Escaping Cattle, Laughing Cows

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Abstract

Deidre Wicks' analysis of the dairy industry suggests that, collectively, there is a certain awareness of violence against animals kept in place by an apparatus of excusing language, animal welfare assurances and distracting mystifications. The mystifications are always themselves infected, haunted, because of the very leakiness of coded language. While laughter can work to distract and mystify, it can also work to cut through and illuminate. Wicks' wordsmithing models this strategic deployment of wry humour in the service of demystifying the exploitation of dairy cows.

Deidre Wicks' classic essay, 'Silence and Denial in Everyday Life – The Case of Animal Suffering' (2011) makes the point that knowing and not knowing about animal suffering *co-exist* within a social collective. The life of the dairy cow is, as Wicks shows, sorrowful, shortened and diseased. From the manipulation of their genes, lives shortened by the metabolic pressures of constant milk production, forced reproduction at the hands of agriculturalists, separation from calves, dairy cows live a life that could not be further from the iconic image of the Laughing Cow, a creature of cheese marketing who revels in her own subjugation ('Demystifying Dairy').

The reason that this image of the 'laughing' cow exists is, as Wicks' work shows, precisely because the opposite is true; cows are not laughing when they push back against all the brutalities they are subjected to. Consumers likely know this but are willingly diverted by the promise of laughter, as the Laughing Cow's company website instructs: 'because it's better to laugh! Laughter does us good; what we eat should do the same'. The laughing cow figures as spokesperson for the 'natural goodness' of dairy (a claim that Wicks expertly dismantles), and, by implication, the 'natural goodness' of laughter itself. The laughing cow's laughter is compulsory ('what we eat *should do* the same'), but not infectious (a word they obviously avoid). Laughter is preferable to something else not specified: 'because it's better to laugh!' they tell us. Better than what? Misery and mastitis?

Wicks' analysis demonstrates that, collectively, there is a certain awareness of violence against animals kept in place by an apparatus of excusing language, animal welfare assurances and distracting mystifications just like the laughing cow. The cover-ups and mystifications are always themselves infected, haunted, because of the very leakiness of coded language. While laughter can work to distract and mystify, it can also work to cut through and illuminate. Wicks' wordsmithing models this strategic deployment of wry humour.

There is a particular example of Wicks' work that I often refer to, and sometimes for teaching. By the time you get to the end of the excerpt quoted below, (depending on where and how you read it), you may experience the odd sensation (odd, given the grim topic of animal death), of a wry knowing smile. This will have been prompted by the way Wicks navigates you, the reader, into the realms of the 'not said' and into the jangling nerves of a meat eater whose psychic cushions and comforts are stripped away as she lists all the things that are 'not said' precisely to protect their feelings or rather, smother those feelings before they make an appearance as 'bad taste'. Wicks writes:

> Without conscious negotiation, people know which facts are better not noticed and which trouble spots to avoid. For instance, people do not consciously repress mention of slaughterhouses when they are guests at a BBQ or dinner party where meat is being served. At the same time, they call on a common vocabulary to discuss the 'tenderness' of the meat (not how young the animal was) and the 'juiciness' of the steak (not how much blood and lymph fluid it contains). There is an unspoken, indeed unconscious agreement that such references would be bad manners or bad taste. This is why the mere presence of a vegetarian at a dinner table can make people uncomfortable. Their presence raises into consciousness all those ideas and images so carefully 'not known' and 'not seen'. ('Silence and Denial' 188)

Often this description elicits a knowing smile, even a giggle of nervous laughter that makes salient the costs and terms of that 'unconscious agreement'. The description reads cinematically in the sense that it conjures up an everyday, pleasant scene of guests at a BBQ who are 'not' consciously repressing 'mention of slaughterhouses' and 'not' consciously choosing to avoid saying blood and lymph fluids instead of 'juiciness'. It's the 'not' followed by the omitted 'real' words that makes it read comedically. Wicks' description of what does not happen at the BBQ, what is carefully 'not known' and 'not seen' is satirical, showing up the culture of 'bad taste' for its failed policing. Her interest in demystification and her writerly strategy here is characteristic of comedic satire. I think she had fun writing that

paragraph, I can almost hear her laughing while writing it, and the satisfaction felt when the gaze is shifted from the usual vegan killjoy to the carnist potentially threatened by the mere presence of the knowing vegetarian.

In the same essay where she paints the portrait of what's *not* said by saying it, Wicks points to the role of mass media as a trivialiser of animal lives and animal advocacy, the latter weaponised when it serves a nationalist purpose of deflecting animal cruelty onto foreigners, the *not* Australians. She also notes the ubiquity of one media story that is so widespread and repetitive it is more of a trope: stories of animals who escape slaughterhouses and run free, at least for a little while. The media story is very often couched in terms of a 'hilarious' chase through the streets, a carnivalesque of city and country, of animal and master and eventual recapture occasioning a reprieve (the animal handed over to a sanctuary) or, less well-covered, a silent, continued journey to the slaughterhouse. Wicks notes that this kind of story is most often framed as 'a moment of "feeling good" about the escapees while remaining in denial about the fate of the vast majority of animals who do not escape' ('Silence and Denial' 195). The framing is often comedic, but it is about as 'hilarious' as watching a 1970s Benny Hill comedy skit in which a sleazy white man in a raincoat chases women through the streets while a laugh track plays.

The 'escapee cattle' media trope is noted in Bob McKay's reading of literature of the 1950s that also focusses on escapee cattle in the context of the rise of industrialised animal slaughterhouses. He notes that a *Times* story from 1954 'positively delights in the possibilities of the steer as a narrative agent, enjoying (albeit tragicomically) his ability to invert expected social and spatial hierarchies' (145). Another kind of 'laughing cow' perhaps. Ultimately, McKay writes, the kind of media narrative that frames the escapee cattle story is one of 'fundamental form of agreement with the regime of killing' (146). The 'comedy' works to make the escapee readable as a city dweller who dreams of escape, a familiar terrain of longing that obscures and makes palatable (by way of allegory), the subordinated text of existential terror at slaughter.

This disjunction between the narrative framing of escapee cattle and the actual cattle who are escaping is of interest in a current project that I'm working on with Lynette Russell. Part of our interest in the cultural politics of introduced animals in Australia relates to how introduced animals (particularly livestock and cattle in our first case study) were perceived by those who trafficked them (the colonisers) and those who met them for the first time (Aboriginal people from 1788) and, importantly, how the cattle responded to their trafficking and encounters on escape (see Probyn-Rapsey and Russell).

Four cows and two bulls trafficked into the colony via Cape Town in 1788 had escaped within a few months. Within a decade they went on to establish sizeable herds to the west of Warrane/Sydney Cove. Not surprisingly, the story of these escaped cattle was of serious concern to a colony that was intending to use them for food, as Governor Philip wrote in a private letter to Under Secretary Nepean 9 Jul. 1788:

> The greatest part of the stock brought from the Cape is dead, and from the inattention of the men who had the care of the cattle, those belonging to the Government and two cows belonging to myself are lost. As they have been missing three weeks, it is probable they are killed by the natives. All my sheep are dead, and a few only remain of those purchased for Government. The loss of four cows and two bulls falls very heavy. (55)

Years later, in 1795, Governor John Hunter relocates the 'wild cattle', after hearing from Aboriginal people over the years that there were many living in herds out west. His excitement at their re-discovery is evident in his letters, and he names the place where the cattle were roaming 'Cow Pastures'.

In her history of the early days of the colony, Grace Karskens describes the story of 'the wild cattle of cowpastures' as a 'white legend': 'beasts had gone forth and multiplied without the husbandry of men and were found again in what the Europeans saw as an Edenic wilderness' (*The Colony*, 287). The wild cattle became, in Karsken's reading, 'pioneers' (*People of the River*, 248):

> [They] invaded the areas occupied by Aboriginal people… They trampled the understorey, seedlings and saplings, and opened up the forest. As grazers, they tended to pull up the tufting native grasses, roots and all, so that after a few years the softer native grasses gave out replaced by wiry, spiky, unappetising species. Like pigs, they churned the earth around the creeks and lagoons, and muddied their waters. (*People of the River*, 250)

What is not emphasised is that the pigs were free to roam until being killed (though on page 1 they are described as 'dangerous and tasty'), and that the cattle did damage in the context of their relentless desire to *escape* the colony and human control, not extend it. Nevertheless, a cross-species culpability for colonisation is common within environmental histories. Alfred Crosby's oft-cited *Ecological Imperialism* is influential. His work highlights the role that what he calls 'colonising species' played in invasion and dispossession. The animals are positioned as culpable by reference to their effects rather than an analysis of their supposed power-sharing. Crosby's writerly tone is sometimes ironic and mocking, often sweeping. He rightly mocks human presumptions of mastery while unfairly short-changing animal agency along the way, as in the case of cattle who refused to comply with being herded: 'one wonders to what extent the animals realized that men were their masters' (182). Of the wild cattle of cowpastures, Crosby writes:

> Australians in time would become fine livestock handlers, but they were not yet, and the best they could do with these fierce African animals was to shoot some and salt them down, and capture a few of the calves. The rest confounded those who pursued them by 'running up and down the mountains like goats'. (181)

Putting aside the generalisations about Australians (I haven't yet become that 'fine livestock handler' that Crosby promises for 'Australians in time'), Crosby's framing echoes that observed by McKay in the 1950s; that cattle who run from their captors subvert their master's domination, but only momentarily and in the spirit of the carnivalesque; a momentary upheaval of hierarchy that perhaps relieves some uneasiness about the brutal power dynamic before settling again into the same old 'regime'. This kind of mockery, where animals are mocked when they are seen to be mocking humans, is detectable in 1881, in a historical recount of the wild cattle of Cowpastures retold in *Australian Town and Country*: '[t]he erratic quadrupeds, as it became manifest years afterwards, were seized with the passion of free selection and had taken to the stampede interior wards in search of "fresh fields and pastures new"' ('Sketches'). The 'joke' is at the expense of the 'free selectors' who at that time were depicted as challenging the land-rich squattocracy for a share of the vast tracts of land expropriated from Indigenous peoples. What is implied is that they, the free selectors, are like cattle and that cattle were like them, because cattle were/are never just themselves.

The mystifications that Wicks draws our attention to in relation to the commodification of animals effects/infects the kinds of histories that are told about the wild cattle then and now. Their escape reflects their resistance to being trafficked and tied to human desires. Why is it funny that the cattle run, through the bush, through city streets, through paddocks, away from humans who presume to own their flesh? Why the ironic tone, the tendency towards pantomime and mockery when writing about animals? Does it reflect an uneasiness that scholarly work might not be taken seriously if concerned with animals? Or is it the nervousness of the carnist at the BBQ that Wicks observes? Or a sense

that an interest in animals might be a misdirection from 'proper' *human* concerns; an epistemological laughing cow deflating the 'seriousness' of a felt political risk? Why is it humorous that the cattle run only to be captured later? Cue the cheesy Benny Hill soundtrack, cue the laughing cow machine.

Thank you, Deidre Wicks, for your wry, knowing humour and helping to hear and switch off an old-dated ghoulish laugh track.

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