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# The Dairy Issue: 'Practicing the Art of War'

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In this paper I offer several stories to respond to philosopher Vinciane Despret and sociologist Jocelyne Porcher's considerations on 'dairy' cows and work. The stories include the cows in the herd that I have lived alongside for almost 30 years, a kind of auto-ethnographic approach; and stories and a few facts about the dairy industry in Australia. These accounts are informed by another story, told by the feminist philosopher and writer Hélène Cixous. Fault lines criss-cross these narratives about bovines. Three works by artist Yvette Watt tell more stories about the lives, and deaths, of cows. One of my underlying interests is in the possibilities of narrative to disturb and disclose cultural secrets of systemic violence, secrets that are 'born in the desire of the one who proposes a narrative of secrecy'.

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In part this essay responds to a question posed by a leading animal ethics philosopher seeking evidence to determine whether ‘a cow has an interest in living another day’. To begin an answer to this question I offer three stories. These include my response to philosopher Vinciane Despret’s considerations on animal work – in particular the aspects that follow sociologist Jocelyne Porcher’s research on ‘dairy’ cows. I include a few stories about the cows I live alongside, and a few facts and stories about the dairy industry in Australia. My juxtaposition of these three diverse accounts is informed by another story, told by the feminist philosopher and writer H el ene Cixous. Three works by artist Yvette Watt tell more stories about the lives of cows. An underlying interest is in the possibilities of narrative – textual and visual – to both conceal and/or reveal cultural secrets of systemic violence, secrets that lead us to a question that we must (unbelievably) take seriously: does a cow want to live another day?

Porcher acknowledges that in the human-made world of industrial farming animals are totally removed from ‘relations with their own world’ and because of this ‘the living conditions of animals and their behaviours clearly appear to be embedded in a working relationship’ (Porcher and Schmitt 41). She goes on to suggest that ‘livestock animals are in a sense the workers operating in the shadows, an ultraflexible underproletariat, exploitable and destructible at will’ (Porcher and Schmitt 42).

To explore the idea of dairy cows as workers Porcher asked a selection of small scale ‘breeders’ (dairy farmers) in Europe their views on the proposition that what the cows perform in the dairy is ‘work’. Most often the breeder’s response was ‘no, it is only people who work, not beasts’ (Despret, *What Would Animals Say* 177) but anecdotal stories from the breeders she interviewed indicated to her that the cows did collaborate in the work. In order to test the hypothesis that ‘animals are actors involved in the process of work, and not simply objects’ Porcher explored ‘the role of animals in work, from the point of view of the animals themselves’ (Porcher and Schmitt 39). With Tiphaine Schmitt, she studied three aspects of the relationship of a herd of 60 cows. Over a three month period Schmitt closely observed and filmed a number of the cows at the dairy, noting details of their movements, responses, reactions and interactions: ‘(a) with their farmer, (b) among themselves, and (c) with a milking robot’ (Porcher and Schmitt 39).

Despret describes their findings in this way:

When the cows go peacefully to the milking robot, when they do not jostle with one another, when they respect the order of turn, when they move away from the robot when its operation is done, when they leave the area to allow the farmer to clean their stall ... when they do what they need to do so that everything runs smoothly, this is not seen as evidence of their willingness to do what is expected. Everything has the look of something that functions or of a simple *mechanical* obedience ... everything flows mechanically. It is only during conflicts where the order is disrupted, for example, ... when they do not move out of the way to allow cleaning, or when they go elsewhere than is asked of them, when they avoid their duties, or, quite simply, when they dawdle – in short, when they resist – that one begins to see, or rather to translate differently, these situations where everything functions. Everything functions because they have done everything so that everything functions. Periods without conflict, then, are no longer natural, obvious, or mechanical, for they in fact require from the cows a total activity of pacification where they make compromises, groom one another, and offer polite gestures to one another. (Despret, *What Would Animals Say* 180-1)

In further research Porcher and Despret worked together, carefully crafting questions that might engage the breeders whom they interviewed for their thoughts on cows working, and with the humans (Despret, 'The Becomings of Subjectivity' 124). Donna Haraway, commenting on the findings from Despret and Porcher's interviews with the breeders, writes:

The animals paid attention to their farmers; paying equally effective attention to the cows ... was the job of good breeders. This is an extension of subjectivities for both people and critters, 'becoming what the other suggests to you, accepting a proposal of subjectivity, acting in the manner in which the other addresses you, actualizing and verifying this proposal, in the sense of rendering it true' [Despret, 'The Becomings of Subjectivity' 135]. The result is bringing into being animals that nourish humans, and humans that nourish animals. Living and dying are both in play. 'Working together' in this kind of daily interaction of labor, conversation, and attention seems to me to be the right idiom. (Haraway 7)

I can agree with Despret when she writes that ‘when everything functions well, the implication that requires everything to function well is made invisible’, but I am not at all sure about either the assumptions she makes in the following question she poses or her response:

What is it that changes, for the cows, such that this active investment in working together becomes visible? Thinking that farmers and cows share the conditions of work – and, following Donna Haraway, this proposition could be extended to laboratory animals – shifts the way that this question is generally opened and closed. This obliges us to think of beasts and people as connected together in the experiment they are in the process of living and through which they together constitute their identities. ... If animals do not cooperate, the work is impossible. There are not therefore, animals who ‘react’; they react only if one cannot see anything other than a mechanical functioning. In operating this shift, the animal is no longer properly speaking a victim ... . (Despret, *What Would Animals Say* 182)



Yvette Watt, *Domestic Animals (scholarly explanation)*,  
2008, giclée print and ink on paper, 80 x 130cm.  
Courtesy of the artist.

I move to the literary, and to autobiography, to consider Despret and Haraway's comments on 'beasts and people as connected together in the experiment they are in the process of living and through which they together constitute their identities' – potentially including laboratory animals – and on humans and animals 'working together' – in the context given of 'living and dying' – as being 'the right idiom' to describe the behaviour of animals such as cows in dairy farms. By way of acknowledging the potential problematic of suggesting an equivalent literacy for evaluation of the claims made, since the reliability and 'truth' values of the different genres of writing are not equivalent, I refer to philosopher Brett Buchanan who notes that Despret considers:

the collaboration of perspectives between the arts and sciences not only entirely appropriate but entirely necessary. The creation of stories is not akin to the fictionalization of animal worlds but more a matter of restoring some of the unfamiliarity that lies within subjective lives that will always surprise us. Despret describes this as the 're-enchantment' of our shared worlds, worlds – or one could say 'pluriversions' – that have been increasingly reduced over the last two centuries to informational data and animal machines. (Buchanan 25)

## **Ape story**

Coetzee's fictional character, novelist Elizabeth Costello describes, in a public lecture, the (imagined) preoccupations of the captive ape Sultan, hidden as he is from public view in the closed world of the laboratory and subject to the order of the human/s in charge; in this case an experiment about how to reach bananas put out of reach by the human in charge:

Sultan is alone in his pen. He is hungry: the food that used to arrive regularly has unaccountably ceased coming. ... He is starved until the pangs of hunger are so intense, so overriding, that he is forced to think the right thought, namely, how to go about getting the bananas. ...

In his deepest being Sultan is not interested in the banana problem. Only the experimenter's single-minded regimentation forces him to concentrate on it. The

question that truly occupies him, as it occupies the rat and cat and every other animal trapped in the hell of the laboratory and zoo is: Where is home, and how do I get there?' (Coetzee 28-30)

## Cow story

About 30 years ago I rented a house with ten acres of grazing land in Kangaroo Valley, a couple of hours south of Sydney, for the little herd of cows I found myself 'owning'. The herd comprised Moo and her daughter Moulin and Minnie and her daughter Minuet. Minuet's father was a sweet young black and white Friesian bull who lived for a while on a neighbouring farm. He used to sit side by side with Minnie, a barbed wire fence dividing them. I went away for a couple of days and on my return saw that somehow they were together in our paddock; nine months later Minuet was born.

I had moved from the inner city to the country and, with no idea at all about cows but needing the grass to be eaten, I bid on and bought Moo at the local cattle saleyard when she was about six months old. I arranged for her to be dropped at home in a cattle truck and she arrived late afternoon. It didn't take me long to realise she felt distressed on her own so I went to the next cattle sale and found Minnie there, a little Friesian calf, actually, just a baby. The elderly dairy farmer watching nearby came over after the auctioneer had moved to the next calf, and he told me that the calf's mother, Lena, was his favourite cow, so he seemed somewhat relieved that my bid had beaten that of the butcher who had stood next to me.

Kangaroo Valley, a lush river valley, has many dairy farms and the conditions for animals appears to vary greatly depending on who is running the farm. One morning I woke up to find a young adult Friesian cow had joined Minnie and Moo's herd – her ear tag read #22. She had deep scratches over her body. I wasn't sure what to do but decided (in contrast to what I would do now) to usher #22 through the gate to the dairy farm next door where I assumed she had come from. The next morning I looked out across our paddock and #22 was back with Moo and Minnie's herd. So I asked the farmer next door: 'no he wasn't missing a #22 cow' and I asked the farmer down the road 'nope, no #22 missing'. I decided I could keep her. I named



her Minstrel, after the wandering minstrel, and that was the start of 22 years (coincidentally) of the happiness of hearing her beautiful low mooing, of witnessing the deep bond that she formed with Minnie and Moo and the other cows in the herd, and the new ones as they joined the herd. Years later I was driving down a back road in Kangaroo Valley when I came across a dairy farm that looked at first like a derelict muddy junkyard, until I saw the cows – thin, poorly cared for – with markings very similar to Minstrel’s. A steep hill separated this dairy from the farm I had rented so it seems likely it was where Minstrel had come from the day she arrived at our place, scratched and alone, and found the little herd who became her home.

## War story

Juggling Porcher and Despret’s writing about the cows in the robotic dairy with my lived experiences alongside a herd of cows, and living in a dairy farming region, brought to mind another story, recounted by Cixous in her 1981 essay ‘Castration or Decapitation’, borrowed from another kind of text, a manual of strategy, by the Chinese General Sun Tse (544BC–496 BC). Here is the story as Cixous recounts it:

The king commanded General Sun Tse: ‘You who are a great strategist and claim to be able to train anybody in the arts of war ... take my wives (all one hundred and eighty of them!) and make soldiers out of them.’ ...

So Sun Tse had the women arranged in two rows, each headed by one of the two favourite wives, and then taught them the language of the drumbeat. It was very simple: two beats–right, three beats–left, four beats–about turn or backward march. But instead of learning the code very quickly, the ladies started laughing and chattering and paying no attention to the lesson, and Sun Tse, the master, repeated the lesson several times over. But the more he spoke, the more the women fell about laughing, upon which Sun Tse put his code to the test. It is said in this code that should women fall about laughing instead of becoming soldiers, their actions might be deemed mutinous, and the code has ordained that cases of mutiny call for the death penalty. So the women were condemned to death. ... He ... acted according to the code and with his saber

beheaded the two women commanders. They were replaced and the exercise started again, and as if they had never done anything except practice the art of war, the women turned right, left, and about in silence and with never a single mistake. (42)

I agree that it is important to shift from a position in which animals are viewed as victims, which as Despret notes ‘implies passivity, with all the consequences attached to this’ (182). But I am concerned that the proposition that cows collaborate in the work of dairy farming, and that signs of their resistance show this to be the case, does not sufficiently take into account the lesson Cixous finds in the story of the king’s wives:

Women have no choice other than to be decapitated, and in any case the moral is that if they don't actually lose their heads by the sword, *they only keep them on condition that they lose them* – lose them, that is, to complete silence, turned into automatons. (42-43)



Yvette Watt, *Domestic Animals, (culinary tips)*,  
2007, giclee print and ink on paper, 80 x 130cm.  
Courtesy of the artist.

## Separation story

The desire of a cow to live another day is imbricated with an everyday human desire – the consumption in the West of an abundance of animal derived products, a banquet wrought, as Dinesh Wadiwel reveals, in the violence of a war against animals.

A friend studying agriculture wrote a letter to me after a field trip to a mega robotic dairy in country New South Wales, Australia<sup>2</sup>; the letter begins:

*Dear Melissa,*

*I have wanted to tell you about this visit to a big dairy when I was doing a certificate in agriculture. You very possibly know how they treat dairy cattle but I didn't until I went there.*

The letter goes on to describe how the cows live in a huge shed from which they are rarely allowed out, except twice a day for milking at which time they are backed into their own slot and stand on concrete while milked by a machine. After about twenty minutes they all troop back to the shed; in her observation none of them interacted. Like the majority of dairy cows each cow is regularly artificially inseminated. On the field trip she witnessed a birth:

*When a cow is due to give birth she is penned up and the dairy hands hover very close. Their task is to snatch the calf away from the cow the split second it is born with others holding the cow's head so that she cannot turn round and lick it or in any way touch it – to avoid contamination. The calf is taken to what seems like a large dog kennel and tied up with a collar and chain. There are rows of these calf kennels in a paddock half a kilometre from their mothers living in the mega-shed. The chain on each calf is perhaps one to one and a half metres long – short enough so that the calves cannot possibly have any contact with each other. Thus they spend their youth.*

The fate of those calves? That's a story about collateral damage. And for the mothers? At a smaller dairy farm in Porcher's research she notes:

- the farm has 'zero pastures' for the cows;
- lactating cows live in an open housing barn (7 square metres per cow);
- the farm is run by a farmer who 'prioritises performance and efficiency rather than his relationship with his cows';

- ‘half of the herd is culled every year’. (44-45)

After witnessing the mother cows in the mega dairy my friend writes:

*To me they seemed dead inside – like automatons.*

## Home story

A couple of weeks ago all through the still night I heard cows mooing constantly as though they were calling out. I was up just before sunrise to feed our old cows and then had to leave for work, about an hour’s drive. I arrived home late and still I could hear the loud, unsettling chorus of mooing cows, and they mooed all through another night. The land that borders mine is a ‘dry paddock’ for a local dairy farmer, the farmer doesn’t live there, and so early the next morning I set off on foot through the thick spotted gum forest on the boundary in case a cow was in trouble in there – perhaps fallen and hurt in the eroded creek bed or caught in barbed wire and perhaps the others all mooing in concern. I have experienced times when the cows at our farm clearly indicated that something was wrong by mooing loudly and insistently. There was no cow injured in the forest but in the distance I spotted a cow who was down, not moving. I drove to a farmhouse at the top of the hill to alert the farmer. From there I could see both the cow who was down and the rest of the herd; they were still mooing and mooing. The story the neighbour told me was this: the cow was not injured she was dead. She had died a couple of days previously in childbirth and no, they weren’t going to bury ‘it’ – ‘hopefully the foxes might eat it instead of my chooks’. The other cows? ‘They’re mooing because their calves were picked up the other day and taken to the saleyards. They’ll get over it, they always do.’

In the same book in which Despret discusses cows and work (*W for Work: Why do we say that cows don’t do anything?*) there is a chapter titled *S for Separations: Can animals be broken down? (What Would Animals Say)*. In this chapter she provides a compelling discussion of the maternal separation experiments carried out by notorious psychologist Harry Harlow – first on baby rats forcibly separated in the laboratory from their mothers, and later on baby monkeys removed from their mothers at birth, some of whom were then isolated in darkness for up to 12 months.

Despret finds Harlow's 'system of evidence' to be in fact 'a system of destruction' an 'historical event' which 'obliges us to think' (*What Would Animals Say* 145).

Harlow's experiments, and those of others such as primatologist Ray Carpenter's experiment to observe what happens when the leader is removed from the troop – disintegration of the social group – are for Despret only one thing: 'a systematic and blind exercise of irresponsibility' (151). Despret notes of Carpenter's experiment: 'it is remarkable that at no moment, in not a single experiment, did the hypothesis of stress caused by the manipulation itself seem to need to be mentioned' (150). In every cow herd there is a leader and in the dairy industry herd structures are constantly disrupted through regular removal and culling of cows and removal of calves. I note that stress, and distress, is caused by these practices (*The Life of the Dairy Cow*).

The separation of mothers from their calves is standard operating procedure in the dairy industry – in fact the industry can only exist because of this separation. Even the farmer who lives near me and who doesn't appear to care reveals that they are aware of the stress caused to the mothers when they say things such as 'they'll get over it'.

I want to suggest that cows are like the mothers in Harlow's experiments who when separated from their babies tried every possible way they could to get back to them, even after Harlow had starved, blinded and mutilated them further by removing their ovaries and detaching their olfactory bulbs. As Despret notes 'separating mothers and their babies, then separating mothers from themselves, from their own bodies ... is known as the model of 'breaking down' in science – separating for hygienic reasons, then just separation itself' (*What Would Animals Say* 149). As my friend noted it was a routine task for the dairy hands 'to snatch the calf away from the cow the split second it is born ... to avoid contamination'.

After living alongside cows for 30 years now I have learnt a few things and it is with this knowledge that I suggest an alternate understanding of cows 'collaboration' in dairy farming. For Cixous, every element of the story of the emperor's wives is important; paying close attention to the details one can read the violence of a system that requires women to literally and symbolically 'lose their heads'. But Cixous also finds that 'woman ... takes up the challenge of

loss in order to go on living. ... She loses, and doubtless it would be to the death ... [but for] the capacity of passing above it all by means of a form of oblivion ... the oblivion of *acceptance*' (54).

For me, the contextual information provided in Porcher's research reveals that dairy cows live their short lives with regular forced pregnancies, with enforced and permanent separation from their new born calves, with the destruction of their herd through regular culling of any cow who becomes ill or whose milk yield does not meet the set quotas, with 'zero pasture' even though they are grazing animals, and with a farmer who 'prioritises performance and efficiency' (Porcher 44-45). I therefore ask, for example, how does Haraway's reflection that 'working together seems the right idiom' resonate for the cows in this industry, or for their calves, removed at birth from their mother so that humans can enjoy the milk and milk products. (What is wine without cheese? What is coffee without milk? What is a day at the beach without an ice-cream for the children?).



Yvette Watt, *Offerings series, Lola*, 2007,  
 artist's blood on linen tea towel, 49cm x 71cm.  
 Courtesy of the artist.<sup>3</sup>

The lives of the calves who I referred to earlier as the collateral damage of this industry typically take one of several directions after being taken from their mothers:

- killed by blunt force at the farm, especially when milk prices are low and their transport would cost more than the farmer would sell them for (Phillips 87).
- male calves (known as bobby calves) deemed a by-product of the dairy industry are typically killed at between 5 -10 days old, but before their death they are often trucked long distances to abattoirs via various farms where more calves are loaded, or from saleyards, and the circumstances of the very long transport times (24 hours is common) and without any of their mother's milk to drink before their slaughter (they would normally suckle multiple times each day) is a cause of concern among those interested in animal welfare (Phillips 87). The variability of the meat from these calves means it is most often used for pet food while other parts of their bodies are used for handbag leather and pharmaceutical products (Phillips 87).
- for some female calves their life will be to replace worn out dairy cows who are typically either lame, sick and/or not producing 'enough' milk.
- Some calves become so-called 'veal' calves. Wadiwel evokes Giorgio Agamben's concept of bare life, 'life that is held within the grasp of the legitimised violence of the sovereign', to shed light on the life of calves destined to be eaten as veal: 'The life of the calf, maintained in a bare, weak state, is monitored scrupulously to prevent premature death; a death that threatens the profitability of that life for the livestock complex' (Wadiwel 83-84).

Naming the practices of the dairy industry to be the cows and humans 'working together' or a 'collaboration' with the breeder seems a stretch of the imagination. I return to Cixous and suggest that if there is a 'collaboration' with the breeder then it is surely through 'the oblivion of acceptance' and the cows 'taking up the challenge of loss in order to go on living' (Cixous 54). Throughout their lives of confinement, violations, rations, procedures, regulations and quotas wrought by the standard operating procedures of the dairy industry, the cows are perhaps more

accurately doing what Cixous contends women do – ‘taking loss, seizing it, living it’ (54). Wadiwel suggests that ‘we must look for war precisely where it is discursively coded as ‘peace’ (18). For me, the cows going about their lives in the dairy industry are, mindfully, ‘practicing the art of war’.

The stories I tell here emerge from living alongside cows, getting to know them – without the distortion of the financial vested interests of breeders and farmers. From this perspective I suggest that ‘dairy’ cows, like the captive ape Sultan, may do the work required by the breeders but all the while preoccupied by the question, ‘where is home’ – where is my calf, where is my herd – ‘and how do I get there?’

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Lynda Hart, *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression*, Princeton University Press, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Excerpts from this letter first appeared in Melissa Boyde, ‘Cultural Myths and Open Secrets: the cattle industries in Australia. *Southerly* vol. 73 no, 2, 2013:

[http://southerlyjournal.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/73.2\\_LP-Melissa-Boyde.pdf](http://southerlyjournal.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/73.2_LP-Melissa-Boyde.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> The artist writes: ‘I see these works as gestures of solidarity with those animals who are killed in their billions for meat. It was a kind of offering, a symbolic giving up of my blood – a recognition of the spilling of the blood of these animals for meat production and of the fact that their blood stains the kitchens of most homes.’ (Yvette Watt, ‘Animal Factories’ in *The Art of The Animal*, 153)



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