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## Pig: a scholarly view

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

### Pig: A Scholarly View

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In George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, the pigs infamously changed the law to read: "some animals are more equal than others" (108). From Charlotte's Web to Babe, there are a plethora of contemporary cultural references, as well as expressions of their intelligence and worth, which would seem to support the pigs' cause. However, simultaneously, the term "pig" is also synonymous with negative attributes—greed, dirtiness, disarray, brutality and chauvinism. Pigs are also used to name those out of favour, including police officers, the obese, capitalists and male chauvinists. Yet, the animal's name is also used to express the most extraordinary and unlikely events as in "pigs might fly". On the one hand, pigs are praised and represented as intelligent and useful, but then they are derided as unclean and slovenly. We are similarly paradoxical in our relationship with them, ranging from using them as a food source to keeping them as pets, and from seeing them as a valuable farm animal/resource or dangerous feral pest depending on which side of the farm gate they are on. Pigs also give a voice to many aspects of popular culture and feature in novels, fairytales, cartoons, comics and movies.

As food, pigs are both for feasts and forbidden, their meat the site of both desire and disgust. They are smoked, roasted, fried, stewed and braised, and farmed in the worst of industrial food producing factories. They are also leading the charge in an eating revolution which is calling for heritage, free-range, organic and cruelty-free farming. Snuck into dishes during the Inquisition to expose false conversos, pigs are today seen by some as unclean, inedible and/or fattening and, yet, they provide the symbolic heart of tip-to-tail eating and some of the most expensive and desired of foodie products: heritage Spanish hams, for instance. In an age where to be slender is the goal of many, pigs have been bred and farmed to provide pork which is ever leaner, and yet, their fat—at its most unctuous and melting—is providing a space where the most celebrated of chefs revel. When more and more people are disconnected from what they eat, snout-to-tail eaters are dining on recognisable pigs' ears, pig's head filled pies and braised trotters. For many, pigs are the other white meat.

Those of us who grew up with television muppet, Miss Piggy, are familiar with the mixed feelings that pigs can evoke. As the contributions to this issue attest, the idea of "pig" can evoke a similarly wide range of responses from scholars working in a variety of disciplines. While as editors we approached the idea of "pig" from an interdisciplinary food studies approach, the symbolic, and even iconic, significance of the pig is a central concern of all of the papers. As Claude Lévi-Strauss put it so elegantly "food has to be good to think as well as to eat" (1963: 128).

A number of the authors in this issue have responded with a regional or country-specific focus, and include perspectives from, or about, places and cultures as diverse as Ireland, Tonga, New Zealand, the Soviet Union, the USA and China. "The Pig in Irish Cuisine and Culture", the title and subject of Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire's historical analysis, opens with the fact that more pork is eaten per capita than any other meat in Ireland but pigs themselves are almost invisible. Various themes confirm the importance of pigs in Irish culture—literature, folklore, the domestication of the animal and their value in household economics, their role in feasts and how they are raised, killed, prepared and consumed. How the history of the pig in Ireland complements that of the potato—the food item more widely recognised as a major contributor to Irish cuisine—is also included, as are an indication of the new interpretations of Irish pork

and bacon dishes by contemporary chefs. In Tonga, conversely, pigs are killed to mark a special event, and are not eaten as everyday food by most people, although they are very significant in Tongan life and culture precisely because of this ceremonial importance. In "Pu'aka Tonga," ex-resident of Tonga Mandy Treagus, explains that this is one of the few things about the Tongan diet that has not changed since Cook visited the area and named it the "Friendly Islands". Treagus also critiques the ways in which the Tongan diet has changed, and how food in Tonga is a neo-colonial issue with pervasive and, sometimes, negative ramifications for Tongans.

Jeremy Fisher's memoir "Tusk" similarly weaves personal and cultural history together, this time in New Zealand. "Tusk" orients the life story of the narrator's father around the watershed moment he experienced when he killed a boar at 16. The tusks he took from the killing were mounted on gold and accompanied him throughout his life, as well as acting as a reminder to others of his act. The tusks thus function as a physical reminder of the night he spent out in the bush and killed the boar, but also a remembrance of both change and continuity over time. Jenny Smith moves us spatially, and temporally, to the Soviet Union in her "Tushonka: Cultivating Soviet Postwar Taste". During the Second World War, the USA sent meat, cheese and butter overseas to help feed the Red Army. However, after receiving several shipments of SPAM, a more familiar canned pork product, Russian tushonka, was requested. Smith uses the example of tuskonka to trace how this pig-based product not only kept soldiers alive during the war, but how later the requirements for its manufacture re-prioritised muscle over fat and influenced pig breeding programs. Smith asserts that this had a significant influence on farming and food processing in the Soviet Union, as well as the relationship between the pig and the consumer.

Pigs are at the centre of debates that have arisen from the growth of a number of social movements that are becoming increasingly mainstream, reminding us that they are also alive, and beings in their own right. These movements include environmentalism, vegetarianism and other alternative food movements advocating ethical eating. Thus, in his analysis of alien creatures with pig and human features in the science fiction series Dr Who, "Those Pig-Men Things", Brett Mills explores our reactions to these characters and their fates. Discussing why pig-human representations are capable of being both "shocking and horrific", but also of arousing our empathy, Mills's analysis suggests the possibility of more complex notions of human/non-human interaction. It also assists in working towards, as he states, "helpfully destabilis[ing our] simplistic ideas of the superiority of the human race." The deepest form of human-animal interaction underlies Peta S. Cook and Nicholas Osbaldiston's "Pigs Hearts and Human Bodies: A Cultural Approach to Xenotransplantation". Cook and Osbaldiston discuss how our categorisation of animals as a lower species has enabled their exploitation, arguing how, in the contemporary West, we largely attribute "a sacred high value to human bodies, and a low, profane quality to animal bodies." The authors provide a compelling account of the social and cultural ramifications of the use of pigs in xenotransplantation (animal-to-human transplantation), a process in which the current "choice" animal source is pigs.

The line dividing human and animal can at other times be a tenuous one, demonstrated by the anxiety generated over eating practices exposed in fears of eating "like a pig". In her article, "Sugar Pigs: Children's Consumption of Confectionery", Toni Risson explains how rules about eating and concealing food in the mouth remind us that eating is an animal act that instruction is required to modify and control. Children's lolly-eating rituals—sharing half-eaten food, monitoring the progress of its consumption and change, and using fingers to inspect this change or pull stuck lollies off teeth—can evoke disgust in adults, but can also create friendship networks, intimacy and a sense of belonging for children as they transgress the rules of civilised eating. As Risson puts it, as "the antithesis of civilisation, the pig is the

means by which we understand ourselves as civilised beings, but the child with a lolly is an ever-present reminder that we may be animals after all”.

Feminism can be added to this list of social movements, with Arhlene Ann Flowers drawing attention to the power of language in her article “Swine Semantics in U.S. Politics: Who Put Lipstick on the Pig?”. Flowers chronicles the linguistic battle between the presidential candidates in the US 2008 campaign over the colloquialism “lipstick on a pig”, used in a speech by then Democratic presidential candidate, Barack Obama. Flowers traces the history of this phrase, as well as the use of other porcine terms in political language including “pork barrelling” and “male chauvinist pig.”

In her article about New York’s first gastropub, The Spotted Pig, one of the co-editors of this issue, Donna Lee Brien, has constructed a brief restaurant biography for the eatery famous for founding chef April Bloomfield’s nose-to-tail, locally sourced pork dishes. In this, Brien reflects upon the pig’s place in contemporary dining, whether as “raw foodstuff, fashionable comestible, brand, symbol or marketing tool.” In Lillian Ng’s novel, *Swallowing Clouds*, references to pigs are similarly closely related to food, but in her article, Spanish author Catalina Ribas Segura argues these references to flesh and meat evoke the concepts of freedom, transgression and desire. In “Pigs and Desire in Lillian Ng’s *Swallowing Clouds*”, Segura focuses on pork and the pig and what these reveal about the two main characters’ relationship. One of these, Zhu Zhiyee, is a butcher, which means that pigs and pork are recurrent topics throughout the novel, but other porcine expressions appear throughout. Pig-related terminology in the novel provides a means for Segura to consider the relationship between food and sex, and sex and literature, and includes a discussion about the connotations of pigs in Chinese culture, where pork is used in a variety of dishes. Lee McGowan’s “Piggery and Predictability: An Exploration of the Hog in Football’s Limelight” focuses in more closely on one of the uses to which we have put pigs, discussing how far “the beautiful game” of football (soccer) has come from the days when an inflated pigs bladder was used as the ball.

Reversing this focus from use back to how we, as humans, relate to animals, can show that how we conceive of pigs in our human history reveals our own prejudices. It is known that pigs and humans have interacted for some 10,000 years. The history of that interaction and their own adaptability mean that pigs have a broad range of possible relationships with humans, wider and more complex than either that of many other species or our contemporary treatment of them would attest. The other co-editor of this issue, Adele Wessell, takes a historical perspective to restore pigs to the centre of the narrative in “Making a Pig of the Humanities.” Drawing on a growing body of work on nonhuman animals, Wessell is interested in what a history of pigs and our relationship with them reveals about humans more generally. She argues that all the significant themes in modern history—production, religion, the body, science, power, the national state, colonialism, gender, consumption, migration, memory—can be understood through a history of our relationships with pigs.

Jim Hearn is a chef, a researcher and writer. Hearn’s article “Percy” is the story of a pig who, as the only pig in the farmyard, longs to “escape the burden of allegory”. All Percy wanted was to belong, but his pig-ness caused offence to all the other animals in the farm. Percy’s story is about belonging and identity, body-image and representation, told from a pig’s point of view. Percy is burdened with the layers of meaning that have built up around pigs and longs to escape, and this fable provides a fitting ending to this issue.

Together, we hope the articles in this collection indicate the wide significance and large number of meanings of “pig” that are possible for different cultures and across historical periods, and the place that pigs inhabit in our national, popular and food

cultures. They reveal how pigs are used and misused, as well as how they are understood and misunderstood. These interesting and diverse articles also show how pigs are both material and allegorical; how they are paradoxical in how they are revered, avoided and derided; and, commonly, how they are eaten.

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