

SHARED OPPRESSION: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE  
EXPLOITATION OF NONHUMAN ANIMALS AND  
WORKERS IN SLAUGHTERHOUSES

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## DEDICATION

To my partner, Joey Tuminello, mother, Lori Guillory, and best friends and siblings, Britney Speyrer and Spencer Venable. Thank you for your unrelenting encouragement, support, and love, which has undoubtedly given me the strength to follow my dreams.

A special thanks to my dear friend and mentor, Dr. David Greenway, who always pushed me to realize my potential. You are forever in my heart.

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## ABSTRACT

JENNIFER VENABLE

### SHARED OPPRESSION: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE EXPLOITATION OF NONHUMAN ANIMALS AND WORKERS IN SLAUGHTERHOUSES

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Although many scholars address the interconnected nature of oppressions, most scholarship concerning animal welfare and human rights issues neglects the connections between the shared suffering of nonhuman animals and employees in slaughterhouses. In this thesis, I demonstrate and theorize about their shared oppression while presenting evidence for the unjust treatment and abuse of both nonhuman animals “produced” for our food and slaughterhouse employees. Utilizing Iris M. Young’s articulation of the five faces of oppression, extending Carol J. Adams’ concept of the absent referent, and considering the consequences of upholding a patriarchal, dualistic mentality, my thesis contributes to ongoing conversations about animal welfare and human rights by suggesting that we must see the exploitation of both nonhuman animals and employees as interconnected within the industrial agricultural system. Addressing these issues separately only alleviates the symptoms that the industrial agricultural system engenders, rather tackling the root causes of their oppression. By considering animal welfare and human rights issues independent from one another, we can only attempt to alleviate some of their suffering rather than advocate for their liberation. Instead of examining animal welfare and human rights issues in isolation from one another, I propose a more holistic

and collective approach towards achieving the shared liberation of these groups by addressing their interlocking oppressions.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

*Who say they don't have no pain? Just 'cause she don't cry?  
'Cause she can't say it, they think it ain't there? If they looks in her eyes and see them  
eyeballs lolling back, see the sorrowful look, they'd know.*

*-Toni Morrison*

What images come to mind when we bite into a chicken-nugget or a steak? What thoughts or reflections come to mind? Do we associate this food with nourishment and health? What bodies are rendered silent in our perceptions of a hamburger? Do we ponder the lives and deaths which have gone into the making of a beef patty? In theorizing about the connections between feminist theory and the protection of nonhuman animals, scholars such as Carol J. Adams have argued that an analysis of “speciesism” is essential for feminist thought and activism.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, human rights issues have been advanced on behalf of the human lives that are also impacted by the animal agricultural system within the United States. However, the existing research on employees and nonhuman animals within the animal agricultural system has generally failed to examine the shared nature of these exploited bodies within the industrial agricultural system.

The two questions undergirding the research I conduct are the following: 1) How may nonhuman animals and workers in animal agriculture be affected simultaneously by

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<sup>1</sup> In his 1975 book, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals*, Peter Singer borrows the term “speciesism” from psychologist Richard D. Ryder who coined the term in 1970 (25). In his book, Singer defines speciesism as “a prejudice or attitude of bias toward the interests of members of other species” (7).

this system? 2) How may these two forms of exploitation be related to each other? My research contributes to ongoing conversations about animal welfare and human rights by suggesting that we must look at the exploitation of both the nonhuman animals and employees as connected when addressing the oppressions engendered by the industrial agricultural system.

For my literature review (see below in this chapter), I separate the discussions regarding the connections between the exploitation of human and nonhuman animals into three sections. First, I discuss past and contemporary scholarship on the connections between feminist theory and animal welfare. Next, I address theories that examine the parallels between enslaved nonhuman animals in animal agriculture and human slavery. Lastly, I focus on Jocelyne Porcher's scholarship on the "shared suffering" between these exploited bodies ("The Relationship" 3). In my methods section, I explain how my thesis expands on a number of theories in an effort to establish the shared oppression between nonhuman animals and employees within animal agriculture.

### **Background Information**

Animal agriculture refers to methods of food production that involve the use of nonhuman animals. According to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), factory farms in the U.S. are large industrial systems that "produce" nonhuman animals for food ("A Closer Look"). Because 99.9% of farmed animals in the United States are raised for food in factory farms, this is the population of nonhuman animals and workers I focus on (Foer 109).

According to the United States Department of Agriculture, in 2013, over 100 million hogs and 2 million sheep and lambs were slaughtered for food in the United States (USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service). Over 30 million cattle and calves were also killed in the same year. Additionally, over 8 billion nonhuman animals, which fall under the category of poultry, were raised and killed for food. From this category, excluding broilers,<sup>2</sup> over 100 million chickens were counted as “lost.” On the USDA website “lost” chickens include “rendered, died, destroyed, composted, or disappeared for any reason except sold during 12-month period” (USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service). The individuals counted for this census are chickens, turkeys, and ducks. Individuals who are also categorized as poultry but who are not counted within these statistics include geese, guineas, ostriches, emus, rheas, and squab. In the year 2013, the total of chickens “produced” to lay eggs was over 300 million (USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service). The USDA does not account for how many individual “fish, crustaceans, rabbits, and other farmed animals” are slaughtered for consumption (“Farm Animal Statistics”). Although sea animals are not accounted for by number of individuals, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations reports that the weight of marine animals used for human consumption was over 5 million tons in the year of 2013 (FAO of the United Nations).

Nonhuman animals raised in factory farms spend their lives in stressful, confined, and unsanitary living conditions and are also subject to unjust and inhumane treatment. Many of these nonhuman animals die from the harsh conditions they face in their living

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<sup>2</sup> Broilers are defined as birds raised for meat rather than for laying eggs (Foer 48).

space as well as during the transportation process from farm to slaughterhouse. The basic process which transforms live nonhuman animals into body parts for consumption is as follows: the animal is slaughtered, decapitated, eviscerated, and chilled for a number of hours. After the body chilled, it is then cut into smaller pieces. The general speed of slaughtering is about “four hundred head of beef per hour, one thousand hogs per hour, [and] thousands of broilers per hour” (Compa 33). Often, the production line moves so fast that the nonhuman animals do not have enough time to die before being dismembered.

Broiler and laying chickens live most of their lives in cramped sheds or in cages (along with 3-5 other birds) with thirty-thousand to fifty-thousand other birds (Foer 129). They each have about an 8x10 foot area for living space (Foer 130). Because of the large number of chickens that are required to be handled and “processed” in an allotted timeframe, their wings and legs are often broken in the process. Additionally, a high number of chickens are still conscious when they are put into the scalding tank (Foer 130). Bigger animals such as steers (cows raised for their flesh) and pigs are also treated roughly or beaten when they do not adhere to commands to move quickly. They also live most of their short lives in confinement and are subject to stressful lives and deaths. For instance, the steel bolt which is used to render cows and pigs unconscious often fails.

When this occurs, their throats are cut and they are often electrocuted and cut into pieces while still conscious (Pachirat 56-57).<sup>3</sup>

Next, I provide documented information about the employees that work within animal agriculture. This industry employs an estimated 500,000 workers annually in the United States (“Slaughterhouse Workers”). (6). According to the United States Government Accountability Office’s (GAO) Report to the Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, U.S. Senate, in 2003, 43% of workers tended to be under the age of thirty-five, 65% were males, and 42% were of Hispanic ethnicity (GAO 3). The data also estimated that approximately 26-38% of all meat and poultry workers were noncitizen immigrants (“Slaughterhouse Workers;” GAO 3). Additionally, in 2014, these workers averaged about a \$26,010 annual income and worked in demanding and often times dangerous conditions (OSHA). Data from the Survey of Occupational Injuries and Illness conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that in 2014 the number of illnesses and injuries was about 3.2 per every 100 workers (3). This rate shows a dramatic decrease of reported non-fatal injuries from previous years. However, as I discuss in chapter three of my thesis, many scholars and slaughterhouse employees contend that the number of *reported* accidents remains in stark contrast with the actual rate of injury and illness.

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<sup>3</sup> For further details on the lives and deaths of factory-farmed nonhuman animals, please see the following sources: *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight* by Timothy Pachirat; *Eating Animals* by Jonathan Safran Foer; *Animal Liberation* by Peter Singer; *Slaughterhouse: The Shocking Story of Greed, Neglect, and Inhumane Treatment Inside the U.S. Meat Industry* by Gail A. Eisnitz; and *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair.

Workers employed in meat “processing” factories must endure extreme physical demands, oftentimes in freezing temperatures. Their jobs also require them to perform repetitive tasks thousands of times a day (GAO 3). They work with and around hazardous equipment along with sharp tools used for dismembering nonhuman animal bodies. They perform their particular tasks using knives or cutting equipment made for disassembling and removing portions of the nonhuman animal remains. Many injuries occur in this occupation because of the high speed of the production line (3). Although mechanical machines are used to dismember nonhuman animals, many slaughtering procedures are still done by hand. For instance, using mechanical devices, slaughterhouse workers are still needed to kill, eviscerate, and dismember nonhuman animals (GAO 8). According to the Human Rights Watch, many employees suffer from injuries because of the working conditions in meat and poultry plants. They reported “scars, swellings, rashes, amputations, blindness, or other afflictions” (Compa 30). Occupational Safety and Health Administration’s (OSHA) report of some of the injuries and deaths that occurred in a Nebraska meatpacking industry between 1999 to 2003 include the following:

Cleaner killed when hog-splitting saw is activated. Cleaner dies when he is pulled into a conveyer and crushed. Cleaner loses legs when a worker activates the grinder in which he is standing. Cleaner loses hand when he reaches under a boning table to hose meat from chain. Hand crushed in rollers when worker tries to catch a scrubbing pad that he dropped. (Compa 30)

Unreported consequences also include “repetitive stress injuries” from performing the same task numerous times as well as cases of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (“Slaughterhouse Workers”). Additionally, many injuries go unreported because many undocumented workers fear losing their jobs or being deported (“Slaughterhouse Workers”).

### **Literature Review**

#### ***The Relationship Between the Exploitation of Women and Nonhuman Animals***

##### **The “Othering” of Beings**

In *The Second Sex*, feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir theorizes about the woman as the “Other.” She posits that because man is perceived as pure humanity, women are defined in relation to him (26). Man then becomes a subject whereas woman becomes an object to be defined or acted upon. Drawing from Aristotle, de Beauvoir historicizes this claim. Given that women have been perceived as “incomplete men” based on their lack of male qualities, they are denied the status that grants one full humanity (25). Femaleness then is seen as devoid of significance outside of the female relationship to the male (26). Beauvoir maintains that the Other is created by rejecting others whom we perceive as different from ourselves: “No group ever defines itself as One without immediately setting up the Other opposite itself” (26). This process of Othering creates distinct value-laden boundaries, where members of a given group use difference to justify the oppression of those who are Othered. Although de Beauvoir does not discuss how Othering applies to our thinking about and treatment of nonhuman

animals, I contend that similar arbitrary boundaries used to Other women are ultimately used to dominate nonhuman animals.

Many feminist scholars have illuminated the connections between feminist theory and the protection of nonhuman animals. According to these views, the fight against oppression does not end at the species border. Oppression and exploitation transpire by the Othering of beings whereby the act of Othering is grounded by perceived differences. As Adams discusses, women become indistinguishable from nonhuman animals through the predominantly western framework of objectification, whereas men are perceived as the “dominant subject” (*Neither Man Nor Beast* 39). As she argues, “violence against animals cannot be understood without a feminist analysis, because this violence is one aspect of patriarchal culture—arising within and receiving legitimation from the way male sexual identity is constituted as dominance” (“Woman-Battering and Harm to Animals” 80). Women and nonhuman animals are impacted materially by their status as “objects.” Thus, the violence against women and nonhuman animals emerges from the patriarchal structure of our society.

In scholarly literature at the intersection of feminist thought and animal ethics, the focus is primarily on the relationship between the simultaneous exploitation of nonhuman animals and women. Similarly, employees who are also exploited by the same system of domination within the animal agricultural system are often negatively impacted regarding their physical, psychological, and social well-being. They are also commonly regarded as insensitive, sadistic, and as contributors to the torture of animals “produced” for food



because of what their job tasks involve.<sup>4</sup> However, as research shows, they are also reduced to “objects” and often experience violent conditions within their work environments. Thus, in my thesis I analyze the material effects of the animal agricultural system on both nonhuman animals and employees. Both nonhuman animals and workers are negatively impacted by alterity through the “production” process and the consumption of meat.

Ecofeminist philosopher, Karen Warren, refers to the interlocking oppressive framework that impacts nonhuman animals and women (along with other minority peoples) as the “logic of domination” (128). This logic relies on a system of values that is utilized to justify the subjugation of beings who lack particular characteristics possessed by the dominant group (128). Although many ecofeminist theorists such as Warren have briefly discussed the oppressive systems that affect minority groups, their work generally has not developed fully enough to illuminate how the structure of alterity has serious ramifications for people of colors. Later, I discuss how labor-intensive, low-pay, and arguably demoralizing work is relegated mostly to people of colors. Because existing scholarship has not theorized extensively about the Othering of minority groups in this context, my thesis provides an in-depth analysis of how employees in animal agriculture are stigmatized directly because of their jobs, and indirectly because of their racialized

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<sup>4</sup> Examples of the stigmatization of the jobs of slaughterhouse are the countless undercover videos by animal advocacy organizations *PETA*, *Mercy for Animals*, *The Humane Society*, and *Compassion Over Killing*, which show many of the employees abusing nonhuman animals. Although this kind of coverage fairs negatively on the company, it also perpetuates a negative perspective about the lack of empathy by employees (Dillard 9).

bodies. I also argue that by representing employees as violent, they are perceived as vastly different from the standard “moral” person.<sup>5</sup>

Some theorists have granted moral consideration to nonhuman animals who exhibit human-like qualities. For instance, in *The Case for Animal Rights*, animal rights scholar, Tom Regan, defines a “subject-of-life” (and thus one who should be morally relevant) as an individual who has “beliefs and desires; perception, memory, and a sense of the future; including their own future; [and] an emotional life together with feelings of pleasure and pain (243). Although Regan does not argue that moral considerability relies on “human” characteristics, he does choose to grant moral standing to nonhuman animals who possess the characteristics that are usually associated with the human capacity. However, as mentioned above, strict binary distinctions become problematic not through the mere recognition of difference, but through the coupling of particular characteristics with a “strong moral hierarchy” (Calarco 417). In an effort to highlight the problematic nature of anthropomorphizing nonhuman animals in order to grant them moral considerability, philosopher Matthew Calarco posits that by centering the human as the standard by which the worth of others is measured, nonhuman animals are perceived as deficient in comparison (416-417). Calarco writes that “beings on one side of the binary (...whichever group of beings are considered properly human) are given relative and even absolute value over beings on the other side (namely, animals and the nonhuman)” (417).

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<sup>5</sup> Here, my intention is not to minimize the violent acts that are done to nonhuman animals in the slaughterhouse sector. However, although many employees do intentionally add to the suffering of these nonhuman animals, we should perceive them as the sole contributors of this additional violence (Dillard 6). Rather, we should analyze the conditions that engender this kind of pathology of indifference in slaughterhouses (Porcher, “Well-Being and Suffering” e67).

Warren refers to the anthropomorphizing of nonhuman animals as “arrogant perceptions” (137). She argues that anthropomorphizing nonhuman animals relies on a moral hierarchy where only beings who possess characteristics similar to humans are allowed ethical standing (137). Additionally, in measuring the value of nonhuman animals according to human standards, theorists fail to recognize the value of animalistic qualities. The centering of human traits as the standard for moral worth reiterates and perpetuates the lower status of nonhuman animals. According to American literature scholar, Colleen Gleeny Boggs, anthropocentrism assumes that humans are inherently special and different from all other animals (99). However, as Calarco argues, this moral hierarchy is contingent upon the idea that there is something intrinsically valuable about existing as a human (and thus possessing “human” characteristics). This line of reasoning not only devalues the individual lives of nonhuman animals, but also acts to relegate minority peoples (or any human compared to animals) to an inferior status. Although nonhuman animals are perceived to lack particular “human” characteristics, Calarco posits that this common assumption does not provide sufficient support for the claim that the absence of these qualities entails the denial of ethical worth and consideration (417).

As the above examples demonstrate, existing scholarship in ecofeminism and sociology has focused on critiquing the Othering of women, non-human animals, and people of colors. However, as briefly mentioned, because racialized peoples are often compared to nonhuman animals, they are relegated to the same inferior status as nonhuman animals. To understand these issues, we must recognize the interlocking relationship of oppressive frameworks. The existing scholarship has fallen short in doing

a sufficient analysis of this relationship. It has also failed to recognize that the Othering of beings takes place on racialized bodies because they are a minority in this society and also affects them in job and economic opportunities. Unsurprisingly and unfortunately, minority peoples disproportionately populate the animal agriculture workforce.

### Theorizing About the Absent Referent

As mentioned in a number of her scholarly works, vegan-feminist scholar, Carol J. Adams has demonstrated the connections between the exploitation of human and nonhuman bodies as well as the patriarchal implication of these phenomena. Adams discusses the concept of the “absent referent” as applied to both nonhuman animals and women when they are consumed or perceived as mere objects: “Animals in name and body are made absent *as animals* for meat to exist” (*The Sexual Politics of Meat* 66). Nonhuman animals become absent referents through language that disguises animal flesh for “meat.” According to Adams, the purpose of objectification is to consume the perceived object (the flesh of a nonhuman animal or a woman’s agency) (73). Thus, stripping a being of her individuality and agency contributes to the objectification, consumption, and erasure of her existence and being.

A similar connection between humans and nonhuman animals is made by ecofeminist theorist, Val Plumwood, in her unnerving recollection of becoming prey for a crocodile. Her shocking encounter allows her to reflect on the lack of distinction between her and other vulnerable and edible beings (142-143). After her escape from becoming *food* for a crocodile, she recognizes her connection and relationship with nature. Just as she was reduced from a complex individual to a piece of meat for consumption, factory

farmed animals are also reduced to “living meat” (144). She concludes her narrative by reflecting on the fact that any being can assert that they are also *more* than just food for another (144).

Adams also makes claims about absent referents that materially and conceptually link violence towards women with violence towards nonhuman animals. For instance, one connection that she makes is the comparison between the nonconsensual use of female and nonhuman animal bodies. Often, abuse against nonhuman animals function as a metaphor for violence against women (*The Sexual Politics of Meat* 72). For instance, a phrase commonly used by survivors of domestic abuse or sexual trauma is that they were treated like a “piece of meat” (72). Comparisons made between the treatment of nonhuman animals and violence against women produce a clear link between the abuses experienced by these groups. Adams also elaborates on the relationships between the exploitation of women and nonhuman animals. As “pieces of meat” are used as representative of female body parts, pieces of meat are literal fragmented body parts of nonhuman animals in animal agriculture (*The Sexual Politics of Meat* 72). Thus, the metaphor of women being “butchered” through acts of assault and other forms of violence not only relegates women to an unwanted “animal status” but also perpetuates the notion of complicity regarding violence towards nonhuman animals. In other words, by borrowing the metaphor of the death of nonhuman animals to describe human trauma, we once again deny nonhuman animals their individual status while maintaining a connection between the value of women and nonhuman animals.

Adams proposes that the structure of the absent referent and the Other are responsible for the violence perpetrated against both women and nonhuman animals (*The Sexual Politics of Meat* 73). In this vein, feminist philosopher, Lori Gruen, posits that consuming *meat* products and “feminized protein” (including dairy and eggs) is a reflection of our culture’s reduction of nonhuman animals and women into objects to be consumed and/or used (74). Although it is clear that Adams has investigated how the structure of the absent referent has functioned for nonhuman animals and women, this concept has not been applied to the workers within the animal agricultural system. In other words, analyzing how both nonhuman animals and employees in slaughterhouses become absent referents through our perceptions of them as well as through the act of meat-eating provides a holistic approach in making ethical food choices. Industrial animal agriculture engenders a system that is built on the exploitation of Others, whether it be nonhuman animals, slaughterhouse employees, the public’s health, or the environment. This thesis is an attempt to raise awareness about two of the confounding consequences of this industry. My analysis also suggests that the exploitation of employees and nonhuman animals are inseparable from one another. Thus, our food choices either reinforce or challenge our cultures complicity of the mass oppression of these aforementioned groups. Utilizing Adam’s concept of the absent referent assists in demonstrating their relationship.

### ***Exploited Bodies: Slavery and Speciesism***

The agonizing lives and deaths of billions of nonhuman animals in industrial agriculture have led some scholars to elaborate on the controversial topic of the

relationship between their treatment and the abuse of enslaved black people. In her book, *The Dreaded Comparison: Human and Animal Slavery*, Marjorie Spiegel argues that she does not intend to identify the individual experiences of black people with those of nonhuman animals (27-28).<sup>6</sup> In other words, although Spiegel discusses the importance in understanding the fundamental similarities between the abuse of enslaved black people and nonhuman animals used for our food, she does not argue that their oppression is the same. However, she argues in support of a distinct connection: that the slavery of black people and the violence against nonhuman animals depends on an unequal power dynamic, where the oppressor exploits the oppressed (28). Although Spiegel holds that individual experiences are unique, she claims that there are a number of overlapping similarities between the treatment and justification of the enslavement of black people and violence towards nonhuman animals (29). The above arguments are similar to ones I make in regards to the relationship between nonhuman animals “produced” for food and the employees which work in the same system.

Other scholars who recognize this interlocking oppression include Carol Adams, A. Breeze Harper, Alice Walker, and Tashee Meadows. Although they have not elaborated on the connections between oppression in the same way as Spiegel, their works have been influential in regard to theorizing about the nature of this relationship.

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<sup>6</sup> A number of civil rights organizations (such as National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Southern Poverty Law Center) have criticized *PETA* for using pictures comparing the lynching of black slaves with a shackled cow in an exhibit entitled “Are Animals the New Slaves?” (Goldstein). The campaign ad also used material from Spiegel’s book without permission, and she filed a lawsuit against them in 2008.

Reflecting on the similarities between factory farmed animals and her black ancestors,

Meadows writes:

Somehow, I felt that eating *suffering* and calling it *nourishment* could only produce more suffering. I thought of my ancestry as a Black woman: the rapes, unwanted pregnancies, captivity, stolen babies, grieving mothers, horrific transports, and the physical, mental, and spiritual pain of chattel slavery. (151)

Meadows considers how the atrocities experienced by her enslaved ancestors reflect the present-day treatment of nonhuman animals in animal agriculture. Additionally, Harper contemplates the relationships among food, nonhuman animals, and black people. In relation to the unhealthy foods Americans consume on a daily basis, she writes:

Recent research shows that we're hurting ourselves and exploiting and enslaving others--nonhuman animals and humans--in a way that is similar to colonialism; similar to when many of our African ancestors were torn from their communities and shipped to the Caribbean and Americas to chop cane for the production of sucrose and rum for addicted Europeans: an entire nation whose civilization rested on the shoulders of the savage African and indigenous American slaves to harvest their drug. (Harper 23)

The aforementioned scholars have engaged in the dialogue about the intersections of racism and speciesism. They have all stressed the risks in drawing these connections out of fear of further oppressing and subjugating black people. However, they all contend



that the similarities between the slavery and violence against nonhuman animals cannot be denied. Therefore, in analyzing this connection we must be cautious and resist collapsing the distinctive experiences of nonhuman animal and black lives. Nevertheless, my thesis extends this analysis to include the relationship between the suffering and exploitation of non-human animals and the employees who work in slaughterhouses.

### ***“Shared Suffering”***

Through my research I have identified one scholar who has theorized about the “shared suffering” between factory farming workers and nonhuman animals used for food. In her article “The Relationship Between Workers and Animals in the Pork Industry: A Shared Suffering,” sociologist, Jocelyne Porcher, argues that because workers and nonhuman animals share the same “work space” the suffering of one another negatively impacts them both (4). Specifically, Porcher posits that in working with exploited nonhuman animals in dangerous working conditions, employees suffer physically, mentally, and morally (4).

Porcher argues that the major factor contributing to the shared suffering of both nonhuman animals and workers in slaughterhouses is the industrialization of animal agriculture which emerged during the nineteenth century (5). The shift from working closely with nonhuman animals to “disassembly-line processes” fractured the intersubjective relationships between workers and nonhuman animals (Compa 1). The transition to using machinery and unskilled labor to “process” the flesh of factory farmed animals ended the care and communication between them. Because the main goal of the animal agricultural system relies solely on high production rates and thus economic

success, jobs have transpired into mindless and repetitive actions where employees perform the same job numerous times throughout the work day (“Well-Being and Suffering” e58). Because workers perform one task repeatedly in “processing” nonhuman animals, they often perceive them as merely objects. This shift in perception from viewing a living being merely as a product influences how employees treat the nonhuman animals in this system (“Well-being and Suffering” e63).

Porcher explains that by distancing the worker from being able to conceptualize the nonhuman animal as a living being (“The Relationship” 6), many employees suffer from “moral or ethical suffering,” which often transpires into indifference to the suffering and deaths of the nonhuman animals (“Well-Being and Suffering” e69). In other words, because the animal agricultural system treats nonhuman animals as mere products, many employees also view nonhuman animals as objects or meat. Porcher states that “this type of work organization sees animals as resources (animal matter, ore) to be transformed, and treats them as such” (“The Relationship” 8). In performing acts of violence, employees are often disconnected from the fact that they are working with living beings (6). They must either be indifferent to the suffering of nonhuman animals or are forced to repress their emotions and empathy for them (6). According to Porcher, this pathology of attachment has terribly oppressive consequences for nonhuman animals, for workers frequently take out their frustrations on the nonhuman animals. Many workers do not sympathize with nonhuman animals because they are also unheard, unrecognized, or uncared for by the animal agricultural industry (“The Relationship” 8).

Porcher asserts that being exposed to and made to perform violent acts to nonhuman animals can lead to additional suffering for the workers: “The suffering from the relationship with the animals is either indirect (suffering from seeing the [sic] animals locked up) or direct when workers must inflict the suffering themselves” (7). Porcher refers to this transference of suffering as “ethical suffering” (7). In other words, employees often experience ethical suffering from either witnessing nonhuman animals suffer or from performing violent acts on nonhuman animals that cause them suffering. Similarly, in her article about psychological harm experienced by slaughterhouse employees, attorney, Jennifer Dillard, argues that workers go against their natural instinct to avoid hurting others: “The slaughterhouse work violates the natural tendency of a person to avoid the direct killing of an animal” (11). She states that because most people are naturally averse to killing others that slaughterhouse occupations negatively impact their psychological well-being (11).

This moral suffering also expands to impact the workers negatively in regards to their personal and social identities (“Well-Being and Suffering” e63). For instance, workers have been reported to be psychologically aberrant because they are able to witness and perform violent and bloody tasks on a daily basis. A quantitative study was conducted to investigate the relationship between slaughterhouse workers and psychological symptoms. This comparative study concluded:

Because slaughterhouse workers constantly kill animals, it has been reported that they suffer from anxiety, panic, depression, increased paranoia, a sense of disintegration, high levels of drugs, and alcohol use.

In addition, over time, some of its employees enjoy the killing. (Emhan et al. 320)

Additionally, the authors of this study reported that crime rate was also higher for slaughterhouse employees than for employees of other jobs (320).

Furthermore, Porcher explains that as the production demand increases, so does the suffering of both the workers and nonhuman animals (“Well-Being and Suffering” e61-e62). She states that “the number of animals per farm and per worker is constantly rising” along with the speed of the production “dis-assembly” line (e61). Because of the increase in demand, there are more chances to make mistakes or be injured. Additionally, because of the overwhelming frustration with unrealistic time constraints, workers are more prone to be violent towards the nonhuman animals who do not cooperate (e64).

I appreciate the work that Porcher has provided because it is quite rare to find any scholarship linking the exploitation of workers and the suffering of nonhuman animals. What Porcher does not do however, is focus on the particular suffering that nonhuman animals used for food endure for their entire lives. In other words, while Porcher recognizes the relationship between the suffering of workers and nonhuman animals, she tends to discuss the treatment of nonhuman animals with less urgency than she does for workers impacted by this system. In drawing attention to the failure of animal welfarists to adequately recognize the suffering of the employees, she fails to mention how human rights advocates also gloss over the inhumane treatment of nonhuman animals in animal agriculture. Therefore, I demonstrate the importance for both animal welfarists and human rights advocates to address both of these issues in tandem. Thus, my research

treats both animal welfare and human rights equally. In theorizing about the shared relationship between the exploitation of workers and nonhuman animals within the animal agricultural business, I reveal the dominant structure that undergirds both. When we focus on one cause over another, we are actively complicit in the suffering of another group of autonomous beings.

### **Methods and Contributions**

In my thesis I theorize about the relationship between the exploitation of employees and nonhuman animals in the animal agricultural system. In order to establish this critical relationship, I utilize a number of theories to explain the foundation to their oppression within this system. First, I draw from Iris Young's faces of oppression to explain the overlapping yet distinct forms in which nonhuman animals and employees are oppressed. Next, I critically apply Adams' concept of the absent referent to analyze the alterity and thus oppression of these two groups of beings. In utilizing the concept of alterity and the structure of the absent referent, I contend that a more holistic understanding of their shared exploitation should be addressed. Here, I explain how sentient beings within the agricultural system become the Other, which consequently justifies the subjugation and erasure of their individual selves and value. Because our present society has been constructed by the domination and exploitation of minorities deemed inferior, my thesis examines how this very same structure is reflected by the oppression of nonhuman animals and employees in slaughterhouses. Lastly, using a number of theories, I argue that nonhuman animals and slaughterhouse employees become the Other by hierarchical perceptions of their worth, which are ultimately

reinforced by dominant narratives within our westernized culture. This research is vital because of the present state of animal and human rights activism. As mentioned briefly above, both animal welfarists and human rights advocates fail to recognize the interconnectedness of animal and human oppression. In separating these issues as if they are not intricately woven, we fail to see the fundamental structure which upholds both of these groups' continual erasure. The exploitation of nonhuman animals and workers is founded by a perceived dualism that separates the dominant from the subordinate.

In conducting my research, I analyze statistical information and reports to describe the working/living conditions within slaughterhouses. Some of the reports I consult include the following: Annual Agricultural Statistics and Census of Agriculture from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Report to the Ranking Minority Member, Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, U.S. Senate from the U.S. Government Accountability Office (U.S. GAO), and the Human Rights Watch report by author Lance Compa as well as accounts of animal welfarist who have made personal observations. I also utilize information from the following agencies: Fisheries and Aquaculture Department of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the Bureau of Labor Statistics from the United States Department of Labor, Occupational Safety & Health Administration. By expanding on a number of preexisting theories, I suggest that both nonhuman animals and workers become absent through meat-eating, the meat producing process, as well as through reinforced stereotypes about their moral and individual value. Many one-sided arguments or advances only help perpetuate the further oppression of the other group of beings affected

by this system. Additionally, I explain how the Othering of beings allows for a disconnect between “us” and “them” and also contributes to their erasure in processes by which we benefit (or experience pleasure) from their exploitation. It is important to look at these issues simultaneously or as connected because transformational change will not occur unless we address the underlying reason for their exploitation.

### **Chapter Organization**

In this introductory chapter, I have provided a literature review of relevant scholarship that has been conducted regarding my research topic. I also discussed the overall argument and methodology I use to answer my research questions. Lastly, I discussed how the theories I expand on allow for a more holistic comprehension regarding the shared oppression between nonhuman animals and slaughterhouse employees within animal agriculture.

In chapter one, I thoroughly describe the conditions and treatment of cows and pigs used for the “production” of meat. Furthermore, I discuss their lives and deaths within animal agriculture. Chapter two explores the working conditions and treatment of slaughterhouse employees within slaughterhouses. For this chapter, I focus mainly on the negative consequences that this working environment has on employees’ physical, psychological, and social well-being.

Lastly, in chapter three, I argue that each food choice we make reinforces or challenges the mass exploitation within the animal agricultural system. I explore this claim by establishing a clear connection between the oppression of nonhuman animals used for food and the employees who work in the industry. Furthermore, I contend that in

order to make transformative changes to end oppression, that our efforts must not exclude one group or the other. Rather, our understanding must shift to consider all beings who are oppressed in our culture rather than favoring one over the other. Because there is a clear relationship between the exploitation of nonhuman animals and slaughterhouse employees, we can only influence lasting changes in this system when we address their shared oppression. In regard to human rights and animal welfare organizations, I suggest a form of solidarity between these various groups in an effort to address interlocking oppressions. We must not allow our preferences or biases to inhibit us from working to liberate all beings from injustice. We cannot allow arbitrary distinctions and differences used to exploit others throughout history to dictate those for whom we are willing to fight.



CHAPTER II  
WHO'S IN YOUR PLATE? MISERY-MAKING  
FOR MEAT

*Most people who eat meat have no idea that they're  
behaving in accordance with the tenets of a system that has defined many  
of their values, preferences, and behaviors.*

*-Melanie Joy*

In this chapter, I discuss the lives and deaths of cows and pigs as well as the conditions in factory farms and slaughterhouses. I also argue that cows and pigs are neglected and abused in industrial agriculture for our food. My decision to focus on cows and pigs in this chapter in no way reflects any sort of hierarchy of value or importance of nonhuman animals. Rather, the abundance of scholarship on the mistreatment of these nonhuman animals will provide sufficient data for an analysis of the relationships between nonhuman animals and employees, which I discuss in chapter four of my thesis. In other words, because many employees who work with cows and pigs are often injured because of their size and strength, I found a focus on these particular species especially helpful for illustrating my argument. Thus, this chapter provides factual and essential information to demonstrate the interlocking nature of oppressions within the animal agricultural sector.

In support of my initial argument for this chapter, I utilize documents from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations as well as sources from animal welfare experts such as Melanie Joy, Timothy Pachirat, Bernard E. Rollins, Gail Eisnitz,

Jonathan Safran Foer, Temple Grandin, and Michael Pollan. My decision to use statistical data from the FAO is based on their willingness to collect credible agricultural statistics to support their mission to end hunger on a global scale. Because statistics and accounts of the treatment of nonhuman animals raised in animal agriculture can be somewhat contradictory, I chose to rely on the following accounts of the named authors because they provide the most extensive and personal accounts. Their dedication to uncover the truths behind “food” animals and slaughterhouse environments has proved to be significant for my research.

As social psychologist Melanie Joy mentions above, humans rarely think of eating animal flesh as a choice or decision. For instance, people often understand the eating of meat as a given, unquestioned norm, rather than recognizing the influence of our culture’s attitudes and beliefs concerning nonhuman animals in general. Industrial animal agriculture is a system that transforms our perceptions of nonhuman animals as well as their actual bodies from living beings into inanimate objects. A system that engenders such violent treatment of others can only be built on greed and oppression. That we reduce living individuals (who are similar to us and care about their own lives) into instruments of production to satisfy our mere desires is a barbaric tragedy. The ease that it takes to do this relies greatly on the traditional behaviors and beliefs we fail to question. For instance, many animal welfare reforms transform particular aspects of the animal agricultural system in an effort to reduce the stress (and thus more “humane” treatment) of nonhuman animals. However, the industry is ultimately concerned with the reduction of stress and anxiety of the nonhuman animals only when these kinds of

reforms improve the quality of their flesh. This reveals the lies we tell ourselves to soothe our moral qualms about the unnecessary suffering of billions of individuals. What does it mean to be treated “humanely” when it appears no different than torture?

### **The Life and Death of a Cow**

#### ***In the Beginning***

Cows are known to be gentle and communicative nonhuman animals and often create emotional and social bonds with one another (Joy 49). According to the USDA, over 30 million cows are killed annually for human consumption for our food. For his book published in 2011, sociologist Timothy Pachirat went undercover as an entry-level slaughterhouse employee in a Nebraskan factory because of his curiosity about normalized violence in our society. Based on information from a USDA inspector during his employment with the company, he reported that one cow was killed every twelve seconds in the slaughterhouse where he was employed (17). This estimate approximates that in the slaughterhouse where he worked three hundred cows were killed per hour, and 2,500 every day (Pachirat 17).

Given the unnatural confinement of pigs and other farmed animals for the entirety of their existences, one could argue that cows raised for food live most of their lives relatively in accord with their natural instincts, grazing on open pastures for approximately six months of their lives (Pollan 69). Cows are birthed in one of the hundreds of thousands of independently owned ranches across the United States (Pollan 69). After their birth, cows usually spend the first portion of their lives grazing open prairies with their mothers.

However, between two weeks to two months after their birth, female cows are branded and male cows are castrated, branded, and dehorned (Rollin 60). These three procedures are done with no anesthesia or analgesia. Males are castrated because it results in more tender flesh and more manageable cows (Rollin 60). Most castrations are performed with a knife, although alternative methods are executed with pincers or elastrators (Rollin 61). Ranchers use knives or pincers to cut or sever the spermatic cord, which hinders blood flow to the testicles (Rollin 61). The elastrator is placed around the testicles, so that the blood flow is cut off to the testicles, eventually removing them completely (Rollin 60).

Hot-branding procedures also cause cows immense pain. This practice is used as an identifier in terms of ownership (Rollin 58). Branding causes third-degree burn to cow's rear ends which often causes dramatic weight loss, a direct stress indicator that is linked to this traumatic experience (Rollin 58). The purpose of removing a cow's horns is to reduce the "damaged hides and bruising" from behaviors of more aggressive cows. Although most cows are dehorned at an earlier age, some undergo this ordeal when they have fully developed horns. For younger cows, chemicals may be used on their "horn buds" to inhibit them from growing (Rollin 64). Another tool used is a hot iron to burn the horn buds. The last, and arguably most painful dehorning procedure is carried out when a cow has fully developed horns. It is at this point that a "dehorning spoon" may be used to gouge their horns out of their skull (64). Although it is widely believed that cows experience less pain when these procedures are done to them at a young age, ethicists

such as Bernard E. Rollin argue that there are no reasons to believe that experiencing pain is linked to a particular age (61).

### ***Transportation***

Most cows raised for consumption are usually transported at least twice in their lives, the first to a Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation (CAFO) and the second to the slaughterhouse. As mentioned above, cows often spend around six months on the ranch they were birthed on before they are transported to a feedlot. Most transportations occur in large trucks with attached trailers and are often filled to the maximum density in terms of space capacity (Grandin and Gallo 137). These crowded confines do not allow much space for the cows to move around and prevents them from having space to lie down during transportation, although their travel may range from two to forty-eight hours (138, 140).

Because the United States does not have regulations concerning mandatory rest-stops for nonhuman animal transportation, cows often spend up to forty-eight hours standing in one position without water or food (Grandin and Gallo 135). Many cows arrive at CAFOs or slaughterhouses extremely fatigued and dehydrated. Their physical and psychological well-being often depends on how many cows are in one truck, the duration of the transport, and the driving of the truck driver. Often, cows fall onto one another and are unable to stand back up for the duration of the ride because they become trapped under other fallen or standing cows (Grandin and Gallo 138). Studies show that this process causes dramatic increases in stress, which is indicated by the levels of cortisol in their plasma (Grandin and Gallo 139).

Extreme conditions such as freezing or hot weather also negatively affect the well-being of cows. It is estimated that 1% of cows die because of the stress of transportation (Grandin and Gallo 146). Additionally, a respiratory disease, also referred to as “bovine respiratory disease,” caused by transportation stress and conditions is responsible for 50% of deaths and 75% of illnesses at CAFOs (Grandin and Gallo 146). This respiratory disease is liable for an estimated 14% of all cows’ deaths in CAFOs (146).

### ***Fattening for the Kill***

Although cows have evolved to subsist on grass, they are taken to feedlots or CAFOs when they are between the ages of six to eight months old. In the 1950s, cows were slaughtered between the ages of three to five years old. Now, however, cows reach the target “slaughter weight” (about 1,100 lbs.) within fourteen to sixteen months (Pollan 71). Feedlots exist to fatten cows quickly on a heavy diet of corn, protein and fat supplements because feeding them only grass takes longer to reach the desirable slaughter weight (Pollan 71).<sup>7</sup> The corn fed to cows in feedlots are blended with antibiotics such as Rumensin and Tylosin (Pollan 74). In an effort to prevent them from growing sick from the feed in CAFOS, cows are fed antibiotics because their stomachs were evolutionarily made to break down the fibrous materials eaten in foraging rather than corn materials (Goodman). Permissible add-ins to the feed include beef tallow,

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<sup>7</sup> Antibiotics fed to cows also risk the health of the public. It is predicted that using antibiotics on such a massive scale will cultivate antibiotic-resistant superbugs that we will not have the means to treat (Pollan 78).

feather meal, chicken litter (consisting of chicken bedding and feces) as well as fish, chicken, and pig meal (Pollan 74-76).<sup>8</sup>

The most common illnesses resulting from cows' unnatural diets are bloating and acidosis. Bloating may result in suffocation of the cow while acidosis often causes "diarrhea, ulcers, bloat[ing], rumenitis, liver disease, and a general weakening of the immune system that leaves the animal vulnerable to the full panoply of feedlot diseases" (Pollan 78). Approximately 15-30% of cows develop abscesses and improper functioning before arriving to the slaughterhouse (Pollan 78). Additionally, the grounds that cows step and sleep on in CAFOs and during transportation include a mixture of dirt, urine, and feces, which have such toxic levels of nitrogen, phosphorus, metals, hormones, and chemicals that many farmers refuse to use a liquified version of it to spray their fields because of the detrimental effects it would have on their crops, adding to the number of environmental factors caused and exacerbated by industrial animal agriculture (Pollan 79, Steinfeld). It is inevitable that some of the bacteria from cows' feces remain on their bodies during slaughter because of the rapid speeds at which they are "processed" for their flesh.

### ***To the End***

At the end of their lives, cows are once again subject to the stresses of transportation in order to face what arguably might be the most horrific experiences during their short lives. After arriving at the slaughterhouse, they are unloaded into pens

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<sup>8</sup> Although the FDA banned feeding cow "protein" to cows, CAFOs are still allowed to feed them fat and blood from cows (Pollan 76).

in a semi-closed area connected to the slaughterhouse (Pachirat 47).<sup>9</sup> Because of the food they consume at CAFOs and the physical stress endured during transportation, many cows are immobile (a.k.a. “downers”) once they reach the slaughterhouse. One slaughterhouse employee reported the following:

[When] cows get hurt, they call them ‘haulers.’ You take an electric winch, latch it on to one of her legs-it’s supposed to be a leg-and drag her all the way through the kill alley to the knocking box...If you couldn’t get her leg, it would go around her neck, and by the time she gets up here she’s almost dead-it’s choking her. (Eisnitz 130)

Employees use electric prods to lead groups of mobile cows into tube like chutes that narrow until they are in single-file (Pachirat 47; Foer 229). Some employees have stated that they will do anything necessary (even beat them) to get the cows moving to the knocking box; some have used chains, boards, and shovels to move cows (Eisnitz 130). Cows are lead to the “knocking box,” where they are suspended by their bellies, and squeezed by automotive retractable walls until the cows’ bodies are fully immobilized except for their heads (Pachirat 53).

The knocking procedure is supposed to render the cow unconscious, but often fails in this respect. An air-powered steel bolt, weighing around 10 lbs., is pressed between the cow’s eyes and is shot into his or her skull (Pachirat 53; Foer 47).<sup>10</sup> Brain

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<sup>9</sup> There are four major companies that slaughter the majority of cows in the United States: Tyson subsidiary IBP, Cargill subsidiary Excel, Swift & Company, and National (Pollan 69).

<sup>10</sup> Some nonhuman animals are not rendered unconscious before they are slaughtered because of religious beliefs (FAO).



matter and blood often gush out of the cow's skull. If the knocker has worked "properly," the cow's head usually slumps forward. If the blow to the cow's head is insufficient, the cow will either have a seizure or begin to thrash around frantically (Pachirat 53). If thrashing occurs, the knocker tries the procedure over again. However, as Jonathan Safran Foer asserts after his three-year investigation regarding factory farms, some slaughterhouses opt for a less effective knocker method because animals who are alive bleed out faster (230). A less effective knocking method reduces bacterial growth in meat and a results in a longer shelf life (Foer 230). One employee reported that between 25-30% of cows retain consciousness after they are knocked (Eisnitz 130). This tragic reality results in many cows experiencing unimaginable conscious pain, while they are bled, eviscerated, skinned, and dismembered. Another employee, interviewed by chief investigator for the Humane Farming Association (HFA), Gail A. Eisnitz, stated regarding the treatment of nonhuman animals in slaughterhouses:

Cattle [are] dragged and choked, stuff like that. Knocking 'em four, five, ten times. Every now and then when they're stunned they come back to life, and they're up there agonizing. They're supposed to be restunned but sometimes they aren't and they'll go through the skinning process alive. I saw that myself, a bunch of times. I've found them alive clear over the rump stand. (Eisnitz 197)

The above encounter reflects the realities of the excruciating pain cows must endure so that we may eat their flesh. Although the knocker is supposed to render cows unconscious so that they do not feel the pain of being dismembered, this account

contends that many cows are fully conscious while their skin is being torn from their flesh.

After the knocking box, a cow then falls onto a conveyor belt where an employee shackles the left hind leg and holsters the cow up into the air until upside down and vertical (Pachirat 54). Many cows begin to kick once they are holstered up. According to meat industry publications, this behavior is described as reflexive rather than indicating consciousness (54). Indications of a conscious cow include “attempts by the cow to right itself, reflexive blinking in response to stimuli, and a tongue that is not hanging limply from the mouth” (54). If these behaviors are observed, employees sometimes use a captive-bolt handgun and shoots the cow once again in the head (54).

The chained rail now brings the cow to what is referred to as the “kill floor.” Next, the presticker employee makes a vertical incision in the neck, and the sticker cuts main arteries and veins, causing an automatic gush of blood that pours out onto a grated floor (Pachirat 56). According to Pachirat, the sticker method is what eventually kills the cow somewhere between the area where they are electrocuted by two metal bars or in the bleed pit (56-57). He also maintains that, with an inefficient vertical cut and sever of the main arteries and veins, that some cows might still be conscious while workers cut off their tails, their legs, and remove their anuses (60). One employee described such a situation:

A lot of times...the leggers'll take their clippers and cut off the beef's [*sic*]  
leg right below the knee-the skinny part...The beef'll [*sic*] continue to kick

but it's not as much of a problem because it don't have that long of a reach. (Eisnitz 127)<sup>11</sup>

This begins the process whereby cows are stripped of all things recognizable to their individuality or animalness. The next procedures disassemble their bodies into the food commodities, for what the animal agriculture system exists. Their bodies are fragmented into homogenous body parts; the tails, anuses, ears, lips, hooves, hearts, stomachs, intestines, esophagus lining, and hides are ripped from their flesh and separated for the different destinations that will utilize them (Pachirat 72-73). The rest of their bodies are marked and cut into different sections, which become undifferentiated and indistinguishable from one another. Their body parts are then cooled and packed for shipment to different companies. The treatment and suffering of cows share many similarities with that of pigs raised for food. Next, I describe the lives and death of pigs raised in the industrial agricultural system.

### **The Life and Death of a Pig**

#### ***And it Begins Again***

Four large companies slaughter 60% of pigs in the United States, which accounts for 60 million of the 100 million pigs killed each year for us to dine on (USDA-NASS; Foer 162). These pigs make up 95% of pig flesh that is sold in supermarkets (Foer 164). In some slaughterhouses, the common speed of killing a pig is every four seconds, approximating 75,000 pigs per week (Eisnitz 63). Unlike cows raised for their flesh, factory-farmed pigs live the entirety of their lives in confinement. They are unable to live

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<sup>11</sup> "Leggers" are employees who cut off the legs of the cows.

according to their evolutionary instincts, whereby in a natural habitat, they would roam around for hours, foraging and exploring their surroundings and creating close social bonds with other pigs (Joy 42). Research has also shown that pigs are extremely intelligent, even more so than other domesticated nonhuman animals we choose as companions (McWilliams 195). They are affectionate, communicative and can also distinguish among individual pigs (Joy 42).

In their natural settings, pigs make a number of decisions in regards to birthing their babies. Not only do they spend a number of hours building their birthing nests, but they also stay close to their babies as they get older (Joy 42). The actual lives of most pigs remain very different from this utopian narrative, however, since the majority of pigs are birthed and raised for their entire lives in factory farms. Pigs chosen for reproduction spend the majority of their lives (3-5 years) in gestation stalls used to maximize production (Rollin 76). These crates are enclosed so that the pig only has enough room to stand up and lay down. She must defecate on the slatted concrete floor where she also sleeps, a behavior that pigs in their natural habitats never do. The lack of freedom to move around thwarts their natural tendencies. This confinement causes stress, anxiety, and incessant boredom because they are such complex and inquisitive creatures (Rollin 76-77). Pigs chosen for reproduction are also kept pregnant or nursing for the majority of their lives (Foer 183). When sows (adult female pig) are about to birth their babies, they are transferred to farrowing crates. After giving birth (aka “farrowing”), sows feed their babies through metal bars of farrowing crates, a metal enclosure that reduces most movement so that she remains on her side (McWilliams 212).

The purpose of the crates is to prevent the sow from rolling over and smothering her babies, which is common in smaller free-range farms (McWilliams 212). These crates are detrimental both psychologically and physically for the sow, because it prevents her from satisfying her natural instincts, which include being close to her babies and having the ability to move around as she normally would (212). This confinement also causes repetitive behavioral abnormalities (which are so common, they are now called stereotypical) such as biting the bars of the farrowing crate and moving her head back and forth (McWilliams 212).<sup>12</sup> Because the main goal of the industry remains maximum efficiency regarding production, piglets who do not grow fast enough to be used are “thumped” (Foer 187). Thumping is when employees pick up these piglets by their legs and beat their head into the concrete floor (Foer 187). This method is used to spare any costs associated with disposing of piglets who are not economically efficient to the system. As one can expect, this “efficient” method does not always prove successful and many piglets do not die right away (188). One employee reported that he has seen many piglets running around squealing frantically, bleeding profusely, with bones broken, and their eyes hanging out of their sockets (Foer 188).

The piglets that are spared this brutal death feed from their mother for about two to three weeks before they are weaned. Soon after the birth of a piglet, their tails are cut off and males are castrated. Both of these procedures are done without any analgesic or anesthetic. While many piglets die from starvation and diarrhea, others are suffocated by

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<sup>12</sup> For this section, I refer to all pigs using the feminine pronoun “she” or “her” although I recognize that many pigs raised for food are male. I refrain from using “it” to refer to pigs because it reduces them to inanimate objects.

their mother when they squeeze into her crate to fulfill their natural instinct to bond with her (Joy 43). After piglets are weaned, they live the next six months of their lives in small, crowded pens or sheds that are littered with their own feces. The toxic gases produced from the copious amount of excrement and urination and humid environment results in many sick or dead piglets (Joy 44; Foer 188). Other pigs suffer or die from respiratory illnesses or lung disease. According to Foer, 30-70% of pigs usually suffer from respiratory illness by the time they reach the slaughterhouse (Foer 188).<sup>13</sup>

### ***The Final Day***

The same factors that affect the health, stress, and deaths of cows during transportation affect pigs as well. Between 150 and 200 pigs are usually squeezed into trucks in extreme weather conditions and are not fed or given water for up to twenty-eight hours (Joy 44). The over-crowding in transportation causes many of them to become ill or die before arriving to slaughter. Many pigs who do survive arrive malnourished and fatigued, with broken legs and pelvises (Eisnitz 199). Other accounts detail how in freezing weather, pigs will arrive frozen to one another or to the sides of the truck (Eisnitz 125). The pigs who remain alive after the stressful travel are unloaded to a holding area until they are chosen to be killed.

A similar process for the killing and disassembling of cows is used for slaughtering pigs. First, employees use electric prods to lead them into a chute-like hallway until they are in single file (Eisnitz 68). Pigs are often shocked numerous times

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<sup>13</sup> These constant illnesses often result in new epidemic illnesses which may infect whole pig populations. They can also be contracted by humans (Foer 188).

and subjected to abusive treatment even before they reach the stunner. One employee stated:

Hogs get stressed out pretty easy...If you prod them too much they have heart attacks. If you get a hog in the chute that's had the shit prodded out of him and has a heart attack or refuses to move, you take a meat hook and hook it into his bunghole. You try to do this by clipping the hipbone. Then you drag him backwards. You're dragging these hogs alive, and a lot of times the meat hook rips out of the [anus]. I've seen hams-thighs- completely ripped open. I've also seen intestines come out. (Eisnitz 82)

Next, they are stunned by a similar tool as the knocker, which is supposed to render them unconscious. However, this method does not always knock them out and many are shot a number of times in order to accomplish this goal. One employee interviewed for Eisnitz's book reported the following:

I've seen them put twenty to twenty-five holes in a hog's head trying to knock her and she was still on her feet. Her head looked like Swiss cheese. Tough gal. Sometimes the captive bolt won't work at all so they'll use a twenty-two and shoot the hog through its [*sic*] eye. Or you might have to hit both eyes on the same hog. (200-201)

Because of the inefficiency of the stunning equipment, many pigs are shackled horizontally while still fully conscious. After they are shackled upside down, their throats are slit (a.k.a. sticking), severing their carotid arteries and jugular veins so that they bleed

out (FAO). One sticker described how he expressed his frustrations out on a pig who was not cooperating. He stated:

One time I took my knife-it's sharp enough-and I sliced off the end of a hog's nose, just like a piece of bologna. The hog went crazy for a few seconds. Then it just sat there looking kind of stupid. So I took a handful of salt brine and ground it into his nose...I still had a bunch of salt left on my hand...and I stuck the salt right up the hog's ass. The poor hog didn't know whether to shit or go blind. (Eisnitz 93)

Sticking pigs is supposed to result in a loss of 40 to 60% of their blood. Shortly after, they are often lowered into a scalding tank to remove their hair (FAO). However, as employees have reported, many pigs do not bleed out in time to die before they are put into the tank. One slaughterhouse employee reported that many pigs are still squealing while going into the scalding tank fully conscious (Eisnitz 71). After the pig is put in the scalding tank, employees then use a scraper to remove the pig's hair from her body. The belly of the pig is sliced open to remove the sex organs and bladder, her body is then cut vertically in half, down her backbone, head in-tact. After all of the pig's insides are removed, her body is refrigerated and prepared to be cut into pieces, packed, and sold (FAO).

### **Suffering for Our Desires**

Nonhuman animals cannot communicate with language that we might understand. However, as the above experiences show, they do suffer immensely for human desires for their flesh. Industrial animal agriculture exists behind closed doors so that the violence



that occurs does not have to weigh on our shoulders. The most contact that we have with cows and pigs are when we are consuming them in fragmented pieces. This allows a distance between us and them, where we can pretend that they either do not matter or that they lived happy lives. And although their lives and deaths are largely invisible to us, this is not the case for the individuals who partake in their killing for hours on end. For those individuals the physical, psychological, and emotional toll bears its mark. It is the nonhuman animals and slaughterhouse workers who ultimately suffer for the food on our plates.

## CHAPTER III

### WHO ELSE SUFFERS FOR OUR GUSTATORY PLEASURES?

#### HUMAN CONSEQUENCES OF MEAT PRODUCTION

*The sight of liver after liver descending against a dull white wall, hour after hour, day after day, week after week until it constitutes an endless, infinite landscape in which the slaughtered cow has no place and against which every act of disruption, no matter how miniscule, becomes an expression of being, of knowing that you are still there.*

*-Timothy Pachirat*

#### **The Lives of Slaughterhouse Employees**

Many advances directed toward social justice within the animal agricultural industry focus on either animal welfare or human rights issues. Organizations such as PETA and Human Rights Watch (conducted by author, Lance Compa) mainly focus their attention on either nonhuman animals or humans rather than addressing the fundamentally interconnected nature of this exploitative system. Although I recognize that there are many negative consequences as a result of animal agriculture such as environmental and health-related issues, for the purpose of this research, I focus on the harmful impacts regarding nonhuman animals and slaughterhouse employees. In this thesis I argue that agribusiness engenders normalized violence toward both nonhuman animals and slaughterhouse employees. In this chapter, I focus on the physical, psychological, and social consequences of working in the meat-packing business that directly impact and affect the lives of slaughterhouse employees. While Americans have the most contact with nonhuman animals when they are consuming them, slaughterhouse

workers spend their working hours immersed in the liminal period between the lives and deaths of nonhuman animals used for our food.

In this chapter, I provide a summary of scholarly work and personal anecdotes produced and gathered on these issues. In discussing the physical injuries caused in slaughterhouses, I mainly refer to documents from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), and Human Rights Watch. My decision to rely on these sources is based on their credibility and reliability in regards to current and accessible data. Furthermore, research on the psychological impacts of working in slaughterhouses remains very limited. Thus, I chose to utilize sources mainly from Gail A. Eisnitz, Jennifer Dillard, and Amy Fitzgerald because of their unique and credible scholarship on this particular topic. Their research indicates that further examination and investigation is presently needed regarding the relationship between human and nonhuman animal exploitation. Information provided by these sources will be useful for my analysis of the interlocking relationship between nonhuman animals and employees in chapter four of my thesis. This chapter is devoted to shedding light on the atrocities that slaughterhouse workers bear on a daily basis.

### ***Physical Consequences***

An astounding number of people are directly impacted by the negative consequences by the industrial agricultural system. Slaughterhouses and meat-packing industries employ nearly 500,000 workers in the United States (“Slaughterhouse Workers”). Because meat-packing facilities have been largely mechanized, and the jobs held are mostly repetitive and unskilled, all employees are expendable. In other words,

studies show that the slaughterhouse industry exceeds a 100% turnover rate annually (“Slaughterhouse Workers”). According to the Food Empowerment Project and the U.S. GAO, an estimated 26-38% of slaughterhouse workers are born outside of the United States. Furthermore, the Occupational Employment Statistics’ “Employer-Reported Workplace Injury and Illness Summary” from 2009 states that the median salary of slaughterhouse workers was \$26,010 (OSHA, U.S. Department of Labor). One clause from the Occupational Safety and Health Act states that “each employer shall furnish to each of his [*sic*] employees...a place of employment which [*is*] free from recognized hazards that are causing or are likely to cause death or serious physical harm to his employees” (OSHA, U.S. Department of Labor).). However, given the health and injury hazards that remain rampant within this industry, it is clear that serious implementation of this provision has failed to make the critical changes in order to provide the necessary safety protocols.

Understandably, killing and dismembering nonhuman animals is one of the most dangerous occupations in American industries because of both physical injuries and health-related issues (Schlosser, “The Chain Never Stops”). Given the high-speed disassembly line as well as the exposure to toxic wastes and chemicals, meat-packing jobs often result in lifelong medical issues. Injuries related to the high speed of the line include but are not limited to amputations, “tendonitis, carpal tunnel syndrome” and dead fingers, which are caused by rapid and repetitive movements (Dillard 3). In 2014, over four-thousand fatalities and roughly twenty-thousand nonfatal injuries were reported from the U.S.’s meat-processing industry (OSHA, U.S. Department of Labor).). This was

before the revised recordkeeping rule was enacted in January 1, 2015 requiring workplaces to “report all work-related fatalities within 8 hours” and also requires them to “report all work-related in-patient hospitalizations, amputations and loss of an eye within 24 hours to OSHA.” Furthermore, it is possible and even likely that the estimated fatalities and nonfatal injuries in 2014 may have been higher than reported.

The above number of deaths and injuries only reflect the number of *reported* annual incidents. Reports by OSHA and the GAO have indicated that many factories utilize threatening tactics (and in some cases bribes) in order to discourage employees from reporting injuries (Oxfam). Accordingly, it is estimated that accident reports might be underrepresented by 30-70% because they are filed solely by employers (Lowe). The precarious state that many illegal immigrants occupy also plays a vital role in the underreporting of occupational injuries which occur in the slaughterhouse. In some factories, between 25-50% of employees are estimated to being illegal immigrants (U.S. GAO, Dalla et al. 175). Although many workers report being intimidated, harassed, and discriminated against, as well as being injured on the job, most do not report these instances in fear of being fired or deported.

In addition to threats to keep employees from reporting incidents at work, many workers suffer in other discriminatory forms. Because in some factories, upwards of three-quarters of the workers are non-native English speakers, cannot read in English (or are illiterate), or are illegal immigrants, they often do not understand their rights as workers and are taken advantage of because of these factors (Schlosser, “The Chain Never Stops”). Oxfam reported that “plants take advantage of workers’ lack of

documentation; when they hire, they ask few questions; when they want to fire (for any reason), they can cite the lack of documentation as the problem” (Oxfam).

According to investigative journalist Eric Schlosser, the rate of injury in the meat-packing industry is three times higher than in other factories in the United States (*Fast Food Nation* 172). Job responsibilities in this sector range from knocking, sticking, and eviscerating nonhuman animals as well as dismembering and trimming their body parts. Slaughterhouses rely on both mechanized equipment as well as the precision of the human hand in order to disassemble the bodies of nonhuman animals. Currently, meat-packing plants utilize a mechanized chain that moves nonhuman animals down the line to each station of which employees work (Gaston and Harrison 57). However, employees perform most of the work done in killing and dismembering nonhuman animals (Gaston and Harrison 57). Many injuries can be attributed to increasing the line speed for maximum production and profit. The foreman (aka “knocker”) often turns down the electric voltage on the gun in order to preserve the quality of the meat. Consequently, many employees reported fully conscious and active nonhuman animals kicking knives out of their hands, sometimes causing workers to accidentally cut themselves. According to the Human Rights Watch, an estimated four hundred cows, one hundred pigs, and thousands of chickens are killed and dismembered every hour in the United States (Compa 25). Consequently, many workers make single cuts every two to three seconds, often estimating ten thousand cuts per work day (Gatson and Harrison 57). Given the rapid speed at which workers must accomplish precise and hazardous tasks, the majority of workers suffer from a range of physical injuries. Because the healthcare professionals

available on site for slaughterhouse workers are employed by the industry, it is common for them to use simple first aid procedures on injuries so that they may send workers back to work as soon as possible.

The sheer volume of nonhuman animals expected to be killed, eviscerated, skinned, and dismembered in a specific amount of time takes its toll on the hundreds of thousands employees who must monotonously perform the same task every few seconds for an entire working day. Many workers complain about not having enough time to sharpen their knife blades, making their jobs even more treacherous to themselves as well as painful for the thousands of nonhuman animals they “process” (Matsuoka and Sorenson 15). Many ongoing injuries also result from the repetitive nature of slaughterhouse responsibilities. Workers often suffer from chronic pain in their fingers, hands, arms, shoulders, and backs (Matsuoka and Sorenson 15). Thousands of concerning reports the injuries sustained in slaughterhouses have been made. Some of the accidents reported and documented on OSHA’s website include the following:

- 1) employee killed when arm caught in meat grinder (1986)
- 2) employee killed after falling into meat mixer/grinder (1988)
- 3) employee decapitated by chain of hide puller machine (1993)
- 4) employee dies of burns when tallow vapors ignite (1999)
- 5) employee crushed and killed when run over by alvey machine (2000)
- 6) employee's finger amputated in machine (2001)
- 7) employee is killed when caught in meat processing machine
- 8) employee amputates fingertip in meat cutter (2004)

- 9) employee is injured by electric shock (2006)
- 10) employee is kicked by cow, later dies (2007)
- 11) employee is pulled into grinder and is killed (2009)
- 12) employee is crushed while herding cows, later dies (2010)
- 13) employee falls into meat processing machine, later dies (2011)
- 14) employee amputates finger on food product auger (2012)
- 15) employee injures hand in meat tenderizing equipment (2013)

Seventeen additional amputation injuries reported to OSHA occurred between January and September 2015 (Monforton 2-3). These accident reports are in no way an exhaustive account of the injuries and fatalities that occur as a result of inefficient training, faulty equipment, or dangerous working environment in slaughterhouses. However, these accounts give us a brief understanding of the gravity of the human rights violations that take place on a daily basis in this industry.

The kinds of accidents that occur in the slaughterhouse industry are especially horrendous. For instance, as mentioned above, a man was working on the kill floor when he was kicked by a cow who was hanging upside down (OSHA, U.S. Department of Labor). It is widely common for nonhuman animals to remain conscious on the disassembly line, therefore making these particular instances very likely. This particular report states that after the initial incident, the employee was unresponsive and bleeding from his nose and mouth. He ultimately died from a pulmonary hemorrhage, which is the bleeding of the lungs, a consequence of the blow from the cow who made contact with him (OSHA, U.S. Department of Labor). Another account is from an employee who



worked for ConAgra in 1999. He reported that he was trying to keep up with the quick line speed as he pulled hides from a water tank, which was purposed for washing the blood and feces off. His steel-mesh glove then got stuck on the hook and he was dragged towards the dirty water pit until someone shut down the line. Losing over three pints of blood, and with a partially crushed arm, he was rushed to the hospital where he underwent the first of numerous operations (Schlosser, “The Chain Never Stops”). After only five months, a company doctor ordered him back to work despite the excruciating pain he was still experiencing. After his injury, he was put back to work in the nurse’s office to handle files and in 2001 and still feared being fired from his job (Schlosser, “The Chain Never Stops”).

As mentioned above, employees remain in constant danger because of the rapid speed of the disassembly line, which quite often does not allow the time or accuracy for employees to render nonhuman animals unconscious. Although USDA inspectors are supposed to stop the kill line if a nonhuman animal falls from the chains (or is conscious), or if an employee is injured, this rarely occurs because of the precedence of their main goal: maximum production. One employee interviewed by Eisnitz stated the following:

Skinning live animals isn’t only cruel but it’s also really dangerous for the skimmers and the rest of us. Sometimes animals would break free of their shackles and come crashing down headfirst to the floor fifteen feet below, where other men worked. There were three in

one day, one right after another. One hit a worker, just a glancing blow, broke his leg. I almost got crushed by a falling bull. (29)<sup>14</sup>

Although employees are provided “protective” gear, numerous dangerous incidents remain almost impossible to avoid. For example, another sticker in a pig slaughterhouse reported, “I was kicked, bitten, stabbed in the forearm, had a tooth knocked out, an eardrum punctured, and finally got my face slashed” (67). While the working conditions in slaughterhouses often leave employees exhausted, hurt, and many times injured for the rest of their lives, the psychological tolls of such violent work also leaves many of them emotionally numb and disconnected.

### ***Psychological and Social Consequences***

In 1906 American novelist Upton Sinclair wrote *The Jungle*, seeking to expose the inhumane and unethical treatment of slaughterhouse employees (mostly immigrants) in meat-packing factories. Rather than jumping to ameliorate the plights of the slaughterhouse employees, readers instead became much more concerned with the sanitation and health violations present in slaughterhouses (Cohen). How can we realistically expect the public to change their eating habits for exploited workers (much less the nonhuman animals involved) when they are usually more concerned with what ends up in their plates than human rights issues, which presently impact the lives of slaughterhouse workers?

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<sup>14</sup> Although Gail Eisnitz’s book, *The Slaughterhouse*, was originally published in 1997, it is still currently a relevant and credible source. My choice of utilizing interviews from her book are based on the uniqueness of the personal accounts she was able to document. In other words, similar work conditions continue to be documented as evidenced by The Human Rights Watch, USDA Labor of Statistics injury statistics, as well as undercover videos of the insides of slaughterhouses. However, her personal interviews prove unique because of their unbiased nature, namely the absence of external influences that might have impacted their stories.

In this section I discuss the psychological and social consequences of being exposed to as well as being involved in the violence inflicted on nonhuman animals every day for hours on end. Acts of cruelty, as most people conceptualize them, become structurally normalized between the walls of slaughterhouses. We might ask *how* it is possible for thousands of people to partake in brutal acts of violence against nonhuman animals for the food that ends up in our plates. In the United States it is considered socially unacceptable and mentally sadistic to intentionally inflict pain on a helpless nonhuman animal (Dillard 6; Beirne 54). Considering this consensus, what are the implications for the condoned violence in slaughterhouses? How does the undeniable misery of the slaughterhouse negatively impact employees psychologically and socially?

Sociologist and psychologist Rachel M. MacNair defines Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress (PITS) as a subcategory of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) resulting from “situations that would be traumatic if someone were a victim, but situations for which the person in question was a causal participant” (7). She explains that a person suffering from PTSD or in this particular circumstance, PITS, will experience symptoms such as “drug and alcohol abuse, anxiety, panic, depression, increased paranoia, a sense of disintegration, dissociation or amnesia from causing suffering or killing other beings (Dillard 7). Although McNair’s study is focused on war veterans, she does include slaughterhouse workers as a vulnerable population that may be affected by PITS. Many slaughterhouse employees express their need to turn drugs and alcohol as a means to cope with the psychological impacts of killing thousands of sentient beings per day. One employee interviewed by Eisnitz as a sticker (a worker who cuts the pigs’ necks

to bleed them out) reported that many employees had drinking problems to cope with their participation in the violence of their workplace. This employee reported, “I’ve taken out my job pressure and frustration on the animals, on my wife—who I almost lost—and on myself, with heavy drinking” (91). The same employee described how he would take out his anger on anything by unconsciously imitating his abusive behavior toward the nonhuman animals in the slaughterhouse:

Little things would set me off. I was putting a new alternator belt on my wife’s car and the wrench slipped and I gouged my knuckle. I stood back and had a fit beating that car. I was beating it, kicking it, screaming at it. It was like I’d lost my mind. (Eisnitz 92)

As several scholars have pointed out, the normalized cruelty and violence that employees take part in also may negatively affect their abilities to empathize with nonhuman animals as well as with the general public. Because of the monotonous and normalized violence which employees are subject to, they often become desensitized to cruelty in all its forms. In “A Slaughterhouse Nightmare: Psychological Harm Suffered by Slaughterhouse Employees and the Possibility of Redress through Legal Reform” lawyer Jennifer Dillard explains that to be able to work in the meat-packing industry, workers must reject their natural instincts to identify with or show compassion towards nonhuman animals as sentient beings in order to cope with their job responsibilities (8). As such, animal agricultural businesses treat and perceive the nonhuman animals they raise and slaughter as mere commodities produced for profit (Porcher, “The

Relationship” 8). This necessary dissociation is evidenced by a former slaughterhouse worker interviewed by Eisnitz:

The worst thing, worse than the physical danger, is the emotional toll. If you work in that stick pit for any period of time, you develop an attitude that lets you kill things but doesn't let you care. You may look a hog in the eye that's walking around down in the blood pit with you and think, God, that really isn't a bad-looking animal. You may want to pet it [*sic*]. Pigs down on the kill floor have come up and nuzzled me like a puppy. Two minutes later I had to kill them—beat them to death with a pipe. I can't care. (87)

Because employees must reconceptualize “food” animals as mere means to an end, they often grow apathetic and indifferent to the suffering of nonhuman animals. Dillard states that a “worker's emotional response to the animal affects the care with which the worker treats the animal; if the worker develops a disdain for the animals in response to that disconnect, he is more likely to treat them cruelly” (Dillard 9). In other words, because employees work continuously in a situation where they must view nonhuman animals as products, they become detached from the fact that they are actually “handling” a living being. Another employee discussed how working in such a hazardous environment often induces stress and anger, resulting in an increased desire to inflict more pain and suffering on the nonhuman animals:

One night I had a boar come through live—about a five-hundred pounder—and I was about to stick it [*sic*]. It was hanging there

upside down and it literally picked itself up [tried to right itself] and looked me right in the face. I grabbed it by its ear and it [*sic*] jerked away. When it came back, its tusk went through my no-cut glove and ripped my finger wide open. I turned around and stick it. Then I shoved the water hose up its [*sic*] nose to drown it. I was so pissed.  
(Eisnitz 70)

Moreover, some workers have even expressed that they take pleasure in inflicting additional pain and distress on the nonhuman animals they slaughter.

That such cruelty is sanctioned in the meat-making business in order for employees to keep up with the line speed is indicative of the relationship between institutionalized violence and individual abuse. The results of a comparative study of 82 butchers (about half working in slaughterhouses and half in meat markets) indicated that employees working in slaughterhouses scored comparatively high in regards to symptoms such as anger, hostility, and psychoticism (Emhan et al. 322). Many standard procedures of slaughtering nonhuman animals include thumping piglets (banging piglets heads onto concrete floors) as well as ripping live chickens' heads off while alive if the throat-cutter had failed (Dillard 6).<sup>15</sup> Such concentrated and condoned violence encourages insensitivity and numbed emotional responses on the part of individual employees toward both nonhuman animals and humans. One report detailing this transference of violence from nonhuman animals to humans is from a former slaughterhouse employee. In

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<sup>15</sup> The Humane Slaughter Act of 1979 excludes chickens in regards to regulating abuse in the animal agricultural industry (USDA National Agricultural Library, The Humane Slaughter Act).

detailing his apathetic attitude towards the nonhuman animals he was slaughtering, he also shared that he perceived humans similarly:

Sometimes I looked at people that way, too. I've had ideas of hanging my foreman upside down on the line and sticking him. I remember going into the office and telling the personnel man that I have no problem pulling the trigger on a person—if you get in my face I'll blow you away. (Eisnitz 87)

This quote demonstrates how his negative attitude and indifference towards the suffering and lives of nonhuman animals began to bleed into how he perceived people as well. Evidently, the desensitization caused by witnessing and inflicting high levels of violence and death negatively impacts the psychology and behavior of employees and their communities (Matsuoka 17).

Furthermore, numerous studies demonstrate a relationship between the abuse of nonhuman animals (usually companion animals) and domestic abuse, child abuse, and rape. In “From Animal Abuse to Interhuman Violence? A Critical Review of the Progression Thesis,” sociologist Piers Beirne expresses the need for scholarship to examine slaughterhouses as representative sites of institutionalized violence toward nonhuman animals. That is, a correlation has been shown to exist between childhood animal abuse and adult interhuman violence and abuse. Because of this correlative link, Beirne contends that further research is imperative to investigate a similar link between animal violence and abuse in slaughterhouses with that of human on human violence within and outside of the confines of the slaughterhouse. Beirne argues that “whenever

human-animal relationships are marked by authority and power, and thus by institutionalized social distance, there is an aggravated possibility of extra-institutional violence” (54). In other words, employees’ violence, anger, and indifference towards nonhuman animals is often redirected toward strangers, families, or companion animals.

The level of violence and brutality that is institutionally condoned in slaughterhouses is arguably linked to extra-institutional violence between employees and others they interact with outside of the meat-packing industry. According to sociologist Amy Fitzgerald, institutionally sanctioned violence tends to increase the overall violence and anger of employees rather than increasing the desire to avoid similar experiences that they had in the slaughterhouse (163). Some examples that exhibit the link between slaughterhouse work and violent crime come from a compiled list of slaughterhouse employees who were convicted of violent crimes. Campaign manager for Animal Aid, Kate Fowler compiled the following accounts:

1. butcher Denis Nilsen was convicted of killing 10 people in 1983
2. former slaughterman Jason Baldwin murdered, disemboweled, and mutilated neighbor in 1996
3. former slaughterman Drew Affleck set fire to house a killed three in 2001
4. slaughterhouse employee Paul Harry Smith beat up his pregnant wife in 2001
5. former slaughterhouse employee Paul Weedon slit the throat of a 91 year old man in 2003



6. butcher Muhammad Arshad used a meat cleaver to murder his mother-in-law in 2004
7. former butcher (and serial rapist) John McGrady killed and dismembered a 15 year old girl in 2006
8. pig farmer Robert Pickton was accused of killing 50 people in 2007 (he also confessed to feeding his victims to his pigs as well as for mixing in his human's flesh in with the pig meat he sold to the public)
9. John McFarlane used bolt gun (which he also used at work to stun cows) to kill a woman he was stalking in 2009
10. Mark Bridger killed five year old girl in 2012

Although not all slaughterhouse employees participate in violent behavior outside of the slaughterhouse, studies have documented an increase in violent crime in communities with slaughterhouses. Fitzgerald conducted an investigation between 1994 and 2002 of 581 counties in the United States in order to examine the effects that slaughterhouses had on employees and communities (158). In conducting her research, she compared the rate of crime within communities with slaughterhouses the crime rate of communities with other industries, whose employees worked with inanimate objects rather than sentient beings (but had other similarities such as worker demographics, high turn-over rates, etc). Her results reveal that as slaughterhouse employment increases, so do rape, child abuse, murder, robbery, and violent crime compared to that of other industries (Fitzgerald 175). Given this data, the study suggests that communities with slaughterhouses tend to have higher crime rates because of the particular psychological

effects of slaughterhouse responsibilities. One employee that Eisnitz interviewed stated that he started getting “as sadistic as the company itself” (75). He and his wife reported that he began to hit her and whipping their kids; although once he left the company, he reflected on his behaviors and stopped hitting them. Another employee reported the criminal climate in the slaughterhouse:

Every sticker I know carries a gun, and every one of them would shoot you. A lot of them have problems with alcohol. They *have* to drink, they have no other way of dealing with killing live, kicking animals all day long. If you stop and think about it, you're killing several thousand beings a day. (Eisnitz 88)

Obviously not all slaughterhouse workers resort to extra-institutional crime; however, it is suggestive that performing violent acts for hours a day has the potential to desensitize employees as well as to negatively affect the way that they identify and perceive others. This research signifies potential connection between animal abuse and interhuman violence. Namely, it suggests that the reduction of employees’ empathy and compassion for nonhuman animals may contribute to the increased of toleration for violence toward any sentient being.

In this chapter, I have argued that the slaughterhouse industry engenders and encourages normalized and institutional violence. In detailing the physical injuries, psychological effects, and social consequences of the work of slaughterhouse employees, I have maintained that employees suffer from sanctioned brutality and violence within and outside of their work sites. I have also suggested that desensitization toward violence

is linked to interhuman violence and increased crime rates within communities that house slaughterhouses. In the final chapter of this thesis, I draw on and analyze connections between the suffering and exploitation of both nonhuman animals and employees in this industry.

CHAPTER IV  
ESTABLISHING CONNECTIONS: THE UNJUST  
TREATMENT IN SLAUGHTERHOUSES

*Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.*  
-Martin Luther King Jr.

In chapters two and three I described the treatment and abuse of nonhuman animals and employees in the industrial animal agriculture system. The mass production of nonhuman animals in industrial agriculture is based upon the connections between the exploitation and oppression of nonhuman animals and the negative physical, psychological, and societal consequences for slaughterhouse employees. Here, I argue that many of our food choices in the United States either contributes to or challenges the dominant paradigm of domination as a basis for humanity. I also contend that the normative oppressor paradigm of dualistic rationality must shift for the sake and liberation of both “farmed” nonhuman animals and slaughterhouse workers. To support these arguments, I address the following questions: 1) How may expanding on Iris Young’s theory of the “faces of oppression,” to include “farmed” animals illuminate the overlapping and interconnected forms of oppression that nonhuman animals and slaughterhouse employees encounter?, 2) How do nonhuman animals and employees become “absent referents” in slaughterhouses?, and 3) What is the significance of

recognizing the relationship between the exploitation of nonhuman animals and employees?

### **Faces of Oppression**

In her book *Justice and the Politics of Difference* feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young differentiates between five distinct, yet circumstantially overlapping forms of oppression. She names the five forms of oppression as exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural dominance, and violence. Young stresses the importance of recognizing that oppressions cannot be articulated in such simplistic terms as the oppressed or the oppressor. Rather, she argues that individual differences allow for a more nuanced understanding of oppression. Often, individuals experience multiple, overlapping oppressions, while others may occupy a dual position in the oppressed/oppressor paradigm. In other words, people are not simply relegated to the exclusive role of the oppressed, but can also act as oppressors in some instances. For the purpose of this thesis, I utilize Young's work to argue that "farmed" animals and slaughterhouse workers experience similar, overlapping "faces" of oppression within the animal agricultural system. Young's work on the multiply overlapping forms of oppression is especially important to my research because it provides a framework to analyze the fundamental similarities between the oppression of nonhuman animals and slaughterhouse employees. Although Young does not directly address nonhuman animals in her examination of overlapping oppressions, her theory can be fruitfully applied in this manner.

### ***Exploitation***

According to Young, *exploitation* involves the unfair wages many laborers earn considering the actual amount of profit they produce for their employers (49). Young further describes exploitative oppression as “a steady process of the transfer of the results of the labor of one social group to benefit another” (49). Exploitation occurs when the product of work or labor benefits those who have not contributed to the production of labor rather than benefiting the worker themselves.

From Young’s definition of oppression, slaughterhouse workers are undoubtedly exploited in factory farms. As mentioned in chapter three, slaughterhouse employees work in hazardous environments with an average annual wage of \$26,010, even as they are employed by multimillion dollar industries (OSHA). They are neither fairly compensated for the profit they generate nor for the grueling and physically-intensive work they provide. They are often neglected when they suffer from illnesses and physical injuries received in the course of their job responsibilities. According to the international human rights standards, workers’ compensation is a fundamental right for those who experience work-related illnesses and injuries (Compa 42). However, because workers’ compensation is enforced by the state, rather than at the federal level, many factories fail to adequately enforce employee’s rights. Unfortunately, the high demand for meat products fuels companies to always place production and profit before their employees (Compa 2). Companies who would act to implement changes in order to respect the basic rights of their employees would face competition with other meat companies who could afford to sell their product for less (Compa 2). Thus, many meat packing factories deny

injury-related compensation claims and instead insist that employees were hurt because they were negligent on the job or that they were injured away from their workplace (Compa 42). When an employee is injured on the job and exhibits a visually obvious injury like an open wound, they are often sent to the on-site medical clinic where the medic decides whether the injury is minor enough to treat it with simple First Aid or a more serious a “recordable injury,” which is documented for OSHA (Compa 47). Workers who suffer injuries that are not visually perceivable are considered to be exaggerating and are sent back to work. Although the work of slaughterhouse workers earns these companies millions of dollars annually, they are not treated as respectable human beings when they are denied basic health care, which threatens their health and physical wellbeing. Thus, the labor and product they provide is transferred to benefit the company they work for rather than fairly compensating them for their treacherous labor as well as the bodily injuries they may have incurred.

Many slaughterhouse workers also experience a specific racialized exploitation within the animal agriculture industry. A large proportion of slaughterhouses workers are people of color, and an estimated 26-38% of slaughterhouse workers are born outside of the United States. This data reflects Westernized assumptions regarding the value of those whom we identify as outsiders (“Slaughterhouse Workers;” GAO). People of colors, especially Latino(a)s and Black people in this particular work-field sector are exploited in our capitalist society. In this job sector, unskilled, serventile, and low-wage labor are ultimately reserved for these marginalized groups (Young 51). Racism often informs the widespread assumption that oppressed racial groups should do the dirty work

that dominant (and often white people) groups refuse to partake in whether they equate particular jobs as immoral or dehumanizing. Thus, privileged groups have the opportunity to always have animal flesh readily available to them because of the labor of people of colors. Not only do slaughterhouse employees work tirelessly for their jobs, but they also must perform violent and gruesome acts on other beings to benefit the privileged.

Although it is obvious that slaughterhouse employees are exploited by the animal agricultural industry, I contend that nonhuman animals are also exploited in this sector of the workforce. In the United States, over 10 billion land animals are slaughtered for human consumption (USDA, *Livestock Slaughter 2015 Summary*). According to Porcher, because “farmed” nonhuman animals “invest their cognitive, affective, and relational potential in the work context” in farms and slaughterhouses, they must also be recognized as subjective agents in their lives (and deaths) (e60). In other words, although one would not necessarily name nonhuman animals as workers in slaughterhouses, their autonomous nature necessitates their recognition within this context.

The bodies and cognitive potentials of nonhuman animals raised for food are undoubtedly exploited. Nonhuman animals are generally perceived as products, or as having merely instrumental and profitable value in terms of their fragmented bodies. Their individual selves and identities are stripped away, and their value is quantified by the number of dollars their carcasses produce for their employers. Similar to that of employees, their exploitation relies on the assumption that their lives and purposes are to benefit the more privileged. Their lives are relegated to mass confinement and suffering,



while their deaths are ironically perceived to provide life, health, and sustenance to human beings.

### ***Marginalization***

According to Young, *marginalization* excludes groups of people from being hired or finding steady employment (Young 53). This exclusion is often based on race, gender, disability, age, mental health, educational level, or financial status. This form of oppression excludes whole groups of people from “useful participation in social life” (53). Often, these groups of people lack access to fundamental resources to meet their basic needs.

Although Young’s definition of marginalization only encompasses people who cannot find or sustain a job, peripheral characteristics of this form of oppression are applicable to employees and nonhuman animals in meat-processing plants. Young explains that marginalization often inhibits people from having access to resources to meet their basic needs (53). Tragically, marginalization also results in the extermination of some groups. As stated above, employees are denied basic human rights as they are not given access to adequate health care or a safe work environment. They are also subject to job-related illnesses from high levels of exposure to toxic wastes in the slaughterhouse. Although these workers have obviously found jobs as slaughterhouse employees, many have little to no opportunity for more skilled and higher-wage jobs. The treatment and abuse of slaughterhouse workers is often one of the many circumstances where people of colors, especially immigrants, are marginalized and often do not receive equal citizen rights (Young 54). The inadequate safety protocols and inefficient health

care systems demonstrate that employees' wellbeing and quality of life are often controlled by those in authority. It also indicates that their safety and wellbeing is sacrificed for mere profit.

Similarly, the lives of nonhuman animals also depend largely on their farmers, "caretakers," and killers (as well as the multimillion dollar companies that employ these workers). In other words, the amount of suffering nonhuman animals must endure depends on the nature of the animal agriculture system as well as the workers who "tend" to the nonhuman animals killed for human consumption. Like other marginalized groups, nonhuman animals are also "expelled from useful participation in social life" other than for their instrumental purposes (Young 53).

### ***Powerlessness***

For Young, *powerlessness* refers to the separation of workers into jobs with autonomy and jobs without any authority (Young 56). Jobs where workers exercise jurisdiction over others are frequently occupied by the privileged upper class while employment with little to no authority is usually relegated for the lower class. Powerlessness has a deeply "insidious" nature in that some individuals begin to internalize the perspective that their participation or opinions are not worth mentioning (Young 56).

As lower class citizens, or noncitizens, slaughterhouse workers experience powerlessness as described by Young, which includes inhibited autonomy and the mobility to develop specific skills that would allow them to reach their potential as employees (Young 56-57). As Young explicates, the powerless are "situated so that they

may take orders and rarely have the right to give them” (56). In slaughterhouses, most employees exercise little to no control over decisions on the job, which directly and negatively affect their safety, health, and psychological well-being. They work at the mercy of faulty equipment and increasingly fast disassembly lines, where of bodily injury remain high. Young contends that a lack of respect also accompanies powerlessness as a form of oppression (57). She explains that in order to be “respected,” others must be willing to listen and act on one’s requests for some actions (57). Because many employees are thought of as malingerers when they experience pain that is not perceivable to the eye, they are not recognized as worthy of respect.

Furthermore, most workers in slaughterhouses are employed for the killing, disassembling, and the packaging of bodies rendered into pieces of flesh. Given the numerous undercover videos suggesting slaughterhouse employees to be the primary offenders of mass animal abuse, it is evident that they are also not respected by the public. For instance, one undercover video titled “The Real Price of Meat: One Cow’s Heartbreaking Trip to Slaughter” explicitly shows and narrates the abuse of one particular cow (PETA). The video also includes specific actions taken by some of the workers against the cow as well as insensitive quotes from one of the employees who took part in the abuse. Another example of animal welfare groups placing the blame on slaughterhouse employees is evident from the video titled “Tyson’s Dirty Deeds” where the undercover employee videotapes a coworker explaining his specific treatment of chickens raised for meat. The coworker he records states:

Yea, you can't get them up there 'cause they want to put their head in the fucking way. I have to start beating their fucking heads on the rail.

Yesterday, I ain't gonna lie, man, I broke one's back...Fucking chickens made me mad. I hurt a innocent chicken because the other chickens made me mad. ("Tyson's Dirty Deeds")

These examples demonstrate how employees are often perceived as sociopathic monsters and anomalies for the unnecessary pain they inflict on nonhuman animals. The videos fail to indicate possible reasons employees may abuse the nonhuman animals they "handle," perhaps in an effort to stress the unjust abuse inflicted on nonhuman animals. Rather than also illuminating the abuse and injustices of workers within slaughterhouses, the video presents them in a very limited manner, as inhuman and barbaric. In addition to the two mentioned, numerous undercover videos recorded by animal welfare organizations indicate their overwhelmingly singular concern over the inhumane treatment of nonhuman animals. Most of these organizations (Mercy for Animals excluded) frame the injustices present in the animal agricultural industry as affecting only nonhuman animals, rather than investigating the interrelatedness of oppression engendered by the industry. Thus, in publicizing videos of animal abuse and cruelty, employees are presented as the culprit of the injustices in the industry, rather than the industry that exploits and oppresses both nonhuman animals and employees.

If employees are powerless in their work in slaughterhouses, the nonhuman animals who die by their hands are also impacted by the lack of power they possess. Although Young does not expand her definitions of oppression to include that of

nonhuman animals, I insist on the importance of also recognizing their oppression in this particular sense. Young describes the associative injustices of powerlessness as the “inhibition in the development of one’s capacities, lack of decision making power in one’s working life, and exposure to disrespectful treatment because of the status one occupies” (58). Numerous studies demonstrate that nonhuman animals raised in mass confinement are inhibited from satisfying their instinctual and natural behaviors (Vestergaard; Zimmerman). One example is that of pigs, who have been scientifically proven to be more intelligent than our companion dogs and who are socio-emotional animals who possess the capacity to bond and form relationships with other pigs (and humans) if allowed. Instead of being treated according to their needs and instincts, many female pigs are kept their entire lives in farrowing and gestation crates so small they only have room to stand up and lie back down. Most nonhuman animals raised for food, including pigs, are granted no autonomy or agency over their treatment or quality of life in this industry. They are regarded as mere means to an end and are not perceived or treated as anything more than meat with legs. It is obvious that they receive the utmost lack of respect for their individuality, because their personal subjectivity is rarely or never taken into consideration unless it impacts the quality of their flesh.

### ***Cultural Imperialism***

According to Young, *cultural imperialism* occurs when the dominant group’s culture is established as superior and universalized as the norm (Young 59). Perspectives and cultural norms of groups perceived as inferior are both rendered invisible and are stereotyped as the Other (59). As mentioned above, cultural imperialism structures our

culture to represent our dominant Western beliefs and perspectives as normal and universal (Young 58-59). Culturally, dominant ideologies have considered both nonhuman animals and people of colors to be expendable and indistinguishable as objects as well as workers. For instance, this particular form of oppression often designates low-wage, dangerous jobs with little to no benefits for peoples of colors, as I have demonstrated in chapter three. Furthermore, the treatment of nonhuman animals and responsibilities of slaughterhouse employees are some of the many experiences that the mass population would prefer to never witness. However, because of our demarcation of individuals and workers who do and do not deserve respect, much of the population have the luxury of not being exposed to the violent experiences that are inevitably prevalent within the agricultural system.

### ***Violence***

Lastly, Young points out, *violence* is utilized to reinforce the dominant status quo in control of groups viewed as fundamentally different. Young states that “members of some groups live with the knowledge that they must fear random, unprovoked attacks on their persons or property, which have no motive but to damage, humiliate, or destroy the person” (Young 61). Often, violence is inflicted on others in an effort to enforce oppressive conditions. State-sanctioned violence is used as a threat to those who challenge and resist their oppression and reinforces discrimination and segregation.

Slaughterhouse employees and nonhuman animals experience sanctioned violence on a daily basis. Employees both witness and take part in the constant violence against defenseless nonhuman animals. Furthermore, their constant involvement in the

institutional violence towards nonhuman animals is often transmitted to interhuman violence within and outside the workplace. Scholars such as Porcher and Fitzgerald hypothesize that some slaughterhouse employees become desensitized to violence in general because of their constant involvement in the killing and dismembering of live nonhuman animals. Although we cannot definitively claim a causal link between slaughterhouse employees and interhuman violence, direct reports from employees demonstrate that many of them in fact do become desensitized to violence in general. For instance, in 2012 forty-two year old slaughterhouse employee Lawrence Jones opened fire at his workplace, Valley Protein, a slaughterhouse in California (Stanglin, USA Today). After leaving two of his coworkers dead and two more critically injured, he killed himself. Furthermore, as mentioned in chapter three of this thesis, a number of slaughterhouse employees have taken part in some sort of interhuman violence over the years.

Although we cannot assume a causal relationship between the constant violence and killing of nonhuman animals and interhuman violence, there are correlations between these phenomena that warrant further investigation. Research findings from Fitzgerald's 2009 controlled study demonstrated that crime rate for violent offenses was greater in communities that housed slaughterhouses than in other industries with similar racial profiles, unskilled job responsibilities, and increasing injury rates. After controlling for such variables as demographics, unemployment rates, and community organization, she concluded that "the findings indicate that slaughterhouse employment increases total arrest rates, arrests for violent crimes, arrests for rape, and arrests for other sex offenses

in comparison with other industries” (1). Further research is imperative to fully understand the fundamental ways that institutional violence impacts slaughterhouse workers as well as others who they associate with.

Nonhuman animals used for food also experience systemic oppression on many fronts. Not only do they live their lives in miserable conditions, but they are also perceived and treated as nothing more than their dismembered body parts. It is ironic that the public continues to express shock when they are exposed to the cruelty in factory farms. After an undercover employee leaked a number of videos of the widespread cruelty inflicted on nonhuman animals in slaughterhouses, a national outcry erupted for more humane practices (“Undercover Activist”). Other examples include the reactions from individuals who volunteered to watch a film about the realities of the abuse of nonhuman animals in the animal agricultural system (“Can You Face the Reality?”). Most expressed their shock by covering their mouths and eyes or crying from being exposed to the abuse and oppression of nonhuman animals (“Can You Face the Reality?”). Comments following the video displayed shock as to how this kind of treatment is readily and currently allowed. For a system that is built on the control and destruction of Others’ bodies for profit, the outrage regarding animal abuse in the meat-making industry feels somewhat displaced. However, because our society has deliberately constructed the animal agricultural business to remain mostly invisible to the mass public, it is understandable that many people feel moral discomfort when learning about the suffering that normally occurs during the production of their food. For instance, many commercials and ads frame the lives of chickens and cows as if they are currently



living in accord to their natural instincts on small farms. Ads and commercials for products such as Blue Bell ice-cream and Yoplait Yogurt create false narratives regarding the “natural” and happy lives of cows, although the reality is quite different (“Yoplait Funny Ad;” “Blue Bell Commercial”). Because many people are influenced by these particular depictions of nonhuman animal lives, they are often shocked that the animal products they consume actually come from miserable and abused nonhuman animals. It is easier to be ignorant of the mass suffering of so many identifiable beings than to recognize that we are all implicated in the oppression and exploitation of nonhuman animals. Next, I focus on how nonhuman animals and employees are made invisible or absent within the system.

### **The Absent Referent**

#### ***What is the Absent Referent?***

According to Adams, in *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, nonhuman animals become “absent referents” through the language we use to describe their corpses as well as through their transformation into edible food (66). For instance, a cow is the absent referent when we eat a hamburger because a) she is dead and therefore literally absent from the experience, b) her animal presence is disguised by the renaming of her dead body as a hamburger, and c) her brutal death and objectified body are used as metaphors to describe violent experiences had by people (67). The function of the absent referent is to disconnect the meat-eater from the individual living being who has been transformed into food. This disconnect structures our cultural meanings of food and erases the lives of the nonhuman animals who have been killed for our food. Adams writes:

Behind every meal of meat is an absence: the death of the animal whose place the meat takes. The “absent referent” is that which separates the meat eater from the animal and the animal from the end product. Once the existence of meat is disconnected from the existence of an animal who was killed to become that “meat,” meat becomes unanchored by its original referent (the animal), becoming instead a free-floating image, used often to reflect women’s status as well as animals’. (Adams 13)

In dismembering the bodies of nonhuman animals, we transform a living subject (a nonhuman animal) into a “dead object” (73). The absent referent then allows us to separate ourselves from the living being (and protect ourselves from her brutal death), perceive her as a mere object, and treat her as such. When a nonhuman animal is converted into pieces and is represented as meat, she is then an object of consumption. Similarly, in disassociating women from their bodies in sexualized media images or pornographic films, we often reduce them to their female body parts. In many cases, pictures of women only wearing underwear or naked (in pornography or in public spaces) function to erase and silence the actual identities of the women, while their bodies are presented as objectifiable (82). In dissociating the bodies of women from their individual identities for the male gaze, they is dismembered and rendered into an object.

Before I discuss how I expand on Adams’ concept of the absent referent, I would like to briefly discuss the limitations of using this concept as a tool for examining the process of othering. In *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Adams describes the way that using

animals metaphorically to describe domestic abuse and sexual violence renders nonhuman animals into absent referents. Adams explains that nonhuman animals are made into absent referents when used as metaphors because of the metaphor's reference to an experience had by someone other than the animal being discussed. In other words, whenever describing a physically and/or sexually abusive situation, some women will express that they were treated like "a piece of meat." In this instance, nonhuman animals who are actually butchered, but not referenced, are rendered invisible. Adams states that "what is absent from much feminist theory that relies on metaphors of animals' oppression for illuminating women's experience is the reality behind the metaphor" (90). Furthermore, she posits that utilizing these particular metaphors perpetuates the oppression of nonhuman animals when we fail to ground these metaphors in the context of the widespread butchering of their bodies (90). Adams also critiques the reverse of this phenomenon, namely using metaphors such as "the rape of animals" to describe the inhumane treatment of nonhuman animals. This metaphor, Adams argues, erases the human individuals who actually experience sexual violence. Although I find this analysis useful, I question her application of the word "consumption" to describe how women are sexualized and objectified. However, I do want to emphasize that Adams does make clear that women in these cases are *perceived* as consumable (16). I nevertheless question whether Adams' application of the word "consumption" also reinforces nonhuman animals as absent referents by relying on this comparison, which she so adamantly advocates against.

### *Absent Referents in Slaughterhouses*

Here, I employ the concept of the absent referent to explore how it functions to silence and erase the identities and lives of both nonhuman animals and employees.<sup>16</sup> While Adams uses the concept of the absent referent in an effort to establish the relationship between nonhuman animals and women, this concept has proven useful in this research in demonstrating the shared oppression of nonhuman animals and slaughterhouse employees. Similarly, I extend the concept of the absent to also analyze the oppression and exploitation of slaughterhouse employees, a task that Adams herself has not undertaken. Employing this concept to examine the erasure and exploitation of nonhuman animals and employees in animal agriculture proves useful in recognizing their interrelated relationship. The absent referent functions as a tool to analyze the way that the animal agricultural system erases and silences nonhuman animals in regards to their treatment and needs. Additionally, this tool provides the means to explore the process by which these individuals are disconnected from their identities.

Adams describes a “cycle of objectification” whereby individuals are fragmented, objectified, and consumed (73). In dismembering the bodies of nonhuman animals, we transform living subjects (nonhuman animals) into “dead objects” (73). The absent referent then, allows us to separate ourselves from a living being (and protect ourselves from her brutal death), perceive her as merely an object, and treat her as such. When a nonhuman animal is converted into pieces, and is represented as meat, she is then an

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<sup>16</sup> For the purpose of my research, I use the absent referent to refer to only to sentient beings although I recognize that there are scientific studies claiming the consciousness and sentience of plants. Although I do not repudiate this claim, for my research, I solely focus on analyzing the function of the absent referent in regards to nonhuman animals and workers in slaughterhouses.

object of consumption. Adams states that “consumption is the fulfillment of oppression, the annihilation of will, of separate identity” (73). Thus, we can use the term “consumption” to literally describe the fate of nonhuman animals.

As mentioned in chapter two of my thesis, most nonhuman animals “raised” in animal agriculture spend the entirety of their lives in confinement and are restricted from meeting their most basic needs as curious, emotional, intelligent, and social beings. The absent referent functions similarly to Young’s descriptions of forms of oppression in that the erasure and absence of nonhuman animals in slaughterhouses (and animal agriculture in general) rely on systems of inequality. In other words, for every subordinated and silenced group of beings, there is a group who is privileged and often benefits from the oppression of the Other. In the case of nonhuman animals raised and killed for human consumption, there exists a falsified benefit for the privileged human, namely the eating of their bodies.

Nonhuman animals become the absent referents through unquestioned assumptions about the normalcy and biological necessity of eating them. People often justify their consumption of nonhuman animal bodies by way of “normalcy” and “necessity,” although there exists ample scientific data supporting a plant-based diet as sufficient for our nutritional needs. Some examples of numerous studies supporting a plant-based diet include T. A. B. Sanders’ journal article, “Meat or Wheat for the Next Millennium? A Debate Pro Veg: The Nutritional Adequacy of Plant-based Diets” as well as a journal article by medical doctors Randall White and Erica Frank titled “Health Effects and Prevalence of Vegetarianism.” However, convincing consumers that eating

meat is more of a biological issue than a moral one alleviates people from feeling responsible for the violence directed toward nonhuman animals raised for our food (Joy, “Carnism”). Those of us who actually have the ability to choose what we eat, and continue to make this choice, support the dominant culture's status quo, as well as the erasure of individual lives. Although many people believe that eating animal flesh is “natural,” their unquestioned assumptions indicate that the lives and suffering of nonhuman animals should not be considered as intrinsically valuable for their own individuality. By failing to address issues that do not solely impact the lives of humans, the individual lives of billions of sentient beings are rendered absent for our consideration of their quality of life.

Nonhuman animals “raised” for human consumption also become absent in terms of their inhumane treatment and object status. The treatment of nonhuman animals I described in chapter two demonstrates our disregard for their capacity to feel pain. They are not differentiated from one another or treated accordingly. Instead they are reduced to analogous inanimate objects, whereas the industry sees them as “resources (animal matter) to be transformed” (Porcher 8). Nonhuman animals become absent when they are kept in unsanitary and unhealthy conditions, when they are stunned in the head one to ten times, when they are beaten with rods, and when they are boiled and skinned alive. In animal agriculture, nonhuman animals are viewed as a massed Other. According to Plumwood, factory-farmed nonhuman animals are defined by what they are to us: food. Because of our dependency on the taste of meat, we generally perceive pigs, cows, chickens, and fish as mere fragmented pieces which will inevitably end up on our plates.

The “mentality of meat,” as Joy would describe it, allows for us to take someone and turn them into something. Each nonhuman animal in this system is stripped of its individuality, of what makes her special, unique, and unlike every other nonhuman animal.

The concept of the absent referent can also be utilized to address the way that the bodies of nonhuman animals are disguised in name and body. The function of the absent referent reveals itself through language and images used to describe nonhuman animals. For example, cows, pigs, chickens, lambs, and fish are Othered and objectified through our cultural representations and dialogue about them (Fonseca 54). They are linguistically, representationally, and physically transformed into what we know as “beef,” “pork,” “bacon,” “sausage,” “mutton,” “hamburger,” “ribeye,” “steak,” “fillets,” “veal,” and “roast.” Our widespread discourse around nonhuman animals reproduces our hegemonic ideologies about the normalcy of their domination and oppression. Thus, by relying on linguistic and culturally representational images of nonhuman animals as our property and as our food, we remove the vitality and individuality of beings who were once a unique being. Removing the *he* or *she* from our perception of meat upholds the unexamined assumption that animal suffering is not important. The distinctiveness and identity of the nonhuman animal becomes absent from her body, because she is dead, as well as from our social construction of her, because she is viewed as our food.

Employees indirectly become absent referents when we partake in eating factory-farmed animals. In other words, not only do many people fail to reflect on *who* they are eating, but they also neglect the fact that employees who work in these industrial

oppressive conditions also suffer immensely. The absent referent functions by Othering and silencing slaughterhouse employees in the meat industry.

Young's definition of cultural imperialism also functions by constructing slaughterhouse employees as absent referents as well as the Other. Dominant narratives and stereotypes about people of colors and immigrants establish the public's opinion of slaughterhouse employees. As Young argues, exploitation functions by designating unskilled and often degrading labor for people of color (52). In other words, our society delegates low-status jobs most people would refuse to perform for Others we assume as inferior. These jobs often include hazardous, labor-intensive, and demoralizing work that most people would wish to never be exposed to. The fact that the majority of the meat that Americans consume comes from industrial animal agriculture allows most people in the U.S. to avoid considering the suffering that must go into the work to kill and dismember billions of nonhuman animals. Thus, employees who suffer physically, psychologically, and socially from working in slaughterhouses are absent in the minds of most people when they consume animal flesh.

Employees must perform demoralizing job responsibilities daily. Many of us also neglect to consider the irony of what we deem "acts of cruelty" with the institutional violence we sanction daily for animal flesh. It is left up to slaughterhouse employees to undertake the demoralizing and violent responsibilities necessary for our prevalent animal consumption. We often relegate occupations that we deem beneath us (based on status) to people of colors. Although most Americans generally condemn unnecessary cruelty inflicted on other beings, the burden of inflicting pain and suffering on nonhuman



animals is placed on the shoulders of people perceived as inferior, or as the Other. This idea supports the fact that a disproportionate amount of people of colors (especially immigrants) are employed in slaughterhouses.

Employees who work in the meat-packing industry are often silenced or not heard by their supervisors or the industry itself. For instance, employees whose injuries are not visible are often forced to go right back to work rather than be treated for their injury. Employee's supervisors have the authority and final decision of whether employees require medical attention as well as if they regard the injury serious enough to be reported (Compa 47). Unless the injuries are visually obvious, like a laceration or amputation, meat-packing companies have the sole ability to claim whether or not wrist, back, shoulder, knee injuries or musculoskeletal diseases are necessarily job-related injuries in need of medical attention. In these cases, employees must fight to receive any sort of workers' compensation for their injuries. One Smithfield employee who reported being critically injured on the job stated:

I kept having pain in my back from the heavy lifting. My supervisor wouldn't let me go to the clinic. He said there was too much work and I couldn't leave the line. I woke up the next day and couldn't move. When I went to the clinic, they told me I got hurt at home. They said that the regular insurance would pay my medical bills if I agreed that I got hurt at home. They asked me to sign a paper but it was in English and I didn't understand it, so I didn't sign it. I quit because the pain was so bad.

Nobody paid my medical bills, neither the company insurance nor workers' comp. (Compa 47)

The above account demonstrates the lack of autonomy and individual choice that employees are granted in regards to their health and wellbeing. As Young contends, exploitation functions with an unequal exchange of instrumental labor (which benefits the privileged) for low wages, unprotected rights, and a lack of care and respect for employees (52). In these cases, employees are literally silenced in regards to their health and well-being, which contributes to a misrepresentation of the actual percentages of injury within the industry. Their forced silence reduces their worth as workers and individuals to the unskilled and monotonous job they perform for hours on end. They are regarded as mere instruments in making profit for multi-million dollar meat industries. Their forced silence demonstrates that the meat industry only values their worth in terms of what they can provide to the industry. Once an employee is injured, the industry thinks of them as a mere liability. Slaughterhouse workers become absent referents because the industry treats them as unimportant invisible entities. Their worth is stripped from them when they are sick and/or unable to work. The lack of respect that they receive is related to public perceptions of their value as individuals.

### **Interconnections**

#### ***Lack of Moral Personhood***

Moreover, philosopher Giorgio Agamben argues that we have historically differentiated between bare life and the good life (or a political agent) (8-9). He explains that persons viewed as bare life are both included and excluded in the political realm

because of our reliance on their exclusion to differentiate those who are valuable from those who are dispensable (9). I have chosen to use his theory of bare life because it further illuminates how we differentiate between the moral worth of individual beings. People who are viewed as bare life are compared to nonhuman animals with whom we assume can be reduced to their instinctual tendencies. Furthermore, he contends that this separation between the bare lives and the good lives relies fundamentally on their political participation. According to Agamben's theory, both nonhuman animals and most slaughterhouse employees are excluded from the political realm because of arbitrary differences the dominant class has deemed essential in dictating superiority and inferiority.

According to psychologist Nick Haslam, dehumanization involves the denial of a person's identity as an individual, or as a distinguishable and autonomous independent (254). When individuals are dehumanized they are excluded from being morally considered, similarly to that of nonhuman animals (Haslam 255, 256). Moreover, negative stereotypes bolstered by the dehumanization of immigrant populations, especially those who are slaughterhouse workers, have represented them as violent, barbaric, and drug addicts. Many right-wing conservatives perpetuate these stereotypes about immigrants that reinforce their lack of moral personhood. For instance, in the recent primary elections for presidency, Donald Trump has been using rhetoric that declares immigrants to be murderers and rapists (Scherer). This ultimately and unfortunately leads a large population of U.S. citizens to view immigrants in this manner.

Given that many slaughterhouse employees are immigrants and/or people of colors, many are treated as non-persons and outside of consideration for our common humanity. Many slaughterhouse employees are neglected basic human rights in the workplace. This neglect is supported by widely held beliefs concerning their humanity or value as individuals with needs and aspirations. In 2013, a former Tyson poultry hanger reported how common it was for workers to urinate on themselves because they were prohibited to leave the disassembly line for hours at a time (Hawthorne, VegNews). Workers have also reported being screamed at, sexually harassed, threatened, and physically abused (Hawthorne, VegNews). Slaughterhouse employees are treated similarly to the nonhuman animals they dismember. They are treated instrumentally, for the services they provide, rather than as unique individuals, and are then dismissed once they are too injured to make more profit for the industry. They are treated as indistinguishable from all other employees, as well as from the nonhuman animals they kill for our consumption.

There is not a term for dehumanizing a nonhuman animal because being an animal is considered to be inferior in and of itself. To dehumanize a person means to perceive and/or treat them as a sub-human or animal. We already perceive nonhuman animals as occupying a lowly position within the alleged hierarchy of living things. Thus, there is not currently a term to describe how and why nonhuman animals are not treated with care and moral consideration as humans hope to be. We lack this term because of our overall acceptance of how billions of nonhuman animals are “treated like animals” within industrial agriculture. It is nothing that we as humans aspire to ever experience,

although it is evident that slaughterhouse employees also occupy a similar lowly position to nonhuman animals. Our perceptions of them often rely on the dualities we uphold about superior and marginalized groups.

### ***Dualistic Mentality***

Plumwood argues that hierarchical relationships and the creation of the Other are maintained by dualisms (*Feminism* 41). Dualisms are grounded by perspectives, beliefs, and attitudes that consider another as inferior. These attitudes become prevalent and appear “natural” because of the influence that dominant groups have in constructing our culture and identities (47). However, the Other is not only established as different, but as inferior. In other words, mere differences do not demarcate why some are viewed as inferior. Instead, boundaries are drawn when the oppressor emphasizes *which* differences are essential to be inferior or superior. Thus, dominant groups minimize the importance of shared qualities and maximize the qualities that are different in order to clearly separate the dominant from the subordinate (Plumwood 49). Another means of constructing and maintaining the Other is relational. When defined in relation to the dominant, the Other is not perceived as an independent individual, but instead is only recognized for the characteristics or qualities that reflect the former’s needs and desires (52). Therefore, the Other is often regarded merely as an instrument, or as a means to an end for the interests of the oppressor. In this way, the Other is never understood to have value or virtue in their own right (Plumwood 52, 53). The Other’s individual purpose, goals, agency, identity, and desires remain invisible to the oppressor and often to the mass public.

The creation of hierarchical relationships that affect slaughterhouse employees and nonhuman farmed animals is maintained by the perceived dualisms between what the public perceives between “us” and “them.” Centuries-old misconceptions about nonhuman animals’ lack of intelligence, socio-emotional lives, and sensitivity to pain have played a large part in our lack of willingness to grant them moral considerability. Similarly, widely held assumptions about groups of people we have deemed inferior systematically perpetuate their exploitation and oppression. Even as time has passed and we have gained a better understanding of the emotional lives of nonhuman animals as well as racist and discriminatory practices we have upheld about racialized groups, we continue to use ancient excuses to uphold normative notions and purposes for factory-farmed animals and people of colors. Joy explains:

It is the mentality of domination and subjugation, of privilege and oppression. It is the mentality that causes us to turn *someone* into *something*, to reduce a life to a unit of production, to erase someone’s being. It is the might-makes-right mentality, which makes us feel entitled to wield complete control over the lives and deaths of those with less power—just because we can. And to feel justified in our actions, because they’re only.... savages, women, animals. (“Carnism”)

Here Joy explains how our perceptions of nonhuman animals so easily transform from seeing them as identifiable creatures to merely objects. Similarly, the plight of slaughterhouse employees remains absent in our decisions about food consumption that

also negatively impacts their lives. As she discusses, when we feel privileged in our dominant positions, we assume authority over the lives of others whom we deem inferior.

### ***Maintaining Oppressive Frameworks***

The connection between the exploitation of nonhuman animals and humans has been widely documented in other food-producing industries around the world. After abuse in Thailand shrimp industries was reported by the Environmental Justice Foundation, an investigation revealed the countless injustices and illegal treatment thriving within the confines of shrimp factories (Ferdman). Workers enslaved and held captive in Thai shrimp industries (some of whom are children and/or trafficked people) are regularly forced to work twenty hour shifts with little to no pay. Many are also tortured, beaten, and murdered in front of their coworkers in an effort to keep others submissive (Hodal, Kelly, and Lawrence). Another investigation disclosed that over fifty percent of interviewed dairy workers in New Mexico reported having been injured on the job, some more than once during their time working at dairy “farms” (Sorrentino). Many workers also reported similar instances documented in chapter three, namely in regard to the dangerous working conditions, lack of training, denied meal breaks, and neglect in worker support in cases of injury or illness. Similar forms of abuse that cows and pigs raised for human consumption endure were also documented regarding dairy cows at Winchester Dairy in New Mexico, which has since been shut down (Sorrentino). Undercover videos document cows being beaten, shocked, stabbed with sharp tools, and dragged by tractors if they were too sick and weak to move by themselves (Glionna). The

above accounts as well as numerous others indicate the need for a more comprehensive consideration of the intersections between human and animal exploitation.

The function of patriarchal dualisms is to differentiate beings as either dominant or inferior. An unfortunate irony lies deep within the industrial agricultural system: employees unknowingly uphold the same system of oppression toward nonhuman animals that is used to reinforce their own oppression and dehumanization. Because of normalized patriarchal dualisms, we are taught that we must oppress or control others to retain our humanity or our distinctions from those we deem inferior. Given the widely held assumptions about the inferiority of nonhuman animal value, many slaughterhouse employees use their power over nonhuman animals to differentiate themselves from the lowly status of nonhuman animals. Because many employees are often treated similarly to the nonhuman animals they “handle,” many feel the need to exert their own authority over another being because they lack this particular agency or control over their environments at their place of employment. However, just as we meat-consuming beings are guilty in the exploitation and oppression of both nonhuman animals and employees within the industry, slaughterhouse employees are also unconsciously implicated in the oppression and abuse of nonhuman animal Others. Because we have historically used domination and control to stake our place in the world as human, some employees enact this same dualistic and controlling paradigm that has also been used to oppress them. Examples include the inhumane and cruel treatment of nonhuman animals in slaughterhouses. The blame, however should not be left on the shoulders of slaughterhouse employees, because many of them have little to no choice but to work in



this industry. Rather, we should contemplate the small but fundamental changes we as the public may make to alleviate and obliterate the mass oppression generated by the animal agricultural system.

### **Implications**

As this thesis has argued, the abuse of nonhuman animals and employees is intricately bound. Many of us, whether it be individuals or welfare organizations, perceive the abuse of “farmed” animals and the exploitation of employees as two completely separate issues. However, as discussed in my thesis, because the systematic and fundamental foundation for their exploitation is rooted in patriarchal dualisms as well as in a culture of violence, we cannot isolate these issues from one another if our common goal is the complete liberation and social justice for all beings. Focusing on only one of these issues rather than a collective concern fails to address what is fundamental to their oppression. Fixing our attention and concern exclusively toward either nonhuman animals or employees only illuminates the symptoms and repercussions of our complicity rather than the actual cause of our decisions and moral bifurcations for particular groups of beings. The proliferation of such interrelated oppression between nonhuman animals and employees, especially in the industrial agricultural industry, bears obvious significance and necessitates additional investigation and research.

Given the similarities in how nonhuman animals and employees are rendered into absent referents, the overlapping of their oppressions within the industry, as well as the patriarchal, dualistic mentality that is used to exploit them, it is imperative that our perceptions about and empathy for others must shift to be more inclusive and holistic.

This thesis is an attempt to demonstrate the intricately woven nature of oppression, to suggest a departure from dualistic discourse and action, as well as to propose a more comprehensive vision of nonhuman animal and human liberation.

My thesis adds to the current discussion on animal and human welfare within animal agriculture. By using Young's faces of oppression as well as the concept of the absent referent to demonstrate the integral and interrelated relationship between nonhuman animals and employee exploitation, I argue that for us to look at their treatment and abuse collectively. Although many animal welfare and human rights organizations tackle these issues separately, I contend that they are too dependent on one another to isolate them if our end goal is complete liberation of all beings from oppression and discrimination. I suggest that these organizations should focus on the fundamental relationships between their exploitation in order to address the underlying system of oppression that ultimately impacts them both in similar and different ways.

### **Conclusion**

Here, I have proposed that a shared relationship exists between the exploitation and oppression of nonhuman animals and employees. Every year, over ten billion nonhuman animals are killed for human consumption in the U.S. alone. However, our complicity with the instrumental use of nonhuman animals for food does not solely impact animal lives. Our decisions to consume animal products also impact slaughterhouse employees' social, physical, and psychological well-being. Other factors that are also impacted by institutionalized animal exploitation that I chose not to focus on include environmental degradation and the health consequences of a meat-based diet. The

impact of animal agriculture does not stop with the slaughterhouse employees who are negatively affected. Thus, unless we address these issues as comprehensive, we cannot fully recognize the full consequences of the mass production of animal products.

I recognize that making more conscientious and deliberate food choices is more complicated than simply acknowledging the existence of systems of oppressions entrenched in the animal agricultural system. However, this very acknowledgment is the first step towards radical and transformational changes. As mentioned above, the lives and deaths of nonhuman animals and the working conditions and exploitation of employees are purposefully kept invisible to the public. Eating animal flesh often goes unquestioned because of how ingrained it is in U.S. culture. It is common to take widely held beliefs for facts when we have been taught that nonhuman animals exist to become our food. Furthermore, our conceptualization of cows, pigs, and chickens, as beef, pork, and nuggets reinforces the reduction of these particular nonhuman animals *as* food, rather than as complex individuals we have decided to *use* for food. Our mistake is perceiving these particular nonhuman animals *as* edible food rather than individual beings who want to live. Still, it is also naive to assume that these recognitions are easy to come to terms with.

It is even more naive to expect most people who do learn about the injustices in slaughterhouses to make lasting changes. Because meat-eating culture is fixed into our society, a number of impediments keep people from changing their eating habits. A lack of accesses to nutritional education and transportation to grocery stores that sell fresh foods disproportionately impacts the lives of the racialized, poor, and low socioeconomic

groups of people. In these instances, not only are the nonhuman animals and slaughterhouse employees exploited by this system, but also those who suffer from health and environmental degradation because of the industrial agricultural system.

Unfortunately, other factors also contribute to the sometimes unconscious complicity of our human population. Traditional and familial factors, gustatory pleasures, societal pressures as well as the normalized infiltration of animal products into many of our foods all provide additional conditions that make it difficult for lasting and transformative change.

By describing the lives and deaths of nonhuman animals as well as the disproportionately abusive treatment of slaughterhouse employees, I have demonstrated a fundamental connection between their exploitation. Using Young's five faces of oppression, Adam's concept of the absent referent, and the consequences of upholding a patriarchal, dualistic mentality, I have argued that we must look at nonhuman animal and human rights issues in tandem in order to fully recognize how their exploitation is reinforced by a fundamentally oppressive framework. I suggest that human rights advocates and feminist scholars consider the impact of nonhuman animals on human life. I also encourage animal rights activists (and campaign fronts) to recognize the intricately woven relationship between animal exploitation with that of humans. Addressing these issues separately only alleviates the symptoms that the industrial agricultural system engenders, rather tackling the root causes of their oppression. By considering animal welfare and human rights issues independently from one another, we can only attempt to alleviate some of the suffering caused by animal agriculture rather than advocate for the

liberation of nonhuman animals and slaughterhouse workers. Rather than perceive these issues as separate, I propose a more holistic and comprehensive vision in their shared liberation.

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