



## Distance, proximity, and freedom: Identifying conflicting priorities regarding urban backyard livestock slaughter



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### ABSTRACT

In many U.S. cities, a new generation of urban residents is taking up gardening, canning, and keeping small livestock. Within this urban homesteading movement, the backyard slaughter of chickens and rabbits for household food production has become increasingly popular in some cities, including Oakland, California, where the practice has incited strong feelings and public debate. Based on a survey of 345 San Francisco Bay Area residents, this quantitative and qualitative research identifies three perspectives among respondents. Some subjects want backyard slaughter prohibited, either to maintain emotional distance from slaughter or because they believe it is inappropriate for urban space. Others express strong support for backyard slaughter, which they see as a humane, healthful alternative to meat from intensive animal production systems. A third group of subjects support urban residents' right to slaughter animals, placing a high value on individual (human) liberties whether or not they personally approve of backyard slaughter. Each of these perspectives was further associated with a cluster of demographic factors, food shopping and production practices, and personal experiences with slaughter. We suggest that different underlying orientations toward the food system – that is, valuing distance, proximity, or freedom – can be seen in the discourses in which subjects discuss slaughter, how their city should regulate the practice, and in their own food procurement practices. The paper concludes by considering both contributions to related literature and the implications of findings for alternative food systems and for the municipal regulation of urban agriculture.

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*“You have just dined, and however scrupulously the slaughter-house is concealed in the graceful distance of miles, there is complicity.”*

[~ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Fate”, *The Conduct of Life*, 1860]

### Introduction

In Michael Moore's (1989) documentary, *Roger and Me*, which exposes the post-General Motors decline of Flint, Michigan, one of the most riveting scenes features a woman who has turned to breeding rabbits for sale as “pets or meat”. She holds a large buff-colored rabbit in her arms, stroking its ears while she answers Moore's questions. Moments later, the camera shows her hitting the rabbit several times on the head with a heavy metal pipe and stringing the rabbit up in a tree. As she quickly skins and guts it, she says, “I was brought up to learn to survive”. Of all the lessons about urban and economic geography that this film offers, our

introductory human geography students invariably remember most vividly this scene with the rabbit.

Why? Is it the idea of animals being killed for food? Students with a commitment to animal rights may find the thought horrific, but for most students who eat meat regularly, the thought cannot be utterly foreign. Is the shock because the slaughtered animal is a rabbit? Even if many American college students have never tasted rabbit, they probably know that some people consider rabbits to be food. It might be the violence of her method, but we suspect viewers would have a similar reaction even if she used a more “humane” method of slaughter.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The term “slaughter” requires explanation. The words used to describe this practice convey a great deal about a writer's politics. Many people, including some subjects in this study, use discourse from a strong animal rights position, in which non-human animals are recognized as subjects, their proper pronoun is “who”, and their death can be called nothing but “murder” for human animals to eat their “flesh” or “corpse”. In stark contrast, the discourse of the animal agriculture industry refers to animals as “production units” “that” are “processed” into “meat”. Here, we use terms such as “slaughter” and “kill”, seeking neither to convey judgment nor to hide the reality of ending the lives of other beings for the purpose of eating their bodies. We also refer to non-human animals as “who”, recognizing them as individuals with lives, minds, and emotions.

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We suggest that perhaps students are startled because the woman both pets the rabbit and slaughters it. We have become used to “compartmentalizing” animals (Fox, 1999), making separations between animals we caress and those we kill, and it feels transgressive to do both with one rabbit.<sup>2</sup> Further, the location of the slaughter may seem out of place – in the city, in her own backyard. This is not the slaughter we have become used to: psychologically and physically distant, out of sight in a rural slaughterhouse, done *en masse* on a disassembly line by workers unknown to the consumers. This is home butchery: animals turned to meat by hand in an urban backyard, where many of us imagine we are far removed from subsistence activities like killing animals for food.

Within a wider urban homesteading<sup>3</sup> movement, backyard slaughter has experienced a recent resurgence in the United States along with practices such as gardening, canning, fermenting, cheese-making, and keeping small livestock (bees for honey, poultry for eggs, dwarf dairy goats for milk). Skills of slaughter, once possessed by many households but lost for much of the 20th Century, are now being regained and spread through chicken- and rabbit-slaughtering classes, YouTube videos, and online “how-to” guides for aspiring do-it-yourself (DIY) butchers. The practice has sometimes been linked in the media with the social identity of “hipsters”, as it is practiced most visibly (though not exclusively) by twenty- and thirty-something adults in liberal urban enclaves such as Portland, Oregon; Olympia and Seattle, Washington; Saint Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota; Oakland, California; Austin, Texas; and Brooklyn, New York.

These practices must be seen within the context of a growing national and international food movement that includes a diverse array of actors pursuing fundamental changes to the industrial agri-food system: family farmers, peasant organizations, political leaders, chefs, food distributors, consumers, and workers. Growing numbers of people following various banners (e.g., food justice, food sovereignty, fair trade, local food, and Slow Food®) are rethinking their relationship with the mainstream agri-food industry. Specifically regarding meat, this trend can be seen in the growing sales of niche meats, with attributes such as “local”, “grass-fed”, “hormone-free”, “antibiotic-free”, or “humanely-raised” (Hoffelt, 2011; Curtis et al., 2011).

Backyard slaughter has become increasingly popular and commands serious attention in a growing number of U.S. cities, in direct contrast to the previous century or more, during which livestock and slaughter became increasingly excluded and distant from the lives of urban residents. This growing material and discursive distance provided some comfort to consumers of animal bodies. In this paper we define distance and proximity both physically and emotionally.

Bringing slaughter back to the city and to residential neighborhoods has met with mixed reactions. One hotspot for public debate over this practice is Oakland, California, home to several of the country’s most prominent advocates of urban livestock production. In Oakland and nearby Berkeley, residents can take classes in the raising and slaughtering of rabbits and poultry through the Institute for Urban Homesteading and other local urban farming organizations. Opponents of this trend such as members of Neighbors Opposed to Backyard Slaughter (NOBS) have been

present at Oakland city council meetings, in the news, on Op-Ed pages, and in the blogosphere, arguing for a prohibition of slaughter. While Oakland may be home to the most visible conflict on this issue to date, it is not unique: similar debates are taking place in neighborhoods and council chambers across the country. This research explores why some urban residents see the growth of backyard slaughter as a positive change and others want the practice banned or restricted.

Although geographers have published considerable work on alternative food systems and urban agriculture in the past decade, the topic of backyard slaughter has scarcely been mentioned. The goals of this exploratory study were: (1) to identify the variety of perspectives that urban residents have toward backyard slaughter, (2) to discern possible patterns or themes among them, and (3) to discover what personal characteristics might be correlated with subjects’ positions on the practice. (In other words, what views do people hold about backyard slaughter, who are the people who hold these different views, and why?)

To answer these questions, we conducted an online survey in summer 2012, examining respondents’ thoughts and feelings about (the prospect of) backyard slaughter in their neighborhoods. Drawing on the responses of 345 residents of urban zip codes within the San Francisco Bay Area in California, we identified three different discourses or logics through which subjects explain where they believe slaughter belongs and why, and how it should be regulated. By linking respondents’ views on slaughter with demographic characteristics, food shopping habits, and experiences with animal slaughter, we found that subjects’ views on slaughter reflect a broader orientation toward the food system. Some individuals value proximity to their food sources while others value distance; a third group primarily values individuals’ freedom to choose.

We proceed by situating this inquiry at the intersection of several bodies of relevant literature, both geographic and interdisciplinary. Our methodology follows, including study design, methods of analysis, and a brief discussion of the limitations of this research. We then present our findings, beginning with a description of the qualitative content analysis of subjects’ written responses to open-ended survey questions. Next we present our quantitative analysis of subjects’ demographic, behavioral, and experiential characteristics in relation to their opinions on backyard slaughter. We conclude by discussing the contributions of this research to the literature, its policy implications, and directions for further research.

## Distance, proximity, and the geographies of slaughter

This research on animal slaughter in cities brings together several relevant lines of inquiry: previous work on cultural animal geographies, on concepts of distance and proximity, and on the place(s) of livestock and slaughter all help to frame the following discussion.

### *Cultural animal geographies*

Wolch et al. (2003) have identified three geographical approaches to the study of animals. The first, zoogeography, arose in the early 20th century primarily as a physical science that analyzed the distribution of wild animals as natural objects. Zoogeography paid limited attention to human–animal interactions, which were understood largely as competitive or conflictual. A second, less prominent approach was developed simultaneously by cultural and regional geographers, including Carl Sauer, who sought to understand the role of domesticated animals (primarily livestock) in shaping cultural landscapes (p. 186). Despite recognizing

<sup>2</sup> This division is not universal. Podbersek (2009) explores the South Korean concept that dogs can be both “good to pet and eat”, depending on the type of dog and the relationship that people have with it. Similarly, Herzog (1988) has shown how individual mice can be socially constructed as pet, pest, medical device, or food, and hold several of these roles simultaneously.

<sup>3</sup> The term “urban homesteading” is widely used by grassroots practitioners of self-provisioning. In 2010, the Dervaes family, who have taught these practices for decades, trademarked the term and have since brought lawsuits against violators (Friesma, 2011). Their privatization of the term has been broadly condemned within the movement.

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