history *because* of their likeness to humans, revealed in their use in transplant technology, as well as because of the iconic and paradoxical status they occupy in our lives. As Ervynck and Rowley-Conwy explain, "On the one hand, they are praised for their fecundity, their intelligence, and their ability to eat almost anything, but on the other hand, they are unfairly derided for their apparent slovenliness, unclean ways, and gluttonous behaviour" (1). Scientist

Niamh O'Connell was struck by the human parallels in the complex social structures which rule the lives of pigs and people when she began a research project on pig behaviour at the Agricultural Research Institute at Hillsborough in County Down (Cassidy). According to O'Connell, pigs adopt different philosophies and lifestyle strategies to get the most out of their life. "What is interesting from a human perspective is that low-ranking animals tend to adopt one of two strategies," she says. "You have got the animals who accept their station in life and then you have got the other ones that are continually trying to climb, and as a consequence, their life is very stressed" (qtd. in Cassidy). The closeness of pigs to humans is the justification for their use in numerous experiments. In the so-called 'pig test', code named 'Priscilla', for instance, over 700 pigs dressed in military uniforms were used to study the effects of nuclear testing at the Nevada (USA) test site in the 1950s.

In *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway draws attention to the ambiguities and contradictions promoted by the divide between animals and humans, and between nature and culture. There is an ethical and critical dimension to this critique of human exceptionalism—the view that "humanity alone is not [connected to the] spatial and temporal web of interspecies dependencies" (11). There is also that danger that any examination of our interdependencies may just satisfy a humanist preoccupation with self-reflection and self-reproduction. Given that pigs cannot speak, will they just become the raw material to reproduce the world in human's own image? As Haraway explains: "Productionism is about man the tool-maker and -user, whose highest technical production is himself […] Blinded by the sun, in thrall to the father, reproduced in the sacred image of the same, his rewards is that he is self-born, an auto telic copy. That is the mythos of enlightenment and transcendence" (67).

Jared Diamond acknowledges the mutualistic relationship between pigs and humans in *Guns, Germs and Steel* and the complex co-evolutionary path between humans and domesticated animals but his account is human-centric. Human's relationships with pigs helped to shape human history and power relations and they spread across the world with human expansion. But questioning their utility as food and their enslavement to this cause was not part of the account.

Pigs have no voice in the histories we write of them and so they can appear as passive objects in their own pasts. Traces of their pasts are available in humanity's use of them in, for example, the sties built for them and the cooking implements used to prepare meals from them. Relics include bones and viruses, DNA sequences and land use patterns. Historians are used to dealing with subjects that cannot speak back, but they have usually left ample evidence of what they have said. In the process of writing, historians attempt to perform the miracle, as Curthoys and Docker have suggested, of restoration; bringing the people and places that existed in the past back to life (7). Writing about pigs should also attempt to bring the animal to life, to understand not just their past but also our own culture.

In putting forward the idea of an alternative history that starts with pigs, I am aware of both the limits to such a proposal, and that most people's only contact with pigs is through the meat they buy at the supermarket. Calls for a ban on intensive pig farming (RSPCA, ABC, AACT) might indeed have shocked people who imagine their dinner comes from the type of family farm featured in the movie *Babe.* Baby pigs in factory farms would have been killed a long time before the film's sheep dog show (usually at 3 to 4 months of age). In fact, because baby pigs do grow so fast, 48 different pigs were used to film the role of the central character in *Babe*. While Babe himself may not have been aware of the relationship pigs generally have to humans, the other animals were very cognisant of their function. People eat pigs, even if they change the name of the form it takes in order to do so:

> Cat: You know, I probably shouldn't say this, but I'm not sure if you realize how much the other animals are laughing at you for this sheep dog business. Babe: Why would they do that? Cat: Well, they say that you've forgotten that you're a pig. Isn't that silly? Babe: What do you mean? Cat: You know, why pigs are here. Babe: Why are any of us here? Cat: Well, the cow's here to be milked, the dogs are here to help the Boss's husband with the sheep, and I'm here to be beautiful and affectionate to the boss. Babe: Yes? Cat: [*sighs softly*] The fact is that pigs don't have a purpose, just like ducks don't have a purpose. Babe: [*confused*] Uh, I—I don't, uh ... Cat: Alright, for your own sake, I'll be blunt. Why do the Bosses keep ducks? To eat them. So why do the Bosses keep a pig? The fact is that animals don't seem to have a purpose really do have a purpose. The Bosses have to eat. It's probably the most noble purpose of all, when you come to think about it. Babe: They eat pigs? Cat: Pork, they call it—or bacon. They only call them pigs when they're alive (Noonan).

Babe's transformation into a working pig to round up the sheep makes him more useful. Ferdinand the duck tried to do the same thing by crowing but was replaced by an alarm clock. This is a common theme in children's stories, recalling Charlotte's campaign to praise Wilbur the pig in order to persuade the farmer to let him live in E. B. White's much loved children's novel, *Charlotte's Web.* Wilbur is "some pig", "terrific", "radiant" and "humble". In 1948, four years before *Charlotte's Web*, White had published an essay "Death of a Pig", in which he fails to save a sick pig that he had bought in order to fatten up and butcher. *Babe* tried to present an alternative reality from a pig's perspective, but the little pig was only spared because he was more useful alive than dead. We could all ask the question *why are any of us here*, but humans do not have to contemplate being eaten to justify their existence.

The reputation pigs have for being filthy animals encourages distaste. In another movie, *Pulp Fiction*, Vincent opts for flavour, but Jules' denial of pig's personalities condemns them to insignificance:

> Vincent: Want some bacon? Jules: No man, I don't eat pork. Vincent: Are you Jewish? Jules: Nah, I ain't Jewish, I just don't dig on swine, that's all. Vincent: Why not? Jules: Pigs are filthy animals. I don't eat filthy animals. Vincent: Bacon tastes gooood. Pork chops taste gooood. Jules: Hey, sewer rat may taste like pumpkin pie, but I'd never know 'cause I wouldn't eat the filthy motherfucker. Pigs sleep and root in shit. That's a filthy animal. I ain't eat nothin' that ain't got sense enough to disregard its own feces [sic]. Vincent: How about a dog? Dogs eats its own feces. Jules: I don't eat dog either. Vincent: Yeah, but do you consider a dog to be a filthy animal? Jules: I wouldn't go so far as to call a dog filthy but they're definitely dirty. But, a dog's got personality. Personality goes a long way. Vincent: Ah, so by that rationale, if a pig had a better personality, he would cease to be a filthy animal. Is that true? Jules: Well we'd have to be talkin' about one charming motherfuckin' pig. I mean he'd have to be ten times more charmin' than that Arnold on Green Acres, you know what I'm sayin'?

In the 1960s television show G*reen Acres*, Arnold was an exceptional pig who was allowed to do whatever he wanted. He was talented enough to write his own name and play the piano and his attempts at painting earned him the nickname "Porky Picasso". These talents reflected values that are appreciated, and so he was. The term "pig" is,

however, chiefly used a term of abuse, however, embodying traits we abhor—gluttony, obstinence, squealing, foraging, rooting, wallowing. Making a pig of yourself is rarely honoured.

Making a pig of the humanities, however, could be a different story. As a historian I love to forage, although I use white gloves rather than a snout. I have rubbed my face and body on tree trunks in the service of forestry history and when the temperature rises I also enjoy wallowing, rolling from side to side rather than drawing a conclusion. More than this, however, pigs provide a valid means of understanding key historical transitions that define modern society. Significant themes in modern history—production, religion, the body, science, power, the national state, colonialism, gender, consumption, migration, memory—can all be understood through a history of our relationships with pigs.

Pigs play an important role in everyday life, but their relationship to the economic, social, political and cultural matters discussed in general history texts—industrialisation, the growth of nation states, colonialism, feminism and so on—are generally ignored. However "natural" this place of pigs may seem, culture and tradition profoundly shape their history and their own contribution to those forces has been largely absent in history. What, then, would the contours of such a history that considered the intermeshing of humans and pigs look like?

The intermeshing of pigs in early human history

Agricultural economies based on domestic animals began independently in different parts of the world, facilitating increases in population and migration. Evidence for long-term genetic continuity between modern and ancient Chinese domestic pigs has been established by DNA sequences. Larson *et al*. have made an argument for five additional independent domestications of indigenous wild boar populations: in India, South East Asia and Taiwan, which they use to develop a picture of both pig evolution and the development and spread of early farmers in the Far East.

Domestication itself involves transformation into something useful to animals. In the process, humans became transformed. The importance of the Fertile Crescent in human history has been well established. The area is attributed as the site for a series of developments that have defined human history—urbanisation, writing, empires, and civilisation. Those developments have been supported by innovations in food production and animal husbandry. Pig, goats, sheep and cows were all domesticated very early in the Fertile Crescent and remain four of the world's most important domesticated mammals (Diamond 141).

Another study of ancient pig DNA has concluded that the earliest domesticated pigs in Europe, believed to be descended from European wild boar, were introduced from the Middle East. The research, by archaeologists at Durham University, sheds new light on the colonisation of Europe by early farmers, who brought their animals with them. Keith Dobney explains:

> Many archaeologists believe that farming spread through the diffusion of ideas and cultural exchange, not with the direct migration of people. However, the discovery and analysis of ancient Middle Eastern pig remains across Europe reveals that although cultural exchange did happen, Europe was definitely colonised by Middle Eastern farmers. A combination of rising population and possible climate change in the 'fertile crescent', which put pressure on land and resources, made them look for new places to settle,

> plant their crops and breed their animals and so they rapidly spread west into Europe (ctd in *ScienceDaily*).

Middle Eastern farmers colonised Europe with pigs and in the process transformed human history.

Identity as a porcine theme

Religious restrictions on the consumption of pigs come from the same area. Such restrictions exist in Jewish dietary laws (Kashrut) and in Muslim dietary laws (Halal). The basis of dietary laws has been the subject of much scholarship (Soler). Economic and health and hygiene factors have been used to explain the development of dietary laws historically. The significance of dietary laws, however, and the importance attached to them can be related to other purposes in defining and expressing religious and cultural identity. Dietary laws and their observance may have been an important factor in sustaining Jewish identity despite the dispersal of Jews in foreign lands since biblical times. In those situations, where a person eats in the home of someone who does not keep kosher, the lack of knowledge about your host's ingredients and the food preparation techniques make it very difficult to keep kosher. Dietary laws require a certain amount of discipline and self-control, and the ability to make distinctions between right and wrong, good and evil, pure and defiled, the sacred and the profane, in everyday life, thus elevating eating into a religious act.

Alternatively, people who eat anything are often subject to moral judgments that may also lead to social stigmatisation and discrimination. One of the most powerful and persuasive discourses influencing current thinking about health and bodies is the construction of an 'obesity epidemic', critiqued by a range of authors (see for example, Wright & Harwood). As omnivores who appear indiscriminate when it comes to food, pigs provide an image of uncontrolled eating, made visible by the body as a "virtual confessor", to use Elizabeth Grosz's term. In *Fat Pig,* a production by the Sydney Theatre Company in 2006, women are reduced to being either fat pigs or shrieking shallow women. *Fatuosity*, a blog by PhD student Jackie Wykes drawing on her research on fat and sexual subjectivity, provides a review of the play to describe the misogyny involved: "It leaves no options for women—you can either be a lovely person but a fat pig who will end up alone; or you can be a shrill bitch but beautiful, and end up with an equally obnoxious and shallow male counterpart".

The elision of the divide between women and pigs enacted by such imagery also creates openings for new modes of analysis and new practices of intervention that further challenge humanist histories. Such interventions need to make visible other power relations embedded in assumptions about identity politics. Following the lead of feminists and postcolonial theorists who have challenged the binary oppositions central to western ideology and hierarchical power relations, critical animal theorists have also called into question the essentialist and dualist assumptions underpinning our views of animals (Best).

A pig history of the humanities might restore the central role that pigs have played in human history and evolution, beyond their exploitation as food. Humans have constructed their story of the nature of pigs to suit themselves in terms that are specieist, racist, patriarchal and colonialist, and failed to grasp the connections between the oppression of humans and other animals. The past and the ways it is constructed through history reflect and shape contemporary conditions. In this sense, the past has a powerful impact on the present, and the way this is re-told, therefore, also needs to be situated, historicised and problematicised. The examination of history and society from the standpoint of (nonhuman) animals offers new insights on our relationships in the past, but it might also provide an alternative history that restores

their agency and contributes to a different kind of future. As the editor of *Critical Animals Studies*, Steve Best describes it: "This approach, as I define it, considers the interaction between human and nonhuman animals—past, present, and future—and the need for profound changes in the way humans define themselves and relate to other sentient species and to the natural world as a whole."

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