



Until death do they part: Loving and killing in Swiss on-farm slaughter

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1. Introduction

Imagine you ground your business in cattle and whatever you can produce from them, but you would also like to respect these animals for the products that they become, so you decide to work *with* them and *for* them to make that respect foundational in a regime of responsibility and care. What some farmers describe as a deal between themselves and their cattle bears similarities to the social contract between humans and other animals mentioned by Midgley (1983), Benson and Rollin (2004), Wilkie (2005), Rollin (2006), and Armstrong Oma (2010). This binding form of a farmer-cattle relationship is not so much a mutual agreement as it is primarily an acknowledgement by, and a reminder for, farmers of their moral responsibility toward their animals. While the cattle perhaps have no understanding and certainly no choice about entering a social bond with non-cattle, the aforementioned concept of a social contract describes a development that “deepen[s] mutual human-animal relations of trust” (Armstrong Oma, 2010: 184), which is crucial to an interspecies relationship. Over the bovine’s lifespan it therefore facilitates a close bond with their humans not only for the sake of a good life but equally important a good death (Ulaiin & Whiting, 2017; Schuurman and Franklin, 2018). Because domesticated cattle can neither accept nor refuse a social contract, the foundation of a mutual becoming that is based on mutual trust (Armstrong Oma, 2010), is rather a pledge by the farmers with its sense of “make oneself responsible for” and “promise solemnly” (Oxford English Dictionary). In our context, a pledge does not require a reciprocal and required response, as it does with a contract, with each fulfilling their part. Rather, it is an *offer* from a person of a particular form of loyalty, to another, an entity, or a cause and a promise of fidelity. Ultimately, this pledge serves both the interest of the farmers and the cattle (Lund et al., 2004). In fact, in the context of Swiss on-farm slaughter (OFS) cattle are granted a certain amount of agency particularly in the last phase of the relationship, the killing, in which, by law, they cannot be forced into the procedure (FiBL, 2020). OFS is characterized by no live transportation and low stress for the animals, which makes it the only slaughter method that fulfills a farmer’s pledge (Lund et al., 2004). Honoring such a pledge requires farmers to establish a

mutual trust that is essential for both caring and killing (Arluke and Sanders, 1996; Armstrong Oma, 2010; Donati, 2019; Tallberg and Jordan, 2022). The practicality of seeing their animals as co-workers (Noske, 1997), partners (Lund et al., 2004) or co-producers (Hurn, 2017) in food production, generates and maintains a strong ambivalence because farmers have to balance an attachment to and detachment from their animals (Wilkie, 2005). To be able to manage this “boundary labor” (Ellis, 2014: 92), Swiss farmers redefine cultural feeling rules and deliberately practice personal emotion labor (Hochschild, 2012), which is expressed in various forms of both celebration and mourning, and often engage farmer and cattle in intimate interactions and mutual familiarity (Armstrong Oma, 2010).

This ethnographic study addresses the knowledge gap of commercial farmer-cattle relations (Ellis, 2014) and follows the calls of fellow scholars for “new stories of farming” (Donati, 2019: 119) and for investigating the ambivalence of physical and emotional interactions between farmers and cattle (Wilkie, 2005). Conducting a longitudinal research companionship with Swiss farmers over the course of two years gave us unique and personal insights into the daily lives, as well as into exceptional events of humans and cattle who share their home and histories and who experience life and death together. Studying the becoming of farmers with their cattle, we explored interactions between both, the meaning of those to the farmers, and the emotive challenges during the cattle’s life phases of pre-birth, birth, a two-year lifespan, an on-farm slaughter training phase, and death as well as post-death. On the premise of a commercial beef production that is based on empathy and animal agency we asked ourselves, why and how do farmers allow themselves to love the cattle they will inevitably kill, and how do they then manage to balance caring and killing?

To kill a being that you assert and demonstrate you love, might, to people outside that relationship, be regarded as a paradox. In this article we explore how, from the perspectives and experiences of the farmers and their animals who are the focus of this study, there is no paradox but rather ambivalences to manage; they love and kill those with whom they develop and maintain close and affectionate relationships. The question is not how *can* one love and kill, rather it is how *does* one love and kill

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and what constitutes that *doing*? As John Berger wrote about French Pyrenean pig-keepers:

A peasant becomes fond of his pig and is glad to salt away its pork. What is significant and is so difficult for the urban stranger to understand, is that the two statements are connected by an *and* not by a *but*. (1980: 5)

The obvious point being that to create that pork the pig must be killed, but that killing is part of, and not simply after, a cared-for life. In a similar vein, Dimitrios Theodossopoulos, in his exploration of the notion of wellbeing on the farms of a Greek island, comments that, “In this context, the death of an animal is seen as a reciprocal bequest for the ‘care’ it received in the past” (2003: 105). The care we explore here is two-fold. The farmers with whom we worked cared *for* their animals through their active practical engagement to ensure their physical wellbeing. They also cared *about* them, their feelings for the animals’ states of being. We trace this out as a continuum. These farmers understand that through breeding and care animals are given lives created for human benefit; their bodies must become meat. However, in the continuum of practices and processes that lead inevitably to their slaughter, although the cattle are productive, they are not reduced to being mere calculable units of production as is the case with industrial beef production (Wilkie, 2005).

Ours’ is a grounded, specific, ethnographic study and we deliberately do not engage with the generalized philosophical discussion of whether humane slaughter is possible (see for example Browning and Veit, 2020). The focus here will be on how our interlocutors are concerned to bring about peaceful and painless deaths and how they make judgements about, and experience, such deaths. Here we find debates about killability useful for orientating our thoughts. In *When Species Meet* (2008), Donna Haraway argues that killing animals (although her scope encompasses human others) need not involve them becoming “killable” – processes that render them, reduce them, to objects, scarcely subjects, which can be killed with little concern for what she terms the recognition of “their presence” (2008: 71). She continues that it is “a misstep to pretend to live outside killing” (*ibid*: 79) and “[t]he problem is to learn to live responsibly within the multiplicitous necessity and labour of killing” (*ibid*: 80), and finally:

“The problem is actually to understand that human beings do not get a pass on the necessity of killing significant others, who are themselves responding, not just reacting. In the idiom of labor, animals are working subjects, not just worked objects. Try as we might to distance ourselves, there is no way of living that is not also a way of someone, not just something, else dying differentially” (*ibid*: 80).

Although we are not suggesting that the farmers in this study would express their orientations, concerns, and practices of OFS in these abstract terms, they do think about and create conditions that do not reduce their cattle to being killable. As we will explore, they do so through their creation of, “the animal farm as a site of convivial world making” (Donati, 2019: 2) which “demands modalities of care that multiply affective intersubjective relations on the farm” (*ibid*: 7). As ethnographers we were in a similar situation to Singh and Dave in their observations of, and thoughts about, commercial, and ritual animal killing in India in which they focused on emotions and practices:

“In focussing on the modes and moods of killing, we found ourselves inhabiting what Agamben called ‘a zone between life and death’. We do not assume at the outset that we know what killing is. Rather we attempt to understand what it means in relation to the modes and moods of specific occurrences” (2015: 233).

These Swiss farms initially came into being as thoughtful enterprises, with the farmers thinking about how they wanted to live with their cattle. This then created practices of care and relatedness such that slaughter became the culmination of lives lived well with death being well brought about. Referring one final time to Singh and Dave, “what

we have attempted is a journey through scenes of killing, which are also scenes of life” (2015: 245). Although our focus is on the specificities of OFS, this article also connects with the broad stream of qualitative research and interests within rural studies that concerns human-cattle relations, moral economies, and practices of slaughter and thereby takes forward an “important step in understanding issues of animal welfare and the beef production chain” (Ellis, 2014: 92).

2. Material and methods

2.1. Participants

The present study is part of our three-piece research project on Swiss on-farm slaughter (OFS) which commenced with its legalization in 2020. OFS presents a new approach to slaughter methods as it is designed to forego live transportation and thereby eliminate pre-slaughter stress for cattle. With this method, cattle are killed without time pressure and without physical force, in their familiar environment and among their family. To date, it is considered the most ethical way to kill animals in food production (Browning and Veit, 2020). Embedded between our studies on the technical aspects of OFS and the consumer perspective, the present paper explores the realities of different beef producers, farmers and cattle, in Switzerland. Our research involved eight farms which practice OFS. Thanks to a mutual interest, we developed a long-term companionship with Diana and Clark which enabled a real-time longitudinal study with these two farmers from one of their earliest on-farm slaughter experiences (June 2021) to their thirteenth (September 2023). As a phenomenon that is “only detectable through a longitudinal research design” (Hassett and Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, 2015: 1), the emotional and professional development of these farmers could be observed and experienced in real time by the researcher for over two years, during regular visits and through a regular remote telephone contact.

All other seven farmers mentioned in this paper participated in interviews that were conducted over one or several days. The researcher attended in situ two on-farm slaughters (mother and calf) at Jane’s farm, one failed OFS at Alex’ farm, and the OFS of bovines Diego and Gaio, as well as the birth of Giugno on Diana and Clark’s farm. All other OFS on the latter were experienced through recordings and recounts of the farmers.

We have maintained anonymity for our sources who might become subject to hate or harm because of the sensitivity of the topic of killing animals, and because they could be easily identified by their own or their cattle’s names (Lahman et al., 2015). Hence, we use pseudonyms for both humans and cattle throughout this work.

2.2. Ethnography among farmers and cattle

Our approach, in terms of fieldwork, was shaped by reading literature in the field of multispecies ethnography (for example Kirksey and Helmreich (2010) as a foundational text) through which the ethnographer explores social/cultural systems in which human and non-human lives are woven together, enmeshed, in co-constituted worlds. In our case these are worlds in which cattle are who they are because of the humans they live close to, and the humans are who they are because of, and through, the cattle with whom they live. This approach meant sharing everyday life, work, unforeseen events and weather, births and deaths, slaughter processes, and therein being exposed to the emotional world of the farmers. What we observed about the farmers’ lives, especially on farm 6, was almost never to separate from their cattle’s lives. Especially during winter, when the herd stays in the barn, their bonds intensify through games like hanging a teddy bear on a string for the cattle to push around or playing hide and seek with the calves; and through cuddles and acts of affection which, as we observed and participated in, concluded the evening barn work every day. We recognized a blurry line between these so-called livestock and the

companion animals they resembled in these moments, which supports the notion of emotion labor at times becoming emotion work (Hochschild, 2012); if one for a moment forgot the commercial context in which both humans and cattle eventually become product and consumer.

To understand the emotional and philosophical worlds of others requires a sensitive, empathic, and careful approach and engagement by the researcher (O'Reilly, 2011). Participant observation allowed for the researcher's direct and personal involvement in the life and work at the farms to understand these spheres from within (Collins and Gallinat, 2010; Fassin, 2013). Frequent overt observations were a way to detach from the events and interpret them reflectively and systematically (Tedlock, 1991; Liebal et al., 2019). Without having immersed herself completely into the world of the researched, it would have been very difficult for the researcher to grasp the complexity of emotional experiences, daily human-cattle interactions, and the realities within multi-species communities like the ones she encountered on the farms (DeMello, 2012). For these reasons the first author conducted ethnographic fieldwork, which allowed her to participate, observe, live with, and enquire — in short, to become participant observer and observant participant in the lives of our research subjects (Atkinson, 2006; O'Reilly, 2011). Typical about this approach is that the “researcher became a willing participant in the creation of the data [which] differs from the traditional ‘assumed privileged standpoint’” (Taylor, 2010: 3), and thereby generated not only unique results but also rather intimate insights into the experiences of herself and the researched.

We set out to explore our research questions, “Why and how do farmers allow themselves to love the cattle they will inevitably kill and how then do they manage to follow through with it?”, for which their answers could not have been anticipated. Rather, they were reflexively produced and reproduced over a longitudinal phase of two years by both researcher and researched (Taylor, 2010), in what can be recognized as a prospective-retrospective longitudinal study (Hassett and Paavilainen-Mäntymäki, 2015). To be able to develop such a research companionship particularly with farm 6, the first author regularly lived, worked, and shared life on the farm over a span of two years, maintained a frequent phone, e-mail, and social media exchange as well as invited the farmers to the research institute. What was special about this mode of research was that, as researcher, she not only attended and played a part in the farmers' and cattle's lives, she also experienced a becoming-with our research participants and the events they underwent in their natural environment (Wright, 2014). Half of the farms we explored had just obtained their license for OFS and so she was able to witness the farmers' very first experiences with this slaughter method (farms 2, 5, 6, 7). Particularly sharing events that were unforeseen or the first of their kind for both the farmers and the researcher, e.g., a failed on-farm slaughter (farm 5) or the moment in which a cow was born and a bullock was killed only half an hour apart (farm 6), created data which were unique in that they could neither be planned for, nor reproduced in the same manner, and were therefore most valuable (Savage, 2006).

2.3. Analysis

We did not intend to measure and quantify how these farmers felt, nor was it our aim or interest to in some way prove that the feelings that they expressed in our presence were true. What was most valuable to understand and learn from our research participants was how they expressed what they felt in the light of their experience. (Hochschild, 1979; Röttger-Rössler, 2002). Instead of looking for consistency, we registered phenomena in these expressions that explained to us how farmers cope with the ambivalence between caring and killing (Arluke and Sanders, 1996). Semi-structured interviews were conducted which, through their conversational nature, facilitated our research participants to “iteratively engage with, move away from and return to, sensitive matters of death” (Schuurman and Franklin, 2018: 112). They were conducted while sitting together, going for walks, and working in

the barn. We focused our understanding of feelings particularly on the “interactive account” (Hochschild, 1979: 553), which was both impacted by the sociality between the farmers, the farmers and the cattle, but also the farmers and external humans (like the researcher or the butcher). How the farmers felt in different contexts was primarily learned through conversations and overt observations. For example, sitting together on the evening before a slaughter day conveyed a sadness in dialogue that could later be recognized in a tear-stained face after the killing. Especially due to the personal involvement of the researcher it was possible to follow each farmer's emotional experience even in the same space. When Diana (farm 6) asked the researcher in an encouraging manner to say her goodbyes to the bullock that would be killed a few minutes later (as she herself did); and the researcher refused because she had bonded with this animal during the training phase; the other farmer, Clark, approached the researcher and told her he would not do it either because it was too hard for him. Here, it was the researcher's own behavior that elicited insights into how Diana needed to say goodbye in the morning and initiated a talk on how Clark would say his goodbyes the night before because he did not want to unsettle the animal with his sadness in the morning.

As ethnographer, the researcher naturally became enmeshed in the lives of others but also anticipated that fieldwork as a “total experience [which] involves so much of the self that it is impossible to reflect upon it fully by extracting that self” (Šikić-Mičanović, 2010: 45). The researcher's own experience with death at the farm had been a gateway to relating more fully to her research participants. Yet research questions are also always emotion questions, and as expert she systematically asked, reflected on, and analyzed a set of questions to ensure a balance between both her involved and detached perspective, and to triangulate interpretations with co-authors and colleagues (Liebal et al., 2019).

We systematically examined the collected and recorded communicative material through qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2004). Using inductive reasoning and revisiting data, this process is especially appropriate because it allows “themes and categories [to] emerge from the data through the researcher's careful examination and constant comparison” (Zhang and Wildemuth, 2009). We noted all life stages of the human-cattle experience as themes and analyzed our data through the interpretative recognition of the concepts ‘feeling rules’ and ‘relief’ (Fig. 1). All notes which were taken during fieldwork were systematically reviewed and incorporated into the interpretation and analysis phase to create a holistic insight into our research and ensure the most thorough conclusions (Emerson et al., 1995).

3. Theory

3.1. Human-cattle relations

Close human-cattle bonds do not develop independently from their environment, farmers are also attached to the pastures they maintain for their cattle and the natural sphere that they share. As Baldwin et al. call it so fittingly “love of the land” (2017), the multispecies world of humans, cattle, plants, microbes, and soil has not only significance for farmer identity (Bruno et al., 2022), but is also an expression of agricultural biosecurity (Holloway, 2019). It is a self-contained system to have land that provides grass, hay, and silage for a suitably sized herd, to additionally have vegetable and fruit resources, and to possibly cultivate bees as well; Brédart and Stassart call this “feed autonomy” (2017). The social and health benefits of small-scale farming offers safety for both humans and cattle (Gorman, 2018; Guth et al., 2022). To be nurtured in the same place and consequently being dependent upon the same resources, creates a mutual life continuum between humans and nonhumans, a becoming-with each other, in which a bovine's role as so-called livestock becomes blurred with that of a companion animal (Haraway, 2008). Such a symbiosis of social relations between humans and nonhumans is an ecocentric approach in contrast to the conventional anthropocentric exploitation of cattle (Noske, 1997). As a

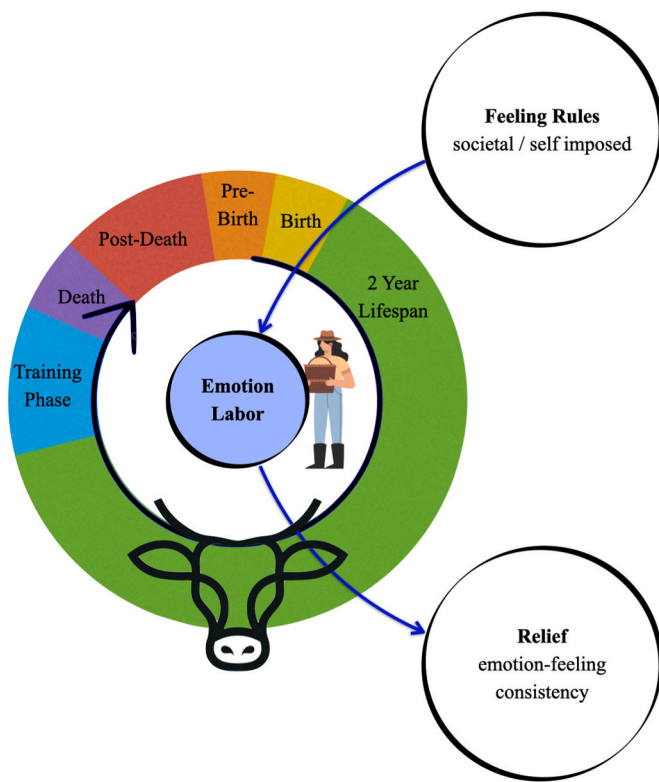


Fig. 1. Farmers' emotion labor during the life cycles of their cattle.

nature-inclusive way of farming, it is not only a practical revision of modern farming (Huttunen, 2019; Westerink et al., 2021), it is also a highly personal one.

3.2. Emotions in commercial beef production

Besides living together, the dying plays an equal part in such an intertwined bond. The method of on-farm slaughter (OFS) (see 3.3) is dependent upon the animal's cooperation and accounts thereby for a high level of subjectivity and facilitates a certain agency for cattle (Donati, 2019). Yet this deliberately personal relationship is also a complicated one which "creates a complex set of interactions between human and cow [and] a number of coping strategies" (DeMello, 2012: 227). Wilkie (2005) identified relations of detachment and attachment in farmers with regard to the commodity status of their animals. It is interesting, in terms of her recognition of the different attachment styles between commercial and hobby farmers, that our research participants rank among the latter even though they *are* commercial farmers; and reveal human-cattle interactions of "attached attachment" (during all life phases) and "concerned attachment" (during the on-farm killing) rather than a detached one, as is usually the case in commercial human-cattle relations (Wilkie, 2005: 218). To make such a complicated relationship work, using cattle commercially but being attached to them nonetheless, farmers develop emotional skills that include "a sense of responsibility, sentiments of dominion, and faith in the cycle of production" (Ellis, 2014: 92). In the context of commercial beef production, even if it is done at home, this can be labeled as emotion labor (Hochschild, 2012), a process in which a person regulates their particular state of feeling to meet a certain relief that is consistent with feeling rules for the sake of being functional in their job. We interpret this in Fig. 1 as the basis on which to discuss the emotion labor of our research participants (Section 4). Societal or self-imposed feeling rules may clash with physical emotions that farmers experience during the different life phases of their cattle; this clash is then regulated or adjusted to create feelings of relief and a consistency between physical emotions and

desired feelings (Hochschild, 1979; Arluke and Sanders, 1996).

Gunderson (2011) addresses the difference between producing food and making money and claims that, "the drive, (il)logic, and intention of rearing livestock [is] to accumulate capital" (261). The farmers in our study seek to create food beyond capital. All of them produce beef for motivations of self-sufficiency but also to enter the market as world changers for their social circle and/or consumers. Some farmers believe mainly in its natural grass-fed quality and become producers of better food. But others follow the opportunity to be teachers by seeking outreach into households, schools, and community to educate about good food and good stockpersonship. Gunderson defines commercial farming by "producing with intent to maximize profits and acutely responsive to market imperatives" (2011: 262), yet here we have commercial farmers that do *not* intend to maximize profits at all, especially not beyond their scope of small-scale farming. If it was only for the capital — which the farmers could make much more of — they would expand their production model easily since they experience more demand than they supply. However, all of them said, "that's not the idea; then we would fall back into factory farming structures".

On these farms, "[m]aking the time from birth to slaughter as short as possible for food animals" (Gunderson, 2011: 262) is turned into making it as pleasant as possible for the animals and human workers. On one farm, the whole business is based on mother cows that were supposed to be slaughtered with ten to twelve years and bought off by the farmers to give them a few more years on their farm. Uneconomically as it may seem, they prolong the use of a cow by producing slow food, something that is valued more and more among consumers¹ for its quality, environmental integrity, and responsible production (Simonetti, 2012; Sobreira et al., 2022). On top of that they do not write off those that have miscarriages, even if it means to produce less beef for another two years.

3.3. On-farm slaughter (OFS)

The farmers who participated in our study practice different methods of on-farm slaughter, all legalized in Switzerland for commercial beef production since July 2020:

- Tom uses the so-called gunshot method: He pens up a group of potential slaughter cattle and shoots one with his rifle at short-range from the *Wildkanzel*, a raised wooden stand. The shot animal is then chained to a lifting arm and hung upside down by one hind leg for exsanguination and subsequently laid onto a customized trailer for carcass transportation.
- Ben operates a mobile slaughter unit (MSU) with the so-called captive bolt pistol method: The MSU, an enclosed trailer, includes a removable ramp (ca. 1 × 2m) with a head gate and a closed hygienic exsanguination drainage system. For the captive bolt pistol (CBP) method direct contact with the animal as well as the animal's willingness to engage is needed. For this, farmers begin to train with the respective animal at least one week before the slaughter in a trust-based procedure that ensures a stress- and fear-free killing. Key to its success is the animal's familiarization with the slaughter area and equipment, for which farmers borrow the removable ramp in advance. The animal to be slaughtered is then trained to willingly enter the ramp and to willingly be held in the head gate. Farmers accomplish this by offering them their favorite treat (often dry bread or apples). Once securely held, Ben approaches with the CBP and stuns the bovine, which collapses onto the ramp before being mechanically hauled into the MSU. Laying slightly tilted head-down, the animal is exsanguinated above the drainage and subsequently

¹ The authors are currently preparing a separate article on the consumers of OFS beef.

transported to the butcher. Of our research participants, Jane and Alex use the MSU service of Ben.

- Diana and Clark, Leon, Lukas, and Samuel also use the CBP method but without the MSU: They have a stationary head gate device at the farm with which they can train all year long. Usually, a training area is established as extension to the barn which becomes a natural outside pen for the herd, and the head gate is part of its fence. For the moment of slaughter, the selected animal must enter the head gate willingly the same way as explained in Ben's method and be subsequently exsanguinated and transported as explained in Tom's method.

4. Results and discussion: How can you love someone you inevitably kill? How can you kill someone you have come to love?

Mufasa: Everything you see exists together in a delicate balance. As king you need to understand that balance and respect all the creatures, from the crawling ant to the leaping antelope.

Simba: But dad, don't we eat the antelope?

Mufasa: Yes, Simba, but let me explain. When we die our bodies become the grass and the antelope eat the grass, and so we are all connected in the great circle of life.

— The Lion King (Walt Disney Pictures, 1994).

4.1. Pre-birth

As Schuurman & Franklin so perfectly put it, a good death “starts long before the final moment” (2018, 111). Our farmers' main motivation to change from the conventional slaughterhouse to on-farm slaughter was indeed their cattle's final lived moment. With all of them we found that compassion and responsibility towards their animals, as well as an ethical food production, urged this change. Tom guided us through his farm and showed us how, “Part of the production process are not only human and cattle, but begins with the soil; it is natural, it is alive, it vibrates.” Ben found it dishonest, in his terms, to keep and care for the cattle and then “close the eyes” by sending them away for slaughter. He told us that he had seen “grown men cry” because of how OFS made such a significant improvement to their animals' wellbeing. Not only the current generation of farmers but even their predecessors, their fathers, seem to have found in OFS a gateway for them to engage with their own feelings about slaughter for the first time, which society had rather denied them even having in the past (Boquet et al., 2018). Jane's father recalled how shaken he was when an imposing horse would collapse “just like that” after being shot. Clark's father would help preparing but withdrew himself during the killing. The farmers, however, had already looked into their emotional world, and choosing OFS as a solution meant accepting a certain intimacy from the beginning. Jane told us,

“I never had a good feeling at the end, I felt like I was looking away when I gave my animals away to the carrier. [Killing on the farm] finally gives me a good feeling of everything being complete.”

Leon recalled the fear and stress he recognized in the slaughterhouse,

“I could hear their screams. Cows are unloaded, peek into the slaughterhouse, and want to run away. One even did during winter and was lost for a few days in a snowy forest. You owe something to the animals when you use them, you must protect their dignity.”

Diana remembered how difficult the experience in the slaughterhouse was even though she stayed with her cattle until the killing:

“In the slaughterhouse one became so scared that I was completely terrified, the boss took me outside [...] and I heard the animal scream in fear, you know, and I was nothing but trembling and I felt a knife cutting deep through my soul. From then on I didn't go to the

slaughterhouse anymore, my partner went alone. I realized that my level of suffering had been crossed and what we were doing was wrong. This was really really bad, but I am so incredibly thankful to this animal because she was the one who encouraged us to build a new system. On-farm slaughter is the best thing we've ever done.”

Also Alex, who had only had his first OFS at the time of our research in a business of dairy cows, was driven by his emotions for the first bull whose mother he inseminated himself. “Loki was my favorite; I didn't want to just give him away.”

It seems that on-farm slaughter promises a form of emotion labor in itself. It serves to replace the farmers' troubled feelings caused by the suffering of their animals with the relief of being able to eliminate all aspects of this suffering, except death. Here, the feeling rules (Hochschild, 1979) are self-imposed: farmers want to feel good about killing their cattle, and they found a way in OFS to realize the desired feelings based on an improved reality of their cattle's dying phase.

4.2. Birth

Tom, who shoots his cattle himself, explained that to experience birth is a way to “preserve your soul”, as compensation to experiencing death. Also, for others it provides a form of solace to cope with all aspects of their animals' lives. Jane “wanted to be part of all of it: birth, life, and death [because] life and death belong together, that is the circle of life.” The anticipation of a new calf is often powerful for the farmers who decide to become very close with them. Jane has to “really discipline” herself not to check upon the mother cow too much before birth. She is so in touch with the birth of the calves that she knows exactly how it smells, “I can even taste it in the moment.” Diana and Clark have rebuilt the barn in accordance with the cattle's needs. Pregnant mother cows find themselves in a separate comfortable “chill” box that is connected to a kindergarten box with a sluice for the calves. The farmers monitor the birthing closely and stay alert day and night. When a calf is born, they give thanks to them, spend time in the box, help drying occasionally if the mother is too exhausted, name them, and take pictures for their consumers.² What constitutes a farmer's pledge is to welcome the calves into a carefree life of two years by the side of their mother and family. For Diana, part of this welcome is also a symbolic transparency of how this pledge will find its conclusion: “I speak to them; I tell them that their part is to generate beef for us and in turn we protect them from any harm or disease” (Diana). This deal is part of the self-imposed moral responsibility of the farmers (Midgley, 1983). Also, Samuel finds a natural circle of life in the human-cattle engagement and said it was fair to tell the cattle, “We protect you from diseases, hunger, winter, etc., but we use you”. He explained that it was reciprocal and that farmed animals had a “right to humans”, too, an allusion to how Tim Ingold framed it: “Just as humans have a history of their relations with animals, so also animals have a history of their relations with humans” (2000, 61); or what Wilkie defines as symbiotic relationship (2005).

All the cattle we have encountered during our research had names, which gives these usually invisible animals visibility and identity within the industry of beef production (Haraway, 2008; Wilkie, 2010). Naming cattle is never random, it is a reflection of the farmer's beliefs (Nkolo-la-Wakumelo, 2013) and their relations with the cattle (Mberwa and Tibategeza, 2022). Jane chooses a different theme of names each year, she says “That raises the price of the bulls”. For Diana, it was a meaningful step towards a consistency between emotion and feeling (Hochschild, 1979): “At first, we called them *Fleischli*, [a diminutive of ‘beef’] *Fleischli 1*, *2*, *3*, and so on. I didn't dare yet to get close and give them identities.” After having performed the first few on-farm slaughters, the entirety of this project meanwhile feels so right for her, that she

² The relationship between these consumers, the farmers, and the cattle will be subject of a later article that is currently being developed by the authors.

questions the status quo, “Why must you anonymize an animal to be able to eat it?” The normativity of eating anonymized flesh (DeMello, 2012) can be deconstructed by a farmer like Diana precisely *because* she offers a connection between liking animals for being animals but at the same time for being food. This challenges the very postmodern notion of not eating anything that has a face (Overall, 2012) as well as the common practice of marking produce with a code and not a name. To ask this question challenges any current meat eater to reflect on their own relation to food that has once lived, (Borkfelt, 2011) and also revisits an agricultural reality that is both past and potential future: animals can have identity *and* be eaten, neither excludes the other because it is done in a mindful way.

4.3. Two-year life

To be able to accept a death as *good*, farmers ensure a good life for their cattle first. In the construction of a new reality for cattle in a commercial context, these farmers recreate the normativity of them as workers (Röttger-Rössler, 2002). Unlike animals in the industry, who are “not allowed to ‘go home’ [because] the ‘home’ itself has been brought under factory control” (Noske, 1997: 17), the cattle in our study enjoy home in the full sense of the word. The only time they have to work, in this sense, is the final moment of on-farm slaughter. Until then, they live a life that is usually not associated with commercial cattle husbandry but rather hobby farming, as decommodified and active individuals (Wilkie, 2005). In Switzerland, however, the commercial landscape of beef is manifold when it comes to cattle husbandry aspects. The so called *Weide-Beef*³ (translated to pasture beef), for example, an organic label for Swiss animal-friendly and natural husbandry, follows the same principles of leaving cattle to a labor-free life, even though they produce for, and on, the regular market. “They are all somebodies, they have best friends and relationships with each other.”, knows Jane, who spends a lot of time observing the herd and nurturing their bond by brushing them or playing tag with some. Allowing closeness not only carries the risk of attachment (Wilkie, 2005) but also has the benefit of developing expertise. “I know every sound and every smell, of the hay, the weather, the birth, I can feel when they are in pain or when a birth is about to happen.” (Jane). Tom called it the “golden middle: we live with the animals and all the advantages that come with that. The animals are everywhere, all is connected.” For his cattle, however, the human-animal relation was secondary to the importance of access to pasture and of having a social life amongst themselves. The industrially enforced alienation of cattle from others and from their own naturality (Noske, 1997) is deliberately eliminated on the farms where work is adapted to the animals’ naturality, instead of the other way around. Even in the case of Ben, who calls his goats “co-workers” because he saves a lot of money and effort thanks to their work, the quality of working at home has changed. His goats do the work of lawn mowing the steep mountain pastures by living out their natural behavior of grazing in steep environment. Here, the animals’ usually suppressed “natural capacity for movement, play, preening, social interaction and contact” (Noske, 1997: 15) becomes profitable for Ben’s small-scale business. With regard to both his goats and cattle, he explained, “I live in symbiosis with my animals, I cannot live without them, and they couldn’t live without me.” Lund et al. call this the “departure point” (2004: 35) of the farmer’s pledge. Living together, however, requires a constant negotiation of power. Ben warned us “You always have to watch out where the animals are, you have to show that you are the boss of the flock”. While his interactions with the cattle seemed very peaceful, to the researcher this became crucial advice for climbing among the goats during fence repair works. Samuel confirmed how cattle-human encounters demanded respect to be able to go well, he explained,

“You approach them like you would a human”.

With the sharing of life and home with their cattle, the emotional impact is profound. Alex, who owned a rather large dairy business at the time, still had a close relationship with the cows and would soothe a bad day by “going to the cows and pet them.” Clark and Diana made it a regular closing of the (winter) days to sit down in the calves’ play pen after work with a tea or beer and talk about everything and anything. “It is the greatest feeling in the world when the calves come in and lie down next to us.” (Diana). The intimate bond and dedicated attention between Clark, Diana, and the cattle became visible in observable interactions but also during our barn talks where we sat down together and talked about the character and life of each bovine, for example:

Researcher: Tell me about Kasra.

Diana: She’s very tender, she never tried to scare us away with her horn. She has a hanging udder, an extremely lovely character.

Clark: She had to make way for a younger cow [at the farm where she had been previously].

Diana: She has the markings of a ‘grumpy cow’, it was difficult to read her at first. She looks serious but she’s the softest cow.

Clark: Because Nala is the leading cow.

Diana: [With Kasra] we always have to pay attention that her udder does not get infected.

Clark: Some hang a little askew (chuckles).

Diana: Our first success was with homeopathy, with *Apis mellifica*, apple vinegar, and milking we saved the udder. Meanwhile we’re doing *ab initio*. Kasra has a natural horn shape, that’s why she is the second most powerful in the hierarchy.

Clark: She doesn’t have particularly close friends ...

Diana: She’s friends with Nala though.

A benefit for cattle within the farmer’s pledge is indeed the care and attention they receive from their farmers. This became most evident when the researcher witnessed a phase of bullying from a younger cow, Niam, toward the newest member of the group, Louise, a pregnant mother cow on the farm of Diana and Clark. Louise was not able to rest, sleep, roam about or even eat when Niam was around. Through observations, we could see how Niam was walking up and down, guarding the entrance to the barn, and how Louise peeked in through the barn curtain once in a while, presumably to see if the coast was clear. Wanting to leave most inner-herd dynamics to the cattle themselves because “this is nature” (Diana), there was never a clear boundary set between what is natural and what is not in this domesticated construct of the farm. However, fulfilling their part of their binding pledge (Armstrong Oma, 2010), Diana and Clark decided to separate Louise from the bully to keep her mentally and physically safe. In a constant evaluation between nature and responsibility (Ellis, 2014), the farmers leave the cattle to themselves at other times. Sometimes, Diana told us, she leaves the barn because she, “Can’t be around them anymore [and] can’t watch when they’re being jerks.” To convince herself that the herd can manage things amongst themselves, she manages her concern (Hochschild, 1979) by acknowledging, “But we don’t know what’s going on at night anyway”.

4.4. Training phase

Love facilitates trust and trust facilitates on-farm slaughter. Along the lines of what Thurmman defines as trust-based violence between horizontal and vertical power-relationships (2023), the training and killing (4.4.) phases are functional only when trust is established first and later used to perform violence. Here, the horizontal relationship, in which cattle and humans intend, and attempt, to live in a mutually consenting co-dependency, comprises all life phases from birth to the last day of the animal’s life. This intensifies during the training phase varying between one month and three days, when mutual trust must be completely secured for the imminent killing. The vertical relationship then plays out during the very brief moment of stunning and exsanguination of the animal; the ultimate deprivation of life (Browning and

³ See the website of its interest group IG BIO Weide-Beef < <https://www.igbioweidebeef.ch/index.php/de/> >

Veit, 2020).

The core aspect of using trust as a means to perform a stress-free killing is fundamental here. If an animal does not trust their farmer to be called out into the training area where they are being fed while letting themselves be held in the fixed head gate, then on-farm slaughter is not legally permitted (FiBL, 2020). Thus, the training phase as preparation for success centers on orchestrating the process entirely in favor of the animal's wellbeing. Ideally, this includes a familiarization with the OFS area, devices and machines used during the process, noises and humans exclusive to an OFS event, and the procedure of leaving the barn and entering the fixed head gate where the animal will be stunned. It is literally a rehearsal for both farmers and cattle, during which their horizontal relationship is put to the test. Even those who told us they do not have a very emotional relation to their cattle, find themselves in a "tightened bond" (Leon) during the training days. It is evident that OFS not only requires a certain amount of human-cattle intimacy, it actually facilitates it. To prevent as many surprises as possible, some farmers practice direct contact (Jane, Diana and Clark) or low stress stock-personship (Samuel) or a regular sound sensitization by shooting from the *Wildkanzel*, a raised stand, (Tom) throughout the cattle's lives. Samuel explained to us that cattle are used to their environment, feed, infrastructure, and their familiar humans,

"You cannot feed them suddenly at a different time, that would be strange. You have to realize their superb observing skills: why is object x now here and not there anymore? Why does he walk so weirdly?"

This is why the particular training of "familiarizing the animal with the few minutes they have to function in the end" (Samuel) is a personal one for both cattle and farmers. Leon, who was getting more and more used to monthly killings, still noticed that a "three-day training tightens the bond to the cattle." The core of this purposeful training is to "make it as easy as possible for the animal" (Samuel) by taking on the stress and emotional burden (Ellis, 2014) that would have otherwise affected the animal, to ensure what is widely considered a "good death" (Feldmann, 2010; Schuurman and Franklin, 2018). OFS, by definition, minimizes stress by keeping the cattle at home: "Separation from the herd means stress, you cannot erase that with training" (Lukas). Tom's method goes one step further by keeping his herd in the most natural state (Hultgren et al., 2022): He decided to shoot them himself, by firing a rifle at short distance from a perch, because he "always wanted the maximum, which meant no compromise; no fixation and no separation of the animals as well as minimized error ratio" (Tom).

Because the "training is dependent upon each animal" (Samuel), every OFS is unique. Jane told us, whenever she felt her cow needed company she would react. She explained that some animals were stressed by the vet, some were not, which is why every animal needed to be prepared individually and not be left alone, "cows are very attentive and notice strange voices and clothing" (Jane). When we watched a training video of cow Gioia, Diana described the extended process which was tailored to the needs of her cow:

"We kept Gioia in the [training] area a little longer [than usual] because she was quite scared, she didn't want to exit the barn as if she somehow sensed it. For her, we got the mother [into the training area], too, but had to remove her when she began calving. Luckily, we began early with the training. Then you study how to make this work. And for her we had to do a hardcore method [referring to an extra effort for this nervous cow]: we rebuilt the feeding area so that she was only able to eat outside in the head gate. We fed her there every morning and evening to give her enough time to familiarize with the area. [...] And this is what I love so much about our project and our way with the herd, you really have a feeling of every animal's character after two years. It can always come differently, there could be a killing one day where you thought this was going to be a safe procedure, no problem, but it won't work. We can only prepare

as well as possible, that's why it's important to train early and we are so happy to have our own fixed device. And with her [Gioia] we trained like this. That's a little bit the magic of our project, this was beautiful in the end." (Diana)

For Alex the first OFS "was emotional, because it is a shame to kill the cattle". The bullock on that occasion had been his favorite, for whom he wanted to establish a good death at the farm. "I took him by the halter and went for a walk with him. I took 2 h to spend time with him, pet him on the pasture. I don't have a ritual otherwise." Preparing themselves emotionally outside of the training often involves the cattle as well. Tom, Jane, Diana, and Clark spend personal time with the animals who are to be slaughtered. At Jane's farm, during participant observation, the researcher took part in a calf's last moments after her mother was killed and observed how Jane caressed her and fondled her back towards the base of the tail. "They like that a lot", she said. Striking here is that until the death of the calf, no change in attachment was observed (Wilkie, 2005), that could have distanced the farmer emotionally from her. However, when asked why the mother cow had to be slaughtered as well, a longer conversation ensued: The first answer referred to saving the mother from grieving her calf. When asked if that phase would not end eventually after which the cow could move on, Jane said she had to slaughter her the next year anyway. When asked to weigh being spared a few weeks missing the calf against another potential ten months of life, Jane's most important reason, as she explained, was that there would not be enough space in the barn over winter if she did not slaughter this cow now. We can argue that from the rather unemotional management task of calculating space in the barn, Jane used a way of emotion labor to create empathy with the mourning mother and make the act of premature slaughter emotionally meaningful.

4.5. Death

"This is only your shell, your soul will be free now", says Diana to Ganja before he dies out of schedule. The eight-month-old bullock had suffered a femoral fracture on the pasture during a thunderstorm and had to be euthanized "before his time". This euthanizing might be considered as akin to a veterinary intervention and process to end physical suffering, rather than one for producing meat. Not being able to give him the promised two years, the farmers struggled exceptionally hard with his death. Receiving the meat of an animal with whom, and for whom, they had not fulfilled the promise of their pledge did not feel right, and the farmers were devastated that they could not protect him from this harm. Surmising that their animals have a soul and trusting that this soul "moves on to the next pasture" (Diana), is a symbolic construction of nature that underlies this system of a farmer's pledge and quite synonymous with emotion labor (Willerslev, 2007). Grounded in animism (Tylor, 1871), the meeting of souls between farmer and cattle come to an end with a stress-free death and the pledge is fulfilled; now the cattle's soul can be set free and their flesh can be collected. The notion of this "movement of the soul" (Papapetros, 2012) relieves the pain of loving their cattle and letting them go: "This is why I'm so glad our animals die under open sky" (Diana). The marked difference from regular slaughter could be seen in the farmers' confusion about what to do with such a young bullock. "It was a hard decision to eat him, it looked weird, too, because we never have meat of such young animals. It took us over a week to process his death but eventually realized that it would only be a high regard to eat his meat. And so, we came up with a new way of seasoning this strange meat and it was really good" (Diana). An eight-month-old usually counts as veal but to slaughter a calf before their independence from the mother was unacceptable in the promise of the farmers' pledge:

Clark: I could never slaughter a four-month or eight-month-old ...

Diana: With two years they enter their Sturm and Drang, become boisterous.

Clark: That also creates more stress within the herd. They [points to

the young calves] are not grown up, they are still children.

Diana: ... haven't had much from life yet.

Clark: With two years I feel better about it, it would have been nature's plan anyway. In the herd is only place for one bull, the others must move on.

Diana: You notice that already now, they lie alone, separate themselves from the others. But it sure is interesting why after two years it feels okay for us. The mother-child relationship is still there after two years.

Clark: But there is no pain of separation, with two years they become independent.

Diana: Emma mooed towards the sky three times after the killing, maybe it's my interpretation, but if she was calling for him [her son], then that is really nice.

Clark: But that is good, that is no pain of separation.

— Interview in the barn, Nov. 2021.

These formerly hypothetical considerations became reality with the injured bullock and demanded a new form of emotion labor. It is evident here, that the calf's interest to live — a highly ethical focus in animal welfare (DeMello, 2012) and animal rights (Petrus and Wild, 2013) — as well as the mother's interest to not miss them both indicate priorities for the farmers' emotional wellbeing. The integration of slaughter into the natural social cycle of a herd, is not only used to legitimize the moment of death, but also to prevent any kind of harm to any of the cattle. Yet even with the most humane methods possible (Browning and Veit, 2020), killing someone you love is not resolved completely through emotion labor. Lukas told us,

"I don't like to slaughter those who I've known for a long time. To slaughter animals that you love and care for is somewhat of a perversion, a contradiction, something strange. I don't think this ambivalence has been completely resolved for farmers".

Samuel reflected, "At 20 it was easier to kill but now I am 40 and it gnaws at me: is it right what I do? Does it feel different after the killing now or does it change?" Also Diana and Clark explained that they "check in" with their inner world to see if it feels "still consistent". Jane expressed her doubts as a moral dilemma:

Jane: Technically, I fool my animals when I give them treats and take their lives.

Researcher: Is it really betrayal if the cattle don't know they are fooled?

Jane: I'm not sure ... But actually, it feels worse to sell my animals, because their lives go on, but I don't know under which circumstances. When they die at home, their life doesn't go on, it's in my control. But at auctions, I never know what will happen to them.

As emotion labor in the final interaction of OFS, different mechanisms come into play. Lukas is "not looking for empathic moments". Tom said that he switches off any emotional thoughts and feelings during the process of aiming and shooting. Also Ben concentrates mostly on performing a perfect procedure because unthinking "routine is dangerous". As with Clark, who often says his goodbyes the night before the slaughter, Ben explained, that he distanced himself from their cuteness in the moment. Quite rationally, Diana reflects, "We decide for their death, I protect my animals but not from the final killing". Most of the other farmers confirmed that the "feelings come after".

Killing their animals is less a moral issue than it is an emotional one. As Lund et al. argue, the killing of cattle "can be seen as morally justified in organic farming, since it is a necessary part of a productive and well-functioning agroecosystem", in which the human is master of life, death, and habitat (2004: 42). This conviction also serves as an act of responsibility: "It has to be done, it's part of it. I have to make a decision." (Lukas); "This is not a sanctuary; I cannot imagine a life without cattle, but I live from them. I have to do it [the killing]" (Jane). The intrinsic necessity of a farmer's pledge comes into play particularly in the phase of the killing and dying. Jane feels, "I owe it to my cattle to be completely present for them, to be there for them, to not forsake them",

a feeling that all of the farmers shared. "We want to be there for them from the first to the last breath", explain Diana and Clark. What might seem like an anthropomorphism (not wanting to die alone) and serves the emotion labor of soothing themselves, is actually an essential part in soothing their animal, too. As is proven as the major problem in conventional slaughter, pre-slaughter stress is harming cattle to great extent, as it involves fear, confusion, and the deprivation of safety which they usually find with their family and trusted caretakers (Harris 2001; Speer et al., 2001; Probst et al., 2012; Wigham et al., 2018; Terlouw, 2020).

Whereas "techniques designed for the purposes of exploitation carry a built-in notion of domination and control" (Noske, 1997: 12), the killing by OFS is done under control but not force. Benefiting from a mutual trust as the foundation of the pledge, the process entails a calling (farmer) and coming (bovine) that relies on a reciprocal interaction (Armstrong Oma, 2010). Ben described it as an "act between me and the animal". Similar to perceptions of hunters (Nadasdy, 2007), he said he felt as if the animal "wanted" to come. Also, Tom declared the killing as a moment "that belongs only to us and the animal". Similar to believing in the moving of the soul, the 'giving themselves up' can be seen as emotional labor in which farmers are soothing a potential uncertainty of the rightfulness of their act, as Samuel called it.

In some cases, we recognized what Hochschild calls "surface acting" (2012: 35 ff.): The researcher watched recordings of previous OFS together with Diana (farm 6). In the moment when Kian was hung up and exsanguinated, Diana exclaimed, "Look at my face! That's an animal I adored, I'm happy!" What Diana called "happy" the researcher recognized as a relieved and exhausted expression. She explained, "it is THAT what we promised to them two years ago, that they won't have to suffer or feel pain or be afraid, that we would take care of it". Another farmer, Leon, smiled upon the question how his first OFS had been and responded, "Super!" Ben proudly told us, "It's a thrilling feeling to feed with one hand and shoot with the other." What sounds contradictory here, is in fact the essence of a successfully mastered emotion labor to overcome an emotive dissonance, however, it was not in our capability to recognize which emotion the farmers felt or "feigned" (Hochschild, 2012: 89) in the presence of the unfamiliar researcher.

As many farmers said to us, emotion labor comes before or after, but not during the killing procedure. Getting a large animal to cooperate (how to make them get used to the area, to the tractor, the head fix, to other people, etc.) is a challenge or a task to be mastered. "This is a giant achievement!", explained Diana after having figured out how to make an anxious cow trust the training process, "Do you see how calm she is now? After what I told you [about the cow's initial fear] this is a giant wonder!" Hence, in the sense of achievement, the exclamation of, "Look how well the blood is rushing!" is not an expression of sensationalism or the pleasure of gore but of a successfully honored commitment to the farmer's pledge.

As consequent emotions after a successful killing, we encountered relief when something had been difficult, triumph when something impossible had been overcome, peace when everything had gone as planned, and pride when the animal had cooperated easily. Whatever emotions were shared with us were an indication of the challenges the farmers faced with every single OFS. The conventional pre-slaughter stress that slaughter-animals usually endure (Ferguson and Warner, 2008), now lies entirely on the humans as a consensual premise: "We have the stress because there's no guarantee that all will go as planned, whether the selected animal will approach the feeding, sometimes they look like 'Nope, don't feel like it', sometimes they are just not hungry" (Lukas). Because OFS is canceled when the animal does not comply, farmers need to regulate themselves emotionally. "Sometimes I'm so nervous, my heart is beating and the cows notice that and become suspicious" (Jane). The researcher was able to witness such a case on Alex' farm, when his second OFS was supposed to take place. Hiding out of sight as a stranger to the herd, she could observe how for 30 min farmer, butcher, and veterinarian waited patiently for a bullock to exit the barn

and enter the fixation device. The black animal took his time exploring his surroundings, sniffing the unfamiliar device, and looking around to look at the people standing around. He approached the device, even entered it two or three times, but flinched touching the unfamiliar material and moved back. Eventually it was decided to take a coffee break and try again with other eligible cattle. Yet due to a lack of training and trust, the result was the same: the small group of young cattle moved around but stayed away from the device. The OFS was officially canceled leaving the farmer somewhat crestfallen. After everybody else had left, the researcher asked what this unsuccessful event meant to him, and he replied: “It was my fault, I didn’t train enough. The first OFS had been perfect even without training.” Somewhat fearing he would lose hope and go back to his conventional dairy production structures, the researcher asked if he would try again. Alex replied, “Yes, I won’t give up. It’s going to be hard but it’s the only way forward. Maybe I’ll quit the dairy business for good and raise only bullocks on the pasture [Weidebeef]”.

Even though new to the procedure, Alex’ main driver had already been what another farmer, Lukas, called “Worthwhile, knowing the cows don’t suffer”, and which constitutes the essence of a pledge (Lund et al., 2004). It is made possible through a certain embodiment of themselves in the world of their animals, in which “involved activity is ontologically more fundamental than the context-free properties revealed by detached contemplation” (Willerslev, 2007: 21). The intimacy between some farmers and their cattle during the training and killing process is an expression of such being in each other’s world. Farmers often described their animals’ cooperation as, “He did it well” or “She’s so great”, which emphasizes their understanding of ‘everybody is doing their part’, a sense of ‘being in this together’. When “our practical involvement with things is prior to the cogitating ego” (Willerslev, 2007: 21), it is able to create unique intimacy between a dying animal and a human who is entwined with their life:

Diana: Until the last breath I hold the leg and feel the pulse and how she leaves ...

Researcher: What do you feel when you feel the pulse weaken?

Diana: Well, with Gaio it was the first time when I accidentally felt the pulse. That wasn’t planned, and at first it startled me because it is intense, that was too much. And then I thought, no, no, actually it is good, because I can observe how much blood is rushing out and how does it change, how does the life flow out. And it is, uh ... it is so peaceful, well, it’s so peaceful how the pulse disappears so slowly. And then in my heart I wish the animal always a good journey.

Researcher: Does it feel like more than just the pulse is leaving?

Diana: Yes, because I know that the soul is free now, too. I also realized how beautiful it is that we are outside in front of the barn under open sky. Because, in the slaughterhouse the walls are shut, you see no sunshine, you see no green, you see no sky. And this is under open sky ...

Diana’s conviction of this slaughter method being the best possible for her animals’ wellbeing during the killing indeed challenges the notion that we treat so-called food animals in a way we would not treat others, when she considered, “Actually, I would like to die like this myself one day.” Not only intrinsically but also emotionally it seems to mitigate the terror of being killed to the extent that this way of dying is acceptable as a good death (Schuurman and Franklin, 2018; Browning and Veit, 2020).

4.6. Post-death: the soul of the prey

Samuel explained to us, that a “good, successful death” was an act of care and responsibility but that “care doesn’t end with death”, similar to what Schuurman and Franklin call an “extended process of social death” (2018: 117). One way to work through their emotions is to relieve the killings, for example by watching the recordings, made for transparency, that all of them make. The researcher sat down together with Diana in her living room and listened to her narration on what was seen in the video. Taking time to reflect on past events, through these recordings,

helped her to process her emotions, and for us it offered a glimpse into how complex the attachment of the farmer to cattle can become:

Diana: And this is Gioia, you see? Our Gioietta, and with her we’ve still had suuuuch a nice time. This was the training, two days before [the killing], ahh this time was so important. Because this lineage, who always misses out a little, these are incredible, great animals, they have an incredibly lovely character, you know. They don’t distress the others (laughs) and our focus is of course on the whole herd but those who are dominant and always approach us, or the weakest who are ill or newborns, are the ones who receive the most attention. The unproblematic ones miss out and we have to be aware of that and take the time for them. It’s funny, this lineage has the same role as Clark and I do in our families, we were also the unproblematic children who missed out and had to become independent due to a lack of support. Now you can imagine what happens, these animals trigger a lot inside of ourselves. You remember how Clark reacted to Gaio and still does (laughs), when you talk to him about the on-farm slaughter of Gaio there will be tears, this is so touching.

Researcher: Yes, I notice that every time.

Diana: Yes, and it was the same with Gioia. She’s been simply great these two years (chuckles).

The attachment here is first shown through a way of phrasing that emphasizes the bond and belonging with the cow (“our” Gioietta) but goes even beyond a “decommodification” (Wilkie, 2005: 218) through Diana’s strong identification with the lineage of these animals. Moreover, Diana brings the cattle’s subjectivity and identity into the context of slaughter, which is nowadays rather unusual in western commercial cattle husbandry (Wilkie, 2005; Adams, 2015). Farmers, such as Diana, rise beyond a societal normativity that regards death as a taboo and not only develop their own self-imposed feeling rules (Hochschild, 1979) but also create a new reality of cattle husbandry and slaughter by reassigning vocabulary we have reserved for our own species (Arluke and Sanders, 1996; Croney and Reynnells, 2008; Boroditsky, 2011). Diana reflects,

“You see, this is an animal that I accompanied and was fond of for two years and it doesn’t give me negative feelings, sadness, or guilt when I see that. It shows me how deep inside my soul on-farm slaughter feels right (smiles). Because otherwise these images would evoke emotions. And sure, you can correct them with your head, but the head is too slow, when you look at these images the heart comes first. And I mean, look at me getting carried away again, that as a farmer you kill your animal and then you enthuse about on-farm slaughter, (laughs) I would probably seem bizarre to so many people. But anyone who experienced [the slaughterhouse] themselves — I know for so many farmers this would be their salvation.”

Also Samuel told us, “Death is a classic taboo, but once internalized it is not a taboo anymore, it becomes natural, it is part of the circle of life”. Not only through their method of slaughter do these farmers make public how natural dying and death is, Tom has a taxidermized head of one of his cows mounted on the wall of the slaughter barn, Diana and Clark boil, bleach, and ornament the skulls of their slaughtered cattle, and Leon and Lukas published child-friendly leaflets to inform about on-farm slaughter. For all of them this is part of paying respect to their cattle and the “gifts” they receive from them, which, in light of the initially mentioned social contract, means indeed more than a metaphor (Nadasdy, 2007) and can be understood as harvest of the flesh (Wray and Parlee, 2013), and an emotional justification for collecting their benefits. Yet even after this deal of a good life for good food, “accepting such gifts [...] incur[s] a debt that must be re-paid through the performance of certain ritual practices” (Nadasdy, 2007: 25).

Jane said she would not speak to anyone during the day of the killing and would light three candles for the dying animal in remembrance. Tom performed a rather ceremonial butchering in his shed where he is alone with the animal and listens to opera music. Having been invited into the shed, the researcher felt a certain weight that the music added to

the occasion and gained an understanding of why Tom chose to seclude himself with the remains of his bovine and this particular music in such manner. Diana and Clark boil the skulls in a small tub on the farm over an open fire, which takes several days, and gives them a time and opportunity to process death and remember the respective bovine individually. The usually saddening event of death (Hochschild, 1979) is emotionally reframed as a socially accepted, purposeful death (to produce beef), and the potentially shocking event of killing is emotionally reframed as “peaceful” and “beautiful” (Ben, Diana). Due to this kind of emotion labor, these farmers balance the ambivalence between mourning and celebrating, between “losing a friend” and being gifted “the most precious food” (Diana). Indeed, providing not only ethical meat (Berger Richardson, 2022) but also creating products of higher quality and making the production chain completely transparent for their consumers (Muchenje et al., 2009) is another main driver for most of our farmers. In fact, Diana feels that “producing beef would not be enough, we want to be able to educate people in what it takes to have beef, to share our appreciation for both the animals and the valuable products, and that a different way of farming is possible”.

Emphasizing the natural quality of his food production process in which multiple species are involved, Tom bridges the nature/(agri-) culture gap (Saltzman et al., 2011) to gain what he calls “living” food. He explained to us how industrially prepared beef or even lettuce was “lifeless”. He explained, “Raw products need to be handled with care, otherwise they lose their vitality. When I collect food from my farm and I take a bite from my salad, I can feel its vibes, it’s alive.” This socio-ecological connection between Tom and his land is characterized by not only by affection (Baldwin et al., 2017) but also emphasizes a farmer identity that is powerfully enmeshed with the lives in its environment (Ingalls and Stedman, 2017; Gorman, 2018). Granting their cattle the most natural habitat on either mountain or valley pastures, our farmers all sought to integrate their husbandry into nature. When Tom bought his land and looked around, he realized, “Animals must fit the space, humans must recognize its characteristics and biography and build a partnership with this unique space.” Diana and Clark live almost entirely from what their environment provides: “Our cattle eat only the grass and herbs of our land which you couldn’t cultivate otherwise, we don’t buy extra feed. This way our cattle are no food competitors to humans.” Samuel makes use of the “holistic resource management” (Savory, 1983) by leading his herd nomadically over several pastures. This, again, is the basis for a functioning holistic farmer-cattle relationship, because it ensures “ethically sound living conditions [...], ecological sustainability and a focus on natural animal behavior [which] are instrumental to animal welfare” (Armstrong Oma, 2010: 178).

5. Final ethical implications & conclusions

I understand. I grew up on a farm. I’m used to it. You see, farmers they love their animals and still kill them because it’s the cycle of life.

— Betty White (Touchstone Television, 1986)

This study is about a new generation of farmers who not only allow themselves to have feelings for the animals they slaughter but whose feelings of affection determine their (re-)form of commercial agriculture. It can be said, that on-farm slaughter (OFS) offers in itself a form of emotion labor in making ‘having feelings’ possible and processable. It serves to replace the farmers’ troubled feelings caused by the suffering of their animals in conventional slaughter with the relief of being able to eliminate this suffering in OFS (Fig. 1.) Here, the feeling rules (Hochschild, 1979) are mostly self-imposed rather than societal, because to realize the farmer’s pledge, farmers need to feel good about their animals’ deaths (Feldmann, 2010) – a feeling that is usually contradictory connoted (Hochschild, 1979) – and a ‘good death’ implies no stress and no fear, basically not knowing that one dies at all (Schuurman and Franklin, 2018). After a life cycle of being loved and protected, the cattle of our study’s farmers are still being killed at home for the purpose of

beef production, which is unusual in commercial beef production (Wilkie, 2005; Adams, 2015). This creates a caring/killing ambivalence in farmers (Arluke and Sanders, 1996; Donati, 2019) something which requires a conscious and constant emotion labor (Hochschild, 2012). Yet the ambivalence between loving and killing the same animal is not merely *present* in the farmers of our study but is actually *necessary* to be able to do both, *because* emotions are involved: Diana reflects quite rationally when she says, “Animals are not ‘prepared’, they don’t say ‘OK kill me after two years’, we have their life in our hands.”

Even though the issue at hand has not been to ask *whether* we should kill animals for food, but rather *how*, we do not want to exclude possible ethical implications for this point. Some of our farmers were indeed preoccupied also by the ‘whether’, “I keep asking myself, is it right what I do?” (Samuel); or experienced more success with selling vegetables than with beef (Lukas). Diana’s argument, “We give our cattle two years of life, otherwise they wouldn’t have been born at all” is, from an ethical standpoint, irrelevant because it would not matter if there were “only 400 cows in the world instead of, say, 400 million” (Rowlands, 2015: 120). Rowlands argues, in ‘Animals Like Us’, that the “welfare of each individual cow is completely unaffected by whether there are 400 or 400 million others of its kind” (2015, 120), yet from our standpoint this claim is too anthropocentric. On a general biological level it matters for the gene pool, on a local level it matters for the mother cows who receive the natural opportunity to bear offspring and create sociality. The translation of “animals wouldn’t be there if it wasn’t for us” (Rowlands, 2015: 121), which was also a recurring argument among some farmers, into “Your children wouldn’t be there if it wasn’t for you either. But that doesn’t mean that you can do whatever you like to your children” (*ibid*) is fatally abbreviated. While not wrong in its simplicity, it neglects the aspect of responsibility towards a whole society of animals that live by human decree. In other words, herd management is a form of responsibility towards herd welfare and killing individuals before they become too many for the space available is therefore part of it.

Ellis (2013) has also commented on this notion of ‘being with’ in a ranching regime of beef production through his theoretical orientations or perspectives in terms of stewardship, husbandry, and dominion. Although he sets out and explores ranchers’ perspectives of their interactions with cattle and environment, in their own terms he does, in his section of ‘symbolic ideology’, suggest that there is a masking with regards to attitudes and practices. He writes critically of these narratives of co-constitution as: “symbolic ideology because it obscures our view of the cultural values that allow people to use nonhuman bodies and the environment for their own ends” (2013: 429); and “The focus on interdependency and co-construction, both by academics and agriculturalists, is ideological in that it mystifies the environmental and animal costs of production” (2013: 443). Although Ellis emphasizes that he does not think there is “something fundamentally wrong with using animals and the environment to produce goods” (2013:446) – in his case study beef – he asks his readers to be wary of taking the perspectives of his interlocutors at face value:

“What is problematic is the story that both producers and academics tell themselves about the relationship being mutually beneficial. This is an ideological trick that sidesteps engaging with the difficult questions the production presents” (2013:446).

We would contend that the farmers in this study are not attempting to obscure or mystify, and they do not sidestep difficult questions. Indeed, it is *because* of the difficult questions they have asked themselves about the killing element in cattle rearing and beef production that they have opted for OFS. We should also note the scale of the ranching operations in his study – mostly ranging from 100 to 400 breeding cows – compared with 17–80 total individuals per farm in our study. In large ranching systems it is difficult to imagine very close relationships with all the animals as individuals. Perhaps the relationship is one of ranchers ‘becoming with’ cattle. In our study the farmers could ‘become with’ individual animals and the farming practices here have been created

explicitly to create these possibilities.

The cattle life cycles involve the farmers intimately, in both life and death, and “wanting to be part in all of it”, as many of our famers framed it, means sharing the joy of newborns and their carefree youth but just as much sharing accidents and mourning of the herd. Taking responsibility for both is what moves farmers to pledge care and protection to their animals, who in different phases of their lives are perceived as co-workers, friends, and food.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Lisa Márcz: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Garry Marvin:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Methodology. **Michael Gibbert:** Writing – original draft, Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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