

[Martin on Robichaud, 'Animal City: The Domestication of America'](#)

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Andrew A. Robichaud. *Animal City: The Domestication of America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019. 352 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), [ISBN 978-0-674-91936-5](#). 

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There are more pet dogs in San Francisco in 2020 than there are children, and indeed, San Francisco has always been an “animal city.” Walking down San Francisco’s streets in the 1850s, however, one was more likely to bump into a horse, mule, pig, chicken, or cow, than a dog. In *Animal City: The Domestication of America*, Andrew Robichaud uses the animal histories of San Francisco and New York to understand how, in the second half of the nineteenth century, livestock were pushed to the outskirts of American cities, while pets and “animal entertainments” were invited in. Many scholars have asked how Americans became alienated from the animals that they eat, and others have considered the rise of humane movements; *Animal City* makes a vital contribution by bringing these two literatures together and considering the shifting geographies of multiple domesticated animals.

Chapter 1 concerns urban feedlot dairies in New York City in the 1820s and 1830s. Robichaud describes how, prior to railroads and refrigeration technologies, dairy cows were “suspended in a landscape that was neither too close to downtown residents, nor too far from them” (p. 17). Relying upon secondary literature, he explains how changing conceptions of human health and social welfare led temperance reformers to condemn urban dairies that fed cows distillery mash. Dairy reformers argued that urban environments were unhealthy for cows, that unhealthy cows produced impure milk for human babies, and, further, that swill milk was part of a larger system that caused greed, illness, and drunkenness. Reformers’ belief that consumers could topple the system by refusing to buy urban milk, Robichaud argues, backfired when rural milk producers adopted the same methods employed by urban dairies.

While consumer activism is the focus of the first chapter, the remainder of the book argues that municipal regulation and zoning played crucial roles in reshaping urban animal geographies. It is a compelling argument, one that complements existing histories that have centered the roles of railroad construction and corporate practices in consolidating feedlots and slaughterhouses. Chapters 2 and 3 detail how the geography of San Francisco slaughterhouses shifted between 1860 and 1880. The 1860s marked the emergence of a set of laws that reshaped the killing and processing of animals in San Francisco. Whereas previous regulations had sought to contain downtown “animal nuisances”—sounds, smells, stampedes, and offal—an 1866 law created a designated slaughterhouse “reservation” on Islay Creek at the southern edge of San Francisco. “Butchertown,” as this reservation was known, pushed animal death away from the eyes and ears of city residents. As

decades passed, Butchertown remained a site designated for pollution, supporting the book's central contention that "without a history of the nineteenth-century animal city, we cannot fully explain why modern cities look the way they do" (p. 4). Robichaud concludes by suggesting that ultimately, it was easier to regulate geography than to regulate practices (p. 107). Here Robichaud misses an opportunity to explore how slaughterhouse regulation was an implicitly or explicitly racist project. Anecdotes in these chapters suggest that city officials found it easier to regulate slaughterhouse geography than to regulate and police *white* practices; we learn that regulators successfully targeted the livelihoods of Chinese shrimp farmers and Italian ranchers, for example. The Board of Health was established in large part to frame Chinese bodies as a threat to white residents, after all (p. 68).

Chapters 4 and 5 tell the histories of the San Francisco Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the New York chapter of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, respectively. These paired chapters go beyond previous analyses of humane reformers' rhetoric to detail the on-the-street practices and police powers of deputized SPCA monitors. We learn how SPCA monitors and officials compelled citizens to rest their horses and to "humanely" kill livestock injured in transit. Robichaud argues that the removal of slaughterhouses from downtown areas limited the effectiveness of SPCA enforcement and meant that horses received greater legal protection than cows, hogs, and sheep. The argument is tenuous, however; he explains elsewhere that in San Francisco, at least, livestock often arrived at docks and had to be transported through downtown in order to arrive at slaughterhouses. Much more convincing is his argument that laws designed to punish individuals for intentionally harming animals were ill-suited to the meat and tanning industries, because they increasingly involved many short-term human-animal relationships across greater distances. This made it hard to connect observed animal harm with individuals. Humane monitors instead focused on cases of individual animal ownership and deliberate abuse—mostly of horses downtown.

In chapter 5—a chapter well suited for an undergraduate animal studies or environmental history course—we learn that between the 1840 and 1870, dog-machine enthusiasts framed dogs as a niche form of power, one untethered from the geographical constraints of water, coal, and steam. Further, dogs were smaller, easier to train, and cheaper to keep than horses. At the same time, New York raggickers used dogs to pull and protect their carts. Robichaud argues that humane reformers exerted cultural and legal pressure to transform dogs into creatures of leisure, not labor, with two exceptions: hunting was considered a "higher skill" suitable to dogs, and dogs pulling sleds remained a romanticized enactment of frontier life. Robichaud notes but does not expand upon the idea that electricity may also have driven dog machines into obsolescence.

Chapters 6 and 7 contend that the purpose of animal exhibits changed over the second half of the nineteenth century, with consequences for urban animals. On Robichaud's account, humane reformers held that proper relationships with animals would cultivate proper states of mind and thereby improve society. "Relationships" might be too capacious of a term, however, as the chapters primarily detail the efforts of reformers to constrain which emotions were evoked by animals on public display. Such animals became the loci of arguments about which public emotional states were appropriate or beneficial to society. When Robert Woodward, creator of Woodward Gardens in San Francisco, was offered a deformed sheep, he replied that he would only accept it if it was "comical and pleasing" and not if it "causes pity" (p. 254). In 1867 ASPCA founder Henry Bergh agreed to allow P. T. Barnum to feed live prey to a boa, but not in public. Robichaud uses these two chapters to

demonstrate that public animal spectacles generally shifted away from horse races, small-scale circuses, and animal fights, and toward “passive” entertainments like private zoos. Nevertheless, Robichaud argues, such zoos subjected animals to violent capture and transport—but crucially, out of sight of downtown viewers.

Robichaud concludes that by the close of the nineteenth century, “for many living in cities, animal suffering and death took place increasingly in the realm of other spaces, attended to by other people” (p. 224). While this was clearly true for animals used for food, it seems to overstate the case with respect to laboring animals and pets. Urban residents would have witnessed and grieved the deaths of their companion animals, and as Robichaud notes, many humane reformers killed animals themselves if they perceived them to be suffering. *Animal City* also leaves open the question of why humane reformers were invested in reducing suffering, which was a slippery concept. The 1868 California Act for the More Effectual Prevention of Cruelty to Animals forbade beating animals “unmercifully or cruelly” (p. 133)—it did not forbid beating. Other animal cruelty laws forbade “unnecessary pain and suffering” (p. 133)—but which forms of suffering were considered necessary and unnecessary? In the conclusion the author suggests that efforts to reduce animal suffering, and with it human violence, “were in some ways collective efforts to heal the gaping psychic wound of the Civil War” (p. 265)—but this interesting claim is not well elaborated in the body of the book. Other scholars have shown that the Civil War played a pivotal role in both reshaping American sanitary practices and ideas about public suffering, which makes the Civil War’s absence from Robichaud’s analysis conspicuous.

Although Robichaud does not frame this as the book’s main aim, *Animal City* offers compelling evidence that efforts to control animal lives were often explicit efforts to control the livelihoods of non-Anglo-Americans. This is clearest in the cases when SPCA monitors took away the dogs of poor New York ragpickers and when San Francisco officials targeted Chinese shrimp farmers and Italian ranchers. Robichaud also mentions occasions when humane reformers framed animals and non-Anglo-Americans as comparably vulnerable; for example, a proposed amendment would have added “Chinamen and Indians” to the 1868 California Act for the More Effectual Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (p. 132). Unfortunately, this evidence is muddled when Robichaud sometimes fails to distinguish the presumed views of his historical actors from his own. He writes, for example, of the first salaried officer of the SFSPCA, Captain Henry Burns: “A veteran of the Apache Wars, he was stationed in the early 1870s at Camp McDowell, in Arizona Territory, where he led numerous attacks on the stubborn and ostensibly savage Apaches” (p. 129).

Animal City begins with the claim that “livestock separation and ideas about animal welfare coexisted and were cocreated” (p. 11). The book sharply details the coexistence of livestock separation and the humane movement, and while it stops short of demonstrating co-creation, there is great value nevertheless to Robichaud’s effort to understand the two phenomena in relation to one another. Ultimately, *Animal City* opens up a wide range of questions for future environmental historians, urban historians, and animal studies scholars. How was the management—legal and spatial—of “wild” animals in dialogue with management of the “domesticated” animals that Robichaud focuses on? In envisioning ideal deaths, did humane reformers distinguish between laboring animals, pets, and livestock? How much causal power, ultimately, can be ascribed to humane societies—as opposed to, say, food adulteration scares—in the creation of bureaucratic oversight of slaughterhouses? Can the humane movement be seen as another mechanism to consolidate wealth among Anglo-

Americans? The book is full of rich examples that will stick with the reader, like dog-powered butter churns, and a boat of animals sent over Niagara Falls in 1827. The book convincingly argues against technological determinism to show that urban animal geography was often shaped by policy choices that preceded the building of railroad infrastructure, and in this argument are lessons for the present day. The argument that the conditions and geographies of animal lives are not teleological, but rather shaped by cultural and legal choices, means that people can make different choices.

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