**Headline:** The Forgotten 10 Billion Lives: A Tale of Suffering, Survival, and the Fight to See Farmed Animals

**Teaser:** Photographs, storytelling, poetry, and well-documented research unveil the immense suffering, ecological devastation, worker exploitation, and economic injustice caused by the animal agricultural industry.

By Isabella La Rocca González

**Author Bio:** Isabella La Rocca González is an artist, author, and activist based in the United States. As the daughter of immigrants, she strives to reconcile values from her Indigenous Mexican roots with her European heritage. Her photographs have been exhibited internationally, including a solo show at the Center for Photography in Woodstock. Awards for her work include the Ferguson Grant from the [Friends of Photography](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Friends_of_Photography). Her creative nonfiction works have been published in various outlets. Her screenplay, “Fugue 9*,*” was chosen as a finalist for the 2008 Sundance Screenwriters Lab. Her short story “Chingonas” will be published in an upcoming anthology of Latina authors. She received her BA in fine arts from the University of Pennsylvania and her MFA in photography from Indiana University.

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**Credit Line:** This is excerpted and adapted by Isabella La Rocca González from her book [*Censored Landscapes: The Hidden Reality of Farming Animals*](https://lanternpm.org/book/censored-landscapes/) ([Lantern Publishing](https://lanternpm.org/), 2024). *This article was produced by* [*Earth | Food | Life*](https://independentmediainstitute.org/earth-food-life/)*, a project of the Independent Media Institute.*

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**[Article Body:]**

In 2012, in Turlock, California, 50,000 hens were abandoned in an egg farm. Every one of those trapped birds embodied a tragic irony. Birds can fly in the sky, unassisted by metal structures or fossil fuels. They are emblematic of freedom. “Free as a bird,” goes the cliché. For her whole life, each of those hens had been crammed in a rusted cage with three, four, five, even six others; her whole life eclipsed by an obsessive desire to bust out of the cage, to spread her wings and feel the sun and the rain and the breeze, to sashay on solid ground under an open sky, to make a nest and raise her babies.

I imagine the grim days that followed. Now her relentless craving for escape amplified by an urgent need for food and water, the air growing louder—deafening—with the sound of 50,000 hens shrieking from thirst and starvation. Now a cagemate is dead. Now more hens immobile in the cages, their sounds muted. Now the air is thickening with the stench of rotting flesh. Second by minute by hour, two weeks passed. Finally, state officials began gassing birds by the thousands. After three more days, animal sanctuaries negotiated to take custody of the surviving 4,460 hens.

A year later, I photographed the empty facility. The filthy warehouses I found there did nothing to alleviate my nightmarish imaginings. The ammonia stink of chicken urine still lingered.

Chickens recognize beauty, protect their young, and exhibit empathy. A rooster signals danger from predators with various calls, depending on the threat. Anyone who has seen baby goats together cannot doubt they are jumping with joy. Stressed fish seek out caresses even from robot fish. The cow bellows and is beaten back as her bleating calf is dragged away. Sentience—the capacity to experience feelings—connects humans with birds, with fishes, with mammals.

The photographs I made that February day in Turlock became the inspiration for [*Censored Landscapes*](https://lanternpm.org/book/censored-landscapes/), a photographic exploration that tells a story in which the central characters are innocent of any crime and yet are condemned to imprisonment, torture, and death. It’s a true story of ecological destruction, of worker exploitation—mostly people of color—and of secretive corporations protected by laws and enriched by government subsidies and lobbies. It is also a story that offers insight and healing.

A photograph is a love song to the ecological implications of the landscape contained inside its frame. Carleton Watkins hauled thousands of pounds of photographic equipment through Yosemite. His photographs influenced Abraham Lincoln to sign a bill that protected Yosemite Valley. William Henry Jackson’s photographs persuaded Ulysses S. Grant to designate Yellowstone as a national park. Ansel Adams’ work inspired Congress to establish Kings Canyon National Park. American landscape photography evolved in conjunction with the conservationist and environmental movement.

The tale told in photographic history books illustrates that American landscape photography, like US history writ large, has been dominated by white men. Their mythologizing of a pristine landscape colluded in the ethnocide of millions of people who lived in this country before colonization. In 1975, the *New Topographics*: *Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* exhibition was considered radical in that it depicted a stark view of human impacts on the land. But only one of the ten artists was a woman, and none were people of color.

The tale of American landscape photography is also one of human exceptionalism. Though humans are now integral to landscape photography, farmed animals have almost entirely been excluded, despite their prodigious numbers. Terrestrial farmed animals account for 59 percent of vertebrates on earth, humans 36 percent, all other terrestrial animals only 5 percent. Approximately ten billion land animals in the U.S. are slaughtered every year. The absence of farmed animals from landscape photography reflects their exclusion from environmental activism even though animal agriculture is a leading cause of climate change, deforestation, ocean acidification, habitat destruction, loss of biodiversity, and mass species extinction.

In the agricultural industry, nonhuman animals do not exist as individuals but as capital to be exploited for profit. The word capital comes from the Latin *capitalis,* meaning head, in the sense of a head of cattle. In medieval Europe, the number of cattle owned by a family stood for wealth and prestige. Cattle were used as currency for large transactions. In the U.S., mercenary corporations are granted personhood, meaning they are entitled to at least some of the legal status, rights, and protections of humans. They can own land and money. Nonhuman animals, however, are deemed property, with none of those rights or protections.

How, then to portray the individuals hidden away in remote places and windowless warehouses? A number displayed with each landscape in this project represents the number of animals bred, confined, or slaughtered in the facility depicted in the photograph.

Accessing the numbers wasn’t easy. People who breed, confine, and slaughter animals conceal their enterprise aggressively. In more than half of the U.S. state legislatures, the industry has attempted to pass “ag-gag” laws that criminalize photographing sites of animal agriculture. These laws are contrary to the First Amendment of the US Constitution, but they are currently in effect in eleven states. The [Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act](https://www.congress.gov/109/plaws/publ374/PLAW-109publ374.pdf) is a federal law that criminalizes economic damage to an animal enterprise, including loss of profits.Photographers who expose the practices of these corporations can be lumped into the same category as Timothy McVeigh and the Unabomber.

The numbers that form an essential element in this project are revealing, but they’re a pitiful substitute for even one of the animals whose identity, sentience, emotions, and existence are obliterated. *Censored Landscapes* also includes portraits and stories of individual animals exploited by the industry. The animals I portrayed in this project serve as ambassadors of their species. Their stories are meant to individualize the vast numbers of farmed animals bred, confined, and slaughtered.

Extensive and meticulously documented facts included in *Censored Landscapes* regarding the treatment of farmed animals substantiate the barbarism and injustice of the industry. For example, virtually all farmed birds, including chickens, ducks, geese, and pigeons, are kept indoors in extremely crowded conditions for their whole lives. In 2022, 9.54 billion chickens, 208.2 million turkeys, and 26.7 million ducks were slaughtered for food in the U.S. Each of the phases involved in arrival at the slaughter facilities causes more suffering for the birds. About twenty million chickens die on the way to slaughter every year.

At the slaughterhouse, the birds are hung by their legs in metal shackles, which causes them more stress, pain, and injury. They are carried upside down to an electrified bath meant to stun them, their necks are sliced, and they are dunked in scalding water. The speed at which the USDA allows facilities to slaughter birds continues to increase. In 2023, the rate was 140 birds per minute, though some facilities have received waivers that allow them to slaughter 175 birds per minute. The stunning technique can be ineffective, so many of the birds are conscious as the blade cuts their throats. Or the saw misses, and they are boiled alive. Almost one million chickens and turkeys are boiled alive every year in slaughtering facilities. Birds raised for food are excluded from the [Humane Methods of Slaughter Act](https://www.nal.usda.gov/animal-health-and-welfare/humane-methods-slaughter-act) and the [Animal Welfare Act](https://www.nal.usda.gov/animal-health-and-welfare/animal-welfare-act). The standard treatment of other species exploited by the industry is similarly abhorrent.

Well-documented impacts of animal agriculture on almost all facets of our world, including human health, the economy, wildlife, and the environment, illustrate the industry’s far-reaching effects. For example, workers in the U.S. meat industry suffer an estimated three times as many serious injuries as the average American worker, including repetitive stress injuries, fractures, burns, head trauma, and amputations. Respiratory disorders are rampant. The rate of injuries and illness is likely higher than estimated; many workers refrain from reporting for fear of retribution. Employers may also underreport to avoid higher costs. Workers do not receive proper safety training and disproportionately lack health insurance.

In 2020, 37.5 percent of workers in animal slaughtering and processing were foreign-born. An unknown but substantial number of workers in this industry are undocumented. In one of the most dangerous industries, they cannot advocate for their own safety, health, fair compensation, or benefits for fear of losing their job or deportation.

*Censored Landscapes* does not focus on the kind of graphic depictions of cruelty found all over the Internet, of men beating turkeys with iron rods and throwing them aside or slamming piglets onto a concrete floor by the hind legs. Atrocities against animals are rife in the industry, but I don’t have the heart to investigate. Most heartbreaking is the innocence of the animals. They can’t possibly understand why this is happening to them—why the contempt, why the cyclonic rage. Beyond unbearable pain, they must feel utterly forsaken by all things good. The men must also feel bereft of goodness, to be so possessed by monstrous resentment or whatever drives them to viciously harm those creatures. My intention is not to expose any specific worker, company, or owner. The dingy, wretched structures revealed in this project insinuate everyone and everything—farmed animals, wildlife, humans, rivers, oceans, forests, soil, air—into their abyss. *Censored Landscapes* scrutinizes animal agricultural industry standards, business as usual.

*Homo sapiens* have existed at least 300,000 years and have only been farming animals less than 12,000 years, a bizarre blip on this end of the human timeline. North and Central Americans did not farm animals until the invasion of the European colonists about 400 years ago. Veggies, legumes, grains, nuts, and fruit are the basis for superb cuisines of all flavors. Plant-based restaurants of every variety are proliferating like wildflowers in spring. Meat, dairy, fish, and egg alternatives are available in all chain grocery stores and even at fast food restaurants.

Numerous studies evidence the human health and environmental benefits of a plant-based diet. A plant-based diet protects against cancer, type 2 diabetes, obesity, heart disease, and other illness. A 2022 study shows that “rapid global phaseout of animal agriculture has the potential to stabilize greenhouse gas levels for thirty years and offset 68 percent of CO2 emissions this century.”

But no matter, Americans continue to consume more animals than ever. Animal agriculture is a ruthless and avaricious business that results in ecological devastation, grievous health effects, and colossal suffering. This I know to be true: environmentalism and social justice must include the other animals who share our planet.

Imagine flipping the script—subverting the colonizing, profiteering paradigm. Sentient nonhuman animals instead of corporations would be granted personhood; forests, rivers, and oceans valued much more than money; prisons and animal farms morphed into homes and sanctuaries. Every transformation, no matter how preposterous or sensible or liberating or urgent, is kindled with sparks of inspiration. Let this be a spark.

May all beings everywhere be joyful and free.