

This article has been published in Cambridge Anthropology:

<http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/berghahn/ca/2012/00000030/00000002/art00004>

Please acknowledge and cite any use of this publication.

2012. "Cuts of Meat: Disentangling Western Nature-Cultures." *Cambridge Anthropology*. 30(2) 48-64
Emily Yates-Doerr and Annemarie Mol.

Cuts of Meat: Disentangling Western Natures-Cultures

Emily Yates-Doerr and Annemarie Mol, University of Amsterdam

Abstract:

Anthropologists, eager to bring out the originality of the people whom they study, have claimed that in contrast to a singular 'nature' in the West, Amerindian ontologies have many natures. But should fascinating accounts of Amerindian ways of world-making presume so much about the 'West'? This is what we doubt. Taking 'Western' not as a region but as a style, we explore Western animal/human relations by describing various ways of enacting 'meat'. Using excerpts – cuts – from our fieldwork materials, we contrast the investment in the tastiness of lambs in a Spanish butcher store with concern for meat contamination in FAO safety regulations. Next, we juxtapose the relevant 'meats' within two classes in a vocational school in the Guatemalan highlands. In one, meat is the centrepiece on a neatly ordered plate, while the other concerns itself with the nutrients that meat contains. 'Western meat', then, is not one. It is multiple.

Keywords: meat, naturalism, multiple, ontology, practice, Western

It is a great virtue of anthropology that it tries to make space within the 'Western' intellectual tradition for 'Other' modes of apprehension. Rather than sticking to 'Western' canons, university-educated anthropologists travel the world to seek original ways of world-making in other sites and situations. They take the time to get a sense of these and they take the trouble of spelling them out. By publishing their treatises in books and journals, anthropologists draw the ontologies of these so-called 'others' into the repositories of anthropology, translating them into English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, German and so on – languages that are 'Western'. But what about the canons that are being inherited in and through these languages: what about the ways of world-making of the 'West'? In this article, we will explore some more of those. More particularly, we will examine what, in the Western tradition, it may be for people to eat meat. These are our questions: what is meat, that is to say, how is meat enacted in Western practices? And how do the ways that 'meat' is being done, alter human/animal relations?¹

Asking these questions allows us to put into another light the – allegedly 'Western' – figure of naturalism that is at stake in this special issue. The 'West' has been called naturalist by anthropologists who were not so much interested in the 'West', as they were in bringing out the

originality of a particular group of ‘Others’, the so-called animists (Descola and Palsson 1996; Descola 2009). Animists – or so they tell us – take it that animals and humans have similar interiorities, similar anima. Both ‘animals’ and ‘humans’ orientate themselves in the world as ‘persons’ who relate to other ‘persons’ as either potential predators (who seek to eat them) or as potential prey (that they seek to eat). This implies that animals and humans share an internal disposition. To abbreviate and to allow for contrast, animals and humans are said to have the same kind of soul, the same culture. However, their nature is different; they have different bodies. These bodies give them different perspectives on the world. All persons may like to drink manioc beer, but some bodies (those of jaguars) see manioc beer when other bodies (human ones) see blood. The drink thus has two different natures, it is both manioc beer and blood. This is multinaturalism. The contrast is with the ‘Western’ tradition where – or so the story goes – animals and humans have the same bodies; the same nature. This implies that they are composed out of the same inorganic substrates. But while in ‘the West’ humans and animals share their physicality, their interiorities or souls are taken to be different. This understanding (‘are taken to be different’) does not reside in the body. In ‘the West’, cultures (interiorities, souls) carry perspectives. Thus, animals, by and large, do not. In most ‘Western’ contexts, animals are not supposed to have ‘interiorities’ at all.² Thus, the ‘West’ is not animist. It is just human beings who have souls (minds, interiorities) and different groups of humans happen to have different (cultural) perspectives. In this sense ‘the West’ combines naturalism with multiculturalism.

This schematized contrast works wonders in bringing out the originality of animist ways of apprehending human–animal relations. When we came across it in Viveiros de Castro’s work (for example 2004) we were initially seduced.³ However, the shape given to this same story by Descola started to make us suspicious. For Descola doesn’t use fluid, churning words in a provocative, playful way, seeking to shift vested understandings. Instead he draws fixed boxes, seeking to add to what was already known and make a solid building out of it. He admits to his own ‘predilection for classification’ and for ‘grouping by attribute’ – both of which are techniques firmly rooted in ‘Western’ science (Descola 2006: 337). The problem is that this way of working, rather than making space for others, pins everyone down. The provocative effect of taking animists seriously is smothered in naturalist – or rather naturalizing – structuralist schemes. The openings, which just began to tentatively appear, are forcefully closed down.

But while Descola’s schemes are sadly rigid, there is an additional risk in using ‘the West’ as a mere backdrop, a point of contrast against which ‘the Others’ may stand out. This is the risk that making space for ‘Others’ rests on accepting vested truisms about ‘the West’. These truisms have a quite specific intellectual history, largely situated within philosophy. In this intellectual history the concerns being addressed tend to be those of (the heirs of) ancient Greek free men: citizens, soldiers, and, indeed, the philosophers themselves. What became sidelined in this intellectual tradition were the concerns of internal ‘others’: strangers, women, children and (former) slaves. Thus, when the terms of ‘Western’ philosophy are used as a ‘self-evident’ backdrop, creating space for others elsewhere comes at the cost of silencing the others within. Countering this risk depends on bracketing philosophical arguments so as to study ‘the West’ (its bracketed philosophical arguments included!) with the techniques of anthropology.⁴

This, then, is what we set out to do in the present article. But we are obviously not the first ones to do so. For a few decades now, scholars have ethnographically explored ‘Western’ laboratories,

hospitals, court rooms, schools, farms, homes, parliaments, building sites, and so on. They do not find naturalism. Or rather, while they confirm that ‘Western’ theories (and philosophy) tend to define ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ in mutually exclusive terms, they report that ‘Western’ practices are populated by socio-material mixtures and hard-to-tame imbroglis.⁵ ‘Western’ practices, then, enact many ‘natures’. The point here is not that different creatures, (jaguars, humans) due to their different bodies, see and live in different worlds. But neither is it that there is one world that different people (given their different ‘cultures’ or varied ‘standpoints’) understand differently. It is rather that in different sites and situations objects are done differently. They are performed, enacted, in a variety of ways. Separating out these objects in ‘natural’ and ‘cultural’ aspects, layers or parts, makes little sense. The relevant differences run across all kinds of (other) lines. This ethnographic work suggests that ‘the West’ organizes its own specific versions of multinaturalism – and that the alleged unity of nature, the ‘naturalism’, may be set up as ‘window dressing’ but does not deserve to be believed. In this article we will bring this out once more – with a particular twist. As we explore the question ‘what is meat?’ our materials have a direct relevance to the issue of human/animal relations.⁶

This leaves us with the question of where to find ‘the West’. One possibility would be to look for a ‘Western’ geospatial region and presume similarity within this region and differences across the border. This approach makes good sense, as globally geospatial regions are highly consequential. There exist nation states with borders that are heavily guarded (no intruders allowed) and that (in many parts of the world) are called ‘the West’.⁷ However, there is also another possibility: which is to listen for ‘Western’ syntaxes. In this way of working, ‘the West’ is not a place, but rather an assemblage of divergent, more or less loosely connected, travelling repertoires. Rather than being located in a border-bound region, these repertoires (syntaxes, styles) spread out in dispersed and juxtaposed fluid networks.⁸ In this article, we adopt this latter approach and search for varied situations where arguably ‘Western’ ways of handling meat emerge. And as we do so, we present several ‘cuts’ of meat. These are contrasting ‘meat’ moments and figures – events – that we draw out from the ongoing shifts and changes in our ‘fields’. As we narrate these events, the aim is not to provide a proper overview of the sites where we did fieldwork, nor to fully represent the mobile syntaxes of the ‘West’. Instead, we hope that these cuts introduce just enough unfamiliarity and strangeness into the tenets of ‘Western naturalism’ that it becomes possible to revalue the human/animal relations that ‘Western’ repertoires afford.

Physical Continuities

‘Western’ naturalism, or so Descola suggests, insists on a ‘material continuity’ that grounds a similarity between animals and human beings.

Although this desecration of humankind may still appear shocking to some, naturalism has rendered almost common sense the idea that the molecular structure and the metabolism that we have inherited from our phylogeny make us no different from the most humble bugs and that the laws of thermodynamics and chemistry apply as much to us as to inorganic objects. (Descola 2009:153)

As Descola presents it, naturalism is Western, but at the same time ‘shocking to some’. Thus,

only those to whom this is not shocking, and more particularly natural scientists, are allowed to speak for and as ‘the West’. Here, the sciences are ‘read’ as generating knowledge and crafting images of the world. They ‘know’, because they follow the principles of biochemistry, that humans and animals have similar bodies. And because of the strength of these principles, human–animal continuities that do not depend on biochemical substrates are sidelined. Ordinary practices for qualifying bodies, practices that are not necessarily informed by science, are simply ignored. It was against that background that we started to wonder about the human–animal relations pertinent to a diversity of practices in ‘the West’ – practices in which knowledge may figure, but where it is not necessarily central, practices in which a continuity between animals and humans does not necessarily point at a similarity. For there may be other forms of continuity – such as those that ensue when one figure incorporates and digests the other.⁹ What, then, might we learn about the relations between animals and humans in practices to do with this particular material, ingestible ‘mediator’ between them: meat?

One of the ways in which animals and humans relate is through eating. Animal predation of humans is rare these days. But human beings, at least some of them, eat meat. That meat does indeed come from animals is often skillfully hidden or at least downplayed.¹⁰ Boneless fillets, cut and clean, packaged in quality plastics, do not scream out where they come from; while the packages may indicate a geographical region (‘from Argentina!’), they do not insist on the lives, times and killing of the animal that you, the consumer, are about to eat. Some ‘Western’ languages tellingly have different words for the animal and its meat: pig/pork, cochon/porc, cerdo/porcino. Sometimes, however, the mode of slaughtering is made relevant (legally certified, halal, kosher). Sometimes the question of the animal’s life is stressed (free range, welfare attended to).¹¹ Sometimes, then, the continuity between animal and meat is foregrounded. But what exact shape do such animal/human continuities take in practice? To address this question we make our first cut (Figure 1).

Early spring 2012: in a small town on Spain’s central plateau, a corner-store butcher is selling lechazo de oveja churro. This is a seasonal dish made of lamb that is so young that it has only been fed with its mother’s milk. The butcher is an elderly woman in no hurry at all. As she pulls a few lamb carcasses out from the cooler where they are stored, she talks to a customer about how these lambs lived when they were still animals. She describes the nearby fields where they were raised, mentions the soil, the morning fog that rolls in off the nearby bluff. She takes the big casserole that her customer hands over to her. She fills it and hands it back again. The lechazo, a limp and lifeless animal in the butchery, will be slowly baked in the nearby church’s wood oven, and over this day it will become a meal. You can see it in the photo (Figure 1). As she is working with her wares, the butcher needs only a few prompts to keep talking. She explains that the rosemary and thyme that dot the hillsides give a distinctive flavour to the meat, suggesting that crucial parts of these spices passed from the mother’s feed into her milk and then into the lamb. An animal’s history is incorporated in the flavour of the meat derived from it. Cheerfully, appreciatively, knowingly, the butcher tells her customer that for a person who eats the meat, it is possible to taste if an animal has lived well.

2004: The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) publishes a manual on food and animal health (FAO 2004). It is the result of work from scientific experts from New Zealand, Namibia, Brazil, the U.K. and Zimbabwe – countries with large meat exports – who have been discussing

‘Good Practices for the Meat Industry’. The animal health that concerns these experts pertains to the animals becoming food. Their concern is that meat derived from animals might be a health hazard for the human beings who will eat it. Good hygiene during the raising and handling of animals should prevent biological contaminants from ending up in meat and meat products. Pesticides used in the fields where the animals graze should not leave chemical residues in the meat. Butchering techniques occupy their attention too, because it is through being killed that animals become meat. And once death sets in, decay becomes a concern. The experts’ discussions also dwell on methods of sterilizing and transporting meat. How should they regulate these internationally in such a way that the suitability of the meat remains assured, preferably even in places where there are no cold chains? The experts want the safety of meat to be judged and guaranteed in every country by a ‘competent authority’ – an official charged by the government with enforcing the relevant regulatory requirements.

For the science of biochemistry, animals and humans form a physical continuity. They are similar and may be studied in conjunction. So much so that if, in practice, biochemical research gets invasive, laboratories freely use animals in order to investigate biochemical processes pertaining to humans. In laboratories, animals are made to stand in for humans.¹² But biochemistry is not ‘the West’ and in other sites and situations human–animal relations are enacted in quite different ways. In some settings, such as that of a Spanish heartland corner-store butcher, a meat-eater may taste the life history of an animal as its feed and hillside pleasures endure in its flavour. In other settings, such as that of an international committee meeting addressing food safety, the concern is that microbes, toxins, stress hormones and other possible contaminations should not travel from animal herds into human populations through ingestion. In both cases, there is continuity between animals and humans but this does not signal a similarity. The flavour of the meat of tasty lambs arranges a relation between animals eaten and eating humans that is much appreciated by the eaters in the equation. Contaminations, however, are health hazards. It is better if consumers never become bothered by these, so they should be prevented by good hygiene, proper handling and meticulously enforced safety regulations.¹³ There are continuities between animals and humans in both cases, but these are valued differently. As meat mediates between animals and humans, tasting the good life of a lamb that roamed a hillside is a pleasure, while falling ill from meat contaminations is an unfortunate incident.

Thus, human beings relate to animals through the mediation of meat in different ways. These ways do not fit the ‘one nature/many cultures’ model Descola (and others) ascribe to the ‘West’: they are not different (cultural) perspectives on a single (natural) reality. Instead, the ‘natures’ implied are different. That animal feed leaves traces in the flavour of meat is not just an apprehension. It also leads farmers to send their sheep up hills where herbs are growing; it leads butchers to buy lambs from farmers with hillside land. And the hope is that it leads customers to enjoy their lechazo de oveja churro so much that they come back next year for more. That animal diseases may harm human beings, likewise, has impressive practical consequences. FAO committees and other governing bodies craft many rules and regulations, putting into place a variety of techniques instrumental to their implementation. Which begs the question of how the two modes of ordering presented here relate. Might it be that they relate variously? They clash in some sites (current EU regulations forbid people to slaughter their own, well-cared-for and lovely tasting lamb). They strengthen each other elsewhere (the butcher in the corner shop has

invested in a good cooler, not just because the ‘competent authorities’ want her to, in order to keep her meat safe, but also because meat contaminations may spoil the meat’s flavour). And elsewhere yet again, they pertain to situations that are simply different (the butcher sells tasty local lambs in the village shop; the FAO committee is concerned with the safety of processed and canned meat exports that travel long distances).

Preparing Meals with Meat

If the ‘West’ were naturalist and were to ‘have’ a single ‘nature’, one might wonder if ‘meat’ would be a part of it. Is meat indeed natural? This is doubtful. In the biochemistry lab it may be studied with biochemical techniques, on biochemical terms. But in other practices things quickly get more complicated. Let’s face it: meat-eaters are, by and large, not hunter-gatherers.¹⁴ The animals that meat is derived from were bred and raised on farms. These farms may rear their animals on lustrous hillsides or in massive stables, but in one way or another, they invest a lot of human labour in them. Feed is largely cultivated, too. This kind of culture is not quite a matter of symbols, meaning, or ‘free will’ (to paraphrase Descola’s rendering of what ‘culture’ would be). Instead, it involves the laborious cultivation of a lot of stuff. Such cultivation does not represent, mean, or imagine ‘nature’. Rather, it puts a shape to it. It informs materialities – organic and otherwise.

In order to illustrate this, we will present you once again with stories from our fieldwork. More particularly, we draw out two different cases in which meat is acculturated. Both of these cases come from the same vocational school in the highlands of Guatemala. Here, students are being taught knowledge and skills that are ‘international’. In the local context these are called ‘Western’. And why not take that designation seriously and go with it? People in Guatemala may wear Western clothes, speak Western languages, listen to Western music – as opposed to wearing clothes, speaking languages and listening to music that are indigenous. Thus, we find ourselves in good company when we treat ‘West’ not as a site but as a style. What, then, about relating to meat in ways that are ‘Western’?¹⁵

Autumn 2008: in the course on International Cuisine, students learn to prepare a three-course meal that might be served in a restaurant (Figure 2). The instructor, who has worked in restaurants for several years, plans the menus. He organizes them around the main dish, the meat. His first decision is whether to work with beef or pork or, occasionally, fish or chicken. He tells his students that the meat is the centre of the meal. Not that the students need to be told: here, people do not go to restaurants to eat vegetables. Other parts of the meal are important, the teacher allows, but their significance comes from how they accentuate or highlight the meat, the largest item on the plate. Detailed instructions accompany the preparation of the dishes. On one such day, the menu includes pork chops, polenta, baked apples and bacon. The students are told exactly how to chop, mix, and slice the ingredients, what temperature to cook them at and for how long to boil or bake. Only at the end, in the garnishing and final arrangement of the food, are they allowed a personal touch. The instructor tells the students that if they follow the recipe carefully there will be no difference between the food that each of them prepares, until this final step. But these last alterations, though sometimes subtle, are enough to make or break the meal – or, as is the case here, to pass or fail the class.

When instructing the students about presentation, the teacher underscores the importance of

balance. Colours, textures and the arrangement of food on the plate must produce a harmony, he says. A subtle shift in presentation changes the plate, and all else must be adjusted. The teacher speaks of patience and of the many years of practice that allow one to intuitively recognize what works. There are no rules that might, for instance, indicate that adding a colour here means taking a colour away there. Instead, students must acquire a feeling for what looks good on the plate. They should follow cooking recipes precisely but learn to be creative when it comes to crafting a compelling visual appearance.

In the same school there is a course on nutrition. Here, students are not taught to cook up meals from ingredients, but to compose them out of nutrients. Their teacher studied nutrition at a state university in Texas and regularly attends meetings at the Pan American Health Organization in Guatemala City. He wants his students to be familiar with the latest theories on biochemistry and human metabolism. He talks about the way bodies burn energy and use up nutrients, creating a deficit that needs to be replenished. In this context, composing a proper meal is a matter of working with calculators and charts that show how many calories and nutrients each type of food contains. This makes it possible for future nutritionists to propose meals that provide people (patients, clients) with recommended daily allowances for various macro and micronutrients. If the diet is for someone who needs to gain or lose weight, the meals may be high or low in calories. But then they should still contain the right amounts of nutrients (Figure 3).¹⁶

In this classroom, fish contains protein, but so do legumes, nuts, and eggs. Beef provides iron, but so do beans and spinach. Since the charts are organized around nutrients, fish, legumes, and nuts fall in the same category, and so do beef, beans, and spinach (egg yolks also have iron and beef also has protein, so there is overlap). Foods that contain similar nutrients are treated as interchangeable. Foods with dissimilar nutrients are held apart, so that liver, with its high vitamin A quantities, may well come from an animal, but it is categorized separately from meat. Variety in weekly meals is achieved by substituting one source of protein or iron for another: egg for fish or beans, beef for chicken or eggs.

The contrast between the two courses, then, does not fit with the model (laid out by Descola and others) of naturalism, where a single nature is interpreted in different ways in/by different cultures. For what we have here is not a single (natural) substance ('meat') that in different classes is accorded a different (cultural) meaning (say, 'centre piece of a plate' versus 'source of protein'). Instead, the two courses each acculturate a different 'meat' and, in doing so, foster different cooking practices. The aspiring chefs learn to cook their ingredients according to set rules and then adorn them creatively on a plate, with meat (that is: pork, chicken, fish, beef, etcetera) as a centrepiece. Here, being a centrepiece is not a specific meaning attributed to the generality 'meat', but rather a position (on the plate, in the meal) accorded to this or that specific piece of meat. In their consulting rooms, by contrast, nutritionists will propose to their patients that they eat meals in which meat (a source of protein and iron) alternates with other sources of protein (legumes, nuts, eggs) and sources of iron (beans, spinach). In the process, they mobilize nutrition science repertoires. But this does not imply that they adhere to, and propagate, a singular representation of 'nature'. Instead, nutrition science repertoires are as practical as those of the chefs. They just suggest other meals.

While a traditional 'Western' philosopher might think that nutrition science presents the facts of a reality that the chefs merely embellish, the ethnographer's finding is that dinner may be

materially shaped in different ways. In the context of this vocational school, nutrition science is not more foundational than what aspiring chefs learn in their cooking class. And neither is nutrition science necessarily reductionist (reducing food to one of its aspects) while chefs are holist (attending to all the aspects of meat).¹⁷ Instead, when contrasted with each other, both repertoires appear to inspire other ways of dealing with the question of what to eat. While chefs learn to care for tastes, textures and compelling visual arrangements, nutritionists learn to care about proteins, calories, vitamins, iron and other micronutrients. This is not a difference of principles, but one of practices. Elsewhere, in practices outside the school, these two repertoires may well go together – chefs may attend to the nutrients that their menus provide, while nutritionists may incite their clients to cook compelling meals. However, there may also be clashes – giving priority to the aesthetic qualities of a meal may come at the cost of the appropriateness of the nutrients, and vice versa. Or there may be indifference. In the vocational school, it is striking that neither of the two teachers even alludes to what happens in the class of the other. While one of them teaches International Cuisine the other concentrates on getting across the most recent World Health Organization’s nutritional recommendations.

Other Cuts

‘The West’, then, if it is opened up and studied, is not ‘naturalist’: it does not ‘have’ a single nature and many cultures. Instead, it orders heterogeneous realities in a variety of ways. To illustrate this, we made two cuts. First, we contrasted two ways of dealing with the continuities between animals and human beings through the material mediation of ‘meat’. Second, we divided up the teachings of a vocational school and presented two repertoires for preparing meals with ‘meat’. Twice we contrasted two meat-versions. It would, however, have been equally possible to cut up our materials in another way. Turn the table. It then becomes possible to contrast the two cases that in the above comparisons come first, with the two cases that come last. For the first two cases, both relate an aesthetic appreciation of meat – but the aesthetics involved is different in each. The second two cases share a concern with health – but, again, these are two different forms of health.

Let’s go back to the Spanish butcher shop. Here, aesthetic gratification primarily pertains to the pleasures of tasting. The flavour of the lechazo de oveja churro is extensively addressed. The look of the dish, where the animal is still recognizable even if it is now meat, is quite typical, but may be so obvious locally that it is not commented on. In the Guatemalan vocational school, by contrast, flavour and texture are shifted to the background. They are relevant, for sure, and the rules for proper cooking are carefully stipulated. But far more attention is given to the visual appearance of the various dishes on a plate. The creativity of the aspiring chefs is devoted to presentation. Thus, an aesthetics that is gustatory coexists, intertwines and competes with one that is visual. In both of these aesthetics, appreciative repertoires and their material preconditions and consequences interrelate. The aesthetics of the butcher depends on and helps to sustain hillsides and the hard work of raising lambs. The aesthetics of the cooking class depends on and helps to cook up pork and the dishes that accompany it. And while in this way the meats being eaten come to be shaped, so, too, do the bodies who are eating. At least some of the customers of the Spanish butcher have acquired the abilities to taste hillside flavours. Meanwhile, the cooks in training learn to subtly differentiate between a compelling sight and one that is not quite presentable in a high- class ‘international’ restaurant.¹⁸

Each of the second two stories presented comes with its own version of health. Both versions are backed up by natural science but they happen to draw on different scientific disciplines that facilitate different techniques of disease prevention. The FAO report is driven by a concern with disasters. Accordingly, the report attends to microbes, toxins and stress hormones that may fairly immediately cause people to vomit, become ill or even die. In this context ‘health’ is fragile in the short term. It is easily threatened by hazards potentially residing in meat and ingested along with it. The FAO report seeks to prevent such hazards from entering the bodies of ‘consumers’. The health relevant to the nutrition class in the Guatemalan highlands is, however, of a rather different kind. It is – not immediately, but in the long run – threatened by an enduring imbalance of nutrients. Nutrition science has for decades, and in different sites and situations, studied the nutrients that bodies need and the quantities in which they need them. The teacher mobilizes, among other sources, WHO publications. As students soak up the knowledge provided here, they learn to counter the under-consumption of protein, B vitamins or iron as well as the over-consumption of fats and sugars. They even learn to deal with both of these, in combination. The hope is that they may help to prevent a loss of vitality, the accumulation of ‘too much’ weight, and the onset of chronic diseases that, if people eat ‘unhealthily’, follow gradually.

The two branches of science concerned, that of hygiene and that of nutrition science, each relate to a different ‘nature’. They do not cast different perspectives on a single object, meat, that – as it is being investigated by various scientific disciplines – stays patiently the same. Instead, they contribute to shaping different natures. They do so in research settings but also in policy institutions, such as the FAO and the WHO. Hygiene cleans; it seeks to eradicate all bugs and germs that might make eaters sick (often, in doing so, introducing residues of the chemicals meant to kill microbial contaminations). It deals in objects that are threats and toxins. It concentrates on non-food, on contaminants that should not enter human bodies. Nutrition science, by contrast, is concerned with the body’s ‘building blocks’. It wonders what human bodies need. Here, meat is not a potential carrier of disease vectors, but an amalgam of nutrients. But in this version of the world, not all these nutrients are ‘good’. As parts of nutrition science stress, meat does not just contain proteins that help hungry bodies run well, but also fats – particularly ‘bad’ fats that have adverse long-term effects. Thus, to nutrition science, meat is not necessarily good food. For persons who have a severe lack of protein and of the micronutrients that meat provides, it may be advisable. But elsewhere it might be better to consider eating other kinds of food – beans, nuts, or, if animal proteins are called for, eggs and milk and cheese. Thus nutrition science, through advisory and other practices, helps to shape ‘what it is to eat’ in ways that are different from the rules set by hygiene and implemented by ‘competent authorities’.

Here, then, is our argument. ‘The West’ is not naturalist in the sense in which Descola and his perspectivist companions use the term. It is not the case that in a singular, coherent ‘Western’ repertoire, humans and animals are disconnected in their souls but connected through their bodies. Instead, ‘Western’ practices are complex juxtapositions of different modes of ordering – containing contrasting and overlapping repertoires. Some of these are developed and fostered, not in ‘science’ as if this were a unity, but rather in different scientific disciplines. Others come from elsewhere. They may, for instance, instantiate gustatory or visual aesthetic inspirations. For not only do ‘Western’ sciences ‘have’ many natures, ‘the West’ can also not be reduced to its sciences. Aesthetics is no less important to the way reality is being ordered in local practices. The butcher celebrates flavour, not facts to do with safety. The chefs present colourful displays, rather than biochemical tables. And even the nutritionists take pride in the clarity and simplicity

of their boxes of information. Other registers (that in the present analysis we kept in the background) are relevant to daily practices as well. ‘Western’ realities are formed and informed by tradition, feasibility, infrastructures, money and so on.¹⁹ Each one of these modes of ordering may compromise with, or override, the others. Take the students who follow the class on International Cuisine in the Guatemala vocational school. They dream of becoming chefs, preferably in one of Guatemala City’s elite restaurants. They invest in learning to cook according to their teacher’s recipes. They try to live up to sophisticated aesthetic standards. And they consider themselves to be better than the students of the other cooking class (that non-incidentally contains more women), who merely learn to cook hospital meals and school lunches. However, when it comes to it, most International Cuisine students do not become chefs. Their skills may come to be impressive, but the market cannot absorb their ambitions and many, if they are fortunate enough to find work at all, will end up on a line in one of the local food factories.

Conclusion

Bringing out the messy complexities of the ‘West’ is relevant in various ways.²⁰ For a start, it adds a few snippets of anthropological description to the pile; this time, descriptions of ‘Western’ practices. But, more importantly, given that these descriptions do not neatly fit the expectations – as they don’t simply repeat ‘what we all know’ about ‘the West’ – they are not just descriptions. They are also interferences.²¹ Thanks to the complexities that they bring out, the mundane stories that we told above interfere with the ‘Western’ philosophical tradition. For they re-examine a series of terms: nature, culture, animal, human, food, eating, relating, aesthetics, health – and comparison, too.²² At the same time, the interference is not just with philosophy. It is also with international modes of ruling and regulating. All too easily, global policies each impose one of the many modernist, arguably ‘Western’, grids on global practices, pretending that this is the only reasonable possibility, that it is just natural. As long as we take it that ‘the West’ has just a single nature, the FAO, the WHO and other organizations may hide the differences and disagreements inside and between them. They may craft a policy out of compromise and then pretend that this policy is in accordance with a single nature (that they are careful not to call ‘Western’). Failures may be attributed to the fact that outdated knowledge was used and that ‘nature’ was not properly represented after all. But what if nothing is ‘just’ natural, anywhere, ever? How might discussions about policy change if they took into account that shaping heterogeneous imbroglios may be done in all but endless ways, so that the pertinent question is not what is natural, but what might be wise to do? If, rather than the truth-value of utterances, the sustenance value of practices would be persistently foregrounded, this would make for a far more interesting and level playing field between traditions, be they ‘Western’ or not.

The question of which repertoire might, here or there, be ‘better’ or ‘best’, is not an easy one. There are many relevant specificities and interdependencies. It is certainly promising that through taste, people may learn to attune themselves to how well lambs have lived. And eating meat from animals that have enjoyed their short lives on nearby hillsides may make for more sustainable food practices than shipping meat all around the globe, exporting it over long distances, so that control schemes such as those of the FAO become necessary in the first place. But that is not to say that infections never plague sheep reared to be eaten locally. Or that only people living close to herb- growing hillsides deserve to enjoy a piece of meat. Or that, given the

size of the global population, meat eating is sustainable at all. Similar complexities present themselves if we look at what is being taught in the vocational school. Here it might be tempting to say that it is fine for food to look pleasant on a plate, but that the ample creativity currently devoted to the plates of visitors to Guatemala City elite restaurants might work more impressive wonders elsewhere – for instance, in the kitchens of the local schools and hospitals. It is also tempting to criticize nutrition science for reducing food to a biochemical understanding of its ingredients. But there again, there are complexities. For severe disqualifications of elite restaurants all too easily turn into in an overall plea for rigorous austerity, and from there into a generalized disqualification of pleasure. And nutrition science, even though fixated on nutrients, at least concerns itself with the problems of people who are presently malnourished. Thus, rather than passing easy judgements, we are inclined to raise – or reiterate – questions. How might we draw boundaries between pleasure that is ‘good’ and pleasure that is ‘bad’? And how might nutrition science, for all its good intentions, learn how to better attune itself to real-life eating practices? How might it come to value foods locally eaten rather than dreaming up radically novel recommended diets?

Instead of providing you with answers to these questions, we end with a story that brings out once more, in yet another way, that ‘Western’ practices are complex. That, however nice and neat structuralizing schemes may be, daily life is full of disturbing confusions. Allow us to take you back once more to the Spanish butcher shop. The customer buying meat there was one of us, Emily. She was carrying a baby. Not just any baby, but her son, a three-month old boy, milk-fed like the lambs. While the butcher praised the flavours of milk-fed lambs, the mother held on tightly to her charge. For all of a sudden she sensed the similarity between one kind of flesh (lamb turned into meat) and the other (boy that definitely should not be eaten). The similarity was striking, the difference shaky. Did the butcher sense this, too? She did not allude to it, but maybe for her the similarity was obvious – in Spain the nickname of small babies is *ternasco* – little lamb. How, then, to differentiate between boy and lamb? Does the first have an interior, a soul, and the second not? Or might this difference be rather more practical. One belongs to a species – a kind, a group, a clan – that has organized itself so as to cultivate and kill the other. The other is just a lamb. Its mother carries no money and no butcher’s knife. Its father has long since been slaughtered. Its body is not particularly strong but strikingly tasty. As the human boy must be fed with yet more milk, the human mother needs to eat, and therefore it is the lamb’s fate to be eaten.

Acknowledgements

The editors of this special section encouraged us to address the issue of ‘Western naturalism’. We thank them for the challenge and their comments. We would also like to thank: the ERC for the Advanced Grant, AdG09 Nr. 249397, for ‘Eating Bodies in Western Practice and Theory’ that allows us to work on this topic; Tom Abercrombie, who gave Emily the keys to his Spanish home and directions to the butcher; the vocational school in Guatemala who accorded Emily field access; the rest of the team – Anna Mann, Sebastian Abrahamsson, Rebeca Ibanez Martin, Michalis Kontopodis and Filippo Bertoni – for inspiration and comments; John Law and Nick Bingham for more inspiration and more comments; and Orion.

