Condensed Lives: The Old Cow Project

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Abstract In this article I seek to counteract the invisibility and loss of individuality in public culture of the lives of cows. The auto/ethnographic approach combines personal experience and observation of particular cows woven through an account of historical events and scholarly reflections on the dairy industry.

Keywords Rotolactor, dairy industry, animal publics, Elsie, cow sanctuary

The article forms part of what I call 'The Old Cow Project', a collection of ongoing research and creative work which includes stories from a herd of cows I live alongside. Previous work for The Old Cow Project includes photographic portraits by artist Derek Kreckler of cows in the herd juxtaposed with archival photographs taken at the now defunct Homebush abattoir in Sydney. I 'attempt to weave into the fabric of everything [I] already know' every archival trace I find of the cows inside the abattoir, 'in order to produce, if possible, a *rethought history*' (Didi-Huberman 99). I suggest that the archival traces of damaged and unrecognisable bodies of cows – some strung up, others dead and mutilated on the concrete floor:

> serve to keep each cow less-than-whole; (literally) rendering them as unlovable and thereby mitigating the possibility of love and, by extension, prohibiting ethical treatment. … Thus represented, the photographic trace of a history of animal slaughter (already hidden and obscured) makes the life gestured to in the artist's photographic portraits of (be)loved cows 'unthinkable' and literally un-imaginable. (Boyde in Potts 145, 147)

Here I would like to tell you about the lives of two beloved cows, Minnie and Moo, both of whom came from dairy farms and who I first encountered as young calves at a calf and cow saleyard auction. I stumbled into living alongside cows over thirty years ago – actually it's getting closer to forty years. Until then I had spent much of my life in Sydney, growing up in an inner suburb before moving to London when I was 19 and then back a couple of years later to a queer life in inner-city Sydney where I lived happily until my girlfriend at the time decided we should move to the country. My only encounter with cows had been during a childhood outing with Mum and Dad and my sister. From not knowing anything about cows I've come to know a great deal. I've seen the cows make friends in the herd and form deep and lasting relationships; I've watched them protect and care for each other and their calves. I developed friendships with the cows while I learned about them and loved them – love in an individual and deep sense. To tell some of their story is also to recount a history of the dairy industry as dairy production became increasingly mechanised.

Before I tell you more about Minnie and Moo and their herd, I commence with a recollection of a family outing where I first saw cows close-up.

Sometime in the 1960s my father drove Mum, my sister and me on one of our many weekend excursions from the suburbs of Sydney into the countryside. On this occasion we drove about an hour or so to the small village of Menangle on the outskirts of the city to see the Rotolactor which had become a popular day trip destination for city families – about 2000 people visited the Rotolactor each week. The Rotolactor was a new machine for milking cows and it was promoted to the public as a family friendly tourist destination (figs 1 and 2).

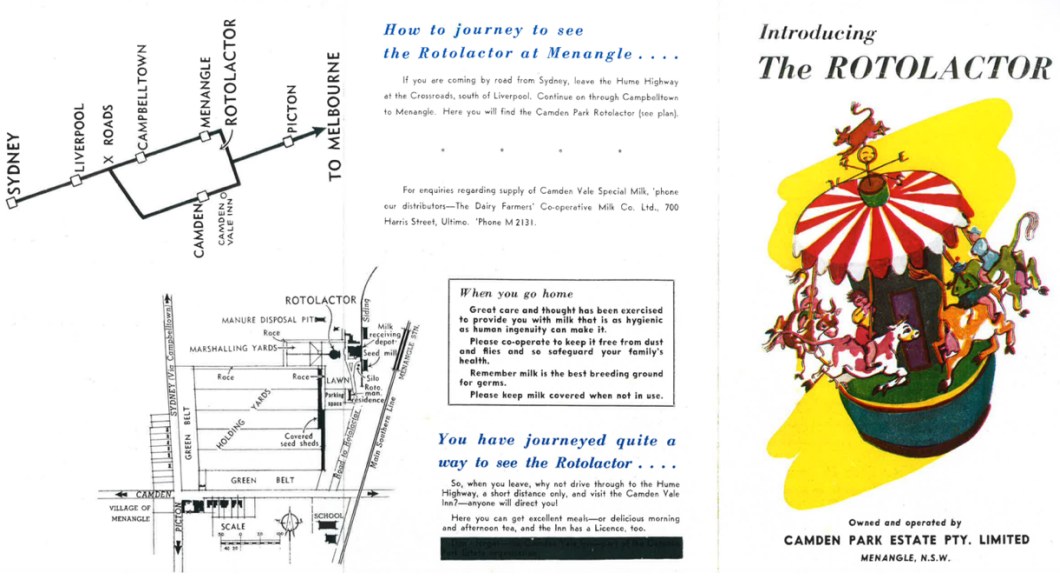

Figure 1: 'Introducing the Rotolactor' pamphlet, Camden Historical Society.

I don't remember much of the visit; just that there were cows in smallish paddocks that you passed on the way in and then cows in a large circular machine being milked; you had a rear view of the cows inside the machine through windows. I think I remember that I didn't

really like looking at the cows in the rotating machine and felt happier when we went to the adjacent milk bar for tourists where Dad bought us ice-creams and milkshakes.

Figure 2: Aerial photo of the Rotolactor with cows on right waiting to enter, cows on left have been milked and the public watches the milking through the windows. https://www.belgennyfarm.com.au/history/agriculture-at-camden-estate/dairying/the-rotolactor (Accessed 2 June 25).

Mechanising Dairy

In Australia the idea of a dairy farm and dairy cows has the potential to conjure an image in the public imagination of contented cows grazing on lush green pastures which (somehow) facilitates the 'natural' production of rich and creamy milk. The numerous publicity and other campaigns organised to promote human consumption of cows' milk products conceal much more than they reveal. In the dairy industry cows are the property of various publics; each dairy cow has value only as a commodity for human use and consumption, while the

actualities of their private lives bear no public value and minimal public protection or even interest. In his influential work Michael Warner shows that 'Publics exist only by virtue of their imagining. They are a kind of fiction that has taken on life, a very potent life at that' (Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* 7). Publics come into being through discourse**,** they are mobilised through language and are therefore, implicitly, humanist. Or perhaps more precisely, publics are implicitly anthropocentric.

The failure to include the lives of animals, to imagine animals, by publics of various kinds has been catastrophic for most animals, including for cows in the dairy industry. I remember one occasion at a university feminist research meeting where laid out on a table at the side of the room was a spread of bottled water, wine, various cheeses and crackers for after the meeting. I waited for what seemed a good moment in the meeting to suggest we might consider ceasing the inclusion of dairy products in catering. To support this, I outlined some standard operating procedures – violations and violences suffered by the cows and calves themselves, all of it so that dairy products are available for humans to consume. My suggestion was met with silence or perhaps disengagement by some, while for others in the group who were vegetarians the idea of also having to give up cheese seemed too hard. Consequently, no change was made to the catering.

> As Deborah Bird Rose writes:
>
> When we use humans as the reference point, we end up talking only about humans. We miss the opportunity to engage with other creatures in the richness of their embodied subjectivities and world, and we lose the opportunity also to understand ourselves in more relational and unexpected ways. (Rose 104)

Cowpastures

The Rotolactor was developed in Australia by Edward Macarthur-Onslow, a descendant of settler colonists John and Elizabeth Macarthur (née Veale), known as founders of the Australian wool industry. The Rotolactor was built on Camden Park Estate in 1952, a large

holding of fertile pastureland known as 'Cowpastures' which was granted to John Macarthur in 1805 by the colonists – land which was never ceded by the First Peoples of Australia. Elizabeth Macarthur-Onslow, the grand-daughter of John and Elizabeth Macarthur, later became the sole owner of Camden Park. She founded the dairy industry there following a visit to England and Europe in the late 1880s. By the 1930s the company had become the largest dairy cattle centre in Australia (Graham Brooks and Associates 6).

Camden Park Estate is a site in which coloniality, 'the transhistoric expansion of colonial domination and the perpetuation of its effects in contemporary times,' was enacted *(Moraña et al. 2).* The first cows and bulls were transported to the colony in 1788 from South Africa, boarded onto a ship in the first fleet at the Cape of Good Hope. One cow was later considered dangerous and shot, while some of the herd, who had been put out to graze under supervision, managed to escape from human control (Hindmarsh 27). The cows 'wandered out into Dharawal Country … and established a herd that became known to settler colonists as 'the wild cattle of Cowpastures' (Probyn-Rapsey and Russell 40).

Lena, Minnie and Moo

To keep the grass down on the 5-acre plot with a small house we had found, near Camden, I decided to get a cow. It was in a dairy on the nearby Cowpastures that the mother of a calf I found had worked as a dairy cow, all her life. I never met her, but I know her name was Lena and the elderly farmer who owned her told me that she was one of his favourite cows. So it seemed he may have had a somewhat heavy heart the day I noticed him, hovering nearby at the Camden livestock auction as the auctioneer and bidders moved to Lena's calf, who was only a week or so old. There was a small crowd of buyers circling the calves but the bidding for Lena's daughter came down to me and a butcher. I was a student at the time with limited money, not enough to buy a ride-on mower which is why I had decided to get a cow to eat the grass, but when, mid-bidding, the butcher looked directly at me and said

'she's no good for you she's good for veal' I knew I'd pay whatever it took. I took her home to meet Moo who I had bought a few weeks earlier at the sale and named the new calf Minnie.

Figure 3: Minne and Moo

Elsie and the World of Tomorrow

Macarthur-Onslow commissioned the Rotolactor, a large, circular, rotating machine designed for automated milking, with the idea of significantly increasing cow's milk production for human consumption with minimal human labour. The Rotolactor was built on the Menangle site based on a version he had visited in America (Graham Brooks and Associates 14). One of the first Rotolactors was displayed by the Borden dairy company at the 1939 New York World's Fair (fig. 4). Expositions like the New York World's Fair, themed as 'World of Tomorrow' and focusing on the transformative capabilities of emergent technologies, 'invite and incite…us to practise what we must become if progress is to progress, and if we are to keep up with it' (Bennett 214). Visitors to expositions become publics who are positioned and mobilised 'as in need of incessant self-modernization' (214). The public apparently loved Borden's Rotolactor; it attracted huge interest and was the most popular exhibit in terms of crowd numbers (214). There the public could watch cows on display as they were milked on the revolving platform.

Figure 4. Elsie the Borden cow

https://www.effinghamdailynews.com/news/history/elsie-the-borden-cow-and-effingham-county/article_0c146f98-f073-11ea-8b35-97bb4bf2908d.html (Accessed 2021)

Figure 4b: Elsie[1] *https://www.bordendairy.com/meet-elsie/ (Accessed 6 June 25).*

For the quiet times between the milking show Borden developed a strategy for keeping the public's attention on the Rotolactor by exhibiting a living Jersey cow. They changed the name given to her by the farm she had previously worked on, 'You'll do Lobelia', to Elsie, which was the name of Borden's cartoon cow used in promotional material for the milk products (Borden Dairy).

[1] Hajdik advises that 'The much loved and celebrated Elsie of the 1939–1940 New York World's Fair met with an untimely, sad end in 1941. While traveling through New York City on her way to yet another public appearance at Schubert Alley in the Theater district, her trailer was rear-ended, and she was hurt so badly that she had to be euthanized. … Borden quietly selected a new Elsie to continue the tradition of live public appearances' (485-6).

> Borden's introduction of Elsie, as well as the company's extensive exhibit at the 1939 World's Fair, reveals how this well-known dairy cow can be seen as both an effective public relations ambassador for a company and industry marked by turmoil in the late 1930s… Elsie was a much needed brand mascot that provided a friendly, maternal face to big agribusiness. (Hajdik 471)

Marketing polls in the 1940s found that 98% of all Americans recognised the cartoon cow Elsie and by 1999 Elsie appears on the top ten list of 20th century advertising icons in America (fig. 5). It seems relevant to note here, following Habermas, that polling 'systematically distorts the public sphere, producing something that passes as public opinion' (Warner, 'Publics and Counterpublics' 54).

Figure 5: Elsie

After a number of setbacks, by 1952 Macarthur-Onslow's Rotolactor was operational; it had the capacity to milk hundreds of cows twice daily, on a revolving steel platform not only, as the pamphlet for visitors 'Introducing the Rotolactor' noted, designed 'to provide you with milk that is as hygienic as human ingenuity can make it', but also designed to facilitate (controlled) public viewing of this spectacle of modernity. The public was invited to observe

the milking spectacle from viewing platforms behind glass windows. But the milking display was only part of the experience; the focus was on the product – and its consumption on site. Drawn into ever-evolving practices of spectacle and consumption, day-trippers to the Rotolactor, like my family, were part of 'a performative imperative in which the visitor … is enlisted for the limitless project of modernity' (Bennett 214).

Figure 6: Rotolactor, Macarthur Chronicle https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10152564242721135&id=51121891134&set=a.10150274302951135 (Accessed 9 June 25).

Pamphlets such as 'Your Guide to the Rotolactor' provided information for tourists on how it worked. The cows walked in single file up a ramp from holding yards, passing through a disinfectant foot spray into a bail where they were held in place by an automatically operated head lock. The cow's teats and udders were washed manually by workers with a sterilized cloth as the platform revolved (Graham Brooks 15). A milk sample was taken and checked

from each of the 50 cows who at any one time stood head-locked in one of the fully automatically operated bails on the platform. The platform revolved in an anticlockwise direction; it took ten minutes to complete a full rotation. The milk was taken from the cows by vacuum milking machines and held in stainless steel containers. The head lock was then released and each cow moved forward from the bail, went down a curved interior ramp and then via a tunnel underneath the platform to return to the holding yard (15). Everything was thoroughly washed and cleaned before the next cow took her place. At least this is what the promotional pamphlet tells us.

By the 1970s the Rotolactor was in 'inefficient operational condition' (15). But there had been numerous problems prior 'including the platform slipping off the rails and the cows being struck by the automatically raised feeding boxes' (15). The company went into bankruptcy in the 1980s and was shut down. Designated in the early 2000s as being beyond repair, the remains of the Rotolactor and the feed silos and animal shelters beside it were cordoned off from public access (fig. 7). But the memories remained.

Figure 7: Rotolactor c2000

Memories

In 2017 the Menangle Community Association organised a festival 'celebrating the history of the Rotolactor and attracted thousands of visitors to the village' (Willis 565; fig 8.).

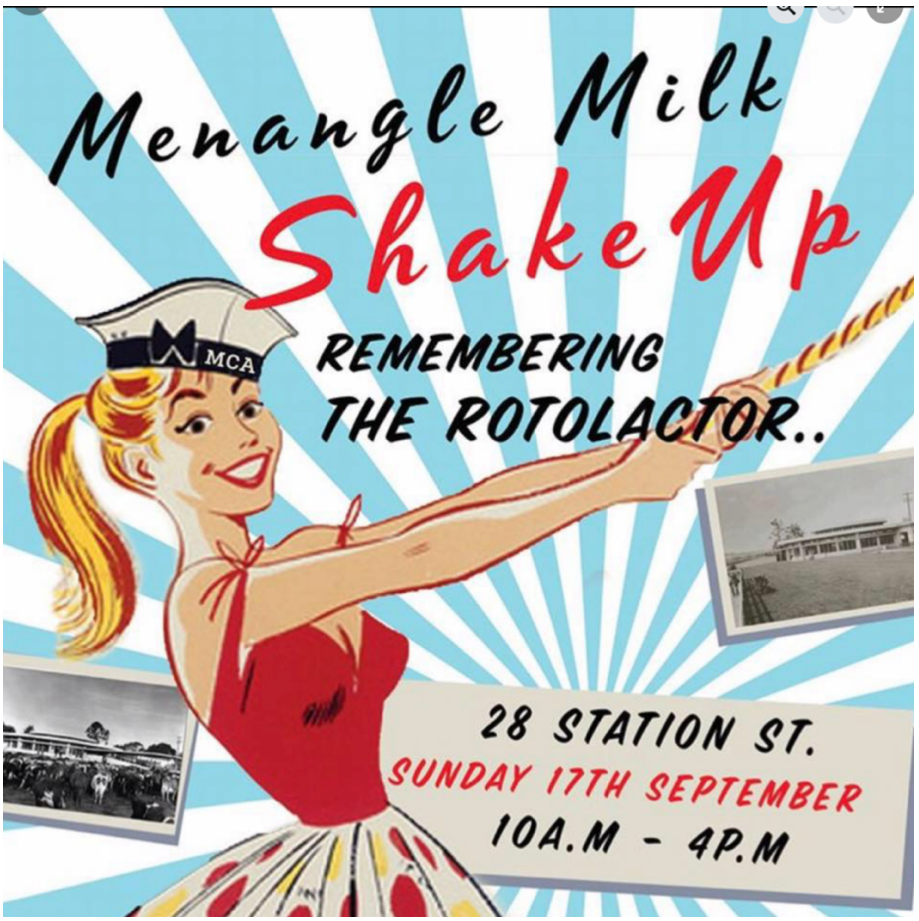

Figure 8: Menangle Community Association festival poster, 2017.
https://www.facebook.com/MenangleMilkShakeUp/about

A local newspaper asked its Facebook followers to post their memories of visiting the Rotolactor. My recollection of our family outing seemed mirrored in some of the comments. It is clear from the memories that the Rotolactor was a powerful convergence of technology and product – an outing by car to a public space where (idealised) families became a 'public' visiting the industrialised milking site and enjoying the dairy products. These are some of the posts:

> Mum and Dad used to take us there all the way from Fairfield just for a real milkshake. Great Memories.
>
> Why does all the good stuff go? I too mourn this place every time I go past. It brings back great memories.
>
> Many fond memories as a child, taking the drive out there with my parents on the weekend just to watch the marvel of cows on a merry go round being milked. Topped off with the delicious milkshake to drink (my favourite was strawberry).
>
> Milkshakes to die for…

Daily Life for the Cows at the Rotolactor

For the cows at the Rotolactor daily life would likely not have generated such pleasurable emotion or memories, even had they had the opportunity to live long lives. At any one time there were nine hundred cows in the Rotolactor herd. Their daily lives consisted of having their milk extracted each morning and afternoon while they were fed crop-based concentrated food in portions allocated on the basis of the yield data collected on each cow. The remainder of the time the cows were confined in adjacent yards called 'resting paddocks'. These were clearly visible from the road which led to the Rotolactor yet in the recollections there is barely a mention of the cows in the yards at the front or those they presumably witnessed being milked inside the machine. Implications of the apparently paradoxical condition of seeing and not seeing, knowing and not knowing, now readily understood through the work of Eve Sedgwick and others, provide insight here to the

situation for the cows who lived in clear, close-up public view. The large number of cows living in the yards at the Rotolactor meant that the ground under their hooves was always bare – there was no grass and no room to graze. Fodder for them was cut from the surrounding 10,000 acres owned by the company and brought in to provide the cows with what was deemed an adequate amount to eat. For visitors to the Rotolactor the open secret of the cows' unnaturally restricted, regimented, spare lives, on full public display, did not rupture cultural disavowal; instead, visitors such as my family 'proceed[ed] all the same' – to the milk bar for an ice-cream – 'as if we did not know' (Sedgwick 50).

Minnie, Moo, Family and Friends

The cows and I moved from our small farm near Camden to 100 acres just beyond the Blue Mountains west of Sydney. The new farm was an instant hit with Minnie and Moo, the rest of the herd, and us. The cool mountain air was invigorating, and the grass was plentiful. The cows explored the boundaries and from then on grazed far and wide. By then Moo and Minnie both had daughters, Moulin and Minuet, and another cow who we named Minstrel had joined the little herd after managing to escape from a nearby dairy. Later at the new farm Minuet gave birth to a calf, Boy, and Moulin gave birth to Girlie (bulls had somehow come into our property and left without us ever seeing them). Boy's birth was difficult – we all stayed with Minuet throughout the night. When he suddenly appeared in the early hours of the morning, he was brown with black tiger stripes. His mother was mostly black, so his father was most likely a reddish-brown Hereford bull. Minuet licked him all over and throughout his infancy he drank as much of his mother's milk as he could fit in each time.

Figure 9: Minuet and baby Boy with Minstrel nearby

Boy grew to be what more than one local cattle farmer called 'the biggest steer I've seen since the 1950s', but to Minuet he seemed always her baby and she kept on licking him, grooming him all over, on and off over the next 15 years, until his death.

The boy calf in the corner

The day I found Minnie at the Camden saleyard, in the stall with her was another calf, a boy, from the same dairy farm. I had spent all my money on securing Minnie so when the auctioneer and bidders moved their attention to the boy calf the butcher who had tried to buy Minnie had no competition from me. He won the bid and the little calf would have been killed for veal. I have thought about that little calf many times over the years and can always see him, only a week or so old, a tiny Friesian boy, standing near Minnie in the small enclosure. His poor mother, confined and forced to work in a dairy instead of being able to protect him and look after him.

Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations — CAFOs

A smaller scale operation than the mega dairy farms which are common now, nevertheless some of the practices of intensive farming were in place at the Rotolactor site. A huge number of animals, including dairy cows, are now confined in factory farms, or concentrated animal feeding operations, for their entire lives – 'the total number of poultry, pigs and cattle alive on farms and in feeding operations across the world at any given time is around 30 billion' (Godfrey-Smith 201; 252). The latest technology in Australia encourages intense dairying farm practices and makes upscaling easier for dairy farmers. Products such as robotic milking systems are advertised in promotional material as 'feed driven and voluntary' but such publicity material distorts and conceals and makes secret the realities for the cows.

The industrialisation of dairying and the hidden secrets of how cows have been transformed into units of production provided the shock that impelled a former teacher of mine to write to me describing what she had witnessed on a visit to a mega dairy as part of a post-graduate agricultural certificate:

> You very possibly know how they treat dairy cattle but I didn't until I went there. All the cows lived in a huge shed (rarely got out to eat or wander around in nature). Twice a day they trooped in like zombies – each backing into their own spot to be milked by machines – standing on concrete. Then after 20 minutes or so they all trooped back – (none of them interacting with each other) – and huge cascades of water sloshed into the giant milking shed to clean it. To me they seemed dead inside – like automatons. The cows are artificially inseminated with semen that is geared to producing heifer calves (the male calves are slaughtered pretty quickly as vealers – approximately 6 weeks old). 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.
> (Letter from E.L.)

The letter reveals the routine taking of calves from their mothers. Many of the calves don't make it to be chained at a kennel since they are considered to be 'wastage or by-products' and can be 'killed on-farm within hours of birth'. Others are 'loaded onto trucks bound for sale yards and slaughterhouses' while female calves will become 'replacements' in the dairy herd (*The Life of a Dairy Cow*, Summary). Typically, replacement cows take the place of dairy cows who are deemed to be worn out, by which is usually meant cows who are sick or whose milk production has dropped. Automatic feeders which the advertising claims supplies a 'correct portion and concentration of feed spread over the day, resembling the natural behavior of the calf' are widely used in the dairy industry for those calves (Lely Benefits).

Figure 10: Calf Feeder

https://www.lely.com/solutions/feeding/calm/

(Accessed 6 June 25)

Calves and Family Overjoyed – an alternative CAFO

The cows and their calves had lots of fun in the paddocks at our new farm with acres of space to explore – they played, ate, slept, moved with the herd, were licked and watched over protectively by the adults and the youngest ones were fed by their mothers. I am not sure how the situation and feeding of the calf pictured in the automatic feeder can be claimed to be 'natural'.

Figure 11: Enjoying the space at the new farm

'Now that we can see what we're doing, what should we do next?'[2]

Only recently I found out something more I didn't know about the dairy industry (would I have looked away if I had an inkling unbearable information or images might be coming?). An accepted practice in the global dairy industry is for cows not only to be kept indoors for their entire lives but also to be *always tied by the neck* in a narrow stall with a concrete floor. Restrained by humans in this way and forcibly kept pregnant to produce milk, each cow can never do what they would if they had freedom; freedom to graze in the outdoors, freedom to be with their calf and their herd.

[2] Peter Godfrey-Smith, 203.

In relation to these kinds of common practices in the farmed animal industries, philosopher Peter Godfrey-Smith suggests the consideration of 'the idea of a *life worth living* – a life that's better than no life at all' (203). He asks us to: 'Imagine that after you die, you can choose between coming back for another life as an animal – the particular kind of animal is not your choice but is determined for you – or not coming back at all' (203). Godfrey-Smith poses the question:

> 'Would you rather come back to a life like one of these after you die, or not come back at all?'

Your decision must be based on two options for coming back: as a pig in intensive farming where, for example, female pigs used for breeding are kept for majority of their life in a metal crate so small they cannot move around, while their babies, who are destined to be bacon or pork are taken from them at about six weeks, castrated and/or have their tails cut (without anaesthetic) and then killed 5 months later never having felt the sun or grass or dirt on their bodies, 'not one day' (203-4).

The other option is to come back as a dairy cow in industrial farming where a common situation, based on current practices, is 'confinement for the animal's entire life and a round of forced pregnancies followed by immediate removal of your calves' (204).

Weighing up these options, Godfrey-Smith decides: 'I'd choose not to come back at all rather than come back as a factory-farmed animal of those kinds. There is no way for me to get the other answer' (204).

That last day with Minnie

Remembering Minnie and Moo's lives makes my whole being smile – there were so many happy days. Minnie was always fun-loving; she was an attentive mother, a loving friend to every cow in the herd and over the years she warmly welcomed the new cows who found their way to us. Beautiful Moo was a steady and loving presence in the herd. For me, they were Minnie and Moo and in the late afternoons for many years I called out across the

paddocks 'Minnie, Minnie, Minnie and Moo, Minnie and Moo' until they appeared with the rest of the herd coming behind them and they would come over to where I waited with biscuits of lucerne hay ready for them. Minnie and Moo.

I was with Minnie when she died, after an injury. We were together in the barn – nothing had worked, nothing more could be done; the vet was coming. After the vet had left, I stayed with her. Every cow in the herd, young and old, one by one, entered the large, open barn and came over to Minnie's body, then slowly circled the barn interior. The elder cows raised their heads and pulled back their lips in a kind of grimace and some let out a low mooing. Before leaving the barn, every cow passed closely by her once again. I felt humbled to be part of the grieving and respect for Minnie, Lena's daughter. Had Lena been allowed to know her daughter and be with her, as I had been able to, her life would have been so full of happiness.

Figure 12: Moo and Minnie. Photograph by Nicholas Coffill.

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Note about this paper

A version of this article was given as a paper at the Australasian Animal Studies Association (AASA) conference, Animal Publics at the University of Melbourne in 2015; Fiona Probyn-Rapsey and I were the co-editors of the Animal Publics book series published by Sydney University Press and I was chair of AASA. I gave my paper in a session on the dairy industry chaired by Deidre Wicks and later when she approached me with her idea for a book on the dairy industry, she asked if I would contribute the work as a chapter – the reason I am including an updated version in this special edition in her honour.