



Death of a Guinea Pig

Grief and the Limits of Multispecies Ethnography in Peru

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Abstract During ethnographic research on the biopolitics of culinary nationalism in Peru, I visited a guinea pig breeding farm north of Lima. Guinea pigs are considered “food animals” in the Andes. That encounter with pregnant guinea pigs—and with one guinea pig in particular who was tossed out of her enclosure and left to die—led me to a visceral questioning of my methodological and political approaches to and commitments in multispecies ethnography. I found myself uncomfortably close to the deaths of these female bodies yet unable to voice my dismay or grief. This essay is a modest effort to theorize what grief has to offer the practice of multispecies ethnography. I explore how writing about the ethnographic encounter as one of tragedy and loss might open up the productive possibilities of mourning and grief in connecting human and nonhuman worlds.

Keywords ethnography, Peru, guinea pigs, grief, multispecies

Introduction

On a warm February day in 2012 I visited a commercial guinea pig farm north of Lima, Peru. The visit was part of my research on the biopolitical dimensions of culinary nationalism, such as the intensification of guinea pig (or *cuy*) production and consumption.¹ There were approximately 1,500 guinea pigs in this farm—one of many cropping up throughout Peru—which consisted primarily of two *galpones* made out of corrugated tin.² The guinea pigs huddled close together and squealed anxiously as I walked into the *galpón* where they were housed. Most of these large and round *cuyes* were female, and many had just birthed or were about to give birth. In most cases just

1. Guinea pigs are considered “food animals” in Peru.

2. A *galpón* is a kind of warehouse of life where plants or animals are stored. In a different historical moment, it referred to the place used as slave quarters.

two or three hours after giving birth females would once again be impregnated, to take advantage of what breeders call the “post-partum estrus period.”

I walked the rows of enclosures, looking closely at the pregnant animals. One cuy had just given birth and was repeatedly nudging a dead offspring, eventually giving up and moving on to clean the three others around her. Another round guinea pig was lying on her side, not moving much and not looking well, so I called Walter over. Walter was the farm’s owner and my guide during that afternoon.³ He looked at her, nodded, and said she was most likely dying of birthing complications. He leaned over, squeezed her, moved her around. She barely responded. Walter then picked her up and roughly tossed this pregnant, dying guinea pig out of the cage onto the dirt floor behind us. “She is almost gone. She will be dead by morning if not sooner,” he said, placing a hand on my back and moving me away from that cage and toward another larger pen with dozens of very young guinea pigs huddling close together in the corner.

This essay is a space to think with this individual guinea pig; to think through that encounter, which provoked in me a visceral questioning about the ethics and politics of multispecies ethnography. It also pushed me to consider what a “felt theory” of grief, following Athabaskan scholar Dian Million,⁴ might offer in thinking about a politics of life. “A felt analysis,” says Million, “is one that creates a context for a more complex ‘telling’ . . . [and insists on] the inclusion of our lived experience, rich with emotional knowledges, of what pain and grief and hope meant or mean now in our pasts and futures.”⁵ For me, the affective power of witnessing that moment is undeniable. After all, many years after that encounter, I continue to think and feel that particular moment. There was something about that experience that, as Naisargi Dave describes in her discussion of animal activism in India, called me into a sense of connection and responsibility. Dave writes about the intimacy of this kind of moment, because it “expands ordinary understandings of the self and its possible social relations.”⁶

And yet I also worry about the limits of grief. What does my grieving for this guinea pig do? In this context, what are the politics of “feeling with animals,” as geographer Kathryn Gillespie might say?⁷ And what about Walter? Following Bhargupati Singh and Dave, what would emerge in attending to the “everyday affects, the doubts and pleasures, cruelties and indifference expressed by our ethnographic interlocutors while witnessing or executing the death of animals”?⁸ In this essay, then, I want to think about life through the multispecies (or *multibeing*)⁹ affective entanglements that make up this

3. Unless otherwise indicated, all names of people and companies have been changed to ensure privacy and confidentiality.

4. Million, “Felt Theory.”

5. Million, “Felt Theory,” 54.

6. Dave, “Witness,” 434.

7. Gillespie, “Witnessing Animal Others.”

8. Singh and Dave, “On the Killing and Killability of Animals,” 233.

9. See Ogden, Hall, and Tanita, “Animals, Plants, People, and Things.”

particular encounter with guinea pigs—and the humans—living, laboring, and dying in contemporary Peru. Thinking with grief, I consider how these experiences of life, reproduction, and death might inform discussions about multispecies ethnography, and our response-abilities as ethnographers working with human and more-than-human others. What would it have meant, for instance, if I had responded not only to Walter (his hand moving me away from the dying animal), but also to the cuy's imminent death? I realize now that my grief was really about the way she died, and the questions that raised about the way she lived. What can that guinea pig's death—or as Singh and Dave might put it, what could the mode and the mood of her dying—tell us about her life, about my life, about the knotted relations that are always already part of life itself? This essay is a modest effort to theorize what grief has to offer to the practice of multispecies ethnography. Writing about the ethnographic encounter as one of tragedy and loss, I argue, might open up the productive possibilities of mourning and grief in connecting human and nonhuman worlds.

Guinea Pig Business

Walter is the general manager of SuperCuy, a private guinea pig production company based in Lima. In Peru, guinea pig production—the business of breeding, killing, and marketing guinea pigs for national and global consumption—has skyrocketed over the past few years. While guinea pigs have been central to the culinary, spiritual, and communal lives of Andean peoples for centuries,¹⁰ this “boom” in guinea pig research, breeding, and production is quite recent and is intimately linked to the emergence of Peru as a global culinary destination.¹¹ Dominant narratives center cuisine, primarily high-end fusion cuisine, as the key element in the country's recent shift from economic precarity and political violence to a peaceful, culturally vibrant, and economically successful nation. Elsewhere I describe this phenomenon and offer a critical examination of gastropolitics as a national project that, despite claims to the contrary, in fact perpetuates settler colonial violence and reinscribes racial and gendered hierarchies.¹² However, this moment has also opened up spaces of economic opportunity. Native producers take advantage of discourses of biodiversity and farm-to-table ethics to sell their crops at higher prices; youth from low-income areas on the outskirts of Lima train in culinary institutes, their education subsidized by powerful chefs; and young men and women try their luck at starting their very own cuy business.

This last example makes business sense, as demand for cuy meat has soared. With the gastronomic boom as background, the association of the guinea pig with indigeneity has shifted. Rather than disparaging the animal because of its connection to indigenous or poor migrant households, the cuy is now upheld as a quintessentially

10. See for example Archetti, *Guinea Pigs*, and Morales, *Guinea Pig*.

11. See García, “Super Guinea Pigs?”

12. See García, “Taste of Conquest.”

Peruvian animal, one that plays a crucial role in authenticating high-end fusion cuisine as *Peruvian* cuisine. Newspapers, Facebook posts, magazines, and blogs tout the health benefits of cuy meat (e.g., low in cholesterol, medicinal, even anticarcinogenic, properties), with some doctors even prescribing a daily dose of guinea pig soup to counteract chronic headaches and for digestive health.¹³ In addition to small production businesses, there are seminars and workshops (both on-site and online) offered by universities, private companies, and state institutes that train those interested in becoming cuy producers at small, medium, or large scales; there are regular cuy producer conferences at regional, national, and international scales; and the export of guinea pig meat has reached unprecedented levels. In 2013 the Ministry of Agriculture declared the National Day of the Guinea Pig, celebrated yearly in October in order to promote and increase guinea pig consumption in the country and abroad.

This is the context in which Walter works. Walter self-identifies as *mestizo*. He was born in Lima, shortly after his parents migrated to the city from the Andes. At forty-six he is proud of the fact that he has worked for most of his life to support his family, first his parents and siblings, now his wife and three children. About ten years ago he was struggling financially when a friend told him about a cuy workshop. After attending the first lecture, he told me, he decided to throw himself into the guinea pig business. He started in 2010 with a focus on large-scale export, but due to bureaucratic constraints, he shifted his focus to the promotion of cuy production and consumption within Peru. Walter regularly offers sessions for those eager to learn about the ins and outs of the cuy business, and, of course, he owns his own breeder farm and sells guinea pigs to families, restaurants, and supermarkets in Lima. Like others involved in guinea pig production, Walter has produced countless YouTube videos discussing the selection, breeding, killing, and marketing of cuyes.

Walter is deeply invested in this business, and as I got to know him through conversations, encounters at festivals, and listening to interviews with him, I realized this was much more than just a business. His family has lived on the margins of Lima's sprawling metropolis for years, but through his business ("thanks to the cuy," he says), he is inching his way in. The time and resources he spends promoting the cuy as an animal of which Peruvians should be proud speak to broader concerns that betray a keen understanding of his own location in Peruvian racial hierarchies, hierarchies that link the cuy to particular bodies, rural spaces, and migrant neighborhoods in Lima. That said, let's return to Walter's business, and more specifically, to his breeding farm.

As he has told me many times, Walter's most valuable assets are the female bodies of the thousands of guinea pigs he owns. He earns at least three times as much for one *reproductora* than he does selling a male or "spent" female cuy for meat. "I care for them deeply. I love my little ladies," he told me during one lunch, his language of love and care seamlessly woven within a narrative of profit. It was at this lunch that Walter

13. Marcela Canales, personal communication, October 2016, Lima, Peru.

invited me to visit his farm. Access to these sites is not easy to obtain, so I was excited about this visit and especially grateful to Walter for his openness and generosity.

It was a sweltering day in February 2012 when Walter picked me up at my grandmother's apartment in Lima. The door of his rusted red station wagon creaked when I opened it and as I sat down on the scalding black leather seat a blanket of heat and smoke engulfed me. As we drove north, Walter told me the farm was just a few months old. He had accumulated almost eight thousand *reproductoras* or female cuy "breeders" in another farm, but people broke in, destroyed that facility, and took his animals. "They left several hundred dead ones," he told me angrily, "and they left me lots of dead babies." He was quiet for several minutes. But then he added with a smile that he was determined to get back on track. He had been struggling financially, but he was convinced of the productive value of this business and excited about the possibilities.

We arrived at Walter's farm at around three in the afternoon. The sun was strong and the air was thick. The one thing I have not yet mentioned is that I was seven months pregnant at the time. And in the stifling heat and humidity of this Lima summer, I was miserable. My feet and hands were swollen and sore, my throat cried out for constant hydration, and my back was in pain with the weight of new life in me. Maybe it was the physical discomfort, or the dryness of my throat, or the hyperawareness of life at that moment that made it so difficult to look at the 1,500 or so guinea pigs in Walter's farm. The guinea pigs were divided between two galpones made of corrugated tin, each with a double ceiling designed to help keep the heat at bay. Before stepping into each galpón, we had to put on covers over our clothes, shoes, and hair and step on a white powdered substance to disinfect our covered feet.

As soon as we entered I heard guinea pigs scurrying; their high-pitched squealing piercing the air. Had Walter entered the galpón alone, the animals would not have scrambled to move away. Guinea pigs are social animals with a keen sense of smell and hearing who recognize and respond to their caretakers. They are easily stressed by disruptions, one reason why a leading guinea pig researcher emphasizes the importance of delegating specific groups of cuyes to specific individual caretakers in order to avoid "unnecessary stress" that translates into a loss in profit.¹⁴ I walked through the galpón, looking at the large and round cuyes. At first glance the animals looked fine; healthier and more alert than I thought would be the case given the stifling heat. But I noticed that the galpones did not include any water for the animals. When I asked about this, Walter told me the animals got all the water they needed from the *forraje*, the roughage, they ate. I told him that what was left of the *forraje* in each of the dozens of enclosures seemed dry because of the heat, and he suggested we give the cuyes more. Walter took an armful of the rough branches leaning against the walls of the pen and handed them to me. The branches were heavy and jagged and scratched my arms as I tried to place them gently on the ground around the cuyes so as not to startle or hit the animals. I watched

14. Stress has been known to lead to miscarriage and heart attacks in guinea pigs.

as Walter threw the branches at the cuyes quickly and roughly. He laughed at my technique saying that the way I was laying down the roughage would take all day and that there was no need to be so careful. The forraje does not hurt them, he said. “They are used to us throwing it at them.” It was as I placed the forraje in each pen and looked more closely at the animals that I caught other details and noticed the guinea pig who would soon be tossed out onto the dirt floor.

And here is where I want to return to the question of grief and of research with nonhuman others in specific contexts. In that moment, I tried not to betray my sadness. I tried to disconnect myself from Walter’s roughness. I tried not to think about the guinea pig’s wounded body, now lying alone, in the dusty, sweltering heat. I’m not sure what I could have done differently in that moment. Or rather, I’m not sure that anything would have changed had I done more than simply continue to walk, more than allow him to move me away from her. But I can’t help but think back and attempt to theorize that moment of sadness, which I think is also one of shame—the shame of taking his side; of worrying about my research, about what would happen if I criticized his actions. Would doors close? Would my concern for this guinea pig raise questions that might imperil access to these kinds of spaces? In that moment, I felt my project, the so-called multispecies research I was conducting, was taking place at the expense of the animal.

Knotted Encounters

As I worked through this encounter, I thought of Donna Haraway’s work on companion species, connection, and response-ability.¹⁵ Following Haraway, I could think of these guinea pigs as “ordinary beings-in-encounter,” that is, “meaning-making figures that gather up those who respond to them into unpredictable kinds of ‘we.’”¹⁶ But who exactly is gathered up in this unpredictable “we”? And what are the shifting contours and cartographies of that “we”? At what moments do I think of intimacy and connection with guinea pigs, and when do I connect mostly through betrayal? And anyway, is this about guinea pigs, or about a particular female guinea pig who I happened to encounter when I, too, though in entirely distinct ways, was experiencing pregnancy?

Here I find it useful to think with Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate scholar Kim TallBear,¹⁷ Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice,¹⁸ and Dian Million about the significance and specificity of *relations*. As Million writes, “We are living in a time when the most vulnerable die (this includes many, many life-forms), a worldwide experience that affects our vital relations with life itself. There is a struggle against the capitalization, the commoditization of life even as it is happening.”¹⁹ Relationality is central to considerations of

15. Haraway, *When Species Meet*.

16. Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 5.

17. TallBear, “Theorizing Queer Inhumanisms,” and “An Indigenous Approach.”

18. Justice, “Why We Eat Our Relatives.”

19. Million, “There Is a River in Me,” 32.

human-animal entanglements.²⁰ Yet, as these scholars all note, context matters. In Peru, the simple act of mentioning this multispecies connection as possibility—to think of the “we” made up of particular and individuated human-animal relations—is often seen as transgressive and inappropriate. To give one example, when I shared my distress over the death of this cuy with my Peruvian mother, she became very angry and told me not to be ridiculous. In her view referencing even the possibility of a connection to a pregnant (nonhuman) animal was insulting to women, and I shouldn’t say such things. She was of course not alone in this view. There are many forces that keep us from voicing such thoughts, including those that operate in the everyday workings of anthropological research.

But this story is more complicated. My mother is also someone invested in the erasure of indigeneity from my family’s history. I did not learn, for instance, that my grandfather was a Quechua miner from the southern Peruvian highlands until I was in my twenties. Her refusal to acknowledge our indigenous ancestry is a common story in Peru and elsewhere, and is intimately linked to colonial histories of violence and dispossession. It is also linked to the disavowal of indigenous epistemologies and ontologies that take seriously the sentience and political agency of more-than-human beings.²¹ While many of my Peruvian colleagues and interlocutors do take seriously the legacies of colonial violence that continue to shape the lives of a majority of Peruvians, they would not similarly worry about the lives of nonhuman animals or control over their bodies and beings, about the “overactive production” of animal life in the service of global capitalism.²² Indeed considering violence against animals in the context of ongoing dispossession and crushing human poverty can be read as enacting another kind of violence, evoking colonial (genocidal) ghosts. Long histories of racial violence, of the animalization of Native peoples, make this a particularly powerful concern in Peru. Indigenous peoples have long been seen as “just animals.” During previous fieldwork I heard many Peruvian bureaucrats say that Indigenous peoples did not feel cold or pain in the same way they did, “because they are more like their animals,” and Andean peoples have often been compared to alpacas and llamas.²³

And yet, it is perhaps all the more important that in this context, we call attention to the entanglements of human-animal violence. What happens when we refuse to see connections? Quite predictably, we miss the ways in which animality and racialization, nature and culture, have long mutually shaped each other. The same logics of classification and hierarchies of difference that govern human mastery over nonhumans are at work in projects of coloniality and racism.²⁴ Thinking of violence against humans and

20. See Govindrajan, *Animal Intimacies*.

21. de la Cadena, *Earth Beings*.

22. Derrida, “Animal That Therefore I Am.”

23. García and Lucero, “Exceptional Others.”

24. See Kim, *Dangerous Crossings*, and Quijano, “Coloniality of Power.”

animals in critical juxtaposition and relation and not in terms of moral or phenomenological equivalence (as my mother did) can move us from atomistic calculations to considerations of broader webs of life, kinds of relational ontologies that have long been part of the worldview of Native peoples throughout the Americas.

While for some in Peru, then, there is an incommensurability in thinking humans and animals together; for others it is a critical move toward alternative political projects.²⁵ For example, José María Arguedas, Peru's most prominent novelist, known primarily for his important writings about cultural resilience and racial revolution, wrote powerfully about the death of the Peruvian pelican in the coastal town of Chimbote. Arguedas describes the bodies of dying, mutilated birds on the beaches of Chimbote as a result of the pollution and toxic waste of multinational factories in that town.²⁶ Importantly, Arguedas makes a clear link between the suffering and death of these birds, and the suffering of Indigenous peasants living in this town who "struggle for survival through desperate and creative means to overcome disease, hunger, despair and violence in the marginalized *barriadas* or slums of Chimbote, the discards of a frenetic and irresponsible industrialization."²⁷

Thinking with grief, relations, and responsibility offers other ways to think about the complexities of care. For Walter caring for his guinea pigs and the profit extracted from their bodies was intimately connected to caring for his family, including his ill and dying sister. I am interested in these entangled multispecies intimacies and ethics of care that so often include extraction, confinement, and killing.²⁸ Who counts as a subject? Who is made killable, or grievable?²⁹ Who lives, and how? These are all questions that take us back to material bodies. As I thought back to moving away from the cuy's dying body, my sense of connection to those other female bodies—also hot, also thirsty, also heavy—shattered in that moment of betrayal. I could not help but think about the abysmal difference between my pregnancy, full of futurity and potential, and their pregnancies, fueled by profit seeking and marked for death. And this feeling has haunted me. But could that moment, and its haunting, in fact open up possibilities for re-centering and rethinking relations? Could grief highlight connections? A curiosity for better understanding the implications of not just how that cuy died, but how she lived? As I write now, I recall Veena Das reflecting on what it is "to hear the speech of the dying . . . , to desire to speak with the dead."³⁰ "In what way does one's ethnography contain the voices of the dead and what conflicts, cracks and disarrays shape the way we (our interlocutors and us) are able to hear these voices?" she asks.³¹ Can ethnography capture, or offer

25. de la Cadena, *Earth Beings*.

26. Arguedas, *Zorro de Arriba*.

27. Shea, "José María Arguedas' Sacred Link," 2.

28. See, for example, Govindrajan, "Goat That Died for Family"; Hua and Ahuja, "Chimpanzee Sanctuary"; Justice, "Why We Eat Our Relatives"; and Parreñas, *Decolonizing Extinction*.

29. Butler, *Precarious Life*.

30. Das, "Death and the Recreation of Life," 1.

31. Das, "Death and the Recreation of Life," 2.

a means of listening to, the voices of dying (nonhuman) animals? And what about the refusal to listen? What could emerge from reading Walter's refusal to acknowledge—at least to me, in that moment—the guinea pig's suffering? Was I witnessing indifference? Cruelty? Perhaps this simply was another example of the “decidedly uninnocent” forms of relatedness, intimacy, and care that abound in our worlds and lives.³²

I want to go back to that lunch, where Walter spoke to me about his work, his life, his love for his “little ladies.” Walter told me he wanted me to eat his guinea pigs. So, I did, knowing that this meal would be one more way in which I would be simultaneously connected to and disconnected from the lives and deaths that were under Walter's care. I would be literally consuming the objects of Walter's professed love but I would also be asked not to think of these as dead animals. Walter ordered six elaborate dishes for us, all of them cuy-based, and all of them centering the guinea pig unusually, though still “traditionally,” evoking the new fusion movement sweeping the country.

After greeting the restaurant's owner, introducing me as “la doctora María Elena García de la Universidad de Washington” (as he would always introduce me), and chatting familiarly with our waitress, Walter motioned for me to sit down at a table next to the kitchen. He sat next to me, ordered some Inka Kola, and began telling me more about the work he is doing, and the importance of promoting cuy both nationally and internationally. Walter was particularly proud of the work he and others did to establish the national day of the cuy. In literally putting the cuy on the national calendar, Walter brings this Andean animal into a tradition of nation-building gestures that includes the celebration of the Day of the Indian, later renamed as the Day of the Campesino. Moreover, the campaign to achieve official recognition of the significance of the guinea pig as a cultural and culinary icon in Peru went hand in hand with Walter's efforts to challenge the “persistent racist assumptions” (as he told me) that link eating cuy with indigeneity and poverty. He was very aware of, and extremely bothered by, depictions of guinea pigs as rats. “They only say cuyes are like rats because our people rely on them as an important food source. But things are changing and we will keep fighting for our cuy.” This statement illustrates Walter's keen awareness of his own racial and social position in the country, an awareness that also links his life, and his future, to that of the cuy; one that intimately connects the deaths of these animals to the possibility of new lives, to the capacity to aspire.³³ As the son of poor Andean migrants who arrived in Lima searching for a better life, Walter has struggled financially for decades. His push to change attitudes is certainly driven by hopes of greater demand for his products, but

32. See Govindrajana, *Animal Intimacies*, and Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*. E. B. White's 1948 essay “Death of a Pig” also comes to mind here. In it, White describes his futile attempts at saving a sick pig, a pig who he was expecting to slaughter only a few months later. The essay is a rumination on the complexity of care, grief, and loss: “When we slid the body into the grave, we both were shaken to the core. The loss we felt was not the loss of ham but the loss of pig. He had evidently become precious to me, not that he represented a distant nourishment in a hungry time, but that he had suffered in a suffering world.”

33. Appadurai, “Capacity to Aspire.”

it also reflects a sense of cultural struggle to reposition how people like him and his family are seen in Peru. As a working-class wing of the gastronomic boom, Walter wants to ride the cuy to great respectability, status, and a better livelihood.

The restaurant owner soon stopped by our table to check on our food. We both said all the dishes were delicious, though Walter noticed I was not eating much and exclaimed: "Good thing I brought her here before going to the farm. She might not want to eat them at all after seeing *los animalitos*!" Once the owner left our table I asked Walter if he ever felt conflicted, or attached to his cuyes, or to particular ones. He laughed and said no. But then he said he understood what I was talking about because like me, his children also worried about eating cuy; they too were sometimes "sentimental" and whenever they joined him at the farm and saw the cuyes, "especially the babies," they begged him not to kill them. Because of this Walter did not allow his children to have guinea pigs as pets, though they often asked. "I have had to explain to my children several times that guinea pigs are not pets, but food." More centrally for Walter, guinea pigs were his business. And he had been clear with his children that it was thanks to the cuy that they had food to eat; that they had been able to buy a computer and might be able to move to another more centrally located home in the near future. Or at least that was the case before his sister got sick. Once she was diagnosed with cancer, Walter spent most of what he had to care for her.

Our discussion about children and affective ties to animals seemed like a good opening for me to begin telling Walter about my interest in cuyes, beyond food and culture, especially as he had already compared me to his children, sentimentally (perhaps irrationally in his eyes) attached to *los animalitos*. I mentioned the new field of animal studies and told him about some of the classes I had been teaching on interspecies relations. To my surprise he was fascinated by the idea of an interdisciplinary field in animal studies. He was thrilled, in fact, because as he told me, this connected us even more closely. He, too, had to delve into the field of animal behavior in order to know what was most efficient in terms of getting the most out of animals. For instance, he said, "You need to know how many to put in one cage so they don't fight, how much food to have so they don't compete. Especially the male guinea pigs. They are like men: we fight over women and resources."

Walter continued to reveal a gendered imaginary as he explained the complex nature of his work. There were precise calculations needed to determine how many females to place in the cage with one male. I was particularly interested in learning when and how often females were bred, so I asked. Walter replied with a fascinating, if disturbing, equivalency: "Waiting five days or [until the female guinea pig weighs approximately] 500 grams, would be like impregnating a twelve-year-old girl. Waiting ten days or 600 grams is like getting a fourteen-year-old pregnant. But waiting twenty days, or until they weigh 800 or 900 grams is like an eighteen-year-old being pregnant. We wait twenty-one days because then they are ready to be mothers."

Waiting twenty-one days, he told me, is also more cost-efficient: at three weeks old, mothers are stronger, have more offspring, and less of them die at birth. This is a

striking—even jarring—equivalence. But practices of animal reproduction are always linked to gender ideologies and imaginaries about male and female bodies.³⁴ And cuy production is no different. What is also worth noting is the comfort with which Walter spoke of impregnating girls and women to me, a pregnant woman. But my pregnant body was somehow distinct from the pregnant twelve-, fourteen-, or eighteen-year-old bodies he had in mind. The cultural capital and status that came with my US-based professional location created a comfortable distance between my pregnant Peruvian American body and the kinds of young women he may have been thinking about.

In my conversations with Walter I have been most struck by how technologies of violence and control deployed against female bodies are made invisible in part through discourses of care. Walter says he cares for his female guinea pigs. He does not extract as much use from their bodies as he could, and he lets female offspring remain with their mothers longer than many other breeders. This, for Walter, is directly linked to how long the animals might live (before they are spent and slaughtered). Naisargi Dave writes of the strange ways in which care for animals can seem more like its opposite: “Cow shelters in which a cow will spend her entire life tied on a short rope to a stake in the ground in the darkness of a shed, periodically milked. Of all the things I have seen, the one thing I wish I could unsee was that. Saved from slaughter, yes, but for what? For life itself. For profit. To perform one’s humanity.”³⁵

Reading this description evoked Elizabeth Povinelli’s “rotting worlds” where life itself, it seems, is but a breath away from death.³⁶ Similarly for the guinea pigs in Walter’s care who are afforded perhaps some small kindnesses but are nevertheless subject to the sterile rationalities of the production manuals that guide his work. The (slow) death of the guinea pig is a necessary part in the life of his family. Dave writes: “Love is an injustice because when we love it is the one or ones who are special to us that we save.”³⁷ For Dave, love individuates, chooses, makes the particular everything, and thus abandons all else. The clichéd idea that love conquers all may be an apt metaphor here, especially in postcolonial cities, increasingly sites of rampant global capital production that commodify, dismember, and consume bodies at alarming speeds and in ways that make this production invisible to most, even those at its center.³⁸

Life Worlds, Death Worlds

In an essay on capitalist structural violence Lauren Berlant develops the idea of “slow death” to think about what she calls “the phenomenon of mass physical attenuation under global/national regimes of capitalist structural subordination and governmentality.”³⁹ Berlant is especially concerned with spaces where experience is both extreme

34. Gillespie, “Sexualized Violence,” and Davis, “Thinking like a Chicken.”

35. Dave, “Something, Everything, Nothing,” 48.

36. Povinelli, *Empire of Love*.

37. Dave, “Love and Other Injustices.”

38. Pachirat, *Every Twelve Seconds*.

39. Berlant, “Slow Death,” 754.

and ordinary, where the reproduction and extinguishing of life are difficult to distinguish. She writes: "Slow death, or the structurally motivated attrition of persons notably because of their membership in certain populations, is neither a state of exception nor the opposite, mere banality, but a domain of revelation where an upsetting scene of living that has been muffled in ordinary consciousness is revealed to be interwoven with ordinary life after all, like ants revealed scurrying under a thoughtlessly lifted rock."⁴⁰

Although Berlant does not extend the notion of slow death to include nonhuman others (aside from her metaphorical ants), I find her thinking provocative and useful. The lives of the guinea pigs in Walter's farm, and in the hundreds of farms emerging throughout the Andes (many of them aspiring toward more intensive agricultural models) are ones of slow death. Here, a guinea pig's existence is one of continuous and confined production of life as they move toward death.

During our tour of his farm, I asked Walter about the rate of survival of his cuyes, and he said he had a very good one. He told me that less than one percent of his breeders die, probably meaning that they do not die while they remain "productive." Berlant reminds us of David Harvey's observation that in capitalist contexts health is defined by the ability to work, something that holds true across the species line.⁴¹ This high survival rate was possible, Walter told me, because unlike many others (and as mentioned above), he is careful about when to breed his cuyes. He explained:

Most breeders start breeding guinea pigs when they are only one or two weeks old. But that means removing the babies from the cages, which stresses the mothers and the babies, and leads to death. And many don't survive pregnancy when you breed them that early, and even if they do, they give birth to only one or two offspring and then they die.

I listened to Walter that day and felt his words in ways I had not previously experienced. Perhaps it was my impending experience of labor, the anxiety I had begun to feel, that enveloped my listening. Reading over his words again now that my child is just over seven years old, I can't help but read them through yet another layer of experiences: the physical exhaustion and trauma of thirty hours of labor, the weeks it took my body to recover, and the overwhelming love for this new person in our lives. But this love has been, for me, profoundly entangled with fear and haunted by the specter of death from the beginning. At thirty-eight weeks I had to be induced into labor because I had developed a rare liver condition that could lead to my child's death in utero just two weeks before his scheduled due date. Rushing to the hospital, full of adrenaline and expectation, his birth was already clouded by the possibility of his death. Thinking back to Walter's breeding practices, I can't help but wonder how guinea pigs experience them. Anxiety, fear, sadness; those might have been the meanings behind the sounds of

40. Berlant, "Slow Death," 761.

41. Berlant, "Slow Death," 754.

vocal mother-pup communication I heard. Such communication has been studied by many scientists who confirm what we already knew: the mother-infant bond among cuyes is strong; infants call out in distress when separated from their mothers, and mothers show visible signs of grief and anxiety when separated from their pups.⁴² And yet in that space Walter and I were not trying to listen, just the opposite. Learned ignorance or evasion would be perhaps closer to the truth. There is need for more work to take up the task of finding new ways to hear and see. As Agustín Fuentes reminds us, “we must retrain our gaze to include other beings, their diverse sets of physio-behavioral-ecological realities, as part of our questions about human beings with other beings.”⁴³

Multispecies Research and Methodological Anxieties

In the late 1960s George Devereux wrote about the role of anxiety in shaping research.⁴⁴ He was especially interested in the anxiety provoked by certain data and the impact this affective engagement with research can have on the ethnographer and on the data itself. I found myself thinking about this as I reflected on this research trip. After visiting the breeder farm, during the drive back to my grandmother’s apartment, Walter had invited me to participate in a guinea pig production workshop he was offering the weekend following my departure. “You should stay!” he exclaimed enthusiastically. “You could participate in the workshop. We have twenty people signed up, some coming from the south of Peru, and even some from Colombia. And the local news will be there.”

I was scheduled to be on a plane that Saturday, flying back home. My first response to his invitation was a deep feeling of regret. Why couldn’t I stay in Lima longer? Should I change my flight so that I could attend the workshop? This would certainly not be the last time Walter offered this kind of workshop (in fact he leads these sessions quite frequently), but the urge to be as “efficient” and “productive” as I could in that moment of fieldwork (given the impending birth of my child) was powerful. As I thought more about what participant observation might mean in this context, however, I began to worry. Walter had walked me through the different parts of the workshop. As a participant you learn how to pick the best “specimens.” You learn to weigh them, brand them, what to feed them, how to house them. You also learn how to kill (or rather, you attempt to learn how to kill). And you practice by trying out several different kill methods (at least four), which include breaking the neck, slicing the throat while holding the animal at the same time, slicing the throat while the animal hangs upside down in a steel

42. See Kober et al., “Vocal Mother-Pup Communication,” and Pettijohn, “Attachment and Separation Distress.” What I did not know until I read some of these studies is that this stress is communicated audibly, but also through scent and body language. See Wagner, *Biology of the Guinea Pig*.

43. Fuentes, “Naturalcultural Encounters,” 618–19.

44. Devereux, *From Anxiety to Method*.

cone, and stunning before scalding to death.⁴⁵ Would I be capable of killing? And even if I chose not to participate but simply observed, would I be able to witness the suffering of so many animals being killed by unskilled hands? Was this part of the responsibility of choosing to conduct a multispecies ethnography? Or was this line of inquiry, my assumptions and presumptions about suffering and killing, foreclosing epistemological and methodological possibilities?

As a Peruvian woman and anthropologist it has been a challenge to think about these difficult questions for multiple reasons. But the concerns I explore here—about care and killing, life and death, race and settler colonialism, poverty and the nonhuman, and my own positionality as a Peruvian anthropologist based in the United States but committed to collaborative and decolonial frameworks—also pose a profound personal and intellectual challenge because they take me back to my grandmother, the person who taught me so much in her kitchen and a woman who knew how to kill chickens and cuyes to feed her family when she lived in rural Peru, but who more recently enjoyed the convenience of supermarkets and delivery chicken in her home in urban Lima. As the smells and memories of my grandmother's kitchen became entangled with increasingly violent forms of industrial agriculture I found myself wondering about the dark sides of love and the slow death that seems to envelop us all not only as people, but as animals caught in a political economy of living and dying.

Methodologically, how does ethnography change when it includes nonhuman others? How *should* it change? Along these lines, Alice Kuzniar asks “whether acknowledgement of empathic sensibilities might permit us to circumvent the condescension and cruelty that can often dominate relations with animals.” She continues, “Mindful that we cannot fully eradicate the power relations that determine our dealings with the creatures dependent on our care, can we nonetheless try to rethink our attachment to it in terms of reciprocity and responsibility?”⁴⁶ But what does multispecies reciprocity and/or responsibility look like? What does collaborative research mean in this context?⁴⁷ This is tricky ethical territory. Anthropologists have a code of ethics with clear limits to participant observation. But multispecies research, if taken to mean that nonhuman lives matter beyond metaphor and symbolism, raises new questions about the intersection of ethics and methods. Is killing other-than-human animals, for example, an acceptable dimension of participant observation? What are the ethical implications

45. Walter lamented that due to lack of space and technological capacity, he could not include a fifth method: electrocution. The larger farms in Ecuador and southern Peru, he told me, are mechanizing death much like in the North. According to Walter, in those slaughter facilities guinea pigs are placed on a thin layer of water and electrocuted before scalding.

46. Kuzniar, *Melancholia's Dog*, 3.

47. Radhika Govindarajan's work on interspecies relatedness in India is instructive. She demonstrates precisely what can emerge from an ethnographic practice that pays careful and continued attention to animals as subjects, and to the complex relations between (individual) humans and animals that call one another forth in response-ability.

of calls for “moving beyond human exceptionalism” and privileging multispecies analyses?⁴⁸ How can we move past human-centered understandings of hierarchies and lines separating the human from the animal, boundaries we reinforce daily even as we try to contest them?

As is by now well known, scholars in multiple fields are worrying with increasing specificity about how to apprehend ethnographically the vital presence of nonhuman actors, and many have cleared paths that lead us to more thoughtful ways to challenge human exceptionalism. I have in mind not only the contributions of multispecies ethnographers and historians,⁴⁹ but also work in “new materialisms,”⁵⁰ Indigenous metaphysics and theory,⁵¹ and recent work on the politics of seeing.⁵² Some scholars insist that the value of multispecies work lies in the challenge it poses to naturalized distinctions between humans and other species.⁵³ As Emily Yates-Doerr puts it, “The power of multispecies scholarship . . . lies not in how it ‘centers the animal’ but in its challenge to conventional taxonomic formulations of classification and belonging.”⁵⁴ The challenge I was experiencing was also a challenge to my understanding of ethical participant observation. How did the presence and suffering of guinea pigs affect the way that I could position myself in the ethnographic encounter?

To put it another way, when I enter Walter’s farm, I must be Walter’s friend, not the guinea pigs’. To understand the fate of the guinea pigs, I cannot save them. Is this the tragedy of multispecies work? I think of colleagues like political scientist Timothy Pachirat, whose ethnography of violence and slaughter would not have been possible without his participation in the killing of thousands of animals,⁵⁵ and of geographer Kathryn Gillespie,⁵⁶ whose work on the gendered violence of dairy production provoked similar anxieties about the ethnographer’s complicity in violence against nonhuman bodies. But perhaps there is some hope that can be found in the echoes of these moments. In writing about the ethnographic encounter as one of tragedy and loss, we open up the productive possibilities that come with mourning and grieving.⁵⁷

48. Haraway, *When Species Meet*; Kirksey and Helmreich, “Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography.”

49. A few important examples from a growing literature: Blanchette, “Herding Species”; Candea, “I Fell in Love with Carlos the Meerkat”; Dave, “Witness,” “Love and Other Injustices,” and “Something, Everything, Nothing”; Few and Tortorici, *Centering Animals*; Gillespie, *Cow with Ear Tag #1389*; Govindrajan, *Animal Intimacies*; Helmreich, *Alien Ocean*; Kohn, *How Forests Think*; Kirksey, *Multispecies Salon*; Nading, *Mosquito Trails*; Parreñas, *Decolonizing Extinction*; Tsing, “Unruly Edges”; and van Dooren, Kirksey, and Münster “Multispecies Studies.”

50. See, for example, Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, and Chen, *Animacies*.

51. See Million, “There Is a River in Me,” and TallBear, “An Indigenous Approach.”

52. For instance, Dutkiewicz, “Transparency and the Factory Farm,” and Pachirat, *Every Twelve Seconds*.

53. See Dave, “Something, Everything, Nothing” and “Love and Other Injustices”; Kirksey, “Multispecies Salon”; Kohn, *How Forests Think*; and Yates-Doerr, “Does Meat Come from Animals?”

54. Yates-Doerr, “Does Meat Come from Animals?,” 310.

55. Pachirat, *Every Twelve Seconds*.

56. Gillespie, *Cow With Ear Tag #1389*.

57. See, for example, Desjarlais, *Subject to Death*; Gruen, *Entangled Empathy* and “Facing Death and Practicing Grief”; Stevenson, *Life beside Itself*; and van Dooren and Bird Rose, “Keeping Faith with Death.”

Concluding Thoughts

As I revised this essay in the summer of 2018, the world was captivated by the remarkable story of a grieving orca mother, a twenty-year-old female whom scientists named Tahlequah and who had given birth to a female calf that died after thirty minutes. Tahlequah carried the body of her dead calf for seventeen days, what many called a “tour of grief,” calling important attention to the complex emotional lives of nonhuman animals.⁵⁸ But, Tahlequah’s grief was recognizable in ways that the grief of other animals, such as guinea pigs, might not be. This is where the stories we tell, and the ways in which we tell them, matter. Thom van Dooren invites us to tell “lively, fleshy stories” about multispecies entanglements because, he argues, they can “draw us into new kinds of relationships and, as a result, new accountabilities to others.”⁵⁹ Similarly, Dian Million reminds us that “stories . . . contain the affective legacy of our experiences. They are a felt knowledge that accumulate and becomes a force that empowers stories that are otherwise separate to become a focus, a potential for movement.”⁶⁰

In his affecting memoir *Eating Animals*, Jonathan Safran-Foer explores the terrain of shame. He expands on Walter Benjamin’s and Franz Kafka’s reflections on the link between eating animals, shame, and forgetting. He says: “Shame is the work of memory against forgetting. Shame is what we feel when we almost entirely—yet not entirely—forget social expectations and our obligations to others in favor of our immediate gratification.”⁶¹ He continues: “Silently the animal catches our glance. The animal looks at us, and whether we look away (from the animal, our plate, our concern, ourselves) or not, we are exposed. Whether we change our lives or do nothing, we have responded. To do nothing is to do something.”⁶²

I want to suggest that multispecies ethnographic research is necessarily, if only partially, an engagement with shame, and against forgetting. But reflecting on research, writing, and producing multispecies ethnographies can be a way to remember, a way to conjure up the shame or grief of the ethnographic encounter as a pathway toward recalling and challenging violence. It can be a way to grieve for the other than human beings included in our work. Centering grief and rage as methodological inspiration and practice is not new in anthropological writing.⁶³ But with some important exceptions, it has thus far been primarily a human-centered endeavor. The anthropological turn to multispecies ethnography is an important corrective to this. Writing about the violence done to guinea pig bodies as violence, for instance, is a way to “do something,” to grieve, to remember. In his essay on animals and precarious life, James Stanescu expands Giorgio Agamben’s and Judith Butler’s insights about bare and precarious lives to consider

58. Yong, “What a Grieving Orca Tells Us.”

59. van Dooren, *Flight Ways*, 9.

60. Million, “There Is a River in Me,” 32.

61. Safran-Foer, *Eating Animals*, 37.

62. Safran-Foer, *Eating Animals*, 38.

63. See Rosaldo, *Day of Shelly’s Death* and “Grief and a Headhunter’s Rage.”

nonhuman animals.⁶⁴ He begins by describing the meat counter at his local grocery store, with people looking at cuts of meat and live lobsters, picking their dinner.

And suddenly, the scene in front of you shifts. No longer are you seeing normal products of everyday existence. In front of you is the violent reality of animal flesh on display: the bones, fat, muscles, and tissue of beings who were once alive but who have been slaughtered for the parts of their body. This scene overtakes you, and suddenly you tear up. Grief, sadness, and shock overwhelms you, perhaps only for a second. And for a moment you mourn, you mourn for all the nameless animals in front of you.⁶⁵

But immediately he notes that this mourning is all but unspeakable. Indeed, it is a reaction that for many, perhaps most people, is unintelligible and even laughable. For these reasons, Stanescu notes, “most of us work hard not to mourn. We refuse mourning in order to function, to get by. But that means most of us, even those of us who are absolutely committed to fighting for animals, regularly have to engage in disavowal.”⁶⁶

At their best multispecies ethnography and animal studies can help us move from what Claire Kim calls the politics of disavowal to an ethics of avowal.⁶⁷ For my own work, I think back to the pregnant guinea pig Walter said would not survive her birthing complications and who was tossed onto the dirt to die, alone and forgotten. Writing about her and remembering her is perhaps a small gesture, but it is one way, the only way I have now, to refuse the idea that her life does not count, that hers is not a grievable life. This suggests that I—we—need to find ways for anthropology to embrace and enact the poetic and political work of mourning, even while there may be limits. Walter Brueggemann’s *Prophetic Imagination* offers a wonderful reminder that biblical prophets grieve on two levels: they grieve for the suffering of those they care for, and they grieve because the suffering that is so visible to them goes unseen by others. Because that pain goes unseen, Brueggemann notes, prophets must also be poets. The poetry of grief must conjure images and metaphors that are equal to the pain of disavowal and powerful enough to give public expression to that pain, illuminating the “real deathliness that hovers over and gnaws within us.”⁶⁸ In the prophetic work of making pain public, new horizons of possibility emerge; or as Brueggemann puts it, “an embrace of ending permits beginning.”⁶⁹

One need not operate in the Christian tradition to be open to these kinds of possibilities. Physicist and philosopher of science Karen Barad has made a similar call to be attentive to poetics, “as a mode of expression, not in order to move away from thinking

64. Stanescu, “Species Trouble.”

65. Stanescu, “Species Trouble,” 568.

66. Stanescu, “Species Trouble,” 568.

67. Kim, *Dangerous Crossings*.

68. Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 50.

69. Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, 60.

rigorously but, on the contrary, to lure us toward the possibilities of engaging the force of imagination in its materiality.”⁷⁰ Visual artist Chris Jordan provides a striking example of both Brueggeman’s active mourning and Barad’s poetic mode of expression in an arresting series of photographs and a film about the birdlife on Midway Island, an island that sits thousands of miles away from any human community and yet is still subject to the violence of human worlds.⁷¹ Photographs of the decomposing bodies of albatrosses (along with several other species of birds, the sole inhabitants of that island) reveal stomachs full of plastic products. To make the tragedy even greater, many of the dead bodies are of albatrosses just days or weeks old. Jordan explains that the “chicks are fed lethal quantities of plastic by their parents, who mistake the floating trash for food as they forage over the vast polluted Pacific Ocean.”⁷² As Jordan reflects on this work, he hopes that people might see these heartbreaking images as a kind of mirror. “Like the albatross, we first-world humans find ourselves lacking the ability to discern anymore what is nourishing from what is toxic to our lives and our spirits.”⁷³ Jordan’s work provides a complementary and perhaps even hopeful alternative view to the theoretical work on love provided by the theorists I have cited here. If the thick bonds of love are somehow linked to the reproduction of injustice in forgetting the many for the sake of the select few, Jordan suggests that there is hope in heartbreak. The heart, he told my students during a visit to my university, is a muscle, and like any muscle, it only gets thicker and stronger by breaking. I too hope that heartbreak may make us more open to more radically encompassing forms of justice that do not depend on the predictable collectivities of family, nation, race, or species and leave room for the “unpredictable we” that crosses those lines. With Barad, I find solace that this kind of thinking “does not require anything like complete understanding (and might, in fact, necessitate the disruption of this very yearning).” Instead, as she concludes, “living compassionately requires recognizing and facing our responsibility to the infinitude of the other, welcoming the stranger whose very existence is the possibility of touching and being touched, who gifts us with both the ability to respond and the longing for justice-to-come.”⁷⁴ Barad’s graceful prose reminds us that our responsibility to the other, the very heart of the notion of justice, depends on our very ability to respond.

In that spirit I end with the words of Rocío Silva Santisteban, a Peruvian scholar who, often against the ridicule of her male colleagues, has brought a powerful ecofeminist sensibility to discussions of power and violence in Peru. She has published academic articles as well as opinion pieces in important Peruvian newspapers, but as Brueggeman,

70. Barad, “On Touching,” 216.

71. The film *Albatross* is available at www.albatrossthefilm.com/.

72. See Chris Jordan, “Midway: Message from the Gyre (2009–Current),” February 2011, www.chrisjordan.com/gallery/midway/#about.

73. Chris Jordan, “Midway: Message from the Gyre (2009–Current),” February 2011, www.chrisjordan.com/gallery/midway/#about.

74. Barad, “On Touching,” 219.

Barad, and others might have predicted, it is in her poetry that I find the most insight and power.⁷⁵ In one poem titled “A Dog on the Tracks of the Metro,” she describes a harrowing scene where a dog, unaware of the dangers of public transportation, finds himself on the tracks of the metro. Awaiting the inevitable disaster or perhaps amused by the tail-wagging dog who was unaware of the scene he had created, she observes cutting through the anxiety of the onlookers, a young girl with a pony tail, who hops down, saves the dog, and scrambles back onto the platform, without so much as a round of applause. She concludes her poem with questions that resonate deeply with my own:

¿Quién soy yo en esta escena?	Who am I in this scene?
¿Soy la víctima inocente sin salida	Am I the innocent victim trapped
que ladra y mueve la cola	barking and wagging her tail
irresponsable ante la muerte?	irresponsibly in the face of death?
¿Soy la joven que se lanza sobre los rieles	Am I the young woman leaping on
	the tracks
impelida por la vida a actuar de forma urgente	compelled by life to act urgently
sin respetar códigos o normas?	without concern for rules or norms?
¿O soy el que graba, acobardado, esperando	Or am I the one who cowardly
	records, awaiting
el impacto del tren contra ese cuerpo	the impact of train and body
para causar en las redes otro cierto tipo de impacto?	so that I can have another kind of
	impact online?
¿Y quién eres tú que impasible	And who are you, who impassively
saboreas estas palabras	samples these words
como si no fueran contigo?	as if they were not about you?

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75. “Poemas de Rocío Silva Santisteban,” conlaa.com/poemas-de-rocio-silva-santisteban/.

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