Breeding Inequality: Human-Animal Relationships in Beef Production

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BREEDING INEQUALITY: HUMAN-ANIMAL INTERACTIONS IN BEEF PRODUCTION

By

Colter Ellis

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Sociology
2011
This thesis entitled:
Breeding Inequality: Human-Animal Relationships in Beef Production

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IRB protocol # 1105.05
Ellis, Colter (Ph.D., Sociology)

BREEDING INEQUALITY: HUMAN-ANIMAL INTERACTIONS IN BEEF PRODUCTION

Dissertation Supervised by Dr. Leslie Irvine

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is about the human-animal relationship in beef production. In particular, I examine the social-psychological context of working with an animal intended to become a commodity. I show that beef producers care greatly for the animals they raise, but this relationship has limits. To learn these limits, young people must acquire the emotional skills needed to understand certain kinds of animals as “market animals.” These emotional skills help young people to understand animals as killable and useable as commodities. The task is to be able to have caring relationships with market animals, while remaining capable of treating them as commodities. Adult ranchers use these same skills to create and maintain an emotional boundary between consumers and the animals they eat. This is what I call boundary labor. Ranchers take on the emotional burden of caring for an animal who is useful to others only because its body is killable. Using these bodies as commodities necessitates the continual breeding of more bodies. This process collapses biological reproduction with capitalist production. I use the term “(re)production” to signify the inseparability of these two factors. Through the social-psychological processes outlined, producers learn to understand their relationship with cattle as symbiotic. I call this process the symbiotic ideology.
Dedicated to Dr. Kelly Evelyn Knight
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is truly a privilege to have had the opportunity to write this dissertation. Finishing my degree would never have been possible without the support and encouragement of my advisors, friends, and family. While I cannot acknowledge everyone here, I do want to take a moment to mention a few very important people.

First and foremost, I want to thank Leslie Irvine. As an advisor, she has worked endlessly on my behalf. She has read more drafts of my work than I can even count. She is an amazing mentor and I am forever indebted to her and grateful for her dedication. Thanks are also due to Amy Wilkins and Patti Adler for their thoughtful advising, availability, general encouragement and support of my research and professional development. Additionally, I am grateful to Michael Zimmerman and Clinton Sanders for there encouragement, flexibility, and constructive feedback.

I am grateful to my undergraduate advisor Lisa Zottarelli. Without Lisa’s faith and support, I would never have applied to graduate school. In addition to Lisa, two faculty members at Idaho State University were especially influential. I am grateful for Ann Hunter for her high standards and diligent commitment to her students and I am forever thankful to Tahmoores Sarraf for introducing me to the field of sociology in the fall semester of 1999. Although I never personally spoke to Dr. Sarraf, he gave me the gift of the sociological imagination and for that I can never thank him enough.

I want to thank Dr. Kelly E. Knight. I am constantly amazed and inspired by her work ethic, meticulous attention to detail, and her kind and giving heart. I am truly blessed to have her in my life.

I want to say thank you to my father Morgan for showing me what it means to have faith, my mother Mari for constantly working for what is fair, and to my brother Jesse for showing me true friendship. I am also thankful for my Oma Walli and Grandpa Don Lenon, my grandfather Lloyd Ellis, my ante and uncle Cole and Diana Ellis, and to the dogs Tasha, Sadie, Spud, and Wiener, and the cats Chewie and Skywalker.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my friends Corey and Lisa Gates, Javier Badell, Ajay Roopchansingh, Leith Lombas, Kris Hoyt, and Peter Lovegrove. Thank you all for your faith and support.
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CHAPTER 1

THE BEGINNING

*The significance of the narrative that follows is paradoxically rooted in its preoccupation with details of life so ordinary that they have rarely been considered the stuff of history.*

—Virginia D. Anderson *Creatures of Empire*

People and nonhuman animals have accomplished amazing things together—things that neither of us could have done on our own. Animals make our lives possible, so much so that we cannot be “people,” in the sense that we understand ourselves, outside our relationships with nonhuman beings. Other animals are necessary components of our inner physicality, and they are essential parts of our own subjective experiences. The enzymes that populate our stomachs, the insects and mice that share our homes, the meat on our plates, and the dogs in our laps, allow us to be who we are. These nonhuman creatures are our coauthors in the production of social life. These relationships are complicated. They are not equal, and are certainly not always friendly, but they are the stuff of our everyday lives.

The role of these animals in society is regularly overlooked and underestimated, in part because many animals are beyond our view. This is especially the case with animals in agriculture. This year, approximately 39 million beef cattle from 753,000 U.S. cattle ranches will produce approximately 34 million calves.¹ Most of us will see these animals only from the car

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¹ The number 39 million represents the beef cows, heifers, and bulls used for breeding and does not include dairy or feedlot cattle (NASS 2010). The total inventory of cattle on all U.S. beef operations including feedlots was 94.5 million as of January 1, 2009 (USDA 2009). The 753,000
window or on our dinner plate. As a result, we do not understand the profound experience of working with cattle. These humble animals are social and emotional creatures, and sharing their lives can be an incredible experience. Through our relationship with cattle, they help us produce billions of pounds of food and countless other products critical to our lives (e.g., leather, glue, steel, drywall, and pharmaceuticals, just to name a few). Their role in society is critical, yet there is little sociological knowledge about the relationship between people and the animals we raise in agriculture. In this dissertation, I investigate the social and social-psychological relationships between people and beef cattle.

What is most immediately clear about our relationship with cattle is that the meanings we give to them make it socially acceptable to kill them and turn them into commodities. During my ethnographic work with beef producers, I became curious about how they worked so closely with the animals they raised for this purpose. It is tempting to assume that people who do this kind of work feel no emotional connection to the animals they raise. As I will show, this assumption says more about urban consumers than it does about people in animal agriculture.

Raising, nurturing, and killing 34 million beef cattle is a formidable task, and the process requires intense human-animal interaction. People have been uneasy with this process of industrialized slaughter since Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906) detailed the gruesome reality of slaughterhouses at the turn of the century. Recent sociological research further discusses the distasteful details of slaughterhouse operations (Erickson 1994, 2002; Thompson 1983; Vialles 1994). This type of work is a perfect example of what Everett Hughes (1962) calls “dirty work.”

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1 In 2009 the United States produced 26.56 billion pounds of beef, of which 1.888 billion pounds, or 7.1 percent, was exported. Japan, Mexico, South Korea, and Canada are the four top importers of U.S. beef (USDA 2009).
According to Hughes, dirty work is necessary to the functioning of society but is stigmatized and taboo. Accounts of the slaughterhouse describe this dirty work and outline processes most consumers of animal-based goods tend not to think about. But the slaughterhouse represents only one part of animal agriculture. Before animals arrive at the slaughterhouse, they must be bred, born, fed, and cared for. This is the work of ranchers. While this work is idealized in the minds of many, it is also dirty—both physically and emotionally. Physically, ranchers work in and with animal feces; they care for sick animals; they directly kill those animals who will not survive; they handle reproductive materials; they breed and birth animals. But this is not all they do. Ranchers’ work is also emotionally dirty.

For people outside animal agriculture, consuming the animals we care for seems unimaginable. For most of us, the thought of eating the family dog, cat, or goldfish is distasteful at best. We share a subjective experience with our companion animals: they share our emotions and communicate with us, and we often feel a “connection” with them (Irvine 2004). This relationship, whether we experience it personally or not, is an important factor that makes eating companion animals culturally taboo. But our feelings about cows, pigs, chickens, and the other animals we eat are very different. In our everyday lives, we typically do not see them as having the same social capabilities as dogs or cats. Why not? It could be that these animals are not capable of this kind of intersubjectivity, that they are somehow physiologically or psychologically incapable of meaningful social interaction. This assumption is problematic. After all, until the late twentieth century, people generally did not think dogs or cats could have meaningful interaction either (Franklin 1999; Irvine 2004). As Leslie Irvine (2004) points out,

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3 I prefer the word “companion animal” to “pet” for dogs, cats, and some other animals whose social role is more emotional than instrumental in orientation. As Irvine (2004) points out, companion animal denotes an effort to think of animals as animals and not simply property, workers, entertainment, or commodities (see also Franklin 1999).
most people at that time did not “describe animals as thinking, feeling partners in social interaction” (p. 57). If we can learn to feel a connection with a dog or a cat, why couldn’t we have this experience with a cow or a chicken? Another explanation could be that our lack of interaction with the animals we consume means we do not have an opportunity to build relationships. I find this argument somewhat more plausible, but someone still has to interact with these animals. Do they build an interpersonal relationship? Do they feel a connection? We typically assume that they do not.

Ranchers closely interact with cattle, and research suggests that when people interact with animals, they often develop a “connection” with them (Irvine 2004). For example, Leslie Irvine found that people adopting dogs and cats from an animal shelter described a sense of understanding and closeness with particular animals. In this dissertation, I show that ranchers also feel this connection, but their job requires them to remain capable of selling cattle as commodities. This emotion management (Hochschild 1979, 1983) protects others in the beef-production chain and consumers from having to engage with cattle emotionally. This is emotional dirty work.

Cultural boundaries separate people, our companion animals, and the animals we eat. In the case of beef, ranching work produces these boundaries, making the killing and consumption of cattle culturally possible.⁴ People in animal agriculture have emotional skills that people outside the industry do not. These skills must be learned. In this dissertation, I discuss the way youth learn to care for animals they will sell at auction, and I show that adult ranchers build

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⁴ The people who work on the slaughterhouse “kill floors” actually kill cattle. This dirty work is very difficult emotionally, and the occupation has notoriously high turnover rates (see Erickson 1994, 2002). Kill floors are specifically designed to minimize interaction between people and live cattle. This lack of interaction means that slaughterhouse work serves a very different purpose than ranching.
strong relationships with individual members of their herds. To do this work, ranchers find ways to understand this process as unavoidable and natural. Ultimately, ranchers create a feeling that their unequal relationships with cattle are reciprocal and symbiotic.

CONTEXT

The beef-production chain can be divided roughly into four stages: (1) the cow-calf operation, (2) the feedlot, (3) the slaughterhouse, and (4) distribution. This study focuses most extensively on cow-calf operations, or what most people think of as cattle ranches. Ranches are typically family owned and range from as small as one or two cattle to as large as several thousand. The primary purpose of cow-calf operations is the breeding and early rearing of young calves. These operations are also responsible for birthing, weaning, dehorning, and castrating steers, as well as branding and tagging cattle for identification (Short 2001). Calves are raised in this environment only until they are weaned from their mothers. At this time, they are typically sold to feedlots, the second stage of cattle production. Once cattle are in a feedlot, or a confined animal-feeding operation (CAFO), they are fed a diet that fattens them to nearly double their previous weight. When cattle reach adequate size, they go to slaughter and are turned into any number of consumable goods.

DIFFERENCES

As a society, we have a lot invested in the normative killing and eating of animals. This process is an important part of our economy, our culture, and our personal enjoyment. Given this investment, a little discomfort is warranted when we start discussing the gritty details of the

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5 These practices are routine in the industry and commonplace in all beef-production facilities, including organic, natural, and grass-fed operations.
process. At least, this was the case for me. I certainly felt uncomfortable when I first began to consider these issues. But what does this discomfort mean? I suggest it points to the fragility of the human-animal difference.

To be sure, there are many differences between people and other animals, but understanding and negotiating just what these differences mean can lead to serious contention. Arnold Arluke and Clinton R. Sanders (1996) point out that the way we regard animals is socially constructed, situated in time and place, and culturally dependent. That is to say, people at different times, in different places, working from different cultures, understand animals differently. The classic example of cross-cultural differences in the ways people think of cattle is the Hindu cow. Cattle in India are revered by Hindu people, who consider it taboo to kill or eat them. This concept is clearly very different from Western ideas about the same animal.

In the United States, the perception of cattle has changed over time. Cattle were once valued mostly as living beings. Capable of assisting cultivation and fertilizing crops, they were considered a powerful resource that signified wealth and prestige (Rifkin 1992; Wilkie 2010). Today, our view of cattle tends to reduce them to the value of a T-bone. John Berger (1980) points to the mistake of taking contemporary understandings about animals as stable definitions. As Berger states, “to suppose that animals first entered the human imagination as meat or leather or horn is to project a nineteenth-century attitude backwards across the millennia” (p. 2). Still, our contemporary attitudes toward animals are important, and there can be a lot at stake when our ideas about the differences between humans and animals are challenged.

One common way to understand differences between humans and animals is to point to one decisive characteristic that fundamentally makes people unique among animals. Commonly cited characteristics of this brand of exceptionalism include our use of language and tools, as
well as our logic, emotions, opposable thumbs, and sense of our own mortality. Every so often, a
ew study of animal behavior provides evidence that supports or, more often, debunks theories of our uniqueness, and the priority of these qualities is debated and renegotiated. I should state here that I am not a biologist, a zoologist, or an animal scientist in the traditional sense. I am woefully unequipped to make arguments about the actual similarities or dissimilarities between people and other animals. Neither am I a philosopher. I cannot speak with conviction about the ethical implications of likeness or difference. To be sure, I have ideas about these dis/similarities and our ethical obligations to animals, but this is not my expertise and it is not the focus of this study. What concerns me is not the validity of the arguments made about difference so much as the assertions themselves. I believe that these discussions tell us more about ourselves than they do about other animals.

Other Animals

As a sociologist, I am most at home dealing with social phenomena that can be studied through direct observation. From this perspective, one of the clearest characteristics of our relationships with animals is that we treat them in drastically uneven and unequal ways. As Arluke and Sanders (1996) have pointed out, “inconsistent behavior towards animals is omnipresent in Western society” (p. 5). The most obvious example is that we treat cats and dogs very differently from cattle and chickens. What is even more striking is that this differential treatment is experienced as natural and normal, as though it has always been this way and could only ever be this way. This is a common mistake. In fact, the human-animal relationship is extremely varied both historically and culturally (Noske 1993; Rifkin 1992; Serpell 1986; Wilkie 2010; among many others).
How do we come to treat one kind of body differently than another? How do we come to experience this inequality as normal and natural? These basic questions are at the heart of the ideologies that create and maintain inequalities among people. I believe we can learn something about the social construction of difference among people by understanding the ways we socially construct the differences between ourselves and other animals. Central to the social construction of difference is the issue of boundaries.

The boundary between people and animals has its origins in the transition to settled agriculture (see Franklin 1999; Ingold 1994; Irvine 2001, 2004; Lawrence 1986; Noske 1997; Schwabe 1994). The success of humans’ switch from a hunter-gatherer society to one of agriculture depended on a successful working relationship between humans and animals. To be sure, killing animals has been a part of the human-animal relationship for the whole of history, and some have pointed to the transition to agriculture as the beginning of human exploitation of animals (Noske 1997; Irvine 2001; Serpell 1986). While there is significant evidence for this point, there is little doubt that the exploitation of animals increased exponentially with the implementation of modern agricultural technologies. This change helped construct new ideologies that further defined animals “as fundamentally different and ontologically separate” from humans (Wolch 1998:121). This separation has significant implications for the human-animal relationship, because it leads to the definition of animals not only as the other but also as inferior beings (Irvine 2004:36).

Defining animals as the other is a fundamental characteristic of the contemporary human-animal relationship. Michelle Fine (1994) discusses “othering” as the method a dominant group

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6 Some have argued that this association is overstated and have shown that agriculture was successful without significant contributions from animals. Despite this finding, nearly all lasting agricultural systems have included the significant involvement of domesticated animals.
uses to define into existence an inferior other as a way to constitute an in-group. Michael Schwalbe and associates (2000) elaborate on this model by showing othering to be a form of collective identity work. They identify “oppressive othering” as a process whereby “one group seeks advantage by defining another group as morally and/or intellectually inferior” (p. 423). Applied to human-animal relationships in agriculture, this model can be used to show that the dominant group (humans) socially constructed another group (cattle/nonhumans) as inferior to people. The case of animals represents one of the earliest, if not the first, examples of this kind of othering (see Irvine 2004).

The intuitive logic, the naturalness, of the animal other is often used to animalize other people (Arluke and Sanders 1996). Notable examples come from critiques of colonial understandings of “savagery.” Kay Anderson (2009) discusses how “indigenous people were variously perceived by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonial commentators as subhuman or less than human” (p. 11). The oppressive othering of indigenous groups as “savage” is pervasive in colonialisant literature and contemporary popular culture (see Deloria 1998; Hall 1996). Sociological accounts of slavery also note the animalization of human groups. Patricia Hill Collins (2004), for example, points out that in chattel slavery, “[d]ehumanizing Black people by defining them as nonhuman and as animals was a critical feature of racial oppression” (p. 55). A broader example comes from Erving Goffman’s (1963) discussion of stigma, in which he states, “by definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human” (p. 5). Statements such as these posit people’s nonhumanness or animality as a defining characteristic.

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7 Fine (1994) shows that the “Self and Other are knottily entangled” (p. 72) and that this unequal relationship is often ignored in qualitative research. By taking on the coconstituting nature of the Self-Other relationship, Fine argues that we reveal “far more about ourselves, and far more about the structures of Othering” (p. 72).
of their oppression. Implicit in these analogies is a general acceptance of treating animals in ways generally unacceptable in the case of humans. This language infers that the naturalness and general acceptance of killing or mistreating animals can be transferred to human bodies if they are posited as somehow less than human. When the animalization of human bodies is wholly successful, as it was during slavery and in other horrible moments of human history, the mistreatment of people likely felt as natural and normal as the mistreatment of other animals.

The link between human and animal oppression is an important contribution of this work. Throughout this dissertation, I constantly emphasize the connection between human and animal oppression and inequality. I consider the theoretical link between human and animal oppression to be a central contribution of this work, but I want to emphasize equally that animals themselves matter as social actors. Looking at animals sociologically is not only useful because it can illuminate human oppression. It is also useful to understand animals because they are co-producers and stakeholders of our social worlds.

GOALS AND CHAPTER ORGANIZATION
Cattle have an incredible influence on our lives, even though most people never actually interact with cattle while they are still alive. One of the central goals of this dissertation is to understand the lives of those whose job it is to work with cattle. The people in this study have shown me that this work is amazing. In their narratives, there is often a sense that ranch work is part of something larger. Many of the people I talked to lived and worked on land that had been in their family for multiple generations. They talked pridefully about producing people’s food and fondly of their animals. Some ranchers could even remember each animal’s ancestry back several generations. Ranchers depend on their cattle for their livelihoods and their lifestyle. Those
animals provide the income that keeps them on their land. They also help keep the hope alive that they will be able to pass that land down to the next generation. Working with cattle also means that ranchers get to work with animals, and as I will show, that working relationship is a very important part of their lives.

In a very real way, ranchers live and die with their cattle. Outside this relationship, ranchers are not the same people. This relationship is not equal. Those that raise cattle must sell those bodies as commodities. In this respect, ranching represents an example of the “caring/killing paradox” (Arluke 1994; Arluke and Sanders 1996: 85). In the chapters that follow, I discuss the various ways ranchers care for the animals they raise as commodities. Managing the tension between this caring and killing is an important part of their work. The goal of this discussion is not simply to understand how people can hold these simultaneous and contradictory feelings toward animals. Rather, I am ultimately interested in how they make this unequal relationship feel natural and normal for themselves and for their consumers.

With these interests in mind, this dissertation is divided into seven chapters. In this chapter, I have given an overview of the questions and topics that are discussed. Chapter 2 outlines my research methods and gives a more complete picture of the context of beef production. Chapter 3 begins the analytic chapters and provides a historical contextualization of contemporary U.S. beef production. In this chapter, I outline the complex history of human-animal relationships in the United States and discuss the steps that led to the eventual reduction of cattle’s social role to that of a commodity. The chapter then discusses the way young people are socialized into the emotional culture needed to deal with animals in this simplified capacity. Chapter 4 develops this same theme, by discussing the emotional skills used by adult ranchers. These men and women work with cattle every day and build relationships that need to be
managed for the animals to be sold and eventually killed. I argue in this chapter that the emotion work of ranchers makes cattle *killable*. Defining cattle as killable means that ranchers need a steady supply of bodies. These bodies need to be bred. This *(re)production* is the topic of Chapter 5. Chapter 6 synthesizes these issues by providing a more macro understanding of ranchers’ interactions with the environment and their animals. This interaction is the final step that helps ranchers experience their work as natural and normal, which I term “symbiotic ideology.”

A NOTE ABOUT LANGUAGE

Talking about the animals we eat can bring up many emotions, and there are a number of tools that help us avoid the issue. There is a well-documented tendency not to talk about individual animals when we talk about animals in agriculture, science, or hunting (Adams 1990; Arluke and Sanders 1996; Phillips 1994; Smith-Harris 2004). When we do talk about these animals, we generally refer to generic members of a class of animals, using plurals and talking of cattle, mice, or deer. In food production, we avoid talking about death or killing by using words such as “processing” or saying that animals were sent to the “packinghouse.” Once animal bodies become commodities, we further reduce them to the status of “things” or “its,” instead of “whos” (Adams 1990; Dunayer 1995).

The animals in this dissertation are as important to the social and physical environment as the people are, and I try to avoid using language that obscures or trivializes their role. This task is difficult and requires using words that can seem more critical than I intend them to be. For example, I use the word “killing” instead of “processing,” but I do not intended to suggest that I think killing animals is fundamentally wrong. This is not my opinion. Killing animals has always
been an important social function, but it is an ugly process, no matter how “humanely” it is done. Calling this killing “processing” or even “slaughter” lets us “off the hook,” to use metaphor derived from killing fish. Throughout this dissertation, I use words that I see as approximating most closely the phenomenon in its most basic and direct sense.

The word “animal” is a little harder for me to escape. Clearly, people are animals and using the word to mean only other animals is a linguistic trick that artificially separates animals into an unequal dichotomy. Still, this is the reality. In the same way that sociologists use race or gender categories, even though they are social constructions, I continue to use the word “animal” to refer to nonhuman animals. As I see it, this language most accurately approximates the reality of the human-animal relationship. An important outcome of this social construction is that it is socially accepted that animals, unlike people, can be owned. Some people reject the notion that humans should have the ability to own other animals. I am sympathetic with this view, but as I see it, animals in agriculture are clearly owned, rightly or wrongly. Because of this ownership, animals can be treated as commodities.

This leads me to another important discussion about what to call animals involved in agriculture. Some researchers have rejected “food animals” as an acceptable category, because the term infers that these animals are inherently or essentially intended for food. Rhoda Wilkie (2010) prefers the words “animals raised for food” as a way to avoid essentializing animals in this way. As a point of preference, I use even more cumbersome language by saying “animals treated as commodities.” I prefer this language because animals in agriculture are not simply used as food, but can be turned into any number of goods.

While our social constructions are dynamic, historically situated, and culturally influenced, they are nonetheless powerful social forces. How we socially construct animals has
drastic and bloody implications for real bodies. After all, animals are not only social constructions. They have a life, physicality, and an agency of their own. As Irvine (2004) states, “our relationships are not limited to social constructions, but they are not independent of them, either” (p. 34). We tend to avoid talking about animal death for good reason. For myself, I don’t really want to think about the who behind the stack I’m about to eat, and I don’t care to ponder the life of the animal(s) whose skin is now my shoes. Academics and activists have rightfully been very critical of this kind of language, pointing out that it clearly masques a culturally ugly and distasteful backstage, to use Goffman’s (1959) term. But it is a mistake to think of this linguistic tendency as approximating the feelings of those who produce animals. As I show in the following chapters, people have a much more complicated relationship with the animals they raise then this language suggests.
CHAPTER 2

METHOD

You can see a lot just by looking.
—Attributed to former New York Yankees catcher Yogi Berra

It was never my intention to study animals. This project was originally going to explore the ecological perceptions of cattle ranchers from the perspective of environmental sociology and the sociology of agriculture. The first interviews focused primarily on ranchers’ natural resource management practices. I was specifically interested in the degree to which ranchers felt empowered to make progressive decisions regarding environmental conservation. At the time, it was my suspicion that market conditions and the policies of agricultural corporations would represent significant obstacles to progressive resource management. While this is still my suspicion, this was not an issue that ranchers seemed interested in talking about. Instead, the questions that elicited the richest data were those regarding their cattle. My original interview guide included several general questions about animal welfare. Eventually, these issues became my central focus.

Cattle ranchers in the West are notorious for their sense of privacy, partly because of the cowboy ethos and partly because ranching, as an enterprise, requires them to live in isolated, rural locations. For this research, I often drove more than three hours one way—much of which was spent on dirt roads—to conduct one interview and one day of participant observation. The people I interviewed made their homes far from the cities and freeways, and most traveled to
small cities only once a month. Gaining access to this population was not easy, and initially I was met with a great deal of skepticism. I found most interviewees through a state agency involved with animal agriculture; a contact there gave me a short list of ranchers who “might” be willing to talk to me. I called the people on the list and explained my project. They were often suspicious of a sociologist interested in animal agriculture who was not from the state’s land-grant university. These concerns were often put to rest when I explained that I grew up in Idaho and that members of my family currently raise cattle. As has been the case for other ethnographers, these aspects of my biography were central to gaining access and building rapport (Cherry, Ellis, and DeSoucey 2011; Harrington 2003). After meeting with me, nearly all of the people I interviewed referred me to neighbors or friends in the industry.

Inductive research techniques are a cornerstone of qualitative and ethnographic methods. As Howard Becker and Blanche Geer (1960) point out, methods that facilitate analytic induction, such as unstructured or semistructured interviews and participant observation, allow the researcher to “maximize the possibility of coming upon unexpected data” (p. 268). Taking an ethnographic approach allowed me to follow the ranchers’ lead and opened up the possibility of incorporating animals into my analysis. John Lofland and colleagues (2006) show that during ethnography, data are gathered, focused, and analyzed simultaneously and continuously throughout a research process. Following this principle, I gathered and analyzed data by looking for themes and identifying patterns. I used this information to focus my research interests, revise my interview guide, and identify new patterns. Each time I went through this process, the role of animals became increasingly pronounced and eventually became the focus of my research.
CONTEXT

This dissertation draws on ethnographic interviews with owners of cow-calf operations, or what most people think of as cattle ranches. The lives of cattle on these operations are very good by the standards of contemporary agriculture. While the majority of pigs and chickens raised for food in the United States spend most of their lives in extreme confinement (Novek 2005), cattle typically begin their lives in iconic pastures and rangeland. These ranches are almost all family owned and typically are very small in comparison to the establishments designed for swine and poultry.

Cow-calf operations are the ones you see in open fields when you drive through rural or semirural areas. The primary purpose of these operations is to breed and raise young calves until they are ready for feedlots. Before I get too far ahead of myself, it is important to talk a little about language. Not all the bovine animals on a ranch are cows. The word “cow” is often used inaccurately as a generic term for all cattle. “Cow” actually refers to female cattle who have given birth. Prior to giving birth, females are called heifers. Adult male cattle used for breeding are bulls. When bulls are young, they are called bull calves, but very few bull calves become adult bulls; most are castrated early in life. When this is done, they become steers. In Chapter 5, I address these names again by way of a gender analysis. For now, it is most important to understand the roles of the different kinds of cattle.

Cow-calf operations selectively breed bulls to cows and heifers in an effort to raise the best and most profitable cattle possible. Ranchers are very involved in the whole process. On some ranches, producers inseminate cattle with semen collected from specialized bulls. The gestation cycle of cattle is about 285 days, after which the calving process starts. Ranchers rigorously monitor calving and assist mother animals who have complications. Once calves are
born, ranchers give them inoculations and monitor their health. When they are old enough, calves are branded for identification, and bull calves are castrated.\textsuperscript{8} There is considerable variation in the weaning and marketing of calves. Calves can be weaned as early as four months old, but most are weaned at six or seven months old. Calves are generally sold to feedlots shortly after weaning, although some are kept longer and marketed as older calves, called yearlings. Regardless, once calves leave the ranch, they are typically sold to feedlots. These feedlots are considerably larger than cow/calf operations and some contain half a million animals. In this environment, cattle eat a high-energy diet of grain and corn and nearly double in weight. When animals reach adequate size, they are sent to be slaughtered. This size can be reached as early as fourteen to fifteen months old (Bailey, Bartian, and Robb 2002). At this point, cattle become meat, leather, and other commodities.

\textit{Ranching Data}

In my work with ranchers, I used semistructured interviews and participant observation as the primary modes of data collection. Before each interview, I revised my interview guide in an effort to further focus my interests and refine my analysis. Although my interview guide was dynamic, all interviews covered four primary areas: personal background, issues of the agricultural industry, resource management, and animal-human interaction. All interviews were developed to be interactive, as outlined by James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium (1995), and they took a conversational and relaxed tone, loosely adhering to the predeveloped interview guide.

The sample for this research is a theoretically driven convenience sample, intended to

\textsuperscript{8} As noted in the introduction, these practices are routine in the industry and commonplace in all beef-production facilities, including organic, natural, and grass-fed operations.
capture both a wide variation of experiences and theoretically important cases. I tried to incorporate ranchers of varying ages, from diverse areas, and from ranches of different sizes. Interviews were conducted gradually over the course of five years. In total, I interviewed 37 people, 7 of whom were interviewed multiple times. In total, I conducted 44 semistructured interviews and visited 27 different ranches. With the exception of one smaller operation, the ranches I visited and conducted interviews on ranged in size from 75 to more than 1,000 animals, and most ranged from 150 to 400 head. These numbers seem small in comparison to large feedlot operations, but the sample roughly represents the typical size of U.S. cow-calf operations. Most beef cattle come from cow/calf operations that have between 50 and 999 mother animals. While these operations represent only about 20% of all cow-calf operations, they produce about 64% of all U.S. newborn beef cattle. Large operations of more than 1,000 head make up approximately 0.2% of all ranches and produce about 8% of all newborn calves. There are a handful of operations over 50,000 animals, but these operations are typically managed as separate herds of a few thousand head each. See Table 1 for more descriptive statistics. Taking from these demographics, my research purposefully sampled ranches to emphasize those that produced the most beef cattle.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Cows</th>
<th>Number of Operations</th>
<th>All Operations (%)</th>
<th>Market Share (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-49</td>
<td>598,000</td>
<td>79.41</td>
<td>28.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>50-99</td>
<td>82,000</td>
<td>10.89</td>
<td>17.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>100-499</td>
<td>67,200</td>
<td>8.87</td>
<td>38.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>500-999</td>
<td>4,350</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>8.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>1000-1,999</td>
<td>1,110</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>4.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>2,000-4,999</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>2.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>5,000+</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>&gt;0.01</td>
<td>1.2</td>
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Source: NASS 2010
Table 2 represents approximate herd sizes for the ranches I visited. These numbers are not exact, because asking ranchers about the size of their ranch is a little like asking how much money they have in the bank. It is also the case that some ranchers are very poor record keepers and don’t actually know how many cattle they have at any given moment. This table also gives the pseudonyms I use for each rancher for the rest of this dissertation. Note that in addition to interviews with ranchers, I also visited three medium-sized feedlots, three breeding specialists, an agricultural engineer, a forest service agent, and the manager of the local auction house. Speaking with people from these peripheral occupations proved to be very useful for gaining a full understanding of the overall context of beef production.
### Table 2. Names, Operation Size, and Occupation of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Approximate Operation Size</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cow-Calf</td>
<td>Feedlot</td>
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* Interviewed more than once

In addition to interviews, I also spent well over 100 hours doing participant observation. I worked the cattle at the local auction house, rode along with a forest ranger who managed...
grassland used for grazing, and completed a certification course in bovine artificial insemination (AI), where I practiced AI’ing live cows for several days. I also visited and took a tour of a semen-collection facility. As part of a school-organized trip, I also had an opportunity to tour a small slaughterhouse and watch a pig be killed and butchered. In addition to interviews, I often participated in moving and feeding cattle, helped ranchers artificially inseminate their own cattle, and rode along with ranchers during their daily work. I had lunch and supper with groups of ranchers and interacted with them casually in restaurants and bars. I also subscribed to several email lists and online magazines in an effort to stay abreast of current issues in the beef industry.

Some of my experiences in the field can be discussed only in individual terms. Especially in Chapter 5, my analysis draws significantly on autoethnography as a way to talk about the embodied and emotional experience of working with animals during breeding and calving. This method has proven useful for others studying human-animal interactions, because it helps to capture the smells, sensations, and emotional experiences of working with animals.

4H Data

As my dissertation research developed, my advisor Leslie Irvine and I began discussing the importance of the 4-H youth livestock program. In this program 4-H’ers, as they are known, raise commercial breeds of cattle, pigs, goats, and sheep for the market. These “project animals” involve approximately a year of work in all aspects of raising a calf, lamb, or other young animal and culminates in the sale of the animal at the county or state fair. At the fair, buyers pay far above market value to support the efforts of 4-H members. Chapter 3 discusses 4-H as a key agent of socialization that teaches young people the emotional skills necessary for livestock production.
Data for Chapter 3 were collected in collaboration with my advisor Leslie Irvine. Together, we conducted 45 interviews with 4-H’ers between the ages of 9 and 18. Each person was interviewed twice, once in the beginning of the summer and once at the end. The first wave of interviews was highly structured and took place during “tag-days,” when the animals’ weights are documented for comparison with the weight at the show and sale in summer. The second wave of interviews was collected over several days at the local fair, where the 4-H’ers showed the results of their work with the animals. These interviews took a conversational style, beginning with open-ended questions about the fair and moving into a discussion of the youth’s relationship with the animals.⁹

ANALYSIS

The data analysis for this project followed the conventions of qualitative data analysis. In accordance with Amanda J. Coffey and Paul A. Atkinson’s (1996) recommendations, I coded the interview transcripts into categories and then inductively linked them to concepts and themes. Drawing from the symbolic interaction perspective, I tried to understand the context of cattle ranching, the meanings generated in this context, and the consequences of those meanings for individuals both human and nonhuman. I coded all interviews in this way. In addition to using interview transcripts for analysis, I also found that repeatedly listening to my interviews was very useful. Over the course of my data collection, I listened to the digital files of my interviews while exercising, driving in the car, or walking to work. During or after listening to my data, I would make memos about important ideas, concepts, or themes that emerged. I found this to be a

useful method for immersing myself in the data and for remembering the interviews in their entirety rather than the isolated fragments collected during traditional coding.

My data collection happened somewhat sporadically over the past five years. The geographic isolation of my population made prolonged emersion in the setting difficult, although I was able to spend nearly a week as the guest of one rancher. The time it took to gather my data was beneficial in some ways. It allowed me to code interviews and revise my interview guide in between many of my interviews. As a result, my questions became more directed and specific as the project developed. The specificity of my interviews is evident in my data. Interviews with Paul, Bill, Steven, and Kenny were some of the most useful and directed interviews I conducted. These interviews all happened during the second half of my data collection, when I was more confident in my role as a researcher and more assertive about the questions I wanted to ask. This is especially apparent in my interview with Steven. Prior to our interview, I had found areas where ranchers were not giving direct answers to my questions. Somewhat out of frustration, I was much more aggressive with Steven and pointed out several times that he had not answered my question. Because this interview was also toward the end of the project, I was less concerned about snowball sampling. While Steven and I had a very civil, interesting—and, I would say, fun—interview, at the end he did not give me names of other people I could contact for my project.

CONSUMPTIVE IDENTITY

My interview with Steven is interesting for another reason. I found Steven’s name and email through an internet site, and from the beginning, he seemed especially cautious of me. For the interview, he asked if I would meet him at a restaurant that was somewhat in between our homes.
I had never heard of the restaurant, but found out later that it was a steak house. At the time, I was not eating meat, but I knew that if I wanted this interview to go well, I needed to order a steak.

I currently eat meat. I have leather shoes, and I have always thought eggs and cheese were delicious. Before I started this project, it never even occurred to me to think otherwise. To be honest, I thought vegetarians were crazy, and I didn’t really know what a vegan was. But over the course of this research, my opinion changed drastically. I eventually became vegan, and I was not eating meat, cheese, eggs, or fish for most of the time during my data collection. Admittedly, I was not a very good vegan, but I did my best. There was a time when I couldn’t even look at an egg without thinking about the pain of the chicken that produced it. One of the things that prompted my change in diet was asking ranchers why they thought it was okay to kill animals or to eat meat. I found their answers very unsatisfactory. I went vegan for about a year, and what I called “animal product lite” for another year and a half. About a year ago, I started eating animal products again regularly. I have a very complicated, contradictory, and uneasy view of this process. It is my opinion that this consumption is ultimately unethical, but I did not find veganism to be a satisfactory alternative, and my consumptive identity is still somewhat in flux.

Eating meat was an important part of my data collection. As Brook Harrington (2003) points out, “ethnographers gain access to information to the extent that they are categorized as sharing a valued social identity with participants or as enhancing that identity through their research” (p. 609). As a white, presumably middle-class man who came from Idaho and has family who raise cattle, my identities allowed me a particular kind of access. But these demographic and personal identities were not the only ones that mattered. In collaboration with
two other sociologists, Elizabeth Cherry and Michaela DeSoucey, both of whom do research on animal-related issues, we developed and use the “term consumptive identities to designate the ways material consumption practices proclaim a person’s values and commitment to a given cultural movement” (Cherry, Ellis, and DeSoucey 2011: 3). Not eating meat with Steven would have revealed a consumption identity that would have fundamentally changed our interview. As a result, I chose to have a steak that night.

My interview with Steven was not the only time I did things in the field I would not have otherwise done. My data collection and analysis depended on my willingness not only to consume animal products but also to cause animals pain. During my data collection, I ran steel chutes that restrained animals, used electrified prods on cattle, helped inject hormones, and forcefully impregnated female cattle. These activities are standard operations for cattle ranches. I certainly never did anything illegal and never once saw anyone harm an animal in a way considered unacceptable by industry standards. I never did or observed anything unethical or illegal, but participating in these activities is ethically difficult for me personally.

Raising cattle as commodities is an ugly process; there are just no two ways about it. In the chapters that follow, I discuss this process in detail. There is a danger in this reporting. The success of the animal-rights movement and popular press books such as Eric Schlosser’s Fast Food Nation (2001) and Michael Pollan’s The Omnivore’s Dilemma (2006) have rightfully brought attention to the environmental and ethical problems associated with meat production. These depictions, though, tend to provide voyeuristic accounts of animal agriculture to nonagricultural audiences and make little effort to empathize with producers or to shed light on their realities. I hope to avoid these largely negative representations in this dissertation.
CHAPTER 3

LEARN BY DOING

*I pledge my HEAD to clearer thinking, my HEART to greater loyalty, my HANDS to larger service, my HEALTH to better living, for my club, my community, my country, and my world.*
—The 4-H Creed

*More than any other institution, 4-H symbolizes rural America’s struggle for cultural survival. Nothing else focuses so clearly on binding the young to the land by the Head, Heart, Hands and Health.*
—Sam Bingham *The Last Ranch: A Colorado Community and the Coming Desert*

Learning to work with animals is a hands-on endeavor. One of the most popular ways to educate young people about animals is the 4-H youth livestock program, which is organized and run through a states’ cooperative extension. The 4-H program socializes young people to understand the biological needs and social role of animals raised as commodities. In the program, 4-H’ers (as they are called) “learn by doing” and can direct their efforts in a number of different directions based on their interests (Enfield 2001). Members in 4-H participate in nearly 200 adult-supervised activities such as cooking, ceramics, electronics, model rocketry, sewing, computers, and archery, but the most popular activity is livestock. The popularity of the livestock program is not a coincidence; 4-H was originally founded as an agriculture-based youth program and has a long and complex history with land-grant universities, agricultural research, and state cooperative extension services. Today, this history seems quite benign, but as I show in this chapter, a long and disgraceful history of North American colonization, slavery, and genocide intersects and runs through America’s relationship with cattle and the lessons of 4-H.
Cattle have played a central role in the Americas, from the first Spanish conquistadores to the establishment of the United States and the subsequent expansion west. With their power and size, cattle helped early Europeans clear forests for houses and farms. Additionally, centuries of living closely with domesticated animals gave colonialists robust immune systems that Native populations did not have (Diamond 1999). Virginia Anderson’s (2004) history of human-animal relationships during colonization shows that conflicts with Native peoples increased as colonialists pressed for more land to feed their cattle. The cultural importance of cattle for Europeans, and their status as private property, gave whites a justification to take up arms against Native Americans. As the process of colonization progressed, cattle played a central role in the eventual genocide waged against Native Americans.

Cattle made colonization possible. Without their help, American agriculture would never have approximated the production that made early Europeans’ lives possible. While this arrangement was very successful (from the perspective of colonizers), it was highly disorganized. Animal husbandry, while exceedingly precise in England, was a mess in the Americas. Cattle, horses, and pigs were uncontrolled and uncontrollable. Like the politics and culture of the place itself, animals were unruly and uncivilized. This changed drastically during the Progressive Era in the United States. This chapter provides an overview of the central historical events that shaped human-cattle relationships in North America and the United States. Through this overview, I emphasize the intersection cattle have with issues of slavery and genocide. It is out of these violent relationships that important agricultural institutions arose. The history of land-grant universities, cooperative agricultural extension, and the youth group 4-H originates in these politics. These institutions are manifestations of the pragmatic philosophy, where youth involved in 4-H are encouraged to “learn by doing” (Enfield 2001; Wessel and
Wessel 1982). But what do 4-H’ers learn through their doing? I propose that what they learn is a historical artifact crafted in the early years of European expansion.

**BIOGRAPHY AND HISTORY**

It seems ridiculous to link something as innocent as 4-H to the horrors of colonization. The image of 4-H is untouchably good, wholesome, and sacred in the minds of many who have participated in its programs. Amanda Nolz, a young and enthusiastic rancher and clear standout in the world of proagriculture activism, wrote about 4-H in her popular and well-read blog, published on the webpage of *Beef Magazine*. In a blog post from April 1, 2010, titled “Get This: HSUS Targeting 4-H Kids through ‘Humane Teens’ Campaign,” Nolz wrote,

> 4-H is an organization based on integrity, hard work, service to others and a passion for agriculture, yet, it certainly seems like nothing is sacred anymore. HSUS [Humane Society of the United States] went directly to the future food producers of America to advance their mission to abolish animal agriculture and eliminate meat and dairy products from our diets. After reading their handout for kids at the conference, “Mission: Humane Action Guide” for teens, it’s quite obvious they are trying to convert wholesome farm kids to campaigning, lobbying HSUS activists. Keep reading; you won’t believe the propaganda they are pushing on today’s youth (Nolz 2010).

To be fair, HSUS is not a friend of animal agriculture and producers, and 4-H’ers cannot be expected to respond kindly to its distribution of materials at their conferences. Nolz’s response clearly articulates how many feel about 4-H (and HSUS for that matter). It is neither my intention nor my interest to enter into this debate. What I am interested in is how the
wholesomeness of 4-H has emerged, and it is with that intent that I want to discuss the long
history of animal agriculture in the United States.

   As one of my favorite sociological quotes reads, “Neither the life of the individual nor the
history of a society can be understood without understanding both” (Mills 1959:1). If we are
going to understand the biographies of 4-H’ers and other producers, their lives must be
historically contextualized. Two important historical narratives flow through both 4-H and
contemporary American livestock production. The first and oldest is the history of beef cattle in
the Americas. The second, more recent history is that of the land-grant university system and the
cooperative extension service. Historiography is not my expertise and this history is highly
complex; still, a discussion of the major events is important to contextualize not only 4-H but
also contemporary beef production. With this in mind, this section provides a necessarily
incomplete overview of the spread of cattle across the North American continent and the
eventual regulation and organization of beef production into an industry.

Creatures of Empire

The Spanish first introduced cattle to the North American continent. This is a well-known, or at
least not a surprising, fact, but it is extraordinary in its implications. Humans introduced cattle.
While they seem quite at home on today’s ranches, cattle are a nonnative species and a cultural
artifact of colonization. Columbus brought cattle, horses, sheep, swine, and goats with him to
Hispaniola and the Caribbean on his second voyage in 1493, and as disease and genocide
decimated the Native populations, cattle increasingly populated the open countryside (Anderson
2004; Rimas and Fraser 2008). The tropical environment and lack of significant predators
brought about high reproductive rates for cattle. As cattle populations grew and their usefulness
for colonization became increasingly evident, the Spanish conquistadores who followed
Columbus brought livestock with them to with them to new colonies. As Anderson (2004) notes,
Hernán Cortés took livestock from Hispaniola with him to the highlands of Mexico, Francisco
Pizarro brought swine with him to Peru, and Hernando de Soto brought Cuban pigs to Florida (p.
97). Still, it wasn’t until the sixteenth century that cattle arrived on the mainland in significant
numbers as an economic endeavor. The notably brutal Beltrán Nuño de Guzmán, a Spanish-born
governor of Pánuco (today the northeastern coast of Mexico), began the import of cattle to
current day Mexico from Hispaniola. Like other American populations, the Native people in
Pánuco were vulnerable to the diseases introduced by colonialists. The unimaginably high
mortality rate made them a poor recourse for enslavement and complicated Spanish goals of gold
mining and other industrial activities. According to William E. Doolittle (1987), in June 1527
“the impoverished and nearly destitute Spanish inhabitants of the [Pánuco] approached Guzmán
with a scheme for improving their economic lot. Their plan involved trading Indian slaves from
Pánuco for both cattle and horses from the Antilles” (p. 2). Together with the cattle Cortés
introduced to the Mexican highlands, these cattle represented the most significant influxes to
what is now Mexico and Central America (see also Anderson 2004; Rimas and Fraser 2008).

In the years that followed, the cattle introduced by Guzmán, Cortés, and the other
conquistadores multiplied and populated the landscape. These Cattle eventually moved
northward, both as feral and tended herds. Doolittle (1987) points to the work of a famous slave
hunter named Luis de Carvajal as instrumental in this process. The Spanish Crown gave Carvajal
an encomienda to settle the land from the Pánuco River north to approximately the location of
modern-day San Antonio, Texas (Doolittle 1987:5). Most likely using horses from the Pánuco
area, imported through the trade of enslaved Native Americans, Carvajal introduced the first cattle to modern-day Texas.

Cattle proved to be profoundly successful in the area from San Antonio, along the Rio Grande, to the Gulf of Mexico. Over the next three hundred years, Catholic missionaries used cattle herds to help “civilize” Native Americans and convert them to Christianity. According to Jeremy Rifkin (1992), “by the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the priests had established over fifty missions in Texas and seeded each with herds of cattle” (p. 68). Eventually Spanish rancheros would extend throughout New Mexico, Arizona, and California. However, after Mexico won independence in the early 1800s, many Spanish missionaries left behind their herds after refusing to swear allegiance to Mexico. These abandoned herds became the Texas Longhorns and would have remarkable implications for the United States and the Native Americans who lived on the Great Plains.

By pulling plows, clearing trees, providing milk, and successfully reproducing in frail herds, cattle made life possible for themselves and Europeans. At this point in the history of North America, cattle were serving many complex social roles. Certainly, colonialists and Native Americans killed cattle occasionally, but this was not their singular purpose. Cattle were more useful to people as living beings and coproducers.

**Texas**

Cotton, not cattle, drove United States citizens to cross the border into Mexican-controlled Texas during the 1820s. Many of the immigrants were slave owners seeking new land to grow cotton and to take advantage of increased cotton exports. In 1826, President John Quincy Adams tried to purchase Texas for one million dollars. Mexico declined the offer. Still, United States citizens
continued to populate Texas, especially near San Antonio. As the population grew, the Mexican government sought to resist this immigration by abolishing slavery. This served only to infuriate the now illegal U.S. immigrants, as well as many Mexican citizens in the area who had benefited from the influx of money and technology. By 1835 there were approximately 20,000 U.S. immigrants outnumbering the 4,000 remaining Mexicans, and in the following year, the illegal immigrants in Texas took up arms against the Mexican army and won independence, thus creating the independent state of Texas and preserving the institution of slavery (Rifkin 1992).

In the years that followed, Texas grew as a significant cotton producer, but also as a key provider of cattle. According to Rifkin (1992), after achieving independence, the Republic of Texas declared all feral cattle to be part of the public domain, a fact that has led some to say that “Texans did not create their cattle industry; they simply took it over” (p. 68). At the time, beef cattle produced west of the Mississippi were becoming increasingly important, providing hides for shoes and boots and many other commodities (Takaki 1993). The problem for Texans was getting their product to consumers. Texas cattle producers had to drive their cattle as far as Missouri or New Orleans to have them slaughtered and transported to more populated areas. The rugged and mobile Texas Longhorn breed made this task possible. But these relics of Spanish colonization would soon intersect with the conflict over slavery in the eastern United States.

*Eastern Politics*

A long-standing tension between the family farms that dominated most of the northern states and the plantations of the South framed agricultural politics in the eastern United States. The tension between these two modalities dates back to Thomas Jefferson, a planter himself, who favored the independence and small-market capitalism encouraged by the promotion of family farms.
According to Jefferson, family farms promoted democracy and good economic policy by producing food for a family and a surplus for trade and export (Kirkendall 1987:5). This perspective drew on, and possibly helped frame, the classic American mythology of hard work and self-reliance, both critical components of democracy, according to Jefferson. This perspective also had a capitalist function. The Jeffersonian perspective encouraged family farms that could produce enough food for families, the country, and for export and trade with Europe.

While these ideas were popular in the North, southern states saw agriculture differently. Competing with Jefferson were southern plantation owners, whose perspective differed sharply from the rugged independence allegedly supported by the promotion of the family farm. Slave labor allowed men to own very large farms capable of producing very profitable exports. Slave labor freed these men to participate in civil and democratic activities (Kirkendall 1987).

As the United States continued to grow and began acquiring western lands, they too became tangled in the political tensions of the East. For example, when the federal government purchased the Louisiana Territory in 1803, the North and South disagreed about the status of slavery in these new areas. This conflict led to the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which allowed Missouri settlers to own slaves, but the issue was reignited in 1854 with the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Texas remained a slave state, and cotton production, especially in east Texas, continued to expand. Texas also provided access to beef cattle, which southern states had always struggled to produce themselves. According to Ulrich Bonner Phillips (1929), the soil in the South did not produce enough grass to make large-scale beef production a significant commodity (see also Constance 2007). While southerners had moved into Texas for cotton production, the beef cattle they inherited also became an important commodity.
The origins of contemporary “rural policy” grew out of these conflicts and came to a head during the United States’ Civil War. In 1862, Abraham Lincoln signed several critical bills into law that served to ensure plantation style agriculture did not expand west. The clearest victory for family farms came with the passage of the 1962 Homestead Act, which granted 160 acres of unclaimed western land to would-be family farmers (Kirkendall 1987). This policy move ensured that smaller farms would populate western states. Policy makers knew that these smaller farms would resist competition from slaveholders. The problem with this policy for many in Washington was that they did not think highly of the U.S. farmer. Most notably, a man named John Morrill “maintained that American farmers were not good farmers” and were inferior to Europeans (Kirkendall 1986, 1987). Morrill and others in Congress felt that farmers needed to be educated if they were to be successful in the West.

Morrill’s poor opinion of the American farmer was not novel. In fact, American farmers were never considered equal to their European counterparts, and nowhere was the American agricultural ineptitude more clear than in the context of animal husbandry. English cattle and sheep production have traditionally been seen as the world’s most advanced. In many respects, English cattle and sheep of the 1800s came to represent the superiority of English people themselves (Ritvo 1987). English animal husbandry was defined largely as the activity of civilized, wealthy men who controlled the every move of their cattle. The cattle these men bred figured their own white supremacy, patriarchy, and power and stood in contrast to the barbarism and savagery of non-English peoples. Settlements in the Chesapeake Bay and New England populated the northeast portion of the United States with such cattle but were never able to maintain the breed purity found on the English isle. Anderson (2004) discusses the difficulties English settlers had maintaining control of their livestock. While the English very precisely
controlled breeding and grazing of their cattle, American colonialists found these practices all but impossible in their unpredictable environment. Partly through necessity, colonialists embraced a new style of “free-range husbandry,” which allowed less control over their livestock. As a result, cattle’s “quality” declined and European visitors often commented on the poor uncivilized nature of American cattle.

The image of inept animal husbandry continued through the establishment of the United States. While agriculture in the United States was quite productive, both in terms of the family farm and the plantation system, the poor image of the American farmer was never eliminated. The Texas Longhorn was the ultimate disgrace. The Morrill Act was a way to establish a new agriculture in the United States: an opportunity to both combat slavery and establish a civilized and sophisticated version of agricultural production derived from science. To this end, the Morrill Act of 1862 founded the land-grant university system. Under the act, each state was provided 100,000 acres of land to establish a college. The colleges were to be dedicated to addressing the agricultural, engineering, and educational needs of the state (Knutson 2005). The Morrill Act eventually established a land-grant university in each state and one in Puerto Rico (McDowell 2001).

**Buffalo and Cattle**

The Morrill Act of 1862 was a significant step forward in the democratization of education, but it was also a part of the Civil War. It was a move to establish northern control of western territories. As the war escalated, western recourses became increasingly important. During the

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10 This style of husbandry also facilitated colonialists’ acquisition of land. Free-roaming cattle would wander into the best pastureland controlled by Native Americans, who had drastically different ideas about animals and property. Conflicts over Native Americans killing cattle were often used as excuses for armed conflict (Anderson 2004).
war, the South’s main supply of beef came from Texas. According to some estimates, cattle producers drove over 100,000 cattle east of the Mississippi to supply food and other goods to the South during the early years of the war. The North quickly maneuvered for control of the Mississippi to cut off agricultural imports from the West, including Texas beef (Dary 1989). During this time, “the longhorns multiplied, and by the end of the war, southern migrants, hoping to rebuild their lives on the frontier territory of Texas, found cattle grazing everywhere” (Rifkin 1992:68). The war had drastically depleted the herds of the North and the South, making these animals a valuable commodity, yet transportation of these animals from Texas remained exceedingly difficult. The economic situation of Texas was very poor in the postwar years and made for a large populace willing to become “cowboys” and drive the herds north. While cowboys had been using the “Kansas Trail” and other northern trails for years, this method was never reliable. Massive herds of buffalo and Native Americans made the track dangerous, and cattle commonly arrived at their destinations in poor shape from having walked hundreds of miles (Dary 1989). The expansion of railroads alleviated this problem.

“The first shipment of Texas longhorns left Abilene [Kansas] on September 5, 1867, in twenty railroad stock cars” (Dary 1989:184). The transport of beef cattle by rail was yet another factor driving the railroads across the Great Plains. In 1862, Lincoln passed the Pacific Railroad Bill, granting land for building a transcontinental railroad that would extend from San Francisco, California, to the Missouri River and connect the rails that ran throughout the eastern United States. The Native American tribes of the Great Plains, notably the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Kiowa, Sioux, and Pawnee, along with the vast buffalo herds that they depended on, were seen as obstacles to this kind of development. In 1969, the transcontinental railroad was completed and the elimination of the buffalo was in full form.
To realize the agricultural possibilities of the newly reunited United States fully, the Native Americans of the Great Plains region needed to be dealt with, but leaders in the United States were somewhat ambivalent about directly killing them. As newly appointed president Ulysses S. Grant said in 1869,

The building of the railroads, and the access thereby given to all the agricultural and mineral regions of the country, is rapidly bringing civilized settlements into contact with all tribes of Indians. No matter what ought to be the relations between such settlements and aborigines, the fact is they do not harmonize well, and one or the other has to give way in the end. A system which looks to the extinction of a race is too horrible for a nation to adopt without entailing upon itself the wrath of all Christendom and engendering in the citizen a disregard for human life and rights of others, dangerous to society. (Takaki 1993:101)

While actions taken by the U.S. government did constitute genocide, killing all the Plains Indians was not feasible. As an alternative, the United States adopted a policy that would wage a different kind of genocide and sought the elimination of Native Americans’ key food supply: buffalo. Between 1871 and 1874 buffalo hunters, many of whom were employed by the railroads, nearly completely eliminated the buffalo herds in the southern plains. Hunters took the hides of the buffalo they killed and were paid between one and three dollars each. The rest of the buffalo’s body was left to rot in the sun.\(^{11}\)

Good estimates of how many buffalo lived on the Great Plains prior to their virtual eradication are difficult to come by but typically range between 30 and 60 million (Lott 2002).

\(^{11}\) Eventually a market emerged for the bones of the dead buffalo. After several years of rotting in the sun, the buffalo bones could be collected in massive amounts. These bones were being sold for eight dollars a ton and were ground up and used as fertilizer (Rifkin 1992:78).
What can be said with certainty is that there were nearly no buffalo in the region by the 1880s. And just as cattle had helped to push Native Americans from their lands in Mexico and “New England,” 600,000 cattle quickly populated the Great Plains (Rifkin 1992).

The husbandry practices used during 1880 closely resembled the free-range practices of the early English colonialists. Like those early white Americans, grazing cattle that moved to populate the Great Plains area were used to fill the space left behind by decimated Native American tribes. These free-range practices did not last long. In 1874, Joseph Farwell Gildden, with his business partner Isaac L. Ellwood, invented and began producing barbed wire (Dary 1989). Use of the wire slowly spread across the West and put an end to cowboys and free-range husbandry by the mid-1880s.

The history of cattle in North America is a history of colonialism. Cattle came with the conquistadors and other European settlers and their use facilitated the takeover of Native American lands. Cattle were witness to genocide and slavery. They pulled the plows, fertilized the crops, and otherwise altered the environment in a way that made life possible for the newcomers. Cattle were central to Mexican independence and the subsequent rebellion of illegal immigrants in Texas, and they were an important part of Civil War strategy. As instruments of colonization, cattle replaced the buffalo and the Native Americans of the Great Plains. After the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890, an event generally taken to signify the closing of the frontier and the relegation of all Native Americans to reservations, cattle would soon play a different role in American life.¹² Their complex history of working, living, and dying with the people that tended them would soon be transformed into a scientific and distinctly industrial capitalist endeavor.

¹² Wovoka, a man claiming to be the messiah and a leader of the Ghost Dance of the Paiute Tribe, promised the dance would bring the restoration of the buffalo (Takaki 1993).
The passage of the Morrill Act and the corresponding establishment of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) were significant steps taken by the federal government during the Civil War period that increased federal involvement in local affairs (Voth 1995:1271). After the war, a second Morrill Land-Grant Act was passed in 1890, which established what are today referred to as the “traditionally black” universities. This bill also supported the private Tuskegee University (McDowell 2001). Although these schools are not often thought of as agricultural schools, Booker T. Washington championed these efforts to support the farms of former slaves and their families (Rasmussen 1989). Unfortunately, the land-grant universities established under the Morrill Act of 1890 suffered greatly under segregation and probably did more to facilitate the migration of blacks out of rural areas than to improve the lives of black rural agriculturalists.

Both Morrill acts greatly increased government regulation and involvement in agriculture. This was a serious departure from the long tradition of unregulated agriculture in the United States, especially in the case of livestock production. The Morrill acts provided a bureaucratic infrastructure capable of taking significant steps to promote a much more guided, controlled, and scientific approach to agriculture.

Today, it is conventional wisdom in agricultural circles that the Morrill Acts and land-grant universities were developed to promote agriculture and have only recently emphasized other topics, such as the humanities and arts. This is a misunderstanding (Voth 1995). Morrill himself insisted that the language of the law include curriculum requirements outside agriculture and mechanics (McDowell 2001). According to John H. Kirkendall (1987), the Morrill Acts promoted a version of democracy that linked education with mobility out of agriculture (see also
Wyallie 1954). In a time when higher education was reserved for the rich, Morrill and his supporters created a system that promoted unprecedented access to education (see McDowell 2001).

The two Morrill acts democratized education but were also part of an effort to facilitate federal regulations on the state and county level. In this role, they were somewhat condescending to American farmers, who were seen by those in the government as incapable of improving their own practices. The post–Civil War era saw the passage of a set of significant agricultural promotion acts, most notably, the Hatch Act of 1887, which funded experimentation stations that, in conjunction with land-grant universities, were to conduct research related to agriculture (Knutson 2005). As these stations quickly grew, so did the body of knowledge surrounding agriculture (Kirkendall 1987). Beginning in late 1896, Liberty Hyde Bailey, Cornell faculty member and the man credited with popularizing horticulture in the United States, began to write and publish *Nature-Study Leaflets* for distribution throughout New York State. These leaflets became extremely popular, and Bailey started youth groups called Nature Study Clubs (Enfield 2001). Bailey also promoted agricultural education for youth throughout the country (Rasmussen 1989).

Bailey’s nature clubs came about at a time when youth programs were becoming especially popular throughout the United States. The turn of the twentieth century saw the development of a number of agricultural clubs, “such as Corn Clubs, Hog Clubs, Canning Clubs, Gardening Clubs and Tomato Clubs” (Enfield 2001). In Ohio, a school principle named Albert G. Graham began to promote vocational agriculture within school clubs. In association with Ohio State University’s agricultural experimentation station established under the Hatch Act, Graham’s clubs were critical to the beginning of the modern 4-H (Rasmussen 1989; Wessel and
The development of these agricultural youth clubs corresponds to a time of profound unease about the status of masculinity, especially of white men and boys. According to Gail Bederman (1995), the Progressive Era was a time of transition and anxiety about the role of men in society. Bederman discusses how G. Stanley Hall, founder and president of Clark University and professor of pedagogy and psychology, thought that white upper-class urban boys were becoming effeminate and that this was endangering American manhood. Hall’s observations resonated with many of his contemporaries, who founded and promoted organizations such as the YMCA and Boy Scouts as a way to promote strong men who possessed appropriate levels of rugged manhood.

I note Bederman’s observations about Hall here because rural manhood and gender identity were also coming under duress in rural America, albeit in a different way. Rural livelihoods were becoming increasingly depressed and difficult relative to those in burgeoning urban centers. This was especially true for black farmers in the South, working as sharecroppers under the worst conditions Jim Crow could muster. The end of the Civil War had abolished slavery but did not redistribute land into family farms, nor did policies facilitate freed slaves’ acquisition of family farms (Kirkendall 1987). Family farms were a white privilege throughout the country, but conditions for the majority of white agriculturalists were still exceedingly poor. For whites enrolled in land-grant university programs, their focus was often not agriculture but programs that would facilitate life away from the farm. When this outcome became clear to Congress, it sparked anxiety about American food security. In essence, land-grant universities exacerbated what was already a troubling trend in rural America at the turn of the century. Large-scale out-migration of whites was prompted by poor rural health, inadequate roads, poor schools and churches, land misuse, and erosion (p. 7). Agricultural clubs like those promoted by
Bailey and Graham hinted at a version of education that could help whites improve their livelihoods on the farm.

At this time, an influx of cotton boll weevil (*Anthonomus grandis* Boheman) began to infest cotton crops in east Texas and the Southeast. Near Terrell, Texas, Seaman A. Knapp, former president of Iowa State Agricultural College, was advising a group of farmers who had organized a cooperative where agricultural demonstrations and experiments would take place on their private property. The cooperative had set a fund aside to protect participating farmers from any losses. When the boll weevil began damaging crops, Knapp was able to help farmers on their own land and teach them how to stop the insect (Knutson 2005). This cooperative experiment was extremely successful, but not all farmers were open to the new scientific methods of farming. While Knapp’s farms were useful when and where farmers could directly observe the new practices, dissemination of the new science was difficult and met with great resistance. Knapp and the USDA turned to the work of Bailey and others involved in youth agricultural education as a way to overcome this resistance.

Youth groups like those organized by Bailey and Graham had proven to have a significant effect on adults’ resistance to new and more scientific ways of farming. Bailey and Graham’s programs were useful tools for disseminating knowledge to adults through their children, who were less set in tradition. When Knapp’s work become the basis for the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, which established the cooperative extension service as part of the land-grant

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13 A man named F. B. McKay had written to the USDA asking for funds that would establish a USDA-sponsored demonstration farm, a new phenomenon at the time, but had been rejected. His continued interest in demonstration farms pushed him to establish the cooperative and recruit the help of Knapp, who volunteered his time (Knutson 2001).
university system, the work of Bailey and Graham began to grow into the corresponding youth organization 4-H (Enfield 2001; Kirkendall 1987; Knutson 2001).14

Agricultural Reorganization

Over the next 100 years, the land-grant university system, cooperative extension programs, and 4-H helped industrialize agriculture by disseminating agricultural science. As these programs grew, industry started to see their benefits. These organizations helped replace ox and horse teams with tractors and in 1902 the General Education Board, a philanthropic arm of Standard Oil and later the Rockefeller Foundation, promoted extension services and youth groups.15 This progression drastically simplified the lives of cattle. Cattle were no longer needed for the purposes of colonization or for assisting on the farm. Their singular use was increasingly becoming their use as commodities.

The use of cattle bodies for commodities ramped-up with the innovations in railcar refrigeration developed after the Civil War. These new railcars helped Chicago slaughterhouses undercut eastern packers by disassembling beef from the Midwest and Texas and shipping dismantled carcasses directly to wholesalers. By the start of World War I, the “big five” beef packers of Chicago (Armour, Cudahay, Morris, Swift, and Wilson) controlled half of the red meat production of the United States (Rifkin 1992). The industrial disassembly of animal bodies

14 Clearly, this progression is substantially more complex than what can be presented here. I want to note the role of A. F. Meharg, William Hall Smith, and the General Education Board. Building on Knapp’s work in Texas, Meharg was hired as a demonstration agent at Mississippi State University for a position funded by the General Education Board, a philanthropic subdivision of Standard Oil. Meharg hired Smith, who worked in collaboration with Oscar B. Martin (appointed by Knapp to organize corn clubs throughout the South) to develop an outline for a relationship between county officials, state land-grant colleges, and youth agricultural education organizations (4-H Timeline).

15 By 1920 there were approximately 246,000 tractors on American farms; in 1930 there were 920,000 (Rasmussen 1989).
in these turn-of-the-century packinghouses was the archetype of Fordist efficiency. Henry Ford himself modeled his assembly lines after the disassembly lines of Chicago packinghouses (Patterson 2002; Rifkin 1992; Wolf 2010). In 1921 these massive corporations began promoting Boys’ and Girls’ Clubs, helping to publish *The National Boys’ and Girls’ Club News*, giving club tours of their facilities, and developing the National 4-H Club Congress, for which the slaughterhouse giant Union Stock Yards (a conglomeration of Armour, Morris, and Swift) provided building space (Wessel and Wessel 1982).

The industrialization process was also reflected in the curriculum of land-grant universities. By the mid-twentieth century, university animal husbandry programs were transformed into “animal science” programs. Bernie Rollin (2008) talks of the consequences of this ontological shift in the field:

> Indeed, textbooks of animal science characterize the field as “the application of industrial methods to the production of animals.” The values of productivity and efficiency replaced the values of husbandry, the detriment of animals, sustainability, the environment, agriculture as a way of life, rural communities, stewardship, and a respectful, moral stance towards the living things we built our civilization on. (P. 11)

The shift from husbandry to animal science reflects the simplification and specialization of cattle lives themselves. No longer full partners in the coproduction of society, cattle are today useful only for their dead bodies.

Cattle have been part of the complex and often horrible history of North America from the arrival of the first Europeans. As creatures of empire, these animals were not simply serving the demands of their European keepers. They coproduced the trajectory of colonization by breaking through fences, pushing for new lands, and helping to alter the environment for
European American settlement. Cattle production played an important part in the Civil War, the eradication of the buffalo, the spread of the railroad, and the rationalization of industrial production. But this relationship changed with industrialization. Today, animals’ complex roles have been simplified to the commodities that can be made from their bodies.

The simplification of cattle’s societal role does not mean that people no longer have interpersonal interactions with cattle. Today’s cattle producers certainly have these interactions and do build relationships. What this simplification means is that the context in which these interactions arise has drastically changed. Cattle were once more useful alive than dead. They could pull plows, fertilize fields, and produce milk. Today, people interact with cattle for the sole purpose of producing a commodity. Treating an animal in this way is not intuitive and requires that people learn to understand the human-animal relationship as fundamentally bounded by this production. Teaching the social-psychological and emotional skills needed in this kind of production has become a central part of 4-H.

4-H: HEAD, HEART, HANDS, AND HEALTH

For most of its history, 4-H has encouraged youth to move away from traditional farming and animal husbandry and toward science-based industrial practices, but this history is not immediately obvious at a local 4-H club meeting or county fair. During my research, I spent time walking through the livestock exhibits of county fairs and stock shows, and I commonly saw goats, chickens, sheep, and calves being tenderly cared for by young people. The animals seemed quite comfortable lying on beds of clean straw in cool barns. I saw young people thoughtfully scrubbing their livestock’s coats, carefully trimming their hair, and walking gently beside them as they moved them from one area to the next. During slower periods of the day, I saw young
people and their families napping in lawn chairs or having lively conversations over lunch right next to their respective animals. These interactions are very different from the conditions of contemporary science-based industrial agriculture. The question thus becomes: what is 4-H teaching these young people? One of the main lessons 4-H teaches is the social-psychological tools needed to raise and work with animals while remaining capable of treating them as commodities.

Today, 4-H plays a significant role in the lives of rural and suburban youth and their communities, but the programs have also grown in nonagricultural directions. Over the course of the twentieth century, 4-H has become the largest educational youth development program outside of school in the United States and the organization now includes many nonagricultural programs directed at urban and suburban youth (Ellis and Irvine 2010; Van Horn, Flanagan, and Thomson 1998). Its literature describes 4-H programs as centering on leadership, citizenship, and life skills. The program currently serves more than 7 million youth between the ages of 8 and 18. In this respect, 4-H accomplishes some amazing tasks, with a wholesome folksiness unparalleled by other national youth organizations. Members of 4-H clubs are active in local food banks, children’s hospitals, nature centers, homeless shelters, and senior centers. Parents and older siblings play a large role in 4-H by volunteering as group leaders. Unlike the Boy Scouts of American, 4-H is open to both boys and girls, with slightly higher membership rates (52.5 percent) for girls, and has a long history in African American communities, although the majority (77 percent) of 4-H’ers are white. The national 4-H headquarters estimates that half a million adults and teens currently serve in this capacity, many of them former 4-H members themselves (Ellis and Irvine 2010; USDA REEIS 2009).

The demographic shift toward urbanism has made appealing to suburban kids a necessity
for the organization. Today, only 11 percent of 4-H’ers live on farms. Nevertheless, animal-related programs are the most popular projects in 4-H, accounting for 1,622,601 projects (USDA REEIS 2009). The popularity of these programs speaks to the attraction young people have toward animals. Livestock projects are some of the most time intensive and involve approximately a year of work in all aspects of raising a calf, lamb, or other animal. Kids start with a calf or other young animal and raise them over the summer. During this time, 4-H’ers feed, brush, and work with their animals to make sure they are ready to show at the county fair, where livestock projects culminate in the sale of the animal. As noted in Chapter 2, buyers at county and state fairs pay far above market value to support the efforts of the 4-H members (See Ellis and Irvine 2010).

While 4-H materials and lessons are clearly grounded in animal science and are regularly guided by agricultural extension specialists, when I talked with 4-H’ers and their parents and watched as they participated in activities at county fairs, it seemed that this is not so much the focus of 4-H. Instead, the lessons of the organization relate more to developing personal responsibility and gender norms and to promoting the human-animal relationship as symbiotic and natural.

EMOTIONAL APPRENTICESHIP

One of the 4-H livestock programs most striking characteristics is the amount of direct contact young people have with their animals. This process officially starts in early May, when animals are “weighed in,” but some have been with their 4-H’ers for most of the winter. During the summer months, 4-H’ers look after every aspect of their animals’ needs. They feed them, work with them, and groom them, and some even walk them. In August, animals are weighed again
before they are auctioned to measure their summer progress. The animals are also judged on a variety of qualities, including their grooming, behavior, skeletal structure, gate, as well as the 4-H’ers knowledge of their breeding history.

All the contact young people have with their animals means there is ample time for young people to build a connection, and it almost feels like this is the point. All the 4-H’ers we talked to told stories of seeing others cry or feeling sad after having to sell their animals. One reported that his sister “was crying for days” after selling her project animal. When asked about themselves, most were more ambiguous. One told me, “the younger kids are more attached. By the time you’re older it’s ‘just another day.’” Learning to control their emotions is a central lesson of 4-H; Leslie Irvine and I have termed this process “emotional apprenticeship” (Ellis and Irvine 2010).

Emotional apprenticeship means young people “learn by doing.” The 4-H program puts young people in a situation where they have a great deal of one-on-one contact with their animals for a prolonged time. At the end of the summer, 4-H’ers are strongly expected, and sometimes required, to sell those animals at auction. It is not uncommon for their parents to buy the animal, pay to have it butchered, and put in the family freezer so the family can eat the animal the 4-H’er had raised. Through this process, young people either learn quickly to manage their emotional connection to the animals they raise or drop out of the program. Those who stay on learn to think of their animals as “market animals,” whose sole purpose is to eventually become a commodity. In Chapter 4, I discuss the implications of this process and how animals become “killable bodies.”
The 4-H animals are intended to die. Talking to Steven, a producer and 4-H parent, I asked him about the difference between the death of a pet and the butchering of a 4-H project animal. He used a hypothetical pet he called “Muffy” to discuss the differences:

The difference in that lesson would be that [their 4-H] project started out with the end result known. The end result was a goal. Muffy was never intended to die. That’s where I would say the difference in the lesson is. [4-H’ers] have a purpose why they started that project, and they’ve got to understand that there is termination to it, there’s closure.

The termination that Steven is talking about here is a product of constructing a 4-H animal as a killable body. The death of the animal is the intended purpose. Learning to give this kind of meaning to an animal is a fundamental lesson of 4-H. As one 4-H’er told me, “Younger kids have a harder time, especially if they don’t know what’s going on. Older kids are OK.” Learning to become “OK” is the task.

While learning to construct a market animal seems less oriented toward increasing the authority granted to scientific communities by rural people than the literature suggests, it nevertheless articulates a central value of contemporary agriculture. For 4-H’ers, the label “market animal” works to define the animals in terms of human use and simplifies the animal’s social role (Ellis and Irvine 2010). This is not to say that all 4-H’ers become heartless industrialists. There is considerable room for ambivalent feelings, and not all the 4-H’ers we talked to felt the same way. Below are two tables that present data from a short qualitative survey I collected with Leslie Irvine. These tables organize the responses young people gave to our open-ended question, “How do you think you will feel when you sell this animal?” As an ethnographer, I tend to steer away from analyzing qualitative data in this manner, but it seems appropriate given that many of the answers are short and to the point.
In these tables, I coded 4-H’ers responses into three categories. Responses indicated that 4-H’ers felt “good” about selling their animals, “ambivalent,” or “sad.” I divided 4-H’ers by gender and by age. In each cell, I put their short response and indicated what kind of market animal they were raising. The tables show some important gender differences between boys and girls. Of the 20 boys, from all age groups, presented in Table 3, 14 responses are coded as “good.”¹⁶ This data indicate not so much that boys truly felt “good” about selling their animals, but that they recognized that they should not feel ambivalent or bad about selling them. In fact, only five boys gave responses coded as “ambivalent” and only one younger boy fell into the “sad” category.

Girls’ responses, reported in Table 4, were far more mixed than the boys’ were. Only 6 of the 20 girls’ answers were coded under “good,” and all but one of these were older than 15. Interestingly, 4 out of the 6 girls coded in this category gave one-word answers, far less descriptive than the boys’ answers. Of those coded under “ambivalent,” all were older than 13 and all provided far more in-depth answers than those coded under “good.” Of 7 girls coded under “sad,” all were younger than 14 years old.

¹⁶ Note that 2 young people did not provide usable answers to this question. This is why there are only 40 answers given in this section and not 42.
Table 3. Male: What do you expect to feel when you sell your animal?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Ambivalent</th>
<th>Sad</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Relieved that I got money. (Steer)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Pretty good, probably. (Steer)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Same as it has been in the past. Probably be more fun. (Hog)</td>
<td>Might be sad, has cried before. (Steer)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Happy and relieved. (Hog)</td>
<td>Don't know. Gets more attached to them over the summer. (Steer)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Accomplished, a load off my back. (Steer)</td>
<td>Will feel the same as other times. Sad that I won't see them again, but it's OK because they're just somewhere else. (Goat)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Same old, same old. Another year. (Sheep)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Fine. (Heifer)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Sells to friends then they eat them at a picnic. Don't get attached. (Steer)</td>
<td>Probably kinda sad, but kinda good 'cause I don't have to feed him. But kinda sad 'cause he's Ricky Bobby and Ricky Bobbie is my friend. (Steer)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fine, just another day. (Hog)</td>
<td>I will not want to sell him. But I will pay him off and buy another. (Goat)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Easy cause I know how to do it. (Hog)</td>
<td></td>
<td>I don't want to get rid of them after I've trained them. Pretty hard, just working with so hard and then you've got to sale them. (Steer, Heifer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Easy, good money so I can get a nicer steer next year. (Steer)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Fine, got second place for him (Goat)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Felt nice to get'em out of here. We feed them so much and I want to figure out a different animal. (Goat)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Ambivalent</td>
<td>Sad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Good. (hogs)</td>
<td>Sheep will be harder because I'll have them longer. May get close to them. (hogs and sheep)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Fine. (Heifer)</td>
<td>Not that bad. I look at it like what am I gonna have next year and we have a lot of good animals at the house. (Steer, hog) If she doesn't win they won't butcher her. (Steer)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Easy. Good money, get nicer steer next year. (Steer)</td>
<td>If I'm really attached I'll be sad. But it's a mean animal-good riddens. It was hard, last year, to get rid of her. Started crying. Got really attached. Never had a cow that good. But that's the bred, they are gentle. (Heifer)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Fine. (hog)</td>
<td>So far I'm gonna like him a lot. I try to imagine him going to someplace better and that helps me settle down. (Steer) Normally, sad, then get over it because I know I'll get another next year. (Sheep)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sad again. (hog) Harder because I'm their &quot;mom&quot; more. (Sheep)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td>I will be sad. (Steer)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sad. I already like him a lot and I've only had him a short while. (Steer)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Felt nice to get'em out of here. We feed them so much and I wanted to figure out a different animal. (Hog)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td>The same except maybe worse because closer this year (Steer) Really sad. No Easier this time. I like Pickles more. (Steer)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Gender differences such as these are a pattern throughout my data. The women and girls I talked with were far more open about their emotional attachment to animals and tended to be far more ambivalent than men were. As I show in Chapter 4, this comfort with the transaction of the sale helps men become the public face of the ranch and facilitates the exclusion of women from this key economic exchange. In Chapter 5, I explore further the use of kinship statuses as a key reference point used to discuss relationships with animals. As you can see, one participant, a 14-year-old girl raising a sheep, referred to herself as her sheep’s “mom.”

Redemption Narratives

Redemption narratives are an important part of learning to understand the purpose of market animals. These narratives mitigate a negative experience by showing how it results in a subsequently positive outcome (see Ellis and Irvine 2010; Irvine 1999; McAdams et al. 1997; McAdams et al. 2001). There are two clear redemption narratives common to both 4-H members and adult cattle ranchers. The first focuses on the financial benefits. Youth in 4-H can make up to $2,000 for a steer who would bring less than half of that at market. We witnessed that several gilts (female pigs under a year old who have not farrowed a litter) sold for $800 and barrows (castrated males) sold for $950. A lamb weighing 140 pounds sold for $4,000. When we asked young people what they were going to do with the money, many said they were going to save it for college, a response that continued the folksy goodness of 4-H. It struck us as remarkable that boys and girls as young as twelve were already thinking so far into the future. Still, who could argue that saving for college is not a worthy goal? While cars and computer games could be dismissed as frivolous, few could disagree with the importance of a college fund. As one girl
explained, “I still get kinda sad, but it’s for a good cause” (Ellis and Irvine 2010).

The second common redemption narrative is what I call “faith in the cycle.” In this narrative, 4-H’ers redeem animals sent to slaughter by focusing on their plans to purchase another animal next year. By helping market animals fulfill their purpose, young people are ensuring that they will have animals to raise next year. As one 10-year-old girl told me about her steer, “I like him, but I don’t get too close, because I know I’ll have to sell him at the end. When I was young, I’d get attached and it was hard, but I know it’s like the one I’m gonna get next year—it’ll be the same.” As I discuss further in the next chapter, looking forward to next year’s animal is also a clear theme in adult ranchers.

Both of these redemption narratives are important because not completing a livestock project would mean alienation from friends and family. “Saving for college” helps young people feel that their sacrifice is worth the effort, and the anticipation of next year’s animal helps soften the sadness of auction day. As one 4-H’er said, “It’s easier when you get a new animal next year, and you get over it.” Another said, “You learn that you get a new one next year to make friends with.” Yet another explained, “Normally, I’m sad, but then I get over it, because I know I’ll get another one next year.” A boy who had raised hogs for several years recalled, “I was sad, but happy to get the money for next year’s animals” (see also Ellis and Irvine 2010).

Responsibility

The lessons conveyed to 4-H’ers during their emotional apprenticeship differ slightly from those hoped for by their parents. The adult ranchers I interviewed often told me that they hoped their children would learn responsibility from working with animals. For example, during an interview with Jesse, the topic of his children came up, and I asked him what he thought his
children were learning through their participation in 4-H. Tom answered,

Responsibility. That’s my main thing, yeah. That they are responsible for taking care of the animal and feeding it and doctoring it if it gets sick. I think that’s probably the biggest thing they’ll get, is being responsible. Other kids may gain this from sports, bein’ responsible to show up for their—my kids never seemed to be that interested in sports, so I think they benefit from the animals just as much. And I think you’re closer to your family, too. Your family works together with the animals. I’m fortunate enough that I have a wife that enjoys it, too, so it’s completely a family affair for us. We go feed our cows at night and work our cattle, and it’s a family deal. It always isn’t the most pleasant experience, but at least we’re together.

Jesse’s answer exemplifies many of the general themes surrounding 4-H and animal practices but does not seem to represent the perspective of animal science. In fact, it appears much more associated with ideas of animal husbandry and pastoralism. In a way, this was something generally true of the whole 4-H experience.

The idea that working with animals builds the responsibility of young people is a typical finding in the study of children and animals. Studies show that parents often bring pets into the family, citing responsibility and affection as main benefits to children (Ellis and Irvine 2010; Fifield and Forsyth 1999). This also happens in school situations where a teacher brings an animal into the classroom. Just how much responsibility kids learn from these pets is sometimes unclear, because the care of the family dog or classroom pet eventually seems to fall to an adult. In 4-H projects, there is a built-in consequence if young people do not take care of their animals. Although parents and family members regularly help 4-H’ers with their chores, and some parents probably take on an inappropriate amount of the work, the 4-H’ers largely face most of the
responsibility. If 4-H’ers are responsible, the county or state fair is a chance for them to show off their achievement.

The theme of responsibility in 4-H is an interesting one, because in some ways it is unclear for what or to whom the 4-H’er is responsible. When parents talked about their children learning responsibility, they probably meant that 4-H teaches kids to follow through with a project or about consequences. This leaves open the issue of how responsible 4-H’ers are for the life and death of their animals. While this responsibility was generally left unstated, it is clear that the process is profound. As one parent told me, “I think my children will take their 4H experience with them through the rest of their lives. I don’t think they’ll ever forget that, the accomplishment of having an animal and raising it until it’s finished and then sellin’ it. So I think it’s good that way.”

DISCUSSION

Particular ways of living and dying with animals make particular kinds of social organizations possible. Domesticated animals in North America are tangled in the history of colonization, slavery, genocide, and racism. The introduction and organization, or disorganization, of domesticated animals in North America had drastic implications for the direction of North American society. Land-grant universities, cooperative extensions, and 4-H clubs are some of today’s most powerful organizing forces that direct our relationships with animals. Some might rightfully add industry to this list. The importance of large corporations is a popular topic in contemporary discussions about agriculture, and while I do not want to downplay their influence, I do want to emphasize that the land-grant universities, cooperative extensions, and 4-H clubs were the key to disseminating the ideas that made industrial agriculture possible.
This history is not immediately evident on ranches or at stock shows. In fact, livestock in these areas seem quite at home in their natural environment. Historicizing contemporary human-animal relationships helps us see that what is experienced as natural is often historically specific. The social-psychological and emotional skills learned in 4-H helps create and sustain this feeling of naturalness. The process of emotional apprenticeship makes 4-H feel like an “organization based on integrity, hard work, service to others and a passion for agriculture,” as Nolz says, but it is also so much more.

Given the evidence presented in this chapter, some might argue, as others have, that there is a directional or causal relationship between the mistreatment of animals and the mistreatment of other human beings. A variation of this this basic idea is the assertion that people who are violent towards animals will be violent in other ways, an argument often called “the graduation hypothesis.” This is not my argument. I do not think, as some do, that people learned to wage genocide or implement slavery through their relationships with domesticated animals. Still, it is impossible to separate our relationships with animals from these events. Free-range husbandry practices clearly helped push Native Americans off their lands and the Chicago slaughterhouses clearly provided a model for the exploitation of the assembly line. Some have even gone so far as to link Ford’s assembly line to the horrors of Nazi genocide (Adams 1990; Patterson 2002; Wolf 2010, among many others). Still others have linked our exploitation of animals to sexism (Adams 1990, Gruen 1993). From my perspective, these kinds of arguments are often overly simplistic and mistake correlation with causation. The work of Arnold Arluke most directly challenges these simplistic associations by discussing the complicated motivations that often underlie violence against animals and the social-psychological work that goes into managing the meanings of that violence (see Arluke 1988, 1989, 1991, 2006; Arluke and Sanders 1996).
Furthermore, they tend to simplify the role of animals by assuming they are fully under people’s control. It is important to remember that we do not have ultimate authority over how these relationships are formulated. As anyone who owns a dog, cat, or other companion animal knows, their emotions, behaviors, and biological needs are not fully within our control and have a significant impact on our life. Animals are wily, deceptive, troublemakers for social organization, even in industrial agriculture. While I reject the assumption that there is a causal relationship between the oppression of animals and the oppression of people, there clearly is a relationship. Our interactions with animals do seem, at the very least, to reflect our relationships with other people. But this reflection can quickly become a hall of mirrors, and it is difficult to pinpoint the exact origins. What I think is most directly observable about our unequal treatment of animals is that it seems as though it is the natural order of things. It is this feeling of naturalness that I want to disassemble.
CHAPTER 4

KILLABLE BODIES

There is no way to eat and not kill, no way to eat and not to become with other mortal beings to whom we are accountable, no way to pretend innocence and transcendence or a final peace
—Donna Haraway When Species Meet

Cattle are killable. Cattle bodies are useful only when they are transformed into commodities. Theoretically, we can kill any body, but some classifications of bodies are useful only when dead. While people can be executed or murdered, fetuses aborted, and dogs euthanized, this killing is not an inherent property of their body’s social role, nor is it their body’s singular purpose. For the most part, people and their companion animals are integrated into social structures that value them as living beings. This social integration differentiates people, companion animals, and animals raised as commodities from pests and wildlife. For example, we can exterminate cockroaches, but they are not integrated into society simply to be destroyed. Similarly, deer can be hunted and killed, but they are not invited into society specifically for this purpose. Cockroaches and deer surely benefit from their relationships with humans, but do not actively serve a social role. That is to say, society would function pretty much unchanged without them—outside of some disappointed hunters and jobless pest-control workers. Cattle, on the other hand, are integral to the functioning of society and are useful only for their bodies, which can be turned into any number of consumable goods fundamental to contemporary society. While cattle have a long and complex history with people, their social role has been
reduced to being farmed for their body parts. Because cattle bodies are killable, they can become these commodities. This chapter asks the question, how do we construct a killable body?

There is nothing essential in a body that makes it killable; this quality is a social achievement. Cattle have not always been killable. As discussed in the previous chapter, this is a new social status for cattle. Cattle became killable because their social role was simplified through industrialization to the point where they are no longer able to contribute to society as living beings. Arnold Arluke and Clinton R. Sanders (1996) use the concept of “boundary work” to discuss “the drawing and blurring of lines of demarcation between humans and animals” (p. 133). Manipulation of these boundaries helps people construct certain bodies as killable. In this chapter, I introduce the term “boundary labor” as a way to emphasize that someone must work to uphold these boundaries as part of the beef product. This is the work of ranchers. But the charismatic and social qualities of cattle complicate their work. Through socialization and participation in groups like 4H, ranchers become skilled emotion laborers, capable of engaging with cattle interpersonally and emotionally, yet remaining able participates in a process that will eventually kill them. Cattle become killable because of the labor of ranchers.

Activists and scholars often reduce the role of animals in agriculture to three simplified issues: their role as commodities, animal slaughter, and the politics of eating animal-based goods. Certainly, these are important issues, but they are not the only issues. Raising and nurturing beef cattle is a formidable task, and the process requires intense human-animal interaction. Unlike in swine and poultry production, raising cattle requires a considerable amount of direct communication with specific cattle. In her study of companion-animal adoption, Leslie Irvine found that people adopting dogs and cats from animal shelters describe a sense of understanding and closeness with particular animals. Ranchers also feel this connection. In this
chapter, I discuss the skill of remaining capable of selling cattle as commodities. This emotion management (Hochschild 1979, 1983) protects feedlot employees, slaughterhouse workers, and consumers from having to emotionally engage with cattle—a kind of “dirty work” (Hughes 1953, 1962).

THE RANCHER-CATTLE RELATIONSHIP

Most people who are not involved with animal agriculture seem to have difficulty understanding the emotional skills of ranchers. People who have not been socialized into the emotional culture either through 4-H or family sometimes find it difficult to believe that someone could sincerely care for an animal raised as a commodity. As a result, it is often assumed that people in agriculture have no emotional connection with the animals they raise. This presumption makes it easy to frame those in animal agriculture as villains. This point of view places the human-animal relationship in binary terms. As Rhoda Wilkie (2010) has pointed out, depictions of intensive animal agriculture cast workers as a “relatively uncaring homogenous cohort who treats all species of livestock as an undifferentiated commodity that is exploited for profit” (p. 8). This misunderstanding of beef production is more an outcome of the effective boundary labor of agriculturalists than a reality of their everyday lives.

Connection

For ranchers, cattle serve a complex social role. Cattle bodies are certainly commodities, but they are also something else. People who work with cattle often develop a connection with them. This finding is not novel. A growing body of research shows that people in agriculture do develop rather intense connections with the animals they raise as commodities (Convery et al. 2005;
Still, these relationships are not free from economic constraints. Living and working with animals is profound, but the difficult reality is that this particular kind of arrangement requires an economic exchange that kills cattle. Cattle are not inherently killable for ranchers; rather, their work makes cattle killable for others.

To make my point about killable bodies, I want to start with a few counter examples of producers who made a connection with individual animals and decided not to allow them to be killed. Several examples of deep emotional connections emerged in this research, but one stands out. During a visit to Mark and Glenda’s medium-sized feedlot, they told me about their steer, Pete. He came off the truck just like any other animal. He entered a pen that held between 60 and 150 cattle. Pete could easily have gotten lost in the sea of 8,000 cattle that generally populate the feedlot. Luckily for Pete, he caught the eye of a feedlot employee, a woman who was in charge of checking the pens for sick or injured cattle. Pete immediately stood out. He was more social than the other cattle and allowed her to scratch his head. As the months passed, and pens of cattle were shipped to the slaughterhouse, Pete would quietly be moved to the next pen back. Eventually, Glenda and Mark decided they were going to be unable to send Pete to the slaughterhouse and, as they told me, “finally we just said, ‘that’s fine, we’ll just keep him.’”

Mark and Glenda talked fondly about Pete and told me how they enjoy letting their two young children ride him and that they intend on keeping him indefinitely. According to Mark, “he’s too big to even go to the packing house… He is huge… He’s just basically a pet. He would come up to you and meet you at the gate. You couldn’t drive through the gate until you petted him, and he’d move out of your way, every time you went in.” For me, this story stands out because it emerged from a feedlot. Presumably, it would be more difficult for a steer to stand out in a group of 8,000 than in a group of 500. The two key actors, Glenda and the woman who
worked the pens, were, of course, women. Still, these same themes appear in all-male settings as well.

For example, I found a similar situation during a visit to a bull-semen collection facility. Ramon, the facilities owner and operator told me about Cookie, a Holstein steer he used as a teaser steer. A teaser steer is a castrated male animal who is used to trick a bull into thinking he is a cow so he will try to mount her. Once the bull mounts the steer, a heated artificial vagina is slipped over his penis to collect the semen. Cookie had worked for Ramon for ten years before his body was unable to do the work required. When this happened, Ramon could have sent him off to the packing plant to become dog food. Instead, he put him in a comfortable back field, where he lived nearly 12 years before passing away of natural causes. What was most interesting about Cookie was that Ramon had been especially decisive when we talked about the human-animal connection. He went on for several minutes about how people in his industry just don’t get attached to their cattle. “It might be true with dogs or horses,” he told me, “but with cattle it just doesn’t happen.” When Cookie came up later in our conversation, I asked him about this inconsistency, and he paused and thought before saying, “I just haven’t really thought about it like that, I guess.”

Pete and Cookie are examples of failed boundaries. They both represent the possibility for a rancher-cattle relationship. However, neither is from a proper cattle ranch. In fact, both Pete and Cookie came from operations where keeping them alive made little financial impact on the overall operation. Aside from feed (the cost of which is not irrelevant), keeping these animals was not really a big deal. On a ranch, the financial value of individual cattle makes it more difficult, and in some cases impossible, to keep them around. Furthermore, Pete and Cookie were able to make an individual connection. One might fairly speculate the difference between feeling
a connection to one animal and connecting with an entire herd. With this in mind, I want to offer a little more data to address these concerns.

With regard to ranchers, there was clear evidence in my interviews that they felt a connection to their cattle. For example, during our conversation over steaks at a roadside dinner, the topic of connection with cattle came up, with Steven prompting me to ask, “Do you feel like there’s a connection with the animals?” He answered,

Oooh, absolutely! There’s a huge bond. Personality is huge. There’s a huge bond. I mean, it’s the way you see some people with their dogs. It’s very much so, and they are creatures of habit. They are. Through the cattle thing, even to this day, I can get—my eyes will get watery when I watch my niece sell [a 4-H project animal] that they’re attached to.

As Steven’s quote shows, ranchers often framed cattle’s individuality as “personality.” As Sarah put it, “You’ll always have characters, ones that have personality.” Such comments point to the personality of individuals, but do not necessarily refer to the herd. Still, ranchers also talked about connection in plural terms. As Jim said,

I think, most people will tell you that you kind of become attached to those animals, and you put a lot of work into raising those animals, and so there’s kind of an attachment there. Most people don’t talk about that, but the truth is that there is… You talk to most ranchers, and if they’re really honest with you, it’s not just the economic thing. There’s an emotional tie there, because they are part of your lifestyle that most people don’t talk about, but it’s there.
Jim put it this way, “It’s not only the work you got into ’em, but it’s just [pause], you feel like they’re a part of you. They’re something you’ve raised.” Still another rancher said, “It’s hard to see the empty pens at the end of the season.

This connection is difficult for some to understand. For people unequipped with the necessary emotional skills, allowing themselves to feel a connection with animals raised as commodities is unthinkable. I have often felt resistance to this finding, as I have presented at professional conferences and talked with other academics. This resistance, I think, speaks to the importance and the skillfulness of ranchers’ emotional labor.

At first, the ranchers did not appear comfortable talking about their relationship with cattle. When discussing this side of ranching, they often saw themselves as the exception to the rule and made statements such as, “these are just my thoughts” or “I’m probably the exception, but….?” Yet all the ranchers I talked to told a similar story. They all had surprisingly close relationships with cattle and described them as having many person-like attributes.

Sociologically, the attribution of selfhood or the status of personhood to animals is a tricky theoretical task. Still, several key sociological studies of human-animal relationships found humans and animals to engage in symbolic interaction. For example, Clinton Sanders (1993) provides one of the first sociological studies showing people award canine companions “person-like status.” In this study, Sanders found that dogs are able to take the role of the other, define the social situation, and adjust their behavior accordingly. Likewise, Janet and Steven Alger (1997) have shown that cats engage in interaction rituals (Collins 1989) with their keepers. Irvine (2004) shows that interaction between people, dogs, and cats commonly leads to intersubjectivity and that these animals exhibit the necessary requirements for selfhood in the Meadian sense. For my purposes, it is less important to demonstrate that cattle have “selves” or
that they are capable of engaging in symbolic interaction than it is to show that those who interact with cattle see them as possessing these characteristics.

Pete and Cookie provide evidence that people, even in the larger operations, can develop strong and lasting relationships with cattle. Clearly, these relationships are exceptional. They represent a kind of failure on the part of the producers to maintain the ability to treat cattle as commodities. As Mark would say later in our conversation, “you can’t save ’em all.” Still, cattle are capable of crossing the line between companion and commodity. These exceptions show the necessity of a skilled emotion manager, capable of decisively making cattle killable despite their capacities for other social roles.

Disconnected

The capacity for social and emotional connection with cattle complicates ranching. Unlike consumers, ranchers see cattle as thinking animals with personalities. For example, Jim, a middle-aged family man and owner of 180 cattle, said, “There’s a lot of thought process that goes on with the animals… Cows know: in the springtime, when we get ready to brand, and they see a lot of trailers pulled into the yard, they’ve pretty much got it figured out that it’s branding time.” Paul said something similar when he talked about moving cattle from his land to graze in the mountains during the summer.

They must have a good memory, because we’ll drive them through town to another pasture. Every year, as soon as we get to the first road we turn so we don’t go through Main Street, and the cows just do it [make the turn]. They’ve done it every year, and they just remember that. They remember where to go when you take them to the range.
Clearly, these kinds of observations could be dismissed as simple behavioral responses, but this is not fair to the lived experience of the ranchers themselves. Still, it is a mistake to overestimate the rancher-cattle connection. These connections are still framed by economics. But it is equally misleading to think about them as strictly economic. Both concerns are present at the same time.

In response to my standard question, “What is the best part of your job?” ranchers, almost without exception, replied that the best part was working with the cattle, especially calving season, which requires the most work. In her extensive study of Scottish livestock producers, Rhoda M. Wilkie (2005) found that 96 percent of them “claimed to enjoy working with animals” and 86 percent “agreed that livestock could become pets” (p. 222). But, if ranchers want to succeed, they can’t keep them as pets. The tension between emotions and economics was expressed nicely by Jim, who said, “You kind of hate to see them go. Like I say, if you’re trying to raise a good product, and you tended to them daily for, say, even 90 days, you hate to see them leave. I think a lot of ranchers would just as soon not sell anything if they really didn’t have to.”

All of the ranchers I talked with discussed preventing animal suffering as much as possible. In fact, this was an argument against organic practices, which regulate against some inoculations and all antibiotics. Steven, who owns of a 300-head cow-calf operation and a small 1,000-head feedlot put it this way:

Those animals suffer, and to visibly watch them suffer [pause]. That’s just their way of doing it, and to allow an animal to suffer. I don’t, I don’t—I’m not comfortable with that. Because I provide for animals, and animals provide for me. They don’t make me hurt; I won’t make them hurt. It’s just growin’ up that way. I just—I don’t like to see an animal suffer. I don’t hunt. I have nothing against hunting, but I just can’t go out and shoot something. I just, you know, and in handling facilities, we handle the cattle with common
sense. The worst thing you can do is put a prod or a hot shot in somebody’s hands that has never [pause] and they think they want to come out and work cattle. You know what? They are more problem than any good they ever do. You take it out of their hands and say, “Stand back and watch.” You learn how cattle work. You learn how to interact. From Steven’s perspective, organic ranching and inexperienced handlers put animals at increased risk for suffering. For him, these people threaten animals’ safety and cause them harm. This empathetic response is intense and sincere, although it is by definition limited.

While ranchers undoubtedly see cattle as thinking animals they enjoy working with, ultimately cattle’s role is to become a commodity. With this in mind, it is understandable that ranchers’ narratives often become contradictory. Ranchers often contrasted confessional stories of connection with assertions of overt disconnection and a clear rejection of cattle’s social capabilities. During interviews, some ranchers went out of their way to assert that they do not have emotional attachments, often without any prompting from me. For example, Robert, a rancher in his sixties, pointed out, “I mean, you don’t—cattlemen don’t get emotionally attached to a herd. It’s people that have just got a handful or something in a pen, and they go out every day and talk to ’em and scratch their heads; they get emotionally involved.” Robert’s statement struck me as disjointed and out of place in our conversation. In the rest of the interview, Robert’s talked at length about the rewards of working with cattle. He talked about how “it’s just delightful to have a herd and a mama that drops that calf out there and within five minutes that calf is up suckin’.” He showed evidence of great empathy for cattle when discussing his rationale for not using hormone injections, by stating,

Every time he has to bring a calf in and run ’em through a chute, or a cow in and run ’em through a chute, it’s a disruption of their day. You wouldn’t like it if every two weeks or
something someone came out there and ran you in; you had to put your head in this damn chute, and they’d give you a shot. So you minimize that as much as you can.

The coexistence of empathy and disconnection was common in my interviews and was sometimes evident within the same statement. A young rancher named Todd is a good example. When talking about the loss of a young calf, Todd had this to say:

You know, you try to do the best you can, and when you lose one, it’s hard. But you just go on, because there’s, how many head we had today? Ten calves today already or so. So you don’t worry about it. I mean you do, but you don’t. You know what I’m trying to say? You just go on.... It’s just like when you’re driving down the road and you blow a tire. You don’t worry about it; you just go get a new tire, throw it on your car, and go again. Same deal.

Throughout our interview, it was clear that Todd cared a great deal about the cattle he raised. However, in this moment, he shows how ranchers must be able to shift from connection: “you try to do the best you can, and when you lose one, it’s hard,” to extreme disconnection: “it’s just like when you’re driving down the road and you blow a tire.” This ability to disconnect is a way of fulfilling the economic needs of ranching. This does not mean that ranchers are insincere in their enjoyment of cattle. Rather, it is an example of what Elizabeth Bernstein (2007) calls “bounded authenticity,” where the feelings of connection are sincere; they are simply bounded by the economic demands of the occupation.

These economic demands require emotion management. While ranchers care for their cattle, this caring has boundaries. If it didn’t, all cattle would end up like Pete and Cookie. In a conversation with Paul, we sat down and discussed cattle’s ability to think. During this
interview, I asked him, “So why do you think, why is it okay to raise animals for food?” to which Paul had this to say:

They are living beings, and the only reason we have them around is so we can take the life out of them, ultimately, [thoughtful pause]. From the cows’ perspective, it’s probably not all right. From an economic perspective, it provides a lot of jobs for a lot of people. From a health perspective, meat is a source of a healthy diet. Just food. Hard question. Who am I to say, “I’m going to create you so that I can take you away from the world?” Ya, I wonder what’s the difference between eating a cow and eating a dog. Seems like there’s a difference. In its purist essence, I guess it’s not that different. How is that any different from a cow?

During our time together, it was clear that Paul and his dog were close. So I asked him, “Is [your dog] different?”

If you looked at it the same way, you wouldn’t be able to do it. If you become as attached to your cattle as you do your dog, there’s no way you could send them to market. I guess you just know that you can’t. For me I guess it’s doable. You couldn’t be in the business if you couldn’t do that.

Even for Paul, a long-time rancher, the distinction between his dog and his cattle is ambivalent. Yet making this boundary firm is critical if he is going to continue his work. Doing so requires the construction of boundaries.

BOUNDARIES

Michele Lamont and Virag Molnar (2002) make a distinction between symbolic and social boundaries. In their view, symbolic boundaries are “conceptual distinctions,” used to create
definitions of reality and to categorize anything from people to time and space (p. 168). When symbolic boundaries are widely recognized, they can become social boundaries, which are “objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities” (p. 168). This framework is useful for understanding the human-animal boundary and the distinction between killable and nonkillable bodies.

Paul creates a symbolic boundary when he differentiates himself from his dog and his cattle. Paul recognizes cattle as thinking and feeling creatures, not unlike his dog, but generates a symbolic boundary that allows him to treat one animal as family and another as a commodity. The nuance here is important to recognize. Lamont and Molnar speculate about the possibility for multiple, nonbinary out-groups, which can be seen in Paul’s perspective; more than simply contrasting himself with the other, he created a set of significant others. Paul’s task is to define one set of significant others as killable.

Paul’s process is social and psychological. Like any rancher, he must interact with cattle. This interaction is rewarding, but he understands that eventually cattle must become commodities. His work is bound by economic demands. The easy mistake is to dismiss all rancher-cattle connections as simple side effects of economic interaction. This perspective assumes that capitalism spoils all potential for real relationships within economic exchange. What I propose here is something far more significant than emotional distancing. Instead of simply not caring about cattle or not building a relationship, ranchers see cattle’s capacities and enjoy their company, but still come to define cattle’s killable nature as an inherent and unavoidable property of their being.
In Wilkie’s (2010) thoughtful book *Livestock/Deadstock: Working with Farm Animals from Birth to Slaughter*, she discusses the way “close physical contact between farmers and breeding animals and their offspring permits and encourages empathy,” but that this process is less likely to occur on large industrial operations (p. 145). Wilkie continues, “unless they [slaughter animals] digress from the normal process of production, slaughter animals are fairly anonymous and will be processed as part of a de-individualized and commoditized group” (p. 146). Building on this observation, my work shows how these anonymous animals are produced and directed into the “normal process of production.” Ranching requires some emotional distancing, but my research shows that what is more important is coming to understand death as inherent to the cattle’s purpose. As long as this is understood, ranchers can interact with calves, love them, take care of them, and still participate in a system that kills them.

It is here that the relationship between symbolic and social boundaries emerges most directly. Lamont and Molnar discuss the way “symbolic boundaries are often used to enforce, maintain, normalize, or rationalize social boundaries” (p. 186). This is one of ranchers’ key tasks. They use symbolic boundaries as a way to manage their own work, but also to uphold social boundaries that distinguish between people and animals, and different kinds of animals from each other. This boundary work is what differentiates ranching from other steps in the beef-production process. When ranchers create and maintain symbolic boundaries that both recognize cattle’s capacities and define them as killable, they alleviate this task for others in the production chain (e.g., feedlot workers, slaughterhouse workers, and, most clearly, consumers). This work is especially significant for slaughter. But the slaughterhouse workers have little if any real interaction with cattle before they are killed. By focusing on this stage, researchers forget that before animals arrive at the slaughterhouse they must be bred, born, fed, and cared for—the work
of ranchers. While ranching work is idealized in the minds of many, it is perhaps more dirty than slaughter.

**Boundary Labor**

When cattle are sold, the boundary work that facilitates this exchange becomes part of the product. In this sense, boundary work becomes boundary labor. My view of boundary labor is derived from Arlie Russell Hochschild’s (1979, 1983) concept of emotional labor. Hochschild’s classic study of flight attendants and bill collectors shows how people in these occupations were called on by their managers to make customers feel a particular emotion. The flight attendants’ job was to make customers feel safe and cared for, while the bill collectors were expected to make debtors feel fearful and ashamed. Since this formative study, numerous scholars have shown that emotional labor is a job requirement in the postindustrial economy (e.g., Bolton 2005, 2006; Bulan, Erickson, and Wharton 1997; Fineman 2003; George 2008; Pierce 1995, 1999; Wolkomir and Powers 2007). Studies of emotional labor continue to focus on service work, but the case of beef production shows that emotional labor is also an important part of agricultural production. Beef does not start as an inanimate commodity; it begins as a “sentient commodity” (Wilkie 2005). The labor of ranchers maintains a boundary between cattle and the inanimate objects produced from killing their bodies. This boundary serves not to create emotions in consumers, as is the case with emotion labor, but to generate an absence of feeling.

To create this emotional absence, ranchers must work face-to-face with cattle and recognize them as having many qualities associated with people, but be able to treat them as inanimate commodities. Wilkie (2010) discusses the instability of cattle’s status for people working in the early stages of beef production, what she calls “byre face”: 
Those who literally come face-to-face with livestock, especially bovine animals, soon realize that the commodities they handle can be unpredictable and demand respect. When animals cease to be mere livestock and come to be seen as living beings in their own right, they potentially disrupt instrumental attitudes (p. 177).

This face-to-face work heightens the need for emotion management on the part of ranchers. One way producers do this is simply to adhere to a distinctly masculine version of what Hochschild (1979, 1983) calls “feeling rules,” or the norms that govern appropriate emotion and expression. These rules help ranchers limit their expression of emotional connection to cattle. Sociologists have long discussed the influence of gender in the expression of emotions (Balswick and Peek 1971; Haas 1977; Hochschild 1983; Pierce 1995). In ranching, a masculine and unsympathetic front helps men and women express only certain emotions. For example, as Steven points out, “Cattle people have to portray an image of being awful tough and callous. You won’t get them to speak about an emotional thing. They’re very quiet about that. It’s something about solitude and inner strength.” Adhering to “tough and callous” feeling rules helps men and women manage the emotional demands of beef production. Not expressing emotion helps ranchers maintain occupationally necessary boundaries. Thus, masculine feeling rules serve as a kind of “emotional capital” (Cahill 1999), because they limit producers to a small set of contextually appropriate emotions. As discussed in the previous chapter, ranching culture provides a number of opportunities to develop these skills. The youth program 4H, for example, allows children and young adults to develop the necessary emotional skills to raise cattle for food (see Ellis and Irvine 2010). As society has become increasingly urbanized, interaction with animals raised for food has decreased, and fewer people have developed the emotional skills needed to both care for and kill animals for food. This change has increased the need for ranchers’ boundary labor.
Ranchers can and do develop a connection with and empathy for cattle, but they must produce these animals as commodities. As a result, ranchers generally express their emotion for cattle in a way compatible with the hegemonic masculine script. One contextually acceptable way to express concern for cattle is to construct compassion as economically driven. During interviews, I found that ranchers used the term “stress” as a way of managing their feelings of attachment, while maintaining a tough and callous image. Ranchers could never give a clear definition of stress, but the term seems to mean anything that causes the animal to be upset, in pain, or unsure of its surroundings. The logic behind stress is always financial. If animals are not under stress, they are less likely to die, more likely to conceive, and will gain more weight, which will improve the profitability of the ranch. Following this logic, concern about stress makes empathy acceptable. Thomas, the owner of a 20,000-head feedlot, put it this way:

Basically, we treat the cattle how you want to be treated yourself. If you’re sick and you don’t feel good, you go to the doctor and do whatever you need to do. That’s the same thing we do for them. Actually, I probably treat them better than I treat myself. They get shots a lot quicker if they’re sick. They’ve got a better ration and diet than I do. It’s all basically stress and trying to keep them happy, and they’re gonna do better because of it.

The narrative of stress allows the seamless coexistence of the economic narrative with an empathetic and caring narrative without a concern for overattachment. This narrative came up in a number of interviews, where men were justifying actions they saw as better for the animals. For example, Kirk, who was explaining to me why he bands his cattle instead of cutting off their testicles with a knife, gave this reason:

The old hard-core guys will tell you, “They’re no good if they’re banded.” Yeah, they are. If you do it yourself, if you take your time and do it, it’s very effective, less stressful.
It’s—when I say “less stressful,” you don’t get near the infections, and it’s a lot less painful for ’em.

Bill gave this justification for not using hormone implants in his cattle:

Because I think it just adds more stress to the animal, and I think, really, honestly, and there are a lot of people who disagree with me, but drug companies, you know, they’re out to make their money, and you’ve got to do this, and you’ve got to do that then. Pretty soon you’re pokin’ so many needles in these things, and you thinkin’ that you’re makin’ so much money that you’re hung on a wall.

What interests me most about these discussions of stress was the flexibility of the concept. No producer was able to give me a clear definition of what “stress” means. When I pressed for the meaning of stress, ranchers regressed into simplistic statements such as “no one wants to see animals suffer” or “you want them to be happy.” In animal science fields, stress is commonly used and is equally ambiguous. The Dictionary of Farm Animal Behavior defines stress as “any disruption of an animal’s homeostatic equilibrium, requiring the animal to make some response to maintain its psychophysiological integrity” (Hurnik, Webster, and Siegel 1995:177). For producers, stress provides enough flexibility that it can serve as a justification for treating their animals well, while maintaining a stoic and masculine presentation of self (Goffman 1959).

By framing feelings of connection as stress, ranchers are allowed to express empathy without deviating from occupational feeling roles. This skill allows ranchers to deal with their attachment so they can continue their work. As a result, consumers have no need for emotion management and are free to consume animal-based goods without feeling. This lack of feeling is the commodity produced through boundary labor. But masculine feeling rules alone are
insufficient for turning cattle into killable animals. They inform a larger narrative that makes beef production natural.

CREATING KILLABLE BODIES

If beef producers felt no emotional attachment to cattle, the production of beef would be simple, just like the consumption of beef. That this is not the case highlights the importance of boundary labor. Ranchers must actively create bodies that are killable. Cattle are not simple drones converting plants into muscle; they are sentient, active creatures whom ranchers engage with socially. Yet, cattle occupy the curious position of existing to die. For large-scale modern beef production to work, cattle must be transformed into beef. To deal with the attachment that grows out of the social engagement between humans and cattle, ranchers draw on masculine feeling rules, which inform a larger narrative that helps them make their work natural. Unlike accounts (Scott and Lyman 1968) and apologies (Tavuchis 1991), ranchers’ narratives do not admit or deny responsibility or make claims that their actions are right or wrong. Ranchers’ narratives go further, creating a feeling that the situation could be no other way. For ranchers, killing cattle bodies is a natural and unavoidable process. This narrative has three interrelated components: (1) a sense of responsibility to the animals and consumers, (2) religious sentiments of dominion, and (3) faith in the cycle of cattle reproduction.

Responsibility

Ranchers feel a strong sense of responsibility to the animals they raise and to the people who consume those animals, and they expressed feelings of pride through comments such as “we feed the nation” or “people got to eat something.” These comments were prevalent in my interviews
and show that ranchers recognize the significance of their position. After all, in a nation that consumes more than 34 million head of beef cattle a year, ranchers do in fact “feed the nation” and rightfully take pride in that reality. This responsibility is a kind of redemption narrative—also present in 4H—that helps ranchers think of their work as important. Ranchers’ responsibility reflects a kind of masculine breadwinner narrative that situates them as the protector and provider.

The narrative emphasizing responsibility to the consumer is paralleled by another relating to a responsibility to the cattle themselves. Ranchers believe that cattle will have lived a good life when they die, as long as the animals are treated right. It is the responsibility of the ranchers to provide that good life for the animal as long as they are in their care. Here again, we see the tension between economic constraints and emotion. A cattle producer and breeding specialist named Darrel put it this way:

[I have a] responsibility to the animals and to my customers and to myself. I have to sleep with my decisions. If I don’t do something and they die, it’s the hardest thing, hard to swallow it. If we lose one, I feel like everything I’ve done is a waste. It’s heartbreaking. You have thoughts, “could I have done something?” If an animal goes through a chute and gets a scratch, or one gets sick ... I feel like I’ve failed if one dies. I’m sure doctors feel the same with people. I guess everyone has their time, but it’s my responsibility to make sure they live until they fulfill their purpose. If they don’t, it’s the hardest thing about the job. It’s something I have to live with.

Although cattle exist to die, ranchers have the responsibility to provide and protect their bodies. Darrel likens himself to a medical doctor in this respect. As Ian Convery and colleagues (2005) have discussed, death that does not occur at the proper time and in the proper place is difficult
for those in animal agriculture. It is Darrel’s responsibility to keep the animals alive. But, the animals, too, have a responsibility within this frame. As Darrel says, they have to “fulfill their purpose,” meaning they have to give up their lives for human ends.

Another way that producers talked about cattle fulfilling their purpose was referring to them as doing their “jobs.” This idea emerged most directly while I was working with Jerry, a veterinarian working at a smaller-sized auction house. Jerry’s job was to “preg-check” cattle being auctioned who were said to be pregnant. To do this, cattle were run through a squeeze chute built to restrain their bodies. The chute allowed Jerry to safely walk behind a cow and, wearing a long plastic glove, insert his hand into her anus. From there, he could feel if there was a fetus. Jerry would then walk to the front of the cow to check her teeth and would place a mark on her head, indicating her condition for the auctioneer.

I observed the preg-checking process and ran the chute. We did this for several hours, during which I talked to Jerry about my project, and we specifically discussed ranchers’ relationships with cattle. As a vet and rancher himself, Jerry immediately knew what I was talking about. As we continued to work, a man approached us and struck up a conversation. Being inexperienced at working the levers of the chute, I didn’t pay him much attention. I was simply trying not to screw up and let a cow slip through the chute before we could check her. Almost without acknowledging me and with no discussion of my status as a researcher, the man began to talk to Jerry about his cattle. As it turned out, the man probably came over so he could make sure his cattle were being treated properly during the preg-checking process. He began to tell Jerry that he was sorry he was selling these animals and that he was “going to miss them.”

Looking up over the rear end of the cow he was preg-checking, Jerry said to me, “See how much ranchers care about their animals?” To which the man replied, “and all that with the full
knowledge that they are going to die.” The man went on to say that he guessed that was their job: “We all have a job to do. It’s the mama cow’s job to raise a calf. The calf’s job is to feed us. And, once the cow’s old enough, she’ll be hamburger and will feed us then.”

Somewhat ironically, Jerry and I later sat down in a cafeteria and had a few burgers after six hours of working in the cold weather. As we ate, we talked more about the bond between ranchers and cattle. Jerry enthusiastically affirmed my suspicion that ranchers cared for their cattle, recounting stories of owners spending more money to save a cow or heifer than she was worth. Jerry also talked about the responsibility ranchers feel toward their cattle. In this narrative, ranchers and cattle work together for a ranch operation to function. The ranchers’ job reflects the contemporary masculine role of provider and protector. It is their responsibility to feed, protect, and care for their cattle. They do this work to ensure that the animal lives to fulfill her or his “purpose,” that purpose being their death at the slaughterhouse. If this is done correctly, unnecessary suffering will be avoided. Producers are then able to frame their work as centered on the avoidance of suffering. Ranchers noted that without their management of the herd, the animals would become sick, would not have enough water and food, and suffering would increase. The assumption here is that cattle are not able to survive outside their relationship with humans. Richard W. Bulliet (2005) discusses this issue by highlighting that some people “contend that humans have so transformed domestic species and bred out of them the characteristics needed for survival in the wild that their only remaining claim to life is to provide for humans” (p. 20). As Bulliet points out, this argument is easily undone by noting the success of “feral” herds that have been documented in many areas. Nevertheless, responsibility as a narrative helps ranchers construct their work as necessary and desirable, despite the drawback of having to kill cattle.
Sentiments of Dominionism

In addition to feeling a responsibility to the cattle, the customers, and themselves, ranchers also feel their work has a religious or natural purpose. Dominionism is a religious belief that humans have a divinely given right to use animals as they please (see Ellis & Irvine 2010; Irvine 2004; Linzey 1998; Scully 2002). Bound up in Judeo-Christian notions that animals are here for the use of people, the concept of dominionism has been used to provide moral justification for factory farming and other cruel treatments of animals (see Scully 2002, 2005). To have dominion over animals is a gendered status. Like responsibility, dominion draws on masculine notions of the breadwinner and protector, but overlays this rhetoric with religious ideas of the good shepherd. As Corey told me, “Cattle and horses, you know, the way I understand it all, they truly don’t have souls, but they’re alive and well. They got feelings, and somebody ought to be around to take care of them.”

Sentiments of dominionism give an overwhelming feeling that raising animals for food is not simply morally justifiable but preferable in the eyes of God. These same themes carry over into discussions about the treatment of cattle. As Kenny said,

You know, I’m of the belief God put us here on the planet for us to remain in dominion of animals. It was man’s—it’s almost a natural instinct to provide nutrition, food and clothing, and warmth…. I am a firm believer God put us here to be in dominion, and we are to provide for ourselves and people like us.

When asked about consuming meat and other goods produced from cattle bodies, even though cattle have feelings, ranchers responded along the same lines. As Cory said,

As far as eatin’ the meat, why, you know, it’s biblical. It’s what you should do. Sure, cows, and what have you, have feelin’s, but they don’t [pause] it’s their job. That’s their
job. That’s why the good Lord give ’em to us, is to eat ’em. And besides, hell, it tastes good [laughs].

Here we also see the use of “jobs” as a part of the narrative. In this case, God ordains that cattle’s job is to feed humans, and as a result, cattle are fit to be killed. As Corey said, “It’s food. They’re not human. We have to live, and I’d rather eat beef than anything else.”

Sentiments of dominion help construct cattle’s bodies as killable. By incorporating God into the responsibility narrative, the killable nature of cattle bodies becomes an essential and everlasting characteristic of the species. This ahistorical view neglects the many other potential components of the human-cattle relationship. Even those ranchers who were not overtly religious or who did not invoke God as a justification for their work understood the animals they raised as predestined to be killed. Even cows and bulls that are kept for breeding become killable once their reproductive usefulness is expended. It is the responsibility of the ranchers, even their spiritual mandate, to ensure that the cattle live long enough to fulfill this goal.

*The Cycle*

The cycle of beef production determines when cattle are bred, born, and sold. Cattle are bred in late spring or early summer, and their offspring are born in late winter or early spring and sold in the fall. The timing of this process varies by region, but it happens each year and is often cited by ranchers as evidence of the naturalness of the beef-production process. Ranchers often pointed to *the cycle* to show that their relationships with cattle were contingent on their ability to sell a certain number of them. In other words, if they want to continue to have the masculine status afforded them through their association with cattle, they have to sell animals. Comments to this effect were prevalent in my interviews. The narrative of the cycle serves as a way to balance the
negative emotions of selling off animals to people who will eventually kill them with the positive emotions of the coming new calves. As Kenny put it,

You spend—with calves and stuff that you may send off to be sold or to be processed—you spend a lot of time with those animals, and again there’s an emotional issue there that a lot of people won’t talk about. But at the same time, you’re in this to make a living, so you understand that that’s just an annual event that has to occur in order to make a living at it. So people balance that out, the emotional tie and the economical tie just kind of balance out. You go through that once a year, twice a year, however many times, and you move on to the next crop of cattle that are comin’ on, which most people are involved in that right now.

For Kenny, like the other ranchers I talked to, calving season balances the emotional sadness associated with sending animals to be processed. He went on to say, “You know, you’ve got these newborn calves. This is the best time of year for me, because we’re calving. You’ve got these new calves born. It’s just like the start of a new cycle.”

The feeling of naturalness provided by the cycle obscures the control ranchers have over the process. The cycle seems inevitable and provides a way to understand the process of creating killable bodies as natural. Ranchers know from years of experience that death is a necessary and seemingly unavoidable part of the cycle. A cowhand named John had this to say:

I think that’s the big disconnect a lot of people never get to see, that life is born but also life dies, either by your hand or something else. This has good sides to it; we’re connected. Life and the cycles go on, and there’s a good perspective, I guess, of life and the life process, from birth through death.
Ranchers’ involvement allows them to see the wholeness of the process. It is through this experience that ranchers become connected to the animals, but also to the cycle. The process sustains their life and their income, but it also sustains their relationship with cattle.

Despite the best efforts of ranchers to adhere to callous and inexpressive feeling rules, their work is emotional. The cycle helps balance sad emotions associated with death with positive emotions associated with rebirth. Combined with feelings of responsibility and sentiments of dominionism, the naturalness of the cycle provides a masculine narrative within which the caring for and killing of cattle bodies is logically coherent.

These narratives create a sense that the killability of cattle bodies is an inevitable and natural part of the rancher-cattle relationship. These sentiments are more than blame-displacing strategies (Frommer and Arluke 1999) or excuses or justifications (Scott and Lyman 1968). Instead, ranchers are able to create a situation within which the relationship could be no other way. This is what makes cattle bodies fundamentally killable. While the process might not always be easy, it is inevitable. In other occupations, caring for and killing animals generates internal conflict (see Arluke 1988, 1989, 1991, 2006), but by drawing on feelings of responsibility and sentiments of dominion and by locating themselves within the cycle of production, ranchers appear to be particularly well skilled at making potentially conflicting feelings coherent. Because they do this, animal bodies can be killed and consumed without emotion.

DISCUSSION
This chapter outlines the process of socially constructing a killable body. While any living body can be killed, it is acceptable to kill only certain bodies. Animals raised for food represent the
most successful and complete construction of bodies as killable. In the case of modern beef production, cattle are useful only for their dead bodies. Ranchers’ daily work leads them to see cattle as having personalities and other components of personhood. As Irvine (2004) notes, through interaction, “additional dimensions of animal selfhood become available as the animal’s intersubjective capacities become apparent” (p. 3). Ranchers are skilled emotion laborers and draw on a masculine narrative to manage the recognition of cattle’s person-like qualities with the need to treat those bodies as commodities. This is not a skill most people possess. In the United States, it is largely taboo to kill and consume dogs and cats because most people see them as having person-like qualities. Many people go so far as to consider their companion animals “part of the family” (AVMA 2007). Yet people commonly consume products made by killing cattle. This is possible because ranchers create a boundary between cattle and the commodities produced from their bodies. Through ranchers’ boundary labor, animals become other to consumers who never witness cattle as sentient beings and therefore can consume their bodies without emotion.

Ranching work is a kind of emotional dirty work. Everett Hughes (1962) frames dirty work as tasks carried out by a small number of people that protect others from the stigma associated with these tasks. The distance produced by dirty workers allows others to maintain a conception of themselves as “good people.” Hughes argues that tragedies like genocide, slavery, and racial violence are made possible because dirty workers separate the larger population from the dirty acts they condone, thereby allowing the majority to feign ignorance about oppression. The emotional dirty work of beef production functions in the same way. Ranchers see animals think and experience pain but do the dirty work of treating them as commodities. Because ranchers do this, consumers are able to ignore how commodities are produced and enjoy the
benefits of that production without emotion. Extending Hughes’s concept of dirty work, this research details how people cope with working face-to-face with the bodies that must be treated as killable.

The narratives of responsibility, dominion, and the cycle help ranchers construct killing cattle as natural and unavoidable. These animals are not simply the other to ranchers. If they were, the production of cattle would be as simple and emotionless as the consumption of animal-based products. Instead, ranchers put a lot of effort into naturalizing their work though these masculine narratives. Instead of denying harm, justifying their actions, or transferring blame, ranchers create a sense that the relationship could be no other way. Unlike Hochschild’s (1983) “deep acting,” ranchers are not generating positive feelings to serve the interests of an institution. Instead, they find ways to care for cattle that are both consistent with masculine feeling rules and do not interfere with the production process. Using words such as “stress” and believing that the cattle’s “job” is to provide food for humans allow ranchers to frame their empathy in ways that recognize the temporary nature of cattle’s lives. Similarly, the cycle lets ranchers feel sad that some animals are leaving, while looking forward to the next crop of calves that will be born. Instead of just not feeling or transforming feelings into something else, ranchers are able to understand these emotions as a necessary and unavoidable part of their job.

The idea of the cycle also infers something a little more complex. The cycle is basically the yearly reproductive cycle of cattle. To be sure, breeding animals is as important as selling them. This is a complicated process and the topic of the next chapter. Just as creating a killable body reflects the politics of human exploitation, the idea of the cycle reflects many ideas about gender and heterosexuality.
(RE)PRODUCING

Sex continues to obsessively fascinate human subjects, even if, as Freedman suggests, it holds little mystery for animals.
—Elizabeth Grosz Animal Sex: Libido as Desire and Death

Women move in one direction, cattle, shells, or mats in the other.
—Gayle Rubin The Traffic in Women: Notes on the “Political Economy” of Sex

The central focus of cattle ranchers is the production of new cattle. This is obvious in a way. If we want to kill animals and turn them into commodities, we need a constant supply of bodies. The only way to get more animals is to breed new ones. This simple premise is essentially the foundation of cattle ranching, but within the job of breeding and raising new animals are a number of complicated social forces. In Chapter 4, I discussed how ranchers negotiate their emotional connection to cattle and outlined a set of emotional tools that help them negotiate this setting: a sense of responsibility, sentiments of dominion, and faith in the cycle. In this chapter, I want to take a closer look at the idea of the cycle.

There is variation in the way ranchers approach the beef-production cycle, and different regions necessitate different timetables. For the ranchers in this study, the process generally looks like this: Cattle are bred in the spring and, with a little luck, they give birth to live calves sometime in February or March. Once calves are a few months old, they’re branded for identification and the males are castrated. This happens in May, at which point it is time to breed
again. The herd then spends the summer grazing until the fall, when ranchers wean the calves from their mothers and sell them. Then the cycle starts again.

Table 5. Diagram of (Re)Productive Cycle

Throughout the cycle, ranchers work with cattle to breed, birth, and nurture new life. This biological reproduction structures cattle ranching, but it is also a kind of capitalist production. Cattle bodies produce commodities. In this chapter, I introduce the term “(re)production” to discuss the implosion of biology and capitalism characteristic of ranching. The (re)production process collapses the capitalist production of commodities and the biological reproduction of bodies into a single process. Within (re)production, different bodies serve different purposes, and there is an inherent stratification. The animals needed for breeding new animals are essentially
capital. Other animals are the commodities themselves. Through this process, distinctly human concepts about kinship and gender are tangled up in the meanings generated through (re)production, and the process creates a situation where people use ideas about heteronormativity to reestablish normative boundaries in a context where those boundaries are challenged.

(Re)production is a cyclical process, consisting of a number of different stages. I have organized this chapter to provide the background information needed to understand how kinship, gender, and capitalism operate in this context. This chapter also provides a thorough description of my ethnographic data, detailing how I came to recognize and think about (re)production and especially focusing on my ethnographic work on bovine artificial insemination (hereafter referred to as AI). The chapter then takes the reader through the rest of the (re)productive cycle—calving, branding, and castrating calves—and the process of trafficking animals as commodities. As I demonstrate, gender and kinship are central to each of these stages. Before I discuss the cycle of reproduction in detail, I first want to describe the fieldwork that led me to think of (re)production in this way.

FINDING (RE)PRODUCTION

My conception of (re)production emerged from my first visit to Carl’s ranch in late February, during the height of the calving season. It took me just under three hours to arrive at his ranch, which was at least an hour from the nearest mid-sized city. The herd that Carl owns is relatively small, with only 130 (or so) mother cows, but Carl also runs cattle with his daughter Angela and her husband, Todd. In addition, Carl makes money tending and feeding cattle for a variety of people in his area, including Bill and Brittney, his neighbors and friends. All told, Carl, Angela,
and Todd tend and feed just fewer than 1,000 animals in any given year. As I pulled into Carl’s large gravel driveway and parked, I could see him and others working in the corral. After gathering my recorder and pocket notebook, I started toward them. Not far from my car, I noticed a dog pulling at the ear of a small calf. The calf was dead, cut in half, and lying skinless next to the wood fence that surrounded the corral.

During calving season, ranchers work around the clock. Carl, Todd, and his neighbors had been working without consistent sleep for some time. I did several interviews on this ranch and spent several days working and helping. Carl is a tall man who regularly wears a dirty hat that reads, “I feed the world.” Carl and the others took their time warming up to me, but when they did, I found them to be kind, funny, and pleasant. On my first trip to the ranch, the weather was relatively warm, and conditions were muddy. Carl directed me toward an old house where I could find some rubber boots. I worked with Carl and his neighbors, administering inoculations to new calves, loading some into trucks, and helping to move and feed cattle. The work was dirty, and I was covered in manure by midday.

Calving season is essentially the beginning of the (re)productive cycle. Like all cycles, there isn’t necessarily a clear beginning or ending, but calving is still generally considered the first step. The ranchers I talked to commonly referred to calving season as their favorite time of year and talked of the fulfillment of seeing new life come into the world. But, calving season is also a dangerous time for mother animals giving birth, especially for heifers who are giving birth for the first time. Beef production values large animals, and bulls are bred to produce profitable calves. Ranchers take great care when picking out a bull, and it is reasonably common for a rancher to spend several thousand dollars on a single male animal. Of central importance is the size of the calves the bull produces. Ideally, the size of the calf at calving would be manageable.
for the cow or heifer to deliver safely, but the weight at weaning would be as high as possible. The desire for large and profitable weaned calves drives ranchers to breed animals who are often too big for first-time mothers to deliver without assistance. As a result, either the mother or the calf could die, leaving a mother without a baby, or a baby without a mother. When this happens, ranchers “graft” an orphaned baby onto a childless mother. For this to work, the mother has to recognize the baby’s scent. Ranchers skin the hide off the dead calf and stitch it over the orphaned calf. This is why I found a skinless calf near my car. Like many parts of ranching, grafting is an ugly process.

While visiting Carl’s ranch, I heard that one of Bill and Brittney’s heifers had complications a few nights ago. Bill is a quiet man in his mid-sixties. I noted in my field notes that he had the brightest blue eyes I had ever seen. On the day we talked, he wore old Key overalls, rubber boots, and an old hat that he proudly declared he had gotten free. Like many of the men and women I talked with, he wore stained clothes and manure-covered pants and shoes. As so often happens, Bill recently had a heifer whose calf was too big to be born without assistance. After trying his best to help, Bill and his wife put the heifer in a trailer and took her to the nearest veterinarian with the hopes of having a cesarean section done to save both animals. Bill told me that when he got to the vet’s office, the veterinarian could tell by the foul smell that it was too late to perform the operation and recommended putting both animals down. Bill did not agree. He loaded the pregnant heifer back into his trailer and drove to another vet, who agreed to cut the heifer down the side and try to extract the calf. Ultimately, the operation was unsuccessful and both animals died.

Bill’s trip to the vet was clearly on the minds of the other ranchers. Bill himself recounted the story to me, as did Todd and Brittney. Additionally, I was involved in a casual conversation
with a neighbor who told the story. Each version of the story emphasized a failure on Bill’s part to let go of the animal. Brittney best summed up the general feeling among everybody, saying, “it was a bad decision; we’d been better off takin’ her behind the barn and shooting her.” While everyone sympathized with Bill’s situation, it was clear that he had made the wrong decision.

According to Todd,

You know it wouldn’t have cost $400 [to shoot the animal]. A C-section and you end up with a dead cow and a dead calf, or both. And it didn’t make anybody any money. But, by god, we had to do something. You know, that’s just want you do.

You know looking back we should have just shot the sucker.

While working with Carl in the corral, he retold the story to me. After recounting the story, both Carl and a neighbor shook their heads in understanding. I noticed the other man roll his eyes.

While Bill was a respected rancher, it was clear that he had let himself go too far to save this particular animal.

This day of research left me with a simple, but important question: why did Bill go so far to try to save this cow? Doing so was clearly, from the beginning, against his economic interests. This kind of event is very common. While it may prompt eye rolls, ranchers often spend more to save an animal (or try to save an animal) than that animal is worth. Despite these efforts, cattle die all the time during calving. When they do, it is a monetary loss, but it is also emotional. Cattle are capital and commodities, but they are also something else. As I drove the three hours home, I wondered about the context and the content of this “something else.” Bill’s story stuck with me for a few months. As the semester wore on, my teaching demands increased, and I was unable to conduct interviews for a while. Still, Bill’s trip to the vet kept popping into my head. In May, I called Carl and asked if I could come out again. He very graciously agreed. He said that
they were going to be synchronizing cattle in a few days and suggested that would be a good time. Not really knowing what he was talking about, I went. My next few trips to Carl’s ranch were amazing and went a long way in helping me understand the something else of Bill’s story.

*Something Else*

No one was at the house when I arrived, but I could see people in the middle of the adjacent field. Not entirely sure what to do, I gathered up my nerve and began to walk the quarter mile to their trucks. There were probably 75 cows in the pasture, and I immediately drew their attention. At a distance, they gathered and watched me intensely. I noted in my field notes how unnerving it was to have them stare at me. When I arrived at the trucks, I found Carl, Todd, and Ed, a person I had seen but hadn’t really met before. After saying hello to everyone, I pulled myself up into Carl’s truck, and we began making small talk. He laughed at me when I told him the cows were staring at me. He told me that “if they see a strange person, they’ll recognize him.” I asked about the day’s plan, and he told me that we would be synchronizing the herd so they could be AI’ed in a few days.

We spent the day in the hot sun driving cattle through a chute and giving injections. I was still a little unclear about what we were doing. All I really understood was that we were injecting the animals with hormones so they would all come into heat together. My job was to glue a “heat detector” onto their backsides as they came through the chute. The chute was a narrow channel with tall, probably six-foot-high, wooden walls. Along the outside was a platform, so we could see over the walls and work with the cattle. I stood on the platform and took what looked like a plastic thermometer and glued it on each animal’s back, just above her tail. Gluing the heat detectors on was messy. As I dealt with the glue and the heat detectors, Todd filled a syringe
with hormones and injected each animal as Carl and Ed drove the cattle through the chute. When we finished, I was covered in glue and smelling of manure. They invited me back to help with the actual artificial insemination.

A few days later, I arrived back at Carl’s ranch. Carl told me that most of the cows and heifers would be coming into estrus at around noon. As this time approached, Ed announced that he was going to head out into the field in his pickup to check the cattle. Carl encouraged me to go with him. Ed was an older man, not especially friendly, and not especially interested in me. Ed’s body was clearly not what it once was. He walked with a stiffness and had difficulty mounting a horse, though he was still able to ride. Grumpily, but with curiosity, he let me ride with him out into the field. After about five minutes of awkwardness, he asked me where I was from. When I told him I was from Pocatello, Idaho, he brightened up a little and asked me if they still had “the big rodeo in Pocatello?” I told him, yes, the Dodge National Circuit Finales were still there, and I talked about what an important event it is for the town. At this point, Ed seemed to open up a little. As we talked, Ed told me that he was retired but had spent most of his life in the cattle industry. He had worked on a large ranch outside Boulder for years, but, as he said, that was before the hippies moved in and ruined some of the best ranchland in Colorado.

Carl had told me that Ed had an amazing knowledge of the beef industry, and the more we talked, the more I understood what Carl meant. Ed had been involved in every aspect of ranching and clearly knew all about the technologies used in the industry. Among his many accomplishments, Ed had bred two prize-winning bulls. One bull had won him a blue ribbon at a major stock show, where he had entered into an agreement to sell the bull’s semen for AI. According to Ed, he had made $100,000 dollars each year, for several years, simply from his share of the bull’s profits. His bull’s semen was bought and injected into thousands of cows.
While Ed was telling me this story, we were driving into the field that kept the animals who were to be AI’ed that day. He focused in on a group that had broken off from the rest. Sitting in the truck, Ed told me that when cows come into estrus they mount each other, placing pressure on the heat detector I had glued on their back and causing the liquid in it to turn red. This group of around 10 to 15 cows and heifers seemed to be especially active, and I saw one of the cows rear up on her hind legs and mount another female cow, just as Ed had described. I later learned that this was a behavioral response to the hormones we had injected them with just days before. The behavior is sexual and mimics breeding. I would later learn that what Ed and I were looking for was “standing heat,” which is the short time that a cow or heifer will “stand” to be penetrated by a bull. Just before standing heat, she will allow others to mount her but will not allow him or her to stay in this position very long. If she is not in standing heat, or otherwise wants to avoid being mounted, all she has to do is walk away. By taking a step forward, she simply slips from underneath the mounting animal. As Ed and I sat in the truck, we were looking for signs that these females were in standing heat.

Ed started to describe to me the different signs of standing heat. He pointed out the fluid on the cows’ vaginas and noted their sociability. He noticed that the heat detectors had turned from white to red. Looking out at the cows and heifers, watching them sniff one another, mount one another, Ed turned and told me that he liked to call these groups “orgies.” I raised my eyebrow at this comment, but decided at the time it was not especially relevant. Still, I noted in my field notes that our observation of the cattle felt voyeuristic, sexual in a way I could not fully describe and did not, at the time, fully understand.

My time with Ed was relatively short, maybe a half an hour. It didn’t take him long to decide that these animals were in standing heat and ready to be AI’ed. We drove back to the
house where Ed and Todd mounted horses and headed out to gather the cattle and drive them toward the barn. When we got back to the house, I caught up with Carl, who was preparing the AI tools. He was working in one of the several rooms in the barn. When Ed and Todd got the cattle to the barn, they drove them into a holding corral. Taking one or two at a time, they brought the cattle into a smaller room inside the barn. One by one, we would drive the cow or heifer through the door that led into the next room and into a makeshift pen. The pen had a chain-link gate, hinged to the back wall so it could swing up against the side of the barn. We pushed the cattle toward the back of the barn and swung the gate so that the wall and the gate restrained their bodies. This was tricky, but once we penned the cow or heifer, a piece of fencing wire (not barbed wire) held the gate tight. The wire ran behind the legs of the animal.

When positioned correctly, the cow or heifer was facing the back of the barn, penned between the fence and the wall, with her rear end facing toward us. The wire that ran behind her legs kept the gate pretty tight, and also kept her from kicking. At this point, Carl would step into the small side room with the AI tools. In this room was a large metal container with “straws” of frozen semen, which Carl had ordered from a magazine. Carl would quickly pull what looked like a coffee straw out of the container and place it in a tool that thawed the semen with boiling water. Carl put the straw in a long (approximately 3 foot) metal rod that he called a pipette. Putting the pipette down his shirt to keep it warm, Carl put on a long plastic glove that went up to his shoulder. Stepping into the next room, they asked me to help restrain the cow or heifer. I stood on the side of the gate and pressed the gate harder against the animal, as Carl inserted his hand into her anus, and then the pipette into her vagina, pressing what looked like a plunger to inject the semen.
As an ethnographer, this was a lot to take in. There was a lot going on that I didn’t understand as far as the technicalities of the process. Admittedly, I was unprepared to fully appreciate what was happening. While I had done some research on AI, the process was much different than I had anticipated and, at the time, much of it was lost on me. What was not lost on me was how uncomfortable I was. As the process happened again, and again, and again—we AI’ed over 50 cows that day—I began to notice a strange dynamic among the four of us. Eventually, I was able to step behind a cow or heifer and watch the process over Carl’s shoulder. I watched as a cow crapped all over his shoes. As Carl would push his hand inside the anus, Ed approached and with his index and middle finger spread the cow’s vaginal lips so Carl could insert the pipette. Looking at Todd and me, Ed said to Carl, “these other guys won’t do that for ya [laugh].” Ed was right—neither Todd nor I were going to touch the animal in this way. There was a strange homophobic feeling to the process, and I noticed that neither Carl nor Todd was making much eye contact with each other or me. This, combined with the crassness of Ed referring to cow’s “twats” and making vulgar jokes, brought my attention to the importance of sex, sexual meaning, and heteronormativity to the context of ranching.

As an ethnographer, this left me with many questions. Was Carl becoming a father? A true animal “husband”? Was this rape? I wondered about Bill and the cesarean section he paid for. While Bill does not AI his cows, could the something else be kinship?

GENDER AND ANIMALS

As I talked about my experiences with Bill and my suspicions about gender, kinship, and capital production, my friend and colleague Leith Lombas recommended I reread Gayle Rubin’s (1975) “The Traffic in Women.” This work has proven to be a powerful theoretical reference point for
understanding what I observed at Carl’s ranch and for grasping the (re)production process. Rubin points out that economic modes of production create kinship relations, which then frame ideas about gender and sex difference. Although issues of culture and materialism make it difficult to talk about kinship, gender, and political economy in any kind of linear fashion, it is clear that these ideas are tangled together and that they often play out in (re)production. While Rubin is not thinking specifically about animals, animals are a central component of kinship, gender, and economic structures. The nature of this relationship becomes most clear in cases of reproductive technologies, like AI.

Laura Mamo (2007) points out that many assistive reproductive technologies (ARTs) are centuries old and were originally animal-breeding tools. Arab horse breeders, for example, were artificially inseminating horses as early as the fourteenth century (Herman 1981). The first documented example of AI was Ludwig Jacobi, who artificially inseminated salmon eggs in 1742 (see Mamo 2007: 25). More recently, these technologies have made the jump from nonhuman animals to people, becoming an everyday part of human reproduction. As a result, these ARTs have contributed to changing family structures. Mamo’s ethnography focuses on lesbian couples and emphasizes how these technologies allow people to produce new identities. When ARTs help create new bodies, they make parents and define the kinship of bodies. While studies of assisted reproduction in humans are many, the importance of animals to the development of these technologies makes me wonder what people create for themselves when they breed animals.

While agriculture clearly uses animal bodies as both capital and commodities, how meanings of kinship and gender are tangled in this process is less obvious. Still, these issues have surfaced previously in the literature. Take Harriet Ritvo’s (1995) term “genetic capital,” for
example. For Ritvo, genetic capital refers to genetically specialized bulls whose fertility is a trade commodity. In her historical work, Ritvo (1987) outlines the emergence of the studbook and the construction of specific animals, rather than whole breeds, as capable of producing offspring of a particular type that could add to a herd’s genetic quality. This transition, credited by Ritvo to eighteenth-century breeder Robert Bakewell, allowed specific animals to become emblems of their aristocratic owners, symbols of their “dignity, social position, and breeding.” Ritvo continues: “Especially a stately prize bull, from which vast herds might spring, seemed a fitting representation of the lord of the manor, in traditional agrarian ideology the quasi-patriarch of an extended rural family” (p. 60). When I read this for the first time, it reminded me of the pride with which Ed had discussed his prize-winning bulls. When I talked to Ed, it seemed he

17 In a more modern context, Sarah Franklin (2002) talks of the “new genetic capital” developed through the creation of Dolly. Franklin notes the importance of kinship and gender and argues that cloning Dolly could have been constructed as a kind of queer reproduction, because it created a new female body from the cells of another female body. Instead, precedence was given to the paternalistic elements of the scientific process that created her. Thus, cloning removed the physical animal herself from reproduction and replaced her with the scientific process that created her. This is at once a kind of genetic capital separate from the animal body, as well as a kind of paternal reproduction. Franklin’s (2002, 2007) discussions of Dolly point out the utility of looking at animal reproduction as a way to understand how issues of kinship, gender, and capital are tangled.
was talking about more than the money he had gotten. What Ritvo’s work suggests is that Ed’s bull may well have created an opportunity for him to spawn an extended rural family of his own.

Cattle are genetic capital and commodities but also take on gender and kinship statuses. For people, working with cattle can come to define masculinity and paternity, leading to some curious possibilities, especially the opportunity for a masculinity not tied to a male body. Some studies of female masculinity explore the disembodied nature of maleness (Halberstam 1998; Shapiro 2007). Judith Halberstam (1998) points out that this task is important because investigating only the ways men do masculinity not only reveals ideological assumptions about men’s relationship to power and control but also reifies the naturalness of this relationship. Exploring masculinity as separate from maleness is an important methodological step, according to Halberstam, because “masculinity … becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white male middle-class body” (p. 356). Looking for masculinity outside the male body dislodges the relationship between maleness, manliness, and masculinity and makes female masculinity possible. In the context of ranching, animals take on gendered meaning and kinship status within the (re)productive process. As a result, people’s association with them helps define gender and kinship statuses.

The inclusion of cattle into human kinship does not mean they are like people. The (re)productive system demands the trade of cattle as commodities, requiring significant emotional control. This control, culturally associated with masculinity, is a necessity in this respect. Violence against animals has long been associated with masculinity and is often constructed as an expression of dominance and mastery over femininity. Research stemming from ecofeminism has shown that the way we figure the environment and animals closely reflects constructions of women and femininity (Adams 1990; Gruen 1993; Kalof 2007).
Raewyn Connell’s (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity refers to the “currently accepted strategy” of being a man (p. 77). Although masculinities are multiple, there is a hierarchy of different ways of doing masculinity. Composed of those characteristics considered the best, hegemonic masculinity is not fixed but varies over time. In the contemporary United States, it emphasizes the importance of control and domination, especially over women and other men. It is not surprising then that men often choose to express their masculinity by controlling, harming, and killing animals. Examples of this violence are present in research concerning hunting (Bronner 2004; Luke 2007), animal fighting (Geertz 1972), and domestic violence (Flynn 2000).

The role animals play in people’s masculinity has largely been absent from masculinities studies. In some cases, the role is so obvious that animals seem to be hiding in plain sight. Take the US version of the “cowboy,” for example. Michael S. Kimmel (1987) describes the image of the cowboy as “fierce and brave, willing to venture into unknown territory and tame it for its less-than-masculine inhabitants” (p. 239). This construction of the cowboy has a strong relationship to Connell’s (1993) idea of “frontier masculinity,” which highlights the gendered nature of colonization and the sexual ideology that permeated the settlement of the United States, South Africa, and Australia. Both Kimmel and Connell overlook the significance of animals—wild, domesticated, even human—to the construction and expression of masculinities, a relationship especially pronounced in the distinctly US version of the cowboy.¹⁸ Both of these masculinities are critical to the growing body of literature that addresses masculinities in rural space and agriculture. As Hugh Campbell, Michael M. Bell, and Margaret Finney (2006) show,

¹⁸ During European colonial expansion, many human groups were thought of as animalistic, savage, and subhuman. The domination and control of these groups was central to white European, and European American, masculinity (Bederman 1995; Deloria 1998; Hall 2001).
hegemonic forms of masculinity often emulate rural masculinity. They point out that the “real man” in many cases is a “rural man” (p. 19). But even in their edited volume on rural masculinities, animals are nearly completely absent. This is a glaring omission, as animals are omnipresent in rural space, serving as coworkers, friends, prey, pests, and products; in most cases, domesticated animals greatly outnumber people.

When Carl, Todd, Ed, and I restrained and AI’ed those animals, we were taking semen produced by a bull, who was bred by a person—someone like Ed— and impregnating another body. This much is certain, but what this action produces is less clear. The temptation is to frame these actions as causally generating gender and kinship. As an ethnographer, I am aware that AI and animal breeding are irresistible grounds for metaphor and that metaphor is a complicated place for an empirical study. My experiences on cattle ranches suggest to me that Carl’s role as the inseminator made him a kind of metaphorical father of his calves. But this metaphor is not so straightforward. Carl was using the semen of a bull produced by someone else. So, is that person, or that bull, the father? This metaphor is dangerous. Is the metaphor of fatherhood even appropriate? Was this simply the production of a commodity? Are ranchers able to shed themselves of the sexual undertones and simply see animals as capital and commodity? AI exaggerates the potential for thinking metaphorically about the ways people come to think about animals as part of the family, but this does not mean that’s how it really is. We need more information before we can make such claims.

GENDER AND KINSHIP IN (RE)PRODUCTION

The most basic evidence of the intersection of kinship, gender, and capital are the names given to the animals involved in (re)production. These names simultaneously characterize kinship
relationships and signify each animal’s role. That is to say, they signify each body’s role in the creation of commodity animals. The word “cow,” inaccurately used as a generic term for all cattle, actually refers to female cattle who have given birth. Before giving birth, female animals are called heifers. Adult male cattle used for breeding are bulls. Ranchers use bulls and cows to (re)produce new animal bodies, and in this sense, they are genetic capital. The majority of the bodies produced through breeding bulls and cows are commodity animals. Commodity animals include most heifers and nearly all bull calves. Bulls used for breeding come from specialty breeding operations to ensure genetic diversity in the herd. As a result, ranchers typically castrate all bull calves produced on the ranch. Through castration, male calves become steers. This process ceremoniously regenders male calves and gives them feminine meaning. Like steers, most heifers are commodities, but some are kept as “replacement heifers,” who take the place of cows who are too old or otherwise unable to fulfill their (re)productive role. These culled cows become commodities. In the end, only female cattle and castrated males become food. Thus, the gender of commodity animals is always feminine.

Others have discussed the gendering of animals and the role they can play in kinship (Luke 2004). For her part, Rubin (1975) also alludes to the importance of animals for establishing gender and kinship relationships. Although she leaves the role of animals unanalyzed, Rubin discusses E. E. Evans-Pritchard’s (1951) anthropological work that examines the role of cattle exchange in deciding the status of fatherhood in the Nuer people. Citing Evans-Pritchard, Rubin points out that through the exchange of cattle “a woman can be married to another woman, and be husband to the wife and father of her children, despite the fact that she is not the inseminator” (1975:169). This observation shows the important role cattle exchange can play in establishing masculinity and paternity.
According to Rubin, heterosexual kinship relationships are part of a broader social apparatus that disadvantages women in the economic, political, and familial realms. A central part of this process is the exaggeration of sex difference, which becomes associated with behavior, thereby creating gender and gender differences as a foundation of men’s control over women. Again building on anthropological research, Rubin shows that people can trade these constructed gender differences. In some cultures, women are “trafficked” by men as valuable gifts to other men. Recounting Claude Levi-Strauss (1963), Rubin argues, “marriages are a most basic form of gift exchange, in which it is women who are the most precious of gifts” (1975:173). As Rubin demonstrates, marriages are especially significant because they connect families through kinship.

Now, it is certainly not my argument that ranchers are in a metaphorical marriage with their cows. That would be silly, right? What I am suggesting is that cattle play a part in ranchers’ families. They do this in a number of ways, not the least of which involves giving up their bodies to produce or become commodities. The fact that nearly all these animals are either female or feminized is significant. These animals are trafficked and exchanged for other goods, but their importance to the family structure does not begin and end with exchange. In fact, exchange is a relatively small part of the process. Conception, birth, and the nurturing of life are a far more significant process in the everyday lives of ranchers and their families. Within this framework, there is legitimate caring and emotion attachment to the animals, and different people take on diverse roles. This brings me back to Bill’s story.

When Bill and Brittney loaded up their cow, they were not only loading up a threatened commodity, they were also loading up a mother and a child. Clearly, the animals represented an economic interest, but they also represented something else. That “something else” has a lot to
do with the gender of those animals and the kinship relationship Bill and Brittney have with them. At least, that’s what I suspected after visiting with Bill, Brittney, Carl, and Todd. To confirm this suspicion, I went back to my data and looked for themes of family-like relationships and language. I also began further investigating and learning about AI. After a long interview with a husband and wife team who were AI experts and business owners, I enrolled in a bovine artificial insemination course hosted through a nearby university.¹⁹

_Becoming the Animal Husband_

Revisiting my data, I found some evidence that interviewees would put feelings of emotional attachment into parental or family-oriented terms. For example, a rancher in his forties named Jesse described his role with animals this way: “It’s much in the same way that a parent provides for their kids.” This kind of familial comment is reasonably common in my interviews, but the data is relatively thin and not overwhelmingly convincing. What is more convincing is the auto-ethnographic data I collected in the exaggerated context of the AI class.

Breeding happens in one of two ways. The most common method is “natural service” and involves turning a bull, or bulls, out into a pasture with cows and heifers. Ritvo’s (1987) detailed discussion of British breeding culture discusses the way cattle, and bulls in particular, take on gendered meanings and become representations of their owner’s masculine self. Sports such as bullfighting and professional bull riding exhibit the hypermasculine states bulls can occupy. This kind of aggressive behavior, constructed as masculine, is the major drawback to natural service. Live bulls are very expensive and can be dangerous to handle. Remember that most male calves

¹⁹ Many of the students attended a nearby community college; however, the class itself was hosted by a land-grant university.
are castrated during branding. Therefore, the only intact males on the ranch are the bulls. Using ARTs, ranchers are able to sidestep the aggressive challenge some bulls can pose.

AI allows the rancher to inseminate cattle directly, without an actual bull. Effectively, this technology castrates the dangerous bull and allows ranchers to appropriate and embody his masculinity. AI is practical because it allows ranchers to improve the genetic quality of their herd by inseminating many female animals with specialized semen. As the logic of animal husbandry goes, it is more practical to invest in AI than to invest in a number of genetically specialized female animals. This is because the semen of one bull, or set of bulls, can “improve” the genetics of a whole generation of offspring, while a female can produce only one “improved” animal at a time. Although new embryo-transfer technologies are available, they are not as cost-effective for whole herds. Generally, only specialty breeders use this technology. While AI is growing in popularity, only about 15% of cattle ranches use the technology. Still, it represents an opportunity to exaggerate the context of ranching and helps make clear some of the issues pertaining to animal breeding.

*AI School*

It is something of a truism in feminist studies that images of women’s bodies reduce them to particular eroticized parts. The process of AI radically exaggerates this phenomenon, reducing the female body to the (re)productive role. This reduction became clear on the first day of AI class. Arriving on a Thursday night, I, with about 14 other people, sat in the rural fire station that served as our classroom. The other students were mostly college-age students taking the class for credit for a nearby community college. After we sat through two hours of power-point slides and lectures covering the basics of AI, one of the instructors, Darrel, directed us toward the garage.
Inside the garage stood four long tables arranged in a square. Garbage bags covered each table and on top sat the complete disembodied reproductive tracts of 12 cows or heifers. The reproductive tracts consisted of the vaginal cavity, cervix, uterus, fallopian tubes, and ovaries. The smell was a combination of garage, chemicals, manure, and the damp mustiness of dead tissue.

Wanting to show that I could handle this, I walked right up to a station. The instructors gave us each gloves and an AI pipette, which they called an “AI gun.” Darrel had gotten the reproductive tracts from a nearby slaughterhouse, and I noticed that the vaginal cavity on mine was sliced at an awkward angle. It was also covered in manure. It was difficult not to vomit.

Darrel told us to maneuver the AI gun through the vaginal cavity, through the cervix, and into uterus. This proved to be very difficult. Everything was slippery. As instructed, I felt for the “spongy mass” of the cervix. Once I found that, I inserted the AI gun into what was left of the vaginal cavity, and worked it toward the cervix. The cervix felt “gritty,” due to interior folds designed to restrict the number of sperm that make it into the uterus. I kept catching these folds with my AI gun, making it feel impossible to reach the cervix. This went on for about two hours, and eventually most of us were able to find the “target.” We rotated and tried different reproductive tracts, some easier than others, but as the night wound down, a few students decided to begin dissecting and exploring the tracts.

Several of the slaughtered cows or heifers were pregnant, and the fetuses were still inside the uterus. With a scalpel provided by the instructors, several students cut out the fetuses. The one that drew the most attention was the size of a football. They explored the fetus, encouraged by the other students and the instructors who gathered around them. A female assistant instructor, Karen, was especially encouraging of this behavior and really got involved. One of
the students stood up and said loudly to the group, “what if PETA saw this [laugh].” At this point, one of the students, a younger man around 18 or 20, noticed that the fetus was male. “Oh look, it’s a bull calf.” He then took the scalpel and cut off the bull calf’s testicles. “Now it’s a steer,” he said with a smirk, as he then began to dismember the body. This went on for about fifteen minutes. I did my best to look benign.

The next day we arrived early at the fire station. For most of the morning, we sat in the classroom, where we saw a power-point presentation about the estrus cycles of cattle. After a short lunch break, we reconvened at a nearby feedlot to practice AI’ing live cattle. When we arrived at the front office, they led us to a nearby corral, holding 15 or so cattle. The cows were facing the back of a long shed, with their rear ends facing toward us. The pens were not as tight as they were at Carl’s ranch; the cows had about a foot on either side. A chain ran behind their rear feet but was not tight against their body. They could kick at us.

After a quick run-through of the AI tools (the container, the straws filled with semen, the tool that thaws the semen, the AI gun, and so forth), we were shown how to properly “load” the “AI gun.” Carefully removing and thawing the semen straw is important because the sperm die easily. The instructors told us to put the AI gun down the front of our shirts to keep it warm and out of the light. After doing this, I put on my long plastic glove, pumped a large dose of the industrial-sized lubrication dispenser, and rounded the corner of the small enclosure that served as the preparation area.

I don’t know a lot about working with cattle. But the one thing I know for sure was not to approach a cow from behind, so I hesitated when it came time to move toward the cows from the back. My anxiety must have been evident because Darrel walked over to me and started
explaining how to approach the animal: “You have to let her know you’re there.” In a calm voice, I said “hello” to the cow. Darrel, laughing a little, instructed me to move slowly toward her. Being careful not to move suddenly and standing slightly to the side, I pushed her tail to my left. She jostled against the gates and moved as far forward in the pen as she could. I gently but quickly rubbed the lubricant that I held in my gloved left hand over her anus. I pressed my body against hers, made a cone with my fingers, and pushed my hand inside her anus. Once my hand was inside her, I could feel the heat from her body. The core temperature of a healthy cow is between 100 and 103 degrees Fahrenheit, hot in contrast to the cold day. At this point Darrel said, “Good, now you’ve got her. Once you’re inside, she won’t kick.” Next, I took paper towels and cleaned the vulva of any feces. In my field notes, I noted my surprise at how humanlike the cow’s vagina was. It was a stark reminder of the profound similarities between human and bovine bodies. With my hand just inside her anus, I made a fist and pressed downward. This tightened the skin around the vagina, causing the vulva to open slightly and allowing me to insert the AI gun without touching the outside skin. With the AI gun inserted, I pushed my hand and arm farther into the colon, past my elbow, and began feeling for the cervix. As I did this, the cow resisted my hand and arm by trying to push me out of her body, pushing gas and feces out of her body in the process. While inside the animal, I found it surprising how much I could feel. To find the cervix, they told us to find the hips and “sweep” downward along them until we felt the “spongy mass” of the cervix. I felt the cow’s hips and uterus. Later on, I mistakenly grabbed one cow’s ovary. From the colon, I had full access to all the reproductive organs.
As can be imagined, AI is an intense interaction between a human and a cow or heifer. During the rest of the certification course, we practiced injecting cattle with fake semen. The cows resisted this process. The cattle were constantly kicking at us and pushing us out of their bodies. This resistance took its toll. While Carl had been able to AI an animal in only a few minutes on his ranch, I was spending upward of half an hour inside a cow or heifer’s colon, trying to maneuver the AI gun into the cervix. My arm got very tired working against the cow’s constant resistance. I can only imagine how uncomfortable and painful this was for the cattle. I noted in my field notes that, by the end of the day, several cows were bleeding from the anus.

Several of the students expressed concern about hurting the animals. Darrel told us that the cattle would be sent to slaughter in the next few days and that it was unlikely that any harm we could do would be fatal before then. This put most people’s concerns to rest, but it didn’t help me much.
Sexual Meanings

Several happenings during the AI classes really drove home the sexual meanings associated with this process. For example, while I was inside one cow, I began to talk to her. I had been inside her for an especially long time, and I mumbled under my breath that it was “okay” and that I was “almost done.” The student next to me, a woman, looked over her shoulder and said, “Are you whispering sweet nothings?” I didn’t know what to say. In a friendly way, she continued to tease me about “sweet nothings” for the rest of the course. Another example comes from a seemingly legendary joke involving a steer who slips in with the cows and a student who unknowingly sticks his hand into the steer’s anus. For my fellow students, this story was hilarious. Recounting it to several veterinarians, they told me this is a common trick (or at least story) pulled on first-year vet students. This joke is a kind of homophobic play that serves to subordinate femininity. C. J. Pasco (2007) has called this type of play “fag discourse.” These happenings point the way to the heteronormative and homophobic sexual meanings at play in AI.

The sexual meanings present in AI also manifest in the technology used to control reproduction. AI allows a rancher to turn his or her body into a prosthetic bull. The appropriation of bull semen is manifested symbolically in the phallic “AI gun” that is “loaded” with bull semen. While Carl referred to this tool as a pipette, the course instructors exclusively called it an “AI gun.” This terminology also appears prominent in most of the catalogs I have found.

The AI process heightens the ranchers’ role and diminishes the importance of live bulls. This substitution allows ranchers, who are primarily men, to replace the sexual functions of the bull with their own body through the prosthetic extension of the AI gun, thus somewhat literally becoming animal “husbands.” These heteronormative meanings were evident from the first time I encountered AI. While I was dismissive of Ed’s use of the word “orgy” to describe the female
cattle mounting each other, I again found further evidence of these sexualized meanings during the AI class. For the unit on heat detection, the course manual had this image depicting the need to watch cattle:

Image 2: Heat Detection

These jokes, events, and images bring me to the issue of analogy and metaphor. Is this image benign? Or does it say something about the use of heterosexual meanings expressed through relationships with animals? Like all questions regarding images and symbolic interpretation, the answer is not easy. If we accept the analogy, it becomes striking how, in such a literal way, ranchers become animal husbands and fathers to their herds. The success, health, and size of the herd become emblematic of the ranchers’ masculinity. Theoretically, the gender of the rancher does not limit access to this masculine status. In the case of AI, masculinity is disconnected from maleness and accessible through a prosthetic AI gun phallus. This phallus is clearly metaphorical and disembodied, allowing a female-bodied woman to appropriate the symbolically masculine statues.

But, if we are skeptical of this analogy, these images and actions are simply benevolent, fun, and irrelevant. This is certainly what many of the producers I talked with would say. Behind
their assertions that these possible connections are silly, outrageous, or even offensive, there is something familiar and suspicious. The presumed absence of sexuality, and the work that goes into separating breeding from sexuality, perhaps gives away its importance to the occupation. Queer theorists have long emphasized the importance of paying attention to the ways sexuality operates in everyday life, especially in contexts that seem asexual. Admittedly, sexuality does not announce itself directly in the context of cattle ranching. In fact, to a great extent, ranching and animal breeding *seems* as though it is natural and independent of human control. My argument here is that this naturalness is a parallel to Judith Butler’s (1990) literalizing fantasy, where gender and self-identity develop through the laborious process of performativity. Because the actions of (re)production are understood within a heteronormative discourse—and so naturally fit within contemporary ideas of kinship, gender, and capital—they become a “natural fact,” invisible to those who participate in the process (Butler: 1990: 95).

**GENDERED ANIMALS, GENDERED PEOPLE**

The story of (re)production has two parallel narratives. The first emphasizes the gendering of the animals. Cattle take on gendered statuses and are folded into kinship and production modalities. The second narrative emphasizes the way people take on these gendered meanings through association with animals. Performative acts with animals gender human bodies. The sexualized meanings of cattle bodies, compounded with their connection to kinship and capital, allow men and women access to masculinity. This theoretical access to masculinity challenges conventionally held assumptions about gendered boundaries, presenting a special problem: these challenged boundaries must be policed. In my data, calving provides the clearest context of this boundary maintenance.
**Calving**

The people I interviewed widely held calving season to be the best time of year. Everyone seemed to take sincere pleasure in watching and contributing to the birth of young cattle, but it is here that the gendered division of labor is most obvious. Although women’s labor is critical throughout the calving season, there is a tendency to downplay their contributions. This tends to happen in three ways. First, much of the work done during calving is physically demanding, and women are considered not strong enough. Second, men are the decision makers on ranches, so their knowledge is privileged. Last, women are seen as emotionally overattached to cattle. This perceived overattachment is the most significant reason men give to exclude women from a masculine status. According to men, women’s emotions make their work unreliable. It is commonplace that people make mistakes and that cattle die during this process. My data show that although men’s mistakes are seen as unavoidable, women’s mistakes are seen as the result of physical inability, lack of knowledge, and emotional overattachment. The attribution of these traits to women alters their kinship relationship to cattle and reestablishes them as mothers. Because of this process, women are also excluded from the economic elements of cattle ranching.

Calving is a big event and requires hard work and long hours. Ranchers depend on the work of their families and neighbors. As Jeff put it, “If you don’t have neighbors, you don’t have nothing.” All the people I talked with held their neighbors and small community in high regard. They relied on them for assistance, advice, and friendship. Although I did observe disputes among neighbors, all participants felt a deep commitment to being a good neighbor, helping one another, and protecting and improving the community. Women’s work in the community was commonly understood as critical, although not surprisingly, when it came to matters of ranching,
men’s labor was privileged. As Todd said, “You know, the first person in the middle of the night when you’re havin’ trouble you ask is your wife. They’re always more than glad to come out and help, but sometimes you need a little more.” In this case, “a little bit more” meant a man’s help.

Carolyn E. Sachs (1983) shows that women often downplay their contributions on dairy farms. I found similar tendencies in the narratives of women’s work on beef ranches. Women play a vital role in calving, as well as in ranching in general, but often dismissed their contributions. This was true of Brittney, a woman in her late sixties, who had been ranching with her husband for 40 years in a small community of about 150 people. Brittney told me a number of stories about what it is like being a women working in the cattle business. All her stories placed her role as supporting her husband.

There has been some situations in the years that have—he’ll come in and say, “Got a problem.”… So at 12:30 at night, we go out there and there’s this cow layin’ there. She’s got overcentered and she threw out her calf pit, her womb. She prolapsed. So what you have to do is, go get the tractor and hoist her up, and you push that back in. You make temporary stitches on her rear end, and you work about three hours trying to get settled, quit straining, and all this stuff. But that’s some of the duties of the wife to get called on…. We know what to do.

Brittney, like many of the men I talked with, had a story of saving calves in particularly bad circumstances:

This neighbor of ours, they live four miles from us. She called up and she said that her husband wasn’t home, and she had this cow calving, and she thought it was backwards. She wanted to know if Bill was home, and I said, “No, he’s not.” She said, “I don’t know
what to do.” And I said, “Well....” I got my coveralls on, went over there, and I pulled the calf for her. It was backwards. Saved the calf. You just have to do what you do.

Although Brittney was an experienced rancher, her neighbor did not hold her labor in the same regard as her husband’s labor. When her husband, Bill, was there, she assisted when he needed help. When the neighbor called, she called for Brittney’s husband. Although Brittney was obviously capable, her labor was not recognized as such.

Throughout my interviews, it was clear that both men and women made mistakes that led to the death of their cattle. However, when women made these mistakes, they often had to answer to their husbands, as shown in this joint interview with Brittney and a man named Todd:

Brittney: Well, the calf was born through the night and we [Brittney and her husband, Bill] had to drag it from the furthest corner of the corral, put it in the barn. She lay there with the calf all day long, and before evening, I thought the cow needed to go out and get some water, so I let her out. Next morning the calf was dead. I shouldn’t have let her out.

Todd: [interrupting Brittney to talk to me] You stress about it and, goddamn, when you lose one, it makes you mad, you know? If my wife done the same thing, I’d have been pissed off too, and yelled at her for a while, just because it would have made me feel better. It wasn’t her fault, but it would have made me feel a little better that I could blame it on somebody else, and then you just go on. He’s fine. He was jokin’ about it this mornin’ when he first got here: “I kind of hollered at Brittney.”

Brittney: [laughs] Oh, you heard about it!

Brittney’s decision to let the animal out was license for her husband to “holler” at her. Todd reasserts that he would have done the same thing just because it would have made him feel better. This was not the first or the last time I would hear such stories. From Todd and Bill’s
point of view, Brittney’s decision to let the cow out of the barn was something only a woman would do. This is evident in the way Todd likens it to something his wife would have done. As a result, it was not uncommon for men to “take it out on” their wives when cattle were lost. By contrast, I never heard of wives “hollering” at husbands for making bad decisions. Women told me they tended to avoid their husbands when they were upset. Men clearly made mistakes, but those mistakes are understood as unavoidable. Ranchers consistently told me “if you have livestock, you’re going to have dead livestock. That’s just the way it is.” Some mistakes are unavoidable, but mistakes have much more significant implications for women.

In addition, men predominantly made all the decisions. This is a clear pattern in agriculture, as shown by the limited literature on this topic, and as is obvious in my interviews. As Todd told me,

You know, with me and my wife, I see it and I know how I’m gonna do it. She might have a different suggestion, but we’re gonna do it my way, because that’s the way you know, and then they do it your way, too. It’s just the way it goes…. If somethin’ happens, you know what to do. You don’t have to ask questions, you just do it…. It’s the way things work.

Brittney said, “I just get told what to do. I go get the soap and the water, and he goes to get the tractor.” Like in AI, control infers masculinity. To be in control and make decisions about animals is a critical part of being a cattleman.

Emotions play a significant role in creating gendered divisions of labor. Peggy Bartlett (2006) found similar patterns in her study of rural families. Men’s decision-making power and women’s caretaking role come from the presumption of men’s emotional disconnection and women’s emotional overattachment. This perception was evident in the way men talked about
their wives as being overly emotional. Jesse for example, “[My wife] bawls out there when we lose a calf. And I feel bad, but I ain’t near as bad as she is. But I’m thankful she’s out there doin’ it. She doesn’t—she never gets discouraged or anything. She hangs right in there.” It is possible to read this kind of attitude as condescending, but it is probably not any more or less so than attitudes held by couples working in other settings. Still, this presumed emotional attachment is likely both a result and a cause of women and men’s different roles in keeping newborn calves alive.

Women and children take care of calves that are sick or need special attention, which often leads to significant emotional bonds. As Carla, calves often need “a little TLC and love” to make it through. As a result, women and children typically take care of “bottle calves.” Sarah, a rancher in her seventies, expressed her affinity for bottle calves by saying “that’s probably the woman in me, although I’ve never been a mother, but I do feel like a mother to the calf.” Angela said in reference to bottle calves,

They’re nasty. I really don’t like ’em [laughs]. I don’t like ’em at all, really. But you get kind of attached to ’em, even though you hate ’em, you love ’em, you know? [laughs]
They’re a pain in the ass and they suck on you, but you still care about ’em, I guess. [laughs] I’m kind of the caretaker. I always try to take care of the sick ones and worry about ’em and stuff.

This is not to say that men don’t also do work that is potentially feminine. Helping a mother cow give birth could be a feminine experience, a kind of midwifery. During participant observation, I had an opportunity to do this on Paul’s ranch. Paul was nice enough to allow me to spend a few nights in his guesthouse during calving. During one night, a heifer was having complications and, at four in the morning, Paul came by and asked if I wanted to help. The heifer was in the
barn, and as we approached, I could clearly see the hooves of her baby protruding from her vagina. Paul placed his fingers inside to check and see if the calf was still alive. He was. Paul invited me to also feel the calf. Sliding my hands down the side of the calf’s hooves and into the mother’s vagina, I could feel the calf move. A little further in, I could feel the calf suckle my finger. It was the most amazing moment of my dissertation research. We then pulled the calf.

Fortunately, both the cow and the calf Paul and I pulled out survived, but deaths are common, and men do sometimes take on bottle calves. Some male ranchers discussed developing a connection to bottle calves as boys. Paul, for example, discussed his first bottle calf and how he felt a connection to him. Paul named the bull calf Lazarus. Paul told me, “he thought I was mommy,” until they found him a mother animal to graft him onto. “Then three or four days [later], I put him out [into the field], and I tried to come up and he ran off; he already forgot.”

Only one adult man discussed taking care of his own bottle calf. During a day-long interview with Travis, I helped him prepare to feed Baby, his bottle calf. After getting the bucket, which was outfitted with a long rubber teat, we walked back into his kitchen, where he mixed the formula. After pouring warm water into the stainless steel bowl of his new Kitchen Aid mixer, he gently and slowly added the formula as the mixer ran. We then walked out and fed the calf. He told me that he was trying to train Baby to recognize him as “momma.” If the calf would do this, he could let the calf out with the rest of the herd, and the calf would come to him when it was time to eat. This process turns AI on its head by allowing a male-bodied man to appropriate femininity by using a prosthetic udder.

Like the phallic AI gun, Travis’s prosthetic udder represents an opportunity for a subversive body act. As Butler (1990) discusses, “gender ought not to be considered as a stable identity or locus of agency … rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time,
instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (p. 191). Travis’s embodiment of momma *could* represent a transgression of maleness, species, and kinship. To some extent, this subversion is a possibility, but this subversion is always in reference to heteronormative and production-oriented thinking that values femininity only so much as it is useful for production.

The heteronormative gender dynamics of calving exemplify three key points. First, they reinforce conventional forms of gender and kinship by associating femininity with the caretaker role and masculinity with the active decision-making role. Second, they provide an empirical example of how femininity and masculinity are simultaneously detached from and bound to maleness and femaleness. Although men and women are able to appropriate aspects of masculinity and femininity, emotional cultural rules still limit their actions. Finally, while gender and kinship boundaries are policed, men and women are able to cross these boundaries when
necessitated by the capitalist demands of the ranch. This is the case in both AI and calving. While taking on these roles can challenge normative associations among, kinship, gender, and capital, they are still interpreted from a heteronormative point of view.

**Branding, Castration, and Consumption**

Men and women’s work of breeding and calving happens in the context of heterosexual scripts. In this process, people and animals take on gendered meanings associated with their role in the (re)production system. As calves get older, people alter their bodies to fit the production chain of modern beef agriculture. Each year, ranchers brand young cattle for identification, dehorn them, and—on nonorganic ranches—inject them with immunizations and often hormones. Ranchers also castrate male calves during this process. They do this so that the meat these animals produce will be tender and relatively uniform with the meat of heifers. However, castration is bound to many other meanings.

Branding time is a big event that requires ranchers to “neighbor-up” to get the job done, often turning this time into an important social gathering. In essence, branding becomes a highly ritualized form of animal-body mutilation. This creates a situation ripe for sexual and paternal interpretations. Some ranchers brand through a chute. As calves come through the chute, they are branded with a hot metal rod with a symbol on it that specifies to whom the animal belongs. In contrast, more traditional operations rope calves and drag them to a fire. Among the people I interviewed, this traditional approach was favored as the most fun. As Corey said,

> There ain’t much work. Hell, it’s more fun than any work, as long as nobody gets hurt.
> But even brandin’, most big places are—a lot of the small ones too, I suppose—they brand their calves through a chute. Now, we got a chute, but we normally don’t use it
unless the herd is just too big, or if I’m doin’ it by myself, or just my wife and I. But for regular brandings, we have people come around. We still rope ’em by the hind feet and drag ’em to the fire on horseback and wrestle ’em.

Branding is fun, dangerous, and traditional. It is a public event: “Oh, I think it’s fun. We hold ’em down. I usually brand ’em or my brother brands ’em, do the castration and dehorning…. A lot of people come out [laughs].” One of the central features of traditional brandings is that the testicles from the castrated bull calves are cooked and eaten. New techniques no longer require ranchers to cut the testicles off, but eating “rocky mountain oysters” or “prairie oysters” is a kind of ultimate masculine act. Castration ceremonially feminizes the calf. The consumption of calf testicles during brandings is a public announcement that Carol Adams (1990) points to as a “symbol for what is not seen but is always there—patriarchal control of animals” (p. 27).

It is tempting to read this castration in psychoanalytic terms, specifically the castration threat. In Freud’s Oedipus complex, the male child responds to the cultural demands that push him to be like his father. To do this, the young male seeks the love of his mother. This results in a backlash from the father in the form of the castration threat. The focus in the Oedipal story is always the child, but it could be that the pleasure of actually castrating the metaphorical child is played out during branding. This kind of public humiliation of a young male’s potential manhood, and the challenge that maleness could pose if allowed to develop, is a way to express hegemony. Although this is a good fit for this kind of analysis, I will stop short of an actual assertion that this is what’s going on. Still, it is impossible to separate the mutilation and consumption of testicles from gendered violence. The consumption of calf testicles in the public setting of branding is an announcement of masculine dominance. While consumption is a somewhat antiquated process practiced on only some ranches, it is simply an exaggeration of the
kinship, gender, and capitalist undertones inherent to the entire (re)productive process. Even if cattle are castrated and branded using more conventional techniques such as banding, the process is largely the same. Cattle who stand in particular kinship and gender statuses (heifers and steers) are marked and prepared as feminine-gendered commodities to be trafficked.

_Selling: Man-to-Man_

Ultimately, men breed cattle to be trafficked. This is the final expression of masculinity provided by cattle production. Although women did occasionally have some input on when to sell cattle, men exclusively handled the final decision and the actual transaction. Men held this process in very high regard and thought of it as one of their most important jobs. The relationship between the seller and the buyer is key, and both parties have reputations to uphold. Accounts of these transactions highlight that they are agreements among men. Kevin had this to say about the men with whom he does business:

> I guess one of the things that I like about the business is the people I deal with. The people we deal with are honest…. You can do business with a handshake, or if they don’t do good business, they don’t stick around, because dishonesty catches up with a business real fast. So I do like the people I deal with.

These relationships develop over the years and sometimes over generations. Corey had this to say:

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20 Banding is an alternative to cutting the testicles with a blade and involves a tight band, like a heavy-duty rubber band, which is put around the testicles until they eventually die and fall off. This method is preferred on many ranches, because it decreases the likelihood of infection.
I’ve always sold private, like, guys that’s got little feedlots and what have you. There was one guy that I used to sell to just year after year, and it was just private, just between him and me. I’d set a price, and he’d think about it a while; he’d give it back and forth like that until we’d settle on somethin’. My dad used to sell to his dad back in the day. And you still have your brand inspection cost to do that, the trucking and what have you, but you’re not givin’ no sale barn no commission. That saves you some. And the old boy, if he’s buying, they know what to expect and they know what the cattle will do in the feedlot. So, it really works pretty good.

The reputation for doing honest business relates to a rancher’s reputation for raising solid stock. It is common for ranchers to think that if a buyer gets to know their animals and sees that they do well in the feedlot, and then he (or she) will pay more for them in the future. However, the feedlot managers disregarded this sentiment.

The man-to-man dealings of selling cattle were highly valued by participants. The exchange of female and castrated male cattle on a handshake was a key signifier of a rancher’s masculinity. Again, these experiences relate directly to heteronormative ideas about family relationships. Nick, a man in his fifties, told me that he gets the same feeling when he sells cattle he is especially proud of that he got giving his daughter away at her wedding. Like parting with his daughter, selling cattle is an emotional sacrifice that traffics females to the possession of other men. Brian Luke’s (2004) research suggests that the emotions of this sacrifice help to establish men’s dominance on ranches further. According to Luke, animal sacrifice helps to establish and maintain paternal kinship arrangements by allowing men to make up for their limited role in reproduction. Men usually conduct animal sacrifice and use it as a proxy for human sacrifice. Building on Karen Horney’s (1967) concept of “womb envy,” Luke theorizes
that men exhibit their ability to take life away through sacrifice in an effort to compensate for their inability to create new life. Trafficking can easily stand in for sacrifice in this model. Either way, this physical violence toward animals translates as emotional violence within the family. That is to say, animal sacrifice, or animal trafficking, reminds a man’s family and other members of his community that their lives continue because of his mercy. This process brings men’s powerful role to the center of the family, generating a paternal kinship arrangement.

Through their emotional inexpressiveness, men maintain power within the family. Angela provides evidence in support of this theoretical exercise:

I don’t ever deal with that. I just go to school, and Dad takes care of it or [my husband] takes care of it. So I never really get into that. Just the other day we had, like, five cows that didn’t breed back, so we had to sell them. I was so sad. These cows have given you all of this—they’ve been in your herd for—some of them were part of the herd that I started before we got married. It was hard for me to sit there and watch them get sold in the sale barn, ’cause usually I don’t do that. [My husband] would just freak out if he knew that I was sad [laughs]. So I just sat there. ’Cause he just has no—that’s just the way it is and he could care less, I guess. I said, “That’s sad, that we had to sell all those cows,” and he was like, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I guess, whatever. I don’t know. So I guess the way I deal with that is to just pretend that it didn’t happen. You can’t let stuff like that bother you, or you can’t do this business.

The ability of men to control their emotions becomes the expression of their masculinity and paternal placement in the family. It also highlights their necessity in terms of the capitalist functions of the ranch. This control, though, has implications for the family. As Angela said later in our interview, “He’s detached. I don’t think he feels anything.” This inexpressiveness makes
men powerful. Withholding emotions is a central part of masculine gender performance. This kind of emotion management also allows men to control the capitalist elements of the ranch. It allows them to be the public face of the ranch, make the decisions, and creates a place where people who express feelings of connection that interfere with (re)productive goals are considered weak, feminine, and unfit to own the ranch.

DISCUSSION
Producing animal commodities requires that people participate directly in biological reproduction and the nurturing of life. People and cattle together enter into the tangle that is kinship, gender, and capital production. This process encapsulates life and death, pleasure and pain, capital and commodity. There is pleasure: people become the proud papa, momma, or businessperson. There is also death, pain, and suffering. Elizabeth Grosz (1995) talks extensively of the relationship between pleasure and death, especially in our observations of animals. She discusses the captivating power that sex has over people and details the way observations of animals are used to affirm our conceptions of human sexuality. Grosz points out that many ethological studies reduce the relationship between life and death in the animal world to what Freud called “the pleasure principle.” Here, “death is inevitable, and sexuality may function as a compensation for and supplement to death,” allowing the organism to live on despite his or her mortality (p. 292). Grosz critiques this perspective as a fantasy that reduces sexuality to a “biologically regulated need or instinct, a compulsion, urge or mode of bodily release (the sneeze provides a paradigm)” (p. 294). The academic shortcomings of this perspective do not disturb its utility in everyday life. The essentialist narrative necessitating orgasmic release is a common one excusing male sexual exploitations, and it is at the center of the (re)productive cycle.
While the psychoanalytic language of pleasure and death is a little overdramatic, it is not inaccurate if we grant a certain amount of license with the concepts. When ranchers AI their animals, when they sit in trucks and watch animals interact sexually, when they help animals give birth, they are participating in a highly rewarding and pleasure-filled activity. Placing my hands inside a mother cow’s vagina and feeling her calf suckle my fingers was a moment I will never forget. The thought of it still gives me a shiver. Living with animals is profound. In the following chapter, I discuss further what ranchers stand to lose if they are no longer able to interact with animals in this way. For now, I want to emphasize that working with animals and maintaining the ranch is a kind of self-production and self-preservation. To lose the ranch and to step outside the coconstitutive relationship ranchers have with cattle is to fundamentally alter a person’s self—a kind of death.

It is here that pleasure is differentiated from the erotic. Ranchers do not experience physical desire or pleasure in the traditional heterosexist sense, nor is this what they are seeking. This is not bestiality, and to think of it as such is oversimplification. These actions relate to desire and pleasure in that (re)producing animals allows the continuation of a masculine identity, status, and subject position. By the same virtue, the process externalizes death. By (re)producing animals, by breeding specialty bulls, by calving, castrating, and trafficking female and feminized cattle as commodities, people compensate for their own vulnerability. They produce commodities that produce and continue themselves.

Herein lies the opportunity for queered relationships. Through prosthetics, men and women can become fathers and mothers to their herds. Within this process, women can “do masculinity” and men can “do femininity” (West and Zimmerman 1989). Kinship functions as a way to organize these gendered doings of self-production. The tension between pleasure and
death, that is to say, the tension between the pleasures of living and working with animals and the potential demise of this relationship, compels the producer to participate in the (re)productive cycle. A kind of gendered fantasy lurks within this participation. In natural service the fantasy is the bulls’ representation of the human self; in AI the fantasy is phallic appropriation and trans-species fatherhood; in calving it is motherhood; in castration, infallibility; and in selling, the bourgeois. The meanings of these fantasies are bound by contemporary ideas about heterosexuality. As Butler (1990) observes, the limits of what can be perceived as real within fantasy are commonly “produced within the naturalized heterosexualization of bodies, in which physical facts serve as causes, and desires reflect inexorable effects of that physicality” (p. 96). That is to say, desire and pleasure do not originate from real bodies; instead, they come from wanting to perform gendered scripts. In the case of ranching, the desire to perform masculine and feminine scripts frames the fantasy. The trafficking of female and feminine bodies within this gender performance is the necessary externalization of death that sustains the relationship. Through this trafficking, femininity becomes commoditized and consumable.
CHAPTER 6

STEWARDSHIP

_The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He leadeth me to green pastures, He maketh me to lie down beside still waters, He restoreth my soul._
—23rd Psalm

_Stewardship, a modern buzzword, is a centuries-old concept of symbiosis: take care of the earth and the earth will take care of you._
—Hussa _The Family Ranch: Land, Children, and Tradition in the American West_

You don’t have to spend too much time with a farmer or rancher before you hear the word “stewardship,” but what it means to be a good steward is a complicated business. While stewardship was one of the first concepts I encountered in the field, it has proven to be one of the most complex and difficult to understand. Stewardship intersects and/or encompasses any number of ideas related to the environment, and both academics and ranchers often use stewardship as a catchall phrase for any pro-environmental action. As a result, terms such as sustainability, management, conservation, and productivity are often folded into what it means to be a good steward, leading to some ambiguity about what stewardship actually means. In this chapter, I seek to understand how the word “stewardship” is used and the implications of its definition. I argue that stewardship describes a process of interaction among ranchers, animals, and the natural environment. Ranchers characterize this process as a balance or symbiosis among these three actors. I term this logic _symbiotic ideology_ because it tends to mystify the process by presupposing a natural environment with which beef production can be in harmony.
Ranching represents a complex interaction among people, animals, and the environment, and people need tools to understand this relationship. Gary Allen Fine (1998) introduced the term “naturework” as a way to understand the role of culture in people’s definition of the environment and their relationship to the natural world. For Fine, “this process is linked to a set of ideologies that specify the relationship between culture and nature, and the moral value of the relationship” (p. 2). Fine (1997) points out that “attitudes towards environmental policy are tied to templates of nature and to images of the ‘good’” (p. 83). Fine proposes a set of ideal types, or what he calls “ideological templates,” to understand people’s thoughts about the appropriate relationship between nature and culture. Fine outlines protectionist, organic, and humanist perspectives of nature and links them to how we experience nature on individual, group, and organizational levels. These kinds of typologies are popular in environmental studies and are useful for understanding people’s perspectives. What these typologies do not tell us about is the process of interaction. How do people encounter the environment, and how does this process influence their conception of the natural world? In this chapter, I discuss stewardship as a process of interaction. After all, people are neither the only animals nor the only beings capable of action. Stewardship is a word used to understand this interaction, but it is by no means the only word. People use stewardship in a number of different contexts and give it many different meanings. Nevertheless, the word always seems to be associated with the complex interaction between people, animals, and the environment.

Symbolic interaction encourages us to observe people’s relationship with the environment pragmatically, in practice. In this framework, proximity to the local environment takes precedence over larger and more global perspectives that are largely inconceivable outside of theoretical and philosophical discussions (see Fine 1998: 13). For ranchers, the environment is
a key aspect of their everyday lives, and the natural world surrounds and permeates ranch life. Ranching requires an enormous amount of land, and the stewardship logic helps producers understand their obligations to that land. The culture of ranching is masculine and often heartless, but the ranchers who work within this industry are often kind and gentle; they care greatly for the land, the animals, and their families. The term “stewardship” personifies the tensions that exist in ranching.

STEWARDSHIP, HUSBANDRY, AND DOMINION

Stewardship has multiple meanings, and academics use the word to represent a number of different things. Richard Worrell and Michael C. Appleby (2000) provide one of the most scrupulous and thoughtful academic discussions of the word. They define stewardship as “the responsible use (including conservation) of natural resources in a way that takes full and balanced account of the interests of society, future generations, and other species, as well as of private needs, and accepts significant answerability to society” (p. 263; emphasis mine). Worrell and Appleby note that many people would add a religious component that recognizes that stewards are ultimately answerable to God. Stewardship has a strong relationship to husbandry and dominion in this respect, and the words are sometimes used interchangeably. As all terms rooted in biblical tradition, there are debates about the origins of the words and their ethical implications. As a sociologist, it is not my goal to enter into semantic debates about what the words really mean or what ethical implications they should have. Instead, I am interested in how ranchers use the words in practice.

In its most general sense, stewardship applies to any action taken by a rancher, farmer, or other land user that is an effort to conserve or improve the natural resources of the land. What
counts as a resource, and what counts as conservation or improvement of that resource, is a matter of perspective. Some actions commonly associated with stewardship include planting trees and other foliage (see Cohen 2004), protecting wildlife habitats, taking steps to prevent wind erosion, crop and grazing rotations, and a host of other activities. These actions ensure sustainability or improvement of the resources present on the land. For ranchers, the underlying goal of this kind of stewardship is the long-term possession and continued use of the land. I use the term *symbiotic ideology* to understand how ranchers come to see their goals as “in balance” with the animals and the environment. Actions that are not in balance, like overgrazing, might lead to short-term profits, but these profits come at the cost of decreased forage in the future and ultimately smaller long-term carrying capacities. The decreased ability to feed cattle then threatens ranchers’ ability to maintain possession of the land and therefore their stewardship status. In this sense, ranchers are accountable for their stewardship. If their work depletes the natural resources of the land, they will not be able to run cattle and will eventually lose their status.

Strongly related to stewardship is the idea of husbandry. In some ways, the two words are parallel concepts. If stewardship is about caring for the land, husbandry is about caring for animals. Bernard E. Rollin (2008) describes the two words as being parts of an “ancient contract,” an agreement of sorts between humans, domesticated animals, and the environment. Rollin has written extensively on this topic and the moral and environmental consequences of animal agriculture’s move away from the ethic of husbandry. Rollin discusses the origins of the word “husbandry,” which he says essentially means (or meant) care. The etiology of the word shows that it “comes from the Old Norse *hus/bond*, ‘bounded to the household,’ a suitable location epitomizing the symbiotic, mutually beneficial relationship between humans and
domestic animals that was agriculture” (Rollin 1995: 83). Rollin (2008) emphasizes the religious elements of husbandry and its association with the good shepherd. Rollin describes modern agriculture’s move away from the stewardship/husbandry ethic as a “betrayal” and states that it is “not only a moral violation of our age-old relationship with animals, but also a prudential denial of our own self-interests” (p. 9).

Stewardship and husbandry have strikingly similar ethics. Both have strong religious undertones and draw on narratives of care, responsibility, and symbiosis. Importantly, the ranchers I interviewed were more likely to talk explicitly about stewardship than husbandry, but they regularly talked about care, responsibility, and symbiosis with respect to both the land and animals. A central characteristic of these narratives is that both concepts are temporary and bound by time. Stewards can hold this position only while they are alive and in possession of the land. Likewise, people can practice husbandry only while the animals they are “shepherding” are alive. This is where the ethic of dominion differs greatly.

In this dissertation, I have explored the uses of God and dominion as important parts of boundary labor. Here, I want to distinguish between the use of God and dominion and of the stewardship/husbandry ethic (hereafter simply referred to as stewardship). The key difference between dominion and stewardship is that the latter is explicitly a temporary state, while dominion over animals is a permanent property of being human. The caretaker narrative obscures the fact that ranchers’ stewardship has significant and detrimental implications for animals and the environment.

Again, in contrast to stewardship, it was rare for producers to say the word dominion specifically. In all my transcribed data, the specific word appears only twice. Despite this, participants regularly invoked God as a justification for the morality of killing and eating
animals. It is in the need to kill animals that dominion and stewardship intersect. The culture of ranching values land and animals that are productive, that can be used to produce a product. What counts as a product is a commodity that will allow ranchers to trade for resources that will maintain the stewardship status and allow them to make improvements to the land. People’s dominion over animals allows them to use animal bodies in accordance with human goals. In this respect, people can use animal labor or animal bodies to assist with their stewardship goals. Through dominion, people have the right to use animal bodies for human ends. That said, people do have some obligations to animals. People are simply not allowed to treat them in whatever way they want. For example, Rollin (1995) discusses the “traditional ethic,” which forbids “cruelty to animals, that is, deliberate, sadistic, useless, unnecessary infliction of pain, suffering, and neglect on animals (p. 4). Additionally, Leslie Irvine (2004) notes the biblical ethic described in Deuteronomy 25:4: “You shall not muzzle the ox while it is thrashing” (p. 37). These obligations typically fall under the umbrella of husbandry. Dominion is thus a significant departure from the narrative of symbiosis present within stewardship. While animals are allowed to “partake of the fruits of their labor” (Irvine 2004: 37), they are ultimately not the owners of that labor, nor of their own bodies. This is a point made clear by Mathew Scully, noted speechwriter for President Bush and former vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin. In Scully’s (2002) thoughtful book on the topic of dominion and animal cruelty, he says, “The term dominion carries no insult to our fellow creators. We were all set forth into the world with different gifts and attributes. Their gifts, the ones their Creator intended for them, are good for many things—governing just isn’t one of them (p. 12).

If stewardship is about balancing the needs of the environment with those of society, dominionism is about people’s right to use animals to help fulfill those needs. In contemporary
agriculture, and in ranching specifically, there is no stewardship without dominion. The “ancient
contract,” the idea that people, animals, and the environment can be in balance, is ultimately a
narrative that makes this arrangement appear to be mutually beneficial when in actuality it is to
the detriment of animals and the environment. This is especially clear when we consider the
extreme horrors of modern agriculture: farrowing crates, battery cages, and veal crates. These
practices are obviously “moral violations.” But the idea that relationships with animals raised for
their bodies, labor, or even companionship can or should be symbiotic is an ideological trick that
mystifies our exploitation of other living beings and allows us not to engage with the difficult
ethical and moral questions that are omnipresent in our relationships with animals.

In the following section, I describe how ranchers think about stewardship. This
experience is fundamentally about maintaining a lifestyle and a family tradition; it is part of a
process where ranchers interact with animals and the environment. Stewardship is a kind of
naturework, and ranchers’ identities are strongly linked to sustaining the process.

WHAT STEWARDSHIP MEANS

For ranchers, stewardship often refers to pragmatic management systems geared to increase
production. These systems bind the rancher, the cattle, and the environment into a symbiotic
value system that determines the worth and interests of all three. What counts as sustainable,
productive, or a resource is derived from this value system, which is couched in culture. Fine
(1997) describes naturework as “the attempt to define the environment in light of cultural
templates” (p. 82). But how do these cultural templates arise? Certainly, social setting is
important. A wide body of research has linked different kinds of environmental value systems to
different social situations (see Jones, Fly, and Cordell 1999; Robbins, Meehan, Gosnell, Gilbertz
These studies often give special attention to rural residents. A common finding is that rural residents tend to have greater “support and trust of farmers as environmental stewards than residents of more urbanized places,” especially when rural residents have close personal ties to agriculture or people in the agricultural industry (Sharp and Adua 2009). These works point to differences in the way people interact with the physical world and indicate that agriculture is a special kind of naturework. In animal agriculture, the people’s livelihoods, family heritage, and legacies depend on a system of interaction with the physical world. Consequently, agriculturalists tend to have a different understanding of the proper use of the environment.

Different social settings, and the value systems they tend to be associated with, often lead to environmental conflicts. This is especially the case with regard to rangeland management. For lifelong ranchers, the value of the land comes from the personal heritage and the lifestyle it provides for themselves and their families. This makes the value of the land strongly linked to productive use. The role of rancher as “steward” is to protect, improve, and continue to use the land. Doing so improves the possibility of maintaining ownership of the land and profiting from its resources. Put another way, continued stewardship is the central focus, as it allows ranchers to continue to take care of the cattle and provide for themselves and their families. This value system dictates that the land is to be used, not simply left alone. But this use has limits. Within ranchers’ value system, it is not in their best interest to abuse the land, as this could disrupt their stewardship. In this framework, taking care of the land is in ranchers’ self-interest, but only insofar as they still use the land to raise cattle. If they take care of the land, it produces enough grass and forage for their cattle to demand a good price and ultimately allows them to make money. The importance of making money is that it allows a rancher to stay in business. In essence, it allows them to continue their stewardship role.
Heritage

I cannot overstate the symbolic importance of maintaining land ownership. Martha J. Sullins and colleagues (2002) show that population growth and a changing political environment have led to decreasing resources available to ranchers. Rangeland, both public and private, that is accessible to ranchers has been on the decline for an average of 1 million acres per year since its peak in 1964 (p. 27). The reason for this drop is a complex intersection of political economic forces, environmental value orientations, and ecological limitations. These issues are not particularly well articulated in the literature or in my interview data. What is clear is that holding on to the land and keeping the ranch running is becoming increasingly difficult but remains central to ranchers’ sense of self. Some of the ranch families I talked to had been on the same land for four generations or more. This family heritage greatly informs the sense of stewardship. As Jesse said:

When I walk across this land out here, I walked across it with my grandfather and my dad and my brother. That’s things you don’t forget.... So like I say, for me, that’s more important for me than any monetary thing I get off here, because I can go out and stand on this canal, and I can see my grandpa walked down there with a dam over his shoulder, you know?

In the face of increasingly difficult economic circumstances, holding on to the land is no easy task and carries with it a great deal of pressure. Only one of the ranchers I visited with did not come from a ranching family. The cost of rangeland is simply too high, and the expected economic return much too low, for most people to start ranching alone. Besides the super rich who can buy ranches for amenity reasons, the only way to become a rancher is “through the
womb, the tomb, or the altar,” as one participant put it. So, for most families, honoring past
generations and traditions means holding on to the land. This was the case for Paul.

Paul was a little over 40 years old when we met. After his service in the military, he had
gone to college and was married for a time but divorced and had moved back to the ranch. For
the past 16 years, he has worked with his father and recently took over the primary management
of the ranch. His great grandfather had homesteaded in the late 1800s, and they had raised cattle
ever since. Unlike many of the ranchers I talked with, Paul was not especially enthusiastic about
being a rancher. “I don’t totally love my job,” he told me several times. “I don’t love working
with the cows. I don’t spend my free time looking at them”—something other ranchers had told
me they often did—“It’s, ah, they’re a pain in the ass to me. But they pay my salary, so I guess I
can’t complain too much.”

When I asked Paul why he continued to work on the ranch, he told me that he enjoyed
working outside and not having a boss. Other ranchers had told me essentially the same thing
and often talked about the ranching lifestyle.

So the best part is just the lifestyle, bein’ able to be outside, work with the cattle,
work with the land, and not being stuck behind a desk in some office somewhere.
It’s—the lifestyle is the best part. And it truly is a great lifestyle, and I wouldn’t
trade it for anything.

The lifestyle of ranching is very romantic. It invokes images of rugged manliness, and I have to
admit, I find it very attractive. When I visited ranches, especially Paul’s place, the beauty and
openness of the landscape was often captivating. While none of the ranches I visited were in
especially desirable locations, the open space was always amazing. But keeping this land is not
easy.
When the land is passed down to you from multiple generations, the pressure to keep the land can be intense. Paul especially felt this demand:

As the fourth generation, it’s important to keep the tradition going. I don’t want to be the one at the helm when it dies. I want to continue what my ancestors, my forefathers, have worked so hard to do. It’s a lot of pressure. I think a lot of it is to please my parents. Wanting them to know that it’s, that the ranching tradition is going to continue as long as I am able to do it.

Central to the idea of stewardship is the sense that the status is temporary. The steward is there to take care of the land for its rightful owner. Worrell and Appleby (2000) posit the “real” owner as society or God. The ranchers in my ethnography saw themselves as stewards of land passed down from previous generations. It is their obligation (or privilege?) to take care of the land so that the tradition might continue. For Paul, being the one “at the helm” when the tradition stops is a painful idea, so much so that he continues to do a job he does not love to keep the tradition alive.

*Legacy*

Stewardship is also for future generations. Linda Hussa’s (2009) book *The Family Ranch: Land, Children and Tradition in the American West* is filled with stories of raising children in ranching culture. Hussa documents the lives of six families who are raising children on Western ranches and eloquently describes the connection between family history, land management, and production:

[Ranchers] care for the land in a way that only those who are invested can care, by history in and love of a place. Their commitment comes from their deep
understanding and appreciation of their homeland. Their payoff is the family unity of purpose, the shared work and responsibility, the ever-present learning and teaching, the rewards and challenges of productivity. (p. xxvii)

With regard to stewardship, Hussa, a rancher herself, writes, “cooperation and respect are embodied in the concept, even love” (p. 144). If the land is not properly cared for, if management strategies are “fly by night,” the land, the lifestyle, and the heritage can and will be lost.

Like 4H, raising kids on the rural landscape is a way to protect them from dangers of modern society and to teach responsibility. Doing so happens at the sacrifice of modern luxuries. The majority of the ranchers I talked to lived modest lives but greatly valued the lifestyle ranching provides them and their family. As Todd described,

In the end it’s a paycheck, but we’re damn sure not gonna get rich off of this deal. We’re doin’ it for the lifestyle. I’ve got two little kids, and what better way to raise ’em, on a ranch—my little boys got six kids in his class, a small school. It’s a lifestyle, a lot of it is. It is your paycheck. That’s all the money I make all year. But not everybody is cut out for it… I know—I feel as long as I can keep the bills paid, my family’s happy, I’m happy, this is what we’re gonna do for the rest of our lives. But I’m never gonna be walkin’ around with a million dollars in the bank and this and that. Well, maybe someday I will, but probably not. This is what I—when I was a little kid, this is what I was gonna do, run cows and break colts and ride horses, and that’s what I do. That’s my life. That’s all I know how to do. It would kill me to go sit in an office somewhere. I couldn’t do it. I’d go crazy. But it is a lifestyle, and you have to enjoy it.
For those who are born into ranching families, especially oldest sons, living this kind of lifestyle is strongly encouraged. Bringing kids up on the ranch and giving them the opportunity to live the ranching lifestyle was a responsibility parents took very seriously. As Jim said:

Bringing your kids up on a farm is the best thing that you can do. We have two girls, and that’s the best thing, the lifestyle. They’re not in it today, but that’s the best way to bring them up.

And as Brittney said:

You could ask a lot of people the reason they’re involved with ranching and stuff is ’cause they hope that their kids will be able to continue to do that. We have a son, and that’s what he wants to do. He wants to be able to ranch. So we continue to do it. It’d be real easy just to say it’s not worth the battle any more, just give it up and do somethin’ else. But most of us do it for our kids and grandkids and hope that we can maintain operations so that they can do it throughout their lifetime.

In the context of stewardship, these narratives indicate the importance of holding on to the land to both honor family heritage and continue the legacy of stewardship. Ranching at this level is a family affair, and raising cattle is central to the family’s core identity. If this land is lost, it is a fundamental failure of the stewardship responsibility. Ranchers must use the land responsibly, symbiotically, and productively to ensure that the land remains in the family.

The ideas of family heritage and legacy are part of the stewardship narrative and central to the cultural significance of the environment. As a result, these ideas frame the naturework of ranchers and the value systems that interpret what stewardship means. Holding on to a ranch,
even in a less than desirable location, is no easy task, and as a result, ranchers’ ideas of stewardship are often malleable, especially when things aren’t going their way.

STEWARDSHIP INTERRUPTED

In some respects, the idea of the “environment” is too abstract to adequately describe ranching’s relationship to the natural world. What ranchers deal with is grass, and lots of it. Grass is the most basic ingredient keeping cattle bodies alive and a central focus of ranchers’ naturework. Nutrition is central to growing and (re)producing cattle bodies, and maintaining a steady supply of food is critical. The problem for ranchers is that it is largely impossible for them to own enough rangeland to support their animals year-round. As a result, in the summer ranchers typically depend on public lands to graze their cattle. While cattle are pastured on public rangeland, the ranchers can use their privately held land to produce hay and alfalfa, which can be bailed and stored for the cold winter months when the cattle are kept on private land.

Grazing cattle is a highly contentious and politicized process. Environmentalists charge that grazing cattle leads to erosion, water pollution, and the devastation of habitat. Ranchers point out that their livelihoods depend on grazing lands, that their product is an important food source, and that they’ve been grazing their animals on public lands for well over a hundred years. Ranchers emphasize their stewardship of the land and the naturalness of cattle grazing. Where these two worldviews collide is in range management. Ranchers must interact with government officials who regulate grazing on public lands. This process disturbs the hyper-individualism ranchers often enjoy. During my fieldwork, I interviewed a Forest Service manager who regulates what I call the National Western Grasslands (NWG). This agent, whom I call Maggie, allowed me to spend the day with her as she worked the grasslands.
Maggie drove a big green “heavy duty” Ford F-350 Forest Service truck. I met her at the grassland office in a nearby town, and together we traveled a half hour out into the NWG area. Calling the NWG “grassland” is a little misleading. The area is essentially a series of fields divided by thousands of miles of fence. Dirt access roads crisscross the area and allow people to drive cattle and other equipment into the land. While some of the area is less developed, the majority is not an expansive open space. Most motorists passing the NWG would likely not notice any difference. As we drove by the fields, I was also unsure which lands were regulated by the Forest Service and which were privately held. Maggie did her best to show me the distinctions between the two.

A few miles off the highway, we pulled onto a dirt road, and a quarter mile down the dusty path, we pulled up next to a gathering of trucks. John, a man I had met before, approached us as Maggie rolled down her window. “Hi Maggie,” he said in a friendly tone. He recognized me immediately, smiled, and said hello. He hopped in the truck, and we headed to the field where his cattle were grazing. We made small talk, and I told him what I was up to, but his mind was elsewhere.

When we approached his plot, I got out of the truck and opened the gate so Maggie could pull through. Once we were in the field, Maggie was all business. She discussed the condition of the grass and pointed out bare patches and areas where cactus was growing. The field was large, around 40 acres. We drove around the perimeter until we happened on a patch that, to me at least, looked like it was in particularly good shape. Maggie looked at John and said, “This looks like a fairly representative area to me. What do you think?” John agreed and we got out of the truck. Maggie pulled out four metal rings, each about a foot in diameter, and randomly tossed them on the grass. She grabbed a paper sandwich bag and a pair of scissors, walked to the nearest
hoop, and proceeded to cut all the grass inside the hoop and place it in the paper bag. After I watched her do this, she handed me another pair of scissors and told me to do the same with the other rings. Later, Maggie took the grass we collected back to her office, dried it out, and weighed it. This gave her an idea of how much grass is on the land and whether or not John’s cattle could continue to graze in this area.

As we cut the grass, John stood by and observed, making sure that we gathered all the grass we could. For John, this was a critical process. He depends on his NWG grazing rights to make his 200-head operation work. The thousand acres he owns is not enough to graze his animals all year long. If it is determined that there is not enough grass in this plot, he will be forced to move his cattle back onto his own land.

Measuring the grass in this way was a contentious process among ranchers, and I have to say, I thought the process was somewhat flawed myself. Bill, an active member of the NWG regulatory board—a group of elected ranchers who meet monthly with the Forest Service to discuss grazing issues on the NWG—shared similar feelings. Bill was in his mid-sixties when we met and has run his ranch with his wife for the past 40-plus years. I had several conversations with Bill and his wife Britney, but our most formal interview was in his old pickup as we hurled down a dirt road toward his house. Bill discussed the NWG process with me during an interview:

Bill: You’re supposed to have 220 pounds per acre of grass, dry matter, is what you’re supposed to have growin’ [according to] the government. And when they throw that ring out there, and they check the grass to see how many pounds per acre you have, that tells you whether you can stay in or not.

Me: Do you think that’s effective?
Bill: No. If you go up there on top of the bluffs, and I’m sure you’ve seen the bluffs, and you throw your ring up there, how much grass are you gonna get in that rock? Nothin’. If you come down to the bottom, where it’s flat and, say, it’s in the same pasture and throw your ring, you’re gonna have grass there. But on an average, it won’t average out. So they’re gonna kick you out because there’s nothin’ on top of the rock.

The fairness of grass measurement is contentious because the consequences of not having that public land are so significant. If ranchers have to pull their cattle off public land early and pasture them on their own lands, there will not be enough hay for the winter. Ranchers would have to either buy hay or trim the numbers of their herd.

The randomness of the ring process is difficult to stomach when the stakes are so high. I found myself feeling nervous for John and trying to work as much grass into the bag as I could. While most of the ranchers I talked with reported having reasonably good working relationships with the agents who regulate rangeland, there was a consistent tension. Within this tension is a difference in worldview. Ecologically, the NWG and other government-owned and regulated lands are home to a variety of plants and animals. The Forest Service has the responsibility of taking care of these habitats and paying attention to wildlife populations. Ranchers’ experience of this land is different. In a pragmatic sense, their singular goal is to use the grass produced on that land. This is not to say that ranchers do not recognize the importance of other animals or plants—they certainly do—but their stewardship obligations make staying in business their priority. They have tradition, families, lifestyles, and personal identities bound to their ability to maintain, protect, and make a profit from their work.

The importance of grass to the lifestyle of ranchers frames their stewardship. As third, fourth, and even fifth generation ranchers, the importance of legacy is critical. Yet both ranchers
and regulators seemed to have a fair amount of empathy for each other. As Lauren, an agricultural engineer, whose job it is to regulate agricultural resources, said sympathetically about conflicts with producers, “no one likes to be regulated.” Similarly, ranchers I talked to generally respected the Forest Service, although often with a sense that the lifestyle may not be able to continue. As Gary told me,

Well, they have to satisfy the public, too, and the recreation people and what have you. I think they’re doin’ a good job. They’ve got to do their best to keep both sides happy. But there’s more public than there are ranchers. So these little old family ranches like this are—I’m pretty well convinced that they’re doomed. I just don’t know when. But I’m still here [laughs].

The feeling that ranch life is “doomed” is a reality many in the industry have had to face. This was especially true for Kevin. I interviewed Kevin on a picnic table in his front yard. His kids played quietly just inside the house while we talked. Kevin told me about the difficulties of raising cattle and how he was concerned he was going to have to put his land on the market soon. He told me, “I’ll miss raisin’ calves. I enjoy that. Just being in the country. I don’t think I’d be a real good city dweller, ’cause I’ve never lived in one.” Adam’s father raised cattle. As a young man, Kevin had owned a small farm, but in his mid-twenties, Kevin was able to afford a bit more land and some cattle for himself. His father had been “pushed out” of his land by encroaching development in the seventies. As a result, Kevin bought land very far from town to avoid the same situation. Over the next 30-plus years, Kevin had watched the encroachment of developments. Living so far from town, Kevin said, “we thought we wouldn’t ever get squeezed out” like his father did, “and now we’re gettin’ squeezed out, out here. It’s going to get
interesting.” When we talked, construction on a new development of more than 200 houses had started just up the road. Each house had its own well, a major concern.

And water is kind of scarce here anyway. And I’m thinking that once they tap into that, our wells, it’ll be hard to even get a windmill to pump water. And then with the drought, we’re gonna be lookin’ at such high hay prices this winter. I’m just thinkin’ it would be a good idea to cut back on the cow herd. And just over the last year or two all we’ve been talkin’ about is sellin’ out the land. And I might have missed the boat on that already anyway. A couple years ago it was worth a lot of money, and I don’t know if anybody’d even want it now.

Kevin’s experience is more the rule than the exception. Nearly all of the ranchers I talked with recognized the prospect of having to sell their land as a very real possibility. Everyone in the ranching industry has seen neighbors having to sell, their lands taken over by developers and transformed into ranchettes. As a result, they have seen their communities move away from the heritage of their families. Kevin discussed the possibility of simply relocating and trying to find an area where ranching is still viable. “If I did sell off,” he told me,

I would try to find an acreage that’s probably isolated from everybody, a little bit, anyway. And we just talked about—earlier we had talked about sellin’ this place and movin’ someplace else where ranches were still ranches and there wasn’t quite as much development goin’ on, but that’s gettin’ harder and harder to find, and the cost of those is gettin’ higher and higher.

Continuing to “struggle,” as he said, was getting less feasible as he got older. Kevin was in his early fifties and worried about being able to learn to do something else:
I’m just thinkin’ that if I did do that, raisin’ two daughters—if I had a boy, I think I’d continue the operation, or be more inclined to. But having two daughters, I’m just thinkin’ that neither one of them really would want to take over anyway, I don’t think. So I’m just thinkin’ that this might be the time to get out while I’m still a little bit young enough to start doin’ something else.

If Kevin sells his land, he also loses his heritage and his way of life. “You know, bein’ born into it and the traditions and stuff that I grew up with, why, I really don’t know anything else.” Environmental and animal rights movements often talk of retraining people to do different kinds of work, but they rarely seem to appreciate what that means for people who have spent their whole life in one profession. In the case of ranchers, this profession is more than a job; it is a family heritage and an obligation to generations past and future.

Kevin’s story highlights a difficulty many in the ranching community face. While Kevin did not seem to feel the same anxiety that Paul felt about potentially losing his land, likely because he acquired his land separately from his father, his uncertainty about what to do next weighed heavily on his mind. When is (or was) the best time to sell? Had he already missed the boat? All this was compounded with the fact that finding another place he could afford to continue to ranch is getting harder and more expensive every year. It should not be overlooked that central to his decision to sell or not sell was the gender of his kids. This was not atypical of the ranchers I interviewed. Bill, for example, had only daughters but had a son-in-law whose interest in ranching made the issue of legacy easier.

Understanding ranchers’ relationship to the land is essential to grasp their perspective on stewardship, which is framed by family heritage, stories of settling the land, hardships of holding on to the land through the Depression, enjoyment of the lifestyle, and obligations to future
generations. While stewardship is a temporary status, the pressure to keep the working landscape can be extreme. Much of ranchers’ responsibility is to their family. As Paul points out, this means an obligation to past generations. On the other side, this also means an obligation to future generations, and sons in particular.

A number of factors have disrupted Kevin’s stewardship. The market had not been favorable for the last few years and the encroachment of ex-urban developments had driven up his properly taxes and threatened his water supply. “Shit,” he told me, “I’m just a bad one to talk to right now because I’m down on it.” The problems encountered by Kevin are problems that complicate the entire stewardship process. The animals, the environment, and Kevin are codependent, so when one (or two) is disrupted, the full system is thrown off balance. When this happens, ranchers must adjust their stewardship, and more often than not, adjustment means selling cows at auction.

When there is not enough water, whether because of new homes or lack of rain, ranchers’ stewardship is pressed. This was the case for Corey, a third-generation rancher who runs cattle on the NWG. He generally has 160 mother cows, but due to drought, that number is down by half. Corey’s situation highlights the way regulation and the environment can complicate the stewardship process:

Well, to keep my permit, I have to follow all their rules and regulations, whether you agree or not, or they could pull your permit. My place is not really big enough to keep these cattle home during the summer months. I need that extra grazing… I understand their rules. They measure and weigh the grass and come up with an amount, and when it drops below that, you’ve got to get your cattle off, because you don’t want to abuse the land. But then you have to have some place to go with them. And if it looks like it’s
gonna be a dry year, you know, you’ve got to either be prepared to have another place to go with them or buy hay or—and then you have the market working against you at the same time. It’s always how much it’s gonna rain or how much moisture you get, is the game. That either makes it or breaks it.

Buying hay is expensive, and selling animals during droughts often happens at a loss. While Corey thoroughly enjoys the lifestyle of ranching, his stewardship is complicated by the actions of the environment and how much rain his area gets. If it doesn’t rain, the grass doesn’t grow, and his work becomes increasingly difficult.

In Fine’s (1997) discussion of naturework and the “problem of overpick,” he encourages sociologists to pose the question: “What social forces impel actors to think about, experience, and talk about environmental topics in particular ways?” (p. 83). To be sure, the cultural values of the land, embedded in family tradition and legacy, shape how ranchers think about the environment. People though, are not the only actors in this equation. The interpretation of the environment does not happen in a vacuum. The environment has an activeness of its own.

An Active Environment

To think of stewardship as a process of interaction, we must consider the environment. For ranchers, the environment is very much alive. Not overgrazing the land is important, and while ranchers might object to some of the ways the Forest Service decides to regulate the land, they all ultimately recognize the utility and accept the principle that they cannot leave animals too long in the same place and expect to continue grazing that area. What these decisions often forget is that interaction with the environment is not unidirectional. The environment is active,
and this activeness is more than simply a reflection of culture. As the ranchers say, they can do only so much and “the rest is up to Mother Nature.”

The rain, the grass, and the wildlife can accommodate or disturb the stewardship practice of ranchers. Kevin’s situation shows this rather well. The lack of rain and the unavailability of water make feeding his cattle difficult. Certainly, the market and encroaching suburban developments are important factors affecting Kevin’s ability to make a living, but these factors are problematic only because they instigate (or amplify) an imbalance between him, his cattle, and the land. Droughts, lack of grass, and pests are parts of the environment that ranchers deal with constantly. Droughts most clearly disturb the balance among the ranch, the animals, and the environment, and dramatically decrease ranchers’ ability to sustain their lifestyle. In this respect, the environment is a special kind of actor and one that must participate if stewardship is to persist. When the environment does not cooperate, ranch lives become difficult. This was the case for Kevin:

It’s hard to be a good steward of the land right now, just because you’re just in a bind. You either sell the cows and get the cows off so the grass can withstand it better, or you try to get by the best you can… until the drought’s over. Right now, I’m just thinkin’ of pretty much lockin’ everything up in the corral and tryin’ to find some feed and hopefully it rains some day and the grass comes back a little bit.

Ranchers, and other agriculturalists, encounter the environment in a very different way than people whose livelihoods and family heritage are less directly associated with the activities of the physical environment. For those not involved in agriculture, rain is relatively irrelevant, a passing event of little consequence. Ranchers’ livelihood and heritage depend on rain, and when it doesn’t come, there are serious consequences.
A lack of rain means a lack of grass. No grass means that ranchers have to buy feed, which can be very expensive. When there is enough rain, ranchers are able to graze their animals on public lands longer and have more grass on their own lands. Todd points out that when rain is scarce, it’s measurable, and the worst part of it is, it costs a lot more. On my cows, I normally wouldn’t have to feed—you know, in a normal year, you don’t have to feed until February some time. We started feedin’ the first of December, and I mean, we’re still feedin’.... And if we don’t get some rain come May, it’s gonna be a drought again, and there ain’t any grass left. Everybody’s ate everything off they got. We usually save back—you know, you go to your summer pastures and leave your calvin’ pastures and your winter pastures, and you use ’em cyclical through the year. [But this year] we won’t have nothin’, you know. There’s gonna be a lot of cows in this country if we don’t get some rain. It’s just bad. ’Cause we’re not out of the drought.

When there is a lack of rain, ranchers have to sell their cattle at auction. This last resort is especially problematic because when there is drought, there is drought for everyone in the area. There are too many cattle for sale locally, which depresses prices.

When it rains, when the grass grows, when bugs return or disappear from the soil, these environmental actions have direct and clear implications for ranchers’ lives. The ecosystem, which ranchers are supposedly in symbiosis with, has an activeness that is a very real part of their lives. The idea of an active environment has some foundation in interactionist theory. For example, Mead (1934) discusses the importance of the physical environment for social interaction. Specifically, a commonly cited example covered by Mead is the interaction between an engineer building a bridge and the physical environment.
An engineer who is constructing a bridge is talking to nature in the same sense that we talk to an engineer. There are stresses and strains there, which he meets, and nature comes back with other responses that have to be met in another way. In his thinking he is taking the attitude of physical things. He is talking to nature and nature is replying to him.” (p. 185)

This kind of feedback from the environment does not assume that the physical world has a mind, in Mead’s use of the term. Neither does it assume that there is a physical world that we can “know” outside of social meanings. Yet the environment is active and an important consideration in our actions. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, the environment responds to our actions. For ranchers, this feedback is the central focus of stewardship. If they overgraze, there will be less grass for their animals and less profits. This feedback, though, is not the same as person-to-person interaction. As Weigert (1997) points out, the environment is active, but its actions are nonsymbolic. Weigert presents the concept of the “generalized environmental other” (GRO) as a kind of physical parallel to the social generalized other. While the environment does not think about its actions, or consider human interests, its actions nevertheless are important considerations for people. Furthermore, as Mead points out, the environment responds to our actions. For example, if ranchers overgraze, there is less edible forage, more cactus grows, and ultimately the caring capacity of the land decreases. For ranchers, who are so directly invested in environmental actions, this feedback is a constant consideration in their daily actions.

It is here that two terms developed by Michael Bell (1994) become important. In his ethnography of a small rural English village, Bell relates how the people of Childerley encounter a “natural other” (see especially pages 143-157). Through interaction with nature, and especially through observations of animals, the people of this small British village come to recognize “an
other uncompromised by the social interests and social desires” (p. 147). Through the experience of this natural other, they then see themselves from its point of view and become the natural me. That is to say, the people of Childerley learned to see themselves from nature’s point of view. In essence, these people “take the role” of nature in much the same way that, as Mead discusses, people take the role of the “generalized other.” This research implies that, like the engineer building a bridge, when we make decisions we take into account the physical environment similarly to how we understand the collective consciousness.

Complicating human-environment interaction is the fact that what is “natural” is socially constructed, and people give the actions of the environment any number of meanings. Thomas Greider and Lorraine Garkovich (1994) warn of reading too much into human interpretations of the environment and encourage us to consider that what we see in the environment is often a reflection of our cultural identities “which are about us, rather than the natural environment” (p. 2, emphasis in the original). Social construction or not, the lived experience of these perceived actions are very important to people’s ideas about themselves. After all, actions defined as real are real in their consequences. To this point, Bell shows that because the environmental other is perceived as external, because it is understood as natural, it is similarly considered truer than the social generalized other. Like Greider and Garkovich, Bell recognizes that what is seen in the natural environment has a lot to do with society, but he is less willing to discard our interpretations of the environment as simple social constructions or self reflections. Bell points out that we don’t simply see society in nature in a one-to-one manner. The physical environment of nature does not always correspond to our social beliefs. The people of Childerley looked to negotiate differences between what they saw in society and what they saw in nature. When the two correspond, Bell describes the effect as “resonance,” meaning that they correspond and
reinforce each other. When this happens, it provides strong evidence for the ultimate truth of the belief. In this sense, our experiences of nature and society are equally social in their essence, but when we find agreement across the categories, we find validation for our ideas, and they become increasingly solidified. Within the stewardship discourse, this has important consequences for people, animals, and the environment.

SYMBIOTIC IDEOLOGY

Stewardship helps ranchers, and others who use this discourse, to align their actions with those of the environment and animals. Creating this alignment is naturework and helps them construct what they are doing as natural and in balance with their physical surroundings. Keeping the land is critically important for reasons of heritage, lifestyle, and legacy. As such, ranchers seek to negotiate their need to sustain this arrangement with the needs of the environment and the animals. When they are successful in this alignment, the ideas resonate with each other. That is to say, they find validation for their actions from the point of view of the environment and society. This is ideological because, while the environment does have agency, how we understand that agency is largely social and interpreted through the lens of our own needs.

The ideological alignment of human, environmental, and animal needs within stewardship is an intuitive and sometimes sacred system. Families are invested in making this system work, for not only income and lifestyle, but also to honor their heritage and continue the family legacy. The stakes are high. For many, ranching is all they have ever known and all they have ever wanted to do. Because so much is riding on this system, ranchers often meet any development that might change the relationship with resistance and often confusion. From the ranchers’ perspective, they are part of a natural system and are therefore closer to nature than
most people are. Not taking care of nature is counterproductive to ranchers’ goals and puts people out of business. If they don’t take care of nature, if they “abuse stewardship,” their cattle will not produce; ultimately their neglect will threaten their ability to sustain a viable ranch. According to many in the industry, this consequence leads them to be greatly concerned with the land. This profoundly common theme in my data is summed up nicely by Steven, who said, “And I think ranchers in general are the best stewards of the land that there is, because that’s where they make their living from. And without taking care of the land, they’re not—their cattle production is gonna be certainly less than optimal.”

Cattle production relies on a symbiotic logic that integrates ranchers into a natural system with natural outcomes. Because of their dependence on the land, it is common for ranchers to feel that there is no need for environmentalists or those not involved in agriculture to tell them how to run their ranch. As Kenny said,

We’re very close to nature, very close to nature. And that’s where we have a problem with environmentalists on the sidelines, trying to tell us how to play the game. We take care of nature. Nature takes care of us. You won’t see—people that abuse—that are not animal welfarists or people that abuse stewardship of the land—we are stewards of the land. We take good care of it. Those people aren’t in business very long, and those people don’t fit well into the industry.

In addition, as Sarah said, “We just got—you’re really part of nature, part of it. You really are. And I think that’s the part I like the best. I feel I’m just part of nature.” Looking over the fields that bordered his home, Bill described ranchers’ land use by saying,

The people that live out here that use it are good stewards to the land. They don’t want to abuse it, because if you’re abusin’ your land, your cattle don’t have
sufficient amount of feed, so your cattle can’t utilize their genetics. So we’re not
out here to abuse it, we’re just out here to use it.

Within the stewardship framework, ranchers’ use of the environment to produce cattle is
good as long as it remains in balance with the environment. The balance within this relationship
has an important materiality. If ranchers overgraze the land, the natural feedback from the
environment will ensure that there is less grass in future years. This will mean cattle have less to
feed on, and the profitability of the ranch will be in danger. A central assumption of this
perspective is that ranchers must use the land to make a living and to sustain stewardship. As
Jesse told me, “to be realistic, you’ve got to—I mean, you can’t just let the land sit there and do
nothing with it. You’ve got to have something to pay your taxes with and things like that.”

Bill, Jesse, and the other ranchers I talked to consistently expressed the centrality of land
use to the definition of stewardship. Ranchers are stewards of a “working landscape,” but how
they work this landscape can have devastating effects. As the logic of stewardship goes, if their
work is in balance, if it is symbiotic, it will not be abusive. Clearly, what counts as balance and
as abuse is a matter of perspective. As Greider and Garkovich (1994) point out, when we give
meaning to the environment, we do so from a “particular angle of vision and through a special
filter of values and beliefs” (p. 1). The need to continue to use the land to make a living from
beef cattle fundamentally informs the meanings ranchers give to the land.

When stewardship is done properly, when it is in balance with the environment, it is seen
as good for everyone involved: the ranchers, the animals, and the environment. This is perhaps
most clear in the case of ranchers. Through the stewardship relationship, ranchers can use the
land and animals to continue a lifestyle they enjoy, honor past and future generations, and make
a living. However, the goodness of the stewardship arrangement does not benefit people only; it
also extends to the land and animals. According to the ranchers I talked to, “the grass needs to be grazed.” It is only natural that this happen, and it is the responsibility of the rancher to make sure there is lots of forage there to be used. As Steven said:

We preach that a good farmer is a good steward of the land. That’s very important.

People complain about cattlemen using the federal rangeland, that they’re grazing; the public has said that they’re ruining it. First of all, the grass needs to be reasonably grazed, because it does better when it’s grazed. And nobody more than the cattlemen—responsible cattlemen, there are a few irresponsible, especially when things get goin’ tough, they’ll overgraze their pasture and do it irreparable harm, but for the most part, cattlemen are much more aware and sensitive to taking care of their land than anybody else. We don’t normally need the environmentalists to come out and tell us how to take care of it.

Kenny said:

I think my responsibility… [is] to maintain or improve the conditions of the land.

From a pasture-range perspective, I think it’s our responsibility to try to improve on the quality of the forage that’s produced on the land and to control noxious weeds, those types of things.

Furthermore, and maybe most paradoxically, ranchers construct stewardship as a beneficial arrangement for the cattle. As one rancher said, “Cows get to live in their natural habitat their entire life, and then they have one really crappy day and it’s done. Cows have one crappy day of their whole life.” This theme arises in a lot of the literature regarding animals as well and infers that domesticated animals have entered into a mutually beneficial arrangement.
Donna Haraway (2008), for example, discusses humans and animals “becoming with” each other. By this, she means that humans and animals—mostly domesticated, but some wild as well—have entered into a relationship that has fundamentally changed the very being of both parties. Humans are not human in the same way they would be without the companionship of dogs, cows, chickens, and so forth. It is also true that dogs, cows, and chickens are not the same beings they would be without their relationship with people. Haraway specifically mentions humans and chickens becoming with each other. She describes chickens as an “Opportunistic Bird” who is “not against surrendering a pound of flesh in exchange for pecking rights in the naturalcultural contractual arrangements that domesticated both bipedal hominids and winged gallinaceous avian” (p. 267). From this perspective, chickens are benefiting from their relationship with humans and vice versa. Especially in the case of chickens, Haraway reiterates constantly that this does not mean people can do whatever they want when it comes to their relationships with animals or their food consumption. She chastises our treatment of chickens by calling us “overreaching” partners of the human-animal relationship (p. 265).

Bernard Rollin (2008) takes a similar approach to his understanding of the ethical treatment of farm animals. Rollin discusses the benefits of domestication for cattle by pointing out that “as humans benefited, so simultaneously did the animals. They were provided with the necessities of life in a predictable way. And thus was born the concept of husbandry, the remarkable practice and articulation of the symbiotic contract.” Rollin continues,

The essence of husbandry was care. Humans put animals into the most ideal environment possible for the animals to survive and thrive, the environment from which they had evolved and been selected. In addition, humans provided them with sustenance, water, shelter, protection from predation, such medical attention as was available, help in
birthing, food during famine, water during drought, safe surroundings, and comfortable appointments. (p. 9)

For Rollin, the emergence of modern industrial practices ruined this rather utopian vision of balance and symbiosis. When this happened, the moral and physical checks present in previous, more pastoral societies became obsolete. Rollin points out that this has especially been the case for swine and poultry. Cattle production, at least at the level of the cattle ranch, still maintains many of these values.

Haraway’s conception of “overreach,” Rollin’s “betrayal,” and the ranchers’ ideas of “abuse” are expressions of the same phenomenon. They all point to an imbalance. The problem here is that the so-called balance in the alleged symbiosis creates a false dichotomy. We are either in balance or out of balance, but there is no questioning the categories that are supposedly balanced. Instead, the idea of balance justifies the “naturalness” of the system (or what the system should be). Through this justification, the idea of balance becomes ideological. If we are good stewards, if we are in balance, if we do not overreach, if we do not betray the “ancient agreement,” then all the derivative concepts of stewardship (management, sustainability, productivity, conservation, etc.) become necessary, natural, and true components of our ethical interaction with animals and the environment. This symbiotic ideology, couched in a narrative of stewardship and husbandry, distorts the necessity of killing animals and altering the environment. That is to say, it obscures our view of dominion. By framing humans in some kind of agreement based on mutual respect and balance, this logic purposefully overlooks the fact that animals must die for this system to work. Similarly, this logic overlooks the fact that the environment must necessarily be changed.
The logics of balance—stewardship, management, sustainability, productivity, conservation—is part of the symbiotic ideology. Through this logic, people address the implications of the interactions people have with the environment and other animals without challenging the legitimacy of the interaction itself. There are very real material consequences when we take stewardship of the environment, and the symbiotic ideology helps us understand and negotiate those consequences without compromising the “resonance,” or the discursive integrity of stewardship logic. The naturework that produces this presumed symbiosis affirms the naturalness of stewardship because it appears in balance with nature’s laws. This is not to deny that there is a very real materiality to stewardship. What the symbiotic ideology does is mystify the problems presented by material limitations by overlaying a logic of balance, thereby framing the question as one of extent rather than kind.

If we “become with” animals and the environment, as Haraway suggests and I tend to believe, the nature of this relationship, in all its cultural significance and materiality, in its natureculturalness, fundamentally frames the options we have when we encounter problems. If there is a major material or cultural problem with cattle production that necessitates a significant shift in the production process, this will instigate a significant shift in the central being of everyone and everything involved in the stewardship process. The proposition of a shifting stewardship relationship generally makes ranchers very defensive. And who could blame them? Within the stewardship logic, their system is good for the environment, for the animals, and for them. It is a natural cycle. A challenge to this cycle is a challenge to something they see as intuitive. I would argue that this is largely the source of Steven’s frustration when he told me about “environmentalists on the sidelines, trying to tell us how to play the game.” While Steven
was one of the more boisterous people I interviewed, most ranchers similarly felt frustrated and believed that environmentalists were out to disturb a working system. As Sarah pointed out,

The environmentalists are constantly putting pressure on the government to kick us off, not let us graze it. And yet we take better care of it, and when I say “we,” I talk about the people who graze it. We take better care of it than the bikers that come out here on their four-wheelers.

Sarah went on to point out that recreationists who ride ATVs or target shoot “abuse the land” and “will eventually destroy it.” From her perspective, these activities are largely unregulated. Sarah felt that some people single out the ranching community for unfair regulation, while recreationists were allowed to abuse the land. “I think they’re afraid of the people, of the general public,” she told me, “because the general public keeps puttin’ the pressure on ’em, ‘It’s our land.’ You know? Well, it is, but they don’t take care of it.” By “they,” she meant people who don’t have a stake in the health of the land.

The idea that ranch stewardship is good for the environment has appeared in some conservation movements that seek to maintain the integrity of large ranches as a way to preserve the environment of the West. These conservation movements tend to play into the logic of the symbiotic ideology. The logic of these programs is that large ranches represent uninterrupted “working landscapes” that facilitate the protection and regrowth of wildlife habitat (Brunson and Huntsinger 2008; see also Starrs 2002). While ranching is an extractive economic system, much the same as mining or farming, this particular kind of work can facilitate certain conservation goals. Sustaining large ranches, and allowing grazing on public lands, protects these landscapes from urban sprawl, recreation, and other forms of land use that are potentially more disruptive than ranching.
According to one study, 95% of all federally threatened and endangered flora and fauna habitat is on private land (Wilcove, Bean, Bonnie, and McMillan 1995). In the eight western states, rangeland covers approximately 336 million acres (61% of the total land base) and about half of that is privately owned (USDA Forest Service 1989, cited in Sullins, Theobald, Jones, and Burgess 2002). Mark W. Brunson and Lynn Huntsinger (2008) point out that grazing on public and private land has long drawn criticism from conservation organizations due to its role in “vegetation change, social erosion, exotic plant invasions, and other ecological impacts” (p. 139). However, as Brunson and Huntsinger also point out, cattle production in the West is something of a double-edged sword. Recent waves of in-migration to rural areas have posed an even more serious problem than ranching (p. 139). The subdivision of large ranches into smaller ranchettes or suburban-style housing, sometimes called “ex-urbanization,” has devastating and arguably more permanent effects on rangeland that, if left only to ranchers, would be more conducive to wildlife (see Starrs 2002). Brunson and Huntsinger propose that, under the right circumstances, protecting and maintaining the integrity of large ranches might be better, from a conservation standpoint, than the current trend of subdivision and development. The same might be true for continuing and supporting “hobby ranches,” which tend to be run more for amenity value than for profit or primary income (Gosnell and Travis 2005; Gosnell, Haggerty, and Travis 2006; Gosnell, Haggerty, and Byorth 2007).

Aspects of the ranching community encourage the idea that ranching is good for the land. Allan Savory is an influential thinker in this respect. In his 1988 (and 1999 2nd edition) book, *Holistic Management: A New Framework for Decision Making*, Savory and Jody Butterfield discuss the importance of understanding the ecological requirements of the grazing landscape. Savory links the depletion of soil and plant life to an imbalanced relationship among humans,
animals, and the environment (see also Savory 2002). Savory points out that the grazing of animals can dramatically improve soil conditions and plant life if done correctly (see especially Chapter 20). This “improvement” depends on the remarkable ability to read the actions of the natural environment. Knowing what bugs to look for and the reproduction processes of certain kinds of plants can help ranchers understand how many cattle can be sustained on a given piece of land, and for how long. Sam Bingham’s (1996) book *The Last Ranch*, which details the importance of Savory’s work for a community in southern Colorado, documents this process.

It is certainly not the case that everyone in the ranch community shares Savory’s views on land stewardship—his work tends to be more influential in ecological communities than agricultural economics—but his ideas nevertheless resonate with a broader understanding of stewardship. Ultimately, the underlying message often pushed by the ranching community is that ranching is (or can be) good for the environment because it protects and produces. This logic extends to animals and the people themselves. My argument here is that this perspective obscures the fact that animals die within this system. The symbiotic ideology obscures the view of this fact by arguing that this arrangement is beneficial to both parties.

The symbiotic ideology is fundamentally a tool of naturework. It helps people understand their connection to the natural world and justifies their role in that relationship. The ethics of stewardship and husbandry construct the interaction of people, animals, and the environment in a very positive light. While doing so, the two ethics obscure our view of the drastic consequences of this process. Dominion is a fundamental part of husbandry, and environmental use is a fundamental assumption of stewardship. Ranchers look to balance these less savory consequences with what they see as positive outcomes. If this balance is struck, they are able to think of themselves and their profession as good.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS

Working with animals is a profound experience. Those who work with cattle link themselves to events larger and older than they are. Configurations of living, working, and dying together with animals define these events. Today’s ranchers are the practitioners of this configuration. They are the ones who live and work with cattle most directly, and they are the ones whose labor produces the boundaries that make the contemporary configuration feel natural, normal, and symbiotic.

Ranchers’ experiences of cattle certainly extend beyond the construction of cattle as killable or useful only for food. They clearly feel a connection with some animals and care for the well-being of their herds. This does not change the fact that social constructions limit rancher-cattle interactions. Like in many social constructions, ranchers experience their relationship with animals as static and everlasting. For those invested in the process of producing animals in agriculture, this relationship feels as though it could be no other way.

People and cattle have shared a long history and have greatly influenced each other. Today’s cattle left their bovine relatives about 8,000–10,000 years ago and are drastically different from those who did not become domesticated (Rifkin 1992; Serpell 1986; Wilkie 2010). But cattle were not the only ones who changed. In many ways, cattle have also domesticated people (Haraway 2008). People’s relationship with cattle gave them new opportunities in
agriculture, transportation, and social organization. Today, cattle bodies provide us with any number of commodities, without which modern living would be drastically different. It is in this context that Donna Haraway (2008) asks two central questions in her book *When Species Meet:*

“(1) Whom and what do I touch when I touch my dog? And (2) How is ‘becoming with’ a practice of becoming worldly?” (p. 3) These provocative questions are just as pertinent in the context of cattle as they are for dogs. When we see cattle, whether alive or as commodities, we encounter a long history and a being capable of serving a complex social role. When we see these animals as linking us to a larger history, we see that we coconstruct each other. To alter this relationship is to change ourselves. If current configurations of the relationship of ranchers and cattle were to change, they would also have to change.

The problem with the coconstructionist perspective is that not all cocreated relationships are “good” or ethical ones. As animal agriculture becomes increasingly industrialized, calls to change our relationship with these animals have increased. This change is a threatening proposition. Ranchers and many rural people are greatly invested in the contemporary configuration of living, working, and dying with animals. Contemporary disputes over animal rights, animal welfare, environmentalism, and natural-resource conservation are debates over the proper configuration of our relationship with animals and the environment. Industrialization has already changed ranchers’ way of life, and these conflicts threaten even more changes to their livelihood and their selves. Because there is so much at stake in these social constructions, these conflicts can be especially volatile.

Sociologists encourage us to place contemporary events in their historical context. From this perspective, we see that people and cattle have shared many different configurations of living, working, and dying. In North America, these configurations have had complicated
intersections with the histories of human inequalities. Cattle witnessed firsthand the consequences of colonization, genocide, slavery, and the massacre of the buffalo; they were also some of the first to suffer the consequences of industrialization. The rancher-cattle relationship continues to intersect with issues of otherness, gender inequality, and heteronormativity. Ranchers’ relationships with cattle continue to change, and they must find new ways to make this relationship feel symbiotic.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

As other scholars have pointed out, our work with animals tells us a great deal about our selves. Throughout this dissertation, I have done my best to focus on the social-psychological context of working with cattle. With that in mind, my research makes three key theoretical contributions. The first is the most pragmatic and obvious. This dissertation provides a data-driven empirical evaluation of the human-animal relationship in agriculture. There is a great deal of speculation about this relationship in both the Animals and Society literature and in social activism, but this is the first ethnography of animal agriculture in the United States to take the human-animal relationship as a central focus. By doing so, I have shown that ranchers care for the animals they raise as commodities. This caring relationship is something underplayed by the animal-rights community and overplayed by the proagriculture community. I have argued that ranchers clearly care about their cattle, but their relationship has limits. To learn these limits, young people take on an emotional apprenticeship, where they learn the emotional skills needed to understand certain kinds of animals as “market animals.”

The emotional skills learned in organizations such as 4-H help young people to understand their animals as killable and useable as commodities. This is not the same as treating
animals like objects. Instead, young people are encouraged to engage with them socially and to build close working relationships. The task is to be able to have these relationships while remaining capable of treating their animals as commodities. Most people do not learn these skills. Adult ranchers use their skills to produce an emotional boundary between consumers and the animals they eat. This is what I call boundary labor. Ranchers take on the emotional burden of caring for an animal who is useful to others only because its body is killable. These findings have pertinence to sociological social-psychology, the sociology of emotions, and the sociology of work and occupations.

A second theoretical contribution of this dissertation relates to the connection between animals and gender. If we want killable bodies, we must constantly produce and reproduce new ones. This process collapses biological reproduction with capitalist production. I use the term “(re)production” to signify the inseparability of these two factors. The relationship between animals and gender is not a new finding. Ecofeminists and others have long been discussing the similarities between the oppression of women and animals, especially those in agriculture (Adams 1990; Gruen 1993; Kalof 2007, among many others). This has traditionally been a very powerful assertion, but one not well founded in empirical work. This dissertation, especially Chapter 5, provides some of the most detailed and empirically oriented evidence of this assertion. My work in this area is not overwhelmingly “empirical”; I do draw on autoethnography and somewhat anecdotal evidence to make my points. Still, given the difficulty in studying such an abstract and potentially volatile topic, my work is an important piece in the continued study of these issues. Furthermore, my discussion of (re)production and the relationship between biological reproduction and capitalist production in cattle ranching is a
theoretical step forward for understanding the esoteric and abstract relationship between female oppression and animals as a function of materialism.

My third theoretical contribution is the idea of *symbiotic ideology*. Ranchers and others involved in animal agriculture experience their relationships with animals as more than natural and normal. They believe that the situation is good and beneficial for animals, who exist for the purpose of providing for humans. Academics also use this logic in discussions of the human-animal relationship. The idea of symbiotic ideology is especially interesting because we would never make this argument with regard to other people. Clearly, our relationships with oppressed groups of people help us become who we are, but intellectually it would be taboo to say that these exploitative relationships are good for everyone involved. This kind of logic is the stuff of Rudyard Kipling’s (1899) *The White Man’s Burden*, which has long been seen as racist and generally objectionable, yet the narrative flows so naturally through discussions of animals. Understanding the way this naturalness is produced in the exaggerated context of animals can further our understandings of how race, class, and gender inequalities become taken for granted as part of our everyday lives.

These theoretical contributions to general discussions in sociology are significant, but I do not want them to overshadow the importance of this dissertation to the emerging field of animal studies. It isn’t easy to get social scientists to think seriously about animals. One way to get people’s attention is to connect animal issues with problems that are interesting to sociologists, which is why some in animal studies talk about the link between human and animal oppression. Others look to the environmental consequences of animal agriculture as a way to validate the importance of animal studies. These issues are clearly a part of my work. Throughout this dissertation, I show the way cattle have been a part of colonization and
genocide. I explore the way people come to think about animal bodies as killable, and I theorize about possible connections with the animalization of human groups. In my section on (re)production, I discuss in gruesome detail the connection between the forceful impregnation of cattle and contemporary issues of gender inequality. In my mind, these are important linkages, but animals are not important simply because their oppression can tell us something about the oppression of people. Animal inequalities clearly intersect with broader issues of inequality pertinent to sociology, but we cannot reduce their importance to these intersections. Animal oppression is important because *animals* are important.

EMOTIONAL CULTURE SHOCK

It wasn’t that long ago that everyone had regular and direct contact with the animals they consumed. As Arnold Arluke and Robert Bogdan (2010) state, “times have drastically changed” (p. 85). At the turn of the twentieth century, almost half the population lived in rural areas or small towns. Today, less than 1 percent of the population is active in agriculture. Many people are drawn to rural culture despite not being directly involved. Each year, thousands of people attend county and state fairs. In Colorado, the National Western Stock Show is one of the year’s biggest attractions. Prevalent in the exhibits at these events are canned vegetables, amazing quilts, and happy animals. These events are a chance to celebrate a wholesome and folksy version of American nostalgia, and animals play a central role in this production.

Events such as stock shows and organizations such as 4-H present an image of agriculture that is unquestionably good. This image is romantic for most people who have very little, if any, interaction with animals raised as commodities. The glaring omission for these events is that they do not address the simple fact that raising animals in agriculture is an ugly business. Dehorning a
calf is not a pretty sight, branding is clearly painful, and slaughter is not humane—it’s just not. This ugliness, though, does not mean that these practices are inherently wrong or bad, but people who are not skilled in the emotional tools needed to understand these actions as symbiotic have a difficult time understanding their necessity. As a result, these events are largely performed away from people who do not possess the necessary emotional skills.

As we continue to invite companion animals into our lives as family members, their social role becomes increasingly distant from the role of animals raised as commodities. This trend exaggerates the differences between agricultural and nonagricultural emotional cultures regarding animals. These differences play a critical role in the growing counternarrative to the wholesome folksy story told by 4-H and stock shows. The vanguards of this counternarrative have tended to be popular press authors such as Eric Schlosser and Michael Pollan. They talk of food-producing corporate owners as mustache-twisting, pesticide Pushing, animal-torturing executioners of the family farm. These same accounts tend to reduce rural and agricultural populations to dim-witted country folk or martyrs of transnational trade. They seem to conceive of the rural population as the poor country mouse who never stood a chance. On the other side, those involved and invested in food-production systems point out that the United States has one of the most robust, reliable, and profitable food systems in the world. According to them, society functions because they provide a steady supply of food. From their perspective, the city mouse “shouldn’t complain with a full mouth,” as Steven once told me.

Animals have everything to do with these debates about food and the industrialization of agriculture. They seem to have a special way of evoking emotions in people, and many social-movement organizations use their images for this reason, especially in the case of agriculture. Because videos and images of the many ugly animal practices can be shocking to those
unfamiliar with the process, groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), Animal Defense Fund (ADF), and other social-movement organizations get a lot of mileage out of them. My dissertation data suggest that the reaction these images provoke are largely a result of differing “emotional cultures.” As Peggy Thoits (1989) points out, understanding emotions and our beliefs about those emotions “is an important task not only because these beliefs influence individuals’ experiences and behaviors, but because they reveal certain macro-level tensions as well” (p. 323). In the case of animals, these macrolevel tensions are a product of the increasing contrast between the treatment of animals in agriculture and those kept as companion animals. These emotional tensions will likely only increase, making for multiple directions for future study.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS
I have done my best to think about this dissertation as the beginning of a book project. This goal will obviously require a considerable amount of work. In this dissertation, I have drafted my basic arguments and theoretical contributions. In addition to refining and thickening these contributions, there are a number of empirical possibilities I hope to explore. One area I am most intrigued by is bull-semen collection. I have conducted one interview in this area and have begun drafting preliminary ideas about the topic. In contrast to AI, semen collection has a kind of homoerotic undertone and includes prosthetics built to simulate female animals. This context is theoretically important, given my arguments about heteronormativity and masculinity in AI. A related area of possible study is the growing demand for sexed semen. New technological developments allow people to sort bull semen by sex. This is especially useful for dairies, which consider male animals a financial drain. This technology has significant implications for human
reproduction, given some cultures’ preference for male children. I also hope to conduct more in-depth participant observation with feedlots and large-animal veterinarians. I feel these components will round out my analysis nicely.

Once this book project is finished, my future research ideas include several smaller studies and two ideas for larger book projects. In the near future, I want to compare beef production with more intensive forms of animal agriculture. I have a particular interest in swine-raising and egg-laying facilities, which minimize human-animal interaction and have especially profound environmental impacts. New developments in commercial fishing, genetically modified salmon, and fishery management are also very interesting to me. I also see the potential to extend my current work by researching hunting groups such as Pheasants Forever and Ducks Unlimited, which focus on the conservation of wildlife habitats of commonly hunted animals. As a more involved follow-up study to my dissertation, I plan to seek funding to conduct an ethnography of groups such as Heifer International, which allow people to buy livestock for others in “developing” countries. Understanding the construction of this “gift” and the impact these animals have for people in other countries has the potential to make important contributions to studies of development and neocolonialism. Another larger project I am considering looks at the use of animals on prison campuses. Many state and federal penitentiaries have begun using prisoners to run dairies, fisheries, and slaughterhouses on their complexes. This topic would dovetail nicely with my dissertation and would provide theoretically and empirically important information about the relationship between human and animal confinement.
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