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The Contagion of Slow Violence: The Slaughterhouse and COVID-19

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Abstract

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Keywords

slaughterhouse; COVID-19; slow violence; state organized race crime; farmed animals; labour; meat-packing

Cover Page Footnote

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Abstract: COVID-19 has brought to the fore the violence faced by slaughterhouse workers and those they are charged with slaughtering. This article argues that COVID-19 has wrought an acceleration of the slow violence of state organized race crime (Nixon, Ward), in spreading rapidly through the slaughterhouse and to surrounding racialized communities. We show that zoonotic pandemics are the result of state organized race crime, and that abattoirs are locations of inseparable animal and racial violence. We then analyse how the law and state institutions have positioned slaughterhouse work as essential, contra workers' claims and general knowledge that meat is an inessential 'item'. We argue that this demonstrates the mechanics of state organized race crime and accelerates the speed of slow violence, while maintaining its insidious and routine nature. We then consider the #Boycottmeat movement which includes slaughterhouse workers, whom despite having a vested interest in this industry, have advocated for meat boycotts and a transition to plant-based diets as a matter of personal and collective safety.

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Locations of human suffering are often locations of nonhuman suffering. Slaughterhouses in Canada and the US, which employ some of the most marginalized workers, have at various times been the locations of the largest COVID-19 outbreaks in their respective countries (Statistics Canada ‘COVID-19 and the Beef Supply Chain’; Dorning; Reiger). Although slaughterhouses have been COVID-19 hotspots in other countries as well, including in Australia (Bucci), in this article we focus on the situation in Canada and the US. COVID-19 of course is neither contained by geographic borders nor by the walls of the slaughterhouse where it spreads quickly and enters surrounding communities – communities whose members are often highly marginalized. Both the COVID-19 pandemic and the location of slaughterhouses aptly highlight issues of racial, animal, and environmental justice. This article shows that the North American slaughterhouse is both embedded in and enacts racism; and that given this, the slaughterhouse during COVID-19 should be understood as accelerating racism’s death drive,¹ which targets the animals bred for slaughter and those who perform the labour of slaughter. Like the animals who suffer the most in animal agriculture and its attendant abattoir, slaughterhouse workers are likely to also be severely harmed or killed by this industry, albeit in a slower and less direct manner – COVID-19 quickens this outcome.

This article draws on scholarship on the slow violence of environmental degradation (Nixon) and the slow violence of state organized racism (Ward) to consider the slaughterhouse during COVID-19. Specifically, we argue that despite environmental violence being much slower than state organized race crime which, in one expression, shortens lifespans, what is common to both is that slow violence is a *specific form* of violence that is insidious, not easily identifiable as racism or violence, and is not reducible to the intent of an individual acting against another. Instead, it is structural, routine, and elongated in its harm and effects. The slaughterhouse is a foundational site in the farmed animal’s total commodification, who is processed into ‘food’ to be sold, while inedible parts are ‘rendered’ to further enhance profitability or disposed of as ‘deadstock’. Slaughterhouse workers, who are disproportionately racialized, are also required to engage in direct violence as the crux of their employment, but also experience high levels of workplace injuries and disease (Fitzgerald et al. 160; Jacques 595; Dillard 393). We argue that the slaughterhouse during COVID-19 represents the acceleration of *forms* of slow violence described by Rob Nixon.

The article is divided into four substantive sections. In Part I, we discuss the interconnections between race, species, and environmental exploitation in a context of colonialism and racial capitalism that shapes the Americas. In doing so, we show that zoonotic pandemics cannot be divorced from the slow violence of environmental harm and degradation. In Part II, we consider how structures of race and species shape the slaughterhouse, oppressing workers and nonhuman animals, while harming the environment. Part III examines the slaughterhouse during the pandemic. We analyse how meatpacking has continued to operate during the pandemic under the category of ‘essential services’, thereby making it a central contributor to spreading coronaviruses across precarious communities. To do so, we focus on racism and the vulnerability of slaughterhouse workers in Canada and the US as well as its relation to animal suffering. These factors contribute to the ongoing slow violence of environmental crime, while accelerating the harm experienced by slaughterhouse labourers during this pandemic and the perpetuation of zoonoses. In Part IV, we analyse resistance to the US government’s declaration that meatpacking is an essential service during the COVID-19 pandemic. We do so by engaging the #Boycottmeat movement that includes slaughterhouse workers, who despite having a vested interest in this industry, have advocated for meat boycotts and a transition to plant-based diets as a matter of personal and collective safety (League of United Latin American Citizens of Iowa, ‘99 Slaughterhouse Worker COVID-19 Deaths’).

I. The interconnectedness of race, species, and environmental degradation

An analysis of the slaughterhouse brings to the fore environmental, ethical, and labour issues; in the Americas, these issues are inseparable. There is widespread scientific agreement that we are currently in the geological epoch of the Anthropocene, an epoch marked by the irreversible impact of humans upon the earth’s systems. In 2019, the Anthropocene Working Group voted to date the beginning of the Anthropocene to the mid-20th century (AWG). Prior to this decision, however, Heather Davis and Zoe Todd have followed geologists Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin in arguing that the beginning of the Anthropocene should be dated to 1610, a date that would mark the beginning of colonialism in the Americas and ‘names the problem of colonialism as responsible for the contemporary environmental crisis’ (763). Dating the Anthropocene to 1610 not only recognizes the role of colonialism, but the inextricability of

slavery, colonialism, and racial capitalism,² as this date is associated with a discernible mark in the stratigraphic record showing ‘the drop in carbon dioxide levels that can be found in the geologic layer that correspond to the genocide of the people of the Americas and the subsequent regrowth of forests and other plants’ (766). Yet the genocide of approximately 50 million Indigenous persons by 1610 of course did not occur overnight but is intimately tied to Atlantic slavery and racial capitalism. This is because ‘settler colonialism – which in the Americas simultaneously employed the twinned processes of dispossession and chattel slavery – was always about changing the land, transforming the earth itself, including the creatures, the plants, the soil composition and the atmosphere. It was about moving and unearthing rocks and minerals’ (770). The way nature has been organized under capital provided the conditions necessary for the Anthropocene; an organization built to harness all of life’s energy, especially that of humans targeted by slavery and colonization, women, nonhuman animals, and the environment (Moore).

Indigenous theorists, race scholars, and political theorists have argued that the making of race and animality have been integral to colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade (see for example, Dayan, Kim ‘Murder and Mattering’; Ko; Stanesco). Bénédicte Boisseron argues that the ‘black-animal subtext is deeply ingrained in the cultural genetics of the global north, an inherited condition informed by a shared history of slavery and colonization’ (ix). This does not mean that we ought to analogize the experiences of racialized individuals and nonhuman animals, but to instead ‘focus on interspecies connectedness’ as ‘the history of the animal and the black in the black Atlantic is *connected*, rather than simply comparable’ (Boisseron, xx). In this sense, race is ‘a permanent presence inextricably part of the animal question’ (2). For Claire Jean Kim, ‘Blackness is a species construct (meaning “in proximity to the animal”), and animalness is a racial construct (meaning “in proximity to the black”), and the two are dynamically interconstituted *all the way down*’ (10). A clean separation between race and species is then impossible – it is their mutual constitution that is foundational to how ‘the human’ is ontologized: ‘the antiblack social order that props up the “human” is also a zoological order, or what we might call a *zoologo-racial order*’ (10). Kim’s work (*Dangerous Crossings*; ‘Murder and Mattering’) on the synergistic relationship between race and animality shows that taxonomies of life rely on the subjugation of animality and blackness as metrics upon which ‘the human’ is established.

Colonialism relied on and ‘produc[ed] the human, understood here in its full European terms’ (Stanescu 141). Human exceptionalism is foundational to which lives are fostered and invested in, and those who are the bodies upon and against which the human produces and sustains itself (136). Derrida (*Points; The Animal That Therefore I Am*) argues that western cultures are premised on the disavowal of the animal. Namely that to be recognized as ‘a subject’ is to be recognized as paradigmatically human – a subject with exclusive access to/monopolization of language, speech, rationality, agency, and a relationship to death, for example. Conversely, animals are denied these capacities and are instead ontologized as those who merely react to stimulus. Within this framework, ‘animal = all body, no mind’ (Kim ‘Murder and Mattering’ 3).

Animal agriculture has perhaps exploited and perpetuated this ontology to a degree unrivalled by other industries. James Stanescu argues that the specificity of how animals are ontologized as ‘deaded life’ in industrial agriculture is unique and incommensurable with other atrocities (148). This is because the entire life of farmed animals is premised on their being consumed. As deaded life, animals are considered machines subjected to the calculus of an industry seeking to maximize profits by inputting the minimum required (food, space, health measures) to produce flesh, eggs, and dairy. Deaded life is then a form of existence framed by consumption, in which ‘it is a thought of life that is not life, life that is not living. It is a sense of life meant as pure production, pure use value’ (Stanescu 151). Animal agriculture is not only bound up in the ontological production of colonial human exceptionalism but has been foundational to territorial acquisition. Animal agriculture in the US and Canada is also a European import, brought by settlers to remake the new world in the image of the old. Animal agriculture was a means for settlers to bring and instil English property law, which entailed imposing private property to relationships upon animals and Indigenous territories (Anderson; Kim ‘Murder and Mattering’ 11; Nichols; Cohen). The instrumentalization of animals and territory in processes of agriculture has been pivotal to the colonial project in its displacement of Indigenous persons, cosmologies, ways of life, and nonhuman animals (Belcourt 9; Struthers Montford). As we will elaborate throughout this paper, animal agriculture is foundationally a violent institution that entails routine and spectacular intra-human, inter-species, and environmental harms.

Slow violence

The Anthropocene and its attendant understandings and relationships to life is marked by what Robert Nixon calls the slow violence of environmental degradation (2). It is a form of ‘violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all’ (2). Nixon’s work focuses on developing a vocabulary that allows us to grasp the calamity of human-driven environmental destruction. Slow violence is not constrained by time or place, nor is it always visible.³ Instead, it is ‘incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales’ (2). This concept is developed in contrast to common understandings of violence, as a spectacular *event* that has a discernable beginning and end, and that includes an identifiable culprit.⁴

Extending Nixon’s idea of slow violence, Geoff Ward applies the concept to racial violence. The law, however, often conceptualizes racially motivated discrimination as an interpersonal event perpetuated by a malicious individual (Beckett and Murakawa 224). Ruth Wilson-Gilmore, on the other hand, defines racism as ‘the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death’ (474). Ward argues that racism, similar to the slow violence of environmental harm, is also insidious, not easily identifiable, and not temporally constrained. Extending Nixon’s concept of slow violence, Ward argues that ‘state organized race crime ... involves multiple interactive forms, including state actors and institutions committing or abetting racial violence’ (300). For Ward, the state perpetuates racially motivated crime that is *criminal* in the scope of the harm that occurs, not in the sense that it violates extant law (300). This is because the law, and more broadly the legal system, is premised on the assumption of racial neutrality. This constrains how racism is understood and has the effect of insulating state agencies from accountability (Beckett and Murakawa). This form of racism is characterized by ‘subtler personal or structural violence contributing to dis-accumulation, collective under-development, and generational disadvantage’ (302) that makes individuals and communities vulnerable to exploitation and harm. While Ward’s slow violence might manifest more quickly in its shortening of life spans, for example, than the outcomes of environmental degradation spanning centuries, the root causes of both racial and environmental violence are interrelated. These include the transatlantic slave trade,

racial capitalism, and settler colonialism – structures that are inseparable and continue to cause intergenerational damage. As Katherine McKittrick argues, plantation logics continue to shape black geographies of state organized placelessness that manifest in the annihilation of communities through practices of urbicide and incarceration (McKittrick 953).

Nixon’s concept of the slow violence of environmental degradation and Ward’s state organized race crime help us appreciate and identify multiple forms of violence that are not commonly considered violence or racism at all. Given the specificity of animal agriculture’s intra-active material harms, we argue that borrowing from Ward’s work to further examine slow violence can help us understand the *longue durée* of the institution – that this *longue durée* is made possible by the immediate and routine violence of animal, worker, and environmental exploitation. Neither exceptional, nor necessarily long, we consider this routine violence within a broader context of how zoonoses are created by the slow violence of animal agriculture, which culminates in these spectacular moments of harm. We do so by focusing on the slaughterhouse during the COVID-19 pandemic to ask how we ought to account for violence that is intentional and legally sanctioned by deeming these workplaces essential, thereby keeping them open and vulnerable. Although COVID-19 has heightened media and public focus on the harms of the slaughterhouse, little to no material improvements for workers or animals have occurred. We propose that governments declaring slaughterhouse labour ‘essential’ accelerates the slaughterhouse’s (racist and legally sanctioned) death drive, rather than the current scrutiny it faces representing an exceptional moment in its history.

II. Context: Animal agriculture, zoonoses, and the slaughterhouse

COVID-19’s origin is still under investigation, but it has been commonly traced to a wholesale food market in Wuhan City, China in December 2019. New evidence suggests that the first case of the virus occurred in November 2019 in China’s Hubei province, although there is still a possibility of finding an earlier ‘patient zero’ (Bryner). Despite not knowing the timing or location of COVID-19’s exact origin, all available evidence indicates that COVID-19 is a zoonotic virus. This means that it was most likely originally transmitted from bats to humans via secondary contact with another nonhuman animal, since humans rarely have direct contact with bats (‘Coronavirus Disease 2019’). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), this

transitional ‘animal host or zoonotic source could be a domestic animal, a wild animal, or a domesticated wild animal and, as of yet, has not been identified’ (‘Coronavirus Disease 2019’). COVID-19 is just one of the latest pandemics of zoonotic origin, predated by various (and oftentimes ongoing) occurrences of bovine tuberculosis, bovine spongiform encephalopathy (mad cow disease), H1N1 (swine flu), H5N1 (avian flu), and MERS-CoV (Middle East respiratory syndrome), to name just a few. Overall, human encroachment into animal habitats and the ensuing displacement, extinctions and loss of biodiversity among nonhuman animals continues to drive zoonotic epidemics. Put simply, racial capitalism, which attempts to commodify all of life and nature’s energies – ecological, animal, and disproportionately those of racialized persons (Wadiwel 530, Moore) – promotes the conditions in which zoonotic pandemics have and will continue to emerge. These global pandemics exist in addition to the everyday risks inherent in the consumption of nonhuman others, including the transmission of salmonella, E. coli, and listeria, for example, as well as the growing threat of antimicrobial resistance. How animals are treated in agriculture, racialized relations of global capital, and slaughterhouse operations promotes the conditions in which food safety issues arise and zoonotic diseases emerge and are transmitted between nonhuman and human animals (see Shukin, see CBC). Specifically in the case of COVID-19, the slaughterhouse is not a site where the virus moves from farmed animal to human, but in which the labour conditions quickly transmit this zoonotic disease to extremely vulnerable workers, their families, and the communities surrounding slaughterhouses. Thinking in terms of slow violence requires that we attend to the environmental racism of slaughterhouses, even in pre-pandemic times.

Animal agriculture and slaughterhouses are often located in rural and impoverished communities where persons of colour reside. Put otherwise, the nucleus of the slow violence of animal agriculture spreads outwards from ‘communities least likely to garner media attention for the horrific environmental and health consequences of living among sick animals’ (Muller 89). Related to the *raising* of farmed animals for consumption, agricultural workers have reported chronic eye, nose, and throat issues, lower overall qualities of life, and suffer increased rates of depression and fatigue. Globally, air pollution is the largest environmental risk factor for humans. Recent research has shown that in the US animal agriculture is responsible for 80% of deaths caused by ‘food-related fine particulate matter pollution’ – 15,900 persons per year (Domingo et al. 1). Groundwater contamination from the faeces of farmed animals can cause

birth defects in both humans and other animals – these issues do not cover the extent to which farmed and free-living animals are negatively impacted (see FEP ‘Environmental Racism’). Manure lagoons, the heavy use of pesticides and fertilizers, and the disposal of deadstock (i.e., the inedible parts of animals) also cause air and water pollution. Specific to animal agriculture’s *end stage*, deadstock from the slaughterhouse production, which comprises up to 60% of a slaughtered animal, including their ‘offal, bones, tendons, blood, and plasma’ (McWilliams) does not enter the food chain. The US, for example, annually produces 1.4 billion tons of deadstock waste (McWilliams). Deadstock is ‘managed’ through rendering (though this is decreasing as it is not as economically profitable as it once was), burying, incineration, and composting – all of which entail various environmental risks (McWilliams).⁵ All stages of animal agriculture represent the slow violence of environmental degradation, and because these operations occur in communities of persons who are devalued by the dominant society, it is also a matter of state organized racism.

Slaughterhouses are sites of multispecies relations and oppressions, with marginalized humans and farmed animals caught up in ‘entangled oppressions’ (Coulter 33). Muller suggests that we think of slaughterhouse labourers and the farmed animals slaughtered therein as ‘slaughterhouse populations’ (88) constituted ‘*in relation* to one another’ (82). Much as cattle are viewed as killable and disposable in Western societies, the human labourers working within the slaughterhouse are seen as inferior, ‘closer to the animal, and therefore of less inherent value’ (Muller 87). The location of the slaughterhouse requires that certain humans remain outside the bounds of acceptable citizenship, and that farmed animals exist as de-subjectified property.

Slaughterhouses employ some of the most marginal individuals – such as undocumented persons, recent immigrants, prisoners, parolees, and those with criminal records (Fremstad et al., Statistics Canada ‘Agricultural Sector Workers’, Jenkins 233). Slaughterhouse wages in the US have been decreasing since the 1980s. While in 1983, these wages were higher than the average manufacturing wage, Dillard notes that by 2002 these wages fell to 24% below this average (Dillard 392). In May of 2006, the median hourly rate for slaughterhouse workers was \$10.43 per hour, with an annual income of \$21,690 (2). Recent data indicates that US slaughterhouse workers make an average of \$26,000 per year for work that is more physically intense and psychologically damaging than other common forms of employment (Muller 83).

According to Frenstad et al., 44.4% of meatpacking workers in the United States are Hispanic, 25.2% are black, and over half are immigrants. Moreover, nearly half of these workers are a part of low-income families. While there is less data from the Canadian sector, where the present authors are located, programs such as the Temporary Foreign Worker program have made it evident that many agricultural jobs are outsourced to immigrant labourers ('Temporary Foreign Worker'; Statistics Canada 'Agricultural Sector Workers'). According to Statistics Canada, in 2015 '40,497 temporary foreign workers filled 45,005 jobs for agricultural operations', over half of whom were from Mexico. Of these 45,005 jobs, 3,346 were within the livestock subsector. Slaughterhouse work also has one of the highest turnover rates, often exceeding 100% and ranging to 200% per year ('Environmental Racism'; Fitzgerald et al. 162).

Slaughterhouses are racially segregated spaces with white and English-speaking individuals occupying management positions, and racialized and non-English speaking individuals performing the labour of slaughter (Pachirat 10, 16, 106). Similar to the way prison administrators group prisoners by racial identification, members of similarly racialized groups are spatially segregated by type of task in slaughterhouses (see Muller, Pachirat). Most slaughterhouses maintain highly specialized divisions of labour formatted into assembly line work that requires sustained and repetitive killing and dismemberment. Paired with long working hours, this division contributes to a lack of empathy for nonhuman animals (Jerolmack 201). Muller reports that in the US slaughterhouse employees often work every day of the week and up to 12-hours per day (83). Some facilities make employees wear diapers rather than allow bathroom breaks ('Lives on the Line'). The division of labour and ever-increasing line-speeds within the slaughterhouse further contributes to the detachment of slaughterhouse workers from their reality, as well as the suffering of animals they are charged with killing.⁶

The slaughterhouse is then a location of immediate and routinized violence, at the same time as being, as we will discuss below, a nucleus from which other violences flow. Common workplace injuries include repetitive strain injuries, being wounded by animals or cutting instruments, bone splinters, and loss of limbs (Muller 93, Fitzgerald). Research has shown that a quarter of slaughterhouse workers become sick or injured every year (Dillard 393). Statistics from Iowa also show that meatpacking has an injury rate five times that of other full-time employment in the state (3). Immigration status and social factors may be life-or-death for some

labourers (Jenkins 234). According to a 2004 study, Mexican workers are 80% more likely to die on the job than American workers, mostly due to a lack of training and under-reporting of workplace hazards, since Mexican labourers are hired to work cheap, undesirable jobs, such as those within the agricultural sector (Pritchard, Jenkins 234). Workplace deaths such as these can be attributed to discriminatory treatment and structural inequality. Other deaths that occur quickly, such as those that result from inhaling toxic fumes and slipping onto knives, are categorized as ‘accidental’ (Muller 93). Not easily captured by available statistical mechanisms, however, is the slow violence – borne by humans and the more-than-human – of the slaughterhouse which can be psychological, environmental, and physically harmful over indiscriminate ranges of time.

Scholars and authors have argued that the very nature of slaughterhouse work, in that it requires the killing and dismemberment of other sentient animals, has unique psychological effects. Dillard has proposed that labourers experience ‘doubling’ in that they emotionally split into two selves, one of which adapts to be able to perform slaughterhouse labour (398). Those who go into fields of animal agriculture and who have favourable views towards animals very likely suffer more psychological harm than individuals who do not hold animals in high esteem, as the disjuncture between the requirements of their employment and their personal views is vast. Slaughterhouse workers are at a high risk of experiencing ‘perpetration-induced traumatic stress’ (Dillard 397), a type of post-traumatic stress disorder related to those ‘placed in excruciatingly traumatic environments in which *they themselves* must perform acts of violence on others’ (Muller 96). Emerging research shows that it is not the case that sadistic individuals are ‘drawn’ to this form of labour, but rather that it is the work itself that is inherently traumatizing and leads to multiple forms of violence that exceeds the kinds required for their job (see Muller).

Research has also shown that employment in animal agriculture results in a lessened ability to empathize with those considered ‘weaker’ such as women and children (Dillard 400). The Sinclair Hypothesis proposes that the violence inherent in slaughterhouses spills out into local communities in ways not demonstrated by other ‘manufacturing’ industries. Fitzgerald et al.’s (2009) research, which tested the Sinclair Hypothesis, confirmed this to be the case (160-162, 174-175). This research showed that increases in slaughterhouse employment were related

to increases in arrests for rape and sex offenses, which provides ‘evidence that the work done within slaughterhouses might spillover to violence against other less powerful groups, such as women and children’ (174). Others such as Jessica Racine Jacques have confirmed the correlation between slaughterhouses and community violence, again showing the slaughterhouse’s impact on increased arrests for rape and family violence (608).

The immediate and routinized violence of the slaughterhouse also has violent ripple effects that not only harm families and communities, but are borne by the environment. These are consistent with the form of violence conceptualized as slow: insidious, dispersed, and the harms of which victims are expected to privately manage. In addition to the fast violence against slaughtered animals and workers, workers can also experience harms that are not easily attributed to the slaughterhouse because slaughterhouse workers are ‘immers[ed] in polluted environments’ (Weis figure 4.1). The ‘slow violence of state organized race crime’ (Ward), in which racialized persons are made vulnerable to premature death through law or state neglect, is made more than apparent in slaughterhouse working conditions. Not only do slaughterhouse workers die in ‘spectacular’ and immediate ways, but they can die slow deaths from exposure to microbial agents that are airborne or transmitted through direct contact with sick animals. This manifests as an ‘excess of deaths from cancer among slaughterhouse workers, particularly of the tongue, esophagus, lungs, skin, bone, bladder, and lymph nodes’ (Muller 93). This group of labourers is also at a disproportionate risk of stroke (93).

The slaughterhouse is a confounding institution of *disposability* where race and species come together to animalize humans and deaden animal life. Muller characterizes this work force as excluded from the parameters of humanity, which includes being subjects of labour law (85). The workers’ proximity to the animal places them in the ‘borderlands’ between colonial ontologies of the human and other animals. Those who are *animalized*, who have historically and, in some matters, continue to be seen as more similar to nonhuman animals than they are to white men, are those who primarily work in slaughterhouses. Put otherwise, those placed toward the ‘non-valuable’ end of the colonial sliding scale perform the majority of slaughterhouse work; they ‘not only represent liminal persons (the non-white, the illegal immigrant, the parolee) but also engage in acts of violence deemed unsuitable for genteel middle-class life’ (88).⁷ It is this *inhumane violence* – the very job description of slaughterhouse

work – that reifies workers’ status as more animal-like than human (Muller 91). As she writes, ‘even though abattoir employees are biologically human, culturally they tend not to hold the legal rights and moral standing promised to employees under U.S. American labour law’ (91). The same holds true in the Canadian context which, despite formalized labour and public health protections, excludes slaughterhouse workers from meaningful protections. For example, the Canada Food Inspection Agency’s (CFIA) review of XL Foods regarding a massive E. coli outbreak showed the routine circumvention of occupational health and safety (‘Independent Review of XL Foods’). Despite the fact that XL Foods had been previously warned six times regarding worker and consumer health and safety concerns prior to the outbreak (‘XL Foods Warned’), the CFIA found that ‘the response and recall [of food products] went well’ (‘Independent Review of XL Foods’), while the worker’s health and safety went unaddressed (‘Union Claims’). Management often use the precarious immigration status of employees to threaten those who advocate for better working conditions (Matz). The constraints of the Canadian immigration system, the general ignoring of slaughterhouse working conditions, and the extreme marginalization of staff results in workers being ignored by employment regulatory bodies and/or excluded as ‘workers’ under related labour laws. Employment practices such as these provide the conditions in which the slow violence of slaughterhouse has accelerated in its detrimental effects during the pandemic. Neither spectacular, nor direct, nor temporally or geographically constrained, the spread of COVID-19 in and from slaughterhouses represents an insidious, dispersed, and compounding violence.

III. The slaughterhouse under COVID-19

Outbreaks of COVID-19 have occurred in slaughterhouses across North America, Canada, and Europe (Rieger, ‘3rd Death Linked’; Kindy; Reuben; Statistics Canada ‘COVID-19 and the Beef Supply Chain’; ‘German Coronavirus Outbreak’; Schlosser; Khalil). Canada’s, and at one-point, North America’s largest COVID-19 outbreak occurred in May 2020, in a Cargill-operated Alberta slaughterhouse. More than 1,500 confirmed cases of coronavirus have been linked to the slaughterhouse in High River, Alberta, and three individuals died (Rieger, ‘3rd Death Linked’). Workers have reported that COVID-19 related public health measures are largely ignored by slaughterhouse owners and operators, with COVID-19 positive employees pressured to leave

self-isolation early and return to work (Rieger, ‘3rd Death Linked’). Just as the violence foundational to the slaughterhouse also manifests outside its walls in the form of domestic violence, sexual assaults, and other forms of community violence (Fitzgerald et al. 172-174), COVID-19 has also spread outward into the community.

COVID-19 outbreaks in slaughterhouses and their subsequent closures have been routine in Canada to the degree that the animal agriculture industry has called it a ‘crisis of capacity’ (McLeod). In Alberta, 25% of coronavirus cases originated in abattoirs, with cases spreading to First Nations communities located in close proximity (Rieger, ‘1 In 4 Alberta COVID-19 Cases’). While the slaughterhouse at High River closed for two weeks (with workers stating that it remained unsafe to return to work), other slaughterhouses with COVID-19 outbreaks have continued to operate without interruption (Rieger ‘1 in 4 Alberta COVID-19 Cases’). The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) began conducting a criminal investigation related to the death of Benito Quesada, a worker at Cargill’s High River slaughterhouse, who died on May 7th, 2020 at the age of 51 after contracting COVID-19 at work (Seglins et al.). The RCMP has confirmed that this is the first criminal investigation into a workplace-related COVID-19 death. A class action lawsuit has also been filed against Cargill by those who had close contact with the slaughterhouse workers at the High River facility (Dryden). Another outbreak in March of 2021 at a slaughterhouse in Red Deer, Alberta has been linked to 4 deaths and 500 COVID-19 cases, including 35-year-old Darwin Doloque who had immigrated from the Philippines and died at home, and Henry De Leon, originally from the Dominican Republic, who died at the age of 50 after having worked at this slaughterhouse for 15 years. The plant was closed by Alberta Health Services and workers were not paid during this two-week period. Upon news of the slaughterhouse’s reopening, employees released an open letter asking for a delay to the reopening, increased safety measures, financial compensation during mandated closures, and no penalties should employees refuse unsafe work (UFCW Local 401).

In Canada, slaughterhouses are defined as essential as per various provincial public health authorities, and these locations are subject to applicable public health measures. Despite this, workers do not feel safe, and outbreaks continue. State neglect and ineffective public health measures combine to accelerate the slow violence of organized racism. For example, despite the province of Alberta declaring the Cargill abattoir safe for operations following its outbreak,

workers reported ‘work[ing] elbow-to-elbow and feel[ing] pressure to show up when sick as Cargill tried to keep its meat-processing lines moving’ (CBC). As Canada rolls out its vaccination strategy, medical professionals have reported that slaughterhouse workers are ‘a population [persons of colour and newcomers] that has been systemically ignored’ and who ‘have borne the brunt of outbreaks, deaths. It actually laid bare the fact that our essential workers intersect with precarious employment, crowded housing, transit and carpooling’ (Tan as quoted in Rieger, ‘Meatpacking Workers’). Medical professionals have called on provinces to consider slaughterhouses ‘hot spots’ that should be targeted for vaccination (Vega-Frey). Alberta has recently announced plans to vaccinate 15,000 slaughterhouse workers across 136 slaughterhouses (‘Vaccinations’). At the time of writing, provinces had not made similar announcements about targeting slaughterhouse work sites for vaccination.

In the US, the pandemic has caused meat production to decrease by 20% (Elejalde-Ruiz). Tight slaughterhouse working conditions, a lack of occupational health and safety enforcement, and the marginalization of workers led to the quick spread of COVID-19. Early in the pandemic, as COVID-19 spread through slaughterhouses, some of the largest corporations such as Tyson and Smithfield temporarily shuttered their abattoirs. Local public health agencies also debated whether to suspend operations at slaughterhouses owned by these and other meatpacking multinationals, such as Cargill and JBS. On April 26th 2020, John Tyson, chairman of the largest US-owned meatpacking company, Tyson Foods, placed full page advertisements in *The Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* lamenting forced closures of slaughterhouses which made ‘the food supply chain ... vulnerable’ (‘Tyson Ad.’). Tyson Foods posts annual revenues of US\$40 billion, largely realized via the work of racialized and immigrant labourers and directly at the expense of animals (Schlosser). Two days later, on April 28th, 2020, President Trump passed an executive order deeming meatpacking part of the national ‘critical infrastructure’. He did so by relying on the *Defense Production Act* of 1950, thereby prohibiting local health authorities from closing slaughterhouses, and preventing liability claims from employees. At the time this order was passed, 5,000 slaughterhouse workers and 1,500 food production workers had been ‘directly impacted’ by COVID-19 (Faulders).

By September 2020, 403 slaughterhouses have had approximately 42,534 workers infected with COVID-19 and 203 have died since the pandemic began (Kindy). The BBC

reported that slaughterhouse managers at Tyson Foods placed bets on how many workers would contract COVID-19 during outbreaks ('Tyson Food Managers Bet'). Two of the biggest COVID-19 outbreaks within slaughterhouses in the US occurred within a Smithfield Foods plant in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and a JSB plant in Greeley, Colorado, primarily due to safety violations such as a failure to implement physical distancing ('Tyson Food Managers Bet'). Consequently, these plants were fined a combined total of \$29,000; a minuscule amount in comparison to Smithfield's \$14 billion and JSB's \$51.7 billion annual revenue. In response to JSB's fine, Kim Cordova, president of the union branch UFCW 7 which represents JSB employees, notes 'These tiny fines are nothing to [meat plant owners]. They give an incentive to make these workers work faster and harder in the most unsafe working conditions imaginable' ('Tyson Food Managers Bet'). While the executive order mandated that slaughterhouses remain open, it did not stipulate federal public health rules that would standardize safety for workers, largely leaving this at the discretion of management.

Although meat processing executives have repeatedly claimed to prioritize 'worker safety', workers have reported being denied masks, hand soap, the space necessary for physical distancing, paid sick-leave, and transparency about COVID-19 in their workplace in addition to a living wage. USDA food inspectors have also reported that they, as inspectors, were not permitted to wear masks inside slaughterhouses *unless* they had permission from slaughterhouse management. As of May 2020, four USDA inspectors have died and 200 more have contracted COVID-19 from their inspection work in slaughterhouses (Dorning). Under Trump's presidency, approximately 40% of senior positions at the USDA remained vacant, meaning that occupation health and safety measures as well as any modicum of concern for animals and the safety of the food supply were drastically lowered (Schlosser). Meat processing executives have also blamed workers for contracting COVID-19. Citing the fact that their workers do not live in 'traditional American family' structures, executives have suggested that workers are not infected at slaughterhouses, but at home in 'crowded living situations' and because of their 'social habits' (Schlosser). Such accusations trade on and continue a long history of positioning immigrants as vectors of disease. As Kim (*Dangerous Crossings*) has shown, Chinese immigrants in San Francisco were animalized as vermin who lived in crowded 'dens' akin to vermin or swine, and who therefore presented a public health risk to white Americans (103-104). COVID-19 transmission is not occurring because slaughterhouse workers *want* to live in over-crowded homes, nor is it a

cultural compulsion to do so. This is a direct function of their poverty, which is directly tied to their earning of low wages. Insofar as transmission is occurring at work, it is a function of the state organized material conditions of the slaughterhouse and the hyper-exploitability of workers that has allowed COVID-19 to spread so quickly through these and into surrounding communities.

The status of ‘essential worker’ has been a central mechanism in which the state has accelerated violence against persons of colour. Recall that state organized race crime ‘involves interactive forms, including: state actors and institutions committing or abetting racial violence’ (Ward 300). The *Defence Act* requires identified industries to act in the service of national interest. During the pandemic this has meant that the well-being of workers and national interest are placed in opposition to one another, with the so-called national interest actually being that of agricultural conglomerates. The continued operation of animal agriculture and slaughterhouses is actually contra to the interests of the nation’s citizens: there is an established literature documenting the negative health effects of consuming meat, including processed meats being categorized as a Group 1 carcinogen (as are cigarettes) (International Agency for Research on Cancer), as well as persuasive and scientifically accepted data that animal agriculture and slaughterhouses are ecologically, physically, psychologically, socially, and culturally detrimental, and the fact that humans can flourish on plant-based diets. The Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee, charged with evaluating scientific evidence and developing nutritional guidelines, advised in 2015 that the US national food guide should recommend plant-based diets, and the recently revised Canada Food Guide advises citizens to eat more plants and less animal products (Hamblin, Hui). Meat is not only inessential but also increasingly advised against by nutritional scientists – thus meat-making should not be understood as an essential service (Feskanich et al. 509-510, Steinfeld, Henning, et al., Van Der Pols et al. 1722).

Slaughterhouses present ideal conditions for the spread of COVID-19. These are cold and damp indoor environments where people work in close proximity to one another while the machinery used to kill and dismember animals is loud, requiring that workers speak loudly. Further, the labour is physically strenuous, leading to heavier breathing, thereby increasing the spread of droplets. Some meat processing facilities also provide shared accommodation, meaning that workers spend most of their time in tight quarters with others (Reuben). Others report

carpooling to work at slaughterhouses. On the ground, regional health authorities are the best defence for stopping the spread of COVID-19, but their enforcement abilities are severely constrained by the essential status of slaughterhouses under the executive order (Khalil). Worse yet, extra-legal practices are organized against slaughterhouse workers. The federal agency Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) has issued non-binding guidelines for slaughterhouses. The Department of Labor, for its part, has indicated that it would side with meatpacking owners and corporations rather than workers (Khalil). Slaughterhouse workers have reported that health and safety signage is only in English, making it inaccessible to many staff. Some have only been provided with masks prior to department of health visits. Workers have also been told that stay at home orders do not apply to them, and to work while sick (Khalil). Inasmuch as there are no social or economic supports should individuals not go to work due to nationality or precarious immigration statuses, some hesitate to report symptoms out of economic desperation (Schlosser; Seglins et al.; Khalil).

The Governor of Iowa, who received hundreds of thousands of dollars of campaign contributions from people associated with the meat industry, has stated that slaughterhouse workers who do not report for work will be prohibited from accessing unemployment insurance (Schlosser). Iowa slaughterhouses have had extremely high rates of COVID-19 infections, with one Tyson pig slaughterhouse reporting infection rates in 33% of its workers. At the time, this rate of infection was ‘50 percent higher than the proportion of people in New York City, the epicenter of the national outbreak, who have been sickened by the disease’ (Schlosser). Understood through the lens of slow violence and state organized race crime, the spread of COVID-19 through slaughterhouses is not an uncontrollable act of ‘nature’ but rather a dispersed and attritional violence that is difficult to trace, but nonetheless abetted and supported by state actors and government institutions. Just as slaughterhouse workplace ‘accidents’ are more often the result of legally sanctioned business decisions rather than chance, so too is the incidence and spread of COVID-19 through the abattoir.

The long-term implications of COVID-19 for humans, the impact of variants and their more efficient transmission, and the implications for how we live and relate to the more-than-human world remain unknown. Returning to the understanding that slow violence is ‘incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal

scales' (Nixon 2), it is unlikely that the impact of COVID-19 will be resolved with the distribution of vaccines. It is clear however, that COVID-19 will continue to affect racialized and impoverished persons most drastically. This will not be accidental, but the result of structural inequalities, 'business' decisions, and a refusal to think and do in ways that break with the racial, colonial, and speciesist status quo. As the pandemic progresses, we will likely cease to understand these issues as exceptional, sensational, one-off events, but as ongoing, expected and eventually normalized. The spread of COVID-19 through slaughterhouse populations and their communities will likely become a routine workplace hazard to be managed. The ongoing repercussions of COVID-19 are similar to those Nixon has written about to describe the magnitude of environmental harm in that we cannot truly escape it, and that it has no definitive pre- or post-. In the context of industrial toxins, Nixon writes: 'if the past of slow violence is never past, so too the post is never fully post: industrial particularities and effluents live on in the environmental elements we inhabit and in our very bodies, which epidemiologically and ecologically are never our simple contemporaries' (8). The true origin of COVID-19 is ideological, anthropocentric, and relies on the instrumentalization of 'nature' – its origin does not merely lie in 'patient zero'. COVID-19 then represents one manifestation of the *longue durée* of racial and animal subjugation – subjugations which, in the Americas, have inseparable histories and entail spectacular and routinized violence. At the same time, such violences are slow, subtle, and routine (Kim 'Murder and Mattering'; Boisseron ix-xx, Ward). This set of circumstances has not, however, gone unnoticed. One notable example has been the #BoycottMeat movement which has emerged in response to slaughterhouse worker illnesses and deaths during the pandemic.

III. #BoycottMeat: Undermining the essential status of meat

Formed by the League of Latin American Citizens (LULAC), a US Hispanic civil rights organization ('About Us'), #BoycottMeat defines itself as a 'coalition of human rights, workers' rights, civil rights, health, environmental protection and animal welfare organizations' that seeks to show solidarity with slaughterhouse labourers who are 'being forced into a death march by an administration and an industry that place profit over lives' ('Boycott Meat'). #BoycottMeat questions the necessity of meat products and argues that meat should not be considered an

essential food item, and that in fact, humans would be healthier without it ('Boycott Meat to Protect'). Billy Williams, union steward at Tyson pork plant in Logansport, Indiana – Logansport having a vested interest in the industry as it is tied to their economic survival – has urged 'go without bacon and let my coworkers live' (Schlosser). Crystal Rodriguez, an employee at a JBS plant in Greeley, Colorado, which has experienced one of the biggest COVID-19 slaughterhouse outbreaks of the pandemic, asks why we must continue to place capitalist production of non-essential items over worker lives: 'I don't understand why everybody's lives are being put at risk just to make the product' (Schlosser). In addition to advocating for the boycott of meat in order to save human and nonhuman animal lives, #BoycottMeat is pushing for 'federal mandates to improve working conditions and employee healthcare, and a shift toward production of more plant-based protein food' (League of United Latin American Citizens of Iowa).

While popular campaigns such as #BoycottMeat advocate for the legislating away of slaughterhouse labourer exploitation and push for individual action, they ultimately fail to address the material conditions which produce these violent labour conditions in the first place – and act largely without the leadership of the actual workers. The LULAC, confoundingly, has close ties to the US establishment and ruling class along with their dominant discourses; their 'self-made' president, Domingo García, was a former Texas lawmaker as well as attorney ('LULAC National President'). Moreover, LULAC has corporate alliances with big corporations such as Tyson Foods ('Corporate Alliance'), which is one of the largest meat producers in the United States ('What We Do'). A. Breeze Harper has also noted that campaigns premised on voting with one's dollars to change food systems are rooted in racial privilege. Specifically, that those with racial privilege will have more dollars to 'vote' with and will have more 'freedom' in the sense of food choice. She instead argues that food justice will require the dismantling of systemic racism and the prison industrial complex. As noted by Wadiwel, 'the character of labor is fundamentally shaped by the rhythms of production' (534), and thus, in order to lessen violence produced by capitalist production, disrupting these rhythms is vital. Therefore, we do not urge for the pushing for more legislation within a system that deems this work 'essential' and upholds these unsafe conditions; instead, in the first instance, we support worker-led movements of resistance in the form of strikes and walk-outs in order to disrupt an industry that inherently causes harm to its workers – an industry that has to go. We recommend these as

immediate measures as offering possibilities for interrupting the flow of animal capital, knowing that the likelihood of strikes destructing these carnist conglomerates is unlikely.

Moreover, groups such as #BoycottMeat could financially and physically show their solidarity with these movements, and amplify worker voices whenever possible, rather than those of their bourgeois leadership. For example, through the use of their economic and political power, groups like #BoycottMeat can aid in the mobilization of workers by demanding, rather than simply advocating for, slaughterhouse workers' rights to organize, a living minimum wage, business responsibility for workplace hazards, amnesty for undocumented immigrants who are integral to the food system, as well as questioning the ethics of capitalism itself, and thus the de-privatization of food production in exchange for worker-controlled production. In the long term, the transition of our economies, diets, and workers has to be of central focus to achieve racial, animal, and environmental justice (Coulter 39; Blattner 'Should Animals Have a Right to Work?' 78; Struthers Montford; Deckha 39). Specific to labour, humane and fulfilling labour occupations which are freely entered into and fulfill the interests of humans, animals, and the environment, are that which we ought to codify as truly essential (Coulter 39; Blattner and Ammann 151).

Conclusion

As demonstrated in this article, the slaughterhouse is a place of nonhuman animal and human suffering, and we ought to view these collective sufferings as ontologically interwoven through the labour and site of slaughter. COVID-19 has brought the interconnectedness of slaughterhouse populations to the fore. It is important to note, however, that the speeds with which humans and animals experience this suffering and death differ. Whereas farmed animals are tortured and slaughtered at quick rates, humans experience quick violences in the form of workplace injuries and death, and/or slow violences that spill outwards into communities effecting humans, other animals and the environment in multiple ways. Within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this slow violence, and in turn 'state organized race crime', is accelerated; the deaths of slaughterhouse labourers become visible, and therefore closer to that of the suffering of animals.

The devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought together labour organizers and animal liberationists on shared issues – movements that have often remained separate despite sometimes related struggles. While groups such as #BoycottMeat have been formed in response to the accelerated violence faced by slaughterhouse labourers, and advocate for legislative measures to fix the health and safety concerns of the slaughterhouse within the context of COVID-19, law will be an incomplete solution. We have shown that law is used to support ‘national’ interests, in which the industrialized breeding and death of farmed animals, and the concomitant deaths of slaughterhouse workers is essentially legally sanctioned. We ought to not only think of marginalized labourers in relation to animals, but of both humans and animals as groups of workers connected through the same struggle of exploitation – exploitation that has accelerated and become more visible as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, unsafe and unethical conditions exposed through COVID-19 outbreaks must not be thought of as spectacular events, but as the result of state organized racism and its attendant forms of insidious violence that targets both humans and nonhuman animals alike.

Notes

¹ Recent scholarship has extended Freud's concept of the death drive in analyses of racial capitalism. Dick and McLaughlin argue that in the 21st-century context, 'the repeated oscillating patterns that continue to define capitalism as a financial system testify the presences of death drive within its economic models' (158). Morton also argues that capitalism is both genocide and self-destruction that is tied to the adoption of agriculture. Beginning 12, 000 years ago, agriculture 'transforms the earth into the human ready, domination-ready state' (30) which provides the conceptual terrain for human superiority at the expense of the plants and animals who get in the way of this resource-based prosperity. It is immediately fatal for some plants and animals while at the same time causing our current geological era in which earth systems are changing at rates faster than many species can adapt, therefore exhibiting the genocidal and self-destructiveness of the agri-capitalist death drive.

² See also Kojola and Pellow (2020).

³ Despite anthropogenic climate change being a scientific fact, and the general acceptance that human activities have permanently altered earth's systems, marked by this geological era being termed the 'Anthropocene', climate change deniers often argue on the grounds that nature is still accessible, beautiful, and pristine.

⁴ Patrick Wolfe has argued that to properly understand settler colonialism, it must be approached as a structure rather than an event. Such an approach is instructive in understanding structures of anti-black racism, which in the West, are inseparable from imperialism and colonialism.

⁵ The industry will bury deadstock as it is cheap and 'disposal pits' can contain thousands of pounds of deadstock. Groundwater contamination from these pits is common and well-documented. Burial pits also seep ammonium, chloride, coliforms, and nitrate for decades, and the dispersion of *E. coli* is magnified by rainfall. Burial is also not a fast 'solution' as it takes a minimum of 25 years for carcasses to decompose, meaning that the environmental implications of burying deadstock will likely be ongoing (Wilkie, Kosseva and Webb, McWilliams). Like burial, incineration is cheap, but unlike burial, is also fast, making it appealing to the industry.

This is atmospherically detrimental as incineration releases heavy metals and other pollutants such as sulfur dioxide, carbon monoxide, and nitrogen oxides. The burning of sick animals also means that a litany of infections and poisons become airborne. Toxins released through incineration reach human food chains as well as contaminate water supplies. The composting of deadstock has recently been lauded as a ‘sustainable’ option. However, it remains expensive, space and resource intensive, and animal bones complicate the composting process. It also poses a risk of transmission of the antibiotics, growth enhancers, vaccines, and agricultural chemicals commonly administered to farmed animals as their bodies compost. The use of the resulting soil is only currently permitted in tasks deemed low risk, such as beside highways. The long-term implications of composting deadstock are currently unknown (Wilkie, Kosseva and Webb, McWilliams).

⁶ In Canada, slaughterhouse labour conditions are similar to those in other jurisdictions (see for example, Fitzgerald; ‘Silence on the Floor’).

⁷ There is a growing movement of middle- and upper-class individuals raising and slaughtering animals in order to look their ‘meat’ in the eyes. It is a slower process, and their reasons often include experiencing the violence inherent in slaughter to justify consuming their victims (Vega-Frey).

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