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Who feeds (on) whom? Labour and the porosity of environments and bodies

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By Victoria Stead

Hannah Landecker writes about the new metabolism as “a model in which food enters the body and in a sense never leaves it, because food transforms the organism’s being as much as the organism transforms it” (2011: 177). Articulating Landecker’s insights into the porosity of bodies through an anthropological lens, Harris Solomon (2016) offers an ethnography of absorption in the particular, situated context of Mumbai. Attending to the cultural meanings, political histories and economic relations of food and illness there, he asks: “who and what become the eater and the eaten?” (ibid,: 5). How, through the absorption of food, are “seemingly bounded” bodies “twisted inside out”? (ibid,: 6). And with what effects?

Writing from the context of another particular, situated place—the orchards and towns of the Shepparton horticultural region in southern Australia—I seek here to offer a related, but different spin on recent inquiries into metabolism and the porosity of bodies and environments. Where Landecker calls attention to the ways in which food enters the body and does not leave, here I want to think about the bodies that enter our food.

*The year 1900***Who feeds (on) whom? Labour and the porosity of environments and bodies**

Phosphate deposits, amongst the highest grade in the world, are identified on the Pacific islands of Nauru and Banaba. Over the 80 or so years that follow, the rocky surfaces of the islands are mined, gutted, and gouged out to make phosphate fertilizer that is then scattered over the agricultural fields of Australia, New Zealand and Japan. As Pacific scholar Katerina Teaiwa (2015) shows powerfully in *Consuming Ocean Island*,Banaba was eaten up, consumed by rapacious colonial and industrial appetites, to enrich the soil that grew the food on which the Australian settler-colonial state fed. The effects were catastrophic, with most of the island rendered uninhabitable and most of the Banaban population displaced, their dispossession echoed in the dispossession of Indigenous peoples within Australia whose own lands were consumed by expanding, Pacific-fertilized agri-industries. Soils, as Giles, Neale and Phillips (this special issue) argue, are curious social-ecological products, metabolising energy, matter,

and meaning.

The year 1901

There are about 10,000 Pacific Islanders working in the cane fields of Queensland and northern NSW, brought there—'blackbirded'—through the Pacific Labour Trade (Banivanua Mar 2007). Federation brings the White Australia Policy and The Pacific Islander Labourers Act, and between 1904 and 1908 most of those workers are deported as part of a process of racial purification (even as the importations of Pacific phosphate continue). One consequence of the deportations is the rise in the use of white labour for some agricultural tasks, including cane cutting in the north of the country, and seasonal fruit-picking down the length of the east coast and back up, inland, to north-west Victoria, near Swan Hill. The union movement rallies against what they perceive as the denigration of white labour, compelled into farm work they see fit only for "kanakas" (Stead, 2019).

August 2017

In his opening remarks to an agricultural lobby group conference in Canberra, Australia, Barnaby Joyce, then the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Agriculture, tells the audience of farmers and agricultural researchers: "We are in a noble profession in agriculture because our job is not to rip people off; our job is to feed and clothe people, and it's a mighty equation…if we get this equation wrong then the most dire thing happens: people starve to death. Therefore we have to stay on our toes. What does that equation look like, ladies and gentlemen? Well, we're going to have 10 billion people residing with us by 2050 and they are sustained by protein, they are sustained by carbohydrates, they are sustained by fats, they are sustained by some sugars, they are sustained by garments. And, ultimately, that sustenance comes off the land, and our capacity to provide that sustenance is the art form that we dedicate ourselves to."

April 2019

Tens of thousands of unionists march around the country as part of the "Change the Rules" protests, demanding changes to industrial relations legislation and better pay for working people. Among them, at a rally in the regional area of Swan Hill, a contingent of temporary migrant farmworkers—from the Pacific, from Indonesia and else-where in South East Asia—organised as part of recent campaigns by the National Union of Workers, march with signs that read "We feed you!"

Food and labour

Food fuels labour, of course, and more precisely, laboring bodies. Metabolism, to this extent, speaks to the transformation, consumption of food within the body, resulting in energy, and physical and productive capacity, healthfulness (or otherwise, depending on what we eat). And labour, of course, produces food. Or, more precisely, the energy and the material engagements of laboring bodies with their environments contribute to the production of fruits, vegetables, grains, meats—carbohydrates, proteins, sugars, fats—that are in turn picked, packed, processed, traded, marketed and, again, consumed. And yet, of course, this seemingly virtuous circle is in practice *twisted inside out* (to borrow from Solomon) by the asymmetries of race, labour, class, distribution. “Bodies also operate in the plural in the domain of metabolic living” (Solomon, 2016: 22), and those pluralities are political. What you give is not always what you get.

That the healthful and nourishing promises of the fresh fruit industry, for example, hinge upon the physical degradation of those who harvest fruit is not a new observation. As Seth Holmes (2013) observes in his ethnography of Mexican migrant farmworkers in California, and as others have similarly noted in other studies of the global horticultural industry, the price of “fresh fruit” is “broken bodies.”

What do these broken bodies contribute to our thinking about the metabolism and its sociality? Whose labour makes the food we consume? Who, in fact, are we consuming when we purchase and eat food? What bodies get chewed up to feed the bodies of others? How are some bodies, and some *kinds* of bodies—classed, and racialized—made as suitable for different kinds of work, and thus afforded different kinds of relationship to, and claim over, the environments in which they work, and which their work produce? In short, who feeds (on) whom?

Richard

I’m at a caravan park in a small rural town, 20km or so from Shepparton, in south-eastern Australia, talking to Richard about his injured foot, whether he’ll ever be able to work again, and what he’ll do if he can’t. I first went there, to the caravan park, a few years ago when I started working with a group of ni-Vanuatu women who were there for six months in a fruit packing shed under the Seasonal Worker Programme, a dedicated temporary labour migration scheme that, more than 100 years after the cessation of the Pacific Labour Trade, is bringing Pacific Islanders to Australia once again to stock the ranks of the country’s seasonal horticultural workforce. The ni-Vanuatu women were staying at the caravan park back in 2016-2017, four or more to a cabin, and I visited them semi-regularly during the time they were there—going to church with them and shopping in town on weekends, eating meals with them once or

twice, drinking cups of tea and talking about what they hoped their work would materialize for them when they went back home to Vanuatu.

I met Richard at around the same time. He's not a Pacific Islander; he's white and Anglo-Australian, part of a small and highly marginalised group of white "locals" who do fruit-picking work. The days of the cane-cutters – the white itinerant workers who emerged as a key labour force after the demise of the Pacific Labour Trade – are long gone. Most of the horticultural workforce today is made up of young European backpackers, Pacific Islanders, and various temporary or otherwise precarious migrant or non-white workers. But there are still some "local" (i.e. white, Australian resident) workers. Richard is one of them. Or, he was. Back in 2016, Richard was working at an orchard down the road as a fork-lift driver. He was living at the caravan park on his own. He'd been working in the industry, in the area, for about 14 years, and at the time I first met him he was just starting to have trouble with his boss at the orchard. It was something trivial, like he'd started playing lawn bowls and wasn't available to work on a Saturday afternoon, and so his boss had punished him by taking him off the fork-lift job he'd had and putting him back on picking. A few months later I saw him again, and he'd left that particular orchard and been moving around others, the work getting more and more sporadic. He'd fallen behind on his rent and been kicked out of the caravan park, moving into one of the rooms in the house adjoining the local Post Office, run as a kind of informal boarding house for seasonal workers. He got bits and piece of work at other orchards, but unpredictable, precarious. At the same time, he was starting to have trouble with his feet. Richard is Type II diabetic—itself a product of diet, of a host of socio-economic factors that articulate with and through "lifestyle"—and what he describes to me is diabetic neuropathy.

Sitting with me two months ago, back in the caravan park where he is living, again, after being kicked out by the post office woman, Richard tells me about the pain he started getting in his feet, and the ulcers that wouldn't heal. He had no choice, he said, but to keep working, so he'd pop handfuls of painkillers each day and go to the orchards whenever there was work available, climbing up and down ladders with the picking bag strapped to his chest. The pain didn't stop. The ulcers didn't heal because he was on his feet, constantly. He'd come home every night and soak them in water but of course that wasn't enough. One night, he said, he was soaking his feet and one of his toes just "came off" in his hand. It was rotten, absolutely rotten, blackened. He was hospitalised, and the rest of the toe amputated, but the infection has spread all through his foot and into the rest of his body. The cabin he lives in is squalid. So he's not working, can't work, probably won't work again. Doesn't take his medication because he can't afford medication *and* smokes, and he doesn't have much left in his life other than his smokes and a family of

stray cats he's let take residence in his cabin. Doesn't have health insurance. Centrelink (the government welfare agency) won't give him a disability pension, although in all likelihood he's going to lose the rest of his foot. He gets unemployment benefits at the moment, but half of it goes towards rent and what's left over is barely enough to eat and to pay the fortnightly fee at the health clinic in Shepparton where he goes to get the dressings changed on his foot.

What kinds of language and understandings might possibly make sense of—do justice to, or for—the indignities that Richard experiences? The metabolic processes that converge in his rotten foot are agonisingly literal. They are also deeply political, social, and historical, extending far beyond the lonely horrors of his own experience. The breaking down and consumption of his body within the horticultural landscape is intimately bound up with the consumption of Banaba for its phosphates a century ago, and the entangled, racialized exploitations of white, black and brown working bodies whose contributions to the provision of sustenance are not recognised as an "art form". These bodies, places, and energies converge and sediment in a colonial landscape—itself founded on the dispossession of Aboriginal people—that carries the layered, interconnected histories of those who have worked it, those who have fed from it, and those who have been fed to it.

Does the new metabolism capture this? (See also Meloni and Mayes, in this special issue, on the question of the new metabolism's 'newness'). These entwined processes and politics are not, after all, far removed from the entwined social and material metabolisms posited in Marx's discussions of *stoffwechsel* in *Capital*. Indeed, on the ocean island of Banaba, as on the Aboriginal lands now planted with orchards in south-eastern Australia, bodies and environments have *always* been understood—within rich Indigenous ontologies, cosmologies, and practices of relatedness—to be porous, mutually affecting and co-constitutive. And it is, so entwined, that Pacific and Indigenous bodies and lands alike have been metabolized to create the horticultural landscapes within which Richard' own body is now decaying, and within which other Pacific Islanders now labour under temporary migration regimes that pit them as a *kind* of person/body fit for the labour of horticultural production (while simultaneously foreclosing any opportunity for permanent settlement or belonging).

Is something of this lost in the current, heightened attentiveness to the molecular constitution and effects of food? Where is labour (and race, and class) in the encompassing molecular cloud that we now understand our food to be? Have we sacrificed too much attention to metabolism-as-metaphor amid the growing scientific precision of our undersandings? Is it perhaps, then, a *new* new metabolism that we need?

If so, it must be a deeply historicised one, not "historically and culturally specific to the twenty-first century" (Landecker, 2011: 174) but rather attentive to the limits and hubris of its own claims to newness. We need a metabolic language and politics attuned to the long threads of class, capital and empire that bind the present to the past, and that converge in the lives and bodies of those consumed within our food system and then spat out again, but not whole.

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