

## IMAGE & TEXT

### Handholds and Other Kill Floor Mnemonics

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*These notes refer to a video component titled Handholds and Other Kill Floor Mnemonics available on Catalyst Journal at [www.catalystjournal.org](http://www.catalystjournal.org)*

### Abstract

On the kill floor of a small U.S. animal slaughterhouse, butchers use knives to separate pig hides from bodies. In the process of skinning and disassembling, the animal's body takes shape, becoming knowable and known in new ways. I focus on the material interactions between hands, hides, and knives to make sense of slaughter as a material-semiotic process. Though animals are unequal and unwilling partners, they take the lead at times, guiding butchers' moves and cuts, and offering ways to get a hold of, make sense of, and manipulate the body. In the short film handholds and this companion essay, I zoom in on cuts in flesh: literal handholds in animals' hides that butchers use to get a grip, to hold taut, to rotate, to skin, to pull a pig across a room, and to carry its head and hide to the offal bin. Here I ask what it means to get a hold of and make sense of a body using this sort of material mnemonic device.

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I spend time on slaughterhouse kill floors, observing and participating in state-sanctioned killing, in chains of contemporary surveillance and control, and in the everyday material work of animal slaughter. I ask questions that are familiar to science studies and feminist scholars, but strange on the kill floor: What sort of knowledge is butchering? Is it embodied in human bodies, animals' bodies, tools, or in material interaction itself? How do bodies come to matter and come to be meaningful in the process of killing and taking apart?

Here, I make cuts in film and in ethnographic details to splice together a brief focused narrative, zooming in on hands, hides, and knives to foreground the cuts butchers use as *handholds* in animals' bodies. The animal's body, I argue, offers a material script for how to see the body, how to understand the body, and what moves to make in the process of disassembly. Scripts – both in theaters and in slaughterhouses – are material guides that come to life in performance. Butchers change the animal's body as they work with it, revealing new layers and parts, cutting and marking the body to aid the process of disassembly as they go. I explore these cuts as material-semiotic devices, following the insistence by feminist scholars including Donna Haraway and Karen Barad that matter and meaning are constituted together.<sup>1</sup> Working in the flesh of things, I focus on the intimate process of re-working a material body, showing how these interactions are simultaneously acts of knowing and of carving out bodies and meaning. Cuts in flesh are markers and handholds that help a butcher know where to go and manipulate the animal's body into a knowable, disassembleable object.

Some butchers cut tears in the animal's body to guide them. On one kill floor with two butchers, the more experienced of the two always took on the difficult task of evenly splitting a cow carcass into two perfect 'sides' of beef. Though the less experienced butcher had been doing the work for a decade or more, the one who was slightly more senior learned to butcher as a child alongside his father, and had a keener eye and steadier hand as he worked. I watched in awe as he stood before a

headless cow hanging upside down, and used a knife to cut a line from the base of the hanging neck upward toward the spine. He then turned to the top of the animal, steadying an electric saw that hung from the ceiling, weighted on a pulley, so that it rested at the center of the animal's crotch, right between its legs. Next he turned on the saw and guided it slowly down using gravity and his own body for balance, splitting the spine perfectly in half. As he got closer to the neck, the slit he had cut at the start became a visual guide for where the saw should travel. This split in the neck is a cut in flesh that makes the animal's body an aid in the process of its disassembly.

Another sort of cut is also common: a slice through hide that forms a handhold that butchers can use to move and manipulate the animal's body. These handholds, sometimes torn by accident while removing a hide; sometimes cut on purpose to help carry a head to the trash or pull a hide off the animal's back, help butchers know AND disassemble the animal.

I describe elsewhere the method one small slaughterhouse uses for removing the cow's entire head so that it bleeds out quickly.<sup>2</sup> Here is what happens next: For a moment, the head hangs by the hide and muscle at the back of its neck while blood spills from the veins. The butcher punctures a hole through the hide at the back of the neck, and puts his hand through it as if it is the strap that hangs above a car door, allowing a passenger to hoist themselves in and out. Holding the head through that newly cut handhold with the left hand, the butcher uses the knife in his right hand to slice the head off completely, severing that last bit of flesh, and leaving the head to swing down to his side, still held in the left hand through the handhold. The butcher can then transfer the head to the inspection table so the teeth (to determine age) and lymph nodes (to check for the presence of systemic disease) can be examined and any valuable head parts – such as a cow's tongue and cheeks – can be trimmed off and included with the rest of the meat from the animal. After inspection and trimming, the butcher can put his hand through the same strap-like handhold, and carry the head to the offal bin for disposal.

In a typical slaughterhouse, pigs' hair is loosened from their skin through scalding, then rubbed off by mechanized or handheld rubbing tools and/or flame. At the end of the process, pigs are wearing their heads and their own pink, hairless skins, looking as they often do at a butcher shop or charcuterie: familiar, edible. But most kill floors I've visited are too small to have a large scalding tank so all animal hides, including pigs', are removed with a knife. Working quickly, it is common for a butcher to accidentally cut slices through the hide of a cow – and even more so a pig – as he<sup>3</sup> removes the skin from the animal's body. For some time I thought that all these cuts were accidental, and used opportunistically by butchers to lift and rotate the pig's body slightly so he could get at another part of the animal. But I realized, over many months of watching live, and then re-watching video, that some of these cuts are accidental and some are cut on purpose. At a plant that gets money for its cow hides, butchers try hard not to cut through the hide as they are skinning. But pig skins are worthless, and are often included in the weight of offal the rendering company hauls away each week. More cuts in a pig hide make no financial difference for the slaughterhouse. Some butchers will intentionally cut handholds into the pig's flesh to help manipulate the animal on the cradle, to pull the whole animal, wheeled cradle and all, to another part of the kill floor, and to provide a good grip and anchor point to pull off the rest of the hide where it is still attached to the animal along the spine once the pig is hanging from the rail.

These handholds help the butchers to disassemble and make sense of the animals. I argue that disassembling an animal's body is itself a way of knowing the animal. Separating a body into legible, edible parts is a material process that reveals the animal's body as a particular sort of knowledge object: not only an object that guides the process of how to take it apart, but an object that can be taken apart, understood, and consumed: a known object in multiple senses.

Just as dissecting a text or memorizing its lines might be ways of knowing a written object, taking apart an animal and distinguishing its parts are ways of knowing a body. Distinguishing here has dual meanings: material

and semiotic. Distinguishing is both a knowing process: mentally separating x from not-x, and a material process: separating x from not-x with a knife's blade. As butchers break down a carcass in the cutting room, they simultaneously make sense of and make separate parts. Butchers distinguish in multiple senses of the word at once: perceiving difference and enacting it simultaneously. Cutting and knowing are drawn together with metal on flesh.

Taking disassembly as a material knowledge-making practice, these handholds can be understood as material mnemonic devices: places to hold onto in the process of knowing the animal body and working a named subject into an edible object. Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky talks about a zone of proximal development: an arena of tasks that an individual cannot achieve on his or her own, but is capable of accomplishing with outside assistance (Vygotsky and Cole 1978). Vygotsky believed that this level of capability – what we can achieve with the aid of others – is a better measure of where a child is developmentally than simply measuring what the child can accomplish alone. I turn to Vygotsky not for his understanding of child development, but for his insight into how individuals learn and accomplish skills in concert with others and with the world. Beyond childhood, we are all knower-doers, developing capacities and skills over time on our own and with the assistance of other people and material aids. Handholds cut by butchers on the kill floor are one type of material-semiotic aid. Using these handholds, butchers are able to make sense of an animal's body and take the body apart, cutting-knowing the body, making its material form matter in particular ways. The work of Wood et al. extends Vygotsky's work to include the idea of "scaffolding": temporary modes of assistance that a knower can stand on top of to get someplace new. By watching mothers encourage and aid three to five-year-olds as they worked with blocks, Wood and colleagues honed in on the importance of general encouragement and specific guidance to help young children accomplish challenging tasks. As Wood and colleagues put it, this sort of assistance allows people to complete "elements of the task that are initially beyond the learner's capacity"

(Wood, Bruner et al. 1976). Scaffolding puts [learners] in a position to achieve success in an activity that they would previously not have been able to do alone.

I draw on these psychologists of learning and development not because the butchers I describe are novices but because all of us – novices and experts alike – are learning from and thinking with the world in every task. Knowledge is inherently social. Knowledge does not exist within the mind of a lone individual but instead is always enacted with objects and others. A butcher “knows how to butcher” in concert with tools and with the body of each individual animal as it presents its particular material form. Complex tasks like butchering an animal are beyond the capacity of any individual, and can only be accomplished in the interactions between bodies (humans, animals, and tools) each time. I argue that humans cannot slaughter alone. Animals take part not only as passive substance, but as guides. Butchers manipulate the animal’s body to make guide lines and handholds: temporary infrastructures that they as knower-doers can stand on to accomplish something that they could not achieve alone. The handholds cut in animals’ flesh act as material mnemonics, helping butchers to know the animal’s body. These handholds are like grooves in a stone wall that a rock climber can use to get a grip as she travels. These particular cuts provide places to hold onto as butchers traverse the animal’s body, transforming it into a known, distinguishable, consumable object; making the body matter in a world of consuming and consumable bodies. Butchering is not unlike rock climbing, passing hands across the expanse of animal flesh while butcher and animal traverse from life to death to standardized commodity. Along the way, butchers carve literal handholds as they make and make sense of the animal’s body as a carcass, a “side” (half carcass), and ultimately as a set of knowable, sellable “cuts” of meat.

Handholds are material mnemonics. In the literal material world, they are places to hold onto. In the linguistic abstractions we use to theorize knowledge, they are tools for knowing and places to stand: scaffolding. While bodies in life come to matter and to be meaningful

through complex frictions of oppressive power and creative becoming, bodies in death can offer, guide, and push back as they are rendered meaningful. Focusing in on the bodily material practices in slaughter allows for a different sort of material analysis of bodies coming to matter. In death and disassembly, bodies become knowable and come to matter through intimate material interaction.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In her 1992 *Promises of Monsters*, Haraway insists that “bodies as objects of knowledge are materialsemiotic generative nodes” (298). In the same vein, Karen Barad uses material-discursive to highlight the inextricability of material and discursive practices (or as she would say, performances) (2003, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> See “Francisco Tickles the Medulla” – forthcoming from *Anthropology and Humanism*.

<sup>3</sup> Yes, all of the butchers I have worked with on the kill floor have been men. Women and queer folks have worked just off the kill floor, cutting carcasses into cuts of meat, grinding meat, making sausage and other products, wrapping the finished products in clear plastic on Styrofoam trays. There is one exception I’ve witnessed: at the kill floor on an agricultural university campus, two young women worked beside me, mostly spraying water and cleaning up, but occasionally taking a knife to the body.

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## handholds film – Supplemental Text for screen readers

**Film Title: “Handholds”**

**Running Time: 5 Minutes 25 Seconds**

Closeup of a knife blade, held in one hand, as the other hand pulls fatty innerskin tissue away from a body, allowing the knife to find a groove between skin and muscle.

[the sound of whirring, a machine stopping and starting, an ongoing buzz-whirr]

The knife cuts from left to right of the screen, then returns to the left side and cuts again, now cutting with shorter slices, still in a line from left to right, revealing a pattern of yellow-white fat and pinkish muscle underneath as the knife cuts more deeply with some cuts and more shallow with others.

[rumpf-rumpf-rumpf-rumpf-rumpf-rumpf: an insistent sound from another machine off-camera: this one, I can tell you, though those watching the film can't see it, is a winch, working hard to lift a body toward the ceiling]

The rumpf-rumpf pulley sound continues, film cuts to a wide shot of a landscape: peaks and valleys, the ground is thinner more yellow and the sky is pink with bits of red – this landscape, we may realize, as the title appears in white lettering over the middle, right at the horizon line – is a landscape of flesh: lines cut with a knife separating the body itself (the top, the ‘sky’) from the skin/hide (the bottom, the ‘ground’).

“Handholds” appears and stays over the image for a few seconds...

[20 seconds in now]

The screen goes black, the title stays, then you hear a pop-pop sound (more protests from the mechanized winch), then voices, screen goes black, then silent.

Voices and background vibrating sound build, we see two hands again, holding a knife in one hand and the hide of an animal in the other, but this shot is wider: we see the butcher from the chest to the knees, we see the pig from the cut-off hoof to the chest. The hand holding the hide was invisible under the hide before, but now a thumb is sticking through: there's a hole there. This butcher has a hold on the animal in a different way, gripping through a hold in the skin rather than grasping skin together in bunches and squeezing.

Cuts to another shot of butcher, this time with whole hand through a hole in the skin, thumb on top, four fingers hidden under the hide, as he cuts in long strokes with the knife, separating body from skin.

Cut to a medium shot: chest to knee, of a butcher with his back to us as he presses on the front and back legs of a pig at once, pushing and rotating the body away from him, then grabbing into two handholds: two torn holes in the animal's hide to lift the body and rotate it further, then one hand in a handhold of skin, the other pressing on the far hind leg, until the pig's body has rotated away from the butcher, and it is possible to resume cutting long lines at the border between body and skin yet again.

Camera zooms in on the hands and knife as the butcher gets a handhold, first through a hole in hide, then grasping folds of skin, and continues with long then short cuts to separate the skin from the body.

Cut to butcher in between medium and close-up, cutting skin away from body, then using the knife to cut a hole through the hide itself: aaahah! This is where those holds in the skin came from! Or were some of them cut by accident? By misses in the separating of skin from body?

The butcher uses this new hole to lift and rotate the body away from him, then puts a hand through the hole to get a grip as he continues to cut along the line between body and hide, camera zooms in, so we just see hands and knife and flesh again. [the sound of sniffing, the butcher perhaps. Then voices: inaudible, yup!, inaudible, yup!] A loud whirring begins then camera cuts to a metal object in top left corner of the frame and some bare muscle and blood – some part of the animal in the rest of the frame. The metal object is making the whirring sound. It is a pneumatic saw, a handheld rotating blade powered by air, from a tube in the wall – but we can't see all this in the frame, just the blade and the handhold and the butcher's other hand, using a hole in the hide to pull the skin taught as the blade meets the threshold between body and skin. The butcher then pulls up with that same hand, moving seamlessly from using the handhold to pull down and separate skin to using the handhold to pull up and rotate the body.

Cut to medium shot with two hands and a knife, cutting along that now-familiar line where the skin is still attached to the body, only now the knife is pointing downward, tip-first, and a finger is pointed downward, poking for a moment (or pointing, it is a pointer finger) through this small hole to pull the skin away and allow the knife to cut, tracing a line and separating body from hide. Then pointer finger pulls out, thumb presses down and into the same hole, holding the same way and pulling the skin away from the body as the knife blade continues to cut. Then the whole hand grips onto folded flesh – there are no holes nor holds here, then grabs onto a far corner of the peeled-off skin, pulling away from here while continuing to cut, then giving slack on the skin, the butcher seems to stand upright, the knife disappears from the frame, and we see that this grip is through yet another hole in the hide – the hand lingers for a few seconds, holding through this cut hidehole, not cutting, just standing there and holding hide through the hole while human voices speak over machine sounds. Then just machine sounds.

Cut to a hand (a different hand? A different butcher? A different day?) holding through a cut in the corner of the skin, toward the edge of the hide and away from the place where it is still attached to the body – much like the previous shot. But this time, the butcher uses this handhold to pull the entire pig's body and the metal "cradle" it is resting on, away from the camera and across what we now see is a red-floored room with stainless steel walls. As he pulls, we see two more humans, chest to feet, one is spraying water, one is standing at the edge of the space, the camera follows and we see for the first time the pig's head, its face and eyes, crying upside-down dried blood and with bright red blood on the snout. The camera follows the butcher's hands, and we see a metal piece: pointed and slightly hooked on each end, with a metal loop at the middle: the butcher is inserting the pointy hook ends into the two hind legs, just below a joint so the animal's weight will be supported. A metal hook is placed through the loop at the center of this metal bar, and we see a butcher's face for the first time as he presses a button on a hanging box, lifting the animal leg-first up to and then above face-height.

Cut to a new scene, more quiet than it has been, one butcher is cutting to separate the hide from the body right at the pig's spine. Then using a hole in the hide as a handhold, he pulls down, peeling the hide away from the body. Another butcher stands at his side. Wait – they are wearing brown aprons, and before the rubber aprons were all yellow. Is this a different pig, a different butcher, a different day, a different slaughterhouse?

The first butcher, the one who cut and pulled, now steps out of the frame and we hear a now-familiar [whirrrr-rumpf rumpf rumpf rumpf] of the winch raising the animal's body. The pig rotates so we are facing its stomach, skinless, and the second butcher is behind the body with his hands hidden from our view. As the body raises, higher, higher, the butcher suddenly moves into a squat position, pulling his arms down with him and toward

the ground, peeling the hide off the back of the pig. As he stands, and the pig's body swings back-and-forth, we see he is holding onto the hide through a hole, four fingers of each hand, then just one hand, invisible to us beneath the hide.

The mechanical sound has stopped, and the first butcher uses his knife to separate hide from body, now parallel to the floor – he must be cutting near the top of the head now – then the whirring and the body raises higher and he jabs the knife, still parallel with the floor, cutting into someplace that makes dark red blood run out. We see his face, facing the back of the pig's head, in profile, with the pig rotated away from us in profile.

He keeps cutting, this looks hard, holding onto a cut in the hide to get a grip and pull down the whole time. He continues to cut – through bone perhaps, this is taking some time, and it is rough and sudden, not like the brushstrokes of knife moving left to right we watched earlier. His left hand is still hidden inside a handhold, his right keeps cutting, and then suddenly the whole hide and perhaps the head too?? Are dangling by a thread of flesh: a few inches only, and then the knife cuts straight across, and the hide-and-head separates, its full weight moving onto the arm of the butcher, held up through the handhold. We see the two butchers now, from the chest down, the headless bloody neck-flesh of the pig disappears out of the top of the frame. The butcher hands this skin-head to the other butcher, for a moment they each have a hand in it, it is intimate, touching each other, inside of this body. The second butcher drags the skin-head over to a grey trash bin, lifts, and plops it in, head first, then the hide hangs inside out, hesitating for a moment, draped over the side before it slides into the grey barrel, disappearing from our view.

The butcher walks back, the camera catches the open neck of the hanging pig, then follows its body upward, over the butcher's shoulder, toward the ceiling. The screen goes black. [we hear the whirring, the click stop start of

the winch, then nothing].

[film by Kara Wentworth]

["Handholds" © 2016]

## Bio

**Kara Wentworth** is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the ACLS/Mellon Public Fellows Program. Her work blends participant observation with film recordings to understand how difference gets made in everyday practice. Her latest writing is on Black Lives Matter, microbial sociality and the future of meat.