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Returning to 'The Good Life'? Chickens and Chicken-keeping during Covid-19 in Britain

Catherine Oliver
University of Cambridge

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Abstract

Through the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns, humans have been exposed to the threat that the exploitation and eating of animals poses to humanity and public health. It has also become obvious that animals want to and are willing to take up more space. In the relative absence of humans during lockdown, animal populations have spread out and some have entered cities and towns for the first time. At the same time, humans have chosen to bring animals into their domestic spaces in the form of companion animals in staggering numbers. The lockdown's slowing of time has opened the possibility to cultivate our domestic space as habitable for other species. In this paper, I explore an emerging animal-human space and dwelling in the surge of interest in and process of re-homing chickens, the motivations underpinning this growth, and I trouble these ostensibly benevolent relationships. In the final part of this paper, I connect and contrast chicken re-homing with the 'frontlines' of intimate animal-human risky relationships of Covid-19 in the slaughterhouse. This paper thus argues that backyard rehoming of chickens has not lowered the labour demands on them and conversely, during Covid-19, the picking up of chicken-keeping as a response to human lockdown is not a subversion but an extension of the expectation of chicken labour.

Keywords

animal geographies, Covid-19, chicken-keeping, chicken-rehoming, labour

Cover Page Footnote

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Returning to 'The Good Life'?

Chickens and Chicken-Keeping During Covid-19 in Britain

Catherine Oliver

University of Cambridge

Abstract: Through the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns, humans have been exposed to the threat that the exploitation and eating of animals poses to humanity and public health. It has also become obvious that animals want to and are willing to take up more space. In the relative absence of humans during lockdown, animal populations have spread out and some have entered cities and towns for the first time. At the same time, humans have chosen to bring animals into their domestic spaces in the form of companion animals in staggering numbers. The lockdown's slowing of time has opened the possibility to cultivate our domestic space as habitable for other species. In this paper, I explore an emerging animal-human space and dwelling in the surge of interest in and process of re-homing chickens, the motivations underpinning this growth, and I trouble these ostensibly benevolent relationships. In the final part of this paper, I connect and contrast chicken re-homing with the 'frontlines' of intimate animal-human risky relationships of Covid-19 in the slaughterhouse. This paper thus argues that backyard rehoming of chickens has not lowered the labour demands on them and conversely, during Covid-19, the picking up of chicken-keeping as a response to human lockdown is not a subversion but an extension of the expectation of chicken labour.

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Introduction

Covid-19 was initially touted by commentators as a 'great leveller', having little concern for class, gender, race, or geography in its viral effects. Instead, Covid-19 has heightened already vast disparities in wealth, healthcare and safety. Arundhati Roy conceptualised the pandemic as 'a gateway between our world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred... Or we can walk through lightly ... ready to imagine another world'. Across politics and policy, economics and care, there have been desperate grasps at continuing the old world, with rocketing unemployment and spiralling deaths met with hyper-individualised rights to personal freedoms dominating political discourse. The consequences of this individualism largely fall on the communities most drastically affected by Covid-19 itself and lockdown restrictions.

Despite the proliferation of suffering and the intensification of capitalistic churn, there are also hopeful spaces of pandemic relationships emerging. From the resurgence of mutual aid (Springer, 'Caring Geographies'); pandemic forms of loss and consolation (Maddrell); networks of social support for mothers (Manzo and Minello) and queer women (Browne et al.); and opening space for anti-racist, anti-oppressive research (Eaves and Al-Hindi), Covid-19 has demanded and fostered new ways of *caring for* and *living with* each other. Emergent forms of care have not, however, extended to all humans; a deep societal investment in the 'human-as-usual' has been sustained, excluding and dehumanising people more vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic, whether socio-economic or health-related. Amidst this, Covid-19 has also revealed explicit more-than-human intimacies. In jumping across species multiple times (Kirksey), Covid-19 has revealed the porosities between human and non-human bodies (Mol).

As our lives have radically changed through the pandemic, many people have chosen to live differently with animals. In more-than-human pandemic relations, shared digital encounters with other animals have allowed the fostering of new emotional connections (Turnbull et al.) and public awareness of the links between eating animals and zoonotic disease has led to reduced meat consumption (Attwood and Hajat). Shelters and breeders have been inundated with requests for animals during 2020 leading to a 'puppy shortage' (Thomas). For those who already live with animals, '86% felt they had bonded more with their animals, 60% thought their pet helped them maintain a regular routine and 43% said that their animal had reduced their

anxiety' (Fox). The temporalities of the pandemic have revealed societal crises that usually prevent living with animals, such as insecure and overcrowded housing, time-consuming commutes, and the over-emphasis on work (see, for example, Graeber). Within the pandemic, interest in keeping chickens has surged, constructing them as 'pets with benefits' (Gaffikin).

In the first part of this paper, I explore how an already growing trend in chicken-keeping in the UK has been expedited by Covid-19. I then consider how people understand chicken-keeping as reforming chicken-human relationships, and critique constructions of chicken-keeping as neutral. I then consider how backyard chicken-keeping reproduces the demands of labour upon chickens. Finally, I turn to the shadow places of chicken-human relations in the slaughterhouse to connect backyard chicken-keeping with spaces of animal killing that have become riskier for human workers in the Covid-19 pandemic.

1. Chicken rehoming during Covid-19

During Britain's lockdown, chicken rehoming organisations have received unprecedented interest and requests for ex-commercial hens. This follows a longer rising trend in backyard hen-keeping; from 2005-2012, 200,000 hens were rehomed in the UK (Karabozhilova et al.) and in 2019 alone, one organisation rehomed 60,000 hens. This growth has been in the face of, and can perhaps be linked to, environmental crises, questions of food provenance and ethics, and now zoonotic crisis. Living with chickens requires complex controls of and care for non-human life; they have specific health and space needs, often receiving insufficient healthcare due to assumptions that they are hardy birds (Carbone 2020). The rise in hen-keeping during the pandemic makes critical approaches to backyard chicken-keeping increasingly important. Drawing on ethnography, secondary data and interviews,¹ I contend that the surge in keeping chickens during the pandemic has not lowered their labour, and that the backyard chicken is inseparable from the conditions, both human and non-human, of the slaughterhouse. In this section, I outline the process of rehoming chickens and the changes to this process during Covid-19.

In the UK, there are around 36 million laying hens and approximately 45% of these hens are 'in cages with no grass beneath their feet, no breeze gently ruffling their feathers and no sunshine on their backs' (Howarth, np). Chicken rehoming organisations 'set out to educate consumers rather than berate farmers, and to demonstrate how individuals could influence farming in the UK through their shopping basket [using] the birds themselves as an educational toolkit' (Howarth, np). Since 2005, over 760,000 commercial chickens have been rehomed through one organisation. Another national organisation writes that they were founded to raise awareness of commercial caged hens, educate people about the egg production industry as it is today, and change attitudes towards caged eggs. In 2019, this organisation rehomed 47,000 hens and in 2020, these numbers increased to over 65,000 hens. These numbers suggest that in excess of one million birds have been rehomed in the last fifteen years, in an upward trajectory. It is worth emphasising that this staggering figure excludes the uncountable numbers of pure-bred and hatched birds across the UK.

Chickens in the UK can be purchased from chicken retailers who sell both pure-bred and hybrid hens but there is also huge demand for ex-commercial laying hens. In this paper, I focus specifically on the latter for two reasons: (1) that information about them is more widely available, and (2) that they present interesting contradictions of retirement, being 'spent,' and labour that reveal the complexities of backyard hen-keeping and its interconnectedness with systems of animal farming. The process of rehoming chickens in Britain is usually facilitated through one of two large organisations, or via smaller local operations. The rehoming process begins at chicken farms. Rehoming organisations work with farmers to purchase their flocks when they are considered 'spent,' at about 18 months old. Hens continue to produce and lay eggs after this age, but their production slows down. The commercial value of their labour is no longer 'earning' the costs of their food, especially when a ready supply of younger, more productive hens is near-constant. In commercial farming, the laying hens' body is a waste or byproduct of the egg industry; their bodies have little economic value, not being as 'fleshy' as chickens used for meat.

When laying hens are deemed 'spent', they are ground up (sometimes alive, Davis) and used in several ways: 'spent hen meal,' which is fed back to chickens; cheap human food, such as chicken nuggets; or other animal food, such as tinned pet food (Oliver and Turnbull). More

'utilizations' of ground spent hen products are emerging, notably as a resource for 'sustainable' biofuel (Safder et al.) as a cheap diversion of 'waste' from landfill that plays into an imaginary of a circular efficient system of industrialized farming. Where spent hens have little economic value, making them into multiple byproducts ekes capital from their bodies (Gillespie). While these hens are considered 'spent' by commercial standards, they will still lay regularly, making them appealing to rehomingers. Whilst rehoming organisations make clear that hens should be taken in whether or not they continue laying, there is an expectation of a productive period.

Rehoming organisations intervene at the end of the commercially viable period of hens' productive lives. The process of rehoming relies on large teams of volunteers. Some of these are based at farms to transfer hens from the farms into poultry crates ready for transportation. Volunteer drivers transport hens to distribution centres across Britain where hens are collected by chicken-keepers. At the rehoming sites, volunteers assign hens and help with loading chickens to their new homes. Rehoming sites are often set up on the land of volunteers, in stables or sheds. The organisations collect from the farm and rehome on the same day, so that stress for the chickens is confined to one day, going from farm to new home in a short period of time. The transition time from farm to 'freedom' can be very quick for chickens, but for would-be human chicken-keepers, this process takes several weeks. Potential homes are vetted to ensure there is appropriate space through a dated photograph of coops and free-ranging areas as part of their home checks, alongside compulsory donations to pay the farmer and transportation costs.

During Britain's lockdowns (March to July 2020, November 2020, and December 2020 to March 2021), rehoming organisations changed their operations as per government directives. In March 2020, planned rehoming went ahead due to animal welfare concerns but subsequent rehoming was paused until May. Rehomingers pivoted to creating educational resources about chickens to support children's home learning, before announcing 'Cluck and Collect' services that allowed rehoming to proceed in late May 2020. By August, chicken organisations had seen their largest rehoming numbers ever, up by 225%.

The rise of chicken-keeping during Covid-19 has overlapped with lower demand for animal meat (Elleby et al.), pointing towards shifting priorities and attitudes towards animals as food producers and 'business-as-usual' attitudes in the food production sector (Galanakis). The increased interest in rehoming hens is entangled with perceived food scarcity at the sight of

empty supermarket shelves, as well as fears over contaminated food. Demand for chickens wasn't limited to rehomed hens; one chicken seller in South-East England:

had a waiting list [for hens] that got up to about 300 just purely from people wanting chickens. You knew whether they were serious or not if they were willing to wait which worried us a bit at the beginning as people were diving in straight away. Purely because they couldn't buy eggs in the shops. We had a lot of demand because people couldn't buy eggs and thought 'well, let's get a chicken'. Regardless of whether they had a coop or run, they just wanted chickens.

Against this backdrop, backyard hens might be understood as a controlled and controllable production 'machine' (Harrison) that at once disrupt industrial food production and reproduce labour demands.

Blecha and Leitner's research on urban chicken-keeping in the USA found that chicken-keepers raise chickens not 'simply to save money or to pursue an eccentric hobby, but rather as an explicit effort to promote and enact alternative urban imaginaries' (86). Backyard chicken-keeping enables people to think differently about food production systems and the human-animal relationship itself. In the UK, domestic chicken-keeping has been on the rise for many years. Ten years ago, Karabozhilova and colleagues' study on backyard hens in the Greater London Area cited chicken numbers as being around three million. Their work revealed keepers were concerned with welfare and offered higher standards than commercial farming, with birds 'generally provided with a living environment allowing them to perform their natural behaviours such as scratching, pecking, foraging, nesting, roosting and dustbathing' (427). One London-based hen-keeper who I interviewed had kept chickens for 14 years and began doing so following 'questions I was asking over where my food came from and what I'm feeding my small children ... the food provenance and the food system here in the UK [is] pretty broken'.

People who rehome ex-commercial hens have often chosen to do so for welfare and sustainability reasons that critique commercial farming. This sometimes results from a desire to keep chickens as part of an 'alternative imaginary' as a mode of resistance, supporting Blecha and Leitner's research. One rehomer told me: 'I was originally going to get some pure-breed chickens. We knew about rescuing ex-battery chickens and I didn't really want to do that,

because I've heard that they're really hard to look after. Then we saw some videos online of chickens being outside for the first time and we just thought it was really lovely'. Rehoming hens is often entangled with a desire to contest or move outside of a commercial farming system. While this is sometimes connected with vegetarian or vegan ethics, this is in a minority of cases.

Chicken flocks with fewer than 50 birds do not need to be registered in the UK (DEFRA and APHA) making detailed knowledge of the numbers of domestic flocks impossible. More informal networks of taking in chickens are not limited to hatching and breeding. My own experience of 'rehoming' chickens fell outside of formal or organisational networks. A couple of miles from my parents' house in the North of England is a commercial farm that keeps young hens up to the point of lay, at between 12 and 19 weeks old, depending on the breed (CIWF). My mum had been hoping to keep chickens since she had moved to a more rural area and in March 2017, after some enquiries on local Facebook groups, she was alerted that some hens were about to be transported to a commercial farm. She drove to the farm and asked the farmer if she could buy six hens from him, marking the beginning of the ethnography that informs this paper (Oliver, *Veganism, Animals and Archives*). These informal and unregulated 'rehomings' are invisibilized and outside of organisational knowledge and regulation.

Backyard chickens are perceived as 'pets with benefits' (Gaffikin) in the domestic space. Hopefield Animal Sanctuary, based in Essex, warns that chickens do need enrichment, space and safe secure housing, and warn that they will dig up gardens but, otherwise, their care is 'pretty easy. They are cheeky and they do have characters and they make you laugh, and they are quite affectionate ... they are really intelligent animals' (@BBCEssex). Through domestic chicken-keeping, normative ideas about chickens are challenged, and domestic chicken spaces reconfigure the relationships produced between humans, chickens, and the other species that they live with, both plant and animal. This production of chicken-human space has created new social relationships, but these are rarely underpinned by emancipatory goals. Covid-19 has expedited a general upwards trend in chicken-keeping that is related to animal welfare, as well as concerns related to the environment and commercial food systems. In the next part of the paper, I explore how the pandemic has seen more people than ever before keeping domestic flocks and experiencing new modes of chicken-human living.

2. Changing chicken-human pandemic relationships

In her memoir *The Chicken Chronicles*, Alice Walker recalls noticing 'a chicken and her brood crossing the path in front of me. She was industrious and quick, focused and determined ... I was stopped in my tracks, as if I had never seen a chicken before ... But had those chickens been like this one? Why hadn't I noticed? *Had I noticed?*' (1-2). Walker chronicles her transforming world when she returns to live with chickens in her adult life, after growing up keeping and killing chickens as a child. How is it that *this* moment of encounter lingered? What are the socio-cultural, political, and spatial qualities of particular interspecies encounters that remain with us, and pull us 'into the parallel universe that all the other animals exist in, simultaneous with us'? (Walker 5). In this part, I explore chicken-keeping during Covid-19 through grey literature and interviews, and an ethnography undertaken prior to the pandemic (see Oliver, *Beyond-Human Research*).

Bringing chickens into domestic space allows interspecies sociabilities to emerge, but it is also entangled with food systems and, during the pandemic, the perceived threat of food insecurity. However, it is important to note that chicken-keeping has notably not increased for the precarious classes who are actually impacted by food insecurity. As Barker and Russell write, Covid-19 'has rendered vast numbers of Britons food insecure' (866). A national survey has estimated levels of food insecurity have quadrupled to 16% of the UK population (Loopstra). The pandemic's impact has not been a great leveller, but reproduced inequality in viral spread and consequences (Ahmed et al.), disproportionately affecting poorer populations in viral and economic consequences. Chicken-keeping's growth has been as a middle-class pursuit (Blecha and Leitner); it is unlikely to be precarious or poorer populations taking in rehomed hens as a resolution to food insecurity. Rather, the pandemic has revealed to the middle classes a *potential* threat of not having access to *particular kinds* of food and opened alternative food systems to those with the space and time to afford them.

Throughout history, human supremacy has made animals into workers, food and companions (Smit, Nasr and Ratta). In 19th Century England, many cities were still filled with working animals and domestic food animals, especially chickens whose small size, space and nutritional needs made them ideal domestic animal food providers. In an 1880's *Cassell's Household Guide*, the recommended space 'for half a dozen fowls ... is five feet square and

sloping from six to eight feet high' (Cassells 30). Chickens were 'an integral part of the urban fabric, relied on by humans' but 'gradually, albeit unevenly, cities were tamed and cleaned for more efficient commerce, sanitation, and middle-class sensibilities, excluding productive animals' (Blecha and Leitner 86). The dispersal of animals from British cities coincided with British colonialist and globalist food production systems, that converted places such as Ireland and Latin America into food production hinterlands (Otter). By the end of the 20th Century, urban livestock was so far removed from the city limits, temporally and spatially, that the keeping of hens in contemporary London has become a middle-class luxury and past time (Otter), overlapping with food movements such as the 'locavores' (Salkin).

While the pandemic has not necessarily produced 'new' modes of living with chickens, it has revealed how alternative more-than-human spatial imaginaries can grow in the face of global and local crises. The desire to turn 'the backyard into an urban barnyard' (Blecha and Leitner 104) ignores how animal relations have very different class politics across time and space. Animals were (and elsewhere continue to be) free-ranging agential urban beings but the industrialisation of farming severed these urban foodways and removed pigs, cows, and chickens from the city. In this distancing of animal rearing and slaughter, these processes invisibilize meat *as the bodies of animals* (White). This separation of animals and death from human habitations reverberates throughout the industrialisation of agriculture, with death deliberately severed from the living (Morin).

People who have rehomed chickens have talked about the time and space they have found during lockdowns to dedicate to chicken-keeping (Mellen). Chicken-keepers have also attested to the joys they find in living with chickens as 'pets', and how watching their chickens is both 'entertaining and sociable' as well as providing 'fabulous eggs with rich deep yellow-orange yolks' (Bloodworth). When asked how lockdowns had affected their relationships with chickens, my interviewees had in general moved to working from home. They have been able to see their chickens more regularly, notably in the winter months when the late sunrise and early sunsets usually clash with working hours out of the home. One interviewee runs an urban smallholding in London set up initially around her hens. Her move to online working has seen

her running poultry-keeping courses online that have been 'well-attended'. The introduction of chickens into the urban space is, for this urban hen-keeper, a 'bridge between the country and city'.

The decision to rehome chickens might be understood as a dedication to experimenting with alternative modes of multispecies living. In building coops and free ranging space, protecting chickens from predators, sourcing feed, dust baths, and health care, the temporalities of the domestic space are reconfigured. When I lived with chickens, I would often sit on a set of steps in their free ranging space, watching, listening and sometimes writing notes about them. As one chicken-keeper said, Covid has meant that 'we probably spent more time on just being outside watching them do things than previous years'. Living with chickens allows insight into the world from their perspective: the threats to their safety from foxes and birds, but also the joy in a favourite treat of grapes or sharing in the bliss of a dust bath (Hepperman). As I wrote in my ethnographic field notes, this raises new questions of our interspecies relationships:

What does the world look like for a chicken? To share a bed of shavings with five others, bundled close together? When I bent over in the yard today, a chicken jumped onto my back. Now, bent to the ground, I am stuck at this angle until she decides to leave. I glance around. Rarely is my head a foot off the floor, but I can see now that I am closer the remnants of corn, lettuce and mealworms invisible to humans. The gravel doesn't look as uneven either. And is that a hole in the chicken wire that I – I mean they – could escape through?

In the next section, I turn to more directly discuss the hens who are themselves implicated and affected by the surge in rehoming and demand during the pandemic. I draw specifically on my own ethnographic experience with hens between 2017 and 2019 to explore how rehoming chickens does not necessarily lower the labour demands on them.

3. Troubling the domestic chicken space

During the pandemic, more people have decided to bring chickens into their domestic space, but these relationships still rely on normative constructions of the animal *within* capitalist relations through the expectation of chicken labour. Amidst the unprecedented demands for

chickens during Covid-19, there have also been troubling attempts by some to mislead organisations by providing doctored images of coops and runs, as well as people regretting taking in chickens leaving the chickens exposed to 'let a fox take care of the hens' (Mellen). The idyllic imagination of the urban barnyard informs a romanticised notion of resurgent natures (Searle and Turnbull), potential closeness with other species, and new relations with them as food providers. One chicken supplier based just outside of London has seen a huge surge in interest during Covid-19, with the first week of the UK lockdown in March 2020 seeing as many requests for hens as the whole year prior. With a decade of experience in selling pure breed and hybrid hens, they find that customers want to keep hens to 'return to "the good life"' or 'their childhood days'.

A zoning in Cherokee County, Georgia, USA cited in Salkin (2011, 2) reads: '[t]he keeping of hens supports a local, sustainable food system by providing an affordable, nutritious food source of fresh eggs. The keeping of hens also provides free nitrogen-rich fertilizer; chemical-free pest control; animal companionship and pleasure; and weed control, among other notable benefits'. The regulation of chickens is a contentious issue in backyard chicken-keeping, not only formally but through community resistance to perceived 'disturbances'. Chicken-keeping brings together questions of 'pet-hood' with the desire of 'locavores' to bring food production closer to home, resulting in complex visions and practices of alternative multispecies living. Sometimes, intimate interspecies living does not live up to the imaginary and chickens are put in danger. For Justin van Kleck, who runs Triangle Chicken Advocates Sanctuary in the USA, the hens that their sanctuary takes in from backyard keepers 'are almost always sick with something, and/or have been the sole survivors of predator attacks due to negligence' (2017).

Despite what their survival of commercial farming might suggest, due to generations of selective breeding, chickens are susceptible to a vast array of illnesses and disease. This is heightened in the backyard, where they can mingle with other species, producing increased risks of avian flu outbreaks. As such, backyard hen-keeping does not always live up to the expectations new chicken-keepers have. The surge in demand for rehomed chickens has not challenged the demands of labour put upon chickens. The backyard chicken is not reconfiguring interspecies solidarities, but instead producing and recentring *shadow work*, where 'the capitalist mode of production is characterized by "the continuous overconsumption of nature," capital is

invested in “producing a more complete and final form of death” (Brennan qtd. Whitney 649). The backyard chicken as a ‘return to nature’ is not separate from exploitation, but rather continues to demand chicken labour. By moving this exchange relationship to a direct one between the chickens and the humans, hierarchical dominations become obscured in the supposed benevolence of the backyard.

My own encounters with chickens offered insights into the impacts on chickens of continued expectations, and breeding into their bodies, of labour. Chickens cannot escape their inherent *chicken-ness*. But, as those who know chickens can attest to, ex-laying chickens are capable of learning and finding more *natural* practices when offered the right care and space: ‘the birds nest in soft piles of hay, dried leaves, or curled wood shavings... At Chicken Run Rescue, they dig in the dirt, perch on branches and sprawl in the grass to soak up the sun through their wings’ (Hepperman 23). As one keeper of rehomed hens said in an interview, ‘the [chickens] we got originally would have only been in tiny cages on their own. Pecking the ground, reacting to the wind, just doing all those natural things that chickens did, I found that quite fascinating because they haven’t learned that from anywhere, it just seems to be innate or in-built’. Behaviours that are controlled or discouraged in commercial hens, such as pecking or bathing, are directly caused by chickens’ attempting to find space to be themselves; chickens resist and remain “wild” in the face of machines that seek to make them docile’ (Wadiwel 528). For Beldo (108), framing the lives of chickens as *labourers* ‘allows for the possibility of agency on the part of farmed animals that includes more than just resistance, disruption, or death’. The histories of humans and chickens through industrialisation are intimately entangled. Turning away from these systems, domestic chicken keepers have sought to imagine alternative multispecies spaces, but this has not demanded a reduction in the labour demands or a disruption of normative chicken-human power relations.

Lacey arrived at our house as the biggest, shiniest, bossiest chicken of six. Tentative at first, but quickly confident in her explorations of the coop, yard and under the fence out to the fields, the ditch and through hedgerows, Lacey was beautiful. A nervousness in her approach soon became a comfortable familiarity; Lacey would always be the first to come and peck my shoes or accept my embraces. Slowly, as the months passed, it became obvious Lacey was struggling. No longer the shiniest or brightest, she was the smallest of the girls, struggling to

eat, but upset when separated from her sisters so that we could ensure she ate at least something. Seemingly upset, one Wednesday she went to bed with the other chickens, snuggled close as always and didn't wake the following morning. In the end, Lacey's breeding overwhelmed her body and her life. Her death was caused possibly by a tumour or a heart attack, conditions common to (ex-)commercial laying hens.

There is little that is natural, evolutionarily speaking, about a chicken laying an egg daily. Red Jungle Fowl, from which domestic hens mostly descend, lay 10 to 15 eggs a year, living in clutches of 4-6 chicks (Capps). It is only with long-term breeding interventions that hens have transformed into egg production machines (Harrison). Where domesticated species are supposedly thriving because humans 'have entered into a social contract with these species, based on our supposed mutual advantage; we provide and care for them, and in return they feed our soil and give us their flesh' (Taylor 208), this contract relies upon physical and psychological turmoil for these animal individuals. These chickens are not living 'the good life' but rather are bound in a liminal space between life and death. Lacey's freedom could not overcome the genetic manipulations and exploitations which are bred into the bodies of laying hens.

Close encounters and relationships with chickens challenges human complicity in harmful systems and entanglements with animals. While there are particularly situated knowledges and practices of living with chickens (notably Hovorka, 2012), close encounters with food animals are unusual for most humans in the UK. The sharp rise in chicken-keeping during Covid-19 lockdowns is entangled with a longer turn towards chicken-keeping as a return to "the good life," which chicken-keepers I have interviewed have related to concerns over food provenance, welfare, and localism. However, the backyard chicken cannot be divorced from the farm or the slaughterhouse. Instead, the backyard reproduces both symbolic and actual demands on chickens' labour.

The ethics of domestic food production embodied in backyard chickens reverberates with ideas of self-sufficiency and a morality of localism, but these idealised notions are a far cry from most of the chicken and human labour in food production (Gray, 2013). Where the pandemic has allowed a privileged few people to try out alternative modes of living, more common forms of chicken-human relationships are receiving less attention. Critical discussions about human working conditions in the slaughterhouse are vital to understandings of chickens,

class, and labour, where the spaces of commercial farming are inseparable from the backyard hens' pandemic popularity. These seemingly opposing spaces are in fact always intimately connected in webs of violence (Springer, 'Violence Sits in Places'), as discussed in the following empirical section.

5. Chickens and class: the slaughterhouse

In June 2020, an outbreak of Covid-19 at a slaughterhouse in Guetersloh County, Germany infected hundreds of workers, and 1500 community cases led to a regional lockdown ('German County'). November brought an outbreak at a mink fur farm in Denmark leading to the killing of 2.5 million mink. These farms were described as acting 'as reservoirs for coronaviruses, incubating pathogens transmissible to humans (Swabe). When the pandemic broke out in early 2020, moral outrage and disgust fuelled by sinophobia (Zhang and Xu) were levelled at 'wet' markets as nurturing and creating the deadly virus through what kinds of animals people ate and how, but not at the eating of animals *per se*. The intimacies of life and death at the wildlife market – as an open and transparent space of consuming animals – could not be more different from the invisibilized spaces of Western farms and slaughterhouses (Morin). This perspective ignores the fact that killing and consuming animals anywhere is a threat to human health everywhere and simultaneously reproduces not only human supremacy, but also racial and colonial supremacy (Oliver, *Covid-19*). Animal agriculture has been a hotspot for outbreaks, revealing transspecies porosities and the connection between Covid-19 and low-paid work, class, race and gender.

When thinking about chicken-human relationships, a focus on the 'caring' spaces of the backyard obscures the intimacies of the slaughterhouse where

workers in factories strain to make thousands of cuts of meat every shift, leading frequently to repetitive motion injuries. Processing lines move so quickly that some workers must wear nappies because there are too few toilet breaks. There is not enough time for staff to cover their mouths when they cough – a potentially deadly issue during a pandemic. Even before the outbreak, the meat industry pushed limits of animal and human biology. (Vettesse and Blanchette, np).

The agricultural industry still relies heavily on human labour and often migrant workers, which allows for the industry to be 'more efficient, flexible and export focused' as 'meat processing companies ... are often in areas where population is less dense and unemployment is low. This means that the local labour supply is often not sufficient to meet the needs of producers' ('Meat Industry Workforce'). During Covid-19, the labour of low-paid essential workers has been highlighted in admiration for care-workers, nurses, and supermarket workers, but the 'dirty work' of slaughterhouse operatives and farm labourers has rarely featured.

Lawsuits filed against Tyson Foods, a self-described 'modern, multi-national, protein-focused food company producing approximately 20% of the beef, pork and chicken in the United States' (Tyson Foods), claim that their pork-processing plant in Iowa was kept open by managers to provide food during the pandemic despite known health risks. Not only were workers exposed through long hours and close contact to a novel and deadly virus, but managers 'placed bets on how many workers would catch the virus' ('Tyson Foods Managers'). The son of the fourth worker (of at least six) to die from Covid-19 filed a lawsuit over his death ('Family of Fourth Dead Worker'). It cites that plant managers not only oversaw unsafe working conditions but also 'organized a cash buy-in, winner-take-all betting pool for supervisors and managers to wager how many employees would test positive for COVID-19' ('Tyson Foods Managers'). A similar lawsuit was submitted in June by the families of three other people who died from Covid-19 transmitted at this plant. These matters of life and death reveal not the expected sterile and machinic environment of the slaughterhouse, but the human costs, risks, and intimacies of killing for workers.

The material geographies of the farm and slaughterhouse through their 'structural design and disciplinary technologies and practices terrorize animal and human bodies' (Morin 41) are carceral sites that are hidden in plain view. The necropolitical site of the slaughterhouse is 'everywhere and nowhere' (Glick 645), woven into everyday life even as a mark of constant death. Places of slaughter are closed and cloistered, and 'the active exclusion of people is aggressively enforced, in the shape of explicit warning signs, electric fences, barbed wire adorning high walls, patrolled by security guards and/or surveyed by CCTV cameras' (White 213). Aside from workers, who are themselves 'animalized' humans (White 213), the slaughterhouse is impermeable. From the outside, the processing of animals for meat are

imagined as mechanizations of death, 'routine, mechanical, predictable, repetitive, and programmed practices' (Morin 45). But, inside, these intimacies condition one another, and animal and human biology overflow; the slaughterhouse is leaky, and as workers move in and out of confinement with animals, their bodies become vectors for disease and circulation.

In the slaughterhouse and processing plant, workers bodies are valued not as humans but 'for their suitability for work on parts of the disassembly line ... workers' bodies are becoming pools of potential value' (Blanchette 180). Yet, in the process of processing, workers themselves understand their labour as an 'embodied material experience' (Blanchette 184) through which they share sensory bonds with not only one another but also with the animals they are killing. Animals and workers are not separate sterile entities that maintain stable boundaries; they brim with interspecies intimacies, conditioning one another. People who work at processing plants and with (industrialised) food animals are classed, gendered, and racialised subjects, and these workers, although essential to the modern Anglo-American diet, are rarely celebrated. Disgust at the intimacies of the farm, and of how animals become fragmented 'food' creates a dismissal or a refusal to consider the work and risky processes of the farm and slaughterhouse as spaces of interspecies intimacy because of the violence and death they are inseparable from.

The surge in backyard chicken-keeping is made possible only through the expansion of industrial animal farming. The infrastructures at the slaughterhouse are inseparable from chickens setting foot into their new backyard homes. Domestic chicken spaces have grown during Covid-19 lockdowns, but focussing on the ostensibly 'benevolent' spaces of backyard chickens ignores the ongoing violence of the commercial farm and slaughterhouse that makes the backyard chicken space possible. 'COVID-19 has exposed the vulnerability of our protein production machine and laid bare the urgent need for systemic change' (Garcés 1). This vulnerability is found in the bodies of workers and animals alike, as environmental, and zoonotic threat is embodied unequally along not only *interspecies*, but *intraspecies* lines. The exposure of chicken processing workers to viral threats reveals the enduring, and usually hidden, bond between backyard chicken-keeping and sites of multiple violence to humans and animals in the slaughterhouse.

Conclusion

During Covid-19, human-animal relationships have changed drastically. For people who live with companion animals, the rhythms of everyday life have been disrupted; wild animals have been able to take up more space; the ethics of eating animals has been more openly questioned; and, as explored in this paper, the space and time to bring animals into domestic spaces has become possible for more people than ever before. Simultaneously, the slaughterhouse as a site of risky encounter, here through viral transmission, is inseparable from the backyard chicken. These different forms of violent and commensal chicken-human relationships reveal the porosity of viral, social, and political meaning to flow across species.

In the first part of this paper, the process and rise of domestic chicken-keeping during Covid-19 was considered within wider changing attitudes towards animals as industrialised food producers, and how the pandemic has expedited this. However, the rise in keeping chickens is also related to attempts to secure eggs in the face of national shortages and find more commensal ways of producing food, rather than a turn away from eating eggs. Next, I situated Covid-19's growth in chicken-keeping within longer trends and explored how this is framed as a benevolent or commensal 'cohabitation', posing questions about the romanticisation of 'nature' in the face of global and local crises of health, food and security. In the following section, I attended specifically to how this rise in domestic chicken-keeping remains a relationship in need of critical investigation and contended that these emergent modes of living are not separate from industrial farming and killing of chickens but rather intimately connected in webs of violence. In the final empirical section, I moved to the slaughterhouse to concentrate on the vulnerabilities of food production as embodied in workers' and animals' bodies and how the unequal impacts of the pandemic are realised in these racialised, classed, and gendered risky spaces.

Chicken-human relationalities are not confined to the domestic space or the slaughterhouse; these are mutually constituted spaces. In the domestic chicken space, there remain expectations of labour and commodification on the chicken, both affective and reproductive. The rehoming process disrupts the typical chain of 'spent' hens at the end of their productive lives, but whether this disruption severs their commodification remains up for question, revealing the inconsistencies of care as a necessarily transformative tool. However, as Dhont et al. contend, 'people's relationships with animals are complicated, pervaded with social

and psychological ambiguities and inconsistencies, influenced by cultural and economic forces ... care for an animal is directly linked to how the animal is typically treated and (de)valued in society' (770). The difficulties in caring about devalued animals such as chickens are challenged and rethought in chicken-human relationships where 'human involvement may support unique forms of agency' (Blattner et al. 17) for rehomed and sanctuary animals, negotiating new forms of community, security and stability.

The rise of chicken-keeping during Covid-19 provides conceptual and practical challenges for animals, animal studies scholars, and humans in critically engaging with emerging forms of interspecies living and their entanglements with violent intimacies. In this sense, Covid-19's temporal incongruencies have sped up, slowed down and otherwise impacted upon more-than-human communities. In the future, as we continue in the wake of the pandemic, it is yet to be realised whether and how this constitutes a promising long-term shift or a continuation of the human-as-usual.

Notes

¹ The ethnography was subject to ethical approval from University of Birmingham in 2018, reference number ERN_17-0640. Virtual interviews were subject to ethical approval from University of Cambridge in 2021, reference number #1841

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