

University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and
Social Sciences

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Fall 2012

Review of *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight*. By Timothy Pachirat.

Donald D. Stull
University of Kansas, stull@ku.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch>

 Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Geography Commons](#), [Other Anthropology Commons](#), and the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

Stull, Donald D., "Review of *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight*. By Timothy Pachirat." (2012). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 1259.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/1259>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight. By Timothy Pachirat. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011. xii + 302 pp. Illustrations, appendices, notes, index. \$30.00 cloth.

"You have just dined, and however scrupulously the slaughterhouse is concealed in the graceful distance of miles, there is complicity."

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

In June 2004, political scientist Timothy Pachirat went to work on the killfloor of an unnamed beef slaughterhouse in Omaha, Nebraska. He started out as a "liver hanger" in the cooler. There carcasses hang before being sent to the fabrication floor where "hundreds of handheld knives and saws reinvent chilled half-carcasses as steaks, rounds, and roasts that are then boxed and shipped to distributors and retailers around the world." For four days he worked in the chutes, driving cattle to the knocking box to be stunned, as required by the Humane Slaughter Act, before being turned into meat. Then for three months he was in QC (quality control), which afforded him access to the entire killfloor. In December, when asked by a USDA inspector to blow the whistle on food safety violations, he explained that he was actually an undercover ethnographer. The next day Pachirat quit his job, but stayed in Omaha for another 18 months "conducting, on a much less grueling schedule, participant-observation research and interviews with community and union organizers, slaughterhouse workers, USDA inspectors, cattle ranchers, and small-slaughterhouse operators." Sadly, this later research does not appear in his account.

Pachirat frames modern meatpacking plants as "zones of confinement," which hide the bloody business of industrialized

slaughter from the outside world. He justifies his clandestine methods with an overview of Iowa's 2011 "ag-gag" law that makes it a felony to gain unauthorized access to—or disseminate documents on—agricultural or food processing operations and practices. But Pachirat wants us to *see* "industrialized slaughter . . . to provoke reflection on how distance and concealment operate as mechanisms of power in modern society." To this end he offers a rich description of the killfloor, which he organizes around a series of detailed maps, including locations and descriptions of each of its 121 jobs. The remainder of the book chronicles his experiences at the plant, beginning with his persistent efforts to land a job.

Pachirat is intent on conveying the sights, sounds, smells of the killfloor: "Shrouded and ghostly in the fog, the yellow hat beckons me into the vast chambers of the cooler. Row after row of headless, hoofless, hideless cattle, split in half and suspended by their hind hocks, fill the room." He wants us to experience—to feel—work in such a place, and he vividly describes the layout of the killfloor, what his jobs involved, and what it was like—emotionally and physically—to do them day after day after day. And he succeeds. But in his enthusiasm for "thick description," he can succumb to monotonous detail, much as workers succumb to the monotony of the line, devoting three pages to his first break, for example. He details the cruelties of his fellow workers as they drive bellowing steers from the chutes to the knocking box and recounts numerous hygiene and food safety violations. But of the injuries and illnesses suffered by his fellow workers, we hear little.

"By removing the methodological distance that typically separates researchers from the social worlds they study and undertaking direct participant-observation research within the slaughterhouse, I sought . . . to provide insight into what it means, from the perspective of the participants, to carry out the work of industrialized killing." If this was his intent, he failed. We are treated in great depth to what it felt like for Timothy Pachirat to become a poorly paid and mistreated meatpacking worker. His coworkers, on the other hand, are one-dimensional walk-on players in this tale. The mustachioed Mexicans who work the chutes are heartless and cruel—to the animals and to the reticent Pachirat, who balks at using the electronic cattle prod. Other coworkers, managers, and USDA inspectors appear briefly to further the plot and to attest to their feelings about their jobs or their sadness for the animals.

Every Twelve Minutes is an autoethnography of one ethnographer's clandestine research in one beef plant. It is, without a doubt, well written, moving, and disturbing on several levels—not the least of which are the ethical dilemmas of undercover research. But Pachirat makes no effort to place his experiences within the context of the larger industry. Nor do we learn very much about his fellow workers, who have little choice but to take dead-end, dangerous, distasteful jobs to support themselves and their families. He could have told their story, he should have—he owed them that. And us. To paraphrase the

ethnographer Gary Allan Fine, Pachirat writes too well and shares too little.

DONALD D. STULL
Department of Anthropology
University of Kansas