

Twenty-first century world-making through processes of domestication

Blanchette, Alex. 2020. *Porkopolis: American animality, standardized life, & the factory farm*. Duke University Press. ISBN – 978-1-4780-0840-8

In *Porkopolis*, the “Industrial Pig” is a being that binds and organizes the socio-ecological worlds of both the book’s subjects and its readers. Alex Blanchette’s compelling ethnography centers on a factory farm in an unspecified town in the United States’ Midwest. Home to one of the densest populations of *Sus Scrofa* in the world, the factory kills up to 20,000 pigs every day. Rejecting the notion that North America is post-industrial, Blanchette explores how concepts and experimental practices of industrialization are finding novel ways of extracting profit from human and pig bodies by redefining “animality” and inventing new forms of interspecies labor and relations. Blanchette’s examination of the conceiving, raising, and killing of pigs deftly highlights how this process is both founded on and performs divisions in class, race, and gender. *Porkopolis*’ sober analysis of human and pig entanglement defies simple tropes of domination, objectification, and alienation. While the author’s ethical and political commitments are not explicitly brought to fore until the final chapters, the detailed ethnographic description of laboring bodies within industrial capitalism speaks for itself. *Porkopolis* reveals a project deeply troubling in its scale, imagination, and treatment of pigs and humans alike.

Divided into five parts, the book’s overarching narrative focuses on a different stage in the industrial pig’s life and death cycle, with each part composed of two chapters. Organized in this manner, *Porkopolis* develops a unique and engaging rhythm. The initial chapter in each part opens broad questions and themes, illuminated through ethnographic vignettes as well as images from photographer-collaborator, Sean Sprague. The following chapter then interrogates in further depth these themes through rich and multi-faceted ethnography. Blanchette structures the book’s analysis by creating a productive juxtaposition between two classes of employees

at the factory farm. First, the managerial staff, whose vision for the industrial pig express dystopian concepts of animality, where employees are “slaves to The Herd” and aim to monopolize all aspects of life related to the pig. And second, the floor workers: marginalized and often non-white, migrant laborers, whose compartmentalized yet intimate and practical engagement with pigs point to gaps in, critiques of and alternative realities to those constructed at the executive level.

A strength of Blanchette’s study and analysis is that it is not confined to the factory farm. Part One illustrates how the farm penetrates and shapes the ecology and social lives of the town’s inhabitants, from insect biology to the air people breathe. In particular, the need for biosecurity and maintenance of pig health serves as an organizing factor, driving the compartmentalization of not only pigs but also the people that work with them. Biosecurity structures and indeed the porcine body itself extends into and is interconnected with relationships and environments outside of the workplace, including who people can interact with and where their family members can work. Intriguingly, Blanchette notes that factory farms are not necessarily examples of anthropocentric dominance; indeed, humans are managed (or perhaps tamed?) in relation to pig needs. An interesting point - yet the factory farm is neither anthropo- or porco-centric; the vitality of both species are threats and limitations in the objectifying calculus towards standardization and the abstract ideal of the Industrial Pig.

Part Two draws comparisons between the biological notion of “instinct” to mechanization and explains how this concept of animality is employed in the factory setting - an astute analytical point underexamined in human-animal literature. Blanchette explores how framing the pig as instinctual enables industrial capitalism to compartmentalize, standardize, and exploit aspects of porcine nature, and simultaneously reduce, simplify and undervalue pig and human labor. On the factory floor, workers resist these attempts to devalue their work, and demonstrate the gendered skill and intimate attunement to individual pig lives required in interspecies interactions. *Porkopolis* stands as a thought-provoking analysis of how porcine ontology is imagined and performed at different levels of engagement, and how these enact divisions in social class and value. Managers, for instance, aspire to a highly abstract yet totalizing concept of the Industrial Pig across the entire factory which they compare to the limited facet of porcine being floor workers encounter in their assigned roles.

Part Three proposes that, contrary to common arguments, the nonhuman animal is not necessarily alienated from humans through industrial capitalism. From a multispecies

perspective this is an intriguing argument, as Blanchette demonstrates how the capitalist desire for maximizing growth and the continuous reconfiguring of interspecies labor has created a pig increasingly entangled with human touch and dependent on intimate practices of care. This is part of a broader shifting pattern of relations described throughout *Porkopolis*, where the pig has become alienated to itself, and people must scaffold, augment, or serve as substitutes to biological and developmental processes. And as Blanchette continuously reminds us, these new forms of interspecies labor are often organized in gendered ways and dependent on the low-paid workforce from marginalized geographies.

Despite managerial aspirations towards pig standardization, the shape of porcine bodies remains variable and creates limits for machine processing. Part Four explores how human bodies and the quality of labor performed have now become the site of modification, as the quest for increased efficiency and profit shapes and pushes human physiology to breaking point. Blanchette emphasizes the “the uncanny joint production of human and hog muscles” (178) as labor becomes increasingly specific to parts of the pig, and trauma manifests locally in the human body. Highlighting this pig-human connection in this manner is rhetorically clever yet feels superficial: a more integrated human-nonhuman-human framing that includes analysis of the tools, cold cement floor, and structure of assembly lines might have given a stronger sense of how human bodies take shape and are broken in the factory farm. On the other hand, focusing on the “joint production” also draws attention to the mirroring of floor worker and pig: a constant theme throughout the book. On the slaughterhouse floor, workers come to embody the value and disposability associated with Industrial pig lives.

The final section is where we see Blanchette’s ethical and political commitment come to the foreground. Following the dissection of the porcine body in which no aspect goes to waste, the text returns to the milieu we encountered at the beginning, one saturated with porcine particles and where the pig is shaped by and shapes all manner of worlds. From bullets to book pages, crayons to data servers, the pig is invisibly embedded in our everyday lives. The condition for this thrifty utilization of porcine bodies is both the mass-killing of animals and global inequality. Yet the more troubling aspect, notes Blanchette, is that we have no choice in participating in the world-making processes of industrial pig. And, the consumer and dietary restrictions employed to resist the factory farm reveals our lack of proper understanding of how factory farming system works

Indeed, this last and powerful point is good enough reason for many people to read Blanchette's ethnography. On top of that, *Porkopolis* is very well written, revealing in its description of factory farm process, provocative in its analysis of human-animal entanglement, and an excellent analysis of twenty-first century industrial capitalism as manifest through the pig. The book is broken into linear parts, yet its analytical themes thread throughout and double back on themselves, producing a satisfying sense of coherence. As a human-animal researcher, I found this book exciting in its examination of how labor and class shapes human-nonhuman entanglement in the industrial setting, and the novel employment of multispecies sensibilities to offer an alternative perspective on the factory farm. *Porkopolis* might also be read as a twenty-first century world-making process of domestication, radically co-shaping environments, pigs, humans, and other species in the process.

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