



Book Review

The Cow with the Ear Tag #1389

Gillespie, K. (2018). Chicago IL: The University of Chicago Press. ISBN 9780226582856 (paper) US\$22.50; ISBN 9780226582719 (cloth) US\$70; ISBN 9780226582993 (e-book) US\$22.50. 272 pages

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In what began as a PhD dissertation, Kathryn Gillespie documents the practices of the dairy industry in the United States, taking readers from automated milking factories to auction yards and animal sanctuaries in an attempt to understand the hidden production practices of America's staple drink. *The Cow with the Ear Tag #1389* offers an overview of America's dairy industry, just one part of the animal agriculture industry that annually slaughters over 56 billion land animals worldwide (Koneswaran & Nierenberg, 2008). Gillespie's book contributes to the growing number of books and films devoted to exposing the cruelty of raising animals for food and how this practice contributes to the normalization of violence. Like others who choose to write on this topic, Gillespie encountered difficulties when researching the dairy industry, which over the last few decades has lobbied for decreased transparency and the criminalization of animal liberationists. She outlines her struggle to find a farmer willing to let her tour their facilities, sometimes despite the companies to which she reached out having stated commitments to transparency (p. 33). When doing this type of research, there is also the added difficulty of not being able effectively to communicate with the research subjects (dairy cows), leading to some assumptions and guesswork. Gillespie also discusses the ethical dilemmas she grappled with as a witness to violence, explaining that "there is a certain level of complicity in this violence that occurs through standing by and watching animals die or be killed while doing nothing" (p. 102). However, her difficulties gaining access to "spaces of animal commodification" (p. 2012) encouraged her to discover alternative ways of conducting research, therefore

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minimizing the (masculinist anthropocentric) value of witnessing this violence in the first place.

Gillespie's work is a great example of stepping outside of and resisting the dominant framework of both research methods in general and the conceptualization of animals in research specifically. Such an ethically complicated and inaccessible research topic requires creativity in research methods. When animals are included in research, they usually serve as a means to an end, a commodified and disposable thing to be used by humans. Gillespie documents with some humour the process of getting her research application approved by the Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) at the University of Washington, which all researchers who indicate animal involvement have to do. It was surprising to the IACUC when she stated that she would simply be *observing* animals, not *using* them (p. 30). Accordingly, a central research question for this book addressed the normalization of animal use for research and consumption and understanding the process whereby nonhuman animals' bodies are commodified (pp. 143, 88).

Gillespie's focus on the dairy industry is significant both within the field of Critical Animal Studies and outside of it. The dairy industry is often overlooked in critiques of the animal agriculture industry, both because of dairy's ability to masquerade as a harmless byproduct, and because of its association with uncomfortable topics of reproductive exploitation, sexual violence, and mass suffering. While not consuming dairy products is seen in many communities as bizarre and even un-American (p. 183), the way dairy is obtained for human use is not something with which most wish to be associated. Therefore, "the details of how dairy is produced (and everything implicated in that production) are obscured from public knowledge" (p. 14), and we are free to continue with our eating habits. To tell the story of the cows who produce the dairy we consume, Gillespie begins with a visit to a relatively small dairy in western Washington – the first dairy whose managers responded positively when she asked for a tour. The dairy has about 500 cows who are milked ten months out of the year (p. 55). After the 10th month they are moved to a new pen where they are artificially inseminated again, a process which usually involves using an electric probe to cause involuntary ejaculation from a bull and then inserting a hand into the vagina of a cow to deposit the sperm. Artificial insemination is more widely used than mating because it is more efficient and effective. The gestation period for cows is about the same length as for humans and once the calf is born, they are taken from their mother within the first day. At the small farm in western Washington, female calves are kept at the farm or sold to nearby dairy operations and male calves are sold to the meat industry. After about six pregnancies, when the cows are six or seven years old (cows' normal lifespan is 18-22 years), they are sent to slaughter and turned into hamburger meat for fast food restaurants (p. 59).

Gillespie uses the small western Washington dairy to provide an overview of the “best” type of dairy production – that which takes place on a small, family-owned and operated farm – and to open discussion on the various steps involved in producing milk. Her next visit is to an auction yard where dairy cows and male calves are sold to farmers, sometimes for continued use and sometimes for slaughter. Gillespie describes the surreal experience of witnessing, in action, the commodification of a living body at the auction yard (p. 88), and explores what it takes to turn a living, breathing, feeling being into a commodity that has only instrumental value. She uses George Orwell’s concept of “doublethink” to explain how this can happen: quoting from *1984* (Orwell, 1949, p. 146), Gillespie explains that to doublethink is to “know and not to know, to be conscious of the complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies...to forget whatever it was necessary to forget.” The 4-H program designed for school children that Gillespie explores in her book is a great example of learning to doublethink. In 4-H, students are responsible for raising and caring for farmed animals in order to learn how to be a farmer. At the end of the season, the biggest and best animals win prizes at the fair and are then sold or slaughtered. Since many first-time 4-H members grow attached to their animals and have difficulty letting them be killed, 4-H is really a “lesson in the proper emotional relationship between humans and animals” (p. 151). Students are taught to distance themselves from the animals emotionally, to not see them as a friend or a living being, but as livestock, literally “stock” that is alive (p. 8).

The emotional distance that is learned early on by young farmers is accompanied by physical, cultural, and linguistic distance that is constructed by the animal agriculture industry and felt by both farmers and consumers. Large-scale farms, called Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs), and the accompanying slaughterhouses, have been removed from the public eye, shielded by walls, barbed-wire fences, and laws that make it illegal to document what occurs within them. The physical distance reinforces our capitalist culture which views dairy and meat – but not their production – as a symbol of America. Carefully chosen terms like “livestock,” “cattle,” and even “veal” and “beef” further obscure the reality of what they represent. Even at the small dairy in western Washington, Gillespie describes how “the cows themselves were abstracted” (p. 71) in the mechanistic labour flow of each day, which involves their constant commodification into gallons of milk and pounds of McDonald’s burgers.

One of Gillespie’s central assertions is that these spaces of commodification are in fact places of violence. She writes that “what I’ve become most interested in, and what I hope to illuminate in this book, is the way violence against certain lives and bodies can become so normalized that it is not viewed as violence at all” (p. 21). She refers to the occurrence of this type of normalized violence against nonhuman animals as “mundane violence” (p. 91); it has become so routine as to be boring, even for those tasked with committing the acts of violence. Gillespie describes how she

attempted to learn the features of the cows she witnessed being auctioned so that somebody who cared would remember them, but there were simply too many of them, and in the end only the most obviously sick and tortured remained vivid in her memory. Cows who have been forcibly impregnated since before they were one year old, calves who were ripped away from their mothers within the first hour of their lives, cows in the auction ring who had been electrically prodded so much that they could hardly stand: none of them were memorable enough because the violence they had experienced was normal and expected, even industry standard. “The category of the animal...is a site of violence and subjugation” (p. 134) Gillespie writes, reflecting on how even humans who have acts of violence committed against them are “degraded” to the rank of (nonhuman) animals in order to justify their mistreatment.

The oppression and suffering of human and nonhuman animals has always been entangled, with the violence committed against one used to justify and motivate violence committed against the other. Gillespie briefly discusses the history of dairy farming in the United States, which began with the colonization of the Americas by Europeans. She explains how “the cow was integral to the colonial project. Cows were physically used to occupy land and change the prairie ecosystems, displacing [I]ndigenous humans and native animal species from their homes” (p. 180). The colonial mindset is still apparent in the dairy industry, made obvious by advertisements and company names; Gillespie notes one specifically, the Superior Settler, which is a bull semen collection company (p. 180). Today, land is still being stolen and ecosystems are still being destroyed by White settlers with the justification that it is necessary for cattle ranching. Since the 1980s, 40% of forest area in Central America has been destroyed, with the majority of cleared land being turned over to cattle ranchers (FAO, n.d.).

Gillespie’s work touches on a number of both emotionally and intellectually difficult topics, utilizing critical animal theory without being overwhelming for non-academic readers. She makes her arguments accessible to readers for whom this is their first introduction to viewing animals and the meat industry in this light, yet still interesting for the seasoned animal liberationist. This was done intentionally by Gillespie, who describes how after witnessing one of the auctions, her “commitment solidified to write articles and a book that would be read both within and outside of the academy, with the hope of making an impact on the way people think about, and practice, our relationships with farmed animals” (p. 98). It is essential for work that discusses important yet hidden truths about prominent features of American society to be accessible outside of the academy. Writers must find ways to explore complex ideas and theories without losing the interest of readers, and in Gillespie’s case and for other authors who write about animals in this manner, they must also ensure that their work is approachable to an audience that may not be keen to learn that they are contributing to large-scale suffering every day. Gillespie

accomplishes these tasks well and I would recommend this book to anybody interested in the animal agriculture industry in America, whether already engaged in animal liberation activism or new to the field.

In order to offer readers a way to view and treat farmed animals that does not see them as having only instrumental value, Gillespie weaves in stories from two Californian animal sanctuaries. Hearing the stories of some of the animals who live there, as well as the perspectives of the staff members and founders of the sanctuaries, offers moments of clarity throughout the book in which readers can see not only the terrible truths of our actions, but also the significant impact that a small amount of compassion can have. In an interview with Marji Beach, the Education Director at Animal Place Farmed Animal Sanctuary, Beach explains how she went vegan after witnessing a calf being separated from their mother. While hearing the screaming of the mother, Beach said she had the realization that “there was my glass of milk right there” (p. 165). While not the same vivid experience that Beach had, after reading Gillespie’s book readers can no longer claim ignorance: we know, in horrific detail, what goes into each glass of milk. We have read about the living conditions of cows used for their milk, the slaughter process, and the perpetuation of rape culture in the milk industry, and we have accompanied Gillespie on her trips to auction yards and so-called “humane” dairies. Gillespie writes that “coming face-to-face with a singular animal can disrupt routine ideas about the place of animals in society as well as the routine market activities in which consumers are involved” (p. 10). In absence of the ability to tour a farm ourselves, Gillespie gives readers the opportunity to come face-to-face with these animals, like the cow with the ear tag #1389. Perhaps the only weakness in Gillespie’s work stemmed from her lack of access to more than one dairy farm. However, this difficulty is to be expected and Gillespie uses it as an opportunity to explain how the industry attempts to shield itself from the public eye and how this in itself speaks to the nature of its activities.

The book explains how the word “commodity” stems from the Latin word meaning “convenient” (p. 82). Just as it is convenient to consume commodities, with their production subsidized by the government, it is convenient to not examine how our food is produced. It is *inconvenient* to realize the reality of the dairy industry and to avoid dairy. Yet, as it becomes clear throughout the book, it is the job of those who consume commercially produced products to think about who is being inconvenienced for our convenience, and if this convenience is truly worth the price we’re paying for it. Gillespie writes that at points throughout her research she “felt deeply ashamed to be human” (p. 96). Allowing oneself to feel this shame, to have any sort of emotional response in the face of industry standards, is a “political act of resistance to violence” (p. 203). Additionally, I would argue, viewing nonhuman animals as a subject of a life, as Gillespie does in her book, is a political act of resistance to violence. She writes “the isolation of mourning for the routinely un mourned is significant” (p. 212), yet doing so is what

Gillespie is asking of her readers. Her book is not a scientific study filled with facts and figures, or an animal liberationist philosophy book trying to persuade readers to change their eating habits; it is a story of the life of the cow with the ear tag #1389. Upon finishing the book, there is a lingering question not directly asked by Gillespie, but asked of readers by the cows whose suffering she documents: what are we going to do about it?

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