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Cruel Intimacies and Risky Relationships: Accounting for Suffering in Industrial Livestock Production

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Abstract

This article investigates the hypothesis that greater human-livestock intimacy can deter cruelty and mitigate suffering in the industrial production of animals for human consumption. The history of industrial agriculture in North America is one of increasingly utilitarian, profit-based, and technologically mediated relationships between humans and the animals they raise and kill for food. Under what circumstances is the physical and emotional distance between producers, consumers, and consumed animals an impetus toward uncaring and irresponsible relationships? Do even intimate interspecies encounters in livestock production involve cruelty and suffering? This article addresses these questions and evaluates reform options by attending to both the localized arrangements and systemic structures of industrial livestock production. Finally, it proposes a risk-mapping strategy to assess the plausibility of caring intimacies in livestock production.

Keywords

agriculture, animal welfare, cruelty, food production, industry, interspecies, intimacy, killing, labor, livestock, meat, risk, slaughter, slaughterhouse, stockyard, violence

Introduction

Intimacy is not the first thing that comes to mind when one thinks of relationships between livestock and people. Whether professional, intellectual, or colloquial, discussions of intimacy center almost invariably on *interpersonal* intimacy—that is, intimacy conceived in humanist (and often romantic)¹ terms. Intimacy generally brings to mind closeness or proximity in either an emotional or physical sense (Thayer, 1986). Whether intimacy is conceived as a process (Macionis, 1978), a sustained state (Kashdan & Roberts, 2004), or a potentially fleeting experience (Wynne & Wynne, 1986), body-to-body

contact or touch is often involved (Thayer, 1986). In psychology and sociology, intimacy tends to have a positive valence and connotes “familiarity and comfort” or security (Kashdan & Roberts, 2004; Marcus & Swett, 2002; Berlant, 1998, p. 281). Intimacy involves a deeply felt physical or emotional sharing, a significant mutual experience of affecting and being affected by another.

Rejecting a humanist circumscription of the term, this paper grapples with intimacies between humans and livestock. Here, interspecies intimacy refers to an experience of physical or emotional closeness with animals of another species as they live or as they die.² Because intimacy is consequential for all involved, it is mutual in some sense. But an intimate interrelationship may feel different for each of its participants—especially when those participants hail from separate species and bring divergent physical and emotional needs to the encounter. Because “intimacy names the enigma of this range of attachment,” it need not be tied to good feelings, comfort, or security (Berlant, 1998, p. 283). Intimacy can also (and simultaneously) involve violence, anxiety, or tension (Metcalf, 2008; Kashdan & Roberts, 2004; Marcus & Swett, 2002; Macionis, 1978).

Does getting intimate with animals today make killing them or treating them with cruelty more emotionally (or even physically) difficult? Animal welfare advocates sometimes assume that greater intimacy or physical and emotional closeness between people and food animals will make it more difficult for us to treat them unkindly. After all, the further we are from livestock animals and the less face-to-face interaction we have with them, the easier it is to forget that they are living, feeling beings; the more distance we have from the processes of raising and killing them, the more we’re able to ignore their suffering. This paper considers and evaluates these assumptions. Does intimacy with livestock animals change the sorts of killing we’re willing to engage in, the types of beings we’re able to kill, the conditions of killing we’re prepared to tolerate, or our practices of caring for those to-be-killed? What kinds and conditions of intimacy do and do not foster less cruel relationships in livestock production?

In addressing these questions, this paper is especially attentive to what Lauren Berlant calls the “moral dramas” and “ambivalences” of intimacy (p. 281). For Berlant, intimacy “poses a question of scale that links the instability of individual lives to the trajectories of the collective” (Berlant, 1998, p. 283). In tying living creatures to one another and to larger collectivities, intimacy challenges us to think about states of cruelty as relational rather than strictly personal phenomena (Barad, 2007; Ahmed, 2004). If we are accustomed to thinking about the ethics of cruelty in terms that are both humanist and indi-

vidualist, paying attention to intimate *interrelationships* may help us account for the cruelty of industrial livestock production in different ways. Doing so, I will argue, forces us to consider intimacy, cruelty, and risk as interlocked structural, personal, and relational phenomena.

How Interspecies Intimacy Matters

What makes it possible to overlook or dismiss human cruelty to the livestock that many of us rely on for food? Some scholars have linked consumers' alienation from the food production process with the prevalence and severity of livestock welfare abuses and with other social and environmental problems. William Cronon, who studied the rise and consolidation of the US meat industry in the mid- to late-19th century, explains how capitalist social and economic structures have enabled privileged consumers to isolate themselves, physically and emotionally, from the violence and ecological destruction caused by their lifestyles (Cronon, 1991, p. 384). Distanced from the production process, humans can ignore the chain of relationships that produce what they eat or use and can therefore consume without a sense of responsibility for the consequences of their consumption—consequences that include animal suffering, perilous labor conditions for human workers, and toxic pollution levels: “Once a product had been processed, packaged, advertised, sold, and shipped within the long chain of wholesale-retail relationships, its identity became more and more a creature of the market. The natural roots from which it had sprung and the human [and nonhuman] relationships that had created it faded as it passed from hand to hand” (Cronon, pp. 339-340). For Cronon, material and emotional distance from the animal and human labor involved in production is a primary cause of cruel practices that disregard both animal and human welfare and produce widespread environmental degradation.

The history of meat production in the United States attests to this: it is a story of increasing mechanization, increasing centralization, and concomitant decreases in intimacy among workers, consumers, and livestock. Over the second half of the 19th century, the mechanization of meatpacking, the introduction of an efficient division of labor in factories, and the capacity to capitalize on economies of scale allowed a few large beef-packing companies to grow at astonishing rates (Pate, 2005; Cronon, 1991). For several decades, the North American rail system placed Chicago as the central broker and handler between Western cattle farmers and Eastern meat-eaters. By 1889, four companies produced 90% of Chicago's packed beef, and they soon dominated or consolidated meat markets throughout the nation. Documenting this process,

Cronon notes an increasing techno-mediation that separated farm animals from their owners and consumers and enabled humans to exercise an unprecedented mastery over animals' lives. As refrigeration practices improved, death and decay were no longer obstacles to centralized meat production. Ice from Illinois and Wisconsin lakes was used to make refrigerated facilities and refrigerated rail cars, allowing the nonstop, year-round slaughter of hogs and cattle from Chicago's stockyards. Seasonal lifecycles and seasonal slaughters rapidly gave way to timed and calculated feedings and transports; animals' bodies and lives were increasingly manipulated to serve their producers' economic interests (Cronon, 1991). Most important was the mechanization of slaughterhouse facilities, which made killing a rapid, piecemeal, impersonal process. The "knocker" alone would confront live animals and quickly send them down the line as immobile carcasses. Divided labor meant a series of discrete and relatively simple tasks for the largely unskilled and poorly paid immigrant workers: a few slices and a tear on each body, no prolonged encounter between *this* worker and *this* cow—and, of course, no encounter at all between the capitalist or the consumer and a living or dying cow (Horowitz, 2006; Cronon, 1991; Sinclair, 1988).

Livestock animals were not the only ones affected: centralized and consolidated meatpacking devastated traditional systems of animal slaughter, shipment, and packing, forcing slaughterhouses and butchers all over the country out of business. Ranchers could stay in business, but the prices of meat were dropping drastically, and the consolidated market left them beholden to the big packers' schemes (Pate, 2005). Besides the animals, the worst off of all were the stockyard/slaughterhouse workers, whose plight of illness, injury, and poverty is detailed in Upton Sinclair's classic, *The Jungle* (Sinclair, 1988). Each of these players in the changing meat business could no longer claim the same relationships with one another or with livestock animals. Longstanding connections were undermined, and traditional rhythms of interaction were sped up, cut off, or otherwise reconfigured. Chicago's major meatpackers manipulated this environment and thrived in it for several decades.

As railroads gave way to diesel trucks, the large corporations born and nurtured in Chicago found it more profitable to abandon the city for locales farther west. Early in the 20th century, the reign of Chicago's "big four" crumbled, thanks to monopoly-busting regulations and empowered unions. But structural reform was uneven, and many of the protections won by US workers and smaller businesses did not last through the century. The last three decades in particular witnessed gross failures to enforce the Humane Slaughter Act or to punish violations of occupational health and safety regulations in US slaughterhouses (Weiss, 2008; Eisnitz, 1997).³ The reconsolidation of the

meat markets, the weakened position of labor, and the penetration of industry interests and representatives into federal regulatory agencies (especially the USDA) under the Reagan, Clinton, and both Bush administrations, means the state of affairs for animals, ranchers, and workers at present is similar to what it was circa 1900 (Weiss, 2008; Burt, 2006; Stull & Broadway, 2004; Eisnitz, 1997). Mechanization and centralization are still, for the most part, synonymous with commercial livestock production.

The legacy of the Chicago stockyards also carries on in the stark alienation of the experience of eating from the experience of killing. According to Cronon, meat had come to appear “less a product of nature and more a product of human artifice” (p. 255). The vast industries that deliver beef, pork, and poultry to dinner tables across the country had effectively obscured the “intricate, symbiotic partnership between animals and human beings,” making it easy to “forget that pigs and cattle died so that people might eat” (Cronon, 1991, p. 256). Cronon suggests that this alienation is inseparable from market structures and capitalist ideology:

[The Exchange Building] was the whole point of the stockyard, the ultimate meeting place of country and city, West and East, producer and consumer—of animals and their killers. Its polished wood surfaces and plush upholstery offered an odd contrast to the wet muck and noisy, fecund air in the pens just outside its doors. . . . [It] seemed somehow at a distance from the animals in whose flesh it dealt, as if to deny the bloody consequences of the transactions that went on within it. For some, this was a sign of civilization, whereby “a repulsive and barbarizing business is lifted out of the mire, and rendered clean, easy, respectable, and pleasant.”⁴ Those who handled the animals in their pens had little to do with those who bought and sold them, and vice versa. “The controlling minds”—the large traders and meat-packers—were thereby “left free to work at the arithmetic and book-keeping of the business,” undisturbed by the manure or blood or the screams of dying animals. (p. 212)

In short, techno-mediation and the utilitarian logic of capitalism have distanced humans from the animals they exploit, allowing most people to ignore the cruelty of this interspecies relationship.

North American farmers, ranchers, and other animal caretakers would also experience significant changes in human-livestock intimacy. Ongoing technological developments and scale shifts in animal farming have profoundly transformed the business of livestock raising and management over the last several decades (Horowitz, 2006; Marcus, 2005; Midkiff, 2004; Pollan, 2002). In the mid-20th century, there developed veritable industrial sciences of selective breeding, feed composition, disease management, and efficient confinement practices for cows, hogs, and chickens (Finlay, 2004; Horowitz, 2004;

Orland, 2004). Together, these practices “compressed the time, space, labor, and energy associated with [livestock] production along the model of an efficient industry” (Finlay, 2004, p. 238). Over forty years ago, Ruth Harrison (1964) worried that “density of stocking,” “industrial type buildings,” “[m]echanical cleaning,” and automatic feeding and watering systems would decrease “the time the stockman has to spend with [the animals], and the sense of unity with his stock that characterizes the traditional farmer” (Harrison, quoted in Stricklin & Swanson, 1993, p. 72). Intimate husbandry practices, where “most farmers personally knew each of the pigs and cows they raised,” were gradually replaced with depersonalized “factory farming” techniques (Marcus, 2005, p. 7). Over time, these techniques have translated into less concern for the health and well-being of individual animals (Midkiff, 2004). Reflecting on the broad realm of contemporary meat and dairy production, animal welfare advocates lament the near elimination over the past forty years of “longstanding methods regarding animal care, which entailed providing substantial amounts of space and human attention” (Marcus, 2005, p. 7).

Diminished care practices and lack of intimacy in commercial food animal production are related to cost minimization and economies of scale. For example, today the vast majority of beef cattle are not permitted to graze for long on grass fields because it is more efficient to raise them in densely populated feedlots (Pollan, 2002, 2006). Regular corn feeding wreaks havoc on the cattle’s health, destroying their livers and producing painful gas. Nonetheless, corn feeding has become standard protocol because it means more pounds at lower cost. Toward the same end, almost all cattle raised for commercial slaughter receive hormone implants to speed their growth and antibiotics to prevent illness in spite of overcrowding and malnutrition. Hogs, chickens, and some varieties of fish fare no better. Holding pens, crates, and cages afford them no room to move, rapid-growth feeding protocols devastate their organ systems, and transportation and slaughter operations regularly result in prolonged and intense pain (Marcus, 2005; Midkiff, 2004; Eisnitz, 1997). Animal well-being is a concern only when it intersects with market value, and too often animal welfare and profit are at odds. There is ample evidence that animals raised for food production in the early 21st century endure more difficult lives and deaths than domesticated animals have faced in the past (Marcus, 2005; Midkiff, 2004; Pollan, 2002; Eisnitz, 1997): “Most farmed animals today suffer intensive confinement, routine mutilation, detestable and unnatural food, and dangerous transport to stockyards and slaughterhouses” (Marcus, 2005, p. 13).

These recent and longstanding developments in the meat industry are related in a complex causal web to the lack of intimacy between domesticated

farm animals and their producers and consumers: “[T]he distance between the animal and the finished meat product exemplifies an alienation that characterizes a more general structure of exploitation and domination” (Burt, 2006, p. 124). Perhaps, as Marcus and Cronon suggest, if we were close to living animals like cows, pigs, and chickens on a daily basis, we would have a greater appreciation for them as species and as individuals and a greater appreciation for the blood, toil, and suffering involved in our everyday consumption. Perhaps we would be so aware of animals’ lifecycles, experiences, capacities, and sensitivities that the thought of their current conditions in feedlots and slaughterhouses would be appalling to us. Perhaps, if we had to raise our dinner, look it in the eye, and lead it to slaughter, we’d feel differently about how that animal ought to live and how it ought to die. If so, greater intimacy and less techno-mediation in interspecies relationships may pose an important challenge to cruelty against livestock animals.

Intimacy, Indifference, and Violence

But how much of the cruelty that we see in commercial livestock production is really due to the *distance* between people and the animals they consume? How much of it can we attribute to the technological and bureaucratic mediation of these relationships? When we evaluate these questions, a paradox emerges: on the one hand, the more centralized and mechanized meat production has become and the more distant consumers are from the animals they will consume, the greater the apparent scope and degree of cruelty we observe. On the other hand, if we pay close attention to the cruel practices of contemporary industrial meat production, we find that many of them occur in the context of very close encounters between human workers and livestock animals. Perhaps the presumed inverse relationship between intimacy and cruelty is not as straightforward as it initially appears.

First, let us recall that mass cruelty and mass slaughter do not occur only in technologically advanced modern industries. From the brutal, hands-on slaughter of animals in some traditional sporting and hunting situations to the near-extirpation of species deemed threatening or undesirable by their close human neighbors, violent human-animal conflicts—some devastating to the species involved—occur in situations where intimacy rather than distance or technological mediation is the rule (Knight, 2000a; Lindquist, 2000; Richards, 2000; Rye, 2000; Song, 2000). Especially where living space and resources are shared, interspecies antagonism and “conflict between people and wildlife [are] ubiquitous” (Knight, 2000b, p. 1). At times, this intimate hostility results

in destruction and cruelty that rival the suffering found in contemporary industrial livestock production in kind, if not in scale.⁵ Thus, a return to pre-technological practices of livestock production would not necessarily eliminate the violence of the human-livestock relationship.

Second, the technologies of modern livestock production have a decidedly ambiguous relationship to animal welfare and to human-livestock intimacy. Animal science experts Ray Stricklin and Janice Swanson (1993) trouble the narrative of diminished intimacy, enhanced technology, and greater suffering offered by Harrison, Marcus, and other scholars. Although Stricklin and Swanson readily admit that contemporary intensive-confinement husbandry reduces animals' "freedom of movement and control[s] their social environment" to a degree that is (or ought to be) troubling, they also believe that many modern farm technologies are "not inherently welfare negative for animals" (p. 73). For instance, therapeutic antibiotics and other veterinary techniques tied to modern industrial farming have reduced disease among farm animals, arguably improving their health and therefore their quality of life. Although today the phrase "livestock technology" calls to mind high-speed mechanized slaughter, nontherapeutic antibiotics, hormone implants, and the economically-motivated genetic engineering of animals, Stricklin and Swanson don't reserve the term for such recent developments. For them, livestock technology is as old as domestication itself; in fact, domestication *is* a technology and it is one that, on balance, has created more complex intimate interrelationships rather than more distance between humans and many types of animals (pp. 69-70). Like Pete Daniel (1993), Stricklin and Swanson remind us that technology is not always linked to capitalist motivations or to intensive-confinement practices in meat and dairy production. Their analysis complicates our understanding of the relations among intimacy, technology, and animal suffering.

Recall also that some commercial meat operations in contemporary industrial societies use relatively traditional husbandry and slaughtering techniques. Their practices approximate the sort of material intimacy that animal welfare advocates like Marcus and Midkiff wish were more common. Kosher butchers, for instance, eschew mechanical killing practices and instead use ritualized slaughter methods like *shehitah*. This involves severing a conscious animal's esophagus and major blood vessels with the use of a sharp, hand-wielded knife. Temple Grandin has written extensively on ways to practice *shehitah* in accordance with religious law and humanely (i.e., with the use of appropriate knives, killing techniques, and restraining devices) (Grandin, 2000a; Grandin, 2000d; Grandin & Regenstein, 2000). Some practitioners, however, shackle and hoist cattle before their throats are slit and let them bleed out while

conscious. Although this is undoubtedly one of the least “high tech” and most materially intimate forms of cattle killing, it is arguably one of the least humane (cf. Preston, 2008). Shackling and hoisting conscious animals is widely considered a cruel practice, and with the use of appropriate modern technologies, it is easily eliminated (Grandin, 2000d; Grandin, 1994). While the absence of this practice in industrial slaughterhouses is debatable (Eisnitz, 1997), one could argue that the apparently detached and alienated techniques of industrial slaughter can, when practiced according to the book, be more humane than some traditional alternatives.⁶

Still, it is undeniable that modern industrial farming is often disastrous for livestock welfare. The careful tracking and manipulation of animal life and growth cycles, the creation of high-growth feed and antibiotic protocols under the guidance of animal scientists, and the development and ongoing enhancement of more efficient processing and killing technologies have facilitated and sometimes spurred the creation of the massive-scale confinement and slaughter facilities that keep capitalists and consumers distant from the living and dying bodies of the animals they consume (Burt, 2006; Finlay, 2004). Even technologies that make the killing process more humane, like the captive bolt guns that render animals unconscious before they are bled out, can become justifications for a larger system that inflicts intense suffering on animals: “‘humanitarian’ methods are complicit in the process itself and in fact contribute to its efficiency and its overall acceptability” (Burt, 2006, p. 126). These facts demand that we stay attentive and critical: technological shifts result in qualitative changes in intimacy, but those changes cannot be formulaically reduced to the increased alienation of people from the animals they keep or consume, *or* to increased cruelty and suffering arising from such alienation. While contemporary industrial farming does cause animal suffering on an unprecedented scale, either more intimacy or less techno-mediation between producers, consumers, and livestock might not in itself prevent or mitigate animal welfare abuses.

Take, for instance, the recently documented cruelty at California’s Hallmark/Westland Meat Company. In January 2008, Hallmark employees were captured on video abusing cows who were too weak to walk or stand, using electrical prods to force them to mount the ramp to the slaughter, pushing them with forklifts when prodding failed, and using trucks to drag roped cows by their legs (Humane Society of the United States, 2008). The Hallmark Meat Company was not a small, rogue operation but rather a major, industrial slaughterhouse—an exemplar of the sort of technologically advanced, hyper-efficient operation that keeps humans far from the animals they eat. Yet, in this video, one cannot help but note the closeness between individual

slaughterhouse workers and individual cows. To prod a downed cow is an intimate endeavor; it is hard to conceive of greater proximity to the suffering of the animal: the forklifts pushing downed cows are not driving themselves, and the cows roped to the rear of moving vehicles were tied there by *someone* not *something*. Although it is tempting to blame distance and technological mediation for the cruelty involved in contemporary industrial meat production, the proximity to the kill and the closeness of the encounter did not deter cruelty at Hallmark. In fact, the video suggests that situations involving human intervention and one-on-one contact—situations that may arise only when something goes wrong, like a fallen cow who can't get up—are among the most cruel human-animal encounters in industrial food production.

Unfortunately, what happened at Hallmark is all too common in modern slaughter facilities, suggesting that intimacy is not absent in industrial meat production and can itself be cruel. Gail Eisnitz's (1997) shocking investigation of cattle, hog, chicken, and horse slaughter at major facilities across the United States documents the normalcy of animal abuse in meat production. The intimacy of wrestling with terrified and combative animals while attempting to "knock" them, slit their throats, or dehide them is hardly a deterrent to cruelty. Eisnitz suggests that routine slaughterhouse work desensitizes humans to animals' suffering and thus promotes uncaring violence. A kill-line employee offered Midkiff this disturbing confession:

On my line, we kill four hundred an hour. If any of them puts up resistance, this is just viewed as a frustration. Some of the guys take it out on the animals. They hit 'em with crowbars even though these aren't supposed to be in the plant, they stick the stun gun in their eyes, or they don't even bother stunning them, just hang 'em on the chain squirming and struggling. (slaughterhouse worker, quoted in Midkiff, 2004, p. 130)

Gail Eisnitz collected similar confessions from countless workers at length and in graphic detail. Tommy Vladak's experience is not uncommon:

[W]hen you're standing there night after night digging that knife into these hogs, and they're fighting you, kicking at you, squealing, trying to bite you—doing whatever they can to try and get away from you—after a while you don't give a shit. . . . You become emotionally dead. And you get just as sadistic as the company itself. (Vladak, quoted in Eisnitz, 1997, pp. 74-75)

Even when intimacy involves life and death stakes for those interacting, it doesn't necessarily signal coinvestment in one another's well-being. Everyday closeness to animals, which is something slaughterhouse workers undoubtedly experience, does not deter even the most abusive and inhumane practices of animal management and slaughter.

These stories illustrate several things. First, in assessing the causes of violence, cruelty, and grossly unequal suffering, we cannot simply assign blame to the technological mediation of relationships between humans and animals in industrial societies. More advanced technology does lead to more efficient (not always more cruel) slaughter techniques, and it enables mass killings that would not otherwise be possible. But cruelty does not demand any given level of technological advancement, and technology is not always cruel.⁷ Second, intimacy between animals and those who work closely with them can take many forms, and it does not always lead to respect and appreciation. Sometimes, physical or emotional closeness fosters recognition of someone or something as a fellow sentient being worthy of ethical consideration, but it can also be a source of avid hostility or simple indifference to everyday violence and suffering.⁸ If our goal is to deter suffering and promote livestock and human welfare in meat production, more intimacy and less techno-mediation will not necessarily get us there.

The Conditions of Cruelty

Our brief investigation of cruelty in livestock production suggests that some intimacies can generate close, caring relationships among people and farm animals, while other intimacies are violent and cruel. Recognizing this shifts our core questions. We can no longer ask only whether intimacy deters cruelty. Instead we must ask: What conditions contribute to cruel intimacies, and how? What conditions contribute to caring intimacies, and how? Inspired by Karen Barad (2007), I argue that we cannot stay at the level of the individual encounter if we want to identify the conditions of intimacy that generate cruelty or caring. We have to trace the relational systems that foster different intimacies—that produce cruelty and empathy, caring and uncaring routines, content and suffering creatures. This Baradian approach demands a webbed analytic that, like intimacy itself, links the structural and the phenomenological, the ecological and the individual.

Let us begin with the violent wrestling between man and beast at the stockyards of Hallmark, at the slaughterhouse where Tommy Vladak worked, or at any of the industrial farms and factories where cruelty has been documented. Those workers engaged in cruel encounters with livestock animals appear, after they are caught, as the proverbial “bad apples.” Their employer often suspends or fires them, condemns their abusive practices, and argues that welfare abuses—far from being the norm—are not tolerated. Listening to worker testimonies about beating hogs with crowbars or watching disturbing footage of dragged and prodded cows lends the impression that the people at work here are very “bad apples”

indeed. Scenes of cruelty in meat production—especially those featuring sick or downed animals—are often illustrations of one-on-one domination, where a comparatively powerful worker acts with more than the requisite cruelty to subdue and torture a terrified animal. These are intensely personal encounters, and they are encounters that can seem, to use Vladak's term, plainly sadistic (Vladak, quoted in Eisnitz, 1997, pp. 74-75). The workers, it would appear, go above and beyond protocol when it comes to neglect and harm. It is easy to watch abuse videos and to believe the problem lies, quite simply, with the abusers.

But the human sadism that is rendered visible in these intimate encounters does not *explain* cruelty; it merely describes it. What if the visible psychosocial dynamic of the cruel encounter—namely, the worker's sadism—must itself be explained? The slaughterhouse workers and feedlot attendants who hide crow-bars and other makeshift weapons at their workstations are not, after all, spontaneously and inexplicably sadistic. They are themselves subject to brutal working conditions and high-speed disassembly lines; they experience suffering that sometimes rivals that of their victims. If some of these workers take sadistic pleasure in hurting animals, it may have a lot to do with *how* they themselves are hurt, *who* they perceive as hurting them, and *where* their power to react lies and does not lie.

Imagine working on an assembly line where the "product" on the conveyor belt is not only trying its hardest to get off the belt, but also fighting back and capable of doing real damage—"kicking at you, squealing, trying to bite you" (Vladak, quoted in Eisnitz, 1997, pp. 74-75). The threat is not imagined. As worker disability and injury rates demonstrate, handling livestock on the brink of slaughter is dangerous work. It is not surprising that workers come to resent the combative animals who make their jobs more difficult. When an animal's behavior is potentially harmful to someone, he or she is not likely to be kind or caring toward that animal.

Kill-line workers, for the most part, do not have many employment options. Large meat production companies target an economically and socially vulnerable workforce, seeking those who are uneducated, unskilled, and new to the community—especially non-English-speaking immigrants who have the most difficult time tapping into community services and local support networks, or, in poultry, unskilled African-American women with few job prospects (Grey, 1995; Griffith, 1995a; Griffith, 1995b; Hackenberg & Kukulka, 1995; Horowitz, 2004; Stull & Broadway, 2004). Slaughterhouse work pays very little compared to other manufacturing jobs, and it is not uncommon for the family of a full-time worker to live below the poverty line. Job loss poses a grave danger for this class of workers, making compliance with the company's

unrealistic speed and productivity rules non-negotiable. The company cares, above all, about the quantity of meat produced at the end of the line and the speed with which it arrives there. This means assembly-line-style production, rapid line speeds, and unskilled, poorly trained, disposable workers.

As workers adjust to the speed and scale of slaughter operations, they do so as a single element in a well-oiled disassembly machine. Typically, each worker has one and only one job. If she is the person who makes the cuts that start the skinning process, then that is all she is or does for eight hours a day. If a conscious animal comes her way, what does she do? She makes the cut that she has been trained to make; the show must go on *and fast*. Because this is an assembly line, there is no opportunity to respond differently to any slightly different scenario. Individual workers do not have the authority to halt the line because an animal happens to be conscious and suffering, and most workers lack the cross-training to be able to troubleshoot in such scenarios anyway. In the high-stress situation of factory production, all their attention must be on their own safety and productivity. To consider anything more can be a liability or a catastrophe in a setting where debilitating injuries are not uncommon and rates of cumulative trauma disorders are exorbitant (Stull & Broadway, 2004; Gouveia & Stull, 1995; Griffith, Broadway, & Stull, 1995; Hall, 1995; Stull & Broadway, 1995).⁹

Consider the experience of John Savage [pseudonym], a 32-year-old knocker employed by a major beef-packing company. Stull and Broadway listened to Savage's testimony at a worker's comp hearing:

I was knocking—killing cows. They run cattle through like a revolving chute, a restrainer, and the animals weren't being cleaned and the [stun] gun kept misfiring, so it bounced off most of the time. Instead of knocking them once, you had to knock them two or three times. It kicked my right arm back into the cow's head. . . . My back hurt real bad. (Stull & Broadway, 1995, pp. 74-75)

Unsafe working conditions and a mandate to keep the line moving (or else) left Savage disabled and in dire financial straits. While his own pain is evident in his account, what is missing—for obvious reasons—is the suffering of the animal who doesn't die on the first knock or, God forbid, the animal who makes it to the skinning machinery after three unsuccessful knocks (something that happens all too often, if Gail Eisnitz's informants are to be trusted). There is real suffering here for both Savage and the cows. Savage, however, is not in a position to care about the cows' suffering, nor does he have the power to do anything about it. Those with the authority to change cattle-handling practices are not those who are directly and physically intimate with the cattle.

And those who are physically intimate with the cattle—an intimacy grounded in visceral violence—cannot risk changing things. Their fate and the fate of the cattle are inextricably intertwined, but their interests are generally at odds. In this zero-sum game of speed and survival, to care for cattle is often to fail in caring for the well-being of oneself, one's coworkers, and one's family. Here, intimacy can only mean killing without caring.

What strikes me above all about these working conditions is the vulnerability of the slaughterhouse employees. In the intimate encounters of meat production, human workers are *at risk* in substantive ways. Their vulnerabilities, which are not often visible in the undercover footage shot by animal rights advocates, are nonetheless manifold; they are physical, financial, and emotional. The life-and-death stakes for both the humans and the animals engaged in meat production place these encounters in stark contrast to the images of caring intimacy described above. Comfort and security are not possible under conditions of mutual exposure that are so deep and so potentially painful. There can be no trust, no expectation of care when neither party is in a position to provide it. Under these conditions, caring about animal welfare is hardly an option, no matter how intimate workers and animals are.

Linking Intimacy to Risk

In the commercial production of food animals, intimacy, vulnerability, and risk are closely linked (Clark, 2007; Horowitz, 2006). Livestock animals are rendered exceptionally vulnerable by the sadistic behavior of slaughterhouse workers and feedlot attendants—behavior that is undoubtedly linked to the workers' own vulnerability in the stockyard or on the slaughter line. Dangerous working conditions, paired with repetitive and frustrating labor, can cause even the well-intentioned worker to “get just as sadistic as the company itself” in his treatment of livestock animals (Vladak, quoted in Eisnitz, 1997, pp. 74-75). These working conditions are, in turn, related to profit-oriented corporate policies, including: the targeting of an economically and socially vulnerable workforce, the failure to train and care for workers adequately, and the imposition of unreasonable speed and productivity expectations (Horowitz, 2004; Stull & Broadway, 2004; Grey, 1995; Griffith, 1995a, 1995b; Hackenberg & Kukulka, 1995). These practices force the workers in meat-production companies—and, subsequently, the livestock animals—to bear a disproportionate amount of risk in the meat-production process (Stull & Broadway, 2004; Gouveia & Stull, 1995; Griffith, Broadway, & Stull, 1995; Hall, 1995; Stull & Broadway, 1995).

Accounting for any cruel encounter in meat production thus forces us to look beyond the encounter itself. As we trace the links among intimacy, vulnerability, and cruelty in meat production, we cannot stop at the cruel, risk-laden meeting of human worker and doomed beast in the stockyard or on the slaughter line. We must confront larger questions about the distribution of risk in the livestock and meat industries. Who else—employers? shareholders? consumers?—is *implicated but invisible* in the cruel encounter between worker and food animal? How do these invisible players experience risk or vulnerability, what does it mean for them, and how might they be shielded from it? How is their vulnerability, or lack thereof, tied to the excessive vulnerability of human workers and livestock animals? Understanding how risk shapes intimacy and cruelty in industrial livestock production demands, first and foremost, an evaluation of how the corporate owners and managers of meat production companies distribute and outsource risk.

While the corporate policies that contribute to cruelty are most apparent at industrial slaughterhouses, similar constraints are operative at farms, ranches, and feedlots: livestock farmers and ranchers “feel misunderstood, wrongly accused and unacknowledged. . . . [But] they admit that they are under pressure of producing as cheaply and efficiently as possible,” resulting in poor livestock and human welfare standards (Miele & Bock, 2007, p. 4). Meat production is a rough business with low profit margins and the potential for catastrophic losses, so large corporations work to transfer financial risk to vulnerable small farmers and ranchers (Stull & Broadway, 1995, p. 72). Corporations do so by requiring small contractors to make their own capital investments (taking out large loans to build, say, chicken housing facilities) and by constructing compensation systems that leave local farmers in competition with each other for low returns. Contracts are always worded so the company need not pay farmers or ranchers if they don’t or can’t deliver on schedule (e.g., if a virus wipes out an entire coop) (Stull & Broadway, 2004). For the ranchers and farmers who have stayed in business by contracting with large production companies, financial hardship and even poverty have become everyday risks (Midkiff, 2004; Broadway, 1995). In outsourcing risk to smaller farmers, major meat production companies force them to consider economies of scale, to adopt minimal care practices, and to utilize efficient intensive-confinement systems. The existing risk-sharing arrangement thus works to prevent the development of *caring* intimacy between even small-scale farmers and their livestock.

Many others share in the risk that corporate producers have shed. When “big meat” moves into a community, local government and residents are traumatized by rapid demographic shifts, new pressures on core community

service providers, and new public health and safety concerns (Gouveia & Stull, 1995; Grey, 1995). Inadequate environmental regulations (and loopholes that protect food producers) permit the major players in meat production to externalize the environmental costs of their operations, distributing costs to the people, animals, and broader ecosystems that suffer the effects of air and water pollution (Midkiff, 2004). For those living in communities downwind or downstream of feedlots and slaughterhouses, this pollution can be financially devastating and can harm their health and quality of life (Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production, 2008; Midkiff, 2004).

Even meat- and dairy-consuming humans take on some of the risks associated with meat production. Risks to consumers most often take the form of susceptibility to microbial diseases like salmonella and the deadly *Escherichia coli* 0157 (Thompson, 2001). As Michael Pollan (2002) writes, “We inhabit the same microbial ecosystem as the animals we eat, and whatever happens to [them] also happens to us”—a fact effectively illustrated by the 2009 swine flu outbreak. Rates of serious infection and death among human meat-eaters are relatively low at present, but human susceptibility to livestock microbes *and* microbial resistance to existing treatments are on the rise (Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production, 2008). Michael Pollan, writing of the steer he purchased in the course of his research, worried that:

The unnaturally rich diet of corn that has compromised [his] health is fattening his flesh in a way that in turn may compromise the health of the humans who will eat him. The antibiotics he’s consuming with his corn were at that very moment selecting, in his gut and wherever else in the environment they wind up, for bacteria that could someday infect us and resist the drugs we depend on. (Pollan, 2002)

Ironically, the “risk management” strategies of industrial capitalism—especially the practice of lacing livestock feed with nontherapeutic antibiotics—amplify long-term risks to public health.

Of course, acknowledging shared vulnerability to dangerous microbes does not mean that human and nonhuman participants in the meat-production system bear equal or similar risks.¹⁰ Because the vast majority of humans in industrial societies (industry employees and neighbors excepted) are intimate with meat but not with living and dying animals, we are by no means threatened in our relationships with livestock in the same way or to the same extent that they are vulnerable in their relationships with us. The *domination* that pervades human-livestock relations should not be ignored in pointing out the health risks of meat-eating or the dangers of antibiotic-resistant microbes (Clark, 2007). There are regular (though, many would argue, inadequate) efforts on the part of corporations and regulators to reduce the risk of infec-

tion for meat-eating consumers, but the “animals are assessed purely [or almost purely] for their ability to convert food into flesh, or ‘saleable products’” (Harrison, quoted in Stricklin & Swanson, 1993, p. 72). If we are advocating greater interspecies intimacy and better care practices, we must pay attention not only to differential distributions of risk, but also to varied manifestations of risk, and to the structural arrangements that produce and maintain today’s risk-sharing systems.

The narrow but helpful framing of risk distribution can thus help us analyze some of the factors that produce cruel intimacies and caring intimacies in livestock production (cf. Giddens, 1991). Here, considering risk and how it is distributed is shorthand for considering the wider consequences of meat production, including *who* benefits, *who* suffers, and *how*, within the existing system (Haraway, 2008). To borrow Donna Haraway’s (2008) terminology, we can ask how suffering is and isn’t shared and how those arrangements contribute to caring or cruelty in the intimate encounter. Such an analysis reveals that many human and nonhuman ecologies are linked into the risk-distribution system of meat production—a system that must be restructured if livestock-management reforms are to promote both better animal welfare and greater social and environmental justice.

When it comes to risk, the policy of corporate meat and dairy producers is the policy of most businesses in a capitalist economy: minimization and externalization. In the existing socioeconomic climate of North America, large and powerful meat-production companies have implemented this policy with impressive efficacy. As I have tried to illustrate, their ability to shield themselves from risk is directly related to the increased vulnerability of other participants in the meat-production process including livestock, small farmers, contractors, neighbors, consumers, and various people and creatures dependent on the air and water near large livestock-production operations. Risk falls with the greatest weight on food animals themselves and on the workers who are most intimate with them—those whose ecological interrelationships with livestock are closest and most apparent.

Redistributing risk when unbridled capitalism is the law of the land is easier said than done. Nonetheless, analyzing how risks are currently distributed reveals possibilities for meaningful reform even in the context of a resistant system. Paul Thompson, a philosopher of animal ethics, suggests that “there may be a proper role for government regulation that will lead to an internalization of [currently externalized] costs and their eventual reflection in the prices paid for animal products” (Thompson, 2001, p. 200). It may, for example, be possible to implement creative legislation or tax reform that requires the producers of animal products to “internalize costs born by animals” and by workers and local communities (Thompson, 2001, p. 200). Other regula-

tory mechanisms could make cruelty not only expensive but perhaps also criminal for those setting and enforcing company protocols that violate welfare standards. Reforms such as these could promote more equitable sharing of risk and induce better care protocols, even if they leave existing incentive structures and risk-averse logics largely intact.

With regard to slaughtering operations, extensive research has been conducted to specify the protocols required to protect animal welfare (Farm Animal Welfare Council, 2003; Grandin, 2000c), worker welfare (Bjerklie, 1995; Hall, 1995), and community welfare (Stull & Broadway, 2004). Risk levels for animals and human workers in slaughterhouses will remain unacceptably high until productivity standards are lowered, factory line speeds are slowed to safe levels, and line tasks are diversified (Hall, 1995; Stull & Broadway, 1995). With regard to livestock production, fairer risk distribution will require even more extensive reforms based on the specific needs of the species involved. Good policy recommendations will always involve adequate space, good nutrition, opportunities for stimulation, veterinary care, and housing facilities designed with species-specific needs in mind. Well-researched reform proposals nearly all point to the long-term need for slower and lower-density meat and dairy production (Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production, 2008). If enacted, such restructuring will result in more expensive food products and will thus pass some costs to the poor and working-class consumers who already bear a disproportionate share of socioeconomic risk. These, however, are the real costs of consuming animal products; like other costs, they should not be ignored but distributed more justly.

This intervention, I argue, has everything to do with both intimacy and cruelty, even if it appears to be an abstract, structural prescription. To be attentive to risk-sharing systems and distributions of suffering is to think about intimacy in terms more broad than we may be accustomed to. It is to take seriously the notion that *who* is involved and implicated in an intimate relationship transcends the individuals engaged, face-to-face, in a close encounter (cf. Barad, 2007). Suffering and vulnerability materialize in many forms along the lines of relationality that constitute the intimate encounters of meat production, and all these lines deserve our sustained consideration. Together, they invite a more expansive consideration of cruelty and caring—a different ethic of concern that both relies on and reconceptualizes the intimate.

Finding Justice across Intimate Encounters

Intimate encounters in meat production are part of complex inter- and intra-active phenomena (cf. Barad, 2007). They involve not only individual animals and industry workers, but also a larger web of socioeconomic, cultural, his-

torical, and environmental conditions that tie livestock animals and industry workers to local communities and ecosystems, and to capitalists and consumers far from feedlots and slaughterhouses. Understanding animal-human encounters in meat production entails close attention to encounters between people and animals as they exist within, and are structured by, larger systems and logics. The politics and economics of animal welfare are always, in some sense, a politics and economics of worker welfare, corporate systems, and consumption-based lifestyles. To challenge effectively the exploitation and cruelty of livestock raising and slaughter, we must analyze the conditions under which intimacy contributes to more caring and humane interspecies relationships and how this is deterred within the market-based system of industrialized meat production. Intimacy, after all, means little when analyzed outside the contextual factors that give it form, significance, and materiality.

This is true not only in livestock production, but in many zones of fraught relations and tangled fates. This paper has sketched how we might begin to understand and map the diverse risks that populate intimate relationships. Such a mapping endeavor always begins with, but extends beyond, the caring or cruel encounter. Implicit in that encounter is an array of material constraints and structured practices that shape the perceptions, beliefs, actions, and identities of those enmeshed beings who must negotiate with one another. Understanding and attempting to map empirically these diffuse structural and personal forces is one means to get a cognitive handle on the powerful but less obvious dynamics that constitute both cruel and caring encounters. Placing an analysis of risks and vulnerabilities at the center of this mapping endeavor is one way to consider what justice means at the level of the encounter. It is a way to strive toward greater accountability to the many players who, whether close up or far away, are intimately engaged across the boundaries of self, space, and species.

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Notes

1. The word *intimacy* is most often used to characterize the relationships of romantically linked (and implicitly heterosexual) "couples" (Wynne & Wynne, 1986) and is sometimes used as a synonym (or polite euphemism) for sexual relations.

2. As Donna Haraway is right to point out, humans are “intimate” with livestock even in contemporary industrial societies (personal communication, March 12, 2008); for most of us, however, this intimacy extends only to processed animal parts, not to animals as they live and die. Throughout this paper, when I refer to the possible impact of greater intimacy in interspecies relationships, I am referring to a close interrelationship with animals as they live and/or die. The forms this might take are unfixed.

3. The Pew Charitable Trust/ Johns Hopkins team that compiled a recent report on factory farming practices alleges the existence of an “agro-industrial complex—an alliance of agricultural commodity groups, scientists at academic institutions who are paid by the industry, and their friends on Capitol Hill” (Robert P. Martin in the Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production, 2008, p. viii).

4. The quotations in this passage of Cronon’s book are from p. 333 of James Parton’s article “Chicago” (1867).

5. John Knight’s edited collection *Natural Enemies: People-Wildlife Conflicts in Anthropological Perspective* (2000b) is replete with examples of this phenomenon. In parts of Sierra Leone there is widespread animosity toward chimpanzees detached from any industrial impetus (Richards, 2000). While far-away conservationists who have little intimate experience with Sierra Leone’s chimps would like to protect them, locals who know chimps well think that slaughter is a better policy. Chimps, after all, tend to be up to no good—mugging children if they dare to trek through the forest carrying food between villages, and allegedly attacking defenseless human babies at forest’s edge (Richards, 2000, p. 80). The Sierra Leoneans’ proximity to chimps and the complex interspecies history in this locale have not created an Edenic coexistence. They have created substantial hostility and left at least one species under threat. Moving to the rainforests of Sumatra, Simon Rye (2000) tells a similar story concerning Javanese transmigrants. Forced to farm under difficult conditions and facing regular crop destruction at the hands (or tusks) of wild pigs, the transmigrant farmers would like nothing more than to exterminate the four-footed pests who make their difficult lives in an unfamiliar territory even more difficult. The more the farmers’ lives are intertwined with the pigs’ lives, the greater the animosity and desire for extermination. John Knight (2000a) discusses an equally contentious interspecies dynamic between villagers in the rural mountainous regions of Japan and the bears who terrorize their gardens. Villagers have led hunting parties into the forests to slaughter as many bears as they are able to track down. As in Sierra Leone and Sumatra, it is close proximity to—and sometimes intimate relationships with—these “problem” animals that breed hostility and conflict.

6. Although I ultimately felt that the *shehitah* example was too important to my argument to leave it out, I hesitated to use it for a few reasons. First, animal welfare advocates and government regulators in Europe and the United States have long used *shehitah* as an example of inhumane slaughter while ignoring or justifying mainstream methods of slaughter that are performed on a larger scale and are often equally or more inhumane (Burt, 2006). Second, as Jonathan Burt has documented, there is a history of anti-Semitism in some European animal welfare discourse. To use *shehitah* as an example of cruel animal slaughtering practices while ignoring the cruelty of other, more dominant forms of animal management and slaughter is inexcusable.

7. Temple Grandin, for instance, has helped factory-style slaughterhouses to implement design changes that reduce the physical and psychological trauma to cattle and other meat animals. She has demonstrated how the proper use of captive bolt guns and other appropriately-calibered weapons can make animal deaths fast and painless, even as this enables the rapid killing of greater numbers of animals and helps justify the continuation of factory farming techniques (Grandin, 1989; 1994; 2000b; 2000c). Again, technology exists in a complex relationship to animal welfare—a relationship mediated by diverse material structures and logics.

8. This is not to argue that the distance and emotional detachment between consumers in advanced industrial societies and the animals they consume is not a significant factor in the scope and degree of inhumane treatment of animals. Distance does, as Cronon has suggested, help to

hide ecological interrelationships and obscure the destruction and suffering caused by industrial meat-production systems. Evidence suggests that life and death might be better for creatures like fish, chicken, pigs, and cows if consumers were made to confront the beings they eat before they arrive dead on a plate or plastic-wrapped in a supermarket. I am only arguing that closeness between people and other animals can also be destructive and cruel.

9. Hall uncovered an internal Perdue memo acknowledging that “about 60 percent of the work force visit the nurse every morning for Advils, Vitamin-6 treatment, and hand wraps” (Hall, 1995, p. 217).

10. Accounting for risk entails attention to its qualitative as well as its quantitative dimensions: Does risk mean a mild case of indigestion or does it mean ending up on the dinner plate? Does it mean losing your lunch or losing your head?

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