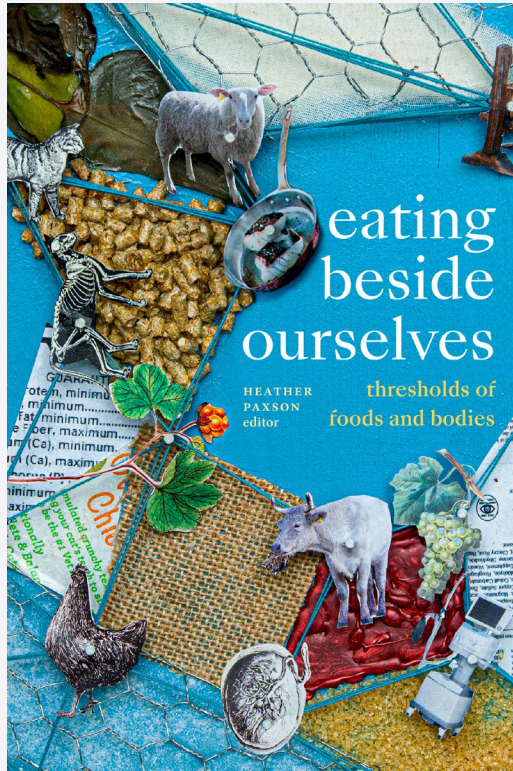


# Who Are the Eaters?

Laura Kuen



Review of:

Heather Paxson, ed. *Eating beside Ourselves: Thresholds of Foods and Bodies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023. xii + 233 pp. \$25.95 (pb); \$99.95 (hb); OA (ebook)

Laura Kuen is a PhD candidate at the Institute of Ethnology, Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague.

Email: [kuen@eu.cas.cz](mailto:kuen@eu.cas.cz)

**W**ho do we think of when we think about eating? Who are the eaters, who the eaten? And how do these assumptions emerge? Unlike Annemarie Mol's recent book *Eating in Theory* (2021) which tries to find fresh answers to the question of what it means to be *human* by taking eating as a philosophical starting point, the objective of *Eating beside Ourselves* aims to decentre the human from conceptualizations of eating and feeding. Edited by Heather Paxson, the volume discusses eating as a transformative, relational, world-making process and multispecies sociality. Too often, the authors say, eating has been understood "as thoughtfully deliberate, a fundamentally cultural matter of intention and meaning" (3) while other-than-human ingestions remained unnoticed. To counteract such imbalance, the volume introduces approaches from multispecies and science and technology studies into food studies not only to broaden the field's object of discussion but also to make it relevant beyond its boundaries. Based on in-depth, ethnographic, and historical research, the authors foreground the "threshold" as the volume's key analytical focus, a concept of processual character and transformative power. For the threshold, as "a baseline or upper limit beyond which a particular phenomenon will occur" (5), is where generative change can be observed.

The theme of the threshold is also reflected in the structure of the volume, in that the seven research chapters are separated by interludes — named *intercalary exchanges* — written jointly by the respective authors. "Serving alternately as portal and as barrier" (6) the terms *processing*, *(in)edibility*, *giving*, *transgression*, and *nourishment* find short contemplation. The chapters are formally different and do not pursue a developing argument. In fact, not all contributions address the decentring of the human but, instead, generally outline the world-making and relational implications that eating holds. This review will focus primarily on the chapters that actively address nonhuman eating and thus become productive starting points for those interested in multispecies or more-than-human endeavours.

The first research chapter is presented by Amy Moran-Thomas, whose book *Traveling with Sugar* (2019) inspired the volume's turn towards thresholds. Moran-Thomas sets her ethnography within a history of colonial sugar plantations. Connecting almost-abandoned sugar refining plants in London to her field site in Belize, she argues that sugar, as a substance and disease, creates and reveals new scales. Through the lens of interrelated thresholds of eating and being eaten, Moran-Thomas parallels thresholds of pollution in Belize's terrestrial and aquatic landscapes with the exorbitant blood sugar levels of many Belizeans. By showing how in London only a few traces of the sugar industry have stayed in place while its aftermaths still critically shape bodies and relations in Belize, Moran-Thomas demonstrates the uneven lingering of commodities' afterlives. A deeper conceptualization of the threshold as an analytical tool, however, remains diffusely interspersed in the ethnography. As such the chapter reads predominantly as an empirical contribution and not as the theoretical grounding or the volume's secondary introduction as which it is framed.

In the second chapter, historian and sociologist Hannah Landecker examines quite literally eating *beside* humans by tracing the history of medicated feed and the industrialization of metabolism in the United States. Following historian Tiago Saraiva<sup>1</sup> who argues that technoscientific organisms such as industrially bred wheat, potatoes or pigs are not merely objects of human modernist experimentation but themselves actively contributing to world-making processes, Landecker asks: "What worlds are made in and through the industrialization of metabolism?" (59) Or: "[H]ow exactly is cheap food made possible, and with what specific effects on the material conditions of contemporary life?" (ibid.). Letting these questions guide her historical analysis, she effectively breaks with anthropocentric narratives of the making of modernity. Landecker structures her account of the US-American industrialization of metabolism into the three successive phases: *conversion*, *scale*, and *acceleration*. While between 1880 and 1920, with the advent of "scientific feeding",

1 Tiago Saraiva, *Fascist Pigs: Technoscientific Organisms and the History of Fascism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016).

animals were primarily conceptualized as machine converters of matter and energy, between 1920 and 1960 microbial metabolism, chemical synthesis, and animal metabolism were joined into new chains of consumption and conversion. In this period, the use especially of vitamins and amino acids enabled the production of key nutrients at lower costs and unseen scales. Eventually, acceleration became the goal. The introduction and use of growth-promoters drastically quickened livestock animal metabolisms and changed the ratio of food that was needed to reach a slaughter-ready weight. The chapter impressively demonstrates how the radical remaking of feeding practices created a modernity based on biochemical experimentation, and in which matter is moved at new scales and speeds which radically alters an array of metabolic relations until this day. Landecker skilfully manoeuvres between empirical description and macro-level argumentation, offering a genuine enrichment to our thinking about the mass-scale eating that happens beside but also because of humans.

Landecker and Alex Blanchette dedicate their intercalary exchange to processing as both their works focus on webs and chains of eating rather than on isolated species. The authors conceptualize processing not as an inherent feature of some foods, but as a process of modularization that, in the wake of industrialism, includes and connects ever more eaters as well as those who are being eaten. As their empirical contributions show, metabolic and sensory processes create and influence new relations under conditions of industrial commodity production. Simultaneously, the authors describe how metabolism and the senses themselves have become the targets and means of commerce and innovation (88) which entails the steady expansion of industrial influence into interspecies relating.

Blanchette gives us another captivating example for the creation of such new webs of relations through industrial reformatting in his chapter on the politics of palatability in the United States. Examining how cats and pigs have been industrially conjoined through the factory farm, he argues that “pork corporations must develop new specialized sites of labour and value within each hog body part to sustain

the broader project of industrialized animal life and death” (90). Blanchette’s research site, an undisclosed company located somewhere in the Great Plains, processes industrial hog lungs as part of a continually finer-grained process of by-production into palatants — powdered or liquid flavourings for pet animal feed. It is one of just a few global sites that amass a unique concentration of pigs, “mining” porcine body parts which only become profitable “processing material” when available in vast quantities (96–97). Following Sarah Besky,<sup>2</sup> Blanchette points to the global longevity of monocultures — despite the justified hopes for them to be doomed — and their ongoing accumulation of new practices, values, aesthetics, and participants. Yet he also hints at monoculture’s fragility, unpredictability, and its unintentional features, exemplified for him by the rapid rise of animal palatant production as a by-product of the pork industry, and the fact that “human eaters alone cannot sustain the economic model of the factory farm” (92). Moreover, Blanchette’s case of industrial feed production posits palatants as transcorporeal technologies that target the interspecies relationship of humans and their pet animals. By making cats purr, stretch, or eat fast when served flavoured feed, palatants are designed to induce visible responses of pleasure in the companion species of human customers. This example shows the extent of the feed industry’s deep involvement in various interspecies relationships, be they “based on sentimental affection (for cats) or efficient exploitation (for pigs)” (95).

Blanchette and Landecker both demonstrate the massive scale and global relevance of animal eating that invites further research. Beyond these, though, rather than promoting a decentring of humans from the conceptualization of eating, the volume’s remaining chapters seem to follow Annemarie Mol’s interest in what we can learn about the human when we take eating as an analytical focus. Still, they hold insightful observations that are summarized in the following. The intercalary exchange between Blanchette and Marianne

2 Sarah Besky, “Exhaustion and Endurance in Sick Landscapes: Cheap Tea and the Work of Monoculture in the Dooars, India”, in *How Nature Works: Rethinking Labor on a Troubled Planet*, ed. Sarah Besky and Alex Blanchette (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2019), 23–40.

Elisabeth Lien, for example, traces the co-emergence of the states of edible and inedible. Problematizing human edibility as “an insufficient baseline feature of the material world” (111), they discuss the emergence of (in)edibility as a situated, more-than-human sociality but also classificatory, social, cultural, physiological, and digestive thresholding project. Lien’s chapter further exemplifies the situational character of (in)edibility by examining how the acts of eating and becoming edible make food an ontological entity. Having a background in interpretative ethnography and material semiotics, Lien starts from the premise that “food” only emerges in the practices that make it so (115). Based on three decades of ethnographic engagement in Arctic Norway, she describes six thresholding moments in which fish, cloudberries, and reindeer flesh either become or cease to be food for her human interlocutors. She invites us to linger on these generative moments because it is precisely “when things are not yet edible or edible no longer, that significant transformations occur” (114). Lien’s chapter takes a slower pace and offers a stimulating ethnographic closeness and is a methodologically inspiring example of how paying attention to eating as a threshold can be interpretatively fruitful.

Turning away from the question of edibility, Lien and Harris Solomon discuss the deeply intertwined relationship of eating and dying in their joint interlude. The authors reflect on the temporality and performativity of death, taking dying not as a single moment but rather as a sequence of unfolding events (139). A further contemplation of life as threshold provides the subsequent chapter by Solomon on life support in an emergency trauma ward in Mumbai, India. He extends the notion of eating and nourishing to the act of breathing in a setting where the death of one patient on a ventilator means the possibility of life support for another. Solomon aims to show how breath as a critical substance and feature of embodiment makes the process of ventilation a topic of interest also to food studies. While this is certainly the case, it is uncertain whether the conceptual expansion of the notion of eating to breathing adds or takes from its analytical applicability. It raises the question of whether metabolism, rather than eating, is the volume’s real leitmotif.

Emily Yates-Doerr thematically stays with the human body by considering the relationality and conceptual dissolution of the individual in embodied feeding relationships. Developing her thoughts around her own pregnancy, an experience when her “singularity was becoming duplicity” (163), she examines the placenta as a threshold of transgression that necessitates both connection and separation which makes it a compelling object for thinking about relationality. Yates-Doerr and Deborah Heath discuss nourishment as thresholding work, a practice of care that refuses absolute distinctions between harm and benefit and can shift between perils and possibilities. Heath then ends the volume with a description of the world-making role of grapevines on biodynamic vineyards in Aotearoa New Zealand. Despite being a welcome shift of attention towards plant and microbial eating, the main interest of the chapter lies in the anthroposophical cultivation practices of the winegrowers. At this point, some more reflection on Rudolf Steiner and the historical context of his anthroposophical teachings would have increased the critical value of the chapter.

Overall, *Eating beside Ourselves* is empirically diverse and insightful and articulates eating as a fundamental form of relating. However, given the variety of approaches, methods, and levels of detail, the book does not develop a coherent theoretical intervention. Each chapter illustrates, in its own way, how a critical attention to eating, food and feeding can open questions about social and interspecies relationships. While many of the chapters engage with decidedly human perspectives, it is Landecker’s and Blanchette’s contributions that stand out and meet the volume’s proclaimed intention of putting more-than-human eating to the table. Nevertheless, the volume’s promise lies in its diverse disciplinary backgrounds, ranging from medical anthropology, history, science and technology studies, feminist and postcolonial studies to multispecies ethnography. Taken together, they can push the question “Who are the eaters?” beyond the field of food studies.