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‘Let’s Find Out! What Do I Make?’ [Review] Kathryn Gillespie, *The Cow with Ear Tag #1389*. University of Chicago Press, 2018. 272pp

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Abstract

I’m halfway through Kathryn Gillespie’s book when it hits me. This enormous shadow lake of sadness I’ve been walking around with – it’s dairy. It’s the electric prods that move cows through pens. It’s the endless stream of bovine bodies flowing around the world. It’s the ginormous global wet market of milk and semen. It’s the aftermath of shotgun blasts delivered to immobile cows, to fugitive cows, still ringing in my ears. It’s the call of mothers and children separated at auction yards. It’s that we’re living in a context of (almost) compulsory dairy consumption. It’s that writing about the commodification of animal life appears to be an endless task and though I cannot take my eyes away from its pages, reading *The Cow with Ear Tag #1389* also feels like an endless task. Endless because I have not, cannot, retain all the details Gillespie has packed into this book in only a single read. I know and I feel that I am not just working my way through this book; it is working its way through me.

'Let's Find Out! What Do I Make?'

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To any artist or scholar working with dairy this is my warning to you – *The Cow with Ear Tag #1389* will radically expand the possible focus of your work because, as Gillespie shows, if you reach out and touch dairy you touch a vast and (almost) unimaginable network of practices, industries, processes, products, geographies, habits of mind and body.

The Cow with Ear Tag #1389 translates the journey from living cow to glass of milk, yes. But it does more. It translates the journey from education systems (primary through tertiary) to slaughterhouses, rendering plants, auction yards, dairy expos, breeding farms, and transport

trailers. All of these spaces, concepts and processes are there in the milk. That is what Gillespie shows. Got milk? You've got the 'cull auction'. Got milk? You've got the 'deadstock hauler'. Got milk? You've got the rod and the paddle, 'common for driving animals through the chutes of the auction yard' (85). Got milk? You've got electro-ejaculation. If you are not (as I was not) familiar with these terms or their definitions, Gillespie's book is for you. Until these concepts, terms, spaces and practices become common knowledge (*mainstream* knowledge) discussion and debate around dairy will remain deficient at the dinner table, in the gallery, on the farm, at the supermarket and in the academy. That is what this book teaches me. But there's more.

Let's Find out. What Do I Make? This is the title of a kid's book. It was handed to me one night as I sat down for dinner at a vegan restaurant on Brunswick Street, Fitzroy, Melbourne. The book was brightly coloured. Shaped like a cow. The front cover illustrated as a smiling cow. In the centre of the cow a hole's cut out. Inside the hole? A jug of milk. I hold the book for a moment. I look at that little book, confused. I open it. 'Cow enjoys a healthy lunch of juicy grass with her friends. Do you know what cows give us?' Oh god. I read on. 'Cows give us ...' but the final word (milk) has been crossed out. Beneath it, written by hand, is the word 'love'. Every page of this book has been altered. Cows give love, love, love. I have thought about that book, aimed at kids pre-kindergarten, a lot. Its bright cardboard pages designed to deliver a complex pedagogy, to teach children something about thinking, feeling, behaviours and nutrition, 'background' knowledge, 'common sense,' 'essential themes,' webs of connection and life processes. Processes, webs, sense, themes and knowledge skewed by political and ethical economies built on extracting labour, body parts and fluids, as well as separating family members from one another.

The topic of love, intimacy and empathy is threaded throughout *The Cow with Ear Tag #1389*. Farmers can love their cows (Chapter 3); children can develop intimate and empathetic relations to 'livestock' (Chapter 7); Americans love dairy (why this book was written?); there is a need for love, solidarity and a buddy system of peer support when researching structural violence (Chapter 5). In every case, love, intimacy and empathy are tangled up with (or contorted by) violence. Even the healing spaces of sanctuaries are places where love, intimacy

and empathy must be used to reckon with the (sometimes literally) crushing aftereffects of industrial breeding practices (Chapter 6).

Let's find out! This phrase announces dairy's staggering self-assigned right to look at and use cows for food and education. Gillespie works through the complex layers that make up the politics of sight in relation to animals in the food system. She writes from an ethical perspective inundated by a dairy-loving overlay. This offers her a dual perspective – at once immersed in and external to dairy discourse. Page after page Gillespie tirelessly subverts the ethos of dairy's, *Let's find out!* She does not ask what cows make for people, but what humans make for cows. And she moves between individual lives and stories of bovines bred, kept, sold, used and slaughtered as part of dairy and its affiliated industries. She links these lives to the broad, structural humanist politics of research within academic contexts, advertising discourse and farming education.

To read this book will mean cultivating a serious double vision for dairy – the normalised vision of milk as a nutritious substance, or a substance overlaid with human profit and symbolic meaning (white supremacy, wholesomeness ...) will be shot through with the submerged vision of dairy as the product of abuse, reproductive exploitation, family separation, the development of utterly strange and cruel processes and practices rolled into the worldwide production of milk (cheese, yoghurt ...). And people love to say they'd find it so hard to give up cheese. Cheese is the thing! And they don't appear to feel the weight or the shock or the horror at the processes that produce cheese when they make this confession. *That* is why Gillespie's book needs to be in all good book stores, included in unit readers, purchased for family and friends, scheduled for book clubs. Gillespie has written this book in an accessible way. There's no jargon. She breaks down 'industry speak'. Shows how discourse shapes everyday life in clear terms (Chapter 8). She develops and articulates the vital need for practices of academic care and concern between colleagues, between species. Gillespie's double vision is a counter-point to the 'double think' (Chapter 7) dairy industries, their consumers, and proponents are either trapped in or promoting or both.

All the calls of feminist animal studies scholars, philosophers and activists to deploy scholarship and research as a practice of care and concern seem to have been crystallised in Gillespie's capacity to go to the sources of dairy and look and look and make her report. Gillespie writes with slow, at times, forensic detail to give us what we need to understand the countless minute processes it takes to commodify lives. And just ... when you reach the story of the cow with ear tag #1389, give yourself a moment to process.