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Does meat come from animals?

A multispecies approach to classification and belonging in highland Guatemala

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**Abstract** In the Guatemalan highlands, distinctions between human and animal are often irrelevant to the treatment of an object as meat. I draw from my ethnographic fieldwork on eating practices in that region to suggest that if the recent social science turn to species is to be a departure from the limitations of Euro-American humanism, it must take species not as a genealogically mappable identity but as a coherence situated amid ever-transforming divisions and connections. Stable distinctions between human and other species are precisely what deserve to be called into question. The power of multispecies scholarship thus lies not in how it “centers the animal” but in its challenge to conventional taxonomic formulations of classification and belonging. That meat takes various, situated forms has implications for multicultural politics as well as anthropological method and inquiry. [*multispecies, categories, belonging, ontologies, everyday life, Guatemala*]

Taxonomy is a practice with histories and cultures, but this is often not readily apparent.<sup>1</sup>

Instead, taxonomy gains strength through its claims of cataloging the universal truth of the singular world. While many biologists are nuanced in their depiction of species as fluid always-

becomings (see especially Hey 2006; Margulis and Sagan 2002), a persistent use of the concept of species evokes fixed and measurable degrees of relatedness (the human is more closely aligned with animals than plants, with mammals than fish, with primates than cattle, and so on; cf. Ingold 2006). The specificities of a species category might change, but the premise of conventional taxonomy is that life can be classified through fixed, objective properties that can be mapped and known with the eventual certainty of ontological being: that *is* a cow, that *is* an animal, that *is* a human.

This article is inspired, however, by the (participant-)observation that meat can take ontologically diverse forms—not all of which align with an understanding of meat that has underpinnings in mononaturalist phylogeny in which definable and orderable parts are linked together in one world. While conducting ethnographic fieldwork in the Guatemalan highlands, I learned that meat was many things and, along with this, that the categories of self and other were done and undone in many ways. In the encounters I describe, not only were distinctions between human and animal often irrelevant to the classification of an object as meat but the pathways of inclusion and exclusion constituting this object also varied.

This observation is situated within a burgeoning field of multispecies scholarship.<sup>2</sup> This field, which owes much to a tradition of feminist anthropology, has usefully “decentered the human” (Few and Tortorici 2013) as the site at which relations originate, unsettling taken-for-granted assumptions about knowledge and its holders. Yet, if the social science turn to species—or, rather, multispecies—is to be a point of departure from the limitations of humanism, species must not be understood as a naturally ordered essence of blood or genetics but as an occurrence of coherence situated amid ever-transforming divisions and connections. Many multispecies-focused authors have themselves argued or would otherwise agree with the claim that “species”

pertain to the making of relations (cf. Bertoni 2013; Hayward 2010; Kohn 2007; Tsing 2010), but discussions of species continue to be haunted by the specter of Linnaean taxonomy, which catalogs beings into fixed types, some lucky ones defined as naturally human while others are not. This article illustrates that stable distinctions between humans and other species are precisely what deserve to be challenged.

The stakes of this discussion are high. In Guatemala (and elsewhere) today, there is considerable political incitement to embrace multiculturalism. In the language of this politics, the bodies and beliefs of various cultures aggregate to make a harmonious whole (cf. Latour 2002). Animals might well join this vision: We are all linearly connected through an underlying similarity of kind. Yet, belying the promise of peaceful integration, variation exists that cannot, and should not, be so easily disappeared. Elizabeth A. Povinelli (2002) and Charles R. Hale (2005) have, in different ways, shown how multiculturalism carries with it the stale smell of essentialist discourses of blood and type that continue to pin people down.<sup>3</sup> The call for multispecies ethnography, if taken as a call to focus anthropological attention on other-than-human (Linnaean) species, runs the risk of similarly reasserting homogenizing, and ontologically violent, modes of ordering.<sup>4</sup> Through ethnographic analysis of meat and its classifications in the cases that follow, I illustrate not only that there can be no steadfast certainty about who is human and who is beast but also that the parameters of these categories themselves do not travel smoothly. Despite a widespread classification of species into fixed, inherent positions in a singular, natural order, there is no register of equivalence on which bodies and beings can be steadfastly pinned. Species are never given but form through a “dance of kin and kind” (Haraway 2008:17) that varies not just between localities but also within them.

Methods and orientation

To highlight that the power of multispecies scholarship lies not in its attention to classically conceived Linnaean species—be they worms, anemones, dogs, or mushrooms—I have drawn the material for this article from everyday experiences of living and eating with families in Guatemala. I focus on a series of fairly quotidian events surrounding the eating of meat to illustrate that everyday interactions have much to teach us about the science(s) of classification (what a mistake it would be to only look to scientists to study sciences-in-action!).

The arguments I make have been shaped by ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in a small town in the Guatemalan state of Huehuetenango over the summers of 1999–2001 and additional summer fieldwork conducted in 2003 and 2005–07. The bulk of the material presented below comes from research on dietary practices in the highland city of Xela that took place during a period of 16 months between 2008 and 2009.<sup>5</sup> I lived with several families during this fieldwork to learn about the everyday negotiations of procuring and preparing food, employing a research strategy perhaps best characterized by Renato Rosaldo as “deep hanging out” (see Clifford 1997:56).<sup>6</sup> Since meat was a daily concern of those with whom I shopped, cooked, and ate, it became of interest to me as well. In focusing on meat, however, I realized that my understanding of it as a stable object—the flesh of animal, as if flesh and animal were each straightforward things—did not map easily onto the ways meat emerged around me. At issue was not just that the category did not smoothly translate across the many cultures and languages that surrounded me but also that my attempt to treat meat as a knowable object did not align with the ways this object persistently moved in and out of salience.

This observation stems from long-standing ethnographic attention to the challenge of smoothly translating concepts from site to site. Marilyn Strathern articulated this challenge well in *No Nature: No Culture* (1980). She wrote of traveling to Papua New Guinea with an interest

in how Hagen divided nature from culture. Yet, in carrying out fieldwork, she learned that those with whom she lived did not deploy these concepts. Rather than contest the definitional parameters—that is, the meanings—of the terms, her observation undermined their universality and, in so doing, created openings to examine what other techniques of division might be relevant, both in Papua New Guinea and in the so-called West (cf. Mol 2014). A lesson from this research, which shaped my fieldwork approach, is that we cannot take practices of connection, in addition to categories themselves, for granted.<sup>7</sup>

To be clear, it is not my aim in this article to make a general argument about how meat is categorized in the world; nor is it my aim to characterize Guatemalan beliefs about meat. The materials I provide have been framed by the years I have spent carrying out research in the city of Xela, where ethnic (K'iche', Mam, Spanish, German, American, among others), class, and geospatial (urban and rural) identities have entangled and divided in historically complex ways (see Grandin 2000; Yates-Doerr in press). Yet I do not deploy these materials with the aim of directly teaching my readers about the region. Guatemala's brutal three-decade genocide—in which more than 200,000 residents, a majority of whom spoke Mayan languages, were tortured and killed at the hands of state and paramilitary groups—has also affected the concerns of this article as has the country's enduring legacy of colonial exploitation, with its slippery, bloody boundaries between the human and the less-than-human. This spectacular violence is not, however, the article's focus (for this, see two excellent recent edited volumes: Grandin et al. 2011; McAllister and Nelson 2013).

I instead focus on the myriad and fluid organization of everyday realities in a few specific cases of eating meat to challenge the continued predominance of Euro-American “modes of ordering” in academic discourse and analysis (Escobar 2008; Law 1994). When I turn to address

commonly deployed categories of social theory—for example, gender, race, and class—my argument is certainly not that these categories do not exist (in Guatemala or elsewhere). It is, rather, that they do not exist in the same way, or to the same effect, from situation to situation. Anthropologists have long illustrated that identities do not have a singular core simply waiting to be properly defined (Rapp 1978; Rosaldo 1980). My examination of meat eating seeks to add to this body of research by illustrating how the techniques through which identities are made to cohere themselves vary. **Of concern** is not just where boundaries are drawn and who or what is added to particular categories but what a relation or boundary can be taken to mean. As the cases in the three sections that follow show, similarity and difference can take many forms.

#### Animal

Cries of “Demo, Demo, Demo” announce their arrival at the market to passengers on the tired stream of minibuses that wind through streets dense with shoppers, sellers, and crates of goods. “Demo, Demo, Demo”—La Democracia is the name of this market, where people come together to sell and buy the food that keeps the city alive (see Figure 1).

Dulce María, with whom I am living, is at La Demo this morning, as she is most mornings, to buy the food that her family will eat that day. She begins at the market’s exteriors, taking time to eye and feel the produce. She barter with familiar women as she fills her nylon bags with red peppers, green beans, sesame seeds, and plantains—and a few goods for which an English translation would be disappointing (e.g., *whiskil*, *chilacayote*).

She then moves to the market’s center, where butchers operate out of wooden stalls. For me, the slabs of meat hanging from large steel hooks conjure up images of violence; the bodies of headless cows bear haunting similarity to the faceless human bodies featured regularly on the front page of the local newspapers (see Figure 2). But this family resemblance is simply not there

for Dulce María. For her, the interior of the market is not a space of death but is filled with the delicious abundance life. The connection I might draw between humans and animals loses intelligibility as we move through the stalls searching for food; our activities are organized by different concerns.

It is near the end of the week, and by the time we reach the center of the market, her money is almost gone. We pass a few stalls selling whole cuts of meat before we arrive at one advertising *carne molida* (ground beef). She will use this carne to prepare a favorite entrée, separately seasoning it, then adding it to the peppers, which she drops into battered egg white and fries, to be served with white bread or tortillas. The dish is not *típico*—she learned it while working as a maid for a wealthy family in the country's capital—but she has prepared it so many times it has lost any sense of being foreign. The meat she works with is also familiar. She does not wear gloves or sterilize her cutting board; she is unafraid to touch the meat and works confidently, without concern if there is contact between it and her body, between what is raw and what is cooked. When her husband and children arrive at the table, she will proudly serve them the meat, stuffed within the center of the pepper, placed at the center of the plate.

On this day at the market, she tells the butcher to sell her more carne than usual. Holidays are approaching, and she will cure a few extra pounds for a seasonal dish. After the meat is weighed—as it is being dropped into the black plastic bag—I notice a note on the stall. *De soya*, says a tag in the corner, indicating that this is not meat from cattle but from soybeans. That afternoon, before her husband and four children begin to eat the feast she has prepared for them, they give thanks for their ability to eat carne in a country too familiar with famine. It is not every day that they are able to eat meat, and days like this, when it is part of the meal, are more celebratory than others. They bite into the dish, chewing with contentment, enjoying the flavors.

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If, when hearing this story, you are tempted to imagine that Dulce María has served her family imitation or artificial meat instead of the real thing, let me instead suggest that something else might be taking place. Let me suggest that there are multiple ways of making meat come into being—or, more precisely, of enacting meat<sup>8</sup>—some of which render meat a physiological substance derived from animals while others do not. John Dupré suggests that the stereotypical framework of species as a stable category of being has a history in John Locke’s theory of real and nominal essences, wherein “real essences demarcate natural kinds” (2002:20). But, whereas taxonomic principles divide species into categories that have an underlying (real, true) property, as seen in Dulce María’s kitchen, life and its substances can be arranged in other (also real, true) ways. As meals can take shape through presentation rather than genealogy, something need not come from animal to be meat.

My argument is not that origins are never relevant. Within Maya cosmologies of meat, which most of the people with whom I lived could easily articulate, origins are central to the categorization “meat”—although, in these articulations, what Linnean taxonomy terms “plants” is not clearly divided from what Linnean taxonomy terms “animal”; human flesh, for example, is composed of maize, which is itself a fleshy, living person.<sup>9</sup> Origins can also matter in Dulce María’s kitchen since, on Fridays, keeping with Catholic tradition, it is important that she serves fish instead of beef—*carne de res*, though “de res” (from cow) would rarely be specified. And origins are also important at the local Walmart, which sells its products by stressing associations between meat and the animal from which it came (see Figure 3). The shelves of the massive grocery store are increasingly lined with parts—mechanically deboned slabs, skins, and fats—in

which beings have been rendered invisible. But for these products to be palatable to highland Guatemala customers, the carcass of the body they came from is staged, re-presented.

My argument is, rather, that meat can be classified through priorities other than origin and it would be prudent to pay attention to these. It is important that this not be read as a division between how classification operates in “the West” and “elsewhere.” If Euro-American intellectual tradition would have it that a substance is singular, with a property that can be measured and known, the variation in substance that I am describing here also emerges within Western repertoires (see Candea and Alcayna-Stevens 2012). For example, the Dominican Republic–Central America–United States Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) that took effect in Guatemala in 2006 made possible a single category called “Meat (and animal feed)” in which poultry, pork, beef, soybean meal, and yellow corn became grouped together as foods exempt from import–export tariffs (Hawkes and Thow 2008). Corinna Hawkes and Ann Marie Thow (2008) note that lobbyists for the American Soybean Association actively campaigned for CAFTA-DR’s low import tariffs on meat, as they were confident that soy would be included in this category. In this mode of ordering, meat is not organized through (agri)cultural histories but through political and economic negotiations.

Meanwhile, in nutrition classes, which have proliferated in Xela in response to an increase in scientific and public health attention to deaths from diabetes and heart attacks (see Groeneveld et al. 2007), nutritionists routinely define meat in terms of its component parts. Here, something is meat because it contains relatively high amounts of protein, iron, and B vitamins. When cataloging meat through nutrients, educators will frequently include egg, since it is full of protein, and will promote it as a more affordable alternative to beef or pork.

Several different techniques of classification might become salient as Dulce María serves soy to her family. In nutritional terms, soy becomes intelligible as meat through its biochemical composition—by having comparable amounts of protein, iron, and vitamins to animal flesh.<sup>10</sup> In economic terms, international politics relating to the price of feed and transportation may matter, as beef may cost more than chicken to produce, shaping the possibilities of what people can purchase. And meat may also gain its prestige by being doubly rich: full of nutrients and also expensive. But, crucially, Dulce María is dominated by neither biochemistry nor price in her preparation of the meal described above. Instead, the meat she works with takes its shape as meat through the expert techniques by which she cooks it and serves it to her family. As she prepares the dish in her kitchen, what she speaks about is taste and texture. What emerges as relevant as she serves it to her family is how it is seasoned and cooked, its place in the lunch (a main dish in a main gathering of the day), and its position on a plate (the center). There is no imitation or deception at work here. This is a meat she is proud of. When Dulce María serves us meat she does not do so on the basis of its contents (soy or cow). She does so because she is working within possibilities of crafting and preparing a delicious meal. She is not in the business of serving phylogeny: Instead, she serves her family food.

### Family

The family gathers every day at half past one. Schools have ended by then, classes starting early in the morning to finish in time for the lunch hour. Martín, the father, also comes home from work, as businesses around the city close at midday. The table is set when he arrives: forks with bent prongs and soup spoons with flecks of stubborn rust laid on the plastic checkered tablecloth along with a wicker basket of hot tortillas wrapped in well-worn cloth. Dulce María will serve the food in courses, starting with a bowl of broth, then a plate with rice and a boiled or fried

potato or carrot, and juice thick with sugar. A few times a week there will be a small piece of beef or sausage, which is everyone's favorite. But no one ever complains if there is none. The children wash their hands in the icy water from the tap before they pile around the table, waiting to eat until they have recited the Lord's Prayer together. "Give us this day, our daily bread ... ." When the prayer ends, Martín regularly makes a small speech about how sitting around the table and eating together makes us family. After I have lived with the family for several weeks, they begin to refer to one another as "Mama Dulce" and "Papa Martín" when speaking to me. "Call your Papa Martín to dinner," Dulce María will say if he is out of earshot of the kitchen. At first it feels strange to use these kinship terms myself, but as the weeks pass it becomes normalized, *familiar*.

The four children refer to each other as "brother" and "sister" and the adults as "mother" and "father." But in a different room is a small picture of another woman whom two of the children also call "mother." Over time, I learn that this mother died giving birth to her second child. Her husband, the child's father, was in no position to care for two small children, so before leaving the country in pursuit of better work, he delivered them to his sister and her husband. It is this mother and father who have raised them, along with their two children, as their own. Other family members help out. Aunts and uncles regularly stop by with food and school notebooks or other supplies. The distant father sends money from abroad whenever he can. Martín, the father with whom the children live, takes on extra work, spending his weekends in construction yards and atop the buildings he helps to assemble. There is exhaustion, but these are his children and no one doubts that he does what has to be done.

Whereas phylogenetic modes of ordering relations might have it that the adopted children belong less to the family than those born into it, this is not the reality around the table where we

gather. Martín is full of praise for all four children. “Eat more, my dear, my angel, my heart, my life,” he urges them, passing around the basket of tortillas until all have eaten. As Dulce María divvies up soup, rice, and the occasional piece of meat, the differences between the children that become relevant pertain to how to use scarce resources to feed those at the table and not to the ancestry of individuals. After the evening supper, all the children pile into the family bed together and wait for their parents to join them. I never hear the terms *niece*, *nephew*, *aunt*, or *uncle* used to describe their relations; likewise *cousin* is a term these children use for others but never for each other. When an uncle dies who, in phylogenetic terms, is “more closely related” to two of the children than to the two others, the anguish all the children feel renders this an inept technique for classifying their relations.

It is, of course, possible that phylogenetic divisions between the two sets of children become relevant when I am not around or that they are simply not evident to me. But as I watch for this truth of the children’s connection to surface in the months I live with them, it occurs to me that I may be missing more relevant truths at play—the truth, for example, that the meals Dulce María makes for her children also make the children hers. And though the picture of the other woman remains on display, when they gather at the table together over meals, the family is not necessarily divided or incomplete. Here things do not need to be whole to cohere.

That eating together can form kinship in the region was a lesson I learned in a different way years before, when I was unable to eat the beef floating in the broth of soup served at a housewarming celebration I attended further north and higher up in the mountains. As a foreigner, I was an honored guest. Unlike any of the other women in the room, I was offered a seat at the table by my hosts, and I was among those served first. But I encountered a problem: It had been more than a decade since I had knowingly put the flesh of cattle in my mouth, and,

though I wanted to participate, I could not bring myself to take this step. I managed to sip the broth as the beads of fat formed at the surface, but I could not chew the pieces. If the fluid was tolerable, muscle, tongue, and tendon were too much (see Figure 4).

When those around me realized what I was doing, they laughed at me. The laughter was not entirely gentle. I was peculiar, but I was also offensive, and several people wanted nothing to do with me when the meal was over, moving away from where I was sitting and, when I tried to make conversation, responding with silence. I had not only failed to achieve closeness of family but, in refusing the meat—as well as undertaking the strange behavior of treating my meal as though it could be dissected into parts to be accepted or refused—I had also cast myself as unworthy of communication, jeopardizing my status as human.<sup>11</sup>

Before beginning the fieldwork that brought me to live with Dulce María's family of four children, I sought to change my body's reaction. I began to train my body to eat what I had earlier rejected so that I would not find myself in the position of refusing both food and the connection enabled by commensality. Food where I lived in Guatemala is typically dished out from a communal pot, and it is uncommon for meals to accommodate personalized dietary preferences and requirements. So, like those with whom I lived, I ate what I was given and, indeed, was treated as kin by many.

But there is one more story within this story to recount: The family I describe above kept a large dog chained permanently at the doorway. The dog, locked within their household walls, protected the family, with its small children, from the uncertain dangers of the outside streets. While mother, father, and their children accepted me into their home, fed me, and extended remarkable kindness, never in my months of living there did this sharp-toothed creature recognize me as one of its own, barking and lunging when he saw me. As he was never removed

from his chain, he was often covered in his own excrement and mucous and I was both saddened and frightened by his presence. Though I gave him biscuits and scraps of fat to try to win his favor, this was never enough. Months after my arrival, he still greeted me with fury.

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The biology textbook concept of species is defined in terms of a/sexual relations. Donna Haraway notes that an “ability to interbreed reproductively is the rough and ready requirement for members of the same biological species” (2008:17). Phylogenetic maps connect species through descent from common ancestry; carne—its various species and their flesh—is born from carnal relations and the language of “blood ties” therein evoked.

Anthropologists and historians have illustrated that “blood” in Latin America has long been conceived as a patchwork of different notions of descent—many of which had nothing to do with determinate, fixed inheritance (de la Cadena 2001; Nelson 1999, 2009; Stepan 1991; Stolcke 1974; Wertheimer 2006). Yet, as 19th-century scientific practices of taxonomic classification proliferated, blood became commonly associated with discrete, bounded physiological types (see Grandin 2000; Little-Siebold 2001). In an especially notable example of this association, Miguel Angel Asturias (1977), eventual recipient of a Nobel Peace Prize, made blood a central focus of his argument for the importance of miscegenation in Guatemala. He writes in his 1923 dissertation, *Sociología Guatemalteca: El problema social del indio*, that the blood of the Indian and the non-Indian needed to mix to reinvigorate the country. In this mode of ordering, blood is treated as the medium of heredity. For reasons that lie outside individual control, people are born with certain types of blood; it is only through sexual reproduction with someone of a different blood type that bloods can mix, changing the blood of the progeny.

Tracing lineage through “blood” clearly affects who may be included in and excluded from mealtime tables in Guatemala today. But while relatedness can be formed out of visions of sex and descent, still there is more to it. I saw clearly in my fieldwork that the institutional power of blood relations did not have a stranglehold on kinship. For, as strong as this form of genealogy can be, people have long been working around this mode of classifying—assembling families and heredity in other ways (see also Abercrombie 2003; Carsten 1997; Farquhar 2002). In Dulce María’s family, temporal and spatial proximity also shaped what Marshall Sahlins has called “mutuality of being” (2011:2). Sexual reproduction (the ability to breed—whatever this means in practice) was not a precondition for the formation of family. It was not only “natural essences” of blood or semen that mattered but also eating meals together. Scientific kinds that are interwoven with political imaginaries of essence-based heredity are not without effect, but neither are they overwhelming. In this household, as in many Guatemalan households, mealtimes made families. To refuse to gather around the table and share in what—and how—others were eating was not merely impolite; it was a challenge to how pathways of belonging were organized.

I do not recount the story of sharing meals with this family to suggest that eating meat at the table ensured my inclusion once and for all. The families I lived with knew that I always had the option of leaving for the United States on a journey that would last but a few hours in the relative safety and comfort of an airplane and that I would easily pass through customs. Rather than imply a “false peace” (Latour 2002) of unification, whereby eating together erases differences and creates systems without friction, my point is that visible, official, and taxonomic modes of establishing family are not all that matter. Some modes of belonging are organized through family trees and the recounting of ancestors. But commensality can also make kinship.

“La familia que come unida se mantiene unida” [The family that eats together stays together], recounts a classic Spanish proverb. To twist this expression slightly, those who stay and eat together can also become family.

While many academics have been inclined to label the mode of connection built around shared meals as “fictive kinship,” this presumes an underlying reality to relations that does not fit with the practices in Dulce María’s home (see also Carsten 2004; Weismantel 1995; Yates-Doerr 2011). Relatedness made through the imagery of blood was not primary and material in this family whereas meal-made kinship was lesser and symbolic. Though the kinship of eating was not predicated on blood, sex, or notions of determinate inheritance, it was kinship nonetheless.

Yet, if familia was not a natural category determined by the fixed substance of blood, neither was it infinitely malleable. Rather than organize family around abstract terms, we might instead follow it through the practices in which it becomes relevant. Eating with families granted me inclusion in some situations, but the large, angry dog also reminded me that this inclusion was never complete. The dog’s own position in the household was telling. In the stillness of the night when the dog lay in wait, ready to defend the home from attackers, he was family. When morning came, and the dog remained tethered in filth to its post while the family gathered in the kitchen for beans and eggs, it was not.<sup>12</sup> And even when it was most thoroughly “animal,” he/it never moved into the category of meat.

Agustín Fuentes makes the compelling argument that animal species and the human species can share personhood, since personhood is based on “similar physiologies and shared sensory modalities” (2006:126). My point here is somewhat different, however, as it stresses the organization of categories of belonging through situated practices rather than through structural homology or unification of a physical domain—both of which retain concern for phylogeny. In

my account above, what comes to matter is what is done, rather than similarity of appearance or perspective. As a result, families can be formed from difference, not merely from resemblance. Moreover, the implications of family diverge: There can be kinship without love or even kindness.

### Collective

The pews in the church are already crowded by the time we squeeze next to those around us.

Some are neighbors, some are less familiar—their faces known but not their names.

Conversation fills the space beneath the vaulted ceilings until the priest enters the sanctuary, and even then it takes some time for the chatter to calm. We are in the midst of celebrations for Día de Difuntos (Day of the Dead, October 31) and Día de los Santos (All Saints Day, November 1), and the city is rowdy and festive. Starting at noon, the restless dead will leave their graves to spend the next cycle of the sun looking for souls to add to a list of those who will join them in the next year.

The holidays incite people throughout the city to mourn and pay respect to ancestors and to pray for health for the upcoming year. They also mark a shift in season. Throughout the countryside, men and women sweep through the rugged hillsides cutting the tall, beloved, stalks of maize and then covering their rooftops with ears and husks to be dried (see Figure 5). What is not exported will be boiled and ground, making a paste that is patted into the tortillas served at nearly every meal. And yet, while maize is clearly eaten, it is far too integral to life itself to be classified by everyone as mere food. Scientists and doctors I traveled with were confounded when villagers refused to list maize among the other goods consumed on food frequency questionnaires. It was an originary substance of mankind—a god, a marker of time, a substance

that would make and was made of flesh—but not straightforwardly food, and certainly not a starch or vegetable.

Over the priest's pontifications, the church walls echo with the sound of firecrackers. There is widespread enthusiasm for the celebrations marking that maize is life and alive—that it has meat and gives meat to others.<sup>13</sup> As the service draws to a close, another substance taken to be “plant” by conventional taxonomy is given flesh. The priest holds up a wafer, asking us to taste the body of Christ. “He gave us oil, he gave us bread, and he gave us wine; he gave himself. Now we take of him.”

Those around me step forward to receive the host. I am not Catholic, so I remain behind. The family had recently recounted a story of a young foreigner who, wanting to demonstrate that he was open to cultures different than his own, followed the crowd to the altar to receive communion. He opened his mouth, received the wafer, but then encountered a problem: He did not know what to do. Was he to swallow it? To spit it out? The family was serious when they told me this. The wafer was no mere cracker but the flesh of God, and stepping forward as the young man did, entering a space where he did not belong, was a grave mistake. What he had taken as simply additive—wheat and water mixed together to form something to eat—did not follow arithmetic's cumulative logic. The mixture made something else entirely. When his confusion became obvious, the service had to be stopped and hundreds kept waiting as clergymen attempted to reverse the damage of the transgression. The boy's ignorance was no excuse: What he had mistaken for symbolism was anything but.

One of the children next to me tells Dulce María he wants to stay back too, but she raps his knuckles. “Tiene que comer la carne!” [You must eat the carne!], she says adamantly.<sup>14</sup> It is essential that her son take communion because in eating the host, ingesting the material of

Christ, he will in turn become one with God. As will the others around him. And, in this way, they will become united with one another. Communion creates the commune; it enacts one as communal. This is not mere metaphor, his mother says; this is what happens.<sup>15</sup> As proof, she gestures to the room where the sea of parishioners—men, women, K'iche', Mam—have gathered together. (The gesture is compelling, but there is another Catholic church, a short walk away, where those wearing Indigenous *traje* will not be granted full membership into the congregation. One with God, mortal divisions remain.)

When the services end, we leave for the home of an elderly couple—the parents of Dulce María—where we will celebrate the holiday. Her parents and two of their daughters have not joined us at the church because they have converted to Protestantism. They now attend evangelical services, held in an unassuming building in a different part of the neighborhood. Unlike the foreigner who did not know what to do with the wafer, they know but do not do it. This particular carne they will no longer swallow.

When Dulce María told me about their conversion, she said she was upset that her mother and sisters no longer shared her God. She mourned that they did not sit together at church and that their communities—and with them, their bodies—had become different. But as we enter her childhood home, the sorrow of her story is no longer apparent. Instead, she and the other women quickly fall into a rhythm of preparing for the afternoon meal. Hunger is growing, and they have much to do.

For some days now they have been assembling *fiambre*, a seasonal dish that costs, according to the regional newspaper, more than 300 quetzales (roughly \$40, more than I have paid for my room and meals for the week<sup>16</sup>). This same newspaper reports that the three dozen-plus ingredients in *fiambre* symbolize Guatemala's ancestral diversity:

[ex]This plate represents the pluriculturality and multiculturalism of the country . . . . The inhabitants of Mesoamerica contributed the vegetables and the Spaniards the sausages, that at one time the Arabs had brought, but the special combination of fiambre is eaten in Guatemalan kitchens . . . . One of the most important characteristics of the mixture is the integration of different ingredients with their definite tastes and characteristics; it is like the mestizaje that happens in the region of Guatemala. [Prensa Libre 2008] (See Figure 6.)

The promise of multicultural integration offered by this dish is seductive (see also Hage 1998). A vision in which unity is formed through “different ingredients” of many cultures has been widely deployed in Guatemalan political circles, a suggestion of tolerance and inclusion. Yet the celebration of multiculturalism too often functions, as Hale (2005) notes, as a rhetorical “alibi” that, by reifying essentialist and bounded expressions of group identity, remakes the conditions for racial exclusion.

When looking at how fiambre is assembled here, we see considerably more variation than is made evident by the classification of difference into bounded cultures. It was the case that Dulce María could not afford to prepare this dish on her own. But she could afford to prepare one or two of the ingredients, and through their combination with ingredients prepared by other women, the meal could take shape. What the women contributed was not determined by who was indigenous and who was not (given their varied preferences for wearing *huipiles* and speaking K’iche’, these identities were fluid and overlapping anyway) but by a different set of means: who had chickens for eggs, who had well-flavored peppers, who had time to pickle the beets or to cure the sausage (or soy!) in brine. Though this was a prestigious dish, food was left on the plate. If this had been a meal of maize and beans—or a bowl of beef soup—all would

have been eaten. But when it came to fiambre, it was acceptable to leave some behind. Their dead, people said, would devour it later.

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In the activities just described for this afternoon—attending services and the meal with kin that follows—there is not one collective but many. There is a collective of the church on this particular day, when community is made through ingesting the host. But not all will join; as some are unable and others do not want to, other communities will be formed. There is a collective of family, but, with diversity of religion, dress, language, and so on, variation remains here as well. And there is the collective of a single meal, although here too we see difference. It is not just difference of cultural tastes that becomes relevant at this particular meal but also difference among the activities of the producers and the bodies of the eaters. Some make the food, some sit at the table and get first go at the meal, and others wait, perhaps until the living have gone to sleep, to sift through the remains.

The newspaper praises fiambre as being representative of Guatemalan multiculturalism. But in this house, Spanish, Arab, and Indigenous “cultures” are not neat types, some to be represented by pickled peppers, others by cured or salted pig. The fractures and unities are far more diverse, and far more fluid, than captured by the story of multicultural integration. Though sometimes the families will gather easily together to honor the dead who walk among them, at other times divisions between Catholic and evangelic will matter intensely. Moreover, the activities surrounding this dish suggest that integration—the making of a whole out of parts—may be a misguided ambition. There are simply too many categories at work for classifications of culture to ever represent, with any kind of finality, the meal’s organization. Also to the point, the meal is not just a symbolic representation of identity—be it national, regional, or

individual—but it is something to eat, which brings particular kinds of relational differences into being. For this dish to come together, there must be women to select, purchase, and cure pounds of meat in a vinegar brine; sisters who prepare the home and table for the day; a dog, tethered in the corner, guarding the door as best he can while people feast; and, not least, the corn, the soy, and the pig and cow who must be slaughtered so that others may celebrate the bounty of life.

If the origins of this dish cannot be clearly charted, neither can its effects. At times in its preparation and consumption coherence will emerge, and it will make sense to refer to the people who eat it as family. At times coherence will pull apart. Some will leave this meal to later ingest the carne of Jesus, some will sit behind in the pew, others will refuse to enter the church, and still others may not be allowed to enter. There will be differences in both appreciation and outcome, whether it is the flesh of corn, or cattle, or Christ that is served. Since bodies vary and “nourishment must always take place” (Haraway 2010:54), it is neither possible nor wise to dish out identical helpings.

To call the dish multicultural—or even to call it multinatural—is too easily misleading, as culture(s) and nature(s) are not fixed objects to be multiplied. The kind of similarity or the kind of difference through which coherence of culture, or coherence of nature, is formed will not be stable. Similarity of appearance, of seed, of taste, of texture, of timing—all may matter, or not, in various, situated ways. Instead of being known by a schema of set and definable similarities, collectives are formed—that is, made carnal—through the contact of ingestion, taste, and touch as well as through pathways of activity that are not so easy to fix into names.

#### Categories (Conclusion)

I have offered here a series of stories featuring different modes of assembling categories, enacting species. In the first, we encounter an array of repertoires of meat on offer in a highland

market: meat as a high-status food; meat that contains iron and protein; meat used as feed. Some meat, purchased from a wooden stall, comes from cows and pigs, and in this case the connection between the animal and what is eaten is important. In the same market, however, we have another enactment of meat wherein the generalization of “animal” is not a useful category. In contrast to a framing of meat as animal substance (muscle with fat and bones and blood), Dulce María can serve meat without origins being **central** to the meal.

In the second story, we encounter variation in the category of family. Sometimes lineage, genealogy, and genetics—a set of relations that becomes knotted together through the term *blood*—are central to how we can know ourselves to be the same as and different from those around us. But heredity, the passing along of qualities from kin to kin, can happen in other ways. Family can be formed through proximity, for example. In this form of family, as eating together incites exchange, it is not possible to eat with those who are un-familiar for very long. And yet, proximity and familiarity do not necessarily translate into like kinds. Not everyone in the family will sit at the table.

Finally, in the third story, the incorporation of carne (the flesh of corn, of Christ, and of a holiday meal) draws the bodies of various collectives together. Though some of these collectives entail rigid inclusions and exclusions—not just anyone can be Catholic, K’iche,’ woman, or even living—the process of building divisions is constantly untangled and reassembled. Belonging cannot be stable, but this does not mean that it is always precarious. The rupture of one collective may yield the emergence of another, and new collectives may form even though no others have decomposed.

There are different lessons to be learned about classification and the practice of belonging from the multiplicity of relations presented here. One of these connects to passing (as something

or someone) and the corollary desire for unmasking, disrobing, and seeing what is really there. Underneath the performance, according to this line of reasoning, lies a natural, knowable type. You might appear as family when you are actually adopted, foreign, or a different kind of creature altogether. Or, the meat you serve from soy is not real meat. I have presented these stories, however, to illustrate that there are ways of making coherence among “kin and kind” that do not depend on knowledge of essence. Instead of forming species from an underlying, knowable, taxonomic reality, species in the cases above are constantly assembled and disassembled, with new realities emerging as this happens. The point is not that species do not exist. It is, rather, that they do not exist outside the practices through which they come into being. You cannot look at the light-skinned, green-eyed woman and know she is family any more than you can look at the abused dog chained in the corner and know that he is not. You cannot know this because there is no fixed answer. Relations are not locked in any particular position or perspective but are variously done and undone.

Which brings us to a second lesson: the meaning of terms (or objects, or enactments of relations) exists not in the abstract but in what we do with them (see also Gluck and Tsing 2009). The field of anthropology is adept at taking the categories of others as the object of our own analysis, but we too often do so through our own words, and thereby on our own terms. Meat is but one example of how a single word may mean, do, and evoke diverse responses in diverse sites and situations. Meat/carne/body/flesh cannot be defined through a universal, genealogical taxonomy but is a category that emerges through specific, situated practices.

Even the icon of genealogy—the kinship system itself—can never operate through standardized terms but is something constituted locally, and, indeed, several different logics might variously mix (remember, in the example above, the children who refer to two men as

father). Taking kinship as a mappable system in which bounded units (beings, bodies, or identities) are connected to other bounded units by stable lines overlooks the fluidity of lived pathways of belonging. At stake is not principally ethnographic engagement with variation in categories but engagement with variation in the practice of classification.

You, as a reader, may have found yourself wanting a definition of meat or eating to emerge from this discussion, since this is the way categories are often organized (Ellen 2006). It is not incidental that I have not offered this. What counts as the object of meat, what counts as the practice of eating, and even what counts as a practice of accounting is not stable from day to day or site to site. It is also no accident that the stories presented in this article contain, like all stories, stories within stories. I might have cut out details, taken away texture, narrowed the focus, and sharpened the message. But these stories, taken from messy worlds of ethnographic observations and experiences, hold onto sentences, plots, and points of attention that do not always tie cleanly together. They retain a small amount of the detail of any given mundane practice—making a meal, eating lunch, attending church—because practices are never straightforwardly carried out. Analytically, we slice them, but despite the singularity of any presented slice, there are other cuts to be made (see also Yates-Doerr and Mol 2012).

This analysis suggests that we had better not get too comfortable with or too invested in the links drawn between any identity and its practice. Conventional taxonomy connects bounded units with stable lines, but it simply does not work in these cases of eating. The problem is not just that someone who does the eating in one moment may find him- or herself eaten in the next.<sup>17</sup> No, it is even more complex: The one who does the eating in one moment may, in that very same moment, also be eaten. We—whichever we emerges—can never be too confident in our assessment of who is predator and who is prey.

Cary Wolfe cautions against the “democratic impulse toward greater inclusiveness of every gender, or race, or sexual orientation, or—now—species” (2009:568). He warns that this penchant for pluralism does little to destabilize a vision of the knowing liberal human subject, leading us, deceptively, along a route of apparent departure that reinstates violent exclusions (see also Dave 2014:446). My article began with a story of La Democracia (Democracy), a periphery surrounding a center. But it did not end there. At the center of this market, we had not a stable substance of meat but a substance enacted as meat through its location among the carcasses, by concern for its preparation, and by its being placed at the center of the plate; it was not a meat made of animal but a meat done with skill of experience and effort of preparation.

Drawing from this meat, I conclude with the observation that multispecies ethnography can help us overcome the trappings, and violences, of Euro-American modes of ordering by disentangling the concept of species from its associations with fixed taxonomic rank. The “multi” of multispecies ethnography should thus be taken as an incitement to study the multiplicity of ways in which relations emerge—and not the pluralist addition of yet more (given) species to the ethnographic canon. It is not an approach that is beyond, more than, or other than “the human” but one situated squarely among questions about the variable and fluid configuration of humanity and its relations that have been with the field of anthropology since its inception (cf. Martin 2013; Redfield 2014). Its potential, in other words, lies in its encouragement to carefully consider how objects and exclusions are made to emerge, dissolve, and emerge again, however differently configured.

Returning to the question with which I began: Does meat come from animals? If this article has been successful, this question, or, at least, the expectations for its answers, must now be shifted. Sometimes origin stories will matter. When walking through a city market, it may be

crucial to smell blood and bone and see bodies of pig and cow hung on display. But at other times—even at the same time—meat has nothing to do with the flesh of animal but, rather, with the practice of learning how to make a proper meal from flavorful food. Rather than seek general definitions of the category “meat,” we might instead follow the practices in which the category takes form. This, in turn, offers an opening for alternative versions of collectivity and connectivity to emerge—versions in which bodies and beings can mix together variously, without being mashed together, made into one. It pushes us not to dwell on absolute answers to the question of what meat is or where it comes from, as if there were a singular truth to be uncovered. It pushes us to ask, what can it be made to be—not in any absolute sense but given particular histories and concerns? This question, finally, moves us away from natural essence toward situated wisdom.

[h1]Notes

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1. For more on the historical emergence of taxonomy as a scientific practice, see especially Foucault 1970, Raffles 2001, and Star and Griesemer 1989. For more on the cultural variation of taxonomy, see especially Ellen 2006 and Tsing 1997.
2. Recent years have seen a proliferation of articles on species within the humanities and social sciences. For introductions to just a few of the many special journal issues that have emerged on this topic, see Kirksey and Helmreich 2010, Fernández Bravo et al. 2013, and Kim and Freccero 2013.
3. See also García 2005 for a nuanced elaboration of multiculturalism elsewhere in Latin America.
4. For more on the concept of ontological violence, see Viveiros de Castro 2013, which draws on the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss to note that “speciesism anticipates and prepares for racism.”
5. My early fieldwork was conducted over the summers as part of undergraduate and master’s research, jointly funded by Stanford’s Department of Anthropological Sciences and Center for Latin American Studies. The concentrated period of fieldwork was carried out as part of my doctoral research at New York University.
6. Since conducting this fieldwork, I have stayed connected to the family this articles focuses on through e-mail and Skype. I have also returned to stay with them during follow-up fieldwork in 2010 and 2013.
7. Who is the “we” of the sentence I have written here, you might find yourself wondering: the we of academia? of “the West”? of humanity? Vinciane Despret notes that “there is always a ‘we’ that imposes itself: an enrolment, a collective capture in a problem” (2008:124). Drawing from this observation, let me suggest that this is a “we” of a given collective or specific practice.

It is not a stable “we” and not one that should be invested with too much certainty. It may not be a “we” to be trusted.

8. For more on the difference between doing (enacting) and making (constructing), see literature on material semiotics, for example, Mol 2002 and Law and Urry 2003.

9. Writing about Zapotec science, Roberto González (2001:120) refers to maize as a “plant person” with a will of its own; elsewhere I have written about a prominent refusal of the public-health category of “the vegetable” in the region, as the K’iche’ and Mam languages spoken in Xela do not group plants together in this way (Yates-Doerr 2012).

10. It is notable that Incaparina, a popular nutrition supplement that was designed in the 1960s with the help of anthropologists and which is today consumed widely throughout the country, is made of a blend of (imported) soy and corn flours. Soy is not, however, a straightforwardly “nutritious” ingredient. Nevin Scrimshaw, a U.S. nutrition scientist who was involved in Incaparina’s development, remarked in 1980 that the foreign donation of (cheap) soy-based products relieved the Guatemalan government from “the obligation to meet the problem of this malnutrition by using indigenous resources” (1980).

11. Ingold (2006) notes that Enlightenment logic has it that humans are distinct from animals in kind and not degree; humans could thus be more or less developed than one another, but their biological humanness remains intact. The statement that I was jeopardizing my status as human might be jarring from the standpoint of this logic, but the experience I describe suggested to me that the stability of “the human” was not necessarily so stable after all.

12. For more on the fractal nesting of a category like family, see Gal 2002. Although many women labor at home, they also both run and sustain the regional marketplaces; for more on the infolding of the public and private spheres in Latin America, see Seligmann 1993.

13. The Popol Vuh, widely held as the K'iche' chronology of the story of life, recounts that the first humans were made from the *tio'jil*—variously translated as “flesh,” “body,” or “meat”—of maize (Tedlock 1996).

14. Here, we encounter still another *carne*, different from those described earlier. It is common for this one to be translated as “body” instead of “meat.” But, despite the desire for meaning to fit neatly into words, translations can be disappointing; *body* is not the same as *carne*, as it loses some of the vitality and fleshiness of the Spanish term.

15. A suspicious similarity can be seen in the collapse of binaries between material and symbol, matter and flesh, body and practice in both the instruction of Catholicism and the theory of material semiotics. I tentatively suggest, although it is a topic that warrants further elaboration, that the Catholic history of Latin America makes material semiotics an especially compelling mode of analysis for this region. For more on the transformation of bodies through the ingestion of communal substances—from the Eucharist to homegrown food—see Paulson 2006.

16. I did not have a predetermined formula for how I compensated the families with whom I lived. Some families, including the one I focus on here, never asked for money, though I left enough to cover my obvious expenses. I thank one reviewer for raising the question of how the circulation of money—its own form of specie—might be tied to the problematization of “kin and kind.” Though beyond the scope of what I can tackle here, this is a valuable consideration.

17. It is unfortunate that the English language forces its speakers into human–animal distinctions that they might not otherwise make. The rule of thumb for the who–which distinction is that *who* is used for people and *which* is used for nonhuman animals and things. Stefan Hirschauer and Annemarie Mol (1995) suggest that English speakers might look elsewhere to find a model of speech in which this slippery, often uncomfortable divide is not rhetorically reinforced. Even

without a foreign model to draw from, we might take advantage of the malleability of language to begin to erode the inevitability of these distinctions.

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#### Figure captions

Figure 1. Produce stands line the periphery of the city market, La Democracia. Xela, Guatemala.

Photo by Emily Yates-Doerr, 2008.

Figure 2. Carne sold from stalls at the center of La Democracia. Xela, Guatemala. Photo by

Emily Yates-Doerr, 2008.

Figure 3. Display at the local Hiperpais (operated today under the name Walmart). Xela,

Guatemala. Photo by Emily Yates-Doerr, 2008.

Figure 4. Evidence of violence? Careful resource management? Delicacy? Disgust? The answer lies not in the object but in its relations. Photo by Emily Yates-Doerr, Xela, Guatemala, 2008.

Figure 5. Drying the harvest. La Esperanza, Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. Photo by Emily Yates-Doerr, 2008.

Figure 6. Fiambre served for Día de los Muertos and Día de los Santos. Xela, Guatemala. Photo by Emily Yates-Doerr, 2008.