

PREFACE **WATCHING HOGS WATCH WORKERS**

ON A COLD FALL EVENING IN 2010, I met a man in his late forties named Juan at a house party. A former businessman in his native Mexico, Juan had reluctantly moved with his family to the American Great Plains in the mid-2000s, trying to escape the escalating borderland drug violence in Ciudad Juárez. He was curious about my research, asking me what I had been learning in this remote agribusiness company town. A couple years back, Juan explained, he had worked in a 2,500-head sow breeding barn that was similar to the one where I was currently employed. He wanted to communicate a haunting impression of hogs locked in tiny gestation crates that was seared into his memory. “They have almost 360 degrees vision,” he said. He slowly moved his pointing index fingers from his eyes to the back of his head, keeping his digits trained onto my face. “They are always watching you,” he continued. “Sometimes they look like they are not looking at you . . . , but if you look at their eyes, you will see that they are always following you.” His body gave off an involuntary shiver—and it was not due to recalling the damp barn heat from thousands of bodies or the smell of feces, memories that can still make my skin tingle years later. He seemed to visibly shake at the feeling of thousands of confined animals scanning his every movement.

They are always watching you. In retrospect, Juan was not the only person I met who had tried to become attuned to the thick sentience of animal agribusiness. Someone who taught me how to artificially inseminate sows, for instance, sternly told me to never look a hog in the eyes. If the animals think you are looking at them, they will freeze. If this happens when sows are being

escorted from the gestation to the delivery barns, he explained, it can cause injuries as advancing lines of animals pile up and crawl over each other. We would walk sideways with our faces to the walls to avoid making eye contact whenever we saw hogs moving through the hallways. Another person instructed me to never touch a gestating pregnant sow. She said this seemingly casual act of individual attention can alarm the animal, make it bellow, and lead to an entire row of overexcited neighboring hogs. As hogs have been gradually bred to bear larger litters, to the very limits of what their bodies can sustain, the simple gesture of touching a sow could potentially lead to waves of miscarriages throughout the barn. Otherwise mundane human actions, such as a sideways glance or a stroke of fur, had apparently become imbued with powers to physically affect animals and the broader project of cheap American meat. These people were being taught that their every random behavior was freighted with the potential to manifest in pigs' bodies and flesh.

In pork industry periodicals, animal agribusiness is presented as a site of biosecure, engineered, and controlled confinement. It is often articulated in popular media as the outcome of technoscientifically precise automation, a matter of well-ordered (if cruel) anthropocentric domination over animal lives in mechanized buildings. But following the sharpening stare of industrial hogs allows us to glimpse something else: how new intensities and forms of intimacy are emerging between hogs and the few human beings with whom they still remain in physical contact in these hyperindustrialized spaces. Within these cramped barns underpinned by extreme productivity, where the efforts of as few as five people now help conceive and birth fifty-five thousand animals per year, the very meaning and efficacy of human life and labor is subtly shifting alongside hogs' bodily conditions.

This book is about the politics of industrialism in an ostensibly postindustrial United States, articulated through the changing forms of being human that underlie porcine life and death. It further reinterprets the shifting logics of agribusiness through ethnographic analyses of overworked animals' immune systems, pheromones, instincts, hormones, ovulation, muscle fibers, tendon distribution, fatty acids, and sentience. I begin with an image of highly observant animals, then, because it suggests that even *how pigs look at human beings* is a historical product with evolving consequences as farm industrialization intensifies. The modern porcine gaze, along with how it can biophysically affect hogs, is itself inseparable from the many waves and epochs of industrialization that have been compounded into this animal over the past two hundred years. Compulsively staring hogs can be read as an embodied meta-

phor for the factory farm as a whole. They are a lively symbol of how much human work has been absorbed by the porcine species—how many economic demands are now built into this creature’s genetics and carcass—along with, in turn, how biophysically attuned industrial hogs have become to human labor. As I suggest in the pages to come, this might also be seen as a potent image to trouble the tenuous yet tenacious—even totalizing—state of industrial capitalism, labor, and livelihood in select pockets of rural America today.